

## Regional task force on anti-terrorism

*State its terms of reference*

A feature of the Awami League election manifesto, insofar as its foreign policy commitments are concerned, is to work towards forming a regional task force to address the issue of terrorism and militancy. This has also been reiterated on quite a few occasions by people in the government since the assumption of office by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Predictably, the opposition led by the BNP has come out against the idea on the perceived grounds that the arrangement might impinge on the sovereignty of the country, apart from a wider strategic ramification should the said arrangement become a part of the global war on terror.

Admittedly, the spectre of extremism and terrorism in Bangladesh is not as intense as one finds in India or Pakistan or even Sri Lanka. But we cannot forget the fact that we had our 21 August 2004, where the senior AL leadership was the target of the militants, and 17 August 2005 countrywide serial bombings, and thus one can understand the compulsion of the AL to take the terrorism issue very seriously, and initiate comprehensive measures to address the scourge.

One must also keep in mind that the phenomenon cannot be addressed by any one or two countries of the region because the problem straddles national boundaries and even more, there is the issue of regional networking and funding.

We feel that absence of a concrete proposal and the definition of the character of the proposed task force and its terms of reference has raised a degree of apprehension among certain quarters which should be allayed once the prime minister elaborated on her idea.

But the concept is not fundamentally new. There is a UN task force, set up in 2007, to coordinate with the member countries for an implementation of the UN strategy on terrorism enunciated in 2007. Near at home a similar arrangement has been put in place by BIMSTEC in the form of a joint working group to combat terrorism and transnational crime, in July 2004. And as disparate a group as Apec has also a counter terrorism task force; and generally speaking, their terms of reference include capacity building, identifying the loopholes, sharing intelligence and coordinating with other international counter terror forums.

As for Saarc there is the Saarc Convention on suppression of terrorism which we feel a task force would be able to operationalise. And assistance from countries like the USA in enhancing capacity and technical expertise at the regional level would be helpful.

However, we feel that countries of the region must come to an agreement before any help is taken from outside powers.

We feel that the matter be considered dispassionately and suggest that the government enunciate the details of its proposal and make them public to put at rest any controversy over it.

## This is utter cruelty

*Those responsible must be punished*

WE are appalled by the photograph of female garment workers walking barefoot on hot concrete during lunch hour, as their footwears were kept in possession of the employers lest the former traveled too far during lunch break. The news item on the front page of The Daily Star on Sunday says that it is done so not on a one-off, but regular basis to compel workers to come back to work after a short while as they would not be able to endure the rough walk for long. It is beyond comprehension that female workers are subjected to such cruelty right in the middle of the capital city and well into the 21st Century. By all means, the whole episode smacks of gender discrimination of the worst kind, because the male workers are not meted out such treatment. Such practices remind us of the days of bonded labour and barbaric treatment to workers that civilisation was thought to have consigned to oblivion.

The readymade garment sector still earns huge amount of foreign currency and remains the largest employer of workforce, especially of female workers in the country. Notwithstanding tough international competition, entrepreneurs have managed to sustain through demonstrating sheer tenacity and business acumen. But at the other pole, the questions of ensuring working environment, healthcare and safety of the workers, especially that of female workers, have remained largely unaddressed. Many of the factories do not have sufficient number of toilets or separate ones for the female workers. On top of it, newer aberrations come to light often, as exemplified in the photograph in this daily on Sunday.

We are so outraged by the oppressive behaviour of the garment owners in Banani that we demand an immediate investigation into the scandal of barefoot walking of female workers. The perpetrators must be punished and steps taken to deter such practice in future.

## The priority for major parties

The two leaders -- Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia -- together faced the problem of dislodging an army dictator by joining hands and working together. Their politics henceforth must not be confrontational, so that the situation does not make it inevitable for a military strongman to step in.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER having gone through two years under a state of emergency, it was presumed that the politicians would have learnt to conduct themselves in accordance with the universally accepted norms of democratic politics. A highly credible election, followed by a magnanimous gesture by the Awami League, reinforced those assumptions.

But within a month, the optimism fell apart when, in the very first session of the ninth parliament, the BNP walked out of the house -- thus firing the first salvo of protests against the treasury bench. The country's political landscape is again being heated up by the same old exchange of complaints and innuendoes.

There might be reasons, like seating arrangements or the contents of presidential address, for the over-reaction by a routed BNP, but they are so flimsy that AL could easily remove them before they could snowball into a crisis leading to the opposition's walkout.

Neither side could rise to the occasion, although the greater share of blame for it is due to the gloating Awami League, because magnanimity is always the preserve of the winners. But unfortunately, the party has, with its overwhelming majority, tended to be dismissive, if not outrightly arrogant.

It could swallow a bit of its hubris and earn the goodwill not only of the people but also of the BNP's supporters, whose numbers are not insignificant.

Sheikh Hasina rightly said soon after her swearing-in that she was the prime minister of all fourteen crore people of Bangladesh, which also included those who opposed her in the election. Never before has a political leader suffered so much at the hands of her opponents, yet made such lofty pronouncements.

None would comprehend better the agony of powerlessness and oppression better. It is only expected that her party will share her compassion and address the opposition's complaint of being neglected.

Amid intransigence on both sides with regard to the seating arrangements, the BNP's boycott continues and the business of the parliament has so far been a dull and one-sided show. There are no signs that past animosity between the two parties will go away, and that the opposition will not spend its entire term trying to disrupt the ruling party. The first signs of this are already visible, although it is too early for the opposition of take to the street.

But they have already done it, and the muted protests are turning vocal. They have held rallies and processions, heating up the political landscape. At the moment, the opposition seems to be building up agitation on the issues of TIFA and transit -- the latter, being a sensitive issue, will provide BNP enough ammunition to effect the Awami League, although the issue is being hidden behind the smokescreen of "connectivity." The promoters of the idea from both India and Bangladesh gave it the garb of a "quadrangle of prosperity," and "sub



Where is the spirit of 1990?

regional cooperation."

But they remained non-starters in the face of public disapproval. Contrary to common perception, our people have enough gumption to differentiate between the real and the spurious. They do not simply want to barter their sovereignty for scraps the transit gurus are dangling before us. If the AL takes the bait, it will surely bump into minefields of myriad problems.

Sheikh Hasina does not possess a talisman to extricate herself from the minefield she may throw into, but she can certainly ward off the evil by listening to the public through a referendum on the issue. Anything related to national interest and our sovereignty cannot be summarily decided in camera, keeping the people in dark.

She aspired for and sought a dominant role, indeed for untrammelled power. The people, in simple faith, fulfilled her desire in the election. It is now earnestly expected that she will keep their sentiment and anxiety uppermost in deciding her course of action.



MUNIRA KORKHED MUNIR/ DRUK NEWS

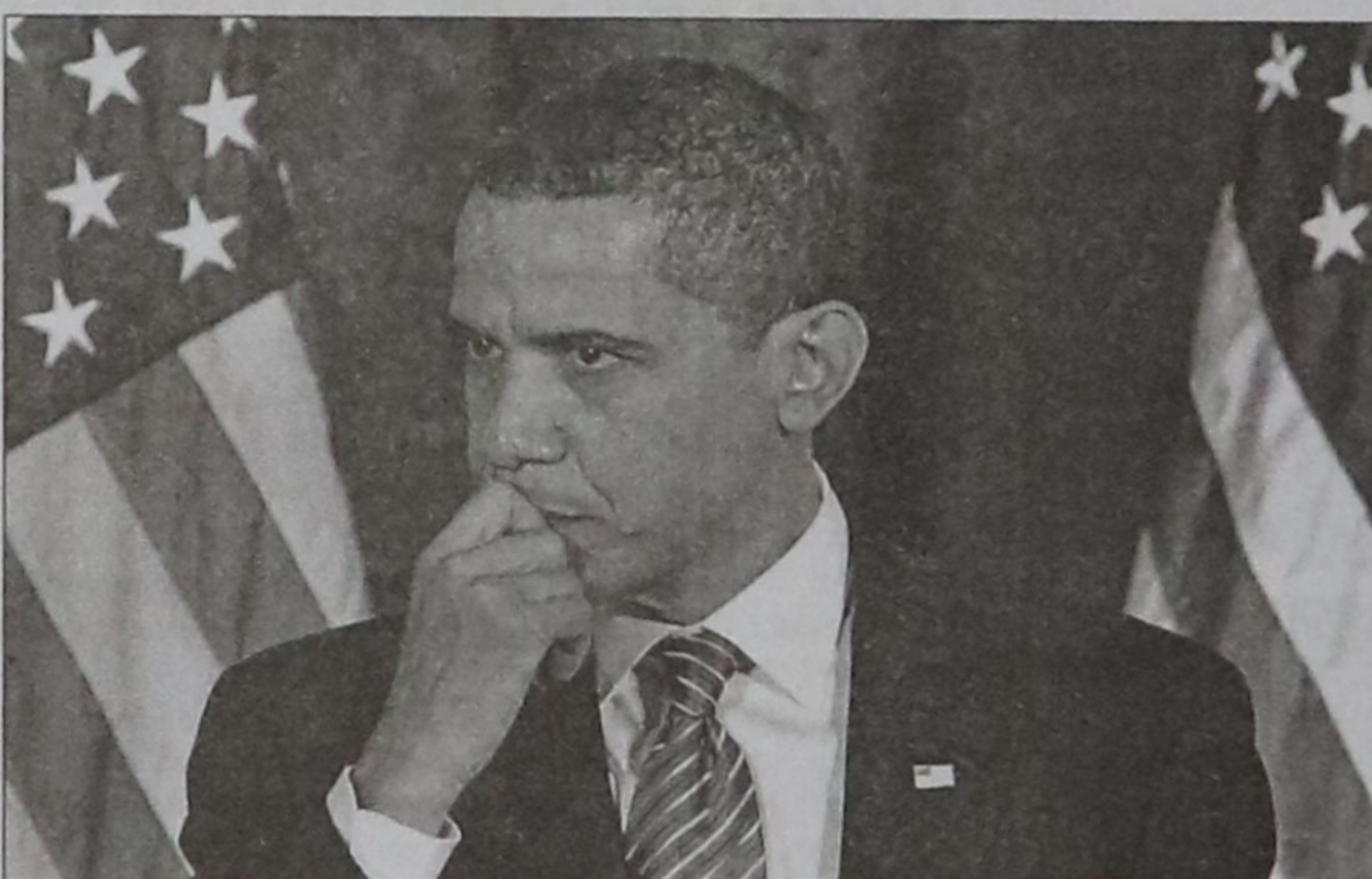
One hopes that this time the major parties will act with greater responsibility and in harmony with each other to consolidate the civilian political supremacy that the politicians were able to restore the hard way. The military, that determined the course of events for the last two years from behind the scene, mercifully did not stay the course. Of course, it was under pressure from the aid donors to return the country to democracy.

Wisdom demands that political leaders should not test the military's patience at a time when the military in the Third World is not shy of taking power, as it happened in this country in 1982. The two leaders -- Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia -- together faced the problem of dislodging an army dictator by joining hands and working together. Their politics henceforth must not be confrontational, so that the situation does not make it inevitable for a military strongman to step in.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

## The inside game

The White House has realised that the best use of Obama's time now is firing up voters; they can demand that members of Congress enact his agenda. Obama will hit the road to sell his plan. As a basketball player, he was known for a confident outside shot. But it seems that he's got more than one way to score.



HOWARD FINEMAN

IN medieval Washington, no one gets a half-hour solo meeting with a president. But as Barack Obama laboured to sell his economic plan last week, he gave three senators, none a household name, the royal treatment. "When I got the call, I was pretty amazed," says Susan Collins, a Republican moderate from Maine. "It was just the two of us, no aides [...] That's unheard of."

After chatting about Oval Office décor, they got down to business. Obama understood her concern: the stimulus bill was too costly and too diffuse. He agreed on some specific cuts and vowed to work for others. So, in the meantime, could he count on her to vote for a minimum of \$800 billion? In flinty-eyed Maine, she said, there just were too many doubts about the price tag. "He didn't convince me," Collins told me later.

To the aficionados of Beltway ball, the new president's private meetings were revealing: he was elevating relatively junior players, and, perhaps, relying too much on a congressional gang of bipartisan centrists at the risk of alienating his own party.

They were one sign, the Beltway types thought, that his "outside" game (campaign-style speechmaking) was still better than his "inside" game (the process of muscling through the crowded paint of institutional power).

But it appeared that they'd underestimated the president. A group of bipartisan senators had reportedly come to terms on a stimulus bill. At about \$780 billion, Collins seemed convinced.

Like all new presidents, Obama is learning how to make friends -- and how to adjust the microphone of the bully pulpit. For one thing, it's extremely sensitive. When the president suggested, in passing, that Republicans stop listening to Rush Limbaugh, the result was to make the radio talk-show host even more influential in GOP ranks.

It also takes time to know when, and how

often, to commandeer airtime. Three weeks into his presidency, Obama already seems overexposed in the capital -- and that was before a prime-time press conference scheduled. The decision to do back-to-back interviews with TV anchors turned into a noble but almost self-flagellatory exercise as he spent much of the time apologising for vetting mistakes.

Dealing with Congress is even trickier, even if it's "run" by your own party. He doesn't really know the place -- he barely had a cup of coffee before launching his presidential bid -- and has had trouble deciding whether to treat the members as equals or as incorrigible children. The former approach seems to have worked.

New presidents naturally want to correct for their predecessor's weaknesses. It's what they run on. George W. Bush feared and loathed the press; Obama likes to show off his ease in dealing with it.

Bush disdained dealing with Congress directly; Obama is sending the opposite message, attending lunches and retreats as if he's one of the guys. Bush refused to apologise or second-guess himself; Obama said, "I screwed up" -- or words to that effect -- on five networks.

The good news for Obama is that his congressional colleagues care about one thing only, winning, and some version of a stimulus package almost surely will be signed into law eventually.

The White House has realised that the best use of Obama's time now is firing up voters as he did during the campaign; they, in turn, can demand that members of Congress (private meeting with the president or no) enact his agenda. Obama will hit the road to sell his plan. As a basketball player in high school, he was known for a confident outside shot. But it seems that he's got more than one way to score.

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## Boycott Israel's allies

Only the conscience of the Bangladeshi consumer will keep out Israeli goods and punish companies that support Israel. So all of us should become more aware of the activities of the companies from whom we buy. In this way, we can pressure multi-nationals to stop doing business in Israel.

ZEESHAN HASAN

JANUARY'S massacre in Gaza by Israeli forces should give us all pause to think. Are we really totally powerless to stop Israeli armed aggression against Palestinian civilians? The answer is, actually, no we are not completely powerless.

South Africa, the original apartheid state, was brought to its knees by an economic boycott against its policies. Yes, Bangladesh is a small country and far from the Middle East; but our imports are bought with the same American dollars that support the Israeli economy, and we should utilise them intelligently.

The economic boycott of South Africa was about more than boycotting South African products; it also targeted multi-nationals that invested in (and thus economically supported) the apartheid state. Bangladesh already disallows direct imports from Israel through its import policy; but Bangladeshi consumers have yet to take action against multi-nationals that have the dubious distinction of directly supporting Zionist land grabbing, or receiving Israeli government awards recognising their investments in Israel.

One company directly supporting Israeli land grabbing is Intel. Exports from Intel's Lachish-Qiryat Gat plant total \$1 billion a year. Al-Awda (the Palestine Right to Return Coalition) has pointed out that the Intel plant is built on land Israel confiscated from Iraq al-Manshiya, which was a Palestinian village of 2,000 people. The Palestinians were replaced by the new Jewish settlement of Qiryat-Gat, where Intel then invested and became a big employer.

Alongside Intel, many Western high-tech companies invest heavily in Israel, viewing it as a cheap source of technical talent. Companies like Nokia, Microsoft, and IBM are all big investors in Israel, with large research and development facilities there.

In May 2002, the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce awarded IBM the Ambassador of Award in recognition of its outstanding contribution to the development of the Israeli high-tech industry and to advancing Israeli exports.

It would certainly be better to buy phones and computer hardware made by Asian companies, which do not outsource to Israel. Taiwanese chip manufacturer Via, for example, makes Pentium clone chips comparable to those from Intel; Taiwanese Acer makes PCs, and Korean Samsung makes phones. No one should buy Microsoft software, as free alternatives like OpenOffice and Ubuntu Linux are good replacements.

Companies which receive awards from the Israeli government are particularly suspect. In 1998, the following companies

received the Jubilee Award from right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: Johnson and Johnson (manufacturer of many baby products), Kimberly Clark (makers of Kleenex tissues and Huggies nappies), AOL Time Warner (owner of Time magazine and CNN news), Nestle (owner of Nido milk and Cerelac baby formula brands, as well as the ever-present Nescafe coffee and Kitkat, Quality Street, Smarties, and After Eight chocolates). These are all popular brands in Bangladesh; the question is do they deserve our money?

Coca Cola (which also owns Fanta and Sprite) is another such case. In 1997, the government of Israel honoured Coca-Cola and its 30 years of support at the Israel Trade Award Dinner. Would it really be difficult to switch to some of the other myriad soft drink brands available?

Only the conscience of the Bangladeshi consumer will keep out Israeli goods and punish companies that support Israel. So all of us should become more aware of the activities of the companies from whom we buy. In this way, we can pressure multi-nationals to stop doing business in Israel. They should decide which is the more important market; Bangladesh with its 150 million consumers, or Israel with only 7 million.

In these times of global recession, organising boycotts against Israel and its corporate supporters could actually work. The customer is king; and kings should understand the world and use their influence to improve it.

Zeeshan Hasan is a leftist local businessman. (All data from <http://www.inminds.co.uk/boycott-israel.php>).



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