

An open letter to President Bush



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

SOMETIME ago, while talking about Iraq you told the Palestinian delegation which met you in the White House that God said: "George, go and attack Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein." Being a religious man you should believe that God does not directly speak to anyone by Himself. God spoke directly only once and that was with Prophet Moses. So what happened in your case, if you really heard anything about attacking Iraq, was your bad dream. Taking a bad dream as the word of God, if you attack a sovereign country and mess it up, then you cannot blame God for it.

One should think before doing anything and not after. However, you did the right thing sometime ago to assemble some sixteen former Secretaries of State and Defense in order to consult them on Iraq. But Mr. President, it was too late; you should have done it before. Indeed, you should have consulted all former presidents and the presidential candidates on such a crucial matter; this is what democracy is all about. At this stage nobody can really help you; you messed it up and you have to fix it. What you got from the meeting was lectures from most of them for your questionable judgment and still more questionable act. But it was extraordinary that you put up a good face on to all that was said there in the White House and then very courageously said you had got their advice and you appreciated them.

In your State of the Union Address on January 31, on terrorism, you said: "No one can deny the success of freedom, but... one of the main sources of reaction and opposition is radical Islam, perversion by a few of a noble faith into an ideology of terror and death." If it is the perversion of a few, then it is not "radical Islam". Islam is not radical; it is those who wrongly use Islam who are radicals. As you correctly said, the real Islam is a noble faith; it is a religion of

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Mr. President, did the American people or the Congress ever give you the authority to export "democracy" to Iraq and other countries at a great cost of American lives? When weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq, you changed your grounds to the issue of export of "democracy" which was never the issue before American Congress nor to the American people. So, are the Americans and others wrong when they say you misled American people?

peace. If it is only misused by a few, then it is better to say by a few misguided people; they could be from any religion.

Some members of your security interrogators in Guantanamo Bay prison, if I remember correctly, desecrated the Qur'an, that hurt the sentiments of the entire Muslim Community.

The cartoon against Prophet Mohammad (sm) that was published by Jyllandas Posten of Denmark in the name of freedom of press and repeated by some in other European newspapers were done by some radicals of some other faith and these deeply hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims all over the world. The whole Muslim world is condemning it, but the concerned governments refused to do anything against it on the plea of press freedom. Freedom does not mean license that press can write anything, even if it is wrong and injures the sentiments of the people of a faith. Anyway, all these were done by radicals of some faith, and religions like Christianity, Judaism, or any other faith as such could not be blamed for it. As far as I know, there is only one religion -- total submission to Almighty God and God alone, which is Islam, and this was the religion followed by Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and finally Mohammad (sm).

Terrorism has been there on earth long ago -- comparatively recent ones are some terrorists belonging to some factions of Christianity in Northern Ireland, Zionist terrorist group Irgun blew up in 1946 British headquarters located in King David Hotel killing 91 people and Menachem Begin, Yithak Shamer, Eitan (father of present Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni), etc were members of terrorist group Irgun, radical groups belonging to Jewish faith grabbing Palestinian land, terrorists ETA in Spain probably of Christian faith, etc. Terrorist Timothy McVeigh who blasted Oklahoma buildings and killed hundreds did not belong to Islam. Who walks into some schools in the

US from time to time and kills teachers and children? They do not belong to Islam. The underground chemical (probably cerin) attack by some Japanese cult members did not belong to Islam. The tragedy of some misguided people who belonged to their version of Christianity killed dozens and then killed themselves in Waco, Texas years ago. If anyone unduly blames a religion, this creates serious problem and leads to clash of religions which all must avoid, if we want peace on earth.

Mr. President, please see the consequences of your unilateral Iraq invasion. The terrorism has indeed spread all over the region and also elsewhere. Can anybody say that there was terrorism in Iraq before your attack? It was only Saddam's tyranny against so-called insurgents, Kurds and Shias, who revolted against his dictatorship. Otherwise, Iraq was really not involved in any terrorist attacks. Even Condoleezza Rice openly stated that Iraq was not involved in 9/11 attack. Then what was the purpose? The purpose obviously was to create enmity between Christians and Muslims. This is what the intention of 9/11 was and those who did it were fully successful. Unfortunately, America and the Muslim world have been paying the price. This must stop. Enough blood has been shed and time has come to reverse it, otherwise both Christians and Muslims would have to regret later.

Iraq issue is only part of the whole game. The Middle East has been the playground of all colonial powers for centuries. Obviously, America is interested to have its influence over the area. You said in your State of the Union address: "So, the United States of America will continue to lead." Why not? You probably deserve it too by being the only superpower, but you are relatively new in the game of the colonial powers. Anyway, achieving leadership is something great but has to be done very tactfully. Mr. President, the world outside the White House has changed greatly. The people around you

probably feel hesitant to give you the correct picture. This normally happens around the seat of power all over the world and hence all the mess on earth. You are out to export democracy to the "non-democratic" world, but some of the kings, emperors and military dictators are your friends as they are fighting "terrorism" with you. But your actions have created too many terrorists in the world. Who wants terrorism? I believe, none. Even terrorists do not like terrorism as it costs them their lives. Indeed, it is almost impossible to fight so many terrorists. We all want the immediate end of terrorism, but your strategy has to change in order to be successful.

You never won the hearts and minds of Iraqis. You see the results of your unilateral actions. All Americans are being seen as enemies in Iraq, in the Middle East and also in many Muslim countries. Your diplomats who used to be adorned by people now have to barricade themselves to save their lives. Your image has gone down even in America. This is not the fault of those Americans. They are losing their loved ones every day.

Mr. President, did the American people or the Congress ever give you the authority to export "democracy" to Iraq and other countries at a great cost of American lives? When weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq, you changed your grounds to the issue of export of "democracy" which was never the issue before American Congress nor to the American people. So, are the Americans and others wrong when they say you misled American people?

The Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds are fighting to have their part of the "pound of flesh." You add Al-Qaeda to it and then see the extent of the mess. The biggest piece led by Shia leaders is likely to have strong alliance with fellow Shiites in Iran. Then it would be a bigger mess for you, Mr. President. You already have serious problems with Iran on nuclear issue as Iran says it is pursuing its nuclear research for

peaceful purposes. To Iran, peace has a different meaning because of the presence of nuclear bombs in Israel.

In the matter of Iraq which happens to be a close neighbour of Iran, you have to be practical. There is still time to make a change. You forced an election in Iraq and you took a lot of credit during your State of the Union address for speedy democratization of Iraq. Only voting does not bring in democracy anywhere in the world. If it was so, then Iraq was already a democracy. Iraqis are used to voting as nearly 98 percent used to come out and vote, but they used to vote to keep only one man in power. Mr. President, successive American administrations used to do the same thing; supporting him to keep him in power. He fought Iran for nearly eight years. Now there is none to fight Iran. These are old stories.

It is well known that the last election that took place in Iraq did not conform to the democratic election rules and regulations. This was apparently done for setting up a government of your liking. This apparently did not happen. Anyway, whatever has happened could give a temporary respite but would not last long. Terrorism would continue. Without the participation of Sunnis, some 25 percent of the population, no government can work and be effective.

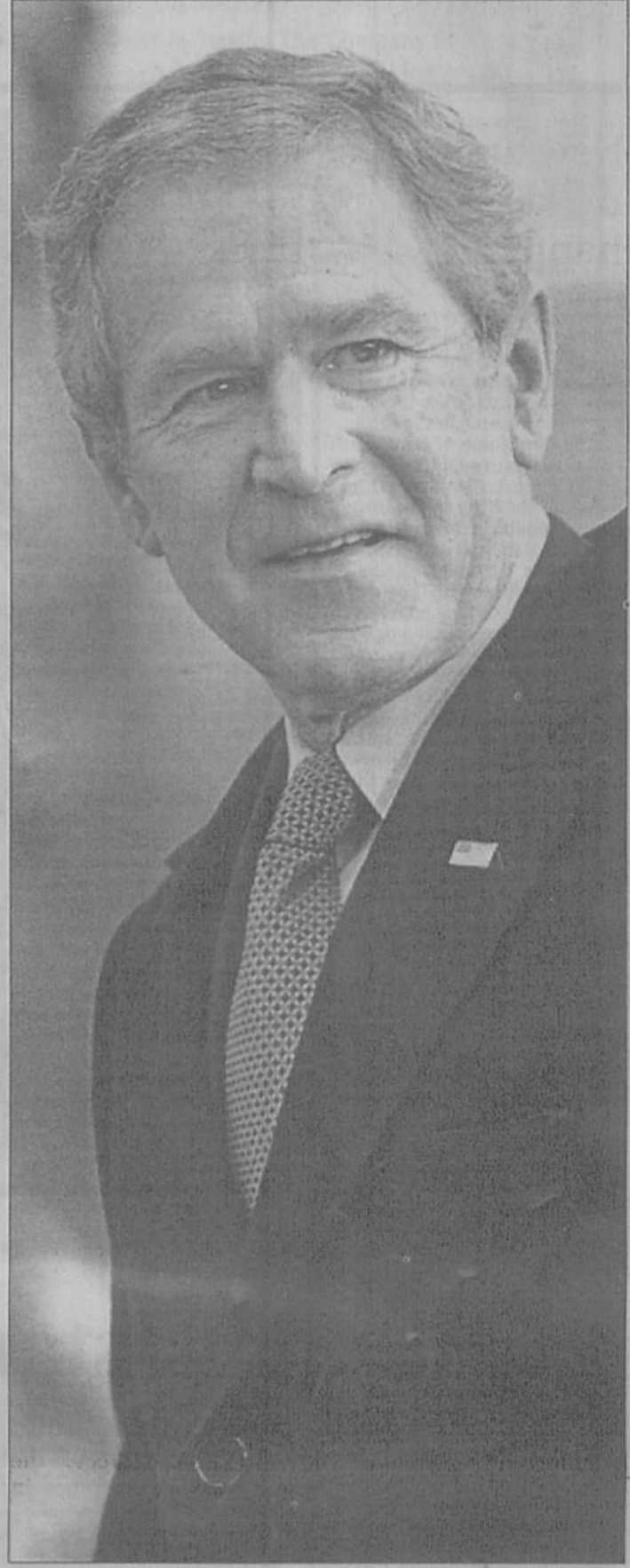
However, your idea of inclusive government appears to be the right one for an acceptable solution. It is good that you are trying to impress upon Shias and Kurds to include Sunnis in the government which is the only way to stop terrorism and establish effective governance. But in order to achieve this, you have to go for negotiation with the rebels. Your Vice President isn't right when he says: "We don't negotiate with the terrorists. I think you have to destroy them." Mr. Vice-President, they are too many now and you helped them grow by millions; you can not destroy all of them unless you use Nagasaki-Hiroshima methods. Anyway, circumstances have made them "terrorists" --

there was no terrorism in Iraq before 9/11. Even without caring for what bin Laden said the other day, negotiations seem to be the only possible way out now. Indeed, your commanders are the practical people and aware of the local situations. They are secretly doing some negotiations with the rebel leaders, but it seems that the rebels do not trust the Americans. They want withdrawal of American forces as quickly as possible. This is where the agenda of both Iraqis and Al-Qaeda meet. This is why the involvement of an independent organization like the UN is absolutely necessary.

Involve the UN fully by a fresh resolution that the UN would take over from the US and its coalition within an agreed time table -- say six months or so -- and have a full inclusive government by holding an independent election under the UN peace forces consisting of troops from friendly countries. Just to avoid further bloodshed, even the present election, despite its serious drawbacks, could also be made acceptable through negotiations, provided the Sunnis are appropriately represented and other agreements made earlier on revising the constitution stand.

Mr. President, it's the most appropriate time to do some rethinking. You have already achieved the "victory" as Saddam has been thrown out. The mechanism is also in place to for normal election for forming a new stable government. Sunni participation in election has to be ensured which is possible through proper negotiations. So, your "democracy," regardless of others agreement, has also taken some shape. So, you may also call it a "complete victory." Then why should you continue to lose American lives when this can be wrapped up by the UN relatively peacefully. So it's time to allow the UN to handle the rest of the things. This may leave Iraq in one piece. But the most important thing for you Mr. President is that you would be able to leave Iraq with honour and dignity, but undoubtedly with significant American influence in politics and economy of Iraq and in wider Middle East. Your insistence on continuation of war in Iraq may end up for America as it was in Vietnam. This would be a real disaster for the US and also for many other countries in the region.

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It has never been this bad

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THE state in which I find us today, I dare say that it is worse than what it was during the times of one Field Marshall Ayub Khan or the Shoirachar Hossain Muhammad Ershad. Does the statement shock you? It does not shock me. I am neither a political activist nor a cultural Guru to indulge in the calculated luxury of "appearing" to be level headed and not go against the tides of the time.

They say that fuel costs are being enhanced once again in keeping with the increase in global prices. Sounds reasonable, but what is disturbing is the way the administration is going about it. Our Honourable Finance Minister gives a statement indicating possibility of further increase in our fuel prices and immediately the corrupt players in the market create an artificial crisis threatening the very fate of our agricultural production. Farmers have to procure fuel at exorbitant prices to run their irrigation pumps.

In the meantime, the Minister for Energy, sitting in the comfort of his office, is engaged in the damage control exercises saying that there is no plan for increase in fuel costs and that no preparatory exercises have been undertaken needed prior to fixing such upward adjustments in fuel costs.

While all this is going on, our Honourable Finance Minister is keeping quite. I believe he is scheming in the quiet of his home and his office as to how to wriggle out of this mess initiated by him.

In the meantime what is most likely to happen is that there will be a final compromise between the Energy Advisor and the Finance Minister and a joint statement will be given to the effect that everything is under control and that there is nothing to worry about for anyone. By then the damage is done.

This regime comes to its senses only when under extreme pressure, pressure that has the possibility of harming the passage of its election campaigning during the forthcoming national elections or some superpower putting the lid on its unscrupulous, anti-people management practices. It cannot operate without someone twisting its arms.

Well as I write this, I have just come

across a report that the Finance Minister has found his favourite escape route, namely the media. Remember, he has done that on previous occasions too? Of late he also is giving statements to the media and elsewhere, which to my mind is either uncalled for or ridiculously senseless. Should not he just keep quiet, which will be good for the people and the nation at large?

In the meantime, let us take a trip to Kansat where we are still trying to recover from a mayhem carried out by our police. This is not the first of its kind; similar incidences of the nature did take place in recent times. This is barbarism of the medieval age. How can a government sleep over such an issue? Yes, I say "sleep" since over a week has passed and the debacle continues causing total disruption in the lives of an entire village where, so far the administration has merely punished the Officer in Charge by making him what it calls "stand released."

If the police are not shooting down people then innocent people are dying on a routine basis on our roads and highways at the hands of wild, inexperienced and negligent drivers of commercial vans and buses. On each and every occasion the police immediately comes up with a statement that the driver of the vehicle could not be nabbed as though it was a pre-recorded statement, and that is the end of it all. How very convenient.

The other day a small school-going child was crushed under the wheels of a mini-bus right at the heart of the city, somewhere in Maghbazaar, and obviously the driver who was alleged to be a helper and not a regular one has escaped. The police was proud to be able to seize the bus, though!

The other day it was reported in the media that there were as many as half a million fake driving license holders in the country. Shockingly enough, the report was based on direct interviews with the gangs or agents actually engaged in issuing these fake licenses. A similar situation prevails with regard to gangs or individuals issuing forged currency notes. Year after year, criminals are nabbed and you hear of not a single individual being punished or brought to justice.

The civil bureaucracy is in total

disarray. Mass scale transfers and promotions, without proper planning, are not only rocking the very foundations of the administration, but also are on way to creating a legacy that we can ill-afford. As it is with the departures of nearly the entire bunch of erstwhile CSP cadre officials, for all practical purposes, there has been a marked deterioration in the professional capabilities of our bureaucracy.

One of the senior officials belonging to the inner circles of the administration when asked about the visit of the US Under Secretary of State told me that people in the governmental circles heaved a sigh of relief since she did not "touch on the sensitive issue of operations of the Rab and alleged human rights violations thereof."

I told him that there is no reason for complacency since there has been an all round deterioration of our human rights. The Ahmadiyyas are constantly being threatened by a known group of religious bigots right under the very nose of the administration. Our police of late have become trigger-happy and killing people right and left when innocent villagers are raising their voices demanding access to some of their basic rights to life and living. There is indeed no denying of the fact that Bangladesh has turned out to be one of the most dangerous places, where there is constant fear of lives of working journalists, particularly at field levels in the outer districts.

We, the people of this country, since our independence, never had anything in our lives to rejoice. Nearly each of the regimes in more ways than one have systematically deprived us of most of our legitimate rights, which given the will were otherwise achievable even under the prevailing circumstances. Other people may have other opinions, but I firmly believe that the dominating factor in all this emanates from the poor and unethical political leadership we have suffered under since independence. However, all things considered, I maintain that it has never been this bad.

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Another Farakka? No, Tipaimukh Dam is different!

Has the Kaptai Dam made the downstream area in Bangladesh a desert? Why then Tipaimukh Dam should make the Sylhet region a desert? Sylhet is not only the highest rainfall area in Bangladesh; the highest rainfall area of the world is just across the border. Let us not misguide the nation and whip up unnecessary anti-Indian feeling.

MA MATIN

I am getting sick of what is being ventilated in Bangladesh newspapers on the impact of Tipaimukh Dam on Bangladesh. In its latest version: "Another Farakka?" published in the Daily Star on February 2, the article claims: "The implementation of the project would cause drastic decline in the water flow of the river Meghna and its tributaries resulting in adverse effects on agriculture and its sub-sectors in 12 districts in Bangladesh. The rivers Surma and Kushiara are likely to suffer most, which would lead to desertification process of the whole of Sylhet region."

Similar claims of desertifications were also made in the daily Ittefaq on November 23 and 25, 2004, in two articles on the impact of Tipaimukh Dam on Bangladesh claiming that Sylhet area will turn into desert!

In all these cases the writers have failed to understand the difference between diversion of water from the main river (Farakka case) and effect of storage dam for generation of hydro-electricity (like Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak in India or the Kaptai Dam on the Karnafuli in Bangladesh).

Has the Kaptai Dam made the downstream area in Bangladesh a desert? Why then Tipaimukh Dam should make the Sylhet region a desert? Sylhet is not only the highest rainfall area in Bangladesh; the highest rainfall area of the world is just across the border. Let us not misguide the nation and whip up unnecessary anti-Indian feeling.

As far as I remember, India raised the concept of Tipaimukh Dam project in one of the Bangladesh-India meetings prior to the first agreement on the sharing of Ganges water. The project was introduced as one where both the countries can get the benefit. At that time Bangladesh was too much pre-occupied with the sharing of Ganges water and as such the discussion on Tipaimukh Dam did not proceed.

Tipaimukh Dam Conference (ITDC-2005) that began on December 30, 2005 at Dhaka has revealed many things. We in Bangladesh had to face serious rehabilitation problem of the people affected by the inundation of Kaptai Lake. India will have to tackle such a situation in the upstream. It is however a matter of great hope that due to the pressure of environmentalists all over the world, rehabilitation of affected people is getting high priority in all major water resources project. The slogan of the World Bank on big projects is now: "Nobody should be worse off due to the project."

It is also understood that India is planning to export this surplus power to Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. If this is true, why can't we get this power from India? This will benefit both India and Bangladesh. India can save the huge investment in power transmission cost while Bangladesh can get cheaper power. Provided of course that other adverse impacts of the project are mitigated to an acceptable limit for Bangladesh.

Let us have a pragmatic approach to the impact of Tipaimukh Dam on Bangladesh. In this connection I would like to touch a few points: a) modification of river flow regime, b) its impact on boro cultivation in the vast haor areas, and c) the flood flows for the water resources engineers, agriculturalists, and environmentalists to ponder. Definitely not desertification, rather water logging may be a problem.

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able for boro cultivation. With the Tipaimukh Dam operational, the river level will be higher in the post-monsoon period and will obstruct timely drainage of the haors and many lands may not be planted because the land may not drain out. A vast area may thus go out of boro production.

Some of the land drained marginally will be vulnerable to early spring flooding (March-May) due to shorter crop height due to late planting.

Construction schedule of barrage and the dam is not known. If the barrage is constructed earlier and commissioning of the storage dam needs several more years, then during the intervening period dry season flow of the Surma and Kushiara will be seriously depleted.

Schedule of release is important from another point of view. In monsoon areas, storage reservoirs are normally filled up during withdrawal of monsoon in order to maximize hydroelectric production. Late monsoon heavy rain, which is not rare in this area, may cause much more than normal flood downstream in Bangladesh due to extra release from the reservoir for its safety. Bangladesh has experienced such floods a few years back when the districts of Kushtia and Satkhira were flooded due to late monsoon releases from reservoirs on the rightbank tributaries of the Hoogly-Bhagirathi system in India. The same thing may happen in the Sylhet area.

Average flood height during the monsoon may decrease but operational fault or operation of the dam without taking downstream flooding into consideration is likely to cause higher flooding at times.

In the event of dam failure due to earthquake or otherwise, there could be serious consequence of downstream flooding.

Increased agricultural activity and development of agro-based industry in the Cachher Plains may cause increased water pollution in the downstream flow due to increased use of fertilizer and pesticides and effluent from the

industries.

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