

How many more national mourning days?

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THE catastrophic news of a building collapse in Savar on April 24, killing more than three hundred people with many more still trapped in the rubble, flashed across the international media within hours of the incident. The mainstream networks in the US showed the heart wrenching scenes of screaming workers bewailing loss of their dear ones, while others were being rescued from the rubble.

When reporting the calamity the media did not hesitate to mention that this was the third building disaster in a year that caused loss of lives of mainly garment workers working in unsafe factories. As a punch line, the reports reminded viewers that Bangladesh exports garments produced by these ill-fated workers to the US and European countries.

This latest disaster happened, as we have been told, because the eight-story building that housed several garment factories and other businesses continued to function despite tell-tale signs of an impending collapse, and warnings from building inspectors. It has also been reported that the garment factory workers were asked by their employers to continue to report to work on pain of losing their wages if they did not comply.

We can explain an earthquake and the consequent damage as an act of God. But even in an earthquake people have some room to run, but not in this case. This was an implosion caused by human neglect, stark disregard for human life, and collusion of the corrupt and the greedy. On the one hand we have a burgeoning industry that is fixated on competitive international pricing by minimising production costs, and maximising profit. On the other we have a facilitating environment that has minimal oversight on work place hazards, workers' protection, and building codes and safety.

Had the Savar tragedy been the only one affecting our garment industry in recent times we could have accepted the standard explanation of an unavoidable accident, as in an earthquake. Had the building collapsed in a sinkhole we could have also accepted this as an unavoidable calamity. But how do you explain a calamity that was written large on the face of the edifice years before? To what do you attribute such gross defiance of warnings of a looming disaster? How do you justify throwing a helpless band of workers into a pit that was impossible to escape from?



The lives of the workers lost in these disasters cannot be brought back, but lives of countless others who work in these Dickensian places can definitely be changed with safe work places. This can happen only with the changes that are our international clients have been crying for, the changes that we have the means to enforce. All we need is the will. Otherwise, we may observe many more national mourning days.

cannot explain otherwise why the persons responsible for the Ashulia incident have yet to be punished.

We know that a large part of the competitiveness of Bangladesh garment industry comes from our so-called competitive wages, but what we as common people may not know is that a significant contribution to this competitiveness also comes from the preferential treatment on tariff that the majority of our importers in the US and European countries give us. Bangladesh was the United States' 46th largest supplier of goods in 2011. The US imported goods from Bangladesh worth \$4.9 billion in 2011, more than 80% of which was garments (woven and knit apparels).

Early this year the US was considering dropping Bangladesh from a list of developing countries that receive preferential trade access. This was in the wake of a garment factory fire in November that

killed 112 people, exposing the nation's poor working conditions. But even before the November 24 fire factory, the US administration had expressed its concerns for workers' rights and workers' safety in Bangladesh. The fire only intensified these concerns.

The US had agreed to postpone its decision until spring this year provided Bangladesh showed some positive signs of improvement. And now, with this disaster striking the industry in less than six months, one need not speculate much how more intense these concerns will be and what shape these will take.

In the interest of the country at large, if not just for the victims of this avoidable disaster, it is imperative that repairs be made. These repairs would start with stern legal steps against the individuals and firms responsible for these humanly caused disasters. These need to be followed by putting in place strict standards of building and work place safety codes for the manufacturing industry, routine annual inspections, and a compact with the industry on its own implementation of the safety programme.

After years of entrepreneurial work by the garment industry in Bangladesh the country became the second-largest supplier after China. But we can retain this status or even outstrip China only after assuring our clients that disasters like Savar and Ashulia will not happen again. This assurance

will come from tangible and visible improvement of work places and workers' safety, and workers' rights. This gain is a national gain, and it should not be allowed to be frittered away because some scoff at laws, and collusion (if any) between them and the powers that be.

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The writer is a former World Bank Staff member. He lives in Washington DC.

Boston attacks

Shocking, puzzling and discomforting

TAJ HASHMI

IT is heartening that within five days of the latest terror attacks in Boston, by Friday (April 19), the FBI and police succeeded in identifying the suspect brothers, killing one of them and arresting the younger suspect by literally closing down the city. Despite the finger-crossings, prayers and tweeting by Muslims: "Please don't be a Muslim," the suspects happen to be two young Muslim migrant brothers from Chechnya, Tamerlan Tsarnaev (26) -- killed in police action -- and the 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, now in FBI custody.

The least expected lethal explosions on the finish line of the Boston Marathon are not only shocking and horrific, but are also disconcertingly puzzling for security practitioners, analysts, law-enforcers and ordinary people across the board.

There is nothing mystifying about the use of IEDs or homemade bombs by some "homegrown" terrorists in an American city. There is nothing baffling about the fact that after several failed attempts in the recent past, this time they succeeded in killing some innocent people, including an eight-year-old boy, in the heart of an American city.

The "eerie" silence from the perpetrators of the attacks apparently confirmed that no ideologically committed organised terrorist group -- such as al-Qaeda -- was behind the attacks, as organised terrorists (unlike ordinary criminals) do not shy away from owning and bragging about the mayhem they cause to innocent civilians among their actual or purported enemies.

However, there are some unresolved questions and loose ends of the story. Why any Chechen Muslim should be angry with America is mindboggling. This is not so because Chechen Muslims are anything but peace-loving, non-violent people; but because of the US government's pro-Chechen stand since the beginning of their uprising against Russia in 1994. By 2004, America's lukewarm and tacit support for Chechen fighters turned wholehearted and open. The US ambassador to Russia publicly declared in

the Russian capital that his country considered the Chechen struggle as "legitimate" struggle for freedom, not as an Islamist terrorist problem.

Since the Russian annexation of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia in the North Caucasus in the 1850s, the region -- especially Chechnya -- has never totally accepted Russian hegemony since the days of the Czar and Soviet Union. Despite the breakup of the Soviet Union into 15 states in the early 1990s, tiny Chechnya (1.3 million people in 6,679 sq miles) has remained a part of Russia. By 1994 Chechnya emerged as the biggest internal security threat to Russia. Chechens and al-Qaeda-backed foreign terrorists have been fighting the Russians and have killed more than

have already declared Chechnya as the base of a New Caliphate in the vast Caucasian / Central Asian region.

In the backdrop of Chechnya's al-Qaeda connections, America's open support for Chechen rebels against Russia does not seem to be a good security strategy. It is anything but a reckless assumption that by its open support for the Chechen fighters (who could be genuinely anti-Russian freedom fighters) the US would get some diplomatic dividends at the cost of Russia. Americans should never lose sight of the fact that al-Qaeda considers the US and its allies in the East and West as its main adversaries. Last but not least, Americans should also realise that their selective support for al-Qaeda and its ilk -- as they have been doing in Syria against the Assad regime -- would eventually backfire.

Now, to turn to the Boston carnage and what is happening in its aftermath. It is too early to conclude if the Tsarnaev brothers, from the Chechen diaspora in America, who are believed to be the main perpetrators of the attacks, are so-called "lone-wolves" or disoriented, unassimilated and angry loners who become terrorists, or they are members of the Chechnya-based "New Caliphate" run by al-Qaeda. Although al-Qaeda or whosoever is possibly behind these attacks has not yet owned up, it is still enigmatic, hence discomforting to all peace loving people in America and elsewhere. They have reasons to worry whether there are Chechen and / or al-Qaeda hands behind these attacks.

In sum, an effective counterterrorism is neither foolproof nor does it always bring any light at the end of the tunnel of fear. America needs balanced diplomacy with long-term vision, and strategies. It cannot make its Homeland secured by making other countries/regions insecure by condoning and even promoting terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, against Russia, Syria or Iran.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

The marathon of hope



A S I lay awake listening to the nocturnal sounds of Dhaka, images of the Boston bombings kept replaying in my mind ... a perfect spring day in Boston's Copley Square with happy crowds cheering the marathon runners, when all hell broke lose. Two blasts rocked the streets near the finish line, killing three people and injuring and maiming more than two hundred and sixty.

The FBI and Boston Police swiftly traced the two suspects -- Tsarnaev, 26, was killed in a police shoot out, while his brother Dzhokhar, 19, was wounded and captured. The two brothers of Chechen origin had been living in the United States for more than a decade. Reportedly they got their ideas about how to build a bomb with a pressure cooker from an online al-Qaeda magazine used for recruitment and radicalisation.

As expected, the media is abuzz with details of the incident. Op-eds, TV talk shows and internet blogs are busy presenting theories and counter theories about why and how the two accused committed this outrageous act of terror. Much of the news is focusing on one crucial question: what motivated the brutal killings? Since the crux of the media debate hinges on what we do not know rather

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than on what we know, it would be presumptuous to offer any answers or even pretend that I have any.

However, given the turbulent world we live in, one cannot remain impervious to terrorist acts and their cascading effects on citizens. Today, terrorism is not just a front-page news headline we read about -- it has arrived at our doorstep and invaded our comfort zone. Movie theaters, shopping malls, places of worship, streets and even schools have now become targets of terror. Whether these acts of terror are perpetrated by Islamic extremists or white supremacists or psychopaths, they all result in the loss of precious lives and cause an erosion of trust in society.

The overriding force guiding the terrorists seems to be hatred. They kill at will to establish their racial or religious superiority or to promote a misdirected ideology. Their actions may be motivated by some delusional form of Islamic fanaticism or right wing extremism or separatism, but none of these "isms" can explain how killing children and innocent men and women helps further their cause.

For ordinary citizens it matters little what ideology (or lack of one) is driving the senseless violence. They go about their daily business with the primary purpose of ensuring a peaceful, secure life for their children and families. Unfortunately, they have very little control over those who, in the process of establishing their narrow vision of society, are driving the world to destruction and chaos.

Most terrorist acts may seem senseless but they end up spreading anger and discord. Common people are pulled into the vicious cycle of "them against us" resulting in rifts and divisions which undermine social cohesion and stability. But isn't that exactly what the terrorists want -- to stifle rational voices and strip our open societies of freedom and orderly discourse?

There are no definitive answers to the question of how governments and free societies should arrest the threat of micro-terrorism, particularly when it is constantly mutating. Improved intelligence and surveillance may reduce the frequency of attacks but they do little to minimise the stress common people face. Perhaps one way of dealing with the fear and anxiety caused by terror is to restore the trust that people have lost in their fellow human beings.

Tragic as the bombings have been, Boston may have taught us some valuable lessons. The entire city was involved in the hunt for the fugitive Chechen brothers thus reinforcing the concept of "community resistance" to terrorism. Boston also reiterated the fact that tragedy cannot diminish us but makes us stronger, if faced with courage and determination. In addition, President Obama's reassuring address to the nation within hours of the tragedy demonstrated how elected leaders could have a calming effect in a turbulent situation.

It may be appropriate to end this column with the inspiring story of the origin of the marathon. The event commemorates the fabled run of the ancient Greek soldier and messenger Pheidippides. Legend states that he was sent from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens to announce that the Persians had been defeated in Marathon, but were preparing to attack Athens. It is said that he ran 25 miles through a rugged terrain and burst into the Athenian assembly with the news and then collapsed. Pheidippides thus aided the Athenian victory, which marked the beginning of a Golden Age of vibrant democracy and intellectual freedom in Greece.

Perhaps, like Pheidippides, each one of us must run our own marathon of endurance to ensure that the ideals of pluralism and tolerance are preserved in the world.

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