

The Q&A on Radio Lacked Credibility

NOBODY can quarrel with our elected Prime Minister wanting to answer questions directly from the citizens. On the contrary one must give credit to her for being the first head of government to introduce this practice in our country which has been in existence in most democracies for a long time.

However what went in the name of replying to public questions raises serious doubts as to how open it really was to the general public, how much of it was orchestrated and how useful it actually was in responding to public concerns. The main purpose of many questions seemed to praise the government rather than to hold it accountable for its actions. Some of the most crucial issues were not addressed at all. The most disappointing aspect of the whole programme was that the Prime Minister avoided most of the tough questions and treated many of them rather trivially. Among the very few serious questions asked was one that dealt with the recent double murder in Sutrapur in which the son of a female leader of AL, who is reputed to be a 'friend' of the PM, is alleged to be the main culprit. The city remains in a state of shock by the sheer cruelty and the savage nature of the perpetration. The question to the PM regarding this event was "... a friend of yours is alleged to be involved in it. What are you going to do about it?" The PM's reply was to the effect that "... all women in the country are my friends." Almost all the questions that required an explanation she avoided. Only those that provided opportunities either to praise her 'achievements' or denigrate her opponents she elaborated on. At the end of the programme was hardly anything close to accounting to the public for her actions but was more of self and party propaganda on public expense.

The fundamental flaw of the programme was that it lacked credibility and as such remained of limited acceptability to the public. In the future if such programmes are to be repeated then more authentic questions must be allowed with opportunity for follow-up questions. However, all said and done, it was good move by the government but one that requires serious restructuring to reach the level of credibility that will make the programme of any worth to the public.

We conclude with a suggestion. We all know that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed of Malaysia has an email address in which he himself responds to questions from the public on a daily basis. Why not introduce one for our PM. Let the public be allowed to ask questions daily, and let there be daily official responses posted on the Internet for all of us in Bangladesh and also for those Bangladeshis living abroad. A special wing in the PMO can be dedicated for this, which we believe will greatly increase the communication between the government and the governed. The cost will be well worth the benefit. This will be another first for Sheikh Hasina's government.

Congrats to the Mosque Committee

OUR heartiest congratulations to Segunbagicha Jame Masjid committee on their giving a consent to Rajuk for demolishing a part of the structure that was built illegally on public land. This is an extraordinary thing to happen in a country where unscrupulous people wearing a fake mantle of religion build mosques on parcels of public land they had grabbed in defiance of the law of the land which is sacrosanct in the eye of Islam as an expression of justice and fairplay. Basically, the great Prophet of Islam Hazrat Muhammad (SM) says that illegally built mosques are not acceptable by the canons of our religion. But in the name of religion a section of people build mosque illegally by grabbing public land to further their commercial interests. Gradually shops are constructed around the structure which in due course become full-fledged commercial centres, totally defeating the purpose of the mosque. As the business starts proliferating more land is expropriated thus setting off a chain reaction. This is not only confined to the capital alone but in other areas of the country too the practice catches on and people can hardly oppose such things dabbed as these were with a religious colour. The example set by the Segunbagicha Jame Masjid committee, we strongly feel, needs now to be emulated by others who had expropriated public or private lands to erect a religious structure with an irreligious motive. Once again we thank the Masjid committee and also Rajuk for their bold actions.

Cancer Treatment

IT'S very unfortunate that the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH) at Mahakali, the only one of its kind in the country, is facing a hard time due to a persistent shortage of doctors and technicians and the non-functioning of some vital equipment. The performance of a hospital that receives at least 100 patients per day, should have been much better than what it is today after nearly two decades since its inception. Patients' rush should have propelled an expansion of NICRH, with proper technical facilities and manpower to go with the same.

When global concern for cancer is at its peak and finding an antidote for the disease is not very far off, the situation in Bangladesh looks patently untenable. It is sad that we are yet to get a fully-fledged cancer treatment hospital in the country even though the inauguration of the first cancer ward in the country at the DMCH dated back to late sixties. More so when budgetary allocations to the Health Ministry have increased to Taka 6000 crore this year from Taka 5100 crore last year a sizeable chunk of money which better be funnelled into priority areas, cancer treatment, for one.

It is understood, the government has taken up a plan to expand the NICRH by raising the number of beds from 50 to 300. The plan is incorporated in the current year's programme for the Health Ministry. The expansion plan will be only decorative without the component for an improvement of the treatment facilities.

Clinton and NMD: Why Pass on the Buck to Successor?

by A M M Shahabuddin

Whatever might be the possible causes and effects of Clinton's proposal of the National Missile Defence shield and its sudden withdrawal by him on the eve of the recent UN Millennium Summit, the 'show' has not ended yet. Clinton has very skilfully passed on the 'buck' to his successor to take the final decision. So the 'powder-keg' is there, just kept temporarily in abeyance.

AT last President Clinton could see the 'reason' behind the strong criticism by China and Russia of his high profile 60-billion dollar National Missile Defence (NMD) programme to protect America from external nuclear missile attacks. He made a sudden 'mid-stream' change of mind by announcing that he was withdrawing his programme announced a couple of months earlier. Definitely, Clinton's missile programme was the "best chance", offered by Clinton to China, on a silver-platter, for the Chinese President Jiang Zemin to 'blast' America at the UN Millennium Summit held in New York (6-8 September), attended by heads of state and government from over 150 countries. That would have been the most embarrassing position for the world's lone super-power America. Perhaps Clinton could force the 'eye' of the upcoming 'storm'. And he made, what is called in war terminology, a 'strategic retreat'.

Whatever might be the consequences of this 'quick move' by Clinton, just as it came as a 'bolt from the blue' for the peace-loving people world-over, his subsequent 'retreat' brought a great sigh of relief for them all. But it is not the end of the game. There is more to it, because Clinton has saved his face, no doubt, by deciding not to execute the programme but at the same time he had declared that he would, instead, pass it on to his successor, whether Democrat Al Gore, or Republican George Bush Jr. This is more intriguing than the withdrawal of the missile programme.

Brobdignagian vs. Lilliputians?

However, before taking up the

challenge to beat Clinton's missile programme at the UN Summit, the Chinese President Zemin and Russian President Putin, issued joint statements on two different occasions to criticise Clinton's policy, first in the Tajik capital Dusban, in the first week of July, where they had gone to discuss regional security along with three Central Asian republics, together known as, 'Shanghai Five', then during Chinese President's official visit to Moscow in the third week of July. In both these joint statements, they had urged America not "to breach" the landmark ABM (Anti-ballistic Missile) Treaty of 1972, to which America was a party.

Reiterating the 'unshakability' of the ABM, they agreed that America's NMD programme would "violate" the ABM and "upset the nuclear balance." From the tone and tremor of Sino-Russian criticism, Clinton could gauge that Chinese President's planned tirade against his new missile policy would be able to influence the largest-ever gathering of world leaders at UN Headquarters to line them up against America. Washington thinks that it needs the 60-billion dollar national missile 'shield' to protect itself from the threat posed by 'threshold' nuclear powers, like North Korea and Iraq. What a sharp argument on the part of the only super-power in the world. A 'Brobdignagian' seems to be too

much scared by the Lilliputians!

America Bound by Anti-Nuclear Treaties

It won't be out of context here to show to what extent America is bound by a number of UN-sponsored anti-nuclear treaties of which America is a willing signatory and now unilaterally ventures to throw those treaties in the wind just to fulfil its missile strategy against a handful of nuclear 'minnows' compared to the huge stock of nuclear missiles held by America. Even the rising so-called 'Asian giant' China possesses only twenty intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). These treaties include (a) the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) of 1965 halting spread of nuclear weapons and the nuclear arms race; and (b) in 1972, the two nuclear competitors, America and Russian Federation, the 'legal' inheritor of 'nuclear wealth' from former Soviet Union were brought to a stand-still through the now-famous ABM Treaty of which China and Russia had made a pointed reference while urging America not to 'breach' the accord.

Then came the Strategic Arms Limitation and Reduction Treaty (START) in 1991 fixing a ceiling of 6000 war-heads for both America and Soviet Union (later Russian Federation), by the year 2001, thereby reducing 1991 stock-pile by 30 per cent. Again under the START II, adopted in

1993, both countries made commitments to reduce their nuclear war-heads of long-range nuclear missiles to 3,500 on each side by the year 2003. And under START III, the parties agreed at Helsinki to begin negotiations for further reduction of nuclear weapons stock in future.

Secondly, Clinton might have thought for himself to put another feather in his cap by offering his people a 'grand presentation' of Missile Defence shield at the fag end of his eventful tenure in the presidency.

Thirdly, there are always some so-called 'war-strategists' or lobbyists who don't like to be in power, but always are nearest to the power that matters. They 'advise' the power that be on the significance and importance of keeping the option open for production and sale of arms and ammunitions which bring them billions of dollars in return. (Clinton's NMD is a 60-billion dollar project.) It is these 'invisible' strategists who give the administration the 'direction' about their next move in production of war materials to keep their world-wide 'arms-market' ever buzzing. Look at Asia and Africa the former colonial powers have bowed down and are gone. But now their presence is felt in a different form as 'arms suppliers', thereby adding fuel to fire in the tribal, ethnic or regional warfares. These people always enjoy the last laugh as the best laugh.

Street Demonstrations in America!

It is against these dark politico-economic 'forces' that recent street demonstrations had been held, not only in Seattle, while

WTO was in session there last year, but also most recently in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, during Democrat and Republican conventions to select their respective party candidates for next presidency. Money and politics go hand in hand in America. That's why Shawn McDougal, an organiser of the recent demonstrations at Los Angeles and Philadelphia, had said: "Whether you are looking at the global economy or corporate American political system, they are both being controlled by the same people... We need to make them accountable to the people."

Whatever might be the possible causes and effects of Clinton's proposal of the National Missile Defence shield and its sudden withdrawal by him on the eve of the recent UN Millennium Summit, the 'show' has not ended yet. Clinton has very skilfully passed on the 'buck' to his successor to take the final decision. So the 'powder-keg' is there, just kept temporarily in abeyance.

So, for China, which wanted to exploit Clinton's missile project to raise an anti-American line-up among the world leaders who gathered at the UN Summit, it is still not a lost battle, because Clinton has not buried the 'hatchet', he has just passed it on to his successor 'for action'. It is true 'cold war mentality' is still prevalent among some countries. And China, still being third world economy, can't be a proper match for America which is both economically and politically a mighty force in world politics. Perhaps the only option left for China is to 'wait and see' for future developments.

The writer is a retired UN official.

Restructure and Revitalise the UN: Demand of the Day

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

The United Nations must keep itself fit to meet any demand any time any where. All member states should pay their dues regularly and play their due part for the sake of making it more democratic, effective and efficient on the basis of the principles enshrined in its Charter.

THE United Nations Millennium Summit of 150 Heads of State and Government, concluded with a declaration to cut poverty, protect the planet Earth and improve the ability of the world body to keep peace.

The declaration should have included at least one para strongly criticising the failure of the Security Council in performing its duty to take pre-emptive action to arrest escalation of conflict instead of allowing other militarily powerful states to intervene unilaterally. The declaration is, in fact, far short of the expectation of taxpayers around the globe.

There have been talks, debates and discussions in the UN body itself for the restructuring and revitalisation of the United Nations. That has not been reflected in the present declaration. Since UN is an independent body for the conduct of international relations for the purpose of achieving peace, disarmament, development and establishment of a just and equitable world order its millennium summit should have been participated by all its member states.

We may recall the preamble of the charter of the United Nations, which reads: "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our life time has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

In spite of the solemn pledges made by the founding fathers of the world body on 26th June 1945, we see today bloodshed continues unabated in Rwanda and Sierra Leone; Afghanistan and East Timor are in the midst of civil war; pro-liberation forces in Chechnya are being routed out by brutal military forces of Russia; Kosovo is still in the cauldron of conflict between majority Alba-

nians and minority Serbs; the well-publicised ME peace talks suffers stalemate; the Kashmir issue remains unresolved.

It is an irony to note that attacks on Muslim villages in Bosnia-Herzegovina continued even after the United Nations declared "no fly zone" in October 1992. Finally the Security Council voted on 31st March next year to use force if the Serbs violated the resolutions. It took five months by the members of the Security Council to take a stand.

Russia, which is one of the permanent members of the Security Council, remained heavily tilted towards the Bosnian Serbs and it took a long time to get Russia to agree to the imposition of sanctions against Belgrade. Russia was opposed to NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs. However, the iron lady of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher said, "The failure of the European community, NATO or the UN to halt human suffering in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a slur on civilization." Despite Russian opposition NATO carried out air strikes against Bosnian Serbs.

Without Security Council mandate US led NATO launched attack on Yugoslavia on 25 March, 1999. Chancellor Gerhard Schroder of Germany on the conclusion of the European Union Summit meeting in Berlin on 26 March 1999 said, "The Alliance had been forced to take this step in order to stop further severe and systematic human rights abuses in Kosovo and to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. The Federal Foreign Minister, the Federal Government and the contact group have in the last few weeks and months left no stone unturned to find a peaceful

solution to the Kosovo conflict." The fact was that west European countries were burdened with Kosovar refugees, who were expelled from their homes by Yugoslavian army. About 400,000 of Kosovar's population took shelter in other European countries, majority of them in Germany, which caused enormous problems.

Whereas worse situation including abuse of human rights prevailed in Chechnya. There was no response from UN or NATO to take punitive action against Russia for the atrocities perpetrated on Chechens. Since no stake is involved, western powers did not consider to take action. No peace will be achieved if the world body or the western powers continue to play double standard in international political arena.

Since 1964 the UN has been experiencing series of setbacks, which have considerably reduced its effectiveness. The Arab League also criticised the role of the United Nations for adopting double standard citing an example of bombing Iraq for violation of UN resolutions while Israel, also a violator, remains unpunished.

With the demise of cold war between West and East there is a need to restructure the United Nations. It was structured more to deal with the cold war phenomena.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) was in line with the end of cold war. However the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), on the other hand, still remains as an active military alliance. In view of the end of the cold war and other events of both changes and anomalies the need for revitalising and restructuring the vital

organs of the United Nations have become all the more necessary. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and particularly the Soviet Union has substantially increased the number of members of the United Nations, while only one member state vacated the seat following the reunification of Germany in 1990.

General Assembly: The General Assembly should be treated as the parliament of the world body. Any resolution on world events passed by the two-thirds majority of the General Assembly should be binding on the member state or states to implement. According to article 11 of the Charter, any such question on which action is necessary shall be referred to the Security Council by the General Assembly either before or after discussion. Article 12 is also relevant, which observes that the role of the General Assembly is ineffective. The role of the General Assembly is to implement the principles enshrined in the Charter.

Security Council: An open ended working group was entrusted to review various options for restructuring the Security Council. Articles 33-54 are relevant with regard to functions and powers of the Security Council, of which article 43 merits special attention. According to this, all members of the United Nations, in order to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security, undertake to make available to the Security Council, on its call and in accordance with a special agreement or agreements, armed forces, assistance and facilities, including rights of passage necessary for the purpose.

As a result of ambiguity of the article, it is not possible to negotiate the agreements with big or small powers to dispatch troops under United Nations Command for containing threats and punishing acts of aggression, or breach of peace.

The Security Council, which is composed of 15 member states including five permanent members, is the only UN body that can take decisions. These decisions are binding on all 188 member states. Only five permanent members have a right of veto. Abstention, however, is not counted as a veto. We have seen the ineffectiveness of the Security Council in the decades between 1945 and 1989 when the permanent members blocked one another through the use of veto against any resolution. Veto was used 193 times up to 1989.

The open ended working group has been assigned to review various options for restructuring the Security Council. The issues involved are: (a) expansion of the Council's membership, (b) achievement of greater transparency and improved working methods, (c) the question of veto.

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The Security Council had eleven members. Presently, it consists of 15 members. It may be noted that the United Nations started its journey in 1945 when the organisation had fifty members. Today 188 countries are members of the United Nations. Therefore, it is logical to increase its membership in the Security Council to make it more representative. A moderate increase in the number of permanent and non-permanent members should be considered. These countries

should enjoy equal rights and have equal obligations.

As the five permanent members are reluctant to extend veto power to the proposed more members, abolition of veto power itself needs to be considered in view of its misuse in the past. The veto power is tantamount to an undemocratic exercise. To make Security Council an effective organ of the world body the working methods should be more transparent and more democratic. If necessary, the Charter may be amended.

Financial Reform: The world body has been experiencing financial crisis, which often compels it to limit or even terminate its functions. Therefore, the need for reform in this sector. Many developing countries have emphasised the need for eliminating outdated or duplicative agencies and programmes.

Many countries including the powerful United States of America are defaulters in terms of their contribution to the UN fund. The United States of America alone owes more than one billion dollars to the UN.

The United Nations employs more than 50,000 people at its New York Headquarters. There are a total of 18,000 employed in its various agencies like UNICEF and UNESCO. There are roughly 2,200 high-ranking officials at the United Nations Secretariat. In view of the constraint of fund there is a need to reduce the number of personnel at the UN Secretariat. A mechanism should be introduced to prevent misuse of the financial contributions in, say, obtaining privilege and special status.

The United Nations must keep itself fit to meet any demand any time any where. All member states should pay their dues regularly and play their due part for the sake of making it more democratic, effective and efficient on the basis of the principles enshrined in its Charter.

To the Editor ...

Military take-over and Bangladesh

Sir, When General Ershad seized power in 1982 overthrowing a democratically elected government, nobody even our present PM dared to protest. Moreover, later her party participated in the general election in 1986 under the ruler and that Parliament legitimised the unconstitutional take-over of power.

As an independent nation, we have long history of military interventions in our national politics. The reason behind such undesired situation, is a different question. But my question is after witnessing all these, do we have the moral authority to call for international sanctions against other nation when we ourselves failed to prevent such interventions? Country like India might have the moral authority to call for international sanctions against other nation when we ourselves failed to prevent such interventions? Country like India might have the moral authority to call for international sanctions against other nation when we ourselves failed to prevent such interventions?

In 1998, Mr Vaipayee rejected our PM's offer of mediation saying India don't need third party intervention defusing tension in South Asia. This time General Musharraf did not turn up to meet our PM. Now I was just wondering is Sheikh Hasina still interested in continuing her effort to revive