

Absence of quorum in JS

Role of ruling lawmakers is disappointing

ON Wednesday, the Jatiya Sangsad session was adjourned because of the lack of a quorum. While we realise that it is rather too early in the day to comment on such situations, we do hope that it does not become a pattern. It is regrettable that even as the nation happens to be going through a crisis over the BDR tragedy, our lawmakers, especially those in the ruling coalition, have already begun demonstrating disquieting indifference to the JS. This quorum crisis is but a repetition of the past, where parliamentary sessions were rendered pointless through similar attitudes on the part of the then ruling party. We would like to make it clear here that the entire responsibility for the quorum crisis on Wednesday must be borne by the chief whip and other whips of the treasury bench as they have more than three-fourths of the seats.

Let us be clear about the responsibilities of our lawmakers. They must regard their job not only as a sacred trust but also as service to the people. That is not only because they have been entrusted by a sacred vote but also because they are paid to do their job and that they enjoy facilities that are generally not the preserve of other people in society. The very perks they enjoy must surely make them more conscious of their role.

That said, we must also point out that our concerns today are not only about a quorum in the Jatiya Sangsad but about certain other aspects of politics as well. For instance, we think that far too much time than necessary was recently lost in the JS over the President's address. Obviously, the questionable role that President Iajuddin Ahmed (who has by now left office) played in the last two years was clear to everyone. Given that reality, should such a long time have been expended on what he had to say to the ninth Parliament at its inaugural session? Did that discussion serve any purpose?

There are other factors that have been disappointing for the country. Instead of a healthy debate on issues, we have observed ruling lawmakers trying to outdo one another in heaping praise on the Leader of the House in a shameless attempt to gain his favour. Such sycophancy does grave damage to democratic politics and diminishes the dignity of the parliament.

On a more serious note, we are not pleased at the way the ruling party has gone about treating the opposition in the JS. It has spared little or no opportunity to make caustic and derogatory remarks about the opposition in the House. The embarrassing incident of state-owned Bangladesh Television blacking out the speech of the Leader of the Opposition on the BDR tragedy was the ultimate affront. Surely the heavens would not fall if Begum Zia's address had been heard by the nation? The ruling party might respond that in the past their adversaries did the same to them. We then ask: where is the change we have looked forward to?

All said and done, we do acknowledge that the JS has meanwhile adopted or is in the process of adopting some important legislation, such as the Right to Information. Let this spirit work in developing cooperation and confidence among all lawmakers.

Pursuing the biggest arms haul case

Get to the unalloyed truth

NEARLY five years ago the entire nation was rocked by the seizure of the biggest smuggled arms consignment in Chittagong. Ever since, the nation has been in the dark about the origin of the huge cache, the actors behind it, local collaborators, if any, for whom it was meant and where was it headed.

The enormity of the haul and the blatant manner in which this was being transshipped, raised an avalanche of concerns about potential security vulnerabilities of the country. The details spoke for themselves: Ten truck loads of arms and ammunitions stacked with 463 boxes containing 1790 weapons of different descriptions, nearly 11,44,000 bullets, 27,020 grenades, 6,392 magazines and 150 rocket launchers. The consignment was detected at the unlikelyst of places viz. Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Factory Ghat (CULF).

Apprehensions were expressed about whether our territory was being used as a conduit for arms trafficking, whether or not arms had already been smuggled through our terrain without our knowing it, if so, with what consequence, or if some of it found its way into local hands, or indeed, our intelligence was compromised in any way. Bordering Chittagong is an insurgency-prone area, so it added another dimension to the security concern.

The way the case got handled and investigations were carried out during the BNP-led four-party alliance government, gave rise to allegations of derailment of investigation, political complicity, and an attempted hushing up of the case from the beginning. These apprehensions were not allayed at any point.

All these unanswered questions having a bearing on national security and the fact that a score of bomb blast cases remain unresolved, all point to the enormous importance of reviving the Chittagong arms haul case. We believe the process has got underway with the confessional statements of those who knew, and this must be brought to its logical conclusion in a purely professional and transparent legal process. We have to get to the bottom of it, determine the level of local involvement, expose those who had a hand in it and bring the guilty to book. Nothing short of the whole truth that can be substantiated should be steadfastly pursued and brought to light.

Resolving hostage crisis

Under such circumstances, military action against a well-armed force might have caused disaster in a densely populated area of Dhaka. Moreover, historically, military action in such cases has proved to be disastrous.

NAZRUL ISLAM

THE 33-hour high drama at the BDR headquarters ended through a negotiated settlement on February 26. But the settlement evoked controversy along political lines and also among a section of armed forces members.

The brutalities that took place at the BDR headquarters can't be fathomed by any means. The loss wrought to the nation as well as the families of the victims is irreparable. A group of heavily armed youths in the guise of BDR jawans took hostage the army officers gathered at the Darbar during the annual gathering of the BDR.

There were two ways to quell the disturbance: One through military action and the other through negotiations. The government opted for the latter.

Some people are arguing that military action would have lessened the number of casualties and that the way the government managed the situation increased the number of deaths and heightened the ordeal of the survivors. But before coming to such a conclusion, we have to analyse the nature of the attack and also temperament of the perpetrators.

Within hours it was evident that the killers were desperate. They fired indiscriminately at the first sight of the army personnel at one of the gates of the headquarters, and a number of people lost their lives and many were injured in the firing spree. Initially, it was thought that it was a revolt by a group of unhappy and deprived hot-headed BDR jawans, who killed a number of officers in a heated moment. But finally, it was unearthed that it was a well-planned killing mission that was executed with utmost coolness and in a well-orchestrated manner.

It is not possible for BDR jawans to kill their entire leadership in such a brutal man-

ner for realising their demands or for any other grudge. Only a group of people having strong ideological belief or motivation can carry out such carnage. The notion gets stronger footing when we see that women and children were not spared and that the dead bodies were desecrated in a planned manner.

Most of the BDR jawans are practicing Muslims. A long time back, I had an opportunity to interact with a group of BDR jawans at a border post, and I found them very hospitable, amiable and gentle. A practicing Muslim without having strong ideological belief could never dishonour a dead body or a woman. But on February 25th and 26th, scores of dead bodies were dishonoured and women and children killed.

It is true that some BDR jawans were seen collaborating with the killers, but it is yet to be verified whether or not they were directly involved in the killings or were forced to take up arms under coercion and intimidation. The executors succeeded in motivating a section of the BDR jawans to join hands with them, at least by taking up arms, by exploiting their deprivation. Where did the killers come from? Were they aliens or invaders? Or were they from the BDR?

The way our country has been infested with religious extremists for the one and a half decades, it is not impossible for them to infiltrate the armed forces, let alone the BDR. Fundamentalist forces carried out innumerable well-orchestrated attacks during the last decade. The subsequent fallout was the execution of the higher echelon of the group and mass arrest of the field-level activists.

It was mainly our armed forces personnel working in the Rab who were the key players in crushing the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and other extremist forces. So, there is every possibility that our military



Peaceful solution was the only way.

officers will be the targets of the extremists. The BDR Darbar was a unique opportunity to implement their plot. So, it can be concluded that the killers were not mere soldiers of BDR, rather they were an ideologically motivated group who were desperate and committed only to their cause.

Under such circumstances, military action against a well-armed force might have caused disaster in a densely populated area of Dhaka. Moreover, historically, military action in such cases has proved to be disastrous. I will cite a few examples of military actions against hostage-taking, where such actions caused huge civilian casualties.

On September 1, 2004, armed youths took hostage about 1,200 school children and their guardians in Beslan of the Russian Federation. Russian forces stormed the school building on September 4, killing about 400 people. Later, it was evident that most of the people were killed in the firing by the Russian forces.

A Chechen group took hostage about 150 people in Moscow theatre on October 23, 2002. The Russian forces pumped poisonous gas into the theatre, killing 129 people and 23 hostage-takers.

We saw that 175 people were killed and

300 injured during the four-day fight between the hostage-takers and the Indian forces during the recent Mumbai attacks.

On the contrary, South Korea could get its 21 nationals, out of 23, released from the Afghan hostage-takers in 2007 after a lingering negotiation of 42 days. Historically, negotiations have always yielded better results in resolving such armed conflicts.

We should remember that when a group, especially an ideological trained group, takes civilians hostage, it does so on a "do or die" basis. The February 25th incident was such an event, and its management was very critical.

The government did the right thing by taking the negotiation option in resolving the crisis. Any hasty military action would have taken massive toll of innocent BDR jawans, their family members, the surviving army officers and their family members, and civilians in the surrounding vicinity.

Any wrong decision at that critical time would have caused a greater loss for the country compared to what happened. That does not mean that I am belittling the loss, rather I am just comparing the current situation with what could have happened.

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BDR revolt and intelligence

According to many, the focus of the intelligence agencies has been basically finding and codifying information regarding civilian opinion leaders and political leadership. The system for secretly recording phone, fax and mobile calls of private citizens

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THE revolt in the BDR headquarters in Dhaka is an eye-opener. Due to revolt, more than 50 lives have been lost, including civilians. Whatever the causes of the revolt, it is a fact that there has been serious intelligence failure, and, secondly, the death of civilians and subsequent alarm demands a serious debate on the merits of keeping the headquarters of security forces or cantonments inside crowded localities of the nation's capital.

In the US, the forefathers of its independence nearly 230 years ago decided not to allow heavy weapons within the borders of the capital. However, it allowed individual citizens to bear arms for self-

protection. In the case of Bangladesh, given its history of coups and counter-coups, it may be necessary to forbid heavy weapons within a 50-mile radius of the capital city of Dhaka.

The BDR revolt, especially killing of innocent civilians and bystanders, once again reminded the Bangladeshi nationals to seriously discuss this issue of relocating both the Dhaka Cantonment and the BDR HQ away from the city limits. If the BDR headquarters had been outside Dhaka, the casualties would have been much less.

That the BDR revolt occurred following the prime minister's trip to the BDR HQ is mind-boggling. If it had happened during her visit, it could have created a greater national crisis. Naturally, serious questions

could be raised regarding the efficiency of the Bangladesh intelligence agencies.

According to many, the focus of the intelligence agencies has been basically finding and codifying information regarding civilian opinion leaders and political leadership. The system for secretly recording phone, fax and mobile calls of private citizens has been designed with a view to collecting information about civilian activities. Even their everyday activities and mobility are being watched in the name of the nation's interest.

Nevertheless, the intelligence agencies had failed to provide intelligence information regarding the terrorist bombing attack on a public rally of Sheikh Hasina on August 21, 2004, in which 23 people were killed -- including the wife of President Zillur Rahman -- and over 300 were wounded or maimed for life.

They failed to provide intelligence information regarding grenade attacks on the former finance minister A.M.S. Kibria or on British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury. They also failed to furnish intelligence information regarding bombings in 493 towns and cities of Bangladesh

simultaneously.

In fact, the performance record of the intelligence agencies till date is very poor. It gets an F. The recent BDR revolt is a case in point.

Most of the heads of intelligence agencies have been active duty military officials. In contrast, most of the heads of intelligence agencies the world over are non-military personnel.

If anyone investigates the history of the heads of the FBI for the last quarter century, he will be surprised that most of them were lawyers or judges. There have been seven FBI directors in the past 30 years, of which three were acting directors. All four directors were lawyers/judges, and among the acting directors, two were career intelligence officers, and one was an accountant. A similar record would be for the CIA.

This raises a valid question. How well has the nation been served by active-duty military personnel as heads of intelligence agencies that mainly focus their attention on political or civil leaderships?

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Religious wars

Matters may become even worse as India's national election approaches. In attempts to solidify their political bases, political parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, may well start kowtowing to religious and cultural zealots.

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INDIA is a nation of extraordinary religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, but sadly it is no stranger to intolerance. Mahatma Gandhi died at the hands of a Hindu fanatic in 1948, and since then religious riots have cast a pall on India's commitment to secularism and religious pluralism. Unfortunately, at a time when India itself has been a victim of religiously inspired terror from abroad, it faces a growing spate of violent religious and cultural intolerance at home.

In the past, promoting sectarian discord and violence was mostly the stock in trade of India's hyper-nationalist right wing. Lately, however, political parties across the ideological spectrum have shown a disturbing willingness to provoke or cater to religious and cultural bigotry.

Ironically, one effect of the brutal terrorist attacks on Mumbai in late November seems to have been to undercut the divisive political message of the worst of the country's nativist political parties. The Maharashtra Nirman Sena (MNS), a local Mumbai party that last year unleashed its goons on some of the most vulnerable sections of the city's working poor, seemed to have fallen off the

scene for a time.

Now it seems as if the sense of common ground that the denizens of this city discovered in the wake of the horrific attacks was only temporary. Religious violence and cultural parochialism are on the rise. Much of these forces seem to be fueled by the global economic downturn, which is bringing out the worst political tactics. In such a turbulent economic climate, making scapegoats of ethnic and religious minorities may well prove to be irresistible for those seeking to divert attention from serious questions of unemployment and growing economic disparities.

Matters may become even worse as India's national election approaches. In attempts to solidify their political bases, political parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, may well start kowtowing to religious and cultural zealots. Several recent developments underscore the dangers that they pose for the wellbeing of India's plural polity and society.

In January, in Mangalore, a group of Hindu activists belonging to the Sri Ram Sena (Lord Ram's Army) accosted some women and their male escorts at a pub. Their leaders not only claimed responsibility, but also publicly defended their actions

on the grounds that they were upholding the honour of Indian women. In their view, women frequenting pubs contravened the mores of Indian life.

Local politicians did little to come to the aid of the beleaguered women. At the national level, only Minister of State for Women and Child Development Renuka Chaudhury roundly criticised the hooligans and stated that the city was being "Talibanised."

Not content with their harassment of the young men and women, the same miscreants threatened to publicly humiliate unmarried couples on Valentine's Day on the grounds that this putatively alien custom was undermining traditional Indian mores. On this occasion, however, these xenophobic zealots met their match.

A group of young women professionals dubbed themselves the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women and took it upon themselves to flood the offices of the Sri Ram Sena with pink underwear. This nonviolent, unorthodox protest caught the xenophobes, who saw their crude, vicious tactics backfire, off-guard.

Within the past month, religious zealots demonstrated their clout in Kolkata after The Statesman reproduced an article entitled "Why Should I Respect Oppressive Religions?" by Johann Hari, a columnist for the British newspaper The Independent. Following its publication, a group of local Muslims sought to intimidate the editors of The Statesman through a series of menacing rallies in which they barricaded the newspaper employees in their office.

Seeking to assuage the sentiments of

these illiberal critics, the Communist-run state government invoked a statute of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits "malicious insults to the religions of any class" and arrested the editors. Under duress, the editors published an apology calling the republication of the column "an editorial misjudgment."

Are these waves of intolerance sweeping across India inevitable? There is no clear-cut answer. However, unless the country's vast civil society and elements of its political leadership form a bulwark of opposition to these developments, India will increasingly find itself at risk.

Perhaps India's secular political leaders will take a page from the strategy of the young women of New Delhi and Mangalore who, through their novel if offbeat counter-protest, left the goons of the Sri Ram Sena flatfooted. Along with the courageous Congress minister who sharply upbraided the display of street thuggery in Mangalore, these young women have shown that feckless cultural and religious intolerance has no place in an inherently plural society.

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CORRIGENDUM

In yesterday's article, "Fiction is much more appealing than fact," Mr M J Akbar was mistakenly identified as Chief Editor of Asian Age. He is Director, Covert Publication. The error is regretted.