

Nabbing new militant leader

Restates need for constant vigilance

ARREST of yet another leader of a potential militant outfit reemphasises the fact that the phenomenon of religious extremism and militancy cannot be completely done away with. But, happily too, the arrest shows that being constantly on guard and with the agencies keeping constantly honed in antennae, these outfits can be anticipated and their germination nipped in the bud.

Mufti Jasimuddin, purportedly the head of an extremist outfit, Ansarullah Bangla Team, was arrested on August 12 along with 30 of his associates from Barguna. He confessed to advocating extremist views. And it seems that he is more inclined to Anwar al-Awlaki, the late spiritual head of al Qaeda, rather than bin Laden.

There are a few lessons that we must draw from the arrests and the information that have emerged from the initial interrogation of Mufti Jasim. Firstly, these groups are no longer operating only in the remote rural areas but are also focusing on the major urban regions of the country. Secondly, it is the educated and the affluent that they are trying to motivate and inculcate with the idea of so-called Jihad. And thirdly, they have added finesse to their operation by creating networks rather than structured organisation.

The arrest demonstrates that there are extremist groups in Bangladesh that draw ideological motivation from international terrorist organisations. However, it is their organic linkage that the agencies must prevent occurring. The information should be used by the agencies to rehash their plans to combat the growth of religious extremism and thwart their effort to add to their ranks.

Egypt sliding into chaos

Collective wisdom should prevail

WEDNESDAY'S crackdown on the pro-Morsi anti-government demonstrators by Egypt's military-backed interim government has spilled the blood of scores of civilians.

We deprecate this action by the Egyptian authority along with the rest of the global community who has universally denounced it.

The high-handed action has not helped to quell the demonstrations, much less restore order in Egypt. On the contrary, the bloody raid by the Egyptian security forces, though it temporarily succeeded in dismantling the camps where the demonstrators had been staging their sit-in from, has only caused to trigger a widespread violence in different parts of Cairo as well as all across the country. The measures like dawn to dusk curfews and the one month's state of emergency as imposed by the authority to bring the emerging situation under control may not help the situation. Rather it will lend further credence to the suspicion that the present military rulers of Egypt might want to continue their grip on state power as long as they can.

If the interim Egyptian authority is really willing to pursue the path of reconciliation as it had pledged upon assuming power after July 3 coup, it must stop further blood-letting and create the condition for inclusive settlement among all the political stakeholders.

The international community, the US in particular, has a crucial role to play in saving Egypt from sliding into a civil war. Given the influence it has on the Egyptian military, it is hoped, the US will wield its influence to usher the country on to the path of peace and democracy.

Laying foundation stone of RNPP at this stage?

ABDUL MATIN

IT is reported (DS, August 8) that the prime minister is due to lay the foundation stone of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) at Pabna in the first week of October, kicking off its construction work.

Traditionally, the foundation stone of a project is laid when the actual civil works start at the site.

It may be mentioned here that according to the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Regulatory Act 2012, no construction can start at the plant site before approval of the preliminary safety analysis report (PSAR) and issue of the construction permit by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Regulatory Authority (BAERA). Any construction at the plant site without the permit will be a violation of the regulatory Act.

Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) signed a contract with NIAEP-ASE of Russia for preparation of a feasibility report in last June. The report is due to be submitted by the end of December 2014. The submission of the feasibility report will be followed by several essential activities before we can start the actual construction of the plant. The phases include (i) evaluation of the feasibility report (3 months), (ii) preparation of the bidding documents (3 months), (iii) preparation of bid documents (3 months) (iv) evaluation of the bid documents, contract negotiations and contract signing for the construction of the plant (6 months), (v) preparation of the PSAR (3 months), (vi) evaluation of the PSAR and issue of the construction permit (3 months).

If we add the minimum time frames of each phase shown in parenthesis, it comes to 21 months. This means, we cannot start any work at the site before October 2016.

It is apparent that the foundation stone of RNPP, if laid in October, will collect dust for at least three years before the actual start of construction. Will this premature act bring any benefit to the project or credit to the government?

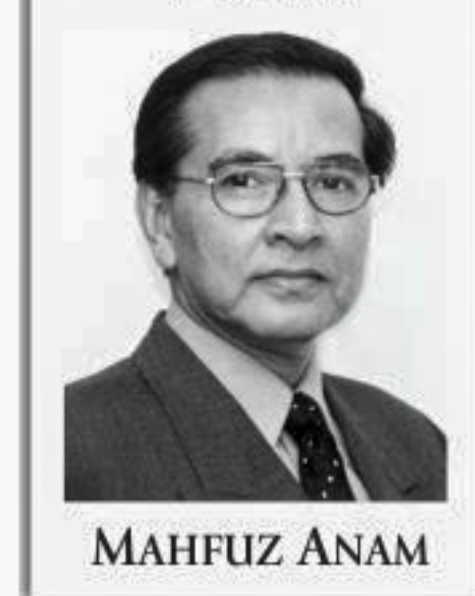
We know the prime minister sincerely wants to implement the project, but is she getting the correct advice on this matter? If she did, I have two simple questions to her advisers: (i) How could the construction of the plant start now without any contract and without any construction permit? (ii) How safe will the nuclear plant be, if we decide to violate the safety regulations before the start of construction of the plant?

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and author of "Rooppur & the Power Crisis."

Something that should seriously worry the PM

The incompetence of some of those who work for her is unbelievable

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

WITH such ministers, advisors and staff members, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina really does not need enemies. They are enough to embarrass, discredit and destroy her, her government and even her party.

Two recent incidents show that those who the PM have appointed/employed around her, are basically unused to the functioning of a government, have a time-server's mentality and are so fundamentally incompetent that they turn a perfectly good cause of the government into disaster. Whatever can be done with finesse, they prefer to do with arrogance, what can be done with logic they prefer force and what can be done legally they do violating or bending the law.

First, is the case of the billboards. Because of the manner in which it was done, whatever value there was of the content was lost, perhaps for the foreseeable future; an example of the process destroying the product.

The idea of going for a propaganda offensive was triggered when the prime minister's son declared that he had come to Bangladesh to help his mother counter the malicious lies being spread about his mother's government.

The Harvard consultants that the PM's son reportedly engaged may have talked about the political propaganda that occurs during the American presidential and other elections in which the mass media is used including billboards. Paying for the whole process must have also come up.

When this new initiative was approved for implementation then incompetence, rent-seeking (as opposed to rent-paying) mentality and power play set in and the billboard fiasco was born. What was patently a good idea became a PR disaster with consequences, the devastating nature of which will only be revealed in the polls, and not before.

Wasn't there a single person either in the PMO, or in the party who could raise the issue of illegality of the process? If there were none, then the PM should be extremely worried about the intellectual and moral bankruptcy that has occurred in her immediate proximity.

If on the other hand there were people who felt 'uncomfortable' at the process but did not dare to speak, then the PM has to address another type of problem- of how to create a system within her environs where differing (not dissenting, God forbid) views interplay.

Both the incapacity to think independently and the fear of expressing differing views are threats to efficient functioning of the PM's office. In fact the most serious criticism that is made of the present PMO is that it is either full of sycophants or of people who are basically professional but run incompetent lackeys, many of whom use the prestige of the office for influence peddling for personal gain.

The handling of the Odhikar report and the subsequent arrest of its secretary Adilur Rahman, are examples of incompetence at their devastating worst that has today brought the government to disrepute and the country to worldwide embarrassment. To have the UN, the US and EU banding together to express their concern is something Bangladesh did not deserve and which Sheikh Hasina's

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government should not have brought upon us.

This paper has covered the Hefajat gathering of May 5 and has extensively covered the events of that evening stretching into the early morning of the following day. We have carefully reported on the deaths occurring then. We did not at that time, and neither today, agree with the Odhikar's figures of 61 death.

We think the government had the right to ask for the names and addresses of the deceased, as was done in the information ministry's letter dated July 10. On receiving Odhikar's refusal a week later to share the information requested for, the ministry should have gone to the court seeking a redress in the matter. In our view government had a good case and the judiciary would, most probably, have directed Odhikar to comply.

Once again arrogance and incompetence came into play. After waiting for nearly a month, the Detective Branch of our police arrested Adilur Rahman, at 9.30 pm when he returned home with his wife and children during Eid celebrations.

Just consider the options that were open to the government:

1. Bringing him in for questioning during day;
2. Serving him with a legal notice specifying laws that oblige NGOs to share relevant information with the government;
3. Seeking a court order to procure the necessary information;
4. Formally and publicly (and not secretly) lodging a defamation case against Odhikar for distribution of false information and damaging the government's reputation.

5. Government could also have engaged a credible research organisation to analyse the various reports of Odhikar and reveal their inadequacies or slant or unfounded conclusions, as the government claims they were full of.

Not only was Adilur arrested, the government also prayed for his remand and got it, which thankfully the High Court rejected. We all know what happens in remand? Why for God's sake was Adilur being taken on remand? Was it to frighten him? Did the government think that it would force him to retract the report or make him 'confess' to his 'crimes'?

The move against Adilur was the result of both arrogance of power, lack of concern for rights of citizens and blundering ineptitude.

The Prime Minister must face the fact that today both her government and her party is so rife with incompetence (We are not referring to corruption as it is not our focus today) that they are unable to carryout simple tasks of doing their own PR or protecting themselves against, what they consider, inaccurate or even false claims of their "enemies".

To us, the latest two examples of her party and her government's actions reveal the serious vulnerability that Sheikh Hasina faces in addition to everything else that is stacking up against her.

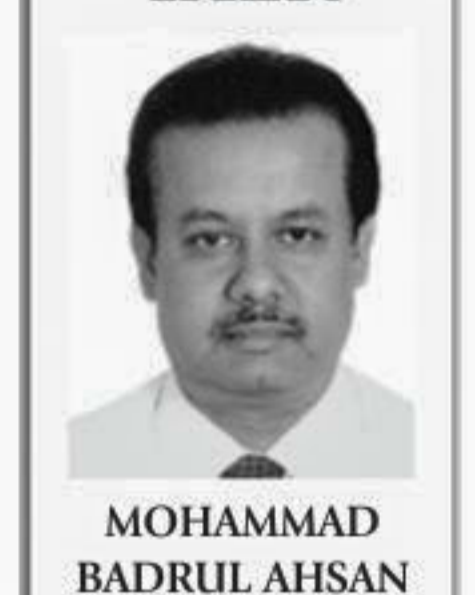
She is harvesting what she had sown early on her assumption of office. Her preference for the mediocre, the party henchmen, the sycophants and the underlings, instead of the plain speaking loyalist, has come home to haunt her at this crucial time when she is on the verge of facing the polls.

The writer is Editor, The Daily Star.

Note: With this article the writer re-launches his column which used to appear earlier.

Living in a Potemkin village

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

BETTER late than even later, the government decided to vacate the billboards whose owners and advertisers complained that their publicity spots were forcibly taken to promote political messages. In a nutshell, this is the story of the billboard blitzkrieg, which was devised to salvage the sinking popularity of this government. Instead it backfired and dragged the government deeper into the political hot water. The poet inside me howls how stained teeth have ruined a beautiful smile.

It could have been a perfect stroke of genius only if the planning exuberance was tempered with more cautious execution. If billboards were borrowed at the rate of 10,000 taka per week, roughly 2000 billboards would have cost the government 200 million taka for one week. Many of the billboard owners and their advertisers would have accepted the deal, though a few oinkers would have still oinked. That way at least what looked like a propaganda putsch would have been masked with some amount of legitimacy. The government could avoid the embarrassment that upended an ambitious campaign.

The mastermind(s) of this publicity campaign may have stretched it too thin, but the messages were mostly statements of facts. If this government has occasionally failed, it also occasionally succeeded. The billboard tunnels were created in the city to tell us that compelling truth. But the messengers drilled into our minds more than the messages, their tunnel mission making us wary of the pitfalls in their tunnel vision.

There is an informal fallacy in logic, which is called "Proof by assertion." It means that a proposition is repeatedly restated regardless of obvious contradictions. The billboards were installed to hit us in the face with the success stories of this government. They were to remind us of how much this government has achieved during its tenure and convince us at the same time that, if re-elected, this government would do no less if not more.

But the biggest damper in this heartfelt drive has been its harebrained implementation. A reverse spin on the Goebbelsian doctrine, it showed that truth can be rendered dubious by repeating it too many times. In the run up to the elections as and when they happen, the voters are going to grapple with their confusion. Which one should they remember more between the botched up billboards and the blighted messages written on them?

We don't know whose idea it was to go for this publicity overkill. We don't know if the government carried out any scientific study as to how they should have spaced out the billboards or worded the stories. What was the thought behind burying an entire city under the creaking burden of those billboards? Who figured it out that people were like raisins that soaked in propaganda water they should get plumper, juicier and softer with confidence and sympathy to vote for this government next time around?

The concept goes back more than two hundred years. In 1787 when Russian Empress Catherine II went to visit Crimea, her minister Grigory Potemkin tried to impress her



The main purpose of a Potemkin village is to use an impressive façade to hide an undesirable fact or condition. The billboard campaign of this government did the opposite; the façade couldn't hide anything but only made its embarrassment more pronounced.

by erecting fake settlements along the banks of the Dnieper River. The most recent example is when, in preparation for hosting the G8 summit in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland last July, large photographs were put up in the windows of closed shops in the town to give the appearance of thriving businesses for visitors driving past them.

The main purpose of a Potemkin village is to use an impressive façade to hide an undesirable fact or condition. The billboard campaign of this government did the opposite; the façade couldn't hide anything but only made its embarrassment more pronounced. It must be said again that a well-meaning opportunity has been lost because some people in the government failed to think.

By pulling down its advertisements the government has partly controlled the damage. It would have been more effective if those billboards were cleared on the day after those advertisements went up. By allowing people to see the messages for a longer time, the government upped the ante of having more people to remember its silly mistake.

The next best thing for the government is to identify those within its own ranks, those who are responsible for this futile propaganda stunt. Someone should pry into their skulls to understand how they believed that such a callow attempt to build popularity was going to work, when it was bound offend some people from the start! The success story, if anything, has only told a story of excess.

General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez was the president of El Salvador between 1931 and 1944. Once he had streetlamps draped in red paper to defeat an epidemic of scarlet fever. Ten days at least we lived in a Potemkin village draped in political slogans. Worked to a fever pitch, it expectedly defeated itself.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Overdue elections to municipalities

It is disappointing that more municipalities facing overdue elections are now in the same situation as the DCC's. The LGD secretary's explanation that delimitating the municipal boundaries is not yet complete and that delimitation is a "continuous process" is unacceptable. This excuse could be used by a government to delay elections indefinitely or at least until a more politically favourable time.

There is no reason that the timing of local elections should be decided by a separate level of government. The incorporation acts for city corporations should include a schedule for the regular holding of elections outlining term length and fixed election dates. Voters and candidates could prepare for the next elections ahead of time and elected officials would know how long they have to implement their programmes. Even better would be coordinating the staging of all local elections nation-wide at the same time for a more efficient use of resources.

Neil Taylor
 On e-mail

Disclose exact death figure

According to the government statement, a total of 11 persons were killed during the daytime anarchy on May 5 and none was killed when Hefajat men were flushed out by law enforcers from Motijheel in the capital. HRW in a report said at least 58 people, including seven members of security forces died during May 5-6. The Odhikar report put the death toll at 61. Now we, the citizens of Bangladesh, have the right to know the accurate death figure.

Hasna Begum
 Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

JS election faces uncertainties

The national election scheduled for January 2014 is now facing uncertainty due to the rigid position of both parties regarding the issue of an interim government. Awami League has emphasised that elections in other democratic countries are being held under party governments, and not under non-party caretaker government.

While it is true, this is also true that very few of those countries' political parties have the level of mistrust and enmity like ours. So in order to have a fair election, we need a different election time government. The structure of it can be discussed between the two parties. On the other hand, BNP seems confident of winning the national elections due to their recent success in the city corporation elections. But they should understand that people voted them in desperation and discontent, not for their own qualifications. If they do come to power, they should not repeat the mistakes they made during 2001-2006.

Tauhidul Islam
 Dhaka

Corrupt employees in banks

Corporate organisations like banks are expected to be run with utmost care and professionalism to succeed in the business world. Capitalising on acute scarcity of jobs in the country, some corrupt bank officials recruit employees at various levels most of whom are inefficient and corrupt. Honest employees are marginalised and ultimately forced to surrender to the whims of the corrupt ones. The board of directors seems ignorant of all these happenings.

Will the authorities concerned look into this matter seriously and try to clean their banks of 'the dirt' that makes the work and life of honest and efficient employees so difficult?

Bulbul Habib
 On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Govt ads taken off from many," published on August 13, 2013

SM

Looks like Inu is taking lead of the propaganda ministry -- well, after all he is indoctrinated in Stalinist ideology!

Nantu

Yet we have to hear falsehoods from the highest level. What a pity! Who believes that there was agreement to use the spaces for a week? If that is true, then why was there such a hue and cry from the owners of the billboards occupied?

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

AL should take disciplinary action against those who indulged in this unholy job.

"AL won't take talks initiative" (August 14, 2013)

Nds

It is good to know that AL does not believe in taking any initiative but prefer to get initiated by others.

Bangali

AL cannot take initiative because they want to organise their blue print election.

Nantu

Looks like good sense is going to prevail...