

Land grabbing

The government must respond vigorously

IT is a startling revelation indeed by the parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry that real estate developers have grabbed about 1,000 acres of premium government land in and around the city.

The committee, which gave the names of some real estate developers, also said that a full list of the illegal occupants would soon be made public. It is another reminder of the truth that land grabbing is going on in an organised manner, with the measures adopted to stop the illegal practice being far from adequate.

A recent survey showed that land grabbers were active all over the country. Such activities are a big drain on the vital national asset. The committee has asked the government to take immediate steps to recover the land lost to the real estate developers.

The government's options are limited. It has to identify the land grabbers and go flat-out to evict them. Matters have been made complicated by the fact that many of the grabbers have forged documents at their disposal. This is the result of the issue being ignored year after year. The noose of the law was slackened to the point where such gross violation of the law could take place.

Obviously, the expropriators have not been alone in their unlawful acts. Most of them have political clout and they must have worked in collusion with the government officials concerned. There is no other way to explain how the land slipped out of the government's hand.

However, the committee has rightly suggested that the cases of land grabbing be filed under the Speedy Trial Act. Speed is an important element here since loss of time in recovering the land would only prolong illegal occupation of the land that the government can use for various development projects.

The government must act quickly and decisively against the land grabbers.

Monga in northern districts

Relief should reach the needy

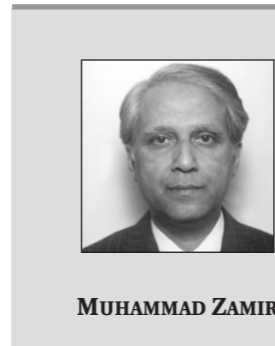
MONGA, a local word to describe a near-famine situation, has taken hold of the northern districts of the country. Reports coming in have painted a grim picture of the plight of the affected people. Stories of those who have been starving only explain how vulnerable they are to the machinations of exploiters.

There are allegations that VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards are not reaching all of those who are entitled to these in the first place. Some did not even get the card for not being able to pay the amount they were asked to pay. What's more frustrating is the denial of the allegation by the administration, while some one in authority reportedly caught red-handed some local functionaries distributing less amount of rice than allocated. Moreover, there have been complaints of political preference being applied while distributing grains. In matters of humanitarian assistance, the administration is expected to remain above board.

Now the government is learnt to have taken steps to check misuse and misappropriation of relief materials. We wish the administration had taken the precaution at the beginning. If they had done so, the allegations would not have arisen in the first place.

However, we would like to see the actions taken by the authorities to be effective. It is important in the ultimate analysis that the needy should get what they deserve and the exploiters kept at bay.

Evolving dimensions of US foreign policy



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

JUDGING from articles appearing recently in various American publications, most US political scientists seem preoccupied with the question whether the US stands at the threshold of empire. What is important is that the intellectual right and the intellectual left are split on the issue, while the vast political middle appear to be open but cautious. Intellectuals realise that the brew in the cauldron is simmering but they still cannot anticipate how things will be in a few years time.

Post 9/11 events have been taking on their own dynamics and public discourse has sometimes attempted to follow with their own pronouncements. The reality is that for the first time in more than two hundred years of its existence, America might be firmly planted in the 'Muslim hertland.' This has created its own aspirations. American expeditionary forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan have started raising questions as to whether the USA is moving 'inexorably' towards an era of unprecedented world hegemony that could also be construed as 'imperial ambitions.'

Supporters of this theory point out that America is the only nation that maintains five global military commands encompassing more than a million armed forces personnel on four continents. It is also stressed that it roams every ocean with major naval forces, guarantees the survival of client states round the world, assumes custodianship of global trade and commerce and declares its desires to be universally suitable.

Still now, patriotism, nationalism and the fervour for the flag have held things together but there is growing

speculation that a continued involvement abroad will in all probability affect domestic politics. We need to remember that an election year is coming up in the United States.

At every opportunity the US Administration has been careful to point out that their actions abroad have not been inspired because of territorial ambitions. It is suggested that US actions are meant to foster democracy, peace and stability round the world. Critics however are equally quick to refer to

democratic institutions and distinctive heritage as a republic in which the idea of the state superseded the importance of any governing individual or faction; and a budding imperial entity that wrapped its muscular body of self-interest in a finely embroidered cloak of idealism and self-perceived virtue." All these principals became the bedrock for eventual belief in UP primacy and entitlement to undertake unilateral action.

It will be harsh if one is critical of the

aimed at reflecting this reality. The paper also suggested that America should "sufficiently account for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order." It was further proposed that the country should "maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." One needs hardly to look too far

almost created a situation that would have required US troops on the ground (with potential for heavy casualties) instead of US planes intervening from high altitudes. Fortunately for all concerned, Russia played a responsible role in persuading Milosevic to give in.

The central problem that we face today is the contrast of perception as to what will ensure freedom, peace and liberty. America believes that it is not only essentially a benign nation but

American dominance and relentless force on behalf of American values. Within the ambit of the current US Administration, several persons like Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith and Richard Perle actively pursue this trend of thought. The dislike for their beliefs by the liberal democrats in America was best exemplified in 'neocons' being referred to as "democratic imperialists" by Brookings Institution Fellow Ivo Dalder.

Right now, the star of the neocons appear to be ascendant. They appear to be receiving more attention from the US President who believes in an existing rationale for pro-active use of American power on a global scale being justified as a necessary protective measure.

Recently, there have been reports in the press (with expected denials) that Secretary Powell will not continue in his post if Bush wins a second term. There is also speculation that he will be replaced by either a 'nationalist' or a 'neocoon'. If Powell leaves and there is such a change towards further right, the scenario will become even more inflexible, be it in matters of environment, trade, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine or other significant issues affecting US foreign policy decisions.

Even the most subtle change in directions of US foreign policy will affect the international scene in more ways than one given American involvement in each pie. Unfortunately or fortunately for America, that country has become enmeshed in being a global cop. We also know that the job of a policeman never ends. As is growing evident in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has been easy for her to get on top of a tiger but it is now difficult to get down from its back. The chaos in the wake of the Iraq invasion and the challenges of nation-building and peace-making will make things even more complex and difficult. The chances are that America will be drawn even deeper into the vortex of other conflicts and more contentious situations.

Hopefully, for the rest of the world it will not be a vicious cycle that will end in that country becoming more isolationist.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

As is growing evident in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has been easy for the US to get on top of a tiger but it is now difficult to get down from its back. The chaos in the wake of the Iraq invasion and the challenges of nation-building and peace-making will make things even more complex and difficult. The chances are that America will be drawn even deeper into the vortex of other conflicts and more contentious situations.

President Bush's recent State of the Union speech where he declared that "the course of this nation does not depend on the decision of others." Recent pronouncements by several highly placed members of the US Administration also run on similar lines where there is a juxtaposition of moral certitude and strategic power. It is this blend which makes things more complex and less transparent.

I was in Boston recently attending a meeting at Harvard University. While there, a Professor drew a very interesting picture. When asked to explain the recent trends in US foreign policy, he mentioned that America at the end of the Cold War found itself in much the same situation as Rome after its destruction of Carthage. The US like the Roman Empire of that time 'had emerged as the sole superpower capable of imposing hegemonic order upon a potentially chaotic world of vastly lesser states'. This view was also supported in an article I read there written by Robert W. Merry. He claimed that America in the 1990s found itself as "a power with far-flung client states and military outposts supporting multitudinous commercial and diplomatic interests around the world; a naval force without peer anywhere upon the sea; a power proud of its

United States for its active pursuit of self-interest. This philosophy is followed by most states, at least in idealism if not in reality. Restraints of different kinds, unfortunately, do not permit many to demonstrate the kind of independence that they might like to show.

What bothers many developing nations however is not this US drive towards looking after its own needs, but the emerging version where the ultimate goal will be "an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of order and the enforcer of norms" (as explained by Andrew J. Bacevich). In the mind of many decision makers in Washington today, this brand will ensure freedom and democracy which in turn implies stability and security.

It would be proper to refer to this point to Paul Wolfowitz, the present US Deputy Defence Secretary and his views about American pre-eminence. In 1991, when he was Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, he supervised the preparation of a position paper which identified USA as a premier geopolitical reality in the post Cold War era and posited the notion that American foreign policy should be

from such assertions, if one wants to discover the philosophical doctrine that led to the concept of pre-emption and America's right to protect itself from potential threats.

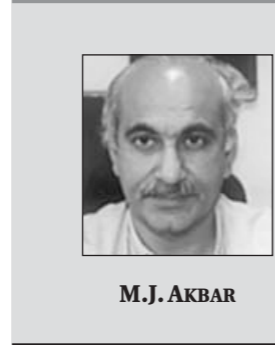
After the debacle in Mogadishu, Somalia, the US Administration policy makers learnt a valuable lesson. They understood that urban combats had to be avoided and that all armed engagements involving US troops has to be carried out in a manner that would drastically reduce possibilities of casualties. This new Clinton doctrine served as the matrix for the dramatic increase in the use of military force around the world. Military analysts have noted that in the decade since the end of the Soviet system, the USA has embarked on nearly thirty military interventions, as compared to only sixteen during the five decades of the Cold War. Bacevich suggests that this is the beginning of the militarisation of US foreign policy. Former Secretary of State Albright however drew a fine line of distinction between the use of military force and starting a war.

This antiseptic approach of intervention without suffering casualties was however most sorely tested during the open-ended Balkan conflict in 1999, when Serb Slobodan Milosevic with his unpredictable defiance

that the world should embrace its habits and systems. However, many nations in the world do not subscribe to this notion and differ as to what constitutes the ideals political and economic system. It is this paradox that is creating conflicts and breeding terrorists.

Dispassionately, if one analyses US foreign policy today, one discerns three strains of thought. The first group may be broadly termed as being 'pragmatists', as embodied in the current Secretary of State Colin Powell. They worry about America becoming militarily overextended and support the idea of US observing international norms and protocols to the fullest extent possible. The second group consists of the 'nationalists', personified by Vice-president Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and White House National Security Adviser C Rice. They believe in the projection of American power to protect American interests and maintain global stability. They however stop short of trying to change the world in America's image. It is the third group -- the 'neocons' (neo-conservatives) that reflect a more extreme position. The unfortunate events of 9/11 have given them the handle to argue their case. They believe in a grand global vision of

Sonia is the problem, not the solution



M. J. AKBAR

minister and party president is 19 per cent. Ashok Gehlot gets 43 per cent support while Sonia Gandhi manages just 24 per cent in a state where the party has some positive bounce.

The evidence is in. Where the Congress has won, it is chief ministers who have taken the party to victory, despite the drag factor called Sonia Gandhi. The minimal job of any leader is to add to the party's base vote; a leader should be an asset, not a liability. If you need any more convincing look at the figures

Ashok Gehlot's excellent performance as chief minister has saved his party from an MP-like fate, but the BJP actually registers a far higher positive swing in this state than in MP.

There is a 7 per cent growth in the BJP vote in Rajasthan although that is still not enough to cross the 44 per cent vote that Gehlot has retained for his party. But a further two per cent swing during the campaign can change the seat equations dramatically. The election campaign will be decisive in

for Atal Behari Vajpayee. In Delhi, Vajpayee has 48 per cent support against the BJP's 35 per cent. In Madhya Pradesh, despite the fact that his party is winning, Vajpayee still rates higher than the BJP, getting 56 per cent against his party's 43 per cent. In Rajasthan the difference is higher in the Prime Minister's favour: he scores 52 per cent against the BJP's 40 per cent; while in Chhattisgarh Vajpayee has a remarkable 62 per cent support against his party's 43 per cent.

points ahead in Chhattisgarh. There was a time when the Prime Minister was just three or four points ahead of the lady who wants his job, but time has exposed Sonia Gandhi's distance from the Indian electorate.

There is no mystery as to why the Prime Minister's approval ratings have gone up. The climb restarted when Mr Vajpayee once again took charge of his own government. The people elected him four years ago, and they elected him to lead, not to be led. When the

dinner for rent-a-*rozedaar* types does not cost crores of rupees. No one heard that the Congress had sent all that fabulous savings to the poor, parched farmer either. Sonia Gandhi's *iftar* has returned to agenda this year because secularism is back in demand, now that "soft-Hindutva" has fallen flat on its face. Placing the party's core values on a hire-purchase scheme is not the answer.

The only realistic option before the Congress, if it wants to make the general election a contest, is to dismount from the high horse and seek alliances. The operative word is 'seek'. It can no longer afford to wait for alliances. Even a year ago, before the Gujarat elections, the Congress was in a much stronger position, and if it had opened options for Mulayam Singh Yadav and Sharad Pawar in Gujarat, its own fate might not have been as dismal as it became. Hubris extracts its price. Today both Yadav and Pawar are looking in a different direction. Both have made it clear that there is no question of accepting Sonia Gandhi as a future Prime Minister. Pawar has gone as far as to laugh at the idea while claiming that he was amused by some other joke. Mayawati now has no such reservations, but she is never an unalloyed joy. Perhaps introspection is too much to ask for from the Congress.

One of the marginal questions in the opinion poll asked: What do you feel about Vasundhara Raje being a *maharani* and the BJP's chief ministerial candidate? Forty per cent of the voters answered: Being a *maharani* is not important. Certainly the commoner, Ashok Gehlot, has taken the measure of royal ambitions. In adjoining Madhya Pradesh, commoner Uma Bharti is giving a serious headache to 'Raja' Digvijay Singh. Is there a message here? Are voters now registering a thumbs-down for dynasts? That must come as bad news to the premier dynastic family in Indian politics, the Nehru-Gandhis.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

The only realistic option before the Congress, if it wants to make the general election a contest, is to dismount from the high horse and seek alliances. The operative word is 'seek'. It can no longer afford to wait for alliances. Even a year ago, before the Gujarat elections, the Congress was in a much stronger position, and if it had opened options for Mulayam Singh Yadav and Sharad Pawar in Gujarat, its own fate might not have been as dismal as it became. Hubris extracts its price.

from Chhattisgarh, where the Congress and the BJP seem evenly placed for the moment. Where Ajit Jogi gets 38 per cent support, Sonia Gandhi can manage only a pitiful 10 per cent. Any Congress president who is 28 points behind Ajit Jogi should resign out of embarrassment.

These figures are relevant because the party leader's campaign will be responsible for the final decisive swing in either direction. Digvijay Singh is hoping to reverse the swing through an alliance with Mayawati's BSP, but that will work only if the voter has not turned decisively against him. Moreover, the BSP has decided to put up candidates only in the seats where it considers itself strong. Someone observant should point out the paradox: the BSP will only be strong in those seats that have traditionally gone to the Congress, because her vote was once the Congress vote.

In any case it will be a tough war. There will be a battle in Rajasthan too, where the BJP has not conceded defeat.

Chhattisgarh, where the two parties are even. If Sonia Gandhi could add votes to her party she would have helped Ajit J o g i w i n . I f ...

All the weathervanes in this poll point in only one direction -- south, as far as Sonia Gandhi is concerned. Her personal popularity has dropped sharply in the last three months. *India Today* did its last exhaustive poll in August this year. In three months, Sonia Gandhi's ratings have dropped 10 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, 2 per cent in Delhi, 7 per cent in Rajasthan and 4 per cent in Chhattisgarh. This is extraordinarily steep and means only one thing: that she will further subtract from the party vote. Sonia Gandhi already lags sharply behind her own party, once again in double digits everywhere: in Delhi the Congress has 49 per cent against 31 per cent for Sonia; in MP, it is 38 per cent vs 15 per cent; in Rajasthan, 44 per cent vs 24 per cent and in Chhattisgarh, 43 per cent vs 10 per cent. Compare this to the figures

You do not have to be a rocket scientist to conclude that Vajpayee will add those crucial votes to his party's candidates, while Sonia will either have no impact, or a negative one. These are not matters of prejudice; these are the only conclusions that can be drawn from the statistics garnered by interviewing 17,413 voters across 115 Assembly constituencies in the four states where elections are due in the first week of December.

The implications of course stretch into the general elections, since Sonia Gandhi will remain candidate for Prime Minister. The prospects are horrendous for the Congress. The most predictable part of the poll is the comparison showing that Vajpayee is more popular than Sonia Gandhi; but even the Prime Minister's most die-hard loyalists might be surprised by the abyss between the two. The Prime Minister is 17 points ahead of the wannabe Prime Minister in Delhi, 26 points ahead in Rajasthan, 41 points ahead in MP, and an unbelievable 52

Prime Minister withdrew from his job, the people withdrew from him. The BJP cannot win an election without Vajpayee.

The Indian voter has an instinctive dislike of hysterics, no matter where they come from, and is apprehensive about the direction in which the party might be pulled without Vajpayee's leadership.

It might be Sonia Gandhi's bad luck that in her make-or-break election she has come up against a naturally charismatic politician who has started firing on all cylinders. But there are ways in which to formulate a political response. Gimmickry, unfortunately, is not one of them. Sonia Gandhi did not host an *iftar* party during last Ramzan, because she did not want to identify with Muslims before the Gujarat elections, in which she had deliberately opted for what was called a "soft-Hindutva" line. The official excuse trotted out was that the Congress had cancelled the *iftar* because of the drought. This was nonsense. One 6 pm

TO THE EDITOR 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.

"On Mahathir and Hitler"

This is in response to Mr. Mahmood Elahi's letter ("On Mahathir and Hitler", October 29.) Hitler considered all non-Aryans (including Arabs, Slavs, Africans, etc.) to be the enemies of his Third Reich, not just the Jews. Anti-Semitism was on the rise in Europe anyway during that time and Hitler took advantage of that to gain popular support for his regime.

Conversely, Mahathir's term in office is over. Although charming to masses, Adolf Hitler was mentally disturbed and quite stupid. Malaysia's former prime minister definitely was not. Hitler's audience was a Germany with no real economy and Mahathir's audience was the world. Mr. Elahi, you might not have liked his speech but that

certainly is no reason to compare him to one of the most evil human beings of this earth.

Rayyan Kamal Gulshan, Dhaka

Over 70 per cent hate status quo!

The country is fast going downhill. I cannot believe how with a three fourths majority the four party alliance could not stop corruption and terrorism. Because of this, the businesses are closing down one by one and the stock market is at its lowest. The future of this country looks bleak. Jamaat-e-Islami also has to take the blame for this condition. They should resign from the government. They are keeping quiet as they want to cling onto power.

We need a strong government with

good, honest and devoted people in leadership positions at every level. They should be mandated to run the country for at least five to ten years as democracy has failed miserably. I am sure if there is a referendum today, over 70 per cent will back the above idea, including the donors.

Khairul Masud Eskaton, Dhaka

Injustice everywhere

This is in reference to your news item 'Of a blessed bureaucrat' (DS 27.10.2003). Ferdous Ara is the very embodiment of what is happening in our country everyday, whereas a good BCS (Admin) officer with a good track record (twenty years of service) is rotting in an obscure corner.

Foreign trips are for shopping and

sight seeing. These foreign trips have no relation to the job they do. Sycophancy is the only qualification needed.

The size of the Ministry has been increased by three hundred per cent (60+) and the size of the government has been increased by five hundred per cent. But has the efficiency of the government increased? Has the misery of the people, or their burgeoning poverty been reduced? Let us not go in for the statistics; let us see the miseries of the people in our own neighbourhood.

I'm talking of Amdia village, Rajshahi town, and the Dhaka city where I spend some of my time. Ninety per cent people of this country are being crushed by the steam roller of poverty.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Gulshan, Dhaka

An epoch-making initiative

The government's approval to set up a Supreme Judicial Council to probe the alleged bail fixing scandal made by an additional judge of the supreme court, the highest court in Bangladesh, is an epoch-making initiative for our judiciary.

Transparency International Bangladesh, in its annual report states that lower courts are one of the most corrupt institutions in Bangladesh. But, now it's clear that our Higher court is not free from such kind of "corruption case" allegation either.

The judiciary is the symbol of people's hope and reliability. An independent and fair judiciary is part and parcel of good-governance. For the most part, it is the last resort of deprived people in

getting justice.

As the government represents the people, it's its duty to make sure that no man regardless of his position in society is above the law.

To implement the aforesaid doctrine of equality and to establish a corruption-free judiciary, the government should change its mode regarding the appointment of additional judges only under political consideration. Partisan appointment in no way can bring the greater benefit for our country.

The judiciary must be kept out of controversy at any cost.

Md. Abdus Salam LLB(Hons), 3rd Year, University of Chittagong

Transparency International

Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." Bangladesh is at the bottom of many things: test cricket, the World Development Report (146th), poverty list, sanitation list etc. But to and behold we have topped the list in being the most corrupt nation in the world. Some 'mad' fellow said, that we are 22nd in the Swiss Banklist.

One of the sixty ministers of the government said, it is all bun-kum. These people collected their information from the newspapers. With due respect to the authorities, T.I. does not have about a million workers that you do. If the T.I. (Bangladesh Chapter) had as many as one thousand workers only, the corruption list would at least weigh a metric ton.

Now Mr. Frederic Temple, Dr. David Carter, Ms. Nishimazu, Prof. Khan Sorwar and Morshed are very polite people and they are also very diplomatic. They all put the hardest facts in a very mild way. But the truth prevails. Sweden Aslam, Kala Jahangir, the "great men from Feni and Khulna skid ghat can kill any number of people they want. But even they cannot kill truth. Dr. Josef Goebbels failed, Sad-al-Sahaf failed.

Let us introspect, let us think, and at least let us be true to ourselves, if not to our wives (because they are the last to know). In a state of nature, the first duty of the government is to protect the life of the people. And if a government fails to do so, they should at least choose compulsory retirement.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Gulshan, Dhaka