

GROUND REALITIES

Our lost country...

No more blame game on Cox's Bazar mayhem

It will be counterproductive in tracking down culprits

IN the wake of the savage attack on the Buddhist community in Cox's Bazar, we editorially warned the government against politicizing the mayhem in anyway.

We were impelled to spell out caution in the backdrop of the home minister himself blaming the local BNP lawmaker for the incident.

Then followed BNP leaders pointing accusing finger to Awami league. Even the opposition leader herself entered the fray blaming the ruling party.

Now we have our prime minister putting the blame on the BNP lawmaker. Unfortunately, our warnings have fallen on deaf ears.

Admittedly, an act of terror is always accompanied by trading of rhetoric and blame between the ruling and the opposition parties. This has been an unfortunate characteristic feature of our political culture regardless of the seriousness and gravity of the occurrence.

But people, who are custodians of law, are supposed to look professionally and impartially at how such a catastrophe happened in the first place.

What becomes the casualty in the process is the investigations which begin on a wrong foot leading to the real culprits going scot-free.

For instance, when the dastardly grenade attack on the then opposition-Awami League's meeting in 2004 occurred, the ruling party of that time, the BNP, oblivious of its failure to prevent the attack, pointed fingers at the opposition for the incident.

That amounted to sheltering the culprits.

But why should the PM commit the same kind of folly in the present case by putting the blame squarely on the shoulder of the local BNP MP?

And in an extended imputation, she even said that the opposition leader 'knew everything'. Such flippant remarks from the PM at this critical juncture is unfortunate, to say the least.

If indeed she has credible evidence in this regard, the PM should bring it before the court and the nation.

Actually, there should have been a united nationwide condemnation and expression of outrage and disgust by the two political parties and a serious commitment shown by the PM to get to the bottom of the cowardly attack.

The PM's obligation is to bring out the truth. She shouldn't indulge in narrow partisan politics for the sake of a meaningful and effective investigation leading to unearthing the truth and punishing the culprits.

Hall-Mark bosses in custody

Let it unmask the magnitude of the scam

AFTER much dithering, the Managing Director and General Manager of Hall-Mark Group of Industries were finally taken into custody over the Sonali Bank loan scam on October 7. It is better late than never. Even so, it is a tiny step given the widespread indiscipline reigning in the financial sector which needs to be addressed firmly and on a sustainable basis.

Now the government has run into an exposure on Destiny and Hall-Mark scams. But prior to these, there was the larger stock market scam. The government is effectively hemmed in by a series of scams. In the stock market case, a probe committee undertook the task of conducting a thorough investigation. It was an exhaustive and substantive probe carried out by a team led by reputed banker Ibrahim Khalid. Yet what did the government do with its findings and recommendation? It debunked both the report and its author. By mishandling successive controversies, a wrong signal has gone out to the whole financial sector. This has resulted in violating the norms of financial governance with long term implications.

When financial institutions turn into dens of corruption, public confidence, which is the bedrock of existence and prosperity of these organisations, is hijacked by a wayward miniscule minority. Therein lies the implications of integrity and honesty of the system so that none can slip through its cracks. The other way of stemming corruption in the financial sector is by meting out exemplary punishment to the perpetrators and we hope that authorities will take the message to heart when dealing with the series of scandals that have shaken the very foun-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT is broken hearts you see in Ramu. Something of the spirit has gone out of the men and women who have all their lives prac-

tised the principles enunciated by Lord Buddha. When you recall the mayhem let loose on Buddhist monasteries nearly two weeks ago, when you observe the ferocity with which fanatical Muslim mobs destroyed the images of Buddha and set fire to Buddhist religious texts, you tend to ask yourself: is this the country we so assiduously created through a bitterly fought war in 1971? When you hear the leading Buddhist religious figure inform you and the entire country that he had not imagined, back in the months when he gave sanctuary in his temple to Muslims, Hindus and Christians during the war even as the Pakistan occupation army pursued them, that forty years down the line those same people or their descendants would put Buddhist homes, temples and religious texts to the torch, you feel that wrench in the heart. And you are ashamed, for these mobs which for hours caused the fire and danced around it in savage delight, have shamed us before an entire world.

It was from this sense of shame, indeed from a need to reassure the frightened Buddhist community and an outraged international community, that Bangladesh's prime minister travelled to Ramu on Monday. What she saw was what each of us has experienced in these past many days. When she spoke of this land being home to every community inhabiting it, we told ourselves that perhaps not all was lost. When a delegation of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist

Party went to Ramu a few days ago and commiserated with the victims, we felt a certain resurgence of spirit in us. And it had to do with the fact that with people across the political spectrum rising in condemnation of such evil as has been perpetrated in Ramu and elsewhere, with citizens across the board coming forth to demand that those responsible for the tragedy be tracked down and punished, a sense of unity of purpose rose in us. That we in Bangladesh are fundamentally a secular people has been demonstrated yet once more through such a coming together. The prime minister, like many of us, served the reminder that the life and property of every citizen is a responsibility all of us must fulfill as a serious undertaking.

We do not serve ourselves at all well through drawing conclusions on who might have caused this terrible scandal. All these bitter exchanges between and among the various political camps will not reassure the Buddhists of this country that what has happened to them was but a quirk of fate, that it was part of life. It was not.

Take the politics out of the whole question of the monastery destruction. We do not serve ourselves at all well through drawing conclusions on who might have caused all this terrible scandal. All these bitter exchanges between and among the various political camps will not reassure the Buddhists of this country that what has happened to them was but a quirk of fate, that it was part of life. It was not. If you observe the entirety of the situation, it was well-conceived, well-thought-out planning which went into the attack on the monasteries. Do not tell Buddhists that it was the Facebook act of a young Buddhist that set everything slipping downhill. How are we so sure that Uttam Kumar

Barua did what these fanatical Muslims who set all Buddhist lives in danger say he did? Besides, since when has a single incident been a spur to the kind of horror the Buddhist community was subjected to at the end of September?

The requirement today is for an entire investigative machinery to get to work. It is not just a rebuilding of the monasteries that the government and we as citizens must emphasise. On a more important and therefore elevated level, it is lost trust -- that of our Buddhists -- that we must restore. That was the point the prime minister made when she spoke to the people of Ramu on Monday. That is also the point the opposition must make. There are some fundamental regions

The visit by the prime minister did something for those wronged Buddhists. It informed them that they were not alone. That the opposition too has been around, that the administration has been going full scale into damage control -- all of these are important. And they are because we have not just caused fear to be driven into the heart of every Buddhist in Bangladesh but also because of the opprobrium we as a nation have justifiably drawn from the international community.

The Buddhists are not alone. That is the point. But points do have a way of becoming pointless when they are not acted upon. Buddhist women buried their faces in the prime ministerial shoulders in Ramu. Their men looked beaten and dazed by what people like you and me have done to them. These images call for action, swift and purposeful, against the perpetrators of the violence. These evil men and their mentors are all out there and unless they are brought to justice, our shame and our self-humiliation will be there.

This is not the country we forged out of the crucible of war forty one years ago. That lost country is one which promised equality for all -- in terms of a practice of faith, in terms of economic equality and justice and fundamental human rights. That country was a land shared by all Bengalis and all indigenous people. That lost country was a secular undertaking and a poetic delight.

It is time to reclaim and repossess that country. The job must necessarily begin through bringing our Buddhists back into our fold. Sheikh Hasina's journey to Ramu was the first step in the process of a healing of the wounds. For all of us, the task remains one of ensuring a full recovery of the health of the nation.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

Why India's FDI policy is opposed

VASAJIT BANERJEE

GIVEN that the ultimate aim of every Indian politician is to be re-elected, their opinion about the Manmohan Singh government's policy of permitting foreign direct investment (FDI) is contingent upon how the policy affects their vote share.

Elections also require spending resources to retain the loyalty of party leaders and acquire new supporters and leaders, apart from large sums of money for campaigning. This necessity of resource acquisition means that regional politicians' stances on FDI depend on whether (and to what extent) they can leverage this stance to acquire resources or not.

However, the election-centric calculation in turn depends on the level of economic development in a state and the characteristics of its major economic sectors. As a result, if the electoral and economic factors are accounted for, then West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's position on FDI becomes increasingly clear and rational.

The first issue of resource acquisition is a short-term one. Banerjee needs resources from the central government to retain popular support, in order to win the legislative Assembly and parliamentary elections.

Resources extend from outright forgiveness or extension of repayment periods on debts owed to the central government to increased investment in infrastructure projects and public sector industrial units in Bengal.

Such resources can help maintain social welfare programmes and generate employment. They can also perhaps aid local contractors and businessmen who have been the financial backbone of many regional parties.

The furor over FDI offers Banerjee a salient issue, worth millions of dollars in alleged kickbacks to senior politi-

cians in Delhi and their allied lobbyists, which she can use to extract central funds.

Though one Indian newspaper notes that Banerjee actually stands to lose Rs.23,000 crore, it also notes that the funds would have paid the state government employees; but the political reality is that the beneficiaries of these funds are generally Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) loyalists, such as teachers and labourers in the Public Sector Units.

Rather, Mamata Banerjee wants funds for her own projects and her high-stakes challenge is based on a calculation that her party's 19 seats have made it indispensable to future parliamentary coalitions.

Thus, even if the present govern-

In light of her political fears, Banerjee's stance against retail FDI is justifiable. However, West Bengal cannot feed and clothe her millions and provide honourable avenues for socioeconomic advancement without re-industrialising itself.

ment were unwilling, future coalitions headed by the National Democratic Alliance would be more amenable to giving her funds with poor conditions. In fact, Abhijit Mukherjee's unopposed election in Jangipur also implies that a future rapprochement with the Congress is possible.

Banerjee's possible second concern is her knowledge of the present condition of the West Bengal economy. In terms of the level of economic development, West Bengal is woefully behind the major industrialised states of India.

Newspaper reports have noted declines in West Bengal's share of the national GDP from the early 80s to 2010, a decline in per-capita income relative to the national average during

this period, and a stunning decline in the share of the industrial sector in the state's economy from the mid-1990s to till 2010.

The facts of de-industrialisation and a corresponding fall in income are well known. Furthermore, these factors did not affect the CPI-M's peasant oriented strategy until the mid-2000s because the CPI-M sought to freeze this peasant support base through interlocking schemes in rural property-rights, distribution of resources, and voting behaviour to perpetuate itself in power.

The CPI-M grand coalition fell apart when the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya government broke this peasantisation strategy by threatening the status-quo on land ownership and

usage based on an effort to re-industrialise the economy.

Banerjee has inherited a deeply different state than the CPI-M did in 1977 when West Bengal was an industrial economy capable of transforming peasants into factory workers.

Today, Bengal is an agricultural economy consisting of small-scale peasant producers who produce enough to subsist with a little surplus that can enter the market. Between the peasants and the consumers in the urban areas, there has developed in the meanwhile a large chain of intermediaries. These can be petty traders buying from peasants, accumulating the produce, and bringing it to large wholesale urban markets.

After that, a set of small grocers and

traders sell the produce in numerous retail outlets. This informal economy has prevented mass unemployment, lowered the population pressure in the rural sector, and provided smoother access to agricultural produce to urban consumers.

Banerjee is perhaps afraid that the large box stores with independent distribution networks, that FDI in the retail sector entails, will destroy this intermediary class of petty traders, merchants, and small shopkeepers.

Without any corresponding expansion in the manufacturing sector, and a large segment of the young population denied entry into the service sector in Bengal and other states due to the CPI-M's disastrous Bengali-medium educational strategy, the displaced population cannot be socio-economically integrated.

A scenario of post-Partition radicalisation headed by displaced peasants and lower middle classes from East Pakistan, similar to the one exploited by the Communists in the 1950s and 1960s, can consequently reoccur.

In light of her political fears, Banerjee's stance against retail FDI is justifiable. However, West Bengal cannot feed and clothe her millions and provide honourable avenues for socioeconomic advancement without re-industrialising itself. Such re-industrialisation implies the smooth availability of cheap goods and services in urban areas, not just in Kolkata, but in smaller cities such as Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kharagpur, Asansol, Durgapur, to name a few.

Thus, partial introduction of FDI in the retail sector, restricted to urban areas and in certain sectors, will allow us to go back to the front.

The writer is a post-doctoral research fellow at the department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

© The Statesman. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 10

680

Battle of Karbala: Hussain bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, is decapitated by forces under Caliph Yazid I. This is commemorated by Muslims as Aashurah.

1911

The Wuchang Uprising leads to the demise of Qing Dynasty, the last Imperial court in China, and the founding of the Republic of China.

1942

The Soviet Union establishes diplomatic relations with Australia.

1945

The Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang signed a principle agreement in Chongqing about the future of post-war China. Later, the pact is commonly referred to as the Double-Ten Agreement.