

## Watery grave in Meghna again

**Fix responsibility, get the basics right**

It is the same old story, only more tragic than before. No passenger manifest was maintained at the originating point to afford any idea as to how many passengers were travelling by MV Salahuddin. It capsized on being caught in a twister last Friday night. There is no way knowing the exact casualty figure except through a body-count of corpses recovered. But this has to be ruled out because any semblance of a salvage operation began at least a day too late. At first, MV Rustam was sent in with its 60-tonne body-weight to haul up the sunken 100 tonne weighing vessel evidently betraying criminal disrespect to the dead and playing pranks with the agonies of their relatives. Then, MV Hamza had to be commandeered from as far as Barisal to ply gingerly through the squally winds to the site thereby mocking at the rules of emergency. With Chandpur not far off, couldn't a rescue vessel be rushed to the spot at the right time, provided of course there was provision for a standby craft? Whose responsibility was it -- the IWTA's or the private shipping company's?

It's the private craft MV Muladi which having luckily escaped the twister returned to the place of occurrence of its own volition to save some lives. It threw in life buoys to nearly a hundred passengers enabling them to float to safety. Its service certainly deserves an official citation.

This means that the launch which met with the accident did not have enough life buoys onboard, a basic safety requirement that was evidently neglected by it. Who will answer for it?

It appears from our report that the vessel was not overloaded to begin with but the balance was lost on the way as it picked up 70 sacks of rice, each weighing 80 kilograms. Who should have monitored it?

It was a known fact that its route through the confluence of the rivers Meghna and Jamuna, particularly during the Baishakhi season, spelt hazards. Such risk factors could be greatly reduced by having the right kind of design and mould for the river-craft and manning it with trained, skilled and competent master who adhered to the basic safety standards. With the built-in precautions absent, the accident was waiting to happen.

The multiplying statistics of river accidents and the heaping recommendations of various inquiry committees formed after each major disaster, have failed to sensitise the authorities to curb the incidence of disasters. May be a court direction to pay compensation to the victim families will oblige all concerned to ensure safety of river journeys. Let that be the starting point.

## Delegation from Tripura warmly welcomed

**A historic bonding celebrated**

THE visit of a delegation from the Indian state of Tripura to Bangladesh is a rare honour for the country and a matter of pride and pleasure for all concerned. Tripura is historically linked to the liberation war of Bangladesh and the delegation's visit to jointly celebrate the war of 1971 is the surest way to pay tribute to our history. We thank the Tripurans for the generosity of their spirit.

The name Agartala is intrinsically linked to the memories of that year when life and death had become one. Millions crossed over to sanctuary and Tripura was one of the safest havens for the fleeing people. If we have been less than enthusiastic in the past to pay our thanks to the people of that area, it's time to do so now. The visit shows that the shared history is a precious legacy for both people and in these days of divides and disruptions, this reaching from across the border warms everyone's heart.

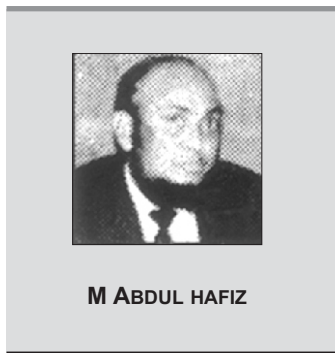
The celebration of 1971 is in itself a reflection of a positive attitude and the spirit too is welcomed. We have all too often lived for too long in the hall of martyrs and tears and forgotten that history's space is occupied by warriors' both dead and alive. By celebrating victory, we don't forget to mourn nor wish to forget those who haven't died. That includes the process of history itself. We must celebrate history. The visit signifies that.

But this is also an opportunity to assess mutual needs and difficulties and explore how we can find our ways out of jingoism and narrow self-interest that actually hurts both parties. Should we be able to recognise that we need each other, we will appreciate the concrete needs and follow up with actions more rapidly.

But this is a fact that South Asian countries in general have proved to be bad neighbours of each other and seem to take a peculiarly pernicious pleasure in making life difficult for each other. Sadly this applies to both small and big nations of the sub-continent. Perhaps it will be easier to contribute a few bricks to build a bridge of friendship when that is to reside next door. Tripura is in that sense closer to us in every way and let the new phase begin with this visit.

We have been together in the past and are now playing host to each other as a tested friend. Let's hope that such visits shall commemorate much more of the same in the future.

# The war: Forgotten but far from over



M ABDUL HAFIZ

NOW with the focus of war on terror shifted to the Middle East where Israel, the US' comprador ally has been surgically engaging the Palestinian 'terrorists' and preparations are afoot to take on Iraq, the world is fast becoming oblivious of what started as first salvo of shots against the world's most wanted terrorist, Osama bin-Laden and his networks in Afghanistan. Bush administration's claim of a famous victory in Afghanistan has been seriously dented with its failure to capture either Osama or Mullah Omar both of whom were able to elude the ever increasing coalition forces ever more determined to flush them out from their secret hideouts. As the administration now turns its attention to new front of the war on terror Bush's anti-terror ideology is indeed running into a messy reality in Afghanistan. Over six months into its running the war on terror is now reduced mainly to mopping up al-Qaida and Taliban fighters still holding out had not been realistic.

In early march the Pentagon had announced that this time it would not allow the enemy fighters to escape. And for the purpose the US military launched Operation Anaconda precisely to trap what the Pentagon described as al-Qaida and Taliban fighters. But the American forces were taken by surprise when they were ambushed by the 'enemy forces' in the Sah-i-Khot valley near the city of Gardez in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. The ambush resulted in the downing of an American MH-47 army transport helicopter and the damage to another. Eighteen US soldiers were killed in the incident, the highest

Referring to al-Qaida resistance in eastern Afghanistan Donald Rumsfeld, the US' Defence Secretary acknowledged that the coalition troops had not been able to dislodge a large number of al-Qaida and Taliban fighters entrenched in the tunnels and other underground shelters in the Arma mountains. According to other US officials the Operation Anaconda carrying out air strikes against the al-Qaida hide outs almost round the clock killed

number killed in a single battle since two American choppers were downed in Mogadishu in 1993 by Somali rebels opposed to the US presence there.

During Operation Anaconda that lasted 12 days seven more US soldiers lost their lives. The Pentagon, however, claimed that 'Anaconda' was a great military success, announced that more than 700 al-Qaida and Taliban fighters were killed in it and claimed that their

over the American forces as both the Islamist forces and a plethora of disgruntled elements are in the process of regrouping. Many of the so-called warlords are already running big cities like Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif as independent fiefs while others profit from the chaos wrought by US' military intervention.

'Anaconda', in fact, may only be the first fire fight in the kind of ground warfare that the US planners have feared oversince their troops were

gustingly feels that the "world's only superpower should focus on big strategic tasks, like taking on the rogues' gallery of nations Bush has dubbed the 'axis of evil' and leave the scut works of peace keeping to smaller nations." But there are few initiatives as yet in that direction. In the meantime the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) and the US presence are the only sources of support or strength in extending the Karzai government's

tion through high altitude bombing but gradually the time is now on their side. Already the resentments are growing in Pushtun area: Many members of Afghanistan's dominant ethnic group feel isolated from and neglected by the central government in Kabul which although led by a Pushtun, Hamid Karzai, is dominated by minority Tajiks from the Northern Alliance. The civilian casualties from the US bombing which has been heaviest in the South, have bred animosity.

With time some inherent cracks in Afghan-US coalition are also likely to be exposed. It is now clear that the ambush that claimed eight Americans and three Afghan lives was based on advance warning of the attacks by Afghans having sympathy for Taliban. The American were gulled by their Afghan allies also before when Padshakhan Zardan, for one, tricked Washington into bombing a convoy of his rivals. As regards Afghans ready to fight the Americans like their Taliban compatriots, there is an air of despondency when Pentagon officials state of late that it is two early to tell "how many they are and what they are doing".

If the US means business, its war in Afghanistan which has already been in full swing is going to be a dirty, long drawn out war. She has apparently no easy escape from the enormous mess she herself created on the country's multiple fronts social, economic, humanitarian and, of course, internal security. Neither can there be a patchwork solution of them unless she lets Afghanistan recede into the same chaos and confusion that existed before.

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

**PERSPECTIVES**  
If the US means business, its war in Afghanistan which has already been in full swing is going to be a dirty, long drawn out war. She has apparently no easy escape from the enormous mess she herself created on the country's multiple fronts - social, economic, humanitarian and, of course, internal security. Neither can there be a patchwork solution of them unless she lets Afghanistan recede into the same chaos and confusion that existed before.

hundreds of their militants but hundreds more remained. US military experts now seem to realise that their earlier estimates of the number of al-Qaida and Taliban fighters still holding out had not been realistic.

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command and control structure in Shah-i-Khat had been destroyed. But all the US military could show to the reporters as proof of its claims were three unmarked graves near the site of the fighting. By all indications the militants made yet another escape, similar to one in Tora Bora. The US admits now that its military offensive in the Tora Bora mountain ranges failed to eliminate or capture the members of al-Qaida or Taliban leadership. The Pentagon also admits that thousands of al-Qaida and Taliban fighters including possibly bin-Laden himself escaped the heavy bombardment during which the Americans used missiles and lethal 'Daisy Cutter' in an attempt to smoke the militants out of their caves. During the past four months ominously there have been sporadic guerilla attacks on American and allied troops. The spectre of urban guerilla warfare is looming

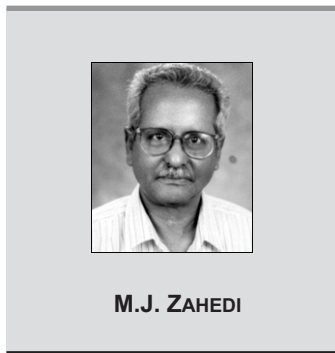
deployed in Afghanistan. The American ground troops will be willy nilly engaged perhaps in many more similar encounters to mop up the remnants of al-Qaida and Taliban militants. But those are not the only problems facing the Americans in today's Afghanistan. The problem is much wider and deeper impeding the nation building in Afghanistan under prevailing circumstances that, like it or not, the US has already been drawn into. The effective internal order in a country where the provinces are cut off from commerce and aid as the fear of banditry and terror still rules the nation's communication system, merits attention as that of an operational emergency.

As the US is caught in an awkward moment between fighting a mop-up war and its 'next mission' of reconstructing the country, it is likely to achieve none. As a result it dis-

writ to the provinces of Afghanistan where the warlords are consolidating their control. Any laxity on the part of Bush administration to boost Karzai government at this juncture would only hurt US interest by neutralizing what all it has achieved in the last six months' war on terror. Yet President Bush continues to insist that no US peacekeepers will be deployed in Afghanistan in addition to special forces that were dispatched earlier to hunt down the remnants of al-Qaida and Taliban forces.

In an interventionist war like one in Afghanistan which is often multi-dimensional there is however seldom any scope to leave it unfinished or half baked. Or else the result will be the repeat of the situation that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. It could have been easy sending the Taliban and al-Qaidas to hiberna-

# Observers waiting to see what Musharraf does



M.J. ZAHEDI

DESPITE controversies over the number that voted in the referendum held on April 30 to say whether people want continuity of the reforms President Pervez Musharraf has started and whether they want him as president for another five years, there is no question that a very big majority of the people said 'yes' to both questions.

The referendum was a different kind of exercise. There was no voters' list, the whole country was declared as one constituency, so one could vote at any polling station, no one had to travel any distance to cast his or her vote, one just had to produce one's national identity card or any other proof that he or she was at least 18 years of age.

According to a government spokesman, the total population of the country in March 2002 was calculated at 144 million. The number of people above 18 years of age was 78.3 million, including

3.5 million living outside the country. Of the total number of voters who turned out, 98 per cent cast their ballots in favour of President Musharraf. The modalities of conducting the election were almost similar to those used during 1984 to elect Ziaul Huq as President. The only exception was that the voting age was reduced to 18 years from 21 years. But many people feel that the referendum

call. The opposition should not expect too much from the voter, who has noted that the main leaders (Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif) are in comfortable exile, while expecting their followers to give sacrifices for their sake. General Musharraf's future is secure, at least for the coming five-year period that begins from October when general elections will be held. But this should not make Gen.

inclusion of the third looks odd, but Gen. Musharraf has justified it on the grounds of pragmatism, and rightly so. That it is so is evident in the fact that the COAS is armed and that gives him the capability to upset the democratic cart at the slightest excuse. Musharraf intends to rein in this tendency by creating the National Security Council, which will be the supreme policy-making and monitoring

Observers are waiting to see what Musharraf does to solve this problem, which he does not yet see but is there for sure.

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**LETTER FROM KARACHI**  
Musharraf has ruled out the possibility of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif returning to Pakistan to take part in the October elections. But if they are not allowed in or are allowed to return but not to participate in the election, the political disharmony and instability will prevail. Rapprochement between these three power brokers is vital for the smooth holding of elections. The participation of Benazir and Nawaz would ensure a peaceful transition.

has polarised the nation. Daily 'The News' said it created much avoidable ill will. "As there was a general perception that there would be a 'yes' vote, it would have been appropriate had the dissent been enabled to get their message known without any difficulty".

The paper said that steps must be taken to reduce the divisions and tension in the country. Indeed, it would serve no purpose to continue the animosity and bitterness that has resulted from the referendum. Many feel that the government needs to take the first step to seek reconciliation with its detractors.

By all accounts, the polling was peaceful and orderly. That, everyone concedes, was impressive. No doubt that was due to the arrangements made by the government although the opposition claims that it too had contributed and because there was no rival candidate. Daily 'The Nation' said that it should also dispel the impression that the president has any large vote bank at his disposal.

The Opposition did give a call to the people to boycott the referendum. However the voter's staying at home was probably more his own decision than the opposition's

Musharraf complacent, convinced that the opposition's incompetence would go all in his favour. Many people think he must recognize the significance of a strong opposition which always stands unconvinced of his motives.

Naturally he will now get busy on making some constitutional amendments to ensure, as he has said, balance in the powers of the three power brokers. He has identified them as the president, the prime minister and the chief of the army staff (COAS). The first two are elected officials while the third is appointed for a fixed tenure. The

body, eclipsing even the parliament. Many however think that it would be a better policy to leave constitutional amendments to the parliament. When that body is in place, Musharraf could coax it to adopt his constitutional reforms. This approach will also calm the sensitivities of the politicians.

The forces against Musharraf present an impressive picture. The mainstream parties, the PPP and the PML-N are opposed to him. The MQM for the time being at least has joined the opposite camp. The religious parties under the lead of the JI and JUI are also against him.

## OPINION

# Of corruption and hydra-headed monsters

M.H SYED

CORRUPTION in our country has become a multi-faceted manifestation of all that is unlawful, immoral and in most instances, pure evil. The tentacles of corruption have spread far and wide and to most of the public institutions and to most of the activities that are supposed to protect the security, interest and welfare of the common people. Unfortunately, the citizens of the country themselves have become the victims of all the corrupt practices either knowingly or unknowingly due to various compulsions, ignorance and sheer helplessness. Each and every aberration committed under the system impact adversely on the common people at large. We seem to be increasingly veering towards an opaque arrangement for governance. Despite a continuous stream of seminars, think-tank activities, task force operations, words of wisdom and advice as to why it is so, what needs to be done and so on, the nation appears to be sliding down. The gap between the preaching and practice is becoming so wide as to boggle the mind.

The Daily Star's (19<sup>th</sup> April, 02) front page news analysis "Political face of BAC" is a courageous attempt to highlight a particularly

horrendous situation. This piece has made my task easier, as it was almost on similar vein I had wished to proceed. However, there are several other aspects of the cases that Bureau of Anti-corruption (BAC) prepares from time to time and more importantly, just following the changes of the government. There are, apparently, two elements in such cases: one is the person or persons against whom the charges of corruption, misuse of office and power, unlawful use of public funds and violation of rules and regulations in non-financial decisions, are levied. The second relates to the amounts (that generally run into lakhs and crores) clearly quoted against each of the charges. Now BAC is a government agency, under the direct control of the Prime Minister or is it under the PMO? -- a point that makes a vast deference in the decision-making process! We will come to that point in due course. BAC is directed to prepare cases as we understand or one can wonder whether it has the powers or the will to undertake investigations into the firm allegations of corruption suo moto, especially against Ministers, Secretaries and other high ranking officials on being satisfied on the prima facie case for doing so. The third question that intrigues perhaps

everyone is whether the legal proceedings once started by BAC under the instructions of the authorities, can be halted at will by executive orders, as is apparently happening most of the time. Should not such proceedings before a court of law be concluded through the due process of law?

Is judiciary even functionally under the mandate of the executive? The inevitable question mark on the independence of judiciary brings the whole concept and the legal system into disrepute. One does speculate whether the prospect of the Government (executive) losing its total control over the process and procedure of law is the reason behind the inordinate delay in separating the judiciary from the executive. Let us examine some of the recent BAC cases that have come into prominence and media attention for obvious reasons. The political face and the partisan nature of these cases have been analysed in the Daily Star piece of 19 April, 2002. One of the BAC cases where Mr. Tareq Rahman and his two friends were reportedly charged sheeted (in June 2000) related to a colossal loss in the sum of Tk 11.443 crores. On 17 April, 02, two long years later, the Court found that the charges against accused in this

criminal case, were not proved. (The Daily Star 17 April, 02). The question here is not about the person, but about the loss that the Government had suffered and on whom the responsibility of such loss has been fixed, now that the accused in the BAC criminal case, who were charge sheeted, have been discharged. How does the BAC and the Government account for the Tk 11 crore loss now? Another case of special interest relates to Mr. Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, the incumbent Home Minister. Two cases related to his helicopter rides to his village costing the exchequer a hefty sum of over Tk. 29 lakhs; the court had framed charges reportedly in January, 2001. The cases containing charges of misappropriation and misuse of power were withdrawn following a letter from Prime Minister's Office to the public prosecutor, on 18 April 2002, almost three years and half after these cases were filed (The Daily Star 19 April 2002). Again, what happened to the loss of Tk 29 lakhs plus to the public fund? What about its accountability? One more point needs to be noted in this, and other such cases 'withdrawn' under executive instructions, the accused person(s) would not be considered innocent, since no verdict has been passed at the end

of the due process of law. Another case relating to Begum Khaleeda Zia and her then private secretary Sabiuddin Ahmed was discharged after the new government had come to office.

All the cases, and obviously the financial losses enumerated therein of staggering proportions, are put away from the public attention and perhaps from the records. Only the former President General Ershad could not escape from all the charges, suffering in consequence jail sentences. That, however, does not seem to have much adverse impact on his lifestyle or political career. The penalty suffered in such cases pales into insignificance when one compares it to the gains achieved. One could recall in this context the fabulous life-style that the main convict of the great train robbery case had enjoyed after serving the jail sentence, on his ill-gotten gains, that had never been recovered. Apparently, our authorities have too many pots of gold to trace and a good many red herrings to avoid. In any event, the public and the public funds continue to bear the burden of the corruption of anti-corruption musical chair. One could quote cases ad infinitum to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that beyond a certain level, a good many

people can, and do, rightly boast as being above the law. They do not suffer any permanent damage; they purely pass through temporary inconveniences, if any. And, that is a system of governance and accountability that all parties would like to see continue.

People have the right to ask the governments in power at different times professing transparency and suppression of corruption to explain -- a) If BAC has processed a case, and after due clearance from the Prime Minister, submitting the same to the court of law, is not the latter expected to complete the trial expeditiously and pass the sentence after all the evidence for and against the accused have been examined in a judicial framework - how then, and why should it be, that the case is withdrawn or discharged just because the accused persons come to power? b) Will not the publication of white paper and filing of cases by BAC now be seen in the similar light? c) Why the BAC has not been empowered to pursue the cases approved for legal trial for completion in time? and, d) Why should the cases in court of law be withdrawn by executive orders?

Let us examine another kind of corruption involving the ultra-rich, ultra-powerful and the highly-connected. There have been a plethora of specific reports on the sordid manipulation of the banking system through a large number of bank-loan defaults. The government and banking authorities have also from time to time made public lists of such major offenders.

The Daily Star report (19 April, 02) "SB gets kind to Tk 170 cr. loan default" exposes a basically corrupt and immoral system that has deep rooted malignancy and no amount of cosmetic reforms would ever put it right. In this particular instance and, in fact in every such cases of brazen default, the authorities concerned - the lending bank, Bangladesh Bank and the Ministry of Finance must be responsible and shall we say, accountable for all the commissions and omissions that have led to such a state of affairs. They have to explain how such huge amounts pile up without due recoveries and why exemplary legal steps are not taken as due. In the reported case of Rahman Group, will it not make a lot more long-term sense to use the amount of Tk.46 crores, so conveniently waived, as reported, to legally recover Tk.173 crore as

due? This will not only restore the credibility of the bank, proving its intentions to deal firmly with the growing menace of a default culture, but also relieve of small, law-abiding borrowers from carrying extra burden of interest on account of these mammoth defaults that are more likely than not to prove bad, irrecoverable debts. The other real and almost tangible benefit of such decisive and lawful actions against malignant defaults would be to remove, at least reduce, the obviously built-in corruption in the system that encourages and sustains such criminal and financial malpractices.

Why can't BAC investigate this particular case of unwarranted waiver involving a huge amount and a long list of unanswered questions for the sake of transparency and in the interest of the country? The need for an institutional solution, as so very succinctly laid out in The Daily Star editorial (26 April, 2002) should not only be recognised all around, but also acted upon by the authorities as a matter of urgency. Having in place a well-designed and independent anti-corruption commission will be one of the most incontrovertible proof of the Government's integrity and transparency.