

BACK FROM THE WAR ZONE

Iraqis Trying to Keep Their Chins Up

by Irtiza Nasim Ali
Special to the Star

THE Iraqis were apparently preparing for the war. As the 15 January deadline ticked on, there was anticipation, but no sense of an impending danger. Life went on as usual. Not many people left Baghdad of 3.5 million population to avoid the imminent doom. Its sprawling night clubs and bars were wide open at every street corners.

The capital of Iraq, by night, was reminiscent of any wealthy European city. Drinks were in abundance at the night clubs with men and women engaged in merry making seemingly unconcerned about the war that would be. Undeterred by the deadline, the crisis did not prevent the Iraqis from even tying the nuptial bonds. I was present on one such occasion in a posh hotel a couple of days before the deadline. One of the guests said: "We know that we are sitting on an active volcano which may erupt any moment but then even life should continue." A few days earlier, the Iraqis attended the annual Army Day celebration on 7 January. All the hotels and restaurants were jam-packed with soldiers, their wives and girlfriends driving and dancing. "We can dance with a bullet in our leg" said an army officer. At the party and sometimes at discotheques and night clubs women outnumbered men by 2 to 1. A fair ra-

to considering the eight years of war with Iran in which Iraq lost more than a million young men.

Although drinks and locally produced beers were in abundance, the Iraqis were running short of food. Diplomats said they had been "conditioned" by the eight-year-long war with Iran to hoard and live with scarcities. Their shelves were full of electronics, fancy brand-named clothing and watches, all allegedly looted from the stores in the occupied Kuwait, some of them with Kuwaiti price tags still dangling from them.

there was no sign of nervousness among the Iraqis. They seemed to have taken war as part of life. That seemed to be the worst part — the Iraqis learning to live with an unending war.

The panic seemed particularly pronounced among the last remaining members of the expatriate community and the diplomatic corps. Overnight a

walls. The American flag was brought down from atop the building.

"This is the beginning. thousands of American flags will come down throughout the world and victory will be ours," said an Iraqi Information Ministry official. Saddam and his lieutenants asserted whichever way the map of the region looks after the sand set-

teally said, "you know why". The cost of living in Iraq has increased manifold. I found a professor of a Baghdad college driving a taxi to augment his income to cope with the rising price index. He has to work for 18 hours a day to earn livelihood for his nine-member family.

The professor, who was used to a modest living with his college income, indicated to the galloping price index, saying the price of baby milk shot up from one Dinar a tin to 12 Dinars. The rising cost of essential commodities ranges from 10 to 100 times of what

fellows Iraqis. But with foreigners they sometimes voice their thoughts. One thing was evident from their conversations that the majority population fears and despises the present dictatorship. Saddam's totalitarian rule and the harsh penalties meted out to any manifestation of opposition to it have left the Iraqis in a state of resigned acquiescence. This, in contrast, reminds one of the spirited defiance of those who fought so courageously for national liberation and social justice only a few decades ago.

The eight-year-long war with Iran is a bad dream for the Iraqis. Hundreds of cripples of the war walked through the streets of Baghdad but foreign journalists would not be allowed to talk to them. After the war, Saddam built an arch, with two swords held in his (Saddam's) fists, in Baghdad at a cost of Tk. 24.41 crore equivalent. The arms rest on hundreds of helmets of dead Iraqi soldiers and were planned to represent the Iraqi prisoners of war (POWs) killed by the Iraqis. Now, Saddam's administration is desperately wooing Iran and Iraqi officials plead with people not to even mention the story.

The writer is an Assistant Editor of the Dhaka Courier. He has just returned from a trip to Iraq and occupied Kuwait.

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In Iraq, there was also panic buying among the general public. As the hours ticked away towards the deadline, supermarkets were jammed with customers. They scurried between shelves picking up canned food and mineral water cartons. Many of them were stocking up for several weeks. As much in demand as food-stuff were masking tape to insulate windowpanes from the sonic booms of supersonic jets. Similar was the demand for rechargeable batteries, pocket radios and jerry cans. Even as they prepared for the war

dozen embassies had closed down and the others were in the process of locking their gates. Two diplomats and eight other staff of the Bangladesh embassy left for Amman on 13 January. The flights to Amman, as Jordan was the only country which kept its air space open for Iraqi aircraft, were packed.

Moving out also was Joseph Wilson, the American Acting Ambassador, who had claimed only a day earlier that he felt "perfectly safe". So safe that he had not even removed the pictures and paintings from his

ties, he will come out a winner.

President Bush retorted, the war will go ahead whatever be the cost.

But with the economic sanctions sprawling its thaws in the desert the Iraqis were really in trouble. Shortage of food was one consequence. A customs official noted, "You may trust the Iraqis with a chunk of gold but cannot rely on them when it comes to food." On the Iraqi Airways flight, tea was served without sugar. The airhostess apologet-

was before August 2, 1990, when Saddam decided to make Kuwait the 19th province of Iraq. Price of wheat and flour, the Iraqis' staple food, shot up by 100 times and sugar 40 times.

There was, however, no dearth of meat and vegetables.

Frightened as they are by the wrath of Saddam's regime the Iraqis are not free to express their opinion. "Neither do they wilfully remember the ravages of the costly war with Iran," said a diplomat. They avoid political discussions with

Another Grouping?

Although it seems to be Malaysia which has taken an active role in floating the idea for a new regional alliance, called, the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG), the support for the move may be the strongest among countries which are left outside the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Australia would top the list of such enthusiasts, followed by New Zealand, while on the other side of East Asia, we have both Japan and South Korea all ready to come in. At one time or another, during the past two decades, all these countries—and even the United States—had talked about bringing together countries of the Pacific basin within a new framework of co-operation in such areas as trade, commerce and investment.

At this stage, it is hardly possible to answer all the questions about the proposed grouping, not even about its membership. Malaysia which recently sent its energetic Minister for Trade and Industry, Rafidah Aziz on an exploratory mission within the region would obviously seek a consensus about its membership, objective, structure and, most important of all, whether or not the alliance should be concerned about matters of regional security. Again, should the new proposed grouping be an extension of ASEAN or be an entirely new body?

Countries like Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan, would welcome membership of a grouping that strengthens their links with Southeast Asia, although one wonders if Japan needs any additional link or framework to maintain its thrust in the ASEAN region. However, from the point of view of Southeast Asian countries, it may be useful to bring Japan into a collective framework and thus put a curb on her unilateral decision-making process. Finally, what about China? Is she in or out?

Even before all the details of the proposed grouping have been sorted out, the idea of the new alliance may well be attractive to a number of East Asian nations. But how does it look to others in the continent, especially to South Asia. While it is still early to answer this question, some initial misgivings deserve to be aired. It is obvious that the East Asian countries want to increase their collective bargaining power with the forthcoming single integrated European market or perhaps even with Japan assuring it is kept out of the grouping. On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with this approach. However, isn't there a danger that the new proposed grouping may itself become inward looking, setting up new barriers to free trade within the continent? If this comes to be the case, countries in South Asia would certainly look at the new grouping with a lot of uneasiness.

Again, there would be many experts within Southeast Asia who might wonder if EAEG will succeed where ASEAN has failed. For instance, will the new grouping be more action-oriented than the 25-year old alliance? Can it stimulate joint industrial ventures among the countries, whose blueprints have been gathering dust in the ASEAN's secretariat? There are also some vague talks about the new proposed grouping being concerned about regional security. Let us hope that these talks do not lead to a proposal for a military alliance—an anachronism in the present-day world—which provides one last chance to the United States to keep its strong presence in this region.

A Matter of Taste Only?

Photographs of sweethearts were a part of standard war gear for the soldiers that fought the two world wars earlier this century. That continued to be so in the many local wars that followed. The staying power of that particular kind of remembrance is easy to explain. Rahmat, the Kabuliwallah, carried, in the absence of a photograph of his child, the chafy print of his daughter's palm. The psychology is the same.

But time flies and the world changes. So do fads and fashions, obsessions and fixations. In the case of fighting men while the photo stays on, some new items are there. Indicating possibly a change in the soldiers attitude to war. Echoes of Rahmat's treasured palm-print can be found in many a soldier's keeping locks of his children's hair—so reminiscent of the fictionalised father of the great Irenaeus, Gerard who, in Charles Reades' the cloister and the Hearth, keeps hidden close to his bosom a lock from his beloved Margaret's hair, becomes an ascetic guest of clergymen after losing her—his trace to be found only on his death. But the other kind of remembrances found on the American troops in the Gulf speech distinctly of newer kind of taste.

Panties of girl friends back home—what was the name of that perversion? But perhaps they don't anymore call such-like by that old value-loaded word in the world come to be at peace with sodomy and lesbianism ennobled by, to choose from only one world, Rock Hudson and Vanessa Redgrave. And there are teddy bears too adding novelty to the soldier's haversack.

Then comes a disquieting item. The Ace of Spade. Kept up inside the helmet. For what? As a token of every Iraqi soldiers killed by the hero come from across the oceans. James, 24, of Atlanta, has five of them. They are for work, he says. "I am a killer", he proclaims. "We are supposed to tuck those aces behind their ears," he elaborates. In another platoon the privates have a slogan on top of the ace: Died like the pig you are."

Wars cannot be waged without the participants—on both sides—yielding to some degree of psychosis. But to go to one all set to kill personally—and kill persons calling them pigs months before and thousands of miles away from the engagement cannot but be disturbing. Mai Lai was denounced only after it was perpetrated. Here is advance notice of Mai Lai—maybe worse—and no one seems to care. Shall we cry for that old-fashioned word—humanity? Hold it, they say they are fighting a principled and just war—perhaps all for humanity.

Ilegal Drugs Afire In Burma

Min Thu writes from Rangoon

In just nine months, close to US \$2 billion worth of illicit drugs were burned by the government, from February to November last year.

Last Nov. 26 some US \$398.768 million worth of seized drugs—including heroin, opium and hashish—were put to the torch. Just four days earlier, three drug refineries in the jungle worth US \$580 million were also set on fire.

Burma started its latest drug-burning campaign in February. Over US \$18 million worth of seized drugs were publicly destroyed. This was followed by the burning of US \$503.91 million worth of illegal drugs last April.

The biggest haul of US \$580 million followed the "liberation" of Burma's Kokang area from communist rebels who have dominated the area for two decades. Kokang is located in the eastern Shan states bordering China.

Until the Kokanese ejected them in 1989, the communists forced the villagers to cultivate opium. By 1970, opium growing was in full swing.

The lucrative but illicit trade flourished as the Burmese communist Party allowed its troops to engage in

drug refining and trafficking to raise much needed funds. Following their liberation, the Kokanese searched and destroyed the three refineries and four barracks filled with opium, heroin and other chemicals. Destroyed were 110 kilos of

ated development programmes in remote areas, especially border communities where poppy was grown. The government expects that total eradication of poppies and other drugs would be achieved gradually. Burma has spent some US

stock raising were made available to the villagers at half price. Mini-hydroelectric power stations were constructed wherever feasible.

The initiative shown by the newly awakened populace of Kokang was seen as an indica-

Until they were ejected, the communists forced villagers to grow opium

heroin worth about US \$264 million. 147 kilos of morphine worth US \$235 million, and 97.98 kilos of opium worth US \$117.576. Also destroyed were 496 litres of liquid opium, chemicals and paraphernalia.

The recent burnings represented major victories for the Burmese government which has pursued a national drug abuse control campaign since 1974 when a stiff drugs law was enacted.

Burma in recent years has put in place a two-pronged drug control policy, according to police Col. Ngwe See Tun, secretary of the Drug Abuse Control Central Committee.

In addition to law enforcement, the government initi-

ated development programmes in remote areas, especially border communities where poppy was grown. The government expects that total eradication of poppies and other drugs would be achieved gradually. Burma has spent some US

Roads, bridges, schools and hospitals were built while water and electricity were provided. Local people were trained in agriculture and livestock breeding as alternatives to poppy-growing.

The crop substitution has so far covered some 140,000 acres, government officials say. The alternative crops are coffee, tea, oranges, apples, lychees, and rubber.

Seeds and fertilisers were given free. Animals for live-

tion of the success of the border development policy.

Kokang itself has announced the launching of its own six-year plan to control poppy and drugs production in a community where some 115,000 people, about 75 per cent of the total population, were engaged in poppy growing.

Kokang leader Phon Kyarshin, who said there were no morphine nor heroin in his community until the communists introduced them, announced that in the first year of the six-year programme, some 1,500 acres of poppy plantation are expected to be destroyed.

Crop substitution will be

introduced to help 2,800 cultivators who will be affected by the destruction of the poppy plantations spread in 14 villages.

In the programme's second year, another 2,500 acres of poppy plantations are going to be destroyed. Suitable arrangements to help some 6,200 cultivators from 25 villages will be made.

Since Burma launched its drug abuse control drive, some 200,000 acres of poppy plantations have been destroyed.

This prevented the release into the market of an estimated 933 tons of opium. Crop substitution has been initiated in about 140,000 acres.

As a result of Kokang's initiative, the government will make it a model area; Assistance has been promised to ensure the success of its six-year drug control plan.

The recent drug burnings were witnessed not only by national and local Burmese officials but also by representatives of the United Nations and the Drug Enforcement Agency of the United States. Chinese criminal investigation and drug abuse control officials also attended the Kokang burning. —

Depthnews Asia



Help the Korean Thaw

While Cold War frost still chills US diplomacy in Korea, Japan and North Korea have begun breaking the ice. Their first round of talks on normalizing relations ended inconclusively, but North Korea's new flexibility offers promise when talks resume next month.

Washington now needs to follow Tokyo's lead, establishing ties with the North and scaling down its military exercises and nuclear arsenal in Korea.

The Japan-North Korea talks are the latest warming sign in northeast Asian diplomacy. Last September, South Korea opened full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. A month later it signed a commercial treaty with China. Now North Korea is reaching out.

Two differences are holding up ties between Tokyo and Pyongyang. Japan has formally apologized for its brutal colonial domination from 1910 until 1945. But North Korea is seeking \$10 billion in compensation. That would cover both the 35 years of prewar colonial rule and the postwar era. Japan justly maintains that any settlement be limited to the North's damage claims from colonial rule.

A second difference is that Tokyo has gone along with Washington in insisting that Pyongyang open its nuclear facilities to international inspection. Pyongyang signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1985, but it resents having its nuclear facilities singled out while the 40,000 U. S. troops on the Peninsula keep nuclear arms.

Washington could meet Pyongyang's concerns by beginning to withdraw its nuclear weapons. It could also reduce the scale and frequency of military exercises in the area. That would encourage North Korea to negotiate tension-reducing arms curbs with the South.

New flexibility in Pyongyang may make that easier. Earlier, Kim Il Sung said a U. S. withdrawal could be followed by cuts to 100,000 troops on both sides, but Seoul wants confidence building before cuts. Now, however, Mr. Kim no longer insists that U.S. forces

be withdrawn before he negotiates with Seoul. And he is willing to accept confidence-building measures.

The sheer size of forces on both sides (750,000 in the South, a million in the North) is troubling, as is their concentration near the North-South dividing line. These concerns could be eased by cuts in tanks and armored vehicles, limits on military exercises and a hot line. In any case, Washington should want to end this last dangerous vestige of the Cold War.

—The New York Times

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Biman fare

Sir, Recently there was a news item in the papers regarding further increase of fare in the domestic route of Biman. The internal fare is already too high for people of middle class. After the new hike, I am afraid they would hardly use this means of travelling anymore.

With the economy in a state vis-a-vis with the Gulf War, and general recession all around, it is difficult to go through the everyday necessities of life smoothly. There must be some relief instilled by those who can, if possible; and nothing that might act as adversary.

It is true that many do not travel by air. But what happens when there is an emergency?

Will the authorities please see the problem from this angle? Then there may arise the question of subsidy, but why not also austerly.

Rahat Yasmin,
Airport Road, Jessore.

The UN and Iraq

Sir, It is actually a battle between Iraq and UN, even though a number of countries led by the US have been engaged in the Operation Desert Storm. The UN resorted to military capability as an effort to enforce its resolutions ordering Iraq to pull out of Kuwait by January 15, 1991 which Iraq defied.

However, the military actions of the US led multinational forces appear to lack adequate strength to "get Iraq out of Kuwait" within the foreseeable future. In fact, the uncompromising position of Iraq has rather attained appreciable moral supports from Islamic as well as anti-US sentiments worldwide.

From the present development, some queries may provoke an observer's thoughts such as: why the UN did not expel Iraq from the world body in the first place; why the UN did not find a way to resolve the issue with Iraq at a table; why the UN sanctions against Iraq did not

succeed; why the UN did not have an effective alternative to war; why less than a dozen countries have taken part in the direct military manoeuvres of the UN; why these military operations have been commanded from Saudi Arabia only and by the name of Allied Forces instead of UN Force; why other countries including USSR, Germany, Japan and China did not dispatch their troops to comprise the UN Force; what if the use of military power fails to produce desired results; does everything pursued to date uphold the civilized values?

As of now, all the calculations and speculations on when and how Kuwait will be freed remain to be real, since the fate of Kuwait still hangs in balance.

M. Rahman,
Zila School Road, Mymensingh.

Book fair

Sir, It is indeed a very useful endeavour, to have a book fair, every time during the month of February, the month of months to us.

The occasion not only gives a chance to new writers to have their books published, but also gives an opportunity to book lovers to have a glimpse of new books, so many of them together and at a time! We hope that each year,

the fair will continue to be bigger than the previous, and improve qualitatively. Hopefully the number of visitors to the fair is increasing. And I feel there can be more such fairs. Young and old alike would enjoy them.

It has also become a tradition and part of our Ekushey February programmes. This provides a remembrance to the solemn memory of the great language martyrs and unique encouragement to new and young writers and poets.

Shamim Ahmed,
Tangail.

Abdus Salam

Sir, I have gone through your weekly column 'My World' devoted to the memories of late Abdus Salam, a veteran journalist of the subcontinent.

Thanks for unveiling many aspects of his life which were hitherto unknown to many a reader. Late Abdus Salam always tried to show intrepidity in all his actions.

While newspaper is called the mirror of the society, it is, therefore the moral obligation of every journalist to follow the ideals set forth by Mr. Salam. What is obviously necessary is that every journalist should endeavour

to shun the path of petty affiliation for a 'party' of his choice. In this regard, we are very glad to know that late Mr. Salam was head and heart a journalist, not a mentor of any political party.

We feel relieved of a stifling situation after the ouster of Ershad regime. So, the nation has more expectation than before from journalists in the wake of changed circumstances. Hope they would always endeavour to serve the nation with a mighty pen like that of late Abdus Salam. Then alone his soul can rest in peace.

Md. Atiqul Karim
Zigatala, Dhaka.

Digging of roads

Sir, Constructing and paving roads is expensive and time consuming. Why then they persist in digging holes in the middle of the thoroughfares in order to plant posts to erect arches and hang banners, etc.

Digging up functional roads is hardly setting up of good example to the public towards the country's development. Let us innovate some novel ways that might speak more of civic responsibility and serve the purpose not in a lesser degree.

Parveen Rahman
Dhanmondi
Dhaka.