LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 6, 2006

Silver lining in the dark clouds

It must not be allowed to disappear

E can perhaps now express our optimism with some delight about a positive outcome of the exercise that the advisers had been untiringly carrying out to see a peaceful denouement to the current political situation.

We commend them for their efforts. The initiative they have taken has been made possible only by the space accorded to them, which the Chief Adviser and the President was so far reluctant to give. We hope the President realises the ability of his cabinet colleagues given freedom and trust. The immediate good result of the advisers' parleys with the two major alliances with the package proposal is the withdrawal of countrywide siege by the AL; we hope the Bangladeshis have seen the last of the siege programmes.

Early indications are that the BNP is quite amenable to the package prescription while the AL is observing as to how far and how quickly the actions contained in the package solutions are put into effect. But so far as we can say, the advisers' options envisaged in the package for resolving the prolonged and damaging political crisis have all but addressed most of the concerns of the AL. Therefore, the focus being on the two important points of the voters list and reliable officials being put at the grassroots levels of the administration, we see no reason why the new formula shall not receive the unequivocal endorsement of the two alliances

And since the clouds of uncertainty is giving way to optimism it is now for the EC to go the whole hog in ensuring a free and fair election. We are happy to see the positive and quick reaction of the acting CEC Justice Mahfuzur Rahman in seeking ways to remove the mistakes in the voter list, quite unlike his predecessor who was not even willing to accept that there were flaws, which needed to be addressed.

We appreciate that making the voter list as near perfect as possible will be a formidable undertaking. But there are ways out that the EC might consider. For one thing there are nongovernmental organisations in Bangladesh with grassroots level linkages that can be utilised to remove most of the anoma-

As for the political parties they must ensure that the silver lining becomes permanent by shunning the path of confrontation and concentrating on the forthcoming elections.

Politics takes its toll

Go for immediate arms recovery

E express our deep concern at the news of fierce gunfight in Moheshkhali between two rival groups belonging to the Awami League and the BNP that left three people dead and 50 injured. The incident took place while the 14-party alliance was enforcing its blockade programme in the area. It is worrisome indeed that such incidences of growing political killings are spreading into the rural areas of the outlying districts that hitherto witnessed comparative calm and a stable environment.

With the election round the corner we simply must deal with such armed violence with strong hand. Amongst the various factors we need to attend to on an urgent basis is to haul up all illegal firearms in the hands of the armed cadres of various political parties. We thus recommend a comprehensive arms recovery drive be undertaken by the administration with immediate effect. We have already lost much valuable time. The recovery plan amongst others should be clear, pragmatic and free from any ambiguities.

In this regard the Caretaker Government's committee has to play the key role ensuring strict compliance. Side by side, assistance on voluntary basis should also be sought from members of the civil society who would more than welcome such drive. On the other hand, as part and parcel of the overall arms recovery, members of the public should also be asked to surrender all licenced firearms in their possession till the election is over. It should be clearly understood that no matter how well a "level playing field" is created through reforming the various electoral processes, guns in the hands of the cadres belonging to various political parties are bound to mar the entire election. Not only that, it is bound to have a direct impact on the voter turn-out at the booths

We are also of the conviction that now is as good a time as any to catch the already listed and known criminals and recover the arms lying in their possession. We feel it should all be quite possible with the kind of authority vested in the Caretaker

Bangabhaban across the years

making of a new dark cloud across the horizon.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

N the morning following the afternoon when the Pakistan army surrendered to the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Command in 1971, a huge crowd of exulting Bengalis chanted Joi Bangla as it tried to make its way into Governor's House. It was not vet called Bangabhaban, but the crowd, among whom was yours truly, felt that it would be quite some experience taking a walk inside a place that had lately come under heavy shelling, forcing the puppet governor installed by the Pakistanis to quit and take refuge in a neutral zone set up inside the Intercontinental Hotel. The guards, all smiling and so very friendly on what would be the first full day of national freedom, told everyone to be patient, said that there were mines inside, and that, once the mines were removed or defused. the place would be ours, the people's. The exuberant men, all drunk with the euphoria of freedom, came away. The country was ours, which simply meant that Governor's House belonged to us too. When the new Bangladesh administration renamed it Bangabhaban, we cheered. It was, truly, a people's republic we were now part of.

It is all part of our history. But when you reflect on everything that has been happening lately inside meetings, the unscheduled arrivals and departures of powerful men and women, the tea served to the two most significant politicians in contemporary Bangladesh -- you cannot but let your mind wander in These days, in the gathering haze of winter, there is an alacrity which defines activity at Bangabhaban. Rare are the times when hope lights up around it; and politics goes round and round the mulberry bush. When you spot the young men and women from the media mulling, at an atrociously big distance from the gates of the palace (no one in that mansion will let them in), over the dreams or the nightmares being shaped anew within Bangabhaban, you look up at the heavens. That faint grey spot could be the

GROUND REALITIES

search of the history, or segments of it. associated with Bangabhaban. No, it is not a matter of how the structure came up. It is, in a large sense, a question of the men and the work they did within its premises. Have these men made us happy? Or did they leave us all wishing that they would do things better? The answers to these queries depend by and large on the quality of the men who have resided in Bangabhaban, beginning in the days when Pakistan was the country we thought was

There were the good, well-

meaning men whose reputations have remained unsullied all these vears. Think of General Azam Khan who, as governor of East Pakistan in the years immediately after the promulgation of martial law in October 1958, earned the trust of Bengalis through the sheer quality of his performance. He was one of the men who had compelled Iskandar Mirza, at gun point, to hand over the presidency to Avub Khan. That was not a bad act on Azam's part, considering the contributions Mirza had made to the web of conspiracy in which Pakistan's politics had become trapped. It was as governor in Dhaka, though, that Azam Khan began to demonstrate the qualities that would soon make Ayub Khan nervous. The governor's comprehension and appreciation of the political and social realities of East Pakistan simply took him closer to the Bengalis he presided over

And that closeness precipitated his fall. He was summarily removed by President Ayub Khan who then placed in Governor's House the extremely uncharismatic Ghulam Faruque. There is nothing in the records to show that Faruque accomplished anything of note to qualify as a man to be remembered by the Bengalis. But it was the man who came after him, the beautifully genuflecting Abdul Monem Khan, a Muslim Leaguer and a thoroughbred Bengali to boot, who would become one of the individuals all too willing to undermine the sanctity of the office he operated in. Governor's House in Monem's time was a hub of constant conspiracy, a long series of it, all aimed at puncturing holes in rising Bengali

nationalistic aspirations.

More loyal to Pakistan than the (West) Pakistanis themselves. Monem Khan made it his life's mission to go after the reputations of such honourable men as Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Awami League leader, warned the governor over and over, would not see the light of day as long as he occupied Governor's House. The big irony is that Mujib was freed and the Agartala conspiracy case was withdrawn on February 22, 1969, more than a month before Monem Khan would be dropped by his president. To this day, anecdotes abound about Monem Khan's incomprehensible fealty to the West Pakistani ruling classes in distant Rawalpindi. In a nutshell, the years that Abdul Monem Khan spent in Governor's House were not edifying ones. He was done away with by the Mukti Bahini in the closing stages of the War of Liberation

One of the finest of men to occupy Bangabhaban (or Governor's House) was Vice Admiral S.M. Ahsan. The difference between him and the others who occupied the place at various points in time was his pretty simple outlook on life. And that consisted of an interplay of decency in behaviour and efficiency in administration. He was part of the Yahya Khan martial law administration. and yet he went out of his way to demonstrate certain moral principles he thought ought to be a basis of political behaviour. He appreciated Bengali aspirations and expected them to be respected and upheld after the general elections of December 1970. Because of his old-fashioned adherence to values, he had little hesitation in throwing away his job as governor in early March 1971 and going back to West Pakistan. He died in London a few years ago.

Now contrast the mess Governor's House became in the times of our very own Bengali. Abdul Mutallib Malek. The man had been an ambassador and a cabinet minister. Respected by everyone who came in contact with him, Malek was a soft-spoken individual. But when he agreed to take over from Tikka Khan as governor

of East Pakistan in September 1971, he sent his earlier reputation down the path to destruction. He was then not his own man, for there was Rao Farman Ali to prioritise things for him. It was on his watch that General Niazi and his men intensified the murder of Bengalis and the rape of Bengali women. Perhaps the only bold act, a self-serving one, A.M. Malek undertook in that dark phase of history was writing out his resignation on the back of a cigarette pack, his hands shaking through the screams made by Indian warplanes flying low over and bombing Governor's House Some of the more hallowed of

moments in the history of Bangabhaban in our times came through the presidency of Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury. The former vice chancellor of Dhaka University was head of state for less than two years, until December 1973, but in that time Bangabhaban once again saw its reputation as a national institution restored. The reputation was further enhanced during the two periods, first as acting president and then as elected president, that Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed served as the symbol of the republic. His honesty was, and is, beyond question. His presidency was a process of a detoxification of the presidential palace. His dealings with people who came calling were not merely above board, but fundamentally and absolutely moral as well.

Contrast the integrity of the Shahabuddin presidency with the venality of the Ershad regime. After nine years of harbouring a condition of political illegitimacy, Bangabhaban went through a cleansing process with the presence in its spaces of President Shahabuddin Ahmed. Indeed, Bangabhaban has so often been pelted with the ugly and the despicable that the story can only go on and on. Think back to the eighty one days, between August 15 and November 6, 1975, in which the

presidential mansion was held hostage by assassins under the patronage of Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed. All manner of conspiracy, every flavour of villainy permeated the corridors of Bangabhaban, typifying as they did the bigger villainy running riot all across the country. Moshtaque's ministers cowered at cabinet meetings at the sight of the guntoting murderer-soldiers. Men like Taheruddin Thakur and Mahbubul Alam Chashi ran the show. A frightened nation watched from the sidelines

The sordid tale appeared to come to an end when a new band of soldiers, more decent and better disciplined, forced Moshtague from his usurped office and sent the assassins into exile. We all thought that the bloodletting of August and November was behind us as Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem took charge on November 6. The next morning, fresh pools of blood were seen flowing in the cantonments as General Zia's lovalists pursued General Khaled Musharraf and the other good men with him to their deaths. For the subsequent five years, Bangabhaban remained in a state of the opaque. The mist would not lift in the few months that President Abdus Sattar inhabited it. And then, of course, there was Ershad.

These days, in the gathering haze of winter, there is an alacrity which defines activity at Bangabhaban. Rare are the times when hope lights up around it; and politics goes round and round the mulberry bush. When you spot the young men and women from the media mulling, at an atrociously big distance from the gates of the palace (no one in that mansion will let them in), over the dreams or the nightmares being shaped anew within Bangabhaban, you look up at the heavens. That faint grey spot could be the making of a new dark cloud across the horizon

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka

Sri Lankan situation nosedives



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

HE South Asian island state of Sri Lanka seems to be inexorably returning to allout civil war as the Tamil rebels have announced scrapping of the peace process and demanded full independence for the Tamils. Their supreme and elusive leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, announced that the 2.5 million Tamils in Sri Lanka were no longer keen on making peace with the government of president Mahinda Rajapakse. This marks a reversal of whatever chances that had existed for a rapprochement between the two sides. Sri Lanka now faces the prospects of fullblown conflict unless something dramatically salvages the situation. Indeed, it is a big setback for the country, and worse times await the nation if it plunges into all out civil war.

Earlier, in Geneva in the last week of October, crunch talks between the government and the

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sink one or two ships in the Straits of Hormuz and block all exports of oil

from the Gulf; and, as it has indicated, Iran can cause a rain of modern

missiles to fall on Israel. That would be no picnic. This is not to say that Iran

can defeat America, Britain and Nato; that is out of the question. But it can

hurt them badly. The weapon of oil is very effective; a closure of the Gulf for

MATTERS AROUND US

Reverting to the demand of independence was not much expected at this stage, but it appears that the rebels have been driven by desperation as their supporters, particularly the cadres, are questioning the very fundamentals of their war. Many are believed to be in favor of a tough stance because they feel that a war in which they are losing men and materials is not worth anything short of independence. They are aware that the task is a very difficult, if not a Herculean, one, but most feel that such losses cannot be accepted for autonomy or any other gains less then their separate identity as a nation. Clearly, Prabhakaran has taken a great risk, as this position will alienate the militants internationally. Probably he is more concerned with the spirit of his

Tamil militants to resolve the civil when the two sides were launching tough, and that is accepting nothwar in Sri Lanka failed to produce any tangible results. The two sides were unable to reach an agreement on the next round of talks. Norwegian mediators had expressed the hope that the discussions would help better the government Tamil relationship, at least to some extent, since both have now come under intense pressure to honor the ceasefire as far as possible. But subsequent developments belied the positive note struck by the mediators, and things are now once again coming back to "Square One".

The solution of the Sri Lankan imbroglio hinged on the crucial talks which were made possible by long and painstaking efforts of the Norwegian government after recent months had witnessed fierce fighting. The talks took place

bigger attacks despite the fact that a formal truce still existed. although only on paper. Now even that ceasefire is in tatters as the Tamil militants have withdrawn from that understanding and vowed to establish an independent

Several rounds of dialogues, following the truce in 2002, had narrowed down the differences between the two sides as both gave concessions. A major outcome of the earlier talks was a significant climb-down on part of the rebels who had agreed to give up the demand for a separate homeland, and were willing to settle for autonomy in the federal structure of Sri Lanka. The fresh announcement by their leader seems to have put at rest that possibility as he is now talking

ing short of independence

Sadly, the Lankan conflict took a turn for the worse in recent times as fighting grew in intensity, with both sides demonstrating scant respect for the ceasefire. The country witnessed the worst ever suicide attack on October 16 when Tamil rebels detonated a truck packed with explosives next to a convoy of sailors, killing more than 100 people and injuring about another 200. The development has angered the government, which swung into all out offensive, using the air force in addition to the army and the navy to confront the rebels.

The fighting intensified with neither side achieving any decisive gain. Fighting was raging, with both sides employing maximum might in the battlefield, even when the talks were going on in Geneva.

This is an indication of where the crisis has gone, as anxiety heightabout the shape of things to come in the future if hostilities continued with full ferocity. The concerns have now further soared after the latest position taken by the militants on the crisis. Reverting to the demand of

independence was not much expected at this stage, but it appears that the rebels have been driven by desperation as their supporters, particularly the cadres, are questioning the very fundamentals of their war. Many are believed to be in favor of a tough stance because they feel that a war in which they are losing men and materials is not worth anything short of independence. They are aware that the task is a very difficult, if not a Herculean, one, but most feel that such losses cannot be accepted for autonomy or any other gains less then their separate identity as a nation. Clearly, Prabhakaran has taken a great risk, as this position will alienate the militants internationally. Probably he is more concerned with the spirit of his cadres.

The United States, peacebroker Norway and Sri Lanka's big and influential neighbor India have not supported the fresh call of independence by the Tamil "Tigers" as they feel that there can be no military solution to the conflict. All are calling for fresh peace efforts and dialogue between the two sides. However, the latest

situation indicates that the Lankan imbroglio is nose-diving, with the grim prospect of more bloodshed and destruction. This will be a bigger catastrophe for the South Asian nation, which has already seen colossal, damages economically and militarily because of the long civil war. The conflict has proved that no side can win the war easily, and both need to be realistic and prudent.

While the rebels must not be carried away by sentiments devoid of realism, the Colombo government should also come forward with such proposals and measures that will help assuage the feelings of the militants and inspire them to shun extreme policies. Now that the rebels have reverted to the demand for independence it will be quite difficult to bring them back to the negotiating table, unless severe pressure and ground realities compel them to go for dialogue. President Rajapakse is also likely to opt for tough position in view of Prabhakaran's announcement. Both parties will be well advised to see "realities" for the sake of their country and people, rather than opting for more bloodshed and destruction. The Sri Lankan situation can still be salvaged, and for this greater wisdom is required on the part of both sides, with the onus largely lying with the govern-

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decline of influence of the only

superpower that is still dominating

the world. The limits of its powers

are now apparent, though its

military sinews are stronger today

than at anytime before. Similarly

the mini-superpower that Israel

was in the region remains as strong

as it ever was, and no comparable

strong Arab state has emerged.

But its ability to go on suppressing

Palestinians and grossly abusing

their human rights, while also

punishing the Hezbollah, is not

likely to last long. Even the Baker

task force on Iraq is set to recom-

mend that America put some

How fares the War on Terror?

Taliban. It is a serious situation for

the Anglo-American leadership that

Nato has not come up to their

expectations, and it is less than

enthusiastic about saving the val-

ues for which the Bush-Blair duo

In Iraq there is a clear and pres-

ent danger that that the state will

soon die. What will replace it may

be, first, a civil war and later three

separate denominational states

with Shias in the south, Sunnis in the

middle and Kurds in the north. Each

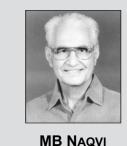
of them will be a messy affair, partic-

ularly the Kurdish state. It has the

potential of engulfing in war all the

surrounding states in which Kurds

started the war.



HANKS to the complexities of the Middle East, and America's choice of starting with Afghanistan and Iraq, the war on terror is not going the way it was expected. This war has some relationship with America's long-range strategic purposes as well as. possibly, with the 9/11 incident. If the war has not proceeded according to Anglo-American expectations, new factors are responsible that were

As it is, the Anglo-Americans have been caught in a quagmire in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It is hard to say which of the two countries is more significant for the Americans. Although the statement attributed to Pakistan's foreign minister has been denied the fact remains that what

has been denied reflected reality: live, viz. Iran, Turkey, Syria and as without Nato agreeing with and far as parts of former Soviet Union. acting on Pakistan's advice it will lose in Afghanistan -- that, too, to the

The Shia state-to-be is the most feared outcome: apart from the determined opposition by al-Qaeda and Saudi Arabia on sectarian grounds, it may signal a much larger war. Shia minorities in most Arab states and Sheikhdoms might rise in revolt against their potentates. Some Arab states like Lebanon and Bahrain have suppressed Shia majorities with non-Shia rulers. This was a little discussed subject earlier. But now, after the recent Lebanon war and the start of civil war in Iraq, it has become a matter of life and death for both sects. Indeed this had better be avoided at all costs.

The Sunni state would require a great deal of understanding and aid from the Shia and Kurd states

some months can cause immense harm to the world economy. because the latter two have oil while the middle desert does not have any. Moreover, the Sunnis have traditionally been the dominant community that has kept the Shia majority as more or less secondclass citizens. The establishment of the Baathist regime in the 1960s did provide relief to the Shias, as it was a secular state. But it did not alter the basis of the society, and it largely depended on Saddam Hussain's tribe for really sensitive jobs. True, secularism of the Baathists was genuine enough; there were Shia generals and, of course, the bulk of the Iragi Army was Shia. Irag fought an eight year war against Shia Iran without its Shia soldiers deserting. But on present indications the political intervention of the Saudi

government into Iraq's affairs carries the danger of a fierce Iran-Arab

These are not the only complications for Anglo-American designs. There is the hardy perennial issue of Palestine. There is wide recognition that unless the Arab-Israeli contradiction within Palestine is resolved, no Arab state can settle down to peaceful pursuits. The kind of atrocities that the Israelis are committing daily are sure to ignite an even larger war with Palestinians, to begin with, and there may also be one in Lebanon. Lebanon is now a powder keg where things are moving in an ugly direction. The recent murder of Pierre Gemayel the famous Maronite leader, and the Hezbollah demonstrations may engulf the country in a civil war once again, and may possibly result in the intervention of Syria, which would bring on a larger war. Neither is the Palestinian issue any nearer to a solution, despite the exertions of US Secretary of State Condeleeza Rice, nor was President Bush able to prevail over Nato heads of governments regarding their more enthusiastic participation in

Establishing a Shia state would be signal to Saudi Arabia that the ultimate change is upon them. The Iraqi civil war may then merge with the Iran-Saudi war, if the western powers would let the "natives" go on fighting themselves. The consequences of such a war are incalcula-

Independently of these troubles, there is the looming crisis over Iran. Somehow the American establishment is hell-bent on destroying Iran's nuclear installations; so is Israel. The threat of war against Iran is serious, and apparently not too distant. But Iran is a different kettle of fish from other Arab states. Because of its size and resources it will not be a pushover. Iran's military capabilities, recently demonstrated, may be fearsome for the American Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Fleets, should they be in the Persian Gulf. Iran has three options that would seriously hurt others.

Whatever else Iran can possibly do, it can surely stop export of oil; it can sink one or two ships in the Straits of Hormuz and block all exports of oil from the Gulf; and, as it has indicated, Iran can cause a rain of modern missiles to fall on Israel. That would be no picnic. This is not to say that Iran can defeat America. Britain and Nato: that is out of the question. But it can hurt them badly. The weapon of oil is very effective; a closure of the Gulf for some months

can cause immense harm to the

What has happened during the last four years? The awe of Israeli, and even of American military strength, has distinctly diminished. The suicide bombers, and the fanaticism to fight fiercely, is a new factor for the Anglo-Americans in the Middle East. Israel, by not being able to win a clear victory in Lebanon, has actually lost that war. It will think many times before it undertakes another military operation against Hezbollah in Lebanon, let alone Iran. The US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has shown that a plenitude of military strength does not guarantee political gains. They can kill a lot of people, but cannot set up effective governments that work. So long as Anglo-American forces are in Iraq and Afghanistan no one can predict an orderly transition to new states to replace the dying ones. It is difficult to imagine that America will undertake a war in Iran, no matter how badly it wants to cripple the Iranian nuclear programme. Whether Israel actually translates its threats into action against Iran is altogether hypothetical. The kind of riposte that ran can make is likely to deter the Israelis, rather than embolden them.

The world is now witnessing a

distance between itself and the Israelis by forcing Israel to make serious political concessions on Palestine for good American reasons. This is something new: the political advantages that superior military strength usually ensured are subject to diminishing returns. When ordinary people become fired with some vision, relevant or otherwise, old assumptions must change

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