

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

# The conspiracy theory



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**S**ENIOR Awami League leaders are convinced that there is an international conspiracy afoot, and that the World Bank (WB) cancella-

tion of the Padma Bridge Project (PMB) funding and the Human Right Watch (HRW) report are well orchestrated part of that. The former they feel is designed to implement the Bank's "hidden agenda." They have not bothered to tell us what that might be.

In Bangladesh we are very fond of conspiracy theory and, quite like some countries in the West that are "addicted to the belief that the other nations of the earth are in a conspiracy to undervalue them," see behind every lamppost a conspirator, and behind every event that has gone wrong there is always the evil schemer hell-bent to put the spanner in the works. All governments in the past have been victims of this phantom.

The PMB, planned so meticulously to meet the growing need of the country, has been consigned to the closet, for the time being at least. Like everybody else I am hurt and disappointed, because not only has the project been scuttled and the nation smeared, but also because of the manner in which the government has gone about glorifying what must surely be a disaster for it on many fronts. What is inexplicable is the government's effort to make virtue out of necessity by hiding

behind the shield of national emotion. And just like misfortune never comes singly the WB missive was followed by the HRW report.

The government can be forgiven for smelling a rat because in recent times no government in Bangladesh had been served a bill of fare that it found unable to consume, let alone digest. And that is perhaps to do with the government's inept and callow handling of international organisations, and its unsuccessful attempt to defend the indefensible.

Let us consider the WB and its hidden agenda. It is difficult to under-

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stand what the leading financier of the PMB project stands to gain by cancelling the loan? The WB has been virtually hauled over the coals for cancelling the funding and we are now being told how "corrupt" the Bank is in its own functioning. The cabinet has suggested that the government seek compensation for the delay the cancellation would impose on the project.

It is true that all international institutions are not epitomes of probity and there have been cases of corruption in those too, but that involved individuals and not the institutions per se. Since June 29 the Bank has

been subjected to verbal bombardment by ministers and AL party high ups who have been at pains to expose the so-called depth of corruption that the WB has been mired in since its inception. And yet we continue to have scores of WB projects running at this moment, to the tune of several billion USD. Criticism of the Bank cannot dilute the gravity of the allegations of corruption against senior functionaries of the government.

There would be nothing better than to reduce our dependence on IFIs and eventually disengage from them, but we should not overlook the fact that

the second and fourth largest economies in the world are the greatest borrowers from the WB. Self financing of the bridge is a good idea but would be difficult to implement, according to the finance minister himself. Emotions cannot build bridges. We need foreign currency for it.

We would like to believe that no corruption has taken place in this case. But it is for the government to prove the point. And in this matter Prof. Jamilur Reza Choudhury has been quoted out of context in garnering support for the government's stand in this matter. While the government may cry hoarse that no corrup-

tion has taken place (meaning that no money has changed hands) and resort to semantics and engage experts to redefine the term, we are well aware that both offering and soliciting bribes are equally culpable offences.

We also wonder why the government is now talking about it being pressured by the WB about a Chinese firm. And that is why we fail to understand the reluctance of the government to make public the WB correspondence in this matter because that would clarify all doubts.

As for the government's rubbishing the suggestion of possible corruption we have not got any response from the government to a Bangladesh weekly's report that money has indeed changed hands under the table. However, one hopes that many things would be clarified when the trial of the two SNC-Lavalin bosses starts next April in Canada

As a wise person has said, more things in politics happen because of stupidity and egotism than conspiracy. Conspiracy theory is a handy expedient to ward off criticisms and hide follies. But unfortunately, it is less helpful than a fig leaf. It is perhaps true also that a government that fails to deliver, and has run out of excuses to account for its actions, and has caused the country to run aground, feels that the entire world is conspiring to run it down, that others are in constant conspiracy against it. Instead of looking for conspiracy and conspirators some self-reflection might help.

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## Tackling hike in essentials price

*Mechanism needed to check it*

**B**EHAVIOUR of the essentials markets of the capital city as elsewhere in the country has started to turn volatile with the advent of Ramadan.

Despite government assurances that with adequate stocks of essentials the prices should remain stable, kitchen markets of the city tell a different story. The main ingredients of iftar items including lentils, edible oil, onion, aubergine and related items have already gone dear.

The government and consumers, especially those in the fixed income bracket, are blaming the business people for the runaway price hike.

The business people, on the other hand, point their finger at the government, since, raises in energy and power tariffs have driven up transport costs, which have factored into the overall rise in prices. Add to these the non-economic factors like toll collection on goods at various points during transport, delays at traffic knots and so on.

Necessarily, the cumulative impact of all these factors is reflected in the further rise in price indices of essentials.

The Bangladesh tariff commission chairman at a meeting with business leaders blamed the unbridled price hike on the profiteering motive of traders.

Ritualistically, government leaders urge traders to be ethical in their business practices. In the same breath, they also warned them of harsh consequences in case of market manipulation. Unfortunately, neither method works.

Hanging price lists at the kitchen markets, surprise visits by officials and occasional raids by mobile courts also hardly work.

Caught in the middle are the consumers who have to pay through the nose. It is time to come out of this vicious trap and look for alternative means to contain hike in artificially manipulated essentials markets.

To give relief to the consumer, the government should develop a failsafe mechanism to remove non-economic elements like middlemen, rent-seekers of various hues from the distribution chain of commodities. That will to a large measure go a long way in bringing down the essentials price.

At the same time, it should run fair price shops with adequate inventories and allow those to operate side by side with the existing market.

Along with these, consumer awareness needs to be raised to resist manipulation and profiteering by dishonest traders.

## Egypt's army, judges in league!

*President Morsi must not be undermined*

**T**HE crisis in Egypt only gets more and more complicated. It is clear by now that the ruling military council and the judiciary, unhappy at the election of Mohammad Morsi to the country's presidency, are looking for ways and means of undermining the president in the exercise of his responsibilities. For his part, Morsi has surely done a most commendable thing by calling parliament, which the court has described as illegal and therefore not qualified to be in existence, into session. The session was brief, but it underscored the very important point that Egypt's first elected president is determined to show the military and the judges who is master.

The judiciary has predictably hit back by condemning President Morsi's act of recalling parliament. The basis of its response is that the president has defied the court and is, therefore, in contempt of the law. The irony here, though, is that Egypt's judges as well as its senior military officers all happen to be Hosni Mubarak appointees. And there lies the reason behind their moves against the new leader in recent days. The disbanding of the new parliament, in which the long-suffering Muslim Brotherhood has a thin majority obtained through direct elections, by the court was a highly inflammatory act. It has exposed Egypt's judges as political partisans determined to take the wind out of Morsi's sails. For its part, the Egyptian army, not used to performing under civilian presidents, has palpably been in league with the judges, the better to scuttle the country's first experiment with democracy. President Morsi will, therefore, need to watch out.

And so will Egypt's people across the spectrum. The fact that hundreds of people have gathered at Tahrir Square to demonstrate their support for the president is significant. It is a broad hint for the entrenched elements of the old order to give way to the new. For Morsi, there is a historical need to display the leadership skills that will neutralize the military and the judiciary, both of which are today aligned in sinister manner to undercut the elected president. Morsi has a popular base and the international community's support. He

### GURMEET KANWAL

**T**HE tracking down of the Mumbai attacks handler Abu Jundal with help of Saudi Arabia and his subsequent interrogation has once again pointed the finger of suspicion -- if proof were needed -- at the state sponsorship of urban terrorism by Pakistan, besides its ongoing proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir.

On November 26, 2008, a new type of tsunami had hit Mumbai, India's commercial capital. Ten mercenary marauders from Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Tayebba, armed to the teeth, and trained, equipped and controlled by ISI handlers, sneaked in undetected from the sea and unleashed wanton attacks on innocent civilians at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus.

During the course of the evening, they also attacked two upmarket hotels, a Jewish centre, a hospital and a café. By the time they were through with their devilish plans, they had left almost 170 people dead and over 300 injured, including several police officers and personnel.

It took India's National Security Guard (NSG), an elite counter-terrorism commando force, 60 hours to flush them out and end their orgy of violence. One terrorist was captured alive. Though he confessed publicly that he was from Pakistan, his country (initially) disowned him -- in keeping with its short-sighted policy of living in constant denial of all major acts of international terrorism being eventually traced back to Pakistan.

The age of "new terrorism" -- as it has come to be called -- had actually reached India's shores with the Mumbai serial bomb attacks of March 1993, well before the term had become prevalent and in the same year when a group of Islamist extremists led by Ramzi Yousef had launched the first attack on the World Trade Centre in New York.

In 1995, Aum Shinrikyo attacked the Tokyo underground with Sarin gas. Soon after, a large truck bomb killed 168 people in Oklahoma City

and visions of apocalypse through terrorism began to haunt the world. The London and Madrid train bombings further heightened the pervasive fear psychosis.

Walter Laqueur, the well-known historian on terrorism, wrote in 1999 that the character of terrorism was assuming alarming proportions and changing in a revolutionary manner. "Rather than the vicious yet calculated application of violence that everyone had become familiar with, the world was now confronted with terrorists whose aim was 'to liquidate all satanic forces [and destroy] all life on earth.'"

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national terrorism and there is now ready agreement that the age of "new terrorism" is well and truly upon us. Even as the world attempts to enhance its understanding of what exactly has changed, four pointers can be clearly discerned.

First, modern terrorist organisations are both diffuse and opaque in nature. They have cellular structures that resemble networks, rather than a clearly demarcated chain of command.

Second, they are increasingly more transnational in their geographical spread, with shifting centres of gravity and constantly changing recruitment bases.

Third, their ideological motivations are driven by religious fundamentalism and they seek to achieve their political objectives through radical extremism even though no religion justifies violent means.

Finally, modern terrorism is far more violent than "old" terrorism. In

the mid-to-late-20<sup>th</sup> century, terrorist organisations wanted "a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead," but this has changed and they now wish to inflict horrendous casualties so that they can impose their will on governments and societies.

India's response to the Mumbai terror attacks was slow and laborious and poorly coordinated among the central and the state governments and their various agencies. Coastal security was virtually non-existent; the marine police were too few in number to effectively patrol the vast area entrusted to them; they were ill-equipped and inadequately trained; and, there was poor coordination between the Coast Guard and the Marine Police. It took far too long to

begin flushing out operations and then to eliminate the nine terrorists who were holed up at three separate locations.

The army battalion located at Mumbai was only given the responsibility to establish a perimeter cordon when it could have launched flushing out operations at least three hours before the NSG commandos arrived on the scene and before the terrorists had consolidated their positions.

The media were telecasting live pictures of ongoing military operations when they should have been at least a couple of kilometres away from the scene. Generally speaking, the response of the internal security mechanism was tardy and left much to be desired.

Peter R. Neumann has written: "Regardless of whether governments are dealing with 'old' or 'new,' the aim must be to prevent terrorist attacks whilst maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the population. In doing so,

governments need to 'harden' potential targets; develop good intelligence in order to disrupt terrorist structures; bring to bear the full force of the law whilst acting within the law; address legitimate grievances where they can be addressed; and, not least, convey a sense of calm and determination when communicating with the public."

This prescription cannot be faulted and India's policy-planners would do well to draw up a counter-terrorism policy on these lines as part of a comprehensive national security strategy.

The Mumbai terror attacks have left a deep scar on the national psyche. The mood in the country, particularly in the urban areas that have been the victims of new terrorism, is that of anger and grim determination.

If there is another attack of a similar magnitude -- and given the extent of radical extremism and creeping Talibanisation in the neighbourhood, there will surely be many more such attacks -- the Indian people will demand military retribution against the perpetrators and their handlers. And, that could mean war if a clear linkage can be established with state sponsors of terrorism from across India's western border.

The central and state governments have no option but to successfully defeat the terrorist organisations that are inimical to India's national security interests and are determined to create a communal-sectarian schism with a view to destabilising India on behalf of their handlers in the ISI and the Pakistan army.

They must be prevented from launching major terrorist strikes in future and, in case some terrorists do manage to sneak through comprehensively organised and coordinated intelligence and police defences, they must be quickly eliminated -- with minimum collateral damage. Like many other countries, India is in for the long haul in the war on terror.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 12

**1191**  
Third Crusade: Saladin's garrison surrenders to Philip Augustus, ending the two-year siege of Acre.

**1799**  
Ranjit Singh conquers Lahore and becomes Maharaja of the Punjab (Sikh Empire).

**1948**  
ArabIsraeli War: Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion orders the expulsion of Palestinians from the towns of Lod and Ramla.

**1961**  
Pune floods due to failure of the Khadakwasla and Panshet dams. Half of Pune is submerged, more than 100,000 families need to be relocated and the death tally exceeds 2,000.

**2006**  
The Hezbollah initiate Operation True Promise.

**2007**  
U.S. Army Apache helicopters perform airstrikes in Baghdad, Iraq.