

Thai government dissolved

But is this any way to practice politics?

THE on-going drama in Thailand has taken a new twist with a constitutional court stripping the prime minister of his post, outlawing the ruling party, and disbanding the government, prompting triumphant anti-government protesters to end their siege of the country's main airport.

However, while it is undoubtedly good news that the siege is over, it would be premature to conclude that the crisis has been brought to an end, as the ruling party has vowed to re-form under a new name and continue to administer the country.

More to the point, we are saddened by the events of the last week in Thailand. It seems to us that taking to the streets and occupying the airport, causing untold damage to the nation, is no way to go about registering one's political grievances. In addition, one cannot help but strongly suspect that the decision of the constitutional court was influenced by the siege, which would certainly be regrettable.

Thailand has remained unstable ever since the army moved against ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra two years ago. Since then, two more prime ministers have now been relieved of office, ostensibly on grounds of corruption and voter fraud, but in reality it seems to be because they were seen as proxies for Thaksin and his banned Thai Rak Thai party, which was unacceptable to his political opponents.

What we are thus seeing in Thailand is a complete break down of the democratic process, with large numbers apparently unwilling to abide by the decision of the people. The fact that Thaksin's power base is rural and poor and that the movement against him is an urban middle class and elite affair is significant.

While the corruption and vote fraud allegations leveled against Thaksin have earned him a conviction, what we find regrettable is the undemocratic means that his opponents are using to get their way.

The prognosis for Thailand is thus not good. When a large section of the electorate is unwilling to accept the will of the people and willing to go to extreme lengths in order to bring down a democratically elected government, the democratic compact, if you will, has been broken. Democracy can only work when those who lose elections are willing to abide by the result.

Encroachment on rivers

Act quickly and decisively to evict the grabbers

WHILE the environmentalists are crying hoarse to make the point that the rivers in and around the city have to be saved from encroachment and pollution, there are few listeners. The ground reality remains appalling. Rivers continue to be the targets of land grabbers having enough political clout and money to carry on the illegal business.

The point will be made clear by what is going on in the river Buriganga and the Turag. The grabbers have gone to the extent of using a signboard to mark the area occupied by them in the river Buriganga at Kamrangirchar. Not surprisingly, the encroachers are reported to be two local political leaders with highly dubious track records. Yet, one of them has got the nomination from a major party.

Obviously, the mortally sick Buriganga cannot survive when influential people keep dealing such fatal blows to it. Already, it has been narrowed down to a trickle of smelly water, which cannot be called a river anymore. The environmentalists have alerted us to the grave danger of allowing this river to die due to pollution and the pressure of encroachment from both sides. The decision makers have apparently been convinced by the arguments of the environmentalists, and attempts to evict the encroachers have been made from time to time. But the signboard in the Buriganga greatly offsets, or even mocks, the progress that has so far been made to recover the lost riverbed. The other lesson to be learned from such brazen encroachment is that the so-called political leaders, known for misdeeds of almost every denomination, could not change themselves in the last two years. And finally it is pretty clear that the government has failed to contain the powerful grabbers having no respect for the law and little understanding of our environmental needs.

The Turag case is no different. A photograph printed in this newspaper yesterday shows how the local influential people have filled a part of the river with sands. Their purpose is understandable, though it is not so clear how they could embark on such a mission in blatant violation of the law.

The authorities concerned and the law enforcers have to act quickly and evict the encroachers, regardless of who they are.

Correction: Yesterday's editorial mistakenly identified Bill Gates as the US Secretary of Defense in place of Robert Gates. We regret the error.

Mumbai havoc and lessons for us

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE nature of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai has demonstrated a change of tactics, not of strategy. And, of course, the modus operandi adopted was meant to fit the aim, which was to kill as many as possible -- the targets were the same -- unsuspecting helpless civilians.

But what was the purpose of the barbaric act, and what did the terrorists want to achieve, and what did they achieve after all?

By going after the icons of Indian economic eminence and targeting India's financial capital, was there any specific message the terrorists wanted to convey? According to a defense analyst, "the attack in Mumbai has done what may well be irreparable damage to the 'shining' image of the 'emerging global power.'"

Or was the attack because of India's closeness to the current US administration, as demonstrated by the Indian PM's comments during his visit to the US early this year, that President Bush enjoyed tremendous popularity in India. That had not been taken very kindly by those who consider Bush to be as much responsible, if not more, for the thousands of innocent deaths, as the terrorists he has waged his so-called war on terror against.

Or was it the act of those that would not like to see the Indo-Pak relationship move away from a path of hostility to an era of understanding and cooperative existence. Is there any group that stands to gain from a constant air of hostility between the two neighbours?

Or, as another analyst has said: "The Mumbai terrorists might have embarked

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It doesn't really matter what nationality or religion the Mumbai terrorists belonged to, what matters is that their warped ideology and the path of violence they have chosen are anathema to civilised norms, certainly to the teachings of all the religions. The only lesson from the Mumbai mayhem is, cooperate regionally or suffer.

on propaganda of the deed without the propaganda in the confident expectation that the rationalisation for the attack -- the narrative -- would be provided by politicians, the media and terrorism analysts."

It is very important that these questions be answered; otherwise India's effort to combat terrorism will flounder.

The Indian authorities have identified the ten terrorists from the statements of the one that has survived the encounter. While the Indian politicians may take comfort in the fact that there is lack of evidence to suggest involvement of any Indian in the terrorist attacks, anyone with a modicum of knowledge of the execution of such operations, planned, if not conceived, and launched from outside India, will know that it cannot be done without a local support base, either inserted from outside, well in advance, to develop a firm base, or created from within.

Very often in the past the Indian authorities had shifted the blame on the

state or non-state actors in the neighbouring countries. That may be a convenient position to take since it spares one the agonising task of having to grapple with the realities at home and to address the fractures in the socio-cultural and religious-ethno-political framework that give rise to disgruntled elements who find in violence the only recourse for ventilating their grievances. But that in no way justifies acts of terrorism and killing of innocent people.

The fact is that there are enough causes and many disgruntled groups in India who have an axe to grind against the establishment. It is not that the terrorists are trying to weaken the country; on the contrary it is the weakness of the country that the terrorists are exploiting.

India is under great pressure from within to react with force. There may be some in the administration that may feel provoked to take the US lead and go for suspected training camps in Pakistan, in exercising its right to "defend itself." But there are compelling strategic compul-

sions that one feels might prevent India from exercising an option that has the potential for greater conflagration between the two countries.

However, terrorism in South Asia is not India's problem alone. We all are affected by it, one way or the other. Bangladesh has a fair share of extremist elements and has experienced their violence, and Pakistan is being haunted by the Frankenstein that it helped the US to create in the eighties.

Let's put the matter in perspective. While during the time near to 200 innocent civilians were being killed in Mumbai in India, at least 97 persons were killed in separate incidents in the NWFP during that period, and approximately 45 persons were killed in militancy-related incidents in the FATA, of Pakistan, while in Sri Lanka at least 164 LTTE militants, 105 soldiers and 10 civilians were killed in separate incidents between November 24 and November 30.

These militants may be of different cultural and religious colour, but they are the enemies of peace. The reality is that we are all facing a common foe, and we must all stand up to it together. It doesn't really matter what nationality or religion the Mumbai terrorists belonged to, what matters is that their warped ideology and the path of violence they have chosen are anathema to civilised norms, certainly to the teachings of all the religions.

The only lesson from the Mumbai mayhem is, cooperate regionally or suffer.

The author is, Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Mumbai fall-out

MATTERS AROUND US

But a major fall-out of the Mumbai incidents is the impact it is likely to have on the topsy-turvy relations between India and Pakistan. New Delhi points the needle of suspicion at Islamabad, while the latter denies any involvement stoutly.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDIA and Pakistan have been continuing efforts to improve their often-strained bilateral ties, but they may suffer a reversal as a fall-out of the Mumbai episode. The sensational terror incidents in the commercial hub of India are over. Various issues are now coming to the fore -- including rolling of heads on charge of dereliction of duty. Home Minister Shivraj Patil has resigned.

The Mumbai massacre has shaken not only India but also the entire world. The media and others are pointing accusing fingers at the federal as well as the Maharashtra state government for intelligence failure, even though the attackers were finally killed or nabbed.

How the attackers could get into the city -- presumably by sea -- and how only ten of them could engage the security forces of a mighty country like India for 62 hours remain a matter of raging debates in India itself. The axe may fall on many other key persons as the dust raised by the incidents is unlikely to settle down in the near future because of the gravity of the matter.

But a major fall-out of the Mumbai incidents is the impact it is likely to have on the topsy-turvy relations between India and Pakistan. New Delhi points the needle of suspicion at Islamabad, while the latter denies any direct or indirect involvement stoutly. The prime minister and the external affairs minister implied Pakistan's links. They said that the attackers might have come from "outside" -- a euphemism for Pakistan.

The Pakistan president asked India not to come up with a "knee-jerk" response and said that his country was not associated with terrorism as it itself was a victim of such acts. Evidently, he was referring to the daring attack in a posh hotel in Islamabad sometime ago. Such comments from the highest level cause a strain in the bilateral ties -- albeit no specific and serious accusations have been leveled by New Delhi.

The state minister for home affairs said that all the ten "terrorists" were from Pakistan. All but one of the attackers were killed, and the one nabbed reportedly admitted that they all came from Pakistan.

It is widely believed in India that the militant Laskar-e-Taiba group was behind the incidents. The same group was accused of launching the attack on the Indian parliament, which had severely damaged Indo-Pakistan ties.

Relations between the two neighbours were normal, but the attack on the parlia-

ment aggravated the ties to the extent that they were on the brink of a war. More than a million troops remained stationed along the border for many weeks.

Fortunately, an open conflict did not flare up, thanks to the reconciliatory efforts undertaken by nations friendly to both India and Pakistan and pressure by the saner sections of the people in both countries.

Nevertheless, this could not obscure the fact that Indo-Pakistan ties are so sensitive that at any time these can be blown out of proportion and spread with all-out belligerence.

Unfortunately, the two neighbours are showing signs in the aftermath of the Mumbai events that there could be a reversal of the positive trend of normalisation of relationship. Reports said that Islamabad was considering moving one lakh troops from Afghanistan to its border with India if tension escalated.

India and Pakistan have nurtured deep animosity against each other ever since the British left India in 1947. The main bone of contention is Kashmir. However, both say they will make efforts to solve it.

The emergence of Saarc also had a sobering effect on the hostile Indo-Pakistan ties, while it is also a matter of common knowledge that many a time the regional forum also suffered the adverse jolts of the negative aspects of the relationship of the two main players of the regional spectrum.

The Mumbai incidents were most unfortunate, and killing of innocent people cannot be condoned under any circumstances. Evidently, the attackers were not acting for causes that they considered important and sacred for them.

The Indo-Pakistan dispute is undeniably complicated and, hence, requires pragmatism in addressing it. Pakistan's president, immediately after taking office, said that guns could not resolve problems.

Sadly, a high level Pakistan delegation led by no less a person than its foreign minister cut short the on-going visit to India and returned home as a sequel of the incident. Cricket matches and other programs between the two countries will be affected.

India is naturally angry, but nothing should be blamed on the Pakistan government without incontrovertible evidence. Even at this stage, goodwill and pragmatism must be brought into play for the overall interest of not only India and Pakistan, but also for the South-Asian region.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.

Road to nowhere

BETWEEN THE LINES

The biggest casualty will be India-Pakistan relations. They have deteriorated to such an extent that even the eventuality of a full-scale war is not ruled out. Voices of reason in both countries are very few, and they are hardly heard when anger takes hold.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT is difficult to say whether the assembly elections in several states are a semi-final. The voters were agitated and angry over the terror attack on Mumbai and it's difficult to say how they would have voted in normal times. Few months are left for the final, the Lok Sabha polls. Much will depend on the people's mood.

The BJP has made it clear that its election plank will be Mumbai, which is understandable. What is not understandable is L.K. Advani's absence from the all-party meeting called by the prime minister to discuss Mumbai and the aftermath. The BJP's leaders at the meeting only criticised the government.

Advani's presence would have sent a message that India was united. What happened at Mumbai has challenged the ethos of pluralism and the idea of India. Election is a means, not the end in itself. The end is the governance through which the country's ideals are protected.

Still the BJP has not given up its parochial agenda. When the fire of terrorism was raging, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was stomping in northern India, articulating national chauvinism. The party published joint advertisements in Mumbai newspapers blaming the government for surrendering to terror.

Here was the time to raise people's morale for a united response. Advani and other BJP leaders should recall how former President Clinton offered his services to President Bush following the destruction of the twin towers.

Surprisingly, the RSS has urged unity. The BJP still has not realised that India's faith in pluralism is not a matter of policy but a commitment. The BJP saw how the semi-final it won before the last Lok Sabha election resulted in a victory for the Congress.

There is no justification for the foreign minister's warning that the military option was open. India has sent a list of some 20 people who have reportedly taken refuge in Pakistan after committing acts of sabotage in India. Certain names had also been sent in 1993.

The point is not the repetition of names but Mukherjee's ultimatum within 24 hours of dispatching the list. Islamabad should have been given ample time to consider the names. Talking of military option in the same breath does not speak well of our respect for the sovereignty of Pakistan.

True, India has every right to bomb the training camps in Pakistan or Kashmir. Vajpayee was also pressed on that point during the Kargil war, but he refused to

allow the bombing because he feared that hostilities could escalate.

In any case, military action is not the option that New Delhi should consider. Cutting off diplomatic relations with Pakistan, and stopping railway and air connections are harsh measures, but more than adequate to show anger by a nation which feels outraged. However intransigent Pakistan is, there is no alternative to peace to bring it around.

The biggest casualty will be India-Pakistan relations. They have deteriorated to such an extent that even the eventuality of a full-scale war is not ruled out. Voices of reason in both countries are very few, and they are hardly heard when anger takes hold.

Maybe things could have been sorted out if there had been confidence between the two countries. When Manmohan Singh requested Zardari to send the ISI chief to New Delhi, the prime minister assumed that Zardari would agree to it. He did.

It's another matter that some forces in Pakistan, nipped the effort in the bud. Had the ISI chief come, it would have established the joint mechanism to fight terrorism that the two countries have been talking about. Since there is no confidence between the two, Pakistan does not take into account even the confession made by the terrorist apprehended in Mumbai.

Whether he was trained at Muzaffarabad or came by boat from Karachi, it was for Pakistan to find out. By this time it should have searched Karachi thoroughly to satisfy India.

The new organisation in place of Lashkar-e-Toibba and Jaish-e-Muhhammad should have been banned. Islamabad should have invited a team from New Delhi to check for itself how far Pakistan had gone. It would have given New Delhi proof of Islamabad assuaging India's feelings.

It is a pity that people-to-people contact builds up goodwill inch by inch, but Mumbai-like incidents destroy it in a jiffy. The anti-friendship elements are too strong to allow the common man's wish to live in a secure and peaceful environment.

Within India, the disillusionment with politicians is understandable, but not with politics. Anger should not lead us to lose faith in democracy.

In our effort to curb terrorism, we should not take any step which may restrict individual freedom. The test of a nation's faith in democracy comes when it is challenged by undemocratic forces.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.