

New probe body into BDR tragedy

Investigations must be quick, unfettered and focused

WE welcome the reconstitution of the inquiry committee to probe into the gruesome incidents perpetrated at BDR headquarters on February 25. The new eleven-member committee, which will replace the earlier six-member body, will be headed by a former secretary and include in it members of the three branches of the armed forces as well as the new director general of Bangladesh Rifles. It is our expectation, as it is certainly of the nation as a whole, that the investigations to be carried out by the inquiry committee will be thorough and absolutely unfettered by partisan considerations of any kind. After what has happened at the BDR premises, it is only proper that the committee, in the course of its work, be made privy to all documents and all other assistance that will prove substantive in the search for results.

In this connection, we note with satisfaction Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's speech in Parliament that even if anyone involved with the ruling party is found to have been complicit in the gruesome incidents of February 25, he or she will be dealt with under the law of the land. Such an attitude is truly appreciated and we trust that no one at any level of the administration will therefore seek to divert the course of the investigations. Given the macabre nature of the tragedy that we are only now beginning to come through, the probe committee must not have any impediments or distractions coming its way. There are the many priorities before the committee, as has been made clear by the Home Ministry announcement relating to its setting up. Additionally, we would like to point out that one of the critical areas the probe must focus on is the failure of intelligence to spot the conspiracy that surely must have been going on for a while. The nation has been told that the BDR security apparatus was relatively small and so limited in scope. Even so, its failure and that of other agencies must be taken into account. An identification of the loopholes is an absolute necessity.

Finally, we must remind the authorities that there ought not to be a repeat of the past where inquiry reports are concerned. No report of any public inquiry has so far been made public. Let there be a departure from that bad norm this time, particularly because of the very grave nature of the crimes committed at BDR headquarters.

We might add that the bad start to the inquiry process by the formation of the first probe body should not have happened. But now that a new committee is in place, let it work to the fullest satisfaction of the nation.

Even cricket is not safe

Worst fears about Pak security situation come true

WE have heard the news of terror attack on Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore with considerable disquiet, horror and surprise.

The terrorists ambushed the bus carrying Sri Lankan cricket squad injuring six players, four of them with minor wounds. Two of them were hurt seriously but their conditions are said to be stable. Thank God, none of the Lankans was mortally hurt.

All the same, the dastardly nature of the assault is amply proven by the fact that eight Pak policemen on security duty for the Sri Lankans were dead. The terrorists made good their escape. From all the tell-tale signs, therefore, it is evident that a premeditated, meticulously planned, and coordinated assault by heavily armed gunmen was perpetrated in broad daylight.

Internal security threats in Pakistan have been mounting lately, in Punjab particularly, the situation has become violence-prone following the removal of Sharif brothers from power in that province. Pakistan President Asif Zardari went to the extent of saying, looking at the overall situation, that Pakistan is locked in a battle for survival. Many tend to believe that the assault on the cricketers should not be isolated from the general pattern of terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

What is important to note about the latest incident in Lahore is that this is for the first time an international cricketing squad has come under attack, although quite a few national sides had cancelled their planned trips to certain cricketing countries considering security risks in them. That is exactly the point; for, we know that Australia and India had stayed away from playing cricket in Pakistan this season out of security concerns. The International Cricket Council (ICC) had advised cancellation of the tournament, but Sri Lanka took a calculated risk. The Pakistan cricket authority's assessment of security risks seems to have been too optimistic.

The cricket lovers throughout the world, especially those in the region, have been shaken to the core by the Lahore incident. There should be more thorough-going risk assessments by the ICC about countries vulnerable to terrorism. In extreme cases, third country venue is a good option.

We wish all the injured speedy recovery.

With democracy, we survive and will thrive

And therein lies the beauty of government by the consent of the governed. There is legitimacy to its actions, a recognised acceptance of its acts as being in the public interest. Which is why the reluctance of the powers that be to authorise an assault on the BDR premises by the army has been acknowledged to be a politically astute move.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT is not just the Bangladesh Rifles we are talking about today. Neither is it only the Bangladesh army, grievously wounded as it has been by the murder of its brilliant officers, that we focus on at this point. There is, significantly and in light of the sad, unfolding history we have been witness to since the liberation of this country, the vast need to reassure ourselves that democratic government will survive, that parliament will go on being the epicentre of all our activities as a nation.

Our choices are limited. Or they are non-existent. With democracy we survive and someday expect to thrive as a society. Without it, we mutate into an emasculated body of men and women.

In this past one week, it has been the elected government that Sheikh Hasina leads as prime minister which has been in as grave a danger as other institutions of the republic. Make no mistake about it: those who perpetrated the grisly horror at the BDR headquarters on February 25 were not merely undermining the nation's military, indeed trying to maim it for long if not for good. They also had within their sights a government that came to office barely two months ago through a decisive popular vote at general elections.

It is easy for many to take the government to task for perceived lapses in its handling of the crisis. And indeed there have been lapses, mistakes which could have been avoided. The manner in which

the government has been responding to questions relating to its performance, in parliament and outside it, says it all.

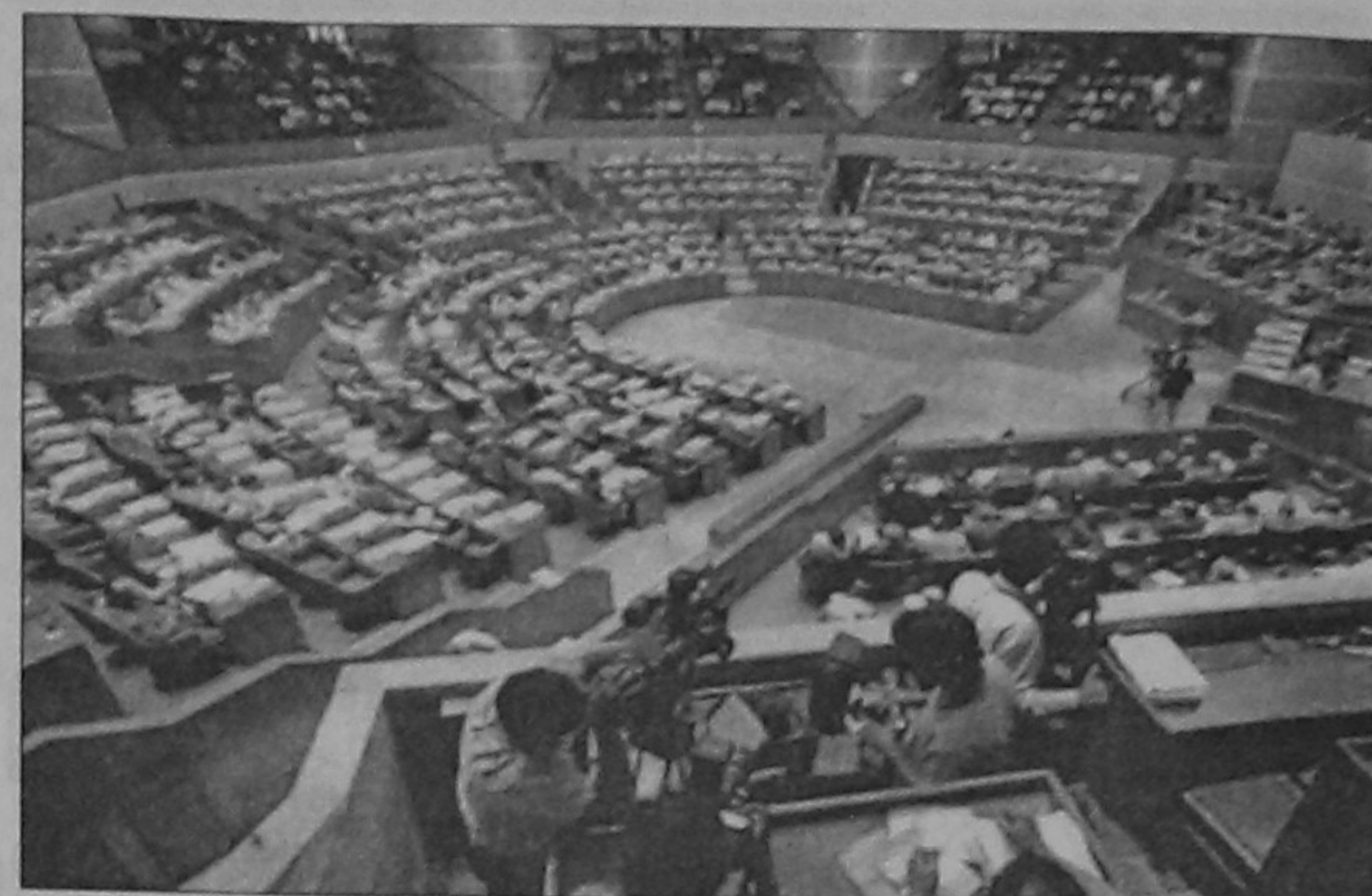
But our collective sense of relief today is in knowing that the government has survived, that indeed the parliamentary process has stayed in place. In a society where pluralist politics has either been dysfunctional or paralytic or both, it is easy to understand how messy things may turn out to be.

Chaos has by and large been part of life in Bangladesh. And frequent have been the moments when extra-constitutional forces sent elected governments running for cover.

Observed from such a perspective, it is for the people of Bangladesh a fortunate happenstance that the government elected to office in December last year has survived the worst in terms of the crisis at BDR. It has handled the crisis well, because it has handled it politically. Ignore the rancour of the debate in Parliament between the treasury and opposition benches.

Go beyond these partisan overviews of the situation, for bipartisanship will yet take a long time to become an indelible feature of national politics. So move beyond the patently partisan that occurred on the floor of the House on Sunday and remember only that we now have a legislative body where sensitive issues of national importance can be debated in public, that both the ruling party and the opposition can keep the nation abreast of conditions.

More than anything else, the murder of



Together we can overcome all crises.

the army officers on February 25 has only brought the nation together in a quiet and yet loud demonstration of unity. On a bigger scale, it has surely helped that a government chosen by popular consent has been around to calm nerves, to take charge of things rendered dangerous by the madness of a mob intent on murder and mayhem.

A non-elected government, because it is that, non-elected, quite possibly would have gone for an entirely different approach. Or it may have done precisely what this government has been doing. The bigger reality here is that the degree of popular support, or public understanding, that a government voted to office enjoys is conspicuous by its absence in all other manifestations of governance.

And therein lies the beauty of government by the consent of the governed. There is legitimacy to its actions, a recognised acceptance of its acts as being in the public interest. Which is why the reluctance of the powers that be to authorise an assault on the BDR premises by the army has been acknowledged to be a politically astute

move. Thousands of lives that would have come under risk have been spared.

Anarchy that would be the result of precipitate, ill-considered military action has been avoided. Ministers have acted with restraint and have sought to assure the country that hell would not break loose, despite the fiendish work that did away with the lives of the soldiers on February 25. The prime minister has been going places has been to army headquarters to listen and to be listened to.

There has been no overkill because the democratic political process has been in overdrive about a preservation of public order. And the orderly, the disciplined is what democracy is all about.

Elected governments sometimes fumble because of the many perspectives within which they operate. But, mark this! Once the critical decisions are made, these governments do not flounder or collapse in a heap. Parliament then becomes a remarkable exercise in political engineering.

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Brutal massacre at BDR headquarters

This was not a revolt for redressing of their grievances, which was the excuse used by the perpetrators to mislead the people. Initially, they were successful in hoodwinking the people. Later, their evil plan was revealed by the senseless massacre of officers.

HARUN UR RASHID

THREE days of mourning were declared, when our national flags flew half-mast to show respect to the departed souls of the Shaheed army officers and others who were killed brutally on February 25 and 26.

On February 25, a brutal carnage occurred in Pilkhana and continued till the next day, in which many brilliant and decorated army officers were killed. This sort of senseless carnage has few parallels in the world during peace time.

They not only killed the officers, but also the wives and children of some officers. Some of their bodies in uniform have been found in three mass graves within the BDR premises, and at the time of writing 63 bodies have been identified. Some of their residences have been burnt and looting of valuables including gold ornaments took place at the same time.

This gruesome incident beggars description and arguably constitutes crimes against humanity, and exemplary punishment must be meted out to the

culprits. This was not a revolt for redressing of their grievances, which was the excuse used by the perpetrators to mislead the people. Initially, they were successful in hoodwinking the people. Later, their evil plan was revealed by the senseless massacre of officers.

Many questions have been raised, such as: How is it possible to carry out such a pre-planned massacre within a disciplined force? What were their motives? Who were behind the massacre? Who financed them?

TV talk shows with senior retired army officers and civilians reveal the following facts:

First, when the meeting was being held in the morning at the BDR Darbar Hall during the BDR week, two jawans suddenly entered the hall and one stood behind the DG BDR. Thereafter, all present at the hall left without defending the head of the BDR. Such behaviour was highly unnatural.

Second, most of the brutal killings took place within two hours, between 9-30 and 11-30, on the morning of February 25.

Third, some have alleged that a pick-up from outside carrying unknown people

entered the BDR headquarters before the massacre. Who were they?

Fourth, some BDR jawans had covered their faces with white cloth and some of them had red bands over their heads. How, when and from where did they get such things?

From the discussions, some observations deserve mention as below:

The tragic event was a pre-planned conspiracy to destabilise the country at a time when Bangladesh, after the fair and free election, gained worldwide admiration. Many foreign dignitaries started visiting the country for economic cooperation and assistance. The incident, according to analysts, might have negative impact overseas in which flow of foreign direct investment is likely to be adversely affected.

The conspirators attempted to bring about a division among the security forces to weaken the security of the state. Furthermore, the perpetrators attempted to weaken the army by killing a large number of senior and highly trained officers.

Some have suggested that there has been a huge intelligence failure. Only the day before, the prime minister took salute from the BDR officers and jawans during the observance of the BDR week. Ordinarily, intelligence agencies are alert and vigilant to detect anything that is unusual in the place the prime minister visits.

Some have raised the question of ministerial responsibility and accountability in the matter.

An investigation committee headed by the home minister is expected to report within a week. Another committee, headed by a nonpartisan individual of probity, will be formed by the prime minister to investigate the circumstances leading to the carnage.

On March 1, some MPs suggested in the parliament that a parliamentary committee from all parties may be set up to investigate the tragic event.

The people and the leaders of the parties want a quick trial, and the government is committed to it, according to the LGRD minister. The minister further has said that the general amnesty did not apply to those who committed the gruesome criminal offences. The amnesty is meant for the bystander BDR personnel.

The whole nation is traumatised, regretful and fuming over the tragic event. The nation is numbed and shocked at the horrifying discoveries of mass graves. Have the perpetrators lost all human values and become animals? Even animals do not kill each other.

The national psyche has been shattered, and we pray for the salvation of the souls of the Shaheeds and offer our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families.

The nation should stand united and move on through resolve and determination, overcoming the crisis with forbearance and fortitude.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

'Fast Break' Obama

If Obama and the Democrats push this plan, a regional war will erupt. It will be ugly and it won't shape up along party lines. It's not a source of revenue Orszag should count on at least not just yet especially if the president is expecting to have an easy time winning Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania in 2012.

HOWARD FINEMAN

THE president is moving so fast, so sweepingly, that we may as well call him "Fast Break" Obama. For several reasons the urgency of the economic crisis, a backlog of frustrated Democratic dreams and his own shrewd strategic sense he's racing up the basketball court of American public life at a furious pace.

Obama wants to pile up a crushing lead on the scoreboard early in the game when his popularity is high and he can still lay all the blame on his predecessor and hope that the resulting momentum will impress the world (he goes to Europe for the G-8 in April), reluctant global investors (the sovereign wealth funds are sitting on trillions) and, of course, American voters and consumers.

The guy appears laid back, and he can be

patient when he has to be, but right now he believes in motion -- lots of it. If you move fast enough, he also knows, people don't have time to flyspeck details and some of the details in his new budget, the outlines of which he released Thursday, are either squishy, controversial or both. There are literally hundreds of things in the budget to focus on, but I will pick out just three:

War arithmetic: In a clever bit of budget making, Obama is taking advantage of George W. Bush's dishonesty to make his own budget look better. The former president's administration never counted spending on Iraq and Afghanistan in the regular budget it sent to Congress. By taking the hit early, and including that spending now roughly \$140 billion a year Obama will be able to claim major savings down the road. In 2011 and 2012, that spending is slated to decline to \$50 billion a year. So

Obama and his budget crew can book savings of \$180 billion assuming, of course, that Obama is in fact able to wind down those wars.

Rosy scenario: The simplest way to make the future look good is to assume that it will be. That is what Obama's budget does. Independent experts, on the Hill and in the private sector, are predicting that economic growth in 2010 will be (to average their estimates) about 1.7%. The president is assuming that growth will be nearly double that number. The rosier outlook allows Budget Director Peter Orszag to pencil in much smaller spending numbers for things such as unemployment insurance, and larger ones for receipts from income and employment taxes. Bottom line: much smaller deficits in the famous "outyears."

Taxing carbon: The "cap-and-trade" concept originated in the world of environmentalism, but it has dawned on federal officials and politicians that it's potentially a colossal source of tax revenue. Lord knows we have more air pollution than we know what to do with, so why not tax the heck out of those who produce it? Specifically, the scheme would tax carbon emissions by the pound, and allow polluters to trade the "right" to pollute by paying taxes. The original aim was to encourage

electric utilities to develop new, non-carbon technologies, on the theory that if they didn't need the "carbon credits," they could sell them to those who still do. Obama is hoping to raise \$79 billion in 2012 by implanting this system.

For now, all the money is supposed to go into technological research, and into compensating low-income customers of utilities that will try to pass on the cost of the tax. But the budget makers know that if they establish the new system, it could eventually yield hundreds of billions a year and there is no guarantee that the \$79 billion, if it materialises, will indeed all be spent on environmental matters.

Still, there is no guarantee that any of this will happen at all. In the heartland of America places where they cling to their guns and their religion they burn coal. Lots of coal. If Obama and the Democrats push this plan, a regional war will erupt. It will be ugly and it won't shape up along party lines. It's not a source of revenue Orszag should count on at least not just yet especially if the president is expecting to have an easy time winning Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania in 2012.

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