

Extremists regrouping?

Can't let down our guard

THE security forces deserve credit for the recent capture of a JMB training camp in the CHT and soon after that the arrest of a Laskar-e-Taiba (LeT) leader from Dhaka. These arrests, we are sure, have preempted the terror acts that these people have been planning to carry out inside and outside of Bangladesh, as revealed from the statement of the captured persons. The captured JMB terrorist was reportedly linked with the plan to bomb Khaleda Zia's election meeting in Comilla in 2008.

The recent discovery of the camp in Naikhongchari confirms the point that we have been trying to make all along since the capture of the top JMB leadership in March 2006. And that is, it would be self-defeating to be contented with what the security agencies had achieved overlooking the fact that the phenomenon is multi-headed and would grow to strike again if we did not take out the fundamental motivation behind their existence. It is not surprising that they would seek secure sanctuary in secluded areas to set up their bases and carry out training and recruitment activity, in order to implement their plans.

Our concern is aggravated by the very recent arrest of the Indian national linked to the Laskar-e-Taiba and other frontline extremist groups in India and Pakistan. This follows the arrests in Bangladesh several months ago of two Indians belonging to the LeT who were on the wanted list in India for planning and conducting terror attacks there. The arrest has also revealed the existence of a regional network, a possibility that we had been alluding to in the past which has been confirmed by the statement of the recently arrested LeT leader. These people reportedly have links with Huji (B) and were operating a terror network in the region.

Now that the external links of HUJI (B) / JMB has been confirmed it must set the security and intelligence agencies on double drive to uncover the sleeper cells whose existence in Bangladesh cannot be ruled out.

If anything the recent revelation of the action plan of HUJI requires a well-coordinated counter terror plan that should also involve the regional countries in terms of data exchange and real time intelligence. When the terrorists and extremists are so well-knit in their effort to cause us destruction and harm what prevents the regional countries to come together to preempt them? And the sooner we do it the better.

Old-age predicament

Resolve we should make to look after the elderly

A report in this paper following The International Day of Older Persons observed day before yesterday, was awash with a renewed concern for the lonely life being led by elderly ladies. This was epitomized by the poignant story of one such at an old-age home in Dhaka.

Her predicament is manifold -- a widow having a house of her own in the capital, but which she could not live in as a complete loner, she had no choice but to abandon it one and a half years ago. Since that point on, she has been living in a space measuring only seven feet by 15.

While she struggles to make her life interesting with a photograph from recent memory kept on the wall, somehow she forgot to display a photograph of her progeny, although a model who visited her lately figures in the photo. She has a son in the USA and a daughter who visited her but once in one and a half years. She actually undergoes the classic experience of most elderly and well-to-do ladies with established children having a life of their own.

There are three points to note about her story: first, she has made friends with people outside the family which shows a greater appreciation in society for the plight of elderly persons. Secondly, it follows from this that the children pay her occasional visits by an intensely-felt profound moral obligation towards her. More so because she herself has all the good wishes for her progeny, is manifestly uncritical of them. Thirdly, no matter how busy the organisers of the home might have remained on The International Day of Older Persons, she shouldn't have made do with residue from a diner for a lunch.

All in all, we would urge the social welfare ministry and all people concerned with the older people to go by the prevailing best practice standards of geriatric care; because there are advanced methods of health care and other forms of aid for the old people in today's world.

Let an Act of Parliament regulate promotions

There is an urgent need for an Act of Parliament to regulate the promotions to higher posts in the Secretariat. Rules may also be framed in line with the Act. This will help promote officials to higher posts in the Secretariat on the basis of their merit, efficiency and honesty and prevent politicisation of the administration to a large extent.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

ON September 7, the government promoted 494 officers of different cadres of Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) to the posts of additional secretary, joint secretary, and deputy secretary in the Bangladesh Secretariat (hereinafter called the Secretariat), commonly known as seat of the government. Of the total, 60 joint secretaries, 163 deputy secretaries and 271 senior assistant secretaries have been promoted to the posts of additional secretary, joint secretary and deputy secretary respectively.

A number of allegations and criticisms have been levelled against these promotions, which have been termed by many as "mass promotions," "wholesale promotions," "unprecedented promotions" and "spate of promotions." It has been said that promotions have been given without the availability of required number of vacant posts, which is a breach of administrative and financial discipline. This allegation stands substantiated when The Daily Star of September 8 reported that with the promotions, the number of additional secretaries stood at 186 against a total of 108 posts while the number of joint secretaries reached 498 against 430 posts. The number of deputy secretaries was already more than the government had posts for, 1,317 against 855. The number of deputy secretaries swelled with the promotion of another 271 senior assistant secretaries.

Second, some 526 officers in these three tiers have either been superseded or denied consideration. This has been done with the intention to facilitate promotion of officers loyal to the ruling Awami League (AL). It has been reported that out of 60 or so deputy commissioners appointed by the caretaker government, only one has been promoted as joint secretary.

Third, in the absence of required vacant posts, most of the promoted officers will remain attached to the establishment ministry as officers on special duty (OSDs) for a long time. This will result in huge financial and man-hour loss.

Fourth, the large number of promotions will not only cause financial loss but will also adversely affect discipline among the senior civil servants. There will be competition among the promoted officials to get better posts and they will end up getting involved in politics. This will lead to further politicisation of administration.

It may be recalled that till 1990, promotions to the posts of deputy secretary and above in the Secretariat were generally given on the basis of actual number of vacant posts. At the beginning of 1992, the BNP government promoted a lot of officials to the posts of deputy secretary, joint secretary, additional secretary and secretary. The promoted officials outnumbered the vacant posts. As a result, some of the promoted officials had to wait for months to be posted against vacant posts. This has been the practice with the successive party

governments for political gains.

While defending the decision of promoting the officials, the establishment secretary said that those who deserved promotions had got promoted. It had also brought an end to deprivation. This explanation of the establishment secretary has given rise to further questions. In its editorial of September 9, The Daily Star wrote: "Most of the promoted officials are said to have been sidelined during past governments. It is stated that one of the criteria for their selection to higher posts has been how unblemished they have been by partisan bias. The question is hasn't the government been influenced by a slant of its own? The issue here is two-fold: fair play and recognition of merit and ability. True, during the two terms served by the BNP since 1991 elections, promotions, postings and easing out as OSDs were largely governed by political considerations. The AL government undertook a reversal process. How long these changes and counter-changes in the administration will continue as the services of the Republic remain in a perpetual state of dis-equilibrium?"

In its editorial of September 10, another English language national daily (New Age) wrote: "If previous experiences are any indicators, it means that the government, just like its predecessors, elected or unelected, has actually rewarded those who are loyal to the ruling quarters, proven or perceived. Simply put, the government is continuing with the sadly familiar tact of politicising the bureaucracy along partisan lines."

Article 133 of the Constitution provides that Parliament may by law regulate the appointment and conditions of service of persons in the service of the Republic, and the president may make rules to regulate the appointment and the conditions of service of such persons until provision in that behalf is made by or under any law.

The Services (Reorganisation and Conditions) Act, 1975, effective from July 1,

1973, empowered the government to reorganise services of the Republic and of public bodies and nationalised enterprises and prescribe grades and scale of pay of persons employed therein. The Public Servants (Retirement) Act, 1974 allows a public servant to opt to retire on completion of 25 years of service on the one hand, and empowers the government to retire a public servant on completion of 25 years of service without assigning any reason.

Both the above Acts are silent about the appointment of persons in the service of the Republic or of any statutory body. Mention may be made that appointment means direct appointment or appointment by promotion. In the absence of an Act of Parliament to regulate appointment, and more specifically promotion, to the above referred posts in the Secretariat, the successive party governments in the past 37 years or so have made, repealed or amended rules on political considerations.

Immediately after taking office on January 6, some AL high-ups reportedly told that the government would enact a law in the Parliament to regulate the promotion of officers in the Secretariat. But any move to this effect is yet to be seen. Enacting a law to regulate promotions to higher posts in the Secretariat will mean a check on the 'long arm' of the executive to manipulate promotions there.

In view of what has been stated above, there is an urgent need for an Act of Parliament to regulate the promotions to higher posts in the Secretariat. Rules may also be framed in line with the Act. This will help promote officials to higher posts in the Secretariat on the basis of their merit, efficiency and honesty and prevent politicisation of the administration to a large extent. This will also lead to fulfilment of a constitutional obligation.

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G-20 has to succeed

The last item that is creating ripples in the G-20 pond is the idea of having a new reserve currency, being actively promoted by China. Others within the G-20 have not given this issue special attention. The International Monetary Fund has also been very careful in this regard. Nevertheless, this question is very much on the burner.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE G-20 was created last year after the global economic system went into a tailspin. Initially, there was some doubt about its possible effectiveness. The latest summit in Pittsburgh, USA however appears to have set aside such anxiety and has demonstrated its emergence as an important international ball player as far as tackling economic and financial issues is concerned.

This was possible due to their ability to coordinate and cooperate. It is true that the variety of its membership (includes 19 nations and the European Union, represented this time in the summit by its president -- Sweden) makes reaching agreement (on issues like the setting of exchange rates) more complex. However on the flip side, one may note that it also allows a more wide-ranging approach to the solution of financial questions as they account for 90 per cent of the global economy.

The Group met in Washington last October, ignoring the fact that President George W. Bush would be out of office within months and built a plan, calling it "The Washington Action Plan." By the London meeting at the beginning of this year, hundreds of billions of dollars had been spent and the leaders met to coordinate how their ambitious plan was performing. In London they agreed to give more money to the IMF and pledged more

cooperation. Some analysts at that time noted that they had no choice given the fact that there was every possibility that the evolving financial scenario could have led to Asia decoupling itself from US and European economic matrix.

Several positives have emerged from the Pittsburgh meeting. They include the following -- that developing nations will assume at least five per cent of voting rights at the International Monetary Fund, that international accounting authorities will come up with a global standard by June 2011 to ease variations among major economies, that governments should eliminate tax havens by March 2010 or face consequences and that the Group will initiate a system of peer review where economists in each member nation can advise on policies in the others. The meeting in Pittsburgh appears to have also agreed that it is too soon to take away the stimulus that is keeping developed economies afloat (needed for sustainable and balanced growth). There was also common realization that the members of the Group will have to coordinate their exit strategies when that time arrives.

I believe that the emergence of the G-20 has been a natural corollary of the G-7 established more than three decades ago. During this period the G-7 consisting of the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan were the leaders. During the Clinton years, Russia was gradually added, not because of the size of its

economy, but to help integrate it with the West after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The primary purpose of this smaller Group was to discuss security issues. A bigger Group has now surfaced because of the economic and financial meltdown.

Some have suggested that it might have been preferable to have had a slightly smaller group consisting of the G-7 countries, Brazil, India, Russia, China, South Korea, Mexico and South Africa. That would have made it G-14. They argue that leaving out Australia, Argentina, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey would have still left the smaller Group representing more than 75% of world GDP and with a more manageable number of countries.

I do not agree with such an assumption. I think that the presence of energy-rich Saudi Arabia, natural resources-endowed Australia, Indonesia and Argentina and moderate Turkey has added to the scope and quality of the Group.

In fact I believe that there is every reason for another country to be added to the list of G-20. Time has come for the LDC group of countries to be represented more meaningfully not only in international financial institutions but also in policy related groups. Those within the G-20 should seriously consider including a representative from the (more than 50-member) LDC group of countries. That would assist in taking into consideration the needs and priorities of the countries while planning steps for future guidance of the global economy through trade facilitation measures and for knocking down barriers in areas like agriculture and business services. This would be recognition of the existing economic reality. The country to represent LDC interests could be selected through an election from within these countries. Such a representative could serve within the G-20 for a non-renewable term of four years.

Formation of the G-20 has been a step in the right direction but this Group still has a

long way to go. There are tensions just underneath the surface that have to be ironed out.

Japan, the second largest economy, will not quite like the special importance being given to its rival China. It may be recalled that there is a historical friction between these two countries that has led to China scuttling Japan's goal of being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

There is also the need to find an economic balance in terms of strategy between the 'high savers' (symbolized by China and Germany) and the 'high spenders' (symbolized by the USA). China has in recent months tried to stimulate her economy with subsidies but one will have to wait and see whether this will focus only on the domestic industry or will also include spending on foreign manufactured goods and services. Imposition of punitive tariff by USA on Chinese tires might not help. The same will apply in the case of a cautious Germany with its new leadership configuration.

The last item that is creating ripples in the G-20 pond is the idea of having a new reserve currency, being actively promoted by China. Others within the G-20 have not given this issue special attention. The International Monetary Fund has also been very careful in this regard. Nevertheless, this question is very much on the burner. In the meantime, China has not hesitated to enter into currency-swap fiscal agreements (with Argentina) with her national currency being the basis for transaction.

Canada will be hosting the G-20 and the G-8 summits together in June next year. After that it will be South Korea's turn. The months ahead will hopefully bring in the requisite solutions. Pittsburgh has set difficult targets but they have to be met. Otherwise, it will affect the credibility of the G-20.

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OPINION

Help the 'needy' and save us

DR. A.K.M.A QUADER

MOST of us are poor and needy. All the religions dictate the respective followers to help and support the needy. Islam in particular instructs to help the fellow poor through fitra and zakat. At the Eid congregation this year while the Imam was giving sermons prior to prayer, I was distracted by something else and guessed who were the true needy and poor in Bangladesh?

Let me explain the reasons for being distracted and distressed. As the Ramadan was approaching this year like every Ramadan of the past, the prices of specific commodities both perishable and non-perishable shot up as a matter of routine malpractice. There were no shortages of these commodities either at the growers' level or at the wholesale market. The growers did not enjoy the benefit of price spiral. The importers, hoarders, wholesale dealers and retailers harvested the profit bonanza. The green chili (kancha marich) and egg-fruit (baygon) attained fame by becoming free market world-class commodities with opportunity cost. These were followed by sugar and its price shot up from Tk 38 to Tk

60-75 per kilo on the pretext of sudden price increase in the international market.

How on earth the sugar that had been in the shops and godowns for weeks would be dearer because of today's price increase in the international market? The same rule does not immediately apply if there is fall in the price in the international market and it takes months to adjust.

When the markets became volatile, very volatile, the bosses of the commerce ministry and FBCCI wake up from siesta to meet the electronic media as well as to visit Kawranbazar, Newmarket, Shantinagar, Moulavibazar etc as if the past bosses had not practiced it earlier. During the past caretaker period, we had vivid glimpses of vicious practices by the crooked importers and hoarders at Khatunonj, Moulavibazar and elsewhere. We were shown how foods were adulterated and rotten items including dates and baby foods unsafe for consumption marketed remorselessly.

A greater surprise came from the BGMEA when its President declared that without Tk 3500 crore stimulus packages from the government, the owners would be unable to pay wages and bonuses to the

garment workers before the Eid. This was an incredible attempt. There is a saying in the capitalist world: the first million the businessmen or industrialists make is dirty sometime but thereafter they make money ethically. But all our millions in Bangladesh are dirty for one reason or other. The industry sector beginning from nineteen eighties has developed a culture of loan defaulting on the money it borrowed from the banks. If we today take lessons from the capitalist west how they have taken over the good assets of the ailing banks and industries through stimulus packages leaving out the toxic assets, all the good assets of the loan defaulting companies and individuals in Bangladesh could have been similarly taken over by the banks.

Unabated corruption in the government offices and departments has become our national practice and pride! We are suffering day in and day out at the hands of such officers and employees occupying these offices and departments. Their greed is insatiable. The past Caretaker regime caught the "Bon-khadoks" but it left out many more like "Rasta-khadok", "Paribesh-khadok", "Shikkha-khadok", "Shasthya-khadok" etc mysteriously. We have no

sympathy for any 'Khadok'. We want them caught and sent to prison.

So, I was right being distracted by the needy ones. The needy ones are not the landless forty percent or the ones belonging to eighty percent population making less than one dollar a day. The real needy and poor are: loan-defaulters; a section of importers, hoarders, wholesale dealers, retailers; corrupt officials and employees who make us suffer because they are not satiated. We should collect alms nationally and give away to these needy 'poor' to save the nation from their wrath.

Why things have not changed or do not improve while the sufferings of the common mass continue? Because all the governments whether democratic or autocratic have been kind and faithful to these 'needy' people and never taken them to task. We are angry and aggrieved; we humbly ask the government to take some drastic actions against these people. God save us from the wrath of the 'needy poor' and guide the government to be conscientiously proactive.

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