

## Two months of horror, waste

### And no signs of abating

Front page report in this newspaper on Friday has very clearly brought out the trauma that the country has suffered in the last two months as a consequence of the political programmes called by the BNP. Our fears are compounded by BNP's threat of even tougher programmes should the government not accede to their demands by 8 March.

We wonder what tougher programmes the BNP can conjure up in the future. As of now 83 people have died due to violence of which 66 were general people not directly connected with politics or political parties. Can we really claim to be civilised when 53 of us die in arson attacks carried out during the so called oborodh and hartals. And what impression are we creating in the minds of the students whose first and most important exam in their life has been put in a shambles? And how are we going to recoup the loss that the economy has suffered in the last two months, an amount that is more than fifty percent of the total budget outlay for the current year?

The government's effort, on the other hand, to curb the violence has displayed misjudgment of the situation, apparent by the number of so called shootouts which, between Jan 5 and March 5, stands at 41.

The country cannot take it anymore. The BNP must immediately call a halt to its programmes and the government must realise that the situation demands more than just tackling current violence. It can ill-afford to soft-pedal on the underlying political issue.

## Sixty seven percent brick kilns illegal

### Are authorities totally oblivious?

At least 67 percent of the country's 8,500 brick kilns are running without the permission of the Department of Environment, according to the environment group, Poribesh Bachao Andolon (Poba). Of these, more than 1,900 kilns use wood to burn bricks, a practice which is a punishable offence as per our environmental laws. These statistics are highly alarming, given that unauthorised brick kilns are responsible for causing irreversible damage to the environment and posing serious health hazards to people working and living in nearby areas.

Large amounts of cultivatable farmlands and forests are being cleared off to make way for these illegal brick kilns, often with the help of muscle power. An overwhelming majority of kilns, which emit highly toxic gases, are set up within three kilometres of residential or forest areas, in violation of laws.

It is incomprehensible how such a huge number of kilns can be operating in the country without valid licenses and relevant clearance, outside the purview of the Department of Environment (DoE) and district administrations. Are we to assume that the authorities are totally unaware of the existence of such kilns and that they are ill-equipped to conduct regular drives to identify illegal and violating brick fields? Or are we to assume that there is collusion between relevant officials and illegal brick kiln owners, given that the illegal activities of such brick kilns have been repeatedly highlighted by different quarters, including in this column itself?

We strongly urge the government to hold relevant bodies accountable for this grievous lack of oversight and take urgent steps to close down all these illegal



ABDUL MANNAN

MARCH of 1971 was a month that will go down in history because, beginning on March 1, the course of history of one Pakistan changed very fast. In the first general election of Pakistan since it was created in 1947, the Awami League (AL) led by Bangabandhu Sk. Mujibur Rahman won 167 seats out of 169 constituencies of East Pakistan (7 reserved seats for women); out of total 300 seats in the National Parliament of Pakistan.

The elections were held under a Legal Framework Order (LFO) announced by General Yahya Khan. The LFO directed that once the parliament was formed it would have to draft a constitution for Pakistan within 120 days based on the ideology of Pakistan, acknowledging its theocratic nature. It also said that if General Yahya was not satisfied with the contents of the constitution he would trash the draft.

AL fought the election on its Six-Point programme and announced that the constitution would be framed incorporating the programme that promised maximum autonomy for all the provinces of Pakistan. Many, including Maulana Bhashani, the chief of National Awami Party (NAP), questioned the propriety of participating in such an election under LFO. But Mujib was no revolutionary and believed in universally practiced democratic norms and that elections were the only means of going to power. The Bangalis did not make a mistake in choosing their leader and the party.

Under a democratic system it is the majority party that is called to form the government. But, on February 28, 1971, Bhutto announced that the 120 days time frame under LFO must be removed, and if Yahya Khan postponed the sitting of Parliament, which was scheduled to sit in Dhaka on March 3, 1971, he was willing to discuss the matters relating to Mujib's Six-Point programme and framing of the constitution. Unexpectedly, on March 1, 1971 it was announced that Yahya had decided to unilaterally postpone the sitting of the parliament. He was dancing to Bhutto's tune. Bhutto was the lynchpin in the conspiracy against the people of East Pakistan.

The postponement of the sitting of the parliament was the last nail in the coffin of a united Pakistan. Syed Shahid Husain, a civil bureaucrat from the then West Pakistan serving in Dhaka and witness to many events leading to March 25-26, 1971, writes in his memoir, *What Was Once East Pakistan*: "The decision to postpone the session of National Assembly triggered an immensely negative response. Dhaka Radio Station broadcast Mujib's call for public protest in the province against the postponement. But people were unable to restrain themselves and showed spontaneous

and forceful resentment by coming out on the streets within half an hour of the announcement....About 150 people showed up in my office and respectfully asked me to order the closure of the office because their democratic rights had been violated. I ordered accordingly."

On March 3, Bangabandhu addressed a huge gathering at Paltan Maidan organised by Purbo Pakistan Chhatra League where a national flag of Bangladesh was formally hoisted and a manifesto of the proposed independent new nation was announced. The national anthem of the would-be new country was also declared. Bangabandhu announced that on March 7, 1971 he would give the formal directives to the nation at Ramna Race Course (present day Suhrawardy Uddayan) about the future course of action.



Before the March 7 address, the air of the country was pregnant with speculations about what Bangabandhu would announce. Would it be a unilateral declaration of independence or would he announce some sort of compromise? In the morning of March 7, leaders of Chhatra League proposed to him that he unilaterally declare an independent Bangladesh and take over the cantonments. The US Ambassador in Pakistan, Joseph Farland, met Mujib and in unequivocal terms warned him that if he declared independence the US would not endorse or support it.

Bangabandhu gave everyone a patient hearing but said very little. He knew exactly what his options were and their possible outcomes. By midday the vast Ramna Race course was teeming with millions to hear from the 'Poet of Politics,' a title given to him earlier by *Newsweek*. Syed Shahid Husain

writes: "I had noted in my diary that Sheikh Mujib was likely to declare independence on March 7. As a matter of fact I had heard this on the BBC. On March 7, Mujib addressed a mammoth rally but did not declare independence. Yahya must have been disappointed as he had probably hoped that Mujib would proclaim independence and thus provide him the justification to arrest the East Pakistan leader."

Bangabandhu arrived at the venue at 2.45 in the afternoon and spoke for only 18 minutes. It was electrifying 18 minutes. Not only the people of entire Pakistan and East Bengal were glued to their radios but the world was holding its breath. However, on orders from the central government, both the radio and the TV had to abstain from broadcasting the historic speech. In protest, the staff

included handing over power to the majority party (AL) in the parliament, lifting of martial law, pulling the army to the barracks, holding impartial enquiry for the killing of innocent civilians by the army. He directed the people not pay any taxes, and to observe complete shutdown. All transport vehicles would run, banks would remain open till 2 p.m. and all buildings would fly black flags. As a matter of fact it was Bangabandhu who was running the civil administration of East Bengal and not Yahya Khan. By all definition East Pakistan was lost and the world was witnessing the slow emergence of a new independent nation.

On March 15, 1971, Yahya arrived in Dhaka to talk to Bangabandhu. But it

the radio and TV walked out of their broadcasting stations. The speech was extempore, and became one of the memorable speeches ever given by a politician.

While Bangabandhu was speaking the Dhaka garrison was preparing for an assault on the unarmed civilians in case there was a declaration of independence. Bangabandhu did not disappoint the waiting millions, but said what he had to in an intelligent and statesman-like way. He ended his speech saying: "The struggle this time is for emancipation, the struggle this time is for independence." A straight declaration would have branded him a secessionist and he would have lost world sympathy.

Bangabandhu declared a programme of non-cooperation unless their demands were met, which

was too late. The die was cast. It was just part of the conspiracy to reinforce the Pakistan army to annihilate the Bengali nation. On March 25, 1969, when General Ayub Khan abdicated power in the face of massive student uprising in both wings of Pakistan, he made a speech saying that he could not preside over the destruction of Pakistan. He handed over power to General Yahya who did exactly that because that was the pre-determined destiny of Pakistan, a country created with a flawed ideology. Bangabandhu's speech on that afternoon has become synonymous with the history of Bangladesh. Long live the spirit of March 7, 1971.

The writer is a former Vice-Chancellor, University of Chittagong. Currently, he is teaching at ULAB, Dhaka.

# Avijit murder: Tackling intolerance

## STRAIGHT LINE


 MUHAMMAD  
NURUL HUDA

THE horrific murder of Avijit Roy, an activist writer, in full public view, has shocked all but the bigoted fringe elements of our society. Beyond clear and unequivocal condemnation of such dastardly act,

there is an imperative to painstakingly ferret out the designs and malevolence of the dark forces as also the deficits in concomitant actions towards prevention and detection.

To see things in historical perspective, Bangladesh had a share of politically motivated destructive activities, particularly following the arrival of religion-centered terrorism and the unsettling specter of suicide bombing in the not-too-distant past. The unfortunate part, however, is that, as in other sectors of our national existence, we have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats to internal security. The approach appears to be ad hoc and on a case to case basis.

We may have to ask ourselves if a perception has developed among the so-called religious extremist groups that the Bangladeshi state is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent. We may have to ascertain if quite a few quarters have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws.

Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various organisations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of

some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the extremists.

Some say that we have not realised that in post-1975 Bangladesh there has been a phenomenal establishment of madrassas throughout the country by persons and institutions about whose credentials not much is known. The suspicion is that while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained in the dark about the designs and programmes of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

It may be relevant to note that the State claims to stand for enlightened moderation. While significant parts of the elite have represented the process of fight against extremist activities some sections of the society have experienced the so-called radicalisation of Islamic thought and action. The focus is on the use of power in pursuit of policy. A section of the public has been converted to this approach. Incidentally, the liberal current of opinion has been significantly de-legitimised in the process.

In Bangladesh, advocates of the radical path appear more determined than liberals or secularists. Secular forces hardly work with intense dedication, much less with a sense of mission. There is a threat in attempts to redefine Bangladeshi statehood in Islamic colours. Initially, there was constitutional faith in state secularism as the defining credo of Bangladeshi nationhood.

A considered view is that the objective should be the restoration of the natural centrism of our politics. We have to remember that the state policy is under attack by religiously mobilised political forces.

It needs to be noted that secularism as state ideology is unable to compete with a language of belonging saturated with religion in our parlance. The compulsions of

the traditional obligations of the ruler to protect state religion had to be kept in view.

In specific terms, do we see a supposedly political body which calls itself the "Defender of Faith" but acts almost always to consolidate its own strategic and corporate interests? Are not there credible fears to believe that violent groups have been created, extremist leaders promoted and young minds trained and instigated to spread dissent and persecute the minorities at the opportune time?

Are we witnessing the formative stage of the growth of a pernicious sub-culture of extremism wherein violence against other fellow beings is justified as religious cause? Are there subtle efforts to infect key organs of the state with radicalism? Is it not time to effectively counter the influence of extremist schools of thought in our context where Islam as a religion had a more benign and accommodative character in practice?

The questions is, has such a quarter created a parallel narrative of hope and strength in times of crisis, and thereby expanded its political capital? Does such a narrative stand to gain in a climate of dependency resulting from political stalemate as evidenced in Bangladesh now?

As against the above apprehensions and well-grounded fears, is there a lack of political consensus and less than adequate institutional capacity, particularly of the regulatory outfits in combating the extremist threats?

The so-called Islamist terrorist groups have been found to organise themselves around the rhetoric of a radical interpretation of Islam and seek to impose religion in the politics of Bangladesh. Such terrorism, in terms of growth, benefits from the unhealthy competition to retain or gain power at any cost.

The militant's focus is on the use of power in pursuit of policy. Some sections of the public have been converted to this approach. Incidentally, the liberal

current of opinion was significantly de-legitimised. The goal, therefore, should be denial of space for the radicalised and the militant. The extremists shall not be allowed to develop vital stakes in the political system for starting a radical movement in the long run.

While eradicating or controlling militancy it should occur to us that in Bangladesh the advocates of extreme path are more determined than liberals. Liberal forces hardly work with intense dedication, much less with a sense of mission.

The way to counter militancy is a battle of ideas, challenging the ideological motivations that extremists believe justify the use of violence. Successful prosecution in the courts, based on gathering of necessary evidence and apprehending those involved in planning acts of terrorism before committing of mischief should be one of the principal approaches of countering militant activity.

We have to understand that if we have a relatively mature institutional base then the extremist movement would neither be represented in the mainstream politics nor would it be able to carry out terrorist activities in various localities. We would not be subjected to hate politics along sectarian lines with its attendant human cost.

The military elite of Pakistan sought to activate the divine sources of legitimacy during the Afghanistan war in partnership with the American military might and financial muscle. In the process, the extremist and the obscurantist elements got strengthened beyond all proportion. Sadly, the agenda for democracy lost its momentum in Pakistan. We in Bangladesh surely do not want to jeopardise our democratic pluralist existence by not recognising the potential and actual threats from the so-called religious extremists.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Teixobactin with great hope

Researchers at Northeastern University in Boston have discovered an unusual method of producing antibiotics from bacteria that live in dirt. According to the researchers' report published in the journal 'Nature', the new powerful antibiotic-the Teixobactin is capable of controlling severe infection without getting resistant. It may be mentioned here that most of the present-day antibiotics have become ineffective against bacteria and this is a major problem around the globe. Teixobactin has reportedly been tested on mice which easily cured severe infections, with no side effects. However the researchers would need some more years to determine the effectiveness of Teixobactin on humans before getting final approval for release.

I sincerely hope that efforts would be intensified to get the testing task of Teixobactin on humans soon so that the new antibiotic could be released worldwide for the greater welfare of the suffering humanity.

**Professor M Zahidul Haque**

Department of Agricultural Extension &amp; Information System, SAU, Dhaka

### Everest climbing

This refers to the report, "Nepal changes Everest climbing route" (Feb.19). Safety should be the prime criteria for any policy on routes to climb Everest. Recently, there have been instances of avalanches, resulting in deaths of Everest climbers and the Nepali sherpas refusing to act as helpers for climbers. The lives of Nepali sherpas are not cheap and they need to be protected. Provisions should also be made for quick rescue operations for Everest climbers and those who accompany them as helpers.

**Deendayal M. Lulla**

On e-mail