

Merry Christmas

A prayer for world peace

HERE could not be a more important prayer at this moment than that for world peace. On the one hand, the spread of terrorism in certain parts of the world, and on the other, the highly intensified state terrorism practiced by Sharon's Israel, has made the world far more unsafe place than it was before. Add to that the behaviour of the United States as the arrogant arbiter of world affairs, and you have a dangerous mix of bigotry and militarism that is pushing our civilisation towards a conflagration of unknown consequences.

Pope John Paul II in his Christmas day message prayed for peace and made mention about the armed conflict in Palestine. The grand patriarch of Bethlehem, the highest Catholic bishop in the assumed birthplace of Jesus Christ, used his homily to criticise Israel for building its "security" wall, which, he said, will neither bring peace nor security to the area.

As the world observes the happy occasion of Christmas, people everywhere are acutely aware that somehow we seem to be losing our grip on events and that more and more our future is becoming uncertain. Extremist philosophies are finding their way into mainstream thinking in many parts of the world including the United States, South Asia, the Arab world and in countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, and India, to name only a few. There are signs of extremism and religious intolerance in the form of attacks against Quadians in our own country.

Overall the fundamental spirit of all religions -- that of tolerance, harmony, acceptance of each other's differences -- seems to be on the wane. The need of the hour is to reverse that process and there is no better time to demand such a change of humanity's course than Christmas. We echo the words of Pope John Paul II for peace and harmony in the world and wish our readers belonging to the Christian faith a Merry Christmas and all happiness in the future.

ADB warning on economy

Law and order essential to economic growth

THE warning issued yesterday by Toru Shibuichi, Bangladesh country director for the Asian Development Bank, with regard to the nation's economic fortunes was nothing we have not heard before. However, as we enter the new year and one more voice is added to what is rapidly attaining the status of a general consensus, it is to be hoped that the government will finally begin to listen to the prescriptions of the experts -- both Bangladeshi and foreign -- for the economic development of the country.

Mr Shibuichi's prescription for Bangladesh's economic development echoed what economists and policy analysts within the country have been saying for some time. The macroeconomic health of the country is good, he said at a press briefing, and Bangladesh has made good progress in enacting much-needed reform in a number of sectors. The principal problem with the economy, however, is that non-economic factors are holding back economic progress.

Mr Shibuichi specifically cited the negative impact the law and order situation has had and is likely to continue to have on the economy. To this, we would like to add the prevalence of corruption at all levels of the administration, poor infrastructure, and lack of an independent judiciary as other non-economic reasons the Bangladesh economy has not performed as well as its economic indicators would suggest it is capable of.

The government is to be commended for some of the reforms it has enacted. The banking sector reforms that the government has instituted and the monetary policy that it has followed, in particular, have by and large been successful in improving the country's economic outlook. However, the non-economic factors mentioned above still hold back the economy and keep it from maximising its potential.

The deterioration in law and order scares away investment and the extortion that businesses have to pay increases the cost of doing business to prohibitive levels. The lack of a functioning judiciary means that there is no workable mechanism for the enforcement of contract rights and the adjudication and settlement of disputes which are essential to smooth economic development. Finally, the poor infrastructure and widespread corruption also raise the cost of doing business in Bangladesh.

It is for these reasons investors are unwilling to invest in the economy and entrepreneurs are hesitant to start ventures. If the government is serious about economic development -- and we see no reason to believe that it is not -- then it must focus on these non-economic factors in the coming year.

Peace for Palestine

MIR LUTFUL KABIR SAADI

THE Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had publicly declared its intention to murder Yasser Arafat, the popularly elected president of the Palestinian National Authority. This announcement was not an emotional outburst by some out-of-control cabinet member. It was delivered by Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Sharon's closest ally and a man frequently mentioned as his likely successor. The threat was deliberate and calculated to serve definite political purposes.

The Israeli security cabinet decided on September 11 to "remove" in principle Yasser Arafat. Several senior Israeli officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the assassination of Arafat was "definitely" an option. They later backed down from those remarks. The United States vetoed a United Nations resolution demanding that Israel neither harm nor expel the Palestinian Authority president, Yasser Arafat. The US veto flew in the face of the Security Council, which voted overwhelmingly in favour of the motion. Eleven members gave their backing and three, Britain, Germany and Bulgaria, abstained.

The decision to exercise the veto sparked anger among the Palestinians and worldwide. The authority's chief peace negotiator said he hoped Israel would not take the American action as a "licence to kill" Mr Arafat. Syria, the only Arab nation on the Security Council, tabled the resolution after a statement from Israel's security cabinet that it intended to "remove" Mr Arafat. The Palestine National Authority (PNA) hailed the United Nations General Assembly resolution last Friday, which overwhelmingly demanded that Israel, the occupying power, not deport nor threaten the safety of elected Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

In defiance of the US veto, the

UN General Assembly approved a resolution demanding that Israel halt threats to "remove" Yasser Arafat. Palestinian diplomats won unanimous support from the European Union and many African states after adding a condemnation of Palestinian suicide bombings to the resolution. The resolution, which was presented to an emergency session of the assembly after the United States vetoed a similar measure this week at the UN Security Council, was passed 133-4 with 15 abstentions.

The US said the wording of the resolution did not promote the "road map" to peace. The road

ment outposts built since March 2001 and a progressive Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in a series of confidence building measures. Next comes the creation of an independent Palestinian state and an international conference on the road map. The third and final stage will seek a permanent end to the conflict with an agreement on final borders, the status of Jerusalem, and the fate of Palestinian refugees and Israeli settlements. Arab states will also agree peace deals with Israel.

Since the UN put forward a plan to partition the former British mandate of Palestine in 1947 into

took the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt -- what remained of British-administered Palestine. Significantly these were areas that large numbers of Palestinian refugees had fled or were forced to flee to when the Jewish state was created in 1948. So while the 1967 war had defended Israel against combined Arab armies massed on its borders, it had also put a significant Arab population under Israeli rule (in addition to its own Arab citizens). It was in the following years that Israel began an illegal programme of settlement building in the now occupied territories, which it successfully

occupation, illegal settlements and the logic of power and hegemony. With the assassination of Anna Lindh, the Palestinian cause and the Arabs in general have lost one of the most important voices supporting their legitimate and just demands. A few years ago she was even imprisoned for two days during a visit to the Occupied Territories upon orders from then-Defence Minister Ariel Sharon. She saw in Israel's use of force against the Palestinians, and in America's tacit approval of this, a consecration of the law of the jungle and a subversion of the role of the UN and of international humanitarian law.

fascism and exposes the extent to which the Israeli right has absorbed the outlook of the Nazis.

Arafat may not be the best, may be the Palestinians deserve better, but the choice is ultimately theirs to make. Yasser Arafat is a man who just a decade ago was invited to the White House to sign an ill-fated peace treaty and -- when it served the purposes of the major powers -- was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. What is the purpose of publicly announcing plans for assassinating such a person?

The Israeli government claims that the murder of Arafat is necessary because the 74-year-old Palestinian president is an intolerable "obstacle to the process of reconciliation and peace." This from a regime that has engaged in ceaseless provocations, from the assassination of leading Palestinians to such collective punishments as the demolition of housing and the lockdown of entire towns, as well as the bombing of crowded residential neighbourhoods and the uninterrupted seizure of Palestinian land!

The Israeli government decision to "remove" Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, whom it considers an "obstacle" to peace-making, mainly reflects Israeli perplexity and frustration. The Israeli government and public opinion are angry, fearful and confused because all their military force and political pressure on the Palestinians have not been able to stop the resistance against the Israeli occupation. Yet this latest threat, like all that Israel has done to the Palestinians in the past 36 years of occupation, will not succeed either, because it is an expression of rage rather than rationality. It has also been attempted before, without success. Israel and the US need to understand the reality and must be rational in their steps for desired peace plan in Palestine as well as in the Middle East.

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map is an internationally devised peace plan, drawn up by the US, the UN, the EU and Russia -- with Israeli and Palestinian consultation -- that seeks a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That means setting up an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the two occupied territories, alongside Israel. The plan was published earlier this year with the backing of the US president, George Bush, who, despite showing little interest early in his term in the Middle East, declared himself committed to the road map's vision of two states side-by-side. He told a summit of Arab leaders in Egypt he wanted to see "a continuous territory that the Palestinians can call home".

The plan sets out to achieve this by 2005 in three stages. The first demands an immediate cessation of Palestinian violence, reform of Palestinian political institutions, the dismantling of Israeli settle-

Arab and Jewish areas, there have been three regional wars and two Palestinian uprisings (intifadas) against Israeli occupation. Crudely put, the root of each has been the instability created by the territorial split: either an Arab wish to destroy the state of Israel or an Israeli wish to extend its boundaries into Arab populated areas. Egypt and Jordan made peace deals with Israel but the instability has persisted. Fears of a regional, or wider, conflagration over Israel have receded but only to be replaced by the view that the conflict is a spur to terrorism, or stirs up hatred towards Israel's mainly western backers. Others simply want to end what they see as the injustice suffered by the stateless Palestinians.

It is clearly found that during each war Israel has extended its boundaries. In 1948 it extended the Jewish areas in the partition plan to its present internationally recognised borders and, in 1967,

defended in the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

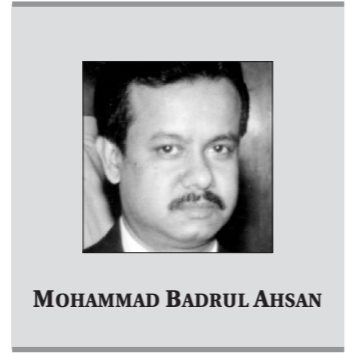
The 1980s intifada, which came in a decade when Israel made peace with Egypt and pursued Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation into Lebanon, demonstrated a rage felt by Palestinians against Israeli occupation that resurfaced in September 2000 with the beginning of the still ongoing al-Aqsa intifada. But the conflict is not only territorial -- much of the economic life of the West Bank and Gaza has been suspended since September 2000, exacerbating unemployment and poverty as many Palestinians are prevented from going to their jobs in Israel.

International leaders who support Palestine also become victims. Sweden's Premier Goran Persson described assassinated Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh as "the face of Sweden" and said she was a voice for truth and justice; a voice against injustice,

With Lindh's tragic departure the world has lost a wonderful and brave voice that dared say what great leaders and powers wouldn't. With her absence, those calling for a re-empowerment of international law and legitimacy have lost a herald who could have played a major role in the ongoing conflict between tyranny on the one hand and justice and law on the other. Anna Lindh carried with her the pain of the oppressed, the weak and defeated.

The murder of Arafat would represent the ultimate provocation, calculated to provoke a violent response that the Israeli regime would use as a justification for a full-scale assault on the Palestinian people. It is worthwhile considering the ideology that gives rise to the *Jerusalem Post's* stunning conclusion that the murder of an elected president is a means of demonstrating that "the tool of terror is unacceptable." This language reeks of

Does practice make you perfect?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SINCE I have asked you the question, let me have the honour to give you the answer. You can do the same thing again and again, and you will do it better. But will it make you perfect? My answer is a big emphatic no. You may get as well as it gets, but never to the limit where it cannot get any better. Practice makes you perfect in relative terms. In absolute sense, nothing is perfect, not even life.

English poet Ben Jonson was of the opinion, "And in short measures life may perfect be." From needlework to nuclear science, perfection is a short-term thing. Shakespeare laments in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* "Oh heaven! Were man but constant, he were perfect". In the long run, all things change, and perfection also changes with it. Only thing constant in life is change, and only thing perfect is the change that has remained a constant.

What does it mean to be perfect? It's a quality, trait or feature of the highest degree of excellence. A man can be an angel in his highest form of virtue. A woman

can be a fairy in the highest form of her beauty. These are all metaphors, not metamorphosis, the Promised Land, which can't be traveled. Perfection exists like the moon, which is visible but not reachable.

An English novelist once said that it was delightful to talk of perfection, but it was vastly far more amusing to talk of errors and absurdities. One of the most resounding testimonies against perfection is history, which repeats itself again and again. It seems that the process of human

fight and told his men: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again".

But that was tenacity, not perfection. You can also call it persistence, in some cases, even perseverance. Gamblers and racetrack addicts are most afflicted by it, as they place hope against hope in their muddled conviction to win. These are people, who perfect their tenacity with each try, because they believe success comes by the way of Russian roulette: the real bullet is hidden among the blanks.

The futility of the practice for perfection comes from there. You must learn to accept that things in life cannot be made any better. "None of us are perfect", said Oscar Wilde. But Irish poet James Stephens has come out even stronger. "Finality is death. Perfection is finality. Nothing is perfect", he proclaimed. Every man works within a scheme of life and perfection is when that scheme runs its course. Perfection is when all things have reached their peaks, when nothing can be done better, when the bus has reached

shining palace on the mountain that nobody has seen. It's the chimeric, the old spinning lady on the moon, the alter ego of the human frailty, the opposite of the glass ceiling. There are people who believe in it like they believe in ghosts and spirits. There are people who believe in it like they believe in legends and myths.

So, how do you practice for it? How do you practice for the imaginary, if not by imagination? Patrick White is an Australian novelist, who writes that only a few people are comfortable with the

mind.

Holy men meditate for year after year in order to perfect their knowledge of truth. They go through austere practices and extreme conditions of self-denial, often without food, shelter and creature comfort. What they look for is a light to perfect their souls, the light that brings the wisdom of the ultimate truth.

Perfection in any form or shape is the hidden light that is never found. And that hidden light is the excellence of things, which is embedded in the intrinsic value of goals set by men. But then it's not the same thing to achieve perfection as to reach a goal. If the goal is to climb a tree, perfection is to climb it without a hazard or fall. If the goal is to solve a problem, perfection is to solve it without making any errors. The goal defines the end, and perfection defines the means.

Is it important to be perfect, if you need to practice it? German poet Goethe observed that what was important in life was life itself, not a result of life. You may have a few glitches and goof-ups, but why bother about the result so long as you have fun on the game!

That reminds us of Carrie Jacobs Bond, an American songwriter, who wrote, "Do you think what the end of a perfect day can mean to a tired heart? When the sun goes down with a flaming ray and the dear friends have to part?" Only thing perfect is the mystery of how the beginning comes to its end. That's the only thing you practice, which is already perfect!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Perfection in any form or shape is the hidden light that is never found. And that hidden light is the excellence of things, which is embedded in the intrinsic value of goals set by men. But then it's not the same thing to achieve perfection as to reach a goal. If the goal is to climb a tree, perfection is to climb it without a hazard or fall. If the goal is to solve a problem, perfection is to solve it without making any errors. The goal defines the end, and perfection defines the means.

destiny is stuck in a dead end, varying only in style but not in substance.

Take the example of Robert Bruce, the King of Scotland, who was hiding in a cave for three months after being defeated in a battle. At the lowest point of his life, he thought about leaving the country and never coming back. One day he watched a spider building a web in the cave's entrance. The spider fell down time after time, but finally it succeeded with its web. That is when Bruce decided also to retry his

Perfectionists are people, who have the tenacity for perfection. They believe one must try again and again in order to improve on what they have already done best. These are people who are never afraid to lose, but winning isn't satisfying unless they have won it well. These are people, who get perfect score in the examinations, still believing that there was room for them to do even more. Each time they do the job right, they want to do it better, like a maniac for cleanliness wants to become cleaner with each wash of hands.

the last stop and you cannot go no more.

Take religion, take philosophy, take opinion and take ideology. So many people have taken them from so many angles, yet there is no single height for any of them. Instead people failed to agree for centuries, and they have been divided again and again. Perfection has proved to be its own antithesis, it is the most imperfect thing.

Thus perfection is the vertical limit that doesn't exist. It's the

idea of self-improvement, while others find it insulting. There are others who prefer to live in the theory, not in the practice, and only a few stubborn ones keep on making blunders in their ambition to become perfect.

Practice for it if you will, but don't expect it to happen. And don't forget what William Blake said: "The errors of a wise man make your rule rather than the performances of a fool." Aspire to be perfect if you like, but don't turn perfection into an obsession. Don't let it become a sickness of

OPINION

Accepting and rejecting criticism of public universities

MONIRUL I KHAN

THE issue is the criticism of our public universities. Since my experience is largely related to the operation of the University of Dhaka my argument and discussion may have a greater reflection of this institution.

Criticism as such is an exercise of right and invoking responsibility as well. It is a right in the sense that as a member and institution of the larger society any university cannot stay above criticism. It is a responsibility because the critic is expected to follow certain norms to establish his or her intellectual product, in this case the criticism. One may put forth another point that in favour of criticism and it is the fact that the public university is run by public money. Had it been even run by private money, criticism could have been there from amongst its clients.

Coming back to the main theme, if I take the case of DU what I would find on the plate dishing out criticism may be reproduced in the following manner:

- The educational level is not of desired level;
- Whatever educational level was there in the past has been deteriorated, particularly after 1971;
- The historical image that DU was the Oxford of the East (!) is gone.

Now if we go through above points one by one what do we learn? The so called 'desired' level of education is unknown to most of us. In other words the meaning of 'desired' level is both subjective and relative. It significantly varies from person to person. For example, when a person who is critiquing without legitimate and adequate experience of learning

about such institution, then he would be projecting an image that would be at best shapeless and amorphous. When the critic is from some reputed educational institution he would be happy to see such an institution in his own soil. As most of us know the exercise of evaluation is a methodical one. You need a precise framework and indicators to do such a job. It may also have horizontal and vertical depth. For example, you may evaluate over a period of time as well as case by case. In this case, any university is composed of several departments and you may choose individual departments. I am perplexed to see the intellectual poverty of the critics, hardly they have done any rigorous homework to present their results.

In order to carry out the evaluation of an institution no lesser than a university there is need for competence and experience

both. What readily comes to your mind in the form of indicators may include qualification and competence of the faculty, routine progress of educational session, competence level of the graduates or the research acumen of the faculty. To what extent such parameters have been carefully examined before the presentation of the criticism is not known to the constituency target of such tirades. How many of our critics are aware of the research publications made by different faculties in the prestigious journals, or how much is known about the intellectual reputation enjoyed by the faculties both at home and abroad? It is not difficult to point out that an institution of Bangladesh is less good than that of another country. While we make such comparison we should not forget a term called 'given context'. It refers to the limitation of comparison. You should not

forget that our universities operate under certain demographic and financial pressure. The number of enrolment increases in a routine manner not compatible with the structure of a university with the goal of intensive interactions at different levels. Another fact is the salary structure in a market economy. Opportunity cost of the highly qualified people vis a vis the salary structure of the universities is no match. The perk offered to a faculty is a dull package when compared to the one provided in the multinational, multilateral and some other organisations. One has to instill adequate amount of subjective inspiration to compensate for the forgone perks. It is hoped that the enthusiastic critic of the universities will care to take this point into consideration while offering their criticism in future.

About the regularity of classes and the competence level of the

graduates the facts are not classified or unknown. You have political disturbances that may disrupt the classes, but the evidence of deliberate neglect of classes is far from a common feat. Both the public and private employers will be more eligible to certify on the competence level of the graduates coming out of the public universities.

Next comes the situation in pre-1971 in the universities. Anyone feel elated to recount his colourful pedigree. The same applies to us also. Still such records are not about that speak of vibrant research milieu in the then universities. The number of research journals published from different universities at that period was either nil or a few. You may like to differentiate between quantity and quality, again the finding would not be a very pleasant one in this particular respect. Actually the critics often forget

the societal context. In a country (erstwhile East Pakistan) with an incipient capitalism within a predatory colonialism you would hardly notice the educational institutions to be productive ones. Without adequate functional necessity of the society the pressure of external factors to produce competent university graduates will be very minimum. Following this logic it is difficult to assume that the pre-1971 was a golden period for our universities.

Thirdly comes the myth of "Oxford of the East". Sometimes it seems to me: are we struggling with a ghost to build our image in a renewed manner? It has turned into a cliché that once the DU was the Oxford of the East. Again the issue of factual judgment comes in: Is the claim mere conjectural? Was there really a time which you can boast of as being the replication of the Oxford? Often we like to build a myth and subject our-

selves to it. Through such act we satiate our certain primordial feelings related to worshipping. Our objective is not to belittle the past, but rather to identify the actual reality when the purpose is making comparisons between two periods. There are skeptics who feel that the current salvo of criticism against the public universities has certain goal to achieve and it is nothing than the removal/modification of the 1973 Ordinance, a logical product of the democratic revolutionary movement of the country. The targeted constituency is well aware of their responsibility to match the operation of the historical Ordinance.

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