

## JMB chief arrested

*Militant threat perception looms*

**T**HE arrest of Maulana Saidur Rahman, chief of the Jama'atul Mujahidden Bangladesh, along with three other leaders of the militant group, has revealed that religious extremists still pose a grave threat to the nation's security. The police have also recovered explosives and bomb making materials from their possession. By all indications, the JMB activists were preparing for launching another attack.

The police have done a commendable job. And it is evident that there has been no let-up in their efforts to neutralise the JMB threat. The police and Rab have conducted quite a few successful operations in recent past, when the JMB activists were apparently trying to regroup themselves, after some of their top leaders were executed in 2007. The executions were a major setback to the party, but it would be too naïve to think that the menace has been completely eliminated. The police raid on JMB hideouts on Monday showed that the JMB leaders were present in the capital itself.

The law enforcement agencies are trying to prevent the JMB from resuming their subversive activities. They are definitely on the right track. However, it is equally important that the JMB is prevented from recruiting highly gullible young boys from madrasas who fall easy prey to their propaganda offensive. A distorted and highly politicised version of Islam is presented to them. It is no secret that the JMB is exploiting the poverty and ignorance of people, particularly in rural areas. So, the government and society have to do the basic work of exposing the JMB's sinister design to the people. Obviously, words alone will not work. What is needed is creation of the socio-economic conditions not conducive to proliferation of this particular brand of religious militancy.

There is reason to believe that the JMB has the network to launch bomb attacks. This is no doubt a matter of concern, but no less worrisome is the fact that the outfit is receiving financial support from different sources. Their supply lines and sources of funding have to be cut off if the law enforcers want to blunt the potentially devastating force of this militant outfit.

Finally, relying on the law enforcers alone to uproot such a well-entrenched group of terrorists is not the right strategy. People have to see through their plans and organise a social resistance against all such evil forces out to ruin the country. The law enforcers will spearhead the campaign, but citizens have to play their due role in eliminating the threat.

## Garment workers' new demand

*Set up a govt committee for a durable solution to their grievances*

**G**ARMENT workers' violence in Kanchpur of Narayanganj on Tuesday has again left some people injured and properties both public and private damaged. And it is for the umpteenth time that garments workers have taken to the street and gone on a rampage.

For a change though, this time the garment workers were not chanting their usual slogans for pay raise and other benefits from the factory management. On the contrary, they were demanding that house rents in that particular industrial area and at other blocks nearby be lowered and supply of water and gas be ensured.

Although they have a legitimate grievance here, the issue of exorbitant house rent and poor supply of gas and water are matters deserving to be addressed at a different level. Why the working of the industry and public mobility be held ransom to it. Breaking vehicles on the road, attacking police box and holding unsuspecting victims who have nothing to do with their demands to ransom are certainly not the way to press home their point. Neither would that convince the landlords to reduce house rent nor ensure smooth supply of water and gas.

The situation obtaining in the garment industry therefore calls for looking deeper into the root cause of the problem that is making the workers nery and prone to violence in greater intensity and number. While violence is a condemnable offence, there is still the room for handling the garment workers' agitation in a mellower light. The demands of the demonstrating workers from Sinha, Opex and Esquire garments in Kanchpur, for example, did point to the very miserable conditions in which the garment workers are compelled to live. In fact, the lion's share of the monthly income of those workers is spent on paying the rents of their unhygienic shanties. Whatever they are left with at the end of the month, their families have to subsist on it.

Therefore, the factory management needs also to look into this particular aspect of the garment workers' service conditions and living and take some steps to resolve their acute accommodation problem by building low-cost living quarters for them.

Overall, the way their demands are escalating are basically reflective of some fundamental inadequacies in their service terms and conditions including their salary and benefit structure. As long as these remain, there will be spurts and bursts of agitation and demonstration across the sector. Of course, each factory will have its specific problems but there is a common thread to their grievances. Even the minimum salary arrived at earlier on through a tripartite agreement has fallen due for a review, let alone the whole gamut of what goes by the name of a compensation package. Given the pressing nature of frequent outbreak garment sector agitation and violence it seems a compelling necessity for the government to set up a composite committee of stakeholders to work out a durable solution to the recurrent problems of the garment sector.



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ZAHEDUL KHAN

## The good and the bad

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

**T**HE law enforcing agencies are in the news again, and it is both for some good and some not so good news. Unfortunately, it is less of the former and more of the latter that raises concern among the public.

The good news is that the police have been able to capture Saidur Rahman, leader of the banned JMB, along with a number of his close associates. This is perhaps the most successful counter-terror operation since 2006 when Abdur Rahman was arrested in March that year; and the police must be complimented for a good job.

The recent operation is a good example of quick response to actionable intelligence, which helped preempt the militants from carrying out their operation.

One feels that there is a possibility, at this point in time, for the public to come away with the impression that the arrests indicate a high degree of militant activity. That is partly true; there is every reason to believe that the radical groups are not sitting idle but are busy in organisational activities including

planning for future operations, particularly after the setback in 2006.

However, what it indicates without a doubt is the proactive role of the security agencies that has resulted, now and also in the recent past, in the arrest of large groups of religious extremists, and helped in forestalling their plans for committing violence.

In this game, the security agencies must always be one step ahead of the terrorists. However, what must also be done concurrently, and this needs a comprehensive plan and involvement of others as well, is to make recruitment by the militants difficult and to turn off the tap of their monetary supply.

But the bad news in respect of this is that several policemen have been injured during the operation. One feels, reading the reports, that the casualties could have been avoided but for the way the raid was conducted. Raid and cordon and search operations, particularly in a built up area, are specialised operations on which skills have to be honed well before such an operation can be launched.

But there are several other reports that leave us a bit worried about the

state of affairs within the Rab and the police. In one single day recently, several newspapers carried reports on the police, particularly on Rab. And one hopes that these would occupy the attention of the commanders of these forces, not to speak of the political masters that call the shots. One is not certain whether these are acts of individual or group indiscretions or consequences of institutional lax.

The list of reports includes alleged encounter killings that have now taken the form of secret disposal of "unwanted elements," extortion, frame-ups like the one alleged to have been attempted in Satkhira recently, and abduction.

These are allegations that cannot be taken lightly. It is even more disconcerting if, according to the Rab DG, these are being done by miscreants masquerading as members of Rab, as has been explained in the case of alleged abduction of seven persons, for which the blame is being put on the rapid action force by the relatives and friends of the victims.

How does one rationalise the Satkhira incident? Is it possible for an elite force to indulge in frame-ups? Media reports suggest that the force was being used by a person against his political rival. It is a humiliation for a force to be kept under siege by the public while on duty. It is regrettable that Rab is losing face and having its reputation dented by such acts.

However, among all these incidents,

what takes the cake is the outcome of investigations into the death of SI Gautam. Were it not for the fact that the matter is related to an unfortunate death, in this case, of a police officer, it would assume a comical proportion for the way the matter has been handled. The ham-fisted manner of handling of the case has created misgivings in public mind, and no one knows how the matter will play out eventually.

As it happens, both the Rab and the police investigations have come up with up with two different sets of accused, both confessing to the killing. It is extraordinary that when, in many cases, the agencies have failed to nab even a single killer after months of investigation, we have two sets to contend with. This is a classic case of testing the limit of public credulity. It is also a case of one-upmanship between the two organs of the same establishment.

Can one be faulted for thinking that the two establishments under the same command are working in tangent with ulterior motives? Is it an attempt to prevent the truth from coming out? And if that is the case what is there to hide, might we ask? There can be no doubt that this will cause the merit of the case to be diluted.

Elite forces are manned by elite officers, and so is the Rapid Action Battalion. The aberrations do little justice to the reputation of the force.

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## The poverty trap

The more cost-effective and durable device for attacking chronic poverty is redistribution of assets, special programs for enhancing education of specific groups of people, and removing the entry barriers for certain segments to markets.

ABDUL BAYES

**I**N a seminal submission, Mahabub Hossain and Nigar Nargis have extensively dwelt on poverty dynamics in Bangladesh during the two decades. Based on panel data of sample households, they observe that 25%-30% of the rural households had always been poor, i.e. they were unable to rise above the poverty line.

As we reckon, neither growth nor globalisation that seemingly "swept" through Bangladesh during this period could push them up. In the on-going poverty discourse, this group is identified as "chronic poor." Note that chronic and extreme poor are separate concepts, although confusedly considered as concomitant in the discussions.

Even the moderately poor may appear as chronic poor. Again, when we speak of chronic poor, we indicate the duration of poverty; extremeness indicates the intensity of poverty. However, and more often than not, chronic poverty is related to a kind of "poverty trap" into which the chronic poor have fallen.

One of my most favourite economists, S.R. Osmani, now a professor of Development Economics at the University of Ulster, argues that chronic poverty may not necessarily be related to poverty trap. Conventional wisdom suggests that the paucity of initial wealth or endowments creates a trap from which a poor person finds hard to break out of without outside help.

But even un-trapped poor persons may fail to escape poverty given that they have a finite lifespan and an even shorter working life. The concept of chronic poverty must then incorporate the idea of lifespan -- strictly speaking the span of working life.

Mahabub Hossain and Nigar Nargis, for example, assumed two decades as a lifespan. Binayek Sen and D.Hulme considered 10-15 years. But taking into consideration a whole lifespan, a person may witness a turnaround in poverty over his whole lifecycle.

The crucial insight offered by Osmani's new perspective is that chronic poverty can arise not just from a low level of endowments but also from a mismatch between the structure of endowments possessed by the poor and the structure of opportunities open to them.

Suppose a poor person is provided with a boat and nets to earn a livelihood by catching fish. If water bodies dry up, it may take away his livelihood. Likewise, a poor person may have some fruit trees but no storage or marketing facilities, or the owner of a cow may find it difficult to market the milk.

In these cases, ownership or transfer of assets to the poor is a necessary but not sufficient condition to raise them from the shackles of chronic poverty.

Many social scientists are sceptical about the potency of economic growth in helping the chronic poor in a meaningful manner. In fact, as Osmani opines, the whole research on chronic poverty weakens, if not nullifies, the potency of growth as a remedy.

This school of thought could possibly be right under the assumption that there is a link between the trap and the turnaround. The author feels that growth is not necessarily impotent in reducing such type of poverty. The impact of growth on chronic poverty would depend on binding constraints -- macro or structural.

The macro constraints implies that

the opportunities available in the economic system are simply too crushing to allow a reasonable rate of return from whatever assets they have. For wage earners, it is less employment and low levels of wages; for the self-employed people it would mean low rates of return in their respective lines of production.

In such a case, a few may break out of poverty with a bit of luck, but not all. Of course, individual effort could make the size of the cake bigger, but coordination failure could keep the overall size small. This is a case of poverty trap at macro level.

There are also institutional failures of various kinds. Higher level of poverty traps could cause chronic poverty at individual levels, whether or not individual poverty takes the form of a trap. Thus, in order to explain chronic poverty it is not essential to invoke the notion of poverty trap at individual level, but poverty traps at higher levels may play a very big role in doing so.

In such cases, the best solution is stimulation of overall growth. As faster growth helps expand the market and push up the envelope of opportunities, those suffering from chronic poverty would find it easier to earn a higher rate of return on their endowments -- pushing up the trajectory of expected income rapidly enough to take them beyond the poverty line during their lifetime.

The other side is structural constraints. Growth matters, but structural mismatch binding might weaken its effectiveness in reducing poverty. Here the pattern of growth -- such as sectoral pattern, geographical distribution of growth, factor bias in the choice of technology -- assumes more importance than the rate of growth itself.

These elements decide how the expanded opportunities offered by growth affect different individuals and social groups. Thus, growth from say rice cultivation could benefit the poor more as they are mostly engaged in agriculture. The expansion of non-farm activities, especially services, business

and trade or fish cultivation, could less benefit the poor in the absence of required capital and education.

What matters here in this case is distribution of opportunities rather than the expansion of opportunities. The bottom line is that the structure of endowments must match the structure of opportunities for the chronic poor.

Admittedly, the problem of structural mismatch is more difficult to address than the macro-level market constraints. More importantly, it requires a policy regime that is designed to guide the growth process in a way that aligns the structure of opportunities more in conformity with the structure of endowments of the chronically poor.

This is no simple task, but if pro-poor growth is to mean anything, this is what it must mean. From the end of endowment scale, the more cost-effective and durable device for attacking chronic poverty is redistribution of assets, special programs for enhancing education of specific groups of people, and removing the entry barriers for certain segments to markets.

In general, the removal of structural mismatch would call for a two-pronged strategy of engendering an appropriate pattern of growth on the one hand and adopting the right kind of targeted interventions on the other.

Thus, a condition of chronic poverty could exist with or without a trap. The search for the causes of chronic poverty should be broadened from the magnitude of endowments to the structure or composition of endowments. In the latter case, macro constraints or limitation of market size may keep people chronically poor by forcing down the rates of return on their endowments.

Structural mismatch also forces down rates of return. The relative importance depends on specific circumstances. When macro constraint is binding, rapid growth may be panacea for poverty reduction. For the second, targeted interventions are required.

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