

Profit and loss



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THE two major political parties are perhaps shaking off their battle fatigue and counting their respective gains and losses due to the turmoil that resulted from their positions on the chief of the caretaker government (CTG), as all political parties must do keeping in mind the forthcoming elections.

But if any one feels inclined to sit back and bask in glory for the notional political victory, they must not forget that victory, if any, has been at the cost of the nation. It has been a Pyrrhic victory at best. It would be odious for political parties to think in terms of gains and advantages accrued against losses, seeing in terms of according political space to the opponent, that is achieved through the miseries caused to the people whose very welfare their policies are supposed to serve.

Although some may feel that we are yet to see the final outcome of the drama that has been staged by

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

We have suffered great losses in recent times. The best course for all would be to participate in the political process. For the CTG, its most important task would be to present us with a free and fair election. That might necessitate effecting important and quick changes in the administration and the Election Commission, to restore the confidence of the opposition as well as of the people in the system.

the two major parties, that the final act is yet to be played out, most are of the view that the AL's stand on the president's assumption of the office of the caretaker head has been a strategic setback for the party.

However, not all are willing to see it in such a cut and thrust manner, of irremediable loss to the AL. In fact, for the AL, not rejecting outright Mr Iajuddin's assumption of the caretaker head has been the most pragmatic action it could have taken. Also, that it has decided to go along with the composition of the council of advisors, which it, nonetheless, feels lean heavily towards the past incumbent, demonstrates a very realistic approach to the issue.

It is, if one can equate with a military manoeuvre, a tactical readjustment in order to gain future strategic advantage. And whatever may have compelled the AL to assume that posture, it must not overlook the fact that it has gone down very well with the public, most of whom failed to see the

logic of violence its program of action generated.

It may be premature at this moment to assess the outcome of the AL's position on KM Hasan. But one would like to ask whether the AL thought that its main rival would accede ground on this issue without getting some political mileage out of a situation in which they appeared to be in the driving seat from the beginning.

If the AL had thought that the BNP would not give in to their demands without a fight, it was a fight that was best fought not on the streets all over the country, at the cost of great many lives and national and private property. It was indeed foolhardy to believe that force, not logic, would decide the issue.

It has perhaps left the AL wondering whether the final solution is not the worst of the two bad options, and whether they would have opted for KM Hasan, a man with BNP link of 20 years ago in place of Mr Iajuddin, whose umbil-

ical is still attached to the BNP, had they known it was coming. Under the circumstances, the AL's best course of action would be to continue to assess the situation while at the same time not to refrain from engaging the president as the chief of the caretaker government.

AL's violent outburst has been dysfunctional and the public response to its siege program has put it on its back foot. What has been very damaging is stopping the operation of the Chittagong port that has, according to some well informed sources, caused a daily loss of Tk 200 crores to the garment sector alone.

It is time for all right thinking person to consider whether our only surface lifeline to the outside world should not be brought under some special arrangement that would free it from influence of political programs. We cannot afford to be laid siege to from within.

A city mayor holding hostage a vital installation, as was the case of the Chittagong port, is unaccept-

able. What if tomorrow, the mayor of Dhaka announces that the Zia International Airport would be made to stop work and nothing will be allowed to operate from there, in support of his party program?

The BNP cannot escape its share of responsibility of the political violence and death and destruction either. It in the end had to back-track on KM Hasan. Softening of its stand earlier might have averted the bloodshed. Their position demonstrates how far a party is willing to go to achieve its political ends. It has exposed the wily tendency of the party to cling on to power at any cost with a steadfastness that has bordered on Taurean obstinacy.

The redeeming feature amidst the chaos is the induction of council of advisors who were sworn in on Tuesday. One hopes that this would ensure the complete mechanism of the interim government to be now firmly in place and they will set themselves to guaranteeing a free and fair election.

But it is hard not to dwell on the impact of the recent development on the concept of the CTG. It is difficult to disagree with those who feel that we have all but seen the end of this arrangement, an arrangement necessitated by the very basic character of our politics, mutual distrust among the political parties, and since the idea was to ensure a free and fair election, which the incumbent party could

not be trusted to organise, a non-party arrangement was put in place. This too has been made a debatable concept with disagreements over who merits heading the CTG.

Prospects of dispute on this count in the future have been made acute by the KM Hasan episode initiated by the BNP. In any case the idea of "non-party" has become a mere euphemism, and to call it so is a mockery.

To start with, the president seeking suggestions (or nominees) from political parties defeats the very spirit of the idea of a non-party caretaker government. On would have thought that it would be possible to select ten persons of repute without falling back on the suggestion of the parties. That is not to suggest, however, that party nominees would not be able to dispense their responsibilities in a neutral manner.

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Advisors take oath

Live up to people's expectations

WITH the 10 advisors of the caretaker government headed by President Iajuddin Ahmed taking oath, a solid step has been taken towards resolution of the on-going political crisis. We congratulate the advisors on their having assumed the great responsibility of steering the nation out of the doldrums that it found itself in, when a near stalemate was created in the political arena.

The advisors are no doubt aware of the fact that the whole nation is expecting them to demonstrate unquestionable neutrality and unflinching commitment to their job. Whatever might be their backgrounds or political inclinations, they have to be guided by their conscience and attain the crucially important goal of delivering a free and fair election. That's what people are looking forward to, and only that can end the political tumult, which has been so costly in terms of men and material.

The advisors are well-established professionals in their respective fields having a wealth of experience. And they have an overall acceptance, which should inspire them to stay above any kind of controversy. It is reassuring to learn that some of the advisors have expressed their firm desire to render the service that the country needs at this point of time.

However, all of them do not have the requisite administrative background for handling the complex problems that will arise while they perform their duties. Matters have really been made worse by the politicisation of the bureaucracy, which inevitably led to the creation of a group of beneficiaries loyal to the immediate past government, while the non-conformists remained on the sidelines. This is a potentially dangerous situation that will require very efficient handling on the part of the advisors. The ethos of strict adherence to rules and regulations must be revived to restore the neutral character of the bureaucracy.

The political parties do have a role in creating the situation where the caretaker government will be able to live up to people's expectations. They must let it work, reposing at least a modicum of confidence in it. Give it a chance to deliver.

Media must be treated better

It is the principal instrument for public information and awareness

IT is not right to bar journalists from seeking information. That is what the new home secretary's recent order would mean by virtually putting the secretariat out-of-bounds to the journalists after office hours.

We have witnessed with concern that since the last several days the media representatives have been confronted with very adverse situation on several occasions when they wanted to collect information with regard to the induction of the Chief of the Caretaker Government (CTG) and the time of swearing-in of his advisors. The Bangabhaban was not forthcoming either and any statement that was made was in front of selected TV camera only where no reporter was allowed in, and no questions were entertained. The reporters were made to wait outside hours together without any information whatsoever. This was indeed absurd, particularly when the entire nation was eagerly and anxiously waiting to hear and see the unfolding of events.

We fail to understand as to why it has to be this way. It must be pointed out that the Bangabhaban today is not what it was until two days ago. It is now the center of the country's administrative and executive actions, and focus of everyone's attention. It is all the more reason that the media personnel should have been allowed to enter the premises and carry on with their professional obligations without any undue hindrance.

There is no denying the fact that of late there exists a kind of stress between the community of journalists and the people in the Administration. It is our belief that given an all round change of attitude in the right direction on the part of the Administration the gap could easily be bridged and what could be a better time than now.

It is also important to realize that the media is the only link between the caretaker government and the people and it should be utilised appropriately to give wide coverage of the CTG's plans and actions. This will not only add to the image of the CTG, it will also add to its credibility, which is so very important. We suggest the PR section in the Bangabhaban be geared up to bring in more efficiency and dynamism in handling the press.

Our suggestion to the current administration is, treat the media as an ally not a foe.

Nothing this time



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE crunch talks, in Geneva on October 28 and 29, between the government and the Tamil militants to resolve the civil war in Sri Lanka failed to produce any tangible results, but the very contact may improve the overall political climate in the island state.

The two sides were unable to reach an agreement on the next round of talks as the rebels appeared lukewarm on the dates, complaining of hardly any progress in the two-day negotiations. However, Norwegian mediators expressed the hope that the discussions will help better the government-Tamil relationship, at least to some extent, since both have now come under intense pressure to honour the ceasefire as far as possible.

The government side feels that the talks were not fully without results, and urged the rebels to soften their stance in a bid to find a negotiated settlement, even though the task is difficult, and very complicated. In essence, the much vaunted discussions have not broken new ground, but may have removed some acrimony, although it is somewhat early to say how the two sides will behave following the talks.

MATTERS AROUND US

The scenario, as such, is evidently not encouraging. But accusations and counter-accusations are part of the game in this situation. While efforts were still continuing for fixing dates for the next round of talks, in either mid or late November, it is possible that fighting in Sri Lanka may lessen because of a fresh dialogue, although cessation of hostilities seems highly unlikely. At least honouring the truce could be a great leap forward towards peace under the present difficult situation. Failing to do this obviously means that the situation will further nosedive.

The focus of the Sri Lankan imbroglio was riveted to the crucial talks which had been made possible by long and painstaking efforts by the Norwegian government, when recent weeks witnessed fierce fighting. The talks took place when the two sides were launching bigger attacks, with the government accusing the Tigers of "aiming to bully the government ahead of parleys," while the rebels say that the offensive is coming from the other side.

In any case, the talks once again offered an opportunity for a cessation of hostilities through discussions, and the two sides met after a long gap. The outcome of the talks may not be called an outright success, as no progress at all was possible on the first day and the second day saw some kind of softening of the positions, although concrete gains are not discernible. However, the mediators believe that the talks have not been that bad under the difficult conditions.

Unfortunately, the Lankan imbroglio took a turn for the worse in recent times as fighting grew in intensity, with both sides demonstrating scant respect for the ceasefire, which still remains on paper. The country witnessed the worst ever suicide attack on

October 16 when Tamil rebels detonated a truck packed with explosives, resulting in a convoy of sailors, killing more than 100 people, and injuring about another 200. The development has angered the government which, however, has expressed its readiness to go ahead with the fresh dialogue with the Tamil militants as decided earlier. But the incident shows the severity of the violence ahead of the talks, and it appeared that both -- the government and the rebels -- were seeking to call the shots to gain an advantage ahead of the dialogue.

The agreement for fresh talks followed tough warnings by the donors and the international community to both, the government and the rebels, to return to the negotiating table, even if the fighting could not be stopped. The Norwegian peace envoy, Jon Hanseer-Bauer, held tough talks with both sides on the need for abandoning the fighting, and resumption of the talks.

Japanese peace envoy, T. Akashi, also spared no efforts to bridge the differences between the two sides. True, they have not been able to resolve the differences much, but resumption of the dialogue has been made possible, which is definitely a big step forward in the present tense conditions and since the talks have been stalled for a pretty long time.

Admittedly, it was the height of folly to expect too much from the "Geneva" round of talks -- let alone a solution. In the several rounds of talks earlier progress was slow, but not meaningless. This time, too, the achievements are not much noticeable in specific terms, but then an improvement in the climate is expected as both sides have made some pledges in that direction.

The fighting was raging even when the talks were going on in Geneva, with both sides employing maximum might in the battlefield. The government swung into the offensive with air, naval and land assaults, with the Tigers depending on their guerrilla tactics while they also have a surprisingly strong naval unit. It is a sad situation for the small, but otherwise prospective, nation which is bearing the brunt of more than a two decade long civil war politically, economically and otherwise.

Many people are fleeing their homes -- some Tamils to India, and some Muslims to safer areas. This is an indication of where the crisis has gone as anxiety heightened, nationally and internationally, about the shape of things to come in the future if hostilities continued with full ferocity. It is against this background that the fresh talks provided some hope that the Sri Lankan scene may change for the better.

In the past such hopes were dashed many a time, and the situation unfortunately went back to square one. The 2002 ceasefire was violated frequently earlier, but the intensity with which both sides have been facing each other for the last several months is a grim reminder of the civil war that persisted in Sri Lanka till a truce was agreed upon. What is more worrying is the ruthlessness that is being witnessed in the fighting as evidenced by the killings on both the sides, and often the helpless victims are civilians. More than 65,000 people have been killed in the conflict so far.

The talks between the government and the Tamil militants resumed in February this year, but whatever optimism the dialogue had generated evaporated in quick time, and things were back to belligerence again. Reverting to the conflict was least expected because of the resumption of the dialogue in Geneva after a long gap, and the assiduously laid ground-work had gone off quite well in the given difficult conditions resulting in a discernible improvement in the situation. But, it was not to be, as obstinacy on the part of both sides was more pronounced.

The pitch of negotiations was further queered by escalating violence. The latest incident by the rebel suicide bombers on the sailors was described as "barbaric" by the government, while the rebels accused the other side of merciless

actions, including aerial bombings on the innocent and the children. Nevertheless, the fresh dialogue was possible because of increasing pressure from home and abroad.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and Tamil supremo Villupillai Prabhakaran demonstrated wisdom by agreeing to resumption of discussions which were seen by many as a litmus test for both, the government and rebels. True, they could not fully seize the opportunity because of the yawning gap in their positions. But one can have some hope that things may improve as a fallout of this new contact.

The chief rebel negotiator, SP Tamilselvan, is not happy about the outcome as he felt that the government has turned down certain demands like re-opening of some roads in the militant stronghold, while government minister, NS de Silva, charged the militants with intransigence. Another Muslim minister, Farial Ashraf, accused the rebels of turning against the minority Muslims.

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At least honouring the truce could be a great leap forward towards peace under the present difficult situation. Failing to do this obviously means that the situation will further nosedive.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

A divided Iraq



HARUN UR RASHID

AS the sectarian violence escalates, it is reported that Shiite politicians last month introduced legislation to divide the country into autonomous regions. Furthermore, Iraqi Kurds in the north no more fly Iraq's flag but their own Kurdish banner on public buildings, the first steps to the disintegration of Iraq.

It is that the legacy the Bush administration wants to leave? It appears to be so.

Despite strong assertion by the US that there is no civil war situation in Iraq, Iraqi politicians know what the situation is. Every day Iraqi people die in sectarian violence.

Following recent violence between government forces and

BOTTOM LINE

It appears that the Bush administration has few answers as violence rages on along sectarian lines in Iraq. Iraq is in a mess, the Bush administration is in trouble, and the US action has resulted in a "Shiite Crescent" from Beirut to Tehran. The Sunni dominated states, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, are worried about the security threat.

the militia of powerful Moqtada al-Sadr, the step suggests a plan to carve the country into three regions -- Kurdish in the north, Sunnis in the middle, and Shiites in the south. Both the north and south regions are oil-rich while the middle is bereft of such resources.

A growing number of Iraq experts believe that disintegration of Iraq is inevitable in the long run, while others say that a confederal Iraq might emerge. The question is whether the Sunnis will accept a confederal country without a share of the oil resources.

Sunnis demand amendment of the new constitution that, in principle, may lead to dissolution of the country, and this was one of the conditions for Sunnis to participate in the election. The

constitution has divided the income from oil-resources between the Kurds and Shiites, while the Sunnis received none. This was the fatal mistake the Bush administration made in new Iraq.

The majority of voters supported the constitution and, in essence, divided Iraq. The major mistake was the American actions after the war, including empowerment of the Shiites at the expense of the Sunni elite. What the US administrator, Paul Bremer, should have done was to convene a conference among all the sects, and to present a plan where all sects, including Sunnis, would form a national government on a consensus basis. But he did not do it at the instance of the Pentagon.

What are the implications of

dissolution of Iraq as a country?

First, one worst-case scenario is that an autonomous Shiite region in the south of Iraq could encourage the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia's north, a significant oil region, to press for autonomy, or in the extreme case, to want to join with their Iraqi brethren to the north. Any unrest in the region will be a blow to global economy.

Second, some strategists say that the dissolution of Iraq will be a great boon for the security of Israel. Zionists, at the beginning of the 20th century, wanted to create many small and unthreatening Arab States. If Iraq's disintegration takes place, their wishes would be fulfilled.

Third, if small states are carved out on the basis of sects the whole

Arab world would be at risk, and a new map of small and weak states would emerge, and the unity in the Arab world would be fragile.

Michael Hudson, a Professor of Arab Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, has reportedly stated that: "What we are seeing now may be signs of things to come, but that was not so much inevitable as it is a result of our action."

It is noted that Senator Joseph Biden (D) of Delaware, seconded by Council on Relations President Emeritus Leslie Gelb, has reportedly called for Iraq to be divided into Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish regions that would provide their own security but share oil revenue, and leave foreign policy to a central government.

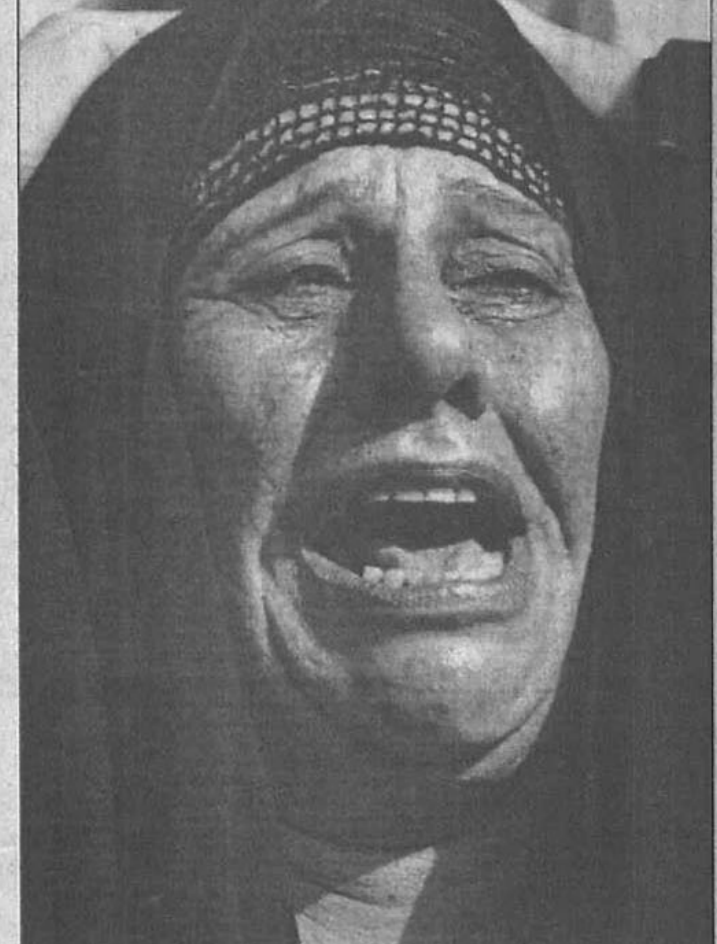
Another plan, from Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution in Washington, reportedly calls for the US to accept that its project for a "multi-ethnic democracy" in Iraq no longer viable. In its place, the Bush administration should consider facilitating voluntary sectarian and ethnic relocation as a means of shortening a long and potentially genocidal civil war.

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as violence rages on along sectarian lines in Iraq. Iraq is in a mess, the Bush administration is in trouble, and the US action has resulted in a "Shiite Crescent" from Beirut to Tehran. The Sunni dominated states, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, are worried about the security threat.

What is damaging for the US is the collapse of trust by other states in the outcome of the Iraqi war. People in many countries trusted the superpower because they believed in the country's good intentions. The use of military power betrayed the trust, and it will be hard to recover.

Internationally, the US is increasingly being seen as an aggressive nation, and the American image as arrogant, incompetent and insensitive is projected in the Middle East. In the name of democracy, freedom, and peace, the actions of the Bush administration have been compared by a French writer to discovering that "a respected uncle has slipped into dementia."



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