

The Gulf War

A glimmer of hope that millions of people nursed until yesterday has been dashed: War has broken out in the Gulf. While we may share the expectation of President Bush that the war would not last long and cause minimal casualties, no one can predict the course of events. Even the most well-prepared invasion, once launched, develops its own momentum and runs its course under its own logic. This is what happened in Vietnam, Afghanistan and more recently in Panama. Will the Gulf war be an exception?

All wars are different from one another, notwithstanding some common features. But by any standard, the Gulf war is the most extraordinary among all armed conflicts since the Second World War. Never has a single country -- in this case, Iraq -- been the target of such worldwide condemnation, manifested again and again in a series of resolutions approved, often unanimously, by the UN Security Council. What made a major Muslim country like Iraq, which had gained a stature of its own in the Islamic world, invade a small neighbouring country, annex it as its own province, then defy the international opposition to its blatant aggression and set the stage for a war that it said would be catastrophic? Is this madness? Or is there some logic behind these seemingly senseless actions? Did President Saddam Hussein have serious doubts about Mr Bush's will to fight? Again, did the Iraqi leader seriously expect the world to believe that the crisis touched off by his invasion of Kuwait would offer the best chance of forcing Washington to tackle the Palestinian question with a sense of urgency?

The unfolding scenario leading to the US air attacks on Baghdad yesterday had failed to provide clear-cut answers to these questions. This partly explains mounting confusion in many Muslim countries, marked by divergences of views between governments which, by and large, have taken the anti-Iraq position and the man on the street who today sees President Saddam as a hero of the Muslim world who has stood up against the United States and can probably change the map of the Middle East, including that of Israel. At this moment, it is no use blaming the masses for being volatile or emotional, while commanding their governments for adhering to reason, logic and enlightened self-interest by joining the international community against Baghdad. The fact is, the Gulf crisis -- and now the armed conflict -- have become a serious destabilising factor for the entire Islamic world. The longer the crisis continues, the more serious will be the consequences -- political, social and economic -- affecting virtually all small and middle income countries in the Middle East and Asia.

Another danger facing the region and the countries involved in the conflict is possible expansion of the theatre of war. We shudder to think of the threatened use of chemical weapons by Iraq, the bombing of oil fields in Saudi Arabia and U.A.E or of the involvement of Israel in the conflict.

If there is any choice left to the world, it is simply this: The conflict must be brought to an early end.

Indeed, even in the midst of hostilities, we must never lose sight of peace. In its latest resolution on the Gulf crisis, the United Nations called for a peace conference on the Middle East. Now Bangladesh has urged that it should take place immediately. We wholeheartedly support both moves. There is no reason why negotiation cannot take place while the guns are firing, just as we saw during the Vietnam War and other conflicts. War may be the continuation of diplomacy by other means, but we must never give up the other means.

Another Accident

Yet another bus plunged into river on Wednesday. Yet another recurrence. So far the body of a victim has been found; several other passengers remain missing. It was an accident, the latest in the series, if not innumerable in a short time-span. Accidents occur unwarranted and then one is at unawares. But how much, when it is an incidence of the same nature experienced time and again earlier.

This time also the driver lost control of his vehicle, a minibus, while boarding the ferry vessel at Mukhterpur ferryghat near Narayanganj, and the protective railing just could not prevent its fall. The victim, so far found, ironically is the driver himself.

Most of the ferryghats in our country are still only make-shift or improvised arrangements, on the plea, among others, that our rivers change courses so often. However, at such a state the chance of a slip is always there and, in the context, some questions naturally arise: Why don't the drivers check their vehicles regularly? Why aren't all the passengers persuaded out of the vehicle at the time of crossing the river? There are more: Why not the protective railings are strong enough to withhold the pressure of a bus or truck? Why aren't emergency rescue and salvage arrangements kept ready-made on the spot? Getting all this doesn't call for a big budget or effort, but attention to the safety of life. How much more experience of such accidents do we need to rise to the occasion?

In the context, we must also think of maintenance of our public vehicles. Owners tend to ply them without recess to derive an uninterrupted pay-off. This doesn't keep the vehicles worthy for the road for long, but they are kept pressed in service much further beyond, at the risk of passengers' life. Even over due check-ups are seldom attended to by the owners. This is, indeed, a matter of grave concern.

QUOTES

It is only my government which is a neutral government in the truest sense among all the governments formed in this region since 1974.

Justice Shahabuddin
Acting President

THE dreaded moment has arrived. The experts said it would. The partisans of the Iraqi and the US positions said it must. And others who knew what war is all about, have seen its devastations and tragedies and were aware that war seldom solves anything and creates more problems, prayed that it would not. The war that may devastate Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and even Egypt has begun.

In human terms 415,000 US troops plus 265,000 allied troops including 2,500 from Bangladesh are now ready to confront 545,000 Iraqi soldiers to fight a battle whose result, which ever way it goes, cannot be a matter of joy for us as citizens of Bangladesh. For on the one side lies the issue of annexation of Kuwait by Iraq and on the other, destruction of Kuwait by the allied forces to restore Kuwait's sovereignty.

The problem with us is that we want both sides to win. Perhaps better put, we want Kuwait to win and Iraq not to lose.

The reality, however, is far from that simple and the Iraqi President hasn't helped things a lot either. The French peace initiative, which came immediately following the aborted peace move by the UN Secretary General, was perhaps the last chance of postponing, if not preventing, this catastrophe. The French move angered the US and UK but

received support from Italy, Germany, Spain and some other EEC countries. US rejected the proposal because it linked the issue of Iraq withdrawal from Kuwait to that of holding an international conference on the Palestine question, a demand that Iraq has made from the very inception of the crisis. What is however not understandable is why Iraq all but ignored the French proposal, forcing the French government to close ranks with US and the other allies.

By launching the massive air attack on Iraq, the US has opened up possibilities that range from a quick defeat of the Iraqi forces to that of a relatively longer war, involving all the countries of the region. If the US can end the war quickly, if the civilian casualties can be kept to the minimum and if Iraq can be humbled without giving the impression that the US was not

out to destroy it, but only to force it back from Kuwait, then perhaps the situation can be contained and move towards

Could We have Avoided this War?

by Mahfuz Anam

peace taken within a short time. But these are very doubtful ifs.

There is just as much likelihood of the other scenario that Iraq will try to draw Israel into the war and by attacking it turn the Iraq vs. US war to an Arab vs. Israeli war.

It Saddam is successful in creating such a situation then he may be able to create rift in the Arab public opinion.

Such an eventuality could produce a backlash, giving a renewed lease of life to the fundamentalist forces who are out to exploit the situation.

The US has a credibility problem in the Islamic world. Years of its one-sided support to Israel, its total neglect of the Palestinian demands and turning a blind eye to the oppression and exploitation of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories have built a deep mistrust in the Arab psyche about the intentions of the US. There is a deep suspicion in the Arab mind as to why the US is in the Gulf. The US says, to free Kuwait and to protect Saudi Arabia.

Most of the world and the Arabs for the moment have accepted that explanation -- at least for the moment. But lurking behind everyone's mind is a suspicion as to US's real intentions. Even those who welcomed US presence, have a feeling that when it comes to Arab versus Israel interest, the US will not be even-handed. This is a major handicap for the US to be effective in the region. The US must realise that the Palestine issue will have to be addressed at some stage and that Israel must not be allowed to oppress the Palestinian people with impunity and the support of the US.

Question lingers in the minds of people as to whether all peace possibilities were exhausted before the US launched the air attack. We are not convinced. Given the complexity of the Middle-East situation and the cross-current of the numerous forces that exist there, it might have been advisable to give the peace process a little more time. True the economic sanctions were

not being very effective, but they were having some impact on the Iraqi population. There were many countries -- including China and USSR -- who advised further time to be given to the peace process. It is true that the Iraqi President was not showing any tangible sign of moving from his position, yet a longer time frame and further exploration of various initiatives, especially the French one, could perhaps have led to some result.

The task at hand now, is to bring the war to a close within the shortest possible time and with as little civilian casualty and damage as possible. In this regard we wholeheartedly support the position of the Interim President in calling for immediate end to hostilities following the achievement of the goals set forth by the Security Council.

It is too early for us to make any assessment or any prediction about the war. However what can be said that a great man-made tragedy faces the Arab people and the people of the world. Once again the Arab

people are facing a war, and in this case fighting one another. A great Arab nation is today directing its military arsenal against other Arabs. The others are joining hands with forces from outside to crush it.

However, the question cannot be escaped as to what triggered it all. Let us take a moment to remember the early facts. It was Iraq's unhappiness towards Kuwait's exploration of the bordering oil fields and the former's demand for reparation that started it all. Let us suppose, just for argument's sake, that Iraqi anger was fully justified. But did it call for invasion and the subsequent annexation of Kuwait?

Today when we call for an early and peaceful resolution of the war, we really want Kuwait to be sovereign and Iraq to be as little damaged and humiliated as possible. But at the same time, in that call, we also announce our determined support for sovereign equality of all nations and reiterate our principled position of opposing invasion and occupation of others' territories. Yes, the world is full of conflicts; yes, there are problems between countries and nations. But we have developed some fundamental norms of solving them. Admittedly they are not perfect. But any day, they are far better than the slaughtering of innocent lives.

How Deby Turned About and Seized Power

by Alan Rake

As one Chadian leader becomes soft and tired, another aspiring warrior chieftain at the head of a band of hungry young guerrillas is ready to take his place. The latest is Idriss Deby. Hissene Habre's former commander-in-chief.

In just three weeks the forces of Idriss Deby's popular Salvation Movement (MPS), operating with Libyan and covert Sudanese backing, stormed to power at the head of only 2,000 troops, as government forces came over to him in their thousands.

In a lightning strike he put the 30,000-strong regular army of President Hissene Habre to flight and crossed the whole width of the country to seize the capital N'Djamena. He rode into the undefended capital in a black Mercedes and pledged to return the country to democracy.

His early pronouncements have been hopeful, vowing to restore multi-party politics for the first time since independence, but his origins and background are just as tribal and factional as any of the other warrior chieftains who

Deby enjoyed the protection

of France against Libya and grew complacent as Oueddi's threat passed and as he tried to transform himself from guerrilla leader to peacetime president.

One of his main objectives was to win back influential allies who had supported Oueddi in Libya. In 1988 he scored a major coup by enticing back Achiek Idriss Oumar, who returned bringing over 1,000 troops with him.

Oumar's return provoked bitter rivalry and reopened divisions between Habre's tribe, the gorane, and Deby's Zaghawa. Then, in a mysterious incident, Oumar came near to assassination and Deby's faction was implicated.

Deby, then accused Deby and his army commander Hassan Djamous of plotting a coup. Both men were Zaghawa and commanded a strong faction in the army.

As fighting broke out within the army, the Zaghawa commanders tried to escape with their troops to the Sudan border. In the chaos Djamous was killed, but Deby fought his way over the border. On April 8 1989 he was in Lagos accusing the Habre government of 'tribalism, extortion and injustice.'

Deby's presence in Lagos embarrassed the Nigerians, but he soon found a ready friend in Libya. He was soon telling Muammar Gaddafi all he knew of Habre's plans and troop dispositions. Gaddafi in return promised him his full backing.

Deby chose to operate not from Libya, but from Sudan where he was near to his own Zaghawa people who lived just across the desert frontier. This presented no problem to Libya which already had considerable influence in Sudan's Darfur province. Deby was established there from the end of 1989 and mounted two major cross-border incursions in November 1989 and in March 1990.

But Deby's total forces numbered up to 30,000. They had fought a brilliant campaign against a direct Libyan assault at the beginning of 1987, when they had mounted their rockets and guns on Land-Rovers which sped across northern deserts chasing the Libyans out of Chadian territory.

This clear victory and the years of unchallenged power had lulled Habre into a sense of false security, but one major factor had changed. France, which had previously refused to let Libyans across the 16th parallel of latitude, withdrew its guarantee. Under the new policy French troops were in place only to protect their na-

tionals, not to keep out invaders.

When Deby struck in mid-November, Habre received no help from France--indeed some reports say France committed at his fall. He found his own troops deserting in droves.

The collapse of his undisciplined army was more sudden than anyone anticipated. Within a week his old colleague in arms had seized power, as the mobs moved in to sack the Presidential palace.

Deby's last words as he fled the country were: "If Idriss Deby wants power let him have it." It was as if the years of strain and office had replaced burning ambition with total exhaustion.

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Tough Times Ahead for Refugees in Europe

by Heenan Bhatti

rapidly deteriorated. Europe is increasingly unsympathetic.

A recent report, *Refugees in Europe*, compiled by the London-based Minority Rights Group, has highlighted how the situation is worsening at a time when the number of asylum-seekers has risen from 13,000 in 1972 to 232,000 in 1988.

The rise in numbers, according to the human rights group, Africa Watch, is to do with an increasingly unstable political situation in the world today.

Refugee groups point to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees as the yardstick for assessing whether asylum seekers should stay. It says asylum should be granted if there is a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion".

European states have acted against the convention, the report says, and reacted to the growing numbers of those seeking asylum with increasingly severe restrictions.

It warns, that unless the issue of asylum is opened up to public debate, a more restrictive and less humanitarian attitude

to refugees will emerge.

The group added that many refugees had been expelled unlawfully under the 1951 UN Convention. Amnesty International says the government was willing to listen to its reports as long as they did not criticise human rights abuses in Britain.

The line of public scandals that have hit the immigration services is long. In a recent report from the British Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee, the immigration services were condemned for the time they took to process applications for asylum.

Figures show only 35 per cent of applications for asylum are now approved in European countries against 50 per cent in 1984.

Only recently shock waves were sent through refugee groups in Britain with the announcement by immigration minister Peter Lloyd that restrictions were proposed on the numbers of refugee claims. If the proposal is carried as many expect it to be, this would mean a massive

ejection of refugees from Britain.

The announcement comes in the light of a report by the human rights group, Amnesty International, which criticises the present procedure of assessing refugee status as so bad that there is nothing to stop bona fide refugees being

expelled.

The group added that many refugees had been expelled unlawfully under the 1951 UN Convention. Amnesty International says the government was willing to listen to its reports as long as they did not criticise human rights abuses in Britain.

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the proposals by the European states to harmonise asylum policy focuses on measures "to reduce the number of asylum-seekers and refugees in Europe at almost any cost".

Countries with more liberal policies are fearing that they will be burdened with the majority of refugees and so are taking measures to oppose such a scenario. In Germany, the most liberal of Europe from 1984 to 1988, restrictive moves are on the agenda.

In 1991, new legislation on refugees is to be introduced. Ausländergesetz. Refugees will have to gain visas in the country from which they are fleeing. A "principle of rotation" will be introduced, so that the person's reason for staying will be categorised. Many will be accepted as part-time labourers, which means they can be asked to leave at the time they took to process applications for asylum.

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Stink of garbage

Sir, I am a resident of Park Plaza, which is a high-rise residential apartment building situated along Kamal Ataturk Avenue.

Right in front of our building are two vacant lots--supposedly earmarked for more high-rise development. In the meantime, the two large vacant lots are used by all and sundry as a dumping ground for garbage. Not to mention the fact that this is such an eyesore along a major road in a fairly expensive residential area, this indiscriminate dumping of garbage presents a health hazard to everyone. I do hope the Ministry of Environment will do something to rectify this "stinking problem".

Disgusted

An appreciation

Sir, I had the privilege of going through your inaugural issue of 'Dreams Reborn' written by Mr. Mahfuz Anam, a brilliant student of the Dhaka University of the 60's. I was really moved that such a meaningful article narrating the cogitation could be expounded in a lucid manner by the writer. I believe he will continue to write on vital issues through your daily for the benefit of the people.

preserve only time will tell.

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M. Shamsul Alam
Managing Director
Reliance Insurance Ltd.</