

Attack on Buddhist temples

Extremists must be defeated

WHAT happened in Ramu and some other areas in Chittagong must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. The outrage that was created by people burning down Buddhist temples and houses belies the long tradition of harmonious and peaceful coexistence between people of various creeds in Bangladesh. Religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence are not only an article of our people it is also enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh.

The regrettable incident has struck at the very ethos and the underlying essence of our long religio-cultural tradition. Whatever may have been the causative factor, the violent reaction seems to have been very well orchestrated. We believe that those who believe in the fundamental message of Islam would have exercised more temperance in addressing an issue centering on an anti-Islam picture on Facebook.

We would not be remiss in suggesting that, given that Rangamati episode being still fresh in our minds, the incidents should have been anticipated in areas with concentration of ethnic and religious minorities, and preempted by the law enforcing agencies. We cannot put it past the agent provocateurs to jump at the slightest opportunity to exploit the sentiments of the people for their ultimate ends. And this is where the saner elements of the society must come together cutting across religious or party lines to thwart the design of the troublemakers.

We are hearing different allegations being aired by different quarters, which we hope would be either confirmed or disproved after inquiry. What however, we find regrettable is the fact that the two parties have chosen to launch broadsides on each other accusing of complicity in the matter. It is regrettable that the Home minister would find it appropriate to hurl allegations even before the enquiry has started against the local MP who belongs to the BNP. On the other hand accusations made by the leader of the opposition based on hearsay that the ruling party elements were at the forefront of the attacks is equally unwarranted. Will these help an objective inquiry?

We must impress upon the need for and quick and objective inquiry to identify the perpetrators, who must be given the harshest punishment, as well as the role of the local leaders to stop the situation from deteriorating.

We express our unequivocal condemnation of the incident.

Giving Biman a chance

Bad management is the key problem

AFTER years of inefficiency, corruption and politicisation of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, a top-ranking minister has finally put his foot down, declaring that if the airline continues in this manner, government financing will be stopped and it will be shut down. We thank the finance minister for taking a stand that should have been taken a long time ago.

Delays on a regular basis, unannounced cancellations, mechanical defects and poor service all characterise the state of our national flag carrier. So much so, that only the extremely patriotic -- but more often those with no other option -- fly Biman, and neither are they rewarded for their sentiments. This has resulted in huge losses in the last several years, with a loss of Tk. 208 crore last year alone.

In all fairness, Biman has never been given a chance. It has always been highly politicised, starting from the appointment of its chairman based not on competence but on political considerations, which is clearly reflected in the performance of the organisation. Without a restructuring of its top-heavy corporate structure and weeding out of inefficiency and corruption throughout the organisation, things will not change. Biman must be given the autonomy to perform at its best and compete with local and international airlines.

Air travel is now more lucrative than ever before, but whereas major airlines are increasing their flights to and from Dhaka to once or even twice daily, Biman's own flights are being cancelled one after the other. A one-member committee has been appointed to investigate the recent schedule chaos, but we would urge the authorities to take immediate measures -- drastic, if necessary -- towards a complete overhaul of the national carrier towards making it more efficient in terms of both performance and services. It is the only way to rescue it from its

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 2

- 1187** Siege of Jerusalem: Saladin captures Jerusalem after 88 years of Crusader rule.
- 1552** Conquest of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible.
- 1869** In India, Father Of Nation Mahatma Gandhi was born in Porbandar Gujarat India.
- 1924** The Geneva Protocol is adopted as a means to strengthen the League of Nations.
- 1941** World War II: In Operation Typhoon, Germany begins an all-out offensive against Moscow.
- 2001** NATO backs U.S. military strikes following 9/11.
- 2007** President Roh Moo-hyun of South Korea walks across the Military Demarcation Line into North Korea on his way to the second Inter-Korean Summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

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Sectarian violence flares up



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE outrage that some unidentified trouble-mongers committed against Buddhist communities at Teknaf, Ramu and Ukhia upazilas on the nights of Saturday and Sunday has shocked the entire nation. Clearly, the perpetrators have tried to besmear Bangladesh's image as a nation of religious tolerance and harmony. The way Buddhist temples have been damaged and desecrated and houses of Budhist villagers have been ransacked and set ablaze speaks volumes for the monsters behind the mayhem.

But how could the monsters in human garb carry out their unspeakable atrocities at night unhindered and unbeknown to the district administration and members of the law-enforcement agencies? Shouldn't they have been on their toes, especially after the ethnic violence between the Bengali and tribal communities in Rangamati district town about a week ago.

Bangladesh has always had a long tradition of communal harmony and barring select incidents the major religions and communities have lived in peace with one another for decades. Indeed the rights of ethnic communities and freedom to practice their religion are enshrined in the constitution. The sectarian violence that erupted in Cox's Bazaar on September 30 are highly condemnable and apparently were the result of the posting of a derogatory image of the Quran on facebook allegedly by a Buddhist youth named Uttam

Kumar Barua hailing from Ramu area. The resulting mayhem sparked mob violence where at least 10 Buddhist temples and hundreds of homes were ransacked.

Government officials have placed the blame squarely on Islamic extremists. The home minister too has been quick to point the finger at communal forces for the incident. Recent events across the border in Rakhine State where the Buddhist majority carried out large-scale destruction of property and forced expulsion of thou-

sands of Muslim-majority Rohingyas is a fresh wound that could be taken advantage of by trouble mongers in the hill districts.

The mob violence that engulfed Buddhist villages saw widespread looting and the gutting of religious relics and monasteries. With some of the most revered Buddhist temples in ashes, including the 250-year-old Shima Bihar in Ramu, communal harmony between Buddhists and Muslims is effectively in tatters. The attacks were an attack on harmony

and on peaceful coexistence. But given recent events, particularly the worldwide backlash of Muslims against a film made in California mocking the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), religious sentiments had already been heightened and subversive elements have taken advantage of the situation to incite communal violence.

Since pre-existent ambience of vulnerability was there, where were the authorities? Why law enforcement agencies were caught largely

unprepared for an eventuality like this? The government must extend all support to the affected Buddhist community. Having failed to contain the situation, the government must now take active measures to bring back normalcy in the area whereby Buddhists may feel it is safe to return. The affected communities have to be compensated for damages caused by the rioting and all religious sites will have to be restored to their former state. Proper security measures need to be put into effect, espe-

cially around sensitive sites of worship. Need for such measures cannot be understated as events in the hill districts may act as an impetus for Buddhist supremacists in Myanmar to go on a fresh rampage which will trigger yet another fresh exodus of Rohingyas across the border.

It is time for an objective look at why this happened. Was it pre-planned? If that is the case, then perpetrators were waiting for an excuse to exploit the religious sentiments. Or was it a spontaneous outburst of emotion. The fact that the violence was perpetrated at night might indicate that there might have been something more than mere spontaneity in the matter.

What is of importance is that the major parties withhold casting blame on each other. These are not only counter-productive; rather we feel would influence an objective enquiry of the incident. Jumping to conclusions about the alleged perpetrators would in fact play into the hands of the actual trouble mongers and agent provocateurs. The saner elements of the society in all these places must take examples of Rangamati and come together to remove the fears that might still stalk the minority Buddhist community.

It has now, therefore, become imperative to conduct a full-scale investigation into the whole matter. Given our lacklustre track record of investigation probes in incidents like this, perhaps a judicial enquiry should be setup and the incident be investigated properly so that those responsible may be brought to justice and exemplary punishment meted out.

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Still a long way to go

undoubtedly the most immediate determinant of the health of the relationship.

Congeniality on the bilateral count will largely depend on whether Pakistan is able to deliver on reconciliation and whether the process is successful.

A number of questions arise: even if Pakistan tries, is it in a position to truly pull the Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban back from violence? The reality is that Islamabad has never been confident of its clout over the Talibs; it has continued to say it wants a central

serious about talking reconciliation. I am far less sanguine about their ability to agree on something that will stick. The most obvious breaking point may well be the end states the respective sides can live with. The Taliban's obsession with an end to foreign troop presence and imposition of the Sharia doesn't seem reconcilable with the other side's emphasis on "political process": power-sharing through elections as the principal means to share the spoils.

If the process does break down at some point, regional actors will very

cordial Pakistan-US relationship will operate successfully in this environment.

Added to this is the fact that the default position for Pakistan and the US is still very much one of deep mistrust, mutual resentment and a willingness to attribute the most malign of intentions to each other. It is hard to overstate the outright hostility among interlocutors on both sides. To put it bluntly, large segments of the policy community in both capitals have convinced themselves that much of their problems in Afghanistan, and even the region, are the doing of the other side.

The more I have delved into this, the clearer it has become to me that neither side will be able to escape the intense negativity and will thus deprive the relationship a real chance of blossoming. It is absurd for a partnership that has been so interactive for over a decade that the two sides simply don't get each other.

In Track-1.5 or Track-2 settings, you will regularly find the two sides make their arguments and the other completely miss the point being conveyed, instead internalising the most destructive connotation of the other's submissions. This is very different from comparable India-Pakistan settings, for example, where both sides understand each other fully but may choose to continue disagreeing and remaining inflexible.

This may sound trivial to a non-policy audience but the fact is that it is precisely this mindset that seeps into the public domain and makes it nearly impossible for policymakers struggling to make things work in the greater interest of the relationship. Even when they try, the acutely negative public sentiment, fuelled by official narratives in the first place, begins to hold them back.

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role but at the same time it has hedged by slipping in that "it cannot guarantee" anything.

The time to test Pakistan's leverage has come: if it proves unable to convince the Taliban to lower the temperature as talks gather momentum, it is difficult to see how it will escape a fresh round of finger-pointing.

But let us assume reconciliation talks are institutionalised. What if they fail?

I am increasingly confident that all sides that matter -- Washington, Kabul, Taliban and Islamabad -- are

quickly revert to self-help mode and begin to back their traditional partners -- read proxies -- in Afghanistan as a means of retaining their respective spheres of influence. Pakistan will be stuck with the headline Pakhtun elements for the most part and will face much condemnation and blame for doing so.

It will once again be on the wrong side of the international community's preferences and a soft target as far as the post-2014 blame game is concerned. It is hard to envision how a parallel effort to cement a long-term

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