

Obama speech a breath of fresh air

It should herald a new approach to Muslim world

WITH high hopes and expectancy filling the air, partly spurred on by the White House, but in a large part building up since his assumption of office on a campaign mantra for change, US President Barack Obama delivered a major policy speech from the Cairo University podium calling for 'a new beginning' between the United States and the Muslim world.

He has sought the cooperation of the Muslim world to work together to fight violent extremism instead of courting its alienation which has been the handiwork of his predecessor George W Bush in the aftermath of terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the US-led invasion of Iraq. Whether it has fitted the tall task of a bill to initiate the process of reframing relations with the Muslim world turned upside down since, only time will tell, hopefully in the near future rather than a distant one.

Yet, his speech so full of forward-looking reflections on what should be the rules of engagement between the USA and the Muslim world, including on the topic of gender equality through spread of education and offer of more leadership choices to women signalled a new, fresh thinking, a new approach on the part of the American leadership. That he accepts the responsibility as the President of the United States to 'fight against the negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear' is something that would need many adherents in the Western world including within America itself. On a slightly different plane, even though Bangladesh is among a handful of Muslim majority countries with women in top leadership, we have a long way to go in according full gender equality of women.

To his allusion to the colonial times and the cold war phase in which Muslim majority countries were treated 'as proxies disregarding their aspirations', we have to say that in the extended neo-colonial era too, the same tendencies were demonstrated in different guises and forms.

On the rather intractable Middle East problem, he fell short of embarking on a new policy by issuing an even-handed call to the Jewish state and the Palestinians to live up to their international obligations. He needs to travel the extra mile there.

Of particular relevance is statement based on his understanding of the Quran: 'Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism, it is an important part of promoting peace' and that actions of violent extremist Muslims are 'irreconcilable with the rights of human beings'.

It is stating the obvious that suspicion and discord between the West and the Islamic world have evolved over decades and would therefore take sincere and determined efforts to be rolled back. But we believe Obama has offered up a new opportunity to remove the hiatus. For our part, we should seize it, as Obama does his part in matching words with deeds.

RMG exporters navigating a rough patch

While they need assistance, they can also help themselves

THERE is an apparent contradiction in the type of international business environment the garments manufacturers and exporters are having to face. It is a strange mix of the negative and the positive. Set against the backdrop of a change in the demand pattern brought on by the global financial meltdown and a high cost of doing business, the garments sector is on the one hand confronted with a buyer pressure to reduce prices and on the other blessed by a set of new buyers' leaning towards Bangladeshi RMG products.

It seems to us that we have to depend and concentrate more on new buyers who are arriving in Dhaka to place orders for our products, because it is learnt that they find RMG prices in other competing countries higher than ours. So, there is a competitive edge as far as the new generation of buyers goes.

That is only a new potential awaiting further tapping, the real issue however remains the general pattern of a good ten percent cutback on our export prices and these have been consistently in decline. Does it mean we have lost some of our bargaining power? This is inexplicable when there is an effective demand for our low- or middle-end products which the buying houses have leaned towards in the ongoing recession.

Besides, the rise in raw material prices and freight charges is difficult to explain given the drop in oil prices in the not-too-distant past, even though lately these have shown an uptrend. It is evident, however, that the exporters have failed to pass the higher costs to the buyers by convincing them of the need to share costs in order for their demands to be met on a sustained basis.

We see here a potential leverage for Bangladesh to be exploited in relation to foreign buyers to try and obtain better business terms from them. We agree with what we believe to be a representative view of the garments sector that it needs to build negotiating capacity and skill to roll back the ebb in the export prices to be securing the profitability they deserve. Our diplomatic missions in the buying countries should try to supplement the efforts. Also we should reinforce our pursuit with the US government to accord us quota- and duty-free access.

In fine, let's remind the garments industry owners that the workers are their asset so that it will be good business for them to cater to their basic and working needs adequately.

The crossfire culture

What we need is adequate provision of witness protection and victim support in the criminal justice administration. To make those effective we need large injection of governmental funds. Any further delay will only swell the ranks of summary-justice seekers and the admirers of vigilante action.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

DEATHS in the so-called crossfire have, unfortunately, become news once again. The Daily Star editorial of May 31, has been quite critical of the foreign minister's comment that the culture of crossfire killing cannot come to an end overnight. While concerned citizens and rights bodies may take serious exception to the minister's observation, particularly in view of her recent assurances about putting an effective stop to custodial killing at international forum, the reality on ground lends credence to the minister's premonition, howsoever retrograde that may sound.

The important question is, how the law enforcement culture, at least partially, has learnt to live with such aberration? To many, the crossfire incidents are in fact extra judicial murders that have been authoritatively encouraged. There is good reason to agree with such a view as the so-called crossfire continued unabated during the democratic dispensation of 2001-2006.

During the caretaker interval there were comparatively lesser deaths in crossfire. The return of democracy since early 2009 has not been able to put an effective stop to the suspected extrajudicial killing in the garb of crossfire.

Under circumstances as above, should citizens believe that lawless enforcement officials are in great demand when lawlessness and disorder prevail? Alternatively, are believers in the rule of law and followers of the straight legal methods not required and have to recede into background? Don't we need to put sustained efforts to achieve substantial results in the long run? Won't we be able to shake off the obsession with the so-called spectacular results that in fact are illusory?

It is high time that we start realising the pernicious effects of the use of dirty methods by law-enforcement officials. When such functionaries are allowed to go

beyond the law, they make the law dirty. If the government becomes a law-breaker, it breeds contempt for law. It has to be borne in mind that for democratic responsible government law is the means and justice is the end.

It is not for the ordinary or gullible members of the public to take a deep look at extra legal killings because their concern is one of immediate relief from the depredations of the local bully or the entrenched tormentor. However, a civilized government cannot be a prisoner of such damaging retrograde thoughts. A very significant aspect, which demands serious attention is that the so-called terrorists killed in the crossfire were in fact politically patronized and blessed. As a result, there is no guarantee that such killings will produce any result.

If as a civilized nation we expect our regulatory institutions including the police to regularly brush up their professional skills then we cannot be a party to willy-nilly facilitate the creation of a scenario wherein one would be willing to believe that those perpetrators of crime who cannot be brought under the law have to be dealt beyond the law.

Needless to mention here that in such an assumption lies the suicidal admission that the criminal justice administration of a democratic polity has failed to act and the state has forsaken one of its primary functions. Since no right-thinking Bangladeshi would reconcile to such a scenario that smacks of a failed government they have a duty to find out why some organs of the state have to resort to apparent vigilante action. The nation needs to know if law-enforcement personnel are deliberately deviating from the statutory directives in anti-crime operations.

Eulogizing or praising the 'crossfire actions' has created a worrying environment wherein result-oriented investigating officers are increasingly getting inclined to resort to short-cut methods to

please official boss or the political masters. The worrisome part is the threat to put an alleged criminal or an ordinary suspect under the so-called 'crossfire scenario' in order to gratify ulterior motives.

Since most crossfire deaths are not seriously perused for establishing the suspected culpability, the culprits in the enforcement and investigative apparatus discover a macabre win-win situation in such patently illegal acts. Elements of accountability and fear recede into background and investigation by the book becomes a pathetically low priority.

Professionally speaking, this is an instance of heightened jeopardy because in Bangladesh the crime fighting machinery already stands accused of not cultivating a scientific modus-operandi and quite often relapsing into the untenable third-degree methods.

The question is, do we want sustained laborious action under the law to strengthen our democratic foundation or do we need rash desperate action without the cover of law? The crossfire actions, undoubtedly, do not fit in with the first proposition. We need to be absolutely clear about that.

The ultimate punishment in the alleged 'crossfire' about whose credibility many are not convinced, appear as summary response from desperate executives of law enforcement. The legality of actions leading to such extreme action apart, any responsible citizen might like to know if in our often over-zealous anti-crime operations, we are just treating the symptoms without venturing to study and assess the objective conditions promoting criminality.

We do not need sociologists and criminologists to tell us that present-day crime is a complex social phenomenon caused by a multiplicity of factors and determining culpability is an extremely mind-exacting task.

Everyday life experience tells us that quite often the fun-seeking delinquent of yesteryears turn into uncontrollable don of the day due to the patronage of powerful quarters and the unexplained inaction of the enforcement outfit. Therefore, when deaths occur in the so-called 'crossfire' some myopic elements may be satisfied but a civilized society, which wishes to live by the cannons of law cannot but be concerned.



Not the answer.

The alleged deaths in 'crossfire' are forestalling the benefits of thorough investigation wherefrom the citizens could have known the pathetic as yet compelling factors behind the growth and maturing of criminals, the shady role of the patrons and the alleged inertia of the regulatory units.

What we need is adequate provision of witness protection and victim support in the criminal justice administration. To make those effective we need large injection of governmental funds. Any further delay will only swell the ranks of summary-justice seekers and the admirers of vigilante action. The decapitating adversity of the victims of crime demand mainstream support of the system.

The rule of law and criminal jurisprudence may appear to be unequivocally in favour of the offenders, the criminals, the law-breakers, the accused persons. That does not automatically give a license to resort to illegal measures because a civilized government must earnestly strive to demonstrate that law-enforcement effectiveness and civil liberties can co-exist in a society governed by the rule of law.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Tactical shift in Pakistan?

The uncertain situation as it exists today in Pakistan is chaotic to say the least. Only one equation is unambiguous. Ordinary civilians all over Pakistan are feeling more vulnerable and their sense of insecurity has been enhanced by the vague nature of Pakistani politics.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

PAKISTAN'S campaign to rid the scenic Swat valley, Buner and the surrounding areas of Islamist fighters has added another chapter to the continuing saga of their commitment to tackle the crisis of fundamentalism. Now the engagement has been more intense, and has achieved a bit of success. The brutal insurgency aimed at imposing Shariah law and expanding militant control appears to have lost some steam but doesn't appear to have lost its momentum.

In the meantime, the local civilian administration in that mountainous area is facing the daunting task of providing relief to over one million internally displaced persons who have left the area of conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as a calamity has described this situation. We have watched reports with concern that have suggested that hundreds of civilians and militants have died and that more than one million are living in precarious conditions in and around Swat's main city of Mingora.

The latest assaults by Pakistani armed forces appear to have been initiated in response to questions raised by certain skeptics about the Pakistani administration's anti-Taliban resolve. It was also obviously aimed at demonstrating to the new US Administration (during the Pakistani President's recent visit to that country) that Pakistan does not believe in compromises with militants associated with Al-Qaida. This latest Pakistani action has however not convinced many of its western allies completely that the Pakistan government has overcome its past history of flip-flop with regard to militants and terrorists.

As expected, Washington has cautiously welcomed the latest Pakistan offensive as the correct measure towards the reduction of the mounting alarm that has arisen over the spread of Taliban influence across the northwest of Pakistan and militant bombings in the Punjab. On more than one occasion, the US leadership has reiterated that containing militancy in that region is vital to US and Nato interests aimed at hitting Al-Qaida and ending insurgency in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's latest campaign, according to media reports, has been intensive. There

has been some progress on the surface. Mingora has been regained. However, questions have also emerged after one month whether its politicized army has the stomach to sustain an effort that has already caused heavy civilian casualties, increased the refugee burden and alienated public opinion in several areas in the sensitive north east and south west.

Analysts, quite understandably, have also started wondering whether a brake on this offensive will take place due to the indirect pressure of Pakistan's powerful Inter Services Intelligence Agency, known for its alleged links with some militant groups who sometimes figure as tools in Pakistan's confrontation with India.

This has made the scenario more complex. Professor Timothy Hoyt of the US Naval War College has interestingly pointed out that it is also not very clear right now whether the intelligence and Pakistan's military elements within themselves view association with such groups as an asset, either for geopolitical or ideological reasons. Nevertheless one aspect is sure. Past shifts in strategy, inconclusive offensives and peace deals with militants have only emboldened them.

We have seen significant developments over the last two months in Pakistan's strategic planning approach with regard to the handling of the militant resurgence. It would however be worthwhile to note that this time, though the civilian and military authorities appear to have acted more closely in unison, it would still be important to keep a very close watch in view of the low threshold of the Pakistan army pertaining to political backlash and civilian damage.

It is important to note here that most Pakistani Taliban fighters are ethnic Pashtuns from northwestern regions on the Afghan border. Perverse idealism and lack of suitable employment opportunities have possibly contributed to this scenario. They support the Afghan Taliban, most of whom are also Pashtun and many of whom fled to the Pakistani Pashtun villages after the US forces entered Afghanistan in late 2001. Thirteen factions are based in different parts of North West Pakistan and they have formed a loose umbrella group, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) led by Baitullah Mehsud, an Al Qaida ally in South Waziristan on the Afghan border.



Internal refugees: Rising by numbers.

TTP and one of its commanders called Faizullah are leading the Taliban activity in Swat and its neighbouring districts. Their efforts towards increasing support have been based on existing frustration with the local administration in that area, prevalent poverty, an ineffective judiciary, anger against feudal landlords and widespread anti-US feelings.

The TTP according to Nato intelligence swears allegiance to Mullah Omar, chief of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and acknowledges dispatching fighters across the border to that war-torn country, ostensibly, as an effort 'to expel western occupation forces'. It is also being claimed that the TTP has forged links with militant Sunni Punjabi groups like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) who specialize in high profile attacks on Pakistani Shia Muslim targets.

It is clear that today the Pakistan army and others involved in strategic planning have been forced to slightly change direction because of the recent sequence of events. Little more than a few weeks ago, General Ashfaq Kayani, the Pakistani army Chief of Staff, regarded the Swat valley peace deal as a 'model' for dealing with Pakistan's indigenous Taliban. The weak civilian government of President Zardari took the cue and also embraced such an approach as a 'home-grown' suitable for defusing insurgency.

International observers were however alarmed and not convinced with the approach. That included US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. There was also public outcry inside Pakistan and the Swat agreement was generally criticized as capitulation. All these factors eventually persuaded the Pakistani planners to undertake the armed measures.

President Zardari has watched his popularity diminish and has also noted that Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister is reinventing himself as a democratic bul-

wark. For obvious reasons this has not been a source of comfort to him.

I believe that it is unlikely that Islamic militants will be able to seize power in Pakistan, given the strength of its military. However, it is also true that recent successes by the Taliban in extending territorial gains could foreshadow the creation of 'mini-Afghanistans' around Pakistan's restive bordering regions that would allow militants even more freedom to plot attacks.

Such a possibility, according to The New York Times, would be consistent with Al-Qaida's strategy of conducting decentralised operations under small but well-organized regional groups. Their efforts would then be directed to the creation of a feeling of insecurity within Pakistan and also embarrassing the government and its steps towards economic development.

Till now Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahri have been wary about claiming credit for the violence in Pakistan. They have probably refrained from doing so to avoid generating a popular backlash against the group and also painting the Pakistani Taliban movement as having an Arab face.

The uncertain situation as it exists today in Pakistan is chaotic to say the least. Only one equation is unambiguous. Ordinary civilians all over Pakistan are feeling more vulnerable and their sense of insecurity has been enhanced by the vague nature of Pakistani politics.

Pakistan today faces an existential challenge. On several occasions the Pakistan electorate have voted against radical Islamic parties but as Bret Stephens has pointed out 'rejecting clerical politics is not quite the same thing as accepting secular ideals.'

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mazamir@dhaka.net