

Chittagong arms haul case Culprits must be punished

IT is welcome news that a court has ordered a fresh probe into the Chittagong arms and ammunition haul, in which 10 truck-loads of combat-grade weapons and ammunition were seized by the police on April 2, 2004. The investigators failed to unearth the mystery behind the huge quantity of arms found on a jetty, even after 46 months.

The nature and quantity of the arms haul do suggest that a big, organised group of arms smugglers were involved in the deal. But it is still not known where the arms would have gone and who would have received them. The danger associated with the case remaining unresolved is far too great to be overlooked. It is also not known how many of such consignments managed to sneak through the security arrangements and where they landed ultimately.

The point is all the more relevant in view of the proliferation of terrorist and criminal activities in not only Bangladesh but also the region as a whole. Such arms and ammunition entering the country through the underworld dealers could easily reach any militant group and used for carrying out subversive activities. The spate of political violence in the country in recent years could also have a lot to do with availability of lethal weapons.

So, the popular expectation was that the arms haul cases would be resolved with due sense of urgency, for these had a direct bearing on national security. But nothing of the sort has happened and it seems, as the magistrate has ordered the police to appoint an honest investigation officer, the case will have to be almost restarted. It is not at all clear why the immediate past BNP-led government failed to attach due importance to such a sensational case. Even though it was the duty of the police to make progress on the investigation, it is evident that the government made no special efforts to catch the culprits. No doubt, national security is compromised by such lapses.

The reinvestigation into the case will hopefully put an end to the mystery that only gave rise to speculations regarding the culprits and the motive of the then government. Finally, the investigation must remain uninfluenced by any extraneous factors.

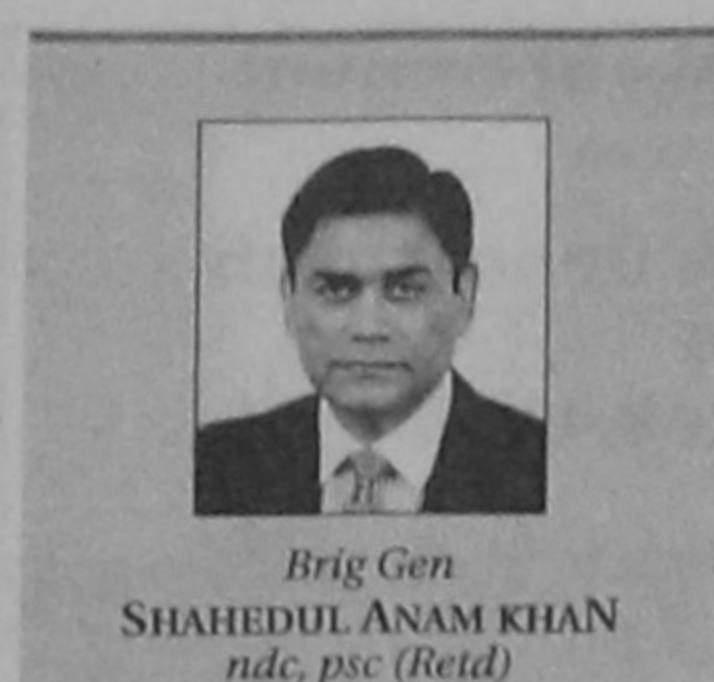
An ambassador goes missing Democracy offers Pakistan a way out

THE disappearance the other day of Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul together with the abduction of two nuclear experts raises fresh and very alarming questions about conditions in Pakistan at present. The feeling cannot be ignored that chaos may be overtaking the country. One certainly hopes that that does not actually happen. In these past many months, with terrorism and religious militancy taking an acute turn for the worse, concerns have grown in the region as well as beyond it of the threats that Islamabad faces from a diversity of forces at this point. With the internal political situation already thrown into turmoil by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December last year, the external threats symbolised by the creeping entry of the Taliban as also al-Qaeda have now brought the country to the edge of uncertainty.

The point that emerges from all this is clear. The regime of General Pervez Musharraf, for all its claims to legitimacy as brought about by the re-election of the president a few months ago, finds itself in a beleaguered state. Indeed, a bunker mentality is increasingly coming to define the state of things in Islamabad. At this point, therefore, it is important that all efforts be made to turn the situation around. And that is possible through everyone involved, from the president down to the political parties, doing all they can to have a democratic order restored in the country. It is in light of such a desire that the elections scheduled for 18 February must be held in a manner that is transparent and therefore acceptable to all Pakistanis. Obviously, one does not expect an election to solve Pakistan's problems overnight. But what a credible election can do is send out a significant message to extremists and their kind that they cannot get away with their sinister acts with impunity. Democracy offers a way out for nations troubled on many fronts. Let that path to the future be taken in Pakistan, in all the sagacity its leading political figures can call forth.

Meanwhile, all efforts must be expended in the search for the missing ambassador and the two nuclear experts. Those responsible for their disappearance will be doing a most civilised thing by freeing them, for no political purpose has ever been served through acts that are manifestly criminal.

Let the guilty men (and women) retire



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

A common question that one very often hears these days being asked is whether the parliamentary elections will be held as per the timeframe as expressed by the Election Commission. While on the matter of elections, one is reminded of an anecdote that is associated with the late president Ziaul Huq of Pakistan.

Every time the Pakistan president sat down to have his hair cut the barber would start by asking, "Mr. President, when will you hold the election in the country?" And the president would reply, "All in good time." Nothing further would transpire between the two till the next time when the barber would start by asking the same question and receive the same reply.

After this had gone on for some time, Zia was mystified by his barber's interest in elections. The next time he turned to his barber, when put the very same question for the umpteenth time, and asked: "How is it that every time before you start cutting my hair you ask the same

question and remain satisfied with the same answer I give."

"I am not interested in your answer, it's only that when I ask you about your intention of holding election your hairs stand on their ends, and that makes my job of cutting your hair easier," was the candid reply.

Let me assert that our interest in the parliamentary elections in Bangladesh is less mundane, but of somewhat greater significance than General Huq's barber's was in his country's election. Apart from the prices of consumables, election is the only matter in Bangladesh that is consuming the time, energy and money of the people at large.

In spite of the CA's repeated expression of hope, and affirmation of his government's intent to have the parliament-ary election by end of this year, there are expressions of doubt in many quarters whether that would actually happen. And this view is reinforced everyday by comments and articulations of newer and fresher options of new

political dispensations -- that might be taken up by way of an exit strategy, according to the protagonists of these ideas, by the caretaker government.

I wonder why people are talking about exit strategy at all when there was no entry strategy in the first place. The involvement of the armed forces was because of a force majeure; and that being the case, nobody should be thinking of strategies that give the impression of an intention to cut and run as a saving grace, leaving everything to Providence.

Nothing can be worse than a situation where honest intentions, bedeviled by incorrect strategy and in some cases faulty tactics, forgive the military parlance, are forsaken, and the aim contorted, only to save face. Those who deal with long-term planning and strategise the shortest road to success cannot have forgotten that the aim must never change, and if strategies cannot lead up to the objectives, it must be so adjusted as to be able to put the plan

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Nothing can be worse than a situation where honest intentions, bedeviled by incorrect strategy and in some cases faulty tactics, forgive the military parlance, are forsaken, and the aim contorted, only to save face. Those who deal with long-term planning and strategise the shortest road to success cannot have forgotten that the aim must never change, and if strategies cannot lead up to the objectives, it must be so adjusted as to be able to put the plan back on track.

Readjustment of position to conform to the needs for achievement of the aim is not an unknown phase in a battle. And that is perhaps something that we do not hear being done much about. However, we must remember what Einstein said about solving problems. He had said: "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them."

One of the new ideas that have resurfaced -- it was being touted as an alternative arrangement -- very soon after January 11, 2007, is the option of a national government. What has gone wrong, one wonders, that an arrangement which only an elected government can put in place by offering other key political parties a share in running the affairs of the state, is being peddled by some quarters.

A national government was perhaps in order after December 16, 1971, and perhaps also when political uncertainties and abridgement of democratic process post 1975, when it could have featured as an

option. National governments have proved useful after a crisis, such as a prolonged period of conflict or war, where all political parties participate in the running of the government.

An historical reference in this regard may be in order. We know about the national governments in the UK, that were formed at various times between the First World War and the Second, to tide over grave crises. There was the national government of the Baldwin, MacDonald and Chamberlain trio, and the all-party coalitions of Asquith and David Lloyd George and of Winston Churchill, that were sometimes termed as national governments at the time, but have now come to be referred to as coalition governments.

The all party government formed by Ramsay MacDonald after the fall in 1931 of the Labour government he was heading, composed of men from all parties, to address a particular crisis, at that particular instance, of the budget. Interestingly, the number of the cabinet members at that time was also ten, whose job it was to balance the budget and then hold general election on party lines.

There are, therefore, two imperatives in the formation of a national government. Firstly, it is done by elected representatives of the people, to fulfill the other imperative, that of addressing a crisis situation.

The idea of a national government had been attacked by many

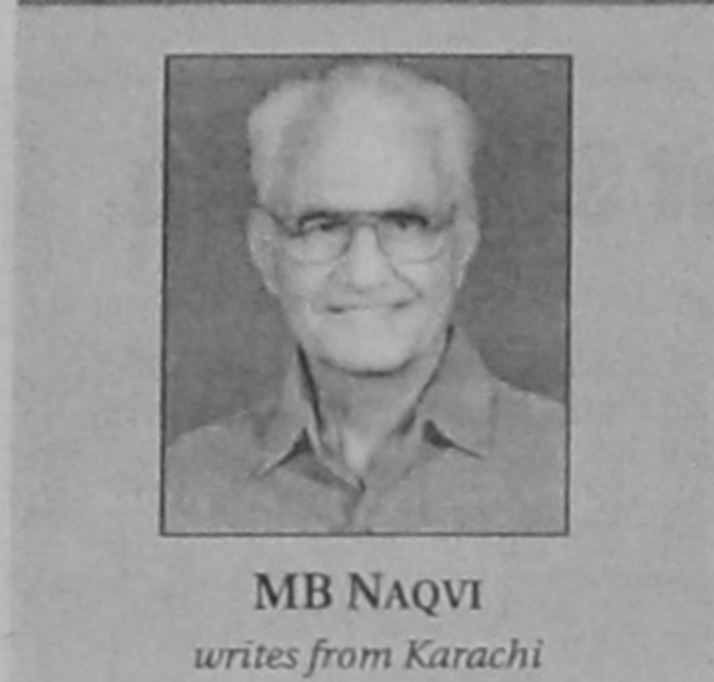
and defended by only a few belonging to the clan of revisionist historians. A national government is a temporary measure which has, nevertheless, been criticised as a viable alternative. It is an alternative that is the consequence of situations brought about by bad leadership -- "Guilty Men" as some were referred to. Alas! We do not have the likes of Michel Foot, David Owen or Peter Howard, who, in coalition had written a book by the same name, criticising the British leadership of failing to confront Germany and adequately preparing the country for war.

Like them, we call for those that brought our country to the precipice recently, "let the guilty men (and women) retire." Politics and democracy in Bangladesh cannot be made a victim of their failings.

Anything that abridges the process of democracy and stifles expression of popular will is a repugnant idea that must be purged from our thought process. A government must retain its moral character. And it can only do so, as Rousseau says, if the government can rest its moral authority on the consent of the governed. It was there post 1/11. It is doubtful whether a volonte generale will be there should any arrangement be other than an election to the Parliament. And that should be held without any further loss of time.

Brig Gen (ret'd) Shahedul Anam Khan is Editor, Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Now or never



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

FIVE crises engulf Pakistan: Firstly, a virtually new Islam wants to rule the polity -- while democracy moves many. Secondly, the ongoing struggle between civil society and the erstwhile military dictator is a growing polarisation; lawyers are striving to end Musharraf's, and the military's, control.

The third is the oldest crisis, over the respective powers of the centre and the provinces. The issue has never been tackled up front. The effort was always to push the issue under the carpet, but the trauma of 1971 led to a consensus; the 1973 Constitution. But it has never worked in its original spirit; the concurrent list survives long after it should have been killed.

The fourth is the economic difficulties faced by the people. The economic crisis is deepening, and unless Pakistanis find means to sharply reduce poverty through a new development paradigm, the state may be sunk in a morass of underdevelopment, unemployment, poverty and high inflation on top of it all. An economic meltdown is also possible; this is feeding the two insurgencies mentioned earlier.

Pakistan's participation in the US War on Terror has given birth to the fifth crisis: it was originally about

foreign policy that is morphing into a domestic political problem.

Few seem to know the magic formula to pull out of these crises. Although friendly advice, and cooperation from friendly nations, is welcome the fact is that Pakistanis have to cut through these crises by themselves. Since no magic wand exists, the first thing to do is to purge minds of cobwebs.

The issues of Islamic extremism, Taliban and militancy in NWFP's tribal areas are linked to two problems; the first is Taliban-like Islam itself. The second is the war in Afghanistan, which has obviously spilled over into Pakistan; while earlier Afghan crises were also an input into Pakistan. The problem should be seen in an historical perspective.

This new Islam is a recent development. It grew out of international intrigue concerning Afghanistan since the early 1970s, centred in Peshawar specifically. American CIA, British MI6, ISI, and Saudi and Iranian spook agencies were all involved. The original purpose was to change Afghanistan's status as a buffer by pulling it into the Western camp, sitting as it does at the door to central and northern Asia.

Pakistan had hosted this intrigue. It was a carrot and stick policy. The Shah of Iran played a dominant role.

PLAIN WORDS

Taliban's Islam in action was instructive. They sacked all women employees. Girls were sent home from co-educational institutions. Women were deprived of virtually all cognisable human rights. The minorities fared worse, including the sectarian minority of Shias; not forgetting the massacre of Hazaras. The vandalism of cultural artefacts shocked the world. Their high-watermark of crusade against idol worshiping was the destruction of historic, giant-sized Buddha statues carved on a mountainside.

He promised the carrot; economic aid worth about \$ 2 billion to President Sardar Mohammad Daud, including a railway from Torkhum to Kabul, and beyond.

The first instalment was also paid, and Daud was willing to join the West but needed time. The Afghan president needed to put down the leftists before embarking on an active pro-west policy.

Pakistan was to provide the stick, if required, and had assembled seven recognised rightwing Afghan religious parties in Peshawar. They kept a military stick ready at Quetta. These rightwing Afghan religious parties were needed for eventual use.

Daud took his time and, by 1978, was about to start eliminating the Afghan left. But the latter got wind of what Daud was up to, and preemptively overthrew him in the Saur Revolution in 1978.

The west was incensed, and decided not to let this new pro-Soviet Afghanistan become a part of the East. It retaliated against the Saur Revolution, with "seven sisters" providing Mujahideen to overthrow the pro-Soviet Kabul government.

The West provided money, equipment and direction. Jihad had started. The Hafizullah Amin government invited the Russian army.

The Russians, alarmed by Western designs, sent in their army at the end of 1979. There is history.

The Soviet Army was comprehensively defeated; like any professional army, it knew nothing about fighting well-armed non-state actors who offered no fixed targets. After the Soviets' departure, the Mujahideen made short shrift of President Najibullah by pulling him out of UN camp. His body was desecrated.

Afghanistan fell plum into the Western lap, and the US left it to Pakistan to nurture a pro-west government in Afghanistan. Pakistan manufactured an Islamic government and installed it in Kabul. The Pakistan Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, offered thanksgiving prayers in the Grand Mosque of Kabul that same day.

However, the course of love between Pakistan and the Afghan government did not run smooth; soon, there were hiccups and differences. The Afghan government's seven components soon fell out among themselves and started fighting one another.

This civil war led to the Afghan state's disintegration. The splintered country came to be ruled by so-called district commanders or warlords. Pakistan became anxious of its fallout inside Pakistan and

brought its secret weapon into play; the Taliban, who quickly overran most areas by special tactics likely to appeal to Afghans in a little over two years, establishing themselves in Kabul in 1996.

Taliban's Islam in action was instructive. They sacked all women employees. Girls were sent home from co-educational institutions. Women were deprived of virtually all cognisable human rights. The minorities fared worse, including the sectarian minority of Shias; not forgetting the massacre of Hazaras.

The vandalism of cultural artefacts shocked the world. Their high-watermark of crusade against idol worshiping was the destruction of historic, giant-sized Buddha statues carved on a mountainside.

The Taliban in NWFP's tribal areas is now spreading that same Islam. No major urban centre is now free from this virus. Its foundation is, of course, orthodox Islam (of Deobandi Maslak) that is prevalent throughout the subcontinent. But Taliban fanatics are a small minority in South Asia.

Much of Islam that is met in all areas is a syncretic Islam, in which music, art, poetry and other art forms are practiced. Indeed, it was through such vehicles that Islam spread. It is mostly about love, tolerance and acceptance of all forms of worship by those who worship their gods differently. Only a few things were prohibited. You can offer your prayers and keep fast as much as you like, but accept others' right to worship whichever god they want to worship. Old Islam is largely an acceptance of diversity and pluralism; it preached tolerance and love.

The Taliban Islam is Deobandi Islam, with accretions of Saudi opinions. Since Saudi Arabia doled

out a lot of money to Islamic parties and groups, its interpretation of Islam, specifically the Salafi and Wahabi ideas, has been developing after 9/11, with resonance elsewhere also.

After the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan for no convincing reason, the anti-western slant became strident under Saudi inspiration; Taliban Islam became more intolerant and extra austere. It accepted no diversity or pluralism.

The warm reception to Taliban's in Pushtoon areas has ethnic reasons. The Taliban, both Afghans and Pakistanis, exemplify puritanical Islamic piety and austerity. Ordinary Pushtoons respect and fear the Taliban, though they do not love them. But this respect and acceptance is also a matter of worry.

This is not the Islam South Asians know, and causes unending strife within the body politic of Pakistan or wherever religious or sectarian minorities exist. They pose a danger that is ideological, cultural and political to Pakistan.

Taliban triumphs in the Frontier's tribal areas represent the emergence of an alternative state that claims to be establishing true Islam by enforcing Shariah and Quran in a certain way. This new state intends to displace Pakistan, and will be modelled on the Taliban regime.

Are Pakistanis ready for it? This is against traditional Islam as it violates the subcontinent's Indo-Persian civilisation. It needs to be fought, though not with the US-recommended means. Pakistanis cannot accept the American methodology. They need a more sophisticated way of doing it.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

The dumpling puzzle leaves a bitter taste

CLOSEUP JAPAN

It still remains a mystery how the dumplings got tainted with pesticide residue. The Chinese factory that produced the dumplings denied any wrongdoing, and said that the records of chemicals kept at the plant's warehouse, starting from December 2006, does not mention the name of the chemical that has been detected in dumpling packets.

MONZURUL HUQ

DUMPLING is a tasty food item devoured by the lovers of Chinese cuisine. Like many things making their way into Japan from the Asian mainland of China, the dumpling, too, made its headway eastward long back in history, and since then has become an essential part of the Japanese diet.

The statistical figure of dumpling consumption in Japan within a given period of time is presumed to be astronomical, and a large part of this widely consumed food item, like many other essential items of today's Japan, is coming from the land of its origin in frozen form. The motive behind such import is obviously to cut the cost of

Japanese supply chain, as procurement of items through import from the places where they are available at a much more competitive price is considered essentially lucrative from the business perspective.

Since Japan has implemented a very strict food quarantine law to protect the country's food market from the harmful penetration of unhealthy items from abroad, nothing was seen to be wrong in the import of dumplings from China as long as quarantine measures were in place. As a result, despite recent incidents in other parts of the world resulting in the erosion of trust on the safety standard of Chinese made products, Japanese food importers continued to depend on China for a number of essential food items.

This sense of security is now swiftly eroding due to a recent food poisoning incident, alleged to have spread from dumplings imported from China.

The news of food poisoning from Chinese dumpling was first reported in the media towards the end of January. Ten people from two different families residing far apart from each other were reported to have fallen ill after eating China-made frozen dumplings, popularly known in Japan as Gyoza.

According to police sources, tainted dumplings that the families consumed contained pesticide residue. Soon after, food-store chains and restaurants all over Japan went into full alert as they suspected a nationwide panicky situation might have serious reper-

cussions on their business. Retailers removed all dumplings from shelves, and restaurants put up special signs saying either their Gyozas were safe or they were not the imported variety.

New incidents of health complaints were reported in following days, which eventually prompted the Japanese government to formally file a protest with the Chinese administration. Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura met the visiting Chinese assistant foreign minister, He Yafei, last Thursday and, in addition to expressing concern about various problems with food products from China, asked Beijing for cooperation in investigating the latest incident.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, meanwhile, asked companies to stop sales of all products from the food processing plants in China's Hebei province, which had been identified earlier as the source of the tainted dumplings.

For China, the incident came as another serious blow after a series of scandals involving food and drugs imported from China last year shattered consumers' trust in

Chinese made products. In 2007, hundreds of cats and dogs died in the United States and elsewhere after eating pet food made from ingredients imported from China. This was followed by toothpaste-related deaths in a number of countries in Central and South America.

As Panama and other countries of the region came to realise the hard truth about the stream of cheap products coming from China, the Western media revealed a new scandal involving paints used in Chinese made toys.

Chinese authorities were compelled to launch a thorough investigation to find out what really went wrong, and eventually tightened control over the manufacturers of items that harmed the country's image as an emerging industrial power. A number of plants identified as problematic were forced to shut down, and others had to go through strict quality control scrutiny.

As one of the leading destinations of Chinese-made products, Japan, too, had her due share of the harmful effects of Chinese commodities during the recent past. In 2002, imports of frozen Chinese

spinach were withheld following reports of extremely high level of pesticide residue.

In the same year, more than 700 people suffered from liver malfunctioning and other disorders after consuming Chinese made dietary supplements. In 2005, it was again diet food, believed to be of Chinese origin that caused dizziness and nausea among the users. Those incidents prompted Japan to adopt stricter pesticide residue standards and tighter control over imported drugs and food items.

But the recent dumpling incident shows that the parties, both in China and in Japan, might have failed to learn the lessons from the past mistakes. If China is to blame for not being careful enough with the shipment of tainted dumplings to Japan, though logical understanding doesn't make it convincing that a company producing the dumpling would do so intentionally, as this would mean the virtual killing of the business deal they are involved in, the Japanese side too is to take part of the blame for being lax in enforcing the strict quarantine law and thus allowing tainted

food items to penetrate Japanese market.

In China, there are more than 6,000 companies that process food items for export to Japan, and around 20 million people are involved in agricultural production targeting the Japanese market. In the past three years, almost 100 percent Chinese food products passed Japanese quarantine inspection. The dumpling incident would most likely prompt the authorities to tighten further the inspection system for food items imported from China.

It still remains a mystery how the dumplings got tainted with pesticide residue. The Chinese factory that produced the dumplings denied any wrongdoing, and said that the records of chemicals kept at the plant's warehouse, starting from December 2006, does not mention the name of the chemical that has been detected in dumpling packets.

Meanwhile, a team of Chinese experts is now in Tokyo to discuss the matter with Japanese officials. The Japanese police are investigating the case, and have so far failed to find any definite clue that might

identify the perpetrators of the criminal act. As of last Sunday, the total number of people who reported feeling nauseous after eating frozen food products from China was recorded to be a little over 1,200.

For politicians, who are always in search of the right opportunity to blame the other side that they love to hate, a definite conclusion is not what they look for. As long as suspicion remains they would love to take the full advantage of the situation, and the dumpling-poisoning incident once again revealed that dubious side of their character.

For China-bashers in Japan, there can be no better moment to intensify the attack, and some of them have already made headlines with their loud claims. Taro Aso, the former Japanese foreign minister, said last Saturday that Japan's agricultural cooperatives should be grateful to China for enhancing the value of Japanese food with its allegedly dangerous dumplings. So, another war in a different front continues as usual.

Monzurul Huq writes from Japan.