

More deaths from building collapse

Emergency rescue facilities need to be developed

OUR inability to respond efficiently to post-disaster situation has been highlighted yet again following the Tejgaon building collapse on Saturday. It was not only the inherent lack of capability of the relevant agencies, but also all other attendant lacunae that prevented the rescue operations from being conducted more efficiently than these actually were.

It appears that our rescue agencies, particularly the fire brigade, were least prepared, and even less equipped, to handle the situation in the aftermath of the building collapse. One would have expected that the Spectrum disaster in Savar, almost a year ago, would have provided the agencies with enough lesson to be acting with promptitude in handling Saturday's disaster. Regrettably, our rescue operations have remained as archaic as one can imagine with very little technical expertise infused into the exercise. Given the fact that the Dhaka city has seen unprecedented growth of high-rise buildings, defiant of any building code in the last two decades, quick reflex response to possible disasters should have been a matter of routine preparedness.

Going by what one witnessed at the site of the building collapse, very little care was taken of the very sensitive nature of the first phase of the operation, which was the rescue of the trapped victims. What was required at the initial stages was to determine the location and condition of those trapped, and the means to approach them without endangering their lives before the removal of debris could start. One did not see any sonar equipment being used for the purpose, instead there was a rush on the debris by all those who were at hand, whose intentions were no doubt honest, but whose actions put the trapped in greater risk.

Those involved in disaster handling should have been aware of the need for some advance planning, keeping the broader picture in mind as well without for a moment losing focus on the tasks at hand. There was very little coordinated planning as evidenced by way the initial phase of operations was conducted and also by the way the adjacent roads were closed to traffic for hours, thereby exacerbating traffic jams all over the city -- going well into the following day.

We suggest that the government conduct a proper assessment of our post-disaster handling capabilities like building collapses and fires where huge gaps are bound to be discovered in terms of equipment, training and management, so that we could do the much-needed capacity building in this vital area of civil defence and internal urban security.

Onus very much on BGMEA

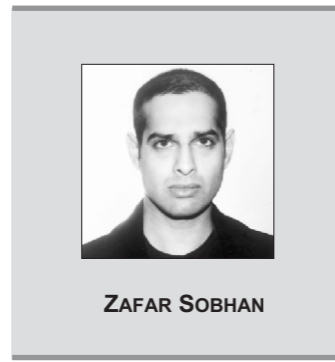
Weed out the errant units

IN almost all instances, fire tragedies in the garment sector have taken place due to non-compliance of laid-down safety procedures on the part of the factory owners, a statement that can be made without any fear of contradiction.

But each time such an incident occurs, the sector's apex body, BGMEA, says that some units were still in breach of safety standards. They cry hoarse with 'promises' of support and some sort of assistance to the affected families. It also promises to identify the factories that are in breach of security and safety procedures and pledges action against the units found errant. Although earlier they had given a clean chit for the factories in general. We find it patently outrageous and shocking though, that over the years out of the total of the 3200 garment factories operating in the country as many as 1500 are not in compliance with standard safety and security rules which is why these murders (we refuse to call them accidents) are taking place.

Let no one be in any illusion that the primary onus in keeping this sector operating in a manner conforming to laid-down rules and procedures so as to protect the life and limbs of its workers lies with the BGMEA and its leadership. It simply must get its act together, form a body to identify the recalcitrant units and begin taking punitive actions against defaulting factories without any further loss of time. In all of this process, they must keep the media and the public informed of the steps they intend to take to fix the errant industries. The BGMEA should even be prepared to take such a drastic action as closing down the defiant factories so as to prove that they have come unstuck from the rhetoric and the business as usual style.

Reading tea leaves



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THERE are all sorts of players involved in the election process other than the political parties, or indeed the election commission and caretaker government that are now at the centre of political attention, and as the election season nears it is important to focus on some of the other key players in the process who, either by action or by omission, have the potential to shape the outcome one way or another.

Let us not forget that one crucial player in the electoral process is the army. On the face of it, it might seem as though the army has little connection with the electoral process, as its role is limited to providing security for the polls, but this very fact means that the neutrality of the army is a key component of good elections, and much depends on the army playing a positive and productive role.

In fact, the critical role of the army can be appreciated by the fact that it is always the opposition who demands greater army involvement and the incumbent who resists, and that in the aftermath of every election, the losing

STRAIGHT TALK

I wouldn't be at all surprised if what we might be seeing is something akin to a slow reassessment of American strategic thinking with respect to Bangladesh. How this might play out in terms of the upcoming election is anyone's guess, but that it can have either a subtle or not-so-subtle impact on the election is certainly not to be discounted, and is something that we might want to consider further in the coming months.

party cries foul about the army's role, but if the army is kept out of the proceedings, the losing party makes the same complaint.

The Dhaka-10 by-election, which was openly heisted by the ruling alliance candidate, is a good example of this. One principle grievance of the losing side was that the authorities had not commissioned the army to ensure security, thus setting the scene for the election to be stolen. Therefore it can be seen that the role that the army plays, be it through action or inaction, can decisively shape the outcome of an election.

Then there is the international community. The effect that the international community can have on the outcome of elections is less readily apparent due to the fact that, for one thing, the community is not a unitary entity that speaks with a single voice, and for another, that the effect it can have on the outcome of elections here is far more subtle and indirect. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the international community can have no effect and plays no role.

The principle way in which the international community (as a whole or individual countries) can exert pressure is through holding out the threat that if the election is not considered legitimate that this could conceivably open the door to economic sanctions, curtailment of aid, and diplomatic isolation.

Let us have no illusions. If the international community or influential members thereof do not accept the legitimacy of the elections, then this can make things extremely difficult for the ensuing government. The international community (as a whole or individual countries) can also always use their diplomatic or economic might to lean on the government or the opposition in the coming months to act in one way or the other that could very well have an influence on the outcome of the elections.

In this brave new world in which we now live, it does make a difference where other countries line up and whether the international community or influential individual countries feel they have a stake in the outcome of a given election. We like to think that we are free of foreign influence when it comes to choosing our leaders, but the truth is that this is not entirely correct, either here, or in any other country. This is a funda-

mental reality of the 21st century. Late last year, a Washington DC-based source who is close to the senior Republican establishment suggested to me that the party foreign policy wise men believed that the ruling alliance would be able to do a better job of keeping the extremists in check, and that if the opposition were to come to power that it would be unable to maintain security and stability, and that this is the reason the Bush administration has remained supportive of the Bangladesh government, despite serious reservations.

This analysis is also supported by the now well established and documented post-9/11 Bush foreign policy of attempting to reach out to "moderate Muslim nations" and to establish close ties to groups and political parties in these countries who are right of centre and have a religious-based appeal.

The idea was that for the Bush administration, the right-of-centre "moderate Muslims" (in this context, the ruling alliance) were a better long-term bet than the left-of-centre liberal democrats (in this context, the opposition) in terms of a potential strategic alliance against the extremists in the

Muslim world. These constituencies are far closer to the Republicans in terms of ideology than the liberal democrats, and the idea was to also thus dispel the notion that the US was anti-Islam (needless to say, the strategy is not working very well).

Confirming all of this are findings from a workshop held last year about the future of Bangladesh sponsored by the US National Intelligence Council, that seem to suggest a Bush administration preference for the status quo, even though the workshop concluded that "the situation in Bangladesh is worsening, and all the indicators we monitor are deteriorating" and predicted that "by 2010, Bangladesh will be an increasingly polarized country bogged down trying to resist radicalism."

But this is all last year's news and the most recent and significant development internationally for us are signs that the Bush administration position with respect to Bangladesh may be shifting as the election draws closer.

One indication of this shift might be the replacement of US ambassador to Bangladesh Harry K Thomas by Patricia Butenis and, to a lesser extent, perhaps also the replacement of US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca by Richard Boucher. Interestingly, there had long been quite a difference of opinion between Ms. Rocca and Mr. Thomas as to how to approach Bangladesh. Mr. Thomas was known for his accommodation of the alliance government, especially the junior partners, for what

he referred to as their "commitment to democracy" and "eschewal of extremism."

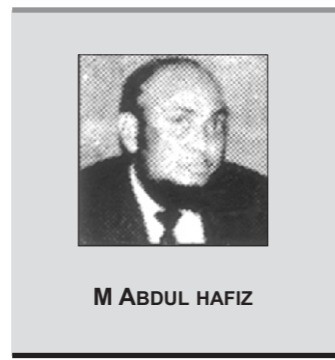
Ms. Rocca, on the other hand, represented the more hard-line school of thought, both in her private and public comments, and was in Bangladesh just last month, once again reading the government the riot act.

There clearly remains a significant difference of opinion within the US State Department with respect to the performance and reliability of the current Bangladesh government, and these latest personnel changes may well serve to bring matters to a head, one way or the other. The key thing to look out for now is what will happen in the aftermath of President Bush's upcoming meeting with Indian PM Manmohan Singh. The geopolitics of the region, and perhaps the entire world, are set to shift dramatically, and what this change might mean for Bangladeshi democracy is an interesting question.

I don't have the answer, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if what we might be seeing is something akin to a slow reassessment of American strategic thinking with respect to Bangladesh. How this might play out in terms of the upcoming election is anyone's guess, but that it can have either a subtle or not-so-subtle impact on the election is certainly not to be discounted, and is something that we might want to consider further in the coming months.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Why the US is hesitant to take on Iran?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE US and Israel have been itching to take on Iran since their strategic setback caused by the latter's Islamic revolution of 1979 which overthrew the monarchy, the great friend of both, and brought to power the incalculable Mullahs claiming themselves to be the true defender of Islam. The revolution was thus certain to clash with both the US and Israel and their client states in the Arab world. Also, to the revolutionary Iran, Israel was totally unacceptable because it was considered a foreign implant in the Islamic heartland, and the US was no less an antagonist for it sought (through Israel and at on its own) to keep the Middle East firmly bound in the shackles of its hegemony.

US-Israeli hegemony over the region had however won a great victory in 1978, when at Camp David, Egypt, hitherto considered the leader of the Arab world, broke ranks, inflicting a severe blow to Arab solidarity, and signed a separate "peace" with Israel. Henceforth, the Jewish state pursued its own agenda unhindered to project its unchecked

PERSPECTIVES

power over the entire region between Israel in the West and Iran to the East -- the twin pillars of US hegemony over the region's people and resources. But the US-Israeli calculation went haywire with the Iranian revolution ending this partnership. At this point Washington would have loved to take back Tehran from the Mullahs but for the countervailing force of Soviet Union. Undeterred, however, by this single adverse factor, the US successfully got Iraq to mount an unprovoked invasion of Iran. The war sapped the energy of Iran, preventing it from any serious attempt to "export" the revolution and challenge US influence in the region. Israel also was left free to pursue its own agenda, as during the eighties the conflicts in the Middle East were between the Arabs and Iranians.

Taking advantage of a situation like this, Israel went whole hog to annex the West Bank and Gaza, expanded Jewish settlements in occupied area and in a daredevil action destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1982. Israel also expelled the Palestinian fighters from Lebanon and established long term occupation over South Lebanon. In fact, by the end of the decade Israel was quite close to the goal of commanding unchallenged power over the Middle East.

The end of Cold War in 1990 opened up yet more opportunities to the US and Israel. Now freed from Soviet checks on their ambitions and with Iran devastated by war, the US was now set for materialising its unfinished agenda of establishing military control over the region in the style of a colonial empire. Iraq's foolhardy invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 quickly ended the process.

The US response was swift -- as if she awaited such an excuse. By assembling 600,000 allied troops in Saudi Arabia, half of which were Americans, it pushed Iraq out of Kuwait and mounted massive airstrikes against Iraq itself, destroying much of its industries, power-generating capacity, and other infrastructure. The US now had established massive military beach-head in the oil rich Persian Gulf. At the end of the one-sided war, the US established permanent

bases in Saudi Arabia in the name of the Kingdom's security and imposed draconian sanctions on Iraq, created Kurdish autonomous zone in the north, and together with Britain continued to bomb Iraq almost on daily basis to pulverise what was left in the country. Iraq, the region's most developed country was virtually consigned back to the middle ages. With the US military beach-head still in place, where do the "real men" in the US and Israel want to go next? At a minimum, the Washington neo-cons and their Likud allies in Israel aimed at effecting a regime change in Iraq, Syria, and Iran -- all considered obstacles to their gameplan. And this was to be delivered by covert action, air strike or invasion to be undertaken by the US alone. Israel would stay away from these operations for obvious reasons but would reap the benefit of their aftermath.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 were catalysing events that put these wide ranging plans in motion. The US wasted no time in seizing the moment and declared a global war against terrorism. Although the first target

was Afghanistan the neo-cons' focus was the Middle East, the strategic hub of the world. On January 29, 2002, George Bush announced his initial targets for regime change: The axis of evil: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The plan was to invade and consolidate control over Iraq as a base for operations against Iran, Syria, and perhaps Saudi Arabia. The assumption was that the invasion of Iraq would be a cake walk and the US troops would be greeted as liberators.

The US invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003 and Baghdad fell on April 9. Understandably the mood in Washington and Tel Aviv was triumphant: the US was indeed irresistible. It was therefore time for marching into Tehran. Now the US was also equipped with much awaited excuse over Iran's nuclear defiance. But nearly three years after the Iraq invasion the "real men" are still stuck in Baghdad. Yes, there has been a great deal of talk about attacking Iran: plans are in place for airstrikes on Iran's Revolutionary Guards, on its nuclear installations, and other WMD sites, and there is even talk of ground invasion. There have been reports of spy flights over Iran and operations by special forces inside Iran. Israel too has been goading the US to go ahead. Or else it threatens to go solo.

What has then been holding the Americans back? One reason is, of course, the turning of the cake walk into a quagmire. The Iraqi welcome, if any, has been replaced by stiff opposition of the insurgents, exacting a high price in terms of American men and materials. As a result, an estimated 150,000 US

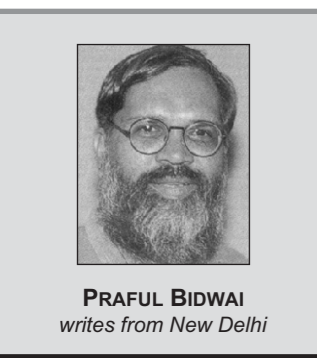
troops cannot be released for action against Iran. While the US cannot mount a full scale invasion of Iran without introducing the draft, it does possess capability despite Iraqi quagmire, to launch air and missile strikes at Iranian targets, using even nuclear weapons, if necessary, to destroy underground weapon sites. Then why hasn't the US mounted air attacks against Iran yet?

As the Americans have taken more and more sober reckoning of Iran's political and military capabilities they couldn't but realise that Iran is not Iraq. When Osirak was attacked by Israel, Iraq did nothing because it couldn't do anything. One thing is certain: Iran will respond to attacks on its nuclear sites, because its nuclear program has the broadest public support. The question however remains: what can Iran do in retaliation. The CIA has conducted wargames to determine an answer. As reported by Newsweek of September 27, 2004, few liked the outcome. According to another source, the wargames were unsuccessful in preventing the conflict from escalating. The architect of several other wargames, Sam Gardner concluded "you have no military solution for the issues of Iran."

No one has yet remarked on some eerie parallels between the US determination to deepen its intervention in the Islamic world and Napoleon's relentless pursuit of the Russian conquest. Those remarks, if made, wouldn't be encouraging, either.

Big (ret) M Abdul Hafiz is former DG of BISISS.

Muslim headcount in Indian army: Hypocrisy or misconceived fears?



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Manmohan Singh government has unfortunately dropped the move to collate data on the status of Muslims in India's armed forces. This follows raucous protests over the "Prime Minister's High-Level Committee" (PMHC) headed by former justice Rajinder Sachar.

The protests got increasingly politicised. The Bharatiya Janata Party sought the President's intervention in his capacity as the Supreme Commander of the armed forces to stop the "mis-guided" PMHC. Former army officers held dharmas against the

In many countries, promotion of inclusive multi-cultural policies became possible only when they abandoned ostrich-like attitudes and confronted reality. For instance, after the race riots of the 1980s, the British police self-critically examined its ethnic composition and prevalence of race- and ethnicity-related biases in its ranks. This prepared the ground for diversity sensitisation programs, retraining, and positive discrimination. Such examples are worthy of emulation. India is missing a chance by ignoring them.

"divisive" move. And Mr George Fernandes termed the PMHC's work a "seditious act" aimed at "communalising" the forces!

Following this, the PMO quickly distanced itself from the Committee. The Defence Ministry, which had sought the relevant data from the services, assured them that it won't forward it to the PMHC.

Numerous arguments were advanced by the opponents of the survey proposal. These hold that the survey would tarnish the armed forces' image as a professional force unfamiliar with words like "caste," "creed," "religion," and "reservation."

Others contend that the army is one of the few reliably secular institutions in India. It's fully trusted

by the religious minorities -- unlike the police or paramilitary forces. It has an enviable record of protecting the lives of the minorities in communally charged situations.

No one can seriously question the Indian army's secular credentials and impartial role in protecting the life and property of the minorities when ordered to do so. The Indian army represents a remarkable achievement. It's one of the few apolitical militaries in the Third World functioning fully under civilian control.

And yet, the army does not reflect the diversity and plurality of Indian society. It suffers from under-representation of certain ethnic-religious and social groups, and from over-representation of

some others, notably the "martial races," including Sikhs, Gorkhas, Dogras, Jats, Rajputs, etc.

Among the under-represented people are Dalits, OBCs, and Muslims. According to a January 9 note from the army to the Defence Ministry, in 2004 it had only 29,093 Muslims -- in an 11 lakhs-strong force.

This 2.6 percent ratio compares poorly with the Muslims' 13 percent population share. To demand that recruitment of Muslims, Dalits, and Advaisis be increased is not to advance an anti-national, communal, or divisive agenda, but to ask for balance.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's greatest Prime Minister, who cannot even be remotely accused of a

communal bias, noted in 1953 that "in our Defence Services, there are hardly any Muslims left. What concerns me most is that there is no effort being made to improve this situation, which is likely to grow worse unless checked."

This concern was reiterated by Minister of State for Defence Mahavir Tyagi, who disclosed that "the percentage of Muslims in the armed forces, which was 32 percent at the time of Partition has come down to two."

Thus the PMHC wasn't being wayward in documenting information about the status of Muslims in the army. It's vital to collect authentic information and establish a reliable data bank on the subject. Without it, we won't know whether there's under-representation of certain communities/classes, what its extent is, and what its causes might be.

True, such information is relevant not just for Muslims; it's necessary for other groups too. But given the PMHC's brief, it was legitimate for it to solicit information about Muslims. This is in keeping with the UPA's National

Common Minimum Program, which promised to promote the welfare of socially and economically backward sections among religious and linguistic minorities.

Muslim under-representation in the defence forces must be situated in context. As MIT-based scholar Omar Khalidi argues in his Khaki and the Ethnic Violence in India (Three Essays, 2003), the army embraced the discredited colonial "martial races" theory which favoured certain "Fixed Classes" like Gorkhas and Sikhs in recruitment.

Muslims were excluded from these, except for groups such as the Qaimkhani community, and units like the Grenadiers, Armoured Corps, Bombay Engineers Group, and the J&K Light Infantry.

It's only in 1984, after the "revolt" by some soldiers of the Sikh Regiment following "Operation Bluestar," that the army adopted a better mix in what's called the "All-India Class".

Yet, the proportion of Muslims in the army remains under 3 percent. Educational backwardness alone cannot explain it. We need to know whether this is because of a reluc-

ance of Muslims to join the army, or because of skewed distribution of recruitment, or unacknowledged barriers to entry, including prejudice.

There's nothing illogical or "divisive" about documenting the status of different communities in national institutions. The United States army, for instance, regularly compiles publicly available data on Muslims, Blacks, and other ethnic groups.

The armed forces cannot be an exception to the general concept of citizenship in a multi-ethnic society. Nor can they be exempt from scrutiny just because they perform a role in defence.

All citizens have a role to play in national life. Real security derives not just from military defence, but other things including social justice, social cohesion, rule of law and human rights. The armed forces are not a Holy Cow.

A data bank on the ethnic-religious composition of all public institutions is a precondition for measures to promote citizens' welfare, including affirmative action for the underprivileged. This need not take the form of quotas and job

reservations. But that's not an argument against diversifying recruitment or promoting equality of opportunity.

There's no reason why the government cannot unilaterally announce that it will endeavour to recruit more under-represented groups without embracing quotas. A caring-and-sharing society must have adequate room for such measures.

In many countries, promotion of inclusive multi-cultural policies became possible only when they abandoned ostrich-like attitudes and confronted reality.

For instance, after the race riots of the 1980s, the British police self-critically examined its ethnic composition and prevalence of race- and ethnicity-related biases in its ranks. This prepared the ground for diversity sensitisation programs, retraining, and positive discrimination.

Such examples are worthy of emulation. India is missing a chance by ignoring them.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.