

Lebanon bleeds

When will international community act?

WE cannot but be alarmed at the escalation of aggression in Lebanon with Israel apparently planning for a full-scale invasion. When already numerous lives have been lost and property damaged extensively following bombing by the Israeli warplanes on 'suspected Hezbollah hideouts', a full-scale war across the entire country would only mean unleashing killing machines to level everything that pertains to humanity. It is with deep concern we note that while Lebanese authorities have appealed to the international community as well as the UN for restraint and help, their Israeli counterparts continue to talk tough giving hints at going all out against the beleaguered nation on one plea or the other.

We feel there is enough to read between the lines of the rhetoric of the Israeli defence minister Amir Peretz when he says, 'We have no intention of conquering Lebanon, but if we will have to act in order to complete our tasks and reach our victory we will do it without thinking twice'. War analysts also predict further escalation of the situation once the evacuation of western civilians from Lebanon is completed. Such blatant threats and ruthless military aggression with the intent of destroying a sovereign country negate all that stands for international rules and conventions, right to independence and democracy.

The much-feared humanitarian disaster has already started inside Lebanon with a large number of people having been displaced. There is no knowing how many more will join the trek to refugee camps against the backdrop of dwindling food and medical supplies since bombing began nine days back. The Lebanese prime minister expressed his surprise before a group of foreign ambassadors at the poor response of the international community while his country was being torn to shreds. Truly enough, though every country speaks against warfare, none has come forward so far to initiate a ceasefire, nor the UN has yet taken any concrete step.

Peace and tranquillity in the entire Middle-East is of paramount importance for democracy to find roots there. The perennial suspicion in the minds of the people in the region about the motive of the West needs to be removed through building bridges and not by destroying them. The powerful Western nations should therefore exert pressure on Israel to stop the naked aggression in the name of self-defence.

Tragedy in Indonesia

Our sympathies with the victims

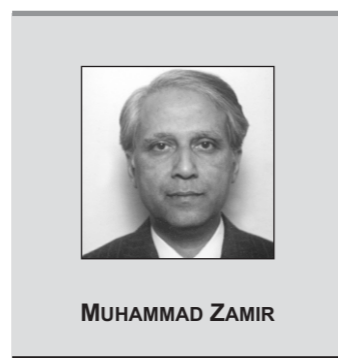
IN 2004 the Indian Ocean Tsunami had killed over 168,000 people. It has hit the coasts of Java once again. Just like the last one, the rampage of the Tsunami was triggered by an undersea earthquake of the magnitude of 7.7 on the Richter scale. No early warning system had been put in place and hence people had no advance information of what was coming, although reportedly Tsunami alerts were issued for parts of Indonesia and Australia.

We are simply dumbfounded by the tragedy that has struck Indonesia. We sincerely condole the deaths and our sympathies lie with the bereaved families and those who are injured. Bangladesh itself is a longstanding victim of the fury of nature in other forms but cannot quite comprehend the essence and the magnitude of Tsunami.

But we in Bangladesh should also think seriously about being a part of the warning system on Tsunami through the consortium of other countries that are in the process of installing the network. We should take all precautionary measures to save lives in the event that Tsunami strikes our coastal belts. With the experience Bangladesh has in disaster management, a warning system in place could certainly help save the lives of millions.

In the meantime our government which has expressed our solidarity and brotherhood with Indonesia and its people at their hour of tragedy should stand beside them with whatever aid we can provide. We could readily consider dispatching some medical supplies and a team of doctors and nurses for the injured and those agonising in hospitals and clinics. We must move fast. The international community, particularly the developed and well to do countries should once again come forward with resources for rebuilding the numerous infrastructures that were destroyed by Tsunami.

Remittances facilitate economic development



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

FIGURES speak a thousand words. Statistics not only enable us to understand issues but also help us to view things in their proper perspective.

I was going through my old press clippings and came across some interesting numbers. I found that total disbursement of foreign aid during July to December, 2005 was about US dollar 488.51 million compared to US dollar 814.9 million during the corresponding period of the previous fiscal year. On 14 June, I came across another news item that indicated that the country had received US dollar 829.728 million in foreign loans till April of the fiscal year 2005-06. An answer given in the Jatiya Sangsad by the Finance Minister also revealed that Bangladesh had paid Taka 9489.50 million (about US dollar 135 million) as interest for loans during this period. So, in effect, net inflow of assistance was about US dollar 695 million for ten months.

These statistics were depressing. Nevertheless, in my own way, I was happy that foreign aid and loans were coming down. For me, it is more important to be self-reliant and for our economic development to be spurred on through our steady growth in exports and the satisfactory rise in inflow of remittances from our expatriate workers

POST BREAKFAST

It is vital that our present and future governments pay more attention towards streamlining of the remittance procedure. We must not forget that transactions undertaken informally enter the underground system and leave no trace. They are used to finance international smuggling, unofficial cross border trade in narcotics and arms movement (with direct consequences for terrorism). All these elements, at the end of the day undermine good governance.

abroad.

The figures splashed in our newspapers on 14 June were really encouraging. Inversely, it appeared to be a direct result of the global fight against terrorist financing through shadowy channels. Instead of using 'hundi' and other informal channels, our expatriate population seem to be taking advantage of regular financial institutions.

It has been announced by the Bangladesh Bank that remittance inflow crossed a record US dollar four billion in the first eleven months of financial year 2005-06. In fact, the exact figure was US dollar 4386 million, almost US dollar 884 million more than what came in during the same period in the previous fiscal year. Analysts are now hoping that by end June, this figure would reach near about US dollar five billion. The exact figures would be available in the later part of July. I thank God for this development.

This increased remittance inflow has helped to keep the country's foreign exchange reserve at over US dollar 3.1 billion. This has been possible despite a severe fall in foreign assistance. It has also helped to maintain the balance of our payments despite our growing adverse balance in trade.

Analysis carried out by government agencies and the financial institutions have also indicated

some interesting information about the background of the people who are sending these remittances. Within the overall figure, the share of the professionals was about seven per cent, of the skilled workers about 30 per cent and that of unskilled labour about 54 per cent. It would be useful to note here that according to our government agencies, there are at present about 19,100 professionals, 81,900 skilled and about 172,000 unskilled workers working in over fourteen countries of the world (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Malaysia, Qatar, UK, USA and Singapore being the most prominent in this regard).

This 22 per cent growth in remittances coupled with almost 19 per cent growth in exports over the first nine months has definitely helped us meet our international obligations. It has, in more ways than one helped to steady the ship in troubled waters, where turbulence has been generated from high oil prices. It has shored up our Taka against the US dollar. It might have depreciated otherwise even more.

This surge in remittances will also help the steady expansion of the economy in industry and services. It will also aid in recovery in the agriculture sector, despite external pressures. This trend has led the Asian Development Bank to suggest that the country's econ-

omy might grow by about 6.5 per cent in 2005-06. This forecast made in the first week of May has since been slightly revised downward because of the troubles that have crept into our RMG industrial sector over the last few weeks.

The influence of remittances, coming in through direct and indirect channels into Bangladesh is immense. Economists have stated that in addition to the regular banking channel, there is also almost another 60 per cent coming in through the informal unofficial channel. It has been estimated that the total inflow is nearer to US dollar seven billion.

The Bangladesh Bank Governor has suggested certain reasons why expatriates continue to use the informal channels sometimes. Official channels in many cases are cumbersome, slow and sometimes expensive. At times they are also inefficient, with remittance eventually arriving in the designated address after two weeks. The alternative 'hundi' system on the other hand, usually takes only three to four days. Another hurdle facing those sending money through financial institutions is, at times, the high banking charge of remittance.

The Bangladesh Bank has also identified that lack of easy access to banks, corruption and unfavourable investment atmosphere within the country are discouraging higher amounts of remittance through

formal channels. In this context, it has been correctly pointed out that branches of Bangladeshi banks and exchange houses abroad, also sometimes fail to create an investment friendly environment to encourage Non Resident Bangladeshis to send more remittances. It has also been suggested that there should be one flat rate for remitting any amount of money through these financial institutions.

It is vital that our present and future governments pay more attention towards streamlining of the remittance procedure. We must not forget that transactions undertaken informally enter the underground system and leave no trace. They are used to finance international smuggling, unofficial cross border trade in narcotics and arms movement (with direct consequences for terrorism). All these elements, at the end of the day undermine good governance.

We must understand that in addition to the expatriate population who are currently abroad and are working for a fixed term as 'migrant labour', there are also a growing number of people of Bangladeshi origin who have immigrated abroad -- to Canada and the USA. We have to target them as well and encourage them to participate in our economic dynamics, be it in the stock market or in the manufacturing sector. We need to learn in this regard from

what is happening next door in India and the way they are treating their Non Resident Indian population.

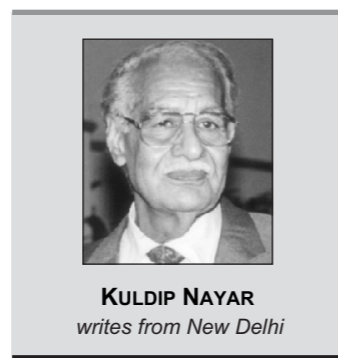
It would help if each of our Embassies abroad, particularly in the countries where we have a large expatriate presence, open up web sites and request Bangladeshis living abroad to give their views on how the government can improve its services in this sector. These suggestions could then help us to streamline the procedures and reduce the volume and complexity of required documentation. This, I am sure, will help increase our remittances.

The government should also seriously try to discover and identify other countries where we can send our semi-skilled and unskilled workers. We could also play a more active role in the context of Mode 4, Trade in Services within the WTO structure. There seems to have been little progress in this regard. The SAARC region could be the first step and then it could be the G-77 group of countries. We could also set up in each district, with government subsidy, institutes that could impart training in semi-skilled and skilled areas that would fit in with the services sector. There could also be institutes for teaching foreign languages in a functional manner -- in English, Arabic, Malaysian, French or Italian.

I am confident that if we approach this entire issue with sincerity, we can, in the next five years, increase our remittances to over US dollar ten billion. It could be for us the ticket that would permit us to get out of our present dependency on foreign aid and loans.

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Jaw-jaw better than war-war



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

I am somewhat worried by the lack of out-of-box thinking within the Indian and Pakistani media. They are still bold and imaginative, yet strangely wedded to the same ideas of 'we' and 'they', the majority and the minority, action and response. Neither has been able to overcome encrusted prejudice. On certain matters their reaction is similar, full of hate, distrust and mostly one-sided. The Mumbai bomb blasts are a case in point.

When 186 people are killed in a matter of minutes the demand for someone's head is natural. The mangled bodies of the dead and the wounded make a grisly scene, giving the impression of a wronged, helpless state. But this is the occasion when the media should rise above bias and show the way. The Pakistan media should have sought answers from their government to the questions raised on training camps for the terrorists and the headquarters of Lashkar and the likes. The Indian media should have assessed how far the Gujarat happenings have found resonance in Mumbai. Pointing an accusing finger in one direction is easy, but

the difficult part is to verify behind-the-scenes briefings. Both governments tend to cover up their own failures by pinning the blame on hostile foreign and banned elements they have not been able to control. There is probably something in the allegation about the complicity of the Pakistani military junta. Looming election in a year's time means the army has to think long and hard about ways to divert the attention of the public to something else, such as heightening tensions with its perennial enemy. When the religious elements in Pakistan, by no standard limited, have different interpretations of jihad, a bleeding pluralistic India only whets their fundamentalism. Consequently, the interests of the army and of fanatics coincide.

The Pakistani media should have come down on them heavily. Before them is the example of Baluchistan where the army has used religious forces to curb a nationalistic expression for self governance. Similarly, Islamabad has allied itself with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of six religious parties, to encourage the remnants of the Taliban still

resisting Kabul's authority along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Since Islamabad would like to convert Afghanistan into a satellite state for reasons of "strategic depth," the Pakistani media in general has gone along with this policy. Nationalism drives liberalism into the background. Isn't this true of the Pakistani media as well as that of Indian? Terrorism is like a Frankenstein. Once unleashed, it cannot be controlled. Probably, the villain of the piece is America which first created Al-Qaida to fight the then Soviet Union. Al-Qaida in turn gave birth to the Taliban which also enjoyed America's blessings until 9/11. Washington did not object to their infiltrating Kashmir and creating trouble, or carrying out acts of sabotage in India. What changed everything were the attacks on New York and Washington when America apparently began using the whip against Pakistan while at the same time depending on Islamabad to control the new Frankenstein.

The question before New Delhi is what options does it possess to face such an unholy alliance of mosque and cantonment? If TV

networks were to be the guide -- they have 98 per cent of viewers saying "we must act" -- we should either take up hot pursuit or bomb Pakistan. Obviously, Islamabad would retaliate. Even by event it might lead to a war -- both sides have nuclear weapons. Are we prepared for that? Even a limited war will definitely impede our development. We have taken our forces right up to the border and kept them there for months at huge expense, but had to withdraw them and today we realise the futility of the whole exercise.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has tried to mollify aroused sentiments by warning Pakistan that the peace process would have no future if "terror modules are instigated, inspired and supported by elements across the border without which they (terrorists in India) cannot act with such devastating effects." He claims to have "credible information" on this. I wish the peace process talks had not been deferred. Jaw-jaw is always better than war-war. True, Islamabad has said that "allegations are altogether unsubstantiated," but the general impression in

India is that the ISI is behind every act of terrorism which has taken place either at Varanasi, Bangalore, Delhi or now Mumbai. Islamabad has every time asked for concrete evidence. In such matters it is not always possible to comply. There is a parallel here with the case of disgraced nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan. After he was caught red-handed selling nuclear material to Libya, Iran, North Korea and others, the Pakistan government disowned him, claiming that he had been acting on his own. As with the terrorists, who can prove to the contrary?

Our problem is that the acts of terrorism aggravate Hindu-Muslim relations. This may suit the RSS and their political bedfellows, but it weakens our secular fabric. I know there are certain fanatic elements in Pakistan who want to see India as a purely Hindu state, mirror imaging their own Islamic credentials. But the ethos of India -- and its independence movement -- is pluralism. No acts of terrorism are going to divert us from our basic values of secularism and democracy.

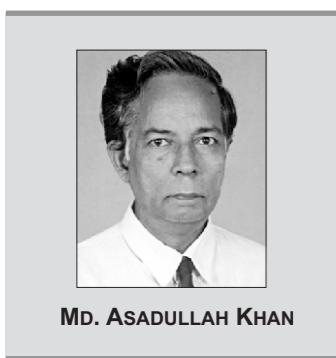
The Prime Minister has rightly

said that the government will "crush" terror modules which exist in Mumbai and many other parts of the country but, if I may say so, the government needs a better intelligence system and closer coordination of the different intelligence agencies. There are eight of them, each going its own way. Why can't they be combined? Except for a few human rights activists the civil society in Pakistan was disappointingly quiet. On the one side, it seems to be afraid of the mullah and on the other side the military. But it does not lack courage and I have followed its individual and collective struggles against the forces of oppression. Why doesn't it speak out now and be counted? This is the moment in history which may turn the fate of Pakistan, provided they declare openly that they would not tolerate terrorism across the border. They must demand the dismantling of training camps and oppose the shelter which Pakistan provides to the terrorists after they have done their job in India or Afghanistan.

With the two governments standing apart and with little prospect of the peace process going further, it is necessary to accelerate people-to-people contact. Unfortunately, the administrations on both sides have reduced the number of visas, although the busses are plying back and forth on ever new routes. In fact, the empty buses are a sad commentary on prevailing relations between India and Pakistan. The core problem remains lack of trust. Kashmir is only the fallout.

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Pragmatic leadership need of the hour



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

RUSSIA, Winston Churchill once said, "is a riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma". So, it seemed, were the health details of the President of Bangladesh for a couple of weeks past. Never had the series of news, views and commentaries in print and electronic media concerning the President of the country so vexed, so much traumatized an entire nation. The president's health details wrapped in mystery, true to everybody's concern and fear, gave rise to more questions than answers. During the past weeks so much was written about it giving rise to more confusions, that only subsided with President Iajuddin Ahmed assuming the

BITTER TRUTH

Pragmatic leadership could possibly put the country on the right track and pave the way for political and economic stability that it so direly needs at this critical juncture. It is worth recalling what Abraham Lincoln said about the leaders of the society. Lincoln said, "You have got to find the facts for yourself and many of the good ones come from outside your inner circle. There's too much you miss if you don't forage around yourself". Could there be anything more revealing that should be brought home to the leaders fighting and squabbling on contentious issues now?

charge of his office on July 6 last. For the Bangladeshis living in the remotest corner of the country, who due to reasons best known to all have not been privy to all the details, such concern about their president not being able to resume his duties even when he came back with a 'fit' certificate from a world class hospital in Singapore was not unusual.

President Iajuddin Ahmed underwent a successful bypass surgery at the Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore on May 26 last. After his return to Bangladesh, the way he was received at the airport and driven to CMH for further checkup to ascertain his fitness to assume charge of the office gave rise to haunting questions in public

mind. As it turns out in all countries following democratic process, there must be some genuine concern about the "First Citizen," meaning the President of the country, especially when he has fallen ill or become incapable of assuming the charge of office in a situation when there is no daily news bulletin regarding his health condition. In such a situation when the country is lurching from one crisis to another speculations sometimes bordering on rumours are not unusual.

However the Prime Minister this time guided by prudence and foresight steered the nation clear of the debacle. As Prime Minister and head of the government she has an unenviable task of keeping the people and the party she heads

happy while trying to stay afloat. It is an enormously difficult but extremely vital job. As long as the country boils, none of us whatever position we hold and which party we belong to can ever live in peace. However much ornamental the post of the President might be in the parliamentary form of government, it is undeniably true that people look forward to the Bangabhaban in their hour of distress. With national elections due in just six months and the issue of EC reforms and Caretaker Government still unresolved and street fighting taking a vicious form with every passing day on such contentious issues concern about the President's well being who is to shoulder a momentous responsibility after this govern-

ment leaves office on October 28 next, was very genuine. This is what makes the speculation about President's health or fitness a more serious matter than idle speculation. As the government started playing down the talk about President Iajuddin Ahmed's health, such hide and seek policy had raised the speculation to a high pitch.

There is a popular adage going the rounds "a burnt child dreads the fire". People still remember the situation that led the immediate past President of the country to vacate Bangabhaban with ignominy writ large on his face. Drawing conclusion from such facts of the recent past, people felt that the president's fitness or illness was

literally a matter of national importance. Coincidentally, India witnessed a similar situation during BJP government rule in 2000 concerning its Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who needed to undergo knee surgery, a fact that the BJP government did not make public at the beginning. But they had to bow down to public demands and media pressure before Vajpayee was admitted to the Beach Candy Hospital in Mumbai, where the whole PMO was temporarily housed in two adjacent rooms for five days. Because of media outcry that echoed public sentiment the whole medical history of Vajpayee was made public. The story did not end there. In the face of public speculation mounting over the PM's health, Vajpayee, then 76, had to appear before the media and talk to them to allay all rumours and speculations.

The conspiracy of silence and cussed refusal to publicly accept that septuagenarians and octogenarians may suffer from the usual ailments that accompany age is not unfair but actually counterproductive. The voter has a right to know if his chosen representative is in fine fettle. This should apply to all from members of the parliament to ministers and last

of all the president of the country. In absence of concrete, easily verifiable information, rumour rushes in to fill the vacuum. Francois Mitterand, Ronald Reagan and Nelson Mandela underwent major surgeries while in office. They did so after taking their people into confidence and neither democracy nor France, the United States and South Africa suffered. Bangladesh deserves similar trust. It is too much to ask our MPs and Ministers to place their medical files in the public domain?

Pragmatic leadership could possibly put the country on the right track and pave the way for political and economic stability that it so direly needs at this critical juncture. It is worth recalling what Abraham Lincoln said about the leaders of the society. Interestingly, Abraham Lincoln relieved General Fremont of his Missouri command during the civil war. "His cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself and allows nobody to see him. The key to being an effective leader is getting around". Lincoln was always out and about picking up information. He was not a prisoner in the White House. Lincoln said, "You have got to find the facts for yourself and many of the good ones come from outside your inner circle. There's

too much you miss if you don't forage around yourself". Could there be anything more revealing that should be brought home to the leaders fighting and squabbling on contentious issues now? Can't they place the country above self, above party?

The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. None in the country would be immune to the pain in the event of an all out conflict. None holds sufficient cards to prevent any titanic chaos. Worse, aggravated by self-anointment and party interest and hardening extremist lines, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond party interests. And with recession and economic slowdown gripping the country, the donor countries' generosity comes hard, especially when donors fear that this country's political and economic chaos and unbridled corruption would swallow up limitless funds.

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