

PM on earthquake preparedness

Follow-up action needed under close monitoring

WE note that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has called upon the agency concerned to identify housing structures in Dhaka and other major cities which are in breach of the building code and make their dwellers aware of the danger they are living with. Only the other day, we implored the government through this column to form a high-power body to assess the quality of buildings in Dhaka and Chittagong centred on ascertaining how tremor-resistant they are. That the PM has laid emphasis on this vital aspect of earthquake preparedness has heartened us. The big task that stares us in the face, however, is: how do we minimise the risks of living in hundreds of buildings, especially the high-rise ones, which were shoddily constructed? Either we write them off as unsafe against earthquake or reconstruct and reinforce them with earthquake resistant materials and construction engineering.

As for any new construction work, a highly fool-proof and demanding mechanism has to be in place to enforce the building code, which itself most probably needs updating to be brought in line with that being followed in other earthquake-prone habitats.

A number of other useful suggestions emanated from the high-level meeting presided over by the prime minister on Sunday on risk of earthquakes and preparedness against them. Some of the ideas are focused on organisational or institutional preparations while the rest have to do with logistics and state-of-the-art equipment. It is important we put together an earthquake management and rescue system involving not only government ministries and departments but also non-government and voluntary initiatives. The idea of making do with an all-purpose disaster preparedness body (for cyclones, floods, and what have you!) is untenable, management of earthquakes being a different kettle of fish. It requires pointed and focused attention; more so because of the neglect we have shown historically to this particular area of human concern. Massive awareness needs to be built about earthquakes among the people on an enduring basis as distinguished from seasonal exhortations. An equally important imperative for the government will be to acquire the capacity to face any eventuality on a short notice so that loss of life and property can be reduced through individual, collective and institutional initiatives.

Needless to say, the PM's emphasis on speedy construction of seismic centres in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and Rangpur should receive priority attention.

DU's trouble complicates

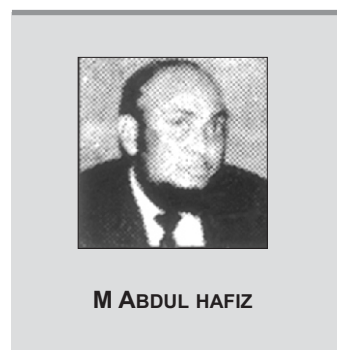
The culture of beating opponent students out of campus must end

THOUGH the demand for which agitation originally began on the Dhaka University campus has been fulfilled, the subsequent involvement by the student wings of both the ruling and opposition parties has put the whole scenario in complete disarray. On available information, the BNP-backed Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) is to be blamed for the current stalemate on the campus. Their 'unprovoked attack' on the processions of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and manhandling of some BCL activists led up to this. The highhandedness has created a problem that apparently cannot be solved without political intervention.

The latest spat in campus violence takes us back to those days when clashes between rival student groups were frequent and regular incidents. Though the general students had no stakes in those clashes, they were the ones who suffered the most in terms of their academic careers. We earnestly hope that this time around things would not be allowed to get out of control. In fact, it is of utmost importance that the ruling party rein in the JCD leaders who basically carry the burden of showing maturity and responsibility in their conduct. A comment by a JCD activist like, 'our senior leaders have instructed us to resist the BCL move' is definitely not going to help matters.

What has been more shocking is the complete silence from the ruling party leaders on the deplorable behaviour by their student leaders on the campus. If they don't take steps to chasten them, no amount of truce or persuasion could change the atmosphere. We simply want an end to the torrid campus scenario; students should be able to move around freely and be able to continue with their studies unhindered. Higher education and violence cannot go together. We have to ensure that violent rivalries and armed clashes between student groups under the umbrella of national political parties has to cease once and for all. The ruling party student wing has to lead the way by providing space to the opposition student party, and not by forcing them out of the campus physically, apart from the fact that all students, regardless of political beliefs, if any, have a right to prosecute their studies unhindered. From this point of view, the BCL also needs to show the desired level of responsibility by calling a halt to their strike.

Bush's African safari: What was it upto?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN as the imbroglia the US is already stuck in both Afghanistan and Iraq is proving to be an overstretch of its imperial reach George W Bush, its warrior President, set his foot on the cusp of yet another geo-political entity when he landed early last month at Senegal's Goree island where Africans used to be held before being shipped as slaves to America. Surprisingly it did not rake up any bitter memory; neither did it make the descendants of those forgotten slaves hostile to the new imperial warlord setting his foot on their soil. Because President Bush began his extended safari of Africa with 'no treaties to shred, no enemies to warn and no troops to congratulate'. Instead, the warrior President even with a record of wreaking havoc in two countries in a short span of time to change their recalcitrant regimes, brought to Africa "the kinder, gentler touch" by promising billions of dollars and making public a series of initiative to relieve the continent of its protracted agony — the agony of a lethal combination of famine, HIV/AIDS, conflict and failed economic policies turning the continent into the world's backwater with virtually none to bail it out. Starting in Senegal and continuing through South Africa, Botswana, Uganda and Nigeria Bush pledged aids for fighting AIDS and trade concession, sparking new hope and bringing a healing touch to Africa's sufferings. His expansive disposition offering aids, his refreshingly sunny assessment of the continent's future and his administration's ambitious commitment to fight

AIDS in Africa could not but catch the imagination of a new generation of Africans. As President Bush casts himself as successor to President Clinton's ambitious engagement with the continent, the mood of the Africans seems conciliatory notwithstanding their apprehension that another imperial warlord is assuming the overlordship of the continent. Because although war-lords have a bad name but not all they do

ment treasuries. To the Africans battered by chronic poverty it is the biggest bonanza in their history and it will dwarf western aid and will provide unique opportunity to alleviate their poverty. For Mr Bush it is an excellent convergence: weaning the US off Saudi Arabia whom the US never fully trusted, particularly after 9/11 and also an objective of war on terror while helping Africa and

ing could be a better deal. But the elderly-Africans conversant with the continent's chequered past aptly conclude that oil and prosperity seldom mixed in Africa. Indeed oil had been a devastating fact for development in Africa: It concentrated wealth and produced disincentive for any other type of development. Nor did it help democracy since entrenched elites were likely to lose much more than office

more poverty. Oil rich Nigeria and its 100 m poor is the case to testify the point. For two decades Angola, Nigeria and Gabon pumped billions of barrels of oil only to discover that it fuelled corruption and poverty, a phenomenon the academics called 'paradox of plenty'. Sub-Saharan Africa is in the throes of a bigger oil rush that could launch afresh cycle of conflict and misrule instead of

pouring down their pet sermons of transparency and good governance. In the meantime, as the seismic data suggest, billions of barrels lie offshore prompting comparisons to Brunei and Kuwait, the lure is irresistible and oil companies are expected to bid at least \$300 m for exploration rights alone. Few in Africa share the US' exhortation that Africa will benefit from oil. They look beyond the rhetorics of Colin Powell who routinely told the African leaders last month to end corruption to benefit from their oil bonanza and see Washington playing by the old rules: dodgy deals, amoral alliances and military engagement. In Sao Tome, a tiny island off West African coast which is virtually floating on oil the signs are already ominous. It astonished industry analysts by awarding hugely favourable term to an obscure Texas oil firm, ERHC, since taken over by a Nigerian, with no drilling rigs.

Mr Bush also offered aid for AIDS victims and enhanced access to US markets. This is horse trading at its best. The fine print on the offer of US market-access has some interesting feature: the benefit for African producers is actually neutralised by the distortions resulting from US government subsidies to its farmers; these subsidies are in fact larger than many African economies, and they are three times as large as total US aid to Africa as a whole. America's generous hand-outs and subsidies to its vast agrobusiness push African farmers out of global and local markets, depriving poor economies of income and employment. All this drains President Bush's rhetoric of its good intent. In final reckoning aid for AIDS might be one item in entire horse trading that will actually bring benefit to Africa. But it has nothing to do with the *noblesse oblige* of imperial warlords. After a month of his African odyssey the hapless Africans, it is not surprising, are still trying to determine whether Mr Bush was there to 'plunder or provide.'

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

PERSPECTIVES

For two decades Angola, Nigeria and Gabon pumped billions of barrels of oil only to discover that it fuelled corruption and poverty, a phenomenon the academics called 'paradox of plenty'. Sub-Saharan Africa is in the throes of a bigger oil rush that could launch afresh cycle of conflict and misrule instead of development and prosperity. Can the US and all other western governments make any difference in the prevailing trend? The Africans are non-plussed to find an answer

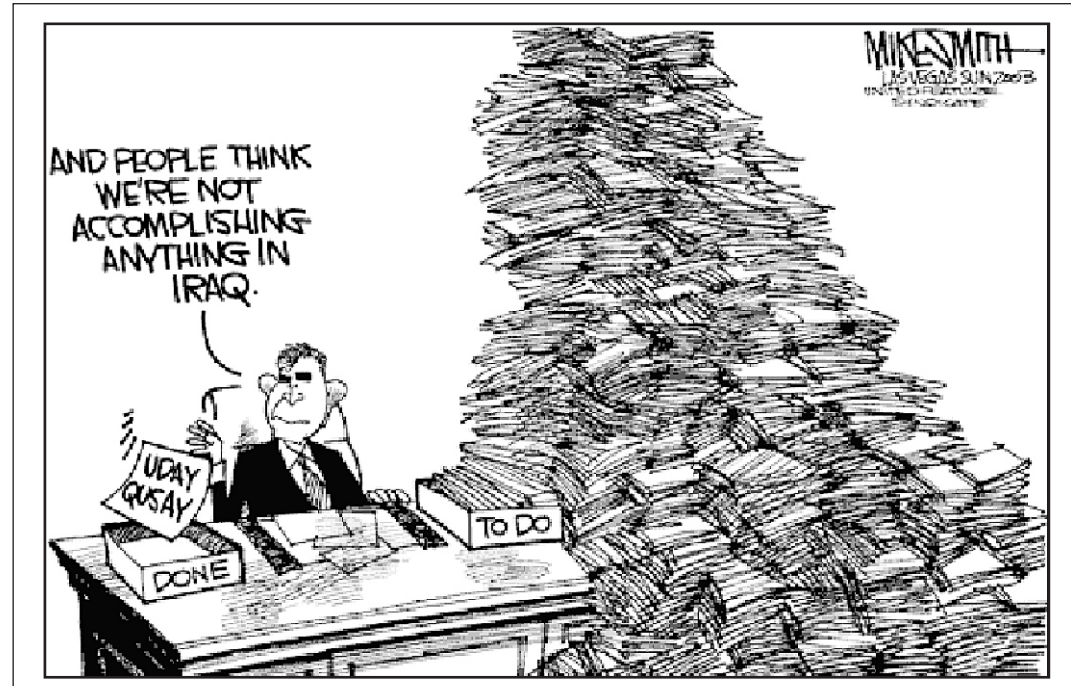
is bad, their basic premise is that a good gun is better than a good law. Also goes in tandem a horse trading: you give me oil, I will get you aid for AIDS treatment. And at the top of the list for Bush's horse trading in Africa are oil and military bases. Bush wants access to oil and installation of US troops to make the region secure against terrorism. Many Africans find it innocuous and a perfect deal.

Bush clan and the members of the present presidential team, some of whom were connected with oil industry have great sense about oil and can instinctively find a wherewithal for its exploration. Or else how could a task force headed by Vice President Dick Cheney link African oil imports to US national security — something pro-Israeli neo-conservative strategists advocated since September 11, 2001. Off West African coast lie vast deposit of high quality crude suited to US' oil refineries. Now a US investment in African oil production is being projected as a tool for development. As the US seeks to reduce dependence on the Gulf oil some \$200 bn in revenues is also expected to flow into African govern-

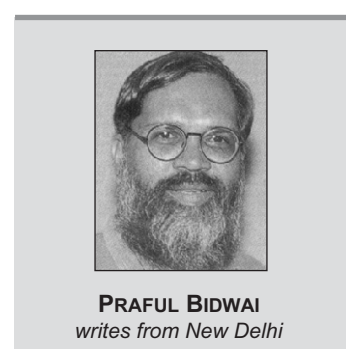
ment points with black voters in the run-up to his re-election campaign. The black Americans have already hailed the development as good news for Africa. The horse-trading or not, for both sides not-

if they had to lose control over the government. Obviously there was slide of the politics towards authoritarian rule. Also the economic shadow effect of oil had been negative and it all wound up creating

development and prosperity. Can the US and all other western governments make any difference in the prevailing trend? The Africans are non-plussed to find an answer while the west is never at rest in



Keep out of Iraq's quagmire: India must stand firm



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Blair and Bush governments have been badly shaken by the death of whistle-blower microbiologist David Kelly, and disclosures that official documents alleging that Mr Saddam Hussein bought uranium from Niger were pure fabrications.

Mr Tony Blair's acceptance ratings are now a negative 17 per cent. Mr Bush's scores have fallen to their lowest since the attack on Iraq. The Democrats are beginning to rediscover their voice and criticise Mr Bush.

Mr Blair is unlikely to emerge unscathed from this. His government faces another charge, besides "sexing up" Iraq's "dodgy dossiers": trying to muzzle the BBC. The chairperson of the BBC's board has accused officials of threatening to cut its funding, remove its director-general and rewrite its charter.

Dr Kelly's death is an especially serious matter. The former UN weapons inspector, who visited Iraq 37 times, knew Mr Blair was lying

while claiming Iraq was 45 minutes away from deploying WMD. In his assessment, Iraq was nowhere near weaponising WMD capabilities. Mr Bush too faces a severe credibility crisis.

Complicating this is the Iraq situation, marked by growing resistance to the occupation, widespread lawlessness, breakdown of public services. A poll by the conservative *British Spectator* shows 75 per cent of Iraqis say that Baghdad is more dangerous than before the war. As many as two-thirds fear being attacked in the streets.

nightmarishly unsafe. Wholesale "de-Baathification" has meant sacking competent technocrats who ran services.

The occupation is proving extremely costly with its \$4 billion monthly bill. Worse, Fifty American troops have been killed since May 1. US soldiers' morale is extremely low.

The New York Times quotes a 3rd Infantry Division sergeant: "we feel betrayed" at the cancellation of our scheduled return home. In circulation is an anonymous soldier's email. "Our moral is not high or even

America's desperation to get Indian troops is best revealed in what it told visiting foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal in early July, according to *The Indian Express*: "Yours is a BJP government, you took the risk in 1998 (Pokharan-II), take the initiative now as well. We know you may ask for UN cover or cite domestic concerns. We can get a UN cover but if you send troops right now, that will strengthen our friendship."

It is surreal that non-proliferation champion US, which supports Security Council Resolution 1172 condemning India's nuclear tests,

prior authorisation — except in self-defence.

Iraq's invasion followed the dangerous doctrine of "pre-emptive" or "preventive" war. The world will become a jungle if mighty states invade others because they might pose a threat in the future. India must not legitimise such doctrines or work against a multipolar rule-based world order.

Third, India is being asked to use up the goodwill it enjoys in the Arab world because of its past Non-Aligned role advocating decolonisation. It would be extraordinarily

even the Security Council. A UN request cannot bind the government — unlike a Parliament resolution.

Finally, US actions in Iraq are part of the ruling Neoconservative agenda in Washington. The Neocons want a US global Empire. This project is unleashing disruptive forces whose dimensions Washington can barely comprehend, leave alone control. These will visit havoc upon the world.

Colluding with the US will bring India into hostile confrontation with ethnic-religious forces that it must live with. It'll earn it the hatred of the Third World. Iraq has become a quagmire thanks to Washington's cynical policies since the 1960s, when it promoted Mr Hussein against his rivals, and through the 1980s, when it sided with him against Iran even as he used WMD.

The US is a poor "nation-builder". A study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says America has so far conducted over 200 overseas military interventions. Sixteen of these involved "nation-building". Only four succeeded in establishing democracy lasting 10 years or longer.

Why should India rescue an America that's bent on failing in Iraq?

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Fortyfive percent of Iraqis believe the war was waged "to secure oil supplies" and 41 percent "to help Israel". Just six per cent think that the motive was "to find and destroy WMD!"

Only 29 percent favour the Americans, although only seven per cent want Mr Hussein back. Although 13 per cent want occupation troops to leave immediately, 71 per cent want power transferred to Iraqis within 12 months.

Four months into occupation, the US has failed to restore order or public services. With its pathetic 3,900-strong police, Baghdad is

low", it says. It is "non-existent."

The US doesn't control the Iraq situation despite deploying 16 of its army's total 133 combat brigades. This well exceeds the recommended one-third ratio. Washington is desperate to relieve its tired, demoralised soldiers and substantially increase total deployment over the present 158,000 troops.

It has approached 90 countries for troops, but persuaded only 19 to commit 13,000 soldiers. American generals too have embarked on a recruitment expedition — witness Gen Richard Myers' visit to South Asia.

should commend those very tests as worthy of repetition!

India must firmly reject the US request — for five reasons. It's established that the case for war on Iraq was based on falsified evidence, sexed-up intelligence, and fanciful inferences. Dishonesty and fraud made the war doubly, grossly, unjust. Equally immoral and illegal is the resulting occupation.

Second, by bypassing the Security Council to wage war, the US mocked at the United Nations and undermined multilateralism. Under the UN Charter, no state can use force without the Security Council's

foolhardy for India to do this and become a target of Arab resistance — thus compromising the security of the 3.5 million Indians living in the Gulf.

Fourth, Indian public opinion is strongly against Iraq's invasion and occupation. Sixty-nine to 87 per cent oppose troops despatch to Iraq. This was reflected in demonstrations in 500 Indian cities and also in the April 8 unanimous Parliament resolution.

No government which respects democracy can violate informed public opinion. The Indian people and Parliament come prior to the US,

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

A noble venture

Quality treatment for the underprivileged section of our society is still a far cry. At least that is the notion I have always harboured, having seen the ordeal, the poor patients in our country undergo — wrong treatment, utter negligence and confinement within unhygienic wards, dismal enough to make even a healthy person sick!

But a recent visit to the Chittagong 'Ma O Shishu' hospital, on a study tour, opened a whole new perspective for many of us!

Situated just behind the Agrabad Children's Park, the hospital is a charitable institution and boasts a collection of highly experienced doctors, arguably the finest in the port city. These doctors render their invaluable services to the needy people free of charge, — manifesting the fact that theirs is the most noble profession on earth! I had the privilege of talking to some of the doctors personally. For them bringing smile to the faces of distressed people, is

the greatest reward.

I must add that their sense of patriotism and readiness to discharge duties are incentive enough to lure anyone into their profession.

The nurses particularly drew my attention and reminded me of the Florence Nightingale (we had read about in our history books). With their efficiency, deftness and dedication they are certainly worthy of high praise!

Another welcome change for me was that the hospital showed signs of cleanliness and proper maintenance, qualities that unfortunately elude most hospitals of our country, especially the government ones. The authorities concerned here are working relentlessly to better the conditions all the time.

My firm belief is that 'Ma O Shishu' hospital can act as a role model for all other hospitals countrywide in eradicating incompetence, negligence and crass commercialism of doctors and taking medicare in our country a step ahead.

Rumman Fatima Nizam
Sunshine Grammer School and College, Chittagong

Harmless serial killer!

Blair's government has failed to address the rise in crimes in UK, mainly due to fewer numbers of police on the street. British people have been calling on the government to increase the physical presence of police on the street, because people believe that a police officer simply walking around in a particular area is sometimes enough to prevent many crimes.

Failing the British public in his promise, Blair's government has been coming up with different honky-donkey tactics. The latest in this area is to take the offender in front of the victim and have them face their victim, talk to them and hopefully that would stop their criminal activities! That sounds like a very noble idea, but I can't stop thinking what the reaction of an old mother would be when the offender

says to her "I didn't mean to kill your son, your daughter-in-law, your granddaughter and your grandson. I am sorry, I am only a serial killer!"

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

Minority repression

It is frequently said that Bangladesh is a secular country. But my question is to what extent? If it were true, there would be no cases of minority repression. But we read often in the papers about minority repression, such as abduction, rape, toll collection, illegal occupation of land and even murder. Discrimination in terms of equal rights and opportunities is writ in the pages of newspapers daily. Are all these stories fabricated or false?

After the last election the rate of repression has increased. And unfortunately this process will probably continue to grow. Even in the job market, minorities are victims of discrimination in spite of being qualified. Often they are

victims of village politics. Needless to say, real progress cannot take place if 15 million minority people are deprived of their basic human rights.

I would like to mention here that in the HSC examination this year a paragraph about "Eid-ul-Fitar" was compulsory for every student, including the non-Muslims. How can one answer such a question if he/she is a non-Muslim? Is it not a kind of deprivation for the minority students from achieving good result? How can one get rid of such unbearable situation?

Nevertheless, there is still a light of hope when our human rights organisations, some progressive dailies and liberal people talk about the repressed, represent or appeal for their redemption. In most cases, government doesn't take such situations into account. Regardless of the dire situation government's constant claim on communal harmony in Bangladesh sounds like a cruel joke.

Palash Podder
Jagannath Hall, DU

Let us define terrorism afresh!

Imagine yourself as a wealthy person who helps people irrespective of their creed and economy, so that you can dominate them easily. You are a lone superpower who intends to promote unipolarism so that no body speaks against you. Now, American president George W Bush, while his recent trip to Africa (Prothom Alo, July, 14), warned that Africa would not be spared. It is now obvious that America attacked Iraq persuading a false statement that Saddam Hussein occupies mass destructive and biological weapons. Avoiding the protest across the world it performed its holy (?) duty and killed the innocent Iraqi people including a huge number of children and women, but it still could not bring a single document on favour of the statement. Their war against terrorism is on. So, in my opinion the

time has come to redefine what is terrorism and what is not.

Md. Abu Musa
Chittagong

The poor condition of Bangladesh Bank High School

Bangladesh Bank High School is situated at Motijheel just opposite the renowned Notre Dame College. Also situated in the same area are Motijheel Ideal, Model and Motijheel Government School. But the situation of Bangladesh Bank is quite different from all the other schools. The overall circumstance of this school has become so poor that 47 students failed (!) among 150 examinee of this year's (2003) SSC exam. And such result is quite surprising for a school in Dhaka city. Especially when the school is under the authority of the central bank (Bangladesh Bank).

More over, no students in this school managed to get a GPA 5 (A+). And those who passed, their

GPA's are not very satisfactory either. There are only a few teachers who have good quality and they can not play their role for reasons best known to them. But just one decade ago, this same Bank School was a renowned institution. But the educational quality is now in the worst position for the negligence of Bangladesh Bank authority as well as the school authority. So the few good students, who are still studying there, are worried about their future. As an Ex-student of this school I feel very sorry when I see this type of poor condition.

I would like to request the authority of Bangladesh Bank to take the necessary steps so that the Bank High School can overcome this situation.

Khademul Islam
Bangladesh Bank Colony,
Motijheel, Dhaka