

Bomb blast inquiry report

Neutral observation should help investigation

THIS is for the first time that a judicial commission report on any bomb blast with some non-partisan conclusions drawn has been submitted to the government. Justice Sultan Hossain Khan, head of the one-member commission constituted to probe the Mymensingh cinema hall bombing mayhem of December 7 last year has made an important observation: *no major political party was involved in the blasts.*

The report fell short of pinpointing any group responsible for it, which of course, is a matter for further investigation to unearth.

The government's promptitude in instituting the inquiry and the objectivity and neutrality with which the head of the commission performed his task have been laudable. The incidents are suspected to be the work of extremist groups 'controlled by outside forces' - people with one agenda which is to cripple the economy, upset political unity and create anarchy'. We believe this is something to go on with. Some suspicion has also been aired that 'the bombs might be of Indian origin', meaning these could have been smuggled into the country. So, there is a pointer to a channel or conduit through which the bombs could have come into the country. All this calls for a full-fledged inquiry to follow up on the commission's findings. Some direction has been given by the report. We urge the government to carry forward the investigation with the same promptitude and earnestness with which they had instituted the inquiry in the first place.

The tendency towards scapegoating leads to a number of distortions: real culprits go scot free, innocent people are harassed, process of investigation is derailed and nation's image suffers. The moral of the commission's report, as we read it, is, the government should avoid knee-jerk reactions.

We are greatly relieved by the fact that the inquiry commission has found nothing to suggest that any major political party had a hand in the bombing incidents. Now, the search for truth must go on untainted by any political colour.

Launch capsizes

Passenger safety still a far cry

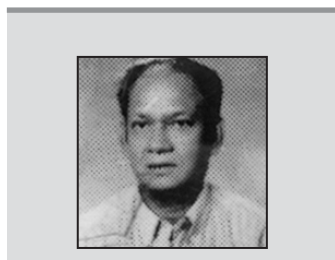
THE disastrous launch accident near Bholra was reportedly caused by a nor'wester. Apparently, no human error or gross violation of navigation rules was responsible for the tragedy. It is obvious that the launch was caught in a strong wind and it had virtually little chance of surviving. That brings us to the question of how effective or useful the weather forecast system is.

The launch operators need to have access to more specific information about weather as they undertake rather perilous journeys along the big rivers, particularly in the southern region. Weather forecasting has to be more localised and target-oriented to enable the river vessels to be aware of an impending danger. Since launch mishaps are taking place far too frequently, the weather experts should evolve ways and means of disseminating more accurate and reliable information, with emphasis on the likely changes of weather condition in the main channels of navigation. The vessels must also be equipped with modern communication devices in order to avert disasters.

But the truth remains that river vessels regularly violate navigation rules. It is not known how many accidents occurred owing to over-loading and faulty designs of launches, but there is no doubt that the number would be appallingly high. However, the authorities concerned have not yet succeeded in enforcing the navigation rules. Regrettably, neither the law enforcers nor the launch operators attach any importance to the safety of passengers. Whenever an accident takes place, the high-ups in the government usually issue some directives with a view to improving the situation. Probe committees are also formed, but no perceptible improvement takes places.

Even if it is argued that nor'westers and storms can strike suddenly, we cannot overlook the fact that nor'westers do not occur round the year. River vessels, therefore, should be doubly cautious during the months of March and April when they remain vulnerable to such natural calamities. But the latest launch capsizing does not suggest that the launch operators had at all been prepared for the hazard.

Change of guard in Palestine?



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THERE is apparently a change of guard at the top in Palestine. Mahmoud Abbas, a Deputy to the Chairman of Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat has been inducted as Prime Minister of the new administration of Palestine. If it is not a cosmetic change, it can have far reaching consequences.

For more than two decades Yasser Arafat, with his Keffiyeh, has been the symbol of Palestine on the world stage. Arab world, without an exception practices what is known as 'Reis' (Chief). In other words the society is tribal in nature and does not have any resemblance with what goes by the definition of modern democracy. It does not mean that the Arab world does not have a mechanism for electing their leaders. Indeed the Arab society is very egalitarian.

Yasser Arafat has been no exception. He has some representative institutions but they cannot be compared with the institutions, which have become universal. It has, therefore, not been an easy task to saddle Arafat, with his deputy in power sharing at the top. The so called 'democratisation' of Palestine, has taken place with massive pressure from the outside.

Indeed Palestinians have shown, if anything, affection for their leader Chairman Arafat.

For half a century the world has been saddled with the Palestinian conflict and there is no end in sight. The world has been deeply involved in trying to find a solution to this conflict. To begin with Palestine has been for long been a UN baby and continues to be so to this day. Then under the aegis of the UN the two superpowers, USA and the former Soviet Union

regime of two Democrat Presidents of the US -- namely President Carter in 1979 and President Clinton in the nineties. In 1979 the epoch making Camp David Accord was signed through which Sinai was returned by Israel to Egypt and in return full diplomatic relations were established between the Jewish state and the most important Arab country. Then followed 12 years of Republican Presidency, which were barren years as far as progress in the field of negotiations

the remaining portion, the capital of Palestine, the yet unborn state. Bill Clinton's great success lay in the fact that the US, which fathered Israel and has been accused of a pro-Israel tilt, managed to win the trust and confidence of the Arabs. Indeed his White House doors were wide open for Yasser Arafat. The counterpart of Arafat was Ehud Barak, the Israeli Prime Minister, who had won elections by promising peace to his people sick and tired of continuous conflict.

All cost. The White House doors have remained shut for Arafat and President Bush has gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid contact with the Palestinian leader. Thus the brilliant even handed policy of Clinton towards the Arabs and Israelis lay buried under the rubble of gunfire of the Israelis. Also lies buried the Peace Process on which Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak and most importantly, Bill Clinton laid so much store.

What next? In the long Arab-

flict, needs a strong foreign hand for a solution. As we have noted before many efforts have been made. EU, which finds itself in close proximity to the region, has made some tentative moves. Yet EU lacks the kind of centralised decision making mechanism in order to move the Peace Process forward. Fortunately EU appears to project a kind of strength not seen before. On the burning question of military strike against Iraq by the US-British coalition, EU, led by France and Germany have taken a strong principled stand. As the world anxiously waits 'denouement' of the crisis shaking the world, there can be no doubt that the stake is if the world will be led by a single superpower namely the US or not.

Ariel Sharon has goaded President George W. Bush to ditch Yasser Arafat much like Bush would want President Saddam Hussein of Iraq to go away. Ditching Arafat may prove to be the most unwise decision of hawk Sharon. Arafat had staked everything for a peaceful settlement of their conflict. The ground reality is that with the arrival of a new prime minister of Palestine, no substantial change can be expected and we can anticipate greater degree of violence. With the resigning of the office of honest broker by US, the chances of the violence snowballing into a larger conflict cannot be ruled out.

With the taking over the reins of power by Ariel Sharon in Israel and silencing of the voice of Yasser Arafat and reducing of the US role as impotent, it is a bleak picture indeed. There is really no room for optimism.

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THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

Ariel Sharon has goaded President George W. Bush to ditch Yasser Arafat much like Bush would want President Saddam Hussein of Iraq to go away. Ditching Arafat may prove to be the most unwise decision of hawk Sharon. Arafat had staked everything for a peaceful settlement of their conflict. The ground reality is that with the arrival of a new prime minister of Palestine, no substantial change can be expected and we can anticipate greater degree of violence.

attempted for many years to find a solution. Israel has time and again attempted to solve unilaterally the problem in her favour by force. Thus we have seen the expansion of Israel in the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. Through the war of 1967 Israel conquered vast Sinai desert of Egypt, Golan Heights of Syria, West Bank of Palestine, and in later years South Lebanon. In 1973 war Israel saw a reversal of her fortune as Egypt reconquered Sinai and Israeli army was in full flight. It was thanks to the US massive intervention by force that Israel was saved.

Since 1973 the Arab-Israeli conflict has entered a new phase. The US, who is the only protector of Israel, has taken a direct hand in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict. There has been some progress and that has happened during the

between the Arabs and Israel were concerned.

Nineties saw the advent of a youthful, dynamic President Bill Clinton. He devoted eight years of Presidency virtually entirely to finding a solution to the Palestinian question, which is the heart of the Middle East conflict. As intricate negotiations progressed Clinton realised that he had to attack the heart of the problem, namely Jerusalem. History, religion and superstition are all mixed up around that small place. Israel has declared Jerusalem as its 'eternal capital'; for Islam it is the first 'qibla' before the Holy Qaaba, and for Christians, the birthplace of their religion. The obvious solution to the issue is a fair division of Jerusalem between Israel, who has made part of the city its capital and

The failure of the effort must be laid at the door of the two leaders -- Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak. They missed a historical opportunity to bury the hatchet and write a fresh new page for the entire region, rich in spiritual values.

The change of guard at the White House has heralded unmitigated disaster for the Palestinians and the Israelis. In Israel Ehud Barak has been replaced by the self-proclaimed hawk Ariel Sharon. He has no time for the Peace Process. He believes in strong arm tactics and blood is freely flowing throughout Palestine. His tanks are rolling through the West Bank and Gaza and letting loose an orgy of fire and blood. He has persuaded President Bush that Arafat is a dangerous terrorist and his company has to be shunned at

Israeli conflict just about everything has been tried. Through active US help Israel managed to extend her frontiers. In 1973 she realised that expansion through force at the expense of Arab territory was not a viable option. US, the patron of Israel, brought her back to the negotiating table. Since then US has realised that she alone can make Israel see reason. During the time of President Jimmy Carter and more so during President Bill Clinton, the US succeeded in projecting an even handed image. This greatly strengthened the hand of the 'doves' in Israel. We have to acknowledge the fact that it is Israel, which illegally occupies Arab lands and it is she, who has to give Palestine has nothing to give to Israel.

The complex Arab-Israeli con-

It's oil that matters

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

THE morning of October 6 of 1973 was the morning of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for the Jews. The synagogues were filled with worshippers. Suddenly, wailing sirens, alerting the populace to the outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war in twenty years shattered the quiet of the atmosphere that enveloped them. The western news media quickly reported that Egypt and Syria had simultaneously launched a massive invasion across the Suez canal and on Golan Heights. The inside story was however different. Media report indicated that President Nixon's assistant John Ehrlicman has asked the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to plan a war against the Arabs. Thus ensued the three weeks of bloody fighting. The United Nations later arranged a cease fire. But it was not just another bitter chapter in the story of unresolved confrontation in the Middle East, it actually turned into an international energy war, as designed by the United States. Thirty years later on 7th March 2003, CNN reported that president Bush said, 'We really don't need anybody's permission to declare war against Iraq.' Supporting the war, Mr Blair British Prime Minister said, 'attack on Iraq is not for oil.'

Lest we forget -- in 1953 both British and American intelligence worked very hard to undermine an elected popular government which was tacitly intending for obvious reason to take control of the oil facilities and interests in Iran for the benefit of Iranians. The British and American governments did not like the idea. They mounted a secret operation to overthrow the great nationalist Prime Minister Dr Mossadegh, as London and Washington feared the communists would acquire Iran's vast oil reserves. It is now widely known how the CIA organised and directed the 1953 coup that overthrew Mossadegh and reinstalled emperor Shah Mohammed Reza

Pahlavi, then in exile, on the throne. As part of the plan, the international oil companies boycotted the sale of Iranian oil. Subsequently, CIA took control of the entire situation. The British lost their oil monopoly, and an international consortium of American, British, French and Dutch oil companies signed a 40 year pact with the Shah for Iran's oil. The Americans managed forty per cent of the share in the consortium.

The US friendly government of Shah maintained a repressive and corrupt regime through SAVAK, and accommodated Anglo-American oil interests sacrificing

hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who died and whose infrastructure was destroyed. The Shah's regime was overthrown in 1979 by a wave of popular discontent and he did not even get a place to die in the United States. Suddenly, Iran was perceived to be beyond western control. The British-American intelligence thought that the solution to the problem was to arm Saddam Hussein in neighbouring Iraq with whom Iran had a long running territorial dispute over access to the Gulf. The long drawn war left both countries economically drained, but with Iraq in the ascendant by the courtesy of US, which has now been reversed again by the courtesy of US.

In 1963, the Baath party (a secular political party) of Iraq was elected as friendly to the west. In 1978, Saddam Hussein took over as leader of the party and the country. With Iran almost ruined, demoralised and effectively out of action for the time being after the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq was now showing every sign of being a politically independent military power in the region. Despite many shortcom-

ings, most Iraqi citizens enjoyed high standards of health care and education with a well developed infrastructure, which has severely disrupted after the Gulf war, in 1991. The mass bombing on Iraq, carried out largely with conventional bombs as opposed to the laser guided type, which could amount for only a small percentage of the massacre, killed thousands of innocent civilians including children and old people. Iraq was in ruins and disease and malnutrition rapidly became widespread. Depleted uranium in the weapons used by Britain and the US contaminated the desert environment.

Cancer, leukemia and horrific birth defects have since become widespread. Is the US government under Bush planning a similar operation, if not worse in the coming days? Isn't that highly immoral? In 1991, the objectives of crippling an independent minded developing country, not just the removal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait, has succeeded brilliantly. US oil companies based in Texas and the Bush family had large stakes. They made a financial killing from the clean up of oil wells and reconstruction work. Today, Kuwait's oil revenue is mostly eaten up by the Americans. The war has not started, but CNN reported on 7th March that Helliburton, an obscure oil company, is prepared to assist in extinguishing fire in oil wells in Iraq. So, it is now the turn of Vice-president Dick Cheney to make money because he was (perhaps still is) the President of Helliburton. It's oil that matters!

Kuwait never existed prior to 1921. It had always been part of Basra province in the ottoman

Empire. When Iraq attained statehood following the breakup of the empire, this territory, with its rich oil fields and vital access to the sea, was severed from it and set up as a separate state of Kuwait after the end of World War-II. The Iraqis were enthused to grab Kuwait in hours. But the Iraq claim was all on a sudden publicly opposed by the US and Britain, more than the Kuwaitis'. This is how the US-British philosophy works. Very interesting though, the most recent Dr Hans Blix report presented to the UN on 7th March, 2003 simply gave a mix verdict that widens rift among major powers. Reuters,

hundred thousand well equipped US troops in the region amid hysterical claim that Iraq's intent on invading Saudi Arabia must be thwarted. The then President Bush (senior) announced in 1991 that there would be no negotiations. This helped to make the desired war inevitable. In 2003, it is almost the same story. With or without UN approval United States will attack Baghdad. For accomplishing the military objectives, the military build up in the first week of March 2003 is as high as two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. Troops have already moved into the no-fly zone. The offensive under Desert

Storm-II record is horrific -- over 1.2 million children have died of embargo related consequences between 1990 and 1998. By late 1998, the terrible suffering of the Iraqi people became known and could no longer be ignored. Calls to end sanctions got louder. The so-called civilised US response was to allow a small increase in oil export to provide revenue for some extra food imports, perhaps little more than a public relation exercise to convert world opinion into thinking that the British and American governments had the humanitarian interests of the Iraqi people at heart. Now, they have lost whatever humanitarian considerations they had.

The media informed in the recent weeks that most weapons were destroyed, the rest are being done now under UN inspectors' supervision. But Bush and his crony Blair are saying that Saddam still has huge stockpile of 'weapons of mass destruction' and nothing was done in the past decade to demolish them. They are even saying that Iraq has enough biological and chemical weapons to wipe out the world twice over! Latest Blix report denies those allegations. If they at all exist, they were supplied by the US and Britain before the invasion of Kuwait. Israel has weapons of mass destruction many times over including atom bombs, and has flouted UN resolutions for years with impunity, making most of the Middle East countries feel threatened. Now the US and British diplomacy is engaged in arm twisting some Security Council members to support the US and also to drum up support for military action, with no attempts to talk to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. The UN agreement brokered by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan only served to postpone military action, but never to stop it altogether.

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America getting isolated as anti-war movement gains larger ground

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

US Senator Edward Kennedy, who is known as a liberal voice in the US Congress, has accused President George Bush of 'dividing' America and the rest of the world on matters ranging from Iraq to civil rights, driving 'Americans and their allies apart'.

Tracing the US role from World War II through Cold War down to the Gulf War, Sen. Kennedy observed that America 'prevailed by building great coalitions for defence and democracy... Today we are far from that standard.' Kennedy lamented that America's that relationship with the peoples of Europe and other parts of the world 'is at or near the lowest point in a half-century.' What a bold and critical analysis of present day hawkish American leadership which is almost set to present itself before the world as 'ugly American.' They are definitely following, being almost intoxicated with power, the most destructive course of action both for America and the rest of the world. Thus America which was successful in building up a strong international coalition force to fight terrorism following 9/11 tragedy, now stands almost isolated from its former allies, for reasons best known to the US war-mongering leadership.

In hot soup?

In fact, this is for the third time in American history that America has gone into 'isolation' because of its own political follies. It is now in the hot soup of its own making. But there is difference in kind between the present isolation and the past two since the end of the World War I in 1918. While the earlier cases of isolation were rather 'voluntary', or 'self-imposed', the present one is imposed by the world opinion discarding its 'gung-ho' or 'jingoistic' policy towards Iraq.

Lest we have a glimpse of the past two occasions when America voluntarily stood isolated. History is a grand witness to tell us that since the end of the WWI in 1918 and the first two years into the WWII (1939-45), America was literally hiding its face from whatever was happening elsewhere away from home. Perhaps this strange US psyche developed because America as a country had never been a victim of bombing and shelling by any enemy aircraft as it was far from the actual theatre of war in Europe and Great Britain who had to bear the brunt.

First 'isolation'

After the Versailles Treaty was signed in 1918, at the dictates of the Allied powers, formally ending the WWI and bringing into existence the first world organisation, the League of Nations, the world heaved a sigh of relief. But soon the

evil shadows were getting larger and wider, just as it is now looming large on the horizon following the end of Cold War and the demise of the 'evil empire' of the Soviet Union. As some of the member countries started giving wrong interpretations of the League Mandate to suit their evil designs, as some are doing now with the UN Charter, the situation was going from bad to worse, turning the League into a 'European Club.' At this crucial moment when America should have played a vital role, then US President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, was feeling helpless, as the US Senate, dominated by the Republicans, refused to join the League of Nations -- not to uphold any pious principles, but just to satisfy some selfish ends, that is, to deal a 'mortal blow' to a Democrat President Wilson and his party as President took the leading part in preparing the principles for the establishment of the League. Commenting on this narrow policy of the Republicans, the well-known historian HG Wells, had said: 'Had America been part of the League of Nations for the next 20 years (that is, up to 1938), the world's history might have been different.' So the great historian exposes what tremendous damage the Republicans caused to world peace by their wrong narrow decision. (Is it not the same Republican Party holding the veins jeopardise world peace?)

Hence, at the first meeting of the League of Nations held in London in 1920, America was conspicuous by its absence, leaving the future of the world peace in wrong, rather raw, hands, till the breaking out of WWII in 1939.

As a consequence of this, Europe was gradually thrown into doldrums, with the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party to liberate economically devastated Germany from the clutches of the Allied powers. The Nazi appeared in full swing with its long victory march beginning in 1938 when it grabbed Austria.

Second 'isolation'

When Hitler, the all-powerful German leader, was overrunning one country after another in Europe, like from 1939 to 1941, the first two horrible years for Europe and Great Britain which had to bear the brunt of German Luftwaffe's hundreds of sorties of devastating air attacks, America was in deep slumber, without even caring for what tragic drama was being enacted on the other side of the Atlantic, because the then ruling party, the Republicans, were reluctant to poke their nose into others' affairs! However, commercially, the Republicans were very calculative. Under the policy of 'cash and carry,' America allowed Allied powers to buy arms and ammunitions from them.

Third 'isolation'

Not its choice

Now the third 'isolation' of America, is not a voluntary one, but a forced one, which has come amidst rising anti war demonstration all over the world, and also on the streets of America itself against the jingoistic policy of the three warmongers -- George Bush, Tony Blair and Howard.

The former South African President Nelson Mandela has conferred a prestigious title on Blair, calling him as the 'Foreign Minister of Bush', for his out-playing Secretary of State Colin Powell in playing the 'second fiddle' while an eminent play Wright Harold Pinter was rather harsh when he said that

US 'barbarism would destroy the world... with Tony Blair as a hired Christian thug.' John Howard was shown in effigies as a 'poodle' being pulled by Bush with a string around its neck, during the street demonstrations against war in Sydney. But the two 'loyalists' are not deterred by such name-calls by 'street-urchins'. So far only these two countries had already offered troops for deployment in war against Iraq.

UN being pressurised?

With the rising tide of popular demonstrations all over the world against war on Iraq and demand for peaceful resolution of Iraq crisis, UN weapons inspection team is being pressurised for an anti-Iraq report. At the same time, the UN Security Council, particularly the permanent members are also under heavy pressure to adopt a resolution, without opposition, accusing Iraq of 'material breach' of the Resolution 1441 and authorising UN to declare war on Iraq to disarm it. Only time will show which way the wind is blowing and how the veto-wielding permanent members, especially, France, China and Russia, who had hitherto showed their strong opposition towards Bush-policy on Iraq, act. The statements made by Foreign Ministers of these countries, particularly France, at the special session of the Security Council on

14 February last, stressed the need to abandon the war-path and find a solution through peaceful means. But as Malaysian Prime Minister had recently said that if they find existence of weapons of mass destruction, kept hidden somewhere in Iraq, then they will accuse Saddam of 'material breach' of the UN resolution and if they don't find any, then also they will blame Saddam for the same 'crime.' It is a story of the lamb and the wolf!

Doomsday, or is there any silver lining?

If America succeeds in getting adopted its much-desired resolution to declare war on Iraq, it would be a sheer mockery of the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. Because when UN proves totally toothless in the face of Israeli use of tanks, missiles and continued destruction of Palestinian lives and property in the name of pursuing terrorists, it becomes ridiculous if the UN suddenly shows its teeth to allow hawkish elements led by America, to attack a UN member country. Then UN is certainly bound to meet the fate of its predecessor, the League of Nations, and that would be a doomsday for world peace and security.

But is there still left any way out to save the world from the impending catastrophe? Perhaps yes. Silver-linings are visible behind the dark clouds. The world is getting united against any evil design to destroy the world peace. The recent Franco-African Summit held in Paris, where all the heads of African state-attended, at the invitation of the French President, emerged as a strong-solid block against the war cry. Moreover, the 13th NAM Summit of some 114 heads of state and government in Kuala warned against any war plan against Iraq as it would bring disaster to the whole world.

I would like to conclude quoting French Foreign Minister de Villepin, who, while addressing the special UN Security Council session on 14 February, said, 'In this temple of UN, we are the guardians of an ideal, the guardians of conscience, this onerous responsibility and immense honour we have must lead us to give priority to disarmament through peace.'

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