

The Rohingya issue

Shun laidback approach

THE pledge of the Myanmar authority to consider a set of new rights for Rohingyas, who have been made stateless in their own country, does not go far enough. It is the question of citizenship of the Muslims of Arakan State that is the nub of the issue. Amidst renewed violence against them in Myanmar, an early resolution of the matter assumes great importance.

The plight of the Rohingyas has been greatly enhanced by the fact that they have nowhere to seek succor except the sea, to escape the persecution, which, according to the OIC, has assumed 'genocidal' proportions.

What is appalling is the position taken by the Myanmar Nobel Laureate on the issue. We find Suu Kyi's unwillingness to take the side of the oppressed as morally untenable, particularly for a Nobel Peace Laureate. Contrary to her belief, her keeping equidistance from the issue will not promote national reconciliation; it will only encourage the oppressors to do more of what they are doing.

However, we hope that the chorus of international condemnation, including that of the UN and the OIC, of the Myanmar government's failure to protect its ethnic minority and even turning a blind eye to the violence perpetrated on them by the majority community with the support of the government agencies, would have a positive impact. And we would hope that President Obama would be able to convince the Myanmar junta to resolve the longstanding ethnic issue, during his forthcoming visit to that country.

While Bangladesh may have made its position clear to the OIC about its stance on the Rohingya issue, and it may have reasons for not offering permanent refuge to them, we find its unwillingness to be more forceful in calling upon the Myanmar government as well the international community, to stop the persecution, rather baffling. The problem is not an exclusively Myanmar issue. Bangladesh suffers the consequences of their persecution and can ill afford to remain a spectator to the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas. It must add its voice in as strong a manner as possible to that of the international community's in calling upon the Myanmar government for a just resolution of the matter.

After the Hay Festival...

New ideas to mullo over

WHAT happens in literature could well be happening in life. It is the symbolism of literature which has served as a huge prop to life through the generations and across societies. It was such symbolism which was on display for a heady, almost intoxicating three days at the Bangla Academy here in Dhaka.

We speak of the Hay Festival, which drew to an end on Saturday amid a cheerful mixture of celebration and reflection through the presence of some of the biggest names in contemporary global literature as also our own prominent men and women of letters. And, of course, there were all the literature enthusiasts, aficionados, if you will, who would not miss an occasion to converse with the likes of Vikram Seth and Kamila Shamsie and our very own Syed Shamsul Huq and Anisul Haq. The Hay Festival, based on the well-known tradition of the annual Hay-on-Wye festival of books and culture in the United Kingdom, has with its latest presence in Bangladesh made its entry twice into Bengali life. The one-day affair last year was but a throwing of an idea into the crowd. This time round, more substance came into it, with a wider swathe of discussions and a larger canvas of literary stars present to inform the people of Bangladesh that out in the wider world of poetry and fiction, Bangladesh's writers could carve their own literary niche.

From such a perspective, Hay 2012 was as much a journey to Dhaka by global literati as it was an opportunity for our men and women of creative imagination to inform the world that they too speak of a literary heritage burnished over time by experience and deep sensibilities and ready to claim its place on the landscape of creativity.

The Hay Festival may have drawn to a close. But, as with all things of literary brilliance, it has left behind new

KALEIDOSCOPE

Between serious matters and lighter remarks



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE dream for a democratic secular and exploitation-free society was the driving ideology behind the creation of

Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her party colleagues had never stopped telling the people that it is this ideological stance that draws the line between Awami League and other parties, especially the opposition BNP.

Besides, secularism is one of the cornerstones of our constitution which has been a little diluted down the line. Even so, we were taken aback by the PM's allusion to Sharia law.

It came as a shocker when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Friday warned that the Jamaat-Shibir activists responsible for recent attacks on law-enforcers would be tried under Sharia law. Are we to believe her words at their face value? She must have uttered those words off the cuff, for trial under Sharia law is inconceivable under the provisions our constitution.

Justice system under Sharia law exists in countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Talibans, who shot the 12-year-old Malala in the Swat valley of Pakistan, follow the strict laws of Sharia. A former military dictator of Pakistan General Zia-ul-Haq disbanded parliamentary democracy,

banned all political parties and set up the Majlis-e-Shura in 1980. He started "Islamisation" of the country by establishing Sharia Benches.

He actually misused Islam for his own survival and the perpetuation of his power. The ultimate sufferer was democracy and the parliamentary system of government existing before. Dictators often use religion to fulfil their personal ends.

So it is exactly not Sharia laws as such, which are basically divine in origin, but their various interpreta-

Jamaat-Shibir people or those facing trial at the war crimes tribunal, it was bound to send chill down the spine.

However, whether the enactment of such a law is at all permissible under the present constitution is another question. As jurist M. Zahid says, "If the trials have to be done under Sharia, the Islamic law has to be passed by parliament," adding that if any law was passed only to punish someone or some people, it would be considered a bad law.

If the PM hadn't meant what she

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tions by people, where the danger of their abuse lies. As noted in the foregoing, dictators, to hoodwink the people, enact draconian laws to suppress opposition and thereby perpetuate their rules.

We also come across, from time to time, reports in the media on harsh treatment of women at the hands of half-educated, self-declared clerics called quadis (judges who are experts in Islamic jurisprudence), who deliver harsh sentence against mostly women allegedly for having broken, according to their interpretation, Islamic codes of conduct.

Whether used by village clerics or by Islamic states, we have only seen the misuse of these laws. So, when the PM referred to Sharia law to try

said, we would have got a clarification from her by now. Even so, what she said was music to the ears of the extremists and bigots, some of whom killed a court judge in the past in a bid to establish their brand of Islamic Sharia court in the country.

The reign of terror in different parts of the country is still fresh in our memory. Being avowedly committed to the cause of secularism and democracy, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cannot be the one to stoke the fire of that of kind of right-wing extremism.

Bangladesh's constitution has already gone through numerous amendments since the country's inception to suit the personal ends of the governments of the time. In the process, its original spirit has been

compromised many times over.

With the introduction of Islam as the state religion during the regime of General Ershad, a provision that is still in existence, talk of secularism from the leaders of the present government sounds hollow.

Against such backdrop, such utterances from the PM, even if these were used in a lighter vein, make us concerned; as the adage goes, once bitten, twice shy.

Another issue of concern is that the PM's words may cause serious misgivings in the minds of people who want to see justice through the ongoing war crimes tribunal. For people may get the impression that the PM is not happy with the process and its pace under the present tribunal, which is why she was referring to Sharia law as a means to ensure expeditious completion of the trial.

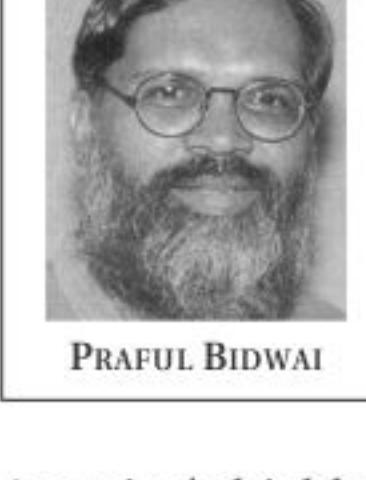
The sooner that kind of misgivings are removed from public mind the better. This is more the reason why the PM needs to come up with a clarification of her statement to dispel any misunderstanding among the people about the efficacy of the ongoing war crimes tribunal.

At the same time, we would expect utmost discretion from the prime minister when she utters something in public. That is because people want to believe what is said by someone holding high public office. So it is important that she would exercise necessary caution while speaking to the audience in a not-so-serious mood.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

New challenges for India



PRAFUL BIDWAI

PRESIDENT Obama's re-election is a welcome. A Republican win would have further widened class, race and ethnic rifts in

America's highly unequal society, strengthened a Rightward economic tilt domestically and internationally, and made for a more jingoist foreign and security policy, with terrible consequences for the world, including South Asia.

The victory owes itself only partly to "positives" like a well-planned campaign, and "negatives" such as Mitt Romney's crass elitism, his repulsive remarks against the 47% of Americans who don't pay federal income taxes, and his inability to attract non-white minorities and women.

Underlying this is a deeper demographic change: A relative decline in the white population vis-à-vis blacks, Latin American Spanish-speakers and Asian-Americans. In the last decade, these groups accounted for an absolute majority of all births. The number of Asian-Americans and Hispanics rose by 43%, and blacks by 12%, but the white population only grew by under 6%.

Over 70% of the new non-white social coalition voted for Obama, supported by a majority of women and university-educated people.

Hopefully, this welcome long-term trend will make for a less pro-rich, pro-corporate domestic policy and a less militarist foreign policy. It won't translate into major shifts immediately. But there will be minor changes and nuances.

The biggest will be a further shift in policy pivot towards Asia, in line with the shift in global power away from the North Atlantic. Early in his first term, Obama wasn't warm towards India. However, he soon visited India, hosted Manmohan Singh as the first

foreign leader at the White House, and advocated a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council.

Obama has since tried to rope India, along with Japan, into a hedge against China. India doesn't want to be seen joining a "China containment" strategy. But India hasn't really thought through its position.

India is under pressure to play a major role in Afghanistan and "cooperate" with US to reduce tensions in the South China Sea, keep vital Asian

foreigner with this.

India should play an important mediatory role in resolving the crisis over Iran's nuclear activities. Iran is probably still many months, if not a couple of years, away from producing enough enriched uranium for a nuclear bomb.

According to US intelligence, Iran hasn't yet decided whether or not to acquire atomic weapons.

A military strike against Iran will be dangerously counterproductive. This

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sea-lines peaceful, and coerce Iran into giving up her nuclear programme although she has the right to pursue peaceful nuclear activities.

India must resist such pressure while maintaining foreign policy independence and strategic autonomy. India must not underestimate its leverage vis-à-vis the US. For instance, even as it pursues the imposition of heavy sanctions against Iran, Washington has had to accept that India will continue to import oil from Iran, albeit in reduced quantities.

India can translate its strategic weight and tremendous goodwill in Afghanistan to see that US does not leave behind a vacuum in which violent *jehadi* forces flourish. India should help train Afghanistan's army and police autonomously of the West, without rivalry with Pakistan.

India is critically poised to repair its frayed relations with Pakistan. Dr. Singh must visit Pakistan very soon. That's a high priority. Nothing, including short-term gains from glitches in Washington-Islamabad relations, should be allowed to interfere with this.

has become apparent even to hard-nosed hawks in the US and Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's plans for an attack have been strongly opposed by many of his cabinet colleagues, and by Israel's security establishment, including serving army chief Benny Gantz, former Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin, and former Mossad head Meir Dagan, who called it "the stupidest idea" he had ever heard.

More than 30 former top US foreign policy-makers, experts and military officers have also warned that an Israeli strike would delay Iran's nuclear programme at best by two years. A much bigger US "military action involving aerial strikes, cyber-attacks, covert operations, and special operations forces would destroy or severely damage many of Iran's physical facilities."

But their "complete destruction" is unlikely; and "Iran would still retain the scientific capacity and the experience to start its nuclear programme again..."

A strike on Iran would produce a

conflagration in the Middle East, threatening US bases and Israel. It will create resentment greater than the American-engineered overthrow of elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. Worse, it would guarantee that Iran rapidly becomes a nuclear weapons-state.

Obama could be receptive to a diplomatic approach. He refused to capitulate to Netanyahu, risking the US Zionist lobby's hostility. India should push Obama to translate his recent call for moving "beyond this time of war" into a major diplomatic initiative, including bilateral talks with Iran for the first time since 1979, which are "under consideration" in Washington. Iranian leaders too have indicated their willingness to mend relations with the US.

India should propose a compromise along the lines Turkey and Brazil worked out in 2010: transferring Iran's low-enriched uranium for further enrichment overseas, but capping domestic enrichment to non-weapons-grade levels. This was then rejected by the US, but has a better chance of being accepted now.

India can thus reverse the damage from repeatedly voting against Iran since 2005 at the International Atomic Energy Agency under Washington's pressure.

This will help India rebuild its relations with Iran, with which it has traditionally had friendly ties, besides a close alliance in Afghanistan. India can then re-launch the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, which was abandoned under Washington's pressure. Bilateral issues also need attention. India must reject US's demand for diluting the nuclear liability act to exempt suppliers. It must not let the US pry open its defence production sector through joint ventures.

It's one thing to have normal relations with a "problem power" like the US; it's another to get close to it.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 19

1095

The Council of Clermont, called by Pope Urban II to discuss sending the First Crusade to the Holy Land, begins.

1942

World War II: Battle of Stalingrad. Soviet Union forces under General Georgy Zhukov launch the Operation Uranus counterattack at Stalingrad, turning the tide of the battle in the USSR's favor.

1943

Holocaust: Nazis liquidate Janowska concentration camp in Lemberg (Lviv), western Ukraine, murdering at least 6,000 Jews after a failed uprising and mass escape attempt.

1979

Iran hostage crisis: Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini orders the release of 13 female and black American hostages being held at the US Embassy in Tehran.

1985

Cold War: In Geneva, U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev meet for the first time.