

Violence in the name of religion is reprehensible

Let peace and rationality prevail

WE have witnessed to our utter dismay, two successive days of clashes between activists of Khelafat Majlish and Islami Shashantantra Andolon on the one side and the law enforcers on the other near the National Mosque during emergency centring around demonstrations by the former against the Women Development Policy. In the fallout many people on both sides have been injured and hospitalised, something that should have been avoidable in the first place. It created a law and order situation at a time when the country is grappling with food crisis and looking ahead to the national elections due by December.

Ever since murmurs of protests were heard, the government engaged the ulema in a meeting clarifying that the Women Development Policy did not contain anything repugnant to Islamic principles. Then assurances followed from various levels of the government including the chief adviser and law adviser reiterating the same position. Furthermore, as a concrete step to remove any misgiving about the Women Development Policy, the government has formed a committee to go into the whole question. Without waiting for the recommendations of the committee, the Islamist parties fell into an aggressive mode. The fact that the detractors are not prepared to be assuaged by the assurances of the government is a proof that they are out to make an issue when there is none.

Islam, after all, stands for peace; any violence in the name of religion is, therefore, reprehensible. Let's not forget, our religion clearly encourages deliberation and logical discourse as a way of resolving any issue or problem.

The whole interest of the country now revolves around the task of achieving the goal for free, fair and credible elections in the country by the year end. Any distraction is hardly desirable now. The rising prices in the international market place and the national arena are a direct challenge to the maintenance of minimum living standards. Let's get our act together to meet the exigencies of the contemporary scenario.

Stage set for Dhaka-Kolkata train

It augurs well for both countries

THE train service between Dhaka and Kolkata, a link to be resumed after 43 years, will add a new dimension to traveling between the two most historic capitals of the region. If everything goes well, the much-awaited service in the shape of "Moitree Express" is to start on 14 April, Pahela Baishakh, which is an auspicious day for the Bengalis on the two sides of the border. According to the deal signed by the representatives of the two governments, passenger trains will run between Cantonment Station in Dhaka and Chitpur Station in Kolkata through the Darshana border for a period of three years. The treaty would be renewed if the two sides find it worthwhile after the period initially agreed upon.

The upside of the new deal is that it would increase connectivity among the peoples of not only the two countries but of the region as well. It could possibly be the cheapest mode of transportation for the people, which would prompt them to prefer train to any other mode. So, if a large number of people start to travel by train between the two countries there is no reason why the project should not be commercially viable. With the Indian railway making windfall profit last fiscal, we rest our hope with the railway authorities of the two countries to make an impact worth noticing. Affordable tickets, online booking, sticking to schedule and high quality service would be the major factors to make that impact.

We believe the Moitree Express would be the flag carrier of not only the two countries but of SAARC as well. As SAARC encourages traveling between the member states, an affordable mode of traveling is what people have been looking for with all earnestness. But both sides will have to ensure avoiding hassle in getting visa and obtaining tickets to popularise the service. We do not wish to see the wonderful opportunity go waste because of unprofessional handling at any stage of operating the train service. Welcome Moitree Express.

Exorbitant prices creating havoc



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ORINARY citizens are not only weary but just about fed up with the continuous bickering between the authorities and the economists. Even now while starvation is stalking the countryside, responsible authorities are playing around with words and denying that there is a crisis of major proportions.

I am not referring here only to cereals -- rice and wheat -- but also to other essential items. This includes edible oil, milk powder, fish, chicken and other sources of cheap protein. Some in the government have tried to explain away the rise by mentioning that there has been a steep increase in prices of food commodities all over the world. The other day someone pointed out to me that India had now fixed rice export price at US dollar 1000 per tonne. He was saying this because he was underlining that the price of rice in our market might reach Taka 70 per kilogram. He was also suggesting that the price of flour would reach Taka 60 per kg by the end of this financial year.

The price of edible oil has already crossed Taka 105 per litre and milk powder is prohibitively expensive. Lentil has similarly gone beyond the reach of the common man. So what is going to happen to the traditional Bengalee who has grown up on dal and bhata?

I am writing today about this

aspect of our daily life not only to highlight the misery being faced by the common man but also to point out the impossibility of their living with dignity and honesty. We can talk of fighting corruption but we also need to ensure that people are not forced to be corrupt to meet their basic needs of food, education and healthcare.

The other day I ran across one of my former peons in the kitchen market. He had lost weight and was exceptionally thin. I asked him the reason for this deterioration. A pious man and a strict practicing Muslim,

healthy diet. He however had tears in his eyes when he mentioned that he wished he had spare change to have fish at least once a week. He also added that he was a person with 'Iman' and so could not be corrupt. He also remarked that the government had failed to ensure that its servants could live with dignity. I was going to buy some fruits. I desisted the temptation and offered the money to him instead. He refused to take the money but agreed to take home some fruits if I bought them for his family.

What I heard was a classic case of

mechanism. This will be in addition to the already existing efforts undertaken with the help of the Bangladesh Rifles. There has also been another report that the Dearness Allowance for government servants will be enhanced.

All these are sensible steps but will they cover the cross section of the population? Providing Dearness Allowance to government servants is but touching the tip of the iceberg. It is only a palliative measure. We have to remember that more than 98 per cent of the population does not work for the government. Similarly nothing is

refused to accept the signs on the wall and the opinions of economists since the beginning of this fiscal year.

Consequently, there was little effective perspective planning not only in arranging import of scarce items at lower prices but also in the procurement process of domestic food grains. In addition, insufficient attention was given towards agro-commodity marketing, balanced use of fertilizer and sustainable seed supply. It was also disappointing to see absence of any form of dialogue on the evolving crisis with representatives of political parties.

the country's agricultural system and a more intensive and integrated approach towards food strategy, on a short, medium and long-term basis. Appropriate and useful technologies required for extension and development of new varieties of food items should also be disseminated among the farmers and entrepreneurs in the rural areas. Measures should also be undertaken to provide them with easier and cheaper access to credit.

The government needs to understand that many of the reforms they have introduced in the sphere of governance might eventually fall apart if there is a spontaneous law and order situation created by this nagging price spiral. Some can remain hungry for some of the time. This will however not be a tenable proposition for months together, specially for poorly paid fixed income families and millions of landless, uprooted rural people whose daily family income has finally become equivalent to one and half kilo of rice. The rubber band of patience can continue to stretch but is bound to eventually snap.

We have today a crisis of major proportions. The government must now come forward and initiate on a priority basis, dialogue with political parties, and seek their views (based on their local experience) on how to transcend this prevailing national calamity till the holding of the general elections. I am confident that such a constructive engagement will enable them to identify measures that might ease the situation and put a stop to 'super-profit' making being carried out currently by some unscrupulous cartels, syndicates and greedy traders. Such an arrangement could start through the seeking of views from political representatives about the forthcoming budget. It is a question of political will and necessary commitment. Everything else will then follow suit.

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POST BREAKFAST

This will require restructuring of the country's agricultural system and a more intensive and integrated approach towards food strategy, on a short, medium and long-term basis. Appropriate and useful technologies required for extension and development of new varieties of food items should also be disseminated among the farmers and entrepreneurs in the rural areas. Measures should also be undertaken to provide them with easier and cheaper access to credit.

he stroked his beard and then told me that he had given up any form of breakfast along with his wife. He said he could not afford it any more. The savings went into preparation of meager tiffin for his school going daughter. He then went on to add that his entire family ate a little bit of rice only during dinner in the form of 'Panta-bhat' (not being able to afford lentils). I asked him about his other friends. He laughed and said that almost everyone had become vegetarian, with potato as the principal vegetable, and had given up tea with milk. Everyone now drank raw tea, once a day, if funds so permitted, with ginger or one clove. He went on to add (with a smile) that the local doctor had advised them that the current rise in prices of food items was probably designed by Allah to ensure that they had less of 'rich' (high cholesterol) food and a more

malnutrition in the making.

I have since been informed by villagers, particularly from the northern and southwestern parts of the country that most families are living only on a diet of just potatoes. If this is not a form of silent famine, what is? Soaring prices are also forcing thousands of additional landless labourers to migrate and seek work in the urban areas every day. In most cases there are also reports that many are withdrawing their children from school and starting them off in lowly paid menial jobs.

The media has recently reported that the government has decided to form a new high-powered core committee, headed by the Chief Adviser to cushion the effects of soaring food prices. It has also been mentioned that the government has decided to increase the sale of rice under the open market sale (OMS)

being done for the senior citizens who have retired from their respective areas of employment and might be on fixed pensions. What is this section supposed to do? We need to think about them too. I know that we are not living in a welfare state, but time has come to seriously consider subsidizing basic food items for senior citizens. They need to be supported with regard to purchase of a minimum requirement of rice, flour, edible oil, lentil and sugar every week. A special form of rationing could be introduced for the elders (above the age of sixty five), both in the urban as well as in the rural areas.

The government, till now, appears to have pursued market management policies in a manner that has generated controversy. It has made them unpopular because the efforts undertaken have been mostly unsuccessful. They consistently

It has been fortunate for the country that common sense and clear thinking finally prevailed among a section of the agronomists before the current Boro season. They need to be congratulated for having helped in the expansion of Boro cropping for this year. I understand that Boro cultivation this year has been in 4.9 million hectares, almost 0.4 million hectares more than the previous year. As a result we are expecting an additional rice crop of one million tons. Hopefully this will enable us to reduce the deficit in our food requirement, assist in rice price stability over the coming months and improve our required food security situation through creation of a bigger food reserve. We must do this with all seriousness because the global rice inventories are right now, according to Financial Times, at 25-year lows. This will require restructuring of

Role model in politics and disconcerting reality



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

FORMER Chief Adviser and Chief Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman while speaking as chief guest at the National Citizen's Dialogue titled "National unity to face major challenges 2008" has implored the nation to "elect such parliament members who will be role models not only in politics but also on our way forward". He has reportedly urged not to waste our votes on incompetent persons. Justice Habibur Rahman could not be more candid. How one wishes his entreaties make an appropriate impact on the relevant quarters?

However, on ground we find politicians whose activities bear testimony to their passionate commitment to public causes for the defence of the rights and liberties of common man? Is there credible evidence of painstaking efforts to ensure that the well-springs of democracy remain undefiled? Do we see the few who would make things happen for the overwhelming majority who have no idea of what happens?

If we look at the history of the sub-continent we find that the people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. We also see that many regimes have been destroyed not by adversity but by abasement. Corruption has been the greatest solvent of public institutions; poverty poses a far smaller threat.

Incidentally, in the democratic experience of Bangladesh since at least 1991, we find that our politicians have remained occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. Instead of vision and imagination our leaders have been served by deception and craftiness. Their

eloquence flourished most when public affairs were in the worst condition.

The question that should bother a discerning mind is whether with our fragile institutions and economic under-performance we can have a truly representative democracy. There is no denying that the whim and caprice of our ruling clan of the immediate past have transformed our democracy into a confrontational and dysfunctional entity. The burly sinners of our political world have consistently corrupted goodness.

perhaps time to take freedom in moderation. It is also time to see if our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that at present our people are in a mood which comes rarely in the life of a country. They are looking forward to new direction, a new era, a new life. It is time not merely for a new budget or a new economic policy or new price structure. It is perhaps the moment for shaping and moulding a new society, for giving a new and clear orientation to the nation.

callous leaders because those leaders were good to them at a personal level. It would not be wrong to assume that even educated Bangladeshis look to their leaders for favours rather than ideas, meaning less rhetoric rather than concrete action.

While deliberating on democratic reforms or political party reforms, we should not be oblivious of the reality that instead of long-term institutional reforms everyone wants short-term gains. In our situation the best politician is one who never says 'no' to his voters or friends.

at least one major political party did not hold any council session for the last 12 to 14 years. In fact, major party decisions have been mostly influenced by the sycophants and the time-servers, the cringing and the craven.

It is to be hoped that the present government will enact such laws and take such executive action as are meant merely to deal with the difficulties of the moment but calculated to ensure the good of the country in the long years ahead. Though political party reforms are no less important, the caretaker government

in the media, are credible evidence of the abominable low to which politics has descended in Bangladesh.

It may be the time to strengthen the local government, now that we have an extended caretaker government that has supposedly no narrow and partisan interests. This is urgently necessary to control the ever-increasing greed and lust of less than conscientious politicians. Greater concentration of power at one point is undoubtedly bad for the political health.

It is time to think if by means of legal and institutional measures we can make life difficult for the corrupt elements. We have to ensure that such elements do not get time to relax and are subjected to real inconveniences in displaying their ill-gotten worldly possessions. The politicians can be kept on track if statutory measures are taken to guard against their becoming unbridled promoters-distributors of favours. This is crucial to stop favour-seeking satellites from hovering around the so-called power points. The opportunity cost of being corrupt in politics has to be very high.

It is time for our society to ensure that the political scene is not dominated by people whose real sources of income cannot be ascertained. For most people politics must not turn into a fulltime occupation, and prominence in public life should be accorded only after some positive record of public service. The villains cannot be upstaged in our political history. Sense of propriety in public life has to be retained.

Running the affairs of State is a solemn and grim business where we need individuals of true grit. It was indeed pathetic to see occupiers of very high political office enjoying largely the perks and privileges of power without feeling the burden of responsibilities. Their conspicuous consumption was a rude shock for many. The single minded pursuit of money by the ruling elite have impoverished the mind of the nation and has also desecrated its heart. Wiping the dirt from the art of politics brooks no further delay.

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STRAIGHT LINE

It is time for our society to ensure that the political scene is not dominated by people whose real sources of income cannot be ascertained. For most people politics must not turn into a fulltime occupation, and prominence in public life should be accorded only after some positive record of public service. The villains cannot be upstaged in our political history. Sense of propriety in public life has to be retained.

Without doubt our polity will need time for our democracy to have an aristocracy of talents, knowledge and character. While waiting for that, good number of criminals and plunderers must be permanently debarred from politics and public life.

The process of replacing the mercenaries of our political arena by men of honour and knowledge will prove lengthy and the delivery promises will be difficult to fulfil but the filth and stench of public life have to be cleansed. Politics have to be salvaged from the dangerous blend of incompetence, unscrupulousness and plain wickedness.

The question is, must the reins of power be handed back to those who appear promise-bound never to become wiser? Also whether we should revert back exclusively to that party system which takes grievous toll of an individual's independence, judgment and freedom of action?

The disenchantment of our people with the state of politics and our politicians has to be appreciated. The premonition that elections and their corruptions, injustice and the power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given cannot be summarily dismissed. It is

We have to remember that our society has to not only fight against the big time criminals masquerading as politicians, it has also to do away with the few hundred petty tyrants that mushroomed all over the country during the last couple of years.

In our politics one can see a patron-client relationship, otherwise described as strong band of paternalism. The adversarial relationship between people and authority has been promoted by our politicians and as a result, our people have become beseeching supplicants and not demanders. We do not ask for amenities as a matter of right, services in return for payment of taxes, respect and dignity as a citizen but everything as a gesture of goodwill from our 'benign' rulers.

It is largely true that most of our politicians seek special favours and feel gratified if corrupt and inept supreme authority bestows these upon them. Instead of collective gains they have preferred individual profits. Most people are beguiled by the feigned humility and politeness of corrupt leaders, ignoring the disastrous effects of the visionless and directionless policies.

It is not unusual to see many of our otherwise upright and honourable politicians praising dishonest and

Democratic and the political party reforms have not received the due attention because our political elite have not believed in the concepts of modern governance. They did not think that a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary and more modern universities and colleges for social sciences, medicine and engineering were essential for building a democratic and progressive polity.

The striking irony of recent times is that the suspension of democratic activities following the change of 11th January 2007 has actually resulted in the sharp awakening of the political conscience of the nation. A realization has perhaps dawned that the people are the only keepers of the constitution and that at poll time they need to exact a heavy price from those who have been manifestly notorious by indulging in the worst of corrupt and undemocratic activities.

Many politicians including the party heads did not sound credible when they pointed to the paramount necessity of the holding of party council session for carrying out the proposed reforms. This is so because

would be rendering a lasting national service by effecting badly needed electoral reform.

The nation needs to be salvaged from the cesspool of degradation to which professional politicians have reduced our country. By voting such politicians to power we have kept a gifted and enterprising nation in the ranks of the poorest on earth. The survival of such politicians as public figures depends upon the continuation of the forces of ignorance. For many of our portly politicians, goodly in girth, public deprivation is good business: they talk continually about poverty without having the will, the expertise or the imagination to eradicate it.

It is only in the very recent past that some of our prominent politicians were contemplating to retire because perhaps politics had been a very satisfying means of personal enrichment for them and that too within a short period. Such an apprehension is suspected to be true for at least some young politicians who in the last couple of years have risen from rags to riches. One such figure who worked in a sensitive post in the chief executive's office during the last political government is now a fugitive from the law. Some glimpses of his illegal acquisitions, as reported

Not by visa alone



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

NAWAZ Sharif, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, is touching upon subjects which leaders in his country and India intentionally avoid. His suggestion to Pakistan to unilaterally lift restrictions on travels by Indians is bold and timely. Tension between the two countries is far less than before and there is a pronounced desire to come closer to each other. The Muslim League which Nawaz Sharif heads is a concomitant with fanatic elements. Some have strong anti-India views. For him to ignore their bias is courageous. Yet, this hardheaded politician as he is, his ears are plugged to the ground. He is convinced that an average Pakistani wants to befriend India. He has

tested this sentiment when, a few years ago, he swept the polls against the late Benazir Bhutto on the plank that the vote for him was a vote for friendship with India. She had then taken an opposite stand. Nawaz Sharif has said that Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairman of the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), also supports his proposal. Zardari or any PPP minister should come out with some statement to confirm their support. It is, however, strange that Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has made no statement to express his views on how to improve relations with India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose visit to Pakistan is awaited anxiously by Islamabad, said a few weeks ago that

BETWEEN THE LINES

Once business and contact come down to the level of ordinary traders and ordinary people the spirit of togetherness develops. Were this to happen, the picture which some politicians, bureaucrats and journalists have painted about each other's country would change. People would come to know each other as they were, not as they are depicted, to fit into the policies the two countries pursue.

he was ready to travel to the other side provided there was something important to sign. The abolition of visa can be worth a visit.

While in the wilderness Benazir Bhutto had come to the conclusion that India and Pakistan should sink their differences - a realisation that came to her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto towards the end of his life. He would even say that he was sick of going to the chanceries of the world. Had Benazir been alive she would have taken the initiative to normalise relations with India. She told me at London during an interview that she wanted a "borderless" subcontinent. She also had Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal in view. Her wish boiled down to a common South

Asia with joint trade, business, services or investment.

The hitch may be from the Indian side. It believes that it is a target of terrorists who are "trained" in Pakistan. New Delhi's fear was initially on the infiltration in Kashmir. But it has now spread to other parts of India, more recently because of disclosures following raids on SIMI, a banned organisation of Muslim students. Some have reportedly made a clean breast of their 'design' to attack key installations and people at high places. They have also admitted their involvement in several blasts, including the one on the Samjhota Express. New Delhi also claims to have proof that Dawood Ibrahim,

an underground don said to be living in Karachi, has planned and executed the bomb blasts at Mumbai in 1993. Some recent incidents of violence have also been linked to him.

Since the "hand of Pakistan" is seen in all these incidents, India would be chary in abolishing visa. Its fear is that terrorists will come through the border, although it is naive to believe that they use normal channels to enter. Some terrorist organisations may be operating from across the border, but there is an established fact that there is an indigenous crop of terrorists in the country. True, during the interrogation of the SIMI men and those of Dawood Ibrahim, the ISI link was

alleged. But there is no going away from the fact that the extremists among Muslims in India have emerged after the killings in Gujarat.

Another hindrance in the way of normalisation may be the BJP which once had the credit of leading its Prime Minister's bus to Lahore. The party has re-adopted its old anti-Pakistan posture and the ideology of Hindutva. Friendship with Pakistan does not fit into its anti-Muslim approach. The party believes that its anti-Pakistan stance will go down well with the Hindu voter in the Lok Sabha elections, due in less than a year.

I see the merit in Nawaz Sharif's proposal if the people-to-people contact is in thousands. Only then will the cobwebs of misinformation and the age-old hostility go. This cannot be done so long as the two countries pledge not to use violence to settle their disputes. It is unfortunate that the Tashkent Declaration did not lead to the abandoning of violence. The then Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, did not sign the declaration until General Mohammad Ayub Khan wrote in his own hand the words, "without resorting to

arms."

Both the countries may not sign a 'no-war' pact which has its own connotation because of the past history. But they should renounce violence to solve the bilateral issues. Using terrorists to destabilise a country is worse. Both countries are at the mercy of terrorists at present. Both would do well if they were to join hands to curb terrorism not only in India and Pakistan but also in entire South Asia. Zardari's suggestion to keep Kashmir aside for the time being is worth pursuing. We have made no progress in the way we have gone about in the last 60 years. Had there been at least free trade between the two countries, there would have been economic interdependence, lessening the space for bickering. Trade ultimately develops into economic ties. The feeling of inter-dependence comes into play. There is give and take. Once this feeling gets hold of the people, they go beyond disputes. At least, the differences are understood in the spirit of accommodation, not antagonism.

One regrettable thing has been that contacts have generally been at the level of the elite where prejudice

has political dimensions. Once business and contact come down to the level of ordinary traders and ordinary people the spirit of togetherness develops. Were this to happen, the picture which some politicians, bureaucrats and journalists have painted about each other's country would change. People would come to know each other as they were, not as they are depicted, to fit into the policies the two countries pursue.

Ultimately the abolition of visa, however desirable, may be of little use if the young minds continue to be polluted. India at least is not guilty of rewriting the history. Unfortunately, history in Pakistan begins with the advent of Islam in the subcontinent. What about Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa or Taxila? The subcontinent has a long history. The birth of two and three countries does not change it. Our separate identities are important. But they cannot be at the expense of the history and traditions which we have shared for hundreds of years. The abolition of visa alone cannot bring it about.

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