

Capture of LeT operatives in Bangladesh

Strengthen regional as well as own counter terror capacity

ONE may look at the recent arrests of people alleged to belong to the Lashkar-e-Taiyeba, which is based in Pakistan, as both a cause to be wary as well as a matter to take a degree of relief from. Reportedly, these terrorists were planning to conduct attacks on the US and Indian embassies in Dhaka, in tandem with attacks on several Indian cities, to mark the one-year of the Mumbai attacks.

The redeeming feature of the matter is that these arrests are a consequence of quick exchange of actionable intelligence which allowed our law enforcing agencies to act in a proactive manner. Arrest of the LeT men from Chittagong on 4th Nov is a sequel to arrests of two Lashkar leaders a fortnight ago in the USA who are believed to be the mastermind behind the attack in Mumbai last year.

The latest arrest in Dhaka follows from the Chittagong arrest. No doubt this has been an outcome of effective international and regional collaboration in counter terror operation. We feel that this must be strengthened and institutionalised further, at the regional level, for South Asia to be able to combat the phenomenon effectively.

Reportedly, there are a few more that are linked to transnational terrorist groups yet to be netted in. They must be apprehended before they are able to perpetrate their designs on our soil, or for that matter anywhere in the region.

In the recent past several foreigners, alleged to be linked to transnational organisations, were hauled up in Bangladesh, and some of them had been living in this country for many years, apparently without any hindrance at all. It should be abundantly clear to even the casual observer that there is a dangerous nexus between some of the terrorist organisation within the region, and that is only to be expected. It is an inescapable reality that terrorism has acquired a transnational character with both organic and ideological linkages; and the reality that the South Asian countries are not all sufficiently equipped in equal measure to deal with the problem effectively must not be lost on us.

That being the case, there is a strong rationale, not only for the countries of the region to develop their individual counter terror capability but also for an efficient regional mechanism. This is reinforced even more by what the countries of South Asia, particularly, Pakistan India and Bangladesh, have had to experience in the recent past. There are existing instruments within SAARC that can be put to use immediately, something that, regrettably, South Asia has been unable to do so far.

New drive to reclaim the Sitalakhya

Encroachers must not escape punishment

THE campaign to reclaim our rivers, in which this newspaper has been playing a leading role, appears to have been given fresh impetus through a new move to free the Sitalakhya of encroachment. We might add here that of late no less a personality than the prime minister has directed the authorities to reclaim rivers from the unscrupulous and predatory elements who have over the years seized increasingly larger chunks of them. Added to that are the directives served by the judiciary about making the rivers free and therefore going back to public hands.

Against such a background, we look upon the fresh drive to reclaim the Sitalakhya as a necessary step and one that is obviously in the right direction. An important component of this drive is the removal of makeshift structures as well as sand from in and around the river. What should now be made clear to citizens is that this time round the drive will reach a logical conclusion and, unlike a previous drive undertaken not long ago, will not be halted halfway. On 20 October, the authorities undertook an operation to remove unauthorized structures erected by encroachers and also directed the latter to remove the sand they had piled at various points around Kanchpur bridge. That did not work as the encroachers simply ignored the orders. By any measure that was a gross violation of rules, indeed of the law; and it should have been for the authorities to take drastic and immediate action against the encroachers. It is not exactly edifying when people who indulge in wrong or criminal acts can defy governmental authority with impunity. However, now that a new drive has been launched regarding the Sitalakhya, we trust the programme will not only bear fruit but will also act as an instance that can be replicated in a reclamation of lakes and rivers elsewhere in the country.

On the first day of the fresh drive, as we understand, twenty unauthorized structures were dismantled. That is good news. But now must come determined steps to have the sand piled up along the river removed as quickly as possible. A particular focus on such drives should be speed and a sense of immediacy followed by security around the reclaimed areas. The authorities have, of course, provided for bidders to remove the accumulated sand within fifteen days from Ati near the bridge. Let that plan be rigorously followed and the task of the removal of sand completed through round the clock work. Apart from engaging men to remove the sand, it must be a priority with the authorities to take to task those who have encroached on the Sitalakhya. Reclaiming the river without at the same time penalizing the encroachers will simply raise some uncomfortable questions.

Loss of the consumerist paradise

In the maelstrom of financial meltdown, the affluent nations have tumbled into a strange reality. With the pride and complacency of assured prosperity gone, the values they prided themselves on for so long are also fast fading out. The edifice of consumer culture is now in a desperate predicament.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

A recent report published in *The Guardian* has exposed yet another downside of recession in the United Kingdom (UK), a very advanced industrialised society. It is common knowledge that the joie de vivre of such a society is the insatiable craving for possessing as much of the creature comforts as possible on offer in the market. However, the ongoing financial meltdown has made a deep dent in the purchasing power of consumers.

To overcome this constraint, some errant customers, who reportedly belong mostly to the middle class, have resorted to outright stealing or shoplifting, to be more appropriate. Ironically, this particular group of consumers mentioned in the report have thus compromised the most fundamental principles of civilised social life. Oddly enough, they have not been doing this to meet their basic needs of life. If they had done it purely out of the urge for survival, then one could allow them some benefit of doubt. Sad to say, we hardly have any argument to consider the case here with commiseration.

What a sad turn of events! What has happened to the middle class people, who

are supposed to be the guardians of the values on which modern civilised existence hinges! Before one indulges in pitying the despicable state of morality in which the middle class society of the West has found itself, it is first necessary to trace the root cause of this aberrant behaviour on their part.

The report in question has dwelt in further details on the number of such cases of pilfering, the type of merchandise they are making off with, the class of shopping malls where such stealing is taking place and the total value of the commodities being thus filched within a particular period of time.

As noted previously, it is not to meet their basic needs that those consumers have resorted to shoplifting. They have been doing it to keep up with the Joneses; it is exactly here that the root cause of their apparently strange and delinquent manners has to be traced.

The report, which was based on the data provided by a retail security company, showed that ethical clothing shops, especially fashion and food stores, were the target of such thievery. Those types of stores have lost some £4.88 billion to the shoplifters in the past year, until last June. This figure indicates that the frequency of

shoplifting is witnessing a surge in recent times.

Though shoplifting is nothing new in Britain, the soaring rate of the crime has sent many thinking what might be the cause of this strange turn of things. The reason, too, as pointed out before, is obvious. It is, of course, one of the upshots of recession. Since it hit the economy, the rate of incidence of this petty crime has gone up by 20 percent during the period under review. The survey data further revealed that fashion clothing stores are worst hit by this kind of customer delinquency, followed by specialty food and convenience stores. The new crop of thieves behind this recession-driven surge in shoplifting consists mostly of novices in the art of stealing.

However, the goods stolen by these rather amateur thieves are expensive items that they presumably cannot afford to buy with their reduced income in these hard times. The picture, however, does not reflect only the behaviour of Britain's middle class consumers. In fact, the survey, which covered 36 countries, invariably showed a similar pattern of behaviour in recession-affected middle class customers.

A very powerful desire drives these middle class people, who, otherwise, are very enlightened, responsible, dignified and honest, to take recourse to stealing. Why so? Because they cannot lose face -- for that matter, their status -- by any means in the society they live! The expensive clothes bearing the tags of the famous brand names that they wear, pricey foods they eat, precious ornaments they wear, costly cars they drive and the exclusive clubs they frequent measure the status

that they so hanker after. It is this craze for such status symbols that has moulded the consumerist psyche of the advanced economies. To these people, losing that status is losing everything, which is why they think nothing of even stealing!

In the maelstrom of financial meltdown, the affluent nations have tumbled into a strange reality. With the pride and complacency of assured prosperity gone, the values they prided themselves on for so long are also fast fading out. The edifice of consumer culture is now in a desperate predicament. The shock of recession has laid it bare in all its hollowness. Now, all its victims -- the rich, the poor, the industrialists, the small business operators, the working and the middle class, the executive and the upper class -- are pointing the finger as one at the prevailing social and economic system for their present plight.

That the disillusionment with market capitalism is at its peak, even two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has been made obvious through a recent poll conducted by BBC World Service and its associates. A large portion of those interviewed, (43 percent in France, 38 percent in Mexico and 35 percent in Brazil and on average 23 percent of all the 27 countries covered by the poll) viewed that free market capitalism was fatally flawed and should be replaced with a new economic order. Yet, 51 percent of all polled believed free market capitalism should be regulated and reformed.

The survey and the poll results speak for themselves and their results converge. The lure of the consumerist paradise is gradually proving to be a chimera.

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Preparing for the globalised world

If Bangladesh is to realise the vision of a digital nation then the politicians have to stand firm and prepare the coming generation to compete in the globalised world by imparting education of international standard. One hopes it will be so.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE mixture of religion and politics has always been a dangerous potion. Perhaps the architects of the American independence had realised this centuries back when the First Amendment to the US Constitution was brought in to deny state patronage to any particular religion or religious group.

The nay-sayers' argument that if secularism was introduced as a fundamental tenet in our constitution then the country would become atheist is an indirect advocacy of those Islamists who believe in one-way practice of democracy to gain power and establish a theocratic state.

Secularism, writes Professor Richard Madsen, is a political arrangement that makes the state neutral with regard to religious belief, and the government's legitimacy does not depend on religion or the blessings of any particular religious community, and culturally it may indicate "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed is unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the, easiest to embrace." Professor Craig Calhoun sees in secularism a contrast between immanence and transcendence immanence

located in our senses of reality and good within the world around us while transcendence gives us a sense of something beyond.

The danger of religion in politics is most evident in Pakistan. Seymour Hirsch's article in *The New Yorker* (In an unstable Pakistan can nuclear warheads be kept safe? -- 16.11.09) has extensively explored President Obama's concern over the fragility of the Pakistan civilian government and the US's concern of transfer of some nuclear assets, not to the Taliban but to extremists in the Pakistan military establishment, through a coup d'etat.

Despite denial by the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen, of secret negotiations that would allow specially trained American units to provide added security for the Pakistani arsenal in case of a crisis, Seymour Hirsch writes that Hizbul Tahrir, a Sunni extremist organisation determined to establish the Caliphate, has made inroads into the Pakistan army.

In reply to the Pakistani argument that the officers are not only professionals but are also trained in England, it has been argued that indoctrination of Islamist ideology takes place, according to an official of the Obama administration, "in services every Friday for army officers,

and at corps and unit meetings where they are addressed by senior commanders and clerics."

As it is, the Muslim diaspora in the West are constantly engaged in drawing up their identity as full fledged citizens of the host country. A poll taken in the US had revealed that the majority of Americans would prefer not to have a Muslim as next door neighbour. The recent Fort Hood massacre has the US Army Chief of Staff General George Casey worried about the possibility of Muslim troopers experiencing a backlash for the gruesome act of Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed 12 fellow army colleagues.

While at the micro level every terrorist act should be dealt with firmly one has to ponder whether hard power alone will suffice in reining-in the contagion of Islamist terrorism in the world. Should not the arbiters of global destiny try to correct, for example, the wrong being done to the Palestinians for decades due to evangelical belief that the second coming of Jesus cannot be fulfilled unless the whole of Palestine is owned by the Jews, in blatant contravention of the promises made, among others by Winston Churchill, that nothing would be done that would be detrimental to the interest of the Arabs living in the area for centuries?

Thomas Friedman's opinion that terrorists spring from societies that have faced humiliation and deprivation at the hands of others, and a way out could be to make the world flatter than it is by making politico-economic opportunities available to those who have been denied for so long, merits serious consideration.

A preliminary probe in Bangladesh

about the assassination attempt on a lawmaker has revealed the alleged involvement of some disgruntled elements in the army in order to destabilise the present government, disrupt the final judicial stage in the case of the assassination of Bangabandhu and his family members, and the alleged involvement of two ministers of the BNP-Jamaat regime along with elements of banned Islamist outfits having links with the terrorist organisations of regional countries in the August assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina make it imperative that an integrated regional approach be taken to fight al-Qaeda terrorism.

Unfortunately, some of our politicians, who fail to graduate from being politicians to the level of statesman and look beyond the next election to the future of the next generation, give in to the blackmail that secular education, that by definition encompasses ethics and moral education as well, would make Bangladeshis agnostics and atheists.

It is amazing that the global power structure that is changing hands from the occident to the orient, embedded with intense competition like Alice in Wonderland who has to run all the time to remain in the same place, is being ignored in favour of amalgamation of the church and the state in the same cauldron.

If Bangladesh is to realise the vision of a digital nation then the politicians have to stand firm and prepare the coming generation to compete in the globalised world by imparting education of international standard. One hopes it will be so.

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Clear-eyed on N. Korea

Following the recent trip to the United States by Ri Gun -- North Korea's top nuclear negotiator -- on which he met with his US counterparts, reports emerged that two rounds of direct talks between the United States and the communist state will be held before North Korea returns to the six-party process.

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THE US special envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, is to travel to Pyongyang before the end of the year. North Korea offered an invitation for Bosworth to visit the country a few months ago and Washington, after extensive consultations with its partners in the region, has decided to accept the invitation, said Philip Crowley, assistant secretary of state, in announcing the senior diplomat's trip.

After abruptly quitting the six-party process aimed at North Korean denu-

clearisation earlier this year, Pyongyang conducted a second nuclear test, launched a succession of missiles and took actions to reverse the disabling of its nuclear facility at Yongbyon.

When those blatantly hostile acts did not result in the international community acquiescing to its demands -- the United Nations, rather, imposed stricter sanctions, which are being vigorously enforced by the international community -- the leadership in Pyongyang suddenly switched gear and started its so-called "charm offensive." North Korea extended an invitation to Bosworth and early last

month North Korean leader Kim Jong-il told the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that it wanted bilateral talks with the United States and may return to the six-party talks if those talks are successful.

Following the recent trip to the United States by Ri Gun -- North Korea's top nuclear negotiator -- on which he met with his US counterparts, reports emerged that two rounds of direct talks between the United States and the communist state will be held before North Korea returns to the six-party process.

Crowley, during the press briefing announcing Bosworth's Pyongyang visit, sought to make clear that the upcoming trip was not part of the bilateral talks that Pyongyang has been demanding. "This is not the beginning of a bilateral dialogue. That is separate from the six-party process," he said.

Emphasising that Bosworth's talks in Pyongyang will take place in the context of the six-party talks, Crowley said: "From our standpoint, the purpose will be to

facilitate an early resumption of the six-party talks and to secure North Korea's reaffirmation of the September 2005 joint statement."

The United States is sending a clear message that it does not view the Bosworth trip as the beginning of US-NK bilateral talks. However, Pyongyang most likely views this as the beginning of exactly that, and probably harbours different expectations.

Two sides coming to a meeting with different purposes does not bode well for its outcome. However, the decision to engage with each other is a positive step forward. Bosworth should use the trip to get Pyongyang to return to the six-party talks and to recommit to the denuclearisation process. The United States should be wary of being "charmed" into giving in to surprise North Korean demands when the two sides meet.

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