

The spirit behind a faith

Martyrs who gave Islam its glow

THE martyrdom of Imam Husain (RA) remains a telling episode in the history of Islam. It is so because what transpired on the tenth day of Muharram in Karbala was tragedy on an unprecedented scale, to a point where Muslims across the world look upon the battle between Imam Husain's forces and his enemies as a defining moment in a war between truth and falsehood. On the surface, the battle in Karbala may have been a struggle for power, and yet it is the deeper dimensions of the Karbala tragedy that are recalled on Ashura.

Those dimensions relate to the moves made by Muawiyah to have power entrenched in his hands or within his immediate circle of family and friends. It was this sinister move on his part to hold on to authority, indeed to promote the likes of Yazid, that could not but lead to the epic battle that was to ensue eventually at Karbala. The enduring sadness for Muslims all over the world, all these centuries after Husain's martyrdom, is that the struggle in Karbala had to end in unmitigated suffering for the grandson of the Prophet of Islam. Where Islam had during and after the time of the Prophet established itself as a new faith of peace and decent social order, where it was expected that Yazid and his forces would wage a war based on ethics and principles, it was heart-wrenching to witness the sordid levels to which Imam Husain's enemies let the battle sink. The Imam was martyred and so were the rest of his family. It was a dark chapter in the history of a religion which had come into being as a force for good, for compassion and for justice.

Today, it is remembrance of the original ideals of Islam that makes Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere pause and reflect. The core message today, as it was in the early days of Islam, is that the faith Muslims practise with such fervour and with such liberalism everywhere has no room for violence. Ashura is much more than a recalling of the sacrifices of Imam Husain (RA) and his followers. It is also a sending out of the message that violence and terrorism are anathema to Islam, that Islam is a belief which combines practical realism with spiritual enlightenment.

Why wait for January?

BNP should join JS now

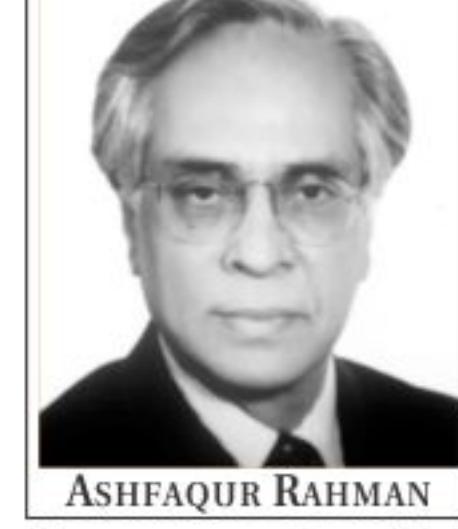
FTER restoration of democracy in early 1991, it was hoped that with the Jatiyo Sangsad functioning, democracy will gain from strength to strength in the coming years. Unfortunately, the last two decades were marked by a largely dysfunctional JS only due to its endless boycott by the opposition of the time on one excuse or another. They have thus made JS boycott into a culture.

The current opposition in the Jatiyo Sangsad, JS, is also following the same practice and has remained absent from the ninth parliament for the longest period so far. They attended its sessions for a very short while only when it became necessary to save their seats to meet the provision enshrined in Section 67 clause 1 b) of the Constitution, which says that (1) A member of Parliament shall vacate his seat if he is absent from Parliament, without the leave of Parliament, for ninety consecutive sitting days."

It is a good indication that on the Armed Force's day on November 21, the leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, in reply to a request from the Speaker to join parliament, said that she would think it over. We would like to consider her reply in a positive note as the BNP's standing committee member Barrister Moudud Ahmed has also hinted to the media that they would join parliament in January 2013. But our question to the BNP leader is if they are really serious about returning to parliament in January next year, which is rather close by, why can't they do so now?

We repeat what we have said so many times in the past -- boycotting the parliament is in effect abdicating the trust reposed in the people's representatives by the voters. We would again reiterate our stand and advise the opposition BNP to join parliament without any more delay to get out of the boycott culture. At the same time, we would urge the ruling Awami League to engage the opposition constructively in the House and together create a congenial environment of tolerance, mutual respect for each other's opinion and thereby make the

Was Obama's visit to Yangon too soon?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, US President Obama made what many term a historic trip to Myanmar. Fresh from presidential elections in his country, in which he won a second term, he surprised all when he went merrily off on an Asian tour. His first stop was Thailand, followed by a 6-hour stopover in Yangon, Myanmar.

He then went to Cambodia to attend a meeting of leaders of the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean). But the world was bewildered because Obama's priorities seem to be misplaced.

First, there was a raging fiscal crisis in the US. Obama's presence at home seemed essential so that the sensitive negotiations ongoing with the opposition Republican legislators could be satisfactorily concluded. If the negotiations fail then, by January next, tax cuts mandated earlier would expire and the country would in effect fall off the "fiscal cliff" and plunge the US economy into chaos.

Obama also needed to stay back in Washington to closely monitor developments in Gaza and the hostilities that were escalating with Israel. Failure to stop the violence there could have serious repercussions in the entire Middle East. Finally, developments in the civil war in Syria were so horrific that he was needed to give the US administration a sense of the way forward.

We are told that Obama's visit at this critical juncture had to do with the new US game plan to invest more time in Asia. They call this policy "pivot to Asia." For too long US military and foreign policy establishment had

squandered resources on the problems of the Middle East. In the meantime, the rising power and influence of China in the world was not attended to.

The US knows that China will soon impact the future course of events in the world. The US also knows that the economies of South Asia and South East Asia as well as those of Japan and Australia can help its economy. Europe is in no position now to give US the support it needs to face China. Hence, Obama without wasting any time after his reelection, moved to this part of the world. The visits to Myanmar and Cambodia were an important geo-strategic move. These countries with poor human rights record and totter-

Yangon University before parliamentarians, retired generals, students, faculty and eminent persons. Both these events had great symbolic value. But they did not seem to have any substantive impact on Myanmar's policy makers.

By highlighting the fact that all permanent inhabitants of Myanmar were citizens of one country, Obama tried to introduce the concept of citizenship as a defining term that encompassed even the unfortunate Muslim Rohingyas who are a part of Myanmar's identity. But this was not formally noted by the Myanmarese authorities. Nor by Aung Sang Suu Kyi.

Myanmar is a resource rich country and geographically within the cusp of

We think that Obama's visit may have taken place too soon. The US may have jumped the gun too fast. There were good reasons for Obama to have been more circumspect. Let us all hope posterity will not have any regrets.

ing democracy are the "weak links" in the chain with which US wants to encircle China.

In Yangon, Obama met President Thein Sein, the quasi-military backed leader of Myanmar. It was the first time that President Sein agreed to meet any visiting head of state outside Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw, quoting "logistical reasons." The US reciprocated the gesture when Obama referred to Burma as Myanmar during his formal talks. The US has not officially recognised the change of name of Burma to Myanmar as this change was done by a military junta.

The high points in Obama's visit were his meeting with Nobel Laureate Aung Sang Suu Kyi and his address in

China. On both counts, the US is interested in being friendly with the present Myanmar government. But commentators feel that such political embrace of the quasi-military government by US is premature. The country has a long way to travel on the road to democracy. It still has institutions in place which obstruct free speech, free press, an independent judiciary and a parliament where a quarter or more of the members are not elected but nominated from the military. There are still several insurgencies led by minority communities against the central government and the majority Burman community. The recent wanton killing of Muslim Rohingyas, who have been inhabi-

ants of Myanmar for generations, is also a case in point.

Obama's visit to Myanmar may encourage the extremist elements there, both in the government and outside, to continue their intransigent behaviour. Besides the Rohingyas, other persecuted communities could still bear the burden of discrimination and denial of their legitimate rights. The economic sanctions that the US government had imposed earlier to discipline the military leadership were lifted unilaterally just before Obama's visit. So what can prevent Myanmar from continuing its past policies?

But there is a chance that good sense could prevail and the visit could after all be a turning point for Myanmar. It could quietly introduce political reforms and amend its past ways. This would be a welcome change not only for Myanmar but also for the region and its neighbours. History would record it as Obama's legacy. He would be remembered as the world leader who brought about this seminal change. But the jury is still out and the verdict is yet to roll in.

We in Bangladesh look on this visit with a wary eye. No one would be happier if Myanmar traveled quickly on the long road to genuine democracy. But no one would be more disappointed if Myanmar uses this visit as a signal that the world has acknowledged its progress and it can rest on its laurels. We think that Obama's visit may have taken place too soon. The US may have jumped the gun too fast. There were good reasons for Obama to have been more circumspect. Let us all hope posterity will not have any regrets.

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The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

America's failed Palestinian policy

YOUSEF MUNAYYER

MORE than 160 Palestinians and 5 Israelis are dead, and as the smoke clears over Gaza, the Israelis will not be more secure and Palestinians' hopes for self-determination remain dashed. It is time for a significant re-evaluation of the American policies that have contributed to this morass.

The failure of America's approach toward the Israelis and the Palestinians, much like its flawed policies toward the region in general, is founded on the assumption that American hard power, through support for Israel and other Middle Eastern governments, can keep the legitimate grievances of the people under wraps.

But events in Gaza, like those in Egypt and elsewhere, have proved once again that the use of force is incapable of providing security for Israel, when the underlying causes of a people's discontent go unaddressed.

The United States government must ask: What message do America's policies send to Israelis and Palestinians?

Washington's policies have sent counterproductive messages to the Palestinians that have only increased the incentives for using violence.

American policy initially signaled to Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah, a Palestinian party committed to the idea of negotiations, that talks would yield a Palestinian state on 22% of the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time the United States, which has monopolised the role of mediator for itself, failed to do anything to change Israel's policies of settlement expansion in the West Bank.

Palestinians' patience grew thin as the number of Israeli settlers tripled between the beginning of the "peace process" in 1991 and today. Palestinians learned that the message

they initially got about a peace process leading to statehood was either made in bad faith or an outright lie. The message they ultimately understood from observing America's reflexively pro-Israel policy was that the peace process was merely a cover for endless Israeli colonialism.

America's policy toward Hamas also sent the wrong message; rather than promoting peace, it only created incentives for the use of arms.

Sanctions imposed after Hamas's 2006 electoral victory told the party that Israel and the United States would marginalise it unless it accepted the same principles put forth by the so-called quartet of Middle East peacemakers that Fatah accepted -- namely, recognising Israel's right to exist and renouncing violence.

Having seen what that path yielded for Fatah -- nothing but continued Israeli colonisation -- Hamas was not persuaded and chose instead

to reject those principles. In return, the Gaza Strip was put under a brutal siege.

Hamas has used armed struggle to achieve certain objectives, albeit at significant cost. Its leaders saw the removal of Israeli settlers from Gaza in 2005 as a victory for their methods, as well as the return of thousands of prisoners last year, in exchange for a single captured Israeli soldier. The returns

may be limited and the costs significant, but when the other options are either subjugation or the path their compatriots in Fatah face, Hamas is likely to make the same calculation -- and choose violence every time.

The cease-fire announced Wednesday will only perpetuate the same incentive structure. Through the use of force, Hamas gained favourable terms. The Israelis agreed to ease collective punishment of Palestinians in Gaza and end extrajudicial assassinations.

While both of these are against international law to begin with, and long-term Israeli adherence to these terms is not guaranteed, these are nonetheless commitments that Hamas believes could only have been extracted through armed struggle.

Further, the fighting brought attention to the open wound of Gaza, which the world had forgotten. Foreign ministers and dignitaries visited the strip and

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton flew to the region for the cease-fire announcement. The real danger is if the underlying causes of discontent in Gaza -- the denial of human rights and dignity for Palestinians -- continue to go ignored once rockets stop targeting Israel. This has been the case each time in the past.

What message is sent to Palestinians

when the only time we pay attention to their plight, and the only time they make gains is through the use of arms?

Likewise, our policy toward Israel has also sent counterproductive messages. As the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority came into the West Bank, many of the costs of being responsible for occupied Palestinians were transferred from Israel to the authority while the entrenchment of occupation continued unabated. This not only reduced the costs of occupation for Israel; it continues to be rewarding as Israel has been able to reap political and economic benefits from exploiting Palestinian land and natural resources.

Moreover, Washington has economically, diplomatically and militarily supported Israel as it continues with its settlement project and thus it is no wonder that some in Israel continue to believe that perpetual occupation, or de facto apartheid, is a viable policy option.

By constantly condemning Palestinian armed resistance, and failing to condemn Israeli settlement expansion and repression of nonviolent Palestinian dissent, the message the United States is sending the Palestinian people is this: All resistance to occupation is illegitimate.

No nation on earth would accept that, nor is it realistic to expect it to.

The disastrous results of the incentive structure we've created have been on full display in recent days. Moving forward, Washington must fundamentally re-evaluate the messages it sends to all parties because we've currently set them on the path to even greater -- and potentially unmanageable -- escalations in the future.

The writer is Executive Director of the Jerusalem Fund.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 25

1177

Baldwin IV of Jerusalem and Raynald of Chatillon defeat Saladin at the Battle of Montgisard.

1491

The siege of Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, begins.

1783

American Revolutionary War: The last British troops leave New York City three months after the signing of the Treaty of Paris.

1936

In Berlin, Germany and Japan sign the Anti-Comintern Pact, agreeing to consult on measures "to safeguard their common interests" in the case of an unprovoked attack by the Soviet Union against either nation. The pact is renewed on the same day five years later with additional signatories.

1999

The United Nations establishes the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women to commemorate the murder of three Mirabal Sisters for resistance against the Rafael Trujillo dictatorship in Dominican Republic.