

Teachers' desperate agitation

Govt must respond with due urgency

As the teachers' tougher movement gets underway showing all the signs of desperation, academic activities at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels are coming to a grinding halt. The government, for its part, has said that it could not arrange, at the fag end of its tenure, Tk 750 crore required to meet the teachers' demands. That creates an apparently insoluble imbroglio -- the government won't give in and the teachers are not going to budge an inch. The result is a stalemate that will cause incalculable damage to the education system unless broken sooner than later.

So, what are we getting into? Will education be held in abeyance as long as the government fails to fulfil the teachers' demands? If so, this is an unacceptable proposition, especially when the stakes are high.

Time is a very important factor here. Students will fall behind with each passing day without any academic engagement. The government has to show a greater sense of urgency and come up with the assurance that will soften the tough posture of the teachers and create an atmosphere in which normal functioning of the schools would be restored. The point here is that most of the demands of the teachers are genuine. And if these were met gradually over the last four and a half years as per the government's promise, we would not have been left with such a heap of their grievances.

We must not also overlook the fact that wasteful expenditures on unproductive ventures have been going on in one shape or form. So the possibility of squeezing money out of such projects should be explored in order that additional funds could be placed for the purpose of meeting some of the urgent demands of the teachers.

The whole set of new problems has cropped up when we were engrossed in a discourse over how to enhance the quality of education. But what we are faced with is the possibility of the education system crumbling down. The decision-makers can ill afford to take a do-nothing stand on such an important issue. Students and their parents are eager to see the impasse coming to an end. Give them a break.

Refusal to entertain a murder case

But this is where supremacy of law is tested

The other day a sixty-year old woman at Savar was kicked and beaten to death by police. The cops had gone to her residence to investigate alleged kidnapping of a girl. We are simply appalled by the incident. We have been witnessing heightened brutalities of the police for quite some time now. In this case it is of a horrific proportion since the act of brutality takes place at one's own home and that too against an old woman apparently unconnected with the incident. Even if involved, should she have been killed so brutally?

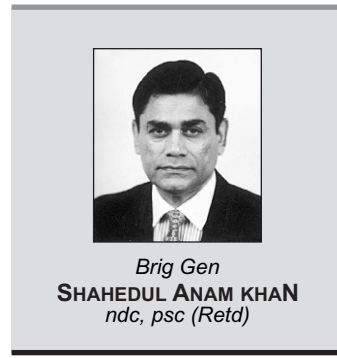
We understand that in the meantime the administration has suspended three personnel of the local police station. Our concern, however, is that incidents of brutality took place in the past and matters were hushed up or some immediate pacifying actions were taken by the administration like suspension of a police officer or his transfer from one place to another.

To us this is clearly a case of brutal murder and thus legal proceedings should be drawn against those involved. But inexplicably, the police refused to register the incident as a murder case.

Cases like these are a challenge to our justice system and hence cannot be treated merely as an administrative issue. Only recently no less a person than the IGP himself in an interview said that there is no provision for 'closing' a police personnel "in the police code". Suspension of the concerned policemen is one thing but legal proceedings against murders are quite another. The first and foremost duty of the law enforcers or the legal apparatus is to uphold the supremacy of law. Often the results of departmental actions against an offender end up in cold storage and never made public and thus the aggrieved are denied justice.

In recent times we have come across news in the media that thousands are being recruited to strengthen our police force, but surely, if this is kind of moral fibre on which police operates then one can well imagine as to what good will that do.

Building US-Asian Muslim understanding



Brig Gen
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ndc, psc (Retd)

A group composed of several US journalists along with two members of the East-West Center in Hawaii was in town very recently, primarily as a part of their forthcoming seminar on, "Building Understanding Between the United States and the Asian Muslim World." The subject is as interesting as are the motivations behind the exercise.

The team paid a visit to the office of The Daily Star, and though the interaction lasted the better part of two hours, the majority of the time was taken up on the current issues in Bangladesh. Since there was very little time to dwell on the subject of the Centre's seminar, this column, one feels, would be well utilised by going in somewhat more detail into the very interesting subject of the seminar, by someone who is both an Asian and a Muslim.

The very formulation of the subject is an acknowledgement of the fact that indeed things are not going too well between the US and the Muslim



It will be for the US to keep in mind that although one is inclined to look at the Islamic world as one single construct when it comes to Islamic issues, and although the Islamic world's views on security and international strategic issues are at times divided, there is one issue that has brought the Islamic world together, that is the US global war on terror (GWOT) and in particular its occupation and the consequent destruction of Iraq.

world on the whole, and the deficit of trust needs to be addressed urgently. To start with, let us consider the focus of the seminar. The particular focus on the "Asian Muslim" world may be justified on the grounds that it is in Asia that the majority of the Muslims live and it is from here that the Muslim world is provided the intellectual thrust from time to time.

But the reason for excluding the West Asians from the ambit of their consideration is not quite clear. Perhaps the perception of the common American, that Islam means the Arabs and the Middle East only, has had much to do in determining the focus of the topic. The focus may also have to do with the ultimate US objective of implementing its countervailing strategy in the Asia Pacific, which can be possible with greater "understanding" with the Asian Muslim world.

As for "building understanding" one gets the impression that the present level of understanding is zero, which one has difficulty in accepting because there was a level of understanding with the US

and some of the members of the Asian Muslim countries during the Cold War period. One should not forget the bulwark formed against the communist threat with the participation of some of the Muslim countries of Asia under the rubric of the now defunct CENTO. It may be also more interesting to recall that of the two countries that the US had allied with (the United States joined the military committee of the alliance in 1958), Iraq is under its occupation, and Iran under constant US threat of reprisal unless it falls in line with its diktats.

The anti-Russian Muslim coalition in Afghanistan under US patronage is difficult to overlook, not because it drove the Russians out of Afghanistan, but because it created the monster that the Americans are now having to put up with, not only in the Middle East, but also in most parts of the world. Sentiments of the Muslim were whipped up and "jihad" was a much-touted word, both by the CIA and the Mujahedeens.

Thus, "rebuilding" rather than

"building" understanding would perhaps be a more appropriate undertaking, both in the context of the time and the modality of building up that trust, that will have to take into account the changed circumstances where something more than only pressure and promises of military and economic largesse, as had been the case in the past, would help in stimulating not only understanding but an enduring trust between the US and the Muslim world.

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Therefore, even before the first step towards rebuilding understanding is taken, it would be

worthwhile for the American scholars and think tanks and journalists to take a detailed stock of how the US is perceived in the Muslim world, particularly post 9/11. One needs to be aware also that the perception of the common man on the street of US policies is at a variance with the official position that has tended to be more pliant, particularly in South Asia.

And what is the Islamic world's perception of the US? The Muslim world feels, and perhaps it is not alone in this view, that US policies are full of double standards when it comes to their application, that the US is rabidly pro-Israel at the expense of the Arabs, and notwithstanding its Bosnia policy, it is seen as anti-Muslim, and its GWOT suffers from contradictions and duplicity.

These points need validation with brief examples. Take the matter of double standards. Mr. Bush's comments made soon after 9/11 that the United States makes no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those who support and harbour them, because they're equally as guilty of murder, appears to look awkward in the context of US handling of the Posada issue. Luis Posada Carriles is a notorious terrorist, linked with the CIA in conducting terrorist activities abroad and accused of having a hand in the bombing of a commercial Cuban flight over Barbados in which seventy-three passengers and crew members died. The US refuses to extradite him to

Venezuela to stand trial. Just contrast this with the way an expatriate Bangladeshi, Mr. Siddique, was virtually kidnapped, of course with the connivance of our government, from Bangladesh because of his alleged links with the Al Qaeda.

One doesn't have to go very far to see the rabidly pro-Israeli policies that the US has pursued over the years. The recent full-scale offensive in Gaza, capture of the elected representatives of the Palestinians, and the wanton destruction of the infrastructure, is nothing but annihilation of a nation to recover one, but only one, Israeli soldier. And the world has allowed Israel to get away with it.

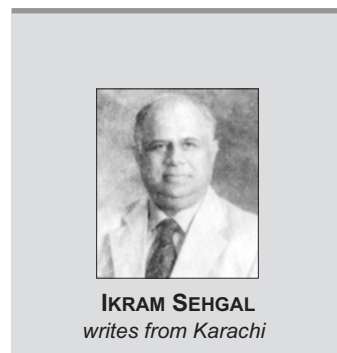
The US policy vis a vis Iran is seen not only as another instance of double standards but also anti-Muslim, when it allows Israel to possess nuclear weapons (it is alleged to have built 30 nuclear weapons since the 1970s) but threatens Iran with physical reprisals if it goes ahead with its nuclear enrichment program.

It is considered duplicitous of the US to have offered almost 160 different reasons for the invasion and occupation of Iraq and made it now a focus on the GWOT when Saddam had neither WMD nor any links with Al Qaeda.

In short, understanding and justice can be built on principles of trust and fair play, not on double standards and deceptions. Unless that is ensured, all other exercises, however well intentioned, will be futile.

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Technocracy versus politics

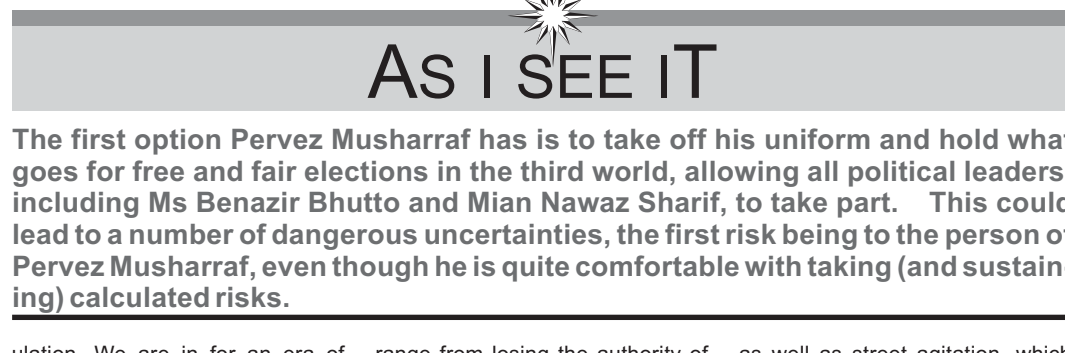


IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

As we approach election year 2007 (or will it be early 2008), the Musharraf regime has to decide very soon what political garb it has to cast itself in to fight the elections successfully. While there is no meltdown of the government, if what we read in the media and hear at private gatherings from neutral observers is true, then in the run-up to general elections we are headed for political in-fighting within the government coalition, with every partner holding out to get the best possible deal for themselves.

That is to be expected, with each constituent utilising this opportunity for crying for more seats than its share, before deciding upon the consensus candidate for each National and Provincial Assembly seat, mostly at the last minute. PML (Q) is a heterogeneous outfit that will be beset from within to an extent, particularly in the Seraikei belt, it will still be the majority party in Punjab, based namely on the strength of individual candidates rather than party affiliation.

However both PPP and PML(N) will also do well in their strongholds. In Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan. PML(Q) is almost non-existent without official manip-



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ulation. We are in for an era of backroom politics, it may not be exactly smoke-filled and whisky-laden, but there will be a potent power-play nevertheless.

At the helm of affairs we have a soldier-turned politician as the Head of State and a banker-turned politician as the PM, both "technocrats" are miles away from being the politicians of the kind that is needed for grass-roots politics, particularly pre and post elections. For experience about street-level politics they should spend one day in the life (and lounge) of Ch Shujaat Hussain in his dealings with friend and foe alike without the trappings of President and/or a PM. In the circumstances President Gen Pervez Musharraf has three stark choices of the election route to follow, with a number of available options with each choice.

The first option Pervez Musharraf has is to take off his uniform and hold what goes for free and fair elections in the third world, allowing all political leaders, including Ms Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif, to take part. This could lead to a number of dangerous uncertainties, the first risk being to the person of Pervez Musharraf, even though he is quite comfortable with taking (and sustaining) calculated risks. These

range from losing the authority of the COAS chair and opening himself up to a legal Pandora's box as well as depending upon his constituency that, once he leaves uniform, could be "Jahangir Karimat-ized", i.e. putting the country into a state of limbo by being reluctant to take any choice whatsoever.

He should not put to test the conscience of the hand-picked officers he has put (and will put) in the military hierarchy. With our external and internal situation tottering on a fine-edge, and given the fact that it has taken us years to reach some economic and geo-political stability, will we turn to political morality and put the country's existence at stake? The Soviet Union chose "Glasnost" over "Perestroika" and suffered the consequences of disintegration, if oil and gas had not been discovered in abundance, Russia would today be an international basket case.

The second option is for the President not to leave the COAS post and to get elected by the present Assemblies, as is being bandied about by all and sundry, most recently the Punjab CM who has a vested interest in the President continuing in place. This is a situation fraught with legal tangles of the constitutional-kind,

as well as street agitation, which may or may not be successful. It could just be an international embarrassment. Sharifuddin Pirzada should be able to circumvent the process in the manner he has assiduously managed for the last few decades for many of our rulers.

The present composition of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and its welcome trend towards positive judicial activism may encourage Musharraf's recalcitrants that the Court will go by the letter of the law rather than the spirit of "the doctrine of necessity" which has been the hallmark of past decisions of this kind. One cannot pre-empt the opinion of the Honourable Justices of the Supreme Court, but irrespective of Sharifuddin Pirzada's input, as citizens of Pakistan they should be concerned with its continued well-being and prosperity as any other citizen: will they risk upsetting the fine-line between what is right theoretically and what is right pragmatically for the country?

Faced with such a Hobson's choice in 1970 we went down the road to disaster, even though in hind-sight the relationship between the two wings of pre-1971 Pakistan is far better now as two independent sovereign nations. The "Alliance for the Restoration of

Democracy" (ARD) parties may not accept election of the President while in uniform, if they subsequently take part in the General Elections it becomes a fait accompli. If things will depend upon brute two-thirds majority in the Assemblies.

The third option is for Pervez Musharraf to leave the COAS post but retain the uniform as President and Supreme Commander. The only procedural changes required will be that the Supreme Commander will head the Promotion Board for general officers (i.e. to two-star rank and above) for all three Services and confirm the promotions to one-star rank. The Budget office for all three Services should be under the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJSC), with the Armed Forces operationally adjusted in four Commands reporting directly to the Supreme Commander's office.

The ARD in its recent meeting in London has called for the President and PM to resign by July 31 or to face impeachment or a vote of no confidence respectively. They link this demand to the recent Supreme Court (SC) judgment with respect to Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM), what one has to do with the other escapes even the wildest imagination. Mian Nawaz Sharif added for good measure that since ARD does not have the votes in the present Assemblies they do not expect either measure to succeed. So why attempt to put the streets on fire? Rather incongruous all around and only a symbolic example of the extraordinary logic that our politicians bring to their concept of democracy. Why not struggle for tangible political objectives instead of being like Don Quixote in trying to slay windmills, taking

them to be dragons? The President (and his supporters) and those in the opposition have to learn to co-exist in the national interest. At least 70% of those in PML (Q) would get elected in free and fair elections, this still makes for a formidable bloc, the opposition cannot sweep this fact under the carpet.

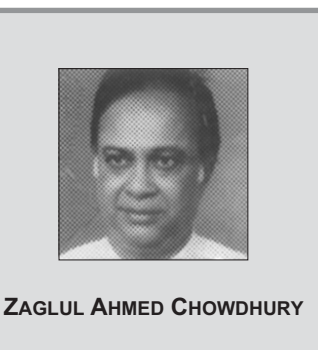
Except for being on one platform, Pervez Musharraf's ouster, the opposition is a house badly divided -- of great concern is there naivety in geo-politics. A comprehensive arrangement could see a broad understanding of the President functioning as Supreme Commander, with Defence Ministry, ISI, and NAB reporting to him. A minor constitutional amendment may be required to put them directly under the President.

The broad understanding would have Pervez Musharraf leave the COAS post and be re-elected by the new Assemblies. The elections for the new Assemblies will be held under a caretaker regime, with 90 days of such appointment. Whatever wins the elections will form the government or coalitions, both at the Federal and Provincial lands, depending upon the outcome.

While the President gives the confidence in our geo-political and economic status, the onus of day-to-day governance falls on the elected representatives. Continuity will be maintained and democracy as desired by the political parties will be restored in Pakistan. It will then be up to our politicians to practice in office what they loudly preach when not in office and forget as soon as they obtain power.

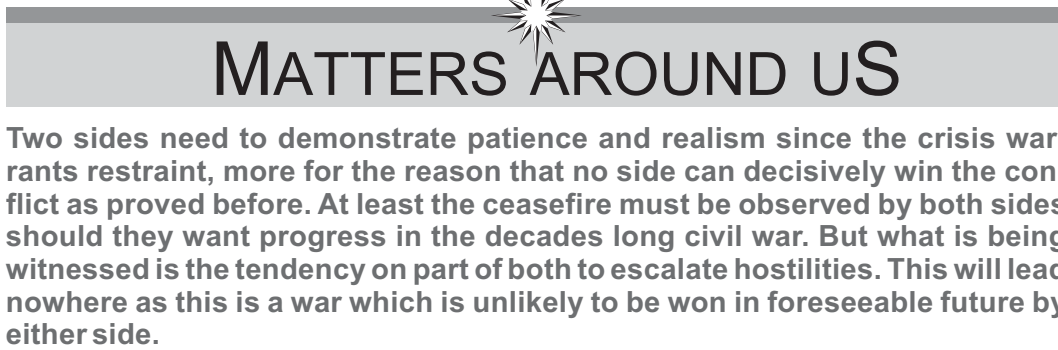
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Sri Lanka conflict: No respite in sight



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

A sudden upsurge in bloodletting during the recent months has turned the overall situation in the island state of Sri Lanka close to resumption of full blown hostilities. Even though a fragile truce remains supposedly intact neither the government nor the Tamil militants are showing respect to the ceasefire. During this past few months talks did take place between the two sides in Geneva, but whatever optimism the dialogue had generated evaporated in quick time and things again were back to square



Two sides need to demonstrate patience and realism since the crisis warrants restraint, more for the reason that no side can decisively win the conflict as proved before. At least the ceasefire must be observed by both sides should they want progress in the decades long civil war. But what is being witnessed is the tendency on part of both to escalate hostilities. This will lead nowhere as this is a war which is unlikely to be won in foreseeable future by either side.

one -- belligerence. A recent contact in Oslo to break the impasse did little to improve the hostile attitudes that exist in both sides and the mediators like the government of Norway themselves are not pinning much hope on the prospect of a negotiated settlement among the contending parties. Evidently, the Lankan situation has not ever changed for the better. On the contrary, with the passage of time all the signs are discernible now towards a further deterioration unless some speedy positive developments emerge, chance of

which, however, looks quite slim. Earlier, both government and the Tamil militants were under intense pressure from the international community for eschewing the path of confrontation and respond to the peace efforts, but unfortunately the warring sides by and large remained stuck to their known positions. Powerful donor and mediators, coming out with harsh measures to mount pressure on both sides to heed the calls for reconciliation, are now slightly disappointed as although the two sides established contacts as a corollary to these inter-

national pressures, but no headway could be made on the resumption of formal talks. Consequently, half-hearted efforts continue by those who are brokering the delicate task of peace. The Sri Lanka scene has nosedived to an extent that hostilities of serious nature have flared up between the Tamil militants and government troops leading many to believe that the tenuous truce has virtually broken down and the nation is reverting to civil war. This was least expected because the resumption of the

dialogue in Geneva in February after a long gap and assiduously made ground work had gone off quite well in the given difficult conditions resulting in a diserable change for the better towards settlement of the complex problem. The next round of talks was scheduled in April 24, but this could not take place much to the dismay of those who want to see lessening of the trouble. But the sharp worsening in Tamil militants-Sri Lanka gov't relations led to the postponement of the dialogue, which now hangs in the balance. In fact, prospects of fresh dialogue appear dim.

Definitely, gov't-rebels are now almost at lowest ebb. The gravity of the situation can be gauged from the fact that several major incidents have taken place in the recent days highlighted by the air strikes on rebel strongholds in the north-east of the country and from the militants side daring attempt on the life of the chief of country's army by a woman suicider that left ten troops killed, many injured including the army chief himself. But

later another senior army General could not escape death in attack. All these mark toughening of stance by both parties witnessed only before a ceasefire was agreed upon in 2002. Even as president Mahinda Rajapakse and the Tamil rebel supreme Villupai Prabhakaran are speaking about the need for peace, both make no secrets that the policy and attitude of the "other side" may force full fledged war. This stance is unhelpful for peace efforts.

The rebels are honouring their much-talked about "suicide bombers" that has introduced a new element in international violence or in the quest for "achieving objectives" by different groups. The cult of this form in advancing causes began in Sri Lanka 19 years ago when a rebel called "Captain Miller" drove a truck packed with explosives into an army camp killing 42 soldiers and injuring many. So far more than 260 men and women gave up their lives in staging such tactics. Their victims included former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and

Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa. "Honouring" the suicide bombers with much publicity clearly sends a message from the militants to the government and obviously this is of tougher line.

As things stand now, the truce remains in the papers only. Some international observers blamed more the government for the violations. Mediators are alarmed at this development, but have not abandoned their efforts. They are clearly dismayed and trying to contain the sharp slide. Two sides need to demonstrate patience and realism since the crisis warrants restraint, more for the reason that no side can decisively win the conflict as proved before. At least the ceasefire must be observed by both sides should they want progress in the decades long civil war. But what is being witnessed is the tendency on part of both to escalate hostilities. This will lead nowhere as this is a war which is unlikely to be won in foreseeable future by either side. Sadly, this is not dawning on the parties involved while they talk

about peace broadly for lip service. Sri Lanka's worsening tangle can still be salvaged if wisdom and sagacity are shown. No more playing to the gallery as often evidenced by comments of key figures of both sides is also needed.

In Nepal, another South Asian nation, a lingering complex political situation has changed for better to a certain extent as a sort of stability has returned to the country. Now, the democratic government and the Maoists are talking contentious issues showing progress marked by willingness on both sides to resolve their serious differences. Why the warring parties in Sri Lanka are not coming out with same spirit and approach while it is all the more expected from a nation which can rightly boast about its education and maturity in this region for manifold achievements in socio-economic fields?

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