

Chittagong violence

All sides must exercise restraint

MUST all political activities and programmes of the opposition lead to violence, destruction, deaths and injury? The clashes in Chittagong between the BNP and its 18-party alliance supporters on one side and the police on the other that lasted for several hours resulted in nearly a hundred being hurt, including police personnel and several journalists too. The party activists also damaged three cars and vandalised a large number of vehicles which could not be condoned.

Reportedly, it all started when two separate processions of BNP and Jamaat, which were proceeding towards the BNP office to join an 18-Party rally to protest the abduction of Ilyas Ali and filing of cases against senior BNP leaders, were intercepted by police. What followed was a repetition of the very familiar scenario. The party men brick-batted the police and the police retaliated. The police even entered BNP office premises chasing the activists into the building and lobbed teargas shells inside it too.

We urge strongly the BNP and its allies to rein in their party activists, some of whom may have deliberately precipitated the situation in some localities, as reports indicate. But the police resorted to preemptive strikes that were clearly high-handed.

And we wonder if the two processions intercepted by the police were violent before they were intercepted. Is there a ban on processions and rallies in the country; if not then why the interception? It is the responsibility of the law enforcing agencies to maintain law and order and they are perhaps at times in a position of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't'. But that is where their training and crowd handling capacity come in. Their aim should be to avoid provocations but never allow the situation to disrupt public order. The law enforcing agencies may not realise but in fact in the name of maintaining law and order they are provoking violence by their premature actions.

Procrastination in journo murder probe

Simply outrageous

THREE months into the gruesome killing of the journalist couple Sagar and Runi, no visible progress has either been made or reported about identifying the killers, leave alone their trial. We are shocked to note that the investigation could not have been handled more abysmally. First came the naive rhetoric from none other than the home minister that law enforcers would find the real criminals in two days. But when that drive fizzled out, from the highest level frustration was expressed to the effect that evidences were lost through over-crowding newsmen at the crime scene. We wonder how an efficient police force could allow anyone to erase the evidences by any stretch of imagination.

Furthermore, when the Detective Branch after two months of investigation admitted failure to find any clue, the case was handed over to Rab officials. They wanted the visceral report and accordingly under court order the couple's dead bodies were exhumed. It came as a double blow to the bereaved family members who were yet to recover from the shock and awaiting justice but it also starkly pointed to the former team of investigators' ineptitude. Why didn't they have the same report done before their burial? As for now, the investigators are still in the dark while the killers remain at large.

Procrastination is thus the natural outcome of this derailed sequence of events. This dithering compounded by a lack of competence is totally unacceptable and is indicative of a gross violation of norms of justice. It brings into sharp focus the security hazards that journalists face while discharging their professional responsibilities. It also impacts their freedom of expression. What is more appalling, the government's failure to identify and arrest the killers will serve to spawn a culture of impunity with which criminals can get away even after killing journalists.

It is the State's responsibility to ensure security to all citizens including the journalists who, in the line of duty, often risk the resentment of persons being exposed. Therefore, we demand the arrest and trial of the killers of Sagar and Runi and a whole host of other journalists. The government should feel sufficiently nudged by the journalists' righteous indignation and conscientious appeal for justice to be done to the victims through exemplary punishment of the killers.

GOWHER RIZVI

DESPITE American ambivalence during our war of liberation, Bangladesh and the United States have over the last four decades forged an exceptionally close partnership based on shared values and outlook. Like all good friends we have not surprisingly had our differences of opinion -- each side has its own national interests to advance -- but the bonds that tie us are enduring and deep; and the relationship is based on deep mutual respect and a community of purposes. The two countries are committed to plural democracy, diversity, secularism and tolerance; a robust civil society as a seedbed of democracy; and an uncompromising attachment to the values of inalienable rights and freedom. Based on these values the two partners have worked shoulder to shoulder in many international fora and have fought together, along with other countries of the United Nations, for preserving international peace and to prevent oppression, discrimination, and violation of human rights.

To the US, Bangladesh is the "standard bearer of South Asia" -- as recently described by the Wall Street Journal -- and an exemplar for the developing and Islamic societies as a moderate, progressive, liberal democracy passionately committed to social justice and empowerment of women. The US government has particularly lauded our efforts to promote connectivity and sub-regional cooperation and our determined effort to combat extremists and terrorists. The closeness of our ties is reflected in the stature that the prime minister is accorded in many of his foreign policy priorities of President Obama. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has emerged as a powerful but moderate voice in the debate on global warming and shared the platform with the US president. She has been

able to use her prestige to influence, moderate and leverage the support of the developed countries to stem the horrors of climate change. Not surprisingly Bangladesh is a partner of choice for the US in many of the foreign policy priorities of President Obama: global food security, global health access, engagement with the Islamic world and global warming. It has not escaped the notice of the observers that at a time when the US has cut back development assistance to many countries the volume of aid to Bangladesh has increased significantly. The US government appreciation of Bangladesh as a pioneer and model for tackling large challenges like food, energy, water and environment crises was reflected in Secretary Clinton's offer to provide technical and financial support for

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sub-regional development projects. It is not accidental that there have been more high-level civil, military and corporate US visitors to Bangladesh in the last three years than in the previous ten. The significance of the visit of Secretary Hilary Clinton has to be viewed in this context.

The decision of the Secretary to come to Dhaka at a time when Washington is so totally gripped by US presidential campaign is a testimony the importance that the US attaches to its partnership with Bangladesh. The visit enabled the two countries to review the entire gamut of the bilateral relationship and to concert our views on a number of international issues. The decision to sign an agreement for a high level Partnership Dialogue -- a status also enjoyed by India and China -- has helped to elevate US-Bangladesh relations to a new height. This will further bolster our existing cooperation in strengthening democratic institutions, fighting

terrorism, money laundering, defense training and trade and development ties.

There is no secret that a number of things on our agenda could not be fully resolved. While the two countries have agreed in principle to the TICFA -- Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum -- as we felt we needed more time to complete the process. We impressed on the visitors the compulsions for securing duty free access to the US market for some of our products so that we could reduce our dependence of foreign aid. Although the decision rests with the US Congress, we were all satisfied that we now have a powerful ally in Secretary Clinton on our side. We also pressed for our inclusion in the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) based on

significant improvements in our social, economic and political indicators. To our great satisfaction the secretary invited Bangladesh to present its case to the committee in Washington DC.

Perhaps largely because of our own inability to communicate our vigorous and free media sadly missed the real significance and outcome of the visit and remained focused mostly on peripheral issues. Much has been made of the "advice" given by the secretary for a dialogue with the opposition parties. Let me state the facts. In bilateral meetings between sovereign states, domestic issues are not a part of the agenda. We did not discuss internal issues and we are not aware if the honourable leader of the opposition raised it during her meeting. As part of our efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and processes we shared our efforts that we have made to strengthen the

electoral system to secure free and fair elections and to ensure an environment where the voters will be able to exercise their franchise without fear or intimidation. The secretary's call for a dialogue was fully in accord with our own views and we welcomed her appeal against the boycott of elections by any party.

The media infatuation with Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus's meeting with the secretary was no surprise. For over a year a large part of the media has reduced the multifaceted US-Bangladesh relations of over four decades based on shared values and interest to a single issue of Grameen Bank. There is no question that Professor Yunus is held in high esteem internationally as indeed here, and there is no denying of his long-standing association with both President Clinton and Secretary Hilary Clinton, but it would wrong to conclude that our bilateral relations hinges solely on this single fact. Secretary Clinton is an enthusiastic supporter of the microcredit experiment and was interested in learning more about the performance of Grameen Bank. The fact that the Bank has endured the transition -- the number of loans has not declined, the rate of loan recovery is as impressive as in the past, and that there was no run on the bank or withdrawal of deposits -- was obvious to a well-informed secretary. No names were ever mentioned in the discussion. The concern, if any, was about the institution of microcredit.

The visit was by any standards a success -- "it exceeded our expectations" was how an US official described it to me -- and we should celebrate the success of Bangladesh-US partnership and focus on how we can further deepen the relationship to our mutual benefit. Diminishing the substance by magnifying the peripherals is not the hallmark of objective journalism.

The writer is Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister.

Inaction over Syria

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

PUBLIC outburst and indignation continue the world over on the senseless killing of civilians as Syria slowly turns into, what many fear, another Libya, or if we turn back the pages of history a few decades, another Lebanon. Yet, why is the West dithering on Syria whilst it moved at lightning speed over Libya? At first look the situation in both these nations seem startlingly similar in that both being embroiled in a quasi-civil war with murderous regimes hell-bent on crushing the largely civilian opposition.

Tougher UN resolutions on the Syrian mess would have come into effect months ago had the situation been that simple. Of all the rebel factions fighting the Syrian government forces for control over the country and an end to the Assad regime, the largest is probably the Free Syrian Army. Composed of diverse elements, it has managed to draw many defecting soldiers and former intelligence officers who had once served the Assad regime. Though the presence of such ex-regular forces give the FSA some aura of a disciplined rebel force with a centralised command, this evidently is not quite the case. This view is reinforced by journalist Nil Rosen of *Al-jazeera* who had spent two months on the road with the FSA and states: "The formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was declared publicly in the summer of 2011, and has been endorsed by the Syrian National Council, the main

opposition bloc. While many in the media trying to cover Syria from outside refer to it as an entity with a leader based in Turkey, there is no central or unified leadership for the armed revolution. The FSA is a name endorsed and signed on to by diverse armed opposition actors throughout the country, who each operate in a similar manner and towards a similar goal, but each with local leadership. Local armed groups have only limited communication with those in neighbouring towns or provinces -- and, moreover, they were operating long before the summer."

In the final analysis of things, it basically boils down to the resolve of Western democracies on whether it makes sense to intervene, by means of military aid to tip the scales in favour of the opposition; or, to let the status quo stand and let the Syrians sort out their "internal" problems.

Since the FSA is not one group but several diverse groups fighting under the umbrella of FSA and if we are to believe what Rosen has stated in no unclear terms, regional and local in nature with different sources of finance and allegiance owed to respective militia leaders, the decision to extend military aid just became that much more difficult for the Western powers. For the recent and unpleasant experience of a post-Gaddafi Libya is still fresh. That country which was touted as one of the worse dictatorships for the better part of four decades under the now-deceased writer of the "Green Book"

has effectively gone the "Lebanese civil war" way; bitter and hostile ethnic factions fighting over their bit of territory and resources in what was a unified and sovereign country. A repeat of this scenario is the last thing that regional or Western powers want or need.

The sad reality on the ground remains that with the FSA being unable to put up a united front against the Assad regime and with limited resources to finance its arms purchases, it will simply fail to make any serious dent in the government's armour. Ironically, the regime at the centre has its own set of problems

that make it impossible for government forces to end the hostilities once and for all.

The Syrian army having been built on conscription continues to lose strength as a steady stream of army defectors, and to a lesser extent personnel from the security organs switch sides. This leaves the regime in a fix, for the security agencies alone cannot hold on to either a village or a town; they need the backing of the army, which in turn is manned by the politically-disenfranchised Sunni majority. The Syrian revolution we are witnessing today is a revolt by the same Sunni-

majority population. Hence, calling upon Sunnis to massacre their Sunni brethren in the name of patriotism obviously does not quite give the regime the mileage it would desire. Mass defections are inevitable when these soldiers are ordered to fire upon mostly Sunni civilians.

Getting back to the main topic of discussion, the fact remains that despite popular perception, the FSA is not one rebel force but an umbrella organisation for all the militias and rebel groups fighting to overthrow the Syrian government. At the end of the day, what has become obvious even to the blind man so to speak is that the situation in Syria will continue as it has for the last year. The death toll will continue to rise for the conflict between the centre and the rest of the country will wage on -- as neither side possesses that extra bit of punch to deliver the final blow to end the war once and for all. In the final analysis of things, it basically boils down to the resolve of Western democracies on whether it makes sense to intervene, by means of military aid to tip the scales in favour of the opposition; or, to let the status quo stand and let the Syrians sort out their "internal" problems.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

CORRECTION

In the article "Leave the man alone, please," printed on May 14, Sir Abed's name was inadvertently printed as Sir Fazle Hasdan Abed. It should be Sir Fazle Hassan Abed. We regret the error.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 15

1536

Anne Boleyn, Queen of England, stands trial in London on charges of treason, adultery and incest. She is condemned to death by a specially-selected jury.

1648

The Treaty of Westphalia signed.

1776

American Revolution: the Virginia Convention instructs its Continental Congress delegation to propose a resolution of independence from Great Britain, paving the way for the United States Declaration of Independence.

1796

First Coalition: Napoleon enters Milan in triumph.

1943

Joseph Stalin dissolves the Comintern (or *Third International*).

1988

Soviet war in Afghanistan: After more than eight years of fighting, the Red Army begins its withdrawal from Afghanistan.