

## The terrorism Israel symbolises

United Nations must act to save Gaza and its people

THE invasion of Gaza by the Israeli military worsens an already bad situation in the Middle East. In fact, the ramifications of Tel Aviv's military operations against Hamas are beginning to be felt all over the world, with politicians particularly in the West finally realising the need for a containment of the conflict. Unfortunately, though, the tough response that should have come from western governments to the terror employed by the Israelis against unarmed Palestinian civilians has shockingly not been there. It appears that their emphasis has more been on the rockets that Hamas has been firing into southern Israel and less on the destruction Israeli forces have been wreaking on life and property in Gaza.

An important development that one notices, though, is the flurry of activity that has lately been going on at the United Nations about the urgent requirement for a cessation of the conflict. With more than 500 Palestinian civilians, including a large number of children, already dead from the relentless pounding of Gaza by Israel and with scores upon scores of buildings destroyed, one would have thought that the Security Council would have acted swiftly to have the Tel Aviv authorities pull back from their onslaught. That has not happened, precisely because of the United States' unwillingness to accept the terms of a possible ceasefire. It is a sign of how the Bush administration, in its final few days in office, continues to back governments that do people grave wrong. There is now the suspicion that until Israel, which successive American governments have maintained is their staunch ally, completes its occupation of Gaza, no ceasefire will come into effect. The damage that such an attitude will further cause the Palestinians -- and global stability -- can only be imagined, to collective dismay.

A stronger response to Israel's aggressive acts in Gaza is a foremost requirement today. Washington and other western governments must see beyond the perceived sins of Hamas, at the patently criminal actions of the Israeli government against innocent Palestinians. Unless quick action is taken against its moves in Gaza, the alienation that Muslims across the world have felt in recent years will only intensify. It is a point the incoming American administration of President-elect Barack Obama would do well to take note of.

## HM Ershad

Forgiven (?), but not forgotten

JP Chairman HM Ershad's harbouring the hope of becoming president of the country is surely not endorsed by many, except perhaps his own party men. And there is reason why Ershad's ambition sounds like an autocrat turned politician asking for too much at the wrap-up stage of his career.

It is true that Ershad has regained the respectability lost during his rule in the 1980s. He must be a happy man to note that his party has 27 seats in parliament and he himself got elected from three places. But then Ershad's comeback is no doubt a quirk of history having more to do with the bitter acrimony between the AL and the BNP, than his own virtues as a politician. Well, we do admit that he still enjoys popular support in certain constituencies. But what we believe is that Ershad should celebrate his victory by serving as a senior parliamentarian fully committed to the people and the nation.

A time should surely come in the life of a politician when to him collective good must take precedence over individual goals. And nobody can prove the point better than Ershad, now in his late seventies. He can overturn the image of a military dictator and emerge as a clean politician. But his hankering after the presidency will not change his standing in the public eye as a politician failing to see anything beyond high profile positions.

As for Sheikh Hasina and her party, a sense of indebtedness might influence their decision-making. But we would urge the AL to listen to the people's voice and assess everything in light of that. The memories of the pro-democratic movements being suppressed by Ershad's regime are still in their minds.

So, a party which has just won an overwhelming majority is not expected to play any role in glorifying a much-maligned dictator.

HM Ershad's position during this late rally in his bumpy political career does indicate that our politicians by and large cannot yet think of anything else other than high positions. They have to come to terms with the truth that veteran politicians can and should try to guide the nation through proper counseling and refrain from setting negative examples.

## Tall talks in talk-shows ...

### SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Thus, the tall talks in talk shows, in a bid to obliterate the memory of the blatant corruption and looting during the tenure of the 4-party alliance government, went on and on, unrelenting. But did the learned participants succeed in changing the opinion already formed by the common masses in their minds? No, they did not.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE all time low scoring of BNP and Jamaat in the recently held national election tournament has puzzled friends and foes alike. The alliance team played more like our national cricket team, with untested players, no practice, low morale and beset with "injuries." The captain of the team looked disarrayed, having no clue of who was a bowler and who was a batsman. And the team looked like a motley band ready for a drubbing. And drubbing they got indeed.

The late night results had left most people -- pro-BNP, pro-Awami League and pro-Jamaat -- gasping for oxygen, some in ecstasy, some in agony. True, even Awami League (AL) had no clue of what was going to transpire in the late evening when counting began at various poll centres. The common guess was 160 to 170 seats for AL, 80 for BNP and the rest for the other parties. The incredible figure of 230 for Awami League alone made even a staunch AL supporter say in amusement that any senior AL leader would have wanted a maximum 190 seats to be on the safe side. Maybe he is right. Maybe he is not right.

And since the day after, political and poll analysts of all colours and hues have been dissecting the results to get to the bottom of

the "mystery," as the BNP-Jamaat loyalists prefer to term it. The analysts have surfaced with all sorts of "reasons" and are now trying to find out what factors went behind creating those "incredible reasons." Well, by now millions of words have been printed in the print media in analysing the reasons, but, in their search, they overlooked one or two major reasons, which I believe had impacted the results. Here they are.

Dear readers, if you backtrack a little and try to recall the talk-shows that had eaten up valuable air time of the numerous electronic channels you will develop an insight into the whole issue. Since the caretaker government took over power with the support of the army, a group of "experts" comprising journalists, university teachers, academics, politicians, political analysts and law practitioners began to decipher the constitution, citing article after article to prove how unconstitutional the caretaker government was. Strange indeed, most of them possibly had never studied the constitution as vigorously before as they did during the tenure of the caretaker government.

They spared no opportunity to stress how the fundamental rights of the politicians were being battered by the agents of the "illegal government," and how the people were being deprived of the opportu-



Talk is cheap.

nity of exercising their democratic right of self-governance. They wanted national election within three months from the caretaker government. They also began to smell the smoke of intrigue in the army camps, which many believed were ready to seize total state power!

The other reason was people's disappointment with senior lawyers. They watched in dismay how some senior lawyers of repute had been giving strong arguments in defence of criminals who had looted the country's coffers. These lawyers became over-enthusiastic in arranging bails for the criminals or managing them hospital cabins. These lawyers prepared documents exploiting the loopholes in the existing laws of the land to make the cases appear weak and untenable. People wanted to see justice, so they reacted when the criminals came out of jails one after another. People blamed the lawyers and the flaws in the laws.

Thus, the tall talks in talk shows, in a bid

to obliterate the memory of the blatant corruption and looting during the tenure of the 4-party alliance government, went on and on, unrelenting. But did the learned participants succeed in changing the opinion already formed by the common masses in their minds? No, they did not. The more the experts talked, the more the people rejected their arguments, and became more resolute to bring about a change.

So, I believe that if the talk-show experts of BNP-Jamaat gharana had rather openly and bitterly criticised the 4-party alliance for the misrule, nepotism, institutionalisation of corruption, covert support to fundamentalists, repression on opposition political activists, tender hijacking and so on, things might have been different today. They had tried people's patience for a bit too long. They had the notion people would fall for the semantics. But it did not happen. The poll results say so.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## No complaining please!

Once the trauma is over, I am sure Begum Zia will be able to realise the situation and decide her course of action most judiciously, keeping in mind the interest of her party as well as that of the country. She has undeniably made a significant contribution towards transition to democracy by participating in the election under trying circumstances.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE much-awaited national election finally took place on December 29, 2008 without any hitch. Out of 299 seats, the Awami League-led grand alliance bagged 262. For Awami League it has been more than a landslide victory, out of 262 seats they won in 230.

For the BNP led-4-party alliance it was more than a shocking defeat. An alliance which had more than two-thirds majority in the last parliament could manage only 32 seats this time, having been totally wiped off in Dhaka and Sylhet divisions. For Jamaat e Islam, it was literally a white-wash. With all the stalwarts losing they could win only in 2 seats as against 17 in 2001.

Election 2008 had some interesting features. Thanks to the caretaker government, the armed forces and the Election Commission, it was for the first time a national election was held with transparent ballot boxes and a fairly accurate voter list with photos. Nearly 87% voters exercising their right to franchise, the highest in any

parliamentary election in the history of Bangladesh.

Women participation in the election, both as voters and as candidates, was also the highest. As many as 55 women candidates directly contested the election in 60 constituencies and 19 were successful.

Given our political culture, it was only natural that BNP would reject the result. In their first post-election press conference BNP chairperson and leader of the 4-party alliance Begum Khaleda Zia termed the election as farcical, stage-managed and, therefore, not acceptable. How such an accusation will hold water is a different matter.

There is no chance of giving any credence whatsoever to such allegation without concrete proof. According to the foreign election observers, it was a free, fair, transparent and peaceful election of international standard. They found no evidence of any election rigging. The opinion of the local observers is not different either.

Taking into consideration their past record of misrule plagued with widespread

corruption, abuse of state power, plundering of national wealth, acts of terrorism, patronisation of Islamic militancy and soaring prices of food and other essential commodities, it was not difficult to predict that the BNP-Jamaat jote would lose.

But to explain such a crushing defeat of BNP or for that matter the stunning victory of Awami League, one has to go further down the track of events that followed the departure of BNP from power in October 2006. I would like to summarise them as follows:

- The prices of food and other essential items, which were already up by 60-70 percent during the BNP regime, went well beyond the buying capacity of common people.
- The anti-corruption drive of the caretaker government revealed harrowing tales of corruption and abuse of power committed by political stalwarts, including the two sons of Begum Zia. The news of former finance minister Saifur Rahman's whitening black money and Begum Zia's son Arafat Rahman taking bribe of Tk. 12 crore from a foreign company and depositing it in a Singapore bank roused tremendous anger among the common people.
- BNP's nomination of a good number of controversial candidates (their wives where they were legally barred) who were either convicted or arrested on charges of large-scale corruption and or abuse of power, was not taken lightly by the voters.
- The issue of war criminals and anti-

liberation forces, thanks to the relentless campaign by the Sector Commanders' Forum and citizen groups, was another dominant factor in the rejection of the BNP-Jamaat candidates.

The internal feud in the Jatiyatabadi camp between the pro and anti-reform groups also played an important role in the downfall of BNP. Expulsion of Mannan Bhuiyan and appointment of Delwar Hossein as the acting general secretary of the party might not have gone well for the party.

People at large, especially the younger generation, which constitutes nearly one-third of the total voters, possibly inspired by the Obama campaign, wanted a change in the political, economic and social scenario of the country. The "Charter for Change" and commitment to try war criminals, as was envisaged in the election manifesto of Awami League, provided them the platform they were looking for.

Once the trauma is over, I am sure Begum Zia will be able to realise the situation and decide her course of action most judiciously, keeping in mind the interest of her party as well as that of the country. She has undeniably made a significant contribution towards transition to democracy by participating in the election under trying circumstances.

She can contribute further towards democracy, peace and prosperity of the country only by joining the parliament and playing a constructive role as leader of the opposition.

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

## Meeting election pledges

Awami League has mentioned five priorities in its manifesto. They are, controlling prices of essentials, combating corruption, overcoming the crises of energy and electricity, alleviation of poverty and establishing good governance. Meeting these pledges, no doubt, will be a tough job.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE grand-alliance led by AL has returned to power with a stunning landslide victory. It is not only the victory of an alliance, it is also the victory of democracy and rejection of corruption, violence and religious extremism. It has given a clear indication of the growing strength of women and the new generation of voters (33%), and has sent a strong message that people have not forgotten the politics of assassination and the failure of the alliance government to bring the criminals to justice.

Our people deserve congratulations for voting peacefully and in a disciplined manner. Begum Zia's observation that the election was a farce is certainly not based on solid facts. It was rather an outburst of a highly frustrated political leader. This is unfortunate because it shows disrespect for the judgment of the people.

The total rejection of the commendations of election observers is also immat-

ture. Observations like "elections were conducted in a remarkably peaceful environment with no instance of bias toward any party by the government," "the elections were administered and took place in a peaceful environment resulting in a credible electoral process," and "elections were conducted with integrity and credibility" were based on close observations.

The general impression about the election is that its hallmarks were professionalism, transparency and credibility. Except for some technical flaws, it has reached international standards. To some observers, it was the best election they had ever observed. The favourable impression of foreign observers will certainly brighten the image of Bangladesh.

The Election Commission successfully responded to the challenges of delimiting constituencies, sorting out candidates, reprinting ballots to show respect to court verdicts, setting up polling booths and distributing ballot boxes and papers, and flawless coordination among bodies

concerned shows high commitment and competence of all concerned with the operation. Special mention should be made about the preparation of an authentic voter list with photographs, and the maintenance of strict neutrality of the police force.

This astounding success of the grand alliance was not just because of the incumbency factor or the people's desire for a change. In fact, the people have given a clear message about their disgust for what happened during 2001-06. Broadly speaking, the people, particularly the younger generation of voters (who constitute about 54%), desired change and Awami League was given the challenging task of bringing it.

Awami League has mentioned five priorities in its manifesto. They are, controlling prices of essentials, combating corruption, overcoming the crises of energy and electricity, alleviation of poverty and establishing good governance. Meeting these pledges, no doubt, will be a tough job. However, with honest efforts and commitment, it appears that it may not be impossible for AL.

Reduction of prices of essential commodities is a complex and difficult task. Following international prices of oil and some other imported items like fertilizer, edible oil, wheat and rice, may make reducing the prices easier. With political stability, and absence of corruption, terrorism and extortion, the investment

climate will improve (resulting in increase in employment). With the possible lowering of the price of energy some of our major export items will be more competitive in the current global economic downturn.

The new government will have to concentrate on increasing employment. It may initiate action on introducing an employment generating scheme on the Indian pattern to ease the current employment crisis. It is true that due to the current global economic depression, the international labour market is shrinking. Because we export mainly low-wage workers, it is expected that remittance will not be affected significantly.

People have voted for AL with the expectation that their lives will be peaceful, and free from corruption and religious terrorism. Thus, the government will have to move swiftly, cautiously and efficiently to fulfill the pledges in the election manifesto.

It has no time for respite because it will have to proceed on in a period of the greatest global economic depression since the 1930s, with a not-so-efficient bureaucracy and a dearth of proper technical hands. More attention must be given to merit and competence for a change in our seniority-based society. This is the clear demand of new generation of voters. It would be interesting to see how much this is reflected in the new cabinet of the grand alliance.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.