

PM's call for security coordination

Intel agencies must go back to their defined tasks

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed the various intelligence agencies to work in a coordinated manner so that the kind of tragedy that befell the Bangladesh Rifles last month and other tragic happenings in earlier years do not recur. The prime minister's thoughts are not only appreciated but also shared by the nation as a whole. There can be no denying that repeated intelligence failures, beginning with the assassinations of Bangabandhu in 1975 and President Ziaur Rahman in 1981 and leading up to the BDR carnage on February 25, have left the nation traumatised. All these failures have now thrown up the question of what must be needed to restructure or reconfigure the intelligence bodies as a way of ensuring foolproof national security in the future.

The need for intelligence to operate efficiently and on a round the clock basis in a modern nation-state can hardly be over-emphasised. More pertinent is the truth that in recent years new issues of security, both within states and on a global scale, have come up and have revealed the complicated nature of the problems that must be handled. It is from such a perspective that a modern state must today reorder its security-related priorities. For Bangladesh, such reordering must necessarily be based on a monitoring system that eschews the means and methods which led to the creation of such giant monoliths, indeed a system of a state within a state, as Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. In other words, what is of importance here is that the growth of intelligence outfits must be commensurate with their need or relevance.

No time could be better than now to suggest some ways in which Bangladesh's intelligence networks, disparate as they are, can be recast in the larger interest of the nation. In the first place, it would be well to remember that the intelligence agencies have well-defined tasks they are meant to perform twenty four hours a day. That being so, steps must be taken now to ensure that the compartmentalised ways in which these bodies, five in all, have been working, are replaced by a healthy, strongly monitored system of coordination. In the second place, intelligence agencies, having overstepped their terms of reference by involving themselves in political matters or been influenced into playing a political role, must now reinvent themselves by going back to their fundamental reasons for being, namely, to ensure the security of the state from internal as well as external disruptive elements. In this regard, the political classes have a necessary role to play, which is to ensure that the intelligence bodies are no more turned into organisations ready to serve those in power by harassing or intimidating those out of it.

The bottomline is obvious: the intelligence bodies must work strictly within the parameters originally set for them. Moreover, they must prove their skills and efficiency within these parameters. And we suggest that, as a way of ensuring that security lapses do not mar lives or governance in the future, an apex body responsible for ensuring and supervising coordination among the existing intelligence agencies (they will be accountable to such a body) be set up at the earliest. A security infrastructure without rigorous coordination will be a fallacy and a risk to boot.

Good sense prevails in Pakistan

New-found conciliatory mood should further democracy

WE are hugely relieved at Pakistan's pullback from the precipice of a dangerous slide into destabilisation. As opposition leader Nawaz Sharif's defiant long march on Islamabad was building into a crescendo, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani announced a package of concessions on Monday defusing the tension to a very large extent. What was threatening to become a full-blown political crisis centring around reinstatement of Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhury as Chief Justice along with six other judges has, hopefully, been averted.

The whole gamut of opposition demands are seemingly being met. Yousuf Gilani has, apart from announcing the government decision to reinstate the deposed Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhury and the other judges, ordered release of PML activists arrested during the week-long movement. Importantly, the Pak PM has promised review of the Supreme Court verdict on the eligibility of Sharif brothers for elective positions. Nothing has, of course, been said about the imposition of governor's rule in Punjab.

There may be interpretations galore about the events saying that cracks were developing in the ruling party and that Zardari had to cave in to pressures from all sides. But it is just stating the obvious that misses out on the deeper aspects of the outcome. While this is a moral victory for Sharif and a triumph of popular will seeking to see major political forces work together to let democracy function, notably this is also reflective of a certain spirit of national conciliation: the Pak Prime Minister made the historic overture to the opposition leader following a consultative process that he, President Zardari and the army chief had engaged in. The cause of democracy which has had a roller-coaster ride in Pakistan through frequent military takeovers has been strengthened by the latest show of political maturity including the decision to let the judiciary function independent of political interference.

We in the Saarc region have stake in the stability of Pakistan, a nuclear powered state. The whole world expects Pakistan which faces dangers from within through the rise of rabid militancy that claim human lives every now and then, to stabilise, strengthen its institutions of democracy and pursue the goals of economic well-being of its people.

Pakistan and its brave new men and women

Quite a few heroic men and women have emerged in Pakistan in these past few days. It is surprising, indeed amazing, that in a country where politics has either been conspicuous by its absence or had with regularity been pushed over the cliff, it is now democratic politics that has now asserted itself.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

QUITE a few heroic men and women have emerged in Pakistan in these past few days. It is surprising, indeed amazing, that in a country where politics has either been conspicuous by its absence or had with regularity been pushed over the cliff, it is now democratic politics that has now asserted itself. And the one individual who clearly deserves credit for this reawakening in Pakistan is a reinvented Nawaz Sharif.

Consider that a decade ago, he had his followers try to storm the courts and introduce in the country facets of Sharia law that would have marked the triumph of medievalism. Consider too that he is a politician who owes his place on the national stage to the Pakistan army. Just as once the army raised Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to the heights (and then destroyed him), General Ziaul Haq plucked Sharif from obscurity and gave him a makeover as a politician in the 1980s.

It is no more the old Nawaz Sharif you have in Pakistan today. His defiance of Asif Ali Zardari through staying resolute about his planned march to Islamabad has paid off. The results are clear for all to see. It is a much-diminished Zardari who tries to govern Pakistan as its president today. If Pakistanis needed a symbol of determined leadership, they now can look to Nawaz Sharif. And the only way the chief of the Muslim League can kill that aspiration is by going back to his past. For now, his stock is up. That is good news for all Pakistanis and

for societies which have always respected firmness in politicians.

There is a second brave man in Pakistan today. If you recall, there was once Justice M.J.R. Kayani, who once informed the world, tongue-in-cheek, that the valiant Pakistan army had successfully occupied its own country (and that was after General Ayub Khan had commandeered the state in October 1958). There was too Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed.

In Pakistan today, it is the heroism of Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhury that inspires lawyers, judges and people across the spectrum. He defied General Pervez Musharraf by refusing to resign from the office of Pakistan's chief justice. Musharraf sacked him. Chaudhury then went to the Supreme Court to have himself restored. He won that battle, but then was shown the door again when Musharraf imposed a state of emergency. Chaudhury has marched on the streets, has been man-handled by the police (who infamously pulled him by the hair and pushed him into a vehicle).

Justice Chaudhury's endurance has paid off. His restoration to his job by an embattled President Zardari is a broad sign that democracy in a steadily weakening Pakistan (think of the Taliban, the ISI, the Sharia laws in Swat) just might steady it after all. Zardari's fear was that a restored Chaudhury would likely move to annul the withdrawal of all cases against him as part of a deal President Musharraf reached with Benazir Bhutto not long before Ms. Bhutto was



Leading a revival.

murdered in Rawalpindi in December 2007.

The probability now is that the chief justice may actually end up creating problems for Pakistan's president. Few will take offence, especially after the way in which Zardari has tried snuffing out opposition to him and after the manner in which he kept backing out of his deals with Nawaz Sharif.

The Pakistan People's Party has seen its appeal slip in these past few days because of the intransigence and hubris of Asif Ali Zardari. The human rights activist Asma Jahangir put it all in perspective when she noted the difference between Zardari and Benazir Bhutto. The latter, said she, always took a stand and carried the people with her. With the former, it has been a case of taking a stand that is at once hollow and without public support. Zardari and the PPP have now eaten humble pie.

But out of this crisis Yusuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister, has emerged stronger and certainly more suave and capable in

handling crises and assuaging the hurt sentiments of the government's adversaries. Gilani has been a professional politician. He has convinced people across Pakistan's political divide that the country's future will be safer in his hands than in Zardari's.

And then there are the moral standards that Sherry Rahman has set for politicians in the poorer democracies of the world to emulate. By persuading herself that she could not be part of an administration that undermined the principles she upheld and by casting off the mantle of minister of information, she has given fresh new meaning to intellectual probity and political heroism.

Principles and probity matter. Ironically, it is Pakistan that is disseminating this lesson today.

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Safety is paramount

Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (Rehab) may have a role to play in ensuring that their members comply with basic safety standards of any high-rise buildings. Fire safety standards and regular fire drills must be made compulsory for any high-rise buildings in the country.

HARUN UR RASHID

PAIN and distress gripped businesses and people around Basundhara City on Friday, March 13th as they helplessly watched a devastating fire on the 17th floor.

The blaze reportedly burnt many offices into ashes inside the country's biggest and iconic shopping centre. It is reported that floors 15 to 19 were gutted, and 7 people were killed and 20 injured.

It took several hours to extinguish the fire, even though military, police and Rab personnel joined the fire-fighting team.

Basundhara City, a 20-storey building opened in August 2004, is claimed to be the largest shopping mall in South Asia and the 12th largest in the world. The complex houses around 2,500 retail stores and food courts that are located on the first eight floors. The upper floors house a multiplex movie theatre, a gymnasium, and the corporate headquarters of the Bashundhara Group.

The complex has become a tourist spot

and thousands of young people from Dhaka city and around come to visit with their relatives and friends. It has become a "must-see" place for visitors to Dhaka. It was difficult to extinguish the fire because:

- Controlling the crowd is one of the biggest problems for fire fighters. Within minutes, hundreds of thousands of curious onlookers usually gather on the streets, thwarting smooth and easy access of the fire fighters and law-enforcing agencies to the place of occurrence. During the fire at the Basundhara city, the military was summoned to control and disperse the crowd
- All the canals and waterways within and around Dhaka have either been blocked or have dried out. Urbanisation has not been planned, and there are not enough places in Dhaka city to get water if needed in an emergency.
- The relaxed attitude of the authorities to allow construction of high-rise buildings in Dhaka without compliance of

fire-safety measures is being cited as another reason.

- The fire service has logistics and equipment to extinguish fire up to the 13th floor and not beyond that. The fire broke out on the 17th floor and the fire service was helpless.
- According to the fire service, the automated fire systems in the Basundhara Mall failed miserably and the hydrants were useless as there was no water in the reservoir (tank) in the building. If the hydrants had worked, the fire might not have spread so fast.
- The modern fire-safety equipment installed in the complex did not somehow work, and one may safely conclude there had been no regular routine fire drills within the complex.

A three-man probe body is investigating the cause of the fire and the reasons for the failure of the automated fire fighting equipment in the complex. Furthermore, the state minister of home affairs announced that a thorough investigation would be made to ascertain whether any rules regarding construction and safety had been violated.

The fire is a warning to all stake-holders including the regulating bodies (Rajuk and the City Corporation). They need to be vigilant and alert to monitor the compliance of rules and regulations (Bangladesh National Building Code and the Fire Safety Code).

Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (Rehab) may have a role to play

in ensuring that their members comply with basic safety standards of any high-rise buildings. Fire safety standards and regular fire drills must be made compulsory for any high-rise buildings in the country.

Ordinarily, the record of any government is measured by its performance in 100 days. Hardly 68 days into the job, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has countenanced testing times in resolving a series of unforeseen challenges.

The global economic meltdown has added to the worries of the government. Bangladesh's economy has been hit, among others, by return of migrant workers, slowing foreign private investment, decreasing remittances from abroad and declining exports. As a result, the national budget is being cut. The prime minister said that her government would announce some stimulus packages to offset the impact.

The richer countries have gone into recession and no one can tell when they will come out of it. The G-20 Summit is expected to begin in London on April 2nd to discuss plans to tackle the current global economic crisis. Many economists suggest that a universal plan that covers poorer countries will be chalked out, reversing their slowing economies, otherwise there could be social crisis in poorer nations.

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Change in Islamabad

Is it a revolutionary change? The answer is not automatically yes or no; it is maybe. It is what the people and political leadership of the country make of it. This is the first ever victory of the people against the establishment.

M.B. NAQVI

RESTORATION of the twice-deposed chief justice of Pakistan on March 16 is a significant change. How real is it? The long struggle began when Pervez Musharraf sacked him in 2007. This is the first time in Pakistan's history that a popular agitation has attained its objectives. But will it last?

The change looks like a new star in the firmament. Who has won? It was the lawyers' movement, supported by the media and the civil society that started it. Later came the support from major political parties. It became a strong movement that forced the PPP government into conceding its main demand.

But who are the losers? They are the recognised stakeholders -- the army, bureaucracy, feudals, *mullahs*, industrialists, bankers and successful professionals. It is this powerful elite that had to concede the popular demand. This is a clear defeat of the establishment, including its foreign supporters -- the western powers. The support of these foreign forces has long manipulated Pakistan's decision-making.

Will it help create a free democratic

dispensation if the winners press on with the democratisation of governance? The answer is neither simple nor automatic. Unless the common people get the message that they matter and that their wishes, if expressed properly, can change things in the country they will not be the new force for change.

There has to be insightful and democratic leadership, which should be able to win popular support and preserve it. These conditions are not easily met. While the adversary remains strong in image, up to a point, the power of the people has succeeded for the first time.

Is it a revolutionary change? The answer is not automatically yes or no; it is maybe. It is what the people and political leadership of the country make of it. This is the first ever victory of the people against the establishment. Its nerves gave way in the wee hours of Monday. But can this kind of pressure be brought against the establishment another time? Who knows? This can become a lasting change if the people remain vigilant.

What it will require is a competent intelligentsia and a political leadership that remains highly vigilant and articulate.

Regular articulation is the name of this game. There is the danger of confusion: this is a government that lays claims to be democratic, though its actions are not. It will be in power for four more years.

This government has been amassing all manner of powers in the hands of its co-chairman. His latest foray was to deny the PML (N), the party controlling the province of Punjab. The two top leaders of the PML (N), Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif, were declared ineligible to stand for any elective office by a plain court. President Zardari clamped the Governor's Raj, the governor being his friend.

After the election last year, the two parties became coalition partners in both the Punjab government and the central government under an arrangement mediated by the US and UK. But one of these, PML (N), was more inflexible in its demand for a free judiciary represented by the sacked CJP.

But the president has deprived the PML (N) of its right to rule Punjab. That probably was punishment for the inflexibility of Nawaz Sharif. The PML (N) threw its full weight behind the lawyers' campaign. Much of the glory for the victory will naturally go to the PML (N) and the Sharif brothers.

Zardari actions were quite unnecessary. The government had mobilised all its resources to thwart a second march to the capital by physically preventing marchers coming from the Balochistan and Sindh provinces when Punjab shut its borders

with them. The president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Ali Ahmed Kurd, was prevented from traveling to Islamabad or Lahore three times in a row.

The solidarity of the people and the developments leading to March 16 should lead to a new election. It is almost certain that only a few parties will prefer a new election and the government will continue. But few will forget the way it grabbed power in NWFP and Balochistan. Its information minister resigned because of Zardari's order to suppress a TV channel and probably to put some restrictions on the freedom of other media also.

There are serious crises in political and economic life. Widespread unemployment, increasing poverty and high inflation are making the lives of common people miserable. Virtually nothing is being done to ameliorate the situation. Ethnic nationalisms remain after 60 years.

There is also the rise of Islamic extremism. It has not been tackled well. The government has been forced to act the way the Americans wanted. The disparity of incomes between the rich and poor grows by the day. The new democracy has to solve these problems.

But this government has done little to tackle any major problem, or move out of the harsh limits set by WTO. It has to act as a guarantor for the democratisation process that delivers something to ordinary citizens. Can such conditions be fulfilled? The task seems daunting.

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