

End political impasse

Prof Yunus echoes national expectations

PROFESSOR Yunus has made a clarion call to the leaders on both sides of the political divide to bury their hatchet and steer the nation on to the path of general election. He has urged the Secretary General of BNP and his AL counterpart to wrap up an agreement on the electoral reform issues in their last meeting scheduled today. What should play a catalyst role in this encounter is the spirit of elation and unity amongst the nation fostered by his winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

We join our voice with Nobel laureate's appeal to the political leaders that they iron out their remaining differences on the reform question with a unity of purpose and confidence in the future of the nation.

Indeed, his winning the Nobel prize is the biggest news since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and restoration of democracy in 1991, unleashing emotions of unity and heightened self-esteem that are gifts worthy of proper utilisation. The most striking thing is when Prof Yunus has won a peace prize, can our political leaders afford to be swamped by lack of peace?

We strongly feel that the Professor's appeal should find a positive resonance in the meeting between BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and his AL counterpart Abdul Jalil and that it would prove productive and conclusive. The whole nation eagerly awaits the success of the talks. The subsequent events like Eid and hand-over of power to the caretaker government speak of severe time constraints. Most importantly, the stakes are too high for the ruling and opposition parties to be failing in their talks. Either they succeed or they leave the nation in the throes of grave uncertainty.

The political parties have their own responsibilities in making the dialogue a success in a spirit of give and take. The voters have reposed confidence in them through their verdicts in the last three general elections. They must live up to popular expectations now.

Passport issue

Need for computerisation

THE report that people applying for passport have to pay a staggering amount of Tk 21 crore in bribe to the police, middlemen and corrupt employees and officials is indeed a shocking example of how the citizens' legitimate right to have a passport is being exploited ruthlessly. The harassment and financial loss that the passport seekers face can be attributed to a syndication of police, middlemen and the employees at the passport offices.

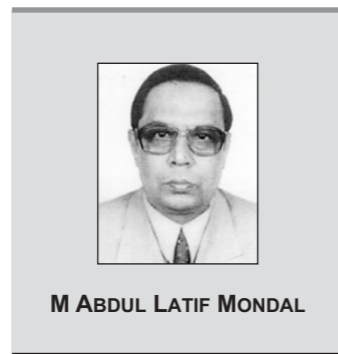
It is obvious that we are still following an outdated system where the role of the dealing clerks and officials is still very dominant. We cannot afford to ignore the fact that passport is no longer a national or domestic issue. It is an international issue and the credibility that Bangladeshi passport enjoys is a crucially important factor when it comes to people traveling to different countries.

Yet attempts to modernise the system are not being made with a due sense of urgency. E-governance with a fully computerised and automatic system of issuance of passports is needed to overcome the problem of corruption at almost every step. The authorities should contemplate introduction of the computerised system of issuing passports to keep pace with other countries that we are interacting with.

Passport has a great bearing on international security and can be associated with many negative and fraudulent activities. The point has become all the more relevant with the rise in militancy and crimes of various sorts. Obviously, crimes like human and drug trafficking can be dealt with more effectively when we have a foolproof passport issuance system. The global security undertaking is something where Bangladesh has a role to play. So it has to be ensured that our passport is treated as an instantly credible document by immigration officials all over the world.

The corruption that plagues the passport offices does indicate that some corrupt officials and employees of the government have turned issuance of passport into a profitable business. Obviously, that increases the chances of criminals and anti-social-elements exerting influence on the system, thus destroying its credibility. The government has to take corrective steps before things degenerate further.

Investing in agriculture for food security



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

OCTOBER 16 is World Food Day (WFD). The WFD is celebrated every year to commemorate the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 1945. The WFD aims to heighten public awareness of the plight of the world's hungry and malnourished and to encourage people worldwide to take action against hunger. WFD 2006 will be celebrated in more than 150 countries, including Bangladesh. The theme of the WFD 2006 is: "Investing in agriculture for food security."

Investment in agriculture

According to FAO, in spite of the importance of agriculture as the driving force in the economies of many developing countries, this vital sector is frequently starved of investment. In particular, foreign aid to agriculture has shown marked declines over the past 20 plus years. Foreign aid to the sector fell dramatically, from a total of over \$9 billion per year in the early 1980s, to less than \$5 billion in the late 1990s. This trend is continuing. Meanwhile, an estimated 854 million people around the world remain undernourished.

Feeding a population expected to swell from 5.7 billion in 1996 to 9.8 billion by the year 2050 will require rapid increase in food production, mostly through increasing output



Since pre-historic days, agriculture has been the main source of livelihood for the vast majority of the people of the geographical area that now constitutes the sovereign Bangladesh. Agriculture has continued to be the lifeline of the economy the country. Farmers themselves are the biggest investors in agriculture. Through their investment and hard labour, they have, in the past thirty plus years, more than doubled the production of food grains (rice and wheat) to feed the nation.

from land already being cultivated. FAO projections indicate that the required gains can be achieved, but only with increased and better directed investment in agriculture and rural development.

The World Food Summit (WFS) 1996 has set the target of halving, no later than 2015, the number of undernourished people. To achieve that goal the needed total gross investment in agriculture of the developing countries, including primary agriculture as well as storage, processing and support infrastructure, has been estimated by FAO at \$180.4 billion annually for the period up to 2015.

The share of public expenditures on agriculture in total government expenditures shows wide variation, with the observations ranging from 0.015% to 23%, and the share being lower than 10% in 90% of the countries for which data are available. Despite the dependence of poor countries on agriculture for incomes and food security, public expenditure for agriculture, whether measured in relation to agricultural GDP or to agricultural labour force, is lower in the category of countries with highest prevalence of undernourishment.

Most of the world's farmers are small-scale farmers. As a group, they are the biggest investors in agriculture. They also tend to have inadequate or precarious access to

food themselves. If they can make a profit with their farming, they can feed their families throughout the year and reinvest in their farms by purchasing fertilizer, better quality seed and basic equipment.

Food security

Food security is defined at the WFS 1996 as: Access by all people at all times to the food needed for an active and healthy life. The three key ideas underlying this definition are: the adequacy of food availability; the adequacy of food access, i.e. the ability of the individual to acquire sufficient food; and the utilization of food i.e. equal access to food having nutritional balance by all members in households, particularly in poor households.

Developed countries produce 43 percent or so of cereals while their population is 22 percent or so of the world population. Food insecurity is endemic in the low income food deficit countries (LIFDC) in Africa and Asia. The LIFDCs spend more than 50 percent of their import bills on cereals. Available information suggests that among the LIFDCs, Asian share is decreasing while African share is increasing.

Availability of food grains or even total food does not in itself guarantee food availability for households or individuals. Food insecurity is endemic in poor households in LIFDCs as well as developing

countries due to income poverty i.e. lack of purchasing power of the poor households to procure required food from the market at the ruling prices.

There are pockets of food insecurity in even the richest countries because food security at the national level does not mean that every household in the country is food secure. The meshes of the safety net may be too large to prevent some individuals and specific groups of individuals from falling through and government policies in several industrialized countries have tended recently to increase the mesh size. A proportion of the population can be living in absolute, not just relative, poverty.

Bangladesh situation

Since pre-historic days, agriculture has been the main source of livelihood for the vast majority of the people of the geographical area that now constitutes the sovereign Bangladesh. Agriculture has continued to be the lifeline of the economy the country. Farmers themselves are the biggest investors in agriculture. Through their investment and hard labour, they have, in the past thirty plus years, more than doubled the production of food grains (rice and wheat) to feed the nation.

Admittedly, the successive governments adopted policies for promotion and development of

agriculture; but the ground realities are that investment to agriculture in the form of subsidy, support services like supplying fertilizer, diesel and electricity for producing agricultural crops, in particular, high yielding varieties (HYV) boro and aman rice, are quite insufficient for this vital sector of the economy. Farmers had to even give their lives for demanding electricity to irrigate their boro crops.

It is a fact that the government has increased subsidy to agriculture sector to some extent in the recent years. Subsidy to agriculture was increased to Tk 1,100 crore in 2005-06 from Tk 300 crore in 2003-04. In 2006-07, subsidy to agriculture stands at Tk 1200 crore i.e. addition of Tk 100 crore only compared to last year. This is quite insufficient when high prices of agricultural equipment, fertilizer, diesel, electricity, etc are taken into consideration. Access to agricultural credit from the financial institutions is cumbersome.

The need for agricultural research can hardly be over-emphasized. The development of HYV rice by our agricultural scientists has been instrumental in the increase of rice production. But our success in other varieties of crops is insignificant. Paucity of funds has been primarily responsible for this. So far, allocations of funds for agricultural research have been 0.5 percent of agricultural GDP against the internationally recommended allocation of at least 1.0 percent of agricultural GDP.

"Despite significant progress in domestic food grain production, poverty and food insecurity problems are massive in the country. Approximately half of the population lacks resources to acquire enough food and consequently remain below the poverty line," says the much-talked-about PRSP. A recent study by the BIDS in

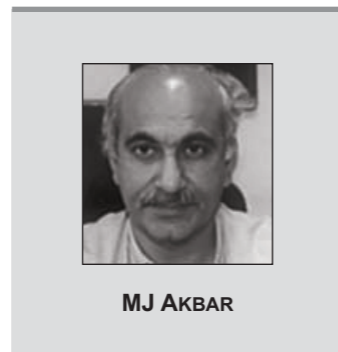
cooperation with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre of the UK reveals that 24 percent population of Bangladesh live in extreme poverty. These are the people who are called ultra-poor, and according Household Income \$ Expenditure Survey (HIES)-2000 of the BBS, these wretched people stood at 20 percent of total population in the year 2000.

The important causes for food insecurity in about "half of the households" in the country are: (i) the rate of increase in annual food grain production is below the annual growth rate of population; (ii) availability of other varieties of food such as fish, livestock and poultry, vegetables, etc is much below the demand; (iii) lack of purchasing power of poor households to have access to required food; (iv) incapability of the ultra-poor comprising the destitute, sick, old and infirm to participate in income generating opportunities; (v) inadequate food safety net programs; (vi) irrationality in intra-house food allocation; (vii) dietary imbalance; and (viii) storage, processing and cooking practices affecting food utilization.

To conclude, food is the most important of all the basic necessities of life, and it is agriculture that produces food. So, there is need for investment in agriculture globally, especially in the least developed and developing countries, for producing more food to drastically reduce malnourishment and hunger globally. Millennium development goals (MDG) include, among others, reducing by half the proportion of population who suffer from hunger by 2015. The observance of the World Food Day will be meaningful if the stated objectives can be achieved.

M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary, Ministry of Food.

Mushroom Rice



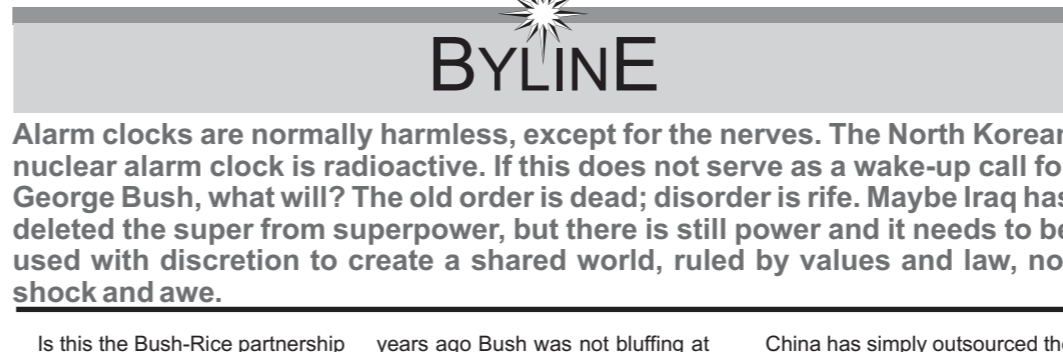
MJ AKBAR

CURIOSITY may be as injurious to the health of columnists as it is to cats, but there is much to be curious about these days.

Kim Jong Il, the not-so-mad dictator of North Korea, tests a nuclear device, his officials immediately begin threatening to use it, and President George W Bush, the famed seeker of weapons of mass destruction, says that America's "commander in chief must try all diplomatic measures before we commit our military."

Is this the same man who refused to give the United Nations time for more diplomacy, the weapons inspectors time for more probing, and started a catastrophic war that has taken more than half a million lives in search of weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein never had?

Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, who foresaw mushroom clouds in Iraq, grits her teeth in her best schoolmistress manner and threatens severe sanctions against North Korea. Is this the same administration that spat on sanctions as a pathetic UN-type wobbly-knee answer to dictators and demons?



Alarm clocks are normally harmless, except for the nerves. The North Korean nuclear alarm clock is radioactive. If this does not serve as a wake-up call for George Bush, what will? The old order is dead; disorder is rife. Maybe Iraq has deleted the super from superpower, but there is still power and it needs to be used with discretion to create a shared world, ruled by values and law, not shock and awe.

Is this the Bush-Rice partnership that keeps threatening to go to war against Iran for enriching uranium -- and urging multilateral talks when North Korea becomes a nuclear military power? Or shall we put it another way: in Bush's mind, nuclear North Korea can be trusted because it is not a Muslim country and Iraq and Iran could not be and cannot be trusted because they are Muslim nations?

Just asking, friends, just asking. I told you curiosity could be injurious to a columnist's health.

It is clearly fine to be fascist in George Bush's worldview, even a nuclear fascist. What you cannot afford to be, as long as Bush is on fire, is an "Islamic fascist."

Bush had a chance to act militarily against North Korea, in 2003, when Kim Jong Il withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and announced that it would go ahead with its weapons program. A strike might have been successful because it was believed that all of North Korea's nuclear weapons were in one known location. What did George Bush do?

He invaded Iraq instead.

There is a simple explanation for what North Korea has done. It has called George Bush's bluff. Three

years ago Bush was not bluffing at the nuclear poker game. He had the strongest hand in the world, by all rules of this game an almost invincible hand. The United States had unquestioned military supremacy, in addition to the most powerful economy. One mistake, wrought by hubris, the stamp of one defect, has shackled American military ability and released competing powers to pursue paths that are alternative, if not hostile, to America's.

It is foolish to think that North Korea was acting, or could have acted, alone. North Korea is a helpless non-entity without China's support. China has been brilliant in the pursuit of its geo-political interests while Bush rushed into Mission Self-Destruct. Look at the map of Asia. The two nations that can challenge China's hegemony in Asia are Japan and India. China's formal relations with both are worthy of a place in the United Nations statute book. It talks trade and peace with India, raising border problems only when it seems that a problem-free relationship is too artificial a construct. Similarly, it talks trade and peace with Japan, dusting out memories of World War II only when it seems that a problem-free relationship is ahistorical.

China has simply outsourced the military confrontation with India and Japan to Pakistan and North Korea. Both are low-cost operations for China, with huge collateral benefits in terms of tying down India and Japan. Pakistan's nuclear program in any case had to mirror India, for reasons that China did not instigate. Neither Pakistan's nuclear capability nor North Korea's is a threat to anyone but China's competitors, or past and potential adversaries. With North Korea aiming nuclear weapons at Japan's head, the pieces on China's chess set are in superb place.

The shadow of Iraq has travelled a long way while America is helplessly immobile.

Who has done the most recent expose of the Blair-Bush fiasco in Iraq? Step forward, General Sir Richard Dannatt, serving chief of the British army. He does not pretend to give advice to his allies, the Americans, but he is clear that British troops, now down to around 7,000, should leave "sometime soon" because "our presence exacerbates the security problems."

In other words, British and American troops are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Sir Richard has provided an honest

explanation of their dilemma, and one that should be read in every nook and corner of Washington. He says: "We are in a Muslim country and Muslims' views of foreigners in their country are quite clear. As a foreigner, you can be welcomed by being invited into a country, but we weren't invited, certainly by those in Iraq at the time. Let's face it. The military campaign we fought in 2003 effectively kicked the door in."

No Iraqi could have put it better.

Another question, out of that itchy curiosity. Why hasn't Sir Richard been court-martialled? He is a serving officer. He has been put in charge of a virulent war by an elected government. His views on the war are totally different from his prime minister, Tony Blair. Why doesn't Blair stop him or sack him? Or is it that General Dannatt has been told to prepare the ground for an imminent decision by seeding the public discourse with thought of departure? Just asking.

The price of departure will be much, much higher than the cost of arrival. What the Iraqis have suffered because of Bush-and-Blair's malign war is already in the realms of the unbelievable.

Johns Hopkins is not a madrasa. It is one of the most respected universities in America, based in Washington. Bloomberg is not an "Islamic fascist;" he is the billionaire mayor of New York who is thinking of using his billions to attempt a run at the White House in 2008. A study by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health estimates that over 600,000 Iraqis have died of violence between March 2003 and July 2006. That makes it 15,000 a month, or 500 a day.

There is no media covering this horrendous tragedy. Those rabid dogs of war extend far beyond soldiers in uniform. Chaos has become the playground of violent passions escalating in a poisonous spiral. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are living in neighbouring countries. Iraq is emptying out of people, as despair overwhelms people who had no control over the decisions that have destroyed their existence.

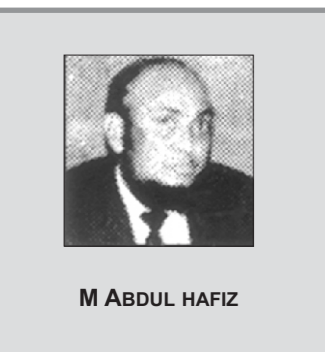
One is often asked: What will happen if the Anglo-American occupation forces leave Iraq? I can imagine many scenarios, none of them pleasant in the immediate aftermath. But what could be worse than what is happening now?

When the British left India, between two and three million Indians died in a frenzy of unparalleled ferocity for this subcontinent. This did not mean that either Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh wanted the British back. We picked up our lives from the desolation of that moment, and slowly moved on. To withdraw from Iraq does not mean that America needs to withdraw from the world; in fact, quite the opposite. It is Iraq that has isolated America from the world.

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MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Blair's woes



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AT the G-8 Summit in St Petersburg early last month, British Prime Minister Tony Blair almost begged George W Bush to authorize him to act as a scout for Condoleezza Rice in the context of the Middle East crisis, following the aftermath of the Lebanese war.

Presumably with that authorization, Tony Blair flew to the region where Israel and the occupied territories of the Palestinians must have appeared to him like a haven of tranquility after a tumultuous week in British politics, when his reluctant commitment to finally quit



Blair, in the meantime, is desperate to leave behind a legacy that won't be viewed with total disdain by succeeding generations. That, too, looks unlikely. His disgraceful attachment to neo-Thatcherism has been one of the more unappealing features of his squalid rule but even that will be overshadowed by his contributions to the international carnage of the past years. He will be remembered more as a collaborator with arguably the most obnoxious US administration in living memory. His political epitaph may as well read: "Here lies Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, sidekick to Dubya, Murdoch's minion, and Maggie's heir."

his job was extracted by a rebellious Labour Party.

While his announcement already unleashed a barrage of vitriol in the bitter battle between the dwindling rank of Blair loyalists and those convinced that he must pack up immediately if the party was to win the next general election, he relished the opportunity to appear statesman-like in war-torn west Asia.

The British leader has long favoured the idea of playing some

role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which can arguably be construed as a commendable impulse, regardless of whether or not it is related to any sense of Britain's responsibility for the mess in that part of the world.

Unfortunately, Tony Blair quickly lost such credibility once he opted for complete subservience to the wishes of the United States whose present administration has not shown even a semblance of any balance in its approach to the

whole crisis.

However, consequent to Blair's self-imposed role as a shuttle diplomat -- in separate statements Mahmood Abbas, the Palestinian Authority (PA) president and Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, announced that they were prepared to meet each other unconditionally. It's hard to understand though, how this relatively minor mutual concession required the British prime minister's mediatory presence. But the observers view it

more as a pre-arranged Blair-booster.

Tony Blair, during his visit, also expressed support for the concept of a Hamas-led government of national unit without meeting, however, any one of the Hamas leadership and insisted that the Islamist outfit recognise Israel and renounce violence although any renunciation of violence must be reciprocal. Of course, neither the besieged PA nor the beleaguered Israeli government considers itself under any obligation to heed the head of the government of a small European island that continues to harbour delusions about its significance on the international stage on account of its past as a formidable colonial power.

But then, look also at the partisan character of his mediatory role, if any! He met the families of the three Israeli soldiers captured in Gaza and Lebanon but failed to extend the similar courtesy to the Palestinians, thousands of whom are in Israeli custody. No wonder, prior to Blair's visit hundreds of Palestinians put their names to a newspaper advertisement declar-

ing Blair persona non grata and advising him to stay away. "He is coming here in order to wash his hands that are dripping with Lebanese blood with Palestinian water," read the graffiti.

It did not, however, deter the British leader who desperately needed a break from Britain where he came within hair's breadth of being declared persona non grata by none other than his own Labour Party. The revolt within the party may be, to an extent, catalysed by unfulfilled ambition of Gordon Brown, Blair's chancellor of the exchequer, with whom the prime minister had an undocumented power sharing agreement, although the albatross around Blair's neck has actually been Iraq.

Notwithstanding his youthful and dynamic style of leadership winning an unprecedented three terms in office, it was Blair's unswerving support to Bush's hawkish stand on Iraq invasion and the war's disastrous consequence that have led to the current disillusionment with Blair.

His paranoid insistence that Iraq possessed WMD and posed a

threat to the West turned out to be a ruse intentionally created to justify the invasion. It couldn't but fuel anger and revulsion in the ranks of his left of centre party on a massive scale. Blair was an overly enthusiastic participant in the myriad deceptions that were employed to build a case for a predetermined invasion. He was justifiably ridiculed for his surreal claim that last year's nasty acts of terrorism in London were unrelated to the situation in Iraq.

Much of the British public has steadily become sceptical about the Iraq misadventure and a substantial section of the parliamentary Labour Party harboured strong doubts about the morality and legality of the Anglo-American intervention. Yet some Labour MPs continued to support Blair out of expediency -- thinking him to be a vote winner.

That's no longer the case. The party's majority in the House of Commons was sharply slashed last year. Since then it's showing in the opinion polls and the opposition Conservatives are waiting in wings with David Cameron, a young and

charismatic leader, at the helm. Britons are yearning for a change and a transition from Blair to Brown isn't what they have in mind. It's not surprising that the Labour, as a last ditch effort for survival, wants to dump Blair before it's too late.

Blair, in the meantime, is desperate to leave behind a legacy that won't be viewed with total disdain by succeeding generations. That, too, looks unlikely. His disgraceful attachment to neo-Thatcherism has been one of the more unappealing features of his squalid rule but even that will be overshadowed by his contributions to the international carnage of the past years.

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Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.