

Fighting militancy requires united efforts

We must all play our part

THE prime minister’s call for everyone to stay alert alongside the intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies to fight religious militancy has come at the right time. She has rightly pointed out that everyone must play their part in the fight against this scourge including religious leaders. She has asked the imams of mosques to deliver sermons against terrorism and militancy at the Friday congregations where they should highlight Islam as a religion of peace.

This is definitely a crucial step in fighting radicalisation that leads to such horrific attacks that we have just witnessed in Sri Lanka and in many other countries including our own. As the PM cautioned, there are still attempts to carry out attacks in this country and although our counter terrorism efforts have been laudably successful, we must all be continuously alert. She has mentioned that guardians, teachers, public representatives, imams of mosques and clerics of all religions can stand together against suspected militant activity in their respective localities.

The reality is that terror attacks can occur anytime anywhere and the profiles of terrorists are becoming increasingly difficult to categorise. But if we can effectively address the roots of militancy it will become more and more difficult for terror groups to recruit agents and carry out attacks. While the government has initiated de-radicalisation programmes, we, as a people, have a responsibility to make sure our young people especially, do not fall prey to the indoctrination of distorted ideologies. Religious leaders do have a major part to play as people are greatly influenced by them. They must speak against these heinous attacks that have taken the lives of thousands of innocents in the name of Islam, as they are in contradiction to the religion’s true teachings.

It is time for all of us to be united against this cancerous growth called terror by embracing and advocating the values of humanity, namely tolerance, peace and love for our fellow human beings.

Keep the market stable during Ramadan

Prices of essentials have gone up as usual

THE spiralling of prices of essentials before and during Ramadan has become the norm in the country, no matter how unethical the practice is. Every year, unscrupulous traders increase the prices of essential food items through syndication before Ramadan and despite government’s repeated assurances that they would check the price hikes, the prices never go down. This year is no exception. After visiting at least six kitchen markets and different grocery stores in the city, *The Daily Star* correspondents found that the prices of grocery items, including onion, garlic, sugar and chickpea, as well as other vegetables have already gone up. What is more, this year the prices of the daily necessities hiked even before *Shab-e-Barat*.

If both the stock and supply of the goods at the markets are adequate, as claimed by the government, why then have the prices increased? And if it is the dishonest businessmen who are behind this, why doesn’t the government take strict action against them? Also, why are there no updated price charts at the city’s kitchen markets, which are supposed to be maintained by the city corporations?

The government agencies concerned, including the city corporations, the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), must sit with the traders’ associations—wholesalers and retailers—and come up with a proper plan to keep the market stable during Ramadan. In addition, the government’s market monitoring schemes should be strengthened and legal steps should be taken against the dishonest businessmen to ensure that the prices of essential commodities remain within the reach of ordinary people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take the water crisis seriously

The recent report about the contamination of drinking water in Dhaka is extremely concerning. There have been similar reports of contamination in the past. And so, instead of dismissing it off-hand, the authorities should at the very least investigate the matter. So that even if our drinking water is truly safe, we can be sure about it through empirical data and evidence.

Saidul Haq, By Email

Time to improve our ZOOS

Zoos across South and South East Asia are in need of a complete paradigm shift. Rather than be exhibitions only, they need to become places for education and awareness about animals.

For a region with such biodiversity, South and South East Asian nations should have much better-quality zoos, with better facilities for animal research and care. The main reason why these facilities are so poor is because of a lack of funding. Therefore it is extremely important for governments to recognise this problem, and to look for a solution working with conservation and scientific experts.

And because the same problem persists in Bangladesh also, I hope the Bangladesh government too will look into the matter.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada

After Sri Lanka’s terror attack: Questions we now must ask

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE devastating series of suicide attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday that claimed at least 250 lives was noticeably well organised. The near simultaneous blasts that tore through three high-end hotels and three churches demonstrate the precision that lies behind the planning of today’s terror outfits. Meanwhile, the task of predicting or preventing acts of terror has become substantially more difficult since the problem of lone wolf attackers became prevalent.

After this attack so close to home, there are two questions that we naturally now must ask.

Are we safe from the clutches of terror? And are we prepared to stop it?

Chiran Jung Thapa, Security Adviser for Oxfam, identifies the corridor comprising of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan as the foremost terrorist prone area in the world factoring in a number of reasons. While one must not forget that predicting where terrorists will strike is extremely difficult—with the mosque attack in New Zealand, considered one of the most peaceful countries in the world, being a clear example—it is incumbent upon us to remain vigilant. So that no intelligence failure, such as the one that occurred in Sri Lanka when its security services failed to heed intelligence warnings prior to the attack, happens here.

Additionally, it should perhaps be taken as a given in our globalised world that no country is fully immune from the threat of terrorism. Which has also been globalised over the years.

As for preventing extremism, there are mainly two approaches: the soft approach and the hard approach.

The soft approach focuses on preventing radicalisation, as well as de-radicalisation through rehabilitation. Individual families, society and its



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various institutions such as schools, universities, religious organisations, etc. and nations must all participate in this process to counter radicalisation. As proponents of extreme ideologies today have a reach beyond anything they’ve had in the past because of improved communications methods. And a variety of more ways—whether that be textual, audial or visual, and over a host of different platforms—to spread their corrupted messages as well as to dress them up to make them seem more appealing. Particularly when the conditions are just right, as they especially are in today’s quickly changing and unprecedentedly uncertain times.

To help individuals navigate through the confusion that has become part and parcel of our times, society must provide an alternatively appealing narrative to the ones spread by extremists. Families, schools and other organisations must pay more attention to how individuals are doing, whether they are being socially isolated or alienated and why—as that is when recruiters primarily look to prey upon people. And, very importantly, religious leaders and scholars must speak up against the misrepresentation of their religions and not shy away from opposing the distortions using their respective scriptures, when necessary.

The government also has an integral part to play here. It should make sure that the interplay between these forces can happen harmoniously. And ensure that its own policies or actions does not lead to any form of social instability, loss of individual identity, or send a message that the arbitrary use of force is either acceptable, or practical in the pursuit of achieving objectives, whatever they may be.

Here we must ask, what have we done to stop radicalisation? And have we done enough? Because some of the factors known to give rise to extremism such as intolerance, injustice, inequality, lack of space to freely express oneself, etc., still appear to be common in our society.

Another motivating factor is the thirst for revenge which drove the attack in Sri Lanka. Given how quickly news today spreads from one corner of the world to another—and the oppression of one group by another in different parts of the world—how can this be addressed? And is it even possible for us to address this on our own, given how geopolitics work?

One step that experts agree is not the answer here, is censorship. Mostly because the size of, let’s say, the Internet, or the Dark Web or the Deep Web, makes it impossible. But we should, nevertheless, look for other, more viable

solutions.

Terrorism also has to be countered through intelligence and surveillance. In Bangladesh, this is done by the DGFI, NSI and three separate units of police. Unfortunately, according to counter terrorism officers, resource constraints mean that the amount of people working in this sector and the training time they receive is relatively limited compared to other countries. And some of the equipment necessary, such as for surveillance, too, are lacking—making their job more difficult.

But despite that, counter terrorism units have so far been mostly successful. And many counter terrorism operations have successfully been carried out thus far, with minimal loss of life. However, while their success remains largely under the radar, it only takes one failure for it to turn into a headline-making catastrophe.

The second approach, that is the hard approach, is essentially the use of force or military to apprehend or take down those who’ve already been radicalised. And it is the final available option when all else fails—which is why those who work in the field of counter terrorism believe that more focus should be placed on the soft approach to prevent things from spiralling on to this point.

Nevertheless, as we’ve seen from past instances, readiness in this field is essential. And proper coordination between different units and agencies, as well as the media, which can have a greatly positive or negative impact during counter terrorism operations—as according to counter terrorism officers, some aspects of its coverage of the Holey Artisan attack was harming their operation by disclosing information that were then being used by extremists—could be the factor that determines success or failure when it comes to saving lives.

Thus in the aftermath of the terror strike in Sri Lanka and an increasing number of attacks throughout the world, these are scenarios we should all together prepare for.

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Sri Lanka is bleeding again



M SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

ON the morning of Easter Sunday, Sri Lankans must have gone through the nightmarish memories of the 80s and 90s when their capital, Colombo, saw deadly attacks on the country’s two presidents. In those attacks, one of their presidents was killed (1993) and the other was injured (1999), the airport was bombed by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (2001) and the Army Headquarters was hit (2009). Scores of politicians and generals were killed.

All these were suicide attacks that the LTTE introduced and mastered. It was a powerful tool to perpetrate devastating attacks by Tamil terrorists. The “tool” has now been adopted by all terrorists. That is exactly what the Sri Lankans witnessed on April 21, 2019 on Easter Sunday in and around Colombo and in the eastern city of Batticaloa where Christians make up 23 percent of its population. That Easter morning, three churches and three high-profile hotels were attacked by suicide bombers within 20 minutes, as claimed by the government one day later—carried out by some unknown or little-known Islamist terror group called the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ) in Sri Lanka, though they never claimed responsibility for the attack.

These attacks were by all measures the most coordinated, well executed and the biggest that South Asia ever experienced. The death toll has risen to 250 with over 500 injured. There were two attacks in the eastern city. Most of the dead belong to Sri Lanka’s minority Catholic Christian group, attacked, as claimed, by members of another minority group—Islamist terrorists. The Sri Lankan authorities have so far arrested 40 suspects, one claimed to be a Syrian, belonging to two Islamist groups as per the government’s announcement.

Apart from NTJ, yet another name of the group Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim has been mentioned as a home-grown terrorist group, suspected to be linked with a larger group outside the country. However, the responsibility for the devastation remained unclaimed for more than 72 hours till an unfounded claim was made by ISIS—although no evidence of it was posted in the various media platforms, which is their standard hallmark.

Usually, organisations like ISIS have never hesitated to claim credit for any action that have a propaganda value. This high-profile attack, in ISIS’s adopted policy, should have been a highest valued propaganda opportunity which would not have been missed. But no instant claim came from any organisation.



Children light candles during a prayer for the victims of Sri Lanka's terror attack.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The question is, has ISIS changed its policy of propaganda or did it miss the opportunity? On the other hand, Sri Lankan defence minister said, “it was a retaliatory action against attack on a mosque in New Zealand last month”, but such claim so far has come from the “supposed” perpetrators.

Whatever the Lankan version may be, there are a number of riddles which, unless solved would be difficult to fathom as to why and for what motive the Sri Lankan minority group—Christian—was attacked by members of another minority community. Sri Lanka is no “crusader country”, which in ISIS’ definition are the prime targets. There is hardly any instance where these two groups had been locked in any internal conflict, rather, in most cases, conflict occurred between the extremist Buddhist nationalists on the one side and the Muslim and Christian communities on the other.

This attack has not only shocked Sri Lanka, but the rest of the world as well. There were 36 foreign nationals among the victims, including Bangladeshis—and children. The attackers targeted one of the main sources of Sri Lanka’s foreign revenue, the tourism sector, which had seen a healthy growth after the end of the civil war.

The attack did not come without

warning. A number of countries—Australia, India and US intelligence—had provided positive intelligence identifying the perpetrators and the possible target weeks before the attack. But this information was not heeded by any policymaker except the top police officials, who had treated the intelligence as a routine matter.

On the contrary, the prime minister and his cabinet, who were in the dark, blamed the president for inaction as he heads both the home and defence ministry in Sri Lanka. The fact remains that there exists serious political tussle between the prime minister, his cabinet, and the president.

The entire Sri Lankan government is fragmented as was demonstrated last October when President Maithripala Sirisena dismissed the present Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa in his place creating a constitutional crisis. The president ultimately had to reverse his decision.

The division had created a political gap which gave the opportunity to plan such a massive attack to the perpetrators. Sri Lanka has become internally weak because of the serious political conundrum and the geo-strategic tangle since leasing out the strategic Hambantota Port to China—an important

link of the Chinese Belt and Road project.

However, the security failure happened mainly because of confrontational politics—a hallmark of South Asian politics which provides the breeding ground for growth of such non-state actors of different ideologies. Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Thus the government carries a heavy burden to keep the nation of 22 million with three other religious minorities, in harmony—so that such lapses and unchecked rise of extra-state forces can be prevented.

What is evident now is that major South Asian countries are facing the threat of terrorism. And the rise of religious based ultra-nationalism is thwarting economic and social growth. There has to be more intense cooperation within the regional countries if effective counter-terrorism mechanisms are to evolve. No country is safe from the menace of such senseless terrorism. To defeat this menace, regional countries must have social harmony, cooperation among nations and good governance. We have the New Zealand model in front of us. We mourn with the Sri Lankans. We should take a collective vow to defeat this menace.

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