

Monga misfortune

Relief operation still missing the needy

An annual feature of an economic lean period has become a veritable misfortune in eight northern districts of the country -- thanks to prepared-ness failure and crisis management pitfalls. First of all, there has been a belated waking up to the crisis characterised by lack of coordination between the local administrations and the ministries concerned in good time before the Monga hit out in full fury. Of course, when government at the top got seized of the contingency comprising lack of food and work, it sent out ministers and high government officials to oversee relief operations in the affected areas. But by then Monga, the near-famine situation, had aggravated. Also, importantly, something else was missing: NGO involvement on a scale one had seen in the previous years.

The government moved to tackle the situation on two levels: one, it began distributing rice among VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) cardholders. Two, it allocated fund for food-for-work programmes designed to provide jobs to the unemployed. But in both the areas, allocations fell short of requirements: 13.5 tonnes of rice has been distributed among VGF cardholders while the allocation for food-for-work stood at Tk 9.55 crore, according to deputy minister for disaster management and relief.

As it is, the demand outstrips the supply. To compound matters, there have been reports of large scale misappropriation of relief materials. Despite the presence of four ministers and five additional secretaries, the relief operations have not been fool-proof. But 60 relief dispensers, including five government officials, have been arrested or are facing punitive action for their part in acts of misappropriation. We welcome such stringent measures.

However, there have been allegations of a lion's share of relief materials going to ruling party men. Complaints have also been heard of rice being distributed short of the allocated quotas. These must be heeded and gone into, so that hunger, which is politics-neutral, is dealt with apolitically. The government at the top can only ensure that.

DMCH emergency at night

The height of negligence

EMERGENCY services at the DMCH are breaking down, especially after midnight. There is perhaps no other way to explain why patients in desperate need of medical attention are left unattended, for an unbelievably long time in some cases.

Patients crying for help, and doctors not knowing what to do with them, are a common sight at the emergency unit. The grievously injured victims of accidents come to the emergency only to be treated with what may be termed unpardonable insensitivity on the part of the doctors and all others concerned. But doctors complain of overwork.

The emergency unit is not adequately equipped or manned to handle the rush of patients. This is really an unacceptable shortcoming, since a pretty high number of road accidents takes place in the city every day.

Incredible though it may sound, the patients who need blood to survive have to arrange it themselves, as the emergency cannot provide the life-saving fluid.

It is no secret that the public sector hospitals are a picture of gross mismanagement and anomalies of all kinds. Nevertheless, an emergency unit is an entirely different proposition. The groaning and bleeding patients need quick medical attention and sympathetic treatment. But the DMCH authorities are apparently not in a position to provide such facilities to them.

That raises a basic question. If an emergency ward fails to attend to people in great physical distress, then it cannot possibly justify its name. True, the DMCH emergency has its constraints and limitations that cannot be overlooked. But the hospital authorities should realise that there are areas where the needed service has to be provided no matter what. The emergency is certainly one of them.

The higher authorities must look into the matter and develop the emergency unit into an effective service provider.

The US' war on terror: Chasing an elusive enemy



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN the messy aftermath of the fall of Baghdad even as the US forces were pushed on the defensive by an evergrowing resistance to their occupation the over-all mood was celebratory in Washington with a notion prevailing in its neo-conservative war cabal that the current violence in Iraq -- thought to be symptomatic of the spasms of the dying enemy -- would stop before long. When it did not, it was an embarrassment for the US' forces and Bush Administration's ire fell afresh on an elusive Saddam Hussein and phantom fighters loyal to him. Also the 'foreign' fighters of al-Qaida variety infiltrating into Iraq particularly from across Syria and Iran were not spared from accusation. With the body counts of the US soldiers rising and the cost of war soaring to an epic scale as the war itself -- now widely

discredited -- is fast becoming an albatross around Bush's neck, the latter grudgingly approaches the UN for a bailout by internationalising the Iraq crisis.

The continuing diplomatic stalemate at the UN and the lukewarm response of the international community to share the US' security burden in Iraq either by sending troops or contributing funding for Iraq's

would complete its 'mission' in Iraq. That its words are not empty threat is testified by the steps the administration is briskly considering. The fresh troops to be sent to Iraq 'for rotation' suggests that the occupation forces are settling down for a long haul.

In the meantime the Iraqis who bitterly resent the occupation are in deplorable condition with Iraq's descent into post war chaos. Still

the Iraqis be kept away from it? However much the occupiers try to cover up their crime of occupation by duping the Iraqis with their twisted version of liberation will the Iraqis be tricked into those sophistry? That they will not has already been amply demonstrated by them.

Fired with a fierce sense of nationalism the Iraqis belonging to diverse political strands are now

motivation of each strand of Iraqi resistance obviously vary: the loyalists are driven by the loss of power, the nationalists by the desire to establish independence and security and the Islamists by their dream of returning political Islam to Iraqi nation. These aspiration may be incompatible, but the focus of each group now is how to fight together against the common enemy of Iraq -- the occupation forces.

manifest.

This is the time to introspect over the zero sum conflict the both sides are engaged with. This is the time for the US to perhaps call it a day in Iraq. But in a bizarre move which is not totally unexpected of a hyperpower the Bush administration is set to raise the stake in its Iraq gamble. It is difficult for the world's sole superpower to concede defeat and beat a retreat. It will make all efforts to turn the tide in the situation and a country of America's richness, resources and talents has indeed many means to employ to achieve its end. But at the end of the day the zeal for winning a national war of liberation prevails. However the occupation force can always make it exorbitantly costly for the resistance movement while itself paying equally exorbitantly for holding it back.

In the months ahead the Americans are likely to deploy more troops and pump in more money in Iraq. In tandem the resistance also is going to stiffen. Already the resistance fighters are engaging the occupation forces with increasing confidence rendering the latter increasingly more vulnerable to threats. This is not as yet a Vietnam because no two situations in military history are ever alike. But Iraq can always make its own history setting in the process its own paradigm.

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PERSPECTIVES

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reconstruction have been anything but a damper for the US' Iraq enterprise. To add to the US' predicaments a further jolt came on 02 November last where one of the US' Chinook helicopters was shot down in Iraq killing 15 US soldiers and injuring an equal number of them - the largest ever US loss since the invasion started. Belying the expectation that the event would sober US' attitude down it seems to have touched on the raw arrogance of a hyperpower which vowed not to be deterred by the 'terrorism' of a few and

deprived of the utility services, their unemployment runs at an alarming 75 per cent. A close aide of Paul Bremer, the US administrator in Iraq admits of knowing all these but asserts that against them "we are trying to demonstrate -- that the benefits of our presence outweigh the humiliation of occupation." But can any amount of benefits to be brought before the shackled people outweigh their humiliation? That is the moot question. America is one of the pioneers to teach the world the virtues of liberation. Can

galvanised to fight back and drive out the occupation forces. The Anglo-American forces first wanted to capitalise on Iraq's ethnic-sectarian diversity. Frustrating those unholy motives of the invaders the Iraqis proved beyond any shade of doubt that they are monolithic on the question of Iraq's nationalism. They already seem to have forged an alliance between diverse strands of Iraq's guerrilla movement also. Iraq is a country that has faced more than 20 years of war and more than a decade of sanctions. The

By all appearance the resistance in Iraq has now assumed the hue of a classical war of liberation from the colonial clutch. No such war has ever failed in history irrespective of the cost involved. If the US now strengthens its military presence in Iraq in the face of increasing resistance it will only alienate Iraqis yet further from its attempts to redraw the political future of Iraq -- and the resistance will continue to spread. Unless there is an early withdrawal the currently sporadic attack can be expected to multiply

The Taslima's way



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Taslima Nasreen strikes again, this time with the honor roll of men who, she alleges, had physical relationship with her. In a book, she has revealed the names of her sexual exploits, along with lurid details of her dalliance with them. She claims to have used those men for her pleasure, not the other way around.

For a change, it's good to know that a woman has laid some men. Womanizing has always been a side of some men. Why cannot manizing be a side of some women? Roman empress Mesalina was endowed with so much ravenous sexual appetite that she was capable of welcoming in a single night every member of the Praetorian Guard. There are lecherous women as there are lecherous men. It has a lot to do with genes and hormones, which package the animal.

So, it must not come as surprise that Taslima sowed her wild oats with so many lovers. No big deal, if you ask me. Libido is like the dog in your house. Once in a while you must run it in the woods to keep it healthy. Now whose pleasure it was and who laid whom is a matter of debate. Let the men who slept with Taslima sort it out with their wives. One of them, a writer, is facing fire already. I am told. He couldn't stand up before his wife to explain how he got laid by another woman.

Many years ago when US Presidential candidate Gary Hart was linked to Donna Rice, a Time article opened with the following sentence, "The destruction of a public man holds a terrible fascination." We don't know if that is the reason why Taslima has written her book. Whether she wanted to destroy the men she shared beds with in some Freudian slip of mind. We don't know if she recounted the memories of men who joined her in raunchy romps for the same reason some people rape their victims and tape it to watch for return delight.

If we take Taslima's words by the face value, then she did it to prove a point. If man could use woman as an object of pleasure, then she could do the same with man. But didn't we already know that? There are prostitutes for men as there are gigolos

CROSS TALK

Perhaps the lasting legacy of her book, other than some broken marriages, will be the new trend of bare-all literature. Perhaps she will be remembered as the terminator of taboos, one who cracked a window in the suffocating house where the foul air of hypocrisy lingered too long.

for women. In between there are many forms of consenting and unconsenting sex, which navigate between lust and love. If Taslima claims to have enjoyed her men, it's good news indeed. After all, ideal sex is meant to be a two some game, when both parties could claim to have taken away some pleasure.

Scandal is when a respectable man, leading a dubious life, runs out of luck. Taslima's men are respectable in their own right- writers, editors, politicians and businessmen, the caste of the most star-studded scandal this country has ever known. Of course, there is always a possibility that none of this is true, that these men are paying the price for a misguided old flame. But then none of the men has said anything otherwise. So far not one of them has uttered a word of protest.

However, Taslima could have made her point without compromising the names of these men. But there is no reason to think that she has done it as her typical moon-baying at the male archetype. She has also written about the youthful indiscretions of her female friends, again giving some names, which could wreck some homes. She could have made her point without compromising those names as well.

It's strange indeed that she has rolled explosives into the tents on both sides of the gender divide, although the male side has been devastated most. Nobody thought that any of these men who kept Taslima's bed warm was a saint. But there is always the first shock of unearthing a scandal, because it has the excitement of a lucky draw. It's like searching for your friend in a hide and seek game and discovering him clumsily stashed in the closet.

Every scandal is when grownups are caught in the closet. And when gifted minds are found there, it gives way to ribald laughter. The famous names in Taslima's honor roll will hear that laughter every time her book changes hand. It's a pity for them to have consorted with a woman who turned into a loudmouth. It's also too late.

But what is in it for Taslima other than that she has laid some respectable men? If you read the book, it not only reeks the smell of a sordid life, but also of a life that needs a direction. And worst of all, this is a life that is predacious on the past. It's destroying the trust and confidence of people she knew, including her near and dear ones. Taslima's life is high on sex, but it looks deplorably low on love.

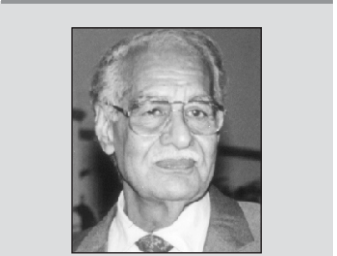
Perhaps the lasting legacy of her book, other than some broken marriages, will be the new trend of bare-all literature. Perhaps she will be remembered as the terminator of taboos, one who cracked a window in the suffocating house where the foul air of hypocrisy lingered too long. May be more and more people will come forward with their stories, making it difficult for grotty minds to hide their misdeeds.

Thus profanity can be the material for profound literature provided there is an overriding philosophy. That philosophy either isn't present in Taslima's book or it has been overshadowed by the banality of stories she has told. It doesn't take a great literary mind to tell us that there are horny men with corny minds. Any neighborhood tramp should be able to do it.

Taslima's book is now talk of the town not because it's a great piece of work, but because it has got some known men caught with their pants down. Perhaps the embarrassment of these men, if not their destruction, holds a terrible fascination. Perhaps the author believes she has performed the great ritual of a whistleblower by dragging these men in the muck of their moral turpitude.

Look at the sunny side, if you will. You can be successful and vulgar, or you can be vulgar and successful. It's the age-old story with a familiar twist. There is always a woman behind a successful man. Here, we have many men behind a successful woman. That's the Taslima's way. And it works. Take the highway, if you don't like it.

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KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

NEW Delhi has the knack of waking up after the event. It does not come as a surprise that it did not know what was happening in its own backyard, Colombo. At least our Foreign Office spokesman was candid enough to say: "We are surprised at the sudden political development in Sri Lanka." Once again the failure of RAW, which is supposed to keep an eye on such things, comes to light.

It was clear for some time that President Chandrika Kumaratunge was contemplating action. She was feeling uneasy over the talks that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe's government was conducting with the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). She had made her annoyance public more than once. Her understanding was that while the government had made all concessions, the LTTE had not retreated a bit.

That was true. Still the decision to suspend parliament when the Prime Minister was away to America was an indiscreet and rash step. The imposition of the emergency was worse. The President could have waited for Wickremasinghe's return. His annoyance was justified. I wonder whether she talked to him on the phone before taking the step. She was, no doubt, within her constitutional authority to do what she did. But she went against the wishes of people who had given Wickremasinghe a majority in parliament on the plank of peace. However, those who are talking in terms of the President's impeachment are only aggravating the situation when all of them should be united.

That Chandrika wanted India to play a role was clear from her two visits to Delhi in the last few months. Apparently, New Delhi was not willing to come to the fore. It was probably scared to entangle itself with yet another terrorist organisation. Sensing India's reluctance, Chandrika talked to the opposition leaders, experts and journalists in Delhi to seek their support. I was present at one of the sittings where she complained that the LTTE was making a fool of Wickremasinghe's government. She made no bones about the unhappiness about the unilateral concessions given to the LTTE. She accused the prime minister of giving it time to consolidate its position, train new cadres and procure weapons. She did not like the LTTE's complete control over the northeast where its supporters lived and from where their leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran operated.

When I visited Colombo earlier this year I could detect the hiatus between the President and the Prime Minister. She felt he had gone too far. The prime minister's predicament was that people had

BETWEEN THE LINES

New Delhi... cannot escape its responsibility. It must use all levers of power to see that the LTTE accepts autonomy within the country. Military assistance rendered in the shape of the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) during the Rajiv Gandhi government was a disaster. Had the IPKF defeated the LTTE, even if it could not eliminate it, New Delhi's credibility would have been higher and Colombo's problems fewer.

developed a vested interest in peace and had no heart in resuming hostilities. As his minister and chief negotiator GL Pieris told me then, "it takes time for a militant organisation to change itself in a political party." I wonder if his assessment about the LTTE has turned out to be correct.

I wish India had taken more active part. The LTTE could dupe Norway which brokered peace, but not New Delhi which was familiar with Prabhakaran's ways. Not long ago, when I asked Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha why India was not taking more interest than it should, he said: "We know what is happening. Norway consults us all the time. We shall come into the picture when we think it is appropriate." India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka was more realistic. He had no doubts about the LTTE's intention to gain time and build its military prowess. Obviously, his voice was not heard in the mindset of Foreign Office at Delhi.

That New Delhi waited for too long is obvious. The Sri Lankan prime minister it went to Washington and got an assurance for support on his peace process. Why New Delhi did not come out openly on his side is sheer misunderstanding of the situation. Wickremasinghe came to Delhi before he travelled to America. Whatever this means, the proposals made by the LTTE are disappointing. They are Eelam in content, if not in name. The demand for an "interim self-governing authority for the northeast of the island of Sri Lanka" covers all aspects of governance. Chandrika's fears have been proved right.

In the proposals made by the LTTE, there is not even a remote reference to federalism which alone can be the basis for any solution in Sri Lanka and which the LTTE seems to have accepted at one time. If the proposals were accepted in to, they would tantamount to creating a separate, independent state. The proposals give everything to the LTTE, including law and order and powers to raise tax and revenue. The Sri Lankan government does not come into the picture anywhere. Nor does Colombo have any overall authority in the northeast.

I fail to understand why the Wickremasinghe government is still not coming out vehemently against the proposals. Its reaction that the LTTE document "differs in fundamental aspect" is too mild and suggests a state of mind which wants to buy peace at any cost. The Prime Minister's remark from America that peace process will not be allowed to be

thwarted is not realistic. Where is the process? It is only the LTTE which dictates. Any sign of surrender can have a bad effect on the army which can prove dangerous in the circumstances.

India's comment that it hoped there would be no adverse impact on the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka is far from facing the facts. The talks can have little meaning if the LTTE is not willing to recognise Colombo as the authority superior to it. Sri Lanka's unity is at stake. New Delhi also forgets the repercussions which the LTTE's independent territory in the northeast can have. Tamil Nadu is only next-door and there is a lot of population on this side which is either afraid of the LTTE or sympathetic to it.

Still there is time for New Delhi to take a bolder stand. It must reiterate that India seeks a solution "within the framework of the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka." Since New Delhi is to blame for having trained the LTTE cadre to begin with, it cannot escape its responsibility. It must use all levers of power to see that the LTTE accepts autonomy within the country. Military assistance rendered in the shape of the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) during the Rajiv Gandhi government was a disaster. Had the IPKF defeated the LTTE, even if it could not eliminate it, New Delhi's credibility would have been higher and Colombo's problems fewer.

India is still not conscious of the dangers the LTTE may spell. It may be willing to strike but is afraid to wound. New Delhi should at least see that the LTTE does not get any succour from the Indian soil. With Jayalalitha as the Tamil Nadu chief minister, who is dead set against the LTTE, it should be possible for both the state and central governments to plug the avenues used for carrying goods to Jaffna. M Karunanidhi, the Tamil Nadu opposition leader, is also categorical on this matter. When I met him last at Chennai, he spared no words in condemning the LTTE. This should make Jayalalitha's task easier. Whatever New Delhi's justification to stay distant in the past, it is of no relevance to the situation prevailing in Sri Lanka today. India should realise that the LTTE's proposals for a separate state have come at a time when even the ink on the defence pact it has signed with Sri Lanka has not gone dry.

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Containable frailties, path to salvation

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

None of my humble contributions to the pages of The Daily Star, published this September, I concluded with the expectation that it was time that politics in Bangladesh sustained a positive change to decency and decorum and to the norms of a civilized society. Shortly thereafter, I beheld the hitherto extinguished candle of hope re-kindled. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's address to the audience at the Political Science Association provided just such an enervating feeling. Her speech contained her express realisation that politics in Bangladesh was totally rotten and that something ought to be done to effect a change. She spoke of mutual tolerance, respect and restraint between the government and the opposition.

No sooner had she come out of the hall, however, than she appeared to

have forgotten what she had said inside. Perhaps her state of mind was influenced by the gathering of educated and enlightened intellectuals. She gave her supporters a speech to be proud of and provided them with the opportunity to claim that their leader was very open and willing to change the present state of mutual mud-slinging so rampant in Bangladesh politics.

But away in the open, public meetings that followed immediately thereafter, her harangues invariably assumed a harsher tone. In this connection, The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam's commentary on October 23, deserves special mention. The editor was alluding to the PM's speech marking the 2nd anniversary of the coalition's rule which he found "both shocking and depressing." According to him, she was not talking like a "democratically elected leader but more like a believer in force, threat, intimidation and not in persuasion or dialogue."

This is not to say that politicians are incapable of being knowledgeable. But as long as they allow themselves to be pampered by their sycophants, their vision of the realities of life will ever remain eclipsed.

Indeed this has been a perpetual malady with our leaders. Personal vilification has been a favourite pastime of theirs. This generalised observation applies to many of our political leaders, either in government or in opposition. These are the ones who appear to have been more keen on basking in the abysmal labyrinth of ignorance rather than in the sunshine of knowledge and credibility. The pitiable deficiency in their language can be easily attributed to such a state of ignorance. And we know that ignorance breeds anger or more precisely that anger is the child of ignorance.

This is, however, not to say that politicians are incapable of being knowledgeable. But as long as they

allow themselves to be pampered by their sycophants, their vision of the realities of life will ever remain eclipsed.

While politics is at its lowest ebb, the day-to-day life of the common people has been at its nadir. Unbridled hikes in the price of essential commodities over the past several months have compounded the miseries of low and middle income earners. The government has not so far been able to contain the spiraling of prices.

At long last the prime minister herself tried in her own way to intervene. So long had she been duped by the feedback of the commerce ministry and other agencies that she got a real shock from the feedback received from her own domestic help whom she

had sent to different markets. They confirmed that whatever the daily newspapers had been publishing was correct. The commerce minister was later reported to have been severely admonished by the prime minister when he reportedly stated that the price of onions was Tk 22-24 per kilo when the prime minister's men informed her that it was selling at Tk 36 that day. Not only in the price of essential commodities but also with the law and order situation the same misinformation persists. The feedback the prime minister has been receiving from the home minister and the state minister and from other intelligence sources on "shanthrash" (violent crime) is too often untrue.

were other reasons as well. He suggested that by pursuing a misguided policy the IwTA was not able to restore the navigability of the rivers in the North Bengal area. As a consequence, vegetables and other perishable goods produced in abundance in the northern districts could not reach the city as hundreds of truck loads of such items remain stranded at the ferry ghats connecting the north to the rest of the country. The ferries take longer to take a single trip due to heavy silting in the river beds. He claimed that the IwTA does the dredging of the rivers when the waters are at lowest ebb. Consequently, the earth dredged at one place resettles nearby making the whole process of dredging an exercise in futility. He suggested that the dredging should be technically feasible at high tide so that the removed earth floats out with the current and cannot settle.

The transportation debacle may very well be linked to the price hike. And the debacle is known to have

been compounded by the hoodlums and extortionists actively operating on the highway.

It is no use bickering over the past. Nor will the old Awami League dishes ever be palatable to the common people. Our advice to the prime minister would be this: See if you can do anything of your own. Instead of using the AL as a bogey, now is the time for you to show your strength, wisdom and farsightedness to extricate the nation from its present miserable plight. You should try to identify and solve the problem. And take care of the self-seeking sycophants and make an immediate shift to the saner part of your party who are presently being elbowed out by the extremists within. You promised to change the type of politics in the country. Why not start working in that direction right now? Take the first step forward. This is our humble entreaty.

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