

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

How serious is the threat of militant resurgence?

Govt must remain vigilant after spate of militancy-linked arrests

The recent spate of arrests following the suspected emergence of a new militant outfit and subsequent police raids have raised concerns about the resurgence of militancy in the country. On Monday, police took into custody 17 alleged militants after locals, with the help of autorickshaw drivers, apprehended them in Moulvibazar. This marks a dramatic escalation in counter-terrorism scrutiny of the region after police raided a suspected militant hideout two days earlier. Overall, in four separate drives over a span of eight days – the first two held in Mirpur, Dhaka – some 38 suspected militants have been arrested. We are told that the suspects also had 11 children with them.

The question is, how worried should we be about these developments? Although all such raids are usually followed by reassuring claims about things being under control, we must approach them with a degree of caution. Any reading of the situation must not only be political, but also be from a security perspective. The new outfit linked to recent arrests has been identified as "Imam Mahmud Kafela," whose ideology apparently aligns with the "Ghazwa-e-Hind," or Battle of India, the prophecy of a pan-Indian takeover under Muslim rule. The chief of the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) of police has suggested that it has more than one hideout, as well as links with other established outfits. During their raid, police have recovered explosives and non-domestic detonators, suggesting its capabilities and possible external influences.

The organisation's recruitment strategies – engaging entire families rather than lone wolves – also reflect a more covert approach aimed at avoiding suspicion and evading the radar of law enforcement agencies. This family-centric strategy signals the adaptability of extremist groups, a stark reminder that the fight against religious extremism remains an ongoing one. All this is quite concerning. Evidently, the lull in major militant activity since 2016-2017 – when Bangladesh experienced a surge in terrorist incidents – should not distract us from the danger posed by the operation of the new outfit and others said to be lying low.

What should we do to stave them off? Anti-militancy operations of the kind witnessed in recent days are an important part of the response. But as we have stressed repeatedly before, for a greater impact, we must not focus on law enforcement alone. While these raids may be successful on a short-term basis, the evolving operational methods of militant outfits underscore the importance of pursuing both hard and soft approaches. We must understand why some individuals or families are getting drawn to radical ideologies. As well as undertaking deradicalisation programmes, both in wider social settings and inside prisons for convicted militants, we must promote a culture of religious tolerance and address the underlying factors leading to radicalisation.

Don't make people your scapegoat

Chattogram city authorities cannot shirk their responsibility for persistent waterlogging

We are quite frustrated to see the mayor of Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) blame residents for the city's devastating waterlogging problem. During a press conference on Monday, he said that "irresponsible" city dwellers carelessly dumped plastic waste in drains and canals, which get clogged as a result and cannot hold water when it rains excessively. The result is flooding and waterlogging that cripples the city every year.

While we cannot deny that responsible civic behaviour is a significant part of a healthy city management system, we must say that placing the blame for waterlogging squarely on the public's shoulder is not only unfair, but is indicative of dereliction by those actually responsible for preventing this scenario. For years, the public have been demanding solutions to Chattogram's waterlogging crisis. Every monsoon, residents brace themselves for dirty ankle- to knee-deep water flooding low-lying areas. Moreover, given that the city is riddled with open drains, getting swept away into one of them is a real possibility as it is nearly impossible to identify the drains because the city gets flooded after minimal rain. What does the mayor have to say about that? Isn't it his job to keep the city safe for the people who voted him into office?

We also want to know what his office has done to make sure that people are not recklessly dumping plastic waste into water bodies. Has there been any awareness-building campaign to stop this problematic behaviour? Has there been any punitive action to deter it? Given that polythene bags and single-use plastic have been banned, why are they still available in the first place?

To his credit, the Chattogram mayor did mention how natural water bodies that were once abundant had been filled up over the years, as well as illegal canal grabbing and hill-cutting. In August 2017, a megaproject costing Tk 5,617 crore was approved to solve the waterlogging problem, to be implemented by the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), a part of which was recovering and dredging canals. Six years on, there is still no visible progress. The CCC has been blaming the CDA for not handing over dredged canals, and the CDA has been blaming the CCC for not improving the city's drainage system. On top of that, illegal hill-cutting has raised the risks of excessive erosion when it rains, with the silts ending up in the water bodies and obstructing water flow.

There is a lot that these government bodies, and those in charge of them, need to sort out first before anyone points a finger at the public. They need to properly do their job, and relieve Chattogram residents of their perennial suffering.

Is the Awami League worried?



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al Masum Molla is chief reporter at The Daily Star.

The debate over which party is more popular or which leader is the most popular in Bangladesh is as eternal as that regarding who the best footballer of our time is: Messi or Ronaldo. It will perhaps never be settled. But come election time, some organisations run their own surveys to ascertain the likely outcome of the polls. Of course, this is not unique to Bangladesh. If anything, our country sees very few surveys of this kind compared to other parts of the world, where groups are continuously polled on how different parties are doing in terms of specific issues.

However, the reaction to these surveys is similar to people's reaction to election results. No matter how authentic or robust, the camp that comes out in a negative light in the survey seeks to discredit it at every turn. The other camp, meanwhile, considers it as one more feather in its electoral cap. But people's acceptance or rejection of these survey results come from a habitual mistrust for data. When there is a serious scarcity of data in every field, it is only natural that people will have little confidence in the ones made available, especially since there are always claims that the survey findings are manufactured, if not doctored. That the agency behind the survey is trying to serve the interest of certain quarters – the one which comes out better in the survey findings, naturally.

It is perhaps keeping this context in mind that one should consider the IRI's survey findings and the reaction of our political parties to it. The US-based International Republican Institute (IRI) – an agency of the Republican Party of the US – has found that 53 percent of Bangladeshis believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, while 44 percent think it is headed in the right direction. But then, 70 percent Bangladeshis, the survey found, approve of Sheikh Hasina's performance as prime minister. The approval for the opposition has gone up from 36 percent in September 2019 to 63 percent in the latest survey. A combined 69 percent Bangladeshis want an election either under a caretaker government or a national



Peter Haas' recent visit to the AL office on Bangabandhu Avenue was perhaps the first time a US ambassador to Bangladesh visited the office of a political party.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

unity government.

In other news, an Awami League delegation has returned from India after a tour at the invitation of BJP. At a press conference (meant to brief the media regarding this visit), Awami League presidium member and Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said they did not discuss anything specific about the election. However, as a *Prothom Alo* report said, the AL delegation has returned with a notion that India would stand by the ruling party in the upcoming election, as they have done in the past. This is significant because India has so far not issued any statement regarding Bangladesh's election, except one by Arindam Bagchi, a spokesman for the Indian foreign ministry, hoping the election would be held peacefully and as per schedule. Given that this did not clarify India's stance convincingly, the *Prothom Alo* report is rather significant.

Meanwhile, US Ambassador to

unusual that Haas spoke to the press by himself after the visit. Perhaps this was done deliberately and the US envoy did not want to be seen addressing the press while flanked by AL spokespersons or other leaders at the party office.

But what would have been the scenario if it was the BNP party office that Haas had visited, while that of AL had been left out? Would he have had to face the ruling party's wrath? Would the US envoy have been taken to school about the propriety of diplomatic behaviour? And would this act have been seen as meddling in local politics, where foreigners are not welcome? At the press conference, with an AL logo looming over his head in the background, Haas made it a point to say that the visit was part of his interaction with all spheres of Bangladeshi society, including law enforcers, news outlets, and other political parties. Whatever the case may be, the sight of the US envoy visiting the AL office and addressing

at parliament that the newest US visa policy was a bid to change the ruling regime in Bangladesh.

It appears that the ruling party is courting all the powers that matter in Bangladeshi politics. That the party is close to India was never doubted, and that this crucial neighbour has historically favoured the Awami League has never been a secret, either. The recent visit of the AL delegation to India was perhaps to strengthen that relationship. On the face of it, the ruling party is using all its forces to reach a favourable position. Interestingly, the Election Commission has finally approved the application of two parties, with names surprisingly similar to BNP: the BSP and the BNM. Although this has raised many eyebrows, the EC did not seem to pay heed to the reactions or speculations. Despite so many factors being in its favour, it is curious that Awami League still seems to be worried about something.

In funding climate actions, we can be more creative



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr Saleemul Huq is the director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development and a professor at Independent University, Bangladesh.

SALEEMUL HUQ

There are only a hundred days left until the start of COP28 in Dubai, set to be held on November 30, and already the world has crossed the critical threshold into what I call "the era of loss and damage," and what the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres calls the era of climate boiling. July was the hottest month on Earth in over 100,000 years. We are therefore at a point that can be described as a new world of climate change impacts leading to more losses and damages than ever before. Just in the last few days, extraordinarily heavy rainfall in the Chattogram region of Bangladesh led to landslides that killed tens of people. The port city is still largely waterlogged, bringing misery to its citizens. Similarly, the US is currently facing the deadliest wildfire it has seen in over a century, happening in Maui county of Hawaii. Over 90 people have died so far, with the death toll expected to rise significantly in the upcoming days.

With all this in mind, one can say that we have left behind the old era when climate change was perceived as something that would happen in the future. As such, the upcoming COP28 should be considered as COP1 of the "new era," where climate change is no longer a threat for the future, but one that is increasingly impacting the present. Leaders who attend COP28 will have to rise to the occasion with the sense of urgency that the crisis requires today.

The COP28 President-Designate, Dr Sultan Al Jaber, has been travelling



Climate change is no longer a threat for the future.

PHOTO: REUTERS

around the world meeting leaders with the aim of conveying this sense of urgency. He recently made a brief stop in Bangladesh to meet the government and Climate Envoy Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

The president designate also made time to meet with a group of young climate change leaders, for which I am grateful to him. One issue for which I have high expectations from COP28, concerning the fulfilment of the COP27 agreement last year in Egypt, is the setting up of a new loss and damage fund. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has set up a Transitional Committee (TC), which is tasked to come up with related recommendations by COP28.

However, having observed the

UNFCCC process for over 27 years, I can predict that even with the strongest will in the world from the committee members – and they are all excellent individuals – they will most likely not finish the work and will come to Dubai asking for more time. But time is something we have run out of. So, unless the COP28 president and United Arab

Emirates (as the host) make a declaration now, with a hundred days left, that they want a new loss and damage fund set up in Dubai and put pressure on the TC to deliver on it, I am afraid that we will end up with a lost opportunity.

Therefore, I would recommend that the UAE government make a declaration expressing its intentions to set up a new loss and damage fund by the end of COP28 in December. In order to push the TC to come up with something concrete, the country should declare its intention to make \$100 million available for the fund and ask the TC to come up with an interim plan to utilise the funds immediately.

To procure this fund, a simple \$5 loss and damage aviation levy could be imposed on every passenger flying on any of the airlines under the

jurisdiction of the UAE. This would generate approximately \$100 million in a year. A similar levy could be imposed by individual governments on the airlines under their jurisdiction. Take for example France, where a few euros are imposed on all passengers buying an airline ticket, which is collected by the airline. Then, the levy is passed onto the French government, and the amount collected is used to finance organisations implementing health programmes for developing countries. This practice has been operating successfully for over ten years. The French levy has nothing to do with climate change, but a new loss and damage levy would be justified as every air passenger is indeed a polluter.

There is no need to reach a collective decision by all countries or for all airlines. But each country, especially the developed ones, could decide to impose the levy on airlines under their jurisdiction and contribute to a new loss and damage fund. None of this would involve the taxpayer or the central government budgets of any country, but would be a nominal amount of a tax on air passengers who do in fact act as polluters.

Another aspect of this proposed levy is that it is a trivial amount – less than the cost of a coffee and croissant at any international airport – and will make absolutely no impact on the decision of a passenger to purchase their ticket. In fact, air tickets have no set price per passenger, as almost every passenger pays a different price for their ticket, depending on when they bought it. I would urge the UAE government to take this idea forward and for the COP28 president to use the remaining days to talk to all his counterparts around the world and persuade them to contribute to the new loss and damage fund in December. If the loss and damage fund agreed upon at COP27 is not set up in Dubai, I will deem COP28 to have been a failure.