

Musharraf's Reaction Overkill

IN a surprisingly emphatic reaction to Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina's call at the UN for actions against any unconstitutional take-over of an elected government, Pakistan's Chief Executive General Musharraf did two specific things. First of all, he unilaterally postponed the meeting arranged by both sides to be held at the sideline of the Millennium Summit. This meant that he virtually called it off unceremoniously having scant regard for the other side's preparations for the same. Secondly, he regarded some remarks of Bangladesh Prime Minister at the UN as being 'a direct interference in Pakistan's internal affairs,' so that he saw 'no point in meeting her in such an atmosphere.' This is something of a reaction overkill.

We do not see any particular reason why Pakistan's chief executive should have taken a personal umbrage of Sheikh Hasina's remarks or even taken those nationally in that those came as a reaffirmation of a general feeling about the need to protect elected and constitutional governments from military take-overs or seizures of power.

Bangladesh feels in it bones as to what it meant to have had a long period of her history being convulsed by military coups and counter coups most violently. In fact, her being a victim of military rule has made her proformally conscious of the dire need to avert it. Pakistan, too, has seen her elected governments falling like house of cards before the military-driven captures of power with a somewhat inexorable regularity. Evidently, the legacy has not proved helpful to the growth of democracy in Pakistan and if the Pakistanis were asked to speak their mind they would have preferred democracy to military rule.

Sheikh Hasina's stand on military rule in general at the world body need not affect inter-state relations with Pakistan nor those with her people.

In the same vein, could we also say that the demands for an apology for the genocide committed in the then East Pakistan and a trial of the perpetrators of the same are not designed to denigrate either the Pakistan government or its people. These are entirely focused on the culprits of 1971, and it is an obligation of the current generation of Pakistanis to set the records straight.

It is also our belief that the prospect for an early resumption of the SAARC summit cycle would not be blighted by any overstretched misunderstanding between governments of the member-countries of SAARC.

Fringe-touching at ZIA

THE three-hour police blitzkrieg Friday at the Zia International Airport and arrest of 78 persons, including nine women and 26 children, from the canopy and parking area must have had a sobering effect on the utter disorder that has become the signature mark for the important installation these days. Harassment of passengers, foreigners and locals alike, just outside the concourse by beggars and drivers of rented cars has assumed embarrassing proportions in recent times. The moment a passenger comes out of the arrival lounge there begins a tug of war between him or her and the rent-a-car people or the 'resident' vagrants. He or she is virtually pushed and shoved around. If one doesn't have pre-arranged transport, one is doomed to extreme inconvenience. Not that those who have are spared the exit hassle. There have been reports of passengers being taken hostage and rescued in return for ransom.

Hopefully, this was not a one-time exercise and would be made into a sustained operation to flush the airport premises of hanger-on. To do that, however, the people at the helm must take an objective view of the sorry state of affairs at the ZIA itself. There are reasons to believe that a cartel is operating at the airport, and that a few lower-level employees of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) are involved. So, to rid the airport of such irritants, the CAAB must start the cleansing from within. And it is not a Herculean task. So far, to our knowledge, there hasn't been any effort to look into allegations of involvement against CAAB employees in a range of corrupt activities within and outside the concourse.

Besides, there are quite a few operational snags in passenger handling that need to be eliminated. Often, the security personnel stationed at the driveway pose hindrance to passenger movement. Ultimately, however, maintenance of law and order depends on strict enforcement of rules. We have heard of plans to commission a police station inside the airport for quite a while but so far have not seen any tangible development in that direction. Security and order at ZIA cannot be ensured with piecemeal arrangements. We expect the authorities to come up with a holistic approach so as to find a sustainable solution to the anarchy at ZIA.

Trees are No Playthings

FIRST, it is done in the name of development, then it happens in the name of construction and now it has happened in the name of cleanliness. Around fifty trees at the Agargaon G-type colony have been felled in the name of cleaning up the environment. These trees included fruit-bearing ones and also the big ones which give timber. But the residents of the area informed the Prothom Alo reporter that the tree-cutting spree came in a sequel to the enmity between the supporters of Awami League and those of rival BNP in the area. A local AL leader along with his supporters decided at an environment improvement committee meeting that the area should be 'cleaned' in the greater interest of the health of the people. This led to the cutting down of some banana trees as well as some Mahogany trees. The youth of the colony tried to prevent AL leader of the area Serajul Islam and his party from felling the trees but he warned them off with threats of police action. The residents complained of damage to their trees which was, however, accepted by the chairman of the environment committee but we do not see how their losses can be made up for.

In recent times much has been written against unnecessary and also indiscriminate felling of trees in the city and across the country but it seems the exhortations have not had any effect on people. We can only appeal to the conscientious section of the population to organise themselves against destruction of the environment in any form or shape. We have much less tree-cover than we need. There cannot be any compromise on the question of retaining whatever trees we have in the country. The government, in the meantime, should also play its part, irrespective of party affiliation.

Unilateral Declaration of Palestinian State Postponed

The total effort towards an immediate solution is a must. Any truncated peace deal will not only postpone peace, it may even ignite violence as any postponement of the Jerusalem issue at this stage may delay this for even another 50 years if not permanently.

PRESIDENT Arafat's well publicized unilateral declaration of Palestinian State on September 13, 2000, the date on which the peace process formally ends, with or without peace agreement with Israel was postponed, though temporarily, under the informal advice of President Clinton and also of the leaders of the European Community. This was expected (ref. my comment on this in The Daily Star on Aug. 9). Though this was the second postponement of the declaration of the statehood in two years, the decision was right as this will give peace another chance. There were reactions among the Palestinians in favour and against postponement but one Palestinian said, "Everybody knows that you can't call it a state if only one party declares it. As a member of the Third World, we can't make our decisions alone. There are so many countries that have influence over this declaration." However, Nabil Saath, a senior Palestinian official said, "Our right to declare a state is purely a Palestinian decision. The delay serves to give peace yet another chance, and it is not for any fear of reprisals by anyone."

Though no deadline has been fixed, the 129-member Central Council apparently had two deadlines in mind: November 15, on which day 12 years ago original declaration of Palestinian independence was made in Algiers and the other date is January 1, 2001, the 36th anniversary of the Fatah movement.

November 15 could be the possible date for declaration though some suggested waiting up to the end of the year to give maximum chance to the peace process. The suggestion appears valid as President Clinton, the person who is really dedicated to the peace process, will get the chance to work on this till his final days in the White House.

Any way, as it seems President Clinton made determined efforts to convince Prime Minister Barak the need for immediate resumption of the peace talk as that was the only way to have the postponement of the unilateral declaration of the Palestinian State. It seems that Barak also felt the same way and hence the decision for resumption of the peace talk. In the meantime, both Arafat and Barak made their positions on Jerusalem known to the world leaders concerned.

The postponement has several implications. This has undoubtedly given immediate respite to the world community on the issue of recognition of the new Palestinian State. However, the most important thing is that this has created the new opportunity for the parties concerned to continue negotiation, at least for another couple of weeks, for finding an acceptable solution. As mentioned above, many Palestinians are gradually getting impatient and indeed worried about their State. But the decision for postponement of the unilateral declaration shows political maturity of the Palestinian leadership and their respect for a peaceful resolution of the issues which are undoubtedly very difficult and have far reaching implications for the people of Faith.

Jerusalem's Walled City that holds the sites holy to the people of Faith is the main stumbling block. According to the Jews, the First Temple lies underneath the Muslim holy sites of the Walled City (Old City) and therefore, they must have sovereignty over the entire area of the Walled City. It's a fact that Solomon, King David's son, completed the Temple to establish "One God". Regarding his Kingdom, Solomon prayed to Almighty God:



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

(Al Quoran, Sura Sad, Ayat 35 Translation by Allama Yusuf Ali) "He said, O my Lord!

Forgive me, and grant me A Kingdom, which (It may be) suits not Another after me: For Thou art the Grantor Of Bounties (without measure)" Though King Solomon had abundant powers and bounties bestowed on him by God, he, as a prophet, withstood the temptation and prayed for forgiveness. Solomon was rightly fearful about the future of his kingdom. Indeed, his kingdom went to pieces after his death. There is no trace of Solomon's Temple; it was totally destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. What is visible today is a remnant of the western retaining wall of Herod's Second Temple.

The Jews still wait over the destruction of the First Temple. Today, there is always someone praying at the Western Wall which is also known as the Wailing Wall. In any case, both religions have sentiments attached to the holy sites in Jerusalem and that should lead them

to the idea of shared sovereignty. It should also be borne in mind that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God Almighty and resolution of the earthly issues should be made keeping that truth in view.

The idea of shared sovereignty emerged apparently from the fact that the Walled City has sites holy to the people of Faith and therefore two major contenders: Palestinian Arabs and the Jews must have sovereignty and free access to the sites holy to their religions.

The other possibility is to allow these two distant cousins in the conflict to have their sovereignty over their respective areas of holy sites. However, in either of the arrangements, the administrative and security measures shall have to be worked out amicably as the sites overlap and there is no way to separate them. May be initially the UN in collaboration with the OIC should help work out the details and ensure their implementation. But it seems that there is no alternative to accepting either of the above possibilities as a basis for a peaceful resolution of this very unique problem which probably does not exist anywhere else in the world.

However, the idea of having a partial peace deal without solving the issue of Jerusalem is fraught with danger. The negotiating environment that exists today

may not remain so after President Clinton leaves the White House. The players in the present negotiations seem to have better understanding of the issues and it would be infinitely good if things can be worked out today with the spirit of 'give and take'.

Today, because of personal commitment of President Clinton for peace in the Middle East, the US Administration is positive towards peace and it is well known that it may exert some reasonable amount of pressure on Israel. To prepare the grounds the US could as well make commitment of some financial and military aid to Israel. This may make Barak's position better domestically and then he could be in a position to be more lenient in terms of making concessions. He seems to be somewhat positive about the holy sites in East Jerusalem as he apparently realises that holding exclusive sovereignty over such holy sites which today belong to another religion would invite constant security and administrative problems. But he may not feel encouraged to make some moves in respect of the holy sites as now his hands are tight. He is already in trouble with his cabinet and the Knesset which would start its winter session from November. Therefore, the total efforts towards an immediate solution is a must.

Any truncated peace deal will not only postpone peace, it may even ignite violence as any postponement of the Jerusalem issue at this stage may delay this for even another 50 years if not permanently.

Suu Kyi's Determined Struggle

It has to be admitted that the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar face a daunting task in their mission since the regime has built up a system over the years which is strong and unlikely to crack easily. True, the long running campaign by Suu Kye has aroused emotions among the people but it would be naive to think that she and her supporters will be able to make significant dent in the ruling base of the regime.

her supporters on August 24 at Dala but the police stopped her and the group travelling with her at the outskirts of the capital. This was Suu Kyi's first trip outside Yangon in last two years and she had to spend in car, locked in a tense stand-off with government officials. When she and the group were forcibly taken back to the capital, the episode once again drew international attention revolving a leader who was denied her electoral victory and is often coming under harsh treatment from the military regime. She was not convinced by arguments of the government that she was stopped because of 'lack of security' measures required for the visit.

She was detained again and this triggered off criticisms from the democratic world, particularly from the United States and the European Union, against the Myanmar government, asking the authorities to release the pro-democracy leader from house arrest and withdraw all kinds of restrictions imposed on her freedom of movement.

Then the government lifted some restrictions and allowed her visitors for the first time since the stand-off. Western diplomats visited her and said both Suu Kyi and the chief of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Tin Oo looked thinner than they used

to be. The government said Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders who were placed under house arrest since September 2 no longer needed to stay at home. The NDL leaders, however, deplored because their headquarters still remain closed and relaxation in the restrictions since the opposition leaders were



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under house arrest were not anything encouraging. The ban for them on travelling outside the capital still stands.

But for Suu Kyi, the lifting of the ban is not enough. She said she would make a trip outside Yangon in next few days. "It is high time that the government stops restrictions on our right to operate as a political party," she was quoted to have said. She turned the table on the authorities saying, it was up to the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), which is the ruling junta, to choose any line of action she likes. The latest situation brings into sharp focus another ordeal that seems to be in the

offing involving the pro-democracy leader and the authorities. Because, any attempt by her to travel outside Yangon is likely to be met with adequate measures from the government, since the restrictions on trips outside the capital still stands. This is expected to come close on the heels of the

recent stand-off on her way to Dala. Two years ago, Suu Kyi spent 13 days in car after being prevented from leaving Yangon. She had to give up her protest suffering from dehydration. For the leader who is struggling to establish democracy in the country, nothing is unexpected since she took up the task as a principal position.

Suu Kyi, daughter of slain Burmese nationalist leader General Aung San, lived in London where she studied and married a British but returned to Myanmar in 1988. She felt the nation should have popular system of governance. She quickly emerged as a pro-democracy leader and

her movement won 82 per cent of the votes in the national elections of 1990 reflecting the wish of the people towards democracy. But the military refused to relinquish power and Suu Kyi alleged massive repression against her supporters while she herself was detained in various phases. She believes in non-violence and is greatly inspired by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. She urges the regime to settle political differences through dialogue and negotiations. She won hearts of the people of Myanmar and her tireless campaign for democratic principles won her the Nobel Peace award. The struggle to restore democracy in the country began in 1962 when the military seized power and Suu Kyi provided the kind of push and encouragement needed to the objective after her return from London.

However, it has to be admitted that the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar faces a daunting task in their mission since the regime has built up a system over the years which is strong and unlikely to crack easily. It says that military has successfully given security and development to a country which was mired with manifold problems. It also says that the transformation of the nation is taking place as far as

the economic development and progress are concerned. The government ridicules Suu Kyi's claim that only a representative government can meet the aspirations of Myanmar people. True, the long running campaign by the democratic leader has aroused deep emotions among the people but this will be naive to think that she and her supporters will be able to make much dent in the ruling base of the regime.

The junta's frequent harsh measures help Suu Kyi earn sympathy but unfortunately there is little likelihood that the situation would explode in anything uprising in the near future. But the strength of the Myanmar popular leader lies in the massive support and sympathy she enjoys across the world. The world leaders at the recent Millennium Summit in New York deplored Myanmar government to for treating Suu Kye 'undemocratically'. Suu Kyi has thanked UN secretary general Kofi Annan for the support during her car ordeal and also expressed gratefulness to the world leaders who morally stood by her.

Undoubtedly, Suu Kye faces an uphill task in her campaign to restore democracy in the country. It is possible that she can see the light at the end of the tunnel. However, this may be a long way. Democracy in this Southeast Asian nation would certainly encourage flourishing of representative government in this part of the world and nearby regions. Suu Kyi deserves appreciation for her uninterrupted struggle to ensure reflection of popular will in the governance.

World Needs a Revitalised UN

by AMM Shahabuddin

The ensuing 55th Annual General Assembly session scheduled to begin in the customary third week of September (this year 19 September) should take up seriously Bangladesh Prime Minister's proposal 'to re-build' the UN as a 'strong forum' to tackle various global problems, and establish peace and security for smooth economic development of all regions of the world, particularly the third world, and thereby re-establish its lost credibility to the "peoples of the United Nations" in whose name the Charter begins.

Millennium Declaration covers all aspects of socio-economic life of the peoples of the world, such as economic development, alleviation of poverty, mass education at primary level for boys and girls, enjoying equal rights irrespective of sexes, campaign against spread of HIV and AIDS and "scourge" of malaria (remember the UN charter pledged to save succeeding generations from the "scourge of war". But has the UN been successful in that? Perhaps not, because it had lost that capacity). Another item included in the "wish list" is to "significantly" improve the lives of "at least 100 million slum dwellers". It also called upon the industrialised countries to adopt by May 1, 2001, a policy of duty and quota free access for all exports from the LDCs and implement a programme of debt relief, so on and so forth. So far so good.

It sounds good. A tree is known by its fruits. When the "pious wishes" would be put into action, no body knows how long it would take to materialise them and when benefits would "trickle down" to the needy nations, then only such lofty wishes would be justified. Till then the wishes would remain only wishes. At least the past experience of such "pious wishes" have proved so. Parenthetically speaking, "If wishes could be horses, then the beggars could ride them."

The most important aspect of the Declaration is that nothing has been categorically said as to how to improve UN's fallen image: what has gone wrong with it in doing its prime duty of maintenance of peace and security and save the peoples from the "scourge of war" (perhaps also "scourge of malaria", as contained in the Declaration); what has made the UN a "lame duck"

and why it has become so weak as to walk with a "borrowed crutch"? These are basic questions and need a thorough analysis. I will try to do it in brief because of space shortage or restraint.

"Re-build the UN...."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has done well, while addressing the Summit, to urge the world leaders "to re-build the UN as a strong forum", capable of eradicating poverty, illiteracy, diseases and ensuring peace and development. Therefore, to achieve these noble objectives, set before the UN, particularly peace, which means freedom from war, one of the aims of the UN, the world needs a revitalised "newlook" UN, free from the clutches of any "superpower" or a group of "big powers" to show its capability to achieve the goals for which it was founded literally on the smouldering ashes of the 2nd world War. The present lifeless, toothless and emasculated UN is merely the shadow of its past image. Think what some "vested interests" have made of the UN to serve their strategy. And to put the UN back on the right track, some basic changes and in some cases strictly follow the book (I mean the charter) approach, are urgently needed. Now let us go for a brief analysis as to how these can be achieved.

Secretary-General's Position

The first thing that comes to mind is the Post of the Secretary-General (SG) who holds the most enviable and unique position in the UN hierarchy, given to him by the Charter. The Charter, although calls him "Chief Administrative Officer" of the UN, but has granted him special "Mandate" not to be mixed up with Super Power or Big Power politics and carry on his responsibilities

without fear or favour and free from any political influence or pressure from outside. Under Article 39 of the Charter, the SG has been authorised to "determine" the existence of any threat to peace, breach of the peace or an act of aggression and make recommendation of "measures" to be taken under Articles 41 and 42.

Under Article 100(1), the SG has been instructed "not to seek or receive any instructions from any government or any other authority external to the Organisation (UN)". And under Article 100(2), the member states have been asked "not to seek to influence" the SG in the discharge of his duties.

There exists a very close coordination between the SG, the Security Council and another powerful committee, known as Military Staff Committee. Article 47 says that "Plans for application of armed forces shall be made by the Security Council with the assistance of the Military Staff Committee". Unfortunately, the Military Staff Committee has seldom been used in any plan of action against any "recalcitrant" state. Hence neither the SG nor the Security Council or the Military Staff Committee, is supposed to play second fiddle to super-power or to become their yes man."

But what the world had witnessed during the Gulf War (1990-91) and the Bosnian War? America was all out with its 'might is right' policy, throwing in the winds all Charter provisions to meet such situations. The then SG Butros Butros Ghali, became the most 'controversial' person in the UN. The UN role was totally ignored both in launching attack against invading Iraqi army as well as creation of 'no-fly zones' in northern and southern Iraq by America taking the lead.

The US-led alliance launched its half planned air action on Belgrade (Yugoslav capital) and Pristina (Bosnian capital) which led to more severe massacre of Bosnian Muslims. And this was done without seeking Security Council approval, as if America is the de facto UN! During the Bosnian war, France, a close ally of America in NATO, proposed for a Security Council resolution to authorise stationing of NATO forces for peace-keeping purposes in Albania and Macedonia, both neighbours of Bosnia, but America, flatly refused to do so declaring that it "could do it independently." Perhaps apprehending Soviet 'veto' on its mission. What a mockery of the name of UN and what a disrespect shown to that august world body!

'Veto' Should be Abolished

Another most pernicious 'fly in the ointment' is the 'veto' power given by the Charter to the five permanent members of the Security Council. The founding fathers of the UN introduced this system perhaps to maintain balance of power between the two super powers America and Soviet Union. This power has been used and misused on many occasions, perhaps, in the name of transparency and good governance of the UN system. But since the demise of Soviet Union and all that it meant, the 'veto' power has now become more a 'property' of the only superpower left in the field. Even if four permanent members agree to lift sanctions, imposed against any country, like Iraq, they can't do it, because there remains the fifth one to veto it.

It may be mentioned here that one of the causes of the pre-mature death of the League of Nations was the overuse of the veto weapon by the then 'big

powers' who actually turned the League into an "European Club". In fact, the 'veto' system, which has been dubbed as a 'lunatic device' by H G Wells, was foreword from the 14th century Polish Parliament which was actually destroyed by this system. Hence the earlier the 'veto' is abolished, the better for the UN which then can be run on democratic system.

Expansion of Security Council

With the abolition of the 'veto' system comes question of the expansion of the Security Council, say, to 30 members from present 15, with the proportionate increase in the number of both Permanent and Non-permanent members. Asians getting at least two more 'slots' for Permanent Members. Henceforth, all decisions on procedural matters should be made by a simple majority or two-thirds votes of permanent and non-permanent members taken together and all other matters by an affirmative vote of, say, 19 members of the permanent and non-permanent members.

To sum-up, the ensuing 55th Annual General Assembly session scheduled to begin in the customary third week of September (this year 19 September) should take up seriously Bangladesh Prime Minister's proposal 'to re-build' the UN as a 'strong forum' to tackle various global problems, and establish peace and security for smooth economic development of all regions of the world, particularly the third world, and thereby re-establish its lost credibility to the "peoples of the United Nations" in whose name the Charter begins. Let not the world leaders forget what the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said that the UN "could come to be seen as a symbol of failure, rather than symbol of hope." Before that woeful pessimism expressed by Kissinger comes true, let the world leaders take a united stand to save the world from going the League of Nations way. The writer is a retired UN official.