

PARIS ATTACKS

SAD BUT NOT SURPRISING AT ALL



STRANGER THAN FICTION
Taj Hashmi

THE terrorist attack in Paris on November 13 has rocked the whole world. Some people have already started calling the attack the "French 9/11".

Meanwhile, Facebook users globally, including Muslims (among others, our daughter and friends), have changed their profile, temporarily using the French colours in solidarity with the innocent victims of the attack.

President Obama was among the first Western leaders to condemn the attack in unambiguous terms. He considered the gruesome attack "not just on the people of France, but [also] an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share."

Despite ISIS's claim, there's no solid evidence of ISIS involvement in the Paris Attack. However, there is nothing so surprising about a Syrian – Islamist or secular – backlash against France. France's direct involvement in bombing ISIS positions in Syria since September and its plan to bomb ISIS Headquarters at Raqqa and the French support for the US-sponsored Regime Change operation against Bashar al-Assad could be important factors behind the Paris Attack.

The US and its allies have been quite ineffective in neutralising the ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Since the US-led Coalition has been mainly interested in overthrowing the Assad regime – a common enemy of the ISIS as well – there seems to be no logical explanation behind the purported ISIS terror attack in Paris. In view of the formidable pressure by the Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah forces on ISIS strongholds in Syria, the terror outfit is least likely to provoke France by a mega terror attack in Paris. Then again, one is not sure. The ISIS could have taken a suicidal move, out of total desperation.

However, whoever was behind the

attack, has successfully implicated the ISIS in it. Thanks to the online circulation of videos of brutal execution of Muslim and Western captives by ISIS terrorists, the terror outfit has outperformed al Qaeda and all other nihilist Islamist terrorist groups to emerge as the most dreadful and hated terrorist group in the world. The Paris Attack has given a loud wake up call to France and the world at large. Muslims and non-Muslims seem to have no reservations about waging an all out war against ISIS. France has already accelerated its aerial bombings on ISIS targets in Syria. It might be the only positive outcome of the attack. Unlike what followed the 9/11 attacks – the enigmatic and vague "War on Terror" – the Paris Attack has led to the French Declaration of war against the ISIS in the most unambiguous terms. Let's hope a concerted Russo-American-French attack on ISIS will soon decimate the terrorist group.

However as 9/11 has left behind unanswered questions and unresolved issues, so has the latest Paris Attack. Apparently, they were terrorist attacks by ideologically motivated people to draw global attention to their cause to establish the supremacy of Islam as an alternative order to Western capitalism. We can't convince ourselves that the desire of establishing the so-called "Islamic World Order" could at all be a motive behind the attacks. Gallup polls of global Muslims reveal that the Ummah (Global Muslim community) is least interested in an "Islamic World Order," let alone supportive of terrorism and anarchy. We need to know who were behind 9/11 and the Paris Attack. We need to know who benefitted most from the attacks. After the American-sponsored invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the world has been further polarised between the Muslim and Western worlds. America's keeping the military option wide open has further aggravated the situation, especially in the wake of the American-



A woman prays in front of a pop-up memorial in tribute to the victims of Paris attacks.

PHOTO: AFP

sponsored selective "regime change operations" in the Muslim World.

We have reasons to be optimistic about the end of the ISIS menace within a year or so, but we also have reasons to worry about the US's persistence that "Assad must go." We believe immediate removal of Assad from power would not resolve the ethno-national and sectarian conflicts in Syria, which like Iraq, is an artificial entity, not a nation state like France or Germany. We believe the US policy of limiting the influence of Iran in Syria and Iraq, and the US policy of destabilising Iraq and Syria to the benefit of Israel, would backfire to the detriment of regional and global peace. Due to the lack of well-entrenched liberal democratic and secular traditions and institutions in the Middle East, the people in general are vulnerable to religious extremism, and subject to mobilisation along sectarian and tribal lines.

In the backdrop of Western cover-ups, the erosion of liberal values and the non-existent "soft power approach" by America, there is nothing to celebrate about winning the "War on Terror". The public demonisation of Islam and Muslims won't do any good to anybody. The end of the Cold War – roughly coinciding with the beginning of the Globalisation Process and the IT Revolution – paved the way for another Cold War between the West and its real and imaginary adversaries in the Muslim World and beyond, in China and Russia. In the wake of the end of the bipolar world, the so-called unipolar world created new problems between the Western and Islamic worlds. These conflicts – reflected in ethno-national, sectarian and class conflicts – are about conflicts of interests and hegemonies, not "clash of civilisations".

The end of the Cold War did not

bring the promised peace, prosperity, justice and freedom for the Muslim World. However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, many Muslims started thinking of staging revolutions in their own countries. The four Arab-Israeli wars since 1948, the Indian occupation of Kashmir and Western invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq embittered Muslims against Jews, Hindus and Christians. Muslims, as aggrieved victims, have been going through the following stages of: a) Denial; b) Shock; c) Grief; d) Compromise; and e) Acceptance. Nine-Eleven led to denial, American retaliation to the attacks shocked and further attacks and humiliation brought grief.

Without being cynical and disrespectful to the 129 innocent victims of the Paris Attack, one may wonder why no Western leader has ever said similar things in solidarity with the Indians, Indonesians,

Pakistanis, Nigerians, Somalis, Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans or Lebanese in the wake of major terror attacks in these countries. The day before the Paris Attack, ISIS suicide bombers killed 43 and severely wounded around 200 people in Beirut. And Western leaders, media and people in general were indifferent to the tragedy; Obama did not consider the Beirut massacre "an attack on all of humanity".

I am not the only "cynic" around! Some Western writers and bloggers have raised the similar question if some deaths are worth mourning, while other deaths are insignificant. David Swanson, author of War is a Lie, and a 2015 Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, questions why "We Are All France! Though We Are Never All Lebanon or Syria or Iraq!" He is also critical of the West, which never declares "deaths in Yemen or Pakistan or Palestine to be attacks on our common humanity." Australian blogger Chris Graham critiqued Western vulnerability to "selective grief and outrage."

Nevertheless, as Indian blogger Karuna Ezara Parikh's poem (which has gone viral in social media) suggests, we should "say a prayer for Paris by all means but pray more, for the world that does not have a prayer." We must pray for Beirut and Baghdad as well, and stop calling Arab refugees, who ran away from terrorists to freedom, terrorists. However, as the "selective grief and outrage" of the West is disturbing, so is its finger pointing at Syrian/Arab refugees in France for the Paris massacre. Politicising the Paris attacks, as US conservatives Donald Trump and Newt Gingrich have done, is even worse. They impute the attacks to the strict gun control laws in France. As if armed civilians have ever neutralised terrorist attacks in America!

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Changing Contours of RTI, Part II

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

IT would be unfair to compare the Bangladesh situation with the Indian experience (refer to Part I of this column published yesterday). This is mainly because our citizens are not using the RTI Act as much as Indian citizens do in their country. Unlike India, we did not have a long-drawn peoples' movement for accountable governance preceding adoption of the Act. Unless citizens put the law to use with a missionary zeal, real change is bound to be slow. A few statistics may help to understand the differences between the two situations.

In 2015 alone, the forecast in India is that over 6 million RTI applications will be filed all over the country. This will bring the total in the last one decade to around 25 million. Only such huge numbers can generate an average of about 3000 complaints/appeals to the Central Information Commission (CIC) per month. If we compare it to our figure of 926 complaints handled by the Bangladesh Information Commission (IC) in the last six years, the gulf between the two countries become clearer. Expecting systemic change at such a pace is thus a far cry. But there is no reason to lose hope. The pace has begun to pick up as stated in this column last month. The main task is how to accelerate it.

INDICATIONS FROM RECENT DECISIONS OF THE IC

The following case studies based on decisions of the Bangladesh IC in the last one year are cited to show recent trends in the nature and subjects of RTI applications.

They indicate that applications are going beyond personal concerns, which we witnessed in the earlier phase, to probing integrity and objectivity of decision-makers. If the trend continues and the number of such applications increases, we may begin to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

Selection process by Public Service Commission: Thakur Das Malo, Sub-Inspector of Police Kalabagan Thana, sent an RTI application to the DO of BPCS seeking information on the number of posts in the general cadre under 28th BCS exam, numbers reserved for *Adivasis/Upojatis* (indigenous) candidates, number of *Adivasis* recommended for appointment at cadre posts, number of *Adivasis/Upojatis* qualified for the written/viva-voce exam and finally number of posts that remained vacant under Freedom Fighter, indigenous and women quota etc. He was given a response after appeal which he found incomplete and misleading. So he complained to the IC which found the information provided to be justified under the given circumstances.

Union Parishad irregularities: Matiur Rahman of village Kolma, Savar, filed an RTI application seeking information on the amount of money allocated under Local Governance Support Project (LGSP) for financial years 2010-2014, list of development work undertaken with the money including awarding of contract to a particular agent. Not receiving information from DO or appellate authority, he filed a complaint to the IC, which ordered disclosure of the information.

Checking on the Anti-Corruption Commission: Matlu Mollik of Daily Alokito Bangladesh submitted an RTI application to the DO of ACC seeking information on charge sheets prepared by the Commission between July 1 2014 to Feb 28 2015 together with names and addresses of persons charge-sheeted, case numbers and date of commencement of investigation, date of approval of charge sheet, investigating officer's name and that of the court. At complaint hearing, the IC directed the DO to provide the information sought except the name and designation of investigating officer.

Illegal occupation of land: Arup Roy of Savar asked the Water Development Board, through an RTI application, if a particular piece of land was owned by it, whether it was leased out to any private person/organisation, or, if it was acquired land, information of such acquisition and its present status. Without any result at the earlier stages, the matter went up to the IC. The latter directed the DO of the Board to initiate the process of collecting names of illegal land grabbers, provide the same to the applicant and undertake eviction measures with the help of the DC.

Non-action by law enforcement agencies: Md. Kutub Uddin of Agargaon, Dhaka, filed an RTI application to the DO of Ministry of Home Affairs, seeking information as to why an accused was not arrested and charge-sheeted in a particular criminal case of Keranigonj thana under Dhaka District. The matter went up to the IC as no response came from the DO or appeal authority. At the complaint hearing, the DO claimed non-receipt of application. The IC asked the

complainant to resubmit his application and directed the DO to provide the information.

Corruption in banks: Delwar Bin Shiraj of Bangabandhu Avenue, Dhaka, sought, through an application to the DO of Janata Bank, information on issuance of loans from 2013 to 2015 as recorded in the register book of the bank. Not receiving a response from the DO and the appellate authority, he filed a complaint to the IC. At the complaint hearing, the applicant informed that he got the information the same day and prayed for withdrawal of complaint.

Environment issues: Badshah Miah of Karwan Bazar, Dhaka filed an RTI application to the DO of Environment Directorate seeking information on list of factories which were mandated to install Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP), number of environment release orders provided to ETP-compliance factories, number of ETP-compliance factories which were inspected by mobile court during inspection drives and number of factories fined for non-compliance. Not receiving the information, he appealed to the appellate authority with no result. So he filed a complaint to the IC. Upon hearing both sides, the IC asked the complainant to frame his question more specifically and directed the DO to provide information upon receipt of his reformulated application.

Discriminatory appointment: Nazrul Islam Ajhar, a journalist from weekly Banglacumi of Joydebpur, Gazipur District, used RTI to seek information from Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) on its practice of

appointing labour at its head office and sub-offices pursuant to an executive order and asked if the order was legal. Not receiving an answer even at appellate stage, he complained to the IC which passed an order directing DO of BARI to provide information sought.

Tender irregularities: Saif Ali from Daily *Sarejamin Barta* of Dhaka filed an RTI application with DO of Police Super office seeking information on a tender invitation for construction of a boundary in Gopalganj district, the names of national dailies publishing the tender, date and name of the company obtaining the contract along with its commercial address. Not receiving the desired information from the DO or the appellate authority, he filed a complaint to the IC which passed an order directing the DO to provide the information requested.

A stark element that emerges from the above examples is that in almost all the cases the information sought was not supplied by the concerned authorities before reaching the complaint stage. They agreed to provide information only at the prodding of the IC. Therefore, if the IC puts greater attention to the matter and starts imposing fines on defaulting officials, it is likely to infuse more life into the RTI regime. However, what is clear is that citizens have begun to understand the potentials of the Act, however slowly. If their efforts are sustained, and larger numbers take the cue from above examples and start to put the law to more vigorous use, systemic change may not be far away.

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The writers are Chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) and Project Coordinator (RTI), RIB respectively.

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