

TIB, polls and unpalatable truths

In the larger public interest, in light of its commitment to a promotion of the public weal, the government needs to respect those who come forth with unpalatable truths. A camouflaging of reality is, in broad measure, an unwillingness to govern in the interest of the governed. The point is not what TIB has done. It is one of what this government should be doing about correcting the lapses in the public service bodies TIB points to.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

People in the police administration are unhappy with Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). So is Home Minister Sahara Khatun. They ought not to be. What they ought to have gone for is a serious assessment of the recent TIB findings, which squarely inform the country through an opinion survey that Bangladesh's police are regarded as the most corrupt of the country's public service oriented organisations.

A good government responsive to public opinion possesses the courage and the liberality to take criticism in its stride and go forth into correcting the wrongs that opinion polls of the kind undertaken by TIB suggest. In this particular case, Bangladesh's government has opted for a denial mode and would like us to believe that TIB is all wrong and that the police have been doing a good job. The home minister does not, however, consider it particularly important to inform us of the modalities upon which she has convinced herself that the TIB's indictment of the police is ill-intentioned.

Nothing can be more damaging for a country whose government feels happy when it is praised to the skies and goes ballistic when it is given a public lashing. The home minister (and there are many who might concur with her) thinks the TIB report on the police is aimed at undermining the police. She goes a step further, to let us in on the thought that what TIB has actually been doing is to promote instability in the country.

It is language that has historically been the preserve of extra- or unconstitutional regimes, all the way from Ayub

Khan to Hussein Muhammad Ershad. It is military regimes which have traditionally mistaken public criticism of their performance for a commission of seditious acts against the state. You expect better than that from elected civilian governments, for such governments operate on the basis of acknowledged public support.

And yet the truth is that both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League have, in government, fallen for the kind of knee-jerk reactions we generally associate with those who seize the state in the belief that it is their religiously ordained task to save the country from all its enemies, within as well as without.

Sahara Khatun takes issue with the figures cited in the TIB survey. Only 1,049 individuals, she tells us, cannot speak for the rest of the population. Oh yes, they can. That is what a survey is all about. In developed countries, opinion polls, particularly in relation to upcoming elections, do not take entire populations into consideration but only focus on a representative sample of them. That is how an image of the reality or probable reality emerges.

In the case of the TIB poll, must we seriously believe that the organisation should have spoken to all 160 million people of Bangladesh before it released its findings? A senior police officer only added to the ire of the minister and the inspector general of police when he asked for an apology from TIB. Where contrition and introspection on the part of those cited in the poll should have been forthcoming, there is ill-disguised umbrage at full play.

That is not the way a public organisation should be responding to a report.



Any organisation whose fundamental reason for being is to provide unadulterated and transparent service to the nation must seriously reflect on any and all negative reports that come to light on the way it functions, or does not function, for that matter.

If the government wishes to make the nation believe that the TIB indictment of the police is a pack of lies, it must base its response on a credible presentation of facts. And then there are all the questions it must answer where public assessments of police performance are concerned. In the nearly twenty years since the return of elected government in the country, how much of a role have the police played in curbing crime?

That said, how does the government respond to all the grievances of citizens, those which specifically speak of police refusal to record statements or accept cases from people harassed by criminal elements in one form or another? There are innumerable instances of mid-ranking police officers owning apartments and vehicles in the transport sector. How did all this happen? And, yes, for our politicians, there is that old question: why have they made it hard for the police to function effectively through injecting their politics into a body that constitutionally must serve the state and not political parties in power?

In Bangladesh, the truth about life, about its systematic undermining or dehumanisation, is always there. There are the obvious realities, only some of which have formally been made public by Transparency International Bangladesh. The corruption, across the board, which has over the years prevented the country from moving on, the incompetence which has generally characterised the nation's political leadership and which in turn has put a brake on any thoughts of dramatic progress in our dealings with ourselves and with the rest of the world are images that you do not wait for to emerge through surveys. These are images you live with, day after day. The police know that. The home minister knows that. We the people know that.

In the larger public interest, in light of its commitment to a promotion of the public weal, the government needs to respect those who come forth with unpalatable truths. A camouflaging of reality is, in broad measure, an unwillingness to govern in the interest of the governed. The point is not what TIB has done. It is one of what this government should be doing about correcting the lapses in the public service bodies TIB points to.

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Obama's surprise visit to Afghanistan

Wrapped in a tight cocoon of secrecy and security, Obama landed at Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul, on a pitch-black evening and told thousands of American service members who greeted him that they had begun to turn the tide in a war that has frustrated commanders and soldiers alike for nearly a decade.

HARUN UR RASHID

As has become customary under both President Obama and former President George W. Bush, the trip to Afghanistan has always been carried out in clandestine fashion.

Obama slipped out of the White House without notice on December 2 after presiding over a Hanukkah celebration. Air Force One took off in secret from Andrews Air Force Base with a small

American service members who greeted him that they had begun to turn the tide in a war that has frustrated commanders and soldiers alike for nearly a decade.

The trip was Obama's second to Afghanistan since he became commander-in-chief. He also visited Afghanistan in 2008 as a presidential candidate.

Many White House officials, and



pool of journalists on condition that they not report on the trip until the president landed in Afghanistan.

He swept into dark and windy Afghanistan on December 3 for a surprise holiday season visit with troops as the nine-year American-led war heads into a new phase intended to finally begin transferring control of the country to Afghan forces.

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most of the Afghan government, were not informed. Aides said that Karzai's government was informed during the last few days.

Obama's trip was the third time he had left the United States in the month since his party suffered major losses in midterm elections. He left Washington at a very busy moment, as he struggles with Congress over a host of issues like tax cuts, deficit spending, arms control, gays in the military and immigration.

Already tense relations with Karzai have been worsened in recent days by

leaked U.S. diplomatic cables portraying the Afghan leader as a weak and paranoid figure at the helm of a government riddled by corruption.

While the broad outlines of this diplomatic depiction came as little surprise, the timing of the leak was awkward, coming only days before the White House was expected to complete a major review of the state of the nearly decade-old U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

This has been the war's most lethal year for U.S. forces, and Obama faces intense political pressure to justify the long and costly conflict -- a task made more difficult by his own envoy's scathing assessment of Karzai. American criticism of the Afghan president has been widely reported, but the damning details in the leaked documents laid bare a relationship beset by mutual mistrust.

Afghanistan's weather confounded the president's plans, just as it has foreign forces over the centuries. Its notoriously gusty winds whipped around him at 45 m.p.h. and dust clouds limited visibility, grounding the helicopter that was to take him to Kabul to meet with President Hamid Karzai. He did, however, speak to Karzai for 15 minutes via secure videoconference. The two men had met before on the sidelines of a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation summit in Lisbon on November 19-20.

"Obviously it would be nice to be able to share a meal together, but at the same time they were able to be face-to-face less than two weeks ago," Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser, told reporters traveling with the president. "I think President Karzai understood the purpose of this was really for the president to spend time with the troops," he said.

The president praised the troops for what he characterised as recent military gains in the nine-year conflict. Our coalition "is strong and is growing," he said. "You're going on the offense (we're) tired of playing defense."

Obama visited a hospital on the base, where he met with five wounded soldiers and three wounded civilian contractors,

reporters traveling with the president said.

He awarded five Purple Hearts and met with the surviving members of a platoon that lost six members earlier in the week. The atmosphere appeared more subdued than in past presidential visits. As Obama noted that "many of you have stood before the solemn battle cross, display of boots, a rifle, a helmet and said goodbye to a fallen soldier."

The president later huddled with National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, and Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan.

It was unclear whether U.S. concerns with the Karzai government publicised this week by the website WikiLeaks were discussed. Two of the cables paint an unflattering portrait of President Karzai's half brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who has been accused of dealing in drugs.

Prior to the latest WikiLeaks disclosures, Petraeus met with the Afghan president in an effort to ease tensions. Karzai had told the Washington Post that he would like to scale back the U.S. military presence in his nation, and criticised it as "intrusive" while calling Special Operations raids a problem. In response, Petraeus told Karzai aides that the president's view could make his relationship with the United States "untenable."

Obama's remarks offered a more positive assessment of the situation on the ground than he has in some time, influenced perhaps by the optimism expressed in recent weeks by his commanding general, Gen. David H. Petraeus. American military forces have tripled, to 100,000, on Obama's watch, and he has vowed to begin reducing the number of troops next July.

But others in Washington and Kabul have been more sceptical of the claims of progress, noting the unabated and pervasive corruption of Karzai's government, the resilience of the insurgency despite escalated attacks and the debacle of recent peace talks that turned out to be held not with a senior Taliban leader but an impostor.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Nabbing militants in Chittagong

Change in strategy in tackling the threat is called for

THE Rapid Action Battalion busted a hilltop training camp of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami in Chittagong on Monday. Obviously it is good news, for it demonstrates the state of alert in which the security forces remain where handling militancy is concerned. There is little question that despite all the operations against them, large numbers of religious militants remain active and could yet pose a grave threat to the security of the state. A heightened and constant state of alert is, therefore, a clear necessity. Unless these disruptive elements are tackled firmly and militancy is firmly put to an end, the future of democratic politics in Bangladesh will remain something of a question mark.

That said, it must be noted that despite all the organized state action against militants, forces like Huji keep rearing their heads and are found ensconced in different pockets of the country. That should serve as a telling message for all, the government as well as the people of the country. It is quite clear that even as we have gone in determined fashion after the extremists, we are yet to have a situation where we can legitimately claim that militancy has been done away with for good. The question now arises as to whether or not a change in strategy in dealing with extremism is called for. The constant raids we have seen being made against militant camps are certainly a necessity. The militants need to be nabbed and their hideouts destroyed. But then comes the question of what the government must do about convincing the militants, once they are captured or arrested, that theirs is a wrong course and that they need to come back to society as individuals willing to respect others and adhere to the law. In other words, the task of nabbing militants must be followed by a process of re-education for them. Nothing can be more dangerous than for the state to keep militants in prison and punish them for their activities without considering measures of how they can be reformed and returned to society.

A process of re-education for militants is rendered all the more crucial by the fact that their extremism is based on a severe degree of indoctrination they have gone through at the hands of their militant mentors. What has so far been happening is that once a group of militants is nabbed or killed, a fresh new group emerges, necessitating new action on the part of the security forces. In other parts of the world, re-education of people considered dangerous for the state has been the norm over the past many years. The system can be replicated here.

One cannot ignore the fact that most of these religious extremists happen to be young men driven by what they think is a cause. It then remains the responsibility of the state and society to wean them away from their incendiary ideology and restore in them the belief that politics is a matter of accommodation, that it is an arena where diverse and divergent points of view are at peaceful play. More importantly, measures must be taken at the intellectual, academic and political levels to ensure that the young do not fall for or embrace such lethal ideologies. Preventive steps, more than corrective ones, are the requirement.

The discovery of the Huji camp in Chittagong is a call for intensified action against militancy. It is, at the same time, an opportunity for a rethink on how we should be dealing with militants, the better to enable them to understand the folly of their ways.

Honouring the friends of 1971

The government decides on a long overdue show of gratitude to our foreign friends

THE government has, at long last, decided to honour the nation's friends of 1971. Four decades into independence, in a long overdue show of gratitude, the close to 500 individuals and organisations which helped the nation achieve freedom are to be accorded a reception and awarded something significant in recognition of their support, next Independence Day. They range from individuals and institutions in India and Russia to the United Kingdom and Canada; from media organisations such as Akashbani of India and the BBC to different United Nations bodies.

While the gesture comes a few decades too late, we welcome it. For, through recognising and honouring those who helped us in our struggle for freedom, we honour ourselves. Though the atrocities were unspeakable and the sacrifices tremendous, few other nations have achieved independence in a span of time as brief as nine months and it may be said that this was due at least in part to the international goodwill garnered. Indian soldiers and Russian submarines were deployed in battle and poetry, music and resistance in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries laid bare to the world the brutality of the occupation forces in Bangladesh's liberation war. The international community had a catalytic influence on our independence movement -- as we hope it will have in the current movement for justice for the war crimes committed in 1971.

The recognition of our foreign friends' contributions to our freedom struggle comes as a reminder to our nation and to the world, of the ravages of war and the ruins it leaves behind. That, and the love with which every word spoken and written, every song sung, every gesture made, is remembered generation after generation in a nation set free with their help.

We felicitate the government on its decision and hope that the nation's friends of its freedom struggle, too, will see Bangladesh as a country strong enough to face its past and do justice not only to those forces who fought against its independence, but also those who helped to fight for it.