

## Okaying new banks now?

Clarification needed to clear the air

**I**N what appears to be a tell-tale recommendation swi... just before the polls, the relevant government committee has proposed names of four new banks to the finance ministry for the latter's approval to licenciate them. The lucky four are said to have been sponsored by either ruling party MPs or their close associates. So political considerations have been apparently allowed to override good economic sense here. There were altogether ten applicants of whom some could have had perhaps the right credentials to receive the consideration that others did riding the crest of political favouritism.

The first question to ask is: whether we need anymore private banks than we already have, given the saturation of private banking business in the country at the moment? Furthermore, there have been private banks with such dubious track-records of mismanagement and liquidity nosedives that one wishes these had not come into existence at all. The dismal performances of these banks bear an eloquent testimony to the dangers involved in sidetracking genuine entrepreneurs to make room for political time-servers. They are destined to abuse their ill-gotten status, because they did not start out with any commitment to the depositors' interest in the first place. Besides, the acute dearth of senior bank officials in the job market is bound to inhibit efficiency of any new banking venture.

Public trust is the linch-pin of the banking sector. What kind of goodwill a bank would start with, if it were to be set up by people enjoying political clout rather than professional competence? Let there be a public statement from the authorities concerned clarifying the position on the proposed four new banks in the private sector.

## Media access to hostages

People have a right to know

**B**Y denying the media access to the three European hostages the government is manifesting a stubborn hostility to the principle of freedom of information. This unfortunate attitude is not only a denial of a fundamental freedom, but also counterproductive to the existence of a healthy media. We deplore the government's tactics.

After the hostages were safely released and brought to Dhaka, they were whisked away to the CMH, without a word from them to the media waiting at the airport. We are more than cognizant of the need to provide the hostages with speedy medical care, but there was no justification for the authorities to have prevented the media from approaching the hostages and only to have allowed photographs to be taken from a 'safe' distance. In any other country, where democracy was not merely preached but also practised, such restrictions on members of the press corps would have been unthinkable.

Since the hostages have been taken to the CMH, the authorities have been tight-lipped and secretive, leaving the media to fend for information about the hostages' well-being and future plans. Far from allowing the press to meet the hostages, however briefly, the authorities have been studiously unresponsive. That they have done so even after the hostages have been rescued safely reinforces the impression that the government is simply unwilling to share information.

We believe implicitly that freedom of information is a fundamental right. We respect the hostages' right to privacy, but also the media has a duty to seek and disseminate information to the people. The government's assumption of omnipotent privileges is undemocratic and counterproductive. It must understand that by erecting barriers to the flow of information, it is eroding its relationship with the media and it is also serving the cause of democracy very poorly.

## In search of a multi-polar world



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

**T**HE world has since come to terms with the reality that the United States today is undisputedly the world's sole superpower. It is, indeed, the only state with preeminence in every component of power economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological and cultural with a truly global reach. It has the capability to promote its interests to virtually every part of the world. Since the close of the Second World War when the US emerged as a superpower none could challenge its ascendancy except the former Soviet Union which, however, was defeated without a fight ten years ago. Considering the power potentials of the US, particularly her near monopoly of information technology, overwhelmingly strong military force backed by \$4 trillion economy and undisputed leadership in science and technology, there prevails a consensus that no country will emerge at least in next fifty years to replace the United States and take its place. The international community earnestly hoped that the US would avail of her enormous power and historic opportunity to set a moral standard for the future world based on shared democratic ideals.

Instead, the Americans only boasted of their power and virtue hailing the US as a benevolent hegemony. They presented the US before the world more as a chivalrous Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest to defend the weak against the strong, but in reality, it only promoted its own interests. The Americans impressed upon other countries on the universal validity of American principles. At the 1997 G-7 summit the former president Clinton boasted of American economy as model for all others. The former secretary of state Ms Madeleine Albright called United States

the 'indispensable nation'. The American leaders constantly claim to be speaking on behalf of 'international community' without however specifying which nation they speak for and whether any nation see them as its spokesman. It has the total grip of the UN system and wields unprecedented influence both with its allies and others. As a result, she has introduced a new kind of tyranny by compelling all others to comply with her dictates. It casts all the images of having created a 'unipolar world.'

a historically guilt-conscious Germany prefers to be in its protective cocoon, a resurgent France happens to be in the forefront of multipolar movement. Sour with American monopoly of world affairs she has, of late, clashed with the US on issues such as nuclear security and NATO enlargement. If the demise of the cold war has brought in its wake the end of ideological conflicts, a national resurgence has inexorably accompanied the transition.

The servile compliance with the dictates of the powerful had never

Although France can never make dent in America's influence in Europe or elsewhere in the world France has been consciously making an effort to propel the world towards a multipolarity. In her calculation, only with the achievement of this goal it may be possible someday to challenge the United States politically and diplomatically. For France, there are some silverlining with Russia reasserting her global role and China emerging as a credible countervailing force

Even Boris Yeltsin, Russia's

arsenal obsolete and the system could be eventually extended to cover Taiwan. Worse still, the Bush agenda will decidedly tilt Asia's balance of power in China's disfavour. The only way China can offset the moves against her is by diluting or shifting some of the power so heavily concentrated with the world's sole superpower. Not only she herself is engaged in bringing about an arrangement where such devolution is possible, but she has been pleading with others to create a multipolar world.

In an extraordinary gesture the Chinese leader Li Peng, the most powerful man in China after president Jiang Jemin, visited India in last January in an attempt to bury the hatchets between the two Asian giants. Only three years ago India's Defence Minister George Fernandez identified China to be India's number one security threat and after Pokhran II, the same year it was China which made the most scathing criticism of India's nuclear explosion. Yet, Indian President K.R. Narayanan made the return visit of Mr Jiang Jemin's state visit of 1996 in May last year. In less than a year Li Peng chose to visit India disregarding a low protocol accorded to him (Mr Vajpayee left for state visit to Vietnam and Indonesia on the eve of Peng's visit). Because he was driven by a sense of urgency inherent in his mission.

With Indian leaders Li Peng discussed routine matters including border, trade and good neighbourliness but throughout his visit he maintained a conciliatory approach to Sino-Indian differences. He however came to the core point of his visit while addressing Indian parliamentarians. Li Peng assured them that "China and India do not pose any threat to each other as they share similar views on a multipolar world in which both can play their roles for peace and development." Stating that "it is China's consistent stand that a multipolar world is better than a unipolar world," he significantly added: "India has the potential to grow into a pole herself." One of the topics discussed during Mr Li Peng's intensive round of consultations with Indian leadership related to the contribution India and China could make in the creation of a "Multipolar World."

## PERSPECTIVES

Li Peng assured Indian leaders that "China and India do not pose any threat to each other as they share similar views on a multipolar world in which both can play their roles for peace and development." ... One of the topics discussed during Mr Li Peng's intensive round of consultations with Indian leadership related to the contribution India and China could make in the creation of a "Multipolar World."

Yet as the cold war ended the structure of the world politics was not the way that would favour the emergence of a unipolar world. There were already several poles of power such as Russia, China and potentially Japan and India as well as some major West European nations apart from the United States the sole superpower. These lesser powers could not possibly pose any challenge to world's lone hegemony but without their participation and cooperation no international issue could be smoothly dealt with. The global politics had then moved from the bipolar system of the cold war through a brief transitory unipolar moment highlighted by the Gulf War and is now passing through what Samuel Huntington calls a strange hybrid of 'uni-multipolar system' before it would enter into a truly multi-polar 21st Century. The world now rushing towards multi-polarity will hardly witness another unipolar moment.

Much before the century dawned the multipolar trend already constituted a challenge to US hegemony and acted as a constraint on wilful US actions. The clamour for multipolarity in world politics has been surprisingly most pronounced in Western camp. As Britain is either pragmatic or more circumspect and

been in French political tradition the history of which is rather replete with the instances of defiance. And that is what has been happening with France in her equation with the world's sole superpower. France's conservative national aspirations were first fueled at the end of the Second World War when France, being vanquished was maneuvered out of great power concert by the allies themselves. Ever since, she clashed not only with America but also with her European allies on the question of security and myriad other issues. Her penchant for an independent foreign and security policy for herself was evident when she left the NATO military wing at the height of East-West confrontation.

The French opposition to an exclusive American way has come in the open whether in the realm of international diplomacy where France maintains a distaste for US' oft-repeated sole superpower status or on matters of culture where the French tend to denounce a growing American 'cultural imperialism'. Lately Franco-American friction has manifested itself most visibly in the West Asia and Persian Gulf area where France's interests seem to clash with America's perception of security.

vis-a-vis the United States.

Much more acute had, however, been Russia's problem with the US, her opposite pole in a bipolar world. Russia, once a superpower herself does not as yet know what is she to the West symbolised by the US an ally, or a client or a mere defeated adversary? Likewise, the ambivalence is no less acute for the West who fails to put her in a single category. Nevertheless, Russia is too big, too proud and too nationalist to be reduced to vassalism. But exactly that is what she has been subjected to. Although the cold war was won by the West, Russians continued to claim the traditional greatness of their country and very much wanted to be one among the equals in their relationship with the west. Yet, she has so far been meted out with veiled contempt and subtle discrimination from the West. Much to the disappointment of the Russians, the flow of the Western financial assistance as a dividend for dumping their socialist ideology came at the most in the trickles. The West only dangled their carrots which often turned into sticks.

In the meantime the West has been busy in drawing a new security line in Europe by expanding NATO further to the East with the exclusion of Russia. She is also wary of Amer-

former President who was largely sustained in power by the West became suspicious of West's intention and was explicit in his tirade against 'some' who were pulling the world towards a unipolar world. On the occasion of Chinese President Jiang Jemin's visit to Russia early in 1997, Yeltsin declared that their two countries had established a strategic partnership one that would shape 21st Century world in a multipolar mould. President Vladimir Putin seems to have carried the process still forward by proposing Joint Missile Defence with China against US' National Missile Defence (NMD). This is in spite of the fact that China and Russia never had an easy relationship historically notwithstanding their ideological affinity.

China's urge for a multipolarity seems to have been accentuated by the recent change in the US administration. President Bush has pledged to stiffen US policy on China, lean closer to Taiwan and reinvigorate what the Republicans believe to be the grossly neglected relationship with Japan. Mr Bush is also determined to go ahead with the Missile Defence System in the face of China's firm opposition because Beijing fears that the system could make its own nuclear

## Scam jolts Vajpayee government



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**I**T was a sort of bolt from the blue. The multi-party national democratic alliance (NDA) government of prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was sailing rather smoothly with no major problem confronting it. Neither the opposition could mount any resistance against the government which is in power for about one and a half years in the current spell. The previous NDA government with the same prime minister from the dominant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of the coalition ruled the country for a similar period before it lost power when some allies notably the AIADMK of Jayaram Jayalalitha of southern Tamil Nadu state revolted and quit the coalition triggering the fall of the government by a razor-thin margin of only one vote when a 'vote of confidence' took place in lower house of parliament (Loksabha). In the snap elections that followed the coalition returned to power with a bigger margin and as such it did not have to walk through a tight rope as far as the majority in the parliament is concerned.

As the main Congress led by Sonia Gandhi and other smaller opposition groups failed to mount

any effective opposition to the government whose main asset is a popular prime minister and personality like Vajpayee, it appeared set to rule the country for a longer time if not the full term. Occasional problems cropped up involving the smaller partners within the coalition but the main constituent could tackle them easily and Vajpayee administration seemed functioning on a solid base. Its majority in the Loksabha is not unassailable but much better than the first spell of

like the president of the BJP, other politicians of repute and several officials who matter in the defence deals were linked to the scandal. The BJP chief Bangaru Laxman quit and also the defence minister George Fernandes. His Samata Party chief and state minister Jaya Jaitly is also at the centre of the controversy as she allegedly took two lakh rupees as bribe in exchange of assurance that she would help two businessmen to procure deals in the defence

secret camera including the handing over of the money to some of the persons and their voices and remarks were recorded. It was done so efficiently that when these were released to the press and public, it made all sit up rubbing their eyes in utter disbelief. After all, it looks and sounds so sensational. How could one believe that Bangaru Laxman, the president of the BJP, could take bribe to influence the deal when he is known for his honest way of life and the BJP too boasts of being

Bhattacharaya is a senior official in a key position.

The fallout of the scam is evidently serious. The opposition stalled proceedings in both houses of parliament charging the government as corrupt and asking for its resignation. The government took action against a major general and some senior officials mentioned and shown in the film. The prime minister initially rejected the resignation of defence minister but later accepted it. The ruling NDA coalition

the elections following the exposure of the scandal which, however, was much bigger than the present one. Jayalalitha of south and another former chief minister of Bihar Laloo Prasad Yadav were involved in big corruption but these raised less uproar as being not linked with defence ministry. The present scam exposed by the "Teheika" directly implicates several top politicians and key figures in defence area. As such, current demonstrations in India and burning of effigies of the leaders including Vajpayee and asking for resignation of the government are only expected as a sequel of this exposure.

The parting of ways by the "Trinamul Congress" from the ruling NDA may not jeopardise the existence of the government as it still has enough majority to survive. But more such defections by smaller allies can put it in real trouble. Some of these smaller parties are sitting on the fence and watching the developments. They may take a side depending on the future course centring the scam. If further withdrawal of support from the NDA takes place, the Vajpayee government will be in tatters. The scandal has opened ways for fresh equations among the allies of the NDA. The government is seeking to turn the table on the main opposition Congress, saying it is the real "thief" because of the Bofors. It remains to be seen how much this scam causes ruptures within the ruling coalition and to what extent the opposition can derive benefits out of this.

In any case, the credibility of the NDA government and Vajpayee administration is certainly in tatters.

## MATTERS AROUND US

The scandal has opened ways for fresh equations among the allies of the NDA. The government is seeking to turn the table on the main opposition Congress, saying it is the real "thief" because of the Bofors. It remains to be seen how much this scam causes ruptures within the ruling coalition and to what extent the opposition can derive benefits out of this.

NDA rule. Some kind of frustration in the Congress, the resignation of West Bengal's respected and experienced leftist leader Jyoti Basu from the post of chief minister of the state, the death of veteran CPI leader and wellknown parliamentarian Inderjit Gupta and some other factors weakened the opposition while the ruling NDA was in full form despite being a combination of as many as 18 parties.

It is in this otherwise rosy picture for the Vajpayee government, the 'bomb' exploded and that too with such magnitude that it has not only shaken the government but brought into sharp question its longevity. It came in the form of a scam involving the purchase of materials for the defence ministry where key figures

ministry without knowing that the phony businessmen were actually newsmen, who were hell bent on exposing corruption in the higher echelons of the government.

The newsmen belonging to a news service called "Teheika dot.com" organised a fake deal for supply of some material to the defence ministry and got in touch with these people in the guise of businessmen desperately looking for sources to win such deals through bribes. These persons including a major general and brigadier in the army and several top officials of the defence ministry including the director of procurement landed in the trap laid by the newsmen. Entire conversations with all these people were filmed by

transparent! He did not deny taking the money as he is seen in the video accepting the amount. However, while resigning from his post, he said the money was taken for the party which few believed. The defence minister was not shown in the film but his close associate Jaya Jaitly took two lakh rupees while several officials not only took money but also spoke how they influenced other deals in the past with the implication that the defence minister is not out of the ring.

But what is disturbing for prime minister Vajpayee himself is that some reports said the name of the husband of his adopted daughter also came up in the discussions that he could be helpful in other ministries like power. Ranjan

received a big jolt as Mamta Banerjee of ally Trinamul Congress in West Bengal resigned as railway minister and quit the coalition. Clearly, she could not take this burden of being an associate of the Vajpayee government when elections in West Bengal are due next month. Corruptions are not uncommon with the political leaders and governments in many countries including those in south Asia. But defence ministry scam is more disturbing since it implies that money can buy men in such sensitive area. Hence, the adverse effects of such scandals on any government are generally severe. Late Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had to pay for the alleged "Bofors" scam as he lost power in

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Promises to keep

The Prime Minister began with a myriad of lofty pledges to free society of evils like corruption and terrorism, and also bragged she would not let her government be polluted with nepotism or invest it with partisan choices as her predecessor did. Corruption and nepotism or, for that matter, partisan choices made during her regime have broken all past records. We have been let down by her. She has forgotten that sincere motives and action do not need lofty words.

Sheikh Hasina's regime will be remembered for the rise in criminal activity committed not only by evil elements in society, but by no less a person or persons than her lawmaker(s) or their sons. She continues to sweep everything under the carpet. Her lawmaker in Feni has continued to unleash reign of terror and is alleged to have been involved in maiming a journalist. Four people were killed in a shoot-out from the procession led by one of her lawmakers in Dhaka. The Home Minister forthwith accused the opposition for the killings and

instituted action under the PSA against the opposition leaders, but the lawmaker still remains unchastised even after almost all the print media provided us with a photograph of the shooters beside the lawmaker.

During her five years in office she has not brought to book a single person implicated in making money by corrupt practices. Ershad's conviction has to be otherwise construed. The government has been lenient towards bank money defaulter as well. The mess over printing and delivery of school textbooks placed students and their parents in such an ordeal as they have never experienced before. There are other allegations to do with contracts and projects that smack of corruption and nepotism. This government has broken the trust we had reposed in them, to be a government of the people and for the people. People's problems and interests appear to have been less of a priority than the interests of ruling party members.

A.H. Dewan  
Dhaka

### 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.

#### Flying enemies



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

It is an ugly and dangerous reality. Thousands of flies have made their home on this pile of sugarcane, soon to be squeezed and served as 'fresh' juice! It was found in a roadside stall in the city. There are countless stalls like this everywhere. Anyone who drinks the juice could be exposed to all kinds of serious infections and stomach ailments. Will the health authorities take action against these stalls?

### Silly argument

According to the repeated allegations of Awami Leaguers, the Opposition is continually hatching plans to 'sell' and 'merge' Bangladesh with Pakistan.

At present Pakistan is fighting a life and death battle for its existence, as its political system has failed and collapsed after half a century of non-performance, and the military has taken over the country once again. The UN and the donor agencies are not at all happy with the current climate and are reluctant to provide continued assistance to that country. In politics the opposing parties do criticise one another, but there must a "method in the madness".

Disgusted Citizen  
Dhaka

### Give rapists what they deserve

Some news items stun one so much, that words fail us. An item published in the "Danik Azadi" on March 5, under the heading, "Middle-aged woman victim of gang rape, police do not know anything" is one such item.

According to the report, a middle-aged woman of West High Level

Road, Lalkhan Bazar, Chittagong was on her way to a nearby shop at 7 p.m. when she was abducted by a young man who lived next door to her, and gang raped. She was rescued in an unconscious state and admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital.

What is happening in our country, from two-year old baby girls to sixty year old women, is no one is safe? It was not like this before, why has it taken this turn? One thing is for sure, rapists are not getting the punishment they deserve.

Sometimes, policemen and members of the armed forces also commit this horrible crime and nothing happens to them. The Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition are both women, but now women are feeling more insecure than ever before. The government must take steps to protect women. The police often play a big role, by refusing to acknowledge these incidents of rape or declining to record a case. We cannot accept this attitude! The police department is paid to look after the people.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong