

First anniversary of Holey Artisan attack

What have we learnt?

ON this day our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the 22 victims of the most horrendous terrorist attack at Holey Artisan Bakery on July 1, 2016. We mourn with them the loss of nine Italians, seven Japanese, five Bangladeshis (one of them also a US citizen and two police officers) and one Indian. Many of the foreigners had come to this country to help with its development.

The brutality of the attack and deliberate singling out of foreigners or those not considered 'proper Muslims' have brought to the fore a different dimension to religious terrorism. It was an attack on our syncretic culture and has left us with deep psychological and emotional wounds. The devastating blows to our economy in the aftermath of the attack, which caused the hospitality and tourism industry the most harm and adversely affected foreign investment, indicate that there was a clear goal to cripple the country. There were sporadic attacks on foreigners before the July 1 attack which hint at a long-drawn-out plan to mar Bangladesh's image abroad.

So far our government's continuous efforts to raid terrorist dens and arrest militants have been fairly successful. But that does not mean that militant activities have stopped or that there is no longer a threat of an attack. Legal loopholes that allow suspected militants to obtain bail so that they can commit crimes, and unchecked spread of militant ideology in prisons and places of worship and education are some of the key factors that have to be addressed immediately. The July 1 attackers were educated youths from well-to-do families. How and where were they indoctrinated to commit such heinous crimes in the name of religion? What about other such youths who have accepted this twisted ideology? Where are they?

These are crucial questions that we need answers to. Alongside the constant vigilance, security measures and operations to unearth terrorist dens, we must all work together to spread a counter-narrative to militant ideology. Without this all counter-terrorism efforts will be in vain.

Patients suffer during Eid holidays

Public hospitals left without adequate staff

SHORTAGE of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff has become a regular feature during the Eid holidays. It was no different this time even though patients were not allowed admission to hospitals during the holidays, unless it was an emergency or a very serious case.

According to hospital officials about 15 to 20 percent of the total number of doctors and nurses were present during the holidays, whereas the pressure of patients increased by around 10 percent in the emergency departments. Patients, therefore, were found to be waiting in long lines at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, National Institute of Traumatology, Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation, and Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, even in emergency cases.

Given that this is all too common, why did the authorities not take any precautionary measures to prevent such shortages? That the number of emergency cases — because of the increased number of various forms of accidents — goes up during the holidays too, should be well known to the authorities. Thus, the lack of preparatory measures can only be explained by an uncalled for apathy on part of the authorities.

This attitude and such inefficiencies should change. Public hospitals should ensure that people are provided with the necessary services properly, at all times, including during the Eid holidays. And the authorities should take whatever steps necessary to make sure that they do.

Are we safer now?



ALI RIAZ

ON the anniversary of the audacious terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery, Bangladeshis may ask two questions: 'Are we safer today than we were a year before?' and 'Where do we go from here?' The answer to the second question is contingent on the answer to the first in the sense that it is the current situation which will determine the way forward. Addressing these questions requires examination of the actions of the government and their implications on the one hand, while assessment of the impacts of regional and global events germane to the militancy in Bangladesh, on the other. It is erroneous to believe that national boundaries are impervious to terrorism.

The absence of any major terrorist attack in the past year in the country may provide an impression that even if militancy is not completely defeated, militant organisations have been severely weakened and no longer pose a clear and present danger. Compared to the strings of attacks between early 2015 and July 2016, relative calm in the past year may breed this complacency. However, security operations conducted on an almost daily basis are testimonies to the presence of resilient militant organisations and their success in recruiting new members. Indeed, media reports do not draw attention of the citizens as much as they did in previous years. This should not be interpreted as people's confidence that the danger of militancy has diminished; instead it tells that people have on the one hand accepted this as the 'new normal', while on the other hand are not entirely buying into the official narratives.

In the past year, security forces conducted 17 major operations in 'militant dens' which resulted in the deaths of 59 suspected militants including five women and six children. Some were killed by security forces while others had blown themselves up instead of surrendering during these operations. The spread of these operations reveals that the militant groups are not located in pockets, but instead exist in various parts of the country. Unfortunately, not all security operations have remained above controversies; the Narsingdi operation in May is a case in point. While we need to acknowledge that information about potential threats cannot be one hundred percent certain all the time, it's also true that incidents like these raise misgivings among people. Besides, claims by family members of arrested suspected militants that they were picked by law enforcing agencies long before they were produced before the press and courts are not helpful by any measure.

After the Holey Artisan attack, a consensus seems to have emerged that involving the community and building a social movement is a *sine qua non* for

confronting the scourge of militancy. But regrettably, to date, no concrete steps have been taken to involve citizens of all political persuasions. Sporadic events, such as staging human chains in cities and discussion events at various educational institutions, were all that followed. Government efforts since then have almost exclusively focused on the security operations; in other words, the government seems to have opted for using force as the only way to combat the growing menace.

While carrying out raids, killings and apprehending the suspected militants have become the primary methods, legal loopholes and protracted legal processes are allowing suspected militants to secure bail from the courts. A recent press report documented that 148 suspected militants were granted bail in the past six months. Of course, one cannot be denied due process, but officials of the counter-terrorism unit confided to the press that there are neither effective mechanisms nor enough resources to monitor these suspected individuals after they are released. There are instances of recidivism. A comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, which seems to be wanting,

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would have addressed this lacuna.

One of the key elements of an effective comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy is a counter-radicalisation programme. There are usually three components to a counter-radicalisation programme: deradicalisation, disengagement and radicalisation prevention. "Deradicalisation measures seek to lead an already radicalised individual to abandon his or her militant views. Disengagement entails a less dramatic shift whereby an individual abandons involvement in a terrorist group or activities while perhaps retaining a radical worldview. Radicalisation prevention measures seek to prevent the radicalisation process from taking hold in the first place and generally target a segment of society rather than a specific individual," according to Lorenzo Vidino, Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. The government's anti-militancy initiatives and actions do not show any indications of counter-radicalisation programmes. Take for example the deradicalisation issue. There are reportedly 669 militants in various prisons of the country. Yet we haven't

heard of any programmes targeted at these inmates. Extensive literature in criminology suggests that prisons are 'schools for crimes'; similar conclusions have been drawn while studying terrorists. American criminologist Harvey Kushner argued in *Holy War on the Home Front* that Western prisons are one of the main recruitment grounds for Al Qaeda. These inmates can become sources of radicalisation of other prisoners.

Notwithstanding the necessity to identify and discuss the misinterpretation of religious texts by the militants, that alone and 'preaching to the choir' about the history of syncretic tradition do little to dissuade vulnerable individuals. Prevention is meant to create a socio-political environment which rejects extremism and violence. Prevalence of extremist rhetoric in society and politics, naturalisation of violence as a political act, use of force as the principal mode of governance, the absence of the rule of law, impunity of segments of society, shrinking space for dissension, and an epidemic of corruption create an enabling environment within which the militant ideology thrives. As the last

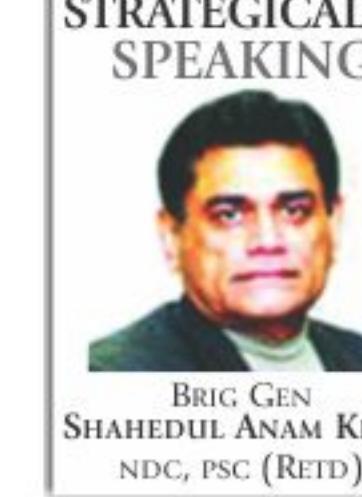
connections", *The Daily Star*, May 24, 2016), we can refer to a recent press report which has documented that of the 42 missing individuals, 33 have joined the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Four of these have died either in US attacks or in the battle on behalf of ISIS (*Prothom Alo*, June 6, 2017). Three youths who appeared in the propaganda video of ISIS soon after the July 1 attack had left Bangladesh in previous months. The same is true with respect to joining Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). The AQIS, founded in 2014, has its foot soldiers in the country. The Central AQIS declared in April that its chief of the Bangladeshi branch, Sohel, died in a battle in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Another Bangladeshi, Saiful Islam Hasan, was reportedly killed in a US attack in 2015. *The Straits Times* of Singapore reported on June 1 that "since late 2015, some 40 Bangladeshi nationals in Singapore were found to have been radicalised, supporting the use of violence to pursue their extremist ideology. Several of them were planning to carry out armed violence against the government in Bangladesh." Several Britons of Bangladeshi-origin have joined ISIS in the past. Recent developments in India are worrying too. The ISIS India branch, founded in late 2015, is 'gaining momentum' in recent months. Reports that a neighbouring country is identified as the source of explosives found in militant dens during recent operations and that the weapons used in the July 1 attack were 'modified' in that country cannot be ignored.

The global dimension of terrorism does not have any good news either. As the so-called capital of the 'Caliphate' of ISIS, Raqqa, is about to fall, foreign fighters are leaving the battlefield and returning to their respective homelands. ISIS leaders have called its sympathisers to engage in attacks wherever they are located. The increased number of attacks in Europe shows that the supporters are heeding the call. The five-week long battle between the ISIS affiliate Abu Sayyaf and the Philippine Army at Marawi is quite alarming. All these point to a shift in ISIS strategy and its desire to spread terror all around the globe.

The regional and international developments in recent months and the course of actions of the government in the country along with poor governance, fractious politics and the authoritarian bent of government do not paint a promising picture. The apparent success in taming the militants should neither mask the reality that they have remained resilient nor should they make anyone complacent. The way forward, particularly in the medium- and long-term, is to devise a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, engage in ideological battle instead of relying on force alone, and lessen the enabling environment.

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A year after

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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HOLEY Artisan attack was a watershed event for us — both the society and the state. It exposed the security forces to a totally unprecedented situation, and seeing the reaction and the method of operation and near instant response of the security forces of the other countries facing a similar emergency situation, one may well feel that this could have been tackled more expeditiously.

However, what has been made abundantly clear is that such acts can seldom be predicted with precision. If anything, the Holey Artisan and similar attacks elsewhere in the world have reconfirmed the grim reality that no country can feel safe from terror attacks nor can it be combatted by any one country alone.

It has also demonstrated that extremism is not only an exportable commodity on which states have displayed a very poor capability to exercise full control, but this can also be homegrown, festered albeit by international situation.

Therefore, the travel ban order of Trump seems all the more a biased move on the US president's part, given the fact that all the recent attacks on US soil have been carried out by people bred in the US.

It has also highlighted the fact that presence of an international extremist group in any country does not necessarily mean the physical presence of hordes of extremist cadres in that country. The social media has accorded the religious fanatics the standoff capability to influence the mind and indeed motivate people to act as per their dictates without their physical presence. According to a CNN report, a total of 143 attacks in 29 countries from September 2014 to July 2016, that have killed 2,043 people, were either carried out or inspired by the IS, and most of the attacks in Europe, North America and Asia were IS inspired. That speaks of the ubiquity of the IS.

The 'lone wolf' syndrome has added a new dimension to the matter, where it has become more difficult to track and preempt individual operatives who may or may not have organic links with international extremist groups but are motivated enough to launch singlehanded strikes on soft targets.

Many developments have taken place, both at home and abroad, insofar as the activities of the extremists are concerned since the most gruesome killing in the country in recent times was carried out on July 1, 2016. Internally, there was a doubling down on the extremists by the security forces, and if absence of manifest destructive acts by extremists is to be considered an index of success against extremists then we can certainly claim some degree of success in this front.

A good number of anticipatory actions have managed to neutralise the activities of the extremists in the last one

year. But one would be remiss to think that an idea, however distorted, can be totally thwarted by anti-extremist actions alone. Absence of acts of terror in Bangladesh should not create an aura of euphoria or satisfaction in our minds. Countering extremism is an evolving and ongoing process and we must be in step with other countries which are grappling with the problem. We must keep track of the developments in other areas of the world where extremism and religious terrorism are being fomented and led by well-organised groups with global aspirations like the IS's.

A stark reality that we were faced with after July 1 last year is the fact that a good number of youths from Bangladesh have gone over to join the IS. However, we are not the largest contributor to the IS ranks. According to an *Indian Express* report of July 25, 2016, "data released by The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (based on data from second half of 2014) as published in the *Wall Street Journal*, nearly 1,200 people had joined jihadist ranks from France alone in Iraq and Syria, followed by Germany and Britain."

As per one local English newspaper report, 38 Bangladeshis had joined the IS. Some of those who had returned to Bangladesh were killed in action here. We do

not know how many there are who have remained undetected or untraced so far, or when and where they might strike. The present situation in Mosul and Raqqa calls for more vigilance for the simple fact that as these extremists lose territory and their sanctuary, they will be compelled to implement their dispersal plan to relocate elsewhere. And there is more than a good chance of many of them relocating in this country, particularly those Bangladeshis who had joined the ranks of the IS.

Internationally, of the major attacks around the world since July 2016, 11 occurred in Europe, with France bearing the major brunt, which took 140 lives. What has added to our disquiet is the enlarged footprint of IS in the Philippines, where the Islamists, fighting under Isnilon Hapilon, who has been endorsed by the IS, have taken control of part of Marawi, the southern Philippine city.

It is therefore not a question of how safe we feel we are, having been able to stymie major extremists attack in the country in the last one year. It is a matter of how well we can guard the society and the country from the ideas that the IS and the likes are peddling. And that calls for a well-considered strategy to counter the idea. We have not seen one articulated yet.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Trump's travel ban comes into effect

President Donald Trump's controversial travel ban has come into effect for six Muslim-majority countries. This will put culture and knowledge on the back burner. It is natural for people from all over the world to want to go and work/live in the US which is known as the "land of opportunities". These aspirations also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and culture which shouldn't be restricted to national boundaries.

There are many professionals from other countries working in the US now. What if another executive order restricts these people's movement too? Moreover, such steps will also attract global backlash.

Countries today are in dire need of a strong and knowledgeable workforce. It would be wiser for the US to tap into the vast knowledge base available in the world instead of shunning it out. True, the safety of the motherland is a high priority. But there are other ways to keep it safe than altogether banning people from specific nations.

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People attend a candlelight vigil for the victims of the Holey Artisan attack.

PHOTO: STAR