

Terrorism on the home front

By M. R. MASANI

THERE has been more than one Press statement from New Delhi supporting the West German rescue of the hijacked hostages at Mogadishu Airport in Somalia; support has been given by India in the UN to fight international terrorism, and a statement has been put out from Delhi that India's fight against international terrorism is going to be waged on several fronts. All this is excellent and estimable.

But is the fight against terrorism only to be carried on outside Indian frontiers? And is there no corresponding obligation to deal with terrorism on the soil of India with the same courage and determination? We ask this question because something approximate to hijacking and the holding of hostages to ransom is being practised on a wide scale in the factories and workshops of this country, at the cost of the safety and dignity of managers and officers of industrial enterprises, at the hands of hooligans who claim to represent the trade unions and of a fall in industrial production that India so desperately needs.

Here, for instance, is a report in the Times of India of October 28, 1977, from its staff correspondent in Kanpur:

'About 3,000 agitating workers of a cotton mill here yesterday virtually seized the mill and gheraoed the manager, demanding arrears of wages for the past one month. The manager, Mr. Agarwal, was allegedly stripped and beaten up with iron rods by the violent workers, who did not allow the police to intervene.

The workers are said to be holding Mr. Agarwal to ransom near a tank close to the main boiler, threatening to throw him into the boiler if the police intervene. The gherao, which began at 9 a.m. yesterday has not been lifted till midnight.

'Though Mr. Agarwal was bleeding, no medical aid could be provided to him because of the violent attitude of the workers who were armed with all sorts of weapons.

'The District Magistrate and senior police officers reached the spot on hearing the report, but they are unable to do anything.

The Labour Minister, Mr. G. D. Bajpai, and the Minister for Industries, Mr. R. R. Rustogi, who are in town, are keeping a close watch on the situation.

There has been no later news about what happened to the hapless Mr. Agarwal, whether he succumbed to his injuries or whether ransom was paid to the labour hooligans in the way of wages, bonus, Diwali gratuity or what have you.

This, alas, is not an isolated incident, but is being duplicated in different forms throughout the country. It is no aberration but a deliberate pattern of intimidation and of violence adopted by a large number of so-called labour leaders as a result of the supine and pusillanimous attitude of the Union Government in Delhi and some of the governments in the States. The feeling has come around that one does not have to go through collective bargaining or even to go on strike, but that goondas and hooligans are the methods that bear fruit in industrial relations in 1977.

Thus, Brakes India Ltd. of Madras, a T.V.S. unit and one of the leading companies in the automobile engineering industry in the country, had to declare a lock-out on October 13. In a full-page statement in the Indian Express of October

31, the management told a sad story of how this lock-out had to take place. Here are a few extracts from their tale of woe:

'The ringleaders among them organised daily meetings of the men inside the factory, inciting them to continue the stay-in-strike and, with this encouragement, the workmen converted the factory into an arsenal by unauthorisedly utilising the company's equipment and materials and manufactured dangerous weapons to threaten the supervisory staff and others.

The deadly weapons included, in large numbers, swords and spears with sharpened edges of different sizes, iron rods and steel pipes of various sizes with and without handles. Iron rods made into spears of different lengths and with sharp ends of different forms, long iron poles with knife ends, long knives made out of brake shoes, small knives made of files and handles, thick bamboo and wooden sticks, sharpened knives like blades of different sizes, hoses with joints, handles and metal with spring ends, machine-belts and chains with griphand, cycle chains with and without handles, aluminium bars, electric cables of different sizes, and bulbs and bottles filled with acid.

'On the 22nd July, emboldened by the possession of the dangerous weapons on a large and systematic scale, the workmen barricaded the factory roads and delated the tyres of vehicles of supervisory personnel parked inside the factory to prevent the movement of vehicles. They posted armed workmen to guard all the gates and made it known that they would not allow the supervisory and managerial staff on duty to leave the factory at the end of their shift hours to go home. The movements of supervisory and senior personnel were restricted and they were subjected to all sorts of humiliation. Control of entry and exit to the factory was taken over by the workmen and it was only under the authority of their representatives signed gate-pass that exit was permitted.

'Thus the factory was under complete seizure by the workmen fully armed with dangerous weapons. This situation was picturesquely described by one of the city newspapers as 'Lock-out of Management'.

'On October 13, 1977, after coming into the factory as usual on the morning shift, a large number of workmen, incited and instigated by the leaders, struck work without justification and went out of the factory in a procession and joined a mob outside in stone-throwing on the police and at buses bringing workmen to neighbouring factories. In defiance of a prohibitory order. The police authorities were forced to use tear-gas shells and resort to other appropriate action to contain the violence. Inside the factory, the supervisory and other senior personnel were abused, threatened and driven here and there and two of them were severely beaten up by an authorised representative. Taking advantage of the confused situation a big mob of outsiders as well as the company's workmen rushed to the perimeter gates and entered the factory. While rushing into the factory, the mob indulged in throwing stones at the neighbouring factory and caused considerable damage.

'There was imminent risk to life and property, and the company was left with no alternative but to declare a lock-out of the workmen effected at

11 a.m. on October 13, 1977. In case it is thought that other States are immune, here is a story told by Amar Dye Chem, which has a factory in Kalyan outside Bombay. Here again a lock-out had to be declared on October 2. Here are some extracts from the sad tale of Amar Dye Chem as told in the Indian Express of October 4:

'On August 7, 1977 several workmen stopped near Gate No. 1 the bus bringing the workers to the factory and tried to force the officers to get down.

'On the same day, A. Swamy, a worker belonging to the rival union, was brutally assaulted outside the Gate No. 2 and he had to be admitted in the hospital for treatment of serious injuries.

'On August 11, violent demonstrations were held by about 400 workmen after entering the Administrative Building and they made an attempt to drag the Factory Manager from his cabin.

'On August 13, similar types of violent demonstration were held throughout the factory giving threats to the Plant Managers and forcing them out of their cabins.

'The management was therefore constrained, as a precautionary measure, to give 14 days notice on August 12, of its intention to declare a lock-out of its factory.

Industries having eminent leaders of the Janata Party at their head are by no means excluded from this reign of terror. The sad story of Mukund Iron & Steel Works is told by Mr. Viren Shah, MP, a member of the executive committee of the Janata Party. In the Times of India of November 8:

'On August 5, India's biggest electric steel furnace complex went cold due to illegal strike and other illegal activities on the part of the workmen. As a result, the steel plant, the heavy foundry and the machine building division had to shut down. The cessation of these operations has substantially curtailed the supply of vital steel products to many manufacturing units in Maharashtra and the rest of India. Most of these are projects of national importance. Slowing down of production in these units and a worsening prospect of closure in some cases threaten thousands of jobs.

'What happened after the failure of negotiations is a sad story of a series of acts of violence, go-slow, threats, violence, shouting filthy abuses etc., paralysing the working of all departments.

'On August 5, the Administration office of the Kalve plant was gheraoed and all entrances and exits blocked by physical force for 16 hours from 3.30 p.m. to 1.30 a.m. The workers were being led by the Union President, Dr. Datta Samant, himself. The gathering crowd of workers could not be dispersed even by senior police officers commanding a large police force.

'From that night onwards, a virtual state of siege was created by the workers around the Kalve plant, which included the staff colony where 81 families reside. For them, the water supply was disconnected, attempts were made to tamper with the telephone lines and essential supplies like milk, vegetables and foodstuffs were stopped, which included visits by a doctor. This happened despite a large police force camping at the factory gates.

'The agitation grew worse and, on August 7, the car of the General Manager was stopped on the road by hundreds of

workers. He and the Dy. General Manager and Personnel Manager were gheraoed for seven hours in the presence of the Collector, police officers, including the DSP, ADSP and a large posse of SRP and armed police.

'The threats to life and property at Kalve loomed larger than ever and the management had no alternative but to declare a lock-out on August 12, 1977.

The Khadi Bhandars have been a constructive feature of the Gandhian cause in this country. But, according to the Times of India of October 14, the Bombay Khadi Gramodyog Sangh announced its decision to close down permanently the Khadi Emporium at Dadabhai Naoroji Road and 12 other bhandars in Bombay because of the goondalism of its workers. Mr. Shantilal Shah, Vice-Chairman of the Sangh, himself an INTUC leader and former Labour Minister in the Bombay Government, said that union workers had assaulted three officers of the sangh.

The contagion has also spread from industry to trade. Bombay textile market, one of the biggest in the world, with a daily turnover of Rs. 5 crores, was brought to a standstill on the eve of Diwali by the goondalism of the gumasta union and insufficient police protection provided by the State Government, and cloth merchants of all the major wholesale and semi-wholesale markets in the city decided to shut down for an indefinite period. At a historic meeting of all the merchants, it was unanimously decided to keep the shops closed till "such conditions are guaranteed by the authorities when all the cloth markets and offices of the commission agents can function without any fear or interference and with full safety".

From cloth, the contagion spread further to drugs and in a few days time the 'Dawa Bazar' or medicine market was also paralysed. Hospitals and even private doctors could not get drugs due to obstruction from the trade union officers. Distress calls were received by chemists from several centres outside Bombay. In a few days the situation became explosive, and there was rioting and violence in Lalbaug and other places. In Lalbaug, gumastas entered a cloth shop and dragged the proprietor to the road, and he was hit on the head with a stone. The police, who arrested the goondas, however, released them later in the day.

All this has nothing to do with the legitimacy of trade unions and the right to collective bargaining, for which we have always stood. Our record for several decades will bear this out.

What is under discussion now is not trade unionism, but terrorism and Mafia rule, taking the form of hooliganism, violence, go-slow and illegal strikes, all of which are violations of the law of the land. To that extent, it is a problem of law and order.

In dealing with these developments during the last nine months, all parties have been equally guilty, whether it is the Janata Government in U.P. or the Congress Government in Bombay, or the AIADMK Government in Madras.

There is need for a drastic change in the attitude towards these terrorists on the industrial front. A little bit of the spirit of Mogadishu and Entebbe needs to be applied to it. But have those in office the guts that are necessary for such emulation? — Courtesy: Freedom First.