

Threat from religious extremists

Formulate effective counterterrorism strategy

THE Rapid Action Battalion deserves appreciation for relentless pursuit of an important individual of an extremist group and following up the lead provided by him to effect a very important haul up. The action has perhaps preempted a possible bomb attack and devastation, the targets of which only further interrogation of the arrested persons can reveal.

Recovery of a large quantity of explosives and other bomb-making materials from a JMB den in the heart of the city only confirms the impression that merely hanging a few front ranking members of extremists group may not have caused dissipation of either the ranks or the ideology of the religious radical groups.

This was one of several instances of seizures of arms and arrests made after the top leadership of JMB and HUJI were executed following their arrest and trial in 2006. And this confirms our assertion that we cannot rest on the laurels of success because such is the resilience of the deeply motivated extremist cadres, albeit with convoluted ideas, that they find ways and means to bounce back.

What causes us concern in this case is the fact that the extremists are able to ply their business in the heart of the city without ever causing anyone to raise an eyebrow, and also the fact that they continue to receive cash and kind for their anti-state activity.

This brings us to the important question of how to tackle the problem.

It is good to know the government has recently formed a high level committee to address the issue of extremism and terrorism under the state minister for home. We feel that the committee should focus on formulating immediately an appropriate strategy to counter the threat and nullify their operational capability to start with before eradicating them completely in the long run.

We feel that there are two important aspects of a counter terrorism strategy that must be stressed that of involving the people and of demotivating the extremist cadres.

Citizens can serve as rich source of human intelligence through a programme of awareness and sensitising them about things they should be conscious of, and of the need to report any suspicious person or activity to the law enforcing agencies.

Also, given that the extremists are thoroughly motivated, whatever may have been their compulsions to join the ranks of the fanatics, an important element of the government strategy should be to demotivate them by making use of various facilities available to it including the media.

HC guidelines on sexual harassment

These should be implemented in letter and spirit

THE move by the High Court last week to lay down a number of guidelines for the authorities to prevent sexual harassment of women is surely a milestone in Bangladesh's legal history. It has long been known, and publicly pointed out, that women in a very large number of instances and in very many professional and other areas have been subjected to such harassment over the years without any measures being put in place to help them deal with the problem. Now that the HC has acted, thanks to a public litigation writ petition filed by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), we can be reasonably sure that concrete steps will be taken to ensure the security of women in their work and movement, that indeed women will be empowered to take such action as will bring the perpetrators of the crime to book.

A significant feature of the HC action is that its guidelines will be treated as law until a law relating to prevention of sexual harassment is in place. This is important, for it allows no time gap to be there between the directives coming into effect and the actual framing and promulgation of a law. Even more encouraging, the HC's directive to the authorities regarding the formation of five-member harassment complaint committees, to be headed by a woman, at every workplace and organisation means that sexual harassment of the kind that has been going on for years could now finally be reined in. In these long years, we have repeatedly come across reports of various forms of sexual harassment in such important places as higher academic institutions, government offices and private enterprises. Such nefarious activities have been carried on both openly and subtly. Moreover, with the arrival of e-mails, mobile phones and SMS, harassment of women has appeared to go up. At crowded public places, women have had to go through such humiliation as groping and pinching without being able to take action against the elements indulging in such outrage.

We feel that the High Court directives have opened the window to change of a substantive kind. It not only helps Bangladesh's women to assert themselves but also reassures the nation that we indeed inhabit a country which means to ensure equality of all kinds and especially between the sexes. It should now be for the government and the private sector to act swiftly on the HC guidelines. When it does, it will be going a major step further in promoting its promised culture of change.

An indication of disturbing diplomacy

The problem is that it has been happening too often. Too many times, foreign diplomats are getting involved to tell us what we should know about our own country. Perhaps the profession is undergoing change. Diplomats, like doctors, are going without borders.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ON the 3rd of this month, the US ambassador to Bangladesh went to the press and disclosed that his country had disturbing indications of terrorist threat in Bangladesh. We should be happy that a foreign diplomat took the time to tell us in advance that a disaster was lurking behind our back. A son of this soil couldn't have done more, if not less.

But the problem is that it has been happening too often. Too many times, foreign diplomats are getting involved to tell us what we should know about our own country. Perhaps the profession is undergoing change. Diplomats, like doctors, are going without borders.

Pablo Casals, the celebrated Spanish musician, had sniffed it early when he said that love of one's country was a splendid thing, but that love shouldn't stop at the border. The diplomats who arrive in this country arrive with that Casals-esque mindset. God's glory, they take interest in our affairs no less, if not more, than they should have taken in their own.

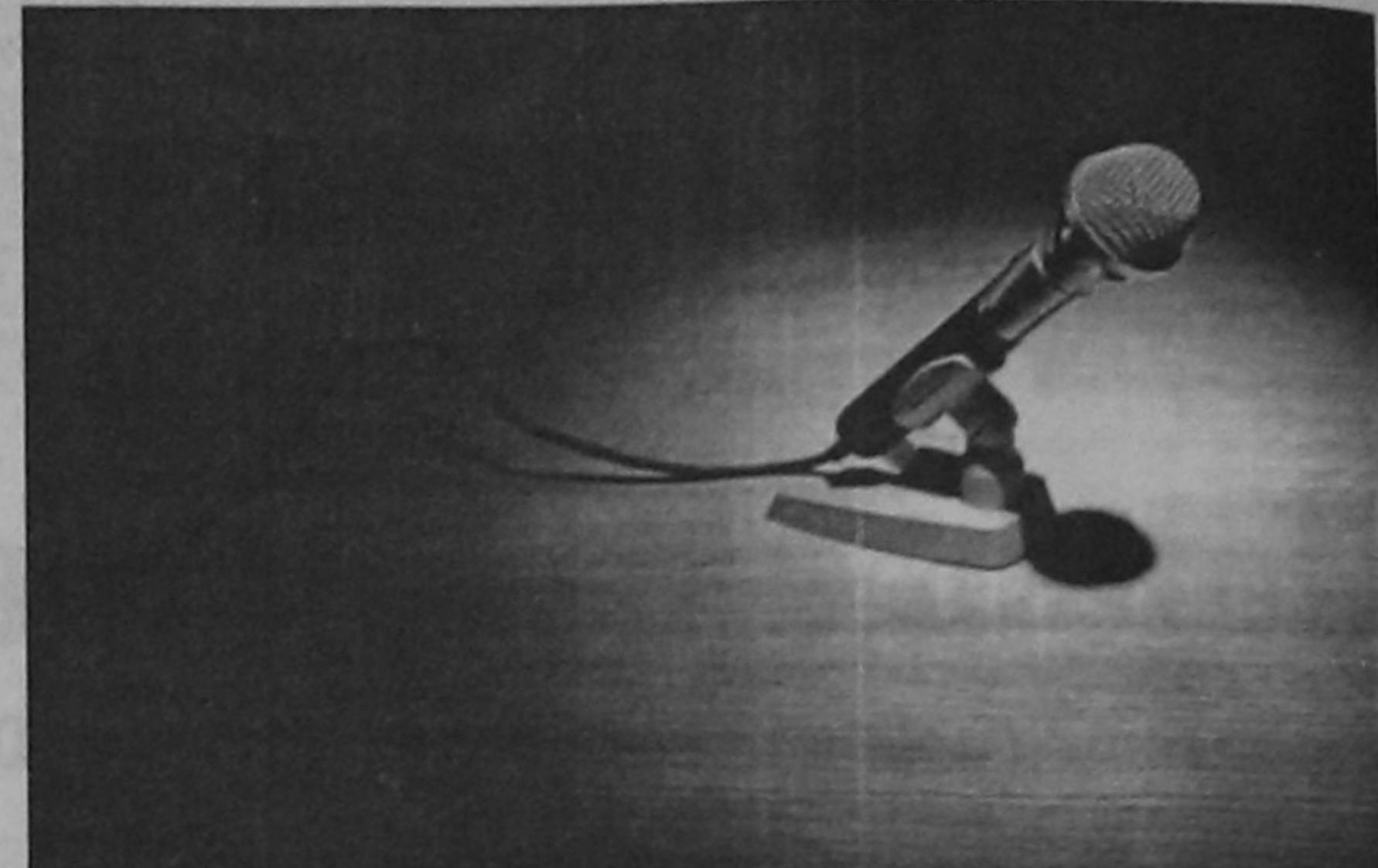
One can possibly understand why. They come from developed nations and feel like Formula One drivers sitting in a jalopy. So they want to prompt us, telling when to shift gears, take turns, blow the horn or step on the gas. It's hard not to get involved if you think you could drive better than the

driver, even harder to resist when all the time the driver is asking for advice. Who can blame those diplomats if we are the ones pushing the microphones into their face?

In one sense, the US ambassador did nothing wrong. He wanted to share some vital information to save us from a potential threat. Maybe that threat will still activate itself even after the United States and its ambassador will have sufficiently cried wolf. Other countries, most recently Pakistan, are cases in point.

What wasn't right, though, was when the ambassador talked to the press. Of course, he can always call a press conference to talk about his country, bilateral relations and other common issues such as swine flu and global recession. But the matter of our national security can't be his subject for public discourse. He should have gone to the relevant desk in the foreign ministry. He could have even gone to our foreign minister or prime minister since he has privileged access to both.

The reason being the Golden Rule: do unto others as you have others do unto you. I bet our ambassador in Washington wouldn't be allowed to do it like this. He couldn't have gone to the American press to talk about American national security without facing some consequences. Again, a private citizen in this country also couldn't get away doing it like this. He could have even gone to our foreign minister or prime minister since he has privileged access to both.



Let us be the first to announce our problems.

have been accused of creating panic, dragged from one interrogation cell to another.

Of course, the US ambassador is the US ambassador. When he speaks, we listen. Not a single reporter asked why it was important to go public with that kind of sensitive information. What was he trying to achieve? Was he trying to create public awareness? Was he trying to refute a claim, made by the leader of the opposition? Was he trying to create panic?

When the ambassador said that the terrorist threat was alive and growing, it was reassuring to know that the most powerful nation on earth was keeping an eye on us on our behalf. Not to say, it also gave that creepy feeling of being watched in the shower. But above all, it compelled us to wonder whether they choose to watch everything for us, or just the part that excites them.

Because, how could they not have the same "disturbing indications" about the BDR killings if we were under their watchful eyes? Did it appear on their radar? Did the surveillance fail because someone had dived off, gone to toilet or left station to get coffee or soda? Not sure if anybody in that press conference bothered to pose these questions to the honourable ambassador.

In 1961, Henri Matisse's painting "Le Bateau" was displayed in New York's Museum of Modern Art. For almost six weeks 11,600 people visited before anybody noticed that the painting was hung upside down. It was another stark reminder on May 3 that, after thirty-eight years and several generations, we are still looking at the picture hung by foreigners, not sure if that picture is hung crooked or upside down.

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Death of migrant workers

It is quite unfortunate that the government is yet to act on the alarming rise of death of our migrant workers. Around 44% of death, which has been attributed to cardiac failure, cannot be accepted as normal cause of death for the young people who had left the country a few months back in quite good health.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE alarming rise in the incidence of death of our migrant workers has become a matter of public concern in recent days. According to official statistics, at least 8,107 expatriate Bangladeshi workers died in a number of countries, particularly in the Middle East countries, between January 2004 and May 9, 2009.

The government recorded a total of 2,237 death cases of migrant workers in 2008, which had been 1,673 in 2007, 1,402 in 2006, 1,248 in 2005 and 788 in 2004. At least 904 migrant workers, including 32 women, died in the first four months of 2009 alone.

The International Migrants Alliance Research Foundation (IMARF), a rights group working for migrant workers, termed this trend of deaths alarming as many deceased workers -- aged between 25 and 40 years -- had been medically fit at the time of leaving home but died in a few months of getting to their workplaces abroad.

According to a Daily Star report, around

44% of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who returned home in coffins between January 1 and May 9 this year had died of cardiac arrest in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries.

A total of 904 bodies of migrant workers returned home this year from different countries -- 391 died of cardiac failure, 268 in workplace accidents, 62 in road accidents and 115 of sickness. The remaining died due to some other reasons. A parliamentary body believes that the death of over 12,000 Bangladeshi expatriate workers in the last eight years was nothing abnormal.

One may also argue that the death of 8,107 workers in five years, among six million workers scattered in different countries, is not a significant cause for alarm. But it is quite alarming. IMARF has rightly pointed to the violation of human and labour rights by the employers and lack of healthcare as major causes of their deaths.

The occupational hazards and systematic maltreatment of our migrant workers also occasionally appeared in the local

media, bringing to light their agonies. But the most ironical part is that the labour counsellors at the Bangladesh missions abroad, who are supposed to redress the grievances of their country's workers, hardly came forward for helping the victims.

The Bangladeshi workers provide most essential menial labour like cleaning roads, hospitals and other important establishments in the Middle East countries. But the companies that place them in these hazardous jobs never fulfil their contractual obligations about salary and living conditions.

These migrant workers have to pay a high price to go abroad for jobs, but quite often their incomes are not up to their expectations. So, they can neither recover the money to repay the loans nor can they help their families back home, which makes their lives abroad miserable.

Bangladeshi workers are now spread over 100 countries across the world, prominently in Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Maldives, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon, Germany, Australia, Iran, Japan, Italy and Spain. They are mostly engaged in various hazardous occupations and their rights are frequently denied. More than five lakh Bangladeshi workers are now working in UAE and many of them are victims of exploitation and systematic maltreatment by their employers.

The fact that some 8,107 migrant workers have died abroad in the past five years, may not be a matter of concern for the

parliamentary body on the ministry of expatriate welfare, but it is crucial that the receive an answer as to why such a huge number of our migrant workers are dying even though they went abroad in perfectly good health.

It is quite unfortunate that the government is yet to act on the alarming rise of death of our migrant workers. Around 44% of death, which has been attributed to cardiac failure, cannot be accepted as normal cause of death for the young people who had left the country a few months back in quite good health. Death from workplace accidents, which account for more than 25%, is also equally worrying.

The government should immediately send high-powered teams to the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries for investigating the huge abnormal death of our migrant workers and also to negotiate, with the governments of the host countries, in improving the working and living conditions of our migrant workers.

A greater responsibility, thus, develops on this government for protecting our migrant workers from the curse of systematic neglect, who have been playing a pivotal role in gearing up country's economy. The country received remittances worth about eight billion dollars from the expatriate workers in 2007-08 fiscal, the highest foreign currency earning in terms of 100% retention value.

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Creating jobs at home

It is the right of all workers to cross national boundaries for work, but this should be by choice and not due to the failure of their respective governments to provide their basic needs and to offer job securities.

AHMED A. AZAD

IN Bangladesh the large population instead of being seen as agent for progress is considered a liability because of the massive unemployment among the poor and also the uneducated youth. The norm, here, has been to put education and technological proficiency on the back burner although they should be seen as our main tools for change and given highest priority.

The exodus of our youth from the rural areas to the crowded cities, and emigration to foreign countries, is simply not the way to achieve Vision 2021 and to create a Digital Bangladesh. Our youth should be primarily employed for nation-building activities.

From opinions expressed in newspapers, TV talk shows, seminars and even in parliamentary debates, it appears that the remittance of remittances through labour export is accepted as a central pillar of our economic policy. But using terms such as "export" and "market" in reference to our expatriate workers demeans them by equating them to trading commodities.

It is a national obsession to involve our youth to seek employment in other countries, simply because it is the easiest way out of a difficult financial situation for the government? In this age of globalisation and democracy it is the right of all workers to cross national boundaries for work, but this should be by choice and not due to the failure of their respective governments to provide their basic needs and to offer job securities.

Unskilled workers make the biggest contribution to the remittances sent to Bangladesh. This helps to improve the country's balance of payments, and their emigration helps relieve the pressure on the unemployed youth at home.

But what do these workers get in return? Everyday we see reports of their maltreatment, their exploitation, and the forced return of the unemployed and destitute workers, as a consequence of the global recession. More than 650 workers returned home in coffins in the first three months of this year. Very little has been done to ensure that the workplace environment of our expatriate workforce

conforms to ILO regulations and that they do not suffer economic exploitation.

In view of the very heavy reliance on foreign remittances, and the huge number of expatriate workers, it would be understandable if the government said that a decent weaning off period is required. Instead, the government and policy experts incessantly talk about providing specialist training to our workers so that they become more employable in the competitive international labour market.

There is much talk about setting up hospitality schools so that our workers can find work in the tourist resorts in the Maldives, Malaysia and the Gulf States. We have some of the most beautiful beaches and forests in the world and unlimited opportunities for eco-tourism. Why not develop our tourist spots to international standards? This will create jobs in the building and conservation industries and our hospitality trainees will find work at home.

There is already a huge migration of our science, engineering and medical graduates causing a shortage of critical mass in these professional disciplines. Very few of the science graduates in our country find suitable or secure jobs in Bangladesh that are relevant to their training. The Western countries currently have an acute shortage of scientifically trained manpower and are very welcoming trained professionals from the developing world. When every sensible developing country is

trying to stem the brain drain, why are we bent on exacerbating this?

So which are the sectors where new jobs can be created immediately and in the near future in the present economic climate? Since an overwhelming majority of our people live and work in rural areas, where up to 40% of the agricultural workers subsist at or below the poverty line, it makes sense to preferentially target the rural areas and population for development activities.

I have previously argued that the best way to counter the global recession, and achieve sustainable development, is to create jobs in infrastructure development and in agriculture-based industries. Because of the energy crises and environmental degradation green technology-based SMEs for the production of biogas and bio-fertiliser can be set up in rural areas all over the country using existing technologies through a partnership between local governments and the Ministry of Industry. This can create a large number of new jobs.

The government should shift the focus from manpower export to job creation in Bangladesh based on infrastructure and capacity development, and set up agriculture-based and environment-friendly SMEs in regional areas to meet our food and energy needs.

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