

Why US should not bomb Syria!

The Felani verdict Justice was not served

THE acquittal by a special Indian court of a BSF soldier in the Felani killing case comes as a huge surprise for people on both sides of the India-Bangladesh frontier. One would have expected justice to be served in a case where brutality had come to be of essence. The young Felani's indiscretion might have been trying to cross over back into Bangladesh from India. But what did upset sensibilities in Bangladesh and also in India was the callous manner in which the young woman was shot dead. The sight of her hanging dead from the barbed wire at the border spoke volumes about the nature of her death. Simply stated, she did not need to be killed. The BSF personnel certainly had ample time to detain her rather than shoot her.

Felani's family as well as many others in this country are not happy with the verdict. In similar manner, the Indian rights organization MASUM has made it clear that justice has not been served in the case and that it is considering challenging the verdict in the Indian Supreme Court. A rather encouraging note emerging from the announcement of the verdict is that the higher authorities of the BSF might reconsider it owing to the 'extra-sensitive' nature of the case.

One will keep fingers crossed. Even so, there is the very justified feeling that the judgment was not fair, that the acquittal of the soldier Amiya Ghosh could now serve as a precedent for similar tragic happenings in the future. That should not come to pass.

G20 talks

Sharp division surfaces over Syria

RESIDENT Obama has been under pressure at the G20 summit to back off from authorising a military strike on Syria. It is not only Russia and China who oppose the move, indeed going by vibes of the meeting, the European Union and BRIC countries also joined in to have US desist from any drastic action out of apprehension that it would hurt the global economy and push up oil prices.

The meeting taking place at St. Petersburg saw the office of the UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon issue the statement "there is no military solution." Despite the best attempts of the US administration to get the UN Security Council to authorise a military response to the alleged-gas attack by the Syrian regime, such an outcome appears increasingly unlikely. With Moscow adamant on vetoing any resolution that favours the use of force against Assad regime, the US is left to pull together a coalition outside of the UN.

Such an attempt would help exacerbate what slim chance there is of attaining peace in the war-torn country. We strongly believe that war is not the answer. What with the horrendous loss of life and the continued displacement of millions of Syrians, there cannot be a lasting peace without a negotiated settlement. And such settlement must be overseen by the UN that would preside over a lasting and workable peace plan to restore peace in the troubled country.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, President Obama was in St. Petersburg, Russia, to attend the G-20 Summit. The ostensible reason was to talk global economics, but the real reason was to see if could bring the top world leaders to support his attempt to teach Syria a lesson. In spite of his warning to President Assad never to use any of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons, the US had evidence that Syria had used the deadly Sarin gas to murder 1,400 of its citizens. Assad had therefore crossed an imaginary 'red line' drawn by Obama earlier, in his fight against rebels. Obama is enraged and wants to punish Syria through a proportionate air strike to deter Assad from repeating such misadventure. The UN Security Council, which is the appropriate body to authorise such a strike, is acting 'impotent' as US knows that any such proposal would be vetoed by Russia and China who support Assad and who are permanent members of the Council.

Earlier in the US, after a special briefing to a select Senate panel, he had obtained a green light to 'shock and awe' President Assad. But this is to be voted on by the full Senate. The US House of Representatives is still debating the president's proposal. Obama at least wants the support of the US legislature in his adventure. Meanwhile, the British parliament was moved by Prime Minister Cameron to join Obama in the attack on Syria. But the parliament members dissented. So the UK cannot help Obama. The matter is now being hotly debated in the French parliament, the remaining permanent member of the UN Security Council. The outcome is yet to be known. Be that as it may, President Obama seems to be in a serious bind. In spite of his isolation he needs to decide whether he will go ahead and bomb Syria. He needs to take face saving action.

But there are several good reasons why the US should not bomb Syria in retaliation for the chemical attack. The cardinal principle in handling such sensitive matters is that it should not do anything more harmful than what has been done by the opposite party, in this case Syria. This will only aggravate the situation. Any reaction has to be proportional and effective. Without the final report of the UN inspectors on the chemical attacks on hand and with two of the five UN Permanent Security Council members ready to cast veto on a US attack, it could indeed be foolhardy for the US to unilaterally move ahead on its bombing. Already, Russia has moved its warships to the eastern Mediterranean close to Syria to probably counter US belligerence. In such a combustible atmosphere it would not be wise for Obama to take any disproportionate measures against Syria now.

The US plan is to perhaps target Syrian chemical stockpiles. These are located within the vicinity of big cities like Damascus where civilian population reside. Any attempt to degrade Syria's chemical arsenal could lead to greater loss of civilian lives and casualties. There is also the possi-



bility of looting of chemical weapons by unauthorised people in the mayhem that may follow. If, however, the US targets Syrian infrastructure, then such attacks would degrade the ability of the Syrian rebels to counter attack Assad's forces in the future. In any case, there is always the possibility that aerial bombing by the US will further inflame anti-US sentiments along Arab streets.

If the US goes ahead with its plan to attack Syria from the air without proper sanction of the United Nations, the world will only condemn the US for its intransigence and disregard for the United Nations. In a dinner at Saint Petersburg last week emotions flared up among the leaders. President Putin of Russia led the verbal attack on Obama and there was a chorus of supporting voices. Only Turkey, Britain, France and Canada sided with the US.

It is important to remember that Syria is not Iraq or Libya. Assad has powerful friends like Russia and China. Even Iran has close links with him. Any unilateral action by the US could trigger intransigent behaviour by these friends of Syria. Each or any one of them could start behaving unilaterally in the future.

One of the precedents that the US is wont to quote is the unilateral action it took against Serbia in Kosovo in 1999. At that time too, the UN Security Council did not endorse US unilateral action. However, the Independent International Commission on Kosovo had later given a verdict that the US action at that time was 'illegal yet legitimate.' It did get a clean chit for its action in Kosovo. Will there be any such verdict in favour of US forthcoming, for its action in Syria?

Although relations between US and Russia have not deteriorated to the level that they were at during the days of the Cold War, President Putin has made it abundantly clear that Russia is not likely to let any US action in Syria go unchallenged. Russia has vital interests in Syria. The port of Lattakia is host to Russian naval ships. Any unilateral action of the US will be resisted and tension between US and Russia is likely to be ratcheted up.

It is interesting to note that bombing of Syria is not the only option available to the US now. There are several others which need to be considered. The US could make a concerted effort to persuade Russia and other great powers to push all parties including Assad to immediately cease hostilities. It should at the same time ensure that the supply of arms and ammunition be stopped to all feuding parties in Syria. This should then be followed up by negotiations without pre-conditions. Another option available to the US is to consider arming the rebels who are moderate in their views about a post Assad regime. Instead of 'shock and awe,' the US might consider 'arm and shame' as eminent US columnist Thomas Friedman suggested recently.

At the moment, Obama finds himself in a corner. This is perhaps because he did not consider getting his concept of 'crossing the red line' duly endorsed by the major players in Syria. It was a typical Rambo style assertion. In the real world such things can often fall foul of rational behaviour. Obama needs to play his cards cleverly and prioritise his available options. Huffing and puffing now is only making him out of breath. It is endangering the fragile international order. A Syria without Assad is only becoming a receding target.

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Then who killed Felani?

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

FELANI has been killed twice. The first time was in the early hours of January 7, 2011, by bullets fired from BSF rifles, and her lifeless body left to hang on the barbed wire fence that cordons the territory of India from that of Bangladesh. It was sometime before her dead body was removed from that state and eventually handed over to the BGB. That sordid and gruesome picture continues to ruffle the collective conscience of the people of Bangladesh, except perhaps those who explain away such killings as normal happenings on the border. There was widespread condemnation by Indian human rights groups too to bring the killer/s to justice.

The second time she was killed was on September 6, 2013. This time not by the bullet of a trigger happy BSF soldier but by the verdict of the special court, set up by the BSF to try the lone accused charged with the killing. This verdict perhaps will continue to hurt our conscience even more and for even longer.

The said special court passed the verdict on September 6, setting scot-free the accused. Constable Amiya Ghosh, the only accused in the killing, could not be found guilty because of "inconclusive and insufficient" evidence against him.

Admittedly, not all judgments reflect the wisdom of the court. And the judge has to deliver his verdict based on the evidences, material and circumstantial, produced before the court. We wonder if everything was done to serve the cause of justice by those who brought the alleged killer to trial.

Let us revisit the facts. First, Felani was shot and killed by some person/s of BSF's Choudhuryhat camp while trying to cross the barbed-wire fencing at Anantapur border point in Kurigram's Phulbarhi Upazila, in Bangladesh.

Second, India had expressed regret at the killing of Felani. And this was done at no less a forum than the two-day Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting between the home secretaries of the two countries in Dhaka on January 19, 2011. This statement is an acknowledgement of the crime perpetrated by the BSF soldier/s of that particular camp.

Third, it was the Indian authorities who started the trial on August 13 following widespread demands to bring to book the person responsible for the killing.

So why, may we ask, was there no credible evidence? After all, a minor girl was killed in broad daylight near a BSF camp. And the only people wielding weapons were the soldiers of the BSF camp. Whose job was it to produce the 'credible' and 'conclusive' evidence to see that justice was done?

And what will be upshot of all this? Felani's family will continue to bleed at the verdict, which admittedly, has not surprised many in Bangladesh; BSF will take cue from the impunity; and our leaders will rue the fact that the optimism they had expressed regarding justice for Felani was premature and misplaced.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

For Israel, a US strike is a no-brainer

DANIEL NISMAN

FOR the past two weeks the Syrian conflict has put the Jewish state on an emotional roller coaster. It began with the massive chemical attack which occurred four hours' drive from Tel Aviv and continued with the debate over military intervention which prompted Bashar al-Assad and his allies to threaten retaliation against Israel.

The Assad regime, Hezbollah and their loyalists in Gaza have tens of thousands of rockets pointed at Israel, with the trigger for much of that arsenal located in Tehran. Combine that with Assad's apparent willingness to gas his own capital and you've got enough of a threat to send Israelis scrambling to grab gas masks and ready their bomb shelters.

The tensions in Israel culminated in one of the Israel Defense Force's largest antimissile battery deployments and a reserve call-up. Those tensions dropped almost immediately -- along with the jaws of many Israelis -- when President Obama announced on August 31 that he would refer the decision to strike Syria to Congress.

Obama's decision has given Israel a window to contemplate the risks and benefits of foreign intervention. But the frenzy that plucked people off the beach, out of coffee shops and into gas-mask lines shouldn't fool anyone.

Israelis understand the risks of even limited intervention more than most, and are willing to brave those dangers to achieve the greater goal of smashing the Iranian axis and recalibrating stability in the region.

As Washington debates ground troops, time frames and end-games, Israel has found creative ways to get the message across to its enemies that even a minor provocation could result in their outright destruction.

On August 22, anti-Assad jihadists in Lebanon fired four rockets into northern Israel, causing minor damage and no casualties. The Israeli army responded the following day with an air strike against a secular, pro-Assad Palestinian militant group a few kilometers from the bunker of Hezbollah's chief, Hassan Nasrallah, in southern Beirut.

This peculiar choice of targets wasn't a mistake. It was a message to the Assad regime that any provocations-by-proxy would be met with a heavy-handed response.

For Israel there is no such thing as a "limited strike" or "punishment" when it comes to deterrence, and Israeli leaders have openly threatened to topple the Assad regime or destroy Hezbollah's infrastructure in Lebanon.

These aren't empty threats. Israeli fighter-bombers are

as trained in carrying out multiple strikes as they are in evading Syria's sophisticated air defense systems. Adding to the punch are Israel's unparalleled intelligence capabilities in Syria -- which allowed it to insert a Jewish spy named Eli Cohen to become chief adviser to Syria's minister of defense in the 1960s; to uncover its alleged ultra-secret nuclear reactor in 2007; and to intercept initial communications apparently depicting Assad regime involvement in the August 21 chemical attacks in Damascus.

For now, this deterrence is all that is stopping Assad and Hezbollah from drawing Israel into the conflict. Both parties failed to retaliate against reported Israeli air strikes against Hezbollah-destined weapons convoys in Syria since January, or the testing of a dummy ballistic missile in the Mediterranean on September 3.

That test set off Russian alarms over a possible cruise missile strike, but the silence in Beirut, Damascus and Tehran could be heard all the way from Jerusalem.

The prevalent assessment in the Israeli government is that Hezbollah and the Assad regime will not draw Israel into the conflict in response to limited foreign intervention. Iran needs Hezbollah's arsenal intact to respond to a possible Israeli assault against its nuclear programme, while Assad needs his military for the civil war.

But there is still plenty of room for miscalculations that could flip a limited US strike into a regional conflagration. Assad's proxies in Lebanon and Gaza have threatened to fire rockets at Israel in response to any strike, while Hezbollah is reportedly weighing the opening of its own front if it appears that intervention will threaten the Syrian regime's survival.

Such a move could complicate any American military campaign and possibly save the Assad regime -- Hezbollah's main arms supplier and political guarantor -- from imminent destruction.

Putting aside the cold calculations of warfare and strategy, the gassing of innocent families has evoked sympathies in Israel that surpass a decades-long rivalry with their Syrian neighbours. Bitter memories of the Holocaust still dominate Israel's national psyche and continue to fuel the country's efforts to maintain its powerful military.

As the fate of the region hangs in the balance of the US Congress debate, Israelis will be watching, fully aware of the risks, and hoping for an American strike.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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They want war anyway

They're not interested in talking peace; they want war. The U.S. has never listened to anybody before, they've always gone ahead and done what they pleased, and nothing will satisfy the U.S. and Israel (who is probably calling the shots) but to eliminate Syria. The U.S. has less reason for fighting this war than any war they've ever fought! They have a hard time even thinking up excuses for it.

I remember reading something once upon a time by a great columnist that my father used to like. He said if they'd put the presidents and kings and the politicians into the battlefield, you'd never have any more wars! Because it's not the people who make the wars who have to fight them. If the people who actually made the wars and got the world into wars had to themselves personally fight them, there'd never be another war!

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Ecuador's warning to Assange

This refers to the report, "Stop using embassy to ridicule politicians" (Sept.1). One tends to agree with the prime minister of Ecuador. Assange has rightly been chastised by Ecuador authorities. Assange should be more careful in his conduct, lest he loses the goodwill of Ecuador and is asked to vacate the embassy. Before ridiculing Australian politicians, Assange should make rules for transparency in running his WikiLeaks party. Earlier also, Assange wanted to hog the limelight in Snowden affair for arranging his asylum in Russia. Snowden seemed to have already made his arrangement for asylum in Russia when media reports said that he was in Russian embassy in Hong Kong and a deal seemed to have been struck to grant him asylum in Russia. One more miscalculation by Assange; it will not be a surprise when he is asked to vacate Ecuador embassy.

Deendayal M. Lulla
 Mumbai, India

Media focus on river-grabbing imperative

A news was published in TDS on 27th August on the grabbing of Buriganga's second channel. It is apparent that the administration and politically powerful land grabbers are destroying Buriganga's second channel through collusion. It is very surprising and disappointing to learn that the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Dhaka district said that it is an "old issue," and other responsible officials ignored their responsibility saying that all land-grabbing has happened before they joined. According to the local lawmaker and state minister for law, "No matter which party in power, ruling party men had always plundered the channel by turns." In this situation, we want continuous media focus on this issue because it will build strong public consciousness and create pressure on the administration to take proper steps to save Buriganga's second channel.

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Comments on commentary, "Frayed and feared vs free and fair," published on September 5, 2013

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

We are requesting Hasina not to conduct a mockery of election by keeping BNP at bay. And we are requesting Khaleda not to observe any destructive programme. In both cases the requests go in vain.

Abul Kashem

Sir, no preaching, advising or counselling will work. They will leave no stone unturned to stick to power for reasons best known to them.

SM

No party can stay in power when people reject them—does not matter how AL manipulates and uses the self-serving constitutional clauses. They can only use the tools of autocratic regimes in guise of democracy.

Ash C.

It's so frustrating and frightening to see that the country has been brought to this crucial stage just at the whim and greed of one all powerful person to remain in power—no matter what catastrophe this whim and greed will bring on this nation. People's wishes or the international communities' including the UN's views are of no concern to the 'all mighty'! God save Bangladesh.

Binodbangali

I think both parties are afraid of each other because of the mere fact that losing state power means facing political repression, and the fear is real for many who abused their position. Having the current parliament unresolved during the next elections is a tactical maneuvering by the PM.

"BNP to resist govt bid" (September 5, 2013)

Shahin Huq

Fear of losing the next general elections has gripped Awami League. But the question is how long can it remain in power without public support?

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Now BNP wants their guardians to solve our internal bitter disagreement. Shame on our political leaders who kneel down to international quarters to gain personal interest.