

## The violence on Monday

*Protests and their handling must be peaceful*

THE clashes between the police and workers of the Jamaat-e-Islami in the city on Monday were a clear pointer to the increasing volatility coming into national politics. What is indeed surprising is that the Jamaat was able to send its young members and followers into the streets in such ferociously organized form, enough to leave as many as 28 vehicles torched and hundreds of others damaged in various degrees. Much more difficult to fathom is why the police found themselves in a position where they were overwhelmed by the protestors, who were demanding the release of their leaders now in prison. The Jamaat had spelt out its programme days earlier and so the police ought to have had strategic measures in place to tackle the situation.

Which takes one back to the disturbances on Monday. There is little question that the mob was in a state of desperation and went about damaging everything it came up against. We can only voice our strong protest against such unwarranted behaviour not just because it sparked violence of a severe sort but also because those who organized the protests should have borne in mind the legalities involved in the detention of the Jamaat leaders whose release was being demanded. That is an important lesson of democracy. Protests are a constitutional right and must be voiced through peaceful means. A resort to violence by any individual or party can only defeat the objectives of a pluralistic society.

That said, one cannot but be disturbed by the ham-fisted attitude demonstrated by the police as they sought to quell the protests. Images of policemen raining down blows on the protestors certainly did not go down well with citizens. It is not a matter of whether or not one agrees with the nature and aims of a protest. But it is surely expected that law enforcers will, even as they come up against provocative behaviour, exercise maximum restraint as they deal with a difficult situation. A liberal use of truncheons and a roping in of protestors, literally, only complicate an already difficult situation.

Protest is a democratic right to be applied through democratic, non-violent means. Equally important is the responsibility of the state in handling protests in judicious, cool-headed manner.

## Palestinian bid for statehood

*Time to break new ground*

PALESTINIAN President Mahmoud Abbas has gone to New York to speak at the United Nations with great hopes and anticipation, in making his bid for membership in the UN as an independent sate. However, this hope is not without forebodings. It does not come without its share of opposition.

The forces which go against the Palestinian bid for a full membership as an independent sate in the UN are not negligible. For one, Israel accuses Palestine of rushing and circumventing direct negotiations, which it sees as the only method to achieve peace.

This position sounds fair as far as rhetorical discourse is concerned but it must not be forgotten that the Palestinians have attempted a series of negotiations on a halt to Israeli settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem only to be refused by Israel. Therefore, where is the room for direct negotiations and dialogue which Israel speaks of? If there is a true desire for Israel to engage in direct talks, why have they taken so long and allowed innocent casualties?

As if the lack of any direct talks was not frustrating enough, Palestine is also faced with the lack of US opposition of settlement activity. Furthermore, the US threatens to veto a full membership application by Palestine, a recurring reminder of its close alliance with Israel.

Envoys of the quartet on the Middle East should take a pro-active role in mediating acceptable solutions in the light of the latest developments. The Palestine move does not preclude new talks but it should be able to negotiate

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 21

**1792**  
The National Convention declares France a republic and abolishes the monarchy.

**1965**  
Gambia, Maldives and Singapore are admitted as members of the United Nations.

**1971**  
Bahrain, Bhutan and Qatar join the United Nations.

**1972**  
Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos signs Proclamation No. 1081 placing the entire country under martial law.

**1976**  
Seychelles joins the United Nations.

**1984**  
Brunei joins the United Nations.

**1991**  
Armenia is granted independence from Soviet Union.

**1993**  
Russian President Boris Yeltsin suspends parliament and scraps the then-functioning constitution, thus triggering the Russian constitutional crisis of 1993.

### GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

took office as Bangladesh's prime minister in June 1996, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi wrote to her to seek pardon for the assassins of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Remember that at that point their trials had not got underway, though it was fairly obvious that the law would soon be applied in bringing them into the net. Quite a few of them happened to be in the country, one of them being Farook Rahman. Those who knew this arch conspirator in those days will testify to the arrogance he went on demonstrating even after the Awami League had come back to power. He was convinced that Sheikh Hasina would not have the courage to touch him.

In the end, Sheikh Hasina did go after him and after his fellow assassins with resolve, to her credit and to the nation's relief. When in years to come she is remembered by this nation, one of the acts for which she will be admired is the cool, properly legal manner in which she went about punishing those who had violated the constitution and molested all moral principles through conspiring against the legally established government of Bangladesh and murdering Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his family and his political associates. Not all of the assassins have walked to the gallows, but you can be sure that the fugitives who keep moving from country to country

in search of safe havens will one day be either nabbed or die miserable deaths. Infamy is cannibalistic, gorges itself on its own.

Gaddafi asked Sheikh Hasina to show magnanimity to the killers and even quoted from the Quran to buttress his appeal. For her part, Sheikh Hasina responded to his appeal with another quote, this one in defence of a need for justice to be done by one whose parents' lives have been brutally done away with. Gaddafi sent no second message. Now think back on Farook Rahman's hubristic belief that he would remain untouched. He, like so many others, must have drawn the

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false conclusion that with governments like Libya's standing behind him and his co-conspirators, Bangladesh's new leader would lapse into silence over the murders of August 1975.

One would do well to recall that following the killings of August and November 1975, Bangabandhu's assassins had found not only refuge but opportunities as well for a fresh new beginning in Gaddafi's Libya. Even as you wonder where the fugitive Colonel Rashid is at this point, now that Gaddafi himself is on the run, you cannot forget the lucrative business he operated in Tripoli for years on end. Rashid and Farook kept in contact, with the assassins frequently making

trips between Libya and Pakistan. The latter country celebrated loudly the death of Bangladesh's founding father in 1975.

Which, of course, takes you back to the manner in which Farook Rahman joined the War of Liberation at its final phase, in November 1971. Unlike other Bengali military officers who made their daring escape to India through the frontier, Farook reportedly travelled first to Tripoli before making his way to the Mujibnagar government. That tells you something. Throughout 1971, Gaddafi remained vociferous in his support for Pakistan and saw absolutely no reason to condemn the geno-

that indignation, through travelling all over the Middle East disseminating the lie that Islam was under threat in secular Bangladesh, that the new country must not be accorded diplomatic recognition. Golam Azam, Hamidul Haq Chowdhury, Mahmud Ali, Syed Sajjad Husain and Raja Tridiv Roy were but a few of these Bengalis. Gaddafi, like other autocrats in the Middle East, rejoiced in the fall of Bangladesh's founder. It was to his country that the assassins went. Zia, the indemnity ordinance firmly behind him, did not appear to mind.

You do not need much wisdom to comprehend the circumstances leading to the formation of the Freedom Party by the assassins in the era of General Hussein Muhammad Ershad. Gaddafi helped, no holds barred. To our undying shame, General Ershad, who had prayed at the grave of Bangabandhu soon after seizing power in 1982, was quite content to see the killers of the Father of the Nation set up a political party and take part in elections. The regime turned a blind eye to Libyan money flowing into the coffers of the Freedom Party. And Libya, after all, was also an economic destination for many Bengalis -- workers, teachers, doctors, engineers which was why Bangladesh's military rulers decided that silence was in order.

History is now in pursuit of Muammar Gaddafi over his sins. We have brought five of Bangabandhu's killers to justice and wait for the others to be hauled in. Perhaps we could now ask the new rulers of Libya to hand over Rashid to us, if he has survived the uprising against Gaddafi, if he is yet there?

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### PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

## Missing a historic chance in Bangladesh



PRAFUL BIDWAI

The answer is largely yes, although the visit registered some gains. On balance, Dr. Manmohan Singh squandered a historic chance to overcome mutual distrust and transform India-Bangladesh relations so they can reflect the potential for exemplary cooperation between the two neighbours, with huge benefits to both and to the region.

The visit's biggest vitiating factor was West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who adopted an unreasonable and parochial stand on sharing the Teesta's waters and pulled out of the trip. Could her obstinacy have been anticipated? Was enough groundwork done to prepare her for equitable water sharing?

There are two divergent accounts of this. One says National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon tried hard to convince her that the interests of her state, in particular, North Bengal, were being looked after in the Teesta agreement with water shared in a 52:48 ratio.

She first agreed, but suddenly raised micro-level issues, such as sharing the flows during the lean season. During that season, she would concede no more than 25% of the flow at Gazaldoba, 90 km inside Indian territory.

Mr. Menon took this proposal to Bangladesh. But meanwhile, Ms. Banerjee abruptly boycotted the trip. She is reportedly extremely keen to build a base for her Trinamool Congress in North Bengal, where the Left and the Congress are traditionally strong.

According to the second account, the government failed to reassure Ms. Banerjee sufficiently, but could have done so had it worked harder on the larger picture, centred on the historic wrong India committed by unilaterally

diverting the waters of the Ganga through the Farakka barrage.

This was grossly unfair in and of itself. Worse, the diversion caused enormous losses of food and fisheries production in Bangladesh for almost two decades. According to Ashok Swain of Sweden's Uppsala university, Farakka changed the river's hydrology, "disrupted fishing and navigation, brought unwanted salt deposits into rich farming soil..." and

caused an annual loss estimated at 2-2.5% of GDP.

This is equivalent to taking the entire Information Technology sector out of the Indian economy! Even worse was the human tragedy, including large-scale displacement, destitution and forced migration. Farakka became a symbol of Indian domination and stoked anti-Indianism in Bangladesh, which the Right has cynically exploited.

Ms. Banerjee could perhaps have been persuaded to reverse this damage. She might even have comprehended the inequity of the current Teesta water-sharing pattern, under which India reportedly has access to 32,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) during the lean season for 8 million people, while Bangladesh makes do with just 5,000 cusecs for 20 million.

Unfortunately, such a focussed effort wasn't made. As a last resort, the government could have asked for more time to negotiate a satisfactory Teesta accord, and still tried to get Ms. Banerjee on board. That didn't happen. This is a huge setback to the cause of

radically reforming Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Dr. Singh's Dhaka visit was billed as a game-changer, which would catalyse a Bay of Bengal community, thus promoting South Asian integration. This didn't happen.

India must now quickly negotiate scrupulously fair agreements on all the shared rivers with Bangladesh and acknowledge and address Bangladesh's

legitimate concerns about Indian dam projects such as Tipaimukh in Manipur.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has unhesitatingly met India's demands on transit and security. Denial of sanctuaries to Northeastern insurgents is enabling the agreement now being reached with the United Liberation Front of Asom.

India's gains on transit are even more handsome. The Dhaka agreement allows transit between India's Northeast and the mainland via Bangladesh. Transporting 45% of all goods through

waterways, roads, rail and air links would yield enormous savings in fuel and time, and help develop this backward and restive region.

India shouldn't have only offered a \$1 billion line of credit to Bangladesh, but made a larger outright grant to build the transit infrastructure.

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*In general, India should do more than reciprocate Bangladesh's gestures. Indian policymakers need to remind themselves of the Gujral Doctrine, a worthy principle which held that India's dealings with all her neighbours barring Pakistan must go beyond strict reciprocity, to generously unilateral gestures.*

Pakistan must go beyond strict reciprocity, to generously unilateral gestures. (I would argue this should apply to Pakistan too.)

The Gujral Doctrine helped counter the charge that India with its Big Brother-like attitude doesn't hesitate to interfere in its neighbours' affairs, as it did in Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives. India must reform not just the image, but the object (its regional relations).

New Delhi shouldn't rest on the small gains from various agreements signed in Dhaka on the land boundary, biodiversity conservation, economic cooperation, etc. It must correct the huge imbalance in bilateral trade, with a deficit of \$4.5 billion vis-à-vis an economy that's 15 times smaller.

Readymade garments make up 80% of Bangladesh's exports. In 2008, India started giving "duty-free" access to them, but negated this by levying a countervailing duty of 4 to 12%. The quota was raised from 8 million garments to 10 million, but Bangladesh exhausted this year's quota in the first six months.

India still has 480 items on the Bangladesh "negative" trade list for. If all these were to be given duty-free access, it would cost India a paltry \$5 million loss in revenue, according to a 2008-09 estimate by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka. This would greatly boost investment, growth and employment in Bangladesh, with immense benefits for regional integration.

India must develop imaginative strategies in economic and cultural cooperation, education, and action to combat climate change. Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate change-vulnerable countries. Parts of India's East Coast are equally vulnerable. Cyclone Aila demonstrated this in 2009.

To change its stance, India must stop seeing itself primarily as part of the global Big League and relate seriously to the region to which it belongs, geographically, culturally and strategically.

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