

Iran's nuclear dilemma

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

LAST year the US intelligence agencies assessed that due to Iran's limited technical abilities, it would take Tehran between six to ten years to produce nuclear weapons, even if Iran were allowed to operate its nuclear facilities freely. In August last year, the National Intelligence Estimate, which represents the consensus view of the US intelligence community, predicted that Iran would not be able to acquire fissile materials for a weapon before "early to next decade."

The preceding year's intelligence briefing given to the US Congressional staff members indicated Iran's inability to produce nuclear weapons until after 2010 because of existential technical inefficiencies in giving full shape to its alleged nuclear program. These estimates contradicted IAEA Director General Mohammed El Baradei telling the CNN in May 2004 that "the jury is still out" on whether Iran's nuclear programs were "exclusively for peaceful purposes" and his interview to the German magazine Der Spiegel early last year that Iran has the capability to produce nuclear weapons in two to three years.

Only the Iranians, perhaps, can tell the world when Iran can have nuclear weapons, assuming Iran has the intention to acquire these weapons. The US bellicosity towards Iran is based on Iran's past efforts to conceal its nuclear activities and unresolved questions with regard to IAEA investigation of Iran's nuclear program.

It may be recalled that in mid-2003, El Baradei reported to the IAEA board of governors that Iran had imported from China about two thousand kgs of uranium materials (without reporting it to the IAEA) which could be processed into fuel for civilian nuclear reactors or fissile material for nuclear weapons. This was regarded as Iran's non-compliance of its safeguard agreement with IAEA. US also questions the rationale of Iran having the world's sixth largest oil reserves but spending billions of dollars to develop nuclear power plants.

Besides, the US remains convinced of Tehran's backing of Hezbollah and Palestinian groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and of Iran's "collusion" with al-Qaeda, ignoring the fundamental difference that while Iran is a theocratic state dominated by the Shia, al-Qaeda subscribes to a fundamental interpretation of Sunni Islam, as well as the fact that during the 1990s Iran backed the anti-Taliban groups with substantial military aid.

In Western eyes, an Iranian nuclear capability would be both dangerous and destabilizing. A group of prominent European and American foreign policy experts (e.g. Sandy Burger and

Tony Lake, National Security Advisors to President Clinton; Douglas Hurd, former British Foreign Secretary; Strobe Talbot, former US Deputy Secretary of State; academics Joseph Nye, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Francis Fukuyama, Kalypso Nicolaidis, etc) holds the view that Iranian nuclearization could lead to further nuclear proliferation (in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey for example), prompt Iran to pursue an aggressive foreign policy (including providing support to terrorist groups or armed intervention in neighboring countries), and strike a fatal blow to the Nuclear Non Proliferation

without the US facing imminent threat (for self-defense) or UN Security Council authorization.

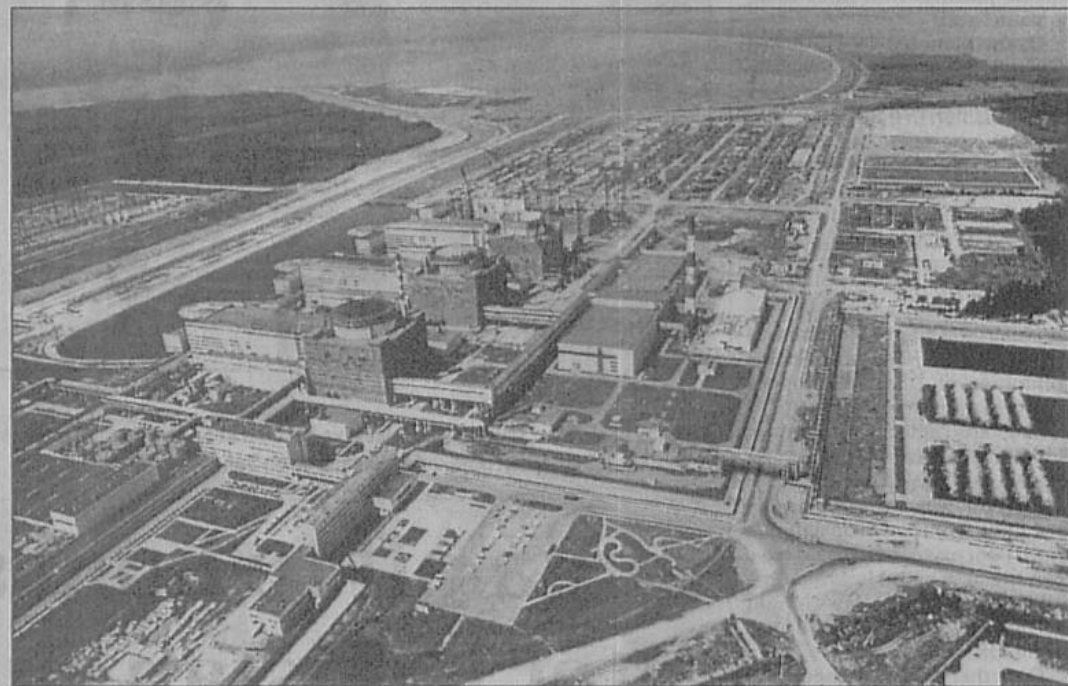
But then again, as Professor Anthony Arend (of Georgetown University) contends, under the regime of customary international law, developed long before the UN Charter was adopted, it was generally agreed that pre-emptive force in self-defense was acceptable so long as the state exercising its right of pre-emption could demonstrate its necessity and the use of force was proportionate to the threat.

More than one hundred years ago then US Secretary of War

nation that under no circumstances should Iran be allowed to become a nuclear power. Even if China and Russia refuse to go along with the West in the UNSC proposing punitive actions against Iran, it is possible that the US and EU along with Japan may impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on Iran on their own.

Under the current circumstances of Iran's reported willingness to compromise, Western bellicosity is unlikely to gain global endorsement, particularly of the Islamic world, a sizeable part of which continues to view the Iraq war, waged under false

The US and the West will never allow such a thing to happen. Osirak option (1981 Israeli preemptive attack on suspected Iraqi nuclear installations) can be exercised by either Israel or the US at any time of their choice. Western interpretation of "plausible threat" will continue to hold sway for the foreseeable future.



Nuclear reactor at Bushehr

Treaty. This group of profoundly influential people is against allowing Iran to develop enrichment and reprocessing capabilities (nuclear fuel cycle) even under international inspection. They urge the US and the European Union to insist that "only a permanent and verifiable end to Iran's nuclear fuel cycle program can provide an objective guarantee that Iran is not working toward a nuclear weapons option."

In essence, therefore, the Western insistence on Iran to abandon its nuclear program is due to the West's lack of trust in the Iranian regime. That Iran so far has not done anything illegal is a moot question. The West, particularly the US, sees a plausible threat in Iran's alleged aberrant behaviour on the nuclear issue. The "plausible threat" argument inevitably brings into discussion Bush doctrine of pre-emption that seeks legitimacy for military intervention breaching sovereignty of another coun-

try. Elihu Root (1899-1904) defined self-defense as "the right of every sovereign state to protect itself by preventing a condition of affairs in which it would be too late to protect itself." Defense of the doctrine of pre-emption/prevention was germane to Elihu Root's definition. The UN Charter described by John Foster Dulles, as a "pre-atomic document" did not envision either weapons of mass destruction nor terrorism by non-state actors.

Besides the Cold War behaviour of then superpowers in the Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Bay of Pigs, etc would provide some of the examples that the UN Charter was not respected whenever then superpowers felt their spheres of influence were threatened. These "threats" on most occasions were not justifiable by any measure of international law.

In the case of Iran, Senator John McCain's view that military option should not be discounted may not be a lone voice given Bush administration's determi-

premises of Saddam regime's possession of WMD and its links with al-Qaeda as a veritable clash of civilizations.

It would be imprudent for the West to ignore the frustration of the Islamic world over Western policy of "nuclear ambiguity" relating to Israeli possession of nuclear weapons while adamantly refusing to allow any Muslim nation to possess any (excepting Pakistan which the Americans appear to view as providing a stabilizing factor in conflict ridden South Asia). The West must also take into account the four "threats" prompting perceived security need of Iran for nuclear weapon capabilities: Pakistan, Israel, the US, and Iraq.

George Perkovich (of Carnegie Foundation for International Peace) notes that global recognition accorded to Pakistan as a nuclear power offended the Persian sense of superiority because to the Iranians, "Pakistan is a culturally and historically an inferior neighbor." Besides Pakistan, regarded by

Iran as a fertile ground for Wahabi fundamentalism and Sunni extremism, is a natural contestant for religious purity in the light of implacable Shia-Sunni divide.

In the case of Israel, the most recent remarks by the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmed-Nijad on Israel and its genocidal policy towards Palestinians reflect the opinion of the broad swath of Iranians. Iran's relation with the US has been a tortured one since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Brussels based International Crisis Group cites the views expressed by the foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini that opposition to the US is not a fundamental tenet of the Iranian Revolution and Iranian leaders have never said that Iran wanted to continue this antagonism indefinitely but wanted the problem to be solved eventually.

Iran's policy makers feel that the problem lies more with Washington than with Tehran and Iranians are confused by contradictory signals given by the US administrations (e.g. threat of military attack, regime change, isolationism, economic incentives etc). Besides use of terms like "axis of evil" does not help the cause of moderates within Iranian society seeking change from the state of asphyxiation caused by theocratic rule. As one Iranian political commentator noted: "Any US strategy that even remotely raises the spectre of foreign interference is doomed to fail."

Iraq poses the most obvious and direct threat justifying Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, the removal of Saddam Hussein from power has considerably lessened the security threat posed by Iraq, and consequently Iran's need for nuclear deterrent.

In the ultimate analysis, it would be foolhardy for Iran to continue its quest for nuclear weapons. The US and the West will never allow such a thing to happen. Osirak option (1981 Israeli preemptive attack on suspected Iraqi nuclear installations) can be exercised by either Israel or the US at any time of their choice. Western interpretation of "plausible threat" will continue to hold sway for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps Professor Ziauddin Sardar has aptly encapsulated the essence of post Cold War global politics in the following words: "The real power of the West is not located in its economic muscle and technological might. Rather it resides in its power to define for example freedom, progress, civil behaviour, law, tradition. What is real and what it means to be human. The non-Western civilizations have simply to accept these definitions or be defined out of existence."

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India in bigotry's grip



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

OVER the past few weeks, India has witnessed an explosion of intolerance, censorship, and physical harassment of people who differ from the "mainstream."

This should shake all public-spirited citizens out of the smug assumption that Indian society is basically tolerant, and that India has internalised the spirit of liberalism and minimum civility. In fact, India shows distressingly high levels of intolerance. It is in serious need of reform.

Consider three recent examples. In Maharashtra, where burning books has become a cult thanks to the quasi-fascist Shiv Sena, the government has banned yet another book on Shivaji by an American scholar on the flimsy ground that he discusses the potentially competitive, complex relationship between Shivaji and his father. (When his last book was banned, goons attacked a prestigious research institute, destroying invaluable manuscripts.)

In Tamil Nadu, another state with a century-long history of social reform, chauvinists have been busy attacking actress Khushboo for violating "Tamil ethos" by making the perfectly sensible statement that young women should take precautions when engaging in pre-marital sex which, surveys show, is widely prevalent.

Equally distressingly, Film Censor Board chairperson Sharmila Tagore invited the Defence services chiefs to vet Aamir Khan's Rang De Basanti, woven around the lives of MiG-21 pilots. The apparent purpose was to reassure them that the film doesn't throw uncomplimentary light on the MiG's poor safety record.

This is shocking. The MiG-21, unfondly called the "Flying Coffin," does have a horrible record of crashes. The IAF has lost 320 MiG-21s.

The services chiefs have no business to vet a film because it deals with defence matters. By that criterion, films that feature cricket players would have to be approved by the BCCI. Those with fictional characters from the corporate or media world would be subjected to censorship by the concerned professional bodies.

Now, the armed forces, like all other institutions of the state, have their place in democracy.

Fundamental rights cannot be suppressed in the name of some "higher" "mainstream" morality and majority "sensitivity." Those who do so practise the worst form of majoritarianism, the anti-thesis of democracy. The hate campaigns are indistinguishable from medieval witch-hunts. If India is to aspire to a liberal-democratic culture, it must not tolerate such crass intolerance. Enlightened citizens must speak up for freedom.

They perform an important job in defending the borders and providing emergency relief. But they cannot demand they must not be criticised. That can only create an unhealthy cult of military hero-worship.

Even not-so-liberal countries like the United States don't subject films critical of war (like Catch-22, Apocalypse Now, or The Deer Hunter) to military's censorship.

However, all these lapses pale beside the egregious police attacks under way on homosexuals and lesbians in Uttar Pradesh, which are driving women to the brink of suicide.

A month ago, the police beat up amorous couples in parks in Meerut -- although they had not indulged in any obscene acts. Now, they have surpassed themselves by arresting four homosexuals in Lucknow. The reason for this harassment is crass prejudice against gays.

Lucknow's police chief Ashutosh Pandey has invoked, perhaps the first time in decades in Northern India, Section 377 of the IPC to arrest gays.

He is homophobic. He says: "In India, practising homosexuality, with or without consent, is a crime. Gays are not respected in Indian society."

Section 377 is a throwback to Victorian morality, itself hypocritical. It should have been removed from the IPC decades ago. It criminalises "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal." This "order" is a bogus and unscientific concept. Worse, it's an invitation to tyranny.

Heterosexuals constitute a majority in society. But they have no right to impose their preferences upon others. Every adult has an inviolable right to his/her sexual preference.

Societies that don't accept this and persecute non-conformists are incipiently tyrannical. They tolerate the vigilantism against lesbian women that's taking place in Indian cities.

In Meerut, a young woman who married her companion, was so badly harassed that she drank poison. A mob chased her into the hospital where she was lodged. The police refused to rescue her.

Similar incidents have been reported from Kolkata, Allahabad, Lucknow, and Bhopal. Such medieval and authoritarian mindsets

should shock us.

A powerful case can be made for rating societies as free on the yardstick of how much freedom they allow citizens in matters of faith, diet, dress, and sex. The worst are those that elevate bigotry to the level of legality and impose an artificial homogeneity upon citizens.

The most emancipated societies are those which respect individual freedom -- not merely legally, but in life. Between the two fall societies which don't outlaw certain practices but which impose taboos on individuals not just in public life, but in their private life too.

Ultra-conservative societies like Saudi Arabia or Talibanist Afghanistan fall within the first category. "Christian" Europe in the first half of the 20th century belongs to this group too.

Much of Western Europe today falls in the "high freedom" category. Many such countries have legalised gay marriages and don't stigmatise people with same-sex preferences -- witness Elton John and Paris mayor Delanoë.

India belongs to the not-so-free group, along with countries with unflattering human rights records like Israel, Singapore, Sudan, and Nigeria.

A modern, enlightened society is based on fundamental rights. These are intrinsic, inherent to human beings. The most basic of them is the right to life. A person's body is inviolate. No institution or individual can inflict harm upon it without breaching fundamental freedoms.

The right to privacy, including the pursuit of one's sexual preferences, is linked to the right to one's body, as well another fundamental right, namely, the freedom of thought and expression.

Fundamental rights cannot be suppressed in the name of some "higher" "mainstream" morality and majority "sensitivity." Those who do so practise the worst form of majoritarianism, the anti-thesis of democracy. The hate campaigns are indistinguishable from medieval witch-hunts.

If India is to aspire to a liberal-democratic culture, it must not tolerate such crass intolerance. Enlightened citizens must speak up for freedom.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Empowering for development

Towards achieving MDGs

MD. ABDUL KADER AND SOHEL IBNE ALI

MR. Hilary Benn, Secretary of the State of DFID in UK told in an interview published in the official newsletter of DFID namely 'Developments' (fourth quarter 2004) that, 'NGOs play a really important role. I saw a good example of that in Bangladesh, where there's a very strong NGO sector. I visited one of the projects we were funding that was helping landless poor get access to land. The law in Bangladesh says you have a right to get access to land, but the people who had the land used to send the police beat up the landless poor and send them away. I shall never forget the conversation with a group of villagers who'd had some success in exercising their rights under the law'. Mr. Benn was impressed to see the empowerment of the landless people organised by Samata, an NGO working for establishing their rights.

In Bangladesh, there is an extensive range of formal rights reflecting a progressive liberal constitution that establishes state commitment to universal human rights. In practice, however, the ability to enjoy rights depends upon who you are, what you have and whom you know. In this existing system, landless poor people face extensive barriers when attempting to obtain access to services, resources and livelihood opportunities. Monopolistic state service providers, an underdeveloped private sector characterised by extensive market failure and

segmentation, and above all pervasive patron-client relationship structure create poverty and inequality along class and gender lines. Therefore, the landless poor, especially women have little access to government-controlled resources, services and administrative decisions.

The economic disparities between rich and poor people are originated in the structural injustices which characterise the nature of the state and society. The principal source of disparity is originated in the monopoly of political power in the country exercised by the rich and the elite. Political parties are generally dependent more on local and national elites who mobilise their dependent clients, rather than the independent "voting power" of landless poor. As a result, politicians are unlikely to hold officials to account or press for pro-poor reform, and often have a vested interest in the accumulation of resources and power by elites.

The landless poor face many dominant constraints in their struggle for a decent livelihood. The nature and magnitude of these constraints often also determine the prospects for dealing with the challenge of poverty. Such constraints are, of course, not immutable and can change over time in their intensity and significance. Over the last three decades or so, one can note a significant weakening of certain types of constraints while in others, little change has occurred. Such constraints are: (a) socio-cultural, (b) socio-political and (c) socio-economic. These

constraints hinder the process of empowerment of the landless as well as their poverty reduction.

More than half of the total population remain deprived of income, resource, education and social security. These people are becoming gradually poor and from poor to hardcore poor as a result of defeating unequal socio-political race. Such socio-political race has been created due to unequal distribution of resources and facilities including land,

Development, to a considerable extent, means following Amartya Sen -- the expansion of capabilities. In other words, it is increasing the possibilities for more people to realise their potentials through the expansion of their capabilities for functioning. Therefore, it can be said that the pathway to achieve the objectives of MDGs has already been created and acknowledged by the development practitioners and academicians, which should be broadened, strengthened and continued. Because, any societal reform is not an easy task, it needs longer time.

education, medical, as well as social and political power in the country. It is becoming very difficult for the poor to survive. Consequently, the discrimination between rich and poor is gradually increasing and the Gini index is increasing very speedily. In the villages, 'Gram Basti' (village slum) is increasing in number and size and on the contrary high rise skyscrapers are coming up indiscriminately and continuously in the capital city. This situation is not indicating any real progress of a state or nation.

The sovereign Bangladesh is now thirty-four years old. Since its birth to date, neither government nor any of the major development partner NGOs ever raised the issue of distributing resources to the

poor. The leftist political parties raised this issue, however, it did not serve the grassroots level effectively. Government and NGOs, keeping this unequal socio-economic race going, are creating 'safety net' through providing micro-credit, VGE VGD cards etc. to the poor. The poor could not demand to establish their right to resource and justice. It means that keeping the poverty process on, creating different safety nets for reducing poverty

effectively

-Empowering the poor through progressive political realisation and participation

As a rights based non government development organisation Samata is continuing a process of ensuring that all people, including those who are normally marginalised and excluded from full participation in activities of society, can take valued part in decision-making processes and utilise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. It is looking at people "holistically"; see their whole context and relationships, NOT just their category or groups. The NGO has been working in the following areas for outcomes:

-enabling the landless poor to

-Expanding the ownership and control of the landless poor over productive assets

-Enhancing their access to a knowledge based society

-Strengthening the capacity of the poor to compete in the market place

-Redesigning budgetary policy to reach public resources to the poor

-Designing institutions for the poor to enable them to acquire ownership of wealth and manage

claim their rights and entitlements

-providing and securing institutional space for the landless poor

-creating a pro-poor environment to support change, and

-capacity building of programme implementers

In the meantime, about 600,000 extreme landless poor people from its member households have moved above the poverty line (\$1

per day) as a result of the acquisition of about 60,000 acres of public khas land, khas water bodies and other natural resources and returns of their savings investments significantly contributed in achieving 'MDG-1: Reduction by half in people living under \$1 per day'. In addition, 316 organized landless people now have become members of Union Parishad, 1645 have become members of Gram Sarkar and 1481 have become members of different socio-political and cultural committees which have important influence on the rural society.

More than 73,000 women group members reported that they were now esteemed and respected in their family while 133 women

group members have become members of Union Parishad, 596 have become members of Gram Sarkar, and 204 have become members of different village based socio-economic and political committees which contributed in achieving 'MDG-3: Gender Equality and Women Empowerment'.

More than 78,000 landless poor families reported that they were able to send their children to schools regularly for primary education. Besides, about 6,000 drop-outs have been re-schooled and 1260 children in remote char land areas received 3 years basic education. These outcomes contributed in achieving 'MDG-2: Universal Primary Education'.

Development, to a considerable extent, means following Amartya Sen -- the expansion of capabilities. In other words, it is increasing the possibilities for more people to realise their potentials through the expansion of their capabilities for functioning. The secretary general of Bangladesh Economic Association Prof. Abul Barakat stated in his paper on 'Power, Politics and Poverty in Bangladesh' that 'the issue of poverty needs to be viewed in relation to deprivation: poor people are caught in deprivation trap, and true human development requires breaking the trap by empowering the excluded -- poor and deprived, focusing on human freedom contrast with narrower views of development such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the

rise in personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with modernisation. Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can be important as means to expanding freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedom depends also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements as well as political and civil rights'.

Therefore, it can be said that the pathway to achieve the objectives of MDGs has already been created and acknowledged by the development practitioners and academicians, which should be broadened, strengthened and continued. Because, any societal reform is not an easy task, it needs longer time. The administrative and political criminalisation, politicisation of national and local public institutions, rampant corruption, administrative irregularities, grabbing of public resources, high level of bureaucratic procrastination, increased insecurity of citizens, lack of employment opportunity, poor governance, lack of transparency and accountability, lack of political freedom, lack of participation of poor and women in the decision making etc. are the unresolved and endemic problems in the country. These cannot be solved only by government. It needs comprehensive rights based activities from the grassroots to national level to address broader societal reformations.

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