

We condemn the killing

Rising intolerance must be resisted by us all

WE are shocked and appalled by yet another murder of a blogger, Oyasiquir Rahman, in broad daylight, barely a month after the savage murder of blogger and activist Avijit Roy. According to the two attackers who were caught by the public, the 27-year-old blogger, active mostly on Facebook, was killed for his "anti-Islamic" views. With the third such murder in two years, it seems that the targeting and slaughter of people with divergent views by religious extremists has become a dangerous trend, one that the government should tackle with due urgency, in which the whole society must actively participate.

The two madrasa students, confessing to the crime, admitted that they were unfamiliar with the writings of Oyasiquir, and slaughtered him only upon the instruction of a person called Masum, who also recently graduated from a madrasa. Oyasiquir was vocal about religious bigotry, superstition and Islamist extremism.

Although two of the three attackers were caught, thanks to the bravery of two transgendered persons, the onus now lies on the government to conduct a focused investigation to find the mastermind(s) of this murder. With the killers of Avijit still on the run, the government must decipher if, and to what extent, the deaths of the bloggers are linked and which extremist groups are instigating these methodical attacks.

The government, it appears, is more concerned with containing the opposition through various means than in addressing the real threat and rising trend of religious and cyber terrorism in a systematic manner, lacking a coherent vision, strategy and political good-will to counter rising intolerance.

We urge the government to give due attention to the rising threats of extremism, and protect our threatened national ethos of freedom of thought, secularism and tolerance.

Bangabandhu bridge at risk

Why sand extraction so close to it?

AS reported in this paper on March 31, the Bangabandhu Bridge Authority (BBA) is apparently turning a blind eye to a syndicate of sand traders that has been engaged for the last three months in removing precious sand a mere kilometre away from the bridge site. That numerous dredgers are engaged in removing sand is clear. What's unclear is how this activity has been allowed to go on under the nose of the BBA, especially when any such sand-removal activity is specifically prohibited within 6 kilometres of the bridge. How can such a key piece of infrastructure like the bridge in question be put in jeopardy just to whet commercial appetite baffles us!

It is pathetic to see that the "syndicate" has the gall to claim that they have had verbal permission to lift sand, which is a clear violation of rules, let alone being denied by the authorities. Are we then to assume that it is perfectly alright to flout rules and regulations in the name of business just because it is blessed by some vested quarters? The denial mode of the authorities notwithstanding it is not going to make the problem disappear. We earnestly hope the authorities wake up to the manmade sand denudation at the expense of the Bangabandhu Bridge, a vital arterial link. We expect a statement on behalf of the BBA explaining the situation and putting a stop to the extremely harmful specimen of sand extraction business.

COMMENTS

"ICC President denied chance to hand over WC trophy" (March 30, 2015)

Sabir

Mr. Kamal wasn't diplomatic; his emotional outburst contravened the protocol. But he proved to be a patriot. He said what he felt right.

Hafeejul Alam

It seems that the ICC has been a den of conspiracy and corruption.

Arif

Mr. Kamal has failed to handle the situation in a sophisticated manner. ICC is an international body and its officials should make comments very cautiously.

Nazia Rahman

This is how you get punished for not being diplomatic. Lotus Kamal should learn from the Bangladesh captain how to become diplomatic with the media. Mashrafe did not criticise the umpiring but he just mentioned "you all saw what happened" to the media. Furthermore Kamal being the president of ICC should not have made any statement against the ICC.

PlainSpeaker

Mr. Kamal's outburst on Bangladesh's defeat to India was not nice and actually it was childish, even though he was right.

"A note from Simon Dring" (March 26, 2015)

Shrimoti S. Begum

Indeed! There are many unrecognised freedom fighters who contributed to our Liberation War.

Paucity of purpose

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

THE people of Bangladesh do not take any insults hurled at them lightly. They also secretly join their palms in prayers and hope that whoever opposes them will someday be proven wrong. Yes, we are an unforgiving nation when it comes to our national integrity. We may have thousands of disputes to settle amongst our political parties or ideologies, but as far as the sustainability of sovereignty goes, there is not one Bangali who will compromise on the question of statehood... unless the opposing forces are outright Razakars.

When Bangladesh won and made it to the quarterfinals, a Pakistani cricketer, who later claimed that his twitter account was hacked, had sarcastically commented that we were celebrating as if it were a victory like 1971, many from Bangladesh pushed his twitter to the limit and bombarded him with counter responses, which were obviously not kind in nature. Similarly, the two controversial umpiring decisions during Bangladesh's quarterfinal game against India in Melbourne did not go down well with the people of this land. While umpire Ian Gould no-balled Rubel in the 40th over of the match, the whole of Bangladesh watched Bangladesh losing to India by 109 runs. While, like all other sports, cricketers nurture their sportsman spirit, millions of Bangladeshis at home and abroad could not but shed tears. In social media, the comments by Rupom, the Indian singer, was also not taken well by many of us. So when India did not make it to the finals, many die-hard Indian supporters in Bangladesh also had little to grieve over... just because as a nation, we stand united when it comes to self-esteem.

Right after Rana Plaza, the brand American Apparel put up an ad with the picture of an almost nude model-cum-employee of the company. The ad read: "Made in Bangladesh," and the tag line ran through the upper half of the girl, Maks -- a merchandiser who worked in the brand's office. The father of the girl is from Bangladesh. The ad enraged most of the manufacturers in Bangladesh and we were hurt. But a couple of days ago, when the news that the struggling retailer, which has faced many controversies, had announced that its sales fell to \$153.5 million, down 9.2% from \$169.1 million in the year-earlier period and that in the three months which ended December 31, its loss was 19 cents a share, compared to the same period a year earlier, not many of us were surprised, shocked or sad.

Bangladesh is a young and a proud nation and with the demographic dividend on its side, it's time to turn it around. If at all any of us want to change things in this land, which way do we go? Is blockade, hartals and an endless phase of protests the real answer to a crisis?

One could cite an endless list of the mistakes of the incumbent and complain about the limitations in our democratic practices in the country, but one also ought to question whether, on the 90th day today, a continuous agenda makes sense and, in the end, who does this agenda benefit but a handful of party loyalists? Truth is, no revolt or protest in the last three years has pole-shifted our lives from what it used to be to a life as we know it today.

What does a real revolution look like, really? A couple of references to a few 'people-led' protests may clear the air. For example, the anti-corruption movement which was carried out in the Ramila Maidan in India for almost 40 days, led by many influential leaders among which Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev support-

governments and existing systems, ever since 2010. In Turkey, in May 2013, the common people launched a series of protests and demonstrations against the clampdown on freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the government's encroachment on the country's secularism. The Movimento Paise Livre (Free Fare Movement), a local organisation advocating for free public transportation, gave birth to mass protests in Brazil in 2013, and the Occupy Movement with a "We are the 99%" tag went global with a cause and recently reached as far as Hong Kong. In reality, none of these protests would have happened had there been no people in the picture.

In the recent spate of protests staged by a major political party in Bangladesh, where are the people?



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

ers stood out the most, had over a 100 million protesters directly linked to it. The Chilean Winter protest carried out in August in 2011 was literally sustained by a series of student-led demonstrations across Chile, who had demanded a new framework for education and an end to the existing profit-motive in higher education. Colombian students also revolted in 2011 and as a result of the protests, a government-planned reform was withdrawn from the parliament on the November 16, 2011. The people of Afghanistan have been protesting against the War in Afghanistan from 2001 till date. In the Arab World, many have become the children of the Arab Spring and have continued with on-going protests and violent and non-violent riots, directing their protest against their respective

There may be a hundred allegations against the government, there may be accusations of oppressing political opponents, there may be a thousand and one arguments against the incumbent of being autocratic, but does continuing a 90-day long protest, without the support of the people justify any purpose? Very often, many politicians tend to forget that it's only the votes that bring them to power and that this land in general is intolerant about violating democracy. To many in Bangladesh, democracy is not only about a single fair election, but it is always about the continuing democratic practices of the incumbent and the democratic tolerance of the opposition.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

The stalled war against Islamic militants

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE war against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) is about to observe its first anniversary. There is no sign of an immediate end to the war, neither to the hold of the militants over a sizeable chunk of land in Syria and Iraq. Despite the efforts to dislodge them through air strikes by Western nations, including the US, the territory in ISIS control remains pretty much the

The war against ISIS will become more complex if it continues to be viewed by the neighbouring countries through a Shia-Sunni prism and not as a threat to the existence of all countries in the region.

same (the size of many Middle Eastern countries).

The air strikes caused ISIS militants some setback, and halted further aggressive advance. In fact, experts said that without ground military intervention it would not be possible to drive the militants from the territory they had seized. But no country was willing to stake ground support, including the US. It was left to the Iraqi government to strike back with the forces at their command, with military advice from the US.

The core of the problem in that part of the Middle East is not just a weak government in Iraq and an imploding Syria. The success of ISIS can also be attributed to the sectarian division of the area between Shias and Sunnis. The kind of welcome they received from Sunni territories of Iraq such as Mosul and Tikrit, where the Iraqi forces were viewed as oppressors, is evidence of that. But their ability to hold on to the territory and the apparent slow progress in the war against ISIS have more to do with the ambivalence of the countries in the surrounding area toward a determined effort to eradicate the forces occupying the area than the military strength of the militants. ISIS successfully exploited that fear and it has been relentless in promoting its appeal to the Sunnis in the area through protecting them from purported Shiite repression under a Shia dominated Iraqi government. (In fact, when the battle to retake Tikrit began, a US fear was of reprisal by the conquering Iraqi forces on local Sunnis for their support to ISIS.)

The progress of the ISIS militants in expanding their territory has not been halted by air strikes alone, but also by the role the non-formal Shia militias are playing in this war. And this is largely because of the role that Iran is playing in this war. Iran is now wielding a greater influence in the counter offensive against ISIS, which became apparent in the recent battle around Tikrit. Reportedly, Iranian-backed militants are taking a bigger role in the fight against the Islamic State than regular Iraqi forces. Iranian leaders have been openly helping to direct the battle, and American officials say Iran's Revolutionary Guards forces are taking

part. Here comes the great conundrum that dominates the current war against the ISIS, their continued presence and slow response of the neighbouring Arab countries to remove them.

Iran's increasing involvement in the war against ISIS has brought to the fore the fear of the Sunni countries of a vigorous Shia presence in the Middle East that may lead to Iran's overwhelming influence in a vast territory stretching from Iran to Lebanon. The Shias dominate in numbers in the region but, except Iran, they were in the political backwaters until the fall of Saddam in Iraq. The new Iraqi government installed Shias in powerful places and lifted them from political repression to political control. Unfortunately, this also led to a new political paradigm that reversed the role of the Sunnis from one of hegemony to impotence.

The presence of ISIS in some ways is counterbalancing the strength of Shia influence and political control in the area. The ISIS is playing on the Sunni fear of Shia oppression and backlash once the Shia-led Iraqi government regains the territories, and Iran's role in the war will fuel that fear. The Shiite militias on the other hand are motivated by ISIS's belief that Shiites are apostates who deserve death. As a recent report from New York Times states, involvement of the militias carries a risk of further inflaming sectarian tensions that ISIS has exploited -- as has already happened in some places where Sunni residents have reported abuse or summary executions by the militias.

The war against the Islamic militants of ISIS has to be viewed against the continuing Shia-Sunni strife in the area. The Western powers who would like to see an end to the militant state and the

radicals who control it are caught between their reluctance to see a powerful Iran presence containing the ISIS militants and the implicit support to these elements from the Sunni countries in the area. Restraining and eradicating the ISIS militants and regaining the territory they control would have been easier if the Arab countries in the area were united and lent ground support to Arab forces in this battle, just as Saudi Arabia did last week to stop the Shia rebels in Yemen.

The war against ISIS will become more complex if it continues to be viewed by the neighbouring countries through a Shia-Sunni prism and not as a threat to the existence of all countries in the region. For the ideology ISIS is propagating, that harks back to a stern Islamic government, is not what these countries want to be thrown into. This is not what the harbingers of the Arab Spring (albeit deflated now) dreamed of or talked about. ISIS stands against the hopes and dreams that people chanted for in the streets of many of these countries only a few years ago.

The West and all democracy-minded countries can support only as much as the countries that are directly affected by the ISIS threat want. This can be moral and, in some cases, auxiliary military support. But the real help and effort to eradicate this threat will have to come from the countries themselves. Sectarian strife and mutual distrust based on sectarian difference will only strengthen ISIS and its expansion. The threat posed by ISIS will remain as long as the neighbouring countries do not work together to fight this.

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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"Will the Palestinians get justice from ICC?"

I have gone through the above mentioned letter by Mobarak Ali published on March 29. There is no doubt that Israel is violating international laws for its brutal attacks on the Palestinians. But will the complaint for justice in ICC (International Criminal Court) bring any change? Israel will never stop. Benjamin Netanyahu already started lobbying with other countries to sabotage world justice by cutting off funding for the ICC to conduct the investigation. Even the US senate has threatened Palestine saying that "If the ICC makes the egregious mistake of accepting the Palestinian Authority as a member, given that it is not a state, Congress will seek ways to protect Israeli citizens from politically abusive ICC actions."

So what is the guarantee that ICC will give any verdict on behalf of the Palestinians? Muslim world needs to be united. They have to raise their voices against the violence of Israel.

Ripu Sen

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Bangladesh: beautiful one day, perfect the next

Independence Day has come and gone, and like all of the previous commemorative days, the occasion served to remind me of the pride I feel in my heart to be Bangladeshi.

So much was sacrificed. So much blood was spilt to achieve our independence and four decades later we're still prisoners in our own homes through hartals and blockades. One wonders if the madness will ever cease and one day we will be truly free of these senseless political moves.

On Independence Day, I received a card from Sir Frank Peters on which he had written: "Bangladesh: beautiful one day, perfect the next". The words touched my soul. This to me not only adds a new dimension to Independence Day itself, it is another justification for the massive sacrifices our beloved freedom fighters made. I think it's a brilliant slogan that has the potential to promote pride in all Bangladeshis worldwide and should be used to attract tourists.

Ferdous Imam and family

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