

DCC buckles under union pressure

A bad example set

THE Dhaka City Corporation's laudable move to streamline garbage truck operation ended in a fiasco when it had to withdraw suspension orders against seven drivers under pressure exerted from the employees' union.

The drivers courted the disciplinary action after they had ransacked the office of the chief conservancy officer under whom they were placed by the DCC authorities transferring them from the transport pool. It was an administrative measure deemed necessary owing to alleged fuel pilferage.

So, this is another example of strident unionism overruling a perfectly legitimate administrative decision. The DCC authorities wanted to streamline the garbage lorry operations by placing the drivers, relevantly, under the conservancy chief. The authorities rightly felt the need for plugging the holes of fuel pilferage.

The drivers simply refused to accept petroleum coupons that the conservancy department wanted to introduce as a way of stopping the malpractice. They were, in effect, asking the authorities to allow them to carry on as they pleased.

The failure of the DCC to push their corrective measure through is no minor debacle. It has set a dangerous precedent that even an illegal activity cannot be stopped as long as trade unionism exists in its most militant form. The DCC, by swallowing the bitter pill at the instance of union leaders, has indeed exposed its own weakness and inability to handle the unruly elements within the organisation. Nothing can be more regrettable than such backpedalling on a perfectly justifiable decision, because it signals abdication of authority on the part of an elected body. This is a formula for disaster that runs counter to any semblance of institutionalisation.

Once the DCC bosses had taken a tough action they should have stuck by it. But they have retreated thereby sending across a message of indulgence to an errant section of employees. Let's put a stop to buckling under pressure.

HSC admission confusion

A realistic, acceptable solution needed

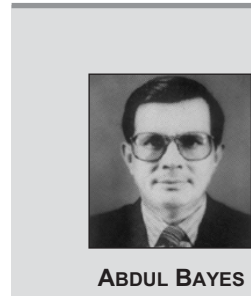
THE students, parents and colleges alike have reasons for being confused over what admission procedure to follow in respect of entry into higher secondary courses. Firstly, as some college authorities have mentioned, the government circular for enrolling students on the basis of grade point average (GPA) instead of written tests, had reached them late; some had not even received it until a few days ago. Secondly, many a college had already begun selling admission forms to students along with furnishing schedules for tests. Their dilemma over whether to follow the government directive or carry on with their old procedure of written tests has apparently thrown the admission process off-gear, at least for the present.

On principle, if the private colleges want to enroll students on a selection basis, probably to maintain their own standards, then they should be allowed to do so. The government colleges should also have similar latitude. Higher grades would give a candidate an advantage on the points table over others -- that is a given thing, though. If the educational institutions want to follow their own procedures, what's the problem? Why should it be a 'punishable offence' if some colleges hold admission tests?

On a general plane, statistics show that there are around 4.5 lakh seats for the first year HSC classes while only 3.31 lakh students passed the secondary examinations this year to be qualified for those berths. It means that rush to better institutions in the cities will leave most colleges in the Mufassil areas without enough students to teach. We are looking at an idle capacity we can hardly afford.

For the longer term, we urge the education ministry to hold meetings with the representatives of the colleges in order that they can arrive at a realistic and rational solution to admission problems that seem to be worsening by the year. On the immediate term, however, the students and parents should be relieved of the anxiety they have been experiencing ever since the confusion over the admission procedure arose.

IFPRI : Changes and the challenges



ABDUL BAYES

THE International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) -- according to its recently released strategic document -- works with a vision and a mission. The vision is reported to be a world free of hunger and malnutrition where every segment of the society has a secure and sufficient access to safe food. The mission, on the other hand, is said to suggest policy solutions to cut hunger and poverty through scientific research and research related activities in agriculture at large. Appreciably, over the decades, this important international organisation under the umbrella of the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) had been helping with researches for food security, especially in developing countries. As an international agency, I understand, it favours supplying facts and figures on food related issues to the governments concerned and not, perhaps, funds and conditionalities like multilateral donor agencies.

There is little disagreement on the fact that many of IFPRI's researches resulted in the change of perceptions of politicians and policy makers throughout the world. And as I argued in one of my earlier write-ups in this column, Bangladesh had also benefited immensely from IFPRI's invaluable -- but not invariable -- insightful research investigations in the realm of food production and distribution. The benefits continue to come through as the economy gradually moves

from subsistence to commercial farming and from parastatals to private initiatives.

Realities and revisions

But IFPRI, with its new captain at the cockpit (Joachim von Braun), attempts to revisit the strategies set out, say, decades earlier. Why a revisit? Firstly, because progress on reducing hunger and malnutrition in the developing countries, sordidly, slowed down over the last decade. For example, the food insecure

tries no more seem to translate food policy research into improved policies. The dawn of the democratic governance with many state holders could be the core of the argument. But more importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the basic role of the government has been witnessing a change; so are the global economy, the structure of the farming sector and global and local food industries and retail business. Markets liberalisation and growing globalisation emerged as both

Nutrition Security (2003)". The world at large is afflicted with devastating diseases that go to deter development in developing countries. Reportedly, HIV/AIDS affected 36 million people in 2000 with serious setbacks: millions of children became orphans, disrupted social bonds, and undermined people's capacity to engage in collective actions. There is also, in evidence, a correlation between AIDS and tuberculosis. As Malaria often strikes at harvest time, it also threat-

much.

Priorities and policy planks

IFPRI adopts four sets of criteria to determine its priorities. It sets out policy solutions that go to: (a) reduce hunger and malnutrition; (b) address major emerging issues affecting food security; (c) turn IFPRI's research as international public goods and (d) confer with and respond to stakeholders to select essential food policy research.

urban-rural linkages and non-farm rural development; (c) food and water safety policies; (d) policy making and the role of the state, the private sector and civil society; (e) food system in disaster prevention, relief and rehabilitation after crisis; (f) trade negotiations related to agriculture; (g) policies addressed to hinder hunger, enhanced food and diet quality of the poor; (h) food and nutrition related science and technology policy i.e. molecular biology, biosafety; (i) future of small holder farming and (j) policies and interventions for sustainable poverty reduction and nutrition improvement.

Bangladesh and IFPRI

The changes that IFPRI had noticed on the basis of its experience, clearly applies to the case of Bangladesh. The pace of our poverty reduction seems to have paused for a while; available modern technologies are yet to reach the resource poor farmers; "layered" society of the early years have been replaced by a "network" society. Both of its agriculture and food production sectors tend to face chiming challenge from growing globalisation and trade liberalisation. Like IFPRI, Bangladesh needs to revisit some of its strategies in the light of the changes that have been shaping the world and its domestic front. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to suggest that IFPRI could help with some of the researches that Bangladesh needs to meet the goal of poverty reduction. This could be comprised of three 'C's: commitments to the goal set, capacity building and communications. Commitments could only be translated into actions through indigenous capacity building. And lastly, both commitments and capacity building could result from good communications between researchers of IFPRI, Bangladeshi partners including various stakeholders and policy makers.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE
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proportion of the developing world's population fell steeply from 37 to 22 per cent over the course of the 1970s and 1980s but slightly from 20 to 17 per cent during the 1990s. There was an absolute decline of seven million food insecure people in the earlier period compared to barely three million per year in the later period. In the backdrop of the Millennium Development Goal of cutting the number of hungry by half by 2015, a chiming challenge seemingly awaits all of us and IFPRI is of the view that a "business as usual" scenario is unlikely to achieve the goals. "Research is needed on the barriers to accelerating this sluggish progress on eliminating hunger in the food-rich world".

Secondly, IFPRI rightly reckons that the policy environment has changed dramatically over the decades. Central government authority, unlike that in 1970s or even 1980s, has been getting more diffused and many more actors have growningly been getting involved in food policy. "Layered societies" of the past have been replaced by "network societies" of the present and *ipso facto*, good working relationship with key minis-

problems and prospects. Researches need to reign over the problems to turn them into prospects so that developing countries could ride on the wave.

Thirdly, new technologies obviously offer great promise for advancing food security but not with an undifferentiated access. Researches are getting market driven and robustly going to the rich as the days elapse. To make research a public good, it is needed to identify policies to assure that food-insecure people have access to it. The policy research challenge is to identify and target high priority biological research and development to solve critical problems faced by small farmers and poor consumers. "More information is also needed to help integrate new technology with farmers' own knowledge and with organic and agroecological approaches to agriculture".

And finally, according to IFPRI, global health crises pose significant threat to food insecurity and nutrition. Allow me to cite some nerve-wrecking statistics from IFPRI's document on strategy named "IFPRI's Strategy: Toward Food and

ens food security. On the other hand, micronutrient malnutrition, often called "hidden hunger" afflicts two billion people with devastating effects on health and productivity.

Food and focus

Travelling with research agenda for long 25 years or so, IFPRI aims to lay its research agenda on the basis of pitfalls, promises and potentials. Its long experience with food security research was the key to arrive at judicious selection of priorities. Meantime, there have been a number of significant paradigm shifts in the evolutionary process:

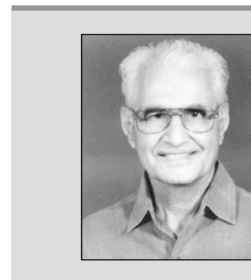
- λ Shift from farms and small holders to poor consumers and food security;
- λ Shift of attention from agricultural production to a broader notion food system;
- λ Emphasis on the preservation of natural resource base upon which the sustainability of agricultural development hinges;
- λ And shifts from general statements like reduction of food insecurity to specific target setting: why, when and by how

There are three policy planks upon which priorities seem to sail upon. First comes **research** on global food system efficiency, food system governance and food system innovations. The document on the details on each of the research item. Second, the **capacity strengthening** of research collaborators in developing countries to carry out food policy research with a new dimension of looking at cooperation with university networks and open universities. And finally, **communications** of research output to public, policy makers and the press with the motive of awareness raising.

Research themes

IFPRI has submitted twelve inter-linked strategic research themes for the next decade. Some of these are "old generation" researches having forceful implication in the days to come and some are "new generation" researches tuned with the changing time. But allow me to highlight only those that I deem close to Bangladesh's concerns: (a) global food situation and scenarios of policy risks and opportunities; (b)

How serious was the crisis?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

COMBINED Opposition's parleys with the government on July 27 last proved to be inconclusive. Still, they ended on a positive note, according to official sources, despite there having been no breakthrough on any substantive issue. Earlier, the government propaganda, to put the opposition on the defensive, was to the effect that the civilian political 'system' was under serious threat. Many inspired stories spoke of the exasperation of the COAS-President, with an oblique hint that the College of senior generals also was losing patience; the latter saw a Parliament paralysed for close on nine months and the Jamali government was proving to be a non-government. The entire political architecture supervised by Generals Tanvir Naqvi and Musharraf is threatened with collapse. It was freely speculated that Gen. Musharraf may take a 'drastic' step. The rest was left to the imagination.

It does look as if the civilian part of the government duly believed these stories. The opposition was also impressed in a general sort of way, though there were some who could not believe that the COAS would at this stage sack the whole lot of Assemblies, governments and take the risk and blame for a second coup -- that too against his own creatures. How would that be explained to world opinion, not to mention the egregious blow to the image of Pakistan -- a country

notorious for military coups and for instability that these underline. For, coups always generate instability.

There was also the legal aspect of such a drastic step, not to mention its political fallout. Hitherto Pakistan Army and its Chief had had a figleaf of Supreme Court's limited and controversial validation for the first three years. Now what legal lincoln they have, if they were to kill the direct offsprings of the last October's election at the end of three 'permitted' years. It would be yet another blow to what is left of the Constitution. It is hard to imagine Gen. Musharraf going again to the

negotiating from a position of strength. True, he has an army of half a million, claimed to be modern, under his command. He is really above law and can do almost anything. But that is theoretical, though his power is real enough for individual citizens. But on the national scale he has to think of the immediate and delayed reactions of 60 to 70 million Pakistani adults; nor can aspects of Pakistan's external relations permit unlimited exercise of power. To repeat, Musharraf and his subordinates not only do not occupy any high moral ground, theirs is a position of political

President's side, there was an iron hard stance about LFO and the uniform; these were said to be given facts; they were not negotiable. Not so now. Earlier Musharraf had retreated and hinted he could take off his Army uniform. On his return from American-European tour he specifically said he was flexible on LFO, the more substantial issue. That was inviting negotiations, though still mainly with MMA. The General may have to retreat some more.

On the opposition side, the position of PPP and PML(N) remains iron hard. Maybe it is due to

differences in their stances. It is quite as sordid powerpolitics as it comes. Where exactly do they finally clinch a deal in the current wheeling dealing is to be seen. True, the Musharraf side has more experienced psywarriors and his negotiating tactics are more effective because he is at the giving end. In such cases give and take is the master strategy in which both gain some and lose some.

That banishes the intimidating crisis? MMA will soon hit the right balance in weighing gains and losses and a deal will be cut. But if newsmen are not inventing, the two

PLAIN WORDS
Who knows better than Pakistanis the horrendous cost of defying the well formulated popular demands, backed by adequate mobilisation. Just as all hell was let loose when Yahya defied them. That can happen again...Respecting the results of a free and credible election is the only way out for rulers. That may open up the high road to progress and stability.

SC asking for another invocation of the Doctrine of Necessity and even ampler legal empowerment. No, that doesn't seem likely. Nor may the GHQ opinion be convinced that another shot at system-making by the same General will necessarily succeed. Well, in such an eventuality the military mind can only think of a tough no-nonsense Martial Law, probably under another General.

Another Martial Law in quick succession to almost four years of the COAS rule is too absurd a proposition, especially after the failure of the system the former built. It would be reinforcing failure. Think of the world reaction to the fourth -- or will it be fifth -- Martial Law. Think of what will hit the image of this country and the load of contempt the green passport holders will carry. No, that is altogether unlikely. Gen. Musharraf does not have all that many options. He is stuck with the system he has taken three and a half years to complete. He has to sink and swim with it.

Musharraf no doubt thinks he is

weakness. They have shot most of what their quiver contained. The threat of drastic action is largely unreal and is a bullying tactic.

It also seems true that the Combined Opposition -- actually no longer quite combined -- is also not as formidable a force as its numbers and claims would suggest. Its unity is a thing of the past. The MMA broke ranks with ARD and other opposition parties, including the two major mainstream parties, in responding with a 'yes' to PM Jamali's invitation for talks. The rest of opposition wanted meaningful assurances from the government. On major issues also -- LFO, President's legitimacy and NSC -- MMA has shifted closer to the government's position on these matters. Hence a serious rift in opposition ranks.

The point of it is that the cries of a serious crisis or the dire threat to the 'system', as Mr. Jamali was putting it frequently, were overstated, not to say a part of psywar by the General against the Opposition. Look at the trend that facts make. On the

dogged persistence with which the General is refusing to deal with them. Their test will come when the General would seek their cooperation on the putative real terms of allowing the exiled leaders to return. The smaller ARD parties have little option but to be highly principled. The MMA has already negotiated away its original demands. The MMA leaders are now publicly saying they will accept Musharraf with his Army uniform till Oct 2004, perhaps March 2005. They also say they will enable him to be elected as the President in the normal way after that. They promise to get LFO passed as Constitutional Amendments if certain agreed out unspecified changes are made in it. NSC's constitutional status is perhaps to be negotiated, as was the case in 1985 when too a General was roughing away a 'system'.

With such astounding flexibility on MMA's part and some unspecified flexibility on the General's part, where is that horrible crisis? Both sides have no insurmountable or in-principle

major MMA parties seem to have differing perceptions over what or how much to concede and what must be gained. They are Jamaat-Islami and JUI. Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the JI Chief, is not seen as keen to cut an early deal with Musharraf merely for flimsy gains or joining the government. He is said to have his sights set on next elections -- whenever they take place. He is said to think that if he plays the more high minded and principled statesman now, he might win power next time. On the other hand, the JUI Chief, Maulana Fazlur Rahman is more realistic about preserving his actual stakes: the NWFP Ministry, not to mention what his party might be able to take additionally from Musharraf in a deal. His recent mission to India may have been an earnest of more to come.

Even so, can Maulanas Qazi Hussain Ahmed and Fazlur Rahman really afford to fall out? One doubts. Both stand to lose far more than either can gain by ploughing a lonely furrow. Both are

said to be highly valued by the

ultimate political authority in Pakistan, viz. the College of Corps Commanders. Their falling out among themselves would be seen by that authority as national loss. They would, it is said, succeed in making them stay yoked. If these omnipotent guys had anything to do with MMA's birth, they should be supposed to demand that MMA stays united. For, a deal with a united MMA would be more effective in giving Musharraf the maximum MMA votes in the Parliament.

This is however the crisis for the rich and the powerful; some may still see it lingering, as the deal has not been signed, sealed and delivered. But it was a bogus crisis nonetheless; it did not concern the common folks. To them what is so different in Musharraf's rule now and of one year ago or what started after the Oct 02 polls? How can they be frightened by yet another Martial Law? Their conditions will remain the same. Indeed, what is going on inside Pakistan, from ordinary people's viewpoint, is generating another and more real Crisis. Its potentialities inspire horror.

Who knows better than Pakistanis the horrendous cost of defying the well formulated popular demands, backed by adequate mobilisation. Just as all hell was let loose when Yahya defied them. That can happen again. True, Pakistanis are not so aware and strong as the Bengalees were. But repeated rapes of democracy through secret doctoring of poll results by "agencies" over time is another name of defying the populace. Similar causes produce similar results. And don't think that the worm cannot turn -- rather suddenly -- as has happened before.

Is there any way out? Well, yes in theory: since the trouble starts by distorting poll results -- with a view to effectively defying the people's verdict -- exit from the still gathering of a storm lies in holding a transparently fair election under neutral international auspices. Respecting the results of a free and credible election is the only way out for rulers. That may open up the high road to progress and stability.

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OPINION

White House fails to whitewash white lies

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

THE end justifies the means, no doubt. This is exactly what has happened in US-led war against Iraq, of course, the other way round. The Bush Administration and its closest 'yes-man', British Prime Minister Tony Blair, very confidently floated the gigantic hoax that Saddam possessed, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and Blair, jumping a few miles ahead of Bush, said that Saddam can use those chemical weapons within 45 minutes of order. Thus they created a panic-situation with impending terror attacks on America, Britain and perhaps Israel too.

Desperate diseases need desperate medicines. Bush-Blair applied the desperate medicine to cure the desperate disease in Iraq. After the World-War II, the biggest ever concentration of ground and air forces was made available around Iraq. Regime of Saddam fell with Saddam's crumbling statue in the centre of Baghdad. Iraq is now under full control of the Anglo-US occupation forces. But the WMD

seems to have gone with the wind! However, in most cases occupation justified war.

Dr Kelly's death: Political implications?

But the whole operation has received the greatest shock and setback following the most unexpected and mysterious suicide of the British scientist Dr Kelly who was also government's weapon adviser as an expert on chemical weapons. Whatever might have been the reasons forcing Dr Kelly to commit suicide, there hangs a prima facie case of political implications. However, much depends on the high-level inquiry into the death, which is already being processed.

This unprecedented tragedy in the life of a scientist raised a huge storm, shaking many top-notchers in their boats. More fuel was added to fire by BBC's recent confirmation that Dr Kelly was the principal source of its most sensational report that Alastair Cambell, Tony Blair's senior aide on communication, had sexed up an intelligence dossier on Iraq's WMD, justifying US-led war against Iraq. But BBC had also

admitted it had tried to protect Dr Kelly from being identified as the source of the report. But the excellent gesture shown by BBC couldn't save the precious life of a scientist, when somebody among the high-ups leaked it and Kelly was grilled by a Parliamentary enquiry committee making his life miserable.

But the British press as well as some MPs took a long hand on Blair administration on Dr Kelly's death. Some of them accused the government of turning the weapons expert into a fall guy. A headline in the Daily Express read simply: Thrown to the wolves. While, the British Tory MP Richard Ottaway said that Dr Kelly's death would be a tragedy of ghastly proportion, if political implications had resulted in his death. A Labour MP Peter Kidfoyle, a staunch opponent of US-led war against Iraq, said in a recent interview, that "this is another bizarre twist to the whole on-going soap-drama which is the weapons of mass destruction excuse for going to war with Iraq".

What weapon experts say?

Let us also have a look at some of

the comments made by some weapons experts, including the just-retired chief of UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, Hans Blix, and another chief of the inspection team, retired earlier, Scott Ritter on the "looking intelligence" that had hyped up the so-called fake evidence on existence of WMD in Iraq.

Mr Blix, in an interview with the British newspaper, The Guardian, blamed some US Administration officials as undermining him, during his three years as chief of the inspection team. He also accused Washington of regarding the UN as an 'alien power', adding, that these officials planted nasty things in the media. He further alleged that Bush Administration was particularly upset that the weapons inspectors did not make more of their discovery in view of the cluster bombs and drones in the run-up to the US-led war.

Mr Ritter, a former US marine, who was chief, UN Weapons Inspector in Iraq (1991-98), and a bitter critic of Bush administration's Iraq policy, in his recent book, titled, "Frontier Justice, Weapons of Mass Destruction and Bush Whacking of

America", has accused Bush of illegally attacking Iraq and alleged that Bush had "lied to the American people and the Congress" about Iraq's WMD. Addressing a recent press conference, Mr Ritter argued that "what is needed in America is a regime change: Anything but Bush and (Vice-President) Cheney". It is interesting to note here that one of the corporate Petroleum companies, of which Dick Cheney was the chairman and Chief Executive from 1995-2000, is trying to grab the lion's share of Iraq's oil resources.

The democrat lawmakers of the US Congress had alleged that the company (Halliburton?) having links to Cheney was "getting too much business out of the Iraq war."

Another chemical weapons expert, Mr Ron Manby, former Director of the Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibitions of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), who was charged with the responsibility of implementing the UN Chemical Weapons Convention, signed by some 153 nations, in a recent BBC interview, had strongly asserted that Iraq's chemical weapons "posed no significant risk" to the world in the

run-up to the US-led war to oust Saddam.

Meanwhile, a German member of the UN weapons inspection team in Iraq, Peter Franck, had accused the US Administration of presenting "false evidence" against Saddam regime, adding that US Secretary of State Colin Powell "did not present truthful evidence" to the UN Security Council in his February 5 speech.

Now the cat has come out of the magical bag. Perhaps to save some fallen angels, CIA Chief George Tenet has volunteered (or, forced to do so?) to offer himself as a scapegoat by taking the responsibility on himself for a "key error" that Bush had included in his January 28 state of the union address to the US Congress. But it is too late for such shifting of burden after some four months of committing a crime in Iraq in the name of world peace and security. It is more than an ordinary crime, when innocent people, including women and children, were massacred to pave the way for a 'regime change'.

Ground slipping fast

But do these world leaders feel that the ground is fast slipping under their feet? Time is running out for them. The recent CNN-time poll shows that the popularity ratings of the US President has slipped down to the lowest level since March last. Fifty-one per cent of Americans polled had expressed their "doubts and reservations" about Bush's leadership which is a slip from 41 per cent in March, and 50 per cent think that Bush Administration had intentionally exaggerated its evidence about WMD. British Prime Minister's position is more slippery and shaky since his going into Iraq war along with Bush. The popularity ratings of Mr Blair, once considered as one of the most popular Prime Ministers in British history, has slid down from 51 per cent to 31 per cent in one month.

The above analysis brings us to the vital question of morality of the US-led war against Iraq and its consequences.

Bizarre show coming to an end?

Undoubtedly, the world had the good opportunity to witness, during

the last couple of months, 'the greatest show on earth', presented by two veteran actors along with a few jokers around to add colour to the bizarre show. But will the show continue? Let us see what a well-known writer columnist and author, Gore Vidal, (a cousin of Al-Gore, former vice-President of Clinton regime), says in his latest book Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and Cheney-Bush Junta" (Ref: DS 7.6.03). Taking a big slap on US Administration, Mr Gore says that the United States of America (USA) has now become "the United States of Amnesia." Gore had predicted that Bush will not win another term "... the economy is going to crush, you can't go on with 6 per cent unemployment, it is unheard of..."

Bush, thus, had pushed the country deliberately into the quagmire of nasty Iraq war. The much hyped adventure in Iraq desert had ultimately proved a mis-adventure with boomerang effect. Repetition of false hood do not become truth. The mills of God grind slowly but steadily.

AMM Shahabuddin is a retired UN Official.