

PM's counter-terror appeal

A timely call to combat militancy

THE Prime Minister's call for people's support in fighting militancy and extremism effectively is fitting and timely. This is especially so when the core values and principles on which we stand as a nation are under attack. Although we had never expected the likes of the Holey Artisan incident to happen in Bangladesh, nevertheless, the nation is facing some grim realities which can only be overcome by a cohesive action involving everyone. While the country is still reeling from the shock of the Gulshan attack that has claimed the lives of 24 people, it is time for some serious reflection to devise ways to combat this threat to our way of life.

We believe that all segments of the society have to cut across party lines and predilections, and come together for the singular cause of successfully dealing with the menace. There is no denying that participation of the general people is an integral component of the country's counter-terrorism efforts, and to effectively do that, we have to create a common front that will incorporate citizens belonging to all strata. In this context, we urge the government to strengthen its efforts to build a broad-based unity under a common platform.

It is also essential to review the social and political conditions that are being exploited by terrorists to recruit from a section of the society that is affluent and well educated. The enabling factors that help the recruiters to gather some youths in support of their distorted explanation of the religion must be analysed and countered.

Trafficked Bangladeshi children in India

Repatriate them immediately

NEWS report in this paper has caught our attention. An open letter signed by 38 Bangladeshi children stuck in a safe-home in West Bengal asking the prime minister for safe conduct home is both touching and alarming at the same time. We understand that the bulk of these children have been stuck in state facilities over the last 18 months for travelling to neighbouring India without valid documents. While the Indian border patrol that apprehended them was merely doing its duty, where have our authorities been in getting them back to their families in Bangladesh? The only reason we got to know about the incident is because an Indian voluntary organisation helped make the letter of appeal public and got in touch with a Bangladeshi voluntary organisation.

We understand that many other minors make the dangerous trip across the border to avail, what they think, for better employment opportunities. Human trafficking gangs charge enormous amounts and lure unsuspecting poor people to cross the border and at the first sign of trouble ditch them and these illegal migrants end up in safe homes. This is a major problem that has to be addressed by both governments. For our part, we must take proactive measures through our mission abroad to actively keep track of such stranded Bangladeshi nationals and expedite their repatriation back home. That such bulk trafficking can take place when there is a huge barbed wire fence along most part of the Bangladesh-India border is indeed baffling.

From Brad Pitt to Bin Laden



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

"I have gone from being Brad Pitt to Bin Laden." A European friend of ours blurted out his disappointment. "How?" I asked. He said that one of the reasons he loved Bangladesh was because he was always treated as a VIP because of his colour. He always got his preferred seat; people spoke to him with more respect, etc. I understood that part. The part that took me by surprise was what he shared next. After being at home for two weeks, the poor soul had gone to grab coffee at a popular coffee shop in Gulshan Avenue. He had walked in, chirpy as ever. But as soon as he had stepped in the café, he was greeted with hushed whispers and fear. All the Bangalis seated at the tables had begun to leave. The fact that once any foreigner was more than welcome within our circles and the fact that today they aren't, just proves that the winds of terror have hit us hard.

How have our lives changed? To begin with, the restaurants are empty; the coffee shops are closing down and the kids are scared. A few nights ago, a young friend had gone to fetch some frozen yoghurt and she had noticed the guy at the reception counter grabbing something. She immediately concluded that it had to be a gun and thus, ducked. The man looked at her in dismay. In reality, it was just the television remote he was fetching. Poor guy was just trying to change the channel. Paranoia has hit us hard. While I walk these days, I take extra time to check out who's around me. Suddenly the youth community has become a straight suspect.

Does it really benefit opening and reopening boxes piled with grief and tears on a daily basis? How brutally insensitive some of our media outfits become? And how fast are we ourselves spreading rumours and fear that are, at times, unsubstantiated? The stories have to stop, and the gossip must end.

One of the nine militants went to school with one of my kids. A regular student, a grieving son mourning his mother's loss was not to be singled out at any point. So, his friends gave him attention, stood by him, indulged in coffee sessions with him outside school and suddenly poof! He went missing. The next thing we know, he is one of the militants killed in Kalyanpur. One of his school friends wrote on Facebook: "He wasn't an evil person. He was a funny, earnest kid who I played cricket with... but along the way, something went wrong and he was encouraged and inspired by an ideology I cannot understand and violence I cannot condone... I hate that I can't mourn. How can you mourn the defeat of something wrong?" There you go.



While we tell ourselves that it's business as usual, the rest of our surrounding disallows us from thinking so. Even after a month, there are stories in the papers narrating how they were tortured, taunted and murdered. Even after a month, there are stories narrating how their loved ones received graphic images and videos of their tormented last moments. While the details may benefit the ongoing investigation, how does it affect the aggrieved family members? Does it really benefit opening and reopening boxes piled with grief and tears on a daily basis? How brutally insensitive some of our media outfits become? And how fast are we ourselves spreading rumours and fear that are, at times, unsubstantiated? The stories have to stop, and the gossip must end. We cannot endlessly offer our spirit to feed fear.

But, it's time we grow fearful of our self-glorified environment. Recently, private universities were asked to encourage active student politics. Fair enough. But what do we do when student leaders themselves are killed in factional clashes? While the silent candlelight vigil ended, Comilla University experienced the attack of a suspended activist, which disrupted the entire event and caused the university a costly closure. A similar incident followed at Barisal's Brojmohun College. So, how does a call for "Shorob

Rajniti" (explicit politics) in campuses work when many young "students" have been blinded by bias? The history of our student politics in 1952, 1971 and 1991 differs hugely from the 2016 version, which has been hijacked by self-seeking aspiring, greedy young pseudo politicians.

At the end of day, our youth, religion and culture are all being hijacked. Very often I hear many of my friends cribbing about leading straight lives, without having too much bank debt, with proper tax assessed lives, relatively devoid of high levels of corruption and yet not being rewarded by God above. Little do they know that our God has also been ideologically hijacked and that what we witness in the world today is a total theft

of our religion, Islam. We have been robbed off our faith.

But of course, we live in a world where theft, robbery, plagiarism are all justified by sheer power and influence. Wives of presidential candidates talk about their migrant experiences, choke, recollect their challenging pasts and pour out words that the wife of another president used to address a sensitive audience. But apparently, that's not plagiarism; that's merely because she was feeling the same way. It's equally amusing to watch Fareed Zakaria, who stole lines, lifted passages from publications and survived the whole episode of accusations, just because everyone loved him on screen. That's another thing to learn. If you are popular, you are forgiven. If one is big, wrong and strong, then that's even more reason to overlook theft, robbery and fraud. Think about our commercial banks - most of them will sink if the owners of two or three corporate groups were to collapse for one reason or the other. Out of 100,000 defaulters, only two to three are good enough to sink the entire economy. Similarly, out of 1.6 billion Muslims, only the insanity of the 5 percent has jeopardised Islam. At the end of the day, it's the ferocity of the deviants that counts.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

NUTRITION

Small investments can make a huge impact



BJORN LOMBERG

BANGLADESH has made great strides in many areas, including poverty eradication and life expectancy. There are still many opportunities for investments that improve the

nation's future and transform lives. Recently, a high-level team of prominent Bangladeshi development and economics leaders and a Nobel Laureate in Economics identified a prioritised list of such opportunities. They were tasked with answering the question: "What policies and investments would give Bangladesh the most impact for every taka spent?"

My think-tank, the Copenhagen Consensus Center, commissioned teams of dozens of specialist economists from Bangladesh, South Asia, and around the world to study 76 concrete solutions to improve the future of the country.

This eminent panel met in Dhaka to examine and test all of this research, and found the top two investments were TB treatment and implementation of an e-procurement system for government. The third best investment (as well as the seventh) was on nutrition, which just underlines how vital it is for Bangladesh.

And for nutrition, too, Bangladesh has seen great progress. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that in 1993, the average Bangladeshi had access to 2,000 calories per day, whereas today that number has increased to 2,450 calories. The prevalence of underweight children under five years of age declined from 66 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 2014, meeting the Millennium Development Goal target one year early.

But poor nutrition continues to impede Bangladesh's progress. The effects include maternal mortality, infant mortality, and stillbirths. Also, poor growth among small children results in stunting, which in turn has life-long consequences. Affecting about six million Bangladeshi children under the age of five, the condition decreases cognitive development, leads to worse health outcomes and school performance, and lowers productivity throughout adult life. The rate of stunting in Bangladesh is significantly higher than the global average.

The Seventh Five Year Plan states, "A particular challenge faced by the

nutrition sub-sector is that it is perceived as a low priority relative to other development issues." The Plan identifies institutional limitations, persistent micronutrient deficiencies, lack of public awareness, maternal under-nutrition, acute malnutrition and lack of dietary diversity as the key problems that need tackling.

My think-tank, the Copenhagen Consensus Center, has partnered with the Bangladesh think-tank Centre for Research and Information to look at nutrition.

This partnership saw us hold a high-level nutrition policy seminar in Dhaka this month.

Publishing new research on nutrition investments and their costs and benefits in Bangladesh, and bringing together key decision-makers and academics to discuss the policy framework, the Policy Seminar provided

face-to-face counselling by a health care provider, the use of printed materials and it would be run by community health workers responsible for home visits and delivering change and communication messages. Examining the costs and benefits, researchers for Copenhagen Consensus have worked out that for every taka we spend trying to change the behaviour of pregnant women, the benefits - from things like reduced healthcare costs and better health - would be worth 7 taka to society.

Another intervention is to focus on providing nutritional supplements during pregnancy. Different supplements do different things; for example, calcium given to pregnant women can reduce the chances of a complication called pre-eclampsia during childbirth. Here, every taka spent just on this specific supplement would generate 12 taka of benefits to society. Iron-folate

women and children. Each taka spent on designing complementary and supplementary feeding programmes will generate a benefit of around 15 taka for society.

Besides complementary and supplementary feeding, direct nutritional interventions aimed at mothers, babies and small children in the first 1,000 days would yield improvements in physical and cognitive development. This can lead to better educational achievements for children as they embark upon a healthier lifestyle, and increased earnings later, upon entering the labour market. Every taka spent in delivering a bundled nutritional package of maternal and child interventions would generate a return to society of around 19 taka.

These are among the ideas examined in seven new nutrition research papers released by Copenhagen Consensus.

Direct nutritional interventions are simple and relatively cheap. As the Bangladesh Priorities eminent panel found, these investments compete very favourably with other policy options.

We know that if we can get certain micronutrients to infants, we can rescue them from stunting. Achieving wider coverage should be a top goal.

To fund such investments, firstly, existing nutrition strategies need to spend the budget allocated, and more needs to be spent across all of government on proven nutrition interventions. There is a compelling economic case to do so. Poor nutrition has an impact on economic outcomes, on health, on education; improving nutrition can bring about positive change in the short and long term and is essential to Bangladesh's Vision 21.

Fortunately, there are smart nutrition interventions, packages and policies like those analysed by researchers for the Copenhagen Consensus Center. By pursuing cost-effective responses to malnutrition, Bangladesh can own the problem and its solutions. Bangladesh can exercise control over its own budgets and policy priorities, and draw on international agendas.

Substantive progress on nutrition policy can be made with strong leadership and coordination across government departments. Prioritising nutrition in the government budget would provide huge benefits to Bangladesh.

The writer is president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, ranking the smartest solutions to the world's biggest problems by cost-benefit. He was named one of the world's 100 most influential people by Time Magazine.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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To those who are in charge of law and order

We condemn the action of the police who on July 28, 2016 fired teargas shells on the demonstrators who were marching towards the prime minister's office demanding cancellation of the Rampal Power Plant project.

From the very beginning, people were against this project. National Committee to protect Oil, Gas Mineral Resources, Power and Ports were going to submit an open letter to the prime minister explaining why the committee opposed the project. It is shameful that they were not allowed to submit the letter, instead they were assaulted and some of them were even arrested. What sort of a country are we living in where people are unable to speak out against what's harmful for the country?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

COMMENTS

"Prof Azad, Saima win Ibrahim memorial award"
(July 31, 2016)

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Congratulations to both of them! We salute them for their contribution in their respective fields.