

JS session ends on a combative note

Trading cheap shots should have been avoided

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia were in a fiercely attacking mood trading some outlandish charges against each other as the eventful first session of the ninth parliament drew to a close on Tuesday night.

While Sheikh Hasina made no secret of her belief that the BNP-led opposition was conspiring to destabilise the country, Begum Khaleda Zia launched a long diatribe, focusing on what she termed the government's grossly inept handling of the recent BDR crisis. What was conspicuous in the proceedings is that our leaders did not appear to have been moved, let alone jolted, by the huge debilitating blow dealt to our national security by the Peelkhana carnage. Now the question is if that was not enough to nudge them into thinking anew constructively, or adopting a less partisan posture on a highly sensitive issue, it is not clear when they will be able to rise above party politics and view highly important matters in light of national interest alone. The speeches, or harangues to be precise, directed at each other, were certainly not flattering specimens of observations coming from top leaders on issues having a direct bearing on national security.

So, there was nothing new in the way the two leaders talked in parliament. And there was hardly any sense of direction for the nation. Some of the remarks made by Begum Zia sounded ridiculous, as she appeared totally oblivious of her and her party's role in the pre one-eleven days, when the country was passing through a deep political crisis. Her attempt to distance the BNP from the murky politics surrounding former president Iajuddin Ahmed was far from convincing. Similarly, putting the blame squarely on the prime minister for the loss of lives at the BDR Headquarters was insensible.

The prime minister's appeal to the opposition to cooperate with the government was a logical move well understood by all. But then accusing the same opposition of scheming to start a civil war in the country was inconsistent. It seems the two leaders tried to score points through cheap shots which were completely out of steps with the popular expectations that their speeches in the first session of the newly elected parliament would be substantive, constructive and directional in nature.

Unfortunately, no change in political culture is visible as yet, at least not from their unwieldy speeches. How long do we have to wait for a change in our political culture?

Breathing fresh air into business

Banks' increased responsibility emphasised

GOVERNOR, Bangladesh Bank, in a meeting with chief executives of commercial banks, has announced a few steps to bolster investment and export currently pitted against a dampening of demands in the context of global financial downturn. These mainly include cutback on the lending rate to 13 percent and the loan rescheduling facility without down payment for six months in such sectors like garment, frozen food, leather, jute, textile and tea.

The 13 percent cap on the lending rate is effectively 1.75 percent less than the existing 14.75 percent in the productive sector. But in case of all other loans the rate of interest has been as high as 18 percent. There is a caveat though, the lower interest rate would not apply to credit card and consumer loan.

The central bank's intervention was inevitable against the backdrop of persistent demand from the business community to reduce the spread between the deposit rate and the lending rate which is the widest in the region and the economic experts' repeated nudges to go for it. The banks, however, got cold feet, even though their profitability has been quite considerably high. The banking sector is apt to argue that in order to lower lending rate it has to reduce the deposit rate. But to be doing so, risks a fall in deposit which is hardly desirable. So, what do we do? The answer lies in reducing banks' profit margins, or rather spreading profits over a raft of services and yet prosper as the banks go on reaping dividends from the growth of productive, export, commercial and service sectors of the economy.

What would be crucial in interest rate adjustment is, however, keeping the inflation rate low, so that the value of money is not eroded and a fillip is provided to saving.

Leaders of the business community want the lending rate reduced to a single digit. But, to our mind, since the loan rescheduling facility will help increase cash flow into the industrial and manufacturing sectors, this factor together with the cut in the lending rate should be on the whole helpful in steadying investment and export.

Have we got our bearing right on terrorism?

One is constrained to believe that some of the comments on the matter have been very randomly made while some have stemmed from a purely political impulse.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

ONE is a little bit confused by comments on terrorism that have emanated from some quarters, amongst which are ministers and government officials.

Terrorism has been hogging the lime-light for some time in Bangladesh. To the credit of the law enforcing agencies, we have not had a terrorist attack on our soil since the simultaneous bombings on August 17, 2005. But we need coordinated action and a coalescence of view while determining the strategy to combat terrorism.

Given that a large quantity of arms and weapons and large numbers of extremist cadres have been apprehended in the last three years, it shows that there has not been a lack of trying on their part. But what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India should give us some comfort, if one can call that so, that we are not in the vortex of terrorist activities.

However, there is no scope for euphoria when it comes to terrorism. And that is why our comments on the matter must stem from clear understanding of the issue and deep cognisance of the matter. And one is constrained to believe that some of the comments on the matter have been very randomly made while some have stemmed from a purely political impulse. Such comments do favour to the terrorists while terrorising the people.

There is hardly any scope of playing politics with a matter that has great influence on our security. We saw that most unfortunately happen during the 4-Party Alliance regime and we are regrettably seeing it happening now. The conse-

quence of this fusion, of random comments and playing politics, is that the method of combatting the phenomenon is likely to go awry, because that influences the determination of who, why and how of terrorism.

The minister for law sees a correlation between the amendments to the 1972 constitution after 1975 changeover and the rise of religious extremism in the country. We understand that he is referring to the changes incorporated by Zia and Ershad, where secularism was dropped by the former and Islam made the state religion by the latter. And of course rise of religious based parties has had a role in the spawning of religious terrorism, according to the minister.

There is a contradiction in the logic. The two major changes in the constitution should have assuaged the sentiments of those that feel strongly about involving religion in the governance of the state, and helped dissuade those that are so inclined from the path of extremism and terrorism. But the contrary has happened. The minister's explanation is a very simplistic way of looking at the problem.

If we go by the remarks of the minister, which implied that removing the secular character of the constitution helped the growth of religious extremism, are we to believe that secular states are free from the curse of terrorism? Glancing at the globe, particularly the region, the argument doesn't hold good.

According to the minister there are as many as 122 organisations involved in terror activities in the country. This is quite a revelation, since even in Pakistan or India there are not so many. His comments that kaumi madrasas foster terror-



Distractions hamper the fight against terrorism.

ism must also be taken seriously. One would benefit from statistics and empirical evidence to support the contention. It may be of interest to know that of all the religious extremists and terrorists captured by the law enforcing agencies in Bangladesh in connection with JMB and Huji (B) activities in 2006-2007, no more than 20 percent are madrasa educated.

There is a perception globally too about madrasas being suppliers of terrorists. But research statistics, not by Muslims but by Western scholars, give a very different picture. William Dalrymple, writing in The Guardian says: "Peter Bergen of John Hopkins University published the conclusions of his in-depth study of 75 Islamist terrorists who had carried out four major anti-western attacks. According to Bergen, '53% of the terrorists had either attended college or had received a college degree.' As a point of reference, only 52% of Americans have been to college."

It is a fact that some madrasas are indeed engaged in dispensing radical ideas and some may have joined the ranks of the terrorists. It is fact too that some of

the madrasas students do not have access to information, having only one newspaper to read, and that too belonging to a particular political party. Some madrasa students are not able to access the internet in spite of the fact that the madrasas have computers because it is deemed anti-Islamic to use internet. Such bigotry must be curbed and those that are engaged in dubious activities must be identified and action taken against them. Sentiments should not play a part in this.

It is for this reason that the madrasas must be brought under state oversight, and some sort of regulatory mechanism evolved to monitor the curricula and the teaching to make the students, as someone has commented, "more than pious villagers from impoverished background," and make them fit for the job market. But to paint all the madrasas with a terrorist brush gives one the impression that we may not have our bearing right on terrorism.

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A manifesto for breaking the gray ceiling

Senior friends, let go. Though two simple words, together they have serious implications. It is an art to let go of leadership and not hold the whole nation, organisation or issue hostage by the mere virtue of being the first to arrive at the scene.

SUMAIYA ISLAM

FROM the president of the country to senior advocates in the High Courts to leading activists in the political sphere, it is the dictatorship of the "aged." Reverse age discrimination in Bangladesh is rampant, alarming and abysmal.

At first, let there be a disclaimer preceding this manifesto. This is a blanket analysis of ground realities and a clear call to upset the deeply-rooted supremacy of the aged.

Envision being young, creative, adventurous and full of ideas. Ready to implement new theories, challenge traditional norms and break institutional barriers. Willing to adapt to changing technologies, eager to please and explore alternative possibilities.

Now imagine being trapped in a dubious contract, frustrated with low pay, troubled by job insecurity and frazzled by the lack of support networks. And working for someone who nonchalantly dumps the load on

the unsuspecting young employee, someone who is hungry to grab undeserved glory and happy to pass other people's work as his own, and gladly enjoys the sweet fruits of other people's hard labour. Welcome to the degraded status and thankless job of young, enthusiastic, driven professionals trying to prove their worth.

A young lawyer with a degree and a large student loan ends up being a miserably underpaid clerk in one of the few city law firms. A young, promising researcher has to resort to editing and writing papers for a reputed professor. A young social justice worker becomes a puppet and paper pusher for the fame-hungry NGO supervisor. Their passion is thrashed, dreams quashed and aspirations abandoned.

Interestingly, it is the carefully orchestrated sport of the "aging and privileged" who have cunningly framed the rules to retain power and score goals in a strategically empty playing field.

Now, had the "seniors" not paid the price

in their own time? They fought colonial rulers, resisted military dictatorships and somehow convinced themselves that they had earned the respect of all parties.

After all, there must be a prize for suffering generational abuse and exploitation. Can it be called "passing the torch of abuse to the lowest rung of the age ladder?" Followed by a moratorium on actively promoting young people to follow their own dreams, clipping their wings to stop them flying on their own, and stripping them of individual aspirations to fulfill the "aging visionaries'" objectives.

The corporate sector may somehow have started to figure out that it is imperative to foster the newer breed of employees. Providing training, investing in skill building and recognising creativity and innovativeness are critical ingredients in building future leaders and attaining maximum output. Managers are increasingly grooming and motivating young professionals and rewarding gifted employees.

Is it insecurity that prevents the senior supervisor from highlighting the work of a young colleague? Or is it humiliation that prevents one from acknowledging the talented new worker's ability to achieve incredible results? Are we inherently threatened by the boundless possibilities of youth that we feel vulnerable and fear

being redundant?

Senior friends, let go. Though two simple words, together they have serious implications. It is an art to let go of leadership and not hold the whole nation, organisation or issue hostage by the mere virtue of being the first to arrive at the scene.

Let the young make mistakes. It is not really about the mistakes is it? You made a lot of mistakes in your own time. Share your experience, guide the youth, and take a back seat. Let them talk about politics, law, science, human rights, religion, constitution, policy, economics and, yes, even history.

Unless the fundamental direction of our work ethics and leadership changes, no amount of education or experience will improve the lack of hope in the future.

A job, especially in the formative years, is an opportunity to discover and pursue a passion, not a death sentence.

Only tyranny can be held on to by sheer will and force. To leave a legacy, one needs others to take over and direct the work to new heights. Hand over the reigns, folks. Experience tells you that now is certainly the time to let go.

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Lessons in global governance

What began as a defensive movement by local fishermen has evolved into an amalgamation of banditry, organised crime, freebooting and insurgency.

CHRISTOPHER JASPARO

PIRACY in Somalia began in 1991 following the collapse of the Barre regime. Dumping of toxic and hazardous wastes by international companies increased. Unlicensed foreign fishing vessels targeted Somalia's fish-rich waters. Local fishermen claimed that foreign boats used tactics such as ramming and hiring local militants to harass them.

Disaffected fishermen then began attacking foreign vessels in the early 1990s, leading to full-scale piracy and hostage-taking. In 2005 a UN agency estimated that 700 foreign fishing vessels were operating in Somali waters, many employing illegal and destructive fishing methods.

In 2006 the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) seized power in most of southern Somalia. They reasserted some control over Somali waters; foreign incursions and piracy declined.

Ethiopia invaded Somalia to oust the ICU. After the ICU's ouster the chaos off Somalia increased. Fishermen fruitlessly complained to the UN about renewed poaching and dumping.

What began as a defensive movement by local fishermen has evolved into an amalgamation of banditry, organised crime, freebooting and insurgency. Somali waters emerged as the hotbed of piracy, accounting

for close to 32% of attacks reported globally between January and September 2008.

Some fishermen attack foreign vessels, others join well-organised pirate groups who in turn attack foreign vessels, local fishermen, and each other. Organised groups commit most attacks and are well armed, equipped with fast-boats, satellite navigation and radios, and employ large "mother-ships" to launch long-distance operations.

Officials from Somalia's region of Puntland issue "licenses" to foreign vessels, which then employ pirates as security. With local and diaspora businessmen and clan leaders providing logistics and capital to pirates Puntland's coastal cities are experiencing a piracy-fueled economic boom.

The surge in piracy warrants immediate security measures, but ultimately calls for an approach similar to that advocated by counterinsurgency experts. Such an approach should focus on a political solution to Somalia's turmoil. Intermediate efforts should focus on assisting Puntland which is the epicenter of piracy and has as a somewhat dysfunctional government.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon emphasised: "Anti-piracy efforts, therefore, must be placed in a comprehensive approach that fostered an inclusive peace process in Somalia and assisted the parties to rebuild security, governance capacity,

addressed human rights issues, and harnessed economic opportunities throughout the country." The then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and representatives of the African Union and League of Arab States similarly argued for wider approaches.

He also noted that he had appealed to 50 countries to commit resources for a broader multinational force for Somalia, but no state was willing to take the lead. At least 20 countries have promised ships for what looks like a 19th century punitive expedition. While over half the nations contributing ships are major global or Indian Ocean fishing nations, none have offered significant resources to help address the deeper roots of piracy.

This military-centric approach erodes the legitimacy of international operations and instead creates anti-imperialist responses that help fuel extremism and discontent. Al-Jazeera, for instance, has taken up the Robin Hood theme reporting that: "Pirates were victims of a US-EU run system that still uses the developing world as a dumping ground for toxic waste."

One commentary posted on June 12, 2008, alleged: "The dumping continues to this day, even though we have been assured that we're living in a 'post racial era' following the election of Barack Obama. That rule doesn't apply to the many black and brown people who still find themselves in the imperial crosshairs."

The fact remains that the UN has failed to include in its resolution 1851 the enforcement of Somalia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) or the relevant convention that bars dumping of toxic waste.

A cynical view suggests that the powerful still prefer military approaches to problems

rather than measures requiring broader, multifaceted solutions. A more charitable assessment would suggest that the capacity and will to tackle every problem comprehensively does not yet exist.

Three points stand-out. First, it is now assumed that un- or under-governed spaces have become breeding grounds for rogue groups. However, this assumption is incomplete. Weakly governed and failed states are often themselves victimised by foreigners.

Second, that the nature of warfare has changed is another accepted truth. War is no longer characterised primarily by conventional clashes between states, but is fought "amongst the people" by combatants including not only states but hybrid networks of criminal gangs, insurgents and international terrorists.

Military force alone is not sufficient to combat such threats; it should be employed to support political solutions and human security. This, however, requires non-military capabilities, resources, patience, and political and public will, which are often lacking.

Third, states often resort to application of force in pursuit of short-term self-interests. Ultimately, the will and capacity to pursue comprehensive strategies that protect both the "winners" and "losers" of globalisation appear insufficient. The question is whether the global commons really can be secured for the common good.

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