## Focus Focus

## Protecting the Sundarbans

OVERING a total area of 100,000 sq. hectares, the Sundarbans is home to 330 species of plant life, 270 species of birds and 42 species of animals, including the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger. The water ways and canals have also been identified as one of the richest fish-nurseries in the

The flood plains adjacent to the Sundarbans, and the estuaries that flow through the region not only provide necessary food for the coastal marine creatures, but also a safe sanctuary and an ideal breeding and rearing ground.

region.

As is the case with many ecosystems, the stress and impingement on the Sundarbans has led to a real concern for its survival. Already six endangered mammal species have became extinct and over 46 wildlife species are listed as being endangered. The size of the Sundarbans has been reduced to half of what is used to be 150 years ago and top dying of trees was observed a few years ago. The Sundarbans has recently been declared a World Heritage site, thereby ensuring responsibility for its preservation, conservation and management.

For any development initiative to be meaningful, projects should ensure development of efficient and sustainable resource management systems which are ecologically sound. But unfortunately many project in the past, have on the one hand over exploited natural resources of the country and on the other, the completed project itself remains under-utilised. Plans in the past may have enjoyed temporary success (and this may be equally applicable to many development projects being implemented now) but in the long-term had negative impacts on both the environment and the populations dependent on the area. For projects to be in tune with the environment. people's participation is the essential ingredient. Involvement of local inhabitants which require co-ordinating realistic demands on the environment, coupled with the experience of the people, need to the integrated as the major thrust of any development objectives.

Devising ecologically sound ways of using available resources and capabilities, to ensure sustainable management of local recourses, is what is needed to bring about a positive change in the life of the majority of people living in an area.

In the beginning of the 1960s, coastal embankments were built primarily to increase agricultural production and secondly to protect human settlements and crops from tidal surges. These embankments have created a permanent change in the region. A remarkable feature of this fertile tidal area is that a large number of valuable marine species spend a vital part of their lifecycle in the estuaries and tidal wetlands. The depth and natural flow of these estuaries are important to protect bio-diver-

However, construction of embankments decreased depth of the estuaries and tidal prism. which led to gradual increase of salinity in the area, whereby large areas of agricultural lands are still continuing to lose their fertility. Many rivers are drying up due to the increasing levels of silt on their beds as an outcome of these embankments. Large areas have become water-logged causing great distress to local populations. The change that subsequently occurred, forced people to look for other forms of livelihoods, often creating more distress to the environment. The coastal embankments in the south-west coastal region bordering the Sundarbans is also considered to be a cause for increasing salinisation in the region. eventually affecting the Sun-

The Proposed Project

conservation system for resources extracted from Sundarbans on the basis of environmentally sound planning, a \$82 million Sundarbans bio-diversity conservation project has been approved, financed by a loan from the ADB together with grants from GEF and the Nordic Development Fund. Part of the project is to strengthen and restructure the Forest Department of Government of Bangladesh's Khulna-based operations, improve bio-diversity conservation and forest management, reduce poverty level of people living in the impact or buffer zone bordering the forest by expanding economic oppor-tunities, and adoption of supportive set of policies regarding charging economic prices for access to the forest.

vation Project as it stands consist of five parts.

 Effective organisation of the SRF, comprising (a) a Sundarbans Management Agency. (b) a Sundarbans Stewardship Commission; (c) a Stakeholder Advisory Council; and (d) Up-Education to Increase Awareness of the Value of the SRF.

ii. Bio-diversity conservation and sustainable resource management based on improved FD capacity to plan and undertake operations in support of forest, aquatic and wildlife resources, including the three existing wildlife sanc-

iii. Socio-economic development of the impact zone, through (a) NGO operations for social mobilization and organisation of user groups to exploit SRF resources on a sustainable basis; and (b) planned social investments and alternative livelihood activities, including micro-linance services, to reduce both the incidence of poverty and the level of dependency on the SRF.

iv. Ecotourism development and marketing, involving (a) construction of basic public infrastructure, (b) training of related personnel to provide services acceptable to international and domestic tourists; (c) development of community awareness of ecotourism opportunities and the potential impacts; and (d) development of a regulatory framework and marketing strategy within government and the private sector to promote the Sundarbans as an ecotourist destination.

(TAG), Monitoring and Studies, comprising (a) a TAG to provide scientific and resource management support and to train personnel; (b) environmental and resource monitoring by a specialist international NGO: (c) independent inspection services; and (d) related studies for improved ecosystem management, pollution monitoring and control, and other priority

NGOs working in the Sundarbans developed a guide for all forthcoming projects in the Sundarban area, in particular to influence the Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project,

darbans.

To develop a bio-diversity As stated the proposed Sun-

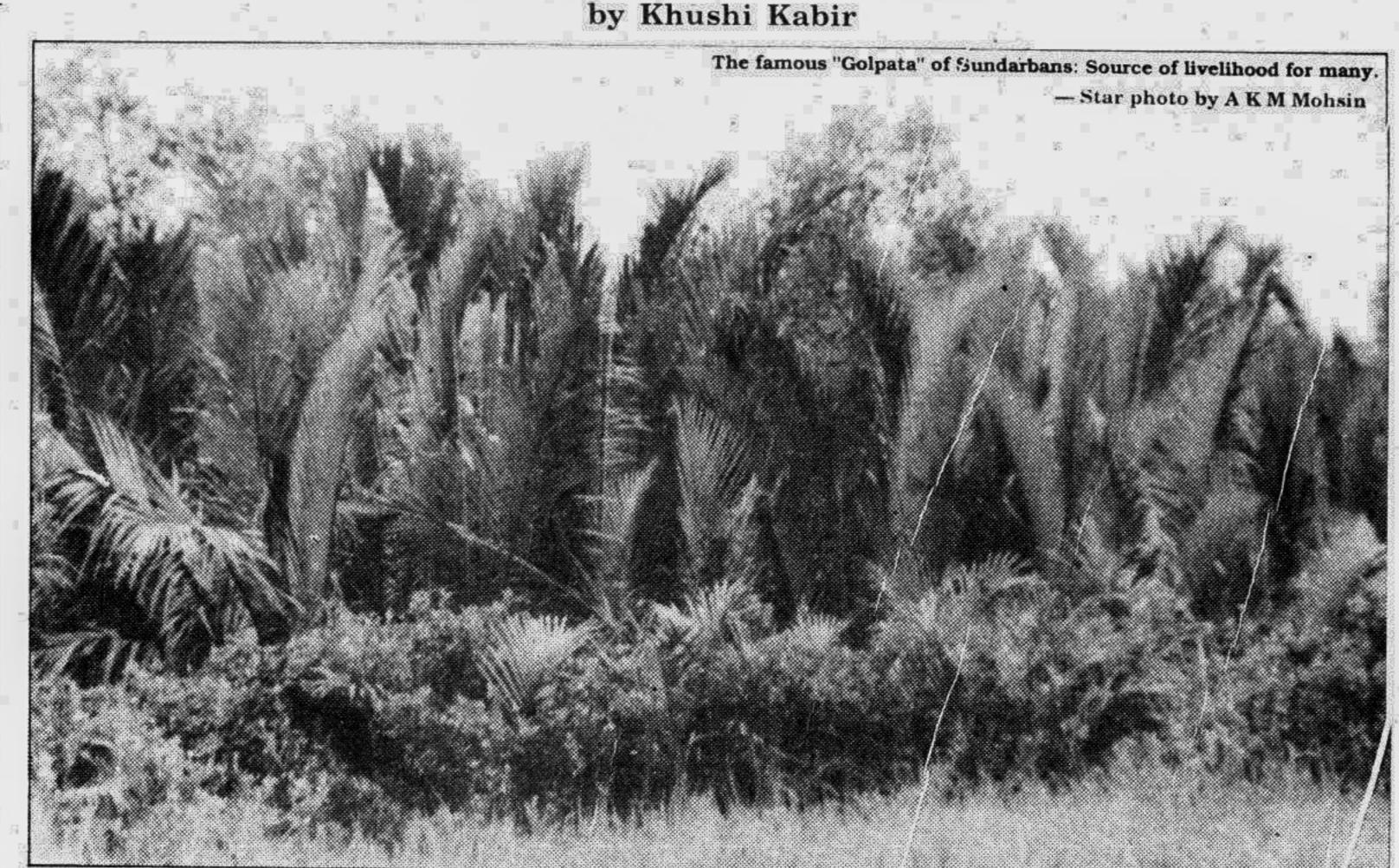
darban Bio-Diversity Conser-

graded Infrastructure; (e) Public

tuaries.

v. Technical Advisory Group

Taking this opportunity, the



in collaboration with local communities.

Major concerns of the study was to ascertain how the Sundarbans impact on people's lives and how people impact on the resources, as well as identify means of maintaining the integrity of the Sundarbans as an ecosystem from different stakeholders perspectives. Specific objectives were to find out: resource users' perceptions

regarding changing resource availability in the SRF; · resource users' view on mechanisms/precesses for in-

stitutional arrangement for conservation and management of the SRF resources; existence of any resource user organisation for example

primary problems faced by

resources users' inter-

est/identification of opportu-

nities for alternative income

generating or employment op-

tions to reduce the pressure on

their participation (actual and

potential), in the management

and conservation of the SRF re-

combining different techniques

of Participatory Rural Ap-

praisal (PRA) and Rapid Rural

Appraisal (RRA) was followed

by the groups for Integrated

Management and Bio-diversity

Conservation of the Sundar-

bans Reserved Forest (SRF)

Feasibility Study as a document

to be used in designing the ac-

The Issues

finally take into account most

of the concerns expressed in the

NGO study, vital gaps still exist.

While stressing that the policy

of the ADB, the major partner

in this project, is founded on

Following the Soviet with-

drawal in 1989 from

Afghanistan, then ruled by

Muhammad Najibullah, the

Arabs, including Bin Laden, be-

gan drifting back to their

homes. But their heightened

political consciousness meant

they now saw countries such as

Saudi Arabia and Egypt as

client states of Washington, just

as the Najibullah regime was

formed a formidable con-

stituency, combining strong

ideological convictions with

newly-acquired fighting skills.

Meanwhile, several of the mili-

tary camps established by the

ISI and CIA near the Pakistan-

Afghanistan border continued

to train volunteers for fighting

In their home countries they

Moscow's.

Though the ADB project did

tual project.

A multi-method approach

· resources users' view on

the stakeholders:

SRF resources and

the three basic principles of protection, production and participation, the project also stresses in its background, the need for natural resource inventories, zoning of lands, establishment of proper land use policies and rationalised user rights to public owned resources i.e. forest areas.

The major occupations of local populations living off or dependent on the Sundarbans (there are no population living inside the Sundarbans) were initially the "Mowalis" (honey collectors) and the "Bowalis' (wood collectors) along with fisherfolk. Towards the last century and immediately prior to it, areas of Sundarbans were cleared for agriculture production. The traditional users of

Sundarbans

marginalised, as agriculturists

now became the major commu-

nities living on the fringe of the

Sundarbans. The setting up of

the Forest Department to pro-

tect the Sundarbans ended up

with the Department being the

primary player in all activities

Starting from issuing per-

mits to use resources, to toll col-

lection and policing the forest

obviously led to rampant cor-

ruption of the Forest Depart-

ment. All the groups without

exception, participating in the

participatory exercise, have un-

equivocally identified the

Forester, with his corruption

and lack of accountability to

the local population, as the ma-

jor exploiter of the Forest, both

The second group of individ-

uals identified as a major

source of exploitation, are the

money lenders on whom the lo-

cal communities are heavily

dependent on, and who in collu-

sion with foresters, are a major

cause for pushing local people

to exploit the forest resources

directly and indirectly.

beyond its capacity.

pertaining to the Sundarbau.

During the 1980s a new phenomena gripped the Sundarbans and its adjacent area with the advent of Shrimp Acquaculture. At present the major economic activity in the buffer zone, (or impact zone as called in the Sundarbans Bio-diver sity Conservation Project), is Shrimp Acquaculture. Agriculture land, which used to be the major source of employment has now been transformed to Shrimp Ponds, locally called "Ghers '. The regular forms of

undergone dramatic changes. Although the economic return at the macro level may have been considered successful, although this is increas-

ingly being questioned, at the

micro-level, it has created a

very adverse affect on the lives

of the majority of the people

living in the area, especially the

poorer sections of society

Shrimp farmers have forcibly

occupied the agricultural lands

of the poor which has now

forced many of them into the

forest to search for their earn-

homestead rearing of ducks and

poultry too, shrimp farming

has led to a decline of the same.

On the other hand, due to loss of

their usual form of livelihoods

and sustenance a large section

of all occupation groups are

moving into collection of

employment. According to a

shrimp fry, as a major source of

seasonal diagram of different

stakeholders activities in the

report, shrimp fry collection is

the only activity that is done

through the entire year. In the

diagram estimating changes

during the past 30 years, loss of

shrimp fry is very starkly indi-

the crab and shell collectors,

The shrimp fry collectors,

In the case of livestock and

occupations of the share-crop-

per, agriculture workers, small

farmers and fisherfolk have

on the Sundar bans as well as those living within the impact zone are clear that stringent laws to control commercial enterprises exploiting the Sundarbans for commercial interests, need to be put in place and

countable, democratic and effi-

implementation of these laws The Forest Department needs to be decentralised and made more responsible and accountable to the local population ... Inclusion of all local communities — particularly the marginalised communities dependent on these natural resources - must be ensured in all phases of planning, implementation

the nypa collectors have all identified the unsustain ability of shrimp fry collection in the area. It also states that t'ne negative impact and the loss of availability of shrimp fry and other species, and the over exploitation of nypa since rice straw used for that, ching materials is now unavailable due to decrease of rice cultivation in favour of shrimp, is also due to large-scale shrinip farming in the area

The communities dependant

their needs. ensured. The Forest Depart ment needs to be decentralised and made more responsible and accountable to the local population. The total control of the Fcrest Department along with their policing function needs to replaced by another more ac-

cient system. All economic interest groups ensuring gender and class representation be given adequate role in monitoring and protection of the forest through a benefit sharing basis. Alternative employment generation has come out as a major need along with cautious and responsible credit availability. The main stress however remains, people's involvement in planning and monitoring of all interventions with the inclusion of NGOs as watch-dogs at

However, care, caution and concern need to be exercised. While the Project Document recognises that shrimp acquaculture through conversion of agriculture lands has resulted in increase of poverty, the major activity prescribed in the

local, national and interna-

tional levels.

expressed regardir ig activities to be undertaken though this credit. Promotion of livestock and poultry with sout tackling the unbridled gre with of Shrimp Acquaculture, i's merely being an Ostrich. Becamise microcredit for livestock 2 and poultry has been consider ed successful in other parts o'i Bangladesh, investing in this activity in the Sundarbans adjacent areas despite the fact that the people have very clearly stated that these acti vities are now almost non-exist ent in shrimp areas due to lack of grazing space, is being very short sighted. The probability is that given the lazk of employment opportuniti es, the credit may be used to ei ther purchase boats and

impact zone has beer a microcre-

dit, with no care a nd caution

nets to catch wild shrimp fry, or star t shrimp culture further destroying the bio-diversity in the Su ndarbans. The proposed projerct has to clearly take account o'i the negative aspects of s,hrimp acquaculture and design the activities in the impact zone accordingly. In the case of microcredit elsewhere in the country, the question remains that nowhere has microcredit really replaced local level money lending as a system, or lessened his interest rates nor does it reach the bottom 20 per cent of the poor. Overexposure of microcredit and lack of investment opportunities has led to a decrease in its popularity amongst its borrowers. Stories of harrasment in the name of loan recovery and credit discipline are well documented. Credit has not yet been proved to have led to self-reliance for the majority of the poor, on the contrary it has created further dependency on yet another institution, the NGO.

Sustainability of people's organisation through use of local and community resources and through collective savings needs to be emphasised rather than credit. The stress on social development through people's control is necessary and needs to be emphasised more strongly. The main stress should be on responsible governance and accountability to the people, with a well designed community based planning process. Involvement of all local communities in not only the planning stage but also community based monitoring can only be effective if people fell that the programme fulfills

The growth of the so-called Eco-Tourism, in the absence of proper monitoring and public accountability may result in further endangering the fragile eco-systems in the Sundarbans. Unscrupulous Tourist companies using the label of "Eco Tourism" may create clearings for construction of tourist lodges and resorts within the forest. For eco-tourism to be effective ecologically sensitive tour companies as well as ecologically sensitive tourist are also essential. Since lack of proper monitoring and faulty administration has been identified as a major drawback in the Sundarbans, as well as in the entire country, simply designing projects without reforming the entire system may be a case of whitewashing in the name of conservation.

The linkages of different projects in the area, particularly in the Water Sector, i.e. the Khulna Jessore Drainage and Rehabilitation Programme (KJDRP), which proposes building of controversial regulators on waterways just north of

Sundarbans and again financed by ADB cannot be overlooked, nor can the need to coordinate all ongoing and proposed pro-jects in the region such as Gorai River Restoration Project and the proposed Ganges Dependant Area Study. The project closure of the Khulna Paper Mills as a polluting industry, without looking at the Mongla Port, or other polluting industries, within the Impact Zone needs to reviewed and a more whollistic approach needed. Consultants being given responsibility for the project should have their track record, particularly in the field of environment and participation, carefully evalu-It therefore becomes very

clear that the proposed project to protect and sustain the Sundarbans can only work positively provided local communi-ties are involved right from the beginning. In cases where local communities may have conflicts of interest amongst themselves, the interest of the preservation of the environment and the interests of marginalised local communities should be given priority. The role of NGOs to ensure and monitor cannot be overemphasised. In a project of such a nature, even though mention of an international NGO of repute the IUCN is highlighted, the need for a larger group to oversee and monitor the project through availability and full access to all information is nevertheless an important facet.

The following recommendations are being put forward:

- Inclusion of all local communities - particularly the marginalised communities dependant on these natural resources ensuring gender and class representation MUST be included in all phases of planning, implementation and monitoring. This must be followed for all interventions and programmes and for all major projects undertaken, in order to protect Ramsar and important ecological sites.

- In case where local conflict of interests may exist, the overriding concern towards ensuring the interest of the marginalised local communities and the preservation of environment, should get priority. - That any development

project outside . World Heritage sites

have even indirect implications on the site itself, must be severely scrutinised and all information be made available to all concerned and interested groups. In other words all projects in the Khulna division and Barisal division must be fully evaluated and open to scrutiny.

- The proposed Sundarbans Biodiversity Conservation Project must ensure access to all information by all national and international NGOs and interested individuals.

- Concern for increasing shrimp acquaculture as the major economic activity in the Impact Zone and its negative impact on the forest has to be taken cognisance of, and remedial measures ensured.

- All construction on waterways that at any point of time may directly or indirectly affect the Sundarbans should not be undertaken unless independent and full assessment is

The author is Coordinator of Nijera Kori, a local NGO working at the grassroots. This piece is based on the author's speech delivered presented at the 13th Session of the Global Biodiversity Forum in San Jose, Costa Rica, in May 1999.

## US Moves to Put Terrorist Genie Back in the Bottle

It is a year since terrorist bombings against United States embassies in Africa provoked an angry Ameri-

by Dilip Hiro

cated.

and momitoring.

year after the United States rained missiles on Afghanistan for sheltering Osama Bin Laden, the militant Saudi businessman alleged to have hatched the bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Washington has failed to nab him or persuade the Afghanis to extradite him.

What was remarkable about the 73 Cruise missiles that US warships fired in anger at Afghanistan on 21 August 1998 was that it was the first time in history that a country had bombed another for the alleged offence of an individual. In their zeal to portray Bin

Laden as the world's number one terrorist - Washington has a \$5 million dollar-reward for his capture — US officials and media have studiously avoided examining the reasons behind his anti-Americanism, let alone the factors that led to his

Chief among the causes is his opposition to the presence of thousands of US troops in Saudi Arabia, home not only to a quarter of the globe's oil reserves but also the holiest shrines of Islam, in Mecca and

So long as the root cause of the problem remains — the US military presence in Saudi Arabia with the ostensible aim of underwriting the monarchy

of the House of Saud - the Bin Laden phenomenon will persist even if the man himself is caught.

The roots of this phethe US, Pakistan and Saudi regime in Kabul.

From the start, the ranks of joined by non-Afghan volunwas Bin Laden, then a 25-yearold civil engineering graduate and a member of an affluent family of contractors in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

courage non-Afghan Muslims to enlist for the anti-Soviet war: The 30,000 men who' joined up were almost equally divided between Arabs and non-Arabs. The former operated under his leadership.

Besides participating in guerrilla actions, Bin Laden helped build roads in rebel-controlled areas. Working closely with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he also collected funds from affluent Saudis.

The Mujahedin underwent military training and political education by Pakistan's Inter-

nomenon lie in 1980s Afghanistan, when Islamic rebels, trained and financed by Arabia, waged a successful torate under CIA supervision. guerrilla campaign against the In political classes, they were Moscow-backed communist given a strong does of nationalism and Islam.

the Afghan Mujahedin were teers. One of the first volunteers

He launched a scheme to en-

'holy wars' elsewhere. Having tested victory in Afghanistan, many of the Arabs felt, naively, that they Services Intelligence (ISI) direccould also oust US troops from

can manhunt for the alleged mastermind, Osama Bin Laden. But a Gemini News Service commentary argues, the man Washington describes as the world's most wanted terrorist is a creature of its own creation.

> Saudi Arabia, which has maintained strong links with Washington since its inception in 1932.

During the 1990 Kuwait crisis, many pious Saudis were angry at the presence of 540,000 non-Muslim US troops in their country. They argued that under Sharia Islamic law, it is forbidden for foreign forces to be based in Saudi Arabia, where the Prophet Mohammed was born and died, under their own

Their anger intensified when Washington did not withdraw all its troops from the kingdom after the liberation of Kuwait in March 1991.

When Bin Laden protested vocally he was stripped of his Saudi citizenship and expelled from the country in 1994. He settled in Sudan, ruled by an Islamist government, and resumed his construction business. But, pressured by Riyadh and Washington, Sudan too expelled him in 1996.

He moved to Afghanistan,

then in the midst of a civil war, and called for a jihad - a holy war — against the Americans in Saudi Arabia.

"The presence of the American crusader forces in Muslim Gulf states... is the greatest danger and [poses] the most serious harm, threatening the world's largest oil reserves," he said. "Pushing out this American occupying enemy is the most important duty after the duty of belief in God." After the Afghan area where

Bin Laden and his entourage were based fell to the Taliban militia in 1996, he became a 'guest' of the Taliban regime headed by Mullah Muhammad Omar, his friend since the 1980s.

There is no official explanation for the US troop presence in Saudi Arabia. Unofficially it is linked to the no-fly zone in southern Iraq. But this zone was imposed only in August 1992-17 months after the end of the Gulf war.

A more plausible explanaion is offered by defence ex-

perts who claim inside knowledge of a joint Washington-Riyadh strategy apparently devised after the armed seizure of the grand mosque in Mecca in a rebellion against the royal family in 1979. More than 470 people were killed in the course of the 15-day-barricade and troops had to be called in from France and Pakistan to end it.

If there is an anti-royalist coup, say analysts, the Pentagon would need 72 hours to marshal its full force to reverse the takeover. The presence of US military officials at key Saudi military facilities is therefore considered indispensable to ensure a swift response in an emergency.

Even the number of US troops in Saudi Arabia is disputed. After a bomb explosion killed 19 US servicemen near the Dhahran airbase in 1996, the Saudi government grudgingly admitted the presence of 5,000 US troops in the kingdom.

But well-informed Saudi watchers claim the number may be three to four times higher, with several thousand working in civilian dress in Dhahran, Jeddah and in the defence ministry in Rivadh.

It was against this background that Bin Laden and his Saudi acolytes expounded the thesis that their country was occupied by the US. During the Washington-Baghdad crisis of February 1998, when the Pentagon built up its naval forces in the Gulf, Bin Laden and a group of other fundamentalist leaders offered this assessment, in language reminiscent of the anti-Soviet rhetoric in Alghanistan

"For more than seven years America has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, humiliating its people, terrorising its neighbours, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighbouring Muslim peoples."

Then came Bin Laden's infamous fatwa (religious decree): "The ruling to kill the Ame icans and their allies — civili?n and military - is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, to liberate the Al Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Hely Mosque [in Macca] from their

grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim

[again]" This was clearly open season for all who agreed with Bin

Whether those who carried out the ghastly bombings in Nairobi and Dares Salaam in August 1998 were inspired by this fatwa or were acting on specific orders from Bin Laden remains to be determined.

According to Milt Beardon, the CIA station chief in Islamabad in the late 1980s, who seemingly worked with Bin Laden, the terrorist's international network is "more often inspired by him than controlled by him."

Washington bags to disagree. On 10 August, the Qatar-based independent Al Jazeera television reported two US military planes landing in Pakistan carrying commandos to seize Bin Laden, believed to be based near

the Pakistani border. Though the report forced the US to abandon the plan, further attempts are bound to follow. since he has by now been portrayed by Washington as the North Star of Terrorism.

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