

## On Ashura, we recall the sacrifices in Karbala Imam Hussein (RA) waged battle in defence of faith

**T**ODAY is a day of mourning for Muslims, indeed for all people who believe in the righteousness of a cause, all over the world. The sacrifices through which Imam Hussein (RA) and his followers saw their lives come to an end on the battlefields of Karbala hundreds of years ago were fundamentally proof once again that martyrdom in defence of faith is a supreme act of nobility. The grandson of the Holy Prophet of Islam (Peace Be Upon Him) has, through his valour and through his refusal to submit before the brute forces led by Yazid, imparted the important lesson that it is the moral responsibility of anyone confronted with gross and manifest injustice to engage in a battle that has as its goal the triumph of good. In Karbala, it was patently an epic struggle between good and evil. Imam Hussein (RA) and his followers, rather than give in to the sinister forces typified by Yazid and his gang of usurpers, happily went down the path of supreme sacrifice.

And yet good does not die when apparently it is evil that wins the day. Imam Hussein's sacrifice was to be but one more demonstration of how often it is in history that good, noble men have seemingly bitten the dust even as the ignoble and infamous ones have claimed victory. On a far bigger scale, however, the Imam's sacrifice has through the centuries acted as a spur to a reinforcing of faith among Muslims of all countries and all sects and has endlessly served as a cardinal lesson to all that when men of questionable intent seek to spread their unhealthy shadows all over our lives, it is time to rise and, invoking the name and grandeur of the Almighty, wage a twilight struggle to restore the cause of right to its majestic splendour. The terror visited upon Imam Hussein (RA) and to his followers was made all the more gruesome through the atrocities inflicted on the children and women of his clan who, deprived of such basic amenities as water, were hacked to death by Yazid and his murder squads. And yet none of these noble dead asked or begged for pity, for a chance to be allowed to live. It was the strength of faith that sustained them even as death stared them in the face.

This morning, as we reflect in sombre manner on the murder and mayhem in Karbala centuries ago, it is a call to faith, to a proper keeping of it that is called for. In worldly terms, the death of Imam Hussein (RA) and his followers was but a consequence of general conflict. In more philosophical and indeed spiritual terms, however, that sacrifice was but a renewal of faith for the followers of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) at that point in time and in the times to be. The cardinal lesson left for us by the supreme sacrifice of Imam Hussein (RA) is that justice and human welfare are causes to live and, when necessary, to die for. It is this lesson we recall on Ashura.

## More deaths in ship breaking yards

*Apathy to workers' safety is inexcusable*

**I**T is shocking that workers engaged in ship breaking continue to die in job related accidents. The recent casualty of four deaths and 13 injuries occurred when an oil tanker that was being pulled down exploded. Reportedly, in the last 20 years as many as 1000 persons have died in Bangladesh in accidents connected with ship breaking.

The statistics of injury are perhaps much more than the deaths. And those who survive are alive, but only just, having suffered most debilitating injuries and left dependent on others' mercy for the rest of their life. We call on the owners to adequately compensate the relatives of the dead and the injured.

The matter has occupied a great deal of media space and time over the last several years, primarily because of the severe danger to men and environment that the industry poses. The fact that the ship breaking yards have been categorised as extremely dangerous appears not to have drawn anybody's attention as yet except for the high court and environmental activists.

Regrettably, although the Supreme Court had stayed the order of the High Court of 17 Mar this year, that among other directives had asked the government to close down all ship breaking yards which did not have environmental clearance, the other very pertinent directives, that would have stymied the ill effects of the industry, have not been implemented as yet.

The matter has taken a very serious proportion given the fact that over the last one year the number of ship breaking yards in Sitakund have sprouted up to almost double that of last year. And none of these has clearance of the Department of Environment. The flouting of rules and directives is simply not acceptable.

What is even more undesirable is that the concerned authorities have taken no action against the owners of those yards that neither have clearance nor proper documents that make them eligible to apply for clearance. There is an unholy nexus that has allowed this business to disregard rules with impunity. And one is not sure that those contracted to undertake the tasks have the necessary equipment and expertise.

The apathy shown to the safety of those working in this industry, not to speak of the blatant indifference to the hazard that it poses to the environment, by the relevant agencies and departments, is simply deplorable.

We demand that not only should the government move immediately to close down all unauthorised ship breaking yards, it should also take steps to implement the directives of the court. It must also immediately employ all the necessary oversight mechanisms to ensure safe working conditions for the workers and make certain that hazards to the environment are removed.

## Crossfire: The return of the scourge

Alarmed at the continued occurrence of extra-judicial killings in the name of encounter, gunfight and crossfire while chasing identified criminals with several cases against them, an unconvinced High Court issued a suo moto rule upon the government on November 17, asking the latter for an explanation.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

**O**NLY a month ago, the nation rejoiced at the denouement of the Bangabandhu murder case with the upholding of the verdict delivered earlier, seemingly establishing the rule of law at long last. It generated great optimism that henceforth there would no more be extra-judicial killings in the country; neither would there be subversion of justice due to anyone, irrespective of party affiliation or family. Such optimism lay in tatters soon after, when the instances of the violation of rule of law came to the notice of rights' activists. It was found that the killings took place during so-called encounters enacted by law enforcing agencies.

Alarmed at the continued occurrence of extra-judicial killings in the name of encounter, gunfight and crossfire while chasing identified criminals with several cases against them, an unconvinced High Court issued a suo moto rule upon the government on November 17, asking the latter for an explanation. It also asked the high-up of the Rab through the attorney-general not to resort to such killings till the next hearing on the matter scheduled for January 9. Never before had the Court been so deeply concerned at the high handedness of law enforcing authorities and been compelled to issue a stern warning.

The rights organisations, Bangladesh

Legal Aid Services Trust (Blast) and Ain-o-Salish Kendra (Ask), however, lodged separate complaints to the Court saying that over 1,000 people were killed in custody in so-called crossfire, gunfight and encounter -- in gross violation of human rights -- since the formation of Rab in 2004. The HC, however, came up with suo moto rule against extra-judicial killings taking place after five years of their beginning in 2004.

What the Court is deeply concerned with is another extra-judicial killing, even after the issuance of suo moto rule on November 17. This is in spite of the prime minister's repeated assurance that during her tenure in power there wouldn't be any occurrence of crossfire. The home minister also, on occasions, testified that there had not been any crossfire under the incumbent government. It means that the cases of extra-judicial killings reported by the rights outfits are in defiance of the solemn pledge made by none other the country's chief executive. Where do we go then?

Amid a plethora of pledges and assurances, as well as the denials, crossfire is still recurrent. As a result, the Court composed of Justice A.E.M. Abdur Rahman and Justice Imdadul Hoque Azad once again desperately called upon the government to freeze what they called a "heinous" practice at least till the hearing of the suo moto on January 9.

Even after the solemn outburst of the



No sign of abating.

Court, which has been repeatedly requesting the government to stop crossfire, two brothers, Khairul and Lutfur in Madaripur, were killed in crossfire to the shock and of the entire nation. The public as a whole is shocked by the repeated incidents of such killings, which it feels has been tarnishing the image of the country.

In the meantime, if the Court had taken some action against a few of the offending Rab officials for such incidents, it is felt that the entire force would have been careful and not dared to commit such high handedness.

The scourge of the crossfire death descended on us after Rab was introduced primarily to combat hardened criminals and political opponents. Till now, both politics and Rab had to pay a toll -- politics by decimation of political figures and Rab through its fall from the moral high ground bestowed on them.

Yet, after its roller-coaster journey through many ups and downs -- sometimes pampered and at others rebuked -- it seems to have come to stay to inflict more blows to the rule of law, which is the ultimate casualty of the many aberrations that keep taking place in our body politics. They are invincible in the sense that they follow a story line that can hardly be challenged.

An identified criminal, when apprehended, confesses his guilt and agrees to take the law enforcers to the site of the arms cache, but attempts to bolt while being taken there. An encounter ensues and -- blah, blah, blah. How can one contradict the law enforcers' story? This circus has been going on for years. Those who opposed it as being inhuman are dittoing the same. So the monster is back and with fury.

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## Pakistan scene: What is in store?

The Pakistan scene is unpredictable, but there is hardly any doubt that the country is facing a political crisis along with other serious problems like the challenge of crushing the extreme religious groups.



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**I**T is a fast developing situation in Pakistan. The country clearly appears convulsed by a political crisis, which may drastically change the present power structure in a nation that is struggling for a stable government. Democracy could hardly flourish in Pakistan because of a myriad of problems and, consequently, a representative government could seldom spread its wings.

Problems broadly emanated from two sources -- unconstitutional interventions in the system and the wrongdoings of politicians that effectively facilitated such interventions.

Indeed, it is a sordid spectacle since the second largest nation in this south Asian region, in terms of size and population, remains mostly unstable either because of lack of democratic values or undesirable situations created by the politicians. The current condition also falls in the same broad parameter even though it has its own dimensions and character, which, however, is not unfamiliar in the political milieu

of that country.

President Asif Ali Zardari is now at the centre of a crisis triggered by a momentous verdict of the Supreme Court, which has invalidated, the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that had given reprieve to a number of politicians and others from corruption cases before the last general elections.

Former president Gen (ret'd) Pervez Musharraf had promulgated the ordinance, wooing the politicians and thereby making the polls meaningful through their participation. It was also seen as a part of an understanding between him and the PPP, since the politicians most benefited by the ordinance were late former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, President Asif Ali Zardari and influential ministers Ahmed Mukhtar and Rehman Malik.

The ordinance had smoothened their participation in politics and elections, which took place in February 2008, and PPP went on to win. Benazir was assassinated during electioneering, but PPP emerged victorious as sympathy caused by her death also contributed to the win. Yousuf Raza

Jilani became the premier and Zardari became president after Musharraf was somewhat forced to resign.

Pakistan's judiciary, which is often at loggerheads with the executive, was in the news when the Supreme Court declared the NRO "unconstitutional" and paved the way for revival of the annulled corruption cases against those leaders. Not surprisingly, this gave a jolt to the ruling establishment since many key figures, including President Zardari, may now have to face the corruption cases.

The main opposition, Pakistan Muslim league (Nawaz), lost no time in asking Mr. Zardari and some ministers, including those of defence and interior, to resign on moral grounds. Expectedly, they all spurned such demands and vowed to stay in office, regardless of the Supreme Court verdict, saying that they were not affected.

The president is protected by a constitutional provision that bars any proceedings against him while in the highest office. But his critics say he should quit on moral grounds since the constitution also stipulates that the president has to be pious and honest.

Zardari is trying to ward off the crisis, citing the provision of immunity, but the opposition have kept up the pressure for his resignation. The president even said that he would not resign, and such a development could take place over his dead body. The small party of cricket star-turned politician Imran Khan has called for immediate midterm polls to overcome the situation.

But more confusion and suspense were created when Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar was barred from going to China on an official visit and an arrest warrant was issued against the home minister in the aftermath of the court verdict. This sparked off speculations and rumours -- one being that the army may be calling the shots and the country is once again on the verge of a military take-over.

However, both the government and the military scotched such rumours, saying that both were working together. But, speculation about whether the army is coming to the scene again or whether there will be other developments as a sequel of the current political tensions is now making the rounds in the political circles of Pakistan and beyond.

Several aspects have come to fore in the backdrop of the present situation. First, whether the promulgation of the NRO itself was the right decision when it dealt essentially with corruption related matters. Certainly, it was done for political expediency, but there is no iota of doubt that it was devoid of morality. The powerful has judiciary struck it down, which is seen as a landmark decision by the people.

Secondly, many Pakistan politicians turn a blind eye to good governance when in power and seem busy in making their fortunes. Sadly, late Benazir and Nawaz Sharif, and some of their relatives, are facing such allegations. Benazir's husband Zardari, during her two-terms as premier, was known as "Mr. Ten percent" because of his involvement in major deals in different areas. Press reports say he has many properties in London and Dubai, and a moderate estimate indicated that these were worth \$1.2 billion. Nawaz Sharif was also prime minister for two stints and he too could not complete his tenure on either

occasion. He has properties abroad, which runs into millions of pounds in London alone.

It is a game between the two main parties, PPP and PML (Nawaz), as the latter is eyeing a return to power as Zardari's popularity had touched its lowest ebb even before the verdict. But Nawaz, demonstrating his wisdom, opposes any unconstitutional action against Zardari or the government. He is keen to force Zardari to quit on moral grounds while upholding the constitutional process. He knows that if the process is thwarted, his chances of coming to power in the immediate future may become bleak.

He also expresses his allegiance to the "Charter for Democracy" reached between him and late Benazir in London during the heyday of Pervez Musharraf, whom both the ex-premiers had called "autocrat" despite protestations from the president to the contrary. But both also took swipes against each other, mainly on the issue of corruption. Nawaz's party obliquely accused the president of corruption, while Zardari's men turned the table on Nawaz by citing financial misdeeds by him and his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif. Relations between the two parties are clearly acrimonious at present.

The army has intervened in Pakistan many a time, and the present situation provides the opportunity for them to again step forward as "saviours" if things continue to worsen.

But the army will definitely weigh the pros and cons before taking a decision, which will obviously invite serious criticism both at home and abroad. They may do so if they are convinced that the people will welcome the development regardless of character of the authority, like what happened when army chief Pervez Musharraf seized power from the unpopular government of Nawaz Sharif in 1998. But the bottom line is that the democratic process must not be subverted because the wind of representative government has touched the south Asian region in recent times.

Any development against the democratic government -- even if it cannot fully exercise its authority or is weak and unstable -- will draw flak internationally. The current crisis has to be resolved through constitutional means. President Zardari is on slippery ground because of his own record and weak administration. He has not initiated any move to curtail the power of the presidency, which can dismiss the government and parliament -- a power that contradicts the Westminster system of democracy.

In Pakistan, the president is very powerful, but he is indirectly elected while the prime minister is chosen directly by the people. Power sharing has been a matter of discord even between two PPP stalwarts, Zardari and Jilani.

The Pakistan scene is unpredictable, but there is hardly any doubt that the country is facing a political crisis along with other serious problems like the challenge of crushing the extreme religious groups. Political and other quarters in the country will be well advised to refrain from anything that may jeopardise whatever is left in the name of democracy.

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