

River Violence and Firearms

There is more than one element of irony in the recent attack on a motor launch and the death of four Ansars in that horrible incident on the placid waters of a Barisal river. The first involves the name of the river which, as they come in such evocatively poetic vein all over Bengal, especially Barisal, is Lata — a kind of a creeper and a twig and a tendril rolled into one. And the name of the passenger vessel — Firdaus, the paradise — was the second bit of irony that lent an extra edge to the Poe-esque horror drama enacted last Friday afternoon.

But those were mere coincidences, unintentional and quite devoid of meaning. The third point of irony involves a world of significance. At a time when the administration is crying hoarse over the importance of recovery of illegal private arms and politicians and their parties also doing no less but themselves not surrendering as much as a machete not to say of modern automatic-firing instruments of sure death — this is a case of looting government arms for use in private violence. This episode in Mehdiganj — another cruel play on words — is quite a measure of the success of the arms recovery campaign mounted by the present government.

This point needs to be stressed over and over again if only to expose the limitations of our major political parties who are captives of their own past doings having little power to go for actions and positions warranted by the exigencies of the hour but are nevertheless contrary to their performances when in power. All the three parties that were in power distributed arms to hordes of russians in order to underwrite a perpetual hold on state power. The unfortunate and unwise and clearly criminal action failed to respond to the need for which it was undertaken. It delivered nothing by way of saving anyone but was capitally useful in harassing others. The parties are miserably failing to extricate themselves from the despicable legacy of this and are very evidently unable to distance themselves from the role of bullyboys that they unmistakably were during their span of rule. This augers very ill for both the election and the prospects of democracy after that.

If the accepted keepers of this land and this policy can be so irresponsible with regard to such an important aspect of the state and societal being — the votaries of by-now a scilicet Siraj Sikdar — the dacoits looting arms from the Firdaus gave slogans in his praise — stand to be rebuked for what? There is of course that question of brutality. The dacoits came only for the arms and did not molest one single passenger. There was provision for eight armed Ansars in their allotted cabin — charged with securing the vessel against criminal raids. One was absent, but his rifle was there. Four were sleeping and too loitering about the vessel — all of their rifles resting in the cabin. Only one was in the cabin reading the Koran after saying his Asar prayers — when the raiders struck, shooting at point blank the devout deputy platoon commander. They knifed three other Ansars. The toll was four Ansars dead and three injured — one of them losing his mind because of the harrowing experience.

That is quite a cruel thing. But compared to the atrocities that every now and then visits riverine travel this is a rather tame and insipid tale. A regular way with the river dacoits, especially in the infested waters of Barisal, is to throw overboard women and children and passengers trying to put up resistance. That is on top of knifing and shooting dozens. How to make river travel safe is a different subject but one that is crying for attention and appropriate action. Recovery of illegal private arms has a relevance here. The dacoits come armed with firearms. Mere daggers and knives would not pay them now. How easy would it be to make them ineffective if there were no firearms in private hands!

Allied heads of state to decide ground war

PARIS, Feb 11: Defense Minister Pierre Joxe said Sunday that key heads of state in the multinational coalition would decide together on when the allied ground war would begin in the Gulf, reports AP.

Joxe will go to Washington on Tuesday to consult with US Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, the Defense Ministry announced. Cheney also planned to meet with British Secretary of Defense Tom King.

In this recent tour of Saudi Arabia, Cheney did not indicate

when the ground campaign to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait would start.

The French defense minister, in a television talk show, said there were advantages and disadvantages to prolonging the current air phase of the war.

Prolonging the air war could help spare lives in a ground offensive but could also work against the morals of waiting ground troops, Joxe said.

The final decision will be made by those who have the supreme responsibility and it will not be the ministers of defense," he said.

Joxe affirmed France's independence while remaining a loyal coalition ally, during and after the war.

France was the object of restrained criticism during the month leading up to the war as it sought to protect its numerous alliances with Arab nations while supporting UN resolutions against Iraq.

Joxe replaced former Defense Minister Jean-Pierre Chevenement, who resigned two weeks ago because of his opposition to the Gulf war. Chevenement represented those in the governing Socialist Party who distrust US initiatives and seek to maintain an independent French policy.

Kashmir militants declare 5-day ceasefire

SRINAGAR, Feb 11: Muslim militants declared a five-day truce today in their bloody campaign for Kashmir's secession from India as a general strike paralysed the snow-covered valley, reports AFP.

The cease-fire, which has the backing of several militant groups, came a day before Muslims begin to celebrate a religious festival called Mehraj Alam.

Gulf War: Imperialism by Another Name

Allan Thompson writes from London

As the euphoria in the US brought on by the outbreak of war subsides, opponents to the war are gaining more attention. Noam Chomsky, internationally renowned academic and veteran of the anti-Vietnam war protests, says the war is merely a continuation of the 500-year-old war against the Third World. Washington was never interested in sanctions; from the start, all it wanted was a war with Saddam.



NOAM CHOMSKY
Enemy of US imperialism

nology, has long been one of the most famous anti-war thinkers in the US, making his mark during the Vietnam War. He is also a staunch critic of the mainstream media and

what he calls American in the Third World who has managed to combine political with a highly-successful academic career.

In an interview with Gemini News Service, Chomsky said Saddam's crimes did not matter so much to the US as long as the Iraqi leader posed on direct threat to the US scheme of things in the Middle East. That changed when Saddam asserted his independence.

"Saddam Hussein showed that he's an independent nationalist, and that can't be tolerated anywhere" by the US. I mean it's not because of anything bad that he did. Saddam Hussein was a murderous gangster on August 1 and he was George Bush's favourite friend and trading partner.

The invasion of Kuwait adds minimally to his already existing crimes, but it added one critical crime — he showed he was an independent

nationalist. Up until then [the US] assumed that he could be kind of bought off and worked into the American system. But when he forcibly invaded Kuwait that showed he was just too independent and had to be destroyed.

Chomsky said that on the face of it, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was little worse than the US invasion of Panama.

"At the time when the UN and the US reacted to the August 2 invasion of Kuwait, there was simply nothing to differentiate Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait from the US invasion of Panama.

"Casualties were about on the same scale, maybe a little worse in Panama. If there hadn't been such a strong reaction to Saddam Hussein, it's possible he might have done what the US did in Panama and put in a puppet government.

"Look, we went through the same story with Manuel Noriega. Noriega is a very minor crook compared with

Saddam Hussein, who is a major gangster. But Noriega was on the CIA payroll, they thought he was just great, killing people and running drugs... he was just fine until he began to show that he was too big for his britches and stopped obeying US orders.

Chomsky said the US action in the Gulf was simply an extension of a longstanding policy of crushing independent nationalism when it surfaces in region's of strategic or economic importance to the US.

"It really takes blindness not to see this. This is almost the historical universal."

He pointed to many instances where the US supported military dictators with appalling human rights records, then destroyed them once no longer served US interests.

"The list includes Trujillo, Somoza, Duvalier, Marcos—all these guys were perfect so long as they worked for the

United States. If they begin to look too independent, you cut off their heads."

He discounted the argument that the multinational force had to go to war with Iraq in order to put right the wrong of aggression.

Chomsky has joined the growing chorus asking why similar international action has not been taken to address the invasion and occupation of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975, the occupation of Northern Cyprus by Turkey, and the occupation of South Lebanon and the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israel—all acts of aggression that have been soundly condemned by the UN.

If there was any "new order" at all, said Chomsky, it was the absence of the Soviet Union from the world scene, giving the US a free hand to engage in conflicts like the Gulf war that would have been unthinkable before.

ALLAN THOMPSON is a Canadian journalist with the Toronto Star newspaper, currently working at Gemini as part of a one-year internship sponsored by Canada's International Development Research Centre. He has a Masters degree in International Relations from the University of Kent at Canterbury, England.

International

US Harrier fighter downed

Allies hammer Iraqi bridges, 59,000 sorties made so far

NICOSIA, Feb 11: French Jaguar fighter-bombers joined the air bombardment of Iraq's bridges yesterday as the Allies stepped up efforts to choke President Saddam Hussein's forces of supplies, reports AFP.

Aided by good weather, the Allies flew a massive 2,800 sorties against bridges, Iraq's elite Republican Guards and other targets in 24 hours, bringing the war total to 59,000, US Brigadier General Richard Neal said in Riyadh.

Iraqi forces shot down a US Marine Corps Harrier AV-8 jump-jet over Southern Kuwait Saturday and the pilot had been listed as missing in action, he said.

That brought the number of Allied planes downed since the start of the Gulf war to 25 of which 18 have been American, he said. The coalition forces had destroyed 39 Iraqi planes in the air.

The French Jaguars fired as 30 laser-guided missiles at bridges in southeastern Iraq in

an air strike in perfect weather today, French spokesman Colonel Francois Regnault said. It was the first French attack against Iraqi forces of supplies, reports AFP.

The planes carried out a second strike against an Iraqi artillery unit in Kuwait before returning safely to base.

Colonel Regnault said the effect of the raids, were beginning to make themselves felt. French pilots had spotted a reduction in light artillery fire which seemed to confirm the Iraqis were beginning to suffer supply problems, he said.

Allied warplanes on Saturday destroyed a second bridge in central Baghdad, the July 14 bridge collapsed under a hail of bombs and missiles.

On Tuesday Allied aircraft knocked out the city's Al-Jumhurya Bridge.

Official Iraqi radio reported that US-led Allies had carried out 57 raids on Iraqi residential areas and military positions

overnight Saturday and early Sunday.

A Riyadh report adds: Iraqi Forces shot down a US marine corps Harrier AV-8 jump-jet over Southern Kuwait Saturday.

A US spokesman said here today.

Brigadier General Richard Neal said the plane's pilot had been listed as missing in action.

That brought the number of Allied planes downed since the start of the Gulf war to 25 of which 18 have been American, he said.

The coalition forces had destroyed 39 Iraqi planes.

Brig. Gen Neal said that over the past 24 hours a further 2,800 coalition air sorties over Iraq and Kuwait had taken place.

This brought the total number of Allied air sorties since war broke out January 17 to 59,000, he said.

Meanwhile, Iraq said today that allied warplanes launched

57 raids on its territory overnight, "aiming at residential areas."

A military spokesman quoted by the Iraqi News Agency (INA) said "Vengeance will be strong and decisive."

"These crimes cannot go by without the Americans, their agents and slaves, paying for them with their own blood," he said.

Iraq on Sunday said it had shot down three more allied planes and reported 164 more raids on its soil.

Iran meanwhile reported today that the allies bombed a major oil refinery and petrochemical complex at the southern Iraqi city of Basra.

"A could to thick black smoke hung over the area" this morning, visible from the western Iranian border, the Iranian news agency IRNA said.

The Basra complex was first bombed on January 28. IRNA said.

Hammadi seeks US pullout

Iraq ready for talks without conditions

AMMAM, Feb 11: Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister said on Sunday Bagdad was willing to enter Arab talks on the Gulf war with no prior conditions if the United States withdrew, reports Reuters.

"We are prepared to enter (Arab) negotiations without any conditions but we want the United States not to interfere in our affairs," Saadoun Hammadi told reporters in response to a question.

Hammadi, the highest-level Iraqi official to visit Jordan since the Gulf war started, made no mention of a possible Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait

as demanded by UN Security Council resolutions which sanctioned the use of force.

His proposals seemed to offer nothing new beyond President Saddam Hussein's August 12 proposals that have been rejected by the US-led allies.

Hammadi urged Arab countries to sever diplomatic ties with the 28-member alliance bombing Iraq.

The least Arab countries can do on a political level is to boycott diplomatically all countries of aggression and to reject United Nations Security Council resolutions that are

being used to destroy Iraq," he said.

Baghdad last week cut diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia.

Door not yet closed: Velyat

A report from Nicosia says: Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati said on Sunday that Iraq had not yet closed the door to a peaceful settlement, sparked by Iraq's August 2 invasion of Kuwait.

Velayati's remarks contrasted sharply with the rhetoric from Iraq which said its decision to fight the US-led allies was irrevocable.

Speaking from Belgrade to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

Velyati, in Yugoslavia for a meeting of the Non-aligned Movement, said Iran had not given up hope of a peaceful settlement to the crisis, sparked by Iraq's August 2 invasion of Kuwait.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in a troubled region, was still optimistic about winning peace but more time and effort were needed.

During his visit to the American Cable News Network, Velyati said Iraq's response to Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's "ideas for peace" were "not on the same level that we had expected."

He said neutral Iran, anxious to enhance its reputation as a stable and responsible

peacemaker in