

Extremists regrouping

Hands-on policy needed to thwart them

AUGUST 17 was the 9th anniversary of the countrywide bomb attack that proclaimed the existence of the religious extremists. We are happy that there has not been any major terrorist activity since August 2004 and much of the credit must go to the proactive measures adopted by the law enforcing agencies, particularly Rab, for anticipating their plans and making timely arrests of members of the extremist groups.

However, that is no reason for the government or the other relevant agencies to be complacent. Arrest of a large number of extremist cadres is an indication that their numbers are not dwindling, and the attack on a police van and snatching away of three high profile JMB members in February this year is also a clear indication that they are not inactive. And this has been amply brought out in the media reports yesterday which confirm the fact that they are not only regrouping but also recruiting new members. And this is what begs the question.

While the state has been relatively successful in anti-extremist actions, much needs to be done as far as countering the extremist strategy. And unless there is a comprehensive action plan we are afraid it would be difficult to foil their efforts to motivate and recruit new members.

And while we want to impress upon the government that formulation and implementation of a long-term policy is long overdue, we would like to impress on the policy makers to take into consideration the important role of the media in this effort.

Jute packaging law

Implement it vigorously

TO boost the domestic use of jute, the government has begun drives through mobile courts and motivational campaigns. It's indeed a commendable effort taken to ensure implementation of the jute packaging law passed in 2010. Jute – once our main cash crop-has long been neglected. Supreme Court's order reinstating government decision to pack rice with jute bags should be implemented vigorously.

The main excuse for not following the law passed four year ago is that it is more expensive than plastic bags. This, however, cannot be a tenable ground as products made of jute are not only environment-friendly, their demand is also growing in geometric proportions worldwide. And in any case wide scale use of jute will bring down the production cost automatically.

The lives of some 4 million farmers and 150,000 workers depend on producing and manufacturing of goods made of jute. The public and private jute mills together produce around 40-50 crore pieces of sacks a year against the capacity of 100 crore. So due to a low demand half of the capacity is wasted. If the current law is implemented, then the existing market will expand.

It's imperative that a strategy to revive our jute industry be worked out quickly. Till now a vast number of our jute workers – failing to secure good price -fall prey to middlemen. Since they are essential elements for the overall growth of the industry, we must ensure that they get a fair price and the required subsidies to carry the industry forward.

How long will Palestine bleed?

ABDUL MATIN

THE history of Palestine is as old as history itself. Strategically located between Asia and Africa and connected to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, Palestine has shrunken into a tiny mass over time due to annexations by neighbours and finally by the artificial creation of Israel and, more sadly, the illegal occupation of its territories by the Zionist state. It is the birthplace of Judaism and Christianity with important historic shrines of the three Abrahamic religions including Islam.

Palestine has a turbulent history of conflicts. It has been occupied by numerous rulers including the Ancient Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, the British and now the Israelis. The Palestinians rule only small fragments of old Palestine.

According to Israel and the US media, all Palestinians are terrorists, the civilians are potential terrorists and the children future terrorists. Israel thus finds full justification for killing them indiscriminately. Palestinian land is under illegal occupation by Israel. Moreover, the Palestinians have been confined to their territory by blockades imposed by Israel and Egypt. They are not allowed to come out of their territory. They cannot market their products abroad. They cannot seek jobs outside. Their economy is thus choking and their backs are pushed against the wall. Even humanitarian aid cannot reach them without permission from Israel or Egypt.

Under such circumstances, what can the Palestinians do besides fighting to recover their occupied land or to establish their fundamental rights to travel abroad or trade with foreign countries? Gaza is ruled by an elected government. Their demands are genuine and include the withdrawal of Israel from their occupied territories, the return of all uprooted Palestinians to their homeland and the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State.

The Palestinians, thus, cannot be called terrorists. On the contrary, they have become the victims of state terrorism being perpetrated by Israel. The United States, under pressure from the Zionists who control most of its media and financial institutions and provide funds to the two major political parties, blindly supports Israel's aggression against Palestine while shedding crocodile tears for the civilian casualties. Encouraged by the US support and emboldened by the possession of a large nuclear arsenal, Israel again carried out genocide in Gaza since July 8. More than 1,900 Palestinians, of which 80% were civilians including children, have been killed.

Palestine started to bleed more than four millenniums ago. It bled with every change of guards since then. It is bleeding again due to repeated aggressions by Israel. How long will it bleed unnecessarily and when will the international community act decisively to stop this bloodshed?

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Limits to critique and dreams

RUBANA HUQ

SHAMIM Osman and Dr. Salina Hayat Ivy's episode in a private television channel aired a few days ago attracted more than a million hits in Youtube. While Shamim Osman attacked Ivy on corruption issues related to local governance, and while Ivy looked uncomfortable trying to answer his concerns, and while the accusations are yet to be proven, Shamim Osman insisted and asked if corruption issues could be addressed later, why would the seven-murder case repeatedly gain attention in the media? At the end of the debate, it became an issue of a comparative sin with Shamim Osman pushing his case through. In our land, a couple of dictums have already been established:

1)The strength of the vocal chords sways the opinion of the people. "Chorer boro gola": The thief has the loudest pitch is what counts in our psyche.

2)"Shokter bhokto, noromer jom": One needs to deliver the hardest punch in order to silence any opposing views forever.

3)"For jar, mulluk tar": Public perception is constructed and deconstructed with the use of force

These age-old sayings have held ground for the longest time possible. Man exerts all his will and power to preserve his body, and therefore ends up in a state of perpetual war of all against all (bellum omnium contra omnes). In such a state of conflict, nothing is just or unjust, or right or wrong. In absence of a common power, Force and Fraud become effective tools of power. Homo homini lupus (man's ferocity wins over all). Hobbes wins. But at the same time, ferocity is not an open-ended strategy and is mostly defeating after a prolonged period of time.

Talk show guests in our television channels should pay heed to these infallible dictums. In fact, the tendency to openly and casually critique has been long practiced in this country of ours. Proof lies in causal interviews, opinions shed by organisations that critique governance and economy with apparent authority. Basically, conversations in this land need to be responsibly restrained. Self-censorship must prevail over all. In all honesty, just rhetoric cannot win over reason anymore.

Just read an interview of a responsible researcher on the state of garments in our country. Interestingly enough, the organisation that he works for has provided a lot of insights into the sector in the last two years or so. Yet, the nagging post-script on the sector not doing enough is still his overarching point. How does a sector transform itself overnight? Are there any prescriptions for this? The inspections of Accord and Alliance are covered in the dailies on a regular basis. Yet, does anyone even know how much money it will take for a sector to remedy itself and that almost no assistance from any sector has been offered and that almost no support is being provided?

For the first time in 2014, exports have dipped by 4.14% in July. Woven garment export came down to \$1.21 billion in July from \$1.26 billion in the same month last year. Exports don't just drop. They drop when business shifts elsewhere. In spite of many academics and industry gurus predicting that exports will continue to soar, your columnist will still firmly maintain that the growth of Bangladesh's RMG sector is not taking the sustainability route and with every fire, every labour unrest, the strength of this sector will be facing fresh challenges.

These challenges cannot be fought alone. Academics and

researchers need to understand the business from an "up, close and personal" basis. Instead of just saying that the sector has loopholes, one would expect the researchers to come up with a list of suggestions that will help the industry. Problems have been identified. How about helping the economy with adequate suggestions? I would humbly suggest the think tanks to tow the following path:

- 1)Be present in an Accord or Alliance inspection;
- 2)Work on the corrective action plans and economics along with the management of the factory;
- 3)Invest in the feasibility of the remediation and in the study of profitability;
- 4)Advise the sector on the scope and relocation of the weak industrial units as new factories, already built and ready, are waiting for gas connections.

Industry critics need to understand that in spite of the unrest, the private sector has achieved unimaginable heights. It's time for everyone to also understand that sustainability does not lie in fire doors, fire resistive walls and sprinkler systems. Sustainability lies in promoting awareness about factories nurturing a care culture, which will embrace humane targets and engage in overall welfare of the workers. However strange it sounds, even Chinese manufacturers have launched a Health Enables Return (HER) project that promotes health, economic knowledge and women's rights. The business benefits include promoting the wellbeing and knowledge of the women workers along with reducing absenteeism and sick leave. One also needs to realise that leadership training needs to be provided.

This industry will never go places if expectations stay limited to papers that relate to simply hardcore compliance. The problem lies in lack of education and awareness. When merchandisers communicate in the weakest form of English and when our graduates come off with flying colours and yet not know the basic business English, when the Fashion Institute churns out graduates with little knowledge of the real world of garmenting, how can an industry take off overnight by just fixing doors, vents and walls?

A full education and counseling at management level is needed. Academics and researchers should aid the sector by devising ways to enlighten the owners of the industry. Otherwise, warnings and critiques will remain unheard and the industry stalwarts will always rise in defense, which will yield no meaningful return or improvement.

Your columnist walked the aisles of her factory just the other day and was wondering what would happen to the worker who would spend twenty years with the factory and then suddenly retire? Will a female garment worker never have a chance to dream? At a time like this, an old friend who has set up a private university for Asian women approached your columnist and has just proposed to take in female workers and provide them access training for a year for them to be inducted into the academic stream without any formal training.

By the time you read the column, your columnist will be interviewing seven women who are exceptionally talented and have proven their worth in the sewing lines. All seven of them will be interviewed and proposed as possible university entrants. This is where the dreams of an owner and a worker converge. This is one of the promising places where the sector wants to be. If your columnist can dream, so can her worker.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

Old habits die hard

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

Official files were carried to her residence for direction. Till today, she has not said a word by way of explanation to defend herself. It appears that she believes that she doesn't have to explain as if it is the dynasty's prerogative. Those who have followed its ways will not be surprised about it.

Jawaharlal Nehru allowed his daughter, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to run the government when he was in bed due to illness. On her part, she constituted a coterie to rule, which was an extra-constitutional authority.

I was then press officer of Lal Bahadur Shastri, minister without portfolio. Nehru had brought him back after sending him out of government under the K. Kamaraj plan, a ruse to oust Nehru's critics, particularly Morarji Desai and Jagjiwan Ram, from the government.

The prime minister's residence was a two-storey building, Nehru staying upstairs. Who from among the visitors would be allowed to go upstairs was dependent on Mrs. Indira Gandhi's decision. She did not like Shastri and would keep him waiting. Once, still working as press officer, I pointed out to Nehru's aide, T.N. Sheshan that Shastri, then out of office, was kept waiting. He told me not to get involved in such things as Mrs. Indira Gandhi did it intentionally. "This is politics," he said.

The ruling party may have changed at the Centre but the political culture has not. We are feudal in our outlook. This trait transcends other considerations. It does not go well with the democratic temperament. But it is there and has not undergone any perceptible change in the past. Those who come to power become dictators in action. Even when they profess that power is with the people they are using it figuratively and not realistically because they, a very few, rule the country.

The rule by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is no different. In fact, the Prime Minister's Office under him is more powerful than the ones before. The PMO is strong and sees to it that every bit of decision is ratified even before the files are sent to the home minister, who only signs on the dotted lines. Thus power has got concentrated in Modi's office. Therefore, one gets the impression that Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and Home Minister Rajnath Singh, however powerful, appear to have Modi's eyes and ears for their statements which look out of line with the party's thinking.

In all fairness, the Modi government should have

changed the administrative apparatus which has the Nehruvian stamp. After independence, Nehru, who had gone through long national struggle, set up paraphernalia which rejected liberalism that bound the different elements together. The BJP is different. None of its leaders went to jail during freedom struggle. The party should have reorganised the polity to suit their way of thinking and their way of doing things.

Alas, the BJP has adopted the same old administrative methods which give all the leeway to bureaucrats. The BJP should have moved the machinery to the direction which will work the way it wants. Perhaps the Modi government should have appointed an administrative reforms commission to suggest steps to implement the saffronised agenda. The administration is still stuck in the old ways, partly secular and partly democratic but mostly the withered ideas of the RSS leaders.

True, there are so many administrative reform commission reports accumulating dust. But the Modi government's commission would be a departure from the past, the liberal era of Nehru. Modi's authoritarian way of governance requires new rules and guidelines. A BJP appointed commission could have provided the Modi government with the instruments to Hinduise the administrative set-up.

I wish I could say that the lessons have been learnt. Persons who used authority without responsibility still wield power. And bureaucrats vie with one another in obedience to the ministers and bend rules to get out of turn promotion or a cushy posting.

The old type of civil servants is going to be hard to get. Yet there is no alternative to the bureaucracy which has entrenched itself in the system from top to bottom. The BJP must have realised this when in power more than 10 years ago. The regret is that it became a part and parcel of the system while its election plank was to cleanse it.

It can be argued that the electorate faces a big problem. People cast vote in favour of the BJP in the recent Lok Sabha elections. This was not because they liked the party. But it was because they were sick and tired of the Congress rule. Party President Sonia Gandhi herself admitted that the voters did not like the Congress. But she said she had no idea that their anger would convert itself into vengeance.

They had voted the BJP to power. So much so they have given the party a majority by itself. But what would they do when they get disappointed with the BJP? They do not want to go back to the Congress. But what option do they have? That is the reason why the Congress is sitting pretty. People are waiting for the Modi government to perform and prove itself. Instead of that, the saffronisation programme is taking shape.

The alternative could have been the Aam Admi Party (AAP). In fact, it evoked hope when Gandhian Anna Hazare held meetings in different parts of the country to warn the people against corruption. Their response was solid and AAP's Arvind Kejriwal was voted to power in Delhi. But then Hazare distance from Kejriwal and his dictatorial tendency, besides the ambition of a few put cold water on finding a clean alternative. Unfortunately, the old cultures do not disappear quickly.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Israel doing much worse than apartheid

Hideous. Sadistic. Vicious. Murderous. That is how Noam Chomsky describes Israel's 29-day offensive in Gaza that killed nearly 1,900 people and left almost 10,000 people injured. Chomsky has written extensively about the Israel/Palestine conflict for decades. It's another one of the periodic Israeli exercises in what they delicately call "mowing the lawn." That means shooting fish in the pond, to make sure that the animals stay quiet in the cage that you've constructed for them, after which you go to a period of what's called "ceasefire".

"In the occupied territories, what Israel is doing is much worse than apartheid," Chomsky says. To call it apartheid is a gift to Israel, at least if by 'apartheid' you mean South African-style apartheid. There's a crucial difference. The South African Nationalists needed the black population. That was their workforce. The Israeli relationship to the Palestinians in the occupied territories is totally different. They just don't want them. Israel's justice has become injustice and their judgment has become the slaughter of the innocent and the butchery of the helpless.

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Bad influence of Indian serials

A few days back I was shocked to hear a news that a girl committed suicide only for not having a typical Indian dress named pakhi. It is worthwhile to note that the said dress was the main attraction of this Eid!

Fashion is a part of life, I am not against fashion. But one should understand the actual meaning of it. Some girls have a preconception that if they embellish themselves with heavy make-up and Indian dresses, it will enhance their beauty. Indian TV serials are mostly responsible for this. Our girls are getting spoiled watching these serials. These TV channels should be banned in Bangladesh.

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Terrorism in religious garb

I support the views expressed by Nobel prize winning author Wole Soyinka in his address to the World Humanist Congress (TDS, August 11). He said that the conflict between humanists and religionists has always been one between the torch of enlightenment and the chains of enslavement. Boko Haram, Salafist, ISIS etc. all groups claim that they are performing religious obligations but in fact they do terrorist activities like killings, bombing and abductions. These groups should be rational enough and admit the truth.
Ahmed Shah
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "No action before enactment of law," published on August 13, 2014

MH Khan

At first Hasanul Haq Inu said that was not a law. Now they are talking about making that black thing a law!

Saleh Md. Shahriar

A thorough analysis of the broadcast policy is needed before its enactment into a law.

"Target a complete electricity hub" (August 13, 2014)

Deepjelejai

Coal-fired plants are one of the biggest threats to the world considering carbon emission. However, we have no other options but to make the best use of our resources. Apart from environmentally hazardous approach, the government should encourage more investment in renewable energy such as windmill, solar power etc.

Shaheen K

Bangladesh is prone to cyclones and storms, especially in the coastal area like Matarbari island near Maheshkhali. So is it wise to invest such a huge amount of money in a project so near to the coast? Maybe the whole project gets wiped out in one typhoon or cyclone and then it is Bangladesh that will be left with this huge debt.

Saleh Md. Shahriar

Load-shedding is common in Bangladesh. More durable electricity generation is undoubtedly the best solution.

"Our adivasis, our constitution" (August 13, 2014)

Bappi Tsangma

Thank you, Ahsan for your crystal clear explanation of the existence of indigenous people in Bangladesh.