

Of impervious investigations and innuendos

STRAIGHT LINE

We will definitely put ourselves and our future generation in peril by our inability to let a truly professional investigating agency grow in accordance with the dictates of the law. Viewing criminal occurrences from a political angle only will be ruinous because that would not only be a damper to the growth of professionalism but also in the process shatter the remaining confidence reposed in the vital institution of the State.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

In recent times there have been many comments on the revised charge sheet submitted against a new set of accused persons involved in the dastardly grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina's meeting on 21st August 2004. Some commentators have doubted the veracity of the second charge sheet that does not find any one of the previously accused persons guilty of any criminal offence. Still others have raised suspicious fingers by branding the subsequent investigation as politically motivated.

In view of the doubts and uncertainties, if the investigating agency stands accused of being dictated by the wishes of successive establishments as has been commented upon, then we need to find out why this has happened. In the same vein one needs to know why some very high-profile politically sensitive accused did not have the benefit of obtaining bail in any one of the multiple cases lodged against him at a particular point of time but subsequently got it in all the cases with the ushering in of another political regime.

It is not for this writer to ascertain the varying judicial wisdom but the concerned members of public have reasons to get upset

when they see the same accused (since convicted) being sought after by the powers that be. Does not such a scenario send disconcerting and conflicting signals to the investigating agency whose operatives have learnt to live with the reality? The cynics might say that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds and as such our investigative agencies must be able to appreciate the dynamics (!) of emerging political reality.

The pernicious culture of playing to the tune of unscrupulous political masters or pandering to their unholy wishes by the investigating agencies and other sensitive State agencies has not occurred all on a sudden. Spells of unconstitutional rule, particularly during 1982-90, have substantially damaged the ethos of our public service including the investigating agencies.

While leadership deficits account for some malfeasance, the real damage has been done by an insensitive and myopic dictatorial establishment that was hell-bent to screw all regulatory and corrective institutions. The unwholesome effect of such institution-bashing is now being felt by a concerned citizenry.

One is, however, not oblivious of the fact that the democratically elected but temperamentally dictatorial regimes since 1991 have been any better in realizing the

damage done to the professionalism of the services. The halo and elan of public service has meant little to the political leadership who have spent more time and energy in fostering the growth of pliable and time-serving personnel for achieving their selfish goals.

While the public's right to be informed cannot be denied and the nation's concern for the safety and security of innocent lives cannot be brushed aside, we will perhaps do well to look at the factual dimension of the bomb and grenade blast in a dispassionate manner. Almost immediate apportioning of blame mostly on rivals of the other camp by responsible persons after each occurrence has become a pathetic recurrent reality. Indiscreet and uninformed comments in such sensitive matters further compound the environment in our society where almost everybody from the humble to the mighty has some expertise on law and order.

Unfortunately, not many people realize that dangerously accusatory comments even before the investigation has started to create an undesirable influence on the investigators, particularly in our society for reasons that perhaps do not need elaboration. This, however, does not mean that our investigators invariably tailor their investigations according to the

dictates of the authority as often alleged in the media. Nor are they indulging in the dangerous game of playing to the gallery as is the practice in some segments of our administration.

What, however, is not attracting our attention is the predicament of the investigating agency in a situation marked by opposing pulls and lack of adequate scientific supports. Investigations of bomb blast cases need sustained painstaking efforts in a professional manner without any influence peddling. Readers may recollect the time, energy and resources devoted to the investigation of the bomb explosion incident that led to the death of Rajiv Gandhi of India. It needs to be emphasized that unnecessary and motivated haste in the investigation of such cases might prove counter-productive.

The police including the central outfit of CID (Criminal Investigation Department) have been portrayed as having very little or no technical expertise and therefore, deemed as incapable of satisfactorily investigating bomb blast cases. That is the impression one gets if one has to go by the media reports. These reports often do not mention that technical expertise is only one part of the investigative process, that collection of non-physical evidence on the basis of

sound and credible intelligence plays a major part, that our police officers trained outside the country do not find adequate technical and organizational support on return, to efficiently operate. Such reports do not mention that those bomb incident cases that ended in charge sheet did not have the benefit of expeditious trial and last but not the least, the difficulties experienced by investigating officers in the face of virulent claims and counter claims of culpability loudly made by leaders from across the political divide.

While the police must unearth and detect the bomb blast cases and prevent such incidents from happening by dint of quality intelligence, they can not be expected to put a complete stop to such incidents because of circumstances beyond their control. Extreme views advocating and implementing annihilation of the opponent is a sad socio-political reality of our society and in rooting out this menace the police is at best a marginal player.

Similarly, the so-called extermination campaign of class enemy by apparently ideologically motivated elements can not be effectively controlled by adopting a purely conventional law and order approach. Extremism of the so-called fundamentalist variety can

be countered by a joint strategy of persuasion and tough action, with political direction being conspicuously pronounced. In all these matters, the acumen needed is political sagacity and patience to fight the painfully long battle against extremist depredations and insurgency.

If it is a political battle with armed support and not the other way, we will definitely overcome the present predicament sooner than apprehended. Violence must not be allowed to be a way of our life along with a political consensus to abjure it. The police, admittedly, in this regard have a secondary role to perform and that relates to prevention of some description and intensive investigation once the damage has been done. Let us make sustained efforts to facilitate the organization in acquiring the hallmarks of a professionally upright body.

First of all, it has to be ensured that following a bomb blast leaders of the political parties do not engage themselves in an acrimonious blame game and thus help and facilitate the investigators to do their job in a professional manner. Political or ideological linkage, if any, would be brought to light if the occurrence is treated like a criminal offence. A pre-conceived notion about possible perpetrators will more often lead to the harassment of innocent citizens while the real criminals will move unhindered.

We must ensure that in upholding the public's right to be informed, a situation is not willfully created wherein the entire process amounts to an investigation by the media. Needless to mention, such a scenario will seriously prejudice the rights of the

victims and the interest of the prosecution because in our legal system the onus is on the prosecution to prove that the defendant/criminal is guilty beyond the least shadow of doubt. Let us remember that the anger, excitement and the euphoria will not be there at the time of trial before the court which will pronounce its verdict on the basis of cold facts and credible evidence.

Secondly, there is a pressing need of adequate training, both in-country and external to be organized along with simultaneous creation of exclusive units in selected places. These units must have sufficient technical support to conduct the initial investigation. Since these exclusive units will not attract volunteers for practical reasons, it would be necessary to provide them very attractive incentives (material and non-material) for drawing the proper talents from the police organization. At the same time very intensive or in-depth exposure will not be necessary at this stage as the Armed Forces expertise can always be counted upon as supplementary assistance.

Thirdly, increased support needs to be given for strengthening the laboratory of CID. Some high quality and high priced capital equipment have to be bought for this section for providing technical support to the investigators whose reports, strengthened by such support will automatically assume considerable significance evidence wise. Consequently, it would be easier to convict the mischiefmakers.

In a perilously polarized polity where criminals enjoy political patronage, criminal activities are accorded respectability for so-called political compulsions and a

loathsome all-pervasive distrust between different social and political groups prevails, the predicament of police investigators who have the double jeopardy of being less-than-credible in the eyes of the law of the land and the members of public, can only be appreciated by a reasoned observer.

Our investigators definitely suffer from inadequate scientific support but even under the present circumstances they can achieve commendable success. Our investigators for reasons known, do not operate in a favourable environment where helpful information comes voluntarily from members of public but still like our physicians they do good clinical investigation without laboratory support by virtue of their intuition, gut reaction and the limited information network.

We will definitely put ourselves and our future generation in peril by our inability to let a truly professional investigating agency grow in accordance with the dictates of the law. Viewing criminal occurrences from a political angle only will be ruinous because that would not only be a damper to the growth of professionalism but also in the process shatter the remaining confidence reposed in the vital institution of the State. We still have pockets of excellence in our investigative outfits and it shall be in the fitness of things to allow such outfits to attain professional excellence without being tainted by any direction. Let the actual facts and circumstances of the incident be ascertained as is the job of the investigator and let that be placed before the court for adjudging the guilt.

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Our tourism sector: Moving forward

POST BREAKFAST

The World Travel Tourism Council (WTTTC) has ranked Bangladesh 94 out of 170 countries. They feel, that given adequate care and investment we can rise up the rankings in terms of approval ratings. They have mentioned about the need for greater private entrepreneurship, infrastructure development, improving our general image as a friendly country to visit and also making available interesting information about our culture, historical sites and cottage industry on web pages.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

FOR the last few weeks there have been several articles in the print media and many workshops over the prospect of tourism in our country. Views have been expressed in this regard by officials from the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, journalists, diplomats and those associated with tourism from the private sector. This initiative underlined the importance of this sector, identified its potential and also its existing drawbacks.

Any discussion on tourism would however require as a first step, an evaluation of what others think of Bangladesh. I was persuaded in this context to re-read the 'Lonely Planet' guidebook on Bangladesh, which has become controversial for calling the glass half-full. Meant for tourists, it is simultaneously published from Melbourne, Oakland, London and Paris. Respected for its reporting, few errors and judgment, it is quite often the ultimate determinant for a tourist, selecting a particular city or country as the destination.

The book on Bangladesh contains an interesting perception of foreigners about Bangladesh and its socio-cultural background. It also includes a synoptic version of our history. It also comments on what to expect when a tourist visits the country.

Some of the assessments are thought provoking and others remind us of shortcomings that need to be overcome if tourists are to consider Bangladesh as a worthwhile place to visit. It also highlights some interesting facts that add to the latent interesting features of Bangladesh for a tourist. For example, discussing rivers as the most important geographical feature in Bangladesh, the guidebook points out that 'as much water flows through the country as through all of Europe, and it is only barely the size of Greece'.

It mentions about the Bhawal National Park, the Sudarbans Reserve, the Modhupur Forest Reserve, the Lowcherra Forest Reserve, the Telepara/Satchari Forest Reserve and the Singara

Forest Reserve. At the same time it does not hesitate to point out the absence and 'dismal lack of designated national parks, reserves and conservation areas in Bangladesh overall'. One presumes that this harsh assessment is related to the absence of adequate infrastructure associated with eco-tourism in these Forest Reserves.

The guidebook praises the verdant beauty of Bangladesh but also dwells on existing poverty, on violence in politics and on the country being natural disaster prone. It is also mentioned that the 'western concept of privacy is not a part of the culture in Bangladesh' and 'staring at' is not considered unusual. A cartoon has also been included suggesting that most often travellers find themselves to be the principal focus of attention of local inhabitants and passers-by. The book also gives guidance about cultural traditions and social customs but laments the absence of 'conventional tourist sites'. I did not completely understand this last observation or the connotation of the word 'conventional'.

Nevertheless, readers will agree that there are obviously not plus points for anyone desiring to visit our country as a tourist. As a PR exercise it is a mini disaster that needs to be redressed. We can start by identifying the negatives and then working towards their removal.

I will not touch on the conditions prevailing today within the Bangladesh tourism industry. Like many others I believe that there is great economic potential in this sector, particularly for the service industry as well as in transport.

It is true that there are several detracting factors -- particularly the absence of a positive image of being a 'fun' place with potential entertainment not only for adults but also children. We have to work harder to project that Bangladesh is a place you can relax in without having to worry about institutional infrastructural support.

At this point it would be pertinent to point out that tourism as a concept is just about starting to take off in our country. We are slowly acquiring interest

in the notion that it is all right to take a holiday without having to spend available free days in one's village or with relatives. Such a view is also probably emerging because of the unconscious impact of globalisation and the electronic media. In other words, it is becoming acceptable for a family to go away to Cox's Bazar during Eid holidays instead of spending time in Dhaka exchanging greetings with relatives. A change of mind-set is slowly creeping in with urbanization. Privacy for the upwardly mobile unitary families is gaining ground. To this section has also been added thousands of expatriate non-resident Bangladesh families or families of Bangladeshi origin coming to Bangladesh on leave from abroad. They are coming home not only to re-acquaint themselves with their family members or rural heritage but also to avail themselves of the chance to visit popular destinations and take boat rides.

This is a relatively new development and is definitely, indirectly, encouraging capacity building

within the hospitality sector particularly in terms of accommodation and associated recreational facilities. It is good that this is happening. It is leading to the growth of easily accessible holiday resorts. In fact, this trend has already led to the establishment of twenty such resorts on private initiative. They are located near the Jamuna Bridge in Tangail, in Cox's Bazar, in Sylhet and also in St Martin's island. I understand that more such investments are on the way.

In addition to this new trend, we also receive non-Bangladeshi tourists, travelling within South Asia or stopping over in Bangladesh on their way from Southeast Asia to Nepal or to Bhutan.

A recent seminar has indicated that tourist arrival in Bangladesh in 2007 posted 44 per cent growth over the previous year 2006. The country apparently received a total of 289,110 tourists in 2007 as against 200,311 in 2006. However, according to the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, the revenue earned in 2007 did not match the percentage of increase in the number of visitors.

It is true that we have a lot of potential in this sector. However, we also have to recognize that fulfilment of potential would require more professionalism amongst those associated in our tourism sector. This starts with the removing of mismanagement in our aviation industry and bringing in place necessary efficiency. The next step is improving our law and order situation and the service delivery system. We could take a few lessons in this regard from Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia.

We also have to improve the structure and facilities required by low-budget conscious tourists and backpackers. We should not forget that a large number of such tourists regularly visit South Asia and Southeast Asia. They need a supportive structure, which should include, a comparatively cheap transport system, inexpensive hotel rooms, restaurants with food prepared under hygienic conditions and local guides who can speak in English. We are discussing here about tourists with a daily budget of US Dollar twenty-five only. There should also be small health care facilities and cyber cafes near such tourist convergence points so that they can seek help in case of need and also be able to remain in touch with their families and friends back home. If we can look after them well, then, they will be our ambassadors abroad. This is our Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia and India have come into the mainstream of the world tourism industry.

The World Travel Tourism Council (WTTTC) has ranked Bangladesh 94 out of 170 countries. They feel, that given adequate care and investment we can rise up the rankings in terms of approval ratings. They have mentioned about the need for greater private entrepreneurship, infrastructure development, improving our general image as a friendly country to visit and also making available interesting information about our culture, historical sites and cottage industry on web pages. This could be updated and maintained not only by the private sector inter-

ested in the tourism industry but also government agencies and our diplomatic missions abroad. These are sensible suggestions.

We have to remember that for a tourist, his destination needs to be like a home away from home. We should also understand that a tourist might be willing to accept and be patient about discomfort at home (for example, lack of hot water in the bathroom) but he will not be willing to do so when he is in another place that he is visiting as a tourist. The last thing that he will also need is harassment, either on the street from beggars or in the shopping malls from other customers. He will want the warmth of friendship without infringement of his privacy.

Hospitality industry requires precision and a constructive engagement. It would be important in this regard to establish in all the important cities, institutions that can imparting training not only in catering, foreign languages and proper customer service for foreigners but also in the creating of entertainment programmes for adult visitors in the evening and for the children during the day, so that they are not bored. As ify Islam noted in his article on tourism in The Daily Star on 5 June, we may also consider developing 'joint ventures with foreign marquee chains to establish resorts' with adequate infrastructure. This to be a holistic approach. Achieving the right blend might take time, but I am confident that we can succeed.

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Further international recognition for microfinance programme

HABIBUR RAHMAN

MICROCREDIT is undoubtedly the number one image builder for Bangladesh. It has earned the most coveted Nobel (peace) prize for the initiator Dr Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank. It has earned many other international accolades for the operators, including the recent 'Banking at the Bottom of the Pyramid' prize jointly awarded by the Financial Times of London and the International Investment Institute (IFI) to ASA, Mayor of London Boris Johnson formally announced the prize on June 3 selecting the Bangladesh institution from among 129 institutions of 54 countries.

Although a new conception in world economy and development programme, micro credit is gradually gaining a greater importance there. It is considered as a better way to reduce economic discrimination for world peace and security. This new Bangladesh brand is being included in development programmes of various countries in alleviating poverty across the world.

The jury deciding the 'Banking at the Bottom of the Pyramid' prize opined that ASA's microcredit model being the most cost effective could be successfully followed in many countries within the shortest possible time. Organisers of the prize maintain that it has been introduced to extend recognition to the institutions working with a

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motive to alleviate poverty and observed that in their estimation ASA topped the institutions trying with finance facilities to help people at the lowest rung of the society to overcome their problems.

At present about 100 crore people are living below poverty line with income less than 2 dollars a day. ASA is believed to be one of the institutions successfully reaching qualitative and flexible financial service to these people. It is serving about 70 lakh people in the country with its sustainable multi-mode microcredit model which includes different credits for men and women, education credit, agri business credit, small trader credit, small entrepreneur credit, interest free disaster rehabilitation credit and life insurance. Besides, the credit receiving members can obtain a one time financial aid for treatment of any acute disease.

The organisation's microcredit programme has already crossed the

national boundaries. By now ASA has directly initiated microcredit programme in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Nigeria and Ghana, and with a view to expanding the service has established ASA International Holding Company in joint collaboration with some reputed investing institutions of the world. Registered in Mauritius of Africa this company is planning to cover 50-60 lakh people of 10-12 countries, besides Bangladesh, under micro credit service investing 8-9 crore taka.

Through this huge programme this Bangladesh NGO is going to emerge in the international development arena with a bang. Its International Holding will create employment abroad for quite a considerable number of Bangladeshi skilled workers. The company is being treated as second generation institution for micro credit. Experts in the field think this

company would initiate new chapter of potentials for the non-government sector of Bangladesh in the international arena.

The Financial Times-IFC prize is the newest addition to its continuity of success and a special recognition for Bangladesh's micro credit programme. ASA was adjudged as top micro credit institution in world in the Forbes Magazine survey in 2007. In 2005 Washington based Micro Finance Information Exchange (MIFIX) recognised it as world's best micro finance institution.

It may be recalled in this connection that with a view to raising the image of the country in international arena, the erstwhile government engaged some foreign newspapers and journalists. A few positive news also came out in some foreign journals including the Time magazine. But more negative news about Bangladesh coincided in the foreign media. As such that initiative of the government was widely criticised. It's true you cannot build image of the country by hiring media men. On the other hand, over the past years a Bangladeshi NGO's activities could be able to attract attention of some world renowned journals. They have been recognising its activities on their own and publicising world over. It's also true, virtues like integrity and dedication pay off in the long run.

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Bangladeshi scientist's discovery to save human lives

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

POLITICIANS and their surrogates have vitiated the atmosphere of Bangladesh while at least some professionals have earned reputation and brought laurel for the country by dint of their efforts, study and research in different fields. In micro finance Professor Mohammad Yunus has earned international fame by receiving Nobel Prize while Professor Abul Hussain has been awarded Grainer Challenge gold and one million dollars by prestigious National Academy of Engineers of the United States of America for his innovative and cost effective project of filtering out arsenic from well waters.

Now Syed Ashraf Ahmed, a scientist, has discovered a highly efficient inhibitor of botulinum neurotoxin type A which can lead to development of a very effective drug to stop the devastating effect of toxin in human body. Syed Ashraf has initiated the structure based inhibitor design as part of the bio-defence research programme of the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) where he is working as principal investigator and research chemist from 1997. Syed Ashraf has concentrated on designing a number of small scale peptide which appears to be an effective anti-dote to the

potent form of toxin.

Research work on Botulinum neuro toxin -- produced by the bacterium clostridium botulinum -- has begun in nineteenth century with the advancement of science when German physician Justinus Kerner described botulinum toxin as 'sausage poison and fatty poison'. Less than a billion of an ounce could cause muscle paralysis leading to death. It is deadly protein known to human being. In 1870, Emile van Ermengem isolated the bacterium clostridium botulinum. In 1944, Edward Shantz cultured clostridium botulinum and isolated the toxin. Dr. Shantz also succeeded to produce botulinum as weapon during Second World War but came out with conclusion that botulinum had only limited battle field application.

Over the years research work on botulinum neurotoxin has been ongoing. Doctor Alan B. Scott experimented on monkeys and produced botulinum toxin type A (BTX-A) which he applied on human body to treat strabismus. US food and Drug administration approved BTX-A in 1989 for treatment of strabismus, blepharospasm, and hemifacial spasm.

Born in Brahmanbaria in 1951 Syed Ashraf Ahmed having obtained MSc in Biochemistry from Dhaka University in 1974 obtained diploma in Microbiology from Osaka and Kyoto in 1979 and PhD in

Microbial biochemistry in Kyoto as Monbusho (Japanese government scholarship Monbukagakusho) scholar. Prior to that he served in Dhaka University as a Lecturer in Biochemistry from 1975 to 1978. Syed Ashraf was a visiting fellow at Fogarty International Centre of National Institute of Health (NIH) in Maryland from 1983 to 1987. National Institute of Health is the largest and most prestigious biomedical research institute in the world. During his stay in NIH scientist Syed Ashraf did some research work on the structure of an important enzyme (Tryptophan Synthase). His research results were duly appreciated by scientists and included in major graduate level biochemistry textbooks in the west.

As a structural protein biochemist Syed Ashraf had studied the structure of protein and discovered that 'the area where the enzymatic reaction takes place, called active site, has a particular property of being highly negatively charged, but positively charged small protein molecules called peptides could bind to the active site interfering with the toxin's normal enzymatic reaction' and arrived at a conclusion that basic peptides inhibitor would be most effective in interfering with the toxin reaction in solution. He requested his collaborator Subramanyam Swaminathan, PhD, lab biologist at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York,

to make solid crystals of the toxin having the bound inhibitor that Syed Ashraf had developed. Brookhaven Laboratory confirmed the finding of Syed Ashraf.

On this success Colonel George W. Korch, USAMRIID's commander, commented: 'This study represents an impressive collaboration in identifying potential inhibitors of the toxin for therapeutic use. It builds upon the successes we have realised in developing effective next-generation vaccines to protect our citizens against the toxin's deadly effects prior to exposure'. Syed Ashraf's findings were carried out in the prestigious widely read journal of Biological Chemistry. In an interview to Voice of America on May 11 Syed Ashraf hoped to make this discovery an eventual success for mankind.

Syed Ashraf Ahmed is research adviser of the prestigious National Research Council of US National Academy of Sciences since 2000. He has to his credit 70 research publications published mainly by Journal of Biological Chemistry and Biochemistry. By now Syed Ashraf has distinguished himself as a scientist of reputation. He is a pride of Bangladesh indeed. It would be appropriate if Dhaka University honoured Syed Ashraf Ahmed by offering an honorary doctorate degree.

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