

BCL's unabated violence

Will it ever stop?

THE Chattra League (BCL) has been hogging the media headlines ever since the AL came to power all for the wrong reasons. And their destructive activities have caused a large number of educational institutions to close down, causing serious problems to the great majority of students who are earnest about pursuing their studies.

It seems odious too that a member of the PM's cabinet would try to draw comfort by comparing percentage wise the number of educational institutions that were forced to close down as a result of BCL violence with the total number of such institutions in the country. The latest round of clashes has occurred in a JNU hall of residence.

What is perhaps most outrageous is the fact that the pall of uncertainty that is pervading the universities and colleges in the country is the result of intra Chattra League fighting. And the infighting is going on despite the call to the BCL by the PM to desist from violence. Where the PM and her advisors have gone wrong is that they have failed to take stern action against the perpetrators and the unruly members of its student wing. Merely suspending their activities is not enough.

The turf war, and the fight over the control of the shoddy business deals in some of the halls of residence, as well as fight for tenders, have been largely responsible for the clashes that have by now caused the death of several students and injuries to many.

An added phenomenon to the extortionary activity of the AL's student wing has to do with the so-called 'political admission.' Allegedly, members of BCL cadres have pocketed huge sums by helping candidates in the waiting list, and those who had failed to get through the intake exams, to get admitted to some colleges in the capital using their muscle and clout. And they are being helped by a section of the staff, including some teachers of these institutions, as reported.

We have spoken ad nauseam on the matter in this column and about how this has vitiated the environment in the educational institutions by what can best be described as the unabated hooliganism by those claiming to be students, their demeanour and deportment suggesting anything but.

It was time the PM and the minister for education moved firmly to get a hold of the situation. Surely, the government's weakness for its student wing should not blind them to the need for providing a peaceful environment in the colleges and universities, which, regrettably, is not the case at the moment.

G-20 nations' deal in London

LDCs' voice went unheard

THE just-concluded G-20 summit of the world's developed and emerging economies in London has sent out a big spurt of hope to those countries participating in it. The leaders ended up promising more than one trillion dollars to the International Monetary Fund and other bodies as a way of shoring up the global economy and reversing the crisis that has already led to thousands of jobs being lost. The summit has also come down heavily on tax havens and excessive corporate pay. It has also stressed sales of IMF gold reserves to help poor nations.

That last point brings us to the question of what likely outcome the G-20 will have on the economies of the world's poorer nations. In practical terms, the absence of representation of the world's Least Developed Countries at the London meeting has been rather disappointing. That ought not to have been the case, given that when developed nations face an economic crunch, the ramifications happen to be grave for those down the economic scale. One example of that comes through exports from poor nations taking a beating as a result of the financial crisis in the West. Overall, what has actually happened at the London summit has been an attempt at a bailout of its battered economies. That leaves the LDCs in a clearly difficult situation. With a billion or so people around the world surviving on less than two dollars a day, to say nothing of those who have nothing to fall back on, conditions in the poor countries call for serious handling. As matters stand following the G-20 summit, these LDCs will now have to depend on such middle income countries as India, China and Brazil to find a way out of their own troubles.

The London summit was without question a brave attempt at overcoming the problems which today plague the world. But the exercise could have been a whole lot more substantive had it taken the LDCs' problems into account. With the root causes of the recession being in developed countries, it is the LDCs that are at the receiving end of it. However, since further rounds of talks on the crisis are expected in the times ahead, we believe that serious consideration should be given to the plight of the LDCs by making it possible for them to raise their problems before the global community. As the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus said not so long ago, any bailout plan ought to have the poor in mind. Ignoring them is fraught with risks.

But the fighter still remains

Under HMC's leadership, 165 people, including 70 politicians, were convicted of corruption. Of the 70 convicted, 41 were from BNP, 25 from AL, and 3 from JP. Almost all of the convicts and the accused -- mostly politicians -- have already been released on bail. There is hardly any chance that they would ever see the darkness of prison again.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

EVERY move Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury made in recent times moved multitudes of people to either cheers or distress: when he resigned as an adviser of the former president Iajuddin Ahmed-led caretaker government, and when he became ACC chairman and spear-headed the crusade against corruption.

Now with his resignation as ACC chairman, he has brought smiles to the faces of the corrupt, but dismayed the multitudes who once cheered his crusade against corruption.

HMC's resignation delighted the state minister for law, Quamrul Islam, among many others, who told reporters: "I am personally happy to know that Hasan Mashhud has resigned." He, however, added that Hasan Mashhud was neither removed nor asked to resign by the government. Well, let the people be the judge.

HMC's resignation was in the making when some lawmakers of both AL and BNP demanded his resignation. The prime minister then added momentum to his departure on February 4 when she told the parliament that the ACC should be reconstituted to ensure its accountability.

She asserted that ACC's past anti-graft drives were steered to shackle politicians. She observed that the commission itself was accused of being involved in corrupt practices during the CTG. Should we still believe that there was no pressure?

Since HMC's position in the ACC is a constitutional one, the government couldn't just boot him out unless he had committed a crime. But they could certainly create an untenable situation for this honest and patriotic citizen, who takes no nonsense from anyone, and would therefore choose to leave his post rather than operate in a compromised environment.

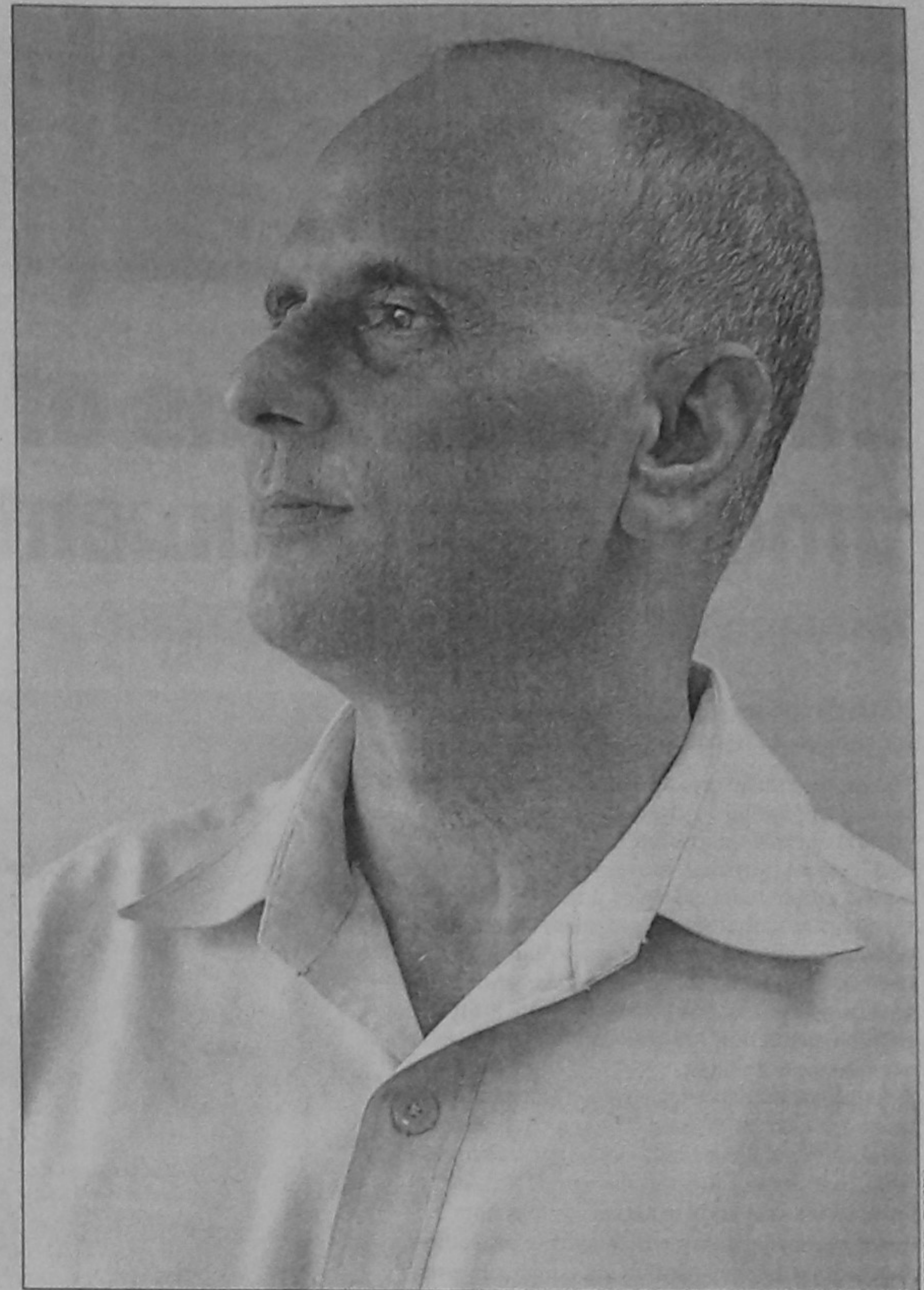
In a graft-infested country like Bangladesh, there is no job that is more challenging and controversial than the job of chasing the corrupt people -- be they politicians, public servants, or businessmen. Then there are the politically appointed judges always ready to find a way out for the corrupt and even for those convicted by courts. During HMC's two years of anti-graft drives, the court failed to play a positive role in prosecuting the corrupticians and curbing corruption.

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Since February 22, 2007, the ACC has lodged 1,216 cases. Of these, 836 cases are under investigation, and 151 are in the process of being charge-sheeted. The HC has so far stayed the proceedings of 344 cases, including 151, which were under trial. Trials of 370 cases, including 19 cases against 18 politicians, are pending.

Don't forget that the last two years' relentless anti-corruption drive was the first of its kind in the country's 38-year history. Because of the enormity of the task, some mistakes could have easily sneaked into anti-graft drive. But the net outcome is positive and the anti-corruption drive was on the right track.

Prominent civil society members termed unfortunate the resignation of HMC. Hafizuddin Khan, a former adviser to a CTG, expressed the feeling of all the honest citizens when he said: "It is frustrating that the ACC chairman who brought dynamism and gave life to the ACC by taking actions against corrupt



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people has resigned." Another former CTG adviser, Dr. Akbar Ali Khan echoed similar sentiment.

The are two challenges to PM Sheikh Hasina concerning anti-corruption: one, finding HMC's replacement who would be as fiercely and fearlessly non-partisan, and passionately committed to take the anti-corruption drive as a patriotic mission, and two, then to let the ACC prosecute all cases against AL, BNP and other politicians as

expeditiously as possible without any pressure and fear of payback.

The people are agonising over both challenges and we hope the PM won't disappoint them with the suggestion that no AL politicians ever committed any corruption.

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How to cope with the recession

ABDUL BAYES

MY students recently wanted to know the definitions of recession and depression. I reminded them of the old joke: a recession is when your neighbor loses his job; a depression is when you lose yours.

Notwithstanding the definitional debate that could invoke 100 different answers from 100 economists, we are assuming that a recession has already gripped the world, the ripples of which are likely to reach (or have already reached) Bangladesh's shores.

The signs are quite obviously ominous: the rate of remittances and export earnings going down; retail sales sliding, growth rate of GDP is estimated to fall, massive unemployment looming large, etc.

The global economy is poised for slower growth. It is thus no surprise that the newly elected government has a stiff task at hand. And in an economy already in shambles with bad governance, any minor exogenous or endogenous shock is sufficient to steal the sound sleep of the finance minister or the economic adviser.

Economists are worried about the projected fall in economic growth rate since a fall in absolute poverty is related to a rise in economic growth. Thus, for example, if Bangladesh is to witness 4.5-5.2 per cent growth this time (World Bank and

ADB forecasts) compared to 6 per cent plus of earlier times, poverty is likely to mount by a big margin.

I fully agree with this calculus, but I am only partly perturbed by the reduction in the growth rate. It should be first noted that the rate of poverty reduction is the growth rate times the growth elasticity of poverty reduction (GE for short). A large negative GE means that even a modest growth rate can bring rapid poverty reduction.

For the dollar-a day poverty rate and average GE at minus 2 (which is average for developing countries), a growth rate of say 5 per cent in mean household income per capita will reduce the share of population living below the poverty line by 10 per cent a year (in proportionate terms). So, quality, not quantity, of growth is more important.

Second, the combined effect of high poverty and high inequality greatly attenuates the growth elasticity of poverty reduction. That means that the initial levels of inequality and poverty are also important determinants of the growth game.

I think the budgetary thoughts of the Finance Ministry should keep the above-mentioned caveat in mind. Quite obviously, an expansionary budget (deficit budget) is called for to raise effective demand in the economy. The prime aim should be to expand the

safety net programs and take up mostly pro-poor projects located in the agricultural and rural development sector. There are ample scopes to invest in water development and agricultural research and extension.

The recession seemingly rings the bell that import substituting economic activities, hitherto left in the backyard, need a firm boost. Unproductive expenses should be shelved at least for the moment (if not for good) and productive channels should be opened up.

En passant, one of the important sources of employment and, via linkages, output, is ADP development projects. The ADP implementation rate is pitifully low now but needs to be speeded up within the next few months.

The export oriented industries should be protected from the recessionary whirlwind with required incentives. But cash incentives should be avoided, as far as possible. Non-cash incentives like lowering interest rates, reducing time and corruption in ports, access to infrastructure, trimming terrorism and private tolls, etc could help stem the rot.

The finance minister's proposal of a public-private partnership to establish a stabilisation fund for creating infrastructure is a laudable option to face the recession. No less important, perhaps, is to lean on economic diplomacy in search of

markets for goods and labour. That requires revamping existing embassies (or creating new ones) with new visions of economic diplomacy.

Resources should be generated through reducing the tax rate but expanding the tax net and raising the efficiency of the tax officials. Whittening of black money may be allowed to the extent that the money is invested in productive sectors.

Another source is borrowing from banks. However, one must note that too much borrowing by the government might crowd out private investment and that government projects are less productive than private projects.

However, serious efforts should be marshaled to mobilise external aid and grants to supplement domestic resource availability. Given that an environment of good governance prevails, there is no reason that foreign aid and investments would not come to Bangladesh.

Let us hope that the upcoming budget pursues and implements human-face policy measures to cushion the effects of economic meltdown. The poor should be protected from peril through safety nets, growth should come mostly from pro-poor and labour intensive projects, and good governance should prevail.

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Monster in the mirror

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BANGLADESH has been making headlines in the leading dailies all across the world recently, as the media is full of reports of militancy links to the BDR mutiny and the discovery of arms and ammunitions in a madrasa in Bhola.

The business community has expressed their concern over too much talk on the terrorist issue, as it has already started to give the country a bad name which is likely to affect foreign direct investment and manpower export adversely.

The people of this country have so far witnessed two strands of reaction while dealing with terrorism. BNP-led four-party government had always been in denial mode on terrorism issue and termed it as the creation of media. On the other hand, the AL-led alliance government is forever crying wolf on the issue.

Admittedly, terrorism in Bangladesh found a new dimension during the rule of BNP-led four-party government, as some of the former ministers and lawmakers

allegedly had directly and indirectly provided support to these groups.

But the situation is quite different now. The success of the law enforcement agencies in smothering militants from different part of the country has neutralised the threat to a great extent.

Therefore, the people of this country hardly have any reason to feel discomfort in the thought that the government has failed to tackle terrorism effectively and that they are living in the grip of militancy.

Defining terrorism has always been a difficult exercise. It is a pejorative term used to describe the action or ideologies of individuals or groups outside the perceived political centre of a society or otherwise claimed to violate common standards of ethics and reciprocity.

The bloody blasts in Mumbai did not make India a breeding ground of terrorism, and the repeated explosions could not turn Pakistan into a country of Osama bin Ladens. The shadow of al-Qaeda and other militancy threat is lengthening all across the world. Therefore, terrorism is to be looked as the

monster in the mirror without exaggerating its influence to each misdeed.

The root of terrorism is embedded in certain political, economic, and social deprivation, which essentially reflects a long but unsuccessful struggle to bring about changes in the state structures. This is a prime cause of the frightening rise of terrorism in this region.

The failure of Pakistani government in containing religious extremism in the country lies in the fact that it did not tackle the crisis effecting social reform and political liberalisation.

The main reasons behind rising religious terrorism in Bangladesh are violation of rights of the poor and use of religion in politics. Unless the government ensures the rights of the poor through poverty alleviation and prevents the use of religion in politics, nothing else will help people to wean away from the hard-line attitude that is sustaining terrorism in Bangladesh.

Redesigning of madrasa education, which is also liable to breed religious terrorism, is imperative to save the young minds from the clutch of religious

extremists. The lack of proper education and enlightened governance has enabled extremists to create pockets of support by manipulating Islamic teachings.

The people cannot afford any more to live in the suspicion created by either of the two afore-mentioned assumptions. We do not really know even today who were the terrorists that attacked the Udichi cultural function in 1999 at Jessore and Awami League rally on August 21, 2004.

CID has filed a case recently against three of its former investigators in connection with intentionally misleading the probe into the August 21 grenade attack case during the BNP-led four-party alliance government's rule.

These officials had implicated a number of innocent people in the case who were compelled to confess before a magistrate allegedly through torture and bribery. This is certainly a glaring example how the BNP-led alliance government dealt with terrorism.

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