

The big armshaul

Strike at the roots of religious militancy

THE haul of a huge quantity of explosives and grenade cases in Mirpur and Shonir Akhra by the Rapid Action Battalion on Sunday only shows how much yet needs to be done by the nation to put religious extremism out of action. Altogether 70 kilograms of explosives and 150 cases of grenades have been seized from members of the outlawed Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh. Besides, other materials such as nitric acid, bomb producing materials and so-called jihadist literature have also been netted by RAB. The RAB action is commendable.

There are, at this point, certain realities the nation cannot ignore. Chief among them is the fact that in the period between 2006 and 2008, when the outlawed JMB ostensibly lay low, religious extremists actually remained in action and indeed appear to have utilised the time in regrouping and collecting new arms and ammunition. To think, therefore, that after the arrest and execution of some of its leaders last year the JMB had been destroyed would be to indulge in complacency. The RAB operations at Mirpur and Shonir Akhra, through which a JMB member responsible for providing training in arms was nabbed, is a sign that the militant outfit is trying to stage a comeback. These new discoveries of weapons are disquieting, for it points to the probability of other such outfits being in existence. We cannot shy away from the truth, which is that the hanging of Abdur Rahman and some of his accomplices was not followed up by a rounding up of the second tier members of the group.

There are quite a few priorities the authorities need to address at this stage in terms of counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism measures. The first is to go all-out in the drive to flush out all remaining elements of not only the outlawed JMB but of any other such militant bodies that might be in existence. The second is to look into the question of whether the JMB is linked to other militant bodies both in the country and outside. It is quite possible for bodies that regard the state as a common enemy to come together to destabilise it. The government must keep careful watch on the possibility of trans-boundary links that such outfits might have and identify the sources of their financial support. The Mirpur and Shonir Akhra episodes should indeed be a spur to further and more purposeful action towards uprooting the elements bent on promoting social disorder and undermining our fledgling democratic structure.

A tribute to Arun Nandi

An indefatigable warrior lost forever

ARUN Nandi, the legendary swimmer died at 68, leaving behind the glorious saga of a man's unflinching determination to endure any ordeal to uphold the cause of his nation. We are proud of Nandi's incredible feat as a great swimmer which was but a powerful statement on patriotism made through the medium of a sport.

He endured the pangs of swimming more than 90 hours in a Calcutta lake in 1971, to draw the world's attention to the undaunted struggle for freedom we had then waged. His idea was phenomenal, and as it appealed to the leaders of the Bangladesh government in exile as well as the many eminent citizens of Calcutta, they all came to converge on the site to cheer him up during the epic swimming feat. In the process, he broke the world record in endurance swimming set by American swimmer BC Moore. As a long distance swimmer, he once covered 110 kilometers!

Nandi, and men like him, are beacons, as it were, from a bygone era when the strivings for accomplishing a noble mission were the order of the day. He never asked for anything, though recognition as a swimmer came his way in the form of the National Sports Award in 1996. It is regrettable, and rather inexplicable too, that we tend to value such men when they are no more. Is death the only occurrence that will continue to bring our unsung heroes to limelight? We as a nation have to realise what a debt we owe to Nandi and all such men and women who never hesitated to take the plunge for the sake of the nation.

The best way to pay respect to Nandi is to make sincere and concerted efforts to fulfill his dream of turning Bangladesh into a nation of ace swimmers. There are talented boys and girls who need to be imbued with devotion and commitment, for pushing the frontiers of excellence. While Nandi found himself in a situation where the thought of his compatriots was uppermost in his mind, our swimmers today can translate the same spirit into excelling over their rivals in international events.

We condole Nandi's death and extend our sympathies to the bereaved family. He will continue to inspire the swimmers and sportsmen in general in the years to come.

Students' movement against corruption

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

A friend of mine recently expressed his sincere desire about returning to Bangladesh and asked for my advice on what he should do to join a political party. I asked him -- somewhat derisively -- if he had any criminal record in his profile.

Specifically, I asked him if he had any police record from his university days in Bangladesh, if he had ever participated in hartal, burning police cars or public properties; if he was involved in extortion and/or in forcibly and illegally grabbing, land and so on.

After hearing his response, I advised him to return to Bangladesh and start all over again with student politics.

Obviously, the above paragraph reflects my impression about the current state of students' politics in Bangladesh and the profiles of many current politicians.

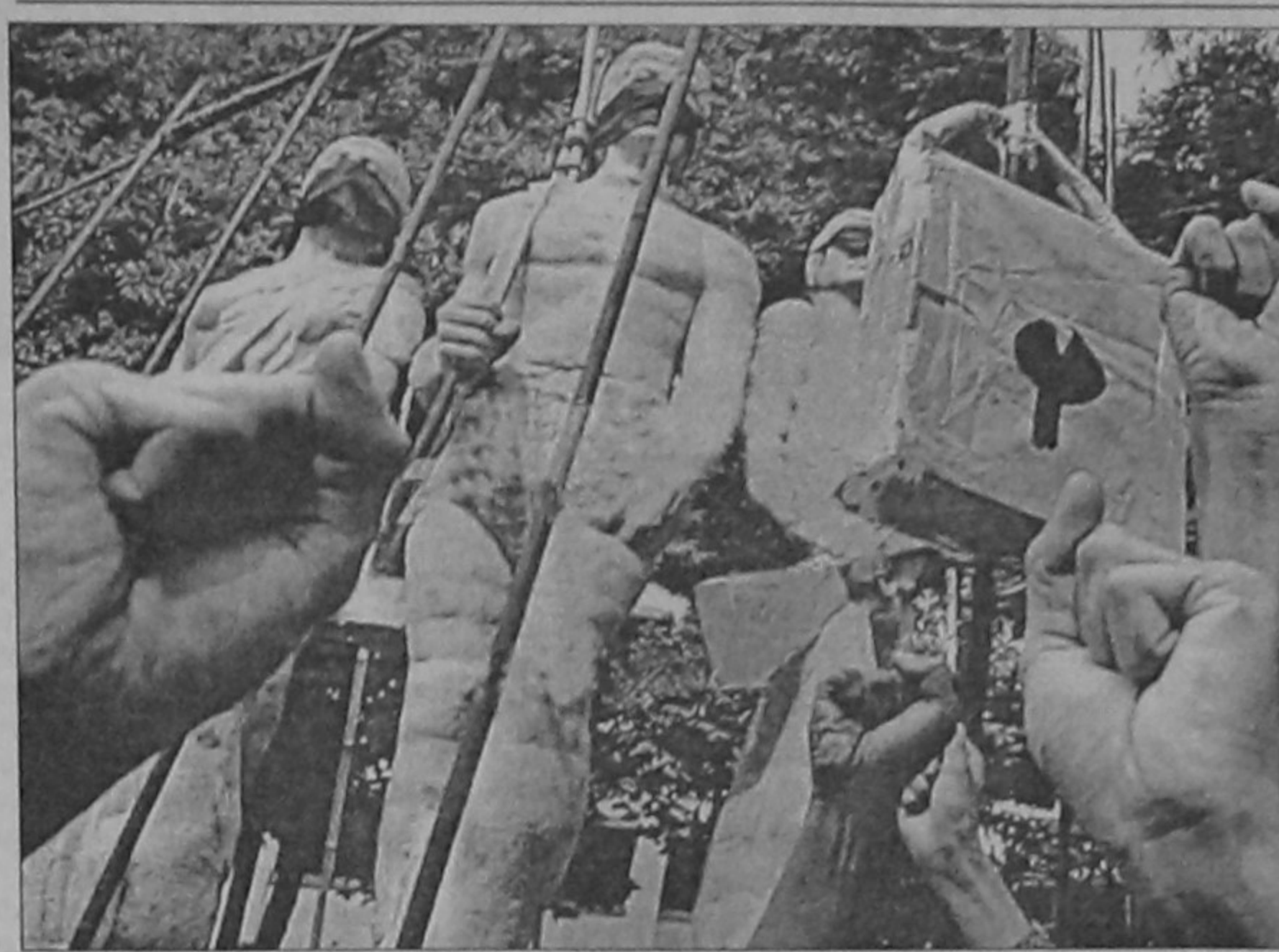
All signs indicate that many alleged corrupt politicians -- whom I call "corrupticians" -- will contest in the upcoming December 18 national elections, and there are clear signs that they will be elected given the outcome of the Sylhet mayoral election.

I made up the word "corruptician" by conjoining the words "corruption" and "politician" to profile a politician engaged in corruption in one word in the same tradition in which many such composite words were coined. For example, the word "stagflation" was coined from stagnant and inflation to describe -- in one word -- an economy in a stagnant state and experiencing inflation at the same time. A competing word, corruptionist, is more general and applies to all corrupt people in public life.

I felt the exigency of such a composite word as "corruptician" in order to differentiate between politicians who are altruistic (assumed to be in the majority) and those who are identified with the profile of BNPs former MP Nasiruddin Pintu -- and obviously he isn't alone.

I was baffled when I watched in the news that Nasiruddin -- accused in various cases -- has spent nine months or so in hospital rather than in his prison cell -- physically and verbally assaulted a prison official in uniform carrying out his official duty. I wondered where the "corruptician" got the audacity to do

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We will not be defeated by corruption.

what he did.

His audacity, it seems, is born out of BNP's seven-point preconditions for election participation, in which dismissal of all criminal charges and release of those already found guilty is one of them. He has every reason to feel assured that, like others of his kind, he will soon get his release on bail and contest in the election.

Does anyone really believe the pledges of Khaleda Zia that "if voted to power we will fight corruption?" What she never said, though, was whose corruption she will fight -- of the politicians, civil servants or businessmen.

From her demand for the release of "corrupticians" "already judged guilty," and dismissal of all charges against others, it is obvious that combating political corruption is not what she has in mind.

If she had some semblance of morality and qualms of conscience, she'd have desisted from making such crass and puerile demands.

Last week's High Court (HC) ruling about the Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) being illegal has certainly dealt yet another body blow to the Anti-corruption Commission's (ACC) fierce drive against high-profile graft suspects.

Meanwhile, most of the graft cases at the special courts have already been stayed for several months by the HC. All these have bolstered the hands of the alleged "corrupticians," bringing ACC's crusade against graft to a near halt.

As to a degree, corruption exists in every society. But there are not too many countries where political corruption is as safe as it is in Bangladesh. Given this scenario, no one now believes that the ACC alone can curb the all-enveloping ills of corruption. But there may be a way out -- only if an all-out, countrywide youth movement across colleges and university campuses can be launched.

At the international level, the largest non-profit and non-political organisa-

tion of students, called Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (Aiesec) with headquarter in Rotterdam, Netherlands and a network (as of February 2008) of 30,000 students in 113 countries at over 1100 universities, is already engaged in anti-corruption campaigning and promoting political transparency and social responsibility. Transparency International (TI) is actively involved, and is providing all kinds of support to this movement.

Students -- under the aegis of AIESEC and TI -- from around the world signed the Guatemala Declaration on Young People's Engagement as part of the 12th International Anti-Corruption Conference in Guatemala held in November 2006.

TI of Bangladesh organised its first youth focused Anti-Corruption Concert in Dhaka on December 29, 2006. With the theme "The Invincible Youth will surely Resist Corruption," the eight-hour concert was attended by 25,000 youths, which generated 7,500 on line viewers' feedbacks.

Addressing the youths, Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus emphasised the importance of collective social movement to combat corruption.

One wonders why there were no anti-corruption activities undertaken by the youths since that concert. It seems the gathering of 25,000 youths was attracted more by the concert itself than by any real enthusiasm to launch anti-corruption drives.

Recent events are telling us that politicians will not jeopardise their own interest by fighting corruption. We're also witnessing the legal hurdles in prosecuting "corrupticians" and purging them from the political process. So, what's the recourse?

The only effective alternative is to launch countrywide students' movements for good governance. This must be organised and driven in the same vein as the language movement of 1952 and those against autocratic rule, and so on. Don't forget, all governments are afraid of youth movements and yield to their demands often unconditionally.

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Will Obama seize the moment?

PRAFUL BIDWAI

BARACK Obama's election as the president of the United States has electrified the world. It's historic that an African-American (AA) will live as the master of the White House, which was built by African slaves but where AAs would rarely be invited until 60 years ago.

This marks spectacular progress in a society where AAs were sold until 143 years ago and couldn't even vote 40 years ago.

This tectonic shift in the world's most influential nation has kindled hope everywhere in the possibility of transformative, even revolutionary, change towards inclusion, equality and diversity.

Everybody wants "a piece of Obama," including former Republican Secretary of State Colin Powell, and one-time neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama. Even France's Right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy is exuberant.

A striking exception to this are Indian policymakers, who view the victory with nervousness. Like the hopelessly US-dependent elites of Israel and Georgia, they wanted Senator John McCain to win. They see Mr. Obama as a threat. As argued below, they're totally wrong.

What's the true significance of Mr. Obama's victory? Domestically, it breaks the conservative stranglehold over US society. Crucial here was his grassroots mobilisation campaign based on the promise of healing social divides. This couldn't have been achieved by John Kerry or Joseph Biden.

This gain stands magnified by the US financial meltdown and economic recession. These highlight the bankruptcy of Mr Bush's disastrous policies and remind Americans of the relevance of healthcare and social security entitlements, progressive taxation, and Roosevelt's egalitarian New Deal.

Mr. Obama's call to end "unforgiving capitalism" was wholly in keeping with this.

Globally, this is a fateful moment, when multiple crises have converged -- a huge economic crisis, discrediting of neo-liberal economics, decline of US hegemony, and climate change. These cast a shadow over the notion of development as market-led accumulation of material goods to which human needs are subordinated.

Domestically, Mr. Obama has a historic chance to launch a new New Deal, re-regulate the economy, and formulate bold healthcare, social security and public-works programs. He will come under pressure from the establishment, including his free-market advisers, not to

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How can he change the world?

break with neo-liberalism. This will perpetuate Casino Capitalism and human misery.

Yet, the logic of Mr. Obama's promises on social programs, taxation, and his \$200-billion plan for roads, ports, bridges, etc, should help him discard neoliberalism. We must hope he succeeds.

Mr. Obama will probably adopt progressive energy and climate change policies. He isn't hostile to the Kyoto Protocol.

Mr. Obama is likely to outlaw torture and shut down Guantanamo. However, whether he will dismantle intrusive surveillance remains unclear.

His economic agenda will greatly depend upon his cabinet appointments. The top candidates for the Treasury are former World Banker Lawrence Summers and New York Federal Reserve chairman Timothy Geithner. Neither is likely to break with neo-liberalism. The test of Mr. Obama's leadership will lie in overruling them.

His very first appointment, Rahm Emmanuel as the White House chief of

staff, is a letdown. Mr Emanuel is a hard-driving Washington "insider," close to the controversial Chicago mayor Richard Daley. Sadly, Mr. Obama also wants to induct Republicans into his team.

On foreign policy and security issues, Mr. Obama promises a less arrogant and unilateralist US -- in contrast to Bush-McCain. He has promised to withdraw troops from Iraq over 16 months. This is a worthy step -- although one hopes the US won't maintain a substantial military presence in Iraq.

Mr. Obama will induct thousands of additional troops into Afghanistan to intensify the war. Unless this is done with a radically new approach, and under Pakistan's leadership, it could turn out a disaster.

His remarks favouring unilateral strikes in Pakistan against al-Qaeda-Taliban militants were a blunder. He must be persuaded to move away from that approach.

Mr. Obama's positions on Iran, Russia, and Son-of-Star-Wars-style ballistic missile defence can bring about a major change in geopolitics.

If he begins a dialogue with Iran, builds friendly relations with Russia, delays BMD deployment, and renews the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, while de-alerting nuclear weapons, he'll have made a major contribution to defusing rivalries.

Mr. Obama holds that unless the US and Russia greatly reduce their nuclear arsenals, they won't be able to persuade Iran and North Korea to forgo their nuclear programs. This is a big step forward.

How Mr. Obama acts globally will largely depend on whether he recognises that US power is set to decline. If he doesn't, his agenda will fall short of the necessary transformative content.

On the whole, Mr. Obama's positions favour a more balanced and peaceful world, and deserve to be welcomed. But Indian policy-makers are cynical towards them. They view them through the narrow prism of India-Pakistan relations, his remarks on mediating on Kashmir and on outsourcing, and his intention to ratify the CTBT and negotiate a Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).

But Mr. Obama is unlikely to want to undermine the competitiveness of US industry by halting outsourcing. His campaign statements on Kashmir are unlikely to translate into policy, which will have to take into account India's reservations. As his transition team has clarified, he'll support a bilateral India-Pakistan dialogue to resolve Kashmir.

As for the CTBT, even Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee was prepared to sign it in 1999, after declaring a unilateral testing moratorium, based on a careful assessment that further testing isn't necessary. If India is truly committed to global nuclear disarmament, it must recognise that the CTBT and FMCT are indispensable.

It's unlikely that Obama will risk damaging Washington's relations with India by aggressively pushing agendas that New Delhi is uncomfortable with. It's a sign of Indian policymakers' diffidence that they can think otherwise.

India can positively engage Mr. Obama by seeking his cooperation in an initiative for a reform of global governance, including a more democratic United Nations, restructuring of the World Bank, IMF and the World Trade Organisation, and through promoting an equitable international economic order and a cooperative security system.

This means jettisoning parochial, short-term preoccupations and thinking big. Can Indian policymakers do this?

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