

Rumpus over Shahriar's reception

Political polarisation taking an ugly turn

A meeting organised by Shahriar Kabir's supporters was violently resisted by another group, which had denounced him as pro-Indian and condemned the activities of the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee. The supporters of Kabir, mostly drawn from AL circles have declared that the opponents were all supporters of the ruling coalition. Bombs and guns have both been used and an innocent has already died. The issue seems to be emerging as a new frontier in our domestic politics. And party lines have also been duly drawn. It adds another bad news to the way of managing national politics.

There is some feeling in most quarters that Bangladeshi politics exists in isolation. Yet, much of the incidents that seem to be driving our politics appear to be influenced otherwise. Being pro-Indian and pro-Taliban is no longer confined to slogans. In this highly charged inter-connected world, the neutral space is the only one that we should occupy.

That translates into not being dogged ideologues and camp followers but focusing on balance. However, there appears to be a tendency to ride horses of proxy politics and use international politics for local gains. In the post-electoral scene, Awami League's criticism of the US and then its attempt to tag the Taliban brand on the ruling party are glaring features of the same.

In the same vein, the anti-Indian lobby is trying to play a dangerous game. There has been an image problem on the communal harmony front lately; so why stoke it further by pushing anti-Indianism to the point of generating hysteria and violence as it happened in Chittagong?

While a part of the ruling alliance may have an ideological agenda, the major part of BNP would do well to remember that the party was put together on what was billed as "politics of balance" by President Zia. That meant no tilt towards any camp and forging a framework of working with all.

The arrest of Shahriar Kabir should remain an issue of freedom of minorities and freedom of expression rather than one of party or national politics. Right now it's becoming another fresh agenda on the menu. The original concerns may even be lost because of this.

Bangladesh will have to be smarter and stronger to survive in the volatile world of international politics and trade. It can't be irresponsible within and expect the international community not to react. We can't use international politics and not be affected. But the incidents show we haven't learnt that lesson.

Partisan politics seems more evident everyday across the board.

Urban Transport Project in doldrums

DCC should have thought before it leapt

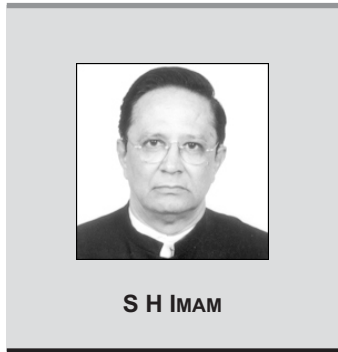
THE World Bank-financed Urban Transport Project, which on completion would have considerably alleviated traffic congestion and air pollution in the city remains non-starter, a hard fact which has been lately revealed in a mid-term review meeting on the status of its implementation. The Dhaka City Corporation, the nodal agency entrusted with 70 per cent of the project work has failed abysmally to do its part.

The World Bank representative's strongly-worded indictment ever to be passed by officials of an international organisation on the DCC has highlighted the latter's failure in no unmistakable terms. Its empty coffers induced the corporation's seminal debacle as it could not come up with 10 per cent of the funds required for completing the important public works component of the project.

It had no coordination with the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and RAJUK even on a special purpose like handling such a must-do project. The reason for a unified authority for the metropolis could not have been underscored more vividly than this. That the corporation has drawn a flak for its inherent lack of expertise in implementing a project of international standard is something that must also be taken very seriously by all concerned.

We appreciate the World Bank's recommendations for the transfer of the urban transport project to either the LGRD Ministry or the Roads and Highways Division under the Communications Ministry. Hopefully, the project will be completed under a double-quick basis under the new arrangements.

Is Bush taking the US to isolationism?



S H IMAM

A lady acquaintance of the family back to Dhaka from a US trip says even the shoes she was wearing were not spared a search at an American airport. Why must a metallic detector of a gateway through which one has to pass as a regulation security check be so unreliable as to call for a manual search? One wonders whether it is not another symptom of the 'US will never be the same again after the 11' September psychosis stretched too far. Obviously, the US Homeland Security is paying attention to the minutest detail!

And why not? The 'standard' after all has been set, in a manner of speaking, by John Reid, the British Muslim of a fundamentalist maverick who was caught onboard a plane in the US with a knife neatly tucked inside his boots. That a single person could ruffle the US security concerns to such a torrid state is unthinkable. A high tech sensor like a detector has to be supplemented by a human search, it sounds rather weird.

There had been another eerie event in the USA in early January

making for a study in strange adolescent behaviour under warped circumstances. Charles Bishop, a barely 15-year-old trainee pilot flew his Cessna right into a 28-storied Bank of America building and dropped dead on a 11 September-style mini suicide mission. The letter he carried in his pocket read of his sympathy for Al-Qaida leader Bin Laden and his endorsement of the 11 September terrorist attack!

Somehow this leads us to a

It has become a mental fixation with us to take snap-shot views of things exhausting our intellect within make-believe circles of our own somewhat echoing Rabindranath Tagore's famous one-liner: 'we tend to believe in what we crave to see'. We seldom put them in an overall context to try and understand why these happened in the first place, and where must lie the remedy for them. Dancing around tiny parcels of semantics with self-pleasing

flexing muscles to open a second, third and even fourth front of attack under his self-anointed anti-terrorist campaign. He has put Iraq, Iran, North Korea along with their unspecified 'allies' on his roadmap. In Afghanistan, the so-called show-piece of success against terrorism, it has returned to business as usual with warlords in the south and the east vying fiercely for control as the authority of the central government, itself run by

his refusal to allow US inspectors, notably under UN aegis, to monitor suspected Iraqi sites for building weapons of mass destruction. It has been a long-standing problem anyway, with the UN in picture as well. So, why make a special issue of it now? Notably, Libya has been spared the threat, presumably because it has agreed to pay compensation to the victims of the Lockerbie hijacking incident of 1988. Iran is being taken on for

aimed at. However, international civility demands even threats should not be issued to any country in an attempt to bring it down to its knees.

The relentless disproportionality of the American reaction to the 11 September events even after the war in Afghanistan is clearly reflected by the US\$ 50.4 billion military and foreign aid budget that the Bush administration had proposed to the Congress. This came under a wider label of an economic stimulus package, although the US economy has been on the mend for sometime. The US senate has shot the stimulus package down on the ground that it would benefit the upper three per cent of the American people at the cost of health and education programmes for the poor. One does not know what the revised shape of the budget would be, but the emphasis on military side, which is twenty times more pronounced in allocational terms than anytime before in the US history, speaks for itself. Notably, Jordan, India, Pakistan, Yemen and Oman are likely to be big recipients of US military assistance.

A new spectre of arms race makes even partial disarmament a still more elusive goal. If this is the world order we are headed for, then God save us!

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

Most of the NATO allies which had declared solidarity with the USA's anti-terrorist campaign against Afghanistan have, however, reacted negatively to Washington's apparent plans for physical war against another country. US Secretary of State Colin Powell perhaps realising the mood of most NATO members, Arab allies, Russia and China lately tried to cushion off the misgivings by saying that it is dialogue and not an invasion that is aimed at.

whole series of eruptive incidents that makes us sit up and take note. For instance, Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal's South Asia bureau chief was abducted some three weeks ago by a so-called Restoration of Pakistan's Sovereignty group. This has been apparently in protest against US treatment of the suspected Al-Qaida detainees, including some Pakistanis, at the Guatenamo base in Cuba. Many British Muslims have dared say openly that Afghan war has not put an end to 'Islamic Jihad'; on the contrary, they added, preparations are afoot to launch a more intense one in the future. A passing reference can also be made to the terrorist attack at the US cultural centre in Kolkata.

conclusions drawn to satisfy our egos cannot get us anywhere. Risking some pontification, let me say that nothing less than a holistic view of the turns and twists will ever alleviate mankind's sufferings.

It's worth remembering that throughout history legends and folklore have largely been the creations of disproportionality of reactions on the part of powers that be to individual or group instances of violence.

From American dreams to beating the whole world into shape by settling old scores, the US under George Bush's leadership, has fallen from the 'sublime to the ridicule.' After the war in Afghanistan which has created more problems for the country than solved, Bush is

factionous elements, remains confined to Kabul. Depressively, in some areas people are eating grass and selling children.

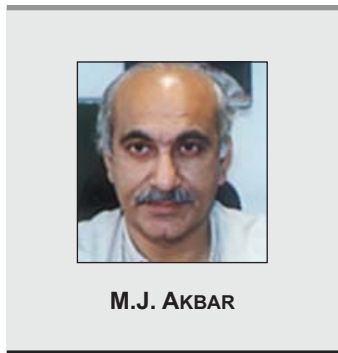
Other country's national interest hardly matters for the USA. It is the freedom of the American people and their security, defence and protective concerns that are being proclaimed as the cause for extending Bush's anti-terror mission to new theatres. It is as if at the altar of these that other countries should be prepared to sacrifice their own national pride. Even though as the only superpower in the world, the US should have been more respectful to other countries' sensibilities.

The ostensible reason for the wrath against Saddam Hussein is

harbouring Al-Qaida fugitives; but Komeini has denied it and expressed astonishment over what he called Bush's 'upbringing'. North Korea's nuclear and missilery programmes have been eyed with great suspicion by the US for long.

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A Portugal diary



M.J. AKBAR

LISBOA: Portugal is Fatimah, the holy mother of Jesus who they worship and adore; Fada, their traditional music, which is still giving strong competition to pop and rock; and Football, which they adore but do not worship. I am sure there is another F on the list of recreations but being Catholic they don't mention it. Where else but on the Iberian peninsula would a footballer be punished for atheism? In the last week of January Oscar Tellez, who plays as a defender for the club Deportivo Alaves was fined 750 euros because he did not go to church. To give you the whole story: a funeral mass was being held for the obviously departed honorary president of the club, Jose Luis Companon which the team was ordered to attend. Oscar went up to the door of the church, and stayed there. He explained: "I didn't enter the church because I don't like churches, and I don't believe in what goes on inside them." Fair enough. Or not. The club did not take kindly to this explanation and decided to make Oscar an example before the club and community. "I don't know why they have to force a player to enter a church," argued Oscar. "What would happen if the club signed up a player who observes Ramadan or doesn't eat meat? Would he be forced to eat or would he be punished too?" No point in wondering about all that, Oscar. It is highly unlikely that Deportivo Alaves is going to sign practicing Muslims or Hindu vegetarians from Churchill Brothers in their crusade for the conquest of the first division league title.

THE tourist literature never quite admits it, but Portugal did not exist

before the Muslims. The peninsula was populated by the Celtic and Gothic tribes (made famous in the contemporary world by Asterix and Obelix) before and during the Roman occupation. In 711 the Muslims arrived with a small army of about 12,000 soldiers and retained their hold until the fall of the great Nasrids of Granada in 1499. Muslims ruled what is now Portugal for four hundred years until Afonso Henriques took the marvellous fort on the highest hill of the city of Lisboa in 1148 and created an independent kingdom. For three hundred and fifty years after that Muslims and Jews continued to live

fourteenth into the fifteenth centuries the aggressive Spanish rulers of Castile tried to absorb Portugal into Spain. King John successfully defended the integrity of Portugal and became a hero to his people. In 1455 Pope Nicholas 5th in a famous Bull gave Portugal the mission to take the holy war to Africa and India; later, to prevent a clash of local Iberian civilisations, Rome divided the world between Portugal and Spain. The former got the east and the latter the west of what was called the Pope's Line. It is instructive to note that Portugal reached India in 1499 and established a kingdom in Goa 16 years before

but doubtless there is a jury out there among readers who will correct me if I have been less than just to Punjabi international influence. I am indebted for this list to the bright, young and idealistic Indian Foreign Service officer in our embassy, Randhir Jaiswal, which gives me another opportunity to blame the government for any of my mistakes. The most poignant word that has travelled so many thousands of miles is duvida, the Portuguese word for our Hindi duvidha. No one can come to India, live for five and a half centuries and return home without a touch of duvidha.

That Portugal is long gone. Portugal's interest in the east is now visible in academics rather than gunboat diplomacy. The Instituto do Oriente of the Universidade Tecnica de Lisboa has an impressive new building, the river Tejo glistening through one window and woods climbing hills through the other. It is run by Professor Narana Coissoro, whose blue eyes twinkle and whose laugh booms through dinner and seminar alike. He is a Hindu who left Goa to study law in Portugal fifty years ago, and is now one of the senior leaders of the government in addition to his responsibilities in the University: That laugh disguises a shrewd understanding of emerging Europe and a rising Asia; his role is to build the links that will nourish both.

in Portugal as citizens rather than rulers until the spirit of the Spanish inquisition seized Manuel in the last decade of the fifteenth century. He ordered every Muslim and Jew to either convert within ten months of his orders, or leave the country. This might have been a comparatively generous option but for a rider. Children below fifteen would be forcibly converted in any case, so parents were given a choice between their children and their faith. The Muslims who chose to leave went across the Atlantic to Morocco, carrying the keys of their homes in the hope that one day they would be allowed to return. Where did the Jews go? To the Ottoman empire, where the Sultans of Turkey gave them protection and a place in their empire for which they were ever grateful. This is one of the reasons why relations between Turkey and Israel have always remained better than between Israel and any other Muslim country. When, during the turn of the

Babur reached Delhi. Portugal was also the last to leave, fourteen years after the British. Stubbom.

IF Portugal continues to live in Goan life, then Goa also continues to live in the Portuguese language. The word for mother is mae and comes from the Indian matri. We have given jungle to English as well; in Portugal it has become janela. Cha for tea is not very surprising, but they use fita for laces, sono for sleep (our sona), nau for boat, almira for well, almira which derives from almari and mesa for table from our very own mez. Pao is pao; no explanations required, surely, for that. Even a verb like dena has become da/dou, while the human feet are perna, a variation of payr. Some words we assume to be Portuguese or at least European come from our very own motherland: reina from rani for queen, padre from padri and chama from shama or flame. However, I am just a shade doubtful whether vejio is a variation of the Punjabi vekhyo

IF you want to see Goa perched on top of a mountain, go to Obidos. The main church of this fortified village, with a sweeping view of the Atlantic from its height, at the northern end of the Rue Direita, was a mosque for four hundred years, and a tribal temple of the Visigoths before it became a mosque. So it goes. The battlements were built by the Moors and provide some idea of why these fortresses were so impregnable. A group of schoolgirls, crowned like princesses, were assembled outside the church when we ambled past, the starting point of their lesson in visual history. Amble is the correct word; hurry would be unfair to the serene spirit of Obidos. The walls of the small houses are white, the roofs are tiled and flowers tumble out of curved verandah grilles. A cocker spaniel guards an empty shop, sitting perfectly still. It would be impolite to bark. There is a domestic air about the commerce. Shops may or may not have shopkeepers, until you step in when

this with the smile that they happily offer and you have the magic recipe for tourists. Goa has contributed to the menu with an European version of prawn masala. Along with this order at the restaurant of the Hotel da Torre, which I could hardly resist, turned up papad. Will there come a day when we shall do unto the Portuguese what we have done with the British? They took over the economy; we have taken over their food. I call this justice of history.

PORTUGAL comes from port, the dark sweet wine. It could easily come from the port on the confluence of the Tejo, a river of African and Asiatic dimension, and the Atlantic. Lisbon grew on this corner. The Tejo sparkles and laps while the Atlantic surges and roars; you would not believe that water could have two such different manifestations in such proximity. The Portuguese commemorate the point from which Vasco da Gama left with three small ships for India, after a

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

"On Arabic Language"

I am writing this letter in response to Mr. Reza's reply (February 4) on Mr. Mustafizur Rahman's suggestion for making Arabic a compulsory subject. Without going into the detail of whether the Arabic should be made compulsory or not, I would like to shed some light on Arabic language from an Islamic point of view.

I appreciate Mr. Reza's patriotic zeal and love for our language, however, cannot agree on his attitude towards Arabic language based on his impression of Arabs. I agree to his points on the characteristics of Arab people. However he also need to remember, when Rasullullah (sm) came to that land about 1400 years ago, the situation was even worse.

However, Allah had chosen Rasullullah (sm) from that very same race and subsequently Arabic as the language of Quran. Definitely of all the languages, Allah exalted this language in divinity and made compulsory for every Muslim to

recite the verses of the Quran in this language in every prayer. You cannot recite the Quran in any other language except the language it was revealed in, i.e. Arabic. You may have "Tafsir" or Translation of Quran in other languages though.

Moreover, during the time of Rasullullah (sm) (even before the revelation), Arabic language had reached its peak in terms of poetic mastery, oral ornamentation and linguistic excellence. That is why, revealing Quran in rich Arabic language through an illiterate prophet (sm) was one of the miracles of Allah to challenge contemporary Arab scholars to produce another book with such elegance in language.

We know that in Arabic language, quite often a single word has different intrinsic meanings. And we know that Quran is full of such words. Therefore the real meaning of such an word can only be realised and understood by thorough and deep knowledge of the Arabic language. Therefore one needs to know Arabic very well in order to understand the real mean-

ing and essence of Quran. We all should think and know first the deeper philosophy of Quranic revelation before reaching such conclusion on Arabic. There is nothing wrong in being patriot, however, if you consider yourself as a Muslim, you have to abide by certain rules set by Allah Himself.

Zafar Hadi
Los Angeles, California, USA

Where is our scholarship?

I have passed S.S.C exam in the year 2000. As I obtained 4th place in the merit list, I was sure to get a scholarship. But two years have passed and till date I haven't received any scholarship. My classmate who stood first also hasn't received any scholarship. Why is the government showing such a step motherly attitude towards us? Why hasn't we got our due money?

Naomi
A student of V.N.C

The wronged Kashmiris

Were the Kashmiris struggling for more than half a century for freedom from Indian occupation in the former Himalayan princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to become post-9/11 world environment's victim, that would be the most callous thing to happen.

They have lost over 70,000 lives to the bullets and torture of Indian military in their struggle over these past 12 years alone. Neither is their struggle religiously motivated nor a Pakistan-sponsored insurgency, as the Indians would have it believed in a bid to discredit it in the world's eye. Nor is it a separatist movement, as foreign analysts not fully familiar with the region's history often term it.

Their struggle is rooted in their right to self-determination that was mandated for them by the UN Security Council 54 years ago, a right they remain deprived of so far due to India's intransigence. Though it had accepted the UN verdict, India has refused to abide by its pledge and continues keeping the Kashmiris enslaved through the use of brute military force.

The saddest part is the international community's apathy in having this UN decree enforced to do justice to these wronged Kashmiris. Over the period, the community has intervened on many an occasion on behalf of similarly beleaguered peoples elsewhere but has shown no such interest in rescuing them from their travails.

So much so, while the Indian military has been brutalising them with impunity for the past well over a decade, no voices of censure against India or in compassion for them have been raised anywhere in the world. Even as the international watchdogs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been spotlighting their doleful plight, the world capitals professing to be champions of global human rights causes are intriguingly keeping quiet.

Their deafening silence is sickening. Not only because it's allowing India to keep up with its dance of death and destruction against these hapless Kashmiris but also because it is helping New Delhi in misrepresenting their legitimate struggle.

But the fact stands that the Kashmiri resistance is essentially

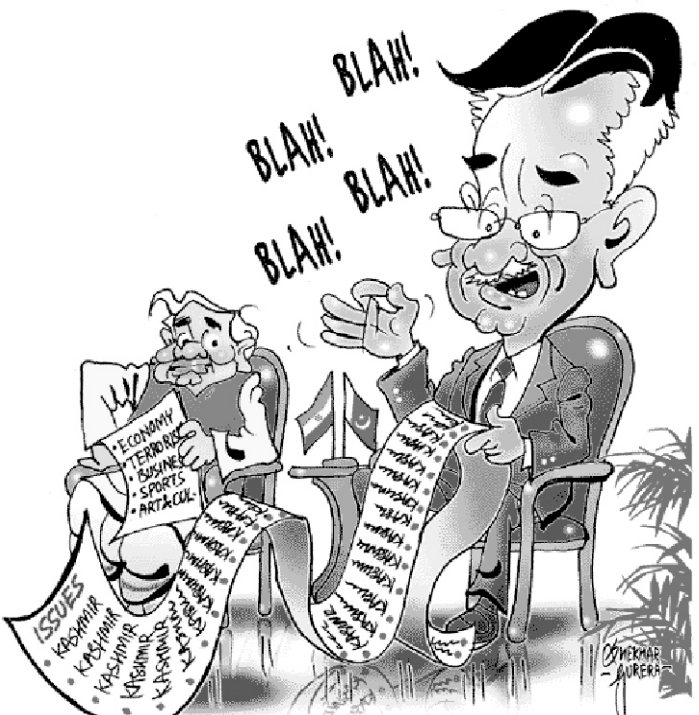
an indigenous movement. For, no resistance can last as long as has the Kashmiris' without local inspiration and participation.

For the last twelve years, they are up in arms against the Indian occupation and there has been no let-up in their movement despite the enormous brutalities the Indian military has inflicted upon them.

Taking advantage of the current global anti-terrorism sentiment and the concomitant propensity to dismiss all freedom movements as terrorism, India has been striving hard to have their movement branded as terrorist while stepping up its own repression of the Kashmiris manifold. Appallingly, it is getting receptive ears as well internationally.

The world community should step in actively to bring the two neighbours India and Pakistan to the negotiating table to seek out a solution to this issue in keeping with the wishes of the Kashmiris. These forsaken people have suffered too much and for too long at India's hands. They must be relieved of their travails now.

Mubarik Shah, on e-mail



Kashmir solution: Talked to death