EDITORIAL The Daily Star



FOUNDER EDITOR LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY AUGUST 6, 2016, SHRABAN 22, 1423 BS

Role of private universities

Assess them in the correct perspective

HE private universities have made significant contributions to higher education in Bangladesh. Regrettably, there exists lot of misconception about these. The suspicion is principally on two grounds. Firstly, of late a causal relationship with militancy is being attributed to private universities by some segments of the public and the administration. Admittedly, a number of militants involved in the latest atrocities did come from some leading private universities of the country, but not all the militants came from there. Militancy and extremism are national issues and there are many reasons for young educated people from well-to-do backgrounds going astray. Linking the two exclusively will be an unfair generalisation. Of course the law enforcing agencies are well within their rights act on specific intelligence with regard to any private university as they would with regard to any other educational institution.

The other ground for suspicion is that these universities are for the children of the rich and elites alone. The fact is thousands of students coming from the middle class study in these universities because our public education system cannot accommodate them all. For the most part, many private universities have risen to become internationally recognised institutions of higher learning and they are centres of knowledge. This sector complements public universities in imparting higher education to thousands of students who would, otherwise, not get access to higher education.

We need to take a step back from coming to hasty conclusions about private university education and recognise the vital role they play in helping building tomorrow's leaders in all sectors of national life. Terrorism is a national issue and narrowing it down to private university education is a gross oversimplification that must be avoided.

Without wages for three months

Pay them immediately

ENIED wages, ration and medical care, about 2400 people including workers and their family members are trapped in a modern version of enslavement at Boikunthapur Tea Estate in Habiganj. Fourteen weeks into this situation, they are surviving on liquid extract from boiled rice, mashed tea leaves and chilies. Is this really happening in a civilsed country? How can the management stop paying the workers the pittance they call wages, about Tk 85 a day, on grounds that it has incurred financial losses?

The woes of the labourers in some tea gardens in Bangladesh are nothing new. But the ongoing 'crisis' in Habiganj has broken all previous records. The lone hospital in the tea garden remains closed for the last six months. Children of labourers have stopped going to school. Is there no one to see their suffering? Can the local administration do nothing to hold the management of the Boikunthapur Tea Estate accountable for violating the rights and dignity of its workers?

We should be outraged over what's happening to the labourers of the tea garden. But we should also be mortified by the apparent indifference of the authorities toward them. The journey of development that the country has embarked upon should include all.

COMMENTS

"BCL infighting in universities" (August 2, 2016)

Marjanul Fattah Ibne Aziz

That is unfortunately what happens when you allow politics in

"Saying no to terrorism" (August 2, 2016)

Lara

Bangladeshi people will never let extremism and terrorism take over their lands.

Terrorists in Bangladesh

Why urban rich, not poor Taliban?



OCALS and foreigners in → Dhaka formally grieved for the victims of the Gulshan Attack one month after the incident. The local and international reaction to the July 1 terror attack at

Gulshan has been far more intensive than the collective reaction to all the previous terror attacks in Bangladesh since 1999; there had never been any such mass grieving for terrorismvictims previously.

Now, why was the Gulshan café attack so significant? Because, it was for the first time, terrorists attacked the heart of the elite enclave and diplomatic zone in Bangladesh, killing 17 foreigners and three well-to-do Bangladeshis. Most importantly, rich, secular-educated urban terrorists killed the foreigners exclusively because of their ethno-national and religious identities; and the three Bangladeshis from well-to-do families for reasons best known to them. At the end of the day, who the terrorists are matters, but who the victims are, matters also.

In the backdrop of fear, conspiracy theories, and singling out private universities as "new madrasas", Bangladeshi politicians, analysts, and intellectuals are surprised, secular-educated, rich urban youths, not poor, madrasa-educated students took part in the Gulshan attack. Their surprise reflects their lack of familiarity about Islamist terrorist outfits in the world, overwhelmingly led and manned by upper class, Muslim technocrats. The perception, that only devout mosqueattending Muslims, and madrasa-educated people are Islamist terrorists is balderdash.

Terrorist outfits like al Qaeda, Islamic State, HUJI, and JMB didn't emerge out of mosques and madrasas. Only Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and the fierce Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan are exceptions in this regard. The US-sponsored "jihad" for Afghanistan, and the Pakistan-sponsored "jihad" for Kashmir, and their promotion of Islamist extremism through mosques and madrasas turned these places into the epicentres of Islamist terrorism. Madrasas teach Islamic rituals, fatalism and nextworldliness; and demonise democracy, modernism, secularism, women's liberation and equal rights; but there's no evidence madrasas initiated their students into terrorism.

Faction-ridden Muslim clerics in Bangladesh often vilify each other as deviant, and even as promoters of terrorism. Recently, Maulana Fariduddin Maswood the imam of the Sholakia Eidgah and the Chief of the Bangladesh Jamiat-ul-Ulama publicly stated in Dhaka that books prescribed by the Bangladesh Madrasa Board promoted Islamist extremism. To him, the Education Minister's alleged oversight virtually amounted to promoting jihad in Bangladesh.

As the ongoing Arabisation-cum-Wahhabisation process has alienated people from secularism and democracy, so have massive corruption and impunity of the rich and powerful estranged many from the state of Bangladesh. Illegitimate rulers like General Ershad were mainly responsible for legitimising political Islam in Bangladesh. Islamist extremism is just the other side of the coin. If the state retains Islam as the "state religion", at the

illustrate the negative correlation of Islam and terrorism. The following Quranic verses dispel some of the myths about Islam's alleged support for discriminations against non-Muslims, and unjust wars and terrorism:

"Surely among Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and whoever does right, shall have his reward with his Lord and will neither have fear nor regret" (2:62);

b) "Permission is granted to those [non-Muslims] to take up arms who were oppressed....And if God has not restrained some men through some others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, where the name of God is honoured most, would have been razed" (22:39-40).

c) "Fight those in the name of God who fight you, but do not be aggressive; God does not like aggressors" (2: 190).

"...Whoever kills a soul unless for

The poor, marginalised, and uninformed madrasa students in Bangladesh are too weak and disorganised to spearhead any violent or revolutionary movement. This explains why urban, rich, and seculareducated - not rural, poor, and madrasaeducated – youths appear so far to be the main foot soldiers of Islamist terror.

end of the day, one can't really blame Muslim youths for taking up arms to establish "true Islam" or Sharia, for peace, order, and a corruption-free society!

What retired basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar thinks about Islam and terrorism is very interesting: "ISIS represents Islam like the KKK represents Christianity". Although terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, terrorist leaders are so good at invoking and exploiting Islam that not only their followers but terrorism experts also start believing that al Qaeda and ISIS et al are primarily Islamoriented terrorist outfits. Hence, the quest for the "violent aspect" of Islam! Imputing Islamist terror attacks to Islam is like blaming certain types of fertiliser, which terrorists use to make bombs to blow up buildings.

I could cite dozens of Quranic verses, including the so-called "violent verses", to a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he has killed the entire human race. And whoever saves one soul - it is as if he has saved the entire mankind" [5:32].

Now, we need convincing answers to the question: Why have urban rich kids, not poor students, swelled the ranks of ISIS in Bangladesh? The Prime Minister's Information Advisor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury candidly admitted the government and experts had simply failed to understand the problem by only finger pointing at mosques and madrasas as the promoters of terrorism in Bangladesh. Author and computer science professor Zafar Iqbal has also raised the same question. He has also narrated an episode in his column in a Bengali daily (Kaler Kantha, July 28) about pro-Government students' "extortion business" at his University. This episode being a microcosmic representation of Bangladesh provides part of the answer to his question

Bangladesh is virtually a safe haven for corrupt people. A section of politicians, government servants, businessmen, industrialists, bankers, professionals, labour/youth/student-leaders seem to be busy making money right and left, through extortions, bribes, and plundering in the public and private sectors. The growing youth bulge - more than 40 percent of the population is in the 18 to 39-year-old age group - and the widening gap between the rich and poor, with massive 45 percent unemployment among educated youths, Bangladesh has a potential of being a fertile breeding ground for terrorism and anarchy. According to UNICEF, 7.4 million children aged between five and 17 are working as domestic servants, agricultural and factory labourers in Bangladesh. These statistics are very discomforting.

Instead of addressing the problems of governance, poverty, and mass alienation of people from society, the Government is trying to "reform" Islam as a counterpoise to terrorism. Although there is no positive correlation between terrorism and mosque-madrasa establishments, yet the government has started preparing a standardised Khutba or Friday prayer sermon through the Islamic Foundation for all mosques in Bangladesh to prevent the spread of any terrorist ideas through unapproved sermons. The Government has already spent Tk. 260 million on this project.

Since terrorism is a political not an Islamic problem, promoting any "decontaminated" Islam would change nothing. We need to understand what the terrorists want to reform, before trying to reform them. But first of all we need transparent and accountable governance with equal opportunity for all. Historically, poverty-stricken classes never staged any revolutionary or terrorist movement anywhere in the world. The poor, marginalised, and uninformed madrasa students in Bangladesh are too weak and disorganised to spearhead any violent or revolutionary movement. This explains why urban, rich, and secular-educated - not rural, poor, and madrasa-educated - youths appear so far to be the main foot soldiers of Islamist terror in Bangladesh.

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PROJECT **■** SYNDICATE

The world the Iraq war made

ROBERT HARVEY

T A 7 ITH the land of the two rivers, Iraq and Syria, now a wasteland of human suffering and rubble, the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, commonly known as the Chilcot report (after its chairman, Sir John Chilcot), has aimed to help explain how we got here. Now that it has detailed the extent of British culpability in the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, those implicated in the report's findings are using two arguments to refute it.

The first, offered by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, that the world would be much worse today had Iraqi President Saddam Hussein been left in power. The second is that invading Iraq would have succeeded but for a lack of post-invasion planning, which allowed for the mayhem that followed.

The second argument has some truth to it. But the first argument is surely false a desperate attempt at reputation management by those responsible for a disastrous decision.

To academic observers and others who reported from Iraq at the time, as I did, Saddam was a prototypical regional bully. Domestically, he was a murderous tyrant; but his primary security concern was Iran, with which he waged, with Western support, a pointless war of nearly ten years that cost a million lives and ended in stalemate.

When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, he assumed it was purely a regional squabble about oil and territorial claims. He mistakenly believed that the West had given him a green light.

The Kuwait invasion was reversed by Operation Desert Storm and other events that led the United States, the United Kingdom, and France to impose crippling sanctions and no-fly zones across large swaths of Iraq. With these measures in place, Saddam's Iraq was weakened almost to breaking point.

In his newly diminished state, Saddam continued to obsess over Iran and hint at his own weapons of mass destruction. Iraq, however, had abandoned its nuclear project in 1991, had no biological weapons, and had only limited chemicalweapons capability. At no stage after being expelled from Kuwait did Saddam's regime pose a serious threat to the region or the West. He was contained, like a jackal in a cage.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush's administration understandably retaliated, by invading Afghanistan, where the Taliban government hosted Al-Qaeda training camps. By December 2001, the Bush administration was considering attacking Iraq, too.

The biggest obstacle for the Bush administration was the absence of an established connection between Saddam's regime and Islamic extremism, though an effort was made to concoct a meeting between representatives of the two in Prague. Quite the contrary: Saddam's regime and militant Islam were mortal enemies.

Still, leading administration figures were determined to wage war on Iraq, so they manufactured a justification: the threat of WMDs. In reality, there was no new Iraqi threat or indication that Iraq

was in a position to deploy such weapons. And even when Saddam had used chemical weapons years earlier against Iranian forces in 1988, at the turning point in the war in the Faw Peninsula, and against Iraqi Kurds in 1991 – the international response had entailed, at most, a no-fly zone, not an invasion. (The 1988 incident drew no response at all.)

Moreover, in the 1991 campaign to liberate Kuwait, Western countries threatened to respond with tactical nuclear weapons if Saddam deployed chemical weapons. He didn't; and during United Nations inspections before the March 2003 invasion, there was no evidence of any additional WMD program.

The plain purpose of the 2003 invasion was regime change. Indeed, Blair has all but admitted as much. Earlier this year, he explained to Parliament's foreign affairs committee that he had doubts about Western intervention in Libya for fear of repeating events in Iraq.

The damage from regime change in Iraq has been substantial. According to the Chilcot report, at least 150,000 Iraqis (and possibly four times that number) have been killed in the years since the invasion, and an estimated three million people have been displaced from their homes. The security situation is far worse than under Saddam, and the economy is no better.

Meanwhile, as many had warned at the time, Iran, with its largest historical barrier to expansion gone, now enjoys a significant strategic advantage.

Through Shia militias and a sympathetic government in Baghdad, Iran is virtually occupying large parts of Iraq. So, too, is the so-called Islamic State, which is largely composed of Saddam's former Sunni henchmen. They are locked in battle against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's murderous pro-Iranian regime; a few pro-Western fighting groups, supported by American and British air strikes; as well as the Kurds, the Turks, and the Russians. The view that the Syrian civil war had nothing to do with events in Iraq is untenable.

One can only guess what the world would look like had the 2003 invasion never occurred. An aging Saddam might still rule, but he would pose little threat, except to his own people. He might hand over power to one of his vicious sons, or perhaps another steely strongman would take over, as Anwar el-Sadat did in Egypt, following Gamal Abdel Nasser's death in 1970. Sadat then began a process of rapprochement with the West, as also might have happened in Libya if Muammar el-Qaddafi had not been overthrown.

Surely even Blair doesn't really believe that this world, however unsatisfactory, would be worse than the fiery maelstrom that is engulfing the Middle East - and jeopardizing European security - today.

The writer is a former member of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, is the author of Global Disorder and A Few Bloody Noses: The Realities and Mythologies of the American Revolution Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2016. www.project-syndicate.org

(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Health benefits of methi

Methi or fenugreek (Trigonella Foenum-Graecum L.) is an important but less known ingredient of the globally famous South Asian curries. The herbaceous plant has indeterminate growth habit with trifoliate leaves and legume pods containing 10-20 golden brownish seeds. This plant species has been used both in ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine in treating a number of human diseases. Both leaves and seeds have rich medicinal properties. The seeds have significant properties in reducing blood sugar and blood cholesterol levels. As such, in addition to its traditional use as a spice and forage crop, the

plant has attracted the pharmaceutical, nutraceutical and functional food industries. Semiarid and drier parts of Bangladesh will be suitable for cultivation of this crop which has a great demand in the international markets. Saikat Kumar Basu

Lethbridge AB, Canada

Rampal vs sustainable development

Even if there's 1 percent chance that the Rampal Power Plant project would cause harm to the Sundarbans and its biodiversity, the government should not implement it. Yes, we are badly in need of power, but we should not and must not risk the Sundarbans at any cost. We may be able to build 10 more power plants but can we build another forest like the Sunderbans?

Mahmud Al Hossain Khan North Shahjahanpur, Dhaka

Seat crisis in JU library

Jahangirnagar University is one of the country's leading public universities where more than 12 thousand students study in different subjects. But it is a matter of great regret that the central library has only 300 seats. We are drawing the attention of the authorities to solve the crisis.

Rasel Rana Dept. of Government & Politics Jahangirnagar University