

PM's Achilles Heel

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has gone public with her sympathies for Lakshampur AL leader Abu Taher who is alleged to have had a hand in the disappearance and murder of local BNP leader advocate Nurul Islam in mid-September. For all we know, she has not cited any proof at the press conference whereby in the eye of the government Taher's name stood cleared.

That's not all. The PM reeled off a plethora of observations, as if in an outburst of pent-up emotions against the Opposition just to defend a partyman under clouds of suspicion of criminal involvement. She put a poser before the newsmen present: why be after one man and blame the AL alone (for terrorism) when '24 AL leaders and workers' were killed during the BNP rule? She wanted them to recall that when Moudud Ahmed had gone to Lakshampur during a by-election an internecine conflict led to a murder there. She strayed further away from the issue at hand by referring to Shibir workers' killing eight Student League activists in Chittagong.

To a newsman's question about someone threatening to break the limbs of journalists and dump them into the river, in presence of a minister, the PM quipped, "It takes two hands to clap", evidently falling far short of discouraging the highhanded approach of her partymen. Whatever ammunition she could lay her hands on to deflect the attention away from Abu Taher she did that. She even asked, why in the Lakshampur incident and also in the case of the murder of a lawyer in Dhaka their wives did not promptly lodge cases with the police?

The Prime Minister is critical of the spurt in press reports on criminal excesses committed by her partymen. Whereas she should have taken a credit for the increasingly energetic role the press has been playing to highlight wrong-doing she has unfortunately demurred at it. She is overlooking the fact that such exposures help her to know things better from an independent source.

All this is a testimony to the fact that she seems hard-put to distinguish her role as party chief and that as the supreme administrator of the country. In both capacities the country expects her to be impeccable. But there are things she cannot simply say from her position as the PM without creating both tremors of shock and disbelief in the public mind. If she is even seen to be shielding alleged acts of excesses it is the credibility of her high office that is on line.

Make Magurchhara Probe Committee Report Public

UNOCAL, the US company which took over Occidental's production sharing contract (PSC) and also its liabilities after the devastating Magurchhara gas-field blow-out, says it has paid Bangladesh till August 31 this year a hefty amount of 332.32 crore taka in compensation for the mishap. Petrobangla says that it is aware of only Tk 38 crore having been paid to the victims so far and has sought Unocal's explanation on the 'ghost payments'. As always, the government did not take the people into confidence over the matter preferring to keep the probe committee report on the Magurchhara blast under wraps. What's more, it has even shown the temerity of saying no flat on the face of the parliamentary standing committee on energy which had demanded that the report be submitted before it. It is 'classified', the energy secretary had reasoned then. Classified even to the JS committee? Intriguing, isn't it? In fact, the whole episode following the blow-out in an exploratory well on June 14, 1997 has been shrouded in mystery. Such a knowledge void has evidently encouraged Unocal to make an attempt to shrug off its liabilities with fabricated repayment claims.

As one independent observer said, the government has "very callously handled" the Magurchhara blow-out and its aftermath. Immediately after the blast, the energy ministry made no move whatsoever to officially assess the subsoil damage. Instead it tried to put pressure on the Occidental to pay Tk 612 crore in compensation, a figure the US company never accepted. Later on, it renewed Oxy's PSC on its assurance that the compensation would be paid "after a joint study" to determine the actual damage which never took place. When Unocal took over Occidental's concerns here, the government made no attempt to settle the compensation issue on the assumption that the liabilities would also be transferred to the new operator. Apparently, things are not quite turning the way the government had contemplated.

Anyway, there has been enough of hush-hush over the whole matter. The government should immediately hand over the probe committee report to the parliamentary committee. In a democratic set-up governed by the dictates of transparency and accountability, such matters cannot be classified. Once the JS body receives the report, it should arrange publication of the report for public knowledge as well.

Hope, or Hype?

IT is evident that five years into the government's eight-year-long Total Literacy Movement (TLM), launched in 1995, only six districts out of a total number of 64 stand free from the bane of illiteracy. However, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education Ministry, Nurul Islam Nahid, dubbed the progress as "satisfactory" and hoped that "the project would be implemented throughout the country and we shall see an illiteracy-free Bangladesh by 2003." If covering only "six" districts in "five years" is an example of success then we wonder what might be the definition of failure! To put literacy figure at 62 per cent is a tall claim. We are constrained to say that the number will not be sustained if literacy is not imparted in a back-and-forth motion so as to retain the earlier gains as we go on adding to them.

Now, there seems to be no dearth of logistics and manpower behind the Taka 682-crore TLM project, scheduled to be implemented by 2003. Posts of additional deputy commissioners have been created, vehicles procured for project officials and local MPs empowered to act as advisors. But all of these things floundered on the rock of mismanagement. Lack of people's involvement has been identified as the prime cause for the near-debacle of the programme. It's very difficult to imagine an illiteracy-free 58 districts in three years' time. The people concerned, must devise a concrete mechanism to associate people with the programme, both as disseminators and recipients of literacy. Otherwise the hope to see a fully literate Bangladesh in the near future will be dashed.

The Cairo Summit : Is it End of the Road?

by Dr. M. Zakir Husain

For far too long, this particular peace making responsibility has remained outside the purview of the United Nations. Now that the brokered peace deal has unravelled, the United Nations has to come in again. Yes, we hear uncharitable statements about the role of the UN emanating from Tel Aviv; they do not need the UN to help. But that cannot be the last word we hear.

tanks against stones. It is an unfortunate fact that in some situations peaceful intentions often signify weakness or inability to confront aggression in the language that is understood and inflicts enough pain or punishment. History also gives evidence that appeasement to aggression does not bring peace but can give encouragement to war. Indeed, in that perspective, the Summit held after four years has failed to live up to expectations.

Given the present context and viewed from the Palestinian perspective, it is disappointing to say the least that the communiqué did not include any practical action in response to what it so strongly condemned in words. Disappointing too is the fact that, according to some observers, the Sharm-el-Sheikh meeting convened by President of Egypt but actually steered by President Clinton did perhaps take some of the wind out of the sail of the Arab Summit which need not have been the case. Meanwhile, in spite of these endeavours and against all hopes, violence and deaths continue, anger and frustrations in the besieged population are huge and seething. From the Palestinian people's point of view, nearly nine years of abandoning "Intifada" and endless negotiations under the stewardship of the US President, did not pro-

duce anything tangible on the ground, made little or no difference to their standard of living; high unemployment and low income, the daily indignities suffered by them at the hands of the occupying power have led to nothing but total despair, disillusionment, and frustration. In retrospect, the peace process has given all the time to Israel to expand their settlements in Arab lands, chip away the viability of Palestinian territories, and lowered their status to that of second class citizens in their own land. All of this is no recipe for respectful partnership nor for enduring peace-building. There is no peace dividend; there is monumental frustration; the situation is desperate. There is no light at the end of the present peace tunnel. Even though the visit by Mr. Ariel Sharon has been blamed, the eruption of the protests is rooted very deep in the entire process of destitution of an entire people during the past 50 years; the Sharon visit was merely the spark to ignite a smouldering cauldron of discontent.

The Palestinian people and their struggle for self-determination are at the crossroads of history. They have tried resistance and they have been also patient with peace negotiation with a partner whose intention to recognise their legitimate

rights and aspirations is now clouded with suspicion. They shall have to choose between resistance or submission to unequal treatment and compromise their sovereignty and dignity. What they will choose is ultimately up to them. The current mood is such that they might make the choice irrevocably and finally. Unless some real breakthrough occurs, which looks improbable though not impossible, the Palestine people might be driven to the path of relentless struggle and fierce resistance; they might see no alternative but to stand up for themselves. Of course, the path may well be bloody and exact many sacrifices. In the path of resistance, they may not expect others to fight their war nor can they let others choose the terms of their peace. If denied of their rights while they concede to others their rights, that is the path they may choose. The costs may be steep, but concessions and charity from the occupation forces may in the end cost even more. Freedom cannot be given in charity; by those who have stolen it; if it is not conceded with respect and dignity, in a spirit of mutuality of interest, it has to be wrested and held with vigilance. Unfortunately, past events seem to confirm that negotiations as unequal partners and under the tutelage

of brokers fail to deliver rights or justice.

The international community has obligations as much as it has options. It can continue to pre-side over a peace process the fragility of which is proven by past evidence; the futility of which in its present parameters is flawed and is sapping the spirit of those involved in the peace process. Specifically, by being unable or unwilling to secure compliance of one party with the collective vote of the world community as articulated in the United Nations, the international community has condoned the offence of one party, and eventually eroded the authority of the United Nations itself a loss which the UN has not recovered yet in the present case. As is now recognised in impartial quarters, the peace process eventually failed because it was inherently flawed; it chose to remain benignly blind to the errors and intransigence of one party, and rather indifferent to the legitimate and historical rights of the weaker aggrieved party.

Given that background, can the international community regain the will and commitment to administer a just and fair settlement that has remained long overdue and bring about a lasting peace and stability in that troubled region? After all, restor-

ing peace and stability is the avowed responsibility of the United Nations, and specifically the domain of its Security Council. Any semblance of peace without addressing the root cause of the dispute and without full self-determination to the Palestinians as their right and not a concession will be an illusion of peace at best and a festering conflict at worst. Peace with security and rule of international law are twin objectives of the world order in this twenty-first century. Will the international community rise to the occasion? The alternative to a just and durable peace is too bleak and stark to contemplate in that volatile region of immense strategic value.

For far too long, this particular peace making responsibility has remained outside the purview of the United Nations. Now that the brokered peace deal has unravelled, the United Nations has to come in again. Yes, we hear uncharitable statements about the role of the UN emanating from Tel Aviv; they do not need the UN to help. But that cannot be the last word we hear. Let us not deceive ourselves; the United Nations can be only as effective and powerful as its member states, especially the powerful ones will let it be. These member states have a historical duty and responsibility. Is it too much to expect that those who possess power may also exercise that power to uphold fairness and justice in the interest of a world largely at peace even if it may not be an utopian world without conflict?

Self-interest is Not Negotiable

The Brazilian President, when he visited New Delhi, was asked: "How is your country's economy doing?" His reply was: "The economy is doing well but not the people." India may realise, as the Latin American countries have done after following liberalisation for 25 years, that the reforms are meant for people, not the other way round.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

affected. Why does the government act late? It could have protected some sectors by not throwing everything open. It would have still been better if it had fixed priorities so that foreign capital could flow to particular fields like the infrastructure. The Narasimha Rao government brought in economic reforms stealthily, without any open discussion. The BJP-led government has adopted the same tactics in opening more sectors. Is there any harm in taking the nation into confidence?

A proposal, which government wants to implement, can be made public beforehand for a debate. At present, the decisions are announced after the cabinet meetings like a fiat by an autocrat government. The Vajpayee coalition is also taking the advantage of a long recess, nearly three months between the monsoon and winter sessions of parliament. There is a proliferation of announcements and even ordinances to "attract" or "reward" foreign investment. The government should know that the resentment has spread to such an extent that the very word, *videshi*, has become suspect. New Delhi's waywardness has made

the BJP's own journal, *Swadeshi*, blast the government on this point.

Let us at least find out whose agenda are we following. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are said to have laid down certain conditions, which we have to follow to get any assistance. We seem to be signing on the dotted lines. Both institutions are being questioned increasingly. The recent demonstration at Prague, indicating the popular mood, is a case in point. Some time ago, Washington also witnessed a protest against the two. The participants were from developed countries. It was similar to the one in November last at Seattle against WTO.

Against this background, when Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha accepts the position of the chairman of Development Committee of IMF-World Bank, what

should the nation infer? Both institutions are keen on retrieving their reputation. They are not using criticism but mud to keep themselves in business. India, a third world country, has come in handy. It will be used to influence the developing and underdeveloped countries where the two institutions tend act as 'agents for exploitation' by the developed world. Sinha was once a pro-socialist. He was also a spokesman of the Janata Dal which said that it would not allow leading foreign companies to 'prowl about'. Former socialist George Fernandes, who was instrumental in throwing out Coca-Cola and the IBM, is now part of government.

New Delhi has also given free access to foreign cartels by removing qualitative restrictions from 714 items. The result is that commodities like tea, coffee, spices, vegetables and rubber products from abroad have already flooded our markets. What happens to our white revolution in milk? Europe subsidises dairy products. How can Indian milkmen withstand the competition? The United Planters Association of Southern India (UPASI)

has already sought tariff protection for crops like tea, coffee and natural fibre.

Where is "the convergence of interests," a phrase used by President Clinton during his visit to India and repeated by Vajpayee in the US? One's sweet is other's poison. The convergence of interests can be between two equals or near equals. Otherwise, the rich will exploit the poor. The UNDP document tells us India's deficiency in human development. Although the decade 1987-1997 saw a decline in infant mortality by 25 per cent, the divergence among different states and districts is striking, with as low as 12 per cent live births in Kerala and as high as 96 and 94 in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Literacy levels reached nearly 90 per cent in Kerala but remained below 40 per cent in Rajasthan and Bihar requiring 12 decades to achieve universal literacy for women in these two states.

What it means is that the better off states, like the better off people, are cornering benefits, leaving most in the country to wallow in poverty. The Brazilian President, when he visited New Delhi, was asked: "How is your country's economy doing?" His reply was: "The economy is doing well but not the people." India may realise, as the Latin American countries have done after following liberalisation for 25 years, that the reforms are meant for people, not the other way round.

OPINION

'The Recent Floods : What Went Wrong?'

T Hussain

An article under the above title, published on October 19, 2000 in the Daily Star attracted my keen attention. The writer, Dr M Monirul Q Mirza, a water resources expert of the University of Toronto, Canada has observed that the recent unprecedented floods in the south-western region of Bangladesh have left very vital lessons for us. First, the notion that the region, by and large, is free from flooding is wrong. Secondly, intense precipitation together with water-control structures in the near upstream can cause serious flooding in the downstream areas. Describing the hydrology of the south-west region, the history of flooding in these areas, the drainage capacity of the Ganges tributaries and the usual rainfalls occurring here, he has told us what actually triggered the recent floods. He has mentioned the two faces of flood that occurred this year in the south-west region of Bangladesh. He has referred to the natural causes, which include several low pressures formed in two phases in the Bay of Bengal during the period in question (September-October) and under its influence, exceptionally heavy rainfall (100 per cent higher than the normal) which generated severe floods in West Bengal. The run-off was so high that the rivers there could not drain it out, which was further hindered by 5-day high tide in the Hooghly River. Backwater effect of the tides and continuous rainfall built up a huge run off which eventually found its way into the adjacent south-west region of Bangladesh. Added to these factors was some manmade

causes, too. The Indian press published information about the release of significant amount of water discharged from dams and barrages operated by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). On the 20th September, government of West Bengal issued warnings about possible inundation in six south Bengal districts by the overflowing dams and barrages. Unfortunately, our friendly neighbour communicated no such warning to Bangladesh. On September 22, flood waters discharged from DVC barrages surged into parts of Hooghly, Howrah and Midnapore districts of West Bengal. There was a record amount (2-6 lakh cusecs) of water released from Tipra Barrage, in addition, 2.4 lakh cusecs from Durgapur Barrage and undisclosed quantity from the Massajore Dam. Most of these waters rolled over on the south-west region of Bangladesh and further aggravated the flood situation. Capacity of these reservoirs has been significantly reduced due to siltation, which obviously influenced overflowing, specially during the monsoon. Release of huge water from the DVC dams/barrages suggest that other new projects or their alternatives must be in place to control lower valley flow in Bihar and West Bengal as well as in Bangladesh.

Flood waters are yet to drain out from many places of the south-west region. Sathkira is such an example. News media reported about inundation of new areas, although onrush of water from India has receded significantly. The idea of only water-sharing has to be abandoned and a new framework

for basin wide water-management has to be worked out. This is only possible through a meaningful dialogue with the upstream countries with mutual respect and good intentions through a common political will. The idea should be revived immediately with a view to finding out a joint approach, beneficial to both the neighbouring countries, to work out a flood and water management plan, only a water-sharing one for 30 years! In fact, it is time the existing agreement be reviewed in the light of the recent deluge the aftermath of which is still lingering.

In this connection, mention should be made of the press report (Probe into causes of deluge ordered, DS, 12 Oct.) saying that govt. of Bangladesh has ordered investigation into the causes of the deluge by the Water Development Board. It is also reported that the India-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission will take up the flood issue and opening of embankments in its next meeting. The West Bengal government, the report further says, did not get any flood warning due to lack of co-ordination with the central government. We find from the aforesaid article of Dr Mirza that West Bengal government on the 20th September issued a warning about possible inundation in south Bengal districts by the overflowing dams and barrages. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the matter is not getting the urgency it deserves from our side.

The writer is retired Secretary, Ministry of Land

To the Editor ...

US-Israel policy

Sir, Israel has violated the peace agreement and defied the historic accord signed in Washington DC on September 13, 1993. Moreover, Israel has now launched a reign of terror on the Palestinians on flimsy grounds.

We strongly condemn the breach of trust and the Israeli atrocities on the Palestinians.

We are also surprised and shocked that the US government and two US presidential candidates Al Gore of the Democratic Party and the Republican Candidate W. Bush have declared their strong support for Israel.

We are bewildered and fail to understand as to how these parties which preach human rights for people all over the world can support the Israeli atrocity?

O.H. Kabir
6, Hare Street
Ward, Dhaka-1203

Three billion dollar belligerency

Sir, Barrister Harun ur Rashid's "Sharm el-Sheikh Agreement: Last Dice for Peace" (DS, October 19) is a comprehensive and precise write-up on the active-volcanic Palestine.

Since the Second World War, the belligerent Israel sustained by the West carved out the State of Israel out of the lands of the Palestinian people to create a Jewish nation with a view to relocate Jews from all over Europe, Russia and elsewhere. Resultantly,

exodus of millions of Palestine refugees took place to adjoining middle eastern countries, even to far off places of the north western Sahara. This did not however end there and with a given pretext Israelis emboldened by limitless western financial aid and massive supply of sophisticated arms and armament pounced upon and occupied Palestine and large chunks of neighbouring Muslim States including west and east of Jerusalem-- second holiest shrine of the Muslim world along with the Sinai peninsula of Egypt, Golan Height of Syria and the West Bank. While holding most of the occupied territories including the Masjid ul Al-Aksa Israelis are gobbling up large portions of the occupied territory for their own settlers from around the world. Surprisingly, these settlements are not set up in one single location of an occupied area. These are strewn in different spots in-between Palestine habitations. Even the central part of small Gaza strip is not spared. Now the Palestinians cannot even move freely into their own territory without crossing enemy check posts while Israeli settlers have free access in and out of their settlements. Even the lake that falls within the territory of Palestine is controlled by their adversary. The former only receive a fixed quota of water per day per person.

The recent flare-up that took hundred plus lives of Palestinians during the last four weeks followed by efforts made by President Clinton, UN Secretary General Kofi Anan and President Hussein Mubarak 'to stop' the

carnage with no effect, while rest of the world are watching with utter dismay the defenceless Palestinians' despair, anger and toothless brick batting to face bullets from the enemy tanks occupying their own land. Three Israeli secret service men died at the hands of Palestinian mob while engaged in undercover activities in the West Bank town of Ramallah following one hundred plus deaths and scores of wounded of the latter. Major Western press, particularly American and British, are angered for three Israeli soldiers' death at the hands of enraged Palestinians while the death of hundred of the Palestinian people did not get their attention as if the life and the cause of the Arabs in general and the Palestine people in particular are of no consequence. Israelis are perpetrating a dreadful outrage under the very benign gaze of America who provides the evil, saddled over the Middle East, with three billion dollars a year, notwithstanding the steady supply of all modern and sophisticated armaments along with satellite pictures of strategic locations of the Arab world. Recently, the Security Council castigated Israelis for their killing spree of Palestinian people. The US, however, refrained from joining the rest. Palestinian people are thus victims of three billion US dollar belligerency. With so much of constant source of money and armaments at hand who would care to respect the sanctity, freedom and sovereignty of neighbouring nations?

Syed Waliullah
Dhaka