

Mumbai siege continues

Indo-Pak intelligence to cooperate

We continue to be shocked by the enormity of the long-drawn-out carnage by a group of terrorists in Mumbai that has left over 125 people dead and over 300 injured. As of writing this comment it has not come to an end yet as terrorists continue to keep hostages in some buildings. The Indian intelligence has claimed that the home grown terrorist outfit Deccan Mujahideen has links with a bigger militant group based in Pakistan, which was also hinted at by Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee. But in a positive development Pakistan prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has responded to the request of Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh and agreed to send the ISI chief to India to assist in the investigation. In a separate telephone call to Manmohan Singh on Friday Pakistan president Asif Ali Zardari had also talked about extending cooperation with India "in exposing and apprehending the culprits and the masterminds behind the attack". Pakistan foreign minister has also said India and Pakistan should join hands to defeat a common enemy, requesting India however not to play politics over the attack.

We believe this is the first sign of a constructive engagement between Pakistan and India, which sharply contrasts with the pattern of accusation and denial the two countries pursued in the past. We hope this time around the call for cooperation will be seen and utilised in full earnest by both the countries to fight a common enemy - terrorism. Pakistan has its own home grown terrorist groups working relentlessly to destabilise the state. The country's involvement in Afghanistan has not been something very pleasant and it has come home to haunt them. Today, the government is calling terrorists its enemy and is ready to join hands with India to get to the bottom of the terrorist attacks. We hope such spirit of cooperation between India and Pakistan will extend to other SAARC member countries and they will get their resources together to destroy terrorist networks in the region.

We hope the latest terrorist attack in Mumbai has left governments in other South Asian countries including Bangladesh wiser than before, as we have witnessed manifestation of many home grown terrorist outfits in the region. Pakistan is paying a heavy price today for not having acted early on against its home grown militant groups. We have said yesterday and we say it again that Bangladesh should not suffer from the illusion that it is immune to such terrorist attacks. We recall the bomb blasts in 63 districts a couple of years back and the recent arrest of a top JMB leader with a large quantity of explosives and weapons. Politicians of the two major parties must work together to fight the menace without ever using them to materialise their selfish interests, regardless of the outcome of the coming election. We have to be preemptive in dealing with the armed militants without giving them the opportunity to strike first.

A multi-dividend project

We felicitate the maiden enterprise

IT'S quite a cheery piece of news when uncertainty prevails about what impact the global financial meltdown might have on our economy. Organic waste generated at the city's Karwan Bazar kitchen market has been successfully recycled into producing quality bio-fertilizer. Our felicitations to the local firm Waste Concern and their Dutch partners which have flagged off the world's first-ever UN-approved Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) compost plant in Narayanganj.

This unlocks a whole range of possibilities that lie in bio-wastes of which we have a super-abundance ranging from our backyard wastes through kitchen-market generated heaps to the variegated dumping grounds in the city. From bio-fertilizer to bio-gas to perhaps electricity -- the possibilities are endless.

Of the many dividends derivable from the technology, some are too obvious to be mentioned such as speedy garbage clearance and efficacious recycling while others relate to cutting greenhouse gas emissions under the lofty Kyoto protocol. Indeed, the chief benefit of the technology is that it is carbon-free, so that this is entitled to receiving a certificate for non-generation of carbon. The developed countries financially support such processes in the poor countries out of a sense of obligation to cut carbon emissions where they themselves have failed to meet the targets.

The products turned out by such environment-friendly technology have a USD 25 billion global market.

So, a bonanza is before Bangladesh now to chart out a course for replication of the project all over the country, either indigenously or through collaboration with foreign partners who would only be too keen on such a highly profitable undertaking. For the present, two more plants are planned to be set up at Gazipur and Savar next year raising the total capacity of handling waste up to 700 tonnes per day out of 3,500 to 4,000 tonnes of total waste generated in the capital daily. The other metropolitan cities, let alone the municipalities, are throwing up a huge amount of waste just waiting to be recycled.

Searching for a meaningful election

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

TWENTY-two months into our current caretaker administration, we have with us an election schedule that keeps on changing many times a week. The glimmer of hope towards the eventual transfer of power to an elected government becomes that much more uncertain with each such exercise.

This is probably the only country in the civilized world where external dictates override pledges and announcements made by the head of a government and the chief of an Election Commission. Expediency and the need to give in to unjustified demands continue to make a simple step more complex. This is disappointing to say the least. One prepares oneself to play football with certain rules of engagement in mind, including where the goalposts are to be located on the field. After this one proceeds to the playground, ready to play soccer or British 'football' as one understands it. On the contrary one arrives and discovers that it will be 'American football' with a different kind of ball. Such a situation definitely impairs a meaningful commitment.

As an ordinary citizen I feel worried with our electoral process. It appears to be so much removed from what has happened elsewhere in South Asia over the last year. In the recent past, we have had credible elections in Pakistan, Maldives and Nepal. People have voted and reaffirmed their faith in the democratic process. These elections have led to important political transformations -- to civilian rule from a junta Presidency in Pakistan, to the abolition of a monarchy and the initiation of a republican administration in Nepal and to a changeover of the Presidency after three decades in Maldives. Significant advances in the structure of governance, to say the least.

We have also watched the making of history in the United States. More than 130 million Americans, both inside and outside the United States, in an atmosphere characterized by joy, competition and transparency exercised their rights and demonstrated once again the power of the ordinary people as opposed to that of behind the scene lobbyists with their own personal agenda. The electronic media monitored every aspect of the electoral process for nearly one year and revealed how basic denominators related to the spirit of democratic governance can be consistent with constitutional provisions. There was participation without threats and undue requests from the political actors. There was respect for institutions and the due process of law. Electoral schedules decided upon did not become the subject of controversy.

Unfortunately, that has not been so in Bangladesh. Nearly two years into the

POST BREAKFAST

The Election Commission has now announced once again fresh dates and another new schedule. One can only hope that all political parties (instead of resorting to further conditionalities) will now take necessary steps to meaningfully engage in the electoral process. The people of this country want an election and an elected government. One can only hope that despite all the complexities, the Election Commission can deliver such a credible and fair poll.

Lifetime of a non-elected government, the population has watched with dismay the continuous shifting of goal posts. Unnecessarily, lack of transparency has only enhanced debate among some and raised questions about possible hidden agendas among others. I myself would like to believe that such anxiety is misplaced and that this has just been an example of poor management.

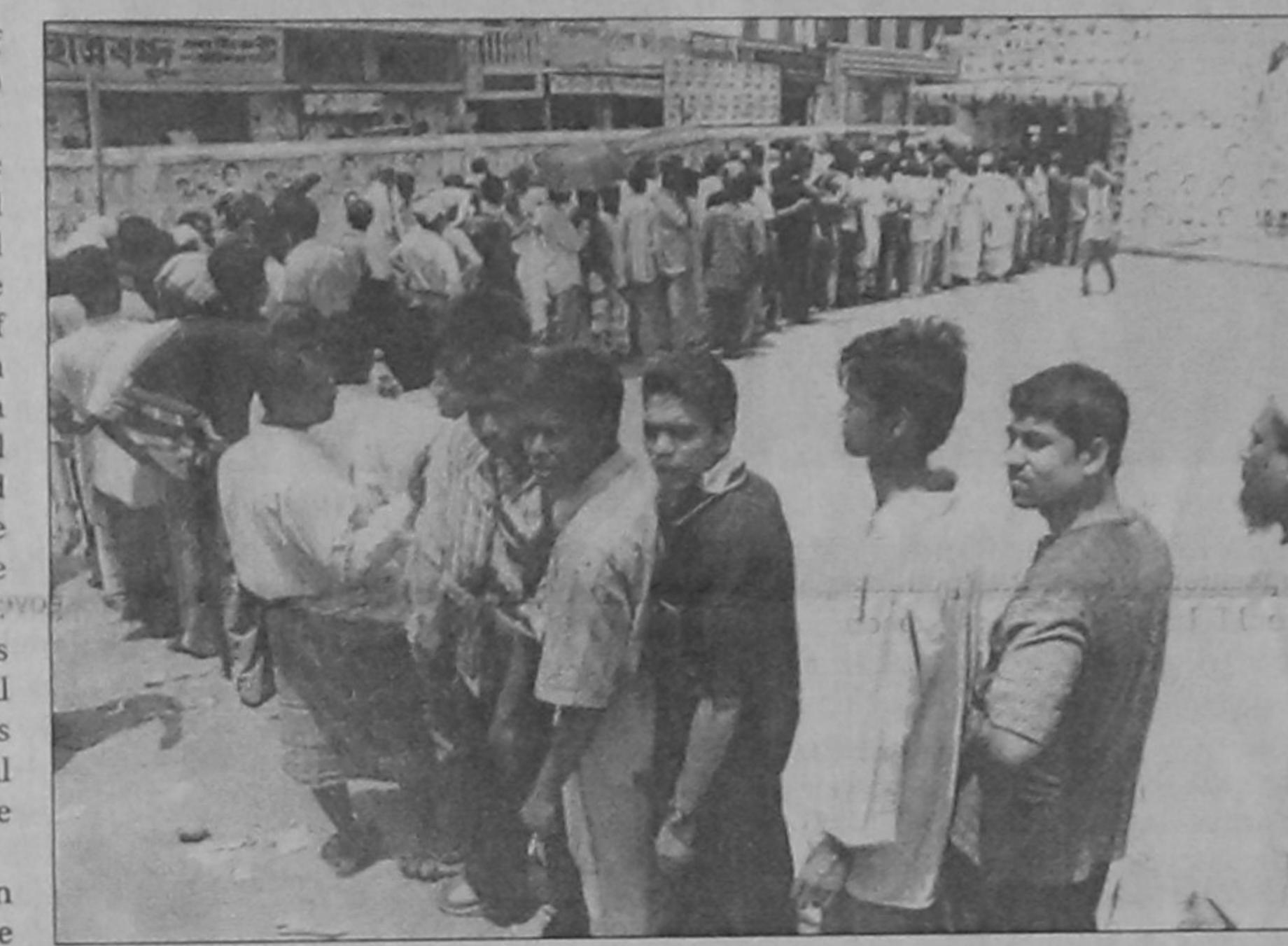
Politics, the political process and the associated factors have been the principal focus of attention both in the print and the electronic media in Bangladesh over the last few months. There have also been many interesting interviews not only with personalities involved with politics from different political parties -- the Bangladesh Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the JSD, the Jatiyo Party, the Gano Forum, the Bokalpo Dhara, the LDP, the Jamat-e-Islami, the Bangladesh Kalyan Party etc -- but also with academics and those in the media. There have also been numerous op-ed articles in the English and Bangla newspapers.

Many agree that this interim govern-

ment has scored a few plus points in its score card -- the revision of the voter list; the initiation of ID Cards with photographs and the re-constitution of important constitutional bodies. However, there has also been criticism on the manner in which the present 'military-backed' government has supposedly interfered in the internal affairs of some of the political parties and 'allegedly' tampered indirectly with the judicial process in the name of introducing 'balance' within the electoral matrix.

Some of these steps have quite justifiably introduced qualms within the body politic of the country. In addition to raising questions about the upholding of the rule of law, there have also been accusations that this government has 'renewed the licence of identified corrupt people, known killers and war criminals to operate in the political field' (Hasanul Huq Inu, leader of the JSD).

Keeping the emergency provisions in place has also come under fire and reviews have pointed out that this step of last measure failed to create the desired



impact in the matter of curbing the use of 'black' money and activities of known criminals during the recently concluded Municipal elections in different districts. In fact Transparency International, the corruption watch-dog, has also made it clear that despite the presence of emergency and the well-publicized anti-corruption drive, the pervasive nature of corruption at the grassroots level has expanded. From that point of view emergency has proved to be fallible.

We need the election, sooner or later. In this context I urge the government to lift the restrictive nature of the emergency regulations immediately (which they have already promised), open the windows and the doors and let the fresh breath of freedom waft into our electoral arena without any further delay. This will avoid unnecessary subsequent accusation from particular parties who fail to do as well as they had anticipated.

The need to retain the comprehensive nature of the emergency provisions for the purpose of maintaining law and order has also lost its basis with the latest statement by the Home Adviser. He has pointed out that due to alternative strategic planning, 'law and order situation will not worsen even if emergency is lifted'. Such a step would also make the electoral process more acceptable and consistent with international expectations -- external monitors from the US based NDI, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the European Union and observers from the United Nations.

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I know that there are still several difficulties related to the distribution and availability of the voter list in all areas. There is also the question of having transparent voting boxes in place in all the voting centers. These are administrative decisions. There are also questions related to voter intimidation, the use of black money and associated problems arising out of new delimitation of constituencies.

One expects, however, that the Election Commission in cooperation with the relevant agencies of government will take suitable steps to raise the moral threshold and make the entire poll a believable exercise. We must not fail to restore the train on top of the track.

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In quest of right candidates

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE forthcoming parliamentary election now scheduled for December 29 could well be a poll that marks a turning point in Bangladeshi politics. Exasperated with the experience of three democratic governments with one party coming to power twice and protracted bouts of non-governance, the voters in the country have again a chance of either putting things straight or catapulting the country into crisis.

The 2008 election may be very crucial in the country's development into a mature democracy while it will be an occasion for the voters to ask and exercise their real options: (1) Can pre-poll coalitions provide greater stability than post-election expediency? (2) Is religious identity espousing radical views, policies and actions more relevant than actual governance? (3) Should professed ideology take precedence over cohesiveness?

These are complex questions with no easy answers. But it was the inability of the electorate to address these questions that led to the past governments becoming non-performers in governance. People are afraid that repetition of the same drama will have a tell-tale effect on the body politic of the nation.

With the election due in about a month from now, we will hear much from the contestants how much their hearts bleed for the people, how it is only for the electorate that they work and how it is only the electorate's interest that they care about.

Voters have to be cautious about the candidates playing religious card again. Zealotry, fanaticism and fundamentalism have no place in a progressive society destined to carve out an independent and dignified place in the contemporary world. Today preservation of any closed system is not only unacceptable but untenable. But this awakening could only come when voters are literate and have risen over the depths of abysmal poverty. Apparently deliberate efforts they were allowed to remain mired in ignorance and poverty because they constituted vote banks for such vote banks cease to exist when people get some education. Voters have to be cautious about the high profile leaders, known for their corrupt practices in the past, who would again fiddle around with sly schemes and lofty promises.

The Bangladesh landscape for the last seven years excluding one year after 1/11

BITTER TRUTH

Now the electorate has to be very cautious and display utmost sensibility and discretion in electing their representatives to the parliament. This time we will elect such parliament members who will be role models not only in politics but on our way forward. The election scenario in the country at the moment has been clouded by spiraling prices of food items and also pangs of hunger. Our leaders must realize that hunger and democracy cannot go together.

appears awash in turmoil. On the political front chaos, divisive war and factionalism reign. The business area too is gripped by a crisis of confidence. More obvious now is the discord as regards nomination of candidates in the forthcoming parliament election following grass roots selection and reform measures in the party structure and its constitution. Away from politics, economic expectation turned into economic disappointment as the recession took a strong hold on all business.

We missed the bus first during the period after the fall of Ershad regime and we missed the bus totally during the erstwhile alliance rule. As the prime minister with the largest mandate in the post-Ershad regime, Begum Zia could have done anything she wanted -- installed power plants, invested heavily in infrastructure, insisted on real growth of literacy and education in the villages, changed healthcare methods, brought about judicial reforms -- and today we could have been a dignified country instead of languishing among the odd 100 poorest ones of the world. Without paying lip service and offering false promises to the electorate as usual, these election seekers have to realize what went wrong in the country.

Elected to parliament this time, the MPs belonging to either treasury or opposition bench, must, on the basis of a consensus, ask for repeal of the article 70 of the constitution that debars an elected representative from retaining his membership in the Parliament if he votes against the party from which he was elected. Dr Zahir, a senior constitutional lawyer in the country while participating in a TV channel talk show questioned the incorporation of such

a anti-democracy clause in the constitution.

The big question for the voters now is, how they will vote for the honest and committed candidate because the anti-corruption drive, as it appears by and large, has failed. Most of the persons, mainly politicians, arrested on corruption charges have come out on bail before the election. All of them were given 'hero's welcome' at the BSMMU prison gate and the electorate are now inclined to believe that they were all innocent until proved guilty by the country's highest court. Unmistakably they are very actively participating in party activities and most of them would be given nomination because of their clout.

Voters in such a situation would be put in a dilemma in making the right choice. Many people in the country harboured apprehension about the efficacy of such arrests and wondered if that would end up in a failed endeavour. Meanwhile the local elections have proved that country's political culture has not undergone any qualitative change and the national election might witness the same scenario.

But gloomy though the situation is, the country's abundant resources and human capital are readily available for a national revival -- if only there is enlightened and determined leadership. Bangladeshis even after traumatic experiences during the five years of alliance rule tend to invest goodwill in their leaders, even overlook transgressions. But only up to a point. That point surely has been reached, and the country's politicians should understand that. Reports have it that most of the country's grassroots organisations comprising youth

groups have been telling candidates willing to contest elections that young Bangladeshis want their leaders to be more accountable.

Mired in grinding poverty and illiteracy as the voters are in rural Bangladesh, they can hardly make independent and pragmatic choices in electing the most competent and honest person. They look to the village 'matubbar', who often plays the most vicious tricks in collecting votes for the person who wields money and muscle power with little record of service for the community. This has bred an unhealthy political climate and a crisis situation in the country.

In the euphoria of coming to power, it will be unfortunate if the top leaders forget to examine what went wrong in the country. Captains of industry, economists and civil society members have all sought to impress the future rulers of the country with deep comprehension of what ails the country. The stark fact is: the past alliance government have done little to improve the lives of ordinary Bangladeshis. Starting from the chief executive, ministers and elected representatives in the past days seemed to have their own narrow causes, often in disregard of the national interest. So we didn't have enough electricity, no new strategies in agriculture despite the looming threat of climate change and didn't find any new gas deposits to augment what we found a decade ago.

Now the electorate has to be very cautious and display utmost sensibility and discretion in electing their representatives to the parliament. This time we will elect such parliament members who will be role models not only in politics but on our way forward. The election scenario in the country at the moment has been clouded by spiraling prices of food items and also pangs of hunger. Our leaders must realize that hunger and democracy cannot go together.

Our political leaders elected to parliament this time will have to do some serious home work about augmenting agricultural production in their regions and enlarging the literacy base in the real sense of the term because literacy is the key to development, healthcare and jobs. Above all, it is the key to population control and there can be no empowerment of either women or any other sections of the population without literacy.

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