

Digging a cultural grave at the National Assembly complex!

DR. ADNAN MORSHED

I am writing with a profound sense of anguish. This is a globally iffy time indeed. While already fretting over Bangladesh's unwarranted inclusion in the special-registration programme by the US government, I noticed with panic the news that *The Daily Star* broke on 26 January 2003: "The Government has resumed construction of two residential units for the speaker and the deputy speaker in the Sangsad Bhaban area, about two months after suspension of the work in the face of protests. Additional workforce has been engaged to complete the construction as soon as possible. Officials at the site said yesterday that they were working extra hours to complete the houses by June."

This thoughtless infringement of a national symbol has not come as a surprise, though. The Government has been skulking around for about half a year with a secretive construction programme to be executed within architect Louis Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar master plan. Environment-conscious architectural community and the members of civil society have protested noticeably and the government seasawed between flashes of prudence and cultural insensitivity. Now that this construction plan has begun again, it seems that good sense on the part of the authority simply won't prevail. Does such an unnecessary encroachment into an internationally acclaimed architectural project, in fact, reflect the poverty of our cultural awareness? It does.

Monumental architecture, like fine literature, demonstrates a culture's highest achievements and renders visually a nation's soul. While comparing architecture's aesthetic expression with literature, for example a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, could require serious excursions into semantics, a master plan as significant as Sher-e-Bangla Nagar could easily be viewed as no less than a fully blossomed aesthetic concept. For the same reason a Tagore poem cannot be changed, a significant aesthetic concept as well cannot be subjected to random alteration. Such a concept -- developed not only to serve functional needs, but also to embody symbolic and cultural values of a people -- can be compared to a literary creation. This analogy bears weight, especially when we are indeed focusing on a piece of architecture that over the years has come to epitomize our nation's cultural and political aspirations. If Tagore's or Jibonandodash's or Jashimuddin's poems, for that matter, shape our cultural imagination, then, as one of the prime visual symbols of the country's built heritage, our National Assembly complex also memorializes the evolution of our national psyche. Tampering with a nationally important architectural asset is, thus, tantamount to undermining our own cultural integrity, a collective faux pas that would be impossible to rectify later. This is the case, at least, in any civilized society.

Let us look around. When the then French President Francois Mitterrand in the early 1980s hired the Sino-American architect I.M. Pei to design an extension to the cultural heart of Paris -- the Louvre Museum -- there was a national uproar that quickly turned into an intense political debate: How does a nation preserve its cultural symbols? Does a head of state by default have the authority to exercise his executive

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power to alter a heritage site? Parisians of all social strata considered such a scheme an affront to the Louvre's stately nineteenth-century presence. They registered their anxiety and disapproval of any authoritarian agenda to extend this national symbol. Mitterrand felt the brunt of the ensuing political maelstrom as Parisian intellectuals unleashed a ferocious signature campaign to stop any secret government attempt to churn out an extension to the famed museum. Not until Pei constructed a life-size model of the pyramid -- on the exact site where now a glass pyramid sits -- in order to reassure the public that the extension would in no way damage the Louvre's visual impact, did Mitterrand receive popular approval to go ahead with his signature project. Although an extension to the



Louvre was eventually carried out, what was remarkable in this story is the practice of democracy, the willingness to listen to people. Further, the message that came out of this national drama is this: Parisians value the building of the Louvre itself as much as they admire Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa that hangs inside it. By the same token, they revere the Notre Dame Church itself as much as they adore Victor Hugo's masterpiece *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a classic fiction that unfolds against the imposing presence of this medieval church.

Consider also the post-9/11 American public response to the World Trade Centre (WTC) site. In the wake of the catastrophic terrorist attack, American people bled at the loss of two potent visual symbols, the Twin Towers of New York. Amidst grief, people spontaneously responded to architectural ideas about what should be and should not be rebuilt on this site, now known as

Ground Zero. What is intriguing in all this popular response is that, although the WTC site is privately owned by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, rebuilding at Ground Zero has become a national responsibility, precisely because architecture expresses a nation's character and its noblest aspirations. The situation has come to a point where no design -- no matter how glamorous or grandiloquent it might be -- could be executed without strong public endorsement.

People in charge of rebuilding the site rightly realize that Ground Zero is no longer a mere private property; it has transformed into a site -- almost allegorical -- for imagining what it means to memorialise through architecture a nation's collective grief. Broad

public participation has become a crucial requirement for any architectural vision for Ground Zero, a term now signifies, as the architectural critic of the *New York Times* Herbert Muschamp contends, "an idea that in the 20th century was called the open university or the museum without walls; a network of learning, a free-floating space open 24/7 and accessible to all..."

The ground zero design process has been an adventure in public education. Muschamp suggests here that the public has virtually created the programme for Ground Zero. What we learn in the process is that civic architecture does offer an abstract site for putting the institution of democracy itself to test.

Let us return to our National Assembly complex. Is Louis Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar so special that it warrants a broad national approach as to how to deal with it? In recent months, much has been said about its symbolic presence within our national imagination. A recent exhibition at the National Museum, curated by architects Khaleed Ashraf and Saiful Haque, more or less succeeded in propagating the importance of our capitol complex to the common folk. While my purpose here is neither to drum up its heritage value once more nor to offer an extended apologia for its much-needed protection, I would nonetheless mention two issues -- among others -- that ought to justify treating the Sangsad Bhaban as a protected heritage site.

First and, most importantly, the Sangsad Bhaban is an architectural masterpiece in the true sense of the word. Its aesthetic composition, visual clarity, spatial order, and virtuoso engineering have been studied and analyzed around the world by leading architectural educators, critics, and theorists. Surprising as it may sound, a good portion of the global community knows Bangladesh through our capitol building, which has also been the focus of many international conferences for merits too obvious to elaborate here. Many doctoral theses have been written on this complex in top universities around the world. Recently a flurry of books, exploring the many facets of Kahn's complex, has also been published. Considering Dhaka's current unimaginable and uncontrollable jungle-like growth, the space carved out by the National Assembly complex appears like an urban oasis, rendered visually by its spatial poetics, lakes surrounding buildings, expansive plazas, and the visual simplicity of its buildings. The complex appeals to the common people, evidenced amply by the large crowd enjoying everyday the late afternoon breeze on its agora-like plazas. It strikes a chord with popular imagination, a fact reflected, in one instance, by the vibrant and colorful rickshaw and now-defunct "baby taxi" drawings. I have written earlier in *The Daily Star* that the National Assembly complex provides the city-dwellers a rare opportunity to escape the tyranny of the capital city's oppressive visual and aural

stimuli.

Second, the conceptualisation of our National Assembly complex parallels and, in fact intertwines with, the very emergence of our nationhood. After being asked to design the government complex for the then East Pakistan, Louis Kahn designed the project principally from 1963 to 1966, a period when the people of East Pakistan dreamed of political and economic emancipation from the doomed political geography of a nation with two separated wings. To create an illusion of political and economic balance between the two wings, as well as concerned with his own "reelection" in 1965, the then military ruler of Pakistan, Ayub Khan, opted for the grand gesture of building a monumental government complex in Dhaka: the "Second Capital." Ayub Khan hoped that if the Bengali East Pakistanis bought into his theory of political balance, they would mandate his continued existence as the ruler of the combined Pakistan. The East Pakistanis, on their part, envisioned in the National Assembly complex the crystallization of their own liberatory consciousness and right to self-rule. When it was eventually completed in 1983 nine years after Louis Kahn died -- the National Assembly complex literally embodied the political odyssey of a people to statehood.

Vandalizing a national treasure as significant as our National Assembly complex with government approval would, then, not undermine our own political credibility as a nation? Would a nation that does not exercise caution and sensitivity in preserving its most prominent built heritage expose nothing but its social and cultural

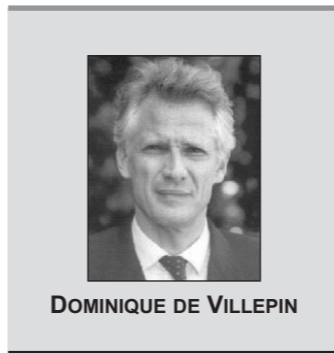
immaturity? The cultural progressiveness of a nation is expressed through not only what it builds, but also how it preserves what is already built. Instead of tampering with the National Assembly complex with one building here today and one building there tomorrow, our government should exploit the great potentials for tourism that this site offers. If packaged with an attractive advertisement campaign, the complex could be a huge pulling factor for local and international tourists.

The drab tourism culture of our country has too long relied on an antiquated idea that only picturesque natural sites could foster tourism. There are many cities around the world that have become Meccas for international tourism principally for their architectural heritage. Without the Empire State Building, for instance, New York is not what it is now. A Paris sans the Eiffel Tower is a Paris without its literary sensuality. Remove the Taj Mahal and there is no Agra. A piece of architecture could literally change the cultural landscape and, eventually, the economy of a city. Bilbao, the northern Basque city of Spain, offers a case in point. Following the substantial decline in this ancient city's industrial and economic base in the 1970s and 1980s, the fascinating rebirth of Bilbao has been almost single-handedly occasioned, so to speak, by one building: the American architect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, which opened in 1997. Not only did Gehry's visual poetry of titanium, stone, and glass catapult Bilbao to the status of an obligatory destination of international tourism, it also played a principal role in regenerating the city's income base. Bilbao's cultural and economic renewal was made possible by both its ambitious architectural programme and the visionary advertisement campaign that accompanied it.

With similar ambitions, our National Assembly complex could also act as a backdrop against which a modern and attractive Dhaka might be projected to the world. It is time we saw in the centerpiece of our built heritage possibilities for cultural renewal and economic rejuvenation. The first step in accomplishing such goals should be to preserve it in its original state, i.e. the 1973 master plan. We have to realize that insensitivity towards historical artifacts will continue to erode our ability to take pride in ourselves and our history and our accomplishments as a nation. I urge our government most respectfully to immediately stop the encroachment into this true masterpiece. If the planned construction continues, the result would be no less than digging a cultural grave at the very heart of our political existence. And the two buildings that are going to be built would be the tragic reminders of our cultural primitiveness.

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Let's give priority to disarmament in peace



DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN

I would like to thank Mr. Blix and Mr. ElBaradei for the information they have just given us on the continuing inspections in Iraq. I would like to express to them again France's confidence and complete support in their mission.

You know the value that France has placed on the unity of the Security Council from the outset of the Iraq crisis. This unity rests on two fundamental elements at this time:

We are pursuing together the objective of effectively disarming Iraq. We have an obligation to achieve results. Let us not cast doubt on our common commitment to this goal. We should collectively this onerous responsibility which must leave no room for ulterior motives or assumptions. Let us be clear: Not one of us feels the least indulgence towards Saddam Hussein and the Iraq regime.

In unanimously adopting resolution 1441, we collectively expressed our agreement with the two-stage approach proposed by France: the choice of disarmament through inspections and, should this strategy fail, consideration by the Security Council of all the options, including the recourse to force. It was clearly in the event the inspections failed and only in that scenario that a second resolution could be justified.

The question today is simple: Do we consider in good conscience that disarmament via inspections is now leading us to a dead-end? Or do we consider that the possibilities regarding inspections presented in resolution 1441 have still not been fully explored?

In response of this question, France has two convictions: -- The first is that the option of inspections has not been taken to the end and that it can provide an effective response to the imperative of disarming Iraq;

-- The second is that the use of force would be so fraught with risks for people, for the region and for international stability that it should only be envisioned as a last resort.

So what have we just learned from the report by Mr. Blix and Mr. ElBaradei? That the inspections are producing results. Of course, each of us wants more, and we will continue together to put pressure on Baghdad to obtain more. But the inspections are producing results.

In their previous reports to the Security Council on January 27, the executive chairman of UNMOVIC and the director-general of the IAEA had identified in detail areas in which progress was expected. Significant gains have been made on several

these points.

-- In the chemical and biological areas, the Iraqis have provided the inspectors with new documentation. They have also announced the establishment of commissions of inquiry led by former officials of weapons programmes, in accordance with Mr Blix's requests;

-- In the ballistic domain, the information provided by Iraq has also enabled the inspectors to make progress. We know exactly the real capabilities of the Al-Samoud missile. The unauthorized programmes must now be dismantled, in accordance with Mr Blix's conclusions;

-- In the nuclear domain, useful information was given to the IAEA on important points discussed by Mr. ElBaradei on January 27: the acquisition of magnets that could be used for enriching uranium and the list of contacts between Iraq and the country likely to have provided it with uranium.

There we are at the heart of the logic of resolution 1441 which must ensure the effectiveness of the inspections through precise identification of banned programmes then

their elimination.

We all realise that the success of the inspections presupposes that we obtain Iraq's full and complete cooperation. France has consistently demanded this. Real progress is beginning to be apparent: -- Iraq has agreed to aerial reconnaissance over its territory;

-- It has allowed Iraqi scientists to be questioned by the inspectors without witnesses;

-- A bill barring all activities linked to weapons of mass destruction programmes is in the process of being adopted, in accordance with a long-standing request of the inspectors;

-- Iraq is to provide a detailed list of experts who witnessed the destruction of military programmes in 1991.

France naturally expects these commitments to be durably verified. Beyond that, we must maintain strong pressure on Iraq so that it goes further in its cooperation.

Progress like this strengthens us in our conviction that inspections can be effective. But we must not shut our eyes to the amount of work that still remains; questions still have to be cleared up, verifications made, and installations and equipment probably still have to be destroyed.

To do this, we must give the inspections every chance of succeeding: I submitted proposals to the Council on February 5. Since then we have detailed them in a working document addressed to Mr Blix and

M ElBaradei and distributed to Council members.

What is the spirit of these proposals?

-- They are practical, concrete proposals that can be implemented quickly and are designed to enhance the efficiency of inspection operations.

-- They fall within the framework of resolution 1441 and consequently do not require a new resolution.

-- They must support the efforts of Mr Blix and Mr ElBaradei: The latter are naturally the best placed to tell us which ones they wish to adopt for the maximum effectiveness of their work.

-- In their report they have already made useful and operational comments. France has already announced that it had additional resources available to Mr Blix and Mr ElBaradei, beginning with its Mirage IV reconnaissance aircraft.

Now, yes, I do hear the critics:

-- There are those who think that the inspections, in their principle, cannot be the least effective. But I recall that this is the very foundation of resolution 1441 and that the inspections are producing results.

No one can assert today that the path of war will be shorter than that of the inspections. No one can claim either that it might lead to a safer, more just and more stable world. For war is always the sanction of failure.

One may judge them inadequate but they are there.

-- There are those who believe that continuing the inspection process is a sort of delaying tactic to prevent military intervention. That naturally raises the question of the time allowed to Iraq. This brings us to the core of the debates. At stake is our credibility, and our sense of responsibility. Let us have the courage to see things as they are.

There are two options:

-- The option of war might seem a priori to be the swiftest. But let us not forget that having won the war, one has to build peace. Let us not delude ourselves; this will be long and difficult because it will be necessary to preserve Iraq's unity and restore stability in a lasting way in a country and region harshly affected by the intrusion of force.

-- Faced with such perspectives, there is an alternative in the inspections which allow us to move forward day by day with the effective and peaceful disarmament of Iraq. In the end it is that choice not the most sure and most rapid?

No one can assert today that the path of war will be shorter than that of the inspections. No one can claim either that it might lead to a safer, more just and more stable world. For war is always the sanction of failure. Would this be our sole recourse in the face of the many challenges at this time?

Let us allow the United Nations inspectors the time they need for their mission to succeed. But let us

together be vigilant and ask Mr Blix and Mr ElBaradei to report regularly to the Council. France, for its part, proposes another meeting on March 14 at ministerial level to assess the situation. We will then be able to judge the progress that has been made and what remains to be done.

Given this context, the use of force is not justified at this time.

There is an alternative to war: disarming Iraq via inspections.

Furthermore, premature recourse to the military option would be fraught with risks:

-- The authority of our action is based today on the unity of the international community. Premature military intervention would bring this unity into question, and that would detract from its legitimacy and, in the long run, its effectiveness.

-- Such intervention could have incalculable consequences for the stability of this scarred and fragile region. It would compound the sense of injustice, increase tensions and risk paving the way to other conflicts. -- We all share the same priority -- that of fighting terrorism mercilessly.

This fight requires total determination. Since the tragedy of September 11 this has been one of the highest priorities facing our peoples. And France, which was struck hard by this terrible scourge several times, is wholly mobilised in this fight which concerns us all and which we must pursue together. That was the sense of the Security Council meeting held on January 20, at France's initiative.

Ten days ago, the US Secretary of State, Mr Powell, reported the alleged links between al-Qaeda and the regime in Baghdad. Given the present state of our research and intelligence, in liaison with our allies, nothing allows us to establish such links. On the other hand, we must assess the impact that disputed military action would have on this plan. Would not such intervention be liable to exacerbate the divisions between societies, cultures and peoples, divisions that nurture terrorism?

To what extent do the nature and extent of the threat justify the immediate recourse to force? How do we ensure that the considerable risks of such intervention can actually be kept under control?

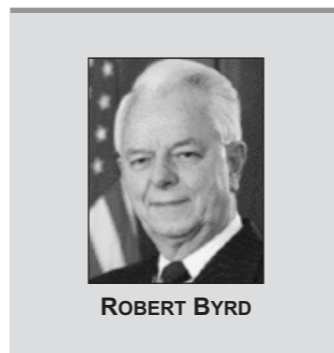
In any case, in such an eventuality, it is indeed the unity of the international community that would guarantee its effectiveness. Similarly, it is the United Nations that will be tomorrow at the centre of the peace to be built whatever happens.

To those who are wondering in anguish when and how we are going to cede to war, I would like to tell them that nothing, at any time, in this Security Council, will be done in haste, misunderstanding, suspicion or fear.

In the United Nations, we are the guardians of an ideal, the guardians of a conscience. The onerous responsibility and immense honour we have must lead us to give priority to disarmament in peace.

Dominique de Villepin is Foreign Minister of France. The article is based on his speech at the UNSecurity Council on 14 February 2003.

Reckless administration may reap disastrous consequences



ROBERT BYRD

To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences.

As this nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war. Yet, this Chamber (Senate) is, for the most part, silent -- ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing.

We stand passively mute in the United States Senate, paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seemingly stunned by the sheer turmoil of events. Only on the editorial pages of our newspapers is there much substantive discussion of the prudence or imprudence of engaging in this particular war.

And this is no small conflagration we contemplate. This is no simple attempt to defang a villain. No. This coming battle, if it materialises, represents a turning point in US foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world.

This nation is about to embark upon the first test of a revolutionary doctrine applied in an extraordinary way at an unfortunate time. The doctrine of preemption -- the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future -- is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defence. It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of world-wide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will soon be on our or some

other nation's hit list.

High level administration figures recently refused to take nuclear weapons off of the table when discussing a possible attack against Iraq. What could be more destabilising and unwise than this type of uncertainty, particularly in a world where globalism has tied the vital economic and security interests of many nations so closely together?

Anti-Americanism based on mistrust, misinformation, suspicion, and alarming rhetoric from US leaders is fracturing the once solid alliance against global terrorism which existed after Sept. 11. Here at home, people are warned of imminent terrorist attacks with little guidance as to when or where such attacks might occur. Family members are being called to active military duty, with no idea of the duration of the stay or what horrors they may face. Communities are being left with less than adequate police and fire protection. Other essential services are also short-staffed. The mood of the nation is grim. The economy is stumbling. Fuel prices are rising and may soon spike higher.

This administration, now in power for a little over two years, must be judged on its record. I believe that that record is dismal.

In that scant two years, this administration has squandered a large projected surplus of some \$5.6 trillion over the next decade and taken us to projected deficits as far as the eye can see. This administration's domestic policy has put many of our states in dire financial condition, under funding scores of essential programmes for our people. This administration has fostered policies which have slowed economic growth. This administration has ignored urgent matters such as the crisis in health care for our elderly. This administration has been slow to provide adequate funding for homeland security. This administration has been reluctant to better protect our long and porous borders.

In foreign policy, this administration has failed to find Osama Bin Laden. In fact, just yesterday we heard from him again marshaling his forces and urging them to kill. This administration has split traditional alliances, possibly crippling, for all time, international order-keeping

entities like the United Nations and NATO. This administration has called into question the traditional worldwide perception of the United States as well-intentioned, peacekeeper.

This administration has turned the patient art of diplomacy into threats, labeling, and name calling of the sort that reflects quite poorly on the intelligence and sensitivity of our leaders, and which will have consequences for years to come.

Calling heads of state pygmies, labeling whole countries as evil, denigrating powerful European allies as irrelevant -- these types of crude insensibilities can do our great nation no good. We may have massive military might, but we cannot fight a global war on terrorism alone. We need the cooperation and friendship of our time-honoured allies as well as the newer found friends whom we can attract with our wealth. Our awesome military machine will do us little good if we suffer another devastating attack on our homeland which severely damages our economy.

The war in Afghanistan has cost us \$37 billion so far, yet there is evidence that terrorism may already be starting to regain its hold in that region. We have not found Bin Laden, and unless we secure the peace in Afghanistan, the dark dens of terrorism may yet again flourish in that remote and devastated land.

Pakistan as well is at risk of destabilising forces. This administration has not finished the first war against terrorism and yet it is eager to embark on another conflict with perils much greater than those in Afghanistan.

And yet we hear little about the aftermath of war in Iraq. In the absence of plans, speculation abroad is rife. Will we seize Iraq's oil fields, becoming an occupying power which controls the price and supply of that nation's oil for the foreseeable future? To whom do we propose to hand the reins of power after Saddam Hussein?

Will our war inflame the Muslim world resulting in devastating attacks on Israel? Will Israel retaliate with its own nuclear arsenal? Could a disruption of the world's oil supply lead to a world-wide recession? Has our senselessly bellicose language and our callous disregard of the interests and opinions of other nations

increased the global race to join the nuclear club and made proliferation an even more lucrative practice for nations which need the same?

In only the space of two short years this reckless and arrogant administration has initiated policies which may reap disastrous consequences for years.

One can understand the anger and shock of any President after the savage attacks of Sept. 11. One can appreciate the frustration of having only a shadow to chase and an amorphous, fleeting enemy on which it is nearly impossible to exact retribution. But to turn one's frustration and anger into the kind of extremely destabilising and dangerous foreign policy debacle that the world is currently witnessing is inexcusable from any administration charged with the awesome power and responsibility of guiding the destiny of the greatest superpower on the planet.

Frankly many of the pronouncements made by this administration are outrageous. There is no other word. Yet this chamber is hauntingly silent. On what is possibly the eve of horrific infliction of death and destruction on the population of the nation of Iraq -- a population, I might add, of which over 50 percent is under age 15 -- this chamber is silent. On what is possibly only days before we send thousands of our own citizens to face unimaginable horrors of chemical and biological warfare -- this chamber is silent.

We are truly "sleepwalking through history." In my heart of hearts I pray that this great nation and its good and trusting citizens are not in for a rudest of awakenings. To engage in war is always to pick a wild card. And war must always be a last resort, not a first choice.

I truly must question the judgement of any President who can say that a massive unprovoked military attack on a nation, which is over 50 percent children is "in the highest moral traditions of our country." This war is not necessary at this time.

Our challenge is to now find a graceful way out of a box of our own making. Perhaps there is still a way if we allow more time.

Robert Byrd is US Democrat Senator. The article is based on his Senate Floor Speech, Feb 12, 2003.