

Country at a political crossroads

Low income groups get hammered

AS the nation waits apprehensively for the passage of the long march called by Hefajat-e-Islam and the capital city goes into lockdown for 24 hours on the evening of April 5, all eyes are now focused firmly on the political scene. The biggest blow of such strikes, show-downs and blockades has been to the economy. With the voltage running high on politics, the economy is getting relegated to the background.

We have ample reason to believe that the hammering the economy has been receiving is leaving a trail of damage that will have far reaching consequences. Numerous reports and studies by national and international agencies point to a general economic slowdown for Bangladesh due to political instability. Little however, is mentioned about how lower income groups are dealing with loss of livelihoods.

Drivers, helpers, auto-rickshaw and rickshaw pullers are all part of the daily wage earner segment. Recent hartals have caused significant damage to the transportation sector. According to a sector-wise study by Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry, incomes of these groups are halved during hartal days. They have little or no alternative sources of incomes. Garments workers are no better off when factories are shut. Hawkers and vendors see their incomes go down by 50-60% on hartal days. Farmers cannot sell harvested crops to markets during hartals since middlemen cannot transport their goods to different markets. Thanks to hartals, stocks of diesel at local depots fall, so farmers cannot irrigate their crops properly. Fishermen fare no better. They are forced to sell only to local consumers where prices are significantly reduced. What it all boils down to is that unless we can find a way out of the present political climate, the economy will continue to contract and the people, particularly the lower middle class will get squeezed into joining the ranks of ultra poor.

Critical dependence on gas for power

Give a reality check to the approach

SEVERAL power projects face uncertainty owing to a gas supply crunch, as our front-page report on Thursday underscored in no uncertain terms. Take it as a warning signal for lessening the critical dependence on gas-based power plants.

Whilst gas supply constraints keep several power plants idle, some new plants are poised to start operating this year without, it seems, an assured guarantee for gas supply. The problem is that most of the new power projects were taken in hand on the basis of Petrobangla's 2011 projection which has proved wrong by a wide margin. Against the projected availability of 2,465 million mmcf in December '15 what we get is less than half of that figure.

The government is implementing 14 large gas-based and three dual-fuel (gas or oil) power projects in the next two years with 6000 megawatt capacity. This is as much as we regularly produce in the country. But the assumptions on which the power projects are to be implemented are tenuous as there is deficit between projected and actual gas availabilities.

The other issue is purely administrative, sufficiently debilitating that it is. Petrobangla and Power Development Board are caught up in a state of dissonance. For instance, while the chairman Petrobangla cut back on projection, some gas sector initiatives having failed, the Power Division apparently overlooked the realistic calculation and went ahead awarding contracts to different companies to set up plants. As a matter of fact, the Petrobangla chief refrained from giving gas supply clearance to many of the new projects. The whole issue requires a reappraisal to link projects to steady availability of fuel.

It is a pity that 'PDB signs contracts with parties to set up gas-fueled plants without obtaining gas supply assurances from Petrobangla'. This is lack of coordination at its worst; for, the cost of miscalculation can be very dear for the fate of the projects. This can mean snapped genera-

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 6

1896
In Athens, the opening of the first modern Olympic Games is celebrated, 1,500 years after the original games are banned by Roman Emperor Theodosius I.

1919
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi orders a general strike.

1930
Gandhi raises a lump of mud and salt and declares, "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire." beginning the Salt Satyagraha.

2005
Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani becomes Iraqi president; Shiite Arab Ibrahim al-Jaafari is named premier the next day.

2008
2008 Egyptian general strike starts led by Egyptian workers later to be adopted by April 6 Youth Movement and Egyptian activities.

The continuing menace



THE recent arrest of the so-called religiously motivated extremists that included four foreign nationals along with dangerous explosives and incriminating materials once again confirms the premonition that serious threats to our democratic pluralist existence are a reality. There is cause for concern because such apprehension comes in the wake of deliberate mischievous attack by suspected extremists on the personnel of law enforcement agency.

The fact that there was a discontinuance of the deadly doings of extremist elements may not be a comforting scenario because their unhealthy growth and harmful rise in our body-politic was not known to the general public. Therefore, the concerned citizens can only guess as to the nature and dimension of the diabolical mischief of the bigots in the days to come.

There is a creeping suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. In other words, was there no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity? These questions should bother us because patriotic citizens of the People's Republic of Bangladesh must know that.

It is a sad reality that, like the responses to other socio-economic issues of our national life, we have been disappointingly reactive in

responding to the threats of so-called religious extremism. The whole approach appears to be ad-hoc and on a case to case basis. Somehow, the establishment had always wished to assure itself by imagining that a hydra-headed monster has surfaced all on a sudden and will wither soon to the relief of a concerned population. Setting a time limit to completely root out the extremist problem gives rise to more questions than it answers. Such utterances do not really create optimism and establish credibility of institutional competence and political sagacity.

Similarly, enforcement officials prematurely ruling out any link of extremist activities to foreign sources also betray a pathetic lack of discretion and judgment.

Many of us have not realised that in post-1975 Bangladesh, particularly during the last 25 years, there has been a phenomenal growth of *madrasas* throughout the country. At the same time many mosques have been built by individuals and organisations about whose credentials not much is known. A question obviously arises in such a scenario. Was moral rearmament or spiritual renaissance the predominant factor behind such unusual growth of religious institutions and places of worship? Doubts creep in as we do not see any corresponding healthy rise in public or private morality. So the reasonable suspicion is that while the establish-

ment, the civil society and other activists have remained indifferent about the programmes and designs of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

Bangladesh polity is now challenged by hostile groups that profess a philosophy of life and of government inimical to our own. In fact, we are now facing an adversary that is armed enough to commit widespread violence. In our free society, while our defenses and deterrents are largely prepared in open fashion, our new antagonists have succeeded in building a formidable wall of secrecy and security. So, to bridge the gap and warn ourselves in time, we have to rely, inter alia, more and more upon our intelligence operations. There is a need to break through the shield of secrecy of the bigots. Special techniques which are unique to secret intelligence operations are needed to penetrate the security barriers of the extremist outfits.

Our preparation to combat the extremists cannot wait for evidence of the likelihood of further hostile acts against us. We should, therefore, be forewarned and forearmed. The act of forewarning could itself constitute one of the most effective deterrents to the bigots' appetite for attack. Intelligence should not be a tabooed subject. What we are striving to

achieve should be an advertised fact.

The most serious occupational hazard in the intelligence field is prejudice. While we are all creatures of prejudice and life. The reality is that we are faced with a closed, conspiratorial and scheming enemy. We cannot hope to maintain our position securely if our opponents are confident that they can attack us at the time and place of their choosing and without any forewarning.

In the last analysis the most important safeguards lie in the character and self-discipline of the political leadership and the quality of the intelligence service and of the people who work for it -- on the kind of men and women on the job, their integrity and their respect for the democratic processes and their sense of duty and devotion in carrying out their important and delicate tasks.

If we decide to operate by the book, we will be adequately informed of the perils which face us. If we do not know the designs of the so-called religious-extremists, then we could well be isolated and our liberties, too, could be in jeopardy. Therefore, we must be ready to deal with all aspects of the not-very-visible war of the bigots with all its ramifications and fronts.

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Cyber war and global order

SREERAM CHAULIA

STARTLING new developments in the American national security doctrine have shaken the foundations of thinking about fear and safety in the world. Chiefs of intelligence agencies in the US have released a report claiming that cyber attacks and cyber espionage pose a greater danger than conventional terrorist groups like the al-Qaeda. The speed with which Internet-based technology is evolving and the alacrity with which various state and non-state actors are trying to leverage it for their own self-interests is baffling even to an advanced web-based great power like America, not to mention less technically adept nations.

Concern over the rising vulnerability on the Internet has not only spooked the US defence establishment, but also spilled into American diplomacy vis-à-vis China. Last month, the US National Security Adviser, Thomas Donilon, explicitly exhorted China to cease its "unprecedented wave of cyber attacks" against America and escalated the issue by warning that inaction and complicity of the Chinese government in incessant hacking of American critical infrastructure would "risk our overall relations."

This missive followed a series of dramatic revelations about a nerve command centre in Shanghai -- an imposing white government building believed to be run by the People's Liberation Army -- being the fountainhead of Chinese incursions into American Internet communication systems. Predictably, Beijing responded to Western allegations as "groundless accusations" and added that "China itself is highly vulnerable and among the most victimised by cyber attacks." For an authoritarian regime to publicly admit that its own computer networks are being hacked by hostile powers is a significant revelation, besides being a clever alibi. It also reconfirms that we are living in an Internet-determined world order where conflict, cooperation and strategy are all inevitably tied to individual and group applications of Information Technology (IT).

Cyber war capacities are not domains of only big guns like China

and the US. They are spreading horizontally to middle and even minor powers. Notwithstanding all the punitive Western sanctions and curbs on its scientific progress, Iran is a fast learner that has announced its arrival on the stage with some spectacular "takedowns" of enemy targets over the last year. In August 2012, a deadly virus infected the information network of the Saudi Arabian oil major, Aramco, and erased data on three quarters of its corporate computers. All the infected screens were left displaying an image of a burning American flag.

It was a symbolic counter-attack by Iran against the economic lifeline of a US ally and a deadly rival in the Middle East, and also a payback for the Stuxnet virus which America and Israel had deployed a few years ago to disable Iran's nuclear centrifuges.

In September 2012, Iran is said to have scored another cyber home run with a series of sequential Internet

conflictual East Asia.

Eventually, in the absence of any multilateral agreement at the level of the United Nations to moderate and set limits on cyber war, there could a balance of power and a "balance of terror" that will set in to regulate the murky business of hacking and destroying Internet assets of adversaries. Governing cyber weaponry is one of the cutting-edge problems facing the international community, on par with emerging issues like weaponisation of outer space and unmanned aerial attack drones.

While many governments are engaged in building up their cyber warfare sinews and flexing them against opponents, there are also some innovative and positive efforts to harness the Internet to deepen democracy inside nation-states. The government of Iceland has set an extraordinary example by deploying Web 2.0 technologies to draft its new, progressive constitution.

From an instrument of human and social will into an all-encompassing parallel world with its own order and breakdowns, the Internet is the defining feature of contemporary global relations.

attacks on computers of giants of the American financial industry, including JPMorgan and Wells Fargo, slowing down the overwhelmed servers and denying customers access to banking services. These targets were fair game for the Iranians, as they are subject to a financial embargo by the same Western banks. Tit-for-tat is an old and essential ingredient of statecraft, but what the Internet is doing is to widen the scope for damaging one's foes without having to break one's military personnel and hardware into a sweat or spill blood.

Even in North Korea -- which was recently visited by the CEO of Google Inc., Eric Schmidt, to open the eyes of what he called the "last really closed country in the world" to the benefits of the Internet -- cyber war is being added to conventional and nuclear abilities. A devastating set of cyber attacks on South Korea's vital information nodes and corporate computers are being attributed to Pyongyang, raising the temperature in an already

Dubbed as the world's first "crowd-sourced constitution, it was put together through citizen comments and suggestions via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. It was direct democracy at its very best, with nearly 4,000 concrete inputs of Icelanders (no small figure in a country whose population is merely 300,000) pouring into a Constitutional Council, which then constructed the document that would be the basis for the laws of the land. Online debates and live webcasting of constitutional proceedings in Iceland have redefined the very meaning of participatory democracy.

If cyber war is looming like an unshackled monster, Iceland is offering an inspiration for a benign and constructive turn with web-enabled "netocracy." Citizen empowerment is proceeding apace in many corners of the world via the Internet.

Democracies that were suffering from a growing disconnect between average people and their elected represen-

tatives now have a powerful technological medium with which to increase accountability of rulers to the ruled. In India, we are moving in a direction of eliminating human intermediaries in service delivery on the premise that public goods can be disseminated with less corruption and more transparency if they are handled on web-based platforms. The Internet is thus reorganising the basic bond between rulers and ruled in democracies.

Dictatorships are, of course, already trembling at the potential for Internet-based revolts sweeping them away.

Yet, we must avoid over-enthusiasm about the worldwide web as a means for proliferating human freedom. Evgeny Morozov's book, *The Net Delusion*, cautions against "cyber-utopianism" and reminds us that the Internet is an open access medium that democratisers and totalitarians can both use at cross purposes to each other. The cyber war between states can also manifest in the form of a cyber war within states, i.e. among contentious factions and sections of society. The war that is shattering Syria today, for example, has all the makings of a full-fledged Internet-driven civil conflict fuelled by propaganda from transnational media outlets like Al Jazeera.

The current Internet era is thus a mixed bag, illuminating the old adage that technology is neither good nor bad in itself but the proof of the pudding lies in its application. Growing Internet penetration rates across the planet in the next decade will only intensify the struggles, both destructive and constructive, for competition and cooperation via the worldwide web. From an instrument of human and social will into an all-encompassing parallel world with its own order and breakdowns, the Internet is the defining feature of contemporary global relations. It is a historic challenge to try and shape it for collective good.

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