

Don't stifle the NGO

Why must we throw the baby with the bath water?

In an era of lessening of government we can only hog negative headlines by being sweepingly regulatory with non-government organisations. This is not to say the NGO should be treated above law and given a carte blanche but to warn against shackling them every step of the way.

Ever since this government came to power it has made no bones about regulating the NGO sector basically working on the assumption that 'some NGOs played a partisan role' in the last-generation election. It is essential to realise, however, that despite the alleged partisan role of such NGOs, BNP won the election hands down against the AL. So, what the electorate wanted was duly reflected through the verdict, regardless of the purported NGO fiddling.

And if the argument is stretched to say it is 'those NGOs' who had contributed to the BNP's defeat in 1996 general election then it stands diluted in the very least by the subsequent victory of the party in the 2001 elections. Moreover, such an exaggerated notion of NGO power is antithetical to the competence and credibility of the caretaker government and the voter independence and maturity in the exercise of their choices.

What are the flaws in the way that the NGOs have been working thus far? The reason why the NGOs have done better than other development agencies is that they have been allowed to function freely. To be candid, much of whatever positive impression of the country has been created abroad is the doing of the NGOs. By putting fetters on NGO sector the government is likely to kill the very reason which has actually helped them succeed. Their spontaneity, creativity and freedom of action in the legitimate fields of development concerns must not be throttled.

However, the three areas where the NGOs should be put in good order and voluntarily subject themselves to scrutiny and discipline have to do with: (a) transparency of funding; (b) regular auditing of their accounts and submission of the same to the NGO Bureau; and (c) conscious avoidance of profiteering through their operations.

In the name of preventing politics, a new type of politics should not be allowed to intrude into the sector. Furthermore, the religious NGOs also need close monitoring including a tab kept on their funding sources and they are being spent.

Banning rally at Shaheed Minar?

A wholly unnecessary move

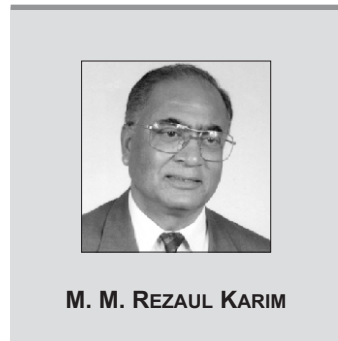
THE government is seemingly intent on preventing any Shaheed Minar-centred rally or demonstration, be it social or cultural, let alone political. There can be no other explanation for the virtual siege the police and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) have laid to the Shaheed Minar over the last few days. The government stance does not only impinge on people's democratic right to assemble peacefully but is also eminently avoidable. Cordoning off a venue does not essentially mean foiling a rally or a demonstration which could be moved to some other venue anyway. That is altogether a different debate. Of relevance here is the government's attitude towards Shaheed Minar-centred rallies, processions and other public gatherings. And, one must say, it is undemocratic.

There have never been such restrictions on the use of the Shaheed Minar as a venue for public gathering, not even during the almost nine-year-long autocratic regime of HM Ershad. Back in the East Pakistan days, the military regime did try that and once even razed the structure to the ground. To the military junta, the Minar was an inexhaustible source of democratic impulses and inspiration for the people and therefore a potent threat to them. We would not want to believe that the ghost is revisiting us in a democratic context.

There has never been any reason to enforce rules relating to use of the Minar as a venue for public rally? Why now? If it is because of the recent developments at Dhaka University (DU) and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), then we must say this is a regrettable case of misplaced emphasis. In case of the DU, it was unprecedented police excesses at a hall of residence for female students that triggered the turmoil. And at the BUET the untoward incidents resulted from JCD factional fight and, subsequently, from police excesses.

Indeed, the government has a duty to protect the sanctity and symbolic value of the Minar and uphold the spirit it embodies -- of freedom, democracy and collective rights. Of late, it has done just the opposite. Let the Shaheed Minar be what it has always been -- a democratic space for people irrespective of their political, social, cultural and religious affiliations.

Is an all-out attack on Iraq imminent?



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

WHETHER an attack on Iraq is imminent or not is a question widely and intensely being mooted in recent weeks and months. President George Bush made it explicitly clear that Saddam Hussain must be toppled in order to save civilization from annihilation by weapons of mass destruction. He expressed his resolve to attain this objective and urged the international community to mobilize to this end. He emphatically did so in his statement in the UN General Assembly. The recent US diplomatic activities centered round two goals. These are to intensify further diplomatic efforts worldwide in order to organize an effective international coalition against Saddam and to pass a befitting resolution of the Security Council to secure international endorsement.

Iraqi government's announcement on 17 September, however, to allow UN inspectors' entry into that country was viewed as a clever, though not unexpected, move by Saddam. So long US government argued that Iraq's earlier offer of conditional entry was nothing but a diplomatic ploy to gain time and to prevent a pre-emptive attack. But the latest Iraqi offer being unconditional has made it more difficult for the US to marshal requisite support at the UN and worldwide. But US

leaders still insist that situation has not changed. They cited volumes of dossiers of UN resolutions and promises that Saddam Hussain had flouted in the past and vowed to destroy him as an evil force.

President Bush is now in the process of promoting a bipartisan resolution in the Congress. It may be recalled that a number of Congressmen, including some fellow Republicans, had cautioned against a premature attack against Iraq

Ocean for radar evasive stealth bombers is now a clear possibility. The US President made it clear that Iraq had already amassed a stockpile of chemical and biological weapons and was due to acquire nuclear weapons within six months. These are designed for use against its enemy at a chosen time. As the leader of the uni-polar world, USA undertakes responsibility of maintaining world peace. President Bush declared war against global terrorism following the most tragic terror-

discussing the issue before committing UK to war. Archbishop of Canterbury and the British clergy also publicly declared their strong opposition.

Members of the European Union and other European states are not in favour of making a pre-emptive attack on Iraq. They will act in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolution. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder stated that his Social Democratic govern-

ment would not participate in the "war games" and refused to provide troops and finance to that end. France had earlier declared its opposition to commit troops. Other EU members will go along a collective decision and UN resolutions. But Russia and China, despite their ongoing co-operation with the United States, have shown much support for Iraq. Still, Bush administration will continue its efforts for these two countries not to cast veto on a resolution unacceptable to the US.

The Middle East, in general, is opposed to a unilateral action by the USA against Iraq. Saudi Arabia had earlier declared its policy not to allow its soil to be used for attack against another Arab country. Following President Bush's UN diplomacy, however, it made it conditional to an appropriate Security Council Resolution. Jordan, having close collaboration with Iraq, manifested grave reservations. So did Egypt. Syria had been opposed from the very beginning. The only Arab countries, who may go along with the United States, are Qatar and Bahrain. They may allow their US bases to be used as springboard against Iraq. The unresolved Palestinian issue and the continuing bloodshed and destruction there already created a perennial destabilization in that region. Any

of USA. One very important matter on which US hardly made any public pronouncement was the scenario that the United States has contemplated in a post-Saddam era in Iraq. Who will take over or be made to take over remains another uncertain issue. It is difficult to figure out any personality in Iraq at present who would succeed Saddam and promote US interests. There exist, however, a host of candidates among Iraqis in exile, including successor in line to the defunct Hashemite dynasty, who ruled Iraq till 1956. But they are hardly known to the Iraqi people, who are unlikely to accept the rule of a stranger. Another possibility is that the country may be broiled in a civil war. The Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south may vie for power with the Sunnis in the middle. The resultant tug of war among these factions will be reinforced by Turkey and Syria in the north, Jordan in the west and Iran on the east for self-aggrandizement. Would such an outcome be in the interest of the West and promote world peace?

However, the pounding of the Iraqi defence targets by a hundred US and UK warplanes on 6 September is held by many as a precursor to war. The dispatch of warships by USA, and, as a token of support, by UK represent preliminary preparations for war effort. The final decision, however, will rest on success of US efforts to secure a favourable resolution in the Security Council and Saddam's ability to thwart these efforts by manipulating the issue on the entry of the UN Inspection Team. The forthcoming talks at Vienna between UN and Iraq will thus help clear the situation and allow people either to tread in fear or rest in peace, at least for some time.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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without due evidence. But the latest comment made by Senate Majority Leader portraying Saddam Hussain as the most dangerous leader of the past decade augurs well for securing a bilateral Congressional resolution authorizing the President to use force. But the Senator made it clear that the President must make a commitment to consult the United Nations. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, on the other hand, repeatedly warned America against a unilateral military action against Iraq.

President Bush's resolve to replace Saddam Hussain as President of Iraq is clear and unambiguous. Preparations for a war effort by dispatching warships by the USA and, to a much lesser extent, by its close ally, United Kingdom, are already afoot. The use of British islands of Diego Garcia in the Indian

ist attacks in USA on 11 September last year. "Saddam is an evil force and must perish." Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spearhead those who are in favour of early pre-emptive actions as a measure of self-defense for America.

The European allies of the United States, while generally sharing views with the US administration, are much less enthusiastic and are reluctant to go to war. They register a common denominator of being guided by the decision of the UN Security Council. United Kingdom, however, having had "special relations" status with the United States is the one who has extended maximum support to US policy. Yet, Prime Minister Tony Blair has no easy sailing in his task. Adverse popular polls are added to the growing demand of legislators for

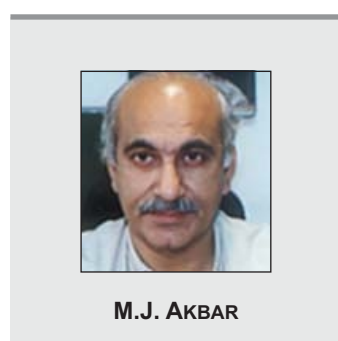
pre-emptive attack against Iraq, without an effective international coalition, will divide nations, create hostility among them, go against general interests of the United States, and render the situation in that area much worse and more vulnerable.

The only and ever faithful ally of the United States in that region is Israel. Its missiles have remained directed against Iraq for long. On the other hand, Iraq claimed that some member of the earlier UN Weapons Inspection Team had been supplying sensitive military data to Israel. That was, in fact, a major reason for expulsion of the Team from Iraq. Many diplomatic observers, however, suggest that the potential nuclear threat was not directed as such to the West but to Israel, since Iraq has no missiles having the range to reach Europe, not to speak

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New heaven



M.J. AKBAR

THE leaves of New Haven have begun to bleed. In a few weeks they will die, marking with their death the onset of the long dark winter that envelops the north of the earth. But here in America, nature will celebrate one last, glorious burst of energy, colour, radiance and joy. Decline and fall are the natural end of the cycles of life, but never was a fall more resplendent than in the autumn of America. These leaves will dance their way to death with such grace, such beauty, such abandon. If only human beings could possess the courage of nature. Every life then would burst with joy before being consumed by time. Instead most of us dither, shamble, shuffle and snuffle our way to death, remote from our past, taunted by the present and terrified by the future. Nature is a philosopher, and defeats time with its impunity. Autumn is the season of the last fling before the inevitable victory of that bleak horizon which has been with us from birth.

These leaves float towards a story. Omar Khayyam understood death, not because he was a poet but because he was a scientist, an astronomer who spent his nights with the mysteries of existence beyond the reach of a mere earth. Khayyam lived dangerously, because he refused the option of silence in a volatile age of despair, rebellion, confusion and insurrection in the Muslim world from Samarkand to Baghdad, and Damascus to Cairo. His two famous contemporaries were Nizam ul

Mulk, who wrote the classic treatise on Islamic polity and served as the vazir and anchor of the rising power of the Seljuq Turks; and Hassan Sabah, who turned assassination into a powerful political weapon that shook both the victorious Crusaders and the defeated Arab sultans. Defying all predictions, Khayyam died peacefully in old age. He was once asked, as a young man of radical mood and tongue, whether he was afraid of death. He

Yale University, they have no right to define themselves as nations. The budget of India, I recall reading somewhere, is less than the budget of New York: should that disqualify us too? The panels change with the topics. They sit on a podium of carved wood, more like a bench of the Supreme Court than a bench of the University, paid to judge rather than paid to think. But the image is deceptive. Academics are mild and pleasant when taken away from a

some strange documentary. The most important item during a two-minute watch was on the crawler at the bottom of the screen. The German Army, it said, had forbidden its troops to have sex when in service. One dare not predict what celibacy will do to the German Army. A friend suggested that this must be because the generals wanted the soldiers to reserve all their potency for the enemy. A good thought, deflated by the fact that Germany

against both the journal and its informants. It describes the contents of "a highly detailed set of military options for attacking Iraq" quoting officials of both the Pentagon and the White House. Which spy could ever boast of moles who had burrowed so deep? All Saddam has to do, if he wants to know American plans for him, is to read the newspapers.

The timing of America's war against Iraq is going to be between

BYLINE

Finally discovered the essence of President George Bush's Iraq policy. It was on television. Being a news junkie, I kept surfing after daybreak on Saturday for some channel to offer something other than movies, cartoons and crazy faces. The moving finger surfed, and having surfed, rested on Arnold Schwarzenegger. The hunk-chunk was dressed in Hamlet-black. He glowered at a skull, and delivered the first line of an immortal soliloquy. "To be or not to be..." he began. Suddenly a switch in voice-pace. "I'll take it!" he said, swivelled, threw the skull away, slashed with his sword, and strode on... I imagine George Bush on his ranch...

answered: "What is there to be afraid of? If there is nothing after death, then there is nothing to be afraid of either. You cannot be afraid of nothing. And if there is Allah then there is mercy..."

We are at Yale Law School for a seminar on the Silk Route in the 21st Century, organised by the Yale Center for the Study of Globalisation, and driven by Strobe Talbott and my old friend Nayan Chanda. Through two days academic minds weave through the game of snakes-and-ladders being played between Turkey and Kazakhstan, through the Caucasus and Central Asia. It used to be a Silk Route. It is now the Gas and Oil Route, and infinitely richer. All the powers and superpowers have placed a grabby paw and oily hand on the region. Academics offer propositions, summations, interventions and prejudice with a disarming display of objectivity. One of them, who shall be nameless, offers the startling thesis that since the budget of three regions is less than that of

microphone. A meal induces the best out of them. The finest of them are not averse to a nap, even on a podium. But get them into a debate over Armenia and Turkey or Georgia and Russia and the steel begins to clatter. We should all applaud the fact that academics are human.

Nature may go to sleep every winter. America goes to sleep every weekend. New Haven, where Yale is situated, goes into a coma. The Lord, when creating this world, gave man one day every week to rest. American Television, when creating news, ordered two days of rest. Round the clock, Monday to Friday, you can get all the news, particularly about the baby beaten by her mother in Indiana, or the dog rescued from a cliff in Plainville. But come the weekend and the world must wait till Monday again to blow itself up. Memo to all nations: There is no point in starting a war over a weekend. If it hasn't reached American TV it isn't news.

My only option was the indefatigable CNN, and CNN was showing

does not have enemies anymore. It exhausted its quota in the second world war. Sex was permitted in that war. Refer to Alan Clark's superb account of Hitler's offensive against the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa. The knapsack of each German soldier sent to this heady and deadly front included one condom. It must have been a reusable condom, made of special German steel.

A small item in the papers tells me that German forces are going to replace the Turks as the lead contingent of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan by December. Is the celibacy order in preparation for Afghanistan? That would make sense.

Saddam Hussein needs Mata Hari to work for him in the United States. He has the *New York Times*. There is no need anymore to send out James Bond. All you have to do is to be pals with the editor.

The lead story in Saturday's *Times* would, not too long ago, have invited a charge of high treason

January and February, when the weather is cooler and the nights are longer. The heavy uniforms of the US Army (particularly of those who will go in search of chemical weapons) is not designed for heat. And the longer nights give America an edge in warfare since it is armed with night-vision binoculars, unlike the Iraqi Army. The war will open from the air with swarms of B52s knocking out the command centres with 2000-pound laser-guided bombs. Once Iraq's response-capability is neutralised, some 100,000 troops, with another 150,000 in reserve, would invade from Kuwait (Turkey is a reluctant partner this time around).

Once upon a time Sherlock Holmes would have been given a fortune, or at least a gong, to keep such war plans out of the hands of the Evil Powers. Modern journalism has made the mystery genre irrelevant.

Have finally discovered the essence of President George Bush's Iraq policy. It was on televi-

Take this as you will... One consequence of 9/11 that may not become widely advertised is that local American Muslims (not the ones imported from India and Pakistan, that is) have begun to quietly reassert their faith rather than distance themselves from it. An interesting story about African-Americans in a New York prison provides more evidence. David Miller, superintendent of the Eastern New York Correctional Facility (this is the age of politically correct nomenclature: in the bad old days prisons were called Sing Sing or Jailhouse Rock or whatever) says that attendance at namaaz by prisoners has gone up 50 percent in the last year and some 150 convicts are attending classes in Arabic, the Muslim traditions and the Holy Quran. The imam of the prison mosque, Yasin Latif, added: "It has been a significant awakening call. The Muslims on the fence at the time of the tragedy (9/11) felt they had to make a statement for the true Islam."

The decision is made. The world is safe from evil.

The prison is next to the church of St. Jude, the patron saint of impossible causes.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the *Asian Age*.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

NGO guidelines

I for one agree that our NGOs need to be brought to heel. But I really don't see how adding bureaucratic red tape will help.

My prime concern with NGOs is their involvement in business. How do these new restrictions affect Grameen's T-shirt factory or Proshika's ISP?

Riki Dhaka

The cabinet committee's strict recommendations to regulate the activities of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) would certainly be a debatable issue for some time.

The committee headed by LGRD and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has reportedly finalised a new guideline to control NGO activities in the country. The guideline includes banning political affiliation, financial regulations, legal action against those not following the rules etc. Through Mr Bhuiyan has said that the government has no intention to control the NGOs, just to simplify the rules and

regulations for them to work easily, such stringent 'rules and regulations' is a least nonethless.

It has been quite apparent that the relationship between some big NGOs and the government has been strained especially since the 4-party alliance formed government almost a year ago. Top-level policy makers in the government, notably Finance Minister Saifur Rahman had been openly criticising some NGOs for their alleged involvement with politics. But there is no denying the fact that the NGOs made a considerable impact in certain sectors like education, health, women's empowerment and poverty alleviation through the most successful micro credit programme in rural Bangladesh. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that anyone and everyone should not be allowed to operate an NGO, in other words, there has to be some accountability on their part as well which had been lacking, as the government says.

It should also be noted that the cabinet committee held meetings with only certain NGOs before finalising the guideline. The accounts of some big NGOs, who

had been labelled as politically biased, have been under strict scrutiny for some time and the concerned authorities have allegedly blocked foreign funds for those. It is interesting to know that members of these NGOs were not even included in the discussions held by the cabinet committee. We welcome financial discipline, but in order to do that the fundamental rights of operating development work can not be restricted only on the basis of political bias which had been the main bone of contention between the two sides. Both have to break out of the 'partisan prism'.

KSD Dhaka

Sanctity of Central Saheed Minar

I congratulate the government for denying unlimited access to central Shaheed Minar.

This was long awaited and necessary step taken by the government to preserve the sanctity of the Minar. Political groups, socio-cultural organisations of partisan colour and myriad sections use the

premises of this great monument to advance their cause and more correctly emotionally exploit the people.

Let this great monument dedicated to the language heroes of 1952 stand in majestic silence and undisturbed by the cacophony of rallies, meetings, fast unto death groups. The government must not compromise on this issue. Necessary legislation should be enacted and rules framed to maintain the sanctity of central Saheed Minar.

Q S Ahmed Major (Retd) Mirpur, Dhaka

'52 families 'outcast' for living 'only on theft'

I have read with shock the news item "52 families 'outcast' for living 'only on theft'" (September 14). It is more shocking to learn that leaders like Suranjit Sen Gupta, MP, Nasiruddin Chowdhury, Ex-MP and other leaders have called for eviction of these wretched people. They are the sons of this soil and have all the rights of citizens of this democratic country.

By evicting these people the problems will not be solved rather their situation will aggravate. Channel-i recently had a news item on their children who have been driven out of school. It is inhuman.

Very few people of the society are professional thieves or beggars. And most of them have been compelled to take up these professions as a means for survival. I have seen people leave these professions if given the opportunity.

It is the responsibility of the Govt., the national leaders, NGOs to rehabilitate these people, create job opportunities for them and allow their children to have education and a better future.

Md. Sadeque Halishahar Housing Society, Chittagong

"American way of life"

I really don't understand why some people have reacted so negatively to "An Immigrants' letter. What he said is absolutely true.

Most of us crave to be a part of the "American way of life" but don't admit it. Are these people embarrassed or jealous, I don't know? But I

know one thing for sure that there are many people who would bring out procession protesting "American way of life", vehemently oppose every decision the American government takes be it an attempt to free the world off a terrorist like Osama bin Laden or fighting the Taliban who disgraced the great religion Islam. But at the same time these very people who would almost grovel to get a hold of an American visa. Just look at the long queue in front of the American Embassy and you will realise what I'm talking about.

We condemn the US double standard, well what about ours?

Selina Sultana Jigatola, Dhaka

Law Minister and law and order

The *Daily Star* (17 September) reports Moudud Ahmed, Minister of Law, as having said in Jatiyo Sangsad that in New York three people are killed every minute, meaning the law and order situation is as bad as that out there. In my reckoning, this works out at

1,576,800 people killed a year. If Mr. Ahmed really believes this, he is out of his ministerial mind. (The actual number is closer to a thousand).

Ignorance of this magnitude might amuse, but the minister's statement, made during a parliamentary debate, has also a very serious side to it. There is little doubt that the law and order situation in the country in recent months has been worse than it has been for years. This has worried even our foreign donors. Almost a year in power now, the government has so far been blaming the "immediate-past" government for the situation (and for every other ill for that matter). That was bad enough. But now it has started to point to other countries (US, India) as well! This is a perfect recipe for doing nothing.

Mahfuzur Rahman Dhaka

I hope the *Daily Star* has misquoted our Law Minister saying, "In New York, three people are killed every minute. In India, one woman is raped every 54 minutes. But those don't become headlines in newspa-

pers, MPs also don't bring the issues to parliament as it's a problem of all." (September 17)

At a rate of three people killed every minute, NY should see 4,320 people killed every day and 1,576,800 killed every year! At this rate, NY will be completely devoid of human inhabitants in only about 5 years. Was this a printing mistake or an example of mindless exaggeration - even for a Bangladeshi politician? The minister was, of course, justifying the abysmal law and order situation of the country.

For those who are interested, the annual murder figures in NY City for the past few years were between 700-900.

Golam Sarwar Dallas, TX

Notice
The readers are requested to send their comments on 'USA and world politics' (9/11 and aftermath, US and Middle East crisis, US on Iraq etc). -- Editor