

## Iraq crisis

*The US has to heed world opinion*

President Bush's plan on Iraq has been derailed by the guerilla attacks, which now account for the US death toll in about eight months exceeding the casualties that Americans suffered in the first three years of the Vietnam War.

Statistics do have a meaning here. The war thrust upon Iraq in utter disregard of world opinion once looked like ending in a decisive US victory. The far superior military might did the trick, but the military strategists perhaps did not take the lessons of history into account.

The lessons have now brought them back down to earth. As popular resistance is getting stiffer day by day, President Bush cannot simply concentrate on implementing his long-term plan. Time is now a crucially important factor. In the latest attack, two US choppers were brought down and no fewer than 17 soldiers lost their lives.

The guerilla warfare has created a very difficult situation for the US troops. Any counter attack on the civilian population further pushes them away from the target of winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. And President Bush's popularity rating in his country is dropping with the rise in the number of dead soldiers.

President Bush has to do something to prevent further escalation of the Iraq crisis. Trying to take on the guerillas in a prolonged war would mean more deaths on both sides. So the only option open to him is to heed world opinion and withdraw from Iraq. President Bush does appear to have that option in mind, but he is still convinced that his mission will not be over until Saddam Hossain is captured.

World opinion has also been tipped heavily by the goings-on in Iraq in favour of an early solution to the crisis. The centrality of the UN role in rebuilding the country is at issue. And even a close US ally like Japan is hesitant about having a direct role in Iraq under the prevailing circumstances.

The US should lose no more time in realising that it cannot keep a nation subjugated on even a medium term basis.

## The meter reader's tale

*Public utilities must not be held hostage to a corrupt few*

YESTERDAY we read in these pages the story of the gas meter reader who gives Tk 1 crore to charity every year and is so powerful that even a state minister once had to offer to bribe him.

The story was told by BNP lawmaker Shakhawat Hossain, who added that the exchequer loses Tk 700 crore as a result of this kind of corruption in the public utilities sectors. This is an especially powerful indictment of government fecklessness, coming as it does from a stalwart of the ruling party and chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on the establishment ministry.

The corruption that the minister spoke of is not restricted to the gas sector but pervades our public utilities. Nor is this problem a new one. With this kind of corruption running rampant, it is no wonder that our public utilities are unable to provide service to the general public in an effective manner.

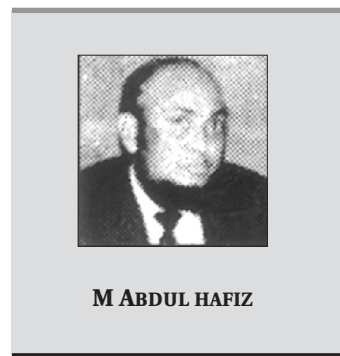
The time is long overdue for the government to take action to put a halt to this corruption in the public utilities sector. It beggars belief that a government as powerful as the current one is powerless to act against a simple meter reader.

Successive governments have long maintained that they cannot afford to alienate the powerful government employees' unions and are thus held hostage to their demands.

But this fear is misplaced. Any loss of support that the government will suffer as a result of moving against this kind of institutional corruption will be more than offset by the support it will receive from the public in general for doing so.

No government can deliver if it allows itself to be held hostage to the machinations of a corrupt few. The government must rein in rogue operatives such as the unscrupulous meter reader before they bankrupt the public utilities sector and destroy public confidence in the government.

# Dilemma in ending occupation in Iraq



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EARLY in the year the European trio -- German, France and Russia -- opposing war in Iraq remained defiant till the last. The US and Britain had to bypass them in the UN for finally going to war. But when after indicating that it was inclined to share the burden of occupation in Iraq the US brought before the security council a revised third draft resolution in mid-October and pressed for a vote the mysterious trio sheepishly endorsed it. It was in spite of the dichotomy inherent in the resolution that the US essentially asked the world body to assume the burden of picking up the pieces from rapidly collapsing campaign in Iraq while decisive powers were reserved entirely for the US. Although the first two drafts submitted by the US came up against objections from influential members and the UN Secretary General himself censured them about their 'rather lopsided perception of power and responsibilities' there was not even a murmur of protest next time and the resolution was passed unanimously marking the US' clear diplomatic victory after a string of security setback in Iraq.

The only audible mumbling from the trio was a demand for 'more substantive power to the UN and a specific time frame for the end of US occupation'. But the US was hardly under any obligation to concede to those demands; neither does it have any intention to do so, nor did it make any commitment to this effect. Because the occupation of Iraq --

central to the US-Israel scheme of things in West Asia -- is only about to widen in scope where even Britain, the US' closest European ally has little place. Indeed, to the occupation in Iraq, Britain, is now 'superfluous, a minor accessory that has outlived its utility and can be cast away'. The US is clearly emerging in an explicit military alliance with Israel with an agenda for the entire region. Sponsored by the Zionist organisations and campaign groups the agenda ominously includes

the Israeli military demolished many houses and killed civilians including children.

Aghast at the scale of destruction Kofi Annan reminded Israel that 'disproportionate use of force in densely populated area is not compatible with international humanitarian law'. The Amnesty International condemned the operation and characterised the Israeli action as 'war crime'. Only the US remained non-chalant of the horror

the US' failure in delivering an imposed Middle East settlement as the Quartet-sponsored Roadmap for Middle East peace is in limbo now, it is entirely the privilege of Israel's overwhelming military power to rule the roost in the region. Only in a peace negotiation, however, the Palestinians stand some chance.

Israel is therefore out to scuttle any such negotiation unless absolutely on her term. Even if Arafat has lent support to a new peace initiative

patronised the initiative perhaps as a last-ditch effort by the embattled Prime Minister Tony Blair to regain his credibility in the world affairs the move is cold-shouldered both by Ariel Sharon and Bush Administration. To Sharon, any Israeli politician associated with the plan would be guilty of consorting with the enemies of Israel. As far as the US is concerned, according to Richard Boucher the plan is a track IIT effort and thus 'irrelevant' for the US government.

old city of Jerusalem. Palestinian side was expected to recognise Israel as a Jewish state for eternity and renounce the right of return of refugees uprooted from within Israel's pre-67 borders. This could be a beacon of light where both sides are presently groping in the darkness for direction. But nothing can make any head way unless on Israel's term.

Both Israel and the US have a propensity for expanding the military engagement in the region. The gathering storm in occupied territories, either in Iraq or Palestine is a pointer to the compulsions of US policy. Historically, Jordan is designated in Zionist ideology as a receptacle that would eventually hold the Palestinians who would have to be transferred out of occupied territories to ease the demographic pressure on the Jewish state. But Jordan can be stable receptacle only if its flanks are secured. Therefore there is little question of granting Iraqis even limited degree of political autonomy before this Zionist plans are fully implemented, because a free Iraq can always be a powerful source of resistance to the designs of Zionist expansionism. Any US intention of retreat from Iraq is thus hostage to the grand Zionist plans.

The recent UN resolution on Iraq also did little to address the demand made by other Security Council members for an early transfer of political authority to Iraqi people and an end to the occupation. It rather designated the occupying forces styled as the Coalition Provisional Authority as the supreme authority in Iraq. Even if the latest change of heart in the US administration after Nassiriya massacre prompts the Governing Council to willy-nilly transfer power to the Iraqis it is to be seen whether that can be done in the face of intricate layers of oppositions to be put up by powerful Jewish lobby both in the Pentagon and the State Department.

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

**Both Israel and the US have a propensity for expanding the military engagement in the region. The gathering storm in occupied territories, either in Iraq or Palestine is a pointer to the compulsions of US policy. The recent UN resolution on Iraq also did little to address the demand made by other Security Council members for an early transfer of political authority to Iraqi people and an end to the occupation.**

regime changes in Syria and Iraq and final decimation of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. How can it consider at this delicate stage an end to the occupation?

That an unholy alliance between the US and Israel is firmly in place and it is already up to implement the items on its agenda can be partially gauged from how things transpired both in Washington and Tel Aviv with regard to their postures towards West Asia. Just days before it brought the motion on Iraq to vote in the UN, the US vetoed a Security Council resolution tabled by Syria condemning Israel for putting up so called security wall grabbing Palestinian lands and expanding its settlements in the West Bank. Earlier, when following a suicide attack in a Staifa cafe, Israel bombed target deep inside Syria the US endorsed it upholding Israel's right to defend itself. In its three years long campaign for the obliteration of Palestinian society when Israel completed its most destructive rampage against the Palestinian people the US simply looked the other way and the media focussed its attention elsewhere. Over four days of recent operations in Gaza

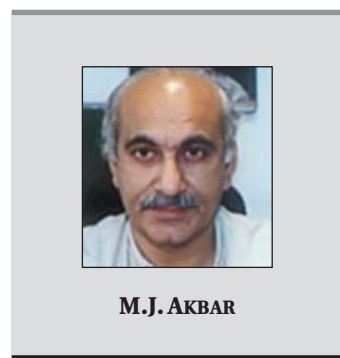
perpetrated by Israel. Richard Boucher, the state Department spokesman, while talking of Israel's recent operation in Gaza routinely expressed concern about 'terrorism' and endorsed the Israeli action. After

jointly worked out by the elements of Israel's Labour Party and Arafat's Fatah faction of Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) it faces strong opposition from the US and Israel. Although Britain is believed to have

Yet the new initiative addressed two major sources of disagreement that rent Oslo peace process to a dead-end. It promised the Palestinians sovereignty over the most of West Bank and Gaza and substantial part of the



# BJP's batty behenjjs



M. J. AKBAR

AS is generally the case in Indian politics, a pattern emerged out of a cross between intention and accident. Ever since it came to power at the core of a disparate but steady coalition, the BJP has made very serious investments in women, and given them far more leeway than is the norm in alliances. There has been negative or poor return on that investment. Any expected fusion has degenerated into confusion. Every single relationship is in a state of torrential disturbance: if it isn't separation bristling with accusations and acrimony, then it is high-sulk.

The biggest sulk of India is surely Mamata Banerjee. It is tempting to say that there is something congenitally wrong with her, but that might be too harsh. But nothing is ever good enough for her, and by the time she reconciles her extraordinary ego to reality, the best that was on offer has also receded. Instead of using office to consolidate her support, she has wasted years because of a hang-up over the railways portfolio. Her rationale for such an obsession indicates how far out of the loop she is (and that is probably as good a description of loopy as you are going to get). She thinks railways is some kind of a Bengali inheritance because Mrs Indira Gandhi left the portfolio in Barkat Ghani Khan Choudhary's charge for years, and which the ageing stalwart used

effectively as a cash crop for jobs to his constituents.

Mamata Didi doesn't get the fact that the nature of government has changed. Government has stopped being a social welfare outfit dedicated to creating unproductive jobs in the service of a distorted interpretation of socialism. In the last set of reshuffles Mamata Banerjee (her sulks are always plural, never singular) first objected to BJP interference over her status as the government's viceroy for Bengal, and

irrespective of how wide that door may be, I doubt if it is going to have sufficient space for the re-entry of the other great feminine BJP hope, Mayawati. Not too long ago, BJP strategists were dreaming of an electoral sweep in Uttar Pradesh. On paper the alliance with the BSP was too good to be true. There was no overlap in the vote banks, which were sufficiently transferable to leave the competition behind. The BJP's deal was in line with its belief that allies

economist (although it helps to know the difference between fiscal and physical). But because Mayawati loves power, she will not depute and get out of the way. Those who know how to rule, understand how to carefully measure the distance from decision-making (Vajpayee is a minimalist). Mayawati's propensity to be everywhere led her to the scandalous shopping corridor behind the Taj; and her conviction that conspirators were hounding her led her to confrontation.

might have enough MPs to make a bid for the top job. Then she loses it. Taking on the Hindu was bad enough. To do it over such an innocuous article was not despotism, it was merely stupid.

Of the three carefully planned electoral bets, one has turned into ashes; a second does not seem worth the effort; and the third has developed a leak before it has matured. Still, those who underestimate Jayalalitha do so to their cost. L.K. Advani, who is the ranking mathematician of Indian

continuing democratisation of the electoral process. The age of glamour is crumbling. The voter now wants leaders who talk like him, look like him, and communicate with him; there is decreasing sympathy for dynasts who are doing the voter a favour by leaving their palaces for social service.

But the most startling fact about Uma and Vasu is how quickly they betrayed their political immaturity. At the first sign of pressure, both bolted. Both made a bid for a second constituency, signalling an utter lack of confidence in themselves and their party. They had to be spanked back into line, but the damage was done. When the spotlight is on you, it is not your face that gets illuminated but your nerves.

The BJP has been much luckier with men. Chandrababu Naidu was among the first friends and has not wavered. He has called for early elections after ensuring that his alliance with the BJP is in place. There is more than one reason why he wants February elections, but he certainly expects the BJP to go for a national election then as well. Only then will the Vajpayee factor help him. Incidentally, the BJP would have brought in at least three of the four Assemblies if it had called for a general election on December 1. The Vajpayee factor (he is streets ahead of Sonia Gandhi in the opinion polls) would have compensated for the nervous mistakes of Uma Behen and Vasu Bhabhi (she is Rajasthan's sister-in-law, rather than daughter). Instead, BJP leaders are privately suggesting that they might end up losing three out of four states. The decisions are not in, but certainly nothing is certain anymore.

The ultimate irony should not escape either the BJP or the Congress. The only woman that the BJP can now rely on is Sonia Gandhi.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## BYLINE

**The Vajpayee factor (he is streets ahead of Sonia Gandhi in the opinion polls) would have compensated for the nervous mistakes of Uma Behen and Vasu Bhabhi (she is Rajasthan's sister-in-law, rather than daughter). Instead, BJP leaders are privately suggesting that they might end up losing three out of four states. The decisions are not in, but certainly nothing is certain anymore. The ultimate irony should not escape either the BJP or the Congress.**

then over her hereditary right to railways. Coal was not good enough for her. Such self-esteem is extraordinary for a woman who cannot win an election. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is an indulgent bachelor when dealing with his women allies; he even forgave her lapse into adultery when she left the BJP for the Congress. Mamata Didi misconstrued indulgence for weakness. It is now dawning upon her that the Prime Minister can forgive a tantrum but does not like being bullied. Mamata Banerjee is the kind of ally who can give you ulcers when she is in a good mood. Vajpayee has had to appoint an ambassador to maintain relations with her, a job that has not as yet tired out the earnest George Fernandes. But for him Mamata Banerjee would have been in serious danger of being forgotten.

The message from this tortured relationship is that the BJP never shuts any door permanently, no matter how exasperating the provocation. But

could keep the provinces as long they left the Centre to the BJP. But while power is famous for being a good adhesive, it can also become abrasive in rough hands. Over the years Mayawati has shown the capacity to get votes, as well as a penchant for hara-kiri. All you have to do is perch her comfortably in power and she will devise a way to fly off on a suicide mission.

She enjoys power, but she does not relish responsibility. Stories abound indicating that she is uncomfortable with both the detail and the language of modern governance. Some complex urges her to pretend that she can understand spoken English perfectly, when honesty would have served her far better. Apparently at one meeting with World Bank officials, each time the Bank worthy advised a healthier fiscal policy, she thought he meant a healthier physical policy, and responded that she was doing a great deal to build sports facilities. It is not essential for a chief minister to be an

In this last she might have been right; conspiracy comes naturally to UP's BJP leaders. The dynamics of the relationship were insupportable. This was a marriage made in a shopkeeper's godown. The BJP has paid a huge price for its fantasies, losing its credibility in what might be called its home state. The party is not worth a dozen seats in UP just now. This belly-up has been a catastrophe for the BJP, and scarred Mayawati as well.

The BJP's third investment in a lady of political means has been quieter. In fairness, the two are still working each other, and warily. But it is apparent that the BJP would like to go into the next elections with Jayalalitha as its partner in Tamil Nadu. Heaven knows if it can be called the curse of the BJP or not, but the Supreme Leader of Chennai was humming along pretty well, picking up praise for tackling government servants with aplomb, decimating a DMK spiked by old age and dynasty, and sending hints that if the next Parliament was hung, she

politics, took care to be friendly in public with Ms Jayalalitha. Mr Advani was not going to let a burst of foolishness scuttle a potential alliance.

The BJP's bad luck with women extends to those within. The party took a very early decision when it named Uma Bhatti, the coy saffronite, and Vasundhara Raje, the princess-in-waiting, as its nominees for chief minister in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. There was a smug air of nomination about the decision, as if the elections had already been won. Ever since, it has been downhill. The two went into campaign mode long before the season started, and may have peaked too early. Uma Bhatti's advantage is that no matter how far she slips, she could still end up ahead. But her compatriot in Rajasthan has not been so lucky, largely because of some excellent position play by Ashok Gehlot, who has made his ordinary image an extraordinary strength. The most astute political strategists have failed to notice that there is a

# I speak of the freedom of the pen

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

I write. I have a pen in my hand. I believe in the freedom of the pen. Pen is mightier than the sword. I believe in the freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of publication and so on. I believe in liberty, freedom and independence of a person, of people, of a state. I believe in the duty and obligation of each one of us to exercise this freedom.

I also believe no freedom is unconditional. Conditions make freedom real. Conditions give strength to freedom. Freedom

without condition is not freedom but licence for anarchy.

Democracy is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. It's more than a definition, it describes the conditions of democracy. Independence is not a national flag, a state monogram and a national anthem.

Independence is that formal status of a nation where every form of freedom of each individual of people is recognised and exercised.

Freedom of individual is also conditional. This stems from the culture, civilisation, written or unwritten constitution and civil and criminal laws. Even how an individual dresses is conditional. You

can get by with any dress that you can think however ludicrous they may look, but you will be restricted from walking the streets in the nude.

In the entire history of mankind there never was freedom without some form of conditions including freedom of the pen. In the name of freedom one cannot write whatever

one feels like. If he/she writes disregarding the 'conditions' he/she destroys his/herself with his/her very pen.

Obscenity cannot get by in the name of freedom of the pen. No society, no nation, no civilized people will endorse obscene writings as freedom of expression.

**In the name of freedom of expression, if anyone decides to wield his/her pen irresponsibly, I will describe his/her pen as chained. I will identify that chain as self-imposed. I will say repeatedly that he/she is chained by his/her own agenda of seeking more fame and so called glory. He/she perhaps will then be seeking greater publicity, bigger sale of his/her books, and so called laurels from the West. We the people of the third world know very well why West praises and dances around some of us.**

One of the conditions of a free pen is that the user of a pen must be fully aware of whose cause his/her writing will serve. He/she must decide before using a pen whether in the name of freedom of pen he/she will be doing disservice to his/her people's and nation's dreams and struggles and fundamental beliefs.

In the name of freedom of expression, if anyone decides to wield his/her pen irresponsibly, I will describe his/her pen as chained. I will identify that chain as self-imposed. I will say repeatedly that he/she is chained by his/her own agenda of seeking more fame and so called glory. He/she perhaps will

then be seeking greater publicity, bigger sale of his/her books, and so called laurels from the West. We the people of the third world know very well why West praises and dances around some of us.

Those of us who love, adore and make the dances are committing suicide. Men are born free but find him/herself chained afterwards. He/she must fight to be free. His/her first fight, as I see, is with one's own self.

This is to keep ourselves free from the trap and lure of fame, wealth, selfishness and pettiness. Even as he/she goes on talking about freedom of the pen, I would

identify such person as *gnanpapi* -- a sinner who sins with full knowledge of it.

As a poet, playwright and novelist engaged in the business of writing for over fifty years, I would say those who think freedom of the pen is nothing but a licence, they are actually against the very grain of human achievements, against positive values and political struggle for emancipation of our people. What they would be, and are, doing is strengthening the hands of reactionary forces within the country and defaming the nation and her sons abroad.