

FALLOUT FROM DESERT STORM

Palestinians are Still Counting the Cost

by Benjamin Cohen

During the Gulf crisis Iraq tried to link its withdrawal from Kuwait to an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. The West spurned that proposition. For Palestinians the cost of the war was immense. And although the Middle East peace conference brought the Palestinian question back on the agenda, a derailed peace process and growing economic difficulties could start another conflict.

Democracy Is the Issue

At long last, we are going to have a general debate on a major foreign policy issue in the Jatiya Sangsad. Foreign Minister Lt Col (ret'd) ASM Mustafizur Rahman displayed a great deal of common sense last Thursday by agreeing to Opposition demands for a discussion on the delicate situation prevailing along the Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier.

No one can deny that the problem facing the foreign minister is of an extremely delicate nature. On the one hand, he has to maintain good relations with Myanmar, which is our only neighbour other than India. But at the same time, he is expected, as a leading member of a government championing the cause of democracy, to stand up for justice and human rights in the region. How the two could be balanced is a trick the foreign ministry has to perform, but parliament could help by determining the priorities. The ministry is no doubt aware that the foreign policy of this country has to reflect the aspirations of the people, which is firmly on the side of consolidation of democracy. As such, our relations with Myanmar cannot be divorced from the issue of human rights.

There is another internal dimension the ministry ought to take into account. Unlike the past, the country is now serious about its newly-restored parliamentary democracy. There is nobody in the country with a greater mandate to discuss public issues than members of parliament (MP) who are the representatives of the people. Parliament exists precisely for the purpose of scrutinising policies, including ones dealing with external relations, and holding governments accountable. The public, therefore, ought to be made fully aware of the issues at stake and the policies being pursued by making the workings of government more transparent.

Here, we have to emphasise the vital importance of holding an open debate in the House, not only on this issue but on all other issues. We expect that the Speaker is fully aware of the dangers of allowing a major debate to take place in secret, as such things can only breed speculation and confusion. A closed-door debate may produce 330 different versions, all unattractable, of what went on, leading to a proliferation of conspiracy theories. But first and foremost, a closed-door debate is undesirable and unacceptable because that is a sure way to deprive the public of the right to know.

Both the Treasury and Opposition benches now have a chance to be forthright in defining the issue and chalking out the parameters within which a national consensus could be established. The question of the refugees and their return to their homes in Myanmar will naturally come to the fore of the debate, and the MPs need to argue forcefully the case for some sort of international involvement in order to reassure the refugees that they would not be forgotten by the world once they had returned. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees would be the ideal agency for such an involvement.

The biggest issue, however, is the question of democracy inside Myanmar. It is highly debatable whether solution to any problem in Myanmar is possible unless democratic rule is established in that country. It is clear that the military junta in Yangon is not prepared to meet the democratic aspirations of the majority Burmese people, let alone those of the minorities. The refugee problem, which has resulted from continuing repression conducted by the military dictatorship, cannot be solved until minority rights are recognised by Myanmar. That, in turn, can only be guaranteed by a democratic polity.

Malaria Stages a Comeback

Malaria has staged a comeback — and, it seems, in a big way. At least the available information is quite indicative of an oncoming epidemic sort of the once-deadly disease in the near future. A report carried in this daily on Thursday has conclusively made a point to this effect. It says at least 167 people fell victim to this disease in the country's east during the last couple of years. Worse, the germ, scientifically known as *plasmodium falciparum*, threatens to sweep the entire country soon. And all this is no layman's projection but comes from as competent a source as the World Health Organisation.

One intriguing and therefore fearsome tailpiece to the news story is that the germ carried by a special type of mosquitoes is drug-resistant. Also worrying is the fact that the probable target of the disease, according to the WHO, is the rural areas. Add to this the lack of preparation on the part of the government to fight malaria. The picture hardly looks rosy.

Against this backdrop, the merger of anti-malarial programme with the general health services seems to have proved a really suicidal step. How grave the situation has already become can be realised by the startling fact as revealed by WHO representative in Bangladesh Dr ANA Aboysudere. According to him an estimated three crore people are either affected or exposed to malarial diseases. That means one person in every four is likely to suffer from the disease. Even the cold figure, which does not always represent the extent of the danger, is enough to send a shudder down one's spine. But the concerned agency of the government may not find it enough rationale to promptly act.

Those who are even remotely familiar with the disease know well enough what a havoc malaria wrought among people in the Bengal of yore. Apart from debilitating people who survive the disease, the health hazards caused by it in various other forms are a good enough cause for the government to take it very seriously. Reason dictates a preventive measure in time can save lives, time and money for the whole nation. A social campaign integrated with a government programme is what really stands to succeed. The point that should be taken into special consideration is that motivation of the people in this case can play a vital role. People today are relatively more health conscious and this advantage should be further pressed home. One important mode of fighting malaria is to eliminate the breeding grounds of mosquitoes which are a potent carrier of the germs of the disease. The people's participation in such programmes can work wonder.

Of all the monumental global changes in 1991, not the least important, was the convening of a Middle East peace conference. The Gulf war dramatically changed the face of politics in the region, forcing all the actors into line with the interests of United States foreign policy.

What was underlined, however, was the persistence of the Palestinian question. Although Palestinian support for Iraq angered most Arab governments, annoyed the US and brought derision from Israel, it is generally realised that peace will not come to the region until the Palestinian question is resolved.

Why did the Palestinians back Iraq? Certainly there has always been a pan-Arabist tradition within the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), but the more immediate reason goes back to 1987. That December the intifada (uprising) broke out in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories under Israeli control since the 1967 war.

The intifada continues, with Palestinian casualties at almost 1,500. Although it has gone through significant change over four years, its basic message remains the same: Israel cannot 'normalise' its occupation; cannot integrate the Palestinians; and cannot deny them the right to set up an independent state.

Palestinian politics, too, were transformed by the intifada. The PLO leadership, based in Tunis, was forced to acknowledge that the agenda was being set by the young political activists in the occupied territories.

At an historic meeting of the Palestine National Council (PNC), held in Algiers in November 1988, PLO leader Yasser Arafat declared the existence of the independent State of Palestine.

The PLO also officially committed itself to a 'two-

state' solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As a result, and to Israeli consternation, the US opened a careful dialogue with the PLO through its ambassador in Tunis. It was, in the end, unsuccessful. In May 1990, after an attempted raid by a dissident PLO faction on a Tel Aviv beach, the US formally suspended the talks.

At the same time, the intifada seemed to have reached a stalemate. Signs of weariness were setting in. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 reinvigorated the Palestinians.

Some observers said the invasion did the Palestinians a grave disservice since they

were removed from the centre of attention in the Middle East. One week later, though, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq came up with the 'linkage' option: Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait would be connected with an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.

The Iraqi dictator came to be regarded as a hero by the Palestinians and the Arab masses. Mindful of the fragile nature of the Hashemite throne, King Hussein of Jordan supported linkage.

The US was not prepared to let Saddam Hussein determine the course of events in the Middle East. Neither were the

other Arab states. Frightened by the prospect of Iraqi expansionism, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries joined the US-led coalition, as did Syria, Iraq's old Ba'athist rival.

For the Palestinians, the costs were immense. Economically, remittances sent by Palestinians workers in Kuwait to their families in the occupied territories were stopped because of the invasion. Assets of Palestinian businesses were frozen and many left property behind in Kuwait.

Palestinian sources estimate that up to \$12 billion was lost through the invasion. Politically, their identification with Saddam Hussein lost them much of the sympathy gained during the intifada.

While war raged in the Gulf, Israel imposed a 20-hour curfew on Palestinians in the occupied territories.

When it ended the plight of the Palestinians quickly came back into the spotlight. In Kuwait, the government accused them of having collectively collaborated with the Iraqi occupiers. Human rights organisations have documented the extent of the abuse against Palestinians in Kuwait, through detention without trial, torture and assassination.

Israeli restrictions of Palestinian family reunification further compounded the situation. Thousands of homeless Palestinians were not allowed to rejoin their families in the occupied territories. According to the Palestinian

legal organisation Al Haq, based in Ramallah on the West Bank, Israeli policy contradicts both the Hague and Geneva conventions.

However, it was not human rights considerations which brought Arabs and Israelis around the negotiating table in Madrid last October. The new strategic reality in the Middle East had to be reflected politically. US Secretary of State James Baker began his shuttle diplomacy to kick-start the peace process.

Interestingly, the post-war situation led to a sharp, and very public, conflict between the US and Israel, its historic ally. Buoyed by the mass immigration of Soviet Jews which began in 1989, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir of Israel is wary of any peace process leading to territorial compromise.

The main issue confronting the Palestinians is Israeli settlement in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. In the most recent of the several scandals over settlement, 4,000 homes are being built exclusively for Israelis in the largely Palestinian Old City of Jerusalem.

The Bush administration is opposed to settlement and does not like dealing with Shamir. The indications are that Israel's Premier feels the same way. Just after the Gulf war, the Paris-based Intelligence Newsletter reported that Shamir had threatened to produce formal proof of Bush's involvement in the Contragate Affair.

Even so, Shamir is no match for the US. Not only has Israel come to the negotiating table, but last September Bush persuaded Congress to suspend a debate on \$10 billion of housing loan guarantees to Israel for 120 days.

Palestinians, too, have been uneasy about the talks. Radical PLO factions and the Islamic movement have opposed the talks, saying that the US aims to neutralise, rather than solve, the Palestinian question. The PLO mainstream thinks differently. 'The conference is the only game in town,' says London PLO representative Afif Safieh, a long-standing moderate. As a result, Palestinian delegates have tried to make the most of the conference, with impassioned speeches in Madrid.

How long Palestinian patience will last is a hotly-debated question, especially as the conference has been plagued by procedural wrangles. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy has made it clear that the Palestinians are being offered only autonomy, as designed by the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, and even this is rejected by hardline Israeli politicians.

If the negotiators, and the PLO, accept and autonomy offer, the likelihood is that militant Islamic groups in the occupied territories will win more support. The equilibrium of the Middle East remains delicate. The simple interpretation of last year's events was that the war would create a new regional order and give a glimpse of peace for the Middle East.

The reality is far more complicated. A derailed regional peace process coming at the same time as the disintegration of the Soviet Union could start yet more conflict.

— GEMINI NEWS



Palestinian children: shortlived jubilation

Worker-Management Relationship: A Crisis Situation

by Gholam Mohammad

THE worker-management (or employee-employer) relationship in our Private Sector industries/other establishments speaks of a crisis situation. It may take a dangerous turn in not too distant a future unless we respond to our task without fumbling on the basic issues. In our intention or attempt to restore industrial discipline, the problem should be identified as one of the top national priorities.

Suspicion, mistrust and animosity appear to be the 'key-notes' of our worker-management relationship. On one plea or the other a situation, which could have otherwise been ignored or remained within manageable limits, quite often turns violent and goes out of control initiating a new series of problems. Those who benefit from this crisis are generally elements external to the organisation. In the final analysis, therefore, neither the workers nor the management become gainer. Each of these confronting parties, on the other hand, stands to lose substantially which, on the graph, illustrates wages and productivity moving to reverse directions i.e. wages increasing while productivity decreasing. From the investment viewpoint, this is a highly undesirable phenomenon.

This being so, the causative factors of this phenomenon should be checked listed and resolved, according to their implicating priority. Instead of applying ad hoc-ism in settling the issues erupting from time to time, ad hoc measures to settle an issue, we should always bear in mind, reflects, among others undesirable, resource and/or time con-

straints. Therefore the following conclusions can be drawn on account of suspicion, mistrust and animosity present in the worker-management relationship: (i) Either or both of the parties viz the workers and the management may be in a hurry to strike a deal for immediate settlement keeping an eye on some convenient time in the future to strike at the other again, to secure still more benefits. (ii) This implies shifting an issue instead for resolving it. (iii) Professional load-shedding on the part of both finds its full expression.

This raises the delicate question of belongingness to the organisation which is almost absent in our situation.

Except for the owners and their near and dear ones sycophants are included with all their inadequacies and absurdities in the management. The workers/employees are given a categorical feeling of being external to the organisation which is illustrative of the feudal attitude in an industrial situation.

Needless to mention that industrialisation in our country is of recent origin, the pioneering role, in the absence of the prospective industrialists, has been played by contractors, order suppliers, indentors etc. Their grooming is absolutely different from that required for building up 'industries'. This goes without saying that the contractors, order suppliers and indentors are interested, by the very nature and compulsion of their business, in quick returns on

their investment. This is in contrast to the attitude/outlook of the 'industrialists' who must of necessity, possess certain basic qualities relevant to pre-investment analysis, setting out production and sales priorities/targets, avoidance of time over-run which invariably results into cost over-run causing over-all cost escalation, sales promotion, vigilance on the market forces, innovation, creativity etc. — which do not ensure a quick returns on the investment as in the event of contracts, 'order supply', indenting etc. During the gestation period as well, regular ex-

cases, were manipulated at will, the DFIs did not attach due importance to the credentials of the sponsors in terms of their expertise, management potentialities, capability to organise the means of production, assessment of the market with a view to correcting the imbalances at their end as well as their leadership qualities together with their crisis management ability. This coupled with other related problems has turned the industrialisation far away from its concept and has given it an unmistakable shape of industrial trading for all practical purposes. In disguise of indus-

trialisational, industrial trading flourished in our country to which, for the facts already mentioned, our country has been exceptionally relevant and receptive. This explains the reasons for a large number of DFI-funded industries being sick while, on the other hand, other business ventures of the same sponsors going unquestionably strong. As such, in majority of cases, people having this or that kind of connections or influence were patronised, as a class, by the DFIs. Now we are given political interpretations of the professional failure mainly on the part of the DFIs who lacked in effective monitoring arrangements in regard to their own funded projects. We now find, the DFIs promptly responding to the new political leadership by presenting to it a list of loan defaulters in terms of crores of

Taka. For this, more than the loan defaulters, the DFIs themselves perhaps owe an explanation to the nation for abetment in the squandering of the national resources.

Now reverting to the subject matter — the worker-management relationship. For the reasons explained, nobody had the time, interest or a sense of responsibility to devote to this basic issue. The relationship developed on its own on the colonial concept of superior-subordinate relationship with deadly elements of feudalistic attitude on the part of the management. As a single major factor, this precludes any scope whatsoever for the workers/employees' belong-

ingness to the organisation. Much more than legislation which is no more than a piece of paper with attractive and decorative phrases, a fundamental change in the outlook of the management has to be reciprocated by the workers/employees. Keeping the interests of the organisation above all other considerations is the crying need of the hour on which, possibly, there cannot be two opinions. Both the parties shall have to be sure, that in the process, their respective interests shall be best safe-guarded. The objective can be achieved by an efficient and responsive group of professionals at different managerial tiers which at the moment is either totally absent or defunct except for its specific use in unavoidable circumstances. As things stand now, in the event of this kind of proposal maturing, the professionals shall find themselves at the point of crossfire between the aggressive workers on one hand and the shrewd management on the other — rendering the performance of duties by the professionals impossible unless, however, the government comes up with strong supportive measures to prove its existence. The supportive measures should include a consensus between the workers and the management on basic issues linked up with a mechanism to operate quickly if either or both the parties back out from their commitments — which shall expose the professionals to the risks of the highest order. This is one of the many options with some safety-valves to restore industrial discipline.

It is, therefore, recommended that as a first urgent step forward in replacing suspicion by understanding, mistrust by trust and animosity by cordiality in the worker-management relationship, objective professionalism, after careful examination of the body-structure of our industries, should be injected into our organisations.

To conclude it may be noted that Bangladesh workforce has established its efficiency at the international level where the management has been responsive. At home, to our bad luck, we find the same workforce turned violent. What is wrong at home? The weather conditions, food habits, language, or inept handling of basic management issues?

It is still not too late to correct the imbalances.

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.

Austerity: Quo Vadis

Sir, I am an MBA, speciality Marketing and Finance, working now in a multi-national drug company. Previously I was in the similar pharmaceuticals section of a premier local firm or group of companies. In private firms, expenses are tightly controlled but trusted employees are allowed a free hand if their results or productivity or profitability is commensurated with I give this background because I am puzzled by the present government's austerity drive (please refer to Mr. Shahabuddin Mahtab's letter in your column on January 12). What was the point of 'transferring' — so to say — a number of medical practitioners on such short notice? It is noticeable that there is no mention of the replacements.

The order is reported to have come from the highest level — why not the regular channels and in the normal way? Does not such hurry and scurry waste more money than otherwise?

Then there is talk of removing about 22 secretaries, heading different ministries on the service level at one stroke. Again, no mention of replacements and their fitness to take up the job. The current Secretary, Ministry of Industries, when at Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre, Savar as its head must have gone through an article in that Organisation's journal on file movement at the secretariat. The article highlights how those at the bottom level, who have to do all the noting, getting various correspon-

dence typed, photocopied, etc. lack the infrastructure while those higher up — the decision-makers and principal signatories — have these facilities stay comparatively idle. How can austerity measures be enforced, if the implementors are so shackled that a file takes weeks instead of days to move up and then down again?

Those who travel along the Mirpur Road will notice, near Fatima Nursing Home and beside Dhanmondi Boys' School, a modest office building with red ceramic brick adjoining the residential quarters there. This is undergoing a major reconstruction. It should be noted that this same (Bangladesh Babosthapona Unnayan Kendro) was mentioned often in the dailies when this parliamentary government was trying to come to power. The M. D. at that time, was accused of 'breaking up' the 'Kendro' and 're-constructing' it with unnecessary luxuries. All the writing in the papers was in vain, it appears. He is now busy, doing it brazenly and with taxpayers money. Incidentally, a plethora

of promotions is being rushed through but not for the staff. The officers earn as much as their salary's amount by working elsewhere as well as at the 'Kendro' after office hours in the evening — the 'Kendro' is not a pure government body — but all are not allowed these benefits. Is all this really needed is what I want to know. Maybe I am prejudiced since I am not a government employee of any sort and have to pay the tax from whatever I earn — and believe me, private firms, local or not, — take as much work out of you as they pay heavily. I have voiced all these sentiments wondering what the various ministers, specially of Health and Industries are doing as well as the parliament. Are there no questions to be asked and satisfactory answers sought? But perhaps the parliamentarians are too busy to trouble with such petty matters, which ultimately affect us, the general public, in terms of soaring prices of eggs, powdered milk, aerosol, vegetables, etc.

Md. Ashraf Motiheel, Dhaka

Peeling of potatoes

Sir, A poor country like Bangladesh cannot afford to waste anything as most of our people are suffering from malnutrition and hunger. But most of our people are habituated to drain away the starch water from cooked rice which, if retained in the rice, can well provide us with calorie, protein and vitamins. Most of us peel potatoes and then wash before cooking thus diminishing to a certain extent its nutrition values which can be retained if it is boiled first and then peeled. In the year 1795, Count Rumford of USA wrote 'Though there is no article used as food of which a greater variety of well-tasted and wholesome dishes may be prepared than of potatoes, yet it seems to be the unanimous opinion of those who are most acquainted with these useful vegetables that the best way of cooking them is to boil them simply, and with their skins on, in water.' A hundred years later, Snyder wrote, 'In order to obtain the highest food value, potatoes should not be peeled before cooking'.

Peeling by hand removes outer layer of the potato including eyes and other substances.

There are differences between varieties due to eye depth, type of skin, colour and shape. Peeling losses are less for large potatoes than smaller ones. Potatoes or any other vegetable must be washed in order to remove all kinds of dirt before peeling or cutting. Peeling losses on potato may run as high as 25% to 30%. Can we afford to waste such a considerable quantity of food when most of our people are starving and suffering from malnutrition? If our people become conscious and stop peeling of potatoes then the country can save 3.12 M. tons of foodgrain from total import of about 20 lac M. tons at present. Non-draining of watery protein from cooked rice and non-peeling of potatoes and other vegetables will minimize malnutrition among our people to a considerable extent. At the same time it will improve the environmental degradation of Bangladesh to a certain extent. M. Alauddin West Nakol Para, Dhaka.