

## Extent of barbarity shocks nation

*Deft handling of the crisis is creditable*

**T**HE extent of barbarity perpetrated by BDR troops on the serving army officers, as was revealed yesterday and the mass graves and bodies from sewerage that were uncovered have shocked us beyond measure. We have no words to express our outrage, anger and disgust at what a section of BDR jawans have done.

As the deep scar on the national psyche takes its time to heal, we can take a pause and draw a sense of relief at the speedy end to troops surrender at Peelkhana without any further bloodshed. We join the nation in expressing satisfaction over the political leadership's deft handling of the situation with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina leading the way with great sagacity and rectitude. We also praise the restraint and maturity shown by the army whose pride, self-respect and sensibilities have been hurt by these killers and who must feel a lot of anger and sense of outrage. We share these feelings and praise them more for their restraint, in spite of such provocation.

PM's series of meetings with her senior cabinet, party and alliance colleagues, and very cogently, with chiefs of Army, Navy and Air Force laid the basis for a coordinated approach to the challenge at hand. The consultative process the Prime Minister engaged in before delivering her decisive speech blending a persuasive message with a stern warning of a tough action in case of non-compliance by rebel elements was of the essence to her mature handling of the crisis. This also helped galvanise the entire law and order and security machinery behind the task of disarming rebel troops, rescuing hostages and recovering dead bodies and weapons.

As for the general amnesty announced by the government, we wish to reiterate our earlier editorial stance on the issue that those who were drawn into the rebellion and committed breach of discipline may deserve clemency, but not certainly those who perpetrated murder, mayhem and plunder. The latter category of offenders must be identified and brought to justice. They cannot go unpunished. We are happy to note that the PM has clarified her amnesty declaration in the above lines.

Indeed, as the full picture of the carnage unfolds, our heart goes out in sympathy to the families of the deceased and once again, we express our profound condolences.

We repeat what we said earlier, and we would like to place on record the calm, equanimity and fortitude with which the army has taken the loss of their peers. It only goes to their credit that they, out of a noble sense of duty to the country, gave peaceful resolution of the grave problem a chance.

Given the extent of the massacre the question that is naturally rising in the public mind is, could the mere issue of grievances about service condition or alleged mistreatment lead to such a huge number of officers being killed. The issue of intelligence failure has already been raised. Was there a total failure? Or was there a warning that was ignored? Obviously the situation calls for a deeper probe and unearthing of any relevant facts. We urge the government to launch such a probe as soon as possible and share with the public the findings through a discussion in the parliament.

## Malls without fire safety arrangements

*Needs awareness as well as enforcement*

**O**UR disregard for human lives is once again demonstrated by the fact that most of the high-rise malls in the city are without adequate measures to prevent occurrence of fire and have even less capacity of fighting it properly once it breaks out. This we suspect is true of malls as well as most high-rise apartment buildings not only in the capital but also in other major cities of the country.

It is painful to see frequent reports of fire in shopping centres or apartments, costing heavily in terms of money and human lives. Whereas it is mandatory to have sufficient provision for fire fighting tools in all malls and apartment buildings, and no building plan can be passed without this arrangement, such a basic rule is being flouted with impunity. And it is for the RAJUK to ensure that the approved plan is implemented in full, which regrettably is not done with honesty.

Not only that such buildings are supposed to be inspected from time to time to ensure that the firefighting equipments are in place and in good order but also those who are supposed to operate them are well versed in the use of the equipment. And a certificate to that effect is required to be rendered to the building owners. We must keep in mind as well that fire safety measures do not involve fire fighting tools alone, but also arrangement for safe egress out of the building in case of outbreak of fire, which must be an integral part of the building plan. But alas! very few, if any, ever bother to fulfill these requirements, because there are always ways and means to make the inspector look the other way.

We feel that the matter is as much one of awareness as of enforcement. Not only must the relevant rules be enforced, people must be made aware of the need for adequate protection against fire hazards and how to react once fire breaks out in a shopping mall or high-rise buildings. And for this the relevant agencies led by the Fire Service should organise inspection as well as awareness programmes and fire drills all over the country. And the sooner it is done the better for the safety of the public.

## Keeping faith in our potential

There are many positives within our economic matrix which should enable us to move forward and succeed. We have a reasonably qualified cheap workforce that is vital for the textile and garments sector. There is also the emerging ship manufacturing industry. In addition, there is also the future prospect of 'digital Bangladesh' carving out a share for itself from within the international ICT market.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

**T**HE last few weeks have seen a series of reports expressing apprehension that the slowdown of global growth may affect our country's export performance. It has also been underlined that we might be unable to achieve the anticipated GDP growth over the next three years. It is being stressed that several challenges will also cast a shadow on the overall performance of the country's economy in the near and medium term. They include rising inflationary pressures, infrastructure constraints, adverse impact of global slowdown on aid flow and workers remittance, comparatively weak financial capacity of manufacturers and relative absence of design and product development capability.

These are serious weaknesses. Nevertheless, I believe that Bangladesh's potential to compete in the foreign market exists and that we do not need to be pessimistic.

I agree that the international economic situation has made us more vulnerable. However, the global financial turmoil should not result in a major credit crunch for us. This is consistent with the World Bank's view that the country's resilience to the global economic woes lies in a large part on its relative insulation from international capital markets and a comparatively low exposure to foreign portfolio investment. We also have a low level of external debt and a reasonably strong international reserve. In other words we have benefited from limited exposure to the securities markets of the United States and the European Union nations. This will enable us to ward off any major disaster for the country's financial sector. This will also be assisted by the fact that the country has a largely closed capital account and capital flows are in the form of soft loans and foreign direct investment.

It is true that we have had some negative reports about the export of some items within the non-traditional export sector. It appears that our vegetable exports have slipped by almost 25 percent in the July-November period of the current fiscal against the same period of last fiscal. Analysts have stated that this

has been due to currency fluctuations (the gradual rise of Taka against Pound Sterling) as well as enhanced phytosanitary requirements. Similarly global recession has hurt our bicycle exports. There has been a sharp drop in recent months in orders from the European Union countries (the main importers). It has declined from Taka 59.93 crore in September 2008 to Taka 23.65 crore in November due to shortfall in demand from consumer destinations in Holland, Germany and Belgium.

News has been mixed in the leather sector. Exports of finished leather and leather goods other than footwear have declined (due to a fall in international demand) by about 18 percent in the July-November period of 2008. Buyers are staying away because of their already existing stock and inventory that were not exhausted during the winter season. It has also been noted that the demand for finished leather (for automobile and luggage sectors) in the international market has been greatly replaced by a growing demand for rawhide and rexin, which we do not export. Consequently, there is anxiety in this regard within the 195 tanneries in our country. The saving grace in this sector has however been provided by our gradual growth in export of footwear to countries like Canada, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iraq, Jordan, India and Nepal.

It has not been gloom and doom everywhere. Yes, exports have sputtered in handicrafts, electronics, ceramic products, cut flowers and iron chains. On the other hand, terry towel, textile fabrics, home textile, chemical fertilizer, tobacco and agro-processed food have registered positive gains.

A classic positive has been the growth in the pharmaceutical sector. It has shown consistency -- growing year on year -- for the past few years at 50 percent on an average. This has been facilitated because Bangladesh has been able to take advantage of the WTO-TRIPS mechanism. This has opened a window of opportunity that will continue till 2016. This has opened new markets in the Middle East and in Africa. One hopes that the government will play a more interactive role within this industry and

expand its potential by establishing a government operated central testing laboratory for export-oriented pharmaceutical industrial units.

For now, we have to look beyond 2016. We also have to take suitable steps to overcome the constraints of financial capital (that will be required for technology, research and development) and meeting the regulatory requirements. Those in this industry will also need to build strategic global alliances to expand their market opportunities.

Latest figures have indicated that export earnings went down by 10.7 percent in December 2008 compared to the same month in 2007. This is the second time this has happened this financial year. The other month was October. However, despite this, the overall exports in the first half of the current fiscal year have posted a 19.37 percent growth, earning \$7,852 million compared to \$6,495 million for the same period of last fiscal. This has been possible because exports of woven garments grew by 20.99 percent and knitwear by 27.07 percent.

Our economy has also been fortunate with regard to remittance received from our migrant workers. A total of \$ 5.369 billion was remitted to Bangladesh in the first seven months of the current fiscal, a whopping 29 percent increase from the corresponding period of last fiscal.

We have clouds in the horizon, but I do not think that there is reason to panic. Yes, there has been an overall decline in foreign direct investment. This will however pick up if we have political stability, uninterrupted supply of gas and electricity, more efficient port facilities and

revamped communication and transport services.

I firmly believe that there are many positives within our economic matrix which should enable us to move forward and succeed. We have a reasonably qualified cheap workforce that is vital for the textile and garments sector. This will enable us to compete with China. This has already persuaded Multiline, a German company, to initiate investment in the setting up of a textile factory at a cost of \$ 200 million. There is also the emerging ship manufacturing industry. In addition, there is also the future prospect of 'digital Bangladesh' carving out a share for itself from within the international ICT market.

Such a progression will require improving and development of infrastructural facilities (including creation of more skilled manpower), assured power supply and internet service. These are doables.

Yes, we have economic challenges. Our trade gap has widened to \$ 3.08 billion in the July-November 2008. Yet, we do not need to despair. We need to focus on solutions in an integrated manner and not politicise the process. The way forward lies in tackling emerging issues with a bi-partisan spirit, having well-defined regulatory provisions, through a constructive private-public partnership and through the containment of corruption and mismanagement in the mechanics of accessing to capital.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net



## Terror strikes again

Neither the government nor the public have any knowledge about the amount of foreign money that slipped into the jihadi fund. Now is time for us to wake up and defend, for someone seems to be out there to break the nation down. The enemies have nothing to lose but themselves, for their act is born out of blind fanaticism, but the country has a lot to preserve -- the national will, its honour and freedom, characteristics and culture.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

**T**HE Police Superintendent's office at Gazipur trembled on February 21 with the explosion of a grenade detonated by a handcuffed JMB operative. At least 15 people were injured. The recent blast, following the bomb attacks in Naogaon in 2004, serial blasts in August 2005 and the blasts that killed two judges in Jhalakathi, is a reminder that no place, not even the police superintendent's office, is immune to JMB's activities.

This action by a handcuffed terrorist shows that innocent people are hostage to an organised terrorist group that can carry out orchestrated attacks across the country. The outlook seems gloomy. It is satisfying that around fifteen operatives of JMB, including three women and the present JMB chief Mohtasim, have been arrested. What is most alarming is that women are being inducted into the JMB.

The blast has certainly convinced the citizenry that some groups belonging to radical Islamic factions are involved in terrorism. No doubt, terror continues to visit us stealthily but steadily, no matter where we are.

The recent blast has shattered the nation's complacency. Out there, someone has been waiting for the right moment and the right place to strike. Fear has staged a comeback. And terror, with a religious address, is no longer a

distant memory, even if the government claims that it will succeed in combating terrorism.

Fundamentalist Islamic groups are operating covertly in about 29 zillas, as reported in newspapers. With the execution of JMB supremo Abdur Rahman Shayekh, Siddiquil Islam Bangla Bhai and Ataur Rahman Sunny in March, 2007, the radical group was weakened and went into hiding because of leadership crisis. By executing some identified leaders the administration has only treated the symptom, not the disease.

The disease is fanaticism which is inculcated into the minds of people who are made to believe that their cause or their thinking, is the just one and must prevail. The fanatics are only a handful compared to the millions believing in the interplay of ideas and opinions as in democratic, open countries of the world. Because they are a minority, they resort to such terrorist methods.

With about 3000 operatives, as reported in newspapers, and about 100 having special training in arms use and bomb making, they have regrouped and gained enough strength to create havoc in the country. If the text of the leaflets circulated are anything to go by, the JMB wants "to establish Islamic rule in the country," followed by a threat that they would go for counteroffensives against the administration should the government fail to pay heed to their warnings.

The leaflet says: "We are the soldiers of Allah. We have taken up arms for implementing Allah's law and the principles Prophet Muhammad (SM), Sahabis and heroic Mujahedeen have followed for centuries." The leaflet denounced democracy, calling it a system crafted by kafirs. It also decried the country's constitution and called for setting up a Shura (the highest consultative committee) comprising Alems, Ulama Mashaek and Islamic scholars.

Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai, through meticulous planning, set up organisational bases and militant training camps in madrasas and in the remotest areas of the country. They translated their plan into action with the help of huge funds from the Middle East, which were meant for building mosques and madrasas. Unhappily, a substantial amount of these funds went into the jihadi fund.

The revelation of foreign money coming into Bangladesh in the name of charitable causes of Muslim organisations, and then being used to promote an ugly kind of fundamentalism and terrorism, is really worrying. One might recall the suicide bombings in Kashmir, Mumbai, Delhi and Gujrat believably carried out with the help of such funds.

It is the proliferation of such foreign funded Qaumi madrasas run by the radical groups that seemingly led to Islamic fundamentalism spreading in the country, which earlier had the most gentle Islam. Mamun, who detonated the grenade kept for display in the SP's office, is an explosives expert and his wife, an ehshar (full time) member of JMB, carried out the sinister plans while working as a management chief of a madrasa in Bogra.

The rise of fundamentalism in its present form, based on hate campaign, was inevitable when Jamaat-e-Islami, the reported mentor of JMB and JMB, got credibility and opportunity after two of its members were appointed ministers. After so many tumultuous events in the

country during the BNP rule, when zealots destabilised the administration, the alliance between the coalition partners was so firm that religion and politics often appeared as inseparable.

It is puzzling as to how the government could, despite repeated warnings about the activities of Bangla Bhai, pass it off as a creation of the media without investigation. More so, how could the administration shut its eyes to the flow of funds from Middle Eastern countries, running up to crores of taka, in the name of funding madrasa education and recovery of Islamic heritage? Neither the government nor the public have any knowledge about the amount that slipped into the jihadi fund.

Now is time for us to wake up and defend, for someone seems to be out there to break the nation down as a whole. The enemies have nothing to lose but themselves, for their act is born out of blind fanaticism, but the country has a lot to preserve -- the national will, its honour and freedom, characteristics and culture.

All the blasts were a message to the law enforcers, law makers and all parties that, in an environment of high political stakes, bickering and heightened anxiety, no one was safe. They remind us that Bangladesh is about to face an ominous storm from zealots in hiding. The consequences are too frightening to comprehend.

The immediate past alliance government's soft attitude may have inspired the "holy warriors" consumed by hate, revenge and zealotry to wage war against the rule they call man-made. Paradoxically, such carnage and murder of intellectuals, politicians and journalists is carried out by a group determined to establish a system divorced from the realities of the world.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail: aukhanbd@gmail.com