

## CEC dragged into controversy

Dignity of the high office should not be trifled with

WE have observed with concern a clear tendency towards embarrassing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) in the Parliament through points of order raised by two ruling party members. Some comments allegedly made by the CEC triggered the unfortunate episode last week. The CEC has categorically denied ever making any comments on either mid-term election or insinuated any MP. Two members of parliament belonging to the ruling party tried to make a big issue out of some newspaper reports and provoked a debate inside the House. There was even talk of planning to change the constitution in order to remove the CEC.

Doesn't it smack of the same undemocratic attitude the ruling party had displayed while removing former President Dr B Choudhury? The sheer idea of removing the CEC who holds one of the highest statutory posts in the country without verifying the facts can only be explained away as a reflection of arrogance on the part of a government having a two-thirds majority. We were shocked that no effort was made by the Speaker or anybody else from the government to check facts with the CEC before the former allowed a discourse on the subject. In specific terms, the CEC was not asked whether the comments attributed to him in some reports were correct or not. On the contrary, the Speaker made suggestions to the effect that the matter would need to be referred to the President who might consider forming a judicial council to initiate action against the CEC.

Tension was brewing between the CEC and the government ever since the Union Parishad election began over the issue of deploying army at the polling centres which the former had raised. Now unfortunately it seems to have had a most unsavoury fall-out. So what conclusion should we draw in the light of all these developments? If someone as highly ranked as the CEC has a difference of opinion with the government, is there no other way but to seek his removal? Even if it means changing the constitution? That we can't accept.

However, in an earlier editorial on the CEC's comments on 'the futility of elections' in a particular context, we had said that he seemed to be quick with his comments on serious questions. In our sensitive political context, he better err on the side of caution and be more circumspect. But now that the CEC has clarified his position, we think the matter should be put to rest.

## Train accidents

Eliminate the risk factors

THE frequency of train accidents in the country has increased appreciably over the last decade. Obviously, the railway authorities would not find it easy to explain how as many as 3,500 accidents could occur in ten years.

Abysmally poor track conditions, mechanical faults and defective coaches and goods wagons have been identified as the main causes behind accidents. So, it is maintenance failure of a very elementary kind that led to loss of lives and property.

The extent of poor management of the railway is appalling. Here are some examples: renovation work of 2900 kilometres of railway track could not be undertaken owing to fund shortage and engines could not be repaired for the same reason. But why should maintenance receive such low priority knowing full well that by operating trains with faulty engines and coaches on worn-out tracks lives of so many citizens have been lost or endangered?

The railway has been on a downhill course for a long time. The facilities that passengers get over most of the system have nothing to do with minimum comfort. As if that was not enough, frequent accidents put safety of train journeys under clouds.

The railway managers should start working on eliminating the risk factors and providing the minimum facilities that passengers look for. That is necessary if the railway wants to regain its competitiveness. Obviously, the organisation cannot serve its purpose if it fails to meet even the maintenance costs.

A closer study of the way the railway service has declined might lead one to believe that it has been destroyed systematically to prop up the motorised mode of transport. However, we strongly believe that the two modes of transport should complement each other and play their due role in the expansion of the communication network. Since the railway has fallen behind it needs to be brought forward with some special material and technical support.

## Why is a war in Iraq inevitable?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN as an anxious world panicked by an impending war in Iraq holds its collective breath the US and its staunchest ally, Britain, are producing casus belli, one after another, to undertake it before its momentum is lost and the war hysteria so far built up peters out. Undaunted by the massive anti-war marches the world over the immune system of the US and British governments have proved to be rather more robust than any one could anticipate. Not for a moment the Bush Administration has shifted from its old refrain of how dreadful the threat is from Iraq's 'possession' of WMD and the unavailability of its moral duty to preempt that threat. Even if an US offer of \$6bn could not secure a consent for its troops deployment in Turkey to facilitate attack against Iraq, the US giant B-52 bombers are already on their way to the Gulf -- a clear indication that the war is about to start. While a huge war machine is already in place, in and around the region, the fresh contingent of troops and consignments of equipment are also being dispatched. A blue print of post-Saddam Iraq is drawn up and Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for the purpose, is at work the way he also handled the squabbling Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Senior American officials have indicated that they are thinking of full scale military attack in the coming weeks if possi-

ble, with a UN authorisation -- or even without it, in case the second resolution is scuttled by one of the veto-wielding countries.

America is today the world's quint essential power. No nation has ever risen taller than her in history. For decades to come no state is likely to combine the resources, geography and growth rate necessary to mount a hegemonic challenge on such a scale.

Now as the Anglo-American special forces are learnt to have entered Iraq and their aircraft started bombing the no-fly zones -- presumably as a prelude to full blown war, the world is seized with a series of unanswered questions. Why, when the most urgent threat arising from illegal weapon of mass destruction is the nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, is the US government ignoring it and concentrating on Iraq? Why

markets can be found, the price of that product falls and profits collapse. The US is now suffering from surpluses of commodities, manufactured products, manufacturing capacity and money. It is also faced with a surplus of labour; yet the two surpluses cannot be profitably matched. It has tried every available means of solving this problem which has been developing in the US since 1973 and, by doing so, maintaining its global dominance.

these new economies also stopped absorbing surplus capital and started to export it. At the same time the investments of previous decade started to pay off, producing new surpluses. The crisis of 1973 began with a world wide collapse of property markets.

The US urgently deployed two blunt solutions to the emerging problem. The first was the shift from the domination of global

peasant farmers, public assets were taken from the citizens through privatisation and intellectual property was seized from every one through the patenting of information, human genes and plant varieties. In all these cases, the new territories were created into which capital could expand and in which surpluses could be absorbed. Both the solutions are failing now.

Because, the east Asian countries whose economies were destroyed by the IMF have recovered and are producing vast capital surpluses of their own once again. The US corporations are now encountering massive public resistance as they seek to expand their opportunities through dispossession. The only alternative solution is a new 'New Deal' which seems to be blocked by the US' political class. The only new spending it will permit is military spending. So, all that remains is war and an imperial control. Invading Iraq offers the US three additional means of off-loading capital while maintaining its global dominance. First is the creation of new geographical space for economic expansion. The second is what some people call "military Keynesianism" -- say, \$200bn ploughed into the war economy -- to boost the investment climate in sagging US economy. The third is the ability to control the economies of other nations by controlling the supply of oil.

It is not surprising that right-wingers in both the US and Britain have suddenly decided without any compunction that empire isn't such a dirty word after all, and that the barbarian hordes of other nations can be at the benign disposal of new emperor. So far as Iraq is particularly concerned the simple economic formula is: blood is a renewable resource; oil is not.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

## PERSPECTIVES

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The most important practical consequence of unipolarity of the US is notable for its absence: the absence of hegemonic rivalry. No state in modern history of international politics has come anywhere close to the US' military predominance. And she acquires this military pre-eminence only with 3.5 per cent of its GDP. America's economic dominance surpasses that of any great power in modern history. The US economy is currently twice as large as its closest rival, Japan. California's economy alone has risen to become fifth largest in the world, ahead of France and just behind Britain. The US has no rival in any critical dimension of power. It is aptly said that if today's American primacy does not constitute unipolarity, nothing ever will. It is preposterous to believe that this power can be threatened from any quarter of the globe -- let alone the question of Iraq already devastated by the first Gulf war and a draconian sanction of a decade thereafter.

has bombing of Iraq, rather than feeding of hungry, providing clean water and preventing disease, become the world's most urgent humanitarian concern? Why, if it believes human rights are so important, is it funding the oppression of the Palestinians, among others?

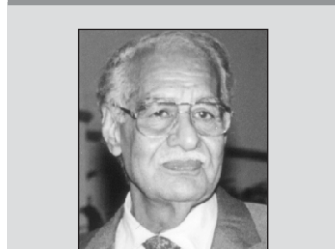
Professor David Harvey, one of the world's most distinguished geographers, has provided what may be the most authentic explanation of the US government's resolve to go to war. In a series of packed lectures in Oxford he suggested that the American determination for war in Iraq has little to do with Iraq, less to do with WMD and nothing to do with helping the oppressed. The underlying problem the US confronts to day is one which periodically afflicts big powers with successful economies: the over-accumulation of capital. Excessive production of any goods -- be it cars, shoes or bananas -- means that unless new

The only remaining viable option is war.

The similar crisis cropped up in the US also earlier -- in early 1930s -- when the US government addressed the problems of excess capital and labour through the New Deal. Its vast investments in infrastructure, education and social spending mopped up surplus money, created new markets for manufacturing and brought hundreds of thousands back into work. In 1941 it used military spending to the same effect. After the war its massive spending in Europe and Japan permitted the US to off load its surplus cash, while building new markets. During the same period it spent lavishly on infrastructure at home and developing some of the relatively backward states. The strategy worked well till early 1970s. By then as the German and Japanese economies developed, the US was no longer able to maintain dominance over production. As they grew,

production to the domination of global finance. The US treasury, working with the IMF began to engineer new opportunities in developing countries for US' commercial banks. The IMF started to insist that the countries receiving its help should liberalise their capital market. This permitted the speculators on Wall Street to enter and, in many cases, raid their economies. The financial crises the speculators caused forced the devaluation of those countries' assets. This had two beneficial impacts for the US' economy. Through the collapse of banks and manufacturers in Latin America and East Asia, surplus capital was destroyed. The bankrupt companies in those countries could then be bought by US corporations at throw away prices, creating new space into which American capital could expand. The second solution was what Professor Harvey called "accumulation through dispossession" -- a polite term for daylight robbery. Land was snatched from

## Sri Lanka: Hopes and fears



KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

IT was an inspiring sight in the midst of festivities at Colombo a few days ago. All were there the Prime Minister, leaders from the opposition parties, academicians, artists and others, resolving how to change the one-year-old ceasefire between the government and the LTTE into a peace settlement. I found the same sentiment all over, with prayers on many lips.

A country, which has been beleaguered by hostilities for more than a decade, has begun to enjoy an atmosphere where people can hear the chiming of bells from the temples and the churches. There has not been a single victim of violence in the last 12 months while the toll had run into thousands earlier. Both the security forces and the militant LTTE have fought for supremacy against each other for years. Earlier, fear stalked the land. I remember how my car was stopped and searched two years ago at every half-a-kilometre from the airport to the hotel. This time not even a single soldier was on the road even at midnight. Barricades, iron gates, check posts have all disappeared to the relief of the people.

Yet I have returned with a feeling

that all is not well. The future is still uncertain. Peace is not the absence of hostilities alone. It is an environment of trust and faith; it is an understanding that all those engaged in conflict have embarked on the path of conciliation. The Sinhalese, who rule Sri Lanka, feel it is too good to last. They suspect that the LTTE has something up its sleeve, which may not allow the peace process to become a settlement. There is a credibility gap.

to suggest that the process is moving even by inches. True, it takes time to create an administrative structure that will give confidence to the LTTE to swap its dream of Eelam, a sovereign state, for an autonomous status within Sri Lanka. But even a preliminary discussion on a federal concept has not yet begun, leave alone disarmament of the LTTE. Peiris concedes that some movement towards demilitarisation will

take place by the Sinhalese of the federal model is a long step forward. A few years ago they were so hostile to the federal system that they saw in it the seeds of their country's disintegration.

The LTTE has done very little to allay the fears of the Sinhalese. It could have made some gesture. An opportunity arose in Jaffna where the government had rebuilt the library building it had destroyed in

at the Trincomalee port. The LTTE controls the forests skirting its territory. It tried to occupy part of the beach but the Sinhalese army rebuffed the LTTE's advance. Following the same principle, Colombo has intercepted a ship carrying illicit arms to the LTTE territory.

The plus point in this is that unlike in the past, the LTTE has made no fuss and accepted what

efforts to improve the conditions of Tamils in the LTTE territory. The Sinhalese government is said to have requested India to attend the meeting of donors at Tokyo later this month. Japan, to New Delhi's dislike, has agreed to give most of the aid. New Delhi's annoyance with the LTTE is not only over its plan to amass arms but also over the venom which its papers pour against India. The LTTE abuses New Delhi but not the Tamils. It has a soft spot for former chief minister Karunanidhi whom it wants to play the role of a peacemaker. But he washed his hand of the matter when the LTTE assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. Still the role of India is important, not because of the LTTE but because of Sri Lanka, a key neighbour. Peiris says: "We understand New Delhi's compulsions after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination but we want it to play its role." New Delhi says that it is in touch with Norway which is brokering peace. Its non-participation is understandable because it burnt its fingers when it sent its forces to help the Sri Lankan government some 15 years ago to oust the LTTE.

Whatever New Delhi's justification to stay distant, it is of no relevance to the situation prevailing in Sri Lanka. Already an international forum, including the US, has come into being. It is meeting regularly. Both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE participate in it. In fact the LTTE, to which New Delhi objects, has already earned legitimacy. India has given Norway the green light to go ahead. But now when the process is on, it is not politics to stay away.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Whatever New Delhi's justification to stay distant, it is of no relevance to the situation prevailing in Sri Lanka. Already an international forum, including the US, has come into being. It is meeting regularly. Both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE participate in it. In fact the LTTE, to which New Delhi objects, has already earned legitimacy. India has given Norway the green light to go ahead. But now when the process is on, it is not politics to stay away.

The Ranil Wickremesinghe government, however, dismisses such fears. As Chief Peace Negotiator and Minister G L Pieris says: "It takes time for a military organisation to change itself into a political party. This should be viewed as a process. Nowhere in the world has this been smooth."

The government believes that the LTTE is tired and wants peace for economic development, as it cannot sustain war. But this can be interpreted differently: it has accepted a ceasefire to use the respite to consolidate itself. The earlier ceasefires seem to confirm this. At a meeting at Oslo, the LTTE spokesman said that they would accept a status within Sri Lanka. But there is nothing on the ground

indicate the progress towards a settlement. He is conscious of the fact that the Sinhalese are getting restive. What worries him and his government is the attitude of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). She says she is all for a peace process. But she is waiting for any wrong move to pounce upon the Prime Minister and his United National Party that won the elections on the peace plank. None has yet spelt out the federal structure, neither the LTTE nor the government. But Peiris believes that the model will have to take into account "the cultures and traditions of the country." What concrete shape it will take is difficult to say. I think that the very accep-

the early eighties. Colombo could not open the library even though Jaffna is under its control. The LTTE came in the way, probably to underline its supremacy in the north. Even the unanimous resignation by the local municipal council in protest has made no difference to the LTTE. The LTTE has not stopped the recruitment of children to its military wing, though human rights organisations and some western newspapers have bemoaned it. The brainwashing of the youth by the LTTE and the extortion of money from the Tamils in the north have continued even after the ceasefire. Still Colombo has not allowed the LTTE to occupy more land. The government guards the sea and the beach

the Sinhalese army is doing to enforce the ceasefire. The LTTE territory is still beyond the control of Colombo. But the government is in no hurry. According to Peiris, matters like division of power, of the police, alienation of state land and distribution of foreign aid "need a lot of deliberation."

The government's strategy is to help the LTTE economically. Its territory, by all accounts, is poorer than the areas in eastern UP and interior Orissa and Bihar. Colombo believes that if people in the LTTE territory begin to improve their living conditions during the ceasefire, they will not allow the return of violence to disturb the rhythm of their life. Colombo expects New Delhi to join the

## OPINION

## CEC's foresight and the hindsight

MAHMUD ZAMAN

FROM the hindsight we can now say that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) was right to ask for the deployment of Army to maintain law and order situation during Union Parishad (UP) elections which began from January 25. More than 45 people have so far been killed. Several thousand people were injured during the period, some of them very badly, according to press reports. The death toll is much higher than 1997 when 31 people were killed. However, in absence of a centralised tally of the deaths, the figure varies from newspaper to newspaper. But even if we accept the most conservative figure it is still very high. Why should we let these people die, in CEC's word, in a "more or less futile

exercise?" Could we save a single death by taking a stringent security measures or by deploying the Army?

Since the beginning of the election procedure the government and the CEC were locked in a tug of war. First the Election Commission announced the election date with which the government disagreed and asked for a deferral of at least three months because the authorities were unable to provide logistic supports to the EC at that time. After a brief stand-off there was a compromise and the EC shifted the election date for three weeks from its original plan. Then there were war of words and exchange of letters between the government and the CEC over the deployment of Army. According to CEC "it is a constitutional obligation of the government to provide all kinds of support it needed to

conduct the election smoothly."

Until the last minute the CEC had believed that the government would deploy Army in the elections. He had also sensed "very bad omen" at the government's failure to comply with his request for deploying the Army. He told the field-level election officials at a pre-election briefing meeting that his request for the deployment of the army had not been entertained. At the same meeting secretary to the local government division, AYBI Siddiqui and inspector general of police Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury told the government line and said that the law and order situation had improved enough to hold the elections without any security concern. "There is nothing to worry about," quoted by the Daily Star as said by the IGP.

From the government side, Prime Minister's political secretary

Haris Chowdhury was very vocal against the CEC's demand for deployment of Army. He ruled out the CEC's demand for army deployment by saying that there was no precedence of army deployment in the UP elections and the law and order situation improved a lot after a long anti-crime operations by the joint forces. He was right in his argument because the rate of crime had dropped much after two and a half months of army 'operation clean heart.' He also said that the elections should be a festive occasion so that the voters can go to the polling stations without any fear of violence. That the army deployment might dampen that festive mood.

On the other hand the CEC's circumspection and insistence for army deployment now proved to be right after so many deaths in election violence. He also said that

the elections would not be fair if the security and safety of some 62 million voters were not ensured. After all this is the biggest local government election exercise in the country where some 200,000 candidates are contesting in 4, 228 UPs.

The tug of war began at a time when the government was contemplating an end to the 'operation clean heart.' Could it be a prudent decision for the government to continue the operation for another couple of weeks? Or was it the wrong time to withdraw the joint forces to experiment whether the regular forces could hold out the achievement obtained by the operation? Critics of the government suggested that the government took the decision of withdrawing the army deliberately to enable the ruling party activists to operate freely in the UP elections.

According to them a large number of BNP activists were arrested and many more went on hiding during the operation. The ruling party wanted them to come to the scene to help out the pro-government candidates winning the elections to strengthen their power base at the Union level. Security questions became secondary to the government resulting into the present spate of violence, the critics claimed.

When the election began the CEC was not consistent in his remarks regarding the elections. His voice was tuned with the government when just after five days of polling, he said that the elections were being held in 'festive mood'. But on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February he termed the whole elections process "more or less a futile exercise." He changed his mind once again and said that it would not be wise to

evaluate an ongoing election. He also refuted his previous comment by saying that his previous comment was based on press reports and observers' assessment. Which point should the public believe?

On the other hand, government complacency about the law and order situation is proved to be wrong. We can now also say from the hindsight that the time was not right to withdraw the joint forces. The government compliance with the CEC's request might have averted violence and deaths. The 2003 UP elections also brought the relationship between the government and the CEC to a new low as the government was reportedly contemplating removing the CEC by a constitutional amendment. The question of violation of constitution was also raised since the government did not comply with the request from the EC.

One argument was made about the custodial deaths during the 'operation clean heart' that more people might have died in the hands of criminals during the period if there were no such anti-crime operation. The argument supports the joint forces indemnity ordinance and condones unnatural deaths in the hands of law enforcing agencies. This is wrong premise when someone's life is concerned. Similarly the authorities apparently did not take the question of people's lives very seriously during the election.

But we must feel morally bankrupt if we try to justify even a single unnatural or violent death.

Mahmud Zaman is a resident of Gulshan, Dhaka