

JAMAAT-UL-MUJAHIDIN BANGLADESH

A potent threat to South Asia

RUPAK BHATTACHARJEE

WHILE the primary focus of policy makers and security analysts remains the radical Islamic groups affiliated to the international jihadi networks operating in the Af-Pak region and Kashmir valley, Bangladesh and the neighbouring Indian states of Paschim Banga and Assam are increasingly becoming vulnerable to Islamic militancy.

Among all Islamic terrorist outfits active in this sub-region, Jamaat-ul-Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) has emerged

as the most serious threat to peace and security. Its sinister design to destabilise the region was brought to light by the accidental explosion in Burdwan on October 2, 2014.

The security establishment is concerned over the sudden spurt in cross-border terrorism and growing nexus between the JMB and various Islamic militant groups active in India and the former's concerted efforts to spread tentacles across South Asia. The NIA investigations have exposed JMB's terror networks extending to a number of Indian states.

Working in close coordination, the security agencies of

India and Bangladesh have succeeded in arresting some of the top leaders of the JMB. The JMB leaders revealed in 2010 that they had recruited and trained several Indian Muslims for waging jihad. The training and indoctrination of JMB cadres have been continuing in Paschim Banga for the last few years. Some youths from Assam too have joined JMB after being trained in the terror outfits camps in the neighbouring country. Taking advantage of the geographical proximity and porous international borders, the JMB has been trying to take shelter and establish bases in Assam and Paschim Banga.

The threat of Islamic terror looms large over Assam. Reports suggest that the jihadi elements operating in the state have incorporated the incumbent chief minister, Kamakhya temple, state secretariat and other key offices in their target list. Assam Police arrested several suspected JMB linkmen and activists from different districts.

The NIA has also decided to focus on suspected terror modules in neighbouring Meghalaya which is an integral part of transit zone between Assam and Bangladesh. The Meghalaya DGP suspects that there may be some Islamic terror sleeper cells in the western region, notably Garo Hills, and the eastern part of the state.

The Bangladeshi radical Islamic groups' bids to expand their terror networks across the borders are not a new phenomenon. New Delhi had intelligence inputs long back in 2005 that JMB, Jagrata Muslim Janata-Bangladesh and Harkat-ul-Jehadi-Islami (HuJI) had been infiltrating into the Indian territory with "strategic, long-term plans" to extend their support to the North Eastern militant outfits and made Paschim Banga a launching pad for spreading their operations.

Earlier reports indicated that the Bangladeshi jihadi groups had been enjoying considerable clout in the India-Bangladesh border regions especially in Bengal. The "mushrooming" of Madrassas funded by foreign Islamist financial institutions on both sides of the international borders might have facilitated the radicalisation of local youths. These Madrassas had been providing recruits to the JMB.

Intelligence inputs indicate that the arrested JMB operatives were part of the jihadi outfit's plan to renew subversive activities in Bangladesh. The discovery of explosives and incriminating documents from the blast site reveals meticulous and high level of preparation by the JMB militants to carry out attacks in Bangladesh. It appears that the terror strikes had been planned as retaliation against Sheikh

Hasina-led Awami League (AL) government's recent crackdown on JMB elements.

The Modi government had been alarmed in the wake of revelation of a deep terror network in Paschim Banga and Assam. The NIA chief claimed that 58 terror modules have been operating in Paschim Banga. The investigators are zeroing on about 180 Bangladeshi nationals involved in these modules, including JMB.

JMB's motives to undermine democracy, political stability, security and peace in South Asia have been gradually unfolding. India's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) observes that the JMB was planning to create "serious unrest" in Bangladesh, using Indian territory as base for its terror operations. The MHA officials have noted that targeting top leaders of both the ruling AL and the major opposition party BNP, was part of their terror strike plans in Bangladesh.

During the last home secretary level talks in September 2-4, 2014 in Dhaka, both the countries reiterated their commitment to combat the menace of cross-border terrorism through greater interaction between the security agencies of the two neighbouring countries and sharing of each other's intelligence inputs.

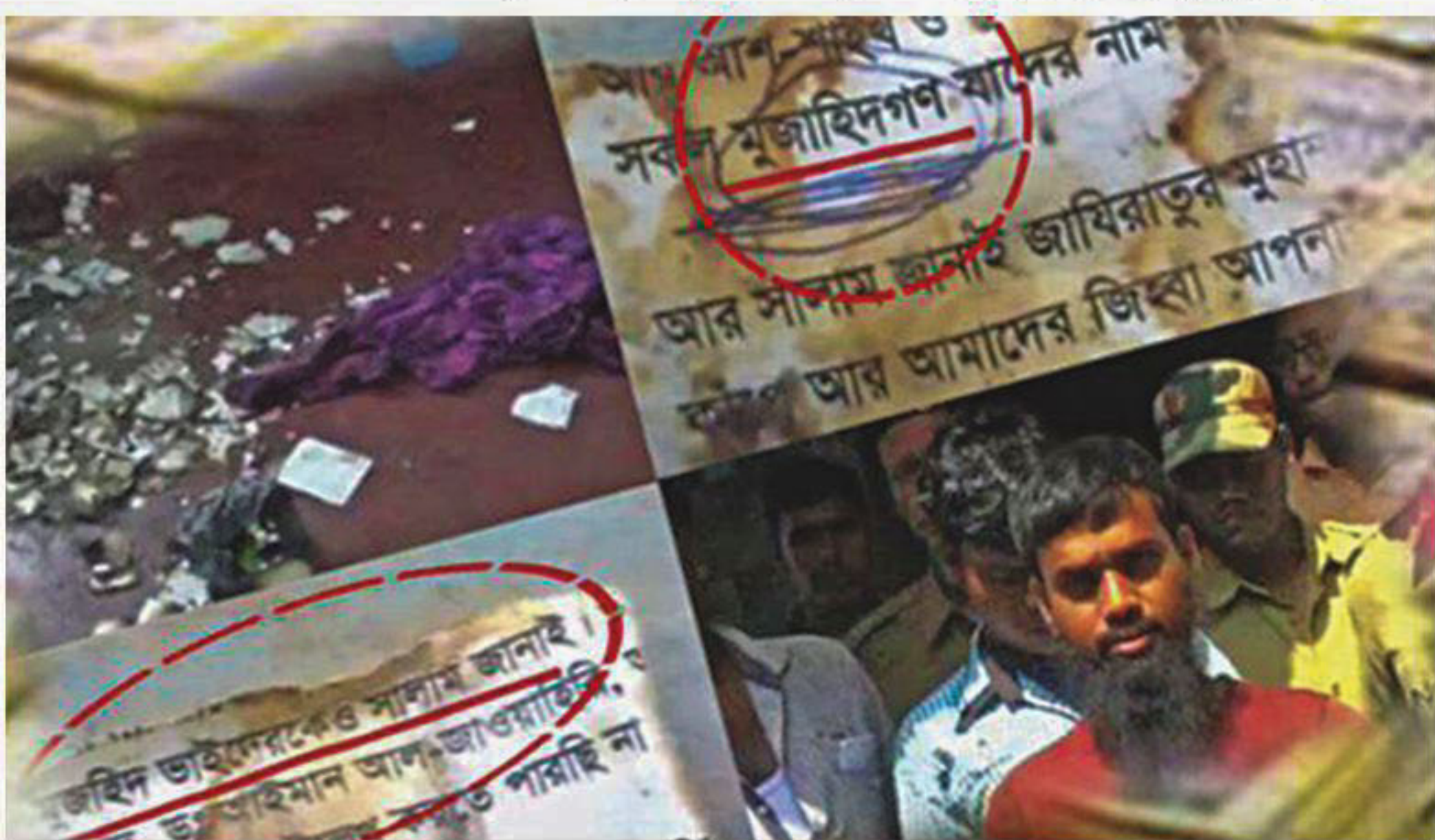
The regrouping of Bangladeshi Islamic terrorist

outfits poses another key threat to South Asia. The security establishment is seriously concerned over the reports of several jihadi outfits of Bangladesh coming under a single platform to expand their terror networks within and beyond the neighbouring country. Intelligence agencies say radical Islamic groups such as JMB, HuJI, Allahar Dal, Hizb ut-Tahrir and others have formed an umbrella platform - Bangladesh Jihadi Group

The AL government's zero tolerance towards terrorism and relentless crackdown on jihadi elements prompted them to set up a common platform for coordination and expansion of their networks across the India-Bangladesh borders. The Bangladeshi Islamic terrorists' attempts to create sleeper cells in bordering states like Paschim Banga and Assam are to be seen in the light of all these developments

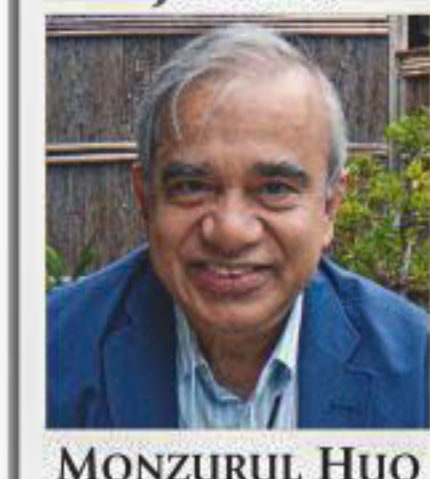
Despite suffering numerous setbacks, the jihadi outfit has bounced back with vengeance. The governments of both the countries are worried as the terror outfit's larger plan is also to destabilise the existing friendly relations between India and Bangladesh. It remains to be seen how political leaders of India and Bangladesh fight jihadi activities in their joint endeavours.

The writer is a political analyst based in New Delhi.



A requiem for Kenji Goto

LETTER FROM JAPAN



MONZURUL HUQ

HE was a fellow journalist following world events with the sincere desire of letting people know more about the plight of those who suffer most in times of crisis - children, the poor and forgotten, and women. Of all the photos that had been released in the media, the one that portrays him most authentically is the image where we see a smiling Kenji Goto showing a boy standing next to him footages of his captured images in the monitor of his video camera. The boy in the photo is watching the footage with great enthusiasm, while Goto is delighted, possibly because of the sense of satisfaction that he could bring at least a moment's joy to a boy in the troubled region of the Middle East, who otherwise might have been living a life of constant fear.

This is the same Kenji Goto who we see later kneeling on the ground in a barren patch of what seems to be a hilly desert area. This was the very last moment of his life in our troubled world, with the man standing next to him, covered from head to toe in black attire, wielding a knife and saying: "Because of your reckless decision to take part in an unwinnable war, this knife will not only slaughter Kenji but will also carry on and cause carnage wherever your people are found. So let the nightmare for Japan begin."

The message was addressed not to the poor fellow about to be beheaded, but to the Japanese Prime Minister Shizo Abe, who not only failed to negotiate with Goto's captors for his release, but also publicly backed the US-led coalition's air strikes against the Islamic State terrorist group that now controls a vast swath of land across Syria and Iraq.

The immediate reaction in Japan to this cowardly act of beheading a journalist known to be a highly professional TV reporter with a strong commitment is that of anger and dismay. The IS video of the Goto beheading was released after midnight Japan time on February 1, and the first official reaction came within an hour. Speaking soon after, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe renewed his earlier vow of not giving in to terrorism and said that Japan would continue providing humanitarian assistance to countries fighting the IS extremists and would work with the international community to bring Goto's killers to justice. Yet, many in Japan blamed Abe's half-hearted attitude, or rather inaction, for the tragic end of two Japanese lives within a week.

The hostage crisis for Japan started with the release of a video on January 20 where two captured Japanese men were seen kneeling on the ground while an IS fighter was reading a message demanding ransom from the Japanese government. The man threatened to kill both unless Japan paid \$ 200 million within 72 hours, the same amount the visiting Japanese prime minister

pledged to provide Egypt and other Arab states fighting the IS in a speech he delivered in Cairo just the day before. The hostage crisis unfolded as Abe moved over to his next destination, Israel, where in a hastily arranged press conference with his Israeli counterpart, Abe rejected the demand and vowed to continue battling terrorism by all means. This ill-conceived act might have complicated the hostage issue altogether, leading to the tragic death of two innocent Japanese. Vowing to uproot terrorism while standing next to the greatest sponsor of state terrorism seems not only funny, but also sarcastic. The hostage-takers must have noted this paradox carefully, and from then on back tracked their demand to make the Japanese position much more complicated.

With passing of the 72-hour deadline, IS beheaded Haruna Yukawa, the other Japanese hostage shown in the first video, and forced Kenji Goto to read a message addressed to the Japanese prime minister branding him as the killer of Yukawa and telling him that his (Goto's) life was hanging in balance unless Japan acted promptly to fulfill the new demand of his captors. The new demand was to swap him in exchange for an imprisoned female suicide bomber held in a Jordanian prison.

This second demand, however, turned out to be much more complicated for Japan to meet than paying ransom money. Jordan has its own captive in IS custody, an air force pilot who was shot down over Syria and captured by IS fighters. Public opinion in Jordan was against a prisoner swap that would not involve the pilot of its own soil, and hence Abe's fate, and also the fate of Kenji Goto, turned out to be sealed right from the moment the second video was released. The time from then on to the execution must have been a time of extreme mental agony for Kenji Goto. He pleaded for his life, but his plea just resounded in the closed halls of Japanese policy makers, failing to wake them up at the crucial moment when his life was hanging in balance.

Goto's friends and well wishers gathered in front of the prime minister's office, and his mother and his wife made a desperate last minute appeal. All these eventually turned out to be in vain as the knife made its way spilling blood from a living human soul. A few drops of that blood have now spilled over to taint the well-fitted attire of Japanese leaders, who now seem to be ready for pressing even harder for allowing Japan to strengthen its military might with the pretext of never again endangering the lives of citizens overseas. And Goto, a pacifist by all accounts, must be looking on from somewhere high above and seeing how politicians love to play with the fate of ordinary citizens to ensure their own gains.

The writer is a Tokyo based Bangladeshi journalist. He is also teaching at Japanese universities.

VISION 2021 AND CURRENT POLITICAL IMPASSE

Aspirations of a common citizen

ABDULLAH AL MASUD

THE nation is in an economic, political and social crisis which is increasingly becoming bitter day by day. The root of this crisis is political; the ruling party has not constructively engaged or accommodated the legitimate grievances of the biggest opposition party on the issue of a free and fair election, and followed a strategy of institutional decimation of its political opponent through various means. As a consequence, the opponent has adopted a strategy of violence and disruption of economic bloodstream as a means to force the government to succumb to its demands. In the process of this political game, the common people are becoming random victims of the conflict and are being forced to pay with immeasurable loss: charred bodies and human lives, deep physical and mental agony, and destroyed livelihood.

This is not a novel phenomenon in Bangladesh. In fact, this, or something of this sort in various degrees, has happened repeatedly in the past no matter which party was in power or in opposition. Crises of this sort seem to have become ingrained in the psyche of the common people.

Is this crisis inevitable in the development trajectory of the nation? It seems that, given the political culture and lack of will to resolve disputes through engagement and dialogue, the repeated appearance of political crises has become inevitable in the course of our history. This is undesirably putting a severe dent in the progress of the nation.

As many observers of the development story of Bangladesh have praised her success and unthinkable feat, the political crisis erodes the fundamental basis upon which the nation thrives. The unstable political conflict erodes confidence on us as a reliable source of products in the international market and as a destination for investment. The political leadership should not be content on the progress that has been made despite the challenges that Bangladesh faces; rather they should consider the missed opportunities and potentials that could be otherwise realised, which very much depend on their actions and

political strategies.

The political parties, as the chief protagonist and steward of this development process, can choose to come to a consensus and find mechanisms to bridge their differences through dialogue, effective parliament and mutual tolerance. A free and fair political competition for people's mandate based on ideas should dictate the political discourse and be the governing principle on how parties should act towards each other and the public. On the contrary, the current practice of intolerance, incivility and violence only reflects the lack of will and political statesmanship that are fundamental to a story of progress.

The ruling party declared the Vision 2021 and reiterated their commitment to the goals of this vision over time. The first five goals are: (a) democracy and effective parliament (b) political framework, decentralisation of power and people's participation (c) good governance through establishing rule of law and avoiding political partisanship (d) transformation of political culture and (e) a society free from corruption. In its Election Manifesto 2014, the ruling party declared that "initiatives will be taken to build consensus among all political parties, classes, political organisations, and civil societies irrespective of opinions on basic issues such as upholding democratic processes and ensuring uninterrupted development." In an article recently published in the New Europe, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina aptly said: "The best way to predict our future is to create it ourselves. Our world in 2015 and post-2015 will be what we now dream it to be. How it will look will depend largely on what our actions are now. Our actions should therefore reflect our words and that is the only way we can predict and build a tangible future." She further added: "Our vision for the world beyond 2015 should focus on people -- on the aspirations and hopes of the people -- in a just and a fair world."

Democracy and effective parliament are in tatters now and most observers urge dialogue between political parties. The Vision 2021 envisions "transforming political culture" through "steps

appropriate to the time to establish democratic principles in the political parties, transparency of political funding, civility and tolerance." Further, establishment of "democracy and strong democratic institutions" for "holding reliable elections at regular intervals, accountability of government and effective Parliament" are also envisioned in Vision 2021.

As the architect of the Vision 2021 and chief protagonist, our prime minister should take extra steps to resolve the crisis through constructive engagement with opposing political parties and build national consensus on basic issues such as holding a free and fair election. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former prime minister Khaleda Zia, along with leaders of other political parties, had in the past worked in concert in times of national crisis, particularly in the movement to restore democracy. Prolonging this political crisis is tantamount to self-destruction and against the aspirations of people.

Now is the opportunity for the leadership of all political parties to resolve this political impasse through meaningful dialogue and engagement, and to create a precedent of statesmanship rising above petty partisanship. Such an effort will embolden all in our journey towards development and put the nation on a solid political foundation that is conducive to realising our economic potentials. As a great service to the nation, this will go a long way towards achieving the Vision 2021; a nation that is free of poverty, promotes peace and thrives on economic prosperity.

It is time to remind the leadership of the truism our prime minister articulated eloquently: "We learn from our past experiences and at times from mistakes. Our past makes us stronger. Let us keep in mind the lessons taught by our past and build our future based on what we have learned. Let us keep in mind that all that is ever important is the 'now' in which we live in and all that is going to be important is the 'tomorrow' that we leave for our children." And I repeat "for our children."

The writer is an economist and an administrator in a private university.

QUOTABLE Quote

I tell you, in my opinion, the cornerstone of democracy is free press - that's the cornerstone. Milos Forman

CRYPTOQUOTE 12-20 XZ DODAV FCZFDXOYRND QYZZDA, EUD GYQXNV XI NXZM EC CBA LYIE, RAXJKD EC CBA GBEBAD. -- YNDP UYNDV

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: BUY ONLY BECAUSE SOMETHING EXCITES YOU, NOT JUST FOR THE SIMPLE ACT OF SHOPPING. -- KARL LAGERFELD

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

HENRY

BY DON TRANCHE

