

Trying times for us

Unity and discipline are the needs of the hour

EVER since the dastardly acts of a section of BDR men came to light, we, through several editorials have expressed our deepest sorrow at the tragic events. We commend the armed forces for the way it has held its grief in check and gone about performing its duties in the most professional manner.

We are passing through a difficult time and the events will no doubt leave a deep sorrow in our collective psyche. We are in the process of overcoming a grave catastrophe at the moment crossing the very initial days of the post-crisis phase. It is thus very important that we preserve our cool and avoid split within the society since that is what those behind the mutiny would be most happy to see happen. One must not fail to see that the mutiny in effect was designed to destroy and damage the two major elements of our defence capability the army and the BDR

It is neither the time for rumour mongering nor giving ears to all the irresponsible tales that are making the rounds. Going by the events of February 25 one can be in very little doubt that there is a deep-rooted plan to destabilise the country and exploit the situation, and we can resist and prevent that from happening if we as one, cutting across party lines, refuse to dance to their tunes by quashing the rumours.

All the political parties must understand that politicising the matter will be very damaging for the nation. We would have liked to see the PM involve her counterpart in the decision making process in the quelling of the BDR mutiny. This unfortunately did not happen and we feel that the Grand Alliance and Sheikh Hasina have lost a golden opportunity to gain the confidence of the opposition. One should not overlook the importance of such involvements since the collective decision, right or wrong, would have to be owned by all. And the blame game one sees is primarily due to this.

The BNP reaction, perhaps a consequence of being spurned by the government, is a disturbing stance to take. This is not the time for blaming one another or pointing accusing finger at the government on mere speculation, since what we need at the moment are cohesion and consolidation not division.

We feel that there will be time for discussion on the way the matter has so far been handled. We shall have enough scope for analysing the actions of all concerned. What we need to do now is to help overcome the immediate problems that of making the BDR operational and strengthening the armed forces to overcome their loss of such a large number of officers. We must work together to overcome the trauma inflicted on us.

US troops withdrawal from Iraq

Obama keeps his word

US President Barack Obama has begun to live up to the expectations of the peace loving people around the world. He has declared that the US will end all combat operations in Iraq through withdrawing two-thirds of the US forces deployed in the war-ravaged country by August 2010. The declaration amounts to offloading the legal and moral burden associated with the Iraq war, which he inherited while stepping into the White House.

This is more than just calling back home the American troops in Iraq who are clearly overstaying in the country that they invaded in violation of all international laws and norms, in the first place. The presence of American troops undermines sovereignty of Iraq as an independent nation, let alone the democracy that former president Bush tried to impose on the sharply divided country.

The Americans have been criticized heavily for the way they captured Iraq and tried to mould its political system according to their own plans and needs. Their success remained confined to toppling Saddam Hussein's much-maligned regime and installing a government of their choice. But the price that the people of Iraq have paid for the US invasion is too great to be outweighed by the United States' own, highly subjective, assessment of success in their mission. Indeed, it has been a humanitarian disaster of great magnitude which cancelled out all that the Bush administration was saying to defend the US action.

President Obama is also going to undo the blatant lies which were the basis of President Bush's extremely outlandish plan of attacking Iraq with most sophisticated war machines. The fictitious WMD story, concocted to give Iraq an ominous look, will be dispatched to history once the American troops withdraw from the country.

The most encouraging signal coming from President Obama's declaration is that a positive shift is likely to take place in the US approach to the Middle East. We believe the US President has taken the path that his predecessors had shunned much to the consternation of all the countries concerned except Israel. It may really help overturn the historical injustice done to the people of Palestine.

The enemy within?

There are people, including the prime minister, hinting that it was the handiwork of an interested quarter, that could be internal, external, or both. The deep-seated conspiracy is believed to have aimed at destabilising, the government as well as the country at this delicate time of a transition. Looking at the scale, precision and savagery of the operation, the apprehension cannot be ruled out.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AN immutable law governing power is that it cannot be shared, because the one holding the sceptre brooks no competitor. Perhaps because of the spirit of that law, Sheikh Hasina has surrounded herself with diehard loyalists in her ministerial team. That is fine. Anyone in her place would do the same in this country. Although it ensured her grip on the levers of the power many feel that a good deal of experience and efficiency has been compromised, leaving the vital flanks of governance vulnerable.

Notwithstanding the sincerity and ceaseless efforts of the members of her dream-team a reality check reveals a rather dismal picture of the country's law and order, which has dipped to a new low in recent days. The ever-deteriorating crime situation reported points to a deep malaise, most of which is inherited from a messy past. But the new dispensation's achievement in curing them is not promising either.

While the occurrence of myriad crimes across the country and the law-enforcing agencies' perfunctory role -- with or without reasons -- in combating them cast a pall of gloom over the concerned citizens. The stunning news of the BDR mutiny, coming quickly on the heels of JMB's suicide bombing in the office of the police super in Gazipur, couldn't but be dampening and depressing. The nation was already grap-

pling with the effects of the global recession, continuing high price of the essentials, and chronic power shortage amid numerous other socio-political challenges.

The carnage that started in Palkhona on an efflorescent spring morning on the festive occasion of BDR week is a national tragedy, opening up a new dimension to the problems the nation is already beset with. It's a tragedy because it could have been avoided, and even preempted, had all layers of the establishment been even routinely circumspect.

It's an enigma that a disaster of such tectonic proportions could befall the nation unnoticed by the concerned agencies, which are not negligible in number. Why couldn't the authorities be forewarned of the looming danger lurking behind the ceremonies? It must have been planned over a period of time, coordinated at various levels and the timings synchronised before the execution on fateful February 25. It's absurd that no one could sense the approaching danger before the whole nation was caught napping.

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Who is behind all this?

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However, in spite of the authority's stark failure to see what was unraveling over the years in an otherwise disciplined force, it acted promptly when in the eye of the storm. The government dealt with the devils in a mature way, kept its cool, and took the right steps to defuse the crisis. But, by then, the catastrophe had already struck and taken its toll.

Even if the storm has blown over, the real problem with regard to the two centuries old tradition-rich outfit like the BDR still remains. Many interested eyes are focused on how the government will now take the developments surrounding the BDR to a satisfactory denouement. But, in all likelihood, things will no more be the same again in this fabled organisation.

This scribe had a stint of BDR service back in the late seventies, when it was an abode of tranquility with its highly disciplined soldiers who always cherished their leadership from the army. What went wrong during the intervening years that some of them are now

averse to it? What made them a bunch of killers and looters? Why did they turn brutal and bestial? Was it only the issue of deprivation? It will be another tragedy if the answers to these questions, and more, remain unearthed or are hushed up.

We have already paid dearly for many of our lapses in the past, and are experiencing their agonising effects. We are aware that new government is barely two months' old and, as such, its achievements or failures do not warrant a critique at this stage, but a projection into the shape of things likely to emerge in future, when the AL will be cutting the shots, is in order.

There are few alternatives to experience. In the days ahead, it will require deft handling of the situation by someone more conversant with the dynamics at work in the minds of the men in uniform and their emotional innards.

So far so good. But let there not be a square peg in a round hole, although both are useful in their respective places.

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Manmohan's last stand

The logic is transparent. Two-thirds of the country is below the age of 35. The young want someone young. QED. There is of course a degree of naiveté in this equation. The young are not a category without distinctions.

M.J. AKBAR

THE Congress has begun its campaign -- for the general elections of 2012-13. All over Kolkata, the party has put up hoardings of a smiling, heavily-dimpled Rahul Gandhi. The visual message is "cute." The written message is unambiguous: this is the face of the future. He may be forced to share the limelight with his elders in 2009, but this is the last compromise. The campaign accepts that Dr Manmohan Singh is the Congress candidate for prime minister this year, but marks him as a transition figure, or in Arun Jaitley's phrase, as a "night-watchman."

Dr. Singh sort of lurks around the edges of the campaign, visible occasionally, out of courtesy, but far from dominant. He may get a few extra hoardings in the city where he lives, Delhi, but the proportion sinks rapidly the moment you move out of the capital. It is curious, given the need for clarity and discipline in communication, that the party should announce a transfer of power before the shift has taken place, offering Dr. Singh the dubious distinction

of a lame duck.

In any case, it is evident that even if the Congress manages to retain power after the April-May poll, the office will go to Dr. Singh but power will shift towards Rahul Gandhi. We have had a bi-polar government so far, divided between Dr. Singh and Sonia Gandhi. This is being stretched into a triangle.

But a second Manmohan Singh administration will serve at least one useful purpose: the cabinet will include Rahul Gandhi, along with a dozen of his peer group. This will be the answer to the "experience" dilemma. A couple of years in office will be cited as proof of ability to deliver as prime minister.

The Kolkata campaign is relevant for another reason. Rahul Gandhi's hoardings are not restricted to constituencies where the Congress could contest if an alliance with Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress became a reality. It has already flowed over into Mamata territory.

Once again, the meaning is utterly clear. The Congress strategy is focused on building up Rahul Gandhi as leader of the whole country, not merely of those parts of it that

have been left to it by coalition politics. This is the last election that the Congress is going to fight with such a profusion of partners.

If alliances happen in 2009, it will go along with them, whether in Bengal or Tamil Nadu. Even in states where the Congress is ready for an alliance, it is using this campaign to establish the difference both with the opposition as well as with its poll partners. If talks over seat sharing fail anywhere, the Congress will not break out in a sweat. It is confident of retaining enough seats in the next parliament to be a player at the roulette table that will open for business as soon as the election results are declared.

The logic is transparent. Two-thirds of the country is below the age of 35. The young want someone young. QED. There is of course a degree of naiveté in this equation. The young are not a category without distinctions. The child of a field labourer who joins the Naxalites at 20 is not as eager to inhale the fragrance of Fair and Lovely as the college student whose parents are spending a comparative fortune to get him or her through a private college.

It is interesting, therefore, that Rahul Gandhi is speaking like Mamata Banerjee in Gujarat, while the Congress is hammering Mamata in Bengal for being anti-development. Rahul Gandhi accuses Narendra Modi of precisely the same sins that Mamata Banerjee holds Buddhadeb Bhattacharya guilty of: of creating jobs for the rich at the expense of the poor. Even the phrases are similar, as is the symbol, Tata's

Nano project. It is only a matter of time, I suppose, before Mamata Banerjee, citing none other than Rahul Gandhi as her inspiration, describes Buddhadeb Bhattacharya as the Narendra Modi of Bengal. That should make the CPI(M) cringe!

It is perhaps inevitable that a national party should be tripped up by contradictions when there is such divergence in regional realities. But this is a difficult one since it addresses a fundamental issue of the core constituency: jobs. Urban youth want Nano, and rural youth do not want to sacrifice their minimalist insurance policy, land.

Narendra Modi has provided jobs through industrialisation, and won the endorsement of his state, of the young and of industrialists. If you criticise his economic performance in order to reinforce your minority base, you sow doubt about your intentions. While politics is a flexible art, it is not so very easy to lambaste industrialisation in Gujarat and seek it in Rajasthan.

This election effectively shuts the door on the ambitions of Dr. Singh's peer group in the Congress. There is no space for anyone else to become prime minister. If Dr. Singh relinquishes office on grounds of ill-health -- his heart is not in the best condition -- then there will be no dispute within the Congress as to who shall be the successor. If the allies do not accept Rahul Gandhi, they may be forced into an unwelcome early election.

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Need for evaluation of student politics

Sadly, the BCL today is poles apart from its idealistic pursuits as its hardcore members have become involved in all sorts of crimes. Not only the BCL, but also other student groups aligned with party-based politics today are far away from the ideology of the student leaders who roamed in the same campuses during pre-liberation period.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IF anything has tarnished the honeymoon period of the new government it is the student wing of the Awami League, that has been involved in conflicts with itself and with others since the landslide victory of AL-led alliance in the December 29 election.

The excesses of Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) activists in establishing their control over the campuses of the public universities, particularly at Jahangirnagar University where they manifested their ugliest muscle flexing in a factional gunfight, have deeply annoyed many.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has expressed her determination to deal strictly with violence and extortion in the name of student politics. Speaking as the chief guest at the 61st founding anniversary of BCL, she stated that no discrimination would be made while dealing with lawbreakers, no matter which party they belonged to.

The warning is indeed timely, but whether the BCL activists are ready to listen to it remains in considerable doubt, as they have failed to learn any lesson from the dissolution of the Jahangirnagar University unit of the BCL because of their defiance of the PM's instructions.

The leaders and the activists of JCD, the student front of BNP, and the followers of Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, were not less violent in any way than the leaders and activists of BCL, and had unleashed the reign of lawlessness in educational institutions across the country during the tenure of BNL-led four-party alliance government.

Student politics became synonymous with party-based politics after independence, when political parties made the student organisations their wings. That was the beginning of the ruination of innocent and aspiring students with genuine intention of getting higher education.

The most silent decay in our national life has occurred in the sector of higher education because of student politics. Frequent strikes, violence and other impediments have been a heavy burden on the general students of the public universities.

Education is an area that has been kept above all political rivalry in most countries in the world. But both politicians and student leaders in Bangladesh are conspicuously devoid of such sense.

Student leaders involved in crime have caused concern in people who are in consensus that student politics needs to change for setting it on an ideal basis. An expectation from the new government is that it will bring peace in the campuses so that higher education can take the right path.

The caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed initiated a move for permanent ban on student politics in public universities and colleges in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutes of higher education. It decided to issue a moratorium on party-based politics by teachers and students of public universities.

It also amended RPO provisions to compel political parties to sever relations with their front organizations, including the student wing. But the major political parties did not agree to do so.

Student politics in this country has a historical and glorious heritage. The BCL, since its inception 61 years back, had been at the forefront of all our national movements, including the language movement of 1952. It

also played the key role in mobilising public opinion in favour of Bangabandhu's six-point program.

Sadly, the BCL today is poles apart from its idealistic pursuits as its hardcore members have become involved in all sorts of crimes. Not only the BCL, but also other student groups aligned with party-based politics today are far away from the ideology of the student leaders who roamed in the same campuses during pre-liberation period.

Therefore, there is a need for the prime minister to give serious thought to student politics, which has not only become devoid of idealism but has also become rotten to the core. Students on rampage is a sign of old style of politics, not in keeping with the promise of change that propelled the AL-led alliance to power.

The time is ripe for taking some effective measures to rein-in the rampaging student leaders before they do irreparable harm to the government's image. The government should also strive to determine the forces that are driving them to violence, and lead the campaign to free the campuses from the clutches of the gangsters who go by the name of students.

Students of the universities should learn politics, but must not be sycophants of political parties. Student politics should focus on promotion of academic pursuits and building up of leadership.

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