

SAARC must be more than the summit

It should have a political content in the present context

WE fully endorse the recommendation emanating from an international conference on South Asia organised in the city on November 3-5 to the effect that the SAARC is in dire need to be 'politically invigorated' to work for regional peace and stability in the present context. Held under the auspices of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) and the Embassy of Germany in Dhaka, against the backdrop of a seismic shift in the global environment and regional paradigm, the moot couldn't have been more timely. We note with great appreciation also that on top of its timeliness, the international conference participated by as many as hundred distinguished scholars drawn from South Asian academia, governments, private bodies and NGOs could be so focused with its recommendation of what need to be done to improve the security environment in South Asia. While brain-storming on the topic titled "confidence-building measures and security cooperation in South Asia: challenges in the new century," the conference arrived at a one-sentence resolution namely, that a politically rejuvenated SAARC itself would be the most effective confidence-building measure (CBM) for peace and stability in South Asia. There cannot be a more convincing pointer to the untapped political resources of the SAARC as a potentially powerful instrument for peace, security, stability and welfare in South Asia. We are entirely in agreement with this line of thinking.

Indeed, a very strong case can be made out for a politically revamped SAARC on the following very cogent grounds: first, the global tensions are all at our doorsteps now swirling around the Afghanistan situation; secondly, it's no longer the Kashmir-centric thinking that dominates the security or strategic concerns of the region; thirdly, the major powers in international relations are operating at close distances, closest perhaps since the Second World War; and last but not least, South Asia is a nuclearised region with the so-called deterrence factor coming under severe pressure owing to the polarizing global and regional scenarios in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the US mainland.

To be practical, we have to get our approach right about certain mental barriers that cynics would like to underline on the issue of the desired political invigoration of SAARC as a potent confidence-builder in South Asia. For instance, the present relationship between India and Pakistan could not have been worse with their fundamentally differing definitions of terrorism and mutually exclusive stakes in the likely post-Taliban dispensation for Afghanistan. If SAARC were politically oriented since its inception to decide what was best for the region then the Indo-Pak relationship perhaps would not have been in the bind that it is today.

The SAARC charter keeps out of contentious bilateral issues on the ground that if it were to be devoted to the same, economic cooperation, the sole preoccupation of the regional body, would be at a disadvantage. But our experience with SAARC for the last 16 years shows that being fixated on an apolitical agenda left the political tensions unaddressed with the result that the ends of economic cooperation themselves suffered. The forthcoming Kathmandu summit should flag off a rethinking on the SAARC process. After such a long time in hibernation, the summit will have its hands full in terms of clearing the backlog. Moreover, one cannot expect an overnight change in the contents of the charter to accommodate bilateral irritants side by side with the economic agenda. But what can certainly be done to endow the regional body with a tension-defusing quality is to make the fullest use of the 'retreat' from the summit venue as an informal diplomatic forum to try and come to grips with the bilateral anguities. The CHOGOM retreat has made a name for itself by being a conduit for relaxation of tension. SAARC being a compact body could try it with a greater possibility of effectiveness if it wanted to. There can be focused discussion on bilateral issues in the retreats from the limelight of publicity, and most congenially without the pressure of high expectations for any immediate dividends. Even so, there is no doubting its potential as a confidence-builder on a sustainable basis.

The 'retreat' consultations will have to be built into the SAARC summity exercise. In other words, these will have to be a natural part of the SAARC process, so that the summit turns out to be a coveted forum to prise open its vast potential for coming to grips with divisive bilateral issues for the sake of stability and sustainable cooperation in the region.

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.

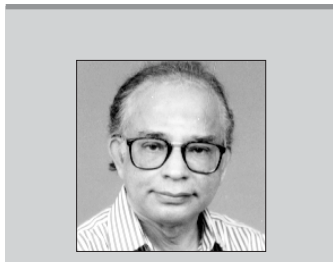


PHOTO: SAIDUR RAHMAN SHAPAN, A FREELANCER

Imposing today gone tomorrow?

Dwarfed by sky scraping bamboo lined up like spears, men cut, chip and prepare them for many uses in the rural areas. There is no official patronage of this plant that has such enormous potential. No steps have been taken to stop its systematic demise. As if, because it is found in plenty, it will not be threatened by extinction ever. Such is how we have lost our natural treasures.

First things first



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE government is now having assumed power barely three weeks ago. But the prime minister and most of the ministers have been in office before, during a stint of five years before the preceding government. Their experiences and credentials for governance are practical and credible. Moreover, in many areas they do not have to start from a scratch there being a good deal of continuity.

Taking over the reins of power the new government is faced with more or less the same set of problems. In some there may have been an attenuation of gravity and circumstances while in others aggravation may have occurred. Whether the aggravations are due to lapses or inept policies of the previous government or the natural concomitants of events the incumbent authority has the responsibility of addressing them. It can accuse or blame the preceding government for the failures but this does not mitigate the urgency of taking appropriate measures in these respects.

The majority party heading the alliance announced a manifesto before election. It is the roadmap now for moving forward with concrete steps backed by coherent policies. It should be the case there was not only rhetoric in the pronouncement. Living up to expectations the government promptly formed five secretaries' committees

to submit report on five areas of assigned priority. Law and order, economic management, human resource development, poverty alleviation and public administration covered the areas of topmost concern. The secretaries were given a week to prepare and submit their reports which they have reportedly done. Given the timeframe it would be surprising if the reports are more than a collection of recommendations. One would balk at the idea of formulating policies on the hoof with a list of recommendations that do not follow review of the past and present and an analysis of all the

and order to deteriorate dangerously. It became precarious after the present government took over when in the wake of the election results there were sporadic attacks on workers of the opposition party and on a minority community. Because of the intertangle between two governments, the caretaker and the present government, there was indecision and even some neglect to take stern action against troublemakers. It raised questions about the attitude of the government towards post-election law and order situation, both at home and abroad, which

to hunt down terrorists and wage a relentless campaign for recovery of illegal arms. Stricter oversight of police to check against excesses or abuse of power by them is equally important. The fact that the previous government did not embark on this is no reason why the present one should not blaze a trail. People who voted them into power expect a better dispensation for protection of their lives and property and rule of law.

While in respect of law and order the agenda of action is clear-cut the same cannot be said about economic management. There have

greatest challenge facing the present government.

After a spectacular drive against poverty and successful measures for its alleviation efforts directed in this regard appear to be in the doldrums. From the beginning funds for poverty alleviation largely came from donors and multilateral sources. Both the government and NGOs depended mainly on this. There was always a risk in this dependence and absence of an incipient home-grown endeavour. It cannot be said that the situation has changed for the better for sponsorship and funds while the dent

the vast army of poor can be pulled above the poverty line on an annualised basis our GDP growth will receive a powerful shot in the arm and by expanding the internal market can help foster closer linkages between supply of goods and effective demand. Integration of the poor into the mainstream of the economy can thus be mutually reinforcing and have multiplier effects along a wide front. Because of this poverty alleviation should no longer be regarded as an add-on element but very much a part of the core strategy for development. The identification of poverty alleviation as one of the five priority areas augurs well and is reassuring. It must not be allowed to take the backseat or regress through benign neglect.

There are other unfinished businesses in the economic sphere. Privatisation and reducing public-sector expenditure are high in this list. In view of resistance against reforms from vested quarters the first year is the best time to go ahead with appropriately designed measures, including painful ones. Export of gas, building a container terminal and transit facilities for goods through Bangladesh are not immediate problems. Taskforces on these should be constituted with representation from parties, trade bodies, academics and bureaucrats. If such a methodical approach is taken there will be little room for misgivings.

The government's intention in solving the major problems on a priority basis is well placed. The approach may need tempering in conceptualisation and fine-tuning for methodology. There will be no loser in this exercise. Transparency, accountability and sustainability may come out as clear winners. In major policymaking the present situation offers a win-win situation. It may not be so for long. Trade-offs have a nasty habit of coming home to roost.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

The government's intention in solving the major problems on a priority basis is well placed. The approach may need tempering in conceptualisation and fine-tuning for methodology. There will be no loser in this exercise. Transparency, accountability and sustainability may come out as clear winners. In major policymaking the present situation offers a win-win situation. It may not be so for long. Trade-offs have a nasty habit of coming home to roost.

parameters involved. Such quick-fix solutions to long-standing problems hardly exist and rarely work satisfactorily. Moreover, the reports intended to be inputs of policymaking should not have been entirely bureaucratic in origin. Though it may be subjected to cabinet scrutiny later, policymaking as a seamless process should have the involvement of politicians (ministers) right from the start. Besides giving necessary guidance such involvement ensures a greater sense of ownership. If the secretaries' reports are related to the policy announcements in the manifesto of the party this particular concern can be said to have been taken care of indirectly. It is not known if that is the case.

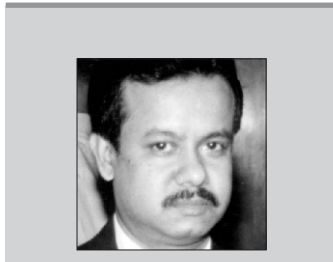
Identifying law and order as a priority concern is very much in order. It is a problem that has bedevilled governance continuously. Failing to check terrorism, the preceding government allowed law

was unfortunate because it was avoidable. The prime minister had issued directives to party workers soon after election results became known which either were not taken seriously or did not percolate down to the field level. The local administration could be more active saving the government from embarrassment but it appears to have been prudent to sit on the fence, waiting the storm to blow over before the new order settled in. Leaving aside the sudden spurt of post-election violence, one thing about law and order situation is encouraging. Like the French proverb the more it changes, the more it remains the same. By the same token, the measures to be taken also remain more or less unaltered. The wheels here don't have to be reinvented, as it is not terra incognita. All that is required is political will and perseverance. The start of a new government is the most propitious time to take drastic and sweeping measures

been many developments in the economic sphere, both incremental and emergent, since the present majority party left office five years ago. Globalisation has bestowed some benefits and also taken its tolls in terms of closure of some indigenous industries and significant unemployment. Among other reasons, liberal import of non-essential goods have drained away the meagre foreign exchange reserve which has been further compounded by frequent devaluation and leakage of wage earner's fund through unofficial channel like hundi. Economic management during the last government was lacklustre, to say the least. The current worldwide recession has dealt a severe blow to our exports, particularly garments. The decisions to reduce bank rate and interest on export loan have been timely. More needs to be done to cushion the adverse effects of the worst recession in recent times. This is the

into the poverty situation has been modest. The NGOs, who were more successful in poverty alleviation and in complementing the government efforts, have of late diversified their activities. However desirable on viability criteria this may have wound down their emphasis on poverty rather too soon. On the other hand, government programmes in these areas have stagnated and could not make up for the slack. What is needed now is a renewed thrust for poverty alleviation jointly by the government and NGOs in a concerted manner. There should be a co-ordinating body located in the Prime Minister's Office for this purpose. The importance of poverty alleviation goes beyond humanitarian and basic rights considerations. It is a very crucial and strategic economic solution for our underdevelopment characterised by low or zero productivity of the poor and their inadequate purchasing power. If

Between Oklahoma and Afghanistan



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1999, a bomb exploded in the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City of the United States, which killed 168 people. Amanda Ripley writes in the Time magazine that the blast wave of the bomb kept shattering lives even long after the explosion. Hard to believe but it is nevertheless true. Bombs have a longer hand of devastation than we thought.

Here are some statistics. In the 10th month after the bombing in Oklahoma, five more babies came into the world in Oklahoma City hospitals than in the state's other urban counties. A year later, it was 16 more births a month, which increased to 37 after two years. Six months after the explosion, nearly half the people who were in the immediate vicinity of the Murrah Federal Building suffered from a psychiatric disorder. At least one third of the people in that vicinity will have post-traumatic stress disorder. Six years later, the family members are still in counselling. At least six people, who survived or lost loved ones in the Oklahoma bombing, have killed themselves. Many more have lost marriages and custody rights.

War on terror: The other victims

JOHN PILGER

THE war against terrorism is a fraud. After a month's bombing, not a single terrorist implicated in the attacks on America has been caught or killed in Afghanistan.

Instead, one of the poorest, most stricken nations has been terrorised by the most powerful - to the point where American pilots have run out of dubious "military" targets and are now destroying mud houses, a hospital, Red Cross warehouses, lorries carrying refugees.

Unlike the relentless pictures from New York, we are seeing almost nothing of this. Tony Blair has yet to tell us what the violent death of children - seven in one family - has to do with Osama bin Laden.

And why are cluster bombs being used? The British public should know about these bombs, which the RAF also uses. They spray hundreds of bomblets that have only one purpose: to kill and maim people. Those that do not explode lie on the ground like landmines, waiting for people to step on them.

If ever a weapon was designed specifically for acts of terrorism, this is it.

I have seen the victims of American cluster weapons in other countries, such as the Laotian toddler who picked one up and had her right leg and face blown off. Be assured this is now happening in Afghanistan, in your name.

None of those directly involved in the September 11 atrocity were Afghani. Most were Saudis, who apparently did their planning and training in Germany and the United States. The camps which the Taliban allowed bin Laden to

Thus one bomb has left a long trail of devastation in the wake of its blast. In effect, it exploded many times since the first explosion, rearranging the forces of life like an earthquake redirects the course of a river. Birth, death, marriage, and all the basic components of human existence were thrown into chaos, its upheavals traumatising everyone who lived in that havoc.

Take that for a standard and count the number of bombs already dropped in Afghanistan. Hundreds? Whatever it is, it has to be more than one. What should be the level of trauma for the people of

basis. In Hiroshima, deaths from radiation poisoning were dropped through years. In Afghanistan, the horror of the bombs will radiate and poison the minds of generations of Afghans.

Professor Joseph Lee Rodgers, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma, explained that surge of birth after the bomb attack in Oklahoma City was attributable to a desire to replace life and a need to solidify one's role in the world. Let us say, the Afghans, who will survive the bombs, are going to be hit by a similar desire. Is there going to be a baby boom in Afghanistan in the

the US have bothered the Americans, but there the brunt of the US attack was spread over a period of fifteen years. Besides, the Vietnamese died and suffered in the zeal for defending ideology and freedom. What are the Afghans dying for? To the contrary, they are dying defenceless in the fight between a zealot and a juggernaut. In fact, their suffering is circumstantial. Had Osama bin Laden taken shelter in another country, the Afghans would have been spared this horror. At the same time one is curious if George W Bush would have cared or dared to attack

That means, even mind is free to pick its disorder. Bombs dropped in New York or Washington agitated the distressed minds of the Oklahomans. But the same minds are unaffected by the bomb blasts in

CROSS TALK

What are the Afghans dying for? ... they are dying defenceless in the fight between a zealot and a juggernaut. In fact, their suffering is circumstantial. Had Osama bin Laden taken shelter in another country, the Afghans would have been spared this horror. At the same time one is curious if George W Bush would have cared or dared to attack if Osama were to hide in another country, for example Saudi Arabia.

Afghanistan if you multiply the effect in Oklahoma with the number of explosions, how many more increased births are we talking about? How many psychiatric disorders are we discussing here? How many suicides? How many lost marriages or custody rights?

Going by the Oklahoma experience, we are looking at the nation of Afghanistan that will remain crippled in its mind for years to come. Its people are going to live through the memories of hell that broke loose on them since the US attack began. As the bombs pulverise rubble into finer rubble, they are coping with fear, starvation, grief, anger, frustration and uncertainty on a daily

post-war period? Will the confused and dazed survivors copiously copulate to reconstruct their devastated country, and pass on the post-traumatic stress disorder to their children in the need for a psychic discharge?

During the week of September 11, Amanda Ripley tells us, the headline at Oklahoma's department of mental health got 300 calls, which was three times its normal volume. Somehow the survivor of one bomb blast connects himself with all bomb blasts afterwards, which stirs the primordial memory of the tragedy extended to others. The explosion of a bomb is disturbing for the mind, and bombs dropped in

Afghanistan. Or, maybe they feel exhilarated to see their country finally striking back at the enemy for the same reason: the relatives of victims in Oklahoma came to watch the execution of Timothy McVeigh.

Will the Afghans ever get to see the execution of their Timothy McVeighs? Perhaps the USA will try to compensate for its atrocities by rebuilding Afghanistan or offering an apology like they have done in Vietnam. For years now, Japan has been trying to do the same for the atrocities committed by its army during the Second World War. But has another country on earth been bombed in history with the duration and intensity of the US attack in

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That realisation will eventually dawn on the Afghans, who will someday hear, if not already heard, the story of Spartacus, how in revenge for one crucified citizen, Crassus crucified thousands of slaves who had risen in rebellion. The six thousand crosses, which staked out the road from Capua to Rome, demonstrated, as Albert Camus writes in *The Rebel*, that "there is no equality in the world of power and that the powerful calculate, at a usurious rate, the price of their own blood."

When the US airforce began to

strike in Afghanistan, one bomb had the name of New York. Police Department written on it. The idea was to seek revenge in the name of its members, who had died on September 11. Which was fair. At least that way the world could keep track of how far the Americans had calculated the price of their own blood, and how many bombs short the USA was of its revenge when Donald Rumsfeld said that Afghanistan was running out of targets.

When evil sets out on the heels of evil, it perpetuates nothing but the vicious cycle of evil. The bomb in Oklahoma was the work of a psychotic killer, who acted under the illusion that he could erase evil with a big bang. In Afghanistan, the USA wants to scorch evil in the heat of its bombs, the evil that incarnates in the persons of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, who signify the terrorists of the world. The pitiful Afghans are getting singled for sheltering a man who believes that evil concentrates in the American government to punish which is a holy war.

In Oklahoma people are still reeling under the impact of a bomb, because it was too sudden. Their grief is no more than the struggle to cope with what was an abrupt horror. For the Afghans, who have been slowly inhaling the vapour of that horror for more than a month, it will be a different ball game. They will have to struggle with the shame of their inability to defend their country, pronounced by the explosion of each bomb. How will they explain why they failed to do anything to stop it? Specially, when they are going to have many more children who will ask that question?

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

The irresponsibility of this conflict is breathtaking. It is not about terrorism. As Blair and Bush stoop to the level of the criminal outrage in New York, British forces are little more than mercenaries for the hidden agenda of US imperial ambitions.

With secret US government approval, the company offered them a generous cut of the profits of the oil and gas pumped through a pipeline that the Americans wanted to build from Soviet central Asia through Afghanistan.

A US diplomat said: "The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis did."

He explained that Afghanistan would become an American oil colony, there would be huge profits for the West, no democracy and the legal persecution of women. "We can live with that," he said.

Although the deal fell through, it remains an urgent priority of the administration of George W. Bush, which is steeped in the oil industry. Bush's concealed agenda is to exploit the oil and gas reserves in the Caspian basin - the greatest source of untapped fossil fuel on earth and enough, according to one estimate, to meet America's voracious energy needs for a generation. Only if the pipeline runs through Afghanistan can the

Washington's imperial ambitions, not to mention the extraordinary pretensions of Blair himself. Having made Britain a target for terrorism with his bellicose 'shoulder to shoulder' with Bush nonsense, he is now prepared to send troops to a battlefield where the goals are so uncertain that even the Chief of the Defence Staff says the conflict "could last 50 years". The irresponsibility of this is breathtaking; the pressure on Pakistan alone could ignite an unprecedented crisis across the Indian subcontinent. Having reported many wars, I am always struck by the absurdity of effete politicians eager to wave farewell to young soldiers, but who themselves would not say boo to a Taliban goose.

In the days of gunboats, our imperial leaders covered their violence in the "morality" of their actions. Blair is no different. Like them, his selective moralising omits the most basic truth. Nothing justified the killing of innocent people in America on September 11, and nothing justi-

Americans hope to control it.

So, not surprisingly, US Secretary of State Colin Powell is now referring to "moderate" Taliban, who will join an American-sponsored "loose federation" to run Afghanistan. The "war on terrorism" is a cover for this: a means of achieving American strategic aims that lie behind the flag-waving facade of great power.

The Royal Marines, who will do the real dirty work, will be little more than mercenaries for

ifies the killing of innocent people anywhere else.

By killing innocents in Afghanistan, Blair and Bush stoop to the level of the criminal outrage in New York. Once you cluster bomb, "mistakes" and "blunders" are a pretence. Murder is murder, regardless of whether you crash a plane into a building or order and collude with it from the Oval Office and Downing Street. If Blair was really opposed to all forms of terrorism, he would get Britain out of the arms trade. On the day of the

If he really wanted to demonstrate "the moral fibre of Britain", Blair would do everything in his power to lift the threat of violence in those parts of the world where there is great and justifiable grievance and anger. He would do more than make gestures; he would demand that Israel end its illegal occupation of Palestine and withdraw to its borders prior to the 1967 war, as ordered by the Security Council, of which Britain is a permanent member.

He would call for an end to the genocidal blockade which the UN - in reality, America and Britain - has imposed on the suffering people of

Iraq for more than a decade, causing the deaths of half a million children under the age of five.

That's more deaths of infants every month than the number killed in the World Trade Centre.

There are signs that Washington is about to extend its current "war" to Iraq; yet unknown to most of us, almost every day RAF and American aircraft already bomb Iraq. There are no headlines. There is nothing on the TV news. This terror is the longest-running Anglo-American bombing campaign since World War Two.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the US and Britain faced a "dilemma" in Iraq, because "few targets remain". "We're down to the last outhouse," said a US official. That was two years ago, and they're still bombing. The cost to the British taxpayer? £800 million so far.

According to an internal UN report, covering a five-month period, 41 per cent of the casualties are civilians. In northern Iraq, I met a woman whose husband and four children were among the deaths listed in the report. He was a shepherd, who was tending his sheep with his elderly father and his children when two planes attacked them, each making a sweep. It was an open valley; there were no military targets nearby.

"I want to see the pilot who did this," said the widow at the graveside of her entire family. For them, there was no service in St Paul's Cathedral with the Queen in attendance; no rock concert with

Paul McCartney.

The tragedy of the Iraqis, and the Palestinians, and the Afghans is a truth that is the very opposite of their caricatures in much of the Western media. Far from being the terrorists of the world, the overwhelming majority of the Islamic peoples of the Middle East and south Asia have been its victims - victims largely of the West's exploitation of precious natural resources in or near their countries. There is no war on terrorism. If there was, the Royal Marines and the SAS would be storming the beaches of Florida, where more CIA-funded terrorists, ex-Latin American dictators and torturers, are given refuge than anywhere on earth.

There is, however, a continuing war of the powerful against the powerless, with new excuses, new hidden agendas, new lies. Before another child dies violently, or quietly from starvation, before new fanatics are created in both the east and the west, it is time for the people of Britain to make their voices heard and to stop this fraudulent war - and to demand the kind of bold, imaginative, militant initiatives that require real political courage.

The other day, the parents of Greg Rodriguez, a young man who died in the World Trade Centre, said this: "We read enough of the news to sense that our government is heading in the direction of violent revenge, with the prospect of sons, daughters, parents, friends in distant lands dying, suffering, and nursing further grievances against us."

"It is not the way to go... not in our son's name."

Source: Internet

John Pilger is a former chief foreign correspondent of The Mirror