

Horror of acid violence

Implement laws with iron hand

WE are totally appalled at the recurrence of acid violence in the country despite the existence of laws to both control sale and purchase of the lethal substance as well as punish the acid throwers. Last week a mother got severely burnt by acid thrown by the rapists of her mentally challenged daughter for filing a case against them. It is a poignant tale of oppression suffered by the vulnerable in society. The rise in acid violence amply speaks of inherent weakness in the implementation of laws by the relevant quarters and lack of awareness among the common people.

It is indeed a matter of utmost concern that criminals will have easy access to acid to pour on victims, mostly women and children, with the intent to disfigure them permanently. They can buy a pound of acid for Tk. 30 from the open market, as they do not need any licence or permit to do that. But the Acid Control Act, 2002 says it clearly, "whoever produces, imports, transports, stores, sells and uses acid without licence could be sentenced to three to 10 years' rigorous imprisonment with fines. People who possess equipment used for producing acids without having licence for them could be sentenced to three to 15 years' rigorous imprisonment with fines." The law is there but what about its implementation? It is another tale of apathy and negligence. The Daily Star report on Sunday reveals that all sorts of acids are sold freely at the city's Tantibazar, only a quarter of a kilometre away from Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office.

Furthermore, no one cares to keep any cash memo or receipt of sale and purchase of acid, as stipulated in the law.

We are further dismayed at the report that the Deputy Commissioner's office has no special team to monitor and control the acid market. Also no one there knows when the mobile court last visited the market to check the authenticity of the licence and other documents. It is therefore quite apparent that the drive for acid control gets least priority at the very office that should be leading a war from the front against acid violence.

Besides going all out on illegal sale and purchase of acid, we strongly suggest that a country-wide campaign be launched to make the common people aware of the dangers of corrosive acids that are being used by the criminals. They should be motivated to check on the local acid shops and report any illegal trading. We hope the government agencies will give a serious look into the matter.

China's walk in space

It is a new point in human experience

ZHAI Zhigang joins a small yet illustrious company of individuals who have been to space. The achievement takes a somewhat bigger dimension considering that the Chinese astronaut has just taken a walk in space, the first Asian on a specifically Asian space programme to do so. The credit surely goes to China, which has through the space walk entered that most hallowed of clubs -- that of nations which have sent their men and women out into space in search of wider meanings to life and what lies beyond. At a time when the Chinese are basking in the glow of the just-concluded Olympics in Beijing and yet are quite battered by the milk scandal that has had global ramifications, this space success will be balm to a bruised ego.

In a wider sense, the Chinese achievement in space adds new substance to the gains that have already been made in the programme of exploring the world beyond ours. Perhaps, for many, this new space walk may not be an exciting affair, given that man landed on the moon nearly four decades ago when the American Neil Armstrong stepped gingerly on lunar soil. But more sober reflection will surely bring up once more the long, often tortuous tale of how mankind first made its trip into space before expanding the dreams associated with such travel. The unmanned Sputnik was launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. In a Cold War era, it was enough to get America seething, get it riled enough to begin thinking of challenging that communist triumph. John Kennedy, having entered the White House in 1961, promised Americans that same year that America would send a man to the moon and have him safely back to earth before the decade was out. That was when the space race commenced. Soviet cosmonauts (Gagarin, Tereshkova, et al) competed with American astronauts (Glenn, Borman and others) in a dazzling show of human ingenuity. Along the way, tragedy happened. Space travellers on both sides perished. But such sadness was forgotten when Apollo 11 landed in the moon's Sea of Tranquility in July 1969.

The rest is history. The Chinese have just added a new page to this history. We, as Asians and as part of the larger human landscape of human experience, offer them our congratulations. As Archibald MacLeish would say, we are brothers on the earth together. One man's space walk is mankind's collective triumph.

The US past the uni-polar moment



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

FOLLOWING the end of the Cold War in the late eighties, the rules guiding international relations changed. There are, however, doubts that they changed for good. The events unfolding in the caucuses during the last few weeks, it is reckoned, should have dispelled those doubts. In late August, President Bush demanded that Russia's leaders reject their parliament's appeal to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and awaited a positive reply.

Within 24 hours Bush had his response; President Medvedev announced Russia's recognition of the two bitterly contested Georgian enclaves -- something unthinkable as America continues to be the final arbiter of global affairs as the planet's sole superpower. The Russian message in recognising the enclaves was, however, unmistakable. The outcome of the war triggered by Georgia's attack on South Ossetia on August 7 was non-negotiable

and irreversible.

After that, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's posturing in Kiev about building a coalition against Russian aggression looked somewhat foolish. The stand-off in the caucuses, it is true, has portended a period of intense diplomatic activity which, however, reveals cracks within Nato's transatlantic solidarity and the European union itself, with the members caught helplessly between the extreme choices.

However, this month's events in the caucuses signal a turning point in the global order, and its veracity can hardly be questioned. The geo-strategic interest of the US in the region has for the first time been challenged, although the current tension in Georgia under Russia's military threat lacked both the ideological and the global dimensions that shaped 40 years of confrontation between the West and Soviet Union after the Second World War.

But what is absolutely clear is

PERSPECTIVES

There has been much talk among western politicians during recent days about Russia isolating itself from the international community. But, unless that community simply means North America and Europe, nothing could be further from the truth. Although the US and British media have swung into full cold war mode over the Georgian issue, the rest of the world tends to see the crisis in altogether different light.

that America's unipolar moment has passed, it has crossed the zenith of its power and the new world order heralded by senior Bush in the dying days of Soviet Union in 1991 is no more. The days when the US was able to "bestride the globe like a colossus" enforcing its will across the world are indeed over.

For nearly two decades, while Russia remained sunk in "catastroika" and China briskly built its economic powerhouse, an unrivalled US exercised unprecedented and unaccountable global power, arrogating itself and its allies the right to invade and occupy other countries unhindered by international law or institution -- sucking ever more states into the orbit of its voracious military alliance.

Now, pumped up with petrodollars, a resurrected Russia has called a halt to this relentless expansion of power and demonstrated that the colossus could be held back -- given the will of any single power at least on regional

basis -- even if on a limited scale. Its satraps are feeling the new limits of overstretched American power, whether it is Georgia or elsewhere in the region.

With regard to the recognition of the Georgian enclaves, there are certainly dangers for Russia's territorial integrity. By legitimising breakaway states, a huge, multi-ethnic Russia has put itself at grave risk. But observers see little practical impact of the move, which is presumably intended to create only a bargaining chip for any likely future negotiation. Moreover, in spite of both the West and Russia using the excuse of "genocide" to try and give themselves legal cover, Russia is surely on stronger ground over South Ossetia -- where its own internationally recognised peacekeepers were directly attacked by the Georgian army.

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According to Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's former UN ambassador, the world is "bemused by western world moralising on Georgia," while the Western view is that the world should "support the underdog Georgia against Russia." Most support Russia against the bullying West. The gap between the Western narrative and rest of the world couldn't be clearer.

The reasons are not hard to understand. It's not only that the

US and its allies have trampled international law and the UN itself to bring death and destruction to the Middle East, Afghanistan, and now Pakistan. In the fog of imperial hubris that left it over-stretched and unable to prevent the return of a multipolar world, the US took Russia's allegiance to the new order and its subversive role therein for granted.

However, the inevitability of history has at long last struck her, although there is no imminent prospect of a serious challenger to the US -- which still remains overwhelmingly the most powerful country -- for years to come. But that power is now being questioned.

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Fuse of self-destructive terrorism gets shorter



M.J. AKBAR

GOVERNANCE is the easy part of being in power. You govern through systems. Institutions protect systems. Institutions grind their way forward on hierarchy, oiled by memory or precedence. When there is need for innovation, change is sifted through a time-consuming committee. The end product may not be brilliant, but it comes with minimal-risk insurance: it will not do damage, and might even do some good.

India's bureaucracy may not be the steel-frame of old. Corruption might have left it a brittle plastic. But it serves. Very often the difference between a good and a bad minister -- the titular head of the bureaucracy -- is no more than his or her ability to leave well enough alone. Lalu Prasad Yadav has created a favourable reputation by the ingenious tactic of non-interference. He lets the Railway Board get on with the job and only appears on the scene when it is time to take credit. Give him full marks. More has been destroyed by the deadly combination of ego and incompetence than has been achieved in government through genius. As the Railway Board has proved, India could be much

BYLINE

This was fuel for a fire that could so easily mesh into an international conflagration. The memory of riots, particularly in Mumbai and Gujarat, was equally incendiary. Indian Muslims have had apostates and middlemen as leaders. In the vacuum, a number of youth found it easy to drift towards the malevolent attraction of evil. They convinced themselves that virulent hate mail and unpardonable killing of innocents was the means to display a destructive strength.

better off if ministers left government on auto-pilot while they concentrated on what they know best: spilling each other's blood.

The difficult part of power is leadership. Any term of office is divided between phases of placidity and the roils of turbulence. If turbulence is not calmed it develops quickly into a storm. Terrorism has become a raging hurricane. The statistics are well known. There is no point wasting space on them. But there is no leader who can challenge this storm, manage its fallout and restore some balm to the jangled nerves of the nation.

Dr. Manmohan Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi have, at best, the most banal phrases to offer. We do not need a prime minister to tell us that terrorism is a grave threat. That much wisdom is available from any taxi-driver, the familiar source of political perspicacity sought by a visiting journalist anywhere in the world. No one has yet written a speech for Mrs. Sonia Gandhi that takes us anywhere near a remedy to this terrible disease.

An answer must begin with a question: when did terrorism

begin? Too long ago. India is unique. Every faith has delivered its quota of terrorists. The Nagas who challenged Indian unity were Christians. The sister-regions of the Northeast gave us Hindu terrorists. Sikhs rose in Punjab, and Muslims in Kashmir. The overwhelming majority of Naxalites are Hindus.

And now some young non-Kashmiri Indian Muslims are playing with dynamite. Some three years ago, when President George Bush visited India, Dr. Singh proudly told his American mentor that Indian Muslims did not believe in terrorism. As evidence, he pointed to the absence of any Indian Muslim name in the rolls of Al Qaeda.

If this was true, then what has happened in the last three years? India has not been ruled by any party that Muslims consider hostile to their interests. Congress has been in power in Delhi. In fact, Indian Muslims believe that if they had not mobilised to an unprecedented degree the Congress would never have got enough seats in the last general elections to cobble together a coalition. Indian Muslims claim a sort of ownership

of the UPA regime. Why have Dr. Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi been unable to prevent a spurt of despair within the community?

The Congress will not even admit this question, so it is difficult to see how it can introspect its way towards an answer. There are two principal reasons for the renewed rise of Muslim despair. First, the community has not got the justice it expected from the Congress.

One fact will illustrate. While those found guilty of terrorism in the Mumbai bomb blasts of 1993 have been, rightly, punished through the legal process, those found guilty of crimes against Muslims in the preceding riots have been left untouched. The constables found guilty of state terrorism during the awful riots in Mumbai after the Babri episode in the report of the Justice Srikrishna Commission are wandering around, free. Dr. Manmohan Singh, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and Mr. Sharad Pawar cannot "find" them.

The second major reason is a sense of helpless hopelessness. The history of economic deprivation long precedes the UPA government, but its mistake was to

believe that it could fudge through its term as its predecessors had fudged through theirs. Dr. Singh should never have asked Justice Rajinder Sachar to find out the truth if he wanted to do nothing about it.

The truth has become the ultimate betrayal, for the report is a devastating indictment of Congress neglect of its most loyal constituency. Muslim youth watched as Mr. Arjun Singh reserved even more jobs for others, and maintained an ultra-secular silence on reservations for Muslims. As I have written before, other communities got jobs under Congress; Muslims got enquiry commissions.

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The Congress is twisting this damaged psyche further with its cynical response to terrorism. There is a suspicion, bordering on conviction, among Indian Muslims that the government of Dr. Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has offered scapegoats in the form of students of the Jamia Millia University to appease majority anger after the

terrorist attacks on Delhi.

We do not know the full truth, but there is enough that is murky in the events of September 19 when Delhi police surrounded and killed two students of Jamia at Batla House, while two others apparently escaped.

There are questions galore, not least being the manner of the "escape": if there was only one entrance, how could the two "escape"? Police have shifted their version after every question. The "escape" now is meant to have been through the rooftop. Did anyone see them in the day-lit skyline? Nor does anyone believe in the version offered of the death of Inspector Mohan Chand Sharma.

It was first put out that he had been shot in the stomach. Then pictures were published of him walking after being shot, with no evidence of a stomach wound. The latest theory is that he died of a heart attack following loss of blood. One TV station claimed that the autopsy report showed he had been shot from the back, hinting at what is known as "friendly fire."

The UPA government then sought to demonise the community when they covered the faces of suspects with the red, patterned, Arab headress instead of the black cloth normally used. Who got these headresses from the market? Home Minister Shivraj Patil, who claimed that he had personally supervised these operations? Was he telling India that these suspects were linked to Arab terrorism?

The questions grow each passing day, each one another fuse for anger.

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Palin is ready? Please



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

WILL someone please put Sarah Palin out of her agony? Is it too much to ask that she come to realise that she wants, in that wonderful phrase in American politics, "to spend more time with her family?" Having stayed in purdah for weeks, she finally agreed to a third interview. CBS's Katie Couric questioned her in her trademark sympathetic style. It didn't help. When asked how living in the state closest to

Can we now admit the obvious? Sarah Palin is utterly unqualified to be vice president. She is a feisty, charismatic politician who has done some good things in Alaska. But she has never spent a day thinking about any important national or international issue, and this is a hell of a time to start.

Russia gave her foreign-policy experience, Palin responded thus:

"It's very important when you consider even national-security issues with Russia as Putin rears his head and comes into the airspace of the United States of America. Where -- where do they go? It's Alaska. It's just right over the border. It is from Alaska that we send those out to make sure that an eye is being kept on this very powerful nation, Russia, because they are right there. They are right next to -- to our state."

There is, of course, the sheer

absurdity of the premise. Two weeks ago I flew to Tokyo, crossing over the North Pole. Does that make me an expert on Santa Claus? (Thanks, Jon Stewart.) But, even beyond that, read the rest of her response. "It is from Alaska that we send out those..." What does this mean? This is not an isolated example. Palin has been given a set of talking points by campaign advisers, simple ideological mantras that she repeats and repeats as long as she can. ("We mustn't blink.") But if forced off those rehearsed lines, what she has to say is often, quite frankly, gibberish.

Couric asked her a smart question about the proposed \$700 billion bailout of the American financial sector. It was designed to see if Palin understood that the problem in this crisis is that credit and liquidity in the financial system has dried up, and that that's why, in the estimation of Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and Fed chairman Ben Bernanke, the government needs to step in to buy up Wall Street's most toxic liabilities. Here's the entire exchange:

COURIC: Why isn't it better, Governor Palin, to spend \$700 billion helping middle-class

families who are struggling with health care, housing, gas and groceries; allow them to spend more and put more money into the economy instead of helping these big financial institutions that played a role in creating this mess?

PALIN: That's why I say I, like every American I'm speaking with, were ill about this position that we have been put in where it is the taxpayers looking to bail out. But ultimately, what the bailout does is help those who are concerned about the health-care reform that is needed to help shore up our economy, helping the -- it's got to be all about job creation, too, shoring up our economy and putting it back on the right track. So health-care reform and reducing taxes and reining in spending has got to accompany tax reductions and tax relief for Americans. And trade, we've got

to see trade as opportunity, not as a competitive, scary thing. But one in five jobs being created in the trade sector today, we've got to look at that as more opportunity. All those things under the umbrella of job creation. This bailout is a part of that.

This is nonsense -- a vivid emptying out of every catchphrase about economics that came into her head. Some commentators, like CNN's Campbell Brown, have argued that it's sexist to keep Sarah Palin under wraps, as if she were a delicate flower who might wilt under the bright lights of the modern media. But the more Palin talks, the more we see that it may not be sexism but common sense that's causing the McCain campaign to treat her like a time bomb.

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She is a feisty, charismatic politician who has done some good things in Alaska. But she has never spent a day thinking about any important national or international issue, and this is a hell of a time to start. The next administration is going to face a set of challenges unlike any in recent memory. There is an ongoing military operation in Iraq that still costs \$10 billion a month, a war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is not going well and is not easily fixed. Iran, Russia and Venezuela present tough strategic challenges.

Domestically, the bailout and reform of the financial industry will take years and hundreds of billions of dollars. Health-care costs, unless curtailed, will bankrupt the federal government. Social Security, immigration, collapsing infrastructure and education are all going to get

much worse if they are not handled soon.

And the American government is stretched to the limit. Between the Bush tax cuts, homeland-security needs, Iraq, Afghanistan and the bailout, the budget is looking bleak. Plus, within a few years, the retirement of the baby boomers begins with its massive and rising costs (in the trillions).

Obviously, these are very serious challenges and constraints. In these times, for John McCain to have chosen this person to be his running mate is fundamentally irresponsible. McCain says that he always puts country first. In this important case, it is simply not true.

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