

Pakistan Should Recall Him

WHAT Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner Irfan Raja said at the Monday's BISS seminar on Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Traditional and Non-traditional Issues was a deliberate affront to the genesis of Bangladesh, made all the more outrageous by the tone and temper with which he delivered it. A paper presented by Salahuddin Ahmed suggested that Pakistan seek apology from Bangladesh for the atrocities committed by its Army on Bangladesh soil in 1971 to foster better ties with the latter evoked a rancorous reaction from the Pakistan Deputy High Commissioner. Absolving the then Pakistan Army of all responsibilities, he contended that the atrocities were "initiated by the miscreants of Awami League" implying thereby that no apology was therefore warranted. While this seemed to be his principal reason for dismissing the idea of apology out of hand he waxed on a curiously mischievous note to ask: Apology for what, apology for losing half of my country? With all the sign of being a vestigial remnant of those days he liked to think that only 26,000 Bangladeshis were killed in 1971. And in an aside he even said, "Two million Bangladeshis are now in Pakistan and we do not threaten them."

The Pak Deputy High Commissioner could not be any stranger to the word 'apology'; for, it has been mooted quite a few times over, not in Bangladesh alone but in Pakistan as well, with many people there increasingly realising and regretting that atrocities indeed were committed upon us. Besides, it is not the present Pakistani establishment, including the military, that is having to face the bar of history by any stretch of imagination. And all of this against the backdrop of Japan tendering apology to North and South Korea, and also to China; and high-spirited conciliatory readjustments having got underway between the USA and Vietnam in terms of their historical baggage.

Deputy High Commissioner Irfan Raja has undermined the spirit of our Liberation War, cast aspersions on a settled fact of history, thrown diplomatic norms to the four winds thereby causing an unwanted damage to inter-state relations and hurled insults at the host government and country. Under the circumstances, we would urge the Government of Pakistan to recall him from Dhaka so that the bilateral relations are restored on to an even keel at the earliest. We hope that his remarks did not reflect the official position of Pakistan on the matters in question; but who can overlook the fact that those words were uttered by a high ranking Pakistani dignitary on the soil of Bangladesh? If Islamabad were to fail to recall him, then perhaps our foreign office would be constrained to expel him.

Failure at The Hague

LEAVING aside the diplomatic niceties the blunt truth is that the US's refusal to make some last-minute critical concessions scuttled the just-concluded global conference on climate change. Though the UK minister has accused his French counterpart of not accepting the last minute deal that he was able to strike with the US counterpart, still it is the US that must shoulder the blame for the failure of the negotiations at The Hague. The country that claims the moral leadership of the world appeared myopic, short-sighted and extremely self-serving when it refused to agree to adopt measures to implement the pact agreed to at Kyoto. The pact called for a five-percent average cut in the developed nations' 1990 level of emissions by the year 2010. The Kyoto target was itself a compromise position. Many experts felt at the time of its adoption that even if implemented in full the Kyoto Pact would not be enough to prevent the disastrous effects of global warming. Now even the watered down pact is unacceptable to the US. Can this be, and should this be the position of the lone superpower of today's world?

The Hague conference saw a significant shift of the classical North-South divide in such global events. It was a divide within the industrial world. It was the European Union (EU) that found the US's position unacceptable. The world waited breathlessly as the leaders of EU and US negotiated. The final talks overshot the conference deadline by 24 hours in the hope that a last minute solution will be found. But it all ended with nothing. However put, we have been let down by the leaders of the industrialised world, especially the USA.

We must point out here that the position of the developing countries has already been watered down enormously before they accepted the EU draft. The great anomaly of the global environment debate is that the biggest culprits are the least sufferers. By far the biggest polluter in the world is the US followed by the countries of the EU. Yet it will be the developing countries that will suffer the most with the weather change. Already severe damages have been caused by unusual floods and untimely cyclones in the developing world, especially in Asia. The industrialised countries of Europe and Australia have also seen dramatic changes in the weather pattern. The net conclusion from all this is that the world faces serious threat from the consequences of global warming and the leading countries of the world are not rising to the occasion.

To the Editor...

How about an Islamic military alliance?

Sir, Hassan Asfour, a cabinet minister of the Palestinian Authority told the Reuters news agency that the Egyptian ambassador's withdrawal from Israel was "a critical message to the Arab nations, to the United States and to the international community that Israel has to pay the price of its aggression". Yes, indeed some day Israel will have no option, but to pay for its present and past aggression over innocent Palestinians. It is important to note that Israel used to be called Palestine in older times. The Zionists through continued aggression displaced an entire nation. What did most of the Arab world do in return? Recognise and shelter an alien in their midst! Israel is strategically located in the heart of the Arab concentration. While most Arab nations are wasting away their oil money, Israel worked on its military might and now stands as a regional super-power.

I realise my comments sound

somewhat passionate, but am I terribly off when I say, the entire Islamic world (and for that matter, the rest of the world, too) is indifferent to the sufferings of the Palestinians who are being hunted and shot at even with tanks? Yes, the United States is working on a failed diplomatic negotiation. Islamic countries around the world are condemning the atrocities and I, like many others cannot do much, but swallow the anguish. Anguish when we read of infants being shot at by Israeli soldiers. Anguish when we hear of an innocent Arab boy being clubbed to death for simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

If analysed, there is always some reason to every situation and the current drive of Israeli atrocities spread far from the gunshots across the oceans. Most importantly, one must understand that there is no permanent representation from the Islamic world at United Nations Security Council. Two, the United States applies maximum influence at the UN Security Council and Israel has strategically accomplished inserting pro Israeli ele-

ments in the top defence commands of the US forces. Three, Israeli intelligence has constructed an image of democracy and consciousness to the outside world. Take for instance that farm boy. His Israeli killer was tried at a mock court and served three months in jail. Four, a constant propaganda that Islamic nations, which includes Palestine, are backward and a bunch of "terrorists" is still continuing. So, the question is, is there anyone out there, who think time is now to unite forces and protect Muslims world-wide? Time to form an "Islamic Military Alliance"?

Apart from these several armed clashes took place between Israeli forces and Palestinian rioters and reportedly some Palestinian police also joined the rioters at some stage. Thus there were more deaths and more funerals and obviously increased anger on both sides. The total death toll appears to have reached 270 already and over 90 per cent are Palestinians. Israelis are most concerned as they are now faced with some type of guerrilla war and in such a fight nobody is safe. The Israeli authority has already warned the Israeli public of such attacks any time at any place.

However, the anger has been spreading through the entire Arab world, Jordan being the closest neighbour of Israel and the second Arab country to have diplomatic relation with Israel is getting increasingly concerned as its population is about 60 per

cent Palestinian. Several demonstrations have already taken place and some were reportedly unruly. In retaliation for the killing by the Israeli forces of one Jordanian visitor who was recently in the Palestinian territory, an Israeli diplomat was attacked in Amman raising the tension very high. Israeli diplomats in Amman are very vulnerable as Israel has a fairly big Consulate in Amman which takes care of the visas and other problems of Palestinian Arabs. I and my wife visited the well protected Israeli Consulate in Amman while taking visa for our visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque some two years back. Jordan also decided not to send its newly appointed Ambassador to Israel to replace the envoy who retired some time ago. Thus the relation between Jordan and Israel is at its lowest ebb because of Israeli high handedness. This has caused serious concern among some Israelis who are interested in maintaining relations with the neighbouring Arab world. Earlier, at the end of Arab summit in Cairo some weeks back several Arab countries including Qatar, Morocco, Tunisia have suspended their trade and other contacts with Israel.

Thus Israel stands isolated in the Arab world, practically no link between Israel and the Arab countries. Arab-Israeli relationship has really turned upside down something totally unexpected during Ehud Barak regime. Even some weeks back the expectation was fairly high for a possible breakthrough in the peace process and there were some positive indications

The only way to control the violence would be to put the international observer force between the feuding parties. The observer force should have the full support of both Israeli and Palestinian administrations... All efforts, local regional and international, must be geared to stopping the violence with the aim of returning to the negotiating table. Peace is the only option as both the peoples are destined to live together side by side.

towards such a possibility. But Sharon's visit to the holy sites has made everything and every step thereafter unholy resulting in virtual collapse of the peace process.

Prime Minister Barak seems to have virtually lost his control over Israeli politics and military. Indeed, the Sharons have taken over though Barak is still in office because of the temporary support of Shaas party. Even a

any result as the US has come back with the obsolete theory of 'non-internationalisation of the conflict' let the parties in the conflict negotiate and settle their affairs. If that theory worked then why did NATO break all UN rules and practices and intervened in Yugoslavia and bombed Serbia for its grave aggression against Kosovo? If the world politics is based on political convenience and individual country's

involve some but hit many countries badly. Therefore Arafat's insistence on having international investigation committee and observer force is in order and indeed necessary in terms of peace and security of the region. If Israel is seriously interested in stopping the violence, why is it not agreeing to stationing the international observers force? Why is it so sensitive about the sovereignty when it is occupying other's land? Does Israel have any clear answer to these questions?

Arafat is being blamed unnecessarily and wrongly for the attacks carried out by the extremists whom he himself considers as his enemies. Indeed, he openly condemned such attacks and issued orders asking them to stop attacks from the Palestinian territories. There was, however, no open call nor any order from Barak to his forces to stop "using excessive forces." Though it appears that Arafat's order was a qualified one, the argument is that he could only speak for the area he controls. The rest are controlled by the Jewish state and as such it has to be its own responsibility. By now it should be quite clear to Israel that the settlements are not only "obstacles" but detrimental to peace in the region. The wrong perception of biblical land may induce occupation and establishment of settlements but this will only continue to put peace out of reach.

Finding no serious actions from the US except long distance advice, President Arafat rushed



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

couple of days back Sharon heavily criticised Barak and said, "This is no way to run the country." Sharon is aiming at discrediting Barak totally. Barak is already in the trap as the entire Arab world has turned against Israel. All the peace work done during the last few years stands virtually destroyed. The situation may further deteriorate unless some immediate steps are taken.

As the election of the US President is in limbo, its diplomatic power is on the wane and the sense of direction in terms of Middle East politics seems to be quite blurred. Unfortunately, the world has also been looking helpless while the region is burning. Kofi Annan's effort for stationing peace observers between the feuding parties has not produced

interpretations of international rules, then the world peace would continue to remain illusive. The US must reduce its undue support to Israel if it wants to play its proper role in the Middle East.

The history of establishment of a separate Jewish entity of Israel in the Middle East in 1948, though Jews as such belong to and lived in Palestine hundreds of years ago, is long and complex and certainly international as several countries were involved in the process, some favouring and some opposing. Therefore, the issue is undoubtedly international as it diplomatically and strategically concerns several other countries. The situation may turn bad any moment and the undeclared war may become a declared one involving all other Arab countries. Such a war will

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Some Thoughts on American Electoral System

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

Now as far as the issue of holding free and fair elections under universal suffrage is concerned, one must admit that the US as a nation cannot boast of its past record. Even though American democracy has always paid lip-service to the idea that the right to vote is the most sacred right of a citizen, ever since its birth more than two hundred years ago, voter fraud has been rampant. Voter registration rules were manipulated in such a manner that the vast majority of the minorities (including the African-Americans, the Asian-Americans, the native Americans) were not allowed to vote until quite recently. The women obtained the right to vote only in 1920 (the Nineteenth Amendment).

of people who were sent to run the federal government. In 1787, most people did not think of themselves as being Americans, but as natives of Virginia or Pennsylvania etc. The state (not the federation) was the central or basic unit around which most political discussions and decisions took place. The territory was vast, communication poor and the loyalty of the settlers to the concept of being Americans rather weak. As there were only a few national figures (as opposed to many state or regional figures) and no national parties, the founding fathers thought that under a direct popular voting system, either there would be many run-off elections among regional candidates to find a final winner, or the candidates for the presidency would merely canvass in states with heavy concentrations of population in order to obtain a majority. In their founding fathers' scheme of things, there was no place for national political parties which could cover all the states of the federation, because they were distrustful of even the concept of political parties. Parties, in their opinion, were corrupt mischief makers and experts in pernicious dealings. They were afraid that because of the above reasons the office of the president would almost always be occupied by candidates from large states. The small states abhorred the idea of being dominated by large ones. Therefore, the founding fathers feared that a presidential election through direct popular vote might eventually threaten the very essence of the constitution i.e., its federal character. So a compromise solution was worked out. The electoral college was the result of this compromise because under this system a candidate was forced to travel to and canvass in all the states big and small, if he wanted to win the election.

Each state is now entitled to designate electors equal in number to the total of its members to the House of Representatives (435) and the Senate (100). Under the current winner-take-all method, the party that wins the popular vote in a state also nominates all the state electors. In total, there are 538 members in the electoral college because the Federal District of Columbia sends three electors. California with its 54 electors has got the largest representation, while Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, Alaska and South Dakota are entitled to send only three electors each. Although in theory, the electors can break their pledges and vote freely, in practice, they almost always follow the party instructions. The person who wins the most votes in the electoral college becomes the president.

Because of the winner-take-all method of designating electors by the states, almost always voting in the electoral college has not only coincided with the results of the popular vote but often magnified the margin of victory in popular vote. There have, however, been occasions as in 1876 (Hayes) and 1888 (Harrison), when the candidates who won the presidency had lost the popular votes but won the electoral college votes only. If at the end of all this legal wrangle, Governor Bush becomes the President, he will do so despite Vice-President Gore's likely popular vote victory.

Whatever the final outcome is

and whoever becomes the President, the sense of general humiliation over the Florida farce, the poisonous relationship between the national parties and the acrimonious exchanges between their leaders will, no doubt increase pressure on many politicians to ask for the abolition of the electoral college system, which would require a constitutional amendment. Hillary Clinton has already asked for its abolition. Before even considering the difficulties involved in a constitutional amendment, let us examine whether the reasons for which the founding fathers invented the electoral college system have disappeared or not. America still continues to be a vast, varied and disparate country. The small states are still suspicious of the bigger ones. The values of small-town America are quite different to those of industrial cities. Although the civil war ended more than a century ago, the rivalry between the South and the North still persists. True, today there are two national parties. But the electoral college system still forces the national parties and leaders to take all the states into consideration. Before any decision to abolish the electoral college is taken, one should also consider its possible effect on the two-party system. Will there be too many regional parties, too many run-off elections, endless litigation and finally too many unholy alliances? How would all this affect the good governance of the country?

Given the fact that no system is perfect, the electoral college system has, on the whole, stood the test time quite well. Besides, most of the reasons for the electoral college was put in place are still valid and a constitutional amendment is almost impossible (it requires the approval of two-thirds of the Senate and the House of Representatives and three-quarters of state legislatures). If it cannot be abolished without creating a monumental political crisis, why not simply reform (which is within the competence of the state legislatures) it to ensure victory in the electoral college for the winner of popular votes? There are many ideas on this subject like awarding one or two bonus electoral votes per each state to the winner of the popular vote (Arthur Schlesinger Jr.), or split the state electoral votes according to congressional districts and then add two bonus electoral votes to whoever carries the state (Lexington). Others suggest that the system should be modified to free the electors from the role of "instructed party agents" and give them a free hand to vote according to the popular will. Although there are many other suggestions, in my opinion, Arthur Schlesinger's idea seems to be the simplest and most effective one to guarantee a victory in the electoral college to the winner of the popular vote.

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universal suffrage is concerned, one must admit that the US as a nation cannot boast of its past record. Even though American democracy has always paid lip-service to the idea that the right to vote is the most sacred right of a citizen, ever since its birth more than two hundred years ago, voter fraud has been rampant. Voter registration rules were manipulated in such a manner that the vast majority of the minorities (including the African-Americans, the Asian-Americans, the native Americans) were not allowed to vote until quite recently. The women obtained the right to vote only in 1920 (the Nineteenth Amendment). In late nineteenth and early twentieth century, politicians and party bosses manipulated the votes of millions of newly arrived European immigrants with the help of corrupt police and local government officials. The poor, irrespective of race or colour have always been discriminated against. Actually, even today voter registration is so difficult that an American friend of mine, who now teaches at a Spanish university had enormous difficulties in trying to register herself and her family members as absentee voters. One of the principal reasons why so much voter fraud is possible is because there are no uniform procedures for registering, voting, counting, recounting and certification. Not only different states have different rules, but also different counties within the same state have different rules, hence so much confusion over hand counts, machine counts, design of butterfly ballots, dimple ballots, pregnant ballots, chads etc. I do not want to minimise the importance of reforming the electoral college, but in my opinion, and I think, what America needs urgently is to have a uniform set of electoral rules and procedures (with uniform standards) for the whole country.

A New Dawn in Vietnam

by Dr Nasima Zaman

As the trauma fades into the memory of the Vietnamese, the United States has come up to transform relations with its onetime enemy "from pretty awful to pretty good." Seemingly, in order to expunge forever the humiliating image of the Americans, President Clinton extended his helping hand to the Vietnamese although he has no intention of apologising to Vietnam

THE historic visit of President Clinton to Vietnam proved once again the old proverb time is the best healer. It was the first-ever visit by a US president to unified Vietnam since the fall of Saigon (now renamed Ho Chi Minh City) and the communist take over in 1975. A glimpse into the past demonstrates that the Vietnam war threatened to tear America apart. Like millions, President Clinton bitterly opposed the war. His opposition to war had made him a real hero to young Vietnamese who make up the 60 per cent of the population born after the last US bomb fell on Hanoi. Thus, the rapturous welcome from the Vietnamese people to President Clinton and his wife Hillary amply demonstrates that both Vietnam and US are eager to bury their past. Because, the strategic importance cannot be overemphasised and the economic factor cannot be ignored, Clinton's administration withdrew the trade embargo in 1994 and opened American embassy in Hanoi in 1996.

The war in Vietnam was a

traumatising experience for Americans, brutalising experience for the Vietnamese, and exploiting opportunity for the Soviets. History repeats the fact that after World War II a vacuum of power was left in East Asia. Indo-China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was totally within the French sphere of influence even after World War II. The French suffered 150,000 casualties from 1946 until 1954 in their attempt to hold on to Indo-China. The Viet Minh nationalist party which under the leadership of Dr Ho Chi Minh, a veteran Communist leader, which had established a provisional government in the North, could not be won over and December 1946 fighting began which resulted in 1954 in the expulsion of the French. Therefore, Vietnam was destined to be independent after World War II. The real question was who would control it. It was partitioned in 1954, with a communist government in the North under Ho Chi Minh and a non-communist government in the South with its capital in Saigon. Between the two was a demilitarized buffer

zone the DMZ. Ho Chi Minh, though a communist leader, received support from the nationalists and Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam received support from the imperialists. Since then, Indo-China became a pawn in diplomatic chessboard of cold war politics. In Indo-China, the Communist movement was securely married with the nationalist movement. The consequences of such an alliance had been disastrous for the West. The defeat and demilitarization of Japan, the rise of Communist China, and the availability of Soviet and Chinese arms to any guerrilla force, whether communist or nationalist, produced far-reaching consequences on the politics of South-East Asia. With the intention of preventing a communist conquest of all East Asia, the United States extended its all-out support to fill the so-called vacuum. Three million Vietnamese, one million of them civilians, and 58,000 US soldiers died in the Vietnam War, which ended with America's ignominious embassy-roof exodus from Saigon in 1975.

To quote Senator George McGovern, "I regard the war in Indo-China as the greatest military, political, economic, and moral blunder in our national history."

As the trauma fades into the memory of the Vietnamese, the United States has come up to transform relations with its onetime enemy "from pretty awful to pretty good." Seemingly, in order to expunge forever the humiliating image of the Americans, President Clinton extended his helping hand to the Vietnamese although he has no intention of apologising to Vietnam. He called for a new era of reconciliation of an unprecedented live address to the nation of Vietnam.

Hopefully, his visit would patch up the broken relations which the Vietnamese people apparently long for. Perhaps, Vietnam has realised that it would be wise to forget the past and make the future happy. For Vietnam, accounting for the past would be the bridge to the future.

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