

## Intemperate voices and the needful



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

INCREASINGLY intemperate and intolerant voices of the so-called extremist groups have been heard during the last two weeks with regard to their vehement opposition to the proposed national women development policy. They have virtually threatened the establishment by serving an ultimatum indicating a time frame by which alterations in the said policy, as suggested by them or wholesale scrapping of the women development policy has to be effected.

Somehow an uneasy truce has been accomplished after security forces turned up in sufficient numbers and appropriate gear to stop extremists from repeating the ugly and violent incidents of the preceding week.

The above incident once again proves, if proof is at all necessary, that the discontinuance of violent acts by the so-called religious extremists for some length of time was no guarantee of a comfortable scenario.

The reason is simple. The growth and rise of such extremist groups in our body-politic is not known to the general public and more disconcertingly its damage potential not adequately appreciated by the political establishment.

In fact, there is a creeping suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the threats posed by the religious extremists. The danger to our democratic polity was perhaps not gauged by those who were in charge of conducting public affairs.

Such a premonition should cause worries in the minds of patriotic citizens. Events of the preceding weeks confirm such premonition when one sees that

while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained indifferent about the designs and programs of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

One would not be far from reality to say that Bangladesh polity is now challenged by extremist groups, which professes a philosophy of life and of government

hope to maintain our position securely if our opponent is confident that they can attack us on any subject, time and place of their choosing and without any forewarning.

The adversaries are known elements. So, there should not be any hesitation in venturing into sensitive and emotionally aligned places and institutions when reasonable suspicion and information so dictate.

This is necessary to effectively

for all citizens.

However, it has been our unfortunate experience to witness the differing political agendas often clouding the pragmatic understanding and appreciation of our real national interests.

Looking back we would find it curious to see that postures wise we were not so conspicuously religious in pre-1971 times under Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Questions naturally arise whether the accelerated growth religious

organisations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the so-called religious extremists?

Since terrorism of the so-called religious extremists have increased in its very nature, thereby demanding changes in the strategy to counter it, are we ready to seriously study the problem, one may ponder.

This is natural because we do

threat perception and appropriate legal action shall be started forthwith. Preempting their nefarious activities should engage the uppermost attention of regulatory authority.

ii. The aforementioned surveillance should ensure that no one is allowed to interpret and propagate a distorted version of the holy books. Our inherently religious folks must not be misled.

iii. The so-called religious extremists committing violence should be treated like criminals and no element of respectability should be accorded to them.

iv. Institutions not playing the national anthem and disrespecting the national language must come under adverse attention and be subjected to effective punitive measures.

v. Institutions imparting religious training and education should be a focal point for inspection and monitoring with a view to turning their students into employable individuals.

Our government needs to work under pragmatic political leadership and if properly and professionally steered, it does not threaten our liberties. If we operate by the book, we will be adequately informed of the perils, which face us.

If we do not know the designs of the so-called religious extremists, then we could well be isolated and our liberties, too, could be in jeopardy.

Therefore, we must be ready to deal with all aspects of the not-very-visible war of the bigots with all its ramifications and fronts, supported by external resources.

The so-called religious extremism has not sprouted with its ugly fangs all of a sudden. So we should not be expecting instant solutions. However, deft political management ensuring pragmatic operational handling on an urgent basis can definitely lessen the harmful impact and energise the mainstream to counter the frontal attack on our democratic polity.

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## STRAIGHT LINE

The so-called religious extremism has not sprouted with its ugly fangs all of a sudden. So we should not be expecting instant solutions. However, deft political management ensuring pragmatic operational handling on an urgent basis can definitely lessen the harmful impact and energise the mainstream to counter the frontal attack on our democratic polity.

inimical to the values and lifestyles of the mainstream. In fact, we are now facing an adversary who are armed enough to commit wide-spread violence.

One has to remember, that while in our free society our defences and deterrents are largely prepared in an open fashion, our new antagonists have succeeded in building a formidable wall of secrecy and security.

There is, therefore, a need to break through the shield of secrecy of the bigots. There should be a firm resolve to be forewarned and forearmed. The forewarning by itself would be an effective deterrent to the bigot's appetite for attack. Intelligence gathering on the so-called religious extremists should not be a subject of authoritative ambivalence.

Concerned authorities must be able to avoid bending facts, obtained through intelligence, to suit or defeat a particular political viewpoint. We may have to admit that we are not really at peace with the so-called religious extremists because they have declared war on our system of government and life.

The reality is that we are faced with a closed, obscurantist and scheming enemy. We should not

shake off the suspected ambivalence of the enforcement personnel with regard to apprehension of so-called religious extremists.

At present, it may be pertinent to remember that in the not-too-distant past extremists who bear striking resemblance to the intemperate opponents of women development policy had the temerity to brand the activities of NGOs and cultural organisations as illegal. At places they did not allow the local people to observe nationally significant cultural functions.

The ominous rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh whose inhabitants underwent unprecedented sacrifices to de-link themselves from religion-based Pakistani State remains a massive paradox of contemporary history.

Perhaps a dispassionate study of this contradiction may indicate the action that would be necessary to counter and arrest the religious obscurantism of all descriptions and keep us steady on the tolerant democratic way.

Without doubt our constitution narrates eloquently our national interests. It says that the aim of the state is to realise the democratic process in which, amongst others, equality and justice will be secured

institutions in post-1975 period are any indication of heightened religiosity.

The increasingly discordant and intemperate voices of extremist elements do not assure us moral rearmament or correct appreciation of the liberal and tolerant dimension of Islam.

On the regulatory front we have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats of extremism. The whole approach appears to be ad-hoc and on a case-to-case basis. It would appear that somehow the establishment fondly believes that some prodigal sons have temporarily deviated and the malaise will soon disappear to the relief of concerned citizens.

We may have to ask ourselves if a perception has developed among the terrorist groups that the Bangladesh State is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent.

We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various

## Of potato, for potato

ABDUL KHALEQUE

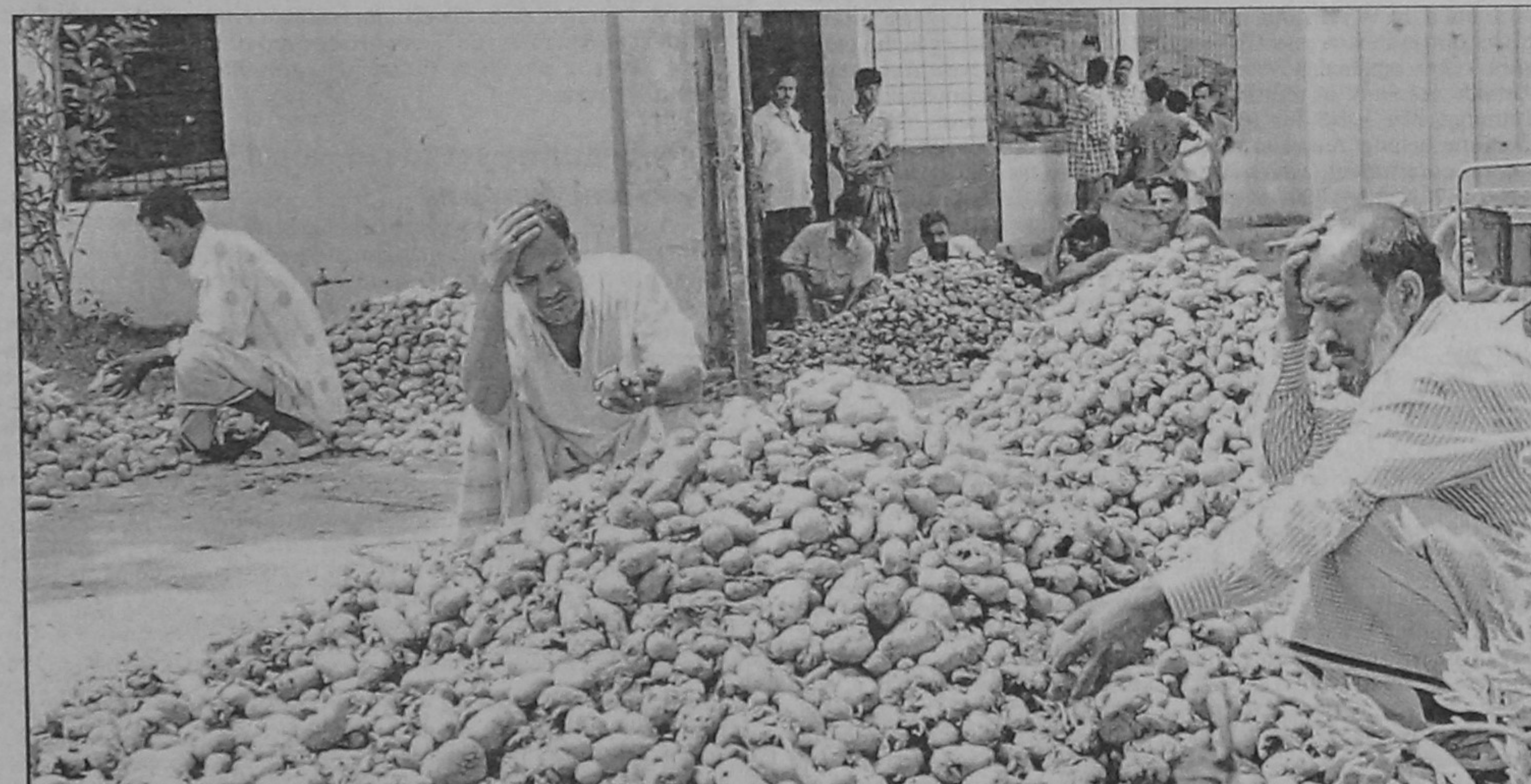
HISTORICAL record shows that Iraq, Venice, Rome, The Netherlands, Athens and Sumer (Babylonia) responded to food deficiencies with their own resources from distant places. In 500 BC, Athens purchased food from Ukraine, Rome from Africa. The breakdown of long-distance commerce in food has worried Bangladesh, particularly because her neighbours -- India, Myanmar and Bangkok have restricted export of rice in apprehension of world-wide food scarcity. Bangladesh has a landless and incomeless population of about 20 millions, badly crippled, disabled and ailing population of about 20 millions, all of whom need to be healthfully fed free or at subsidized rate.

Against the basic inadequacy of per capita land to meet the increasing demand for school, college, madrasa, varsity and other academic needs, industrial and social-economic projects, Bangladesh is now left with only marginal farmers in sub-divided and fragmented holdings which are not at all capable to taking advantage of modern technology of agricultural growth in any large scale agricultural operation. About 150 years ago, 50 percent of USA farmers (95% of the population) had in their individual ownership consolidated farm lands of at least 1000 acres, 30 percent of farmers had partnership, ownership of at least 400 acres. Today, American farmers constitute only about 4 percent of the population.

Bangladesh suffers from the sub-divided and fragmented land tenureship for which it is not possible to undertake any large scale modern scientific operation. What can we do to overcome this fact of history? We cannot have any large scale agricultural project. Canals, ponds, playgrounds, grazing lands for cattle have substantially disappeared. Above all, the threats of climatic change, earthquake, hurricane, hailstorm etc. and the sea-rise are too dangerous for safe living.

It must be noted that our primitive ancestors enjoyed more varied diet than we do now, because they used to eat various species of plants and several hundred types of living creatures. But only a tiny percentage of these edibles were ever domesticated later. An increase in the amount of food available has occurred in recent centuries in places where the number of farmers has been reduced. The success of modern agriculture has been related not only to its mechanization but to the concurrent decline in the number of those working in it.

Potato cultivation in large scale in small and fragmented and sub-divided land-tenure system is not a strange idea if such cultivation can be popularized. The most important aspect of the change of habit to eat potato as a food should commence with the affluent who can afford to bear expenses of potato preparations. Such a programme gradually may attract the poor, illiterate masses who have been for centuries used to eating rice up to the full capacity of the stomach.



Before the 19th century, hardly we knew what food humans needed in order to live. Scientists say that there is a nitrogen component of living plants or animals and that all herbivorous animals build up tissues from protein of plant foods which were converted into muscles and other organs. It was discovered that humans and animals decline in health when they lack in vitamin, even if they have enough of protein.

There is interconnection between food and health, so the precise quantity of calories and proteins needed by people was discovered by scientists. During war or even in peace time, many countries introduce rationing of foodstuff in the interest of proper distribution. Quantity of alcohol, fruits and other supplementary foodstuff, affect the quantum of major staple food requirement. History of bread made from white wheat or bran removed from wheat makes a difference in quality while rice became alluring. Such difference is looked upon as a privilege of egalitarianism. Russia and USA were the granaries for Europe in the 19th century. The innovation of IRRI brought about a radical change in the quantum of rice production. Bangladesh flourished

in the production of irrigated and fertilized boro paddy to meet its rice requirement.

Diversification of agriculture demonstrates the domination of grain or rice upon which the civilization was built. After wheat and rice, potato played an important role with maize among the important crops of the world. Potato is a South American contribution to the world's food. It was taken to Mexico by the Spaniards. Before 1500, potato was grown in the gardens. The first Indian immigrants found wild potato as their best chance of a staple food. They knew potatoes in South America as 'papas' which is still the Spanish word for potato. The potato was represented in the Peruvian pottery as early as 200 AD. It can be stored as well as dried, but it loses a third of its strength after three months.

Potatoes took a long time to become popular outside the Andes. No edible plant had been grown in the Old World from tubers rather than from seeds. No other plant previously had such mysterious, white or flesh-coloured modules. The tubers seemed to people at first, to be deformed, like the feet of lepers. Many, indeed, thought that potato caused leprosy. When

that disease vanished, scrofula was attributed to it. The coincidence of the coming of potato to Russia with the major cholera epidemic of the 1830's set back cultivation there for a generation.

Ireland, a country already devastated and impoverished, with old traditions breaking down with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, was the first European country to grow potato plants seriously. Irish farmers of the 17th century were the first to realize that a quarter acre of land would yield twenty bundle weights of potatoes -- which with a few pigs, could keep a family better than any other crop on so small an area. Potato was first noted in Ireland in 1623. During the next 40 years it established itself. Elsewhere progress was slow. In France, it did not have that much popularity. In Burgundy, potatoes continued to be thought of as a kind of truffle till 1789. Occasional notes suggested a patchy but widespread cultivation on the continent till the late 18th century. It was widely cultivated in Tuscany in the late 16th century. It was still not quite respectable in southern England till 1815. Balkan peasants in the 19th century would not eat "that cursed food hidden in the earth". Even in the 20th century there were educated people who

regarded the potato as 'sheer poison'.

Still, from the late 18th century, a good deal of propaganda was lavished by enlightened governments in an attempt to encourage the use of potato. It was served ostentatiously at the table of a French minister of the time. Frederick the Great was successful in the end to persuade his subjects to grow potato substantially. It became the characteristic crop of the enlightenment, when cultivation of potato in the garden of an eminent retired person was referred to by Voltaire. In England, potato was widely cultivated in the north of the coal line. Adam Smith predicted that potato might replace wheat as the mainstay for the poor. He also thought that the strongest men and the most beautiful women of Britain (that is, the Irish) all lived on that root. A historian of the potato plant (Professor Radcliffe Salaman) once argued that the widespread cultivation of the plant saved mankind from starvation. Peasants were impressed since it thrived when wheat harvest failed. Potatoes also contributed a good deal both to cattle and to industrial alcohol during the 19th century. One could safely say that all prejudices were

overcome after a careful examination of the potential quality of potato as a food for humans in the main.

The blight of 1840 destroyed tubers as well as leaves; as a result, potato harvest had failed. This failure led to starvation, scurvy, dysentery, cholera and typhus. It particularly hurt Ireland where people lived around the potato. The Irish population dropped sharply. Anybody who could afford left for USA (three and a half million Irish people left the country between 1851-1946). The Irish experienced that a small plot of land for potato could support a family. Failure of potato cultivation in Ireland for some years created famine which induced Irish men folk to marry late. Ever since one could see about 33.5 per cent of Irish males remained unmarried between 45-54. The population of Northern Ireland which was 8,75,000 in 1840 became 4,36,7,000 in 1980. In the United States, the gold rush brought potato and pioneers in Colorado by about 1824. When the Colorado beetle provided threat, the crop went eastward. The beetle alarmed Europe and led to banning of USA potato for some time.

Despite its heavy protein, the potato is still one of the main foods in the world over in more than 30 countries. When a grain crop fails, people can fall on potato.

Adaptation of potato to the modern world has made great stride in the worldwide food crisis of our generation. It may be noticed that habits die hard. So, a sort of habit forming propagation is necessary. Bangladesh with its limited farm land is perhaps best suited to meet the growing need of food in the highly potential growth of potato in small patches of fertilized land. Potato cultivation in large scale in small and fragmented and sub-divided land-tenure system is not a strange idea if such cultivation can be popularized. The most important aspect of the change of habit to eat potato as a food should commence with the affluent who can afford to bear expenses of potato preparations. Such a programme gradually may attract the poor, illiterate masses who have been for centuries used to eating rice up to the full capacity of the stomach. Doctors may say if potato eating as staple food in Bangladesh would be nice or not. In Bangladesh, we have used so far potato as a vegetable to cook fish/meat. How much success can be achieved in eating potato as a staple will depend upon well-considered opinion of doctors only.

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## Boats

This is a country of rivers and rivulets.  
This a country of rafts, floats and boats.  
There is no impassable river  
That you cannot cross.  
Is there any fool  
Who will like to cross the river swimming  
When the boats are waiting at the quay?

Boats do not ply on the mountains.  
Boats do not move on the dry lands  
Even if built on the legendary *hijol*  
Or put on the sail by the mind-wind.

But by what magic or the *mantra*  
The people's boat climbs the mountains  
And the lover's boat moves on the dry lands?

Rivers are tired of carrying man's dirt  
Rivers are tired of cleansing man's heart  
But like boats they bear all the burden  
And like mothers all misdeeds they do pardon.  
Would you not cross the river?  
Won't you board the boat to cross the river?

The high tide will flow and it will be nice  
When the boatman finishes his meal of rice.

Now if you have no work to do  
Listen to  
The lipping ripples  
Whispering  
To the boat's ears  
At the bottom.

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## Obama facing the music

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

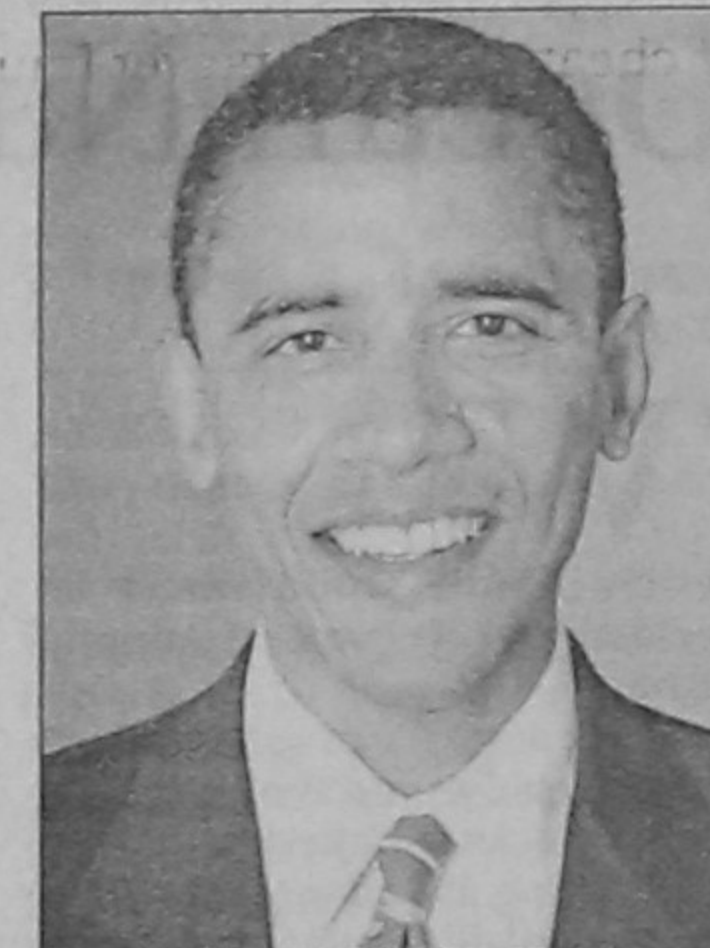
DEMOCRATIC presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama has been facing the music from the media particularly radio talk shows and cable networks, including Fox News which appears to be ending the honeymoon with print and electronic media. Obama has been enjoying favourable coverage since he announced his candidacy for president last year. The press has marvelled at his oratory, swooned over his campaign strategy and given him credit for inspiring youth voters, and reach across party lines to come to vote during primary elections. Senator Obama was spared the negative onslaught by the media until recently.

Since Senator Hillary Clinton's election campaign team has raised the question of double standards in media coverage, pundits have begun research work on Obama and are looking more closely into such matters as Obama's relations with indicted Chicago developer Tony Rezko; his ties with Rev. Wright, retired pastor of Trinity United Church in Chicago, who gave inflammatory sermons condemning America; his relations with Louis Farrakhan, a Muslim clergy who is reportedly anti-Jewish and Israel and who praised Obama as real leader in the United States and Obama's one time meeting with former member of the radical weather underground in 60's. This group's leader, William Ayers, was reported to have been anti-government because of war in Vietnam when Obama was 8 years old. Senator Clinton's campaign said they have been asking about William Ayers who was a key supporter of Obama's first race for elected office in Illinois.

In the latest 21st debate sponsored by ABC on April 17 in Philadelphia, Senator Obama was squeezed by moderator George Stephanopoulos with negative questions which began with Obama's association with the weather underground group in particular with its leader William Ayers. In a New York Times article published on September 11, 2001 Ayers boasted of bombing the Pentagon and other government buildings. Stephanopoulos, however, came under scathing attack by broadcast and radio talk shows for moderating such a despicable debate between Senator Clinton and Senator Obama to please his former boss's spouse, Stephanopoulos was President Bill Clinton's Director of Communication. Fox News is still playing up the story.

Senator Clinton's early morning commercial suggesting that Obama is not ready for the presidency is not the latest in a long line of political attacks.

Obama himself offered an opportunity to Clinton for criticizing the comments Obama had made while conducting fund raising in San Francisco. He has said small towns Americans hit by job losses were bitter, explaining, they cling to guns or religion or anti-immigrant sentiment, or anti-trade



sentiment, as a way to explain their frustration. Senator Clinton described Obama as an elitist, out of touch, and frankly patronizing. By contrast, Clinton said, "I grew up in a church, going family whose father taught me how to shoot when I was a little girl". As her campaign went into full attack mode, Obama countered attacked, mocking Clinton's attempt to portray herself as a gun-toting member of the working class. Obama told a laughing crowd of steel workers in Pennsylvania "She is talking like Anne Oakley - with a six-shooter. I want to see that picture of her out in the duck blind". New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd also hit Obama for the comments.

Sometimes negative attacks work as in Pennsylvania on April 22 during the primary elections. Obama lost the primary but Senator Clinton did not win with big margin as was expected. Senator Clinton's ominous TV ad using attack on Pearl Harbour, the great depression and image of Osama bin Laden in Pennsylvania played a great role in drawing attention of conservative and old white voters. Obama himself hurt the voters by telling a group of donors that small town Pennsylvanians were bitter people who cling to guns or religion. Senator Clinton won by 10 point margin. Clinton's big win in Pennsylvania does little to reverse Obama's big lead going into May 6th Indiana and North Carolina primary contests.

That is not the end of negative trend. The political group by the name Willie Horton that helped defeat Michael Dukakis in 1988 presidential race is planning to release ads against democratic presidential hopeful Senator Obama. They are planning to release the ad which draws parallel between Obama's weakness on gang violence and the war on terror. This was disclosed by Floyd Brown, a conservative strategist. It seems that Obama is being tested by negative campaign trend. There has been trend in the United States that hostile media treatment is doled out to every democratic presidential candidate since 1988. Obama is no exception in facing the music.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.