

PR campaign in US

Change the substance, image will change by itself

THE first thing that we note is that appointing lobbyists is a common practice in the US. However, the controversy has arisen due to the secrecy with which it has been done and the TOR that has been arrived at. The most important thing for the government to do now is to reveal all the relevant facts to the public.

The principal issue is whether the PR campaign was aimed at enhancing the image of the country as much as it was that of the ruling alliance. One is tempted to suggest that had the national interest been paramount, then perhaps things might have been handled very differently.

However, even if we accept that the campaign was for the benefit of the country, and not the ruling alliance, this raises the question of whether the government's move was a wise and appropriate one. After all, one would have thought that lobbying with regard to zero-tariff entry into the US market, for instance, might have been a better use of resources.

Certainly, the country's image needs a boost, but surely a better way of catering for it would be to actually improve the situation on the ground. If the government were doing its job better, then one is hard-pressed to see why they would need to engage the services of professional lobbyists in order to get this across to the world.

If the country has a poor image due to corruption or militancy or extra-judicial killing, then who is to blame? Surely, a large portion of the blame must fall on the government. Spending money on lobbyists to resolve the resulting image crisis seems to us to be a rather misguided use of resources and underlines this government's regrettable emphasis on simulated image over substance.

After all, it was the capture of two top militants that caused Time magazine to change its tune regarding the country. The Time cover story came in response to the achievement of the government and not as part of a lobbyist's campaign that was bought and paid for by the Bangladesh government. This surely goes to show that the best way to boost the image of the country is for the government to simply do its job.

The tyranny of extortion must end

Businessmen need protection

THE desperation of the businessmen in the city's New Market area was quite manifest when they brought out a procession on Monday to protest extortion by members of the Dhaka College JCD unit. They also kept their shutters down on the day as tension ran high in the whole locality.

The traders have complained that their shops and establishments have become the target of regular extortion by none other than JCD elements of Dhaka College. They have appealed to the college authorities to oust the criminals in the garb of students. What is particularly disturbing is that the police are not doing anything to put an end to the malady which is why perhaps they have turned to college authorities. But nothing short of ruling party intervention can set it right.

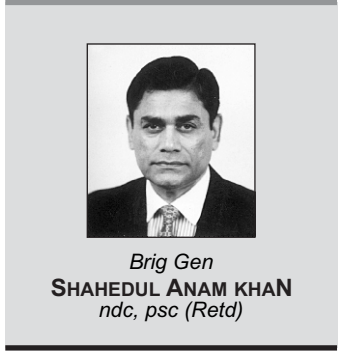
The report is another example of how student-wing elements of the ruling party are engaged in devious activities that the BNP claims to have blunted to a great extent, but the ground reality speaks otherwise. After all, it shouldn't be particularly difficult to identify and catch the extortionists operating within the small radius of a known locality like Dhaka College and thereabouts. The talk of halting the ever-worsening law and order situation loses much of its meaning when none other than some members of the ruling party student body are found involved in such damning activities.

It is a question of allowing the law to take its own course. Politics, or any other consideration, for that matter, should be set aside while dealing with such clear cases of abuse of a supposed proximity to the ruling party. It is not only tarnishing the image of the ruling party but also contributing to the growth of a political culture based on muscle power.

Neither is ignorance bliss, nor is it folly to be wise

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

While the matter of appointing lobbyists is a subject for separate discussion, it is the government's handling of the issue that has created such a perception, and international observers may perhaps be forgiven for perceiving Bangladesh going the way of Afghanistan, even though it is evident that the fear is exaggerated and the apprehensions are unfounded. But these needn't have arisen at all had the issue been handled pragmatically and promptly without letting any extraneous political consideration come in the way.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

SOME hold the view that what you don't know cannot hurt you, and lexicographers suggest that the proverb encapsulates the aphorism that, not knowing something is often more comfortable than knowing it. But as things have turned out up to now, insofar as it relates to the religious militants in our country, it not bliss to be ignorant and certainly an act of great inanity to be less than prudent.

It seems that some of our government leaders have really taken to heart the saying, hoping perhaps that pretending not to know about the unpleasant developments in the country will somehow insulate Bangladesh from the problem in the long run. That was perhaps why the government had been so vociferous all this while in refusing to acknowledge that the dangerous cancer of religious militancy was taking root in Bangladesh, hoping that such a posture would cause it to disappear on its own.

The State Minister for Home, however, had to swallow the bitter pill when the two most wanted criminals, Sheikh Abdur Rahman

and Bangla Bhai, were apprehended by the police, by conceding that the two were no phantom figures sired by the imaginations of the media and some anti-government elements trying to run the government down, but were real phenomena.

But one is not certain what to make of the Prime Minister's remarks on her interview with Time magazine that her government was not aware of the existence of the religious extremists till the rude awakening caused by the near simultaneous blasts all over the country last August 17.

All along so far, the potential and the real threat of these radicals were being projected in the media, particularly in the print media, who had been in the forefront in exposing the doings of these groups from the very seminal stages of their operations, when these elements were trying to gain their footholds in Bangladesh.

(see e.g., The Daily Star, 27.2.03 and 19.8.03). And all along, the idea was being dismissed as fig-

ment of the imagination of the media.

However, it is difficult to believe that what was in the knowledge of the journalists was outside the realms of knowledge of the national intelligence and security agencies in Bangladesh. One might therefore ask whether it is a case of "not knowing" because of lack of information or one of unwillingness to entertain and accept such a possibility because of other compulsions.

Be that as it may, the consequence has been that the "bliss" of ignorance, instead of providing any comfort, has turned out to be extremely harmful for the country, as subsequent events have proved. There are two relevant issues that need to be expanded upon here in the light of the PM's comments. One, that our agencies were totally deaf and blind not to have picked up the reports appearing in the media, and conducted a probe into the affair. And even if they had investigated the matter they had failed to come out with definite information to

reach any conclusive findings.

This appears incomprehensible given the incidents of bombings and the nature of their targets since 1999; the strategy and the political and religious orientation of the extremists would have been fairly apparent to anyone delving in the matter. Moreover, the fact that the government in February last year proscribed two of these radical organisations suggests that it was well aware of the existence of these groups.

Therefore, the only conclusion that one can draw from the comments of the PM is that the government was not willing to acknowledge the existence of the radical religious elements in Bangladesh. One wonders why? Is it because admission of their existence would dilute our standing as a "moderate Muslim state" in the eyes of the West?

Or was there any internal political compulsion that made the government act like an ostrich, hoping that the storm would pass? Was it the

slighting of the country's image that the government was concerned about, something that it feels had been the preoccupation of the major opposition party since the coming to power of the coalition government?

What however, must be accepted, though, is the fact that while the existence of the radicals was fairly evident over the last several years, one was not certain as to the capability and the extent of their influence in the socio-political scene. Evidently, while they were able to garner a hard-core element, their political strategy was rather nebulous, as obvious from the way things have developed since August 17, 2005.

Not accepting the existence of the radicals when reports appeared initially has cost the lives of many innocent people. It has also provided our detractors with enough material to arguably justify their accusations that Bangladesh was becoming another hotbed of Taleban activities and would eventually end up replicating Afghanistan.

Apart from that, several western countries have issued travel advisories to their citizens while the US has withdrawn its Peace Corps workers for fear of radical reprisals on them. On the whole, we have now a serious image problem, and no wonder the government has thought it fit to commission US lobbyists to offset, according to the foreign minister, some of the political leaders' "false campaigns abroad against our beloved country and the people" and their effort "to brand Bangladesh as Taleban, Al Qaeda and a fundamentalist state. Being in

the government it is our responsibility to uphold the nation's image foiling that vile propaganda."

While the matter of appointing lobbyists is a subject for separate discussion, it is the government's handling of the issue that has created such a perception, and international observers may perhaps be forgiven for perceiving Bangladesh going the way of Afghanistan, even though it is evident that the fear is exaggerated and the apprehensions are unfounded. But these needn't have arisen at all had the issue been handled pragmatically and promptly without letting any extraneous political consideration come in the way.

Had that been the case, we would not need to spend nearly seventy thousand dollars monthly and would not have had to do away with the post of the press minister of our embassy in Washington, for resuscitating an image whose denigration the government's clumsy handling of the issue was responsible for in the first place.

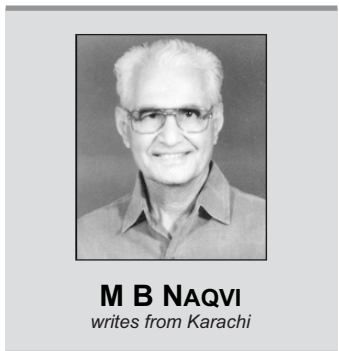
Comments of people in high places cannot be taken lightly, more so, if they happens to be the PM's. Inaccurate formulations, particularly when they relate to our security, have serious ramifications, and when it relates to fighting extremists of any hue, it casts a poor light on the government's seriousness in tackling the problem. And that is when not only the image but also the interest of the country actually suffers.

The author is Editor, Defense and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Oracle has been worked?

PLAIN WORDS

The Frontier area has several confrontations that divide people's sympathies. There are the MMA parties that look like getting more votes next time largely because of how things are shaping up. Secondly there is the old dormant question about Pushtoon identity and relationship with Afghanistan. The intrusion of America into this old quagmire can scarcely yield peaceful solutions; it increases tensions and polarisations.



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE cutting edge of the west, the UK and US administrations, are supposed to have been telling soldier-President Pervez Musharraf to hold the elections in 2007 and earlier than that he should hang up his battle fatigue. That was said in February last by Don Mackinnon, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Then the Americans took over. Among others Richard Boucher, the US Assistant Secretary of State, said a revolutionary thing: the US wants to see civilian control of the Army and of course the return to democracy. The National Security Advisor, Steve Hadley, endorsed him the very next day on Thursday last week. What does it all amount to?

What Boucher has said has two components: (a) US wants to see civilian control in Pakistan; but (b) he also told us that he is not asking the President to doff his uniform; it is an internal matter of Pakistan in which America would not interfere. What does it mean in the backdrop of full spectrum of American satisfaction with the policy pursued by the Pakistan government under Pervez Musharraf? Does it by any chance mean that the US is going to

ditch him? This is the most unlikely thing that cannot easily be inferred from facts all around us. America needs Musharraf and Musharraf needs America. So that these two forces continue to be two are united in policy matters.

There are things that we should not forget. Among these are: (i) the US still desperately needs Musharraf's cooperation in Afghanistan and in fighting what he calls Terror. (ii) Actually the US cannot now take the risk of democracy in Pakistan after what they have seen in Egypt, Hamas victory in Palestine and of course there are the lesson of Latin American elections, not to mention the recent Ukraine election. The Americans would not want to let Musharraf be defeated in what may be called a free and fair or transparent election. (iii) Should Musharraf be able to manage (a) to make PML win the way it won last time in 2002 or (b) if he were to get a proper vote or a measure for his remaining in office by Parliament, in the 2002 way, including keeping the leaders of PPP and PML(N) out of the fray plus using other tricks that the 'agencies' employ. (c) That will be OK by the US because the how of it is an internal matter of Pakistan

with which the US is not concerned.

But once Musharraf makes sure of his next term of office for five years from Oct 2007 onward, no matter how and whether before or after the 2008 polls, the world will behold the spectacle of US claiming that in Pakistan the civilian control over both the Army and national affairs has returned. That is after Musharraf finally doffs his uniform. The US will then give a hoop of delight, claiming there is civilian control in Pakistan while Mr. Musharraf continues ruling the country. The US expects that Pakistanis will be satisfied with that democracy. How they remain satisfied and how the President remains secure would be the details with which America will not be concerned, being internal matters. Pakistanis thus have the prospect of Mr. Musharraf's rule up to 2012 as a 'democratic' civilian.

But what Pakistanis cannot forget is: (a) state of the polity today and the dangers facing the Federation. As it happens, there are full-scale insurgencies in many territories, the FATA and NWFP areas close by. Tribesmen are calling for the withdrawal of Pakistan Army; they think that

they have been, and are, free people, not necessarily an integral part of Pakistan. Which is where the whole controversy of Pakhtoonistan arose. As a result the Durand Line became controversial. Not only the governments in Kabul, friendly or unfriendly to Pakistan, have never accepted it as a legitimate boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the position was endorsed by many Pakhtoons on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. The issue is a can of worms that had better remain shut. Continuing military operations threaten to spring it open. All the furies will then fly out.

Pakistanis cannot also forget the dangers inherent in the present state of the Pakistan economy. Pakistan is supposedly shining; the government has been working overtime to show that Pakistan has now taken off and is among the high growth countries where the per capita income is increasing. Well, this is true enough. But where are the extra riches going? No doubt, the streets now are chockful of cars and other vehicles that the government with the help of easy money policy has encouraged. The burden on the poor has

increased immensely. Apart from traditional poverty, the differential between the incomes of the rich and the poor has widened, some would say dangerously. The rich are getting richer by a handsome margin. But the poor are also getting poorer by a wider margin.

On top of it is the inflation. This means more money chasing fewer goods. In this case more money in the hands of a few means their ability to corner goods to make the unjust and immoral extra buck. That some of the manipulators and hoarders are inside the government circle is known. The whole arrangement suits the racketeers fine. But the question persists: why is actual inflation, as counted by the government, remains in the region of 9 to 11 per cent?

People want to know where is the extra money coming from and where it is ending up. The issue has now to be discussed. The government's expenditures are being financed by taxes and revenues, plus export earnings plus Pakistani expatriates' remittances plus the money coming in from the sale of family silver plus loans and credits that Pakistan takes, including borrowing from international money markets in the shape of bonds and other instruments. The deficits in the budget, trade and in the balance of payments will one day lead to a drastic devaluation of the currency, which in the first instance would intensify the inflationary pressure and in the next lead to poverty becoming intensified. Can the present trends be allowed to continue?

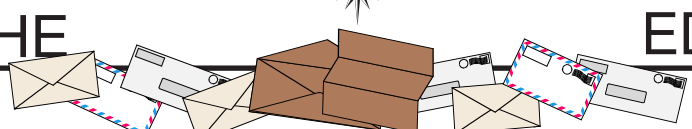
Finally, someone should analyse and think about what Pakistan is reaping today by sowing the American controlled

policies. Look at the social fabric: is it or is it not under strain? Law and order is deteriorating. Pakistan can now boast, like India, of so many insurgencies going on simultaneously. One is in Balochistan, which in itself is a complex phenomenon, comprising more than one insurgencies: there is the al-Qaeda and Taliban forces that are doing their damndest by way of sectarian terrorism, dividing the people along an ancient faultline. Then there are the Balochistan Liberation Army fighting what it claims to be a national liberation struggle.

Pakistanis can question the legitimacy of their means and not go on about "a few Sardars". But can anyone forget that the popular sentiment over wide areas in Balochistan is now for those "few Sardars"? The Frontier area has several confrontations that divide people's sympathies. There are the MMA parties that look like getting more votes next time largely because of how things are shaping up. Secondly there is the old dormant question about Pushtoon identity and relationship with Afghanistan. The intrusion of America into this old quagmire can scarcely yield peaceful solutions; it increases tensions and polarisations. Then, there are specific al-Qaeda and Taliban groups trying to control the FATA and some other areas close by. Can Pakistan afford to remain smug and carry on with its Washington-dictated policies, including how to run the economy according to neo-classical paradigm?

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

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.

Power and the powers that be

Is electricity issue going to be the death bell for the regime? Many of my friends and relatives replied in the affirmative when asked this question. The amount of discontentment seen in his or her face was simply anybody's guess. Think about the chain reaction due to load shedding and electricity failure.

1.Serious water crisis due to non-functioning of water pumps. City dwellers are cursing the govt.

2.Farmers cannot irrigate. Agricultural production is being affected.

3.Students cannot study due to excessive heat and warm conditions.

4.Daily sales have gone down significantly because of a reduced number of buyers. The shopkeepers are annoyed.

5.The cost of production of industrial units has gone high because of intermittent disruption in the production line. The industry people are unhappy. So

on and so forth. Will the BNP government be able to sustain the after effects of discontentment in all the above vital sectors? One wonders how could they forget this issue so easily when there was an almost similar situation in the last year of AL's rule in 2001.

I really feel sorry for the BNP because they have done quite a lot of good works in other areas. Who is to be blamed for it? I think the issue should be sorted out immediately.

N.Z.Khan
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Corruption in medical sector

Your staff correspondent's front page report and photograph (DS: April 05) followed by your (April 06) editorial next day is a disgrace to the medical profession in general and the management of National Institute of Kidney Diseases and Urology in particular. Where has medical ethics gone? Probably gone to the dust

like every other value racing away from our country.

I think like the chief executive of the country and other ministers' musings; the answer will be "We were not aware", although the mobile court and your correspondent were! It is a shame indeed. No wonder those who can afford to, go to India, Thailand and Singapore for medical treatment including our national leaders.

In reply to your statement, "The health minister owes an explanation," the expected response will be "we were not aware". Possibly the AL leaders or "agents from across the borders" were involved in it!

Various inspections, codes, controls and regulations suggested in your editorial are all well and good. Will it not however open a Pandora's Box of corruption? Unfortunately, who will catch whom and when and how? This country is going through a progressive character regression with morality as the first casualty. Who can stop it? Least

of all our politicians! Only Allah can help us.
S. A. Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka

Scary advertisement

For a few days my son is so scared at night. We are very much worried. Persistent investigation reveals that he is afraid of the ghost telecast in a toothpaste advertisement that shows if the kid does not brush his teeth the ghost will engulf him. What a pity, is it the right way to teach something? We should not scare our baby since the fear may persist throughout his life. I would request the authorities to ban the item and be careful about telecasting anything that may scare children.

Shifa
Pallabi, Dhaka

Talented, but inconsistent

Mohammad Ashraful is a wonder

boy of Bangladesh cricket. There is no doubt that he is extremely talented. And he also proved his worth by playing some extra ordinary innings against the world-class teams like Australia, Sri Lanka, India. But it's very disappointing for everyone who supports Bangladesh cricket that this wonder boy is wasting his talent. He is not consistent at all and consistency is the hallmark of a great player.

He played some good knocks against Sri Lanka and also scored a century, but against Kenya, in the last ODI series, his highest score was 18!

It's also very sad that a player of his class has an average that is so poor!

He played 31 Tests, and batted in 61 innings but scored only 1443 runs at an average of 24.87! Highest Score: 158* against India.

He is a world-class batsman but his average is below 25!

The cricket board and the coach should look into the matter since he has the potential to

contribute tremendously to our cricket in future.
Khan Mohammad Ibn Sina
Bottala, Tangail

We must succeed

Thanks for the editorial 'Bangladesh Shining'. Whatever Mr Alex Perry thinks about Bangladesh from time to time, it does not change anything in the country. The reform will have to come from within and it should be the responsibility of the ruling party, opposition and people from all walks of life. We will have to sort out our own problems and address them keeping in mind the common goal of prosperity of the nation and its people.

We don't have any room for complacency. If we can progress, so many Alex Perrys will fly to Bangladesh to report about our stories of success!

Dr. Md. Mozaheedul Islam
On e-mail

Tajuddin's house

We read with anguish and con-

cern regarding the state of the house of late prime minister Tajuddin Ahmed. We do not want to go into the details of the role and contribution of Tajuddin Ahmed in the struggle of freedom of the Bengalis and his deft management of the Mujibnagar government, which are well known and established facts. Probably the developer wanted to go for a two-tier basement and assumed that it would not rain in the month of 'Chaitra'. However, they should have taken adequate precautions for the unforeseen situation. I would not brand them as bad people as the promoters are entrepreneurs and contribute a lot to the development of our real state industries. But we would expect them to compensate the damage.

The house was built in 1960. At that time DIT usually used to sanction plans for two storied buildings. The present house is four storied. On the top of it, most of the structural designs were developed by less qualified overseers, diploma engineers

etc in those days. So, a house built on such purportedly weak foundations may give in. We also possess a house in the close vicinity. On pragmatic considerations it may turn out to be a boon. A 45-year-old house ought to be pulled down and the family of late respected Tajuddin Ahmed should go for constructing a new modern house.

The memories of the late prime minister live in the hearts of the people.

SN Mamoon
Dhaka

The two parties

It is not a conflict between two women-- Khaleda and Hasina. Rather, it is a conflict between two parties-- the Awami League and the BNP. It is a conflict between two contrasting philosophies.

Democracy can never be built around such sharply contrasting philosophies, I'm sorry to say.

Rafiq
On e-mail