

Nation awaits a dialogue

Take the process forward

THE proposal of the ruling party to form a committee with equal representation to undertake the solemn responsibility of organising the dialogue on electoral reforms is a positive step forward. In response to the Awami League's letter containing some queries sent nine days back, the secretary general of BNP replied with the specific request to the opposition to nominate five representatives from the 14-party alliance to the proposed 10-member committee. The committee is to accommodate non-parliamentarians as members presumably in deference to an opposition wish to make it broad-based, which would also infuse an element of dynamism into the process. No doubt through this flexible approach taken by the ruling alliance another hump has been crossed.

It may be recalled that the opposition had tabled its 5-point proposal on caretaker government and electoral reforms on February 12 and the prime minister agreed to form a joint committee to discuss the reforms issues. But, in between, the ruling alliance and the opposition alliance kept going with their usual politics of diatribe that threatened the prospect of formation of a committee to get things moving. The sit-in programme of the opposition alliance on 30 March and the government reaction to it had the potential of aggravating the situation, but thankfully, it did not. Instead, it took a turn for the positive with the proposal coming from the BNP high command for forming a committee.

Understandably, the proposed committee, once formed, will sit to evolve a modality and fix the reforms agenda on the basis of which the talks would go forward and hopefully reach a meaningful outcome. Thus the common standpoint should be that no side must take a cast-iron attitude and verbal restraints should be applied so that the committee can start functioning without much ado. The overarching fact is that whatever understanding is forged between the two sides, it will have to be legislated in parliament to amend the relevant constitutional provisions.

Now that some form of engagement has commenced through exchange of letters it is of paramount importance that this be taken forward to its ultimate goal by ensuring an atmosphere congenial to furthering the process of the dialogue.

Why not produce more cotton?

A missing lifeline to RMG sector

COTTON farming is an oft-neglected option for value addition to the textile and RMG sectors which remains critically import-dependent for input supplies. Our local industries can gain a competitive edge over other apparels exporting countries if indigenous cotton output is increased for which potential remains untapped. This will also help foster backward linkages to the sectors.

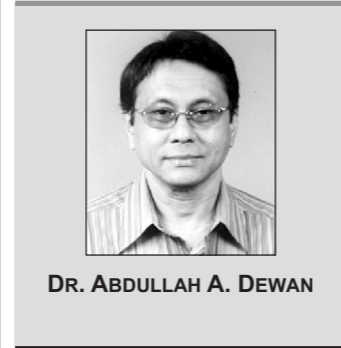
The global situation, as far as availability of cotton is concerned, has to be taken into consideration. The cotton importing countries might face a crunch if the producing countries do not have a surplus after meeting their own demands. This is a possibility that we cannot lose sight of as a country with established markets for RMG products.

Most importantly, we have great potential for producing high-yield varieties of good quality cotton. At the moment, the locally produced fibre can only meet one-twentieth of our requirement. That's indeed a sordid example of the premier foreign exchange earning sector not getting adequate support in terms of basic raw material supply. Its enhanced production, experts say, can make Bangladesh a top competitor in the global RMG market.

Basically, we are not making the best use of advanced technology to boost cotton production, as our vision is still blurred by the age-old notion that the soil and climatic conditions in Bangladesh are not suitable for cotton cultivation. How else could one explain the lack of any worthwhile initiative on the part of the government to boost its production? The government hasn't created adequate research facilities, nor is it giving subsidy to the farmers, which is required at the initial stages to stimulate farming.

The key to success in any sector lies in maximising production through making the most out of the available resources and, more importantly, by creating new facilities or enhancing the existing ones. The planners and decision-makers are expected to attach due importance to cotton farming in view of the challenges faced by the RMG sector in the post-MFA regime.

Why US must not withdraw troops now



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

OVER the recent months, an impassioned debate has been underway unabated in the talk-show driven TV media, print media, and all other avenues of public discourses about US troop withdrawal from Iraq. These are spotlighted around unremitting emotional toll, draining from the death and destructions that are streaming in on a daily basis. Some lawmakers who voted for the war three years ago are now campaigning for troop withdrawals due to increasing budgetary constraints and possible political gains.

The Iraq debacle has been overshadowing the Bush Presidency and the first casualty is the White House Chief of Staff Andy Card in a March 28 shake-up which may tip the scales even at the cabinet level. The shake-up has been brewing to recharge and reboot the Republican voter base in the November mid-term congressional election in which polls indicate a take over of the House of Representatives by the Democrats.

It all started after the 9/11 debacle and President George Bush's 2002 State of the Union address in which he had lumped Iraq with the regimes of Iraq and North Korea in an indecorous "Axis of Evil" triangle of nations that were allegedly seeking weapons of mass destruction, sponsor terrorism, and repress their own citizens. Since then, the phrase has undergone some trans-

formation as did the rationale for the invasion of Iraq.

With the Axis of Evil portrayal emerged the subtle doctrine of pre-emption against the perceived "evil" states or other evil empires. What followed next warrants no one's conjecture.

Iraq was invaded by the US (March 20, 2003), Baghdad fell on April 9, 2003, Saddam was overthrown, and an insurgency waged war continues at this time seemingly with no discernible strategy for stabilizing Iraq and pulling out US troops.

The year after Bush's speech, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Experts believe that North Korea now has enough plutonium to make half a dozen nuclear bombs.

Iran may have perfected its uranium enrichment technology and fortified its resolve to process uranium enrichment domestically for its nuclear fuel supply.

Saddam Hussein's repression and tyranny have been replaced by the nightmare of deaths and destructions of a persistent insurgency. Innocent Iraqis are dying weekly by the hundreds and American soldiers are dying alongside them.

Watching the current stance of insurgency, The Detroit News in its March 22 editorial commented: "Iraq has not become the beacon of

NO NONSENSE

Some of these countries allowed their airbases and sea ports to be used by the invading forces. In legal terms, they all are accessories to the Iraqi carnage being waged by the insurgency. Now, without pointing fingers at the US and guided by rectitude, they better team up to help Iraq stand on its own and send US troops back home -- but not prematurely, not before the mission is accomplished and rebuilding of Iraq is consummated.

democracy in a part of the world that sorely needs freedom's light. Rather, its future remains in doubt -- the odds are great that Iraq could ultimately fall to an even worse despotism than it knew during Saddam's reign of terror."

Even before the invasion of Iraq, Los Angeles Times in its October 17, 2002 editorial entitled: "Rebuilding Iraq: Japan is no model," wrote: "Democratization of Japan by the US after World War II worked because of General Douglas MacArthur's strategic decision to retain Hirohito on the throne and had all occupation reform directives come from the emperor. He did not replace the wartime Japanese government but kept it intact, only now taking orders from him."

Frustrated by slow progress or lack of it, President Bush, in an hour long press conference at the White House on March 21 affirmed: "US forces will remain in Iraq for years and it will be up to a future president to decide when to bring them all home."

The press conference was impelled by strings of polls showing less than 40 percent job approve of the Bush presidency and that a growing number no longer trust him. Bush blames the media for exaggerating the negatives from Iraq while ignoring accomplishments, whatever they may be.

Last month an Iraq Study Group,

independent of the war planning team and the affairs of the presidency, was formed at the expediency of a small bipartisan lawmakers to examine the situation with renewed perspectives. These think tanks are entrusted with analyzing all dimensions of the noticeable impasse above the fog of politics and recommend to Congress ideas for resolution.

A more significant development is the last month's move for a US-Iran dialogue. Several Iraqi politicians, however, have expressed concerns over the proposed talks and argue that such a talk might become entrenched with the US-Iran nuclear dispute, opening up the potential for Iraq being expendable in any forthcoming accord between the two.

Although it is murky how much Iraq could do to assist in quelling what is essentially a Sunni-led insurgency, a stable Iraq is much to the benefit of Iran and the entire region. Many believe that the dialogue may widen to encompass many thorny issues including Iran's much controversial nuclear dossier. Others suspect Tehran's dialogue with Washington as an attempt to deflect or sidetrack UN Security Council pressure over the nuclear tangle.

There is no hiding that Tehran has historical links with some of the main Shiite parties which have

strong representation in Iraq's parliament and it is to Iran's vested interest to see a relatively strong, Shia-dominated government there. Besides, Iran openly expressed its business and economic interests (e.g. car manufacturing) in a stable Iraq. It certainly wants to see US forces withdrawn from Iraq but not before restoring order and stability. Iran realizes that a fragmented Iraq or an unrestrained civil war could open doors to insurgents to cross-over to Iran and stir up separatist movements in Iran's already squirming Kurdistan region.

Many of us are optimistic of some positive outcomes from a dialogue between the two adversaries given both have high stakes in bringing stability in Iraq. Any demand for troop withdrawal by the US lawmakers and the Muslim leaders around the world is premature, if not self-serving. Such a move would be tantamount to a "cut and run" dastardly act for a lone superpower and equally irresponsible as the original invasion of Iraq. Withdrawal of US troops will explode the on-going controlled sectarian strife into a full scale civil war. That shouldn't be too difficult to grasp.

Despite mutual abhorrence and exchange of inflammatory rhetoric, neither Washington nor Tehran wants to see Iraq slide into a full blown civil war. Also neither wants Iraq to be under the tutelage of the other. In face to face meetings, the US wants to tell Iran what is right or wrong in their activities inside of Iraq. Tehran rejects US "bullying" and wanted to make US understand Iran's views. Although these rabble-rousing pre-dialogue contentious rhetoric are a sign of cynicism, both Washington and Tehran realize that adversity will only deepen if talks on Iraq prove a dialogue of the deaf.

Iran's condemnation of the 9/11 terrorists attacks and its token

support for the US-led war in Afghanistan, once seemed by many as the beginning of a thawing to edge both sides closer, culminating in a much more wide-ranging development. All optimism were spoiled by Bush's tetchy rhetoric directed at Iran. Washington must not spoil the prospect this time around.

The mess George Bush created has now become a quandary for the entire region. All neighbouring countries should get involved with the US and Iran and work as a team to restore sectarian harmony and stability in Iraq. The US should invite Syria in a tripartite dialogue. As reported in the March 27 issue of The Guardian, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani insists on Iraqi government representation in the talks and rightly so.

The 22 member Arab League summit in Khartoum on March 27 agreed only on a face saving pledge to open embassies in Iraq as soon as possible without specifying any time-frame.

Do not forget that the countries in the region, except Iran and Syria, had their overt acquiescence for US invasion of Iraq. Indeed, some of these countries allowed their airbases and sea ports to be used by the invading forces. In legal terms, they all are accessories to the Iraqi carnage being waged by the insurgency. Now, without pointing fingers at the US and guided by rectitude, they better team up to help Iraq stand on its own and send US troops back home -- but not prematurely, not before the mission is accomplished and rebuilding of Iraq is consummated.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

Bangladesh Biman: A grounded airline

None with any background of a commercial airline is represented in the Board. It is very pertinent to mention here that the post of Biman's CEO, the Managing Director, has always been held either by a bureaucrat or by an Air Force Officer from flying branch. So no one with any background, training or knowledge of running a commercial airline, a highly competitive and high-tech industry, exists either in the Board or at the top management post. So it is natural that Biman has been suffering from management inefficiency, inefficiency in fleet planning as well as in commercial operations.

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

THE history of Bangladesh Biman is replete with failure. Whosoever has traveled by Biman has invariably experienced some unpleasant situation in one form or other and perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say that it would be difficult to find out a passenger, regular or casual, who has not undergone some kind of hassle while flying by Biman.

Of late Biman's failure to maintain its flight schedule is making headlines in all newspapers of the country. And the reason for Biman's incapability to operate its flights on schedule has been attributed to its shortage of aircrafts. It is well known to all that all the aircrafts of Biman are very old, so much so that their maintenance has been posing a serious problem.

The aircrafts suffer from mechanical trouble very frequently causing disruption of the Airlines flight schedule. Moreover such old aircrafts are creating a negative impact on its commercial viability and the members of the traveling public tend to choose other airlines wherever these are available. The situation can be gauged from the fact that the government servants, while travel-

ing on duty were under orders to patronize Biman in all such routes where Biman flights were available. But due to general unwillingness to travel by Biman caused by its inefficient service this embargo has recently been withdrawn.

Immediately after Liberation, Biman started its journey as commercial airline, a national flag carrier, all with hired/leased aircrafts. This is understandable. The new country, ravaged by war and facing myriad problems on all fronts was not in a position to buy new aircrafts for its airline. But after its long sojourn for 34 years it could not yet come out of the situation of running with hired and/or old aircrafts.

Naturally the question arises as to why this is so. Had there been a well thought out plan, short and long term, followed by serious attempt to buy new aircrafts in phased manner the present impasse, perhaps, could be avoided. It is not known to the people whether such planning and such attempts were there. What all knows is that all purchases or procurement of aircrafts on lease, dry or wet, were non-transparent and not a single procurement of aircraft, either by outright purchase or on lease has been made without any allegations of corruption surfac-

ing in such deals.

The above picture signals that there is some deep-rooted management inefficiency. The first question is: who runs Biman? Biman has a Board of Directors. This Board has been constituted and reconstituted a number of times. Only one factor was constant: the Chairman of the Board has always been the Minister/State Minister in charge of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism.

In the year 2000 the members of the Board of Directors were the following:

1. Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister.
2. Secretary, Finance Division
3. Secretary, ERD
4. Secretary, IRD
5. Secretary, Establishment Division
6. Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism
7. Managing Director of Biman
8. The General Manager, Corporate Affairs of Biman used to act as the Member Secretary without any voting right.

At present the Board is composed of the following:

1. Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister
2. Secretary, Ministry of Civil

Aviation and Tourism

3. Secretary, Finance Division
4. Secretary, Ministry of Communications
5. Chairman, Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh
6. Managing Director of Biman
7. Two Members of the Parliament

From the above composition it is seen that none with any background of a commercial airline is represented in the Board. It is very pertinent to mention here that the post of Biman's CEO, the Managing Director, has always been held either by a bureaucrat or by an Air Force Officer from flying branch. So no one with any background, training or knowledge of running a commercial airline, a highly competitive and high-tech industry, exists either in the Board or at the top management post. So it is natural that Biman has been suffering from management inefficiency, inefficiency in fleet planning as well as in commercial operations.

Perhaps Bangladesh is unique in this respect. It should be mentioned here that to be a member of the Board of Directors is quite lucrative. Once somebody becomes a Director, even if for one day, he becomes eligible for free ticket for himself and his family members wherever Biman flies not only as long as he continues as such but also three years after he ceases to be on the Board. In addition there are other travel concessions as well for them.

It has already been mentioned that the Minister/State Minister of the Civil Aviation Ministry heads the Board. In this connection, the comment of the Public Expenditure Review Commission is appended below:

"Since most of the operational and financial matters are under the purview of the Board, the decision of the Ministry influences the Board. Since the Minister himself heads the Board, the Board finds it difficult to formulate independent and objective opinions and recommendations in all such matters. In a corporate management concept a board of directors is accountable to a higher authority or to shareholders for its activities. But in case of Biman, the Board is not accountable to a higher authority because the Minister himself is the Chairman of the Board. The Board is not directly accountable to any other body nor is it under obligation to report to any other authority for its activities and performances. For efficiency and success, the board of directors of any organization having commercial activities should be composed of experts and professionals."

Unfortunately Biman does not have any professional or expert in airline industry on its Board nor has it ever seen a professional as its CEO.

The result is mismanagement in all aspects: in fleet planning, fleet rationalization, operation of loss making routes, flying to a large number of destinations not commensurate with the number of flight worthy aircrafts, financial management, etc. The Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) has pointed out the position in detail but the authority does not appear to have taken any initiative to look into the recommendations of the said Commission.

The PERC also mentioned that for a fleet of 17 aircrafts (the number has dwindled to 13 now due to damage or sale of some aircrafts)

Biman has 5,484 employees on its payroll incurring annual expenditure on pay and allowance alone to the tune of Tk 279.61 crore (FY 2001-2002). It is certain that this amount has gone up manifold by now.

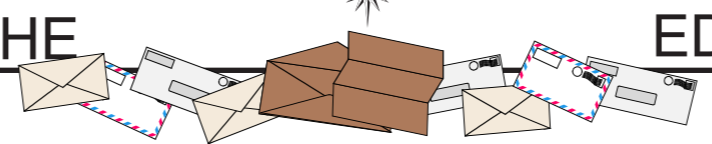
According to the PERC report, Biman has got 171 motor vehicles of various kinds. The cost of maintenance and fuel for such a large size of fleet of vehicles was Tk 3.50 crore in FY 2001-2002. For a small airline like Biman the number of vehicle appears to be on the high side, the PERC report commented.

About the strength of staff the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh in one of his audit reports published in the late nineties showed that the number of personnel per aircraft in Biman was ten times higher than Singapore Airlines.

No wonder that Biman has been and will continue to be a loss-making airline, will remain an unreliable carrier unable to compete with other airlines, and if due attention is not paid to revamp its administration and management the situation, may lead to grounding of the national flag carrier altogether.

The writer is a former Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Congratulations, Bashar & Co
Many thanks for giving us this precious gift in the month of our independence. What a month to achieve this! Bangladesh proved that they are a fighting unit now. We can now beat any team on our day. In every department, the Tigers outplayed Kenya. They showed great temperament. They will hopefully play the same brand of cricket against Australia. Carry on, guys. Make us happy!
Korak Sen
One-mail

improve relations between Islam and the West I have ever seen.
Thank you for printing this insightful article. I wish religious leaders and politicians of all countries would read and heed the suggestions given by Mr. Hashmi.

As a former resident for fifteen years in Bangladesh, I appreciate your paper and check the headlines and read articles very frequently.
W. Trueman Moore
Arkansas, US

Privatisation of ports
According to the Privatisation Commission of Bangladesh, port and container handling is one of the foremost sectors for privatisation along with six other sectors: Power, Natural Gas and Oil Exploration, Tele

Communication, Transport Sector, Aviation & Tourism, Banking & Insurance.

There is bright prospect of private sector participation in improving port services in Mongla and Chittagong and in handling container services in the ports and other areas. The cargo handling in Chittagong port, which handles 80 percent of the country's export-import trade, often comes to a halt because of mismanagement and strident unionism. The shippers on an average have to count a loss of extra 5,000 dollars every day in operational costs for each stranded ship.

Given the delays and congestions at ports, leading to extensive demurrage charges for ships, ways of improving port productivity through better management systems and

infrastructure developments have been considered.

There are numerous objectives of privatisation. First, privatisation would attract new foreign direct investment, which would increase productivity and competitiveness. The investments would bring the port services up to international levels of efficiency. Second, privatisation would increase trade at the national and regional levels, and directly or indirectly create jobs. Finally, introducing market based labour reform would reduce port labour costs on the public budget.

However, better cooperation is expected from all concerned governmental organisations in order to create a competitive ambience in the commercial ports across the country.
Let's not procrastinate over the

massive reforms of our port and cargo handling system before it gets totally bogged down.

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Pornography

Day 1: In the middle of a summer vacation I went to Nihket book market in order to buy some books required for my study of economics. The market is a legendary place as many rare books, their photocopy etc are available there. So it used to be the best place for students like us. But a peddler on the footpath just drew my attention and asked me whether I needed the "real things". I did not yet understand what he meant by that but replied yes. Then he at first showed me some CDs with pornographic covers. He also asked me

whether I liked "foreign" or "desi". I somehow managed to come out from that place. But I am afraid I am not the only one with such an experience. Most of their customers are teenagers who are not adult enough to have control over themselves.

Day 2: At the hall of my own university I was at the canteen and found some of my friends talking about the local pornography. They said most of the times the victim is the girl who is actually innocent. Somehow the videos are shot without informing her when she is busy with her private business or she is raped. We also read at the newspaper how the girls are deceived. But we should have sympathy for the victims who are virtually ostracised following such incidents. They are betrayed by their most beloved ones and

they even decide to commit suicide. But who is responsible for this? I think both the makers and viewers of these films are doing a great disservice to society. If this sleazy business is not stopped, we will have to pay a high price in the form of moral degeneration.

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On expressions

I would like to refer to an article published on March 28, 2006, entitled "Allah Hafez."

The writer sensed that the 'new' expression came with the new government. The expression "Allah Hafez" certainly is correct as it is widely used in most of the Muslim countries.

The writer asked a question: how long will we continue to

swallow the different ideological terms of different regimes at their free will, which have no special significance or value? The question sounded 'political' to me and I was truly confused-- what the word "swallow" really meant here. Having the desire to respond perfectly I opened my dictionary, pointing at seven different meanings!

As I don't have any political experience to speak about international affairs and security, I read and review political speeches of important leaders. And one can notice that great politicians always argue with some common phrase and create their identity as unique. There is nothing wrong with such a practice.

Tahsin Hyder
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