

As the Bishwa Ijtema ends . . .

It is a renewal of faith we experience

THE conclusion of the three-day Bishwa Ijtema on the banks of the River Turag on Sunday brought to an end the annual observance of religiosity which tens of thousands of Muslims from Bangladesh and other countries take part in. With the Akheri Munajat came fresh new prayers for the prosperity of the country and for peace around the world, along with a hope for the purification of the soul among those who took part in the congregation and those who did not or could not. It is the sheer magnitude of the ijtema or congregation that has since 1976, when these prayers were first initiated beside the Turag, that has left a deep impression on the faithful. With the passing years, the number of devotees at the ijtema has gone up manifold, with the result that this year it hosted people from as many as seventy countries around the globe.

In a land that has consistently had its religious moorings as part of its heritage, the Bishwa Ijtema is a shining instance of how the call and glory of Islam can be highlighted before the global community. At a time when extremism in the name of faith poses a threat to civilised order and malcontents are all too ready to commandeer the faith in their own narrow and violent interests, the annual congregation of devout Muslims serves as a reminder of the essential spirituality that underpins all religions and especially Islam. A remembrance of one's duty towards one's faith along with one's responsibilities in the temporal world is an integral component of individual life. That is the lesson which the Bishwa Ijtema reinforces every year. It is a lesson that devotees take in with fervour, for it also reminds them of the transient nature of worldly existence and of the truth that the hereafter is all. And yet one must not turn one's back on the worldly because it is on how one deals with the worldly that one's place in the hereafter depends. This, once more, was at the core of the Akheri Munajat yesterday.

The Bishwa Ijtema, besides bringing the faithful together in one gigantic gathering of humanity devoted to prayers and prostration before the Almighty, is an opportunity for Bangladesh's people to play host to devotees and religious scholars from abroad. Over the years, ulema and other individuals learned in the ways of Islam have joined the ijtema from India, Pakistan, the Middle East and other parts of the globe. This year was no different. There is a rich symbolism that has always underlined the Bishwa Ijtema. On the banks of a river (and rivers have historically been a spur to the rise of civilisations), millions of the faithful seek to connect with the Creator. Nothing could be more poignant and more soul-piercing.

Whipping of a rape victim

Court order on extrajudicial penalties disregarded

JUSTICE has been made a farce of once again. In a shocking repetition of misuse of fatwa, a rape victim was at the receiving end of a hundred and one lashes; the punishment was fixed through local arbitration participated by some village elders in a village in Kashba upazilla. And the rapist is roaming scot-free.

The incident is shocking not only for the gruesome brutality meted out to the 16 year old girl, but also because of the attitude of the law enforcing agency who did not act promptly enough to prevent the whipping or take cognisance of the incident later. It is very clear that the High Court directive to the police, issued in August 2009, to investigate all extrajudicial punishments, has not been fully implemented. Had that been the case the perpetrators would have been brought to justice and made examples of, and this would have acted as a deterrent to others.

The recent incident is disturbing on two counts. It demonstrates once again that helpless women, who are victims of rape and other forms of torture, not only cannot seek redress of law, they and their parents are further subjected to physical and mental torture including social ostracisation, as in the recent case in Kashba.

The other disturbing aspect is the role of the police. We cannot comprehend the statement the OC of Kashba PS that he would take appropriate action if the victim filed a case in this regard. He is in clear breach of the High Court directives in this regard. It is even more disturbing because three women have been victims of lashing as result of fatwa in this very district

Winds of change

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KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE Bangladesh prime minister's visit to India on January 10-13, 2010 was a momentous event. For the first time since the assassination of the Father of the Nation the two countries have been able to create an environment of trust and cooperation that will be beneficial to both. Given the asymmetric relationship due to the different geographic, economic, and population size of the two countries there is a latent fear in some quarters in Bangladesh of social Darwinism that suggests survival of the fittest. Adherents of this school of thought following Plato and the Aristotelian argument in favour of economic self-sufficiency to secure a nation's power would see a deepening of Indo-Bangladesh relations as "inherently threatening." They argue that such ties would be harmful to "national interest" by invoking the necessity of political and economic self-sufficiency, thereby reducing dependence on others.

In this age of globalisation it would be well nigh impossible, and indeed suicidal, to restrict socio-economic advancement of the people by refusing to relate with others who are already positioned in a higher rung of the economic ladder and could become the third largest global economy in a few decades.

A careful reading of the joint communiqué issued after the prime minister's visit would leave no doubt that not only have our (and India's) concerns on security and terrorism been addressed but that the two leaders have "put in place a comprehensive framework of cooperation for development between the two countries, encapsulating their mutually shared vision for the future, which would include cooperation in water resources, power, transportation and connectivity, tourism and education."

The agreements on Mutual Legal

Assistance on Criminal Matters, Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and on Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking are essentially covered by the Saarc Convention on Terrorism, various UNSC resolutions and international law.

The visit addressed positively the challenges faced by the Bangladesh in the area of food security (albeit the prime minister, in her press conference on January 15th assured the nation that the country had enough food stock to meet future needs) by recognising that "the eradication of poverty and ensuring food security were great challenges of the century (and) agreed that the international community should initiate a fully coordinated response and address these issues in a comprehensive manner, from short to medium and long term. India also agreed to "supply to Bangladesh 250 MW electricity from its grid. In this context, both prime ministers emphasised the need to expedite inter-grid connectivity. They also agreed that the two countries shall cooperate in development and exchange of electricity, including generation from renewable sources, and may set up joint projects or corporate entities for that purpose."

The Bangladesh prime minister agreed that Bangladesh would allow use of Mongla and Chittagong seaports for movement of goods to and from India through road and rail. Bangladesh also conveyed its intention to give Nepal and Bhutan access to Mongla and Chittagong ports.

Surprisingly, some people in Bangladesh apprehend that allowing India to use Chittagong and Mongla ports would "seriously endanger the country." One may wish to be reminded that Rotterdam, the largest port in Europe, provides excellent access to the hinterland, reaching Basel, Switzerland and France. Rotterdam functions as an



This is just the beginning.

important transit point for bulk material and between Europe and overseas. From Rotterdam, goods are transported by ship, river barge, train and road.

Likewise Singapore, currently the world's busiest port in terms of total shipping tonnage, transships a fifth of the world's shipping containers and half of the world's annual supply of crude oil. It is difficult to understand how road, rail and port connectivity can endanger the security of Bangladesh when the meaning of the term "security" is no longer confined to physical security of a nation but includes food, environment, freedom from want and poverty, health, education and many other aspects of life that provide a meaningful existence.

It would be inane to blame the prime minister for not concluding an agreement of sharing of Teesta River. If the Ganges Water Treaty had taken so many years to be concluded, the expectation of an agreement on Teesta was impractical. The issue was addressed in Delhi and the water resources ministers are to meet for an expeditious conclusion of a treaty.

The Indian agreement to address removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and port restrictions, and facilitate movement of containerised cargo by rail and water, India's initiative to provide duty-free access to Saarc LDCs to the Indian market and reduction of the number of

items from India's negative list that were of direct interest to Bangladesh are positive developments.

One should also note India's announcement of a line of credit of \$1 billion for a range of projects, including railway infrastructure, supply of BG locomotives and passenger coaches, rehabilitation of Saidpur workshop, procurement of buses including articulate buses, and dredging projects. The joint communiqué also includes many other issues of importance to Bangladesh.

No one in his right mind would expect one visit to solve all outstanding issues. If anything, the visit has created an atmosphere of trust between the two countries that has been lacking for a long time. The unequivocal assurance that the territory of either would not be allowed for activities inimical to the other, and the resolve not to allow their respective territories to be used for training, sanctuary and other operations by domestic or foreign terrorist/militant and insurgent organisations and their operatives, will be beneficial to both. One hopes that the many follow-up actions that will be required will be taken in right earnest to bring about the lifting of bilateral relations to a higher level.

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Miles to go before we sleep

The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. Reaching the targets will be a great challenge for Asia. It is also a great challenge for Bangladesh.

SAYEED ARMAN

NINE years have gone by since the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declarations, which gave rise to the Millennium Development Goals. Since then, the countries of the Asia-Pacific region have been working hard to reach these goals. Some countries of this region have been very successful, others have made satisfactory progress, while some other are making less progress to reach all the goals by 2015. Many countries have prepared their own reports on progress towards the MDGs. UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (Escap), UNDP and ADB have gone into a partnership to present a regional picture of MDG achievement in the Asia-Pacific region.

Here is an overview of progress of MDGs made by the Asia-Pacific region goal by goal.

Eradicating extreme poverty and hun-

ger: On the poverty target, the Asia-Pacific region has made dramatic progress. Between 1990 and 2005 in the 23 countries offering sufficient data, the proportion of people living on less than \$1/day fell from 32 to 17 percent. Here, overall poverty reduction will inevitably be swayed by the achievements of China and India, while 17 other countries, including Armenia, Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Mongolia are on track.

The second target is to remove hunger: For 27 countries, the proportion of people consuming less than the minimum dietary energy requirement fell between the early 1990s and 2005, but only slightly from 18.7 to 14.2 percent. The worst position is in Tazhakistan, with 55 percent of the population going hungry, followed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with 36 percent. Another important indicators is child malnutrition, which is disturbingly high in countries like Nepal, Afghanistan,

Bangladesh and 40 percent of India.

Achieving universal primary education: Here progress has been satisfactory. Most countries in the region have primary enrolment ratios above 85 percent, and many above 90 percent. Of the 33 countries with sufficient data available to estimate trend, 10 have already reached the goal and 13 others are on track. However, dropout rates can also be high. For example, about half of the children drop out before grade five in India, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar.

Another measure of success is the primary completion rate, which, for the region as a whole between 1998 and 2008 rose 89 to 95 percent, though those figures give an over-optimistic picture since the number is swollen by over-age children.

Promoting gender equality and empowering women: Elimination of gender disparity in education is proceeding well, but progress in participation and empowerment needs to be accelerated. The target under this goal focuses on eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education. At the primary education level, 26 countries have already achieved the target. Bangladesh and China have made particularly rapid progress. Of the five countries that are regressing, the most serious situation is in Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the second level many countries have achieved the target.

Reducing child mortality: Here the picture is mixed. The first target is to reduce the mortality rate by two-thirds. For this indicator the 49 countries with data available are divided into two halves. Half have already achieved their targets and all have child mortality rates below 40 per 1,000 live births. The other half, however, are in a very different position, only four are on track to meet the target, 9 are off track, making progress slowly, while three are regressing. In 2005 the largest number of child deaths was in India (2.3 million) followed by China (650,000) and Pakistan (481,000). China has been making sufficient progress but India and Pakistan are slow.

Improving maternal health: Here the progress has been far too slow. The target is to reduce maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters between 1992 and 2015, but the ratio in the average Asian developing countries has only declined from 395 to 318. Even more alarming, of the 42 countries for which data is available maternal mortality has gone up in 22 of them. Around two-thirds of Asian maternal deaths, takes place in India, Pakistan

and Bangladesh. The highest maternal mortality rates are in Afghanistan, Nepal and Timor-Leste. Each year, across the region around are quarter of million women die as a result of a normal life cycle event -- pregnancy and childbirth. Most of these deaths could have been avoided if care and access to emergency obstetric care.

Combating HIV/Aids and other diseases: HIV/Aids is also an area of great concern. The target is to halt the spread of the epidemic by 2015. Overall, however, the region is off-track. Between 2003 and 2005, the prevalence among those aged 15 to 49 in the average Asian country rose from 0.39 to 0.45 percent. Asia-Pacific region has over nine million people living with HIV/Aids, and each year half a million people die. There are also worries about malaria, although there is insufficient data. It is serious in Indonesia, India and Lao People Republic.

Ensuring environmental sustainability: The first target is to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs. Based on their progress in preparing national sustainable development strategies, only five countries are early achievers and 10 are on track. Here, the picture is also mixed. Forested land increased in 13 countries, remained unchanged in 17 and decreased in 18. Deforestation has been excessive in Bangladesh, Micronesia Myanmar, Indonesia and Laos.

Developing global partnership: There are five sub-regions to develop in a global partnership for development. But the Asia-Pacific region is not being sufficiently active in developing a global partnership. At present, they are just going ahead to build a regional partnership. Here it is important to note that the most developed countries always seem to avoid the developing and least development countries. So it is big challenge for this area.

The Millennium Development Goals that have to be achieved by 2015 respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. Reaching the targets will be a great challenge for Asia. It is also a great challenge for Bangladesh.

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How far have MDGs helped her?