

We are concerned

Spiral of violence calls for restraint

IN 22 days since February 5 when the verdict on Abdul Quader Mollah was pronounced triggering reactions among Jamaat-Shibir protestors around 30 persons lost their lives. Thereafter, the International Crimes Tribunal-1 having delivered death sentence on Delawar Hossain Sayeedee, as many as 37 to 45 people lost their lives in a single day. The demonstrations after Juma prayers have been turning into clashes with the police resulting in casualties of one kind or another.

Add to all this, the pre-48 hour hartal called for Sunday and Monday by Jamaat-Shibir which is likely to be marked by violence with more in store as the hartal progresses.

Vandalism has been a part of the desperate bid by the Jamaatees who seem set to create public disorder. With their backs to the wall, these elements would not stop short of anything to make their prowess felt. In such a context, law enforcement agencies are under pressure to act. But at times, they appear to be overwhelmed by the Jamaatees and become rather nervy to be rushing use of force, sometimes lethally. While their intelligence wings are said to be aware of Jamaati plots we wonder why they should not concentrate on preventing gatherings before these take shape. Mob control and containment under very stressful circumstances is a very tough call but a modern police force should prove up to the task without causing unnecessary deaths.

There have been casualties on all sides and a good deal of destruction wreaked on private and public properties. One very concerning tendency related to burning of temples and houses of minority community in Noakhali. They should be protected by the citizens and the government agencies.

The restiveness and violent eruptions quite clearly stem from a sense of desperation but actually the legal process is yet to be completed with appeals and their disposal taking their time. So, the agitators should think of the leeway between now and the final outcome.

We call for restraint and responsibility from all sides so that violence and loss of lives can be fully obviated.

Exam centres 17 km from home!

One couldn't be more insensitive to examinees' woes

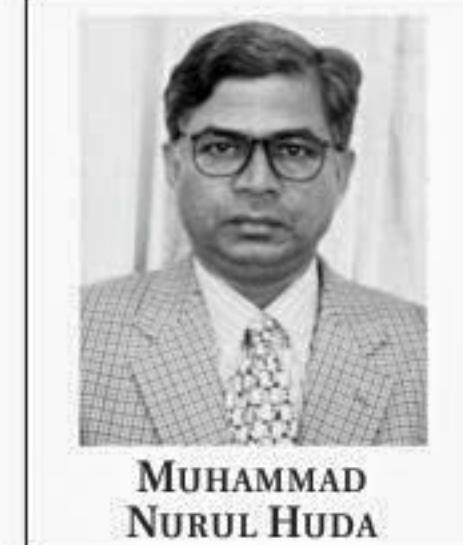
ONE has not come across a news item, not in recent times at least, that a large number of SSC candidates of four schools in Mohalchari upazilla in Kharachari district have to traverse 17 kilometers to appear in the SSC exam. But that is what 300 SSC examinees of the said schools have to do.

Given the condition of terrain and the state of communication in most of the areas in the CHT, it is no wonder that the examinees have to leave home early to be at the exam centre on time. And they have to retrace the same distance after the exam. The parents are not rich enough to rent temporary accommodation during the exams.

The authorities may have their own explanation for the present arrangement. But we feel that nothing can justify putting examinees through such pains to attend what happens to be a very important exam of their school life. If this is not a display of lack of sensitivity to the need of examinees than what is. It is regrettable that the efforts of the local leaders have not yielded results, and even official request by one of the schools to have an exam centre closer to the schools has fallen on deaf ears.

We feel that the upazilla education officer and even the UNO could have devised some arrangement to reduce the hardship of the SSC candidates. Could they have not been more innovative to make life easier for the students? And why is the education board sleeping? It would not have been much of a hassle to rent temporary accommodation to work as examination center. We know that as examinee one has to go to the centre to take exams, but this is a case where the authorities could have brought

A perspective on religion based politics



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

IN recent times Bangladesh polity has been experiencing quite heated discussions on the demand for banning religion-based politics. There

is a clamour for authoritative denial of recognition to political activities of the so-called religious parties. In specific terms, the Election Commission has been requested to cancel the registration of political parties that are accused of using and perhaps misusing religion for attaining political objectives.

As reactions to such demands some journalists, politicians, academics, lawyers amongst others have gone on record saying that from a constitutional point of view religion-based politics is under no restriction. They have counter-charged to the effect that under our constitutional dispensation there is no scope for indulging in left politics.

In such a situation, the not-very-informed Bangladeshis are likely to get confused. This writer does not wish to confound an already sensitive scenario by dilating on what constitutes religion-based politics and which are the religiously driven parties with alleged ulterior motives. Or how should we differentiate a nationalist right-wing party claiming faith in pluralist dispensation from an ideologically driven outfit actually believing in doctrinaire politics, insofar as their use of religion or religious symbols for attaining political objective is concerned?

On matters pertaining to religion and its use for attaining political objective in a democratic polity, it may perhaps be relevant to look at the Indian experience. According to one opinion, for almost two decades ending 2004 the main dynamism in Indian politics had been provided by the rise of Hindu nationalist right, in particular the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) and its ideology of Hindutva (primacy of Hindu values).

According to expert view, the BJP did make efforts to enable itself to redefine Indian statehood in Hindu nationalist colours. In fact, since the 1980s state secularism in India has been under attack by the political forces mobilised by Hindutva and anti-secularists.

The Indian constitution of 1950 was an Indian compromise with forces of religion. Although it did not recognise an official religion, secularism as such found no mention in the constitution. The Muslim minority's fears were assuaged by the concession of Muslim Personal Law, though with a constitutional commitment to eventually move towards a unified civil code that would embrace all religious communities.

In June 1975, Mrs. Indira Gandhi

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imposed a state of Emergency and it was during the Emergency that she sponsored an amendment which incorporated the word "secular" into the constitution. However, this measure was undertaken at the behest of the Communist Party of India which was then her coalition partner.

It may be relevant to note that the aforementioned BJP, its sister organisations -- the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP/or the world council of Hindus) -- are the direct descendants of political tradition dating from pre-independence (pre-1947) that has sought to anchor Indian nationalism and the state in an unambiguous Hindu ethno-religious identity.

In the 1980s and 1990s VHP, RSS and other Hindutva organisations were at

the forefront of mass mobilisations over the Babri Mosque issue. In a radical innovation these mobilisations introduced new modes of political pilgrimage in which the nation was re-imagined in religious idioms as well as remapped by cross-country marches, often leading to well-planned physical confrontations with minority religious communities. Hindutva appeared to be the new ideological handmaiden of an economically and militarily powerful India.

On the subject under discussion, we may venture into the Pakistan scenario. The military elite that actually rules Pakistan sought to activate the divine sources of legitimacy during the Afghanistan war in partnership with the American military might and financial muscle. In the process, Islamabad and Washington ended up strengthening

contexts. In other words, while public policy remained secular, the national profile became increasingly Islamic.

The unfortunate experience in Pakistan is that since from early 1980s, hate politics along sectarian lines increased manifold. On the one hand, the Shia minority had been inspired by Khomeini's revolution in Iran, which jolted them out of complacency and politicised them in terms of articulation and projection of sectarian demands. On the other hand, the Zia-ul-Huq government embarked on a programme of Islamisation of law, education and economy that was unabashedly based on Sunni jurisprudence.

A considered view is that in Bangladesh the policy makers in their long-term strategy should take measures that will put an effective brake on the preaching of ideas that run contrary to Islam and civilised democratic polity.

The ominous rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh, whose inhabitants suffered unprecedented sacrifices to de-link themselves from religion-based Pakistan state, remains a big paradox of contemporary history. A dispassionate analysis and explanation of this contradiction may indicate the action that would be necessary to counter and arrest religious obscurantism of all descriptions and keep us steady on the tolerant democratic way.

What we need, perhaps, is a policy on the resolution of conflict. We should be able to do away with the increasing cynicism about a just solution of the socio-political issues and conflicts. We may benefit by recognising that politics divorced from moral values becomes debasing and is likely to become oblivious to the moral failings of the liberal democratic market state.

The writer is a columnist for *The Daily Star*.

AFIFA RAIHANA

CONVINCING the financial sector about the merits of sustainable finance in Bangladesh presents a huge challenge -- showing the financial institutions (FI) the benefits of such financing. The key is to link climate change -- a new concept to some -- with the activities of the financial sector. Not an easy task!

First and foremost, the main question that pops into a banker's mind is "why climate change?" If an FI launches a product which finances energy efficiency (EE) or renewable energy (RE) will there be enough profit margin? Is the market big enough? Surely it wouldn't make sense to design and launch a product which might not fetch enough transactions. Lastly, does the FI have capable people enough to understand, design and launch a product customised for green financing? Does the frontline staff have the capacity to have meaningful discussions with the clients about, say, carbon financing?

If you speak to a biogas producer, he would say it is difficult to get financing from banks for this sort of project. On the other hand, banks that have already launched green financing initiatives complain that there is a lack of projects, and it is very difficult to find clients that are working in this field. Surely there must be a gap somewhere.

In my years of experience of working with FIs on environmental issues, I feel that the challenge of

rolling out green financing products lies in motivation of top management, skill and training of front line staff and lack of credible market information. There are other market barriers like lack of service providers and consultants in this field, lack of clear cut policy and lack of best practices, which makes sustainable finance a difficult area for FIs.

For financing green projects, be it biogas or ETP or solar energy or energy efficiency -- anything that reduces carbon emission -- the first precondition for rolling it out is top management buy in. If there is no vision among the top management, if

the environment of the country." Bankers' concern is identifying profitable sectors where they can invest and recover their money with profit. So, the best way is to discuss the triple bottom line.

Even after the top management buy in, the middle management and front line staff are the key to implementation.

Their understanding of the market, climate change and relationship with clients, along with sustained efforts, can make a sustainable finance project successful.

When a banker with finance background joins an FI and banks don't cover sustainable finance

Global sustainability is not an easy goal to achieve, but we have to start somewhere. And every small effort has the potential to make a huge impact worldwide. We look forward to a time when climate change will be fully mainstreamed across the financial sector.

there is lack of understanding of how this market will only be growing over the years, then it will never happen.

When I first started talking to bankers about climate change there was strong skepticism about it, and they were very vocal about it. Now that media has made "Climate Change" a household phrase and people have become more familiar with it, the top management of the banks are not so vocal about their skepticism with regards to climate change.

One lesson I have learnt is never to start a discussion with bankers by saying: "Banks also have a responsibility to care for the

environment of the country." Bankers' concern is identifying profitable sectors where they can invest and recover their money with profit. So, the best way is to discuss the triple bottom line.

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Standardised training programmes will not be useful. Bankers will need to understand the theoretical basics of climate change; market opportunities; the role of the financial sector with regards to sustainable finance; the country-specific context and the market they operate in; how to deal with green financing; identifying projects; and appraising and investing, which will have to be complemented by understanding of the FI's own credit procedures which have to be in line with central bank requirements.

The last big challenge of selling climate change to bankers is answering questions like how big the market is in monetary terms, which are the potential sectors, where they are located, how we can tap into this market segment, etc etc. Arguments have to be backed by solid figures and real life examples. There are many global reports which identify potential markets in terms of sectors. In Bangladesh, certain development agencies are working on Bangladesh-specific sector reports which can help banks make an informed decision prior to designing a green product.

Global sustainability is not an easy goal to achieve, but we have to start somewhere. And every small effort has the potential to make a huge impact worldwide. We look forward to a time when climate change will be fully mainstreamed across the financial sector.

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Challenges of selling climate change to bankers

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 2

1946

Ho Chi Minh is elected the President of North Vietnam.

1955

King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia abdicates the throne in favor of his father, King Norodom Suramarit.

1962

In Burma, the army led by General Ne Win seizes power in a coup d'état.

1969

Soviet and Chinese forces clash at a border outpost on the Ussuri River.

1990

Nelson Mandela is elected deputy President of the African National Congress.

1991

Battle at Rumaila Oil Field brings an end to the 1991 Gulf War.

2002

U.S. invasion of Afghanistan: Operation Anaconda begins, (ending on March 19 after killing 500 Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, with 11 Western troop fatalities).