

Khaleda-Larma meet

High priority to law and order in the CHT

THE meeting between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Parbattya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) chief Shantu Larma on Saturday carried a special significance for two reasons. One, this was the first-ever dialogue between them since the BNP-led alliance came to power. Two, the BNP leader who had opposed the peace accord signed by AL government with the PCJSS in 1997 and pledged to scrap it when in office has taken a forward-looking approach to the question. Nothing along the line of scrapping the accord was even remotely echoed at the meet. Essentially, Shantu Larma met the PM along with Moni Swapna Dewan, deputy minister for CHT Affairs not merely as the leader of a political front of the since defunct Shantibahini, but as a co-signatory to the accord and chairman of the CHT regional council. To put things in perspective -- and we mentioned this in our initial comments following the signing of the peace accord -- BNP, for its part, had advanced peace negotiations with tribal leaderships between 1991 and 1996. Actually, it was then that the idea of an all-party team for negotiation got put into practice, which continued into the subsequent AL rule, although BNP was to withdraw from it towards the end. So, there is an underlying ring of familiarity to the background of what's happening at the present moment.

The immediate priority concern for the Chittagong Hill Tracts is law and order. For, it was in the shadows of the bloody battle on Friday between the PCJSS and the UPDF, short for United People's Democratic Front, that Larma's meeting with Begum Zia took place. UPDF is opposed to the peace accord. Khoai Marma and Promod Bikash Chakma lost their lives in the tribal feud. And almost as the talks were taking place in Dhaka another gunfight between the two groups claimed the lives of Proshen Chakma and Kanti Chakma.

So, the focus *per se* revs on to the dire need for resolving the bitter conflicts between tribal factions in the CHT. They must present a unified face in carrying forward the mutually reinforcing agenda for peace and development. Without a guarantee for security and peace in the region, neither the international community nor the local entrepreneurs will feel drawn to invest money there. That way, the huge national endowment of the area, which has otherwise caught the attention of potential investors, is bound to remain untapped. The stakes are that much higher for the people of Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban to close their ranks.

The Hague meeting on bio-diversity is laudable

But will this pass the test of adequacy?

ENVIRONMENT Ministers from different countries including the developed ones have adopted a resolution at the Hague on protection of forests. It was cheered by numerous governments as a step forward and described by activist organizations like the Greenpeace and others as a failure. The actions are meant to preserve the primary forests critical for sustaining bio-diversity but may not address the issue of sustainable development for all. The resolutions of the Hague Conference will also be presented at the sustainable development summit at Johannesburg but the time for discussion has run out. Sadly, the time for action in many sectors have run out as well.

Countries which own these forests are against any kind of policing of their natural resources but have agreed to some actions. However, many feel that such steps are terribly inadequate. These intact or virgin forests have a role beyond being a natural construct. What troubles many is the attitude of the developed and developing countries to look at global problems through the lenses of individual countries or zones. Most of them, like Canada, Malaysia, Brazil etc have opposed any policies that may pass on accountability matters beyond the national border. Thus, the approach is to think globally but act locally, a slogan made popular by the UN agencies themselves. In this case it has become the cloak of irresponsibility which most wear to take selfish decisions.

The end line of this all is the impact they will have on the developing world, increasingly marginalized by international environmental politics where no regulatory body exists which can exert sanity on them all. Thus decisions which affect the world are taken on the basis of narrow national self-interest. Since few countries believe that there is the presence of a global moral standard, they prefer to look after themselves. And that is why the problem will not go away as easily as we all want.

Was Powell mission pre-destined to fail?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

in doing so, the failed mission of Powell only helped Israel getting a stamp of legitimacy for her actions. Moreover Mr Bush's words at his Crawford ranch calling upon both sides for a cease-fire were sufficiently ambiguous for Israeli Prime Minister to have taken them as no more than an amber light.

Yet, it is only the US which has all the leverages on Israel to make her comply not only with the US' call for a troops' pull back but also with international law and norms which

which she on 29 March last declared an all out war on the stateless Palestinians in the name of dismantling their terrorists' infrastructure in occupied territories, the US justified the steps saying that Israel had the right to defend itself. In a ridiculous display of bravado when Israel unleashed its monstrous forces -- tanks, helicopter gunship and F-16s -- against defenseless Palestinians living in entities humiliatingly dependent on Israelis even for their day to day routine life, it seemed to

one with regards to fighting terrorism. Sharon can, therefore, easily decipher the exact message of the US irrespective of whatever may be its outward pronouncement. How also would one interpret Bush's anti-Arafat statement, his tardiness in sending an emissary to the region and now his warning to Syria, Iran and Hezbollah? Ariel Sharon calls the Palestinians including their leader Yassir Arafat 'terrorist'. George Bush, presently obsessed with terrorists the world over not

with Blair dutifully standing by his side, Bush unhesitatingly character-assassinated Arafat and viciously pilloried him for being unworthy of his 'trust' and failing to live up to American expectation. President Bush did not elaborate what 'trust' Arafat has not been worthy of and what were precisely the American expectations. Ariel Sharon also has not as yet clearly explained what he hopes to achieve through his military assaults but he dropped a couple of hints. Recently he publicly

lages, at the end of this process you will still have suicide bombers. It is indeed doubtful whether Bush would have at all made the 'gesture' he did at Crawford had he not been urgently advised, by hawks and moderates alike, that Sharon's conduct -- by incensing public opinion in friendly Arab states -- was jeopardising key alliances to a point where any military action against Iraq would be impossible to contemplate. Otherwise to the US Arafat is a 'terrorist' unworthy of American trust while Ariel Sharon is a 'man of peace' as reporters were told by President Bush at his Oval office while he was briefed by Colin Powell on his return.

Such perceptual bias on the part of the US is in no way conducive to lasting peace in the Middle East. As the attitudes are hardening on either side of the conflict, increasingly an imposed settlement seems to be the only way out. Even in that event it is again the US which has the leverage and influence on Israel to make it possible. The murky background of Powell mission or a muddled policy on an issue of historic dimension -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- will fall short of the objectives to be achieved through an American intervention on which the entire international community is pinning its hopes. The mindset that is now at work behind the US' Middle East policy will make any number of mission to the region stumble at the intransigence of Israel. To make her submit to international law and justice it will demand clear policy and more explicit statement from Bush and not just his continuous effort to whitewash Sharon's white murders as "legitimate self-defence".

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

PERSPECTIVES

The mindset that is now at work behind the US' Middle East policy will make any number of mission to the region stumble at the intransigence of Israel. To make her submit to international law and justice it will demand clear policy and more explicit statement from Bush and not just his continuous effort to whitewash Sharon's white murders as "legitimate self-defence".

Israel has been floundering with impunity. Since its creation in 1948 Israel heavily depended for its survival on the US and is still sustained by an enviable \$4b a year in military and economic aid from the latter. For these reasons the US is regarded as the only power with an overwhelming influence, to restrain Israel's excesses. This it did in the past whenever it was deemed necessary. As a result the US had the privilege of playing a key role in all peacemaking endeavours in the Middle East -- from the Suez crisis in 1956 to Camp David in 1979 to Oslo Accords in 1993. A constant awareness that the course of Middle East conflict shaped by cold war politics could trigger a major war, led to a fine act of balancing in American policy. That balance too is now ostensibly missing.

What talk of restraining Israel from her wanton warmongering in

have enjoyed an approving nod from the United States where people were blithely unconcerned with the appalling miseries of the Palestinians being mowed down by the barrages from Israeli tanks and gunships.

The US' Arab allies were disappointed that she did not even come forward with her traditional balancing acts to moderate the brutalities of Ariel Sharon. They were ostensibly hurt at the blatantly partisan role of the US which kept condemning Arafat's failure to rein in the Palestinian extremists without uttering a word if the holocaust perpetrated by Sharon's military did not constitute the state terrorism. President Bush never went so high among his people since the ignominy of his signing the Oslo Accords wherein the PLO accorded recognition to Israel in 1993.

At his media durbar at Crawford,

said that he would like to send Yassir Arafat into exile abroad and hunt down a number of his top political and security lieutenants. He seems to believe that Israel can stop 'Palestinian terrorism' through its force of arms and that Arafat and his deputies will be eventually replaced by more moderate leadership willing to accept Sharon's plan for a 'longterm interim settlement' that would indefinitely extend Israeli control of East Jerusalem and most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Like Sharon's previous attempt to destroy Palestinians' national aspiration through an invasion of Lebanon in 1982 this strategy is also doomed to failure. At least some officials in the Bush Administration including the Secretary of State Colin Powell understand it. Mr Powell aptly explains it in the following words: No matter how many tanks go through how many vil-

War and peace in the Middle East



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

installing miles of electrified barbed wires around them. He has also placed Yasser Arafat under house arrest in his semi-destroyed headquarters without water, electricity and food ... Needless to say, all this has, in the words of Kofi Annan, created a humanitarian disaster of enormous magnitude. Now, why is Sharon doing all this? Is he insane? Has he become senile at his old age?

No, Sharon is neither mad nor senile. Actually, all through his long

Palestinian territories only when he has uprooted the infrastructure of "terrorist activities", meaning, Palestinian resistance. In all this, he all the time uses the language and tactics used by his mentor and protector George W. Bush after September 11. For Sharon, it is a cynical expedient to link his efforts to destroy the Palestinian Authority and Yasser Arafat to Bush's so-called War on Terror and Osama bin Laden. The plan is to liquidate the Palestinian Authority and the Pales-

the Arabs, hence this racist colonial war.

Will Sharon's strategy work? No, I do not think so. It has been proven time and again in history that a colonial army has never been able to subdue a nation by brute military force for ever, unless, of course it could physically exterminate or expel the entire population. While Israel has got thousands of tanks, modern missiles, helicopter gun ships, F 16 fighters and even atomic bombs, the Palestinians are

billions could set up and finance a pro-Arab lobby in the US with Christian and Muslim Arab professionals, if they really wanted to help the Palestinian cause. As long as the US remains as the world's only superpower, no one should underestimate the power of American public opinion.)

Colin Powell is a pragmatist and in my opinion, understands the tragedy of the Palestinian people and sympathises with their cause. But unfortunately, he represents a fundamentalist administration which to say the least is ignorant and bigoted. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, they now realise that they must have something more than the Oslo peace process to achieve their independence and that they cannot trust the Americans as honest brokers. All future peace negotiations must be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations, the European Union, the US, Russia and the Arab League. The Palestinians have suffered too much and still continuing to do so. They cannot accept a cease fire without something positive. A fair and comprehensive political settlement with a view to establishing a viable Palestinian state with internationally recognised borders must go hand in hand with the cessation of hostilities.

Eventually, the Israelis will have to go from the occupied territories as all colonial powers have done before them. There will be a Palestinian state, more or less on the basis of the original UN resolutions, the "Taba negotiations" of January, 2001 and recent Saudi proposals. How long would it take for these to happen? No one knows. Meanwhile, this insane cycle of violence will continue, because Israel's intransigence and American indifference to the Palestinian cause of today will translate into the death of hundreds, if not thousands of Palestinians and Israelis of tomorrow. It is a pity that, instead of using its unparalleled leverage to bring about a just and lasting peace in the region, the US, through its short-sighted policy of acquiescence has decided to cheer on the "hero" of Sabra, Chatila and Jenin in his mad colonial adventure.

career, Sharon has been an extraordinarily consistent soldier-politician. He has very rarely tried to hide his plans and objectives. He has always felt that he has been ordained by God and history to fulfil a mission, i.e. the establishment of "Greater Israel" from the Jordan river to the sea. For this, he feels, he has the sacred duty of cleansing the territories of local population and repopulate them with hundreds of Jewish settlements, which will be linked among themselves and with Israeli cities by modern motorways. (The Palestinians will not be allowed to use these motorways.) For that, if he has to commit mass murders or organise wholesale deportation of the Arabs, he will do so without any hesitation. (Actually he is responsible for the death of so many Arab civilians since 1953 (village of Kibya) that the US would have accused him of genocide or crimes against humanity, if he were not an Israeli politician.) In order to achieve this goal, he has designed a plan. What is this plan? Will it succeed? What is the current US role in all this?

Sharon has started this "holocaust" as a retaliation for recent Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel, which the US seems to forget are the results of desperation, frustration and indifference of the West to Israel's 35 year-old occupation, aggression, assassination and daily humiliation inflicted on the Palestinians. Actually he was waiting for such an excuse to reoccupy the West Bank. He says that he will pull back his troops from

Palestinian national identity as political and cultural factors. In order to achieve these goals, he is prepared to kill as many Palestinians as possible, inflict such suffering on the rest that most of them would gradually leave Palestine and then confine the survivors in bantustans or virtual prison camps (which if they want to call "state" or "states", he would not mind) as serfs supplying cheap labour. The Palestinians living in these bantustans will neither have freedom of movement nor control over connecting roads, airspace and water. (Some hard-line members of Sharon's cabinet would even like to "transfer", that means get rid of all the Palestinians, including the Israeli Arabs in order to have a "pure" Jewish state.) Then, only then, Sharon feels, there will be peace and security in Israel. Until then Sharon is not interested in peace with the Palestinians. Actually Sharon has used every tool in Palestinian violence (for example, a period of three weeks after Dec. 16, 2001) to perpetrate targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders and massive incursions in Palestinian cities with the clear objective of provoking further retaliatory violence from the Palestinians. The suffering of the "inferior races" does not worry him, because this is of little importance in his grand historic design. It is ironic that Sharon, very much like his people's European oppressors for hundreds of years (innumerable pogroms and holocausts), considers himself and his people superior to all other races or ethnic groups, in particular

only lightly armed. This asymmetric military situation, in effect empowers the Palestinians in their resolve to throw out the Israelis from the occupied territories. The Palestinians have lost everything except their lives, which they are prepared to sacrifice for their honour and independence. This is what turns them into formidable enemies. While the Israelis are fighting a colonial war (where are their so-called democratic values?), the Palestinians are fighting a war of liberation. They are convinced that since the world cannot help them, they have to help themselves. As many foreign journalists in the occupied territories have pointed out recently, every Palestinian is a potential human bomb. As William Pfaff of Los Angeles Times Syndicate International wrote recently, "Their (the Palestinians') capacity to endure suffering and strike back is proving greater than the Israeli public's willingness to accept suffering and inflict punishment". More than five hundred Israeli soldiers and officers have refused to fight in the occupied territories, because according to them it is an "immoral war".

The US must understand two fundamental facts: First, that Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories for more than 35 years is the root cause of the conflict. Until and unless, the occupation is ended there will be no peace in the Middle East. Second, they must not apply double standard, while measuring violence in this conflict. While the violent death of any civilian is regrett

right to defend themselves? Why have the Americans not done anything to prevent the massacre in Jenin? Why have they not taken any action to punish Sharon? Where is the international force to protect the Palestinian civilians? Is Israel life more important than Palestinian life? I merely wonder what sort of reaction the US administration would have had if something similar (no, only 10% of the atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli army) had taken place anywhere else in the world. Why does the US insist on the application of UN resolutions to all other countries except Israel? If this is not morally hypocritical and one-sided, what is?

Actually the coverage given by the media in the United States to Sharon's holy war has been, to put it mildly, completely biased in favour of the Israelis. There is much talk of Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli suffering but scanty coverage of Israel's state terror on unarmed civilians in Palestinian territories. There is, of course, hardly any mention of the root causes of the conflict, i.e. Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories for the last thirty five years and the ever-expanding Israeli settlement activity in these territories. It is particularly sickening to read the "brilliant" expositions of the situation by journalists like William Safire and Thomas Friedman in the New York Times. No wonder, American public opinion remains so tilted towards the Israeli version of the tragedies in the Middle East. (Actually, I have often felt that the Saudis with their

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Col Akbar vs the Danes

I think there's been a sting!

The Danes have accused the Minister of the intention of corruption. How would any investigation or probe ever prove the intention of corruption? The charges and evidence are subject to interpretation and since the accused must be given the benefit of the doubt, there can be no guilty verdict or report.

The Shipping Ministry also managed the muddy waters by bringing up the other Colonel, probably a fixer, working on behalf of the Danes. His role can only be clarified by the Danish Embassy and failure to do so would constitute the possibility of impropriety on the part of the Danes.

But what's happened? Well at face value, the hapless Danes have blundered into a diplomatic faux pas without any irrefutable proof of guilt on the part of the Minister (To

accuse or not the accuse that is the question). In the meantime, the BIWTC, never a paragon of honesty, now gets to float the tenders for the overhaul of the ferries without any foreign oversight. With respect to the Minister, who to be fair may not be involved, kickbacks galore.

Tintin

Dhaka

"Bannig is not the way to fight criticism"

I refer to Mr. Ahmed K. Rashid's letter (April 17) in reply to mine on April 14 on the above subject.

I wish to congratulate Mr. Rashid through your esteemed daily for his rather gleeful reconfirmation of his allegiance to Mr. Berlir Lintner. I never questioned his loyalty. Some individuals have their own way of wanting to 'stand out in the crowd' for instant fame - from streaking to

almost anything - even selling their souls. Mr. Rashid chose to stand out by eulogising and identifying himself with Berlir Lintner who maliciously tried to defame our whole nation to the rest of the world - a nation where Mr. Rashid apparently still lives and breathes its air.

Mr. Rashid has quoted the US Ambassador Mary Ann Peters totally out of context in a vain attempt to mislead the readers. Newspaper reports rather clearly show that Ambassador Peters has proactively tried to fend off the anti-Bangladesh propaganda. She "has rejected the 'terrorist image' of Bangladesh as portrayed in a section of press" in her address to the Congressional Bangladesh Caucus on Thursday, April 11 in Washington (full report: DS April 14).

Yes, Mr. Rashid - we still have to worry and keep constant watch - primarily, as long as we have the fifth columnists in our midst. As and

when these 'snakes under grass' are effectively taken care off, the task ahead would be less treacherous - no doubt.

Ashfaque Chowdhury

Banani, Dhaka

Three cheers for terrorist-cum-commissioner aspirants!

Is not it gratifying and hope inspiring, that famous (!) criminals and terrorists, who are contending in the coming City Corporation elections have, in their election pledges, vowed to eliminate terrorism, extortion etc. from their respective wards, if elected by the voters? Our dexterous and good soul police force is pitifully helpless vis-à-vis the criminal gangs of this country.

Thanks to the formidable criminals and terrorists, who are settling their mutual accounts through physical elimination of each other, that the criminal population of this country gets trimmed now and then. So bravo to the "gladiators on the streets for democracy"! After all we live in a queer society where rule of law is next to daydream, where gang leaders evoke social respect; gentle and wise people are pitted. Faruque Hasan

Dhanmondi, Dhaka

"Arab-Israeli conflict: A layman's view"

Some of Mr. Omar Khasru's claims in his opinion "Arab-Israeli conflict: A layman's view" (April 12) are quite spurious and therefore should not go unchallenged. Mr. Khasru regards Israel as a country with a "semblance" of democracy. And it also shows that despite its "semblance" of parliamentary democracy, Israel's law and practices create a caste-like system that puts Jews and Arabs into different classes with unequal rights. Israel has repeatedly attacked and killed Palestinians and Arabs. Israel does not adhere to the Geneva Convention, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and UN Security Council Resolutions.

Ironically the Geneva Conventions were drafted to ensure that no regime could resort to Nazi-like tactics. Israel has consistently supported right-wing fascist dicta-

torships in Latin America and in Africa. Under Sharon leadership, Israel killed nearly 17,000 people in Lebanon. No one yet knows how many people they have killed and are still killing in