

Waltzing out of step

We are scratching the surface of the problem, not getting to its heart. It is about Ramu, Ukhia, Teknaf and Patia. What remains unsaid is more tell-tale than what has been said.

Yes, there was police inaction; yes, there was intelligence failure; yes, the local administration proved incompetent; and yes, indeed there was demonstrative lack of political will on the part of elected public representatives. But the big question is, why? That leads us to some fundamentals.

The day we lost the cardinal principle of separation of state from religion, or for that matter, debunked the disconnect between politics and religion, we unwisely unfurled a culture of indulgence and impunity to religious fanaticism, particularly of the reactive kind. Basically, we extended a hand to religious intolerance and high passions. There lay the seeds of the whirlwind we are now reaping.

The unvarnished truth is, it began with Ziaur Rahman diluting secularism in the Constitution. Down the road, the theme was picked on and developed by Ershad declaring Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. In the meanwhile, Zia had opened the avenue for religion-based political parties to operate. As military men seeking legitimisation they relied on the populist appeal of religion. They had their own reasons but were not farsighted enough to have a

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vision of what their policies could eventually run into.

They calculated, quite astutely at that, such changes once brought into the constitution would be immutable. No future leader of Muslim-majority Bangladesh would dare tamper with such insertions in the constitution for fear of being impolitic and unpopular.

The calculations of military-turned-civilianised leaders have proven right; for even secularist Awami League retained those provisions in the constitution formalising non-separation of religion from the state.

It is somewhat like building a mosque or setting up an organisation in an illegally occupied land after the name of high ruling party dignitary or renaming national airport as Shah Jalal International Airport secure in the belief of immunity to change. This is a trapdoor of legitimisation, so to speak.

Leave aside the lighter side of the story, recall the how, why and what of the incidents of violence, vandalism and pillage that swept through Ramu, Ukhia, Teknaf and Patia in varying degrees. Imagine that Bangladesh was not caught up in the waves of the violent reactions triggered by a US video clip

Innocence of Muslim sweeping through a large number of Muslim countries where lives were lost. Bangladesh by and large went sober with its protests which practically died down as quickly as they raged. It was a sign of maturity of our people who thought it was against the true spirit of Islam to be retaliatory to freaky products of paranoid minds. Better ignore such stuffs.

But surely there were quarters who were grudgingly looking at the passage of an opportunity to demonstrate their ugly face of vengeful, bigoted, reprisal. They were waiting in the wings to contrive a pretext to desecrate religious temples including holy texts and archives going back to centuries-old religious-cultural heritage in these parts of the world. So, you see a planted heretical reference in a Facebook, picked up on the mobile and circulated among youngsters. Incitement could get a free play because the ground could be instantly fertilised by the trouble-mongers and thus the rapid-fire spread of the message and the consequent destruction wreaked on prized possessions of a peace-loving community. The evil machinations of a few bought silence or tacit support of many or maybe partici-

pation of some as the dark hands of inhumanity went about their perverse business. Even what the Babri mosque desecration couldn't do, a technology trick has done so venomously. This was almost like copycatting a Pakistani Christian girl's attempted tainting by a cleric who shoving in heretical material into her bag with what consequences one only knows too well not to see replayed on a different target.

If the evildoers played politics with religion so are the politicians fishing in the mucky waters trying to make political capital out of a communal aberration. The politicisation of the environs can impede any serious effort to bring to light the masterminds and frontline actors of the destructive swipe.

As an afterthought, vigil has been mounted on vulnerable places in the country's southeast and all sorts of peace-making conferences and marches have been set afoot. These are like putting balm on a sore not having acted in time to prevent the catastrophe in the first place.

What happened in Ramu where Buddhists and Muslims have lived together for centuries in perfect harmony is as bad as pulling down of the 53 metre long Lord Buddha's statue dating back to 8th-9th century in the Bamiyan Valley by the Taliban. What a badge of perversity we have put on in a country generally reputed for peaceful coexistence between faiths and religious denominations!

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: husain.imam@thedadlystar.net

WORLD TEACHERS' DAY 2012

'Take a stand for teachers!'

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

TODAY is "World Teachers' Day." Teachers' organisations in various countries will hold programmes to commemorate the Day. The aim is to mobilise support for teachers and to ensure that the needs of future generations will continue to be met by teachers. Hundreds of thousands of students, parents and activists around the world will pay respect to teachers on the day.

In an article published year before last, Dr. Quincy Lettsome, a veteran teacher leader, wrote: "What is now known as World Teachers' Day evolved after a number of administrative and legal procedures by teachers' organisations throughout the world. The Day was first referred to as International Teacher Day and, probably because of such events as the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was changed to World Teachers' Day, which included all teachers throughout the world."

He further said that he was "a delegate and represented the BVI Teachers Union as president." In Geneva, Switzerland, during 1982, he made the proposal which later materialised to World Teachers' Day. This proposal was made in the forum of a three day workshop, which followed the then World Confederation of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP) Assembly, which was convened in Switzerland. The proposal was made on the premise that, since there are days to honour mothers and fathers, there should be a day set aside to honour teachers. This recommendation was passed unanimously.

I contacted Robert M. Barker, a former Director of International Programmes of Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF) and also a veteran senior leader of World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP), to ascertain the authenticity of Dr. Lettsome's claim. He sent a clarification which reads in the main: "I do recall the name Quincy Lettsome. In the 1980's, CTF had a great number of projects in the Caribbean, including some in the British Virgin Islands. I would have to look extensively in my files in order to ascertain just what the role of Quincy Lettsome was at the time. However, I have no reason to disbelieve that he was engaged with the BVI during this period and that he represented the island at the WCOTP Assembly in Switzerland in 1982. I did not attend the pre-Assembly seminar in Geneva to which he refers and have no way of knowing what form his suggestion took. As I recall, WCOTP was a proponent of the idea of a recognised 'Teachers' Day,' but where the notion actually came from, I don't know. It probably came from many different sources, perhaps including Quincy Lettsome's suggestion in 1982. I am quite certain that the appeal was made by WCOTP (and possibly jointly with IFFTU and WCT) to Unesco. I am not sure when Unesco actually made it official, but it has

been celebrated officially on October 5 since 1994. Education International (EI) came into being in January 1993 and it seems to be clear that it has been an ever increasingly strong proponent of World Teachers' Day since its inception."

This year, new impetus has been added in the celebration of the Day by the theme: "Take a stand for teachers!" In a joint statement commemorating World Teachers' Day 2012, Unesco Director-General Irina Bokova, ILO Director-General Guy Ryder, UNDP Administrator Helen Clark, Unicef Executive Director, Anthony Lake, Education International General Secretary Fred Van Leeuwen said: "We take a stand for teachers. Teachers are the foundation of good schools and good schools are the pillars of healthy and democratic communities. Teachers are the keys to reaching education for all goals. An estimated 1.7 million more teacher positions are required to reach the goal of Universal Primary Education by 2015. As we recruit new teachers, we must continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Governments are urged to provide teachers with access to

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training opportunities and continued professional development, based on appropriate qualifications. Attracting committed and diverse teachers requires environments that value professional autonomy and equality. Teachers need to be supported in fulfilling their responsibilities to students, and their voices must be listened to by school leaders, education systems and public authorities. Teachers' salaries must be set objectively and fairly, such that remuneration is commensurate with the importance of the profession and the qualifications and responsibilities of individual teachers. Teachers, in turn, must be accountable to their students and communities. The teaching profession is encouraged to design and implement teacher codes of conduct, based on the highest ethical and professional standards, and to be oriented around the goal of teaching all students effectively and equally. This World Teachers' Day is an opportunity to honour the women and men who inspire, challenge and nurture us. On this day, we call for the creation of supportive teaching environments, adequate teacher training and safe-

guards for the rights of teachers. We must break the vicious cycle of declining professional conditions for teachers in order to improve the quality of learning for all. The world expects a lot from teachers -- they, in turn, are right to expect as much from us. This World Teachers' Day is an opportunity to take a stand for all teachers."

Meanwhile UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has taken the initiative to mobilise the UN agencies, the World Bank, civil society organisations as well as the private sector, to help achieve education for all children by 2015. He formally launched his initiative "Education First" at the UN Assembly in New York last month.

Non-government teachers and education employees of schools, colleges and technical and vocational institutions in Bangladesh have launched a movement for their 8-point demand and 7 recommendations for improvement of the quality of education, in line with nationalisation of education or ensuring due role by the government since education is a state responsibility as stipulated in the Unesco-ILO recommendations. It may be mentioned here that non-government educational institutions bear 98% of the burden of education in Bangladesh.

Now, under the banner of National Front of Teachers & Employees (NFTE), a joint platform of 11 national level organisations of teachers and education employees are holding a series of programmes in support of their demands. Meanwhile, the education ministry invited the NFTE for a dialogue on September 23. But the meeting did not yield any tangible result as the government could not come out with concrete decision to concede to the long-standing demands of teachers and employees, which include induction in the regular pay roll, regular promotion and increment, festival bonus, and above all security of job and the rights and privileges mentioned in the joint ILO-UNESCO recommendations of 1966 and 1997 concerning the status of teachers.

World Teachers' Day will provide opportunity for the teachers and the employees to move forward with their charter of demands more vigorously. However, a fruitful dialogue and positive attitude on the part of the government vis-a-vis the demands of the teachers and employees will be the deciding factors in resolving the current crisis in education.

The theme of this year's World Teachers' Day, "Take a stand for teachers," is very much relevant in the Bangladesh context, where not only should the role of the government be positive, the support of the guardians is also no less important. Proper evaluation of the situation by the teachers' organisations, along with sharing of the concerns of the guardians about the education of the students, is also no less important.

The minorities of Bangladesh

RUMI AHMED

RAMU Upazilla of Cox's Bazaar district usually comes in the news when mad wild elephants attack localities and trample people to death. But this time, news of a different madness sent a chill through the spine of the nation. Through a night-long mob attack and violence, dozens of Buddhist temples, religious structures, monasteries, and households were destroyed and burnt to ashes.

This is apparently the first communal attack on Buddhist minorities in Bangladesh. As Hindu and Pahari minorities used to be at the receiving end of almost all communal atrocities in Bangladesh, Buddhists coexisted peacefully with mainstream Muslims for centuries.

This attack makes it the third major incident of communal violence this year. Earlier in February the attack on Hindu temple and households in Hathajari, Chittagong remained much under the radar. Major media of Bangladesh decided not to embarrass the so-called progressive secular government by publishing these stories of minority persecution. During the immediate aftermath, government leadership, in the face of utter failure to control the situation in a timely manner, found it convenient to blame the opposition political parties. Eight months have passed, but no real efforts have been made to investigate and punish the perpetrators in Hathajari.

In March of this year, another major wave of attacks was launched on Hindu properties, temples, and businesses in southwestern district of Satkhira. Like the events in Hathajari, this news also did not make it to the mainstream news media. People only came to know about the atrocities in Satkhira when a group of angry Dhaka University students

belonging to Hindu community came out in the streets protesting the event. And, as usual, the government, instead of going to the root of the problem and sincerely trying to find the real criminals, found it a very convenient excuse to come down harder on some opposition political parties.

When Ramu incident first came to light, the highest government official making a statement on this issue, the home minister, blamed the local leader and MP of the opposition party for the atrocities. He changed his blame rhetoric a couple more times since then. Then he blamed the Rohingya refugees from Burma for the violence. Later on the same day, he notified the media that he had information that local terror networks in collusion with an international terror organisation committed the Ramu atrocities.

And instead of securing all the

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remaining Buddhist and other minority localities and religious structures, the government leadership, starting with home minister, industry minister, police high-ups, AL leaders Hanif and Nanok, and AL MPs kept all the law enforcement resources busy with VIP duties for their political visits and statements. As a result, more Hindu and Buddhist temples in nearby Patiya, Ukhia, etc. came under fresh attacks.

September 2012. March 2012. February 2012. It is rare for Bangladesh to have three events within the span of eight months.

For the last major incidents, we have to go back to October 2001 when major Hindu persecution took place. That incident may be different from the current incident in that it took place under the newly formed BNP government, which was yet to exert control over the administration.

The event before 2001 was that of December 1992. Although it may sound like a politically biased statement, it is true that compared to what the administration did to prevent escalation of violence in December 1992, in Hathajari, Satkhira and Ramu, the current administration failed to mobilise resources in time to stop the rioters with a heavy-handed approach.

Starting from the 1980s, when religious violence used to be instigated by Ershad government to divert peoples' attention away from anti-autocracy movements, to 1990s and now in the new millennium -- administration and law enforcement agencies have always been slow and reluctant to take measures against rioters. However, all these times, civil society, media, human rights bodies and progressive cultural forces, all came out vocally against religious persecution and stood beside the oppressed. This trend is relatively absent or weak "at best" when an Awami League government is in power.

At some point, the minorities must start demanding the government's answers for these failures to protect minority lives and worship sites.

The writer is a political analyst and co-founder of AlalOdal.org blog



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM