

Bush's fiery entry into Baghdad

'More it changes more it remains the same'



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE US and UK have conducted their bombing raid near Baghdad killing some innocent civilians and damaging some buildings. This is President Bush's first entry into the politics of the Middle East. This is confirmation of the adage 'more it changes more it remains the same'.

This all began nearly 11 years ago during the Presidency of George Bush, the father of the new President. There was a massive coalition built up against the forces of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, who committed the big folly of invading tiny Kuwait. The intention of Saddam was to lay his hands on the huge oil wealth of Kuwait. Since oil politics is completely controlled by the giant oil companies of the US and western Europe, no mercy is shown to any other country particularly of the Middle East, should they stray from the charted course.

Since Iraq was clearly the aggressor, a US led coalition could be built easily and a war was launched against Iraq. Hounded by the coalition forces and bombarded by the allied forces, Iraq was literally pulverized. In vain Iraq begged for mercy and Iraqi forces were deci-

mated. In the end Iraq laid prostrate. Saddam Hussein became the bad boy of the West and faced periodic punishment from the air.

Attempts were made to inflict every kind of humiliation and punishment on Saddam. Several attempts were made to assassinate Saddam including organising an uprising through the help of a son-in-law of Saddam. Interestingly every attempt to eliminate Saddam has failed and Saddam appears to active mythical qualities by his sheer survival. US and Britain have virtually divided Iraq into three parts and have given them the liberty to bomb Iraq at will. The US intelligence outfit, the CIA, organised an uprising in northern Iraq, home of Iraqi Kurds Turkish Turkmens and more importantly very rich oilfields. The forces of Saddam met the uprising head on and the CIA trained forces had to be evacuated in great haste.

To tighten the noose round the neck of Saddam Hussein, the UN Security Council has been used to full effect. Shortly after the defeat of the forces of Saddam more than ten years ago, the Security Council passed draconian resolutions imposing severe sanctions on Iraq. The most humiliating part of the sanctions was that severe restric-

tions were placed on Iraq for her external relations particularly her right to sell oil in the world market. That severely curbed her activities and a regime was established for inspection of installations in Iraq, in order to virtually strip Iraq of any weapons. The regular visit of inspectors stripped Iraq of any self respect.

With the passage of time, the sanctions regime have progressively lost its teeth. More and more countries have started trade with Iraq in spite of the sanctions. To begin with most Arab countries, who ten years ago were against Saddam, have come round and have started advocating for taking Saddam back into the international fold. The countries of Western Europe have been doing flourishing business with Iraq. The latest bombing raid by the USA and Britain has found very few supporters in the international community. Members of the Security Council like France, Russia and China have openly criticised the Anglo-American action. Many other countries around the globe have spoken strongly against the bombing raid.

President George W Bush has started his Presidency with a bombing raid in Baghdad. This is deja vu. It started more than ten years ago

and continued regularly during the Presidency of Bill Clinton. It would seem that the US has developed a habit of slapping Saddam periodically and thereby remind Iraq and her neighbours about her (US) strong presence in the region. This is also a reminder that leaders in the area can play with oil at their peril.

The most remarkable phenomenon of this decade-old crisis is that President Saddam Hussein is

virtually indestructible. Bombs have rained on his head periodically, plots have been hatched to assassinate him, sometimes with members of his family, economically this oil rich country lies in ruins and hungry children roam the streets. In spite of all this Saddam Hussein remains at the helm of affairs and by his sheer power of survival, has managed to extract grudging admiration from

his adversaries. Although President George W Bush has picked up the thread from President Bill Clinton, it is becoming obvious that bombing raids on Iraq and sanctions and inspections regime, are becoming counter productive. More to the point the USA has as usual her trusted partner Britain beside her, but little else. Her allies are drifting away and a chorus of voice is rising to put an end to Saddam baiting.

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THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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Repeal of old laws

Make access to information reality

THE Law Minister's statement that the government is 'actively considering' repeal of the Official Secrets Act, 1923, has reinforced the long-felt need to remove this 70-year-old colonial era legislation. We urge the minister to translate his welcome words into action. The scope of law reform should be expanded to include other primary and ancillary Acts, such as the Sea Customs Act, the Post Office Act, the Press and Publications Ordinance, among others, that run counter to the norms of discrimination of information where necessary.

In a similar vein, the Chief Justice's statement that court proceedings should be open to the Press has been uplifting. The Press has been hampered by the possibility of contempt of court, as well as by an atmosphere of exclusivity surrounding court proceedings. We would like to see these remarks take effect in a tangible form so that journalists could actually exercise their right to information on a regular basis, with the acceptable caveat to function as a responsible, honest and fair Press.

The government is urged to act on its assurances. We would expect the minister to prioritise the process of reform, and the supreme judiciary to introduce suitable mechanisms that would open up the judiciary to the Press.

We urge the government, once again, to adopt a Freedom of Information Act that would hold positive directives for the free flow of information and aid good governance in a healthy state. It would usher in provisions for the benefit of the Press and the common person, reflective of modern governance precepts. The government of the day stands to benefit immensely from the fair criticism by the media. Free Press and good governance are inextricably linked.

We welcome HC directives

On navigation safety

AS thousands of Dhaka-dwellers plan to spend the upcoming Eid-ul-Azha vacations in the countryside with near and dear ones, the issue of passenger safety comes to the forefront. Once again surface fears of tragic mishaps on the riverine routes. Sad memories of 200-odd lives lost on the river Meghna on December 29 during Eid-ul-Fitr vacations when MV Rajhongshi capsized after being hit by another passenger-carrier, MV Jalkapot still haunt us. And so do those of hundreds others who were condemned to watery grave by criminal callousness of crews on board. The regulatory authorities have been no less responsible. In most cases, their activism ran out of steam with formation of an inquiry committee, whose report, even if submitted, would rarely be acted upon. More crucially, the recommendations set forth by these probe bodies were seldom made public.

This paper has always maintained that the system, regulatory and administrative, must go through a drastic overhaul. Accountability, we have always argued, is the first major step towards making the riverine transport system risk-free. With its crucial directives issued yesterday, the High Court, in our considered opinion, has set the ball rolling in this direction.

The Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) certainly deserves credit for having brought the issue to the court and so does the Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association (BELA) for providing the much-needed legal assistance.

The higher judiciary has specified four areas where regulatory and administrative authorities like the BIWTA and BIWTC should get their act together. The judges have laid special emphasis on dissemination of the provisions of the Inland Shipping Ordinance 1978. They have ordered media publicity and display of these safety provisions on passenger-carriers and at the terminals. The emphasis here is on raising awareness amongst passengers. That the launch-owners have so far shown apathy towards equipping their vessels with adequate number of lifesaving gears actually reflects absence of awareness among passengers. Had they been aware of the mandatory security requirement on the part of launch-owners and the legal provisions to penalise them if they failed to cater for it then the passengers could be insistent on the safety measures. And riverine transport system would have been rid of gross irregularities such as overloading. As we hope the HC directives would initiate the much-needed process of positive changes in the system, we would suggest that the government constitute an implementation machinery to facilitate the same.

Crime and punishment



ALMAS ZAKIUDIN

IDON'T know if there is an equivalent outside South Asia. Or, if it is, what this form of punishment is actually called. The victim is made to hold his earlobes, one in each hand, then ordered to slowly do sit-ups, up and down and up and down, until his head reels in humiliation and his thighs scream for mercy.

The earlobe-holding testifies to a sense of contriteness on the part of the victim. It is a gesture one makes when (or, in some peoples' case, if) one is really and truly sorry. Done voluntarily, it evokes a quick response and it is soon over. But the form of penance I am referring to is a public one, carried out often to censure children for naughtiness.

To see a grown man doing it, and that too, in the middle of a busy intersection in Dhaka, would have been hilarious.

Pity I missed it. If you came across the rather cute news report tucked away on the back page of our newspaper this Wednesday, you will know what I mean. There was this scene, apparently, when the driver of a white Toyota was hauled out of

his car and made to do sit-ups in full view of the standing traffic.

The driver was evidently being a real pain, honking loudly and incessantly while waiting at the traffic lights near Farmgate. Several motorbike riders cautioned him to stop, or else. When he refused to desist, one man pulled him out of the car, hundreds rallied round. The driver asked to be forgiven but the crowd refused to relent. They forced him to hang on to his ears and do 10 sit-ups.

The most amusing part of the episode, for me at any rate, was that others waiting at the intersection

were delighted that at least one wretch was getting what was coming to him.

But it is a sad day for us in Dhaka. That we have to sink to the level of forcing grown men to beg every-one's pardon and do sit-ups in public is an indication of the total absence of discipline. It speaks of an emasculated police force. One feels angry at their superiors who know completely well what is happening in the concrete jungle. But they continue to send their troops out to fight the enemy, without any consideration of, or any game plan to combat successfully, the enormous

pockets. Indeed, one is told that most of them are susceptible to rent-seeking. I, myself, have seen two instances in the last four years. One, near the Mohakhali crossing where lorries are not supposed to do U-turns, and another in Motijheel when a scooter turned against the light. Both times, the constable nearest to the vehicle coolly stuck out an open palm into which something was placed, swiftly and matter-of-factly. I remember blinking, to make sure I had seen the exchange. I am not condoning the bribery, or being flippant but as Oscar Wilde remarked, most people can resist

too daunting.

Is there a way out? If one were being flippant one would recommend mulling over ear-lobe sit-ups like the Farmgate episode to every-one who broke the rules. It wouldn't work, of course, because every car driver would have to be hauled out in public. And the rickshaws, the scooters, the rest of the street cacophony as well.

But the time may come when more than a mere set of sit-ups would be meted out. When my chuckling had died down, I re-read the news item and noted that the passenger in the car had apparently remained sitting inside, talking on

sions, ready to explode without warning.

It is the locked-in anger that cannot but manifest itself one day. Have the chiefs of police considered this reality? Or are they sitting back complacently because they can always call upon the armed forces to do their job for them? When the kitchen gets too hot to handle, they step out and let someone else clean up their mess. Don't they feel even an iota of embarrassment?

If my boss replaced me overnight because he said I had failed to do my job, I would either immediately join the order of Mother Teresa or go nuts until I had earned his respect. Seriously. You know what I mean. I would do something. If I were the police chief and I woke up one day to read that right there under the nose of my constables, a vigilante group had the guts and the subtlety to take one idiotic driver to task, I would wonder why I was still drawing my salary every month.

One wonders if any senior officials have read that news item. Did they just laugh and turn the page? Did they wonder how small the entire police force has been made to look by this one silly, stupid but revealing incident?

It ought to be mandatory for all superior officers to spend one day each month doing the job of ordinary constables. Sounds radical? The problem calls for a radical solution. If they refuse, they can stand by and watch as first our soldiers, and then ordinary people do their job for them.

IF YOU ASK ME

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applauded and chorused along, counting loudly as the man completed his penance.

What strikes a note of concern in the picture is the report that a couple of policemen hanging around watched the performance and did nothing but smile broadly. One appreciates their loathing for all creatures on our wretched roads, perhaps more for horn-happy drivers like this one. So one cannot blame them. They must have been silently applauding the civic initia-

odds that are stacked against them.

I mean, what can a traffic policeman actually do? He has probably no idea where to start. Sure, he waves his arms around when it gets hairy, which is always. Indeed, one never ceases to marvel at the energy with which traffic constables try to imitate Don Quixote. They end up, like the whimsical character, displacing a lot of hot air. Nothing and nobody else pays the slightest attention to them.

True, some constables line their

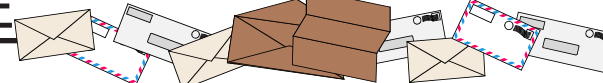
everything except temptation. Placing traffic constables in a no-win situation with the world and its mother cracking up around them to get right of way, is asking for trouble. They, of all people, must know how truly ineffectual they are, day in and day out. One cannot accept that they start off being crooked or inefficient. Some of them must feel intense frustration, perhaps even anger and outrage.

But the tide is simply too inexorable; the forces of confusion are just

been calling for help? I know I would have, had I been surrounded by hundreds of people demanding a penalty.

That matters did not go out of hand testifies to the innate goodness of people in this country. That and a terrible ability to accept the worst. Stoicism has its limits and I, for one, would rather wish that people marched every day on the streets demanding an end to the outrage on the roads, than that they drove around with pent-up pas-

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Ban on workers

I was shocked to read in the newspaper about the ban on Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. Let me quote a few lines from The Sunday Times of Singapore: "The Malaysian government says many Bangladeshis marry for convenience, leave their employers for illegitimate jobs and overstay their welcome". This I consider a serious blow to our economy because the wages earned by the lakhs of Bangladeshis will now be stopped and the country would lose a huge amount of foreign earnings by its non-resident nationals.

This is not an isolated issue, but linked to the law and order situation. The whole country is now hostage to terrorists whichever side they may belong to. The instability in politics and society is now the norm, rather than an exception. We are losing our prestige as a nation in the world arena, handicapping our negotiators in pushing our agenda with their counterparts in international forums. The ban can also be due to poor bilateral relationships between Malaysia and Bangladesh, otherwise how could a country decide unilaterally on such a serious issue? Are we at all concerned of the consequences that would follow once the decision is implemented by the Malaysian government?

We, ourselves, have to restore our pride as a nation. Our government has to take the lead to address the law and order situation in the country in order that political stability

is ensured and the economy is on the right track. This would result in the restoration of our pride in the world arena and boost the morale of our nationals both at home and abroad. This is the only way to make sure that we are not marginalised in Malaysia and also elsewhere.

Manish Paul
Singapore

Fresh water source

The people of Shatgumbaz mosque area were hopeful when the adjacent dighi or large pond re-excavation project started under the World Food Programme in 1998. Unfortunately, the dighi could not be fully re-excavated. The job was abandoned and today the pond is covered totally with water hyacinths.

The Shatgumbaz mosque is one of the oldest large mosques and it has been listed in UNESCO's world heritage almanac. I would like to ask our learned engineers how, when this dighi comprising an area of about 50 acres was excavated by the great Islamic preacher Khan Jehan Ali 555 years ago, we have failed today with our modern engineering knowledge, skill and equipment? Would the WFP look into the matter and re-excavate this dighi so that people adjacent to it can get fresh potable water at no cost.?

Mahbubar Rahman
Dasani, Bagerhat

Depicting history
With reference to the letter from.

Wasting their time

When their guardians go off to work, children of the slums are forced to amuse themselves. They can be seen making mud pies, playing or just hanging out. They should be in school and some are, but for a few hours a day. But where can they go? There are no parks or play areas for them. Often, children are abused or exploited or simply bullied on the streets. Who would protect them or take care of them? Their guardians exist on the margins of society, in one of Dhaka's many slums. Isn't it about time the slums were converted into low cost housing complexes?

Mazhar Haq, "Sound and Light Show" (February 16th), from what I have seen, heard and read over the last four years, when it comes to the history of our nation, it begins and ends with the present government. Everything else is relegated to the rubbish bin, not worth talking about. Not that we have had too many things to be proud of since the Liberation War, but we must create a habit of telling the story of our nation as it unfolded. Disrespecting history and twisting the truth to one's advantage would only cause further trouble and disparity among people. Our liberation doesn't belong to a single party or an individual. Rubber stamping the struggle and sacrifice of millions is wrong and nothing short of desperation.

Babar Anwar
Dallas, Texas USA

Sharon in power

The mid-east is ill fated. To get the "butcher of Beirut" at the helm of affairs in Israel has sent alarm bells ringing in every Muslim country. We sympathise with the people of Palestine and we urge the USA which has influence and interests at stake to redress the balance before more lives are lost. Now with Barak opting out of Sharon's cabinet, there is no sobering influence on the hawkish Israelis. We have to pray that the Palestinians are strong and the US reads the writing on the wall.

AMH
Dhaka

SP's role in Feni

The report in your newspaper on February 4th said that the officer-in-

charge (OC) of Sadar police station in Feni is known as the "chief of Staff" of Hazari's armed cadre. I would like to ask why your report has not identified the S.P. of Feni? When you allege that the police are taking bribes, surely you must know that the police are passing it on to the Superintendent of Police? One of the main reasons for the deterioration of law and order in Feni lies in the actions of the SP of Feni. It is not fair to criticize only the OC, without touching on the real source of the problem in the police administration.

Resident of the area
Feni

Bombing of Baghdad

An overwhelming majority of Arabs here favored Bush's victory. The illegal bombing of Baghdad is the first gift and the first foreign policy decision that the new President George Bush has bestowed on his constituency. Will his second gift be his campaign promise, a shift of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? President Bush launched a deadly attack over Baghdad, where children are dying owing to his father's policy of continued aggression and sanctions against Iraq. This policy of bombing is not serving American interests, nor upholding American values or helping security of its people. It must stop. If this policy continues, could it be another disaster like Vietnam?

Abdul Momen
Saudi Arabia