

Pakistan in an embattled condition

Key to solution lies in greater Washington-Islamabad coordination

CONDITIONS in Pakistan have clearly been going from bad to worse in this past week. Just how horrific matters are in the embattled country is made obvious by the ceaseless activities of militants, especially in the northwest. The death toll from bombs and grenades detonated by elements like the Taliban has been rising, with the Pakistan authorities virtually unable to stem the tide of violence sweeping across large parts of it. Matters are certainly not being helped by the drone attacks carried out by the Americans in Pakistan, especially along the border with Afghanistan.

What should have been, on the part of both the Pakistani and American governments, a smooth, coordinated strategy to flush out the Taliban has now become an absolute imperative. Much as the people of Pakistan, or at least a large majority of them, are no sympathizers of the extremists, they are nonetheless vexed by what they see as the implications of the American role in their country. That was a point made clear to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her latest visit to Pakistan. It all raises a very fundamental question of what the United States and Pakistan can do collectively to make things turn around to a point where a coordinated and purposeful response to the extremist threat can be made. Indeed, given that there is a public perception inside Pakistan that it is actually caught in the crossfire of a war between the Taliban/al-Qaeda and the US, it is extremely important that whatever differences exist between Washington and Islamabad be narrowed down to a point where the threat can be rolled back. The fact of the matter is that it is not just America's war but also Pakistan's. That is why the onus is on both Washington and Islamabad to devise an effective strategy to beat back the forces of extremism threatening not only Pakistan but also regional and by extension global stability. Briefly, the Obama administration and the Pakistan government (and within that equation come the US military and the Pakistan army) can go for a swift exploration of the ways as to how best the present critical situation in Pakistan can be neutralized. In other words, both countries now need to reassess their approach to the problem in the interest of a stable Pakistan as well as a peaceful region.

Pakistan's condition acquires a sense of urgency because it has been bearing the brunt of the conflict. It is essential, therefore, that in this desperate struggle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the United States remain sensitive to Pakistan's concerns about its dignity as a society and sovereign status as a nation. It is all the more important that such be the approach given that the threat is common to both countries.

The message is loud and clear. The battle against extremism and the forces of disorder must be won. There can be no retreat.

Interest waiver on loans

A precedent that should be discarded

IN a central bank report to the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (ECNEC) it is revealed that Tk 3,685 crore worth of interest had been waived on outstanding loans during last eight years. In the period under review, a Jammāt-BNP four-party alliance government and a caretaker government were in power. As many as 693 borrowers including former MPs and influential businessmen got the massive waiver from nine state-owned banks and financial institutions.

We are not aware of whether the then central bank governor/s, and chiefs of banks and financial institutions were consulted, and if they were, what views they had aired about the extraordinary gesture of accommodation. Suffice it to say though, that the two governments, one political and another apolitical, decided in favour of waiving accumulated interests. And it so happens that the caretaker government waived more than the erstwhile alliance government which also did it mostly in the terminal year of its tenure.

When default culture is entrenched in the country and defiant of government efforts to recover outstanding loans impacting severely on the national economy, anything that negates financial discipline and loosens the grip over loan default is bound to be self-defeating. As it is, staggered rescheduling of loans topped off by scaling down of the down payment requirement have been the signature of consideration shown to loan defaulters. Now comes the waiver of interests. This is making a discrimination between genuine borrowers who are apt to repay and those who try to wriggle out of obligations through lobbying. More to the point, how does a government insist on a certain category of borrowers with any moral force to repay loans while it has clearly shown leniency to handpicked class of borrowers. Basically, it is patently opposed to any serious loan recovery drive. At best, in the case of borrowers having genuine difficulties in servicing debts, the banks could move to reschedule their loans and not write off accumulated interests which in two cases amounted to as much as Tk 148cr and Tk 103cr respectively.

An 'exit policy', we endorse the suggestion of Bangladesh Bank, should be carefully designed for the state-owned banks and financial institutions by the central bank and the finance ministry, and not dictated to.

Application of law: Making no exception

The ordinary people do not readily accept it when the lawmakers are failing to behave responsibly in conformity with the law, for example, when they break traffic rules or fail to pay utility bills.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

A parliamentary panel has recommended that to ensure strict adherence to traffic rules by all, even members of parliament (MPs) and ministers will not enjoy any immunity from the law. The Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Planning Commission, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Leader Oli Ahmed also echoed this view, suggesting further that, to ease congestion on the roads of Dhaka and Chittagong, and to stop haphazard parking of vehicles, the flouters of traffic rules should be made to pay Tk.1000 as fine, regardless if they are MPs or ministers.

The members of the Jatiya Sangsad, who recommended such stringent application of the traffic rules, which would be applicable to all cases of infringement without any exception, deserve plaudits for their boldness. This is very heartening that the elected public representatives of the country have thought of a move that does not differentiate between people in high places and those falling under the category of ordinary mortals.

One, who is from the industrialised West, especially from Western Europe and North America where democracy works in its real spirit, may not find anything great or special in our MPs' recommendation to apply traffic rules to an individual, irrespective of her or his social position. It is an irony, however, that in Bangladesh, context democracy has taken a strange twist. Here, the constitution, though it unequivocally provides that everyone is equal in the eye of law, in different in practice where some, belonging to the privileged section of society, are able to get away with impunity after violating this fundamental principle.

Well, one may not still consider such travesty of law at the hands of the powerful

in Bangladesh a unique instance in the world. Who does not know that the privileged section of society enjoy some degree of latitude just about everywhere in the world and are apt at slipping through the loopholes of law, if only by dint of their having money, power and connections. This is in spite of the fact that the constitutions of modern states are written in such a way as to never discriminate among people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

However, what is being stressed, in the present case of our parliamentarians' going for such stringent legal measures to punish violators of traffic laws, is that the language of the recommendation uses no general terms, but specifically points out that the lawmakers and the ministers would be equally punishable under the legal provision. That makes the difference. In fact, it is perhaps out of sheer exasperation that the lawmakers have taken upon themselves this seemingly unpleasant task of making the beginning of 'the rule of law' from somewhere. Why not start it from the traffic gridlocks where one can see defiance of the law with careless abandon!

It would be necessary to draw a line between the people whose forte is wealth and the power that flow from it and the elected representatives of the people. The privileged few who owe their power and pelf to their business acumen, or pure inheritance or to any other means fair or foul, have no reason to be very responsible or punctilious in matters of rules and norms, be it on the road or in the office or on any other occasion, social or otherwise. Since money is their only strength, it is only natural that they are loath to go by the rules, for that is tantamount to missing the opportunity of exhibiting their special position in the world. Also, they are not oath-bound to the people to behave in



Traffic is for everyone, even lawmakers.

accordance with the norms, or as the law dictates. So, it raises a few of our eyebrows when those impatient swaggering nouveau-riches break a few laws of the road. However, what about those supposedly most responsible and respected citizens, who owe their privilege and power to the people who voted them into their positions? Does it suit them to break the rule of the road, or any law of the land for that matter? Moreover, aren't they the ones who enact the laws that are enshrined in the constitution? Oddly though, it sometimes becomes difficult to tell some of them from the rather snobbish privileged members of society.

Sad to say, the implementers of the law, presently the traffic police, often look the other way when the powerful and the privileged are found ignoring the rules of the road. The reasons for that are also not very hard to understand for neither our law-enforcers, nor the privileged, who are often found running afoul of the law, are angels.

This is a well-known fact and is accepted as a fait accompli. Even then, the ordinary people do not readily accept it when the lawmakers are failing to behave responsibly in conformity with the law, for example, when they break traffic rules or fail to pay utility bills.

In fact, in advanced democracies, the public representatives do not enjoy any special favour when it comes to laws of the land. Their ministers, like the common people, have to suffer in the traffic jam or to face the music in default of any non-compliance of the rules.

Now that the parliamentarians themselves have risen to the occasion and elected to make no exception in the application of the traffic rules, we are reassured. As the proverbial charity begins at home, we hope, this bold stance on the part of our lawmakers will go a long way in establishing the rule of law in the country.

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The evolving global construct

The G-20's significance lies in greater influence in national and international financial regulations, triggering more pressure on defence budgets of most nations, magnifying world protectionism, and weakening national efforts around the globe to reduce carbon emission.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE formalisation of the G-20, in place of G-8 with the US as chairman of the board of governors, is now expected to monitor and guide politico-economic affairs of the world. Yet, despite Thomas Friedman's claim the world is not flat enough, conflicting interests abound among G-20 and non-G-20 nations. At the recently held G-20 meeting at Pittsburgh, China and other developing countries got greater say in the IMF while the USA maintained its veto power, but the non-G-20 got nothing. They wanted more resources for development through a new concessional fund, a disproportionate share of the IMF gold sale, a more liberal interpretation of the debt sustainability framework, and funds for climate change devastation. All they got were promises. Still, the very fact that the G-20 was formalised at Pittsburgh was a positive step.

Robert Blackwill of the Rand Corporation thinks that over time, the G-20 will become more influential than the G-8. In the next decade or so, the G-20 will exert more influence on the IMF but is unlikely to shape the UN Security Council. Blackwill lists the G-20's significance lies in greater influence in national and inter-

national financial regulations, triggering more pressure on defence budgets of most nations, magnifying world protectionism, and weakening national efforts around the globe to reduce carbon emission. Blackwill's prediction is based on reading transcending events in history like the French Revolution bringing in Napoleon, Bolshevik Revolution producing the Soviet empire, the Great Depression reinforcing the demise of the Weimar Republic, the advent of Adolph Hitler, among others.

Though a unipolar moment may have passed, the US, as Leslie Gelb writes in his book *Power Rules*, the global power is decidedly pyramidal -- with the US alone at the top, a second tier of major countries (China, India, the UK, France, Germany and Brazil) and several tiers descending below will be the key determinants of security in the 21st century. If power is the capacity to make people do what they do not want to do, then the US may not want to force the doctrine of pre-emption as the way to solve global issues and instead, as the Nobel Committee said in its citation while awarding Barack Obama the Peace Prize, the US may opt for a global reconciliation among different groups pledging allegiance to different

faiths and opposing further dissipation of national sovereignty. The US, with its global reach and surplus wealth (discounting the current recession that may be on the mend) will remain the determining power in the world for the foreseeable future.

One may tread the fault lines of global politics if one assumed that peace and tranquillity would rule the world. China's resurgence in Asia would worry Japan and, to an extent, India, given Chinese objection to the Indian prime minister's visit to Arunachal Pradesh for its election campaign, with China's ire at the refuge given by India to the Dalai Lama, who fled the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and at his visit to Arunachal Pradesh, and India's objection to the building of a dam in Tibet by China that may affect water flow in the rivers flowing into India and Bangladesh. Europe in this matrix may continue its efforts for a more internationally acceptable legal framework for a new global construct. The opposing views are not exceptional in most countries. In Australia, for example, the differences between the Conservatives and Labour were based on realism and idealism.

In this evolution of a new global architecture, it has become necessary to discern and defeat the religious factor in the al-Qaeda and Taliban sponsored terrorism.

The most engaging issue today is the Taliban problem in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The terrorism perpetrated in the two countries has become a daily narrative in the subcontinent with the possibility of its dark shadow being cast far and wide. Pulitzer winning journalist Steve Coll, in a testimony to the US Senate

Foreign Relations Committee in October, observed that "any durable American exit strategy from Afghanistan will depend upon the emergence of a stable Pakistan that is moving towards normalisation with India and the reduction of extremism within its borders." Coll felt that it was critically important to persuade Pakistani military and intelligence that Pakistan's national interests demanded normalisation and economic integration with India and abandonment of proxy Islamic groups such as Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba and others. Many think that in US policy-making circles, there is a growing realisation of the centrality of Pakistan to US interests and regional strategy. Perhaps General McChrystal's initial assessment in August, that increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan could exacerbate regional tension and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India, is such an indication.

In the ultimate analysis, the Taliban menace, believed by some as having no central command and presently owned by different terrorist groups, still has its epicenter in South Asia, and hence, the region is in imminent danger of instability as evidenced by daily terrorist activities in Pakistan and the Pak army's determined efforts to destroy the Taliban stronghold in South Waziristan. The affluent countries of the erstwhile G-8 have the great responsibility of adopting a strategy of smart power to tackle this menace. It would be wrong to let Afghanistan and Pakistan slide back into the Stone Age.

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Of human rights and changing realities

The notion of reflexive respect for innate and law-based rights in the widely disparate Asean region will need time to develop. It has taken 16 years for such an institutional mechanism to become fact, after the idea germinated following the 1993 leaders' meeting.

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THE birth of an Asean human rights commission at the grouping's annual composite meetings last week in Thailand was eclipsed not just by practical matters, like faster economic integration and reinforcing linkages with China and India. There was a sense also that expectations had to be understood as being realistic, although this was a development of some note in Asean's evolution. The notion of reflexive respect for innate

and law-based rights in the widely disparate Asean region will need time to develop. It has taken 16 years for such an institutional mechanism to become fact, after the idea germinated following the 1993 leaders' meeting. The United Nations' perspective is also instructive. Its human rights commission's regional representative, Mr Homayoun Alizadeh, said the Asean commission will have to work hard to establish its credibility and help close the gap between human rights rhetoric and the reality on the ground.

Hard to swallow, obviously, for Myanmar and the Indochina states, or even the absolute monarchy of Brunei. There is no need to belabour the point about Myanmar, as criticisms of its record are well-documented and justified. But note that the concept of human rights and their applications are not immutable. The United States is to open a dialogue with Myanmar after years of futile punitive actions, even if it appears to have a motive in also wanting to counter China's diplomatic monopoly of the Indian Ocean region. The US has long had unresolved issues with its black citizens. As well, the European Union is proud of its rights tradition and its enforcement mechanisms - but its immigrant communities from South Asia and Turkey, religious minorities, native-born gypsies and Jews will beg to differ.

So, yes, the Asean Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights will have to

perform contortions promoting human rights while taking into account 'national and regional particularities' and respect for different 'historical, cultural and religious backgrounds', as its terms of reference say. This alone is tricky, but the biggest deficiency is the lack of enforcement power as non-interference in members' affairs remains steadfast. Progress will therefore be incremental, but Asean can consider the usefulness of an enforcement enablement when the articles are reviewed after five years. One positive aspect is that member governments and activists will come under internal pressure to do a better job of defining, honouring and defending citizens' rights. The commission's next task is to draw up a human rights declaration. Members will show their commitment best by reinforcing the commissioners' work with more funding and staff secondments.

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