

Business leaders' proposal

It echoes what everyone feels at the moment

WE welcome the proposal of the top leaders of the country's business sector for holding talks between the general secretary of the ruling BNP and that of the main opposition Awami League in order to end the current political stalemate. There can be no denying that the proposal has come at a time when the country is passing through a haze of uncertainty created by inept political and bureaucratic manoeuvring and manipulation. However, it would be saying the least that the proposal for the meeting at the general secretary level amply echoes what the common people have been trying to say over the past months. That top leaders belonging to the two camps should hold direct talks to find ways of reconciliation for the good of the country, is the crying need of the time.

The team of business leaders that met Abdul Mannan Bhuiya on Thursday mentioned in a letter addressed to him that the two major political camps remain widely distanced from one another on the question of caretaker government and other electoral reforms, and that if a free and fair election cannot be ensured at the end of the day, it would have serious implications. They further informed the BNP general secretary that there was widespread apprehension among the people on the question of whether the next general election would be held in a free and fair manner.

We strongly feel that the proposal of the business leaders is not only pragmatic and timely, it makes a great deal of sense at such times when sensibility seems to be in short supply. When the very question of disregard to the practice of democracy is under scrutiny, it is expected that all sides will act according to the norms expected in a democratic setup. We hope the political leaders will give the proposal for the meeting a serious consideration.

Block allocation released

A hindrance to national development

ARRANGEMENTS are in place to spend the huge amount of public money set aside as 'block allocation' in the last budget. The ECNEC has given green signal to as many as eight projects and allotted Tk. 1,473 crore on a single day. Though the cash money has been allotted for spending on public welfare projects, no one can really ensure how much of it would go into implementation of worthwhile undertakings. At this point we recall what the finance minister of the country had said at a post-budget press conference concerning lump allocation. He had indicated that it would not be possible for the incumbent government to release a single penny from the allocation in the remaining four months of its tenure. Then referring to the accusation of the opposition regarding creating scope for 'looting' the money, the finance minister had further enlightened that rather it is the caretaker government that would get the opportunity of spending the money.

This exercise of allocating huge sums on a single day may be considered a precursor of what is coming in the days ahead. It is no wonder that people are always skeptical about such allocations in the budget and the ensuing spending spree towards the fag end of a government. More often than not, major slices of the funds are kept aside for fulfilling narrow partisan interests. Not only is this antithetical to financial and budgetary discipline, it is also tantamount to flouting constitutional principles. The allocations in question are large amounts for a country like Bangladesh, where, ironically, projects for meeting basic human needs cannot be implemented because of lack of funds. But, when it comes to making money available before an election, there are always the astronomical amounts that the ruling party stalwarts of the day can easily fall back on.

We can only hope that relevant regulatory bodies of the government would supervise the expenditures and ensure accountability of the people implementing the projects.

Present politics and our future

DR. MATIUR RAHMAN

POLITICS today defines the course of a nation for tomorrow, and each generation of politicians during their time commands a step toward the future direction of a state. Most nations at some point of their history found visionary leaders and statesmen who took stock of their national resources, defined the ideals and goals in keeping with the needs of their states, and brought about revolutionary reforms in their society. Thus they changed the course of history by dramatically improving the lots of their people as well as many others beyond their political borders.

Bangladesh, in her thirty-five years of history, has seen a number of presidents, prime ministers and leaders of many political parties, but yet to find a statesman who could propel the nation towards the path of real progress, economic and otherwise. So, the hopes and aspirations of our people for having a just and equitable society with humanity, dignity, equal respects and opportunities for all of its citizens remain largely unachieved.

The failure of our leaders to consolidate the ideals of democracy and implement it in a fair and beneficial manner may be attributed to the evident lack of their wisdom, vision, farsightedness, honesty, integrity, and magnanimity required of great leadership. With the exceptions of a few, most of our heads of government and political parties, through their thoughts and actions, could not

The empire of corruption and evil has to be crumbled in order to establish justice and meaningful democracy so that our future generations do not suffer the way we do. It is a very difficult mission, but a doable task which will undoubtedly require a lot of sacrifice and hard work on the part of everyone involved. But, by any measure, it is a truly great endeavour worthy of every effort, despite the hardship.

distinguish themselves above the rank of ordinary.

Noticeably, the most important agenda for many of our politicians is to get elected and grab power by hook or by crook, so that, as is blamed, they can squander national resources to amass towering fortunes for themselves and for the members of their parties and families. Therefore, change of government through elections did not make any difference either, because our major political parties are merely the two sides of the same coin. So, corruption and cronyism, crime and violence, abuse of power and waste of meager national resources continue to increase under each government, with simultaneous deterioration of peace and safety for all. Life for the ordinary citizens is becoming unbearably more miserable day by day.

For all practical purposes, democracy in our country is dysfunctional to the extent that it is no more than a deception and mockery to legitimise the plunders of politicians—in their hand it only serves the corrupt to facilitate their evil deeds and selfish interests. In our society today, individual's talents, abilities and honest work are not necessarily the principal parameters of success; the rich and the mighty get whatever they want by depriving

others of their due rights.

Besides, political leaders and their coteries view public resources and state instruments as their personal property and do not hesitate to abuse and dispose of that interests at their whims and desire. It appears as if they look upon the country as their kingdom and manipulate its business in a way that would satisfy their motives, all under a fake democratic cover.

Moreover, there is now talk in the political circles that the leaders of both major parties, in collusion with their cronies, are hatching up plots to transfer party leaderships to their immediate family members as harbingers for state leadership. Leadership that is not earned, but handed over by political conspiracy and selfish design to perpetuate the state power in one or two families is not much different from absolute monarchy. This kind of sinister scheme is a treachery and travesty of democracy, with terrible consequences which we have already been experiencing. The nation cannot afford to have those dark chapters of history repeated anymore. The wise and the honest in the political arena must resist it at any cost, for the sake of democracy.

Most, if not all, of the vices that exist in our society are the outshot of our corrupt political parties. They have created a vicious cycle of crime, violence and terror by nurturing criminals just to protect their interests and intimidate their opponents. Needless to say, the innocent people are the worst victims of this harmful situation.

Under these circumstances, concerned citizens are crying out for a savior to rescue the nation from its current state of crisis and cure the ills of our politics, but no sign of help seems to be in sight. Any isolated and cosmetic attempt to confront corruption, nepotism, injustice, violence and lawlessness, without fixing the political system is just like treating the external symptoms without addressing the cause of the disease. The problems need to be addressed where they belong -- at the roots, not at the branches.

So, the country at this time needs revolutionary reforms in its politics and policies. Without such reforms, any superficial change will be just another futile attempt to alleviate the pains and sufferings people are going through for no fault of their own. It does not seem plausible that anyone from our major political parties will be able to

rise above the crowd and answer the call of the nation for the urgently needed reforms. However, this is not to say that everyone in our political circle is corrupt and worthless.

There are some very talented and decent individuals among the politicians, but because of their honest, objective and independent thoughts, they are either cornered in their party or already cast away. Some of these individuals have formed their own political organisations, and whether happy or not about their fate in politics, they now seem to be at a distance from their counterparts.

These politicians, who are relatively less influential but honest, and some intellectuals on the sideline of our politics had the potential for doing something good for the country, but unfortunately they cannot move beyond the shells of their ideologies and petty differences to unite others like them for a greater cause. Their organisations and activities may give them the personal satisfaction of lofty political identity and intellectual pursuits, but do not offer any effective programme to attract the attention of the general public, and are therefore practically useless.

So, the prevailing political envi-

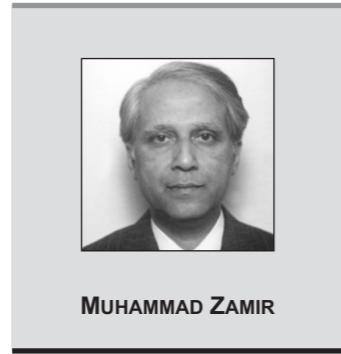
ronment in Dhaka is not indicative of any prospect for true reforms, unless there is a miracle of Biblical proportions. But, be it miracle or magic, the solution to our problems has to come from the people of our society, and the country cannot wait too long for that to happen.

The empire of corruption and evil has to be crumbled in order to establish justice and meaningful democracy so that our future generations do not suffer the way we do. It is a very difficult mission, but a doable task which will undoubtedly require a lot of sacrifice and hard work on the part of everyone involved. But, by any measure, it is a truly great endeavour worthy of every effort, despite the hardship.

The nation genuinely expects and needs more from its educated, wise and privileged citizens, especially those who have been in high positions and still command some influence and authority over matters of national importance, to help change its ailing situations. At this moment of our history, the country is clamouring for her brave sons and daughters to stand up and move forward to wake up the hero that lies in every individual. That is the need of the time, and those who can rise to the occasion to meet this challenge of our generation will be saluted as real heroes by many more generations to come.

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Problems continue in Iraq



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

PAUL Pillar, the former deputy chief of the US Central Intelligence Agency, has published an interesting article on Iraq in "Foreign Affairs" in its March/April, 2006 issue. Writing on intelligence gathering and its implications for preparing strategy on the ground, he has noted that "the most serious problem with US intelligence today is that its relationship with the policy making process is broken and badly needs repair". He has also observed that "in the wake of the Iraq war" it is clear "that official intelligence analysis" is "not being relied on in making even the most significant national security decisions". He has also commented that "intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions already made".

These are indeed very harsh and frank observations by a specialist who is now a member of the Faculty of the Security Studies Programme at Georgetown University. Events of the recent past appear to support the idea that the US is superior to everyone else in terms of high-tech surveillance and intelligence gathering. However, they still do not really possess the desirable network and means for obtaining clear information on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A few weeks have passed since the death of Abu Musabb al-Zarqawi. The US Special Forces through this act have shown that targeted assassination is now

nevertheless, both the US as well as the Iraqi government should understand that in Iraq today, their common effort should be solely directed towards winning the hearts and minds of the affected people. This is not happening. The problem in Iraq is fundamentally political. Its solutions will not be found in greater use of technology or armed forces. According to US and Iraqi sources, there are, in Iraq, in addition to nearly 1,50,000 foreign forces, nearly 2,60,000 Iraqi soldiers and police. Obviously, their presence has not been enough. It has not curbed violence.

acceptable. Iraqis in general have also not been mourning his demise. Nevertheless, it is clear that it has not made much of a dent in the ranks of Iraq's insurgents. On a regular basis, the horror of killings and sectarian violence continues.

Analysts now believe that there is today in Iraq a Mujahedin Shura Council. Besides, Zarqawi's Al Qaeda, its membership possibly also includes seven other organisations. An umbrella grouping, it has ostensibly been set up to coordinate activities among religiously motivated insurgent factions. US agencies also think that in addition to this Council, there are four other 'Islamic terrorist groups' who are operating inside Iraq. Strategists have also indicated that former Saddam loyalists and a Baath underground linked to Saddam's intelligence apparatus are supplementing this 'terrorist' organogram, enhancing its complexity.

Consequently, despite having an elected government of sorts, Iraq appears to be stumbling along. This has included differences of opinion even in identifying Zarqawi's successor. Not everyone agrees that Abu Ayyub al-Misri, an Egyptian, has taken over Zarqawi's group. Even, Stephen Hadley, the US National Security Adviser is 'not clear at this point' about this matter.

This lack of clarity underlines the latent constraints that exist in the relationship between intelligence gathering and policymaking in Iraq.

It has become that much more cumbersome because efforts directed towards obtaining intelligence have been affected somewhat by conflicting interests and credibility. Analytical projections and their policy implications have become fuzzy. This is making confused situation even more chaotic.

In the recent past we have also witnessed media criticism, particularly in the USA and Europe, about how 'the Bush Administration deviated' from established 'professional' standards. It has been acknowledged even by Paul Pillar that there has sometimes been aggressive use of 'intelligence to win public support' for Bush's controversial decision to go to war in Iraq. In this context, it has 'meant selectively adding data -- "cherry-picking" -- rather than using the intelligence community's own analytic judgments'. Such steps have not enhanced, for obvious reasons, trust within the international community.

Several factors have emerged over the last few days in Iraq. Press reports coming out of Washington have mentioned that American deaths, since the invasion of Iraq has reached 2509-1,981 service members killed in action and 528 dead from other non-hostile causes. 18,491 troops have also been wounded in action, including 8,501 who did not return to duty. It has also been revealed that nearly 4,800 Iraqi police and security forces have died during the war and

at least 30,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed. These are grim statistics. It has also led some members of the US Congress to call for a timetable for the eventual withdrawal of the estimated 127,000 US troops from Iraq.

Bush has dismissed calls for a US withdrawal as election-year politics. He has also consistently refused to either give a timetable or any benchmark, for evaluating the required success, that could enable the US troops to return. In the meantime however, Japan has ordered its 600 troops to leave Iraq, ending its first military mission since World War II to any country where fighting is under way. These troops are expected to return by the end of July. In similar vein, the government of Italy has also undertaken steps that would soon result in Italian contingents coming back.

The criticism and pressure generated by the European Union and the United Nations over the closing of the Guantanamo prison facility have also not helped. To this has also been added the controversy created by the killings in Haditha and in the Salahaddin province. All these have contributed to the erosion of the moral high ground claimed earlier by the occupying forces.

The continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and other associated elements in the war against terror have been taking a serious toll in the popularity ratings of both US President Bush and British Prime Minister Blair. Bush's

popularity has reportedly fallen to a mere 31 percent, lowest among recent incumbent US Presidents. Similarly, Labour Party's popularity in Britain has fallen to 32 percent, the lowest in 20 years. Since April 12, consecutive opinion polls have put the Conservative Party ahead by between two and 10 percentage points.

President Bush and his policymakers have tried to boost his ratings through his recent visit to Iraq. Despite comments by many Iraqi officials that several Iraqi civilians have not been treated with respect and killed on suspicion, US spin-doctors have tried to refute these charges by claiming that the circumstances of such incidents were generally ambiguous.

Nevertheless, both the US as well as the Iraqi government should understand that in Iraq today, their common effort should be solely directed towards winning the hearts and minds of the affected people. This is not happening. The problem in Iraq is fundamentally political. Its solutions will not be found in greater use of technology or armed forces. According to US and Iraqi sources, there are, in Iraq, in addition to nearly 1,50,000 foreign forces, nearly 2,60,000 Iraqi soldiers and police. Obviously, their presence has not been enough. It has not curbed violence.

As I see it, what is required is effective political bargaining. Prime Minister Nuri-al-Maliki has to seek national reconciliation. Faeed Zakaria of 'Newsweek' in his col-

umn on 5 June has suggested that 'co-opting the majority of the Sunnis' within the government machinery would be the simplest way for crippling the insurgency. Yes, that would help.

The Iraqi government would also however have to address other issues. It includes the proposed amendments to the Constitution and the sharing of oil revenue. In addition, sooner than later, both the US and the new Iraqi government, have to take definitive steps to end the de-Baathification process, which has created massive unemployment and social unrest among whole classes and groups of people. In this, the US should follow the advice of their Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. He has correctly suggested that 'de-Baathification has to evolve into reconciliation with accountability'.

The other important step that needs to be taken by the Shia dominated Iraqi government is to rein in the Shia militias who are running rampant in all areas of Iraq other than the Kurdish provinces. If they cannot disband these groups and also the informal armed cadres of Moqtada al-Sadr, the insurgency will not end. The infighting will continue to increase and it will not be unlikely for the fractured violent political landscape of Iraq to become another Lebanon.

Once mixed ethnic neighbourhoods in Iraq are unraveling at a brisk pace. Discord has also grown among factions. Sectarian killings have become common. Decentralisation of powers and relations with neighbours has also not progressed sufficiently. The future role of Islam within the context of governance also remains unclear.

There are issues and problems in Iraq and they have to be addressed with seriousness and understanding. Intelligence gathering and policy planning will have to move together.

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OPINION

Achieving national interest

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

RESIDENT Abraham Lincoln of America said in 1863 at Gettysburg where 7000 died during civil war that "these dead shall not have died in vain". The people of Bangladesh fought a bloody war against the army of Pakistan to establish the principle of freedom, equality, justice, and human rights and exploitation free society. But during the 35 years the people neither achieved the dream for which millions sacrificed their lives and fortunes nor succeeded to drive out the exploiters. Did they die in vain?

Both the ruling and opposition political parties exploited the innocent and resilient people of Bangladesh to amass wealth for themselves. Instead of 22 notorious wealthy families during Pakistan period, now we have more than 200 similarly wealthy families in Bangladesh. Possibly the days are not far off when they, including us because of proximity, will have to pay the prices with tears and humiliation. Indeed, the present chaotic, lawlessness, and corrupt environment in the country indicate to that direction.

A recent news item in the media says that there have been 99 killings in the capital city of Dhaka alone over the last three months. The rate of dacoity is on increase. The series of bomb blasts, killing of honest lawyers, judges and outspoken politicians, kidnapping of businessmen, increase in vandalism, looting and arson of garment factories do not speak of a peaceful living environment in the country. The country appears to be gripped by anarchy. It gives the impression that the government does not either have the power to contain the situation or is a passive onlooker. Since political leaders are also involved in corruption they apparently lost moral strength to resist it, to say the least. Since 2001 Bangladesh has been placed as number one among the corrupt countries by Transparency International. As a result, Bangladesh has been deprived of the benefit from US' Millennium Challenge fund.

Although many commentators have complained of total failure of the government to protect the garment factories, but crux of the problem perhaps lies also somewhere else. Another group of

commentators are of the opinion that it could not be ruled out that there is a foreign hand to sabotage or cripple the growing industry which brings foreign currency to Bangladesh.

If we look at the benefits that have been accrued by the owners of garment industries in Bangladesh since mid 1980's when this industry started to show its strengths, they did not pay any attention to the work force in terms of financial, health or any other fringe benefit. Worker is the backbone of any industry, whether it is big or small, it makes no difference. Workers in Bangladesh need two meals a day, a set of clothes to wear and a roof to sleep under. This is a bare minimum necessity. In most garment factories there is no provision for extra pay for extra hour beyond 8 hours a day. There is no provision for lunch break either.

European Union and the US had objected to the employment of child labour in garment industry. This resulted in the conclusion of tripartite agreement between government, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturing and Exporters Association) and ILO

(International Labor Organisation). Under this agreement, owners of garment factories are obliged to pay for the education of the child of the garment workers instead of employing them in the factories. Here, as a signatory to the tripartite agreement the government has the inherent responsibility to ensure such arrangement through monitoring in each and every factory. BGMEA also ignored this vital aspect of the agreement.

Lack of knowledge of manufacturers and exporters and change of design every year have caused hindrance in the way of expansion of this industry and further penetration into the markets in the United States and Europe. As a matter of fact, European Union had offered ten years moratorium to develop linkage industries and build up adequate infrastructures and support services. But owners did not pay any attention to these vital aspects of the industry. On the other hand, the possibility of passing a bill to allow quota free entry into the market of US is bleak for the present because of ensuing mid-term elections in November this year. Another equally ominous

sign is the placing of a bill in the Senate last month by Byron Dorgan, Democratic Senator from North Dakota, to prohibit buying garments from such countries where minimum wages are not paid to workers; use of any forced or compulsory labour exists; employment of child labour is in practice and occupational safety and healthcare are not provided. More or less all these elements are in place in garment industries in Bangladesh, although this bill is intended to block buying from Jordan. According to the Senator, Jordan has been hiring cheap child

labour from Bangladesh and they are being treated shabbily.

Working relations between management of garment factories and workers are not healthy either. Decade long grievances and exploitation by owners reflect in the present unrest in the factories. Political leaders are no exception either. They did not serve the interest of the people and the country as well. Had there been proper utilisation of trillion dollars of foreign aid since the independence of the country, the fate of the people must have changed for much better by now.

The alarming situation in gar-

ment factories could have been avoided had the owners of garment factories accepted the legitimate demands of the workers. Their demands were not that high which could be met. It is true that without the factory workers could not have earned livelihood. It is equally true that without the workers owners of garment factories could not have earned their billions. Last year readymade garments earned more than two billion dollars from America alone. Workers have the inherent right to demand minimum salary of Tk. 3000, which means \$45 dollars a month. Against the backdrop of

rising prices of essential commodities this amount of money hardly meets bare minimum necessity.

After 35 years of independence we must seek advancement not statement under any circumstance, not only in garments, but all other sectors. We must overcome problems of our own making by our own efforts in our own interest. No self-seeking group or individual interest should create hindrance in achieving overall national interest

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Agitating garments workers.