

The carnage in Mumbai

It is time for all South Asians to fight terrorism unitedly

WE strongly condemn the terror attacks that have left Mumbai reeling. This attack, vicious in its nature and with wide-ranging ramifications, has brought home to all of us in South Asia the lesson that a serious, purposeful and united effort toward combating the terrorist menace is now necessary. Indeed, the series of attacks that have occurred in India in recent months, together with the violent attack on the Marriott Hotel in Pakistan's Islamabad, were broad hints of how wide the network of terror was getting to be. With the Taj and Oberoi hotels in Mumbai (as well as other spots) now coming under attack, it is clear that terrorism is now no more a national but a broad regional menace. It is now anyone's guess as to where terrorism will strike next. But what is clear is that no one is safe and at this point it is for all South Asian nations to come together to combat the threat. At the same time, people everywhere must condemn the atrocity perpetrated in Mumbai. After having been claimed responsibility by the so-called Deccan Mujahideen, it is especially for Muslims everywhere, seeing that such atrocities are being perpetrated in their names, to condemn the killings loudly and make it clear that their faith abjures violence of all kinds.

The ramifications of the attacks, carried out in military precision by men coming in from the sea, and literally too, can easily be imagined. Those who perpetrated the attacks have clearly gone much farther than those who have in recent times been targeting people across the country. The fact that the attacks have been so coordinated and so easily carried out clearly raises the fear that not only India and Pakistan but the region as a whole is now in a state of severe vulnerability. In fact, the attacks have now introduced a strong feeling that unless drastic measures are taken to handle such terrorist acts on a regional basis, instability could become a real factor in South Asia and so leave societies open to depredations of the kind that have left Mumbai reeling. As we write, there are a large number of hostages still in the terrorists' hand and violence is still continuing as the terrorists continue to wreck havoc. We sincerely hope that no human life will be lost before the terrorists are captured.

It has been a sad day not only for the Indians but for people across the world as well and especially for us in South Asia. At this moment of trial what is important is the need to identify and apprehend the culprits. On a bigger scale, it is South Asian stability, which is at stake.

Our condolences go out to the families of the dead and injured.

The Aids concern

Ensure compliance with safety rules

THE Commission on Aids in its report has shed light on different aspects of the killer ailment, which continues to be a major concern in many Asian countries, despite a number of programs being taken up by the governments to contain it. Though the situation is believed to be improving slowly, there are still five million HIV-positive in Asia at the moment.

The campaign for creating awareness among the most vulnerable groups in our context has not gained the desired momentum due to lack of community involvement. Aids, unfortunately, is still a social taboo, which makes it difficult to bring the patients or the newly infected people into the fold of medical treatment. Openness in all such matters is a precondition for combating HIV/Aids successfully.

We have to live with some unpleasant truths that cannot be altered overnight. Though the widespread and laudable social perception is that the best way to prevent Aids is to lead a morally sound, disciplined life based on the teachings of religion, the fact remains we have groups of vulnerable people whose presence cannot be ignored. For example, there are the sex workers and drug addicts badly exposed to HIV/Aids. As long as they cannot come out of their wretched existence, the recommendations on safe sex, preventing use of contaminated injection syringes and containing sexual aberrations acquire critical importance. These are elementary safety measures, which need to be recognised and practised. The Aids Commission has set the long-term goal of reducing new HIV infections substantially during the period 2008-2020 through adoption of the safety measures. Much will, however, depend on the responses from the governments and the organizations working at the national levels.

The prospects of Aids patients' sustaining life are better now with the availability of the anti-retroviral drug. So, it is necessary to let them know that they do not have to give up without a fight. Losing the battle psychologically before it is actually lost can have an extremely negative impact on the patients.

Bangladesh' vulnerability lies not only in low social awareness, but also in the proximity to and regular interaction with some of the worst affected countries. Formulation of a broad policy to deal with the risk factors has become imperative, along with launching of the awareness-building campaign to reduce incidence of HIV/Aids.

Zero tolerance time

ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT in God's name is going on in India? Pakistan and Sri Lanka have long been tinder-boxes, periodically erupting into welters of death and destruction, and recent years have added Nepal to the nations in the region beset by radical upheaval. Indeed, not long ago, it seemed as though even Bangladesh may have been heading in the direction of increasing violence and discord.

But, of late, it seems that India's tenure as the only long-standing and stable democracy in South Asia is coming to an end.

Of course, perhaps part of the problem is that we have simply not been paying sufficient attention as India has steadily descended into its present state of chaos and confusion over the past few years.

Perhaps we have not paid sufficient attention to the tensions in Kashmir, the north-east, and in vast swathes of the countryside along the country's central and eastern belt that are now under the de facto control of Maoist insurgents and their sympathisers.

Perhaps we have not paid sufficient attention to the implications of atrocities like the Gujarat carnage of 2002 and the recent pogroms against Christians in Orissa and surrounding areas.

Perhaps we have not paid sufficient attention to the steady increase of terrorist bombings over the past few years in locales as far ranging as Delhi, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, and Guwahati. In fact, since 2005, more than 520 people have been killed, and hundreds more injured, in 12 major bombings around the country.

Well, everyone is paying attention now. The sheer scale, co-ordination, precision, and audacity of the Mumbai attacks is something unprecedented.

At time of writing, there were over 100 dead and hundreds more wounded. The attacks appear to have encompassed at least seven distinct locales, planned and co-ordinated with seemingly military precision. There is no report on how many terrorists were involved overall, but it cannot be fewer than 50.

It is hard to write insightfully with the shadow of carnage behind one's shoulder. The truth is that words are wholly inadequate to discuss and dissect the enormity of the tragedy that has transpired in Mumbai. At a time like this it is hard to break free of the clichés and the obvious, to do more than to express shock for the barbarity of the crime committed and sympathy for those affected.

When the dust settles, half of the talk will be about how this attack should serve as a wake-up call and demonstrates the need for India to redouble its anti-terror efforts.

Already the opposition BJP is suggesting that the ruling Congress-led govern-

STRAIGHT TALK

The policy must be zero tolerance. But we need to join hands across national borders and across communities and understand that our enemy is not another country or another community, but those who would foment communal discord and perpetrate atrocities in order to sow hatred and to drive a permanent wedge between the different peoples of the region.



When will it ever end?

ment is soft on terror. In an already tough electoral climate, this atrocity and the apparently massive intelligence failure that allowed it to happen could be a devastating blow to the sitting government (though whether state or national government should bear the brunt of the blame remains an open question).

Others will argue that an atrocity of this scale means that India really needs to look at the root causes of terror and take affirmative steps to address the grievances of the disaffected and the marginalised.

It remains unclear at the time of writing whether the terrorists are a home-grown Indian outfit or whether they come from outside the country. Already fingers are being pointed at Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba (although responsibility has been claimed by a hitherto-unheard of outfit by the name of Deccan Mujahideen), but it is too soon to know with any certainty who is behind the attacks, where and by whom they have been trained, and what their motives are.

There is no happy answer to these questions. On the one hand, the negative repercussions in terms of regional stability if the attackers are found to have significant links outside India, are too great to even contemplate. On the other hand, if

the attackers were home-grown in India, then this is hardly reason for anyone either inside the country or out to breathe a sigh of relief, and in fact raises a host of new and uncomfortable issues with respect to the radicalisation of Indian Muslims.

If there is a lesson to be learned for the region I think that it is this: we have a regional problem on our hands, and there is no way to address the threat of terrorism except on a regional basis.

It is unclear what, if any, links exist between terrorists in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (to say nothing of links between Maoist extremists across South Asia), but what is incontrovertible is that all three countries of the Indian sub-continent have active terrorist networks, and given the porosity of our borders and the ideological affinities of many of the groups, it would be unlikely if cross-border networks and support structures did not exist.

There is no question, for instance, that the terrorist groups in Bangladesh receive the bulk of their training, support, and financing from outside the country. There is thus no question that counter-terrorism efforts in Bangladesh need to be focused outside the country as well as inside.

We can take satisfaction in the fact that the last two years have seen a marked diminution of terrorist activity in Bangladesh, but we should not let ourselves get complacent. It seems to me that as long as terrorist activity remains high in the region then we continue to remain vulnerable.

The next lesson we need to put in place, both nationally as well as regionally, is that there must be zero tolerance for terrorism. I believe that the current mantra is "tough on terror; tough on the causes of terror." Now this may sound trite and sloganeering, but it does succeed in neatly encapsulating the dual approach that is our only hope of successfully countering terrorism. Indeed, the two approaches are inextricably linked.

Let us start with the root causes of terror. It is axiomatic that the fewer genuine grievances that the dispossessed and the marginalised have, the fewer terrorists will be engendered. This is not to in any manner justify, excuse, or rationalise the targeting of innocent civilians, which can never be condoned whatever the provocation, but merely to point out the obvious.

In addition, addressing issues of dispossession and marginalisation and genuine grievance also has immense operational benefit when it comes to counter-terrorism. The only successful method of actually countering a terrorist insurgency is through infiltration or building a network of informants. This, in turn, is only possible if there is good will towards the authorities on the part of the communities from which the terrorists spring and where they find shelter. I believe that this is known as "draining the swamp so there will be no mosquitoes."

Terror begets more terror. Pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat lead to the radicalisation of Indian Muslims and, indeed, Muslims all across the sub-continent. Targeting of Hindus in Bangladesh or Pakistan provides a tailor-made excuse for Hindu extremists in India to commit atrocities in return.

If moderates all across the region and from every community do not come together to address this issue then it is all over for us. The policy must be zero tolerance. But we need to join hands across national borders and across communities and understand that our enemy is not another country or another community, but those who would foment communal discord and perpetrate atrocities in order to sow hatred and to drive a permanent wedge between the different peoples of the region. They are the enemy, and they must be stopped.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Will they make or become history?

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THREE earthshaking things have happened between November 13 and 21. Bleach has been killing germs for over 200 years but US scientists just figured out how this cleaner does its dirty work. After 103 years German, French and Hungarian scientists proved Einstein's celebrated formula $E=mc^2$. At home, top two political leaders spoke to each other after sixteen years, and this nation has been touched.

Other things also happened across the world during this time. Barack Obama appointed his secretary of health and human services. More people got killed in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Muqtada Al-Sadr bellowed warnings at the United States that its forces would be forced out of Iraq.

An email campaign tried to tarnish the image of Pakistani president claiming that he had misspelled the words "God" and "strength" in a message that he wrote at the tomb of Qaeeed-e-Azam. And oye, oye vey, a video showed the world leaders not shaking hands with George Bush at the G-20 summit.

But amongst everything that happened, those three earthshaking things are of special significance. If an unexamined life isn't worth living as Socrates said, we have examined life a bit more in the first two instances. Hypochlorous acid, the active ingredient in bleach, attacks proteins in bacteria and causes them to clump much like a boiled egg.

The $E=mc^2$ formula shows that mass can be converted into energy and energy can be converted into mass. But resolving this formula at the scale of sub-atomic particles, in equations called quantum chromo dynamics, was particularly difficult. What was a hypothesis for all these years has been corroborated for the first time.

We, however, can't explain why two leaders in whose hands, in whose voices, rested the fine balance of this nation's fate, refused to shake hands and talk to each other for so many years. For fifteen years they took turns in government and parliament, in position and opposition, countless times addressing the people, media and foreign guests.

It remains a mystery why they didn't want to sit with each other face to face.

CROSS TALK

Still it's good news that they have talked better late than never. It will be even better news should this continue in future, should these two leaders shake hands and speak more often in the truest sense of democracy, in direct interface with each other cutting out the middlemen.



Time to show some leadership.

May be like bleach, like Einstein's formula, this mystery will be resolved someday, hopefully sooner than hundred, two hundred years.

Still it's good news that they have talked better late than never. It will be even better news should this continue in future, should these two leaders shake hands and speak more often in the truest sense of democracy, in direct interface with each other cutting out the middlemen. I plead with them that they should understand how a contentious nation is like a contentious home. When parents remain incommunicado, children stray, servants take advantage, and the house lives in disorder.

The signs of that disorder don't need introduction. People, national and foreign, have fished in this troubled water, cashing in on the silence that fell between these two politicians like an iron curtain. And this silence percolated through party

ranks, business community, bureaucratic hierarchy and professionals of all kinds, down to the common folks, dividing this nation into partisan halves. It's because they refused to talk that our politics has become so cacophonous, fringe elements moving into mainstream, even a despicable dictator lusting for return to power. Rimshot, please!

Interestingly, the two leaders have behaved contrary to the law of magnetic poles: like poles repel, opposite poles attract. It's obvious that they aren't likeminded, that their political beliefs are different. Yet they failed to attract each other, may be for reasons beyond politics, may be for reasons more visceral.

For what other reason should they hold this nation hostage to their purported silence? They are not two housewives or the clucking hens in a kitty party. They are the grand dames of our national politics,

former prime ministers, formidable politicians, daughter and wife of this nation's liberators. People have loved them and that love has elevated them, bestowing honour and obeisance upon them, countless people willing to lay down lives at their behest.

How can they not realise that all of these make their role larger than life? People look up to them as symbols of hope, and one hundred and fifty million people wake up in the morning and go to bed at night counting on their leadership. They have the authority of bringing this country to a halt by the wag of a finger, or gathering millions by an urgent call. How can they afford not to use this power to bring this country together? How can they afford to lose this opportunity if talking to each other is what it takes?

Sigmund Freud, the master explorer of the mental universe, coined a term in 1917. He called it "narcissism of small differences," which describes the manner in which our negative feelings are sometimes directed at people who resemble us, while we take pride from the "small differences" that distinguish us from them. The narcissist sees in others those parts of himself, which he can't countenance and deny.

Perhaps that is one thought whose time has come. Is it possible that the unwillingness to talk is a form of countenance and denial? Is it possible that these two leaders have so much in common that they have nothing to talk? These questions are relevant after what we saw last Friday, a celebration of five minutes that they spent talking between them, surrounded by ingratiating VIP smiles, shining under the glittering lights of the Armed Forces Day reception.

To me it felt like they were doing us a favour. Two leaders shaking hands and talking is a common sight in other countries. In this country it made headlines in the news as though we were most obliged by that simple gesture, a phenomenon that waited sixteen years to happen.

In another sixteen years our two leaders are most likely to fade out. Last call for them to pick a choice. Either they can talk to each other and make history if they wish. Or, they can stick to their vow of silence and become history.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.