

# 'Open your ears and hearts'

## Attack on a Sufi shrine in Pakistan

Greater expertise needed to fight terror

We are deeply saddened by the news of yet another suicide bombing in a Sufi shrine in Pakistan that has left 70 people dead and over 150 badly injured. This time the IS has claimed responsibility for the attack. It follows another deadly attack in the same week, claimed by an Al Qaida faction, in Lahore, that left 13 people dead and dozens injured, again by a suicide bomber.

Pakistan is hardly new to terrorism and has been constantly reeling from one terrorist attack after another leaving hundreds of innocent people dead and maimed. The recent bombing on a Thursday, when a large number of devotees would be present, shows that the intention was to cause the maximum number of casualties. That a Sufi shrine was attacked is no coincidence. The shrine in question was a symbol of tolerance and peaceful coexistence - basic values of Sufism. Thus the assault is on any kind of divergence from what these terrorists consider to be the true faith. Other terrorist attacks have been on Christian minorities, people of the Shia community or police and other public officials. It is clear that despite all the strong rhetoric by the Pakistan government that they will not tolerate such terrorism, so far there seems to be little progress in curbing these deadly militant outfits that seem to be getting bolder.

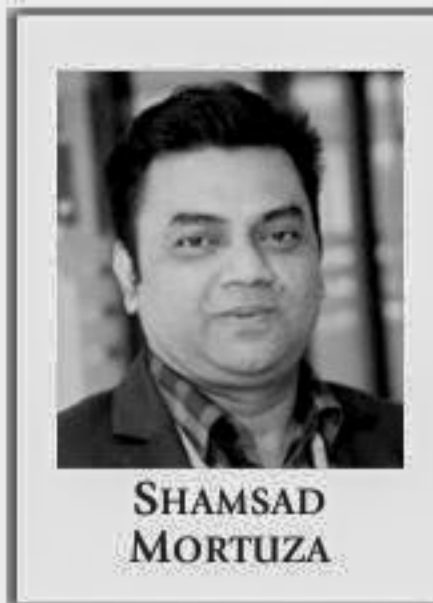
In Bangladesh, we too have faced militant attacks and it is important that we are more vigilant and equipped to fight terror which has the tendency to spread from one country to another. Religious militancy destroys cultural diversity and religion itself through distortions and lies and therefore has to be completely eradicated. We laud our government's commitment to fighting militancy, a fight that must continue with vigour, sincerity and determination. We express our heartfelt condolences to the families of those who have perished in these mindless, cowardly acts of terror.

## Injury-related deaths on the rise

Most due to road accidents

The findings of the second Bangladesh Health Injury Survey (BHIS), 2016 carried out by the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) was revealed yesterday and the four leading contributors to injury-related deaths came from suicide, traffic accident, drowning and fall. Some 15,000 people fell to their deaths from high places, 9,210 deaths occurred due to electrocution, a little more than 19,200 children drowned, nearly 24,000 people committed suicide (which is several times more than the number of people murdered: 6,475); but the most shocking figure comes from road accidents, which resulted in 23,166 deaths! The media has been crying hoarse on the issue over the years and now there is irrefutable proof that our roads and highways have turned into death traps for people.

According to CIPRB data, some 50 adults are dying daily, on average, due to traffic-accident injuries. With such data now made available, all we can hope for is some impetus on the part of authorities to do something to address the multifarious problems we face on our roads with regards to passenger safety. While rural children learn swimming in ponds, where do our urban children go? No ponds and no swimming pools mean generations growing up without lifeskills. The media constantly covers the hazards of live wires left haphazardly in the city and the dire lack of safety for construction workers, and yet these are hardly ever looked into. Homicides apart, the rise in stalking and dowry-related violence is opening the doors to increasing suicides and this is a social malaise that requires engagement among government, the people and health practitioners. At the end of the day, these are all avoidable deaths and authorities need to address them seriously to save lives.



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

SALIIHA Ben Ali is a mother of a son who had fallen prey to recruiters of a terrorist outfit. Saliha is a mother who was promised access to Paradise by her radicalised son. "I will be there to guide you through the gates of paradise," Sabri, the son inboxed from Syria to assure her mother in Belgium, after he had decided to join the Islamic force fighting Bashar Al Assad. His stint in Syria, however, lasted only for three months. A 'strange phone call in a distant voice on a Sunday morning' congratulated the family on the martyrdom of their son. Sabri was nineteen.

Instead of reeling from the shame of being a mother of an extremist, Saliha garnered enough courage to join an international alliance called Sisters Against Violent Activism (SAVE). Founded by Dr Edit Schlaffer, SAVE offers a platform where women like Saliha share their stories hoping that a counter narrative can be produced to stop many other young men and women from the lures of the dogmatic pied-pipers. The mothers' group has more than 1,000 women across countries like Indonesia, Nigeria and Zanzibar, engaged in finding a personal and tangible way of tackling militancy.

It was a rare honour to listen to Tunisian-born Saliha when she came to give a talk at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) on February 15 before an audience composed of parents, teachers and students of various private universities. Sabri's story is all too familiar: a young boy, who failed to integrate in the mainstream Belgian society, because of his North African origin. He was bullied at school. He applied for a job in the Belgian Army, but was denied, apparently because of his medical condition. "They could have at least made me a courier boy or a chef," Sabri shared with his mother. He wanted to become a firefighter, and was once again denied. He was a second generation Belgian who wanted to join public service to prove that he was truly a patriot with sincere interest in serving his country. The rejections made him vulnerable as he was convinced that the country that his parents had adopted held no future for his generation. He started to identify himself with a group

that would offer him solace, at least an identity. But the Imam of Saudi origin at the mosque he went to did not speak French or Flemish to communicate with him. Sabri was later befriended by a radical scout, and his mind was soon to be moulded with extremist ideology.

The mother was worried, but there was little she could do. She did not have the deeper knowledge or understanding to counter the extreme views that had already begun to germinate in her son. Sabri would not allow the family to watch TV or invite female relatives fearing that he would have to shake hands with them. Even before the mother could gauge the intensity of the

group. The response should be multi-modal given the wide spectrum of the problem. We probably do not have issues of racial profiling or frustration over cultural identity that the immigrant populations in Europe are facing. Still, there are many reasons to be disenchanted by the things both at home and abroad. We have already seen how some of our youths, and surprisingly, not necessarily from the madrassas but also from affluent private institutions, have espoused extremist ideology. We can no longer afford to suffer from the proverbial ostrich syndrome. The story of Saliha coming out of her cocoon is a stark reminder of how important it is to

secularism may not have the desired effect. We cannot altogether deny our Islamic heritage or the contributions Muslim scholars have made in various sectors of knowledge. At the same time we need to integrate the madrassa students in the mainstream. We need to understand both ends of the rope that brought the rich boy Nibras and the poor boy Khairul together in their mission to kill innocent people in the name of religion.

Just take an afternoon walk at any park in Uttara. You will surely be touched by the lively madrassa students playing football or cricket. They are our children whom we have relegated to a



Saliha Ben Ali, a Belgian mother whose son was killed in 2013 while fighting for IS in Syria, speaks at the programme "Campaign to Counter Violent Extremism: Learning from the Society Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) Belgium" at Dhaka University.

problem, Sabri disappeared in 2013. He called from Syria to confirm that he had found a purpose, albeit false, in life. They had one exchange of communication over FB. The mother pleaded: "open your ears and heart...you are in danger!" To which the son replied: "never say come back. It will not work."

In the last three years, the world has learnt about many Sabris. We had our own rude awakening to extremism when the attack on Holey Artisan cafe took place on July 1. There was a lot of discussion about our home grown terrorism that has foreign recipes. Many members of our civil society have talked about forwarding a counter narrative. There are some TVCs alerting the target

come out of the shell of denial.

There is one particular lesson that I personally picked up from Saliha's question answer session. She said the Turkish Islamic centres in Belgium have outreach programmes that allow the young men to talk to their mentors or even play football in the mosque complex. Consequently, the number of Turkish youth joining IS is considerably negligible. In contrast, the mosques run by the other communities, who preach in Arabic only, are alienating many of the young Muslims.

A massive overhauling of our education system to address the resurgence of fundamentalism is long overdue. Emphasising simply on

convenient system in which they are almost destined to be only preachers. Do we have any inter-madrassa sports or cultural competitions? Not that I know of.

We need Muslim mothers like Saliha to unite to tell us there is a problem in a patriarchy that showcases male chauvinism. We need our sports role models to go and play with the madrassa kids in the park and tell them that they too can one day roar like a Tiger. We need educated mentors who can understand the pulse of our youth and act.

The writer Heads the Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

### PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Trump and the rebirth of press freedom

TONY KARON

US President Donald Trump's administration has shocked the mainstream press by bullying news outlets and unabashedly trafficking in "alternative facts" (also known as lies). But Trump's challenge to the media status quo may not be an entirely bad thing; journalists now have an opportunity to root out the bad habits associated with coyness up to those in power.

Trump's chief strategist, Stephen Bannon, drew gasps recently when he told the *New York Times* that the news media represent "the opposition party." Bannon may have wanted to disorient his interlocutors, but he also inadvertently reminded them of the adversarial role they are meant to play. In a healthy democracy, the press helps citizens hold the government accountable, by vigorously interrogating official policies and behaviour.

Unfortunately, it has been decades since America had that kind of news media. Instead, the press has allowed multiple presidential administrations to spoon-feed it information. News organisations in the

have, in recent decades, confined their coverage to a narrow range of topics that tend to confirm the political establishment's self-serving narratives. Because they had exposed themselves only to elite perspectives, members of the mainstream media were initially blindsided by the fact that many Americans who had previously voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 either stayed home or voted for Trump in 2016.

But no calamity better captures the dangers of a press corps too beholden to power than the invasion of Iraq, a cataclysmic blunder whose ghastly knock-on effects afflict the Middle East, as well as Europe, to this day. In the lead-up to the invasion, George W. Bush's administration assiduously courted journalists at mainstream liberal and conservative news outlets, who then helped it win public support by disseminating what turned out to be false claims about weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

In the US, the only mainstream media organisation that ran consistently sceptical articles about the case for war was the Knight Ridder group (which has since been acquired by McClatchy). As reporters Warren

senior officials, they can now focus strictly on holding the administration to account.

To take this high road, media outlets will need to rethink longstanding editorial models. Reuters Editor-in-Chief Steve Adler, for his part, recently called on his peers to cover the Trump administration no differently than they would an authoritarian government abroad. "Give up on hand-outs and worry less about official access," Adler wrote in a letter to the Reuters staff. "They were never all that valuable anyway. Our coverage of Iran has been outstanding, and we have virtually no official access. What we have are sources."

Trump hopes to control the national conversation, and he need not worry that his mendacity will alienate his supporters, because they already believe that the "liberal" media detest them and the president they elected. But, while we should commend the *New York Times* for describing the administration's palpably false statements as lies, we should also draw attention to important unlearned lessons of the *Times'* abysmal record in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Taking the Bush administration at its word about WMD, for which the *Times* later apologised, was only part of the media's failure in that debacle. News outlets not only allowed the administration to marshal questionable facts to justify the invasion; they also permitted officials to attach undue significance to those facts, with no questions asked.

It is worth remembering that Germany and France concurred with the Bush administration's factual claims about Iraqi weapons, but vigorously opposed the invasion, because they believed that the consequences would pose a larger threat than Saddam Hussein ever could. They have since been vindicated. Even if US forces had found stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq, history would not judge the war any less harshly.

Bannon's "opposition" remark should serve as a reminder of this recent history. To defend American democracy against the threat of authoritarian populism, media outlets must not stop at vigorously challenging Trump's "alternative facts." They must tell a different story, based on observations, investigations, and critical assessments of claims made by both Republicans and Democrats in power.

The real story, as 2016 showed, is often playing out in places to which the media is paying no attention. Adler instructed his staff to, "Get out into the country and learn more about how people live, what they think, what helps and hurts them, and how the government and its actions appear to them, not to us." Journalists should not fear being on the wrong side of power. On the contrary, that is exactly where they belong.



United States have prioritised access to the corridors of power above all else, even when access is conditioned on avoiding uncomfortable questions or accepting evasive answers.

When "access journalism" leads senior editorial decision-makers to identify with political elites, explaining the government's thinking to the public becomes their primary purpose. Combine that with cuts to news budgets, and political coverage becomes a mere endless cycle of sound bites from politicians and their surrogates - not unlike a dedicated sports channel covering a football season.

Strobel and Jonathan Landay later explained, their middle-tier news service was not granted top-level access, so they had to rely on sources from inside the intelligence community, who forthrightly pointed out the flaws in the Bush administration's claims. Journalistic truth telling thrives when there is no need to nurture access.

The Trump administration is already shutting the door on some media mainstays, with CNN the most prominent example. Trump's media handlers may be hoping that they can demand compliance as a condition for renewing access. But this should liberate shunned media outlets. Having lost direct access to

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Reckless snatchers in Mymensingh

The Mymensingh city market is a hub of shopping and leisure activities for most of us living in the area, especially the students. Recently, however, snatchers have been circling the area and mugging civilians in broad daylight. Students have also been stabbed in the worst of cases.

We urge the mayor and concerned authorities to look into this matter immediately.  
 Mohsin Reza  
 BAU

### Anti-smoking laws must be implemented

A study has reported 40 percent of the population in Bangladesh to be smokers, the majority of whom are young. Despite the existence of laws banning smoking in public places, people can be seen defying the law, contributing to the already widespread heart conditions, chronic respiratory illnesses, and even cancer. The laws against smoking should be practiced more stringently if the authorities want to minimise these health risks in our society.

Samartha Goldar  
 BSMRSTU

