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Land grabbing

Its identification as a national problem is welcome

AND grabbing has finally been identified as a national problem. And the government has decided to address it with the objective of recovering the huge areas of land 'lost' to the encroachers. We fully endorse the idea.

Recent reports have pretty much established the fact that land expropriation is going on in a planned way across the country. It is also true that the steps taken so far to counter the illegal business have not been particularly effective due largely to lack of concerted and determined efforts on the part of the government agencies concerned.

Obviously the elements that could make a sustained drive against illegal occupation of land successful were missing. The secretaries' meeting addressed by the Prime Minister underscored the necessity for stringent laws and formation of a broad-based national monitoring committee. It also exuded a realisation that the problem cannot be handled by a single ministry. A collaborative approach with the participation of all the line ministries concerned is the need of the hour.

There is no alternative to the pure law and order approach in dealing with the land grabbers. The housing minister has given a call for social movement against the encroachers. We believe a social movement is already on, particularly in the environment-related cases. People are taking a stand against occupation of land that ignores the environmental needs. So the government's job is to respond

Finance and Planning Minister Saifur Rahman has very rightly said that the first task is to determine the extent of the damage, that is, to find out how much land has slipped out of government's possession.

Theoretically speaking, there is no dearth of right thinking. But the biggest challenge before the government is to recover the land already expropriated by the grabbers. The practical bottlenecks are many, as in most of the cases the grabbers have managed to collect or frame forged documents in support of their ownership. It is going to be a long-drawn legal battle, but the outcome is bound to be positive if the matter is pursued till the end with grit and

Above all, political will is needed to put an end to land grabbing. The will must be strong enough to overcome the clout of the land grabbers, many of whom have political connections and are capable of putting up resistance through pressure lobbies.

No WMD found in Iraq

There can be no excuse for misleading the public

HE initial report of US chief weapons inspector, David Kay, that his team has to date found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, is bad news for President Bush. It is bad news because it is becoming increasingly apparent that his arguments justifying a rush to war were, at best, misleading, and at worst, outright dishonest.

Bush insisted during the run-up to war that Saddam had an active biological and chemical weapons program and that he was aggressively pursuing the development of a nuclear weapons program. It was on the explicit grounds that Saddam's WMD capability presented an imminent threat to the security of the world that Bush took the US to

Mr. Kay's preliminary report makes it clear that even if Saddam is eventually found to have possessed some esidual WMD capability and this is looking less likely by the day - under no circumstances did his WMD capability present an imminent threat to the world.

Somewhat perplexingly, Bush remains unabashed by the report's uncomfortable findings. He now insists that even if no active WMD capabilities or programs are found in Iraq, the war was still justified on the grounds of Saddam's history of developing and using WMD in the past and on the grounds that he was a brutal dictator.

Bush's anxiety for the suffering of the Iragi people under Saddam is refreshing but scarcely credible, if for no other reason than his administration's indifference to protecting human rights in other contexts.

In any case, the issue here is not whether or not Saddam had a history of developing and using WMDs or whether the Iraqi people are better off without him. The issue is whether it is acceptable to mislead the public into war.

It is possible that Bush did believe that Saddam should be removed from power due to his appalling human rights record and due to his history of developing and using WMD, but that is not what he told the world and that is not why he went to war. The justification he gave to the world for war was that Saddam possessed active WMD programs that posed an imminent threat to world security. Mr. Kay's initial report strongly suggests that Saddam's WMD capability posed no imminent threat to world security and that President Bush is thus guilty of seriously misrepresenting the case for war.

The nation's collective shame



NOUGH ignominies were already smeared on the face of the nation ever since its emergency -- thanks to numerous omissions and commissions of our ruling class. But seldom has the public conscience been so profoundly stirred as of now when the established norms and values are crumbling down and the societal order and cohesion going haywire. Or else how could an episode of police brutality involving the women activists of Opposition Awami League could at all take place early last week. The nation aghast at the spectacle of a woman dishonured in the street wonders just how many more notches will it go down in ignominy if the trend goes unde-

On 27 September last when an unprovoked swoop was made on what was reported to be a peaceful procession of women activists to protest against rising prices of the essentials, among other things, and some of processionists were stripped, it at once put the nation to a collective shame for it was an aberration of civilisational dimension. It inexorably pushed us towards the brink of an abyss -- the abyss of bestiality and desecrated the soul of the nation. It could not to be looked upon as just another incidence of insignificance and the nation stunned by its sheer ugliness will take long to recover from the trauma of it.

As the diverse sections of the public opinion were vocal in condemning the police action and stridently accused the establishment for the obscenity of the incidence, the four-party alliance and its supporters came up with a grotesque explanation of the tell-tale pictures published in the newspaper. They alleged that the agitating activists themselves were responsible for their debasement. It was perfectly in line with their earlier refrain while countering the AL allegation of the alliance government killing its men. The alliance government always insisted that it was AL itself which killed its own men to make an issue out of it. The question, however, remains open if some one or some entity would make an issue through self-annihilation and its own debasement.

In BNP's utopian vision the country ruled by it could indeed be hunkydori, but for the AL's perfidy while the AL is convinced that the only impediment in their way of turning the country into 'Golden Bengal' are the usurpers of post-1975 Bangladesh. Caught in the middle the public concern is where the both are taking the country! How the polity has been shaped up in the mage of the both is evident from their perception of each other Yet, in a democracy they could hit a common ground had they

on a conspiracy theory of the latter winning it through rigging Much of the AL's politics and political agenda follows this notion which is both counterproductive for the party itself and pernicious for the country's healthy political development. Had the AL accepted the result in food grace and participated in the democratic process of the governance of which the opposition also is a vital part, the picture could be different. Instead in its doctrinaire rigidity, the party stuck to its archaic way only to lose further its once-acclaimed mass appeal.

The AL's chronic inability to accept unpleasant reality has not only left the party in lurch it has also been in a great measure, responsible --among other things -- for the prevailing deadlock is national politics.

Similarly, the debasement of the national politics is no less the product of the BNP's chronic

PERSPECTIVES

How the polity has been shaped up in the image of the both are evident from their perception of each other. Yet in a democracy they could hit a common ground had they been shorn of the prejudices they so far lived with. Far from that prospect coming true the two premier political parties of the country are set on a collision course of unpredictable

been shorn of the prejudices they so far lived with. Far from that prospect coming true the two premier political parties of the country are set on a collision course of unpredictable horror.

We are witnessing only the syndrome of that horror with both the parties going berserk in debasing each other. If no good to the country, they have been able to bring it to a pass where even the honour of the women is not spared. The perverse attitude developed by both blind them to distinguishing between what is decent and what is not and can go to any extent to score political mileage.

It is a typical 'Awami' mindset not the accept the legitimacy of an overwhelming mandate received by the BNP-led alliance in last election and to harp

inability to deliver and pass the buck to its political opponents for all of its failures. The party's strong arm-tactics in dealing with its opponents only reveals the hollowness of its authority and it is likely to adopt still more hardline in desperation only to an impending peril for the polity.

Unless good sense prevails on both the parties there can be many more repetition of the horror in the street we witnessed early last week. Till then we pin our hopes on the arts of possible and keep our fingers crossed, although it is only the weaklings who believe in miracles to happen to change their destiny.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

US Presidential Race

On the nomination trail Who's afraid of Wesley Clark?



And they have good cause to be worried. Bush trails Clark in recent opinion polls and has no discernible strategy to use against a centrist Democrat with unimpeachable national security and foreign policy credentials who is a four-star general and a Rhodes Scholar to boot.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

OW can you tell Republicans are afraid of Gen. Wesley Clark? It's easy. You can tell by the whispering campaign that has already begun against the General. No sooner had he announced his intention to run for the Democratic nomination on September 18th than Republican operatives and propagandists were all over cyberspace and other more conventional channels of communication slyly denouncing and attempting to discredit Clark

Conservative pundit, John Ellis, incidentally first cousin of the president, who achieved notoriety by calling the 2000 election for Bush when working for Fox News, precipitating the media rush to declare Bush the victor, floated his theory as soon as September 19th that Clark's entire candidacy has been conceived of and stage-managed by ex-President Bill Clinton. According to Ellis's theory, the idea is to create a groundswell of support for Sen. Hillary Clinton as Clark's vice-presidential running mate. The full idea is for Clark to lose, thus making Sen. Clinton the front-runner for 2008, the run as VP supposedly having cleansed her of any residual baggage she might be carrying. What is in it for Clark according to this scenario is unclear, one of many flaws in Ellis's grand theory.

This particular attempt to discredit Clark's candidacy, which has received much airtime in certain conservative strongholds is based on the mistaken assumption of Clintonhaters that anything associated with the ex-president will turn off the voters as much as it does them. More subtly, though, positioning

Clark as a tool of the party establishment could hurt Clark with the grass roots of the party. Sadly for Ellis and his ilk, there is zero evidence to suggest any such thing.

The idea of Sen. Clinton as Clark's running mate idea that has been propagated by Republican activists is perhaps a shrewder tactic, as voters remain ambivalent if not hostile to the idea of Sen. Clinton on a national ticket a recent poll put her negatives in such a context in the 60s. But of course Sen. Clinton is not going to run in 2004 for the simple reason that such a move would make her look exactly the kind of carpet-bagging, power-hungry politician she has convinced the people of New York she is not. In any case, she already is the presumptive front-runner for 2008 and it's hard to see the attraction of being on a losing ticket. And of course, they might win, and then where would she be? In Al Gore's old job? I don't think so.

Then there is the story widely publicized by the Rupert Murdochowned Weekly Standard that Clark had told two people (incidentally Republican operatives) that upon his return to the US from Kosovo, he had attempted to find work within the Bush administration but that the only reason he wasn't a Republican was that "Karl Rove never returned my phone calls." Clark has since clarified that he made the statement in jest. The incidentally Republican operatives insist that Clark made the comment in deadly earnest. Rightwing propagandists, led by the inimitable Andrew Sullivan, profess that the issue raises grave concerns as to Clark's consistency. Sullivan, indeed, regularly drops items accom-

panied by a barbed snide comment

from him into his widely-read weblog

(www.andrewsullivan.com) suggest-

ing that Clark is unstable and inconsistent and, in Sullivan's opinion, a little nuts

Expect to hear a lot more in the coming months about Clark's prosecution of the Kosovo war and especially about his being a hothead who was constantly in conflict with his superiors in the US military and his allied commanders in NATO.

This malicious little buzz that is running through right-wing airwaves in the US is standard operating procedure for Karl Rove, President Bush's political adviser. It mirrors his insidious whispering campaigns against both John McCain and Al Gore in 2000. That McCain must have gone a little crazy in captivity in Vietnam. That he had a black lovechild (actually his Bangladeshi-born adopted daughter). That Gore was a pathological liar. That Gore said he invented the internet. That Gore had to hire a woman to teach him how to dress and act like an alpha-male.

In a sense, this attempted smearing of Clark is something of a compliment. It indicates what a serious threat the Bush political machine and its minions believe Clark to be. And they have good cause to be worried. Bush trails Clark in recent opinion polls and has no discernible strategy to use against a centrist Democrat with unimpeachable national security and foreign policy credentials who is a four-star general and a Rhodes Scholar to boot. So far all the Bush team has managed to muster against Clark is a little under-handed innuendo. But if Clark continues to rise in the polls, expect the attacks to get lower in turn.

Move with the time



KULDIP NAYAR writes from New Delhi

HE Dawn, one of the few liberal English dailies in the subcontinent, posed this August a question to 26 leading writers and poets in Pakistan: Should Pakistan and India bury the hatchet? All of them responded positively. There was none who hedged or put conditions to the proposition. In fact, they said that it was time that the two countries settled down as good neighbours, many reminding the governments on both sides that they had no other option. Of course, the replies were in the wake of the electrifying effect the visits of parliamentary delegations had created in June and July. I do not think there is any basic difference in the mood even after the spat between Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf at the UN. I was in Karachi a few days ago to attend a seminar. My interaction with many people convinced me that the same current of goodwill ran beneath the surface, although there were some bruised feelings and some expressions of exasperation that people should resign themselves to sour

I suspect that when Islamabad

allowed the parliamentary delegations and a meet of MPs and journalists it expected the governmentlevel talks to follow. After New Delhi's firm 'no' to a dialogue until cross border terrorism stopped, the Pakistan establishment was angry. This became clear from a statement by Foreign Minister Kurshid Kasuri. Hewelcomed people-to-people contact but wanted the governments to take over for any tangible result. It should not come as a surprise that Islamabad barred the entry of former Indian jurists, eminent artists and writers. That looks

them face the police harassment or pinning them down to one or two cities. Visitors on their return make no secret of their admiration for India's open society and its technological advancement

What happened at the UN has had a negative effect on the people on both sides, although there is nothing new in the accusations and counter-accusations. In fact, this has become an annual ritual which could have been skipped if Musharraf had not used the vitriolic language while attacking India on Kashmir. Vajpayee when they witness the UN-like scenes. But my experience is that they soon dust off the fallout and nick up the thread from where they had left it off. It is apparent that a vested interest in peace and amity has got built over the years. Still wish the civil society in both the countries had been more vocal and more critical of their respective government for keeping the peoples

Vajpayee, who is singled out for praise in Pakistan for his desire to nurture good relations, has rekincould have avoided the situation by dled some hope by saying at Zurich

admitted his complicity when he offered during his UN speech to encourage a general cessation of violence within Kashmir. But will his successor, another military dictator, be better? A television programme at New Delhi showed the audience almost unanimously preferring Musharraf to any other military man. I do not see any immediate

Kashmir. True. Musharraf has

prospect of military losing control over Pakistan. Should we continue to keep Islamabad at bay as long as Musharraf is at the helm of affairs? In a new audiotape released by

without further loss of time. To begin with, Musharraf should work unilaterally on the general cessation of violence in Kashmir, the offer he made at the UN on "reciprocal basis." Vajpayee on his part should take up Musharraf's offer for a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC). This does not amount to beginning a dialogue. It

is for the examination of ceasefire

proposal. New Delhi will not look

be available between India and

Pakistan. Even now, with all their

efforts, they will be hard put to find a

solution which is acceptable to New

Yet, some steps should be taken

Delhi, Islamabad and Srinagar,

changing its stand. One of the suggestions made by Pakistan Foreign Minister was to have a SAARC force to supervise the LoC. Musharraf's latest is a joint supervision by India and Pakistan of the LoC. New Delhi was itself once in favour of a joint patrol of the LoC to check infiltration. All these proposals can be on the table for a discussion between the top brass from both sides. They can also be examined at the diplomatic level now that both countries have their ambassador in place.

The warning by the UN observers overseeing the LoC that the violence can escalate should be taken seriously even though we do not recognise them officially. I think New Delhi should make more efforts f it wants to give some shape to Vajpayee's remark that "a fresh impetus" was needed to bring about amity between the two countries.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian colum-

BETWEEN THE LINES

The warning by the UN observers overseeing the LoC that the violence can escalate should be taken seriously even though we do not recognise them officially. I think New Delhi should make more efforts if it wants to give some shape to Vajpayee's remark that "a fresh impetus" was needed to bring about amity between the two countries.

like the pattern henceforth unless some developments take place to ease the atmosphere.

New Delhi has not banned the entry of Pakistani groups because it has not been rattled by the popular response as the Pakistan establishment has been. Still when it comes to issuing visas to individuals, however distinguished, the Government of India is as cussed as the one across the border. New Delhi does not realise that it is losing the opportunity for wider contacts by not issuing visas liberally. This is the time when India

should open an office at Wagha near Amritsar to facilitate the visit of Pakistanis to India, without making

ignoring what Musharraf said. But then the two have certainelements at home to placate. The disappointing part is that the democratically elected Prime Minister is increasingly bringing himself down to the level of a military dictator.

The dangerous aspect of the stand off is that every time the lanquage is becoming harsher and the attitude harder. So long as the two sides find in abuses the catharsis to their alienation is not bad. But things can go out of hand, particularly when officials on both sides seem to have been allowed to dip their hands in the muck and throw it at the other in the manner they prefer.

Many people do get worked up

that "a fresh impetus" was needed to bring about amity between the two countries. He may have rightly blamed Musharraf's statements for causing "a setback to peace initiatives." But has he ever considered the Pakistan President's predicament? Maybe Musharraf has got the short end of the stick. He wants a way out of the various problems he faces and believes that the talks with India would provide him with one. True, Musharraf is the person who initiated the Kargil war and sabotaged the Lahore Declaration. True, he is the one who has encouraged militants such as Maulana Masood Azhar of Laskar-e-Toiba which operates in

Osama-bin Laden group, the terrorist outfit of Al-Qaida has appealed to the Pakistanis to "topple" Musharraf. It finds him too soft towards India and its allegation is that he will hand over them "to the Hindus." Obviously, he does notlook popular with at least one set of terrorists even though he has the knack of keeping another set on his side.

Time is of the essence. It is an open secret that there is nobody other than Vajpayee who can push the government or the BJP to come to terms with Pakistan. Between now and the general elections, there is only one year left. Both Vajpayee and Musharraf have to face the facts. No ideal situation would ever

OPINION

Bus menace in Dhaka streets

MOHAMMED NAWAZISH

E were happy that rickshaws were withdrawn from some important roads making vehicular movement easier and guicker. We were equally happy to learn that a large number of modern buses would be pressed into service to cater to passengers' needs. Indeed, Dhaka streets are now filled with fleets of buses though many are of the old stock heavily reeking and emitting roaring noise. The number is still increasing and the narrow streets are already showing signs of getting clogged creating a new sort of traffic jam that is no less undesirable than that created by slow moving rickshaws. But the real menace created by the swelling number of large-bodied vehicles centers round the core issue of traffic discipline and human safety. I am afraid the growing trend is

sending down a very ominous signal. The reverse side of the coin does not look that glittery.

A bus -- a human-hauler, doubledecker, medium or very large type -has a strong body and a very powerful engine and the driver is fully aware of the monster under his command. He knows that in case of minor hits and collisions it is the lighter vehicle that has to bear the brunt. Most drivers possess dubious driving licenses and are illiterate and stubborn. Driving such powerful and large vehicles on crowded city roads requires both skill and a very patient and cool temperament none of which is expected from these persons. Let us have a look at the present situation on Dhaka streets.

First, buses care little about speed limits and even on 90-degree turns they keep up an unusual thrust that threatens all smaller vehicles assembled near the crossing convergence. This is sheer recklessness fraught with grave

Second, they never keep within a lane but continue swerving from lane to lane as they roar ahead. They do not care to see if another vehicle is running parallel along a different lane and a small deviation might end up in a devastating crash. Only recently I escaped miraculously as a bus in full throttle suddenly swerved right to enter the lane on which our car was cruising and in a split of a moment a large portion of the left front mudguard, including the headlight of our car, was sheared of with a loud bang. There was no previous signal or indication that the speeding bus was about a veer into a different lane to its wrong side. The bus sped off as we lav in a state of trauma. Buses are often seen moving in swarms occupying all available lanes in a

road forcing all other modes of transport out at bay. Third, it is a common sight in

Dhaka streets that buses are parked in or near the middle of the road to drop and take in passengers halting traffic flow creating severe bottleneck in the process. No amount of honking and persuasions can make them move before completing their task. To cite a few instances, look at the unearthly chaos and frenzy at Shahbag, Kalabagan, Gulistan or Farmgate areas. This practice in fact originated with the failure of the city authority to provide sufficient and clearly marked stoppage spaces for buses. Even when some marked spaces are available, the drivers would not take the trouble of edging out and queuing to halt at the given space. They get little or no resistance from on-duty traffic personnel as

they continue violating stoppage regulations. Authorities concerned have immense responsibility in this regard. The number of large-bodied buses has since leaped up and the number is still expanding. It has to be ensured that stoppage spaces allotted at different points are reasonably spacious to accommodate the flow of incoming vehicles especially during rush hours. A routine and cursory solution will serve no purpose. Traffic constabulary has to be strict in enforcing parking regulations.

I have referred only to issues relating to road safety and traffic discipline that are vital at this critical hour when buses are going to take over the place of rickshaws and, to a large extent, the private cars in view of increasing operating cost, parking problem and dreaded traffic jam. A customer-friendly and efficient bus service is an indispensable part of modern city life all over the world but a mismanaged and disarrayed service is bound to do more harm than good. I put forward some suggestions that might prove helpful in resolving the overwhelming problem.

Drivers must possess genuine driving license and must be physically and mentally fit. I do not know how the authority will ensure it but ensure they must. It is strongly recommended that a short training course on city driving conducted by the traffic authority should be made mandatory for every driver. A 6 to 8hour training package should be adequate to serve the purpose. The class-room environment and a face to face interaction with those responsible for controlling traffic on streets will have a positive impact on drivers. The enforcers of traffic discipline have to clearly define

what the drivers are required to do and not to do. Mere periodic announcements by microphones, and that too in garbled language, fall on deaf ears.

The maximum speed for buses has to be strictly restricted to 30mph within the city limits. The bus lanes should be clearly demarcated and no bus should normally be allowed to change lane or overtake the one in front. In keeping with modern technology, portable speed detectors and cameras to detect overtaking and swerving-off-lane should be occasionally installed at unidentified locations.

Buses will stop only at the designated points and never park alongside a stationary vehicle to create parallel rows. They will leave parking areas serially without creating confusion and disruption in normal traffic flow. It has to be ensured, however, that stoppage

well-marked, and must have enough space to handle rush hour movement of heavy vehicles. There has to be a rational configuration pattern in the schedules of trips and stoppages of buses belonging to different owners in order to avoid unnecessary congestions at certain points or on routes Old and rickety buses are to be

points are selected carefully and

withdrawn to make way for new and better ones. A good and tidy road network with adequate markings and updated automatic signaling device at crossings is a sine qua non for ideal traffic management. We are trying to induce people to adopt busculture but we have to be cautious that in doing so we do not let loose Frankenstein's monsters on roads to cause destruction to life and property. The mess-up on roads has to be cleared at all costs