

Unwarranted violence

Who answers for the death and infliction of injuries, losses?

THE rapid-fire eruption of violence engulfing Dhaka University, Dhaka College and BUET campuses following news about Tareq's injury evokes instant condemnation. It has not only caused death, injuries and smashing of vehicles but the manner in which violence has been wreaked has had a sinister ring about it.

The lethal reaction was far out of proportion to the nature of injury sustained by Tareq's slipping on the toilet floor which was accidental and described as not being serious. In our emotive culture one could perhaps allow for a modicum of angry reaction on the part of Chhatra Dal activists to the news of ailing Tareq's injury but in spite of the clarification by medical authorities early on the day about Tareq's condition being not serious, the activists didn't relent from violence perpetrating it almost throughout the day.

The torching of the vehicle which led to the gas cylinder bursting and killing a businessman took place at around 2.00pm followed by other incidents. All this shows that the Chhatra Dal activists were out and hell-bent upon disrupting peace. It seemed deliberate, programmed and also orchestrated. In a related development, JCD activists in Bogra set the engine of a train afire around 8.00pm. The JCD activists were raring to organise protest demonstrations for release of Tareq for some time. There was a reason for the authorities to take precautions, especially under an emergency, but apparently this went by default.

The BNP leadership played a mute bystander to the happenings on the day not feeling obliged to even move their little finger in dissuading their student loyalists from the violent course they had taken. BNP is a major political party having been in power for a few terms and could also wear the mantle of government in future; but what account is it giving of itself by allowing the students to cross critical thresholds in terms of relating to the people. Who is going to take the responsibility for the dead and the bereaved, the physical injuries inflicted upon people, 30 vehicles vandalised and the two set ablaze?

Pakistan's coalition collapse

The ramifications can only be imagined

THE deepening political crisis in Pakistan threatens to mar its newly found democracy. The withdrawal of Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League from its coalition with the Pakistan People's Party, because Mr. Sharif thinks Mr. Zardari has reneged on a promise to restore to their positions the judges sacked by former president Pervez Musharraf, is a development that disappoints not only Pakistanis in general but also people who are worried about the growing power of the Taliban and al-Qaeda along the country's western frontier. Indeed, Asif Ali Zardari, who aspires to Pakistan's presidency following the resignation of General Pervez Musharraf, has let it be known that the Taliban are winning the war in Pakistan. That statement, in light of the uncertainties now confronting the country, seems aimed more at gaining political mileage than an exposition of hard realities. It can only make things even harder for the government Zardari's party leads.

What Pakistan needs now is a sure sign that the new government, in the immediate aftermath of the Musharraf resignation, is equipped to handle the very serious problems of terrorism and a sliding economy the country is up against. Pakistan's borders in the west are today a virtual no-go area for its army and other security forces. Such a situation can only be handled through the government proving effectual in running things. But that again is dependent on how serious Zardari and Sharif, having united in their opposition to Musharraf, are about pursuing liberal democratic politics. Pakistan's democratic history has not exactly been edifying, but in the present circumstances a failure to promote pluralism can only intensify the slide. Which is again a powerful argument why both the PPP and the PML(N), together with other democratic forces, must close ranks and come together to give the people of Pakistan a sense of direction. Unfortunately, the swift falling out between Zardari and Sharif rules out such unity, at least for now.

It will be naïve to expect that Pakistan's problems will be tidied over soon. But with the nuclear-armed nation getting deeper into a political quagmire, one does not need to be prescient to suggest that forces like the Taliban and other radical elements will gain fresh ground. The ramifications, both in Pakistan and outside, can only be imagined.

Of contradictions, assassinations and birthdays

GROUND REALITIES

Yes, there are contradictions in observing the solemnity that comes with remembrance of murder most foul and celebrating the birthday of a living politician through lighting pretty little candles on a weighty cake. The darkest day in the life of this nation, or any nation, cannot be made light of, morally as well as politically, by our pretending that nothing of the wrenching kind happened on the day, that whatever has happened is of little consequence in the history of this unfortunate country.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ON National Mourning Day, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Khondokar Delwar Hossain informed the country that he saw no contradiction between observing the death anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and celebrating the birthday of former prime minister Khaleda Zia on the same day.

Such an expression of sentiment raises quite a few questions, fundamentally around the premise of morality. That small matter of what day of the year actually happens to be Begum Zia's birthday apart, considering the controversy raised around it, and with full appreciation of why her followers believe she was born on the same day that was destined to mark the end of Bangabandhu's life, there come to us thoughts of values. In this country, indeed all over Asia, values have sustained life. Ask Singapore's grand old man Lee Kuan Yew. He will tell you how Asia's traditions have always been a priority with the continent's people.

It all boils down, therefore, to

the idea of what we should and should not do on days that remind us of monumental grief. On August 15, we who have consistently remembered the War of Liberation and have endlessly recalled the momentous leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in our lives do make it a point to exercise self-restraint in all that we do in terms of individual observances and celebrations.

We consciously stay away from playing music of the sort that we play all round the year, for we remember the old lesson imparted to us by our parents that memories of sadness must not be marred by an insensitive demonstration of happiness. Those are, let us remind ourselves once more, part of the value system on which we were brought up by our parents.

When the muezzin sounds the call to prayer, even those who do not set much store by conventional faith are insistent that proper respect be shown to the Creator and his commandments. And they do that through turning off the music, through suspending their raucous laughter until such time

has elapsed as to warrant a resumption of the banal festivities of life. Which is why we think that on August 15, the loyalists of the Begum could afford to be a little more circumspect about celebrating her birthday. If they cannot do that, it will -- as it has generally been -- always be taken as a sign of bad taste.

There are days of the year, in this country, when we studiously observe or respect the occasions when serenity came to be attached to them. The death anniversary of a parent, the illness of a child, tragedy in a neighbouring family, et al are the points when we avoid indulging in contradictions. Khondokar Delwar may not spot any contradiction in a simultaneous remembrance of murder and birth, but those of us steeped in an understanding of life all the way through to its roots remain acutely aware of what we need to do.

We do not have our children marry on Ashura; and we stay away from organising luncheons during Ramadan. That attitude springs from our innermost beliefs. Or it is

a sign of our absolute faith in and respect for the right of devout men and women to uphold the sanctity of religion.

At the National Memorial in Savar, the only music we play or hear is the last post, for it is with heartbreak that we recall the three million martyrs of the War of Liberation. As darkness falls over Bangladesh every March 25, it is remembrance of the early martyrs of that twilight struggle that comes alive. For men and women of sensitivities and an understanding of history, that is as it should be. At Yad Vashem, we celebrate no birthdays as we pray for the six million Jews the Nazis killed in their enthusiasm for the creation of a pure Aryan race.

On January 30, it is Mahatma Gandhi's martyrdom we recall in the way that we feel intense sadness remembering Indira Gandhi on October 31. And not many of us may recapitulate the day Colonel Abu Taher went to the gallows, but those of us who wake up at dawn every July 21 silently pray for him.

Every November 3 we salute four brave men -- Syed Nazrul

Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, A.H.M. Quamruzzaman and M. Mansur Ali -- men who led us through the trauma of war and into freedom and then were done to death by the assassins who only months earlier had shot down the Father of the Nation. Every November 7, for all the cacophony about a "sepojanata biplob," silence and prayers come in abundance for Khaleda Musharraf and his loyalists murdered by men defined by brutality.

Remembering is important. For remembering is a sign of civility; and paying respects to the memory of dead men and women is proof that the world has not yet been taken over by elements thriving in sinister darkness. Ask the people of Japan. For a couple of days every August, they recall the tens of thousands of people that Harry Truman's atomic bombs wiped off the face of the earth in 1945. And along with the Japanese, millions of people around the world remember Abraham Lincoln paid tribute to the fallen brave in Gettysburg in 1863 thus: "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it can never forget what they did here."

We do not celebrate the joys of life on the old battlefield in Gettysburg, just as we do not trivialise the skulls of all the Cambodians bludgeoned to death by the homicidal Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979 through cheerful verbosity at the museum holding these specimens of what used to be lives. Which brings us back to August 15. Bengalis try to

stay away from marrying on the day. They have little appetite for partying, for carousing on the day. There are forever contradictions when you adulterate a patently solemn occasion through an unabashed infusion of things frolicsome.

On September 11, people cause to well up in their souls memories of Salvador Allende. Chileans remember 1973; and not very many of them will be willing to lionise Augusto Pinochet as thoughts of the old bloody coup come rushing back into their sensibilities. In New York as elsewhere, heads are bowed low in prayer for those who died when the Twin Towers collapsed on September 11 twenty eight years after Allende's life came to an end. Men of faith and adherents of historical truth do not celebrate birthdays on the day. And they do not because they know of life, of the metaphysical that binds life and death to the cosmic patterns of Creation.

Yes, there are contradictions in observing the solemnity that comes with remembrance of murder most foul and celebrating the birthday of a living politician through lighting pretty little candles on a weighty cake. The darkest day in the life of this nation, or any nation, cannot be made light of, morally as well as politically, by our pretending that nothing of the wrenching kind happened on the day, that whatever has happened is of little consequence in the history of this unfortunate country.

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US-Russia relations hit a new low

BOTTOM LINE

Russia feels that the US has overstepped the line in all spheres -- economic, political and humanitarian. The Bush administration has gone from one conflict to another without achieving a full-fledged solution for any of them. Relations between Russia and the US are at their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This does not augur well for international peace and security. The UN Security Council is deadlocked because of veto powers of the US and Russia.



HARUN UR RASHID

AFTER their first meeting in 2001, President Bush said that he had looked into the eyes of President Putin and got "a sense of his soul," but he subsequently pursued policies that Putin vigorously opposed, or just tolerated. Russia was then coming to terms after the disastrous years of President Boris Yeltsin.

Observers believe that the Bush administration could not shed the Cold War mentality and wanted to poke "Russian eyes" at every possible opportunity.

Some of the actions are given below:

First, in 2002, Bush abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, which barred both superpowers from deploying national defenses against long-range ballistic missiles and from building the foundation for it.

The treaty was based on the premise that if either superpower constructed a strategic defense, the other would build up its offensive nuclear forces to offset it. They would, therefore, head towards a never-ending offensive-defensive arms race.

Bush issued a short written statement the day the treaty expired, saying that it was "now behind us," and reiterated his commitment to deploy missile defenses "as soon as possible" to

protect against "growing missile threats."

Second, came the expansion of Nato, contrary to an agreement that Nato's expansion would not disadvantage Moscow. Nato has deviated from its original charter, and assumed responsibility on a global scale for everything that happens. For example, Nato troops are in Afghanistan.

Third, the Bush administration proposed deployment of an anti-missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, which appears to be an attempt to chip away at Russia's influence in the region, to the annoyance of Russia.

When Russia attempted to place nuclear devices in Cuba in 1962, the US immediately went to high defensive mode. Why can't the Bush administration understand that placing any facility with nuclear weapons is likely to upset and antagonise Russia.

Russia is angry because it knows that the deployment of the missile system in these countries is meant for Russia, and not for Iran's missiles. It seems that the US wants to encircle Russia with its allies to keep it "within the box."

Is an anti-missile defence system reliable?

Some military experts say that, at the present rate of progress, a

reliable missile defence is only 50 years away. Some say that all the trials run so far -- successful or otherwise -- have been rigged. The target, its type, trajectory and destination, are known before the test begins, and only one enemy missile is used.

Decoy missiles bear no resemblance to the target and are identified as decoys in advance. In order to enhance the appearance of success, recent flight tests have become even less realistic: the agency has now stopped using decoys altogether when testing its GMD system.

Meanwhile, the anti-missile defence system, according to many US writers, is a product of military industry lobbyists. Many Democrats are not sure whether an anti-missile defence system will work. Some military experts say that rigorous tests should continue, and deployment of an anti-missile system in Poland is misconceived. The Congress may not provide funds to the Bush administration for it.

The U.S. has spent between \$120 billion and \$150 billion on the program since President Ronald Reagan re-launched it in 1983. Under George Bush, the costs have accelerated. The Pentagon has requested \$62 billion for the next five-year tranche, which means

that the total cost between 2003 and 2013 will be \$110 billion.

A new Russia

Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, is different from that under President Yeltsin. The president is responsible for a resurgent economy and a new wave of nationalism. Soaring oil and gas prices have made Russia's economy vibrant.

Putin has used his country's resource to boost the military and flex Russia's muscles in global affairs. Eight years of Putin have instilled self-confidence among Russians. Russia, which went begging in the '90s to Western investors, has an investment-grade credit rating and has the world's third largest foreign currency reserves of \$470 billion.

Military spending is running at a post-Soviet record. New nuclear submarines, missiles, and aircraft have been commissioned.

The new approach is backed by a defence budget that has jumped by 25% percent to \$40 billion this year. The Defence Ministry has announced a \$222 billion rearmament program. It is aimed at replacing half of the current military equipment by 2015. It includes new early-warning radar, new intercontinental missiles and a fleet of supersonic bombers.

The navy is to get more than 30

warships, including new aircraft carriers. Three new submarines will be commissioned, each carrying 12 missiles, and their sister boats will carry 16 a piece.

There are plans for a "fifth generation" fighter with a low radar profile, and claims that the new Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles has stealth technology that will allow it to penetrate the US missile-shield.

Russia has real energy and financial clout, and is prepared to use it politically. Europe is becoming increasingly dependent on gas from western Siberia. Germany depends on Russia for 30% percent of its energy. The Russians point out that energy has been synonymous with power, and the oil-rich countries in the Middle East have a lot of power in regional affairs.

Georgian conflict

The US wants Nato to expand to the borders of Russia, some say to the underbelly of Russia, such as Georgia, violating the agreement with Moscow. Russia views Georgia as the US views Central America -- as its own backyard. Georgia has become Russia's Cuba.

The Bush administration encouraged Georgia into thinking it was under American protection, built up and trained its armed forces with the help of Israel, and established one of the biggest embassies in the region to make it a centre for American influence in the Caucasus region.

When crunch hour came for Georgia, not a single Nato country, including the US, wanted to pick a fight with Russia on its door step. President Saakashvili of Georgia must be disillusioned with the American response and action. He totally miscalculated the situation in South Ossetia. Russia is deter-

mined to "teach" Georgia and the West a lesson this time.

At the recent Nato meeting, the US secretary of state promised to "isolate" Russia. Some American politicians have threatened to expel Russia from the Group-8, to abolish the Nato-Russian Council, and to keep Russia out of WTO.

According to former Soviet president Gorbachev, these are "empty threats. Do we really need them? Just to sit at the nicely set dinner table and listen to a lecture?" Meanwhile, Russia has cut off its military cooperation with Nato.

Russia feels that the US has overstepped the line in all spheres -- economic, political and humanitarian. The Bush administration has gone from one conflict to another without achieving a full-fledged solution for any of them.

Relations between Russia and the US are at their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This does not augur well for international peace and security. The UN Security Council is deadlocked because of veto powers of the US and Russia.

Where do we go from here?

Both the US and Russia need each other to address global issues such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, stability of global finance and reversing of economic slow-down.

A bipartisan commission led by Senator Chuck Hagel and former Senator Gary Hart has recently been established at Harvard to report on American-Russian relations to Congress and to the next president. If the commission takes into account the vital interests of Russia, it may actually help restore relations with Russia.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Expatriate woes

Some of them are forced to work 16 hours a day without overtime payment, and KD5 per day are deducted if someone fails to turn up due to illness. The company compels them to buy plane tickets from a certain travel agency which charges exorbitant fares.

MD. MASUM BILLAH

THOUGH Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries, it has some achievements as a nation, like the language movement, liberation war, and the participation of the armed forces in UN missions.

Bangladesh is overpopulated, and manpower is its wealth. Many Bangladeshis live and work in many countries in various capacities, with much appreciation and success. Some have even invented and discovered many new things, and earned world acclaim. Wherever they work and whatever work they do, they deserve due honour and prestige, first as Bangladeshis and then as human beings. Dishonouring them is a serious crime.

The Kuwaiti government

announced that it would deport Bangladeshi workers involved in violence during the recent unrest over low pay. South Asian workers in Kuwait, including hundreds of Bangladeshis, staged demonstrations and went on strike demanding better working standards and pay. Newspapers in the Gulf kingdom reported that some workers were paid as little as KD8, amounting to Tk.2000 a month. The Kuwaiti government said that it would increase the minimum salary to KD40, or Tk.10,000.

However, Kuwaiti authorities announced they would examine video footage and photographs of protesting workers to find out those responsible for damaging vehicles and attacking the police. Kuwaiti police arrested 800 Bangladeshi workers during the

demonstrations, of whom 300 were released. Kuwaiti government assured the Bangladeshi mission that all innocent workers would be spared after investigation.

This situation is the result of labour unrest which had remained suppressed. Some harrowing tales follow, which are simply crimes against humanity. In some cases some workers were withdrawn from jobs without any reason or prior notice. They were kept idle for several months without salary. Workers who speak out their grievances are invariably victimised and deported. The supervisors, foremen and managers abuse and beat them up, and if the matter is reported to the Arab bosses, they even kick them. Though they were promised KD50, they were paid KD18 a month.

Some of them are forced to work

16 hours a day without overtime payment, and KD5 per day are deducted if someone fails to turn up due to illness. The company compels them to buy plane tickets from a certain travel agency which charges exorbitant fares. Shahriar Kader Siddiky, labour councilor in the Bangladesh embassy said: "Many workers could not go on leave over the last 8 or 10 years as the company didn't allow them to." Even if a worker is granted leave for returning home, the company charges KD30 as security money, but it is never given back. Many workers are forced to sign job contracts that are different from the ones they signed before their arrival.

Bangladesh army personnel have achieved international fame and acclamation. They are honoured wherever they work as peace-keeping forces. On the other hand, Bangladeshi workers have been seriously humiliated outside the country. Our government must give due consideration to the fact that labour and gar-

ments are flourishing and promising industries, and are contributing to our national economy considerably. They must come within the purview of the government's top priority.

What do the people in our missions do, except routine work? Active, capable, innovative, courageous and patriotic people must be posted in the foreign missions. For the last two decades, with some possible exceptions, these appointments were done purely on political grounds. Every tier of the state machinery has been vitiated by nasty political games.

It is a common allegation that Bangladeshi missions don't bother about what Bangladeshis do outside the country. Whenever anybody faces any problem, the mission hardly comes to his help. This attitude must be drastically changed. When Bangladeshi workers are humiliated and harassed by Kuwaiti police, how can the Bangladesh mission sleep? These workers represent our dear Motherland. Their disgrace means dis-

grace for the whole nation. It seems that Bangladeshi missions are not bothered by this. What kind of patriotic feeling do they hold in their bosoms?

Battered by employees and cheated by agents, 45 Bangladeshi workers returned from Malaysia on August 11 after staying there for over one year. The returnees spent over Tk.2 lakhs each to get an overseas job. The Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia did not address their issues, and they had to leave the dreamland.

The IMA Research Foundation at Dhaka organised a conference where many cheated workers narrated their bitter experiences in Malaysia. One said that he went to Malaysia in a group of 40 through a recruiting agency named Mark Overseas in July last year and was employed in a plastic company in Kelang at monthly RM700. "We were told that we would work 12 hours a day but we had to work 18-20 hours. In case of a mistake, the Chinese boss would beat us up."

The workers were given work targets, and if anyone failed to fulfil it the boss used to hit him. 15 workers fled the company in less than a month as they could no longer endure the torture. "We told our agent Kamal of Vital Manpower in Malaysia that we could not tolerate the torture anymore. After two months he withdrew us, promised us alternative jobs," said another worker. But Kamal took them to a hotel and disappeared.

These kinds of incidents are taking place regularly, but the response of the Bangladeshi missions is disheartening. They don't address the human rights abuse issue or bother about the welfare of the workers, rather they sometimes treat them like slaves.

Middle Eastern countries imported workers from third world countries in the 1970s and 80s, and paid them comparatively handsome salaries. To meet the increasing demand for manpower many recruiting agencies have sprung

up. Very weak government controlling system and corrupt officials have made avenues for exercising illegal ways and rules. The victims are the workers who sell their land to procure the money for going abroad.

The ministry of expatriate affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must have regular meetings with the foreign employees, recruiting agencies working in Bangladesh and their branches abroad. They must have regular meetings with the workers, who are far away from their near and dear ones. This will boost the workers' morale. All the rules and regulations must be announced in the news media. The people in our missions actually do not know where, how and when our workers are sent abroad, nor where they work and in what situation. They must shoulder a huge responsibility when they are in foreign missions.

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