

## Targeting law enforcers

Address the causality

**T**ARGETING law enforcers must be unequivocally condemned by every peace loving person. Those who have hurled petrol bombs at a police vehicle engaged in law and order duty causing grievous injuries to 13 police personnel cannot be considered as political workers. This can only be an act of miscreants.

We have been greatly distressed at the increasingly violent character that the so called blockade and hartals have assumed. This is, unfortunately, repetition of what we had witnessed in the latter half of 2013, but has become only more intense. And when the police become target of miscreants during a so called political programme the government cannot take a reactive stance but become a proactive player.

Therefore, while it is the bounden duty of the government to ensure safety of its citizens, and that must be ensured on a priority basis, we feel strongly that a robust law and order prescription will not necessarily stem the widespread violence that we are witnessing, because it is essentially a political issue and the causal relevance of the prevailing situation must be acknowledged by the government. And this is where a proactive stance by ruling coalition is essential. Thus, it is in the political realm that the government can exhibit its wisdom by initiating necessary actions that would help address the current unrest.

We would hope sanity would prevail and the BNP would call upon its activists to desist from violence, and, despite these attacks on them, the police would continue to perform their task of providing safety and security to the people in a non-partisan manner.

## Hands raised in prayer, hearts beating in unison

Clarion call for piety, peace and brotherhood

**B**ISWA Ijmeta, translated as world congregation of Muslims, by the bank of Turag in Tongi, the second largest after Hajji, ended yesterday with Akheri Munajat, the concluding prayer, marking the end of the final phase of the Ijmeta. So massive is the appeal and magnetism of the annual event that in order to cater to the bonding and spiritual needs of Muslims of Bangladesh and overseas, Biswa Ijmeta had to be organised in two phases, the first one having ended on January 11.

Altogether, it was a massive demonstration of supplication before the Almighty seeking His blessings for peace, solidarity and progress of the Muslim world, by extension welfare of mankind. The compassion, fellow-feeling and bonding were enriched by living under the same canopy, praying together, exchanging views and listening to discourses of eminent Islamic scholars. Indeed, it was spiritually heart-warming and highly enlightening for the participants.

Bangladesh justifiably prides itself on being the host to such a major annual Islamic event marking spiritual-cum-worldly handholding devoted to equality, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence, the core strivings of Islam.

This year's circumstances were challenging for the organisers, attendees and participants alike for the countrywide blockade which, though, as it turned out, could not deter the enthusiastic journeys on to the banks of Turag. Our congratulations to the organisers, volunteers, local administration and security personnel whose diligent efforts and constant vigil contributed to the success that the event was.

## Sundarbans, our Sundarbans

MUHAMMAD ABDUL MAZID

**I**N 2011, the New York-based Wild life Conservation Society discovered a population of 6,000 Irrawaddy dolphins in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. This led to the creation of three sanctuaries for Irrawaddy and long-nosed Gangetic dolphins. The fact that the oil tanker was wrecked in one of the sanctuaries has heightened the grave concerns about its environmental impact. Fringing the land with long, twisted roots, mangrove trees have evolved to withstand the relentless tugging of a powerful tide that alternately swamps the low-lying forest and recedes to leave glimmering sand. The tide constantly reshapes channels and shifts sand, creating new banks for the many creeks and rivers that the mangrove is adept at colonising. At the edge of the water, the mangrove's sprawling root system is the land's front-line defense against erosion. Therefore, the many species of mangrove that make up the Sundarbans' forests are central to the region's intricate chain of life.

The recent sinking of an oil-tanker after being hit by another vessel on the Shela River in the Sundarbans has worried forest officials and environment experts deeply. Around 350,000 litres of furnace oil spilled into the river will cause serious ecological disaster. The oil will reduce the amount of oxygen in the water. This will create a crisis for all the aquatic animals, plants and resources of the mangrove forest. This huge amount of oil on the water will heavily affect the coastal biodiversity for a long time, as there is little chance that high and low tide could clean up the oil from that part of the river fast because water flow in the downstream was not strong. In the short to medium term, plants with pneumatophores will struggle too, as the spiky respiratory roots of the mangrove tree that rise, snorkel-like, through the mud. If their roots are suffocated, the mangroves will die -- and in this place of ever-shifting sands and tides, the tenacious mangroves are what hold the land together. The fact that the oil tanker was wrecked in one of the sanctuaries has heightened the grave concerns about the environmental impact. Loss of the mangrove forest will result in the loss of the protective biological shield against cyclones and tsunamis. This may put the surrounding coastal communities at high risk.

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# Impact of low oil prices on the global order

**BOTTOM LINE**



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

And Asia began tapering off due to weakening economies and new efficiency measures.

In the US, by offsetting declines in conventional oil production, increases in shale oil output have allowed overall American crude oil production to rise to an average of about nine million barrels a day from five million a day in 2008, according to the US Energy Information Centre.

The increase of four million barrels in the US is reportedly more than increases in either Iraq or Iran. The US has become the second largest oil producer after Saudi Arabia. The US Energy Information Administration still expects that overall US oil production will grow by another 700,000 barrels per day in 2015.

As prices slid, many observers waited to see whether Opec, the world's largest oil cartel, would cut back on its production to prop prices up. But at its big meeting in November, Opec did nothing. It will wait for another six months.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia didn't want to give up market share, and it hoped that lower prices would help throttle the US oil boom and would hurt Iran and Russia. Another reason is that the cost of oil production in Middle East countries is much lower than the cost of getting oil from shale. If the oil price stays around \$60 per barrel the US producers may not make any profit and go out of business. Opec members hope that the oil price will stabilise.

The oil price crash is now not only upending the global economy, but is also shifting the global order to the advantage of the US against anti-American states -- Russia, Iran and Venezuela.

The situation in Russia, Iran and Venezuela is getting the most attention these days. Russia is hugely dependent on oil and gas production -- with oil revenues making up 45% of the government budget -- and the sharp fall in prices seems to have been ruinous for the country's economy. On December 15, Russia suddenly hiked interest rates from 10.5% to 17% in an attempt to stop people from selling off rubles.

It is reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin has scrapped New Year holidays for government officials because of the unfolding economic crisis in his country.

**F**OR much of the past decade, oil prices were high -- bouncing around \$100 per barrel since 2010 -- because oil production couldn't keep up with demand, so prices spiked. It is a question of supply and demand.

Many of those dynamics for price-hike have changed. High prices spurred companies in the US and Canada to start drilling for new, hard-to-extract crude shale formations. At the same time, demand for oil in Europe

Putin has banned officials from taking time off in January. "For the government, for your agencies, we cannot afford this long holiday, at least this year -- you know what I mean," Putin said.

Iran needs oil prices to be well over \$100 per barrel to balance its budget, especially since Western sanctions have made it much harder to export crude. If oil prices keep falling, the Iranian government will find it difficult to sustain their economic, military and diplomatic support for President Assad of Syria.

Venezuela, one of the largest oil producing countries, receives 95% of its revenue from oil and has used the oil money to curb the influence of the US in Latin America, including shipment of reduced price petroleum to Cuba.

In Venezuela, there is growing concern that the oil crash could cause the country, another major oil producer, to default. The nation's economy -- heavily dependent on oil revenue -- is set to shrink some 3% this year and inflation is rampant. Many economists believe that the economy is in recession. Venezuela's leaders have rushed to China for assistance, which reportedly agreed to invest \$20 billion in that country.



Hard-hit anti-American oil producing countries have alleged that the US, working with Saudi Arabia, has adopted policies to drive down the oil prices.

Analysts say that oil price is likely to remain low for a year due to supply and demand. It has always been hard to predict the oil price as its price had been full of surprises in the past. For example, China's economy could come roaring back, Europe could suddenly rebound out of its economic malaise and Saudi Arabia could decide that enough is enough and cut back on production all of a sudden. Any of those events could increase prices.

If history is any indication, oil prices will eventually rise again. And some experts think the world should be preparing for that day. Energy expert Michael Levi wrote a piece in the Financial Times, on how the US (and other countries) could take advantage of low oil prices to make needed energy-policy reforms -- such as ending wasteful fossil-fuel subsidies or putting in place new efficiency measures. That would help countries insulate themselves against future price shocks.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## Competing narratives from France

SIMANTINI KRISHNAN

**T**HE outpourings of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* have generated an interesting counter-narrative. Liberal commentators in India and the West have taken this opportunity to point out how institutionalised Islamophobia promoted by the likes of *Charlie Hebdo* has been responsible for backlash against Muslims across the world. The polarisation achieved by Islamist radicals is in fact matched by the marginalisation of Muslims on account of a radical secularism sans sensitivity towards a besieged minority.

At a time when religious fundamentalism is on the ascent in many parts of the world, it is perhaps necessary to regard the implications of shielding religious identities from interrogation. The tendency to draw clear lines between the legitimate practice of religion and distortions thereof by fundamentalists ends up exempting religion from scrutiny. On the flipside, religious fundamentalism thrives on perceived slights to deeply held beliefs. Mockery of such beliefs by the holders of an incommensurate set of beliefs can only fan the fires of intolerance, with immediate consequences for the security of minorities and other vulnerable groups in society.

In the immediate aftermath of Paris attacks, popular opinion was divided into two camps. The questioning of Islam and its teachings was rivaled by the tendency to view such violence as an act of religious transgression. In a controversial statement, Rupert Murdoch held all Muslims accountable for the proliferation of jihadist ideology. It provoked global outrage, besides raising parallels with acts perpetrated by extremists professing other faiths. Should Christians worldwide own up to their responsibility for the Spanish inquisition, Hitler's holocaust, or sexual abuse within precincts of the Catholic Church? Are Hindus answerable for repeated misdemeanours of right wing fundamentalists in the name of Hindutva? If Murdoch's political incorrectness has to do with singling out Islam for censure and scrutiny, his politically correct detractors must be taken to task for exonerating religion altogether. Liberal critiques of the former are not hard to come by, though few would question the correctness of the latter.

Yet, the emerging counter-narrative can hardly be dismissed. Muslims, an already besieged minority in France, have been further marginalised in the aftermath of *Charlie Hebdo*. With mounting attacks on their beliefs, rituals and places of worship, France's Muslim population is forced to confront the paradox of their existence in the land of liberty, equality and fraternity. The sheer impossibility of

practicing their faith without attracting ire and ridicule, or the inevitability of questions concerning their loyalties have heightened the dilemma of being Muslim in the Western world. These are further pronounced when one considers the transgressions of free speech and democracy by the very bastions of these values.

America's grossly unjust war on terror has been responsible for radicalisation of Muslim youth who now populate the armies of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Within few hours of the Paris march for freedom of expression, French authorities cracked down on dissidents of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, while the march itself featured free speech offenders such as Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Earlier, Nicholas Sarkozy's proclamation of war on civilisation exacerbated the prevailing tensions by situating Islam and its teachings in sharp relief to the very idea of civilisation. One must also consider the legacy of French colonialism in North Africa. The very values of secularism and free speech, which are being employed to judge the beliefs and practices of Muslims, were never extended to the vast numbers of colonised Muslims.

Colonies such as Algeria were also excluded from the legal separation of church and state that was mandated in France in the early twentieth century.

The scrutiny of Islam and its followers is often validated by the majoritarian violence perpetrated by Islamic regimes on non-believers and dissidents. The plea of Muslim minorities in the West ceases to make an impression in global discourses when pitched alongside the rise of extremist violence. The trade-off frequently leads to scrutiny of Islam, which then provokes parallels with other religions.

It is the contention of many that faith is a deeply personal affair, and none should have to provide justification for their beliefs. But when faith itself becomes a battleground for ideological control over the public, believers cannot run away from difficult questions. The appropriation of religion by extremists is routinely countered by claims of religious transgression. This tendency to absolve religion from blame exacerbates the dilemma rather than resolve it. Yet, the questioning of religion cannot be isolated from the political context, which determines the plight of ethnic and religious minorities. If Western democracies cannot tread this fine balance between secularism and sensitivity, it would be futile to point fingers at the rest.

The writer is a London-based political scientist. © The Statesman (India). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### "BNP-Jamaat's mindless violence, again"

I refer to the erudite write-up, "BNP-Jamaat's mindless violence, again" by Editor Mahfuz Anam on the present political situation in Bangladesh. (January 16, 2015) From the observation of the editor, the BNP and its associates have resorted to terrorism, failing to organise mass-movement against the government.

Obviously, people at large have no reason to be unhappy with the present government's economic performance. For the last one year, the country was by and large peaceful. Now, terrorism has set in at the behest of the BNP and its associated religious bigots. The innocent people are made victims, and cars, buses and trains are being torched. The country is suffering unprecedented loss only to get a party in power. Is this the democratic way?

Dialogue is possible only with political parties having political programmes, not with terrorists. Is there any instance in any country where terror tactics went parallel with dialogue? Then why should the government of Sheikh Hasina submit to the party (or parties) that are involved in violence and intimidation in pursuit of gaining state power? Hafejul Alam One-mail

### Improve the public transport network

I fully endorse the views of Mr. Ziauddin Ahmed which appeared in your Letters column recently. BRTC buses are run by the trained drivers who are aware of the traffic rules and safety of the passengers.

Everywhere in the world one has to know the basic traffic rules before one is given driving license, no matter what his/her social status is.

Furthermore, in Europe, America, Britain, etc, vehicles owners are mostly educated and they themselves drive their vehicles as they cannot afford to employ a driver. And being educated, they abide by the traffic rules. Hence, there are very few cases of road accidents for lack of knowledge about the laws.

In our country, if the owners of the vehicles take the initiative to drive their own vehicles, then we will be able to minimise road accidents drastically. If our public transport network is improved with reasonable comfort and systematic timings, then even the car owners, with some exceptions, will prefer public transport facility rather than driving their own cars.

Sirajul Islam Paribagh, Dhaka

### Another cartoon!

Charlie Hebdo has again published a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Even after the terrorist attack, their cartoon shows the Prophet holding a banner saying "all is forgiven." Even though they believed this sign to be positive, Muslims around the world are offended. These Muslims also include 10% of France's population and it only serves as further provocation for the terrorists. Such pictures were the reason why they were attacked in the first place. They may have a good intention to show solidarity by reprinting this cartoon, but every seventh grader of my class would agree with me that disrespecting and dishonoring an extraordinary, historical and religious personality cannot be a sane way of showing solidarity. Mirza Ghulam Haseeb Queens, New York, US

### Comments on news report, "Bribe for every service: TIB," published on January 16, 2015

Deep

A first-rate report by TIB. Hope high-ups of the government would consider the findings seriously.

Snr Citizen

Crime and unethical 'business' have increased about three to four fold. Criminals could not care less about ethics and respecting the law. Case in point: A medicine, Vastarel MR, was imported from France previously. For the last 4 years or so, it is being produced in BD, but the price remains unchanged! Local manufacturers are making 400 to 500% profit.

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### "The separation of business and politics" (January 16, 2015)

Mithun Ahmed

I always admire Badrul Ahsan's articles. While the piece is well-written, it misses the fact that our economy is a regulated one. Much of the business is sustained and nourished by the government. It is difficult to grow in business in BD without the patronisation of the government. It is not a free economy with easy access and entry. In such an economy, business can't be separated from politics.

Niam Kureishi

Very nice read. Some sad universal truths were revealed; it was nice to hear them and understand them in new light.