

Don't let Bangladesh become a cocoon of terror

ABDUL MANNAN

LAST Sunday, training materials and sophisticated arms were recovered at militants' training centre in Banshkhali, Chittagong. This should not come as a surprise, especially to those who monitor the growth, expansion and activities of militancy in this country. In March 2013, I happened to meet the renowned Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner in an international conference in Yangon. Lintner worked as a senior journalist for the now defunct weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) for more than two decades. He specialised in cross-border terrorism, religious militancy and terrorism financing. After his retirement from FEER, Lintner settled in Cheng Mai in Myanmar. He shot to fame after publishing a cover story in FEER in April 2002, titled 'Bangladesh - A Cocoon of Terror.' In the story, he wrote extensively about the rising fundamentalism, religious intolerance, threatened secularism and moderate Islam in this country. He commented that "the implications for the region and beyond are grave, but it's not too late for a counter-revolution."

A few months before our meeting, I happened to read his new book *Great Game East*, in which he expresses his alarm at the growing menace of militancy and terrorism in the border of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Before writing the book, he came to Bangladesh in 2004 and met quite a few influential ministers of the four-party alliance government. He discussed with them the scare of rising militancy in Bangladesh. None of them agreed with the fact that such a problem exists in Bangladesh. He visited a Rohingya camp in Teknaf where the camp leaders eagerly showed him militants' training sessions run by them. To his surprise, he found that none of whom were trained there were Rohingya; all of them were activists of



Jamaat and Shibir. He also found trainees who traveled all the way from Sulawesi in Indonesia to receive training in terrorism and militancy. On enquiry, he found that most of the Shibir trainees remain in Bangladesh to operate inside the country while many of those from Sulawesi leave for Afghanistan as mercenaries.

Lintner also wrote extensively on how Khaleda Zia's government was sympathetic to the Indian militants (especially the ULFA) and how the military intelligence gave them sanctuary during her rule. He also mentioned that militants fled Bangladesh once Sheikh Hasina was voted into power in 1996, with the exception of Paresh Barua and Anup Chetia who returned from his hideout in Bangkok once he felt safe. Unfortunately for Chetia, he was picked up by the police in 1997.

He is now in prison in Bangladesh. The people of Chittagong are religious but have never supported fanaticism. Taking advantage of religious sentiments of the people of the district, militant organisations like Jamaat, Shibir, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Hefajat-e-Islam and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front among other such organisations took roots in this district after 1971. The entire South Chittagong up to Cox's Bazaar has become a fertile breeding ground for militancy, especially the madrasas and Arabic learning centres. These madrasas are generally of Quawmi variety and have managed to stay beyond the control and supervision of the government. The Hefajat headquarters are in Hathazari Upazilla of Chittagong whose 90-year-old chief Maulana Shafi heads one of the largest madrasas of the country -- Al-Jamiatul

Ahliya Darul Uloom Mainul Islam Madrasa. Given the chance, the degree of mayhem that they can create was witnessed by the people of the country on May 5, 2013.

All these madrasas are generously funded by expatriate workers from the Middle East. They fund these madrasas in good faith with zakat and fitra mostly during Ramadan. Many principals of these madrasas visit Saudi Arabia during this time to collect money. Some even travel to London and buy slots in local Bangla TV networks to solicit monetary support for their madrasas. They also collect the hide of sacrificial animals during Eid-ul-Azha from local people. Another important thing that needs to be mentioned is that when it comes to large amounts of funds, affluent people from all parties are very generous towards these madrasas.

Perhaps no other upazilla in Bangladesh has as many madrasas as there are in Hathazari. For every school there are at least ten madrasas or Arabic learning centres. Because a large number of expatriate workers who go to Middle East are from Chittagong, they are told that working knowledge of Arabic will help them get good salaries. The failure of the government is that it has not been able to provide a better alternative. Most of the students who study in these madrasas are from low income families, and these madrasas provide them with free lodging and food.

In South Chittagong there are innumerable madrasas in Rohingya camps funded by some local and foreign NGOs. No matter if they are in Hathazari, South Chittagong or any other part of the country, many of these madrasas later turn out to be training camps for militants like the one busted in Banshkhali. The poor students are easily lured into the militancy trap, and before they realise it they become hostage to many of the deadly and sinister outfits. However, not all madrasas are breeding grounds for militancy. But even those who turn out to be Mullahs may become easy target for militant recruiters, and end up in the wrong place.

The busting of a militant training camp in Banshkhali is just the tip of the iceberg. The law enforcement agencies alone cannot tackle the situation. The government must build public awareness and take the local people into confidence. The local public representatives must be held accountable for their respective areas. When these militants become pawns of influential political parties, it becomes a matter of concern. Let us all remember that the region cannot have another cocoon of terror. The fallout may be devastating.

The writer is former Vice-chancellor, University of Chittagong. He currently teaches at ULAB, Dhaka.

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LAUNCH DISASTER Where lies the remedy?

It is neither the roaring forties of the southern oceans nor the mighty seas of the Indian Ocean that our river transport system has to negotiate with. It is our rivers, the Padma, the Meghna, the Jamuna, the Buriganga, we are talking about.

HUSSAIN IMAM

ON Sunday February 22, M.V. Mostafa, on her way to Daulatdia from Paturia, Manikganj, collided with a cargo vessel and sank instantly in the river Padma in broad daylight with reportedly more than 200 passengers on board. So far, 72 dead bodies have been recovered -- 28 among them from inside the launch.

It is indeed a great human tragedy. It has not only shattered the dreams of those families who have lost their dear and near ones but also compelled the whole nation to think with shock and horror that they are not safe -- at home, on the street, on the river, nowhere.

The government has responded quickly with the salvage operation of the ill-fated launch. It has, as usual, instituted an inquiry committee to find out the causes of the incident and the persons responsible for it. The outcome of such inquiries is anybody's guess.

Launch disaster has become almost a regular feature in this country over the years. Every time such an incident occurs, the television crew and the print media get busy with their coverage. People witness the incidents with shock and horror. Some of us, like me, write articles expressing our deep sorrow, anguish and sympathy.

The minister in charge rushes to the spot and consoles the bereaved families.



lies. The department concerned orders inquiry, often by those officials who are directly or indirectly responsible for the incident; gets a report, shifts the responsibility onto others as usual, and shelves it. Nothing happens. With the passage of time, the public forgets the incident until the next one occurs and the authorities concerned also get away from public accountability for their responsibilities, if any.

This is how we dealt with M.V. Rajhongshi, which collided head-on with another vessel in the Meghna on December 28, 2000, and sank instantly, leaving more than 200 passengers dead

and another 100 or more missing. This is how we dealt with M.V. Mitali, which was caught in a Nor'wester and capsized in the river Buriganga on April 21, 2003 with more than 400 passengers on board.

This is how we dealt with M.V. Prince of Patuakhali, which was caught in a Nor'wester and capsized near Calachipa on May 15, 2005 with nearly 200 passengers on board. The list can go on and on. The story is the same. Each one surpassed the other in terms of loss of life and property.

It is high time somebody did something to put a halt to these unending

miseries. Worldwide, river transport is considered to be the safest mode of transport. No wonder one gets confused when one sees the opposite scenario here. It is neither the roaring forties of the southern oceans nor the mighty seas of the Indian Ocean that our river transport system has to negotiate with. It is our rivers, the Padma, the Meghna, the Jamuna, the Buriganga, we are talking about.

If our river transport system cannot ride over the ripples of the calm or relatively calm waters of the Meghna or Jamuna and ensure the safety of life and property of the passengers on board in the 21st century, we had better not talk about the politics of millennium development.

The main causes of launch disasters in our country leading to such colossal loss of life and property have been identified and highlighted by different quarters many a time. These are: (a) faulty design, (b) structural weakness, (c) lack of adequate safety measures, (d) lack of adequate supervision by a competent authority during the construction period, (e) absence of qualified crew, (f) weakness in inspection procedures, (g) obtaining of fitness certificate through unfair means, (h) overloading, (i) disregard to weather forecast, and (j) negligence in duties by the ship's crew.

If, as an old seafarer with 9 years experience in riding the high seas worldwide and working with the Bangladesh inland water transport

system for nearly 10 years, I am to identify one single reason, I shall without any hesitation mention that it is the inherent fault in the design and construction of these motor launches that is responsible for the disasters leading to such colossal loss. If I am not wrong, a survey, carried out in the not too distant past, revealed that almost 60% of these motor launches were unfit to ply because they were not built in accordance with the standard practice of shipbuilding.

Nobody can say for sure that the situation is different now. Let us take the case of M.V. Mostafa. The vessel with nearly 200 passengers on board collided with a cargo vessel and sank instantly, leaving 72 dead and others missing. The collision was surely because of either mechanical fault or the negligence of the master or the sareng, or of both.

The instant sinking of the vessel was because of its faulty design and structural failure of its hull. It was broad daylight. The weather was fine. The river was calm. Even if the vessel had collided with the other for one reason or other, it would not have sunk instantly if it was built in accordance with the standard shipbuilding practice. Even if it had sunk, the loss of life would have been minimal had the vessel complied with standard safety requirements.

The writer is a retired merchant navy officer and former Marine Superintendent, BIWTC. Email: himam55@yahoo.co.uk

QUOTABLE Quote

The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.

Sydney J. Harris

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Adds up

5 Tricks

10 Hymn singers

12 Laughable

13 Cost

14 Ship of 1492

15 Fuming feeling

16 Splash in drops

18 Glib talk

20 "we there yet?"

21 Proton's place

23 Flowed into

24 Custom

26 Like some tea

28 Snapshot

29 -- time (never)

31 Do something

32 Tea party attendee

36 Break completely

39 Groom's answer

40 Fierce fighter

41 Some messages

43 Be penitent

44 Rich dessert

45 Annie's pooch

46 Goby

DOWN

1 Temporary currency

2 Colleague of Spock and Sulu

3 "Water Lilies" painter

4 Canine command

5 Strahan's co-host

6 Fathom or furlong

7 South-western capital

8 Went in

9 Charred

11 Nile Delta city

17 Debate side

19 Leather shade

22 Mosque tower

24 Kansas city

25 Stop sign, for one

27 Guest's bed

28 Trattoria choices

30 Common title word

33 Pageant crown

34 Fixes copy

35 Play parts

37 Look after

38 Deuce beater

42 Custodian's tool

CRYPTOQUOTE

S NKPSR HW YSRV ... HMJH HWW PWWV J BMJXJBHKKX SQ SRBWRZKRSKRH.

-- QSX EJGHKKX QBWHH

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: WE ARE HERE ON EARTH TO DO GOOD FOR OTHERS. WHAT THE OTHERS ARE HERE FOR, I DO NOT KNOW. -- JOHN FOSTER HALL

Yesterday's answer

S	A	T	I	R	E	S	P	A	R
I	B	E	R	I	A	I	A	R	T
D	E	N	I	M	S	T	O	M	E
S	E	T	O	F	F				
A	R	C	H			M	O	U	R
D	U	O		O	V	E	R	S	E
A	N	N	B	A	N	I	N	S	
M	U	F	F	I	N	S	O	A	T
S	P	U	R	T			O	N	L
S									
A	L	I	E		A	X	E	M	A
D	O	O	R		B	I	G	A	P
D	O	N	S		S	T	A	T	U

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.