

## No more letters please

*At least talk about talking*

IT is two months since the protracted penmanship began mounting on them to negotiate a political settlement that can only take place on the basis of minimal give and take, compromise and trading of concessions. Cast-iron rigid positioning is bound to be self-defeating.

It is time they tried out something creative and new to break the impasse. Both sides know it too well that without talking with each other rather than talking to each other reactively after each round of letter writing, they will continue to draw a blank even in terms of making a start. They have common stakes in the reform agenda and they are all too aware that without reaching a workable consensus on a minimum programme of reforms they cannot participate in the next general election on a level playing field.

Time is fast running out with national and international pressures mounting on them to negotiate a political settlement that can only take place on the basis of minimal give and take, compromise and trading of concessions. Cast-iron rigid positioning is bound to be self-defeating.

We can keep faith with certain positive signals underlying the long haul letter exchanging mode the opposition and the ruling party have fallen into. Both sides seem keen on avoiding responsibility for talks being a non-starter. Both parties are vigorously and visibly going ahead with preparations for the elections otherwise. Only that they do not want to be seen to be losing ground to each other in terms of political strategy which is more a matter of perception than realism.

The last and fourth missive despatched by Abdul Jalil to Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan is a predictable reiteration of the opposition's persistent positioning that it shall not sit with Mujahid and Amini included in the 4-party alliance list, names associated with war crimes, communalism and patronising extremist militancy. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's reply to the last opposition letter is awaited. It is at this point that we have a suggestion to make. We would like to latch on to his initial expression of hope that within the constraints of the rigid positions adopted by both sides, he is optimistic, they will make concessions to each other for a dialogue to start. They may not be prepared to discuss the concessions publicly right now, but at least Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Abdul Jalil can initiate a ground breaking tete-a-tat on what their parties are willing to concede to each other. So, we urge them to talk about talks.

## Our workers' misery in foreign lands

*Government must act*

A recent report published by the National Labour Committee (NLC) based in New York and carried by our media, paints a very distressing picture of Bangladeshi workers in some of the garment factories in Jordan. It is even more upsetting the government has not come out with any statement regarding the report or the actual condition of our workers except for both the relevant ministry in Dhaka and our embassy in Jordan expressing ignorance.

One has to be thankful for the report of the NLC but for which we would have continued to be unaware of the most inhuman conditions that our workers are enduring in that country. One cannot but be surprised at the sheer magnitude of the plight of our workers, who are being driven like slaves for many months now by their employers, and our embassy in Amman is apparently unaware of these.

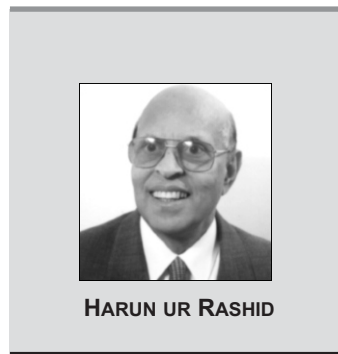
Our workers are there with valid documents and on very specific employment terms. And to think that they are given as many as only one percent of the promised wages, and that too not regularly, and made to work far longer hours than are allowed in any civilised country, is disturbing.

There are several questions that we would like to put. First, if these workers are there on valid documents and lawfully employed, on whom does the responsibility of ensuring that the concerned parties keep their side of the agreement, devolves? Secondly, why is that we have to learn about our workers' plight in a foreign land after reports are published by agencies in a third country. Thirdly, why hasn't our government moved as yet to address the situation?

Although the Jordan government has admitted to violation of workers rights in some of the garment factories and has taken certain corrective measures, that such a condition should have prevailed in the first place in special economic zones, or evaded inspection, is rather surprising. It must take to task the responsible persons.

It is the responsibility of our embassy also to ensure that our workers get their part of the deal and that they are not subjected mental, physical or sexual harassment, which they clearly were in this case. Admittedly, they have failed to do their job, and must too be held to account.

# Why Tehran ignores the UN resolution



HARUN UR RASHID

"THE Iranian nation won't give a damn about such useless resolutions," Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared. He was referring to the UN Security Council resolution to halt nuclear enrichment programme.

Iran claims that it is beyond the competence of the Security Council to adopt such discriminatory resolution. Iran insists that it is within its sovereign right to enrich uranium for nuclear energy under the 1970 Non-Nuclear Proliferation Treaty and the nuclear energy programme is peaceful.

Why does Iran wish to ignore the UN resolution? There are several reasons and some of them deserve mention:

First, Israel has consistently rejected UN resolutions (28 since

1975) on Palestine issue, the most important one has been the 242 of November 1967, calling upon Israel to withdraw from the occupied territory of Palestine and negotiate with Palestinian Authority to secure its borders. Did the US criticise Israel for not complying with the resolution? It did not, rather supported the Jewish settlements in the occupied territory, contrary to the UN resolution.

If Israel can get away so easily flouting UN Security Council resolutions, why Iran cannot? All states are equal and there should not be "pick and choose" policies to which states comply and which do not. Observers believe that the Jewish lobby has disproportionately affected foreign policy of the US. They argue that concern on

## BOTTOM LINE

Iran's nuclear programme by Israel is pushing the Bush administration to war of words with Iran. Any military action would serve Israel more than the US interests.

Second, the Bush administration itself went outside the UN resolution when it attacked Iraq. The UN resolution 1441 of November 8, 2002 did not authorise the US to attack Iraq in 2003. A second resolution was required specifically to wage a war on Iraq. The Secretary General, on the advice of the Legal Counsel of the UN, stated that the Iraqi war was illegal under the UN Charter.

Third, balance of power refers to distribution of power among states in a region. All states define their interests in terms of power and whatever states want, they need power to achieve them. This

is the theory of realism, pursued by Kautluya, Machiavelli, Cardinal Richelieu and Henry Kissinger.

Nuclear weapons came to be seen as a badge of great-power status and a potential shield against a hostile world. All the permanent members of the Security Council felt it necessary to acquire their own nuclear capabilities. If Israel has nuclear weapons (reportedly 200) in the Middle East, can it not be argued as to why other countries in the region will be denied to have the capacity to build, if necessary, nuclear weapons to correct the balance of power in the region?

Fourth, Iran and the US have been at loggerheads since 1979. It appears that many senior figures in the Bush administration have not

accepted that Iran's Islamic regime is still firmly in power a quarter of a century on. Even after Iraq fiasco, they still think the US can change the regime and believe that majority of Iranians would welcome a change.

Iran, on the other hand, appears to be adamant not to back away from its nuclear programme to show to the world that it can stand up to the US threat. This stance is highly popular among ordinary Iranians. Furthermore Iran cannot forget the gross interference in 1953 in removing the reformist Prime Minister Mossadeq, restoring Shah Pahlavi's autocratic regime. Political analysts believe, if the US would not reinstate the autocratic regime, the 1979 Islamic revolution would not have occurred.

Fifth, there is a perception that Ahmadinejad's government is narrowly based but it is argued that on nuclear issue, there is no divide between the government and majority of population. Foreign Policy Centre -- a London based think-tank -- issued a timely paper indicating that Ahmadinejad may be alarming more and more but there is no clear split between the regime and the populace. Further it states, "A strategy that gambles

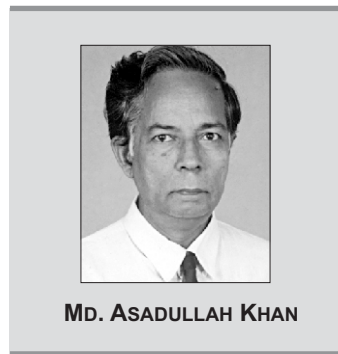
on a popular uprising to bring down the current regime runs the risk of undermining those very forces it purports to want to help."

Finally, political observers believe that President Bush seems to be pursuing his "god-given-mission" to take away Iran's nuclear programme, while Iran's President believes that he is also divinely inspired (he told during his UN speech that some one saw a halo around him) to ensure its right to peaceful nuclear programme. It seems to be a contest of "who is exactly following God's will."

Iran's defiant stance, according to political analysts, is a response to US threats. Iran may also think that it has a role to play at the 21st century to tame the US power and the time is right for them. Political analysts say both sides need to cool their heels and Washington should not stay on the sidelines refusing direct dialogue with Iran.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# Eat now, pay never!



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WHENEVER there has been a crisis in the form of a failure of some agency or organisation the people in the country have raised the issue in a manner that somebody with the capacity and the will to find a solution be available. This is because of the people's innate moral strength and their firm belief in the rule of law. Precisely speaking, of late there has been a spate of public-interest litigations targeting corruption and irregularities in high places in the country. It is equally true people overlooked irregularities for some time, but then there comes a time when things go beyond the threshold of tolerance. There is also a much greater awareness among the people, that change can be brought about. Apparently the crisis we see today is due to the failure of the older generations, either as our representatives or as administrators in different levels of the government machinery. Thankfully, the youth and the enlightened public or even the rural masses hard pressed by deprivation and lack of economic opportunities are not accepting everything that the elders or the ruling class is doing.

The presumption of legitimacy of judicial intervention is also a presumption of illegitimacy of the executive for failing to reach constitutional goals in a society in which corruption is no longer an aberration but rather the rule. In a society rocked by bouts of conflicts and corruption and looking for recovery, it has to be borne in mind what great people have said: Try to keep the top clean, and whatever trickles down will also be clean.

In a landmark judgement that the High Court passed on April 27 last directing the BTB to realise within six months arrear telephone bills totalling around Tk 6 crore from 427 members of the fifth and seventh parliament, it has once again been established that Bangladesh is a sovereign democratic republic and is governed by the government of law. Most importantly the law is not a respecter of persons and does not discriminate between the ordinary citizens and functionaries of the state, however high and mighty they may be. The message that this judgement of the writ petition filed by BLAST in 2001 transmits is the fact that the government is an agent and trustee for and on behalf of the people and the MPs are bound by the laws enacted by themselves just like any common citizen of the country. There is no dispute over this: the judiciary continues to be an institution of 'Last Hope' on earth in all countries including Bangladesh. But justice does not often reach out from the ruler to the ruled at least in this country.

While democracy is still alive in the 35th year of independence, the fact remains that our masses are still illiterate and immature and they are unable to distinguish between meaningless rhetoric

and truth. Here in this country even people with a criminal background are eulogised and elected to offices of great responsibility. The question that looms large is: could these people further the democratic process or make it only counter-productive? The High Court verdict directing the BTB to realise the unpaid telephone bills from the lawmakers and annulment of the provision of the appointment of District Ministers by another High Court bench on the same day are by no means any definitive indicator of who is corrupt and who is not. It is in essence an institutional overhaul that was long overdue. A churning of democratic process in which the thrust of the enlightened public opinion spiced with a dose of political opportunism and activism of the country's highest courts converged to restore a modicum of moral authority to a system. One that has been rapidly deteriorating into a brazen display of naked political power without accountability to the real sovereigns -- the people. The prosecution or indictment of ministers, lawmakers and politicians of all hues who so far enjoyed the charmed life of living beyond the clutches of the law is a process of evolution: the emergence of Bangladesh, albeit slowly into a

constitutional society. The annulment of the provision of the district ministers brought into being by a gazette notification on the basis of a cabinet decision in 2001, not in keeping with the constitutional provision, might put at rest the designs of a government inspired with political motive. As people's experience indicates, other than what the honourable High Court bench has observed, this provision of designated ministers has interfered with the working of the local administrators and local parliamentarians. While one makes a detailed analysis of the functioning of the state machinery, one feels convinced that the debilitating malaise lies in the failure of the executive and legislature to adhere to certain goals: honesty, respect for the environment, public health, educational opportunities and openness, all of which are preamble to the constitution and the directive principles of the state policy. The High Court verdict in both the cases has reinforced people's trust in the country's highest court as the last resort. True, a strong arm is often needed to make the executive work.

Shockingly, with a section of our lawmakers busy looking for perks and facilities more than their entitlement, the matter was

made to reach such a sorry pass. Without mincing words, it must be said that the country can't afford politicians whose main purpose seems to glue themselves to the chairs of the ministers or some influential power blocks not to ameliorate the sufferings of the poor but line up their pockets. Let us take lessons from other places around us beyond the frontiers of this country, say, India. Such incidents of non-payment of dues owed to the government by the members of the Indian parliament were settled by executive action. Forced to go without power and water at their Delhi residences at least 30 MPs including Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Raghuvanshi Prasad Singh and A.B.A Ghani Khan Choudhury, now deceased, finally paid up their staggering dues.

Seventeen members of the Parliament were forced to go without power and water for periods ranging from a day to over a week for nonpayment of dues over Rs. 50,000.

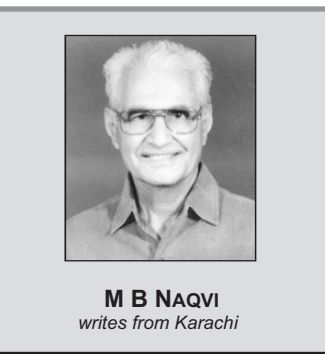
The punitive action paid off. Fourteen of the MPs quietly paid up a quarter of their dues. One of the aggrieved members, however, raised the issue in the parliament and as expected everyone rallied to his support. The argument in defence of the MPs were very tangible and forceful. It was argued that MPs were not strangers and they didn't run factories and the amount compounded at three and a half percent monthly surcharge inflated the bill. The Parliament, it was learnt, raised the MPs annual free entitlement to 50,000 units of power. It was further learnt that the recovery of

dues from the politicians was intensified ever since such action came under judicial supervision.

Lawmakers in our country could have followed suit: the question of inflated bill or whatever it is, could have been raised in the parliament and a decision could be arrived at after a logical debate. But none, least among them the lawmakers, should try to ride roughshod over the law they are enacting in the parliament. In a liberal constitutional system, parliament formulates policies and is also the judge of their wisdom and efficacy. The executive implements them and interprets the public interest while the judiciary ensures their legality and constitutionality. And the presumption of legitimacy of judicial intervention is also a presumption of illegitimacy of the executive for failing to reach constitutional goals in a society in which corruption is no longer an aberration but rather the rule. In a society rocked by bouts of conflicts and corruption and looking for recovery, it has to be borne in mind what great people have said: Try to keep the top clean, and whatever trickles down will also be clean.

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# Is American influence slipping from its zenith?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

VIS-À-VIS the Iranian Crisis, what we may also be witnessing is the rapid draining away of American influence. Time was, after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989-91, when the US became the sole superpower. The Russian economy quickly disintegrated as a result of what was the loot of huge Soviet resources by robber barons known as oligarchs. American star zoomed to its highest pinnacle. People talked of it as hyper power. The Americans themselves began planning a whole century, the 21st, to be America's own in which they would establish a 'new Holy Roman Empire' that would not be based on colonialism but on financial benefits, control of key resources and strategic bases. What seemed easy earlier is now facing difficul-

## PLAIN WORDS

This should not be construed to mean that Americans are finished and their wishes and designs do not matter. They will remain an important factor for a long time, sometimes decisive. Only their pre-eminence will diminish; opposition to their designs will grow. Since the Americans know the art of spending their dollars judiciously, they can still call most of the shots in many developing countries.

There is an obvious convergence between Russia and China in the UN that is thwarting the American wishes vis-à-vis Iran. The Iranian crisis has resulted from two factors: re-organisation of Russia's economy, and strengthened hold of Iranian clergy. Helped by high oil prices, Iran has consciously built itself as a regional pre-eminent power and has acquired some capabilities to sustain the design. During the current crisis, Iran has showed off some of its new technological weapons, whether developed by itself or with the help of friends, that can sink some big war ships in the Gulf. Iranians are cocksure of their own capabilities because they are ignoring the direct American threats of bombing its nuclear installations with huge conventional or quasi nuclear bombs or even with nuclear weap-

ons. This confidence of the Iranians can only be based on their ability to retaliate and inflict painful costs on the attackers. What the Iranians can do to America include the disruption of oil trade, probably by blocking the Straits of Hormuz. They may be able to sink a few American warships by their new smart munitions. They can also attack Israel directly. The political mischief that Iran can play in Iraq and the rest of Middle East is only too well known to the Americans and everyone else. What Iran can do is a formidable list of possibilities that America has to fear, including a recession in the world economy by oil prices crashing through \$100 a barrel barrier; European and Japanese economies can be seriously damaged thereby. But Iran's power is by no means comparable to America's. The US cannot be defeated militarily by

any other power through direct battles. But new power centres have however emerged that are now beginning to challenge its influence. That influence was based on America being number one in both military and economic spheres. Economy today is America's weakest wicket. All their economic fundamentals make America vulnerable to all manners of difficulties. Militarily, of course its \$500 billion budget ensures that it is likely to remain number one indefinitely. But technological breakthroughs elsewhere have created small pockets of vulnerabilities for the American influence, to be sure. As we look around, there are the obvious emerging power centres of Russia and China. Earlier, the other power centres were (a) Japan that still remains under the umbrella of America's strategic partnership while the US

has integrated it into what amounts to a military alliance with South Korea, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand. The US remains a formidable force in the Pacific and confronts Asia with a wall of steel and fire. But then, Russia and China are now new and un-ignorable power centres. Russia always had the where-withal of re-organising itself. The bonanza of high oil prices has enabled Russia to re-order its otherwise chaotic economy and it is now flexing its diplomatic and political muscles. Even so widely different kinds of Russians such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Mikhail Gorbachev have said that the Americans are trying to encircle Russia and a new cold war has begun between Russia and the US.

Chinese diplomacy is far more supple. China is a powerhouse economically and its military might is also growing. It has been growing at over 9 per cent for nearly two decades. It has captured many markets through the export of its manufactured goods. It earns \$ 200 billion of surplus from the American market alone, while Americans cannot but continue to invest in China because it remains an open and attractive market for foreign capital. Therefore there is a limit to what the American displeasure can do.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have one of the largest stakes in America's foreign debt after Japan, if they have not overtaken it. Should the Chinese withdraw their dollars, the dollar will simply sink into nothingness. True, the Chinese will also lose all their deposits with the Federal Reserve System. These constitute mutual limits on what either can do.

The bottomline is neither of the two dares to become an open political enemy of the other. The stakes are mutual. That however permits China to become strategic partner of Russia, corner some of Russian energy supplies and create a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with the easily ascertainable purpose of whittling down the American influence from former Russian zone of influence in Central Asian Republics. As of now, the SCO is a factor that has to be taken into account which probably has led to the US-India military and political link up.

Politically speaking, Americans are unpopular amongst all Muslim and Arab countries, not excluding Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. This unpopularity is shared by ruling circles as well as common people. The Americans are hated in all Arab lands at the popular level. The mass demon-

strations that the Europeans have organised against American designs at different times tell a definitive story of mental separation. World public opinion cannot be accused of being pro-American; it is quite critical of American actions and designs. In addition, there is an anti-war sentiment growing at home. It is true that it is centred on Iraq and to a smaller extent Afghanistan and rest of the Middle East. But nevertheless it is a significant indicator of unrest in the home country.

As if to add to Americans' difficulties, the American hold over Latin America is rapidly eroding. Today to say that South America is America's backyard would invite opposition from all Latinos. As one writes, Bolivia has just nationalised British and American oil and gas companies operating in the country. Bolivia's President Evo Morales is going the way of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. Americans had proposed a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). There have been three major absentees from the FTAA: These are Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia. These three have united under what they call Bolivian Alternative for Americas (ALBA). That was initially promoted by Castro and Chavez in an attempt

to thwart US plans for FTAA. The Americans have to perform a lot of salvaging operations at home and closer to home in Latin America.

The kind of confidence with which Neo-Conservatives had inaugurated their programme for the new American Century is now virtually in shreds.

This should not be construed to mean that Americans are finished and their wishes and designs do not matter. They will remain an important factor for a long time, sometime decisive. Only their pre-eminence will diminish; opposition to their designs will grow. Since the Americans know the art of spending their dollars judiciously, they can still call most of the shots in many developing countries. After all, their military strength will continue to be an important factor, even if popular notions of American prestige and influence will continue to be seen as declining.

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