

Govt's anti-money laundering drive

Terror-financing should receive a sharper focus

THE government's formation of a 10-member high-powered committee styled as National Committee on Anti-money Laundering -- Combating Terrorist Financing reflects its desire to provide an organised basis to the fight against illegal international monetary transactions and financing of terrorist networks. So far as we understand, the national committee will principally act as a policy-making body while a working committee consisting of representatives from the similar ministries and bodies are represented on the NC will assist the latter on the implementation side. Additionally, the new body is to help recover money stashed away abroad. There are thus three functions before the committees: one, combating money laundering; two, fighting terror financing; and three, bringing back unearned incomes of Bangladeshi citizens kept in foreign financial institutions.

The new arrangements envisage a committee within a committee -- rather a wheel within a wheel. That way there is a built-in element of coordination between the two committees. So far so good, but what we believe to be necessary is to have a nodal agency or a taskforce looking into terror financing as an integral part of the counter terrorism strategy. The committee set-up being torn between three agendas there is likely to be a diffusion of focus on terrorist funding. That's why we are asking for a separate agency to look into the phenomenon of financing terrorism.

Let's not forget that while changes in the anti-money laundering act have been followed by remittances soaring through the formal banking channels those by themselves may not prove enough to checkmate clandestine use of money by extremist quarters. We have heard allegations of outlawed extremist groups operating under different labels and some NGOs and banks linked to suspicious banking operations with Bangladesh Bank looking into them. They are yet to be extricated from the oxygen of support they receive from recalcitrant quarters as is evidenced by the discovery of grenades and arms caches.

The anti-money laundering thrust is understandable though, as the money transacted through informal channels like hundi that is not recorded through the banking system is susceptible to use for subversive activities including trafficking in weapons and terrorist activities. While the national committee addresses the question of collaborating with foreign governments and international financial institutions and banks to secure their cooperation in fighting money laundering and flight of capital, a special cell is needed to tackle terror financing in a focused and intensive way.

Rights of the physically challenged

Time is here to ensure their dignity in society

THE problems faced by the physically handicapped in Bangladesh ought to have been tackled decisively a long time ago. That we yet have to emphasise the need for people with disability to be provided with the rights that are applicable to others demonstrates, in a big way, the insensitivities such individuals have been subjected to over the years. It is against this background that the call by the Chief Adviser for a protection of the rights of the disabled assumes significance. Indeed, the campaign for rights to be ensured for the disabled has been there since long before the remarks made by the head of the caretaker government. His intervention in the matter only reconfirms the public conviction that the time to address such issues is here and now.

There are particular areas that must be focused on in any discussion of the rights of the disabled. Foremost among these is the great need to enable the physically challenged to play their due role in the job industry, of which government service happens to be a key element. For years, organisations geared to the welfare of the disabled have expended sustained efforts towards promoting the cause of the disabled insofar as their role in administrative and other services is concerned. Progress, unfortunately, has been minimal. At the educational level, physical disability has almost always been looked upon as a stigma, with the result that individuals with such drawbacks have found it hard to make an entry into such academic areas or have been compelled to go looking for opportunities that have smacked of segregation. As far as other areas of activities are the matter, notably the general movement of the disabled, it is unfortunate that as a society we are yet to devise the means by which the physically challenged can conduct themselves with ease. At a time when such facilities as disabled car parking, toilet and overall movement facilities have become a given in the West as well as large parts of Asia, it is most regrettable that in Bangladesh no thought has in a real sense been given to introducing similar amenities for the disabled in our country.

The upshot of it is that in Bangladesh there is still a very large measure of discrimination against the physically challenged. What is therefore needed is much more than any amendment to the existing Disability Welfare Act. And that entails a full-scale and foolproof mechanism that will not only speak of the rights of the disabled but also ensure their proper and swift implementation. We need to move beyond platitudes.

Marching forth



ZAFAR SOBHAN

DON'T get me wrong. I think Hillary Clinton would make a superb president. For what it's worth, I even think that John McCain would be a significant improvement over the current occupant of the White House. Aside from his faith in America's imperial destiny, McCain is actually not that bad, as far as Republicans go.

Nevertheless, neither Clinton nor McCain can do for their country and the world what I believe that Barack Obama can do. What he has the potential to do is to remake America, both in its relationship to its own citizenry and also in its relationship to the rest of the world. It is the capacity that he has to be a transformational president in the manner of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan that makes his candidacy so special.

Domestically, Obama represents a new generation of liberal, unscarred by the traumas of the 1970s and 1980s, and confident both in liberalism's ability to better the lives of the American people and in the belief that Americans are ready to embrace an essentially

liberal agenda for change. The older generation of liberals, personified latterly by Hillary Clinton, came of age in the 1970s and 1980s at a time when the country was swinging back towards the conservative side of the political spectrum after the tumult of the 1960s. Bill and Hillary Clinton ran Texas for George McGovern in 1972, and one can understand how dispiriting that must have been, and how that experience as well as all that followed forged their belief that America was and would remain a fundamentally conservative country, and that there were severe limits to what could be achieved politically in such a landscape.

Liberals of that generation were never able to come right out and say what they truly believed on a whole range of issues for fear that it would be poison at the ballot box. To a large extent they internalised the conservative caricature of liberalism and spent their entire political careers trying to demonstrate that they were not anti-American or anti-religious as their critics charged.

Their policies were, and remain, the politics of compromise and capitulation, of nibbling away at

the edges, accepting the conventional wisdom, operating within the framework drawn up by the conservatives that dominated the political discourse in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

It has been a long time since there was an unabashed liberal, who was unashamed of his liberalism and eloquent in its defense, running for US president. As an eloquent and committed advocate of liberalism and liberal solutions, Obama can do for American liberalism what Ronald Reagan's presidency did for American conservatism. Hillary Clinton would make a fine president, but she wouldn't try, nor would she be able to accomplish what Obama can: create the conditions for a complete realignment of the American political landscape.

Outside America, Obama's impact could be even greater. The American declaration of independence acknowledges the importance of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," but this fine sentiment has been all but forgotten in the America of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Indeed, although George Bush came into office promising a "humbler" foreign policy, the current

administration's foreign policy, informed by the thinking of the Project for a New American Century, typifies the exact opposite.

John McCain is a firm believer in America's exceptionalism and imperial destiny. He may not be as resolutely unilateral in his outlook as Bush, but the idea that America is unique and has unique rights in the world, and need not be concerned unduly by niceties such as world opinion is very much alive in his campaign rhetoric and record.

Even Hillary Clinton, I do not think, has the vision or the inclination to fundamentally reshape America's relation to the rest of the world. Evidence of this is her Iraq war vote and her insistence that she would not meet with leaders she deems to be enemies of America, such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Raul Castro.

Obama would, he promises a fundamentally different approach, one in which America is part of the community of nations, and does not stand outside and above the other countries of the world.

The impact an Obama presidency would make on the rest of the world would be titanic. Not only does Obama credibly promise



a humbler, more co-operative foreign policy, but in his very being, he personifies a different kind of America, and his election would show America in its best light.

Not only would America potentially be able to use its vast power for the greater good of the world, but it would be given the benefit of the doubt that no one wishes to give it now under George Bush. Those around the world fighting for human rights and human dignity not only would have a useful ally in the White House, but also an ally that would not discredit them in the eyes of those who need to be won over.

Right now, the Iraq war and the innumerable imbecilities of the Bush doctrine, insofar as it relates

to the shadow cast by America over the rest of the world, not only tarnishes America's image, but also has had the unfortunate consequence of empowering the most retrograde and retrogressive forces all over the world, especially in the Muslim world. Obama can change this.

March 4 is just around the corner. The Democratic primaries in Ohio and Texas could be Hillary Clinton's last stand. But this time it will not just be Americans who will be watching to see who will challenge John McCain in November. The whole world is watching, and hoping to see a new chapter in American history unfold.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

National unity government?



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

WHILE disasters tend to unite the nation, it is infinitely better that the nation closes ranks before any impending disaster. With world recession looming in our faces, we do not have the economic resilience to cushion the impact. Coupled with shortages of food, fuel and electricity, and increase in suicide bombings, only a monumental effort by all and sundry will see the country through a long hot summer.

Political confrontation will only complicate matters. Inheriting a truncated Pakistan on the way to further disintegration in December 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto managed to keep the country together because all the disparate political forces united behind him to see off the crisis.

With JUI-NAP led coalitions in NWFP and Balochistan Bhutto bought time and deftly managed to avoid geo-political meltdown; this was political opportunism of the magnificent kind. A little more than two years later he threw it all away, dismissing the two provincial governments on less than credible trumped-up accusations, and laying the seeds of permanent political turmoil in what was left of

Quaid's Pakistan. Even though violence since has taken many faces, economic disparity because of racial inequality remains the major reason for it. With all players across the broad political spectrum awash with purpose and goodwill in the first flush of victory over the forces of autocracy, Bhutto's son-in-law Asif Zardari finds himself more or less in a similar position. Will he take the major political risk of cobbling together a national unity government?

Even though Zardari's potential partners have common cause uniting them against a common foe, they remain ideologically way apart as political entities. With the president dangling the NRO Sword of Damocles over his head, should Zardari take the more pragmatic route of forming PPP-led coalition governments by including the PML (Q) instead of PML (N) at the centre?

Notwithstanding enormous baggage in the form of lingering corruption charges, Asif Zardari is a courageous man. He was unbending during his long captivity, and bore it with considerable grace and dignity. While Zardari has reasons, the silence of all politicians (and the electronic media) on the question of the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) is deafening, it is as if the NRO did not exist. On October 19, 2007, I had written "blanket amnesty on political grounds is certainly an instrument for national reconciliation but only individual pardons are given for corruption. There is not a single instance in history of blanket amnesty for corruption. If the Supreme Court rules otherwise, it will be a first, and under the doctrine of fantasy! Instead of putting SC to the test of its credibility, one appeals to Pervez Musharraf to revoke the blunder of enacting the NRO and consign this dark and dank document to the dustbin of history. Black is black!"

The consequences for the society of lack of accountability were detailed in an earlier article in September 2005, to quote, "the smugglers of the '50s and '60s are today openly considered some of the pillars of Pakistan's commerce and society, not much separating them from the civil and military personnel who have looted the state's treasury. Contemptuous of the laws of the

land they flagrantly flaunt their ill-gotten millions, investing in commerce and industry to make their ill-gotten gains legitimate, some do not even bother to conceal their past. Some are even investing heavily in the print and electronic media. For the ordinary citizen making his (or her) living the hard way, frustrations are at the point of boiling over, the schism could lead to a class war. Hundreds and thousands of retired personnel who earned an honest livelihood and are living in pitiable state on meager pensions now openly lament their failure to avail the opportunity to make money when they could have. Their virtual penury is a living symbol to our present and future generations that honesty does not pay."

When the masses are subjected to further deprivation the very worse can happen, as is very likely to happen in the next few months. To quote from my article of September 29, 2005, "the Naxalite movement in India today is a greater and more potent force to contend with, killing criminals and the corrupt in the judiciary and law enforcement alike, not to mention corrupt bureaucrats,

crooked businessmen, anybody amassing inordinate wealth, etc. The fabric binding society is the belief that those that are supposed to uphold the law will do so, if one has reason to fear them violating the laws of the land then the very basis of civilisation fails, and will force those seeking justice to take law into their own hands. Vigilantes may come from law enforcement agencies (LEAs), and/or from the public."

There are other contributory reasons in PPP's pursuit of political expediency, the first and foremost reason being the PML (N)'s ambiguous stance on the "war against terrorism." While the "war against terrorism" may be a US-crafted phrase, it is a dire necessity for Pakistan. In the relentless fight to root out terrorism from our midst, there can be no appeasement of those who are engaged in mindless violence, ripping apart our social fabric both literally and symbolically.

The poverty of our masses and the lack of education are fertile grounds for exploitation. Our jihadi militants are exploiting this frustration to the hilt by giving it religious connotations. Can one even begin to decipher the callous mindset of those who launch others on suicide bombing missions?

While the aim is certainly to spread fear and anarchy, the proliferation of incidents is alarming. Mian Sahib must come up with a clear statement of intention, one has yet to be convinced he is committed to fighting this prime menace to the state and the society.

When Mian Nawaz Sharif says

that the army should not get involved with politics he is quite right, the army has no business being involved with politics or -- for that matter -- business. So, in the same manner, politicians have no business interfering in the inner working of the military, showering them with gifts, favours and praise for their own selfish motivated purposes.

Given his history of confrontation with army chiefs, Mian Sahib's stance towards the army must remain a matter of ambiguity. In such circumstances, including the Sharifs in the centre (even though Shahbaz Sharif is far more amenable and acceptable) will require deft political footwork.

One feels that Zardari will take the middle ground of risking 1988 all over, a PPP-led coalition without PML (N) at the federal level, conceding Punjab to the PML (N) despite the bitterness of PPP activists in that province.

All our leaders must render themselves accountable, in all senses of the word, to the people who have voted them to power in good faith. Whatever may be Zardari's motives, we must take them at face value as being Pakistan-specific. While political initiatives must go hand in hand with military ones to root out the menace of terrorism, this country badly needs a united stand to meet serious economic challenges looming in the near future. That is only possible by having a national unity government.

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

Good for America, good for the world



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

AS the US primary election season approaches its decisive phase with two of the delegate rich states of Texas and Ohio, the desperation in the presidential bid of Sen. Hillary Clinton may turn into a doomsday despair unless she wins both states by 65% of the votes cast on February 5 -- a nearly unrealistic proposition according to most pollsters.

Then again, winning by such a landslide margin will only make her competitive with Sen. Barack Obama in the elected delegate counts (pledged delegates); forcing the nomination to be decided in

NO NONSENSE

Obama's message of hope for the hopeless, change from the past, and promises for the future has captivated the imagination of millions of the disgruntled American voters, and transcended race, colour and income brackets. All this augurs well for America -- and what is good for America must also be good for the rest of the world.

the party's August convention in Denver, Colorado -- one that would require invoking the "nuclear option" -- the wheeling and dealing of the so-called 796 superdelegates.

Deciding on a presidential nominee by invoking the "nuclear option" is undemocratic -- one that subordinates the aspirations of the voters. However, this option will not be warranted if Obama wins both Ohio and Texas primaries.

The concept of super-delegates first surfaced after the Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern was routed in the 1972 general election. That defeat made the party bosses innovate a complementary role for themselves to

ensure that the eventual nominee was electable. They will also vote to choose a candidate in case of a stalemate -- when a candidate fails to win the 2025 elected delegates required for the nomination.

Not since the 1984 nomination race between vice president Walter Mondale and Sen. Gary Hart has a democratic primary election been as evenly contested as the one in progress between Obama and Clinton. Mondale was put over the top only after he mounted an intense campaign for super-delegates.

In recent interviews, many super-delegates expressed concern about a growing fear among voters that the nomination process may be stolen by super-delegates --

one that may witness the spectacle of a brokered convention -- reminiscent of the 1968 Chicago convention, with its violence in the streets and vitriol inside the hall.

Despite his meteoric rise in the Democratic primary elections, Obama is considered a neophyte in national politics. His lack of a military background, executive decision-making, and foreign policy experience is his Achilles heel -- a shortcoming that is being raised by his Democratic rival Sen. Clinton and the possible Republican presidential nominee John McCain at every step.

Obama and his team counter by saying that the experience of both McCain and Clinton took us to the

"unwise" war in Iraq that cost over 3,000 American lives and \$700 billion -- not counting hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives obliterated. Besides, both Bill Clinton and George Bush, former governors, were elected presidents though they had little military and foreign policy experience.

Interestingly, what separates Obama and Clinton is not policy differences in their positions, it is, rather, distinctively demographic. Women, senior citizens, Latinos, rural dwellers, and blue-collar workers are Clintonites, while Obamites include people under 30, blacks, urban dwellers, and affluent white-collar professionals.

Obama, however, won 11 state primaries in a row by making inroads with white women and blue-collar workers, who were considered to be Clinton supporters.

In a Zogby national presidential poll Obama leads 14% over Clinton. He leads John McCain by 7%. This survey, conducted over the period of February 13-16, included 1,105 likely voters nationwide (plus minus 3%).

Obama's advantage over Clinton spans most of the ideological spectrum -- he leads by 23% among progressives at the far left; by 16% among extreme liberals; and by 8% among moderates. Clinton leads over Obama by 14% among likely Democratic voters who consider themselves conservatives.

His lead against McCain stems from his strong base among voters under 65 years old, and among women and independents. Among blacks he leads 80% to 3% with 18% undecided. Only among white voters does Obama lose to McCain by a 47% to 41% margin with 12% undecided.

Obama does not have the stigma of slave ancestry (Kenyan father and white American mother), nor is he a product of the early American civil rights movements. Some black civil rights leaders think of him as not black enough -- a black man who acts like a white.

However, his childhood was not any different from poor black or poor white children. That may be a reason why his messages transcend race and enthrall blacks and

whites alike.

The US, with roughly 6% of the world's population, imprisons 20% of the world's prisoners -- the vast majority being men of colour. A recent report released by TV Channel MSNBC shows that about 16% of black men in their 20s, instead of being in college, are serving times in prison, while almost 60% of those in their early 30s have spent time in prison. Human Rights Watch reports that, nationwide, blacks are incarcerated 8.2 times the rate of whites.

Understandably, Obama's message of hope and change encompasses many of the aspirations of black Americans and poor whites. He believes that electing John McCain will be embracing Bush's failed policies, which fanned the flames of anti-American sentiment stretching over all continents. Electing Clinton will be more of the same -- making her a Democratic establishment president.

Obama passionately addresses the immediate need for America's energy independence, and automobile fuel efficiency. He prom-

ises to end the Iraq war by bringing the American occupying army from Iraq within a year. His quoting of John F. Kennedy: "We must not negotiate with our enemies out of fear but mustn't fear to negotiate," is gaining momentum with the electorate. He also promised to close the "torture camp" -- the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison on Cuban coast.

Racism in America will not end with Obama's winning the presidency. Glen Ford of Black America says that an Obama presidency will free white people from the burden of having to listen to historical black complaints of the legacies of slavery.

Obama's message of hope for the hopeless, change from the past, and promises for the future has captivated the imagination of millions of the disgruntled American voters, and transcended race, colour and income brackets.

All this augurs well for America -- and what is good for America must also be good for the rest of the world.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University, is currently visiting Bangladesh.