

Unchecked ship-breaking industry

When will the authority wake up to its hazard?

NOBODY in the relevant quarter of the administration seems to internalise the long-term effect of allowing the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh to operate unregulated. It has failed to address the safety of the workers causing a thousand deaths and leaving ten times that number maimed. It demonstrates the sordid condition of this industry, although the government would not like to grant it the status of one.

In spite of the concerns raised by various quarters over the last several years, the operation of the ship-breaking yards continue in the same vein. And so does the loss of lives of the poor workers who, without the benefit of any government safety net, are held like bonded labour. There are no specific laws to ensure the minimum safety of the labourers who work under very hazardous environment, and whatever the laws that exist are disregarded by the unholy nexus between the government agencies and the syndicate that control this industry. It speaks volumes about the government indifference.

While not making light of the contribution of the industry in providing jobs over the past thirty years, more than thirty thousand of them, and providing for the subsistence of a quarter of a million and raw material for our steel mills, it cannot be a provider as well as a destroyer at the same time.

A particular reason that our shipbuilding industry has expanded so rapidly is the somewhat more stringent regulations in our neighbouring countries in this regard and the laxity in following whatever regulations are in place, in Bangladesh. Regrettably, it is because of the lack of proper regulation, poor working condition and lax oversight, that there have been repeated accidents, impacting both human life and the environment.

We feel that the trinity that is linked with this industry, the ship breakers, the shipbuilders and the government should be responsible to ensure the safety and security of the workers and keep the environmental safety in focus.

We suggest that the government address the issue without delay by first and foremost checking the source of the hazard, the contaminated ships-for-scrap that are brought in unrestrained, then putting together adequate regulations to bring the industry under stringent control, and lastly, breaking the hold of the syndicate on the industry.

Teachers' strike

Show due urgency to resolve the crisis

STRIKING teachers of non-government high schools, colleges and madrassas have announced a month-long programme to further intensify their movement. So, the possibility of an early resolution of the deadlock created in the education sector by the strike is not in sight.

It is generally admitted that the teachers' demands should be met as a matter of principle. All the more so, because the ruling BNP is pledge bound to address the issue. But the government has so far done nothing except pointing out the resource constraints that stand in the way of fulfilling the demands. A negotiated settlement of the impasse is also unlikely to take place very soon, as the decision makers in the education sector did not respond to the invitation extended to them by the Shikhhak Karmachari Oikkyo Jote (SKOJ) to attend a discussion meeting.

The picture emerging from the teachers' attempt to go for a tougher movement and the government's failure to handle the matter with a sense of urgency is a bleak one. The students are losing valuable time and their academic future might become uncertain if the strike continues indefinitely. So the stakes are high, though no attempt has so far been made to end the stalemate. The teachers have also sent a message to the UN Commission on Human Rights, in an apparently desperate bid to draw its attention to their plight. This can only give a poor account of governance in our country.

It is disquieting news that the teachers, who should have been in classrooms, are planning to block roads and waterways in the districts on August 1 as part of their movement. While their purpose is to put further pressure on the government, one can hardly overlook the law and order aspect of the issue. We watched with great consternation the police action on the striking teachers and are dismayed by the thought of another showdown between them and the law enforcers.

The government should immediately talk with the striking teachers and make sincere efforts to put an end to the crisis. The education sector is too important an area to be dragged into any kind of controversy, or made non-functional on any excuse whatsoever. Since the teachers are agitating for attainment of some very reasonable goals, it is the government's duty to respond sympathetically without wasting any more time.

The game of "power" and ...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE powerful people in the political and bureaucratic quarters continue to play their high stake game of "power" in Golden Bengal. High stake always means high drama, melodrama or mellowed-down-drama at times. And that is exactly what is going on in the power sector at the moment.

A chain of events has created a haze of confusion around the state minister in charge of the power ministry. It started when he had threatened to root out corruption from this sector in a recent workshop. He reportedly said he smelt corruption in several power projects including one in Tongi. Well, those were mighty unsavoury words to be uttered in public, especially when the entire government machinery is geared towards denying all reports of corruption.

Undoubtedly, he earned the wrath of the high and mighty ones by doing so. So the chain of events began to move fast. According to reports, within hours he was summoned to the prime minister's office, obviously to do some "explaining." Next, he was asked to join the ministry of communication as state minister. The chain then began to move faster.

State minister Talukder refused to "commute" himself to the ministry of communication. He decided to submit his resignation instead. Now it seems the power minister is not empowered enough to play the game of "power" with his more powerful opponents.

Meanwhile, confused citizens want their homes to be "lighted" and themselves enlightened on the result of the high stake game of

power.

Ershad back on track?

It seems former president and chairman of Jatiya Party HM Ershad has been able to pull the spotlight towards him on the political stage for a while. That he intends to play his cards carefully this time, despite having no aces up his sleeve, became evident when senior joint secretary general of BNP Tarique Rahman and state minister for home affairs Lutfozzaman Babar went to his residence and held a discussion.

And just like any other closed door meetings between powerful people, this latest one at Baridhara also managed to let out rumours, speculations, gossip, guesswork, hearsay, and conjectures in abundance. Why so? Because anything about and

"around" Ershad generates tremendous interest in people today, as it did in his heyday.

That's why one will hear such discussions everywhere: Is he going to join the 4-party alliance? Has he been offered the chair of the president? Has he been given the promise that he would be kept out of jail?

We feel such public attention, both positive and negative, could be exploited by him diligently to gain more grounds in the latest political race that he is likely to run. It's run or ruin situation for him. As a last chance to be in power, he has to play his cards even more carefully now against powerful opponents. And his opponents are numerous.

Reports tell us that some leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami are not too happy about the latest entente

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Surprisingly, the two general secretaries of the two main parties are all the time talking to the people, via media channels, instead of one another. And when they talk to the people, they always complain about one another. This actually reminds us of the legendary mother-in-law and daughter-in-law syndrome in this part of the world. Why are the two not on talking terms? Aren't these two overgrown gentlemen behaving a bit child-like?

between JP and BNP and they are becoming quite vocal about it. On the other hand, his own brother GM Quader is likely to quit JP if Ershad finally joined the Alliance. Therefore, it looks like Ershad will have to fight enemies both outside and within. And one "err," and Ershad could be out of politics for a long time.

Toilet diplomacy!

An AFP report from Kuala Lumpur says that a high level Chinese diplomat and his Japanese counterpart held important talks inside a toilet during the break in a security meeting in the Malaysian capital! (My, my! Don't they have anything called pride? They should come to Bangladesh to learn how to behave like a diplomat.)

Well, the report elaborates on how the foreign ministers of Japan and China accidentally met one another in the same washroom during a break.

The ministers lost no time to exchange notes on some important points. For the next 20 minutes their worried staff members waited outside biting their nails. Finally they emerged from the toilet and went back to the formal meeting. This incident was promptly dubbed as "Toilet Diplomacy."

What is there for us to learn from this interesting episode? A lot, we

guess. Since there is very little possibility of our political leaders of the two camps bumping onto each other in any toilet, they even refuse to meet at some better place, like a 5-star hotel or residence of a neutral person. They refuse to talk directly with one another though they are quite aware that the country is slowly but steadily limping towards anarchy and ruin.

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We therefore wonder if the two diplomats of the two countries having a long history of enmity can talk inside a toilet, why can't our politicians even talk over telephone to break ice? Are their respective "egos" more important than the fate of the nation?

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Renovating the United Nations



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IT appears that the developed regions of the world are increasingly getting protective of their national identity, particularly about the centrality of Anglo-Saxon culture which, in the case of the US, had to incorporate the "unassimilable" cultures represented by African, Spanish, Italian, Jewish, East European, and now, perhaps, most uncomfortably, the Muslim culture.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, assimilating Muslim culture into the values of multi-culturalism has become difficult, not only in the US but in Europe as well. This was quite apparent during the recent spate of violence which occurred in parts of Europe following the Prophet Mohammed cartoon incident.

That in some European countries even today blasphemy laws exist to protect, for example, the Anglican version of Christianity from indignities hurled by others, was quietly forgotten and the Muslim response was seen by many as proof of the "unassimilable" character inherent in Muslim culture.

Graham Fuller refers to the raging debate between advocates of total assimilation of all people into a common founding Anglo-Saxon culture vis-a-vis those who would like the retention of different ethnicity and culture, ultimately enriching the American identity. But fears exist that retention of sub-national identities could put a citizen in a conflicting situation should he/she perceives a conflict in the policies of his/her country with that of the country of origin.

The Madrid, London and the most recent Mumbai terrorist bombings bring up the question whether national identity has been able to transcend the differences in race, religion, and culture.

In this complex global situation, the United Nations has to play its role as the only body whose legitimacy is accepted by all and which perhaps can act as a counter to the uni-polarity still advocated by neons and new sovereigntists in the US who consider international law as too amorphous and intrusive to merit American consent and refuse to consider global concern as their own unless these concerns converge with American interests.

In September 2003, Kofi Annan, addressing the General Assembly, spoke of the challenges to be faced by the UN in the years ahead and created the high level panel on threats, challenges and change. The panel in its report identified six clusters of threats that would be faced by the world in decades ahead: war between states; violence within states, including civil wars, large scale human rights abuses and genocide; poverty, disease and environmental degradation; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational crime. The interconnectivity of the world driven by constant force of globalisation means that a major terrorist attack anywhere in the industrial world would have disastrous consequences for the well-being of the

people of the developing countries.

The high-level panel put emphasis for real improvement in the UN system for prevention of wars between and within states by improving the UN's diplomatic and mediation capacity. They suggested the adoption by regional organization of strong norms to protect governments from being unconstitutionally overthrown. In order to respond successfully to terrorism the panel felt that occasions may arise when the Security Council may have to be proactive needing a more expansive interpretation of Article 51 of the UN charter which provides for an inherent right of self-defense.

In addition, the panel report endorses the emerging norm of protecting civilians by the international community from being brutalized by dictators/tyrants and those who willfully and widely abuse the rights of the minorities in any country. The argument is that if the state fails to protect civilians then the international community has a responsibility to act through humanitarian intervention as a last resort.

As the Iraq imbroglio has demonstrated, the UN has often devoted too little attention and too few resources to the critical challenge of post conflict peace building. Successful peace building requires the deployment of well-resourced and well-trained peace keeping forces with clear mandate so that they can perform their duty,

most difficult in most cases, which does not become controversial at a later stage.

The utter helplessness of the Dutch peacekeepers at the hands of numerically more Serbs with better equipment rendering the Dutch virtual prisoners led to the massacre of innocent civilians at Srebrenica and the late response of the west and of the UN in the Rwandan crisis resulted in the horrendous killing, rapes and mutilation of inordinately large number on Rwandans will, for eternity, remain as black mark against the UN.

The immediate task before the UNGA and the Security Council is to appoint a new Secretary General, as Kofi Annan's second term ends in December. Article 97 of the UN Charter specifies that the Secretary General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the UNSC.

Since 1946 to 1996, the General Assembly adopted a passive role in the appointment of the UNSG because the UNSC used to send only one name for the appointment. In 1997, however, UNGA adopted a resolution which outlined a role for the president of the assembly in the appointment of the UNSG. The resolution authorized the president of the assembly to consult with member states to identify potential candidates and forward the results of the consultation to the UNSC.

The appointment of the new UNSG will be the first one to be

made since the resolution was passed. The appointment of the UNSG, however, is subject to veto of the P-5. For example, in 1946 Trygve Lie was selected when all other candidates were opposed either by the US or the USSR; in 1953 Dag Hammarskjold was appointed after Canada's Lester Pearson was vetoed by the USSR; in 1991 Javier Perez de Cuellar was eventually appointed after Kurt Waldheim running for a third term was vetoed by China, Salim Ahmed Salim of Tanzania was vetoed by the US, and Sadruddin Aga Khan was vetoed by the USSR; and in 1996 Boutros-Ghali's reappointment was vetoed by the US.

Though in the past there was no fixed term of office of the UNSG, a resolution adopted in 1997 has made it mandatory that the duration of the term or terms of appointment, including the option of a single term, shall be considered before the appointment of a new UNSG. The UNGA also resolved that in order to facilitate smooth transition, the next Secretary General should be appointed no later than one month before the expiry of the term of Kofi Annan.

One of the most contested factors in the appointment of the next Secretary General would be the principle of regional rotation. Though Article 97 of the charter provides no guidance about regional rotation, Asia demands that it is now Asian's turn. After U Thant of Burma, who finished his term in 1971, there has been no Secretary General from Asia.

In February, the 53 member African group in the UN joined the 50 member Asian group to reaffirm Asia's claim for the top post. The principle of rotation was also invoked by the Latin American delegations at the time of the selection of Perez de Cuellar. When Boutros-Ghali was vetoed by the US, it was understood that the next Secretary General would be from Africa.

Besides, if one looks at the terms held by Secretaries General from different regional groups, one would find that Western Europe had 6 terms, Africa had 3 terms,

Latin America 2 terms, and Asia, comprising more than half of the total world population, had only 2 terms.

Three of the five permanent members of the UNSC (China, Russia, and France) have already announced that it is Asia's turn to lead the UN now. US ambassador John Bolton, known for his critical remarks about the UN, rejects the principle of geographic rotation and publicly hinted that the job should go to an Eastern European, although Eastern Europe as a geographical entity has virtually ceased to exist after the end of the Cold War.

Former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, who energetically supported Bush invasion of Iraq, is reportedly the favourite of the White House. This paradoxical US position on the issue is difficult to understand because no one is more vocal than the East Europeans to claim that they are now fully integrated into Europe and that "East" and "West" Europe are Cold War relics. Given China's almost certain veto to give the post to one outside Asia, Bolton's antics is not expected to succeed.

The announced Asian candidates are: Shashi Tharoor from India; Jayantha Dhanapala from Sri Lanka; Thai Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart Sathirathai; and South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon.

Time is short for the world to decide on who will steward the United Nations in the turbulent times ahead. Bangladesh has been put in the unenviable position of having to choose one from among two South Asian candidates and two from countries which accord with Bangladesh's Look East policy.

But in the ultimate analysis, one would expect Bangladesh to take a policy which would not only bolster regional cooperation but would also be beneficial for our bilateral relations with our most immediate neighbour.

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Demise of Bush's Middle East policy



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

WHEN Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert unleashed his navy and air force on Lebanon, destroying infrastructure, indiscriminately leveling civilian structures, and killing innocent citizens, the last mainstay of Bush's Middle East policy of democratization is pushed back into the incubator.

An US Air Force General Curtis LeMay, once infamously suggested in 1965 that the "US should bomb Vietnam into the Stone Age." That was his "solution" to resolve the Vietnam conflict. The US didn't test that hypothesis then; however, Israel seems resolute to execute that very same stratagem against the Palestinians. By declaring a "war" against a fledgling democratic state of 4 million people in Lebanon, in all essence, the same tactic is now executed against that country with the acquiescence of the West,

NO NONSENSE

Many neutral observers argue that Israel and her paid lackeys appear whispering in Bush's ear to cease the opportunity to expand the Iraq and Afghanistan war to include Syria and Iran, and have America fight and subdue all of Israel's enemies. The whisperers are the same crusaders of democracy who duped Bush with the wishfulness that Iraq was only months away from acquiring nuclear arsenals; that the invasion of Iraq would be a "cakewalk;" that the invading US troops would be hailed with flowers; that democracy would glow across the Middle East; that Israelis and Palestinians would live peacefully thereafter.

especially the US.

The lack of decision on a cease fire in Rome at the July 26 meeting of the dignitaries prompted Prime Minister Fouad Siniora of Lebanon to lash out with a cry of despair. "Is the value of human life less in Lebanon than that of citizens elsewhere?" he asked. "Are we children of a lesser God? Is an Israeli tear-drop worth more than a drop of Lebanese blood?" Accusing Israel of "barbaric destruction," he vowed to seek justice, announcing that Lebanon will begin legal proceedings for war reparations.

"Where are the Christians?" wondered Patrick Buchanan (twice a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination and the Reform Party's candidate in 2000). "Why is Pope Benedict virtually alone among Christian leaders to

have spoken out against what is being done to Lebanese Christians and Muslims? Democrats attack Bush for crimes of which he is not guilty, including Haditha and Abu Ghraib. Why are they, too, silent when Israel pursues a conscious policy of collective punishment of innocent peoples? Such a policy violates international law and comports neither with our values nor our interests. It is un-American and un-Christian."

Lebanon has a pro-American democratic government; a glowing example of Bush's democracy crusade in the Middle East. Yet, with his open display of exuberance for Israel's decimation of Lebanon with American made arsenals of destructions, F-16 fighter planes, and laser guided missiles, Israel has turned back the clock of

Lebanon's accomplishments for at least 20 years.

The Bush administration seem to give an impression that Israel has an unrestrained "license to kill" its enemies no matter what the costs are. In case of Lebanon, the purpose is to inflict irreparable economic and political costs to the Lebanese government for its "support" of Hezbollah. Hardly any consideration was evoked if that support was a deliberate policy stance or a syndrome of a militarily weak state. In reality, the Israeli armed escalation and onslaught was aimed less about the two soldiers that Hezbollah kidnapped and more about its design to disarm the Lebanese resistance. This will facilitate the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

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Lebanon's accomplishments for at least 20 years. The Bush administration didn't accede the democratic election victory of Hamas because Israel rejected such a victory. Hezbollah's winning

of parliamentary seats in Lebanon was also an ominous sign for both Israel and the US. If democracy were to be rooted in the Middle East they must be acceptable to Israel first -- a precondition to receive America's clapping. Here goes the old saying: "It needs two hands to clap."

Had Israel and the Bush administration welcomed the election victories of both Hamas and the Hezbollah, and talked with them, things could have taken a different turn. The notion that the use of force will breed western style-liberalism and moderation are increasingly proving a nonsensical stance.

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The history of the region bears no indication that Israel's obliteration

of popular mass movements led by Hamas or Hezbollah would inveigle their descendants closer to western-style democracy. But the evidence of happening of the opposite is irrefutable. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 drove away the PLO only to the innovation of a stronger resistance group Hezbollah instead.

Deputy Foreign Minister Fayssal Mekdad of Syria has said: "America and Israel are mistaken to think that destroying Lebanon will bring peace. What Israel is doing with US involvement will only produce more violence and hatred." Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said Israel has "pushed the button of its own destruction" with the attacks on Lebanon.

The western press and the leaders seem embarked on a deliberate policy of exploiting the theological differences between Sunnis and Shiites, and working to pit one against the other like the way they maneuvered the 1979 Iran-Iraq war. So the US is courting Saudi Arabia. Egypt and Jordan and jolting the autocratic rulers of the Sunni dominated countries that Iran is building nuclear arsenal to become the regional power and dominate the rest of the Muslim countries. They even connected the dots with Shiite majority rule in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The Kings, Sheikhs, Emirs, Sultans and the thugs of the Sunni majority

countries are falling for the trap. Myself being a Sunni Muslim, I find this outright deplorable and despicable.

If Egypt and Jordan can peacefully co-exist with Israel and if President Musharraf of Pakistan can meet with Israeli leaders in Washington last year, I believe all other Muslim countries should also recognize Israel's right to exist, including Hamas and Hezbollah.

This is attainable only if all parties are committed to a cessation of all hostilities against Israel in exchange for Israel's concomitant resolution of all outstanding issues with its neighbors. The alternative is: all parties including Israel will continue to be worse off but Israel will continue to exist, although in continued enmity with its neighbors.

The war in Afghanistan, the devastation of Iraq, the death and destruction in Gaza, the bombing of Beirut and the invasion of South Lebanon are all underscoring an evolving evil design meant to break Arab and Muslim will and subjugate it to untrammelled Israeli brute force backed by the world's sole super-power.

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