DHAKA WEDNESDAY APRIL 16, 2003

Why the threats against Syria?

Talk of sanctions has already begun

HE Bush administration has virtually taken no time to be fixated on Syria after the military operations in Iraq attained the primary objective of occupying the country. Now it is Syria's turn to explain every bit of its 'military build-up' to the United States.

Already, Damascus has a difficult task on its hands as charges, which smack of Washington's readiness to go to any length to clinch the issue in its favour, are strikingly similar to those brought against Iraq. First, intelligence reports are said to have revealed that Syria tested a chemical weapon only a fortnight back. That is 'a sin' the enormity of which needs no elaboration, after what Iraq has been through in the last four weeks. The US seems annoyed that the Iraq war does not appear to have been 'a lesson' to Syria.

Second, chemical weapons do fall in the category of weapons of mass destruction. The coalition troops have not found them in Iraq, but they have not yet given up the hope of discovering the weapons, that would give President Bush's Iraq mission an aura of legality, which it sadly lacks. Now, it is Damascus which is on Bush's list of the countries that are 'rogue enough' to build the weapons of mass destruction which only the stable western democracies are permitted to

Third, the United States believes Syria has helped leaders of Saddam's regime flee Iraq and given them shelter. This is an unpardonable crime to Pentagon as its plan of liquidating all the enemies might have been disrupted if it were true that some Iraqi leaders of the fallen regime did manage to cross over to Syria. Then the US is very unhappy with some Syrians having allegedly fought against them in Iraq.

But western analysts seem to believe that the pressure being put on Syria might be part of the US plan to reduce its bargaining capability, since there most probably won't be any mention of Golan Heights in the latest US roadmap on the future of the Middle East. That couldn't be to Syria's liking; so the cards are being played in a highly confusing order to fudge the issue.

The signs are ominous. The talk of some economic or diplomatic sanctions on Syria has already begun. Will the squeaky voice of British foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, who has promised that there will be no strike on Syria, remain audible amid the intimidating rumblings coming from Colin Powell or Donald Rumsfeld?

First case of SARS?

More awareness and efficiency needed to tackle the issue

E are concerned about the first suspected case of the killer disease called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the country. The airport authorities seemed to have been on alert when they spotted a businessman arriving from Hong Kong with suspected SARS symptoms and wanted to put him on quarantine. So far so good. But we fail to understand how the gentleman managed to disappear from the scene almost in no time. Undoubtedly the authorities should have been extra careful with a man who seemed to be diffident in being tested or quarantined. For his part, the arriving passenger should have volunteered tests to be sure about his status. Their failure may have put

We note that the suspected SARS patient first went to a private hospital. Later, his relatives took him to the infectious diseases hospital at Mohakhali. A medical officer of the private clinic reportedly said, '90 per cent of the symptoms he had matched with the killer disease.' So, there is cause for concern simply because it's the first suspected case we are having to deal with. The Health Directorate should pursue

In these circumstances, awareness among the people who may have been exposed to the disease abroad is of utmost importance. We would appeal to all of them to come forward and report to the doctors for test or treatment if they show any obvious symptoms of the disease. It is imperative for the authorities to keep an eye on the sensitive travel sector and have a mechanism in readiness, especially at the airport, to deal with any eventuality. It's time for all concerned to be on alert for two reasons: one, this has been the first reported suspected case; and two, the experts are yet to find an antidote for this killer disease, although a new light has been shed on its epidemiology linking it to the cold syndrome.

Esho hey Baisakh...



K.A.S. MURSHID

imagine that during classical times the Bangla New Year celebrations received Royal blessing and were altogether a grand and festive occasion for all -- rich and poor, young and old, men and women. I suppose that in those days all celebrations had a religious connotation since secularism was not yet invented. As can happen (and indeed does happen frequently) the advent of a new religion results in the large scale erosion of the older, pre-existing order so that Baisakhi celebrations inevitably lost out after the advent of Islam, retaining a rather tenuous foothold among the ordinary, rustic folk of Bengal. Without royal patronage or official recognition, these celebrations gradually lost all the glamour and the glitter -- reduced to the annual mela or the occasional jatra or jari gaan session. For our minority communities, of course, there was less reason to tone down celebrations, so

much greater enthusiasm about baisakhi celebrations amongst Hindus, Buddhists and tribal peoples than among Muslims.

Actually, I am no longer certain that what I have just written is entirely correct, Urban Bengali Muslims, at any rate, appear to have taken to Pahela

that we are witnessing the evolution of a truly secular festival -- one in which everyone can participate as equals, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, gender, creed, caste or class. And perhaps for the first time in our history, we have the potential here to unite all the disparate groups that make up Bangladeshi society and polity.

OK with me. The problem however is that these friends of ours insist on knowing what is good for ALL of us. And they seem to have decided that secular celebrations point vigorously to the road to hell. The question is how on earth do we get them to change their minds?

Actually, there will always be a few

that the event would be madly popular -- even if free batashas were to be

Pahela Baisakh in the region

As many of you are aware, we Bengalis are not the only ones who celebrate Pahela Baisakh or Chaitra Sangkranti. In fact this is one of the most important ally temples and Wats are overflowing with people on the day in much of the

I suspect that in SE Asia what started out in ancient times as a religious festival slowly began to take on a secular complexion. Today, Songkrant in Thailand is basically billed as a cultural event, appropriately packaged for the tourist industry and virtually devoid of any religious content. In Cambodia, the packaging is missing. While the religious element remains strong and vibrant, there is clear evidence that the 'cultural' aspects are on the ascendancy, marked by boat races, floats, musical events and

Looking to the future

Actually, I am enormously excited by the prospect of a secular festival whose trappings continue to develop and evolve as we grope for new symbols and reinvent older ones. Most importantly, while we know that there are religious roots to every celebration this need not cause us to lose any sleep. Bengali Muslims have enough common sense not to deny any part of their history and culture and sufficient genius to be able to get away with it. despite a few bombs here and there

and some raised evebrows. Subho Nabo Barsho!

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

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Baisakh as fish to water and in the process have succeeded in reinterpreting the Bangla New Year in modern, secular terms, devoid of religious significance but rich in potent cultural and even political symbols. (As an aside allow me to observe for example, the undercurrent of a deep, anti-war sentiment in our celebrations this year, symbolised by a huge, confusedlooking replica of the Statue of Liberty in front of the Institute of Fine Arts.)

I personally consider the growing appeal of Pahela Baisakh to be of momentous significance. It is perhaps for the first time in the sub-continent

Dangers ahead

Clearly there are dangers ahead. Some of our friends think it is improper to have 'secular' fun -- that kind of thing should be left for the life beyond. These spoil sports (and hopefully their numbers are very few) dislike celebrations of any kind, especially if these are of a non-religious character. Now, I have nothing against waz mehfils and the like -- in fact I have even tried attending those once or twice. Personally, that is not exactly how I would want to use my spare time -- but if that is what appeals to you, that is perfectly

their minds. The others will have to be, as they say these days, 'engaged' proactively and incorporated within the secular fold. You attend 364 Waz Mehfils a year, let us have this one day for secular celebrations. What better deal can one possibly strike? 'What about Ekushey?' you ask. Ekushey is a political celebration and I understand some of you DO celebrate it through milads and prayers -- in other words you have found a way around your selfimposed dilemma. I doubt if you can usher in Pahela Baisakh with a milad. And even if you did, I don't suppose

hardcore types who will never change

including Thailand, Cambodia and Laos -- even if baishakh is pronounced as pisakh in Cambodia and Sangkranti is referred to as Songkrant in Thailand. However, the scale of the celebrations in these countries point to the central importance attached to these events within each culture. Although much of the celebrations are of a secular nature the religious element emerges quite clearly. For example, Buddhist Khmers consider it particularly rewarding to be able to go to Angkor Wat (which remains a 'live' temple even today) to give offerings to Lord Buddha. Gener-

of festivals throughout Southeast Asia,

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Now the scramble for spoils of victory

VEN as the last act of the tragedy of violent assault and played out and the final curtain drawn, there is a mad scramble for spoils of victory by the winners. France, Russia, Germany and many others want a 'central role' of the United Nations in post war Iraq administration and governance for rebuilding, reconstruction and humanitarian work. President Chirac. Chancellor Schroeder and President Putin have reiterated their positions after their recent summit in the Russian city of St. Petersburg. The UN secretary general Kofi Annan has said that the UN must play an 'important role' in post war Iraq reconstruction in order to have legitimacy citing experience in political facilitation as well as humanitarian aid and human rights. The G-7 economic group of countries has called for a Security Council resolution providing for a central role of UN. But America wants to have a 'leading role' in post war Iraq interim administration, and recon-President Bush and prime minister

Blair after their meeting in Belfast said post war Irag. But what was behind the semantics of 'vital role' was made clear later by Vice President Dick Cheney when he said that the UN was not adequately equipped to take up the task and America will have to play a leading role. He is dead wrong. East Timor, Cosovo, Afghanistan and Cambodia are some of many instances of successful performance of the UN as a transitional interim authority in post war conflict resolution, administration and peace keeping. Vice President Cheney's statement is in keeping with earlier statements of secretary of state Colin Powell and National Security Council adviser Condoleezza Rice. Rice who is more royal than the king is on record to have said that 'having given life and blood for liberating Iraq, it was natural that Britain and the United States should take a leading role in Iraq after the war is over. Later

Powell spoke in the same vein. The Belfast statement was deliberately vague, fuzzy and ambiguous to mean that the UN's role will be confined to fund raising and management of humanitarian relief only. It is understood that the Belfast plan for post war Iraq involves three phases from an essentially military rule through an interim Iraqi administration to a representative government.

In total disregard of international claims for a central role by the UN, the Pentagon has already begun putting in place the first phase by assembling an immediate interim administrative authority in Iraq headed by a retired American General Jay Garner known for his Israeli connections for supply-

The rebuilding may represent a pot of gold which according to UNDP amounts to 30 billion dollars over the next three years. Vice President Cheney's former company Halliburton has received the 7 billion dollar contract for fire fighting of burning Iraqi oil wells. The US Stevedor company has received the 900 million dollar contract of rebuilding Om Qasr port. Brechtel group, the largest US contractor company of former Secretary of State George Shultz is poised to get a lion's share of the contract booty in the reconstruction of Iraq. So much for President Bush's claim for no 'ulterior motive' before going to war against Iraq. His

This is not a war of American

the White House for the second term.

interests alone but for Israel also, Long ago the right wing pro-Israeli lobbyists around Bush planned the overthrow of Saddam. The war is based on ideology. This would destroy the most powerful Arab state in the Middle East. Israeli chief of staff Shaol Moffaz demanded earlier that the war was essential to change the political landscape of the region for ever. Sharon will now emasculate Palestinian movement in full vengeance. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy defence secretary, Richard Pearl and Douglas Faith at the defence department, Eliot Abrams at the National Security Council and Ari Fleischer at futile quest for weapons of mass, the White house together with two non

done what the empire builders of the past have all along done to use the military might in order to have political and economic hegemony. . The intoxication of power knows no boundaries.

This is the first major war of the 21st century and bodes ill. Bush administration is pursuing an imperial policy which is frightening. The use of force to eliminate contrived threat is a dangerous precedent. The only way for the United States to attack a much weaker enemy is to launch a huge propaganda offensive depicting it as an evil or a threat to America. The war will have changed the world beyond recognition. While Iraq war is an important ingredient in US strategy it is the first phase in American drive to rearrange

European balance of power as a counter weight to America. The conference at St. Petersburg by an alliance of France, Germany and Russia may be a step in that direction. This century has inherited a world

containing a superpower with no competitor. It can literally do what it wants and now it is just doing that openly and brutally. Now it is Iraq. Who is next.? According to Israeli newspaper Haaretz in February last the US undersecretary of state, John Bolton told Israeli officials that after Iraq US will deal with Iran, Syria and North Korea. Syria is already hearing increasingly angry voices from Washington which has accused Syria of possessing weapons of mass destruction, supply of arms to Iraq during the conflict, providing safe haven to fleeing Iraqi leaders and supporting Hizbullah terrorists in Lebanon. These are straws in the wind raising worry in Syria of a gathering storm. What about Pakistan? Colin Powell has said that he will take up Indo-Pakistan issue as "part of a broad agenda" after the Iraq war is over. Is the "broad agenda" to persuade Pakistan to get rid of the bomb(nuclear)? America may brook no nuclear weapon or nuclear facility in Pakistan suspected to be a haven for run away Al Oaida terrorists from Afghanistan, notwithstanding Pakistan's current expedient US appeasement policy. Is there no hope for the weaker states? The only hope is if the other major powers form a strong 'axis of restraint' to provide them protection and security.

I am sorry, I cannot adequately account for the motive of Tony Blair joining the Bush war. May be, the psychiatrists have an answer. I am, however, reminded of the motiveless malignity of Iago who goaded Othelo to murder his innocent wife Desdemona in sleep in Shakespeare's

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when he was employed in the Space ruins and rubble in a 'liberated' Iraq. defence secretary Rumsfeld support by intimidation. It is also the first step and Defence Command and Sv Coleman, a defence contractor firm. British Major General Tim is tipped as his Deputy. Others in Garner's team include James Woolsey, a former CIA Director known for his Israel sympathies and Michael Mobbs a Pentagon lawyer known for his hawkish views on national security and human rights for supporting imprisonment of US citizens suspected of terror links without trial. Their credentials are brief indications of what the interim authority is up to. Before the war has ended, Pentagon is giving American companies juicy contracts for reconstruction of Iraq much to the chagrin of foreign competitors from France, Germany and Russia. The European commission is reviewing if the offer of contracts without international tenders was not discriminatory and in violation of WTO rules

ing Patriot and Arrow missiles to Israel destruction has now been reduced to Jews vice president Dick Cheney and both the region and much of the world The Television footage about draping of statue of Saddam Hussain with the American flag by an American soldier may be symbolic of American occupation for a long haul.

The military occupation of Iraq by America will expand its hegemony over the entire Middle East -- secure for America unfettered control over the vast oil resources of Iraq as well as the Caspian Sea oil reserves, over all the Arab oil and over the world economy, and prevent the emergence of a strong competing European economic block from challenging America. By fighting against Iraq America is fighting as much against Europe. The war is also to promote the end game and agenda of securing Israeli security interests. Rising on the crest of his popularity for going to war to fight the imagined threat from terrorism, Bush as calculated, has assured his return to

Ariel Sharon and the extreme right in Israel and some of them have worked under Benyameen Netanyahoo, the former Israeli prime minister. But this is first and foremost a war for American interests. However, Bush and Sharon believe that American and Israeli interests are practically identical.

The core US Middle East policy is the defence of Israel. As of now the strategic oil requirement of Israel is met from export by a third party since the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979. Removal of Saddam will ease direct flow of oil for Israel. The Jewish was group in Washington, which acts in concert with Christian fundamental ists who now control the Republican party, has a hidden pro Israeli agenda. The US Administration driven by Christian fundamentalist-Zionist ideological alliance and goaded by oil barons and military industry giants has in a multi-level assault aimed at demonstrating the military might of America. It is the proverbial 'shot across the bow' to other major powers including France, Germany, Russia and China to send them the message to behave and toe the US line without raising dissident voices. For these major powers contending with American power, the Iraq crisis is about what kind of role the US would play in the world in future and whether it would play by the rules. And the US Administration has made it clear that it does not.

President Bush told Europe to take a hike on global warming. He told Russia to forget ICBM treaty. He pulled out of International criminal court. All in 2 years. Signs are that the old Europe sans Britain may not tolerate insults and humiliation inflicted on it by America over the Iraq crisis any more but forge unity by a combination of a

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Invasion of Iraq: Some questions

ABDULLAH HAROON PASHA

NE would have imagined that such things happened in the 18th and 19th centuries when European powers were in a mad rush to occupy territories in Asia, Africa, Latin America; one would have thought that direct military intervention and occupation of an underdeveloped country was a passing phase of history. Not that the former colonial powers have suddenly become pure and holy and developed altruistic motives of helping their former colonies; they have taken to more subtle and clever ways of exploiting the resources of poor countries by foisting autocratic rulers, by restructuring the international system that suits their interests, a kind of neocolonialism developed since the second world war.

But the unthinkable is happening in these early years of the 21st century. Virtually before the very eyes of the people of the world, courtesy information technology, the Anglo-American invading forces pounced on Iraq on trumped up charges. Initially US President George Bush and British

Prime Minister Tony Blair talked about Iraq possessing weapons of massdestruction (WMD). Hundreds of apons inspectors led by Hans Blix and El-Baradei searched every nook and cranny of Iraq for more than three nths. These UN Inspectors are no ordinary folks; they are experts in their own fields. They found no evidence of WMD. Finally, in a queer inversion of logic, US and UK authorities asked Iraq to prove that it didn't have such WMD.

American forces and their political masters are desperate to find such WMDs. They have not discovered any. And imagine the utter hypocrisy of the Anglo-American desire! The country that possesses the largest collection of WMDs in the world is frantically searching for WMD in Iraq. They think that this will give them the fig-leaf of moral justification for launching this attack. The country that dropped atomic bombs on civilian targets is US (Remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed thousand and thousands of innocent Japanese when Japan, in any case, was on the verge of defeat). US forces used napalm bombs and

sprayed highly toxic agent orange as a defoliant to destroy Vietnam's dense, tropical forests. The US now used cluster bombs in Iraq which has killed many unsuspecting civilians, women and children included. One of the earliest users of WMD was the British military. When the hapless Iraqis were revolting and rising up against the British who were occupying Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s in the guise of a socalled mandate given to Britain by the now-defunct League of Nations, the Royal air Force used toxic mustard gas. The Anglo-American leadership's new love for "clean" bombs has to be judged in much historical context.

The reason now given by Bush and Blair and company for justifying attack is that they would remove the oppressive dictatorship of Saddam Hussein's regime and "liberate" the Iraqi people and shower democracy on them. If they care to look back only 20-30 years, the US government played the major part in building Saddam Hussein and supplying him WMD which he used against the Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War. The US patted him in

Which country next? Is it Iran or Syria or North Korea?...Peoples of the world and governments have to ponder this question, and how to free the Iraqi people and nation from the clutches of this greedy, hypocritical and self-serving foreign occupation.

fearful of a fundamentalist Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini whose Islamic Revolution was considered to be a threat to US interests in the area. It is similar to the US and CIA helping Osama bin Laden with weapons and money as long he played their game and fought Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The tables then turned!

Bush, Blair and their military want to 'liberate' (they already have, in fact, by invading) the Iraqi people and bestow democracy on them. Is it not pertinent to ask how many of their friends in West Asia (Middle East), the Emirs and Sultans and Sheikhs, have a democratic set-up? Doesn't that bother the US and British administration? In their sheer arrogance of power

their lust for Iraq's wealth, they have forgotten that democracy does not descend from the wings of B52 bombers, it cannot be planted on the deserts of Iraq by bunker-buster bombs. Whatever may be the fault of Saddam Hussein, not withstanding his tyranny and oppression, he will remain a hero in Arab legend, he had the guts to challenge the ruthless Anglo-American military machine when most other Arab rulers were cowering in fright. For the rest of the world the aggression has brought into sharp focus the nature of the new imperialism, its devious and diabolic means and its insatiable appetite for other peoples' resources.

Bush-Blair and cohorts argue for

"regime change" in Iraq. This is a new but a repugnant idea. Who has given them the right to change the regime in Iraq? Does the UN Security Council Resolution 1441 authorise a regime change? If this concept is accepted in international law as a casus belli for war, then no country, particularly small and militarily weak, can be safe from the predatory desires of big countries. The form of government in any country is the internal domestic matter of the people of that country. The UN charter of which USA, UK are signatories ensures the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nationstates. The Anglo-American invasion Iraq is a wanton act of aggression, pure and simple. It is totally illegal and wholly immoral. They imposed an unjust war of occupation on Iraq. In the midst of such darkness in the

international political landscape, there is still some hope. Most people of the world have seen through this game. The formidable media machinery's unrelenting campaign to justify the war has not fooled such people. They know that it is not WMD or

dictatorship that is the issue; it is greed for Iraq's oil, making it safe for them and their friend Israel. It is also to frighten countries that stand against Anglo-American national interest and last but not least, to test their latest hitech weapons in actual battle field conditions. For that purpose, if hundreds of Iragis die, thousands are maimed and millions terrorised, so be that. This is not an act of terrorism!

Processions and demonstrations are continuing throughout the world, from Japan and New Zealand to Canada and Mexico, from Finland and Sweden to South Africa and Chile. Large and most intense and passionate demonstrations have taken place in European countries; in USA itself and Middle Eastern countries; also in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Since the end of Vietnam War in mid-seventies the would has not witnessed such large-

scale mass condemnation of the war. It would be a miracle if Iraq hold on against the military judgement, against the invading forces for long. Iraq doesn't have any air support, any

navy. The half-armed Iraqi forces and people fought heroically. Tragically they fail, but their resistance will be part of Arab folklore, part of Arab regard and the world's admiration. It will make the Arab nations proud. They can stand up to the mightiest and

But which country next? Is it Iran or

Syria or North Korea? Next year the American elections are coming. President Bush and his men would like to attack another Third World country on some pretext, claim victory and ensure his second term which Bush senior Peoples of the world and govern-

ments have to ponder this question, and how to free the Iraqi people and nation from the clutches of this greedy, hypocritical and self-serving foreign occupation. The people of this ancient and deserve a honourable and peaceful life and a truly representative and democratic government chosen by

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