

Reflections from Iraq visit

MAJOR GENERAL (RETIRED) SYED M IBRAHIM, BIR PROTİK

IRAQ had always been on my agenda for visit, basically because of religious attachment. The fourth Caliph of Islam, Ali ibne Abu Talib (Ra.) had shifted the capital of the Islamic state from Medinah to Kufa, little south west of Baghdad. Ali (Ra.) had been laid to rest at nearby Najaf and his shrine is a sacred attraction to Muslims of all shades who know of the shrine. About 60 kilometres away from Najaf is Kerbala, a bustling township now, but 14 centuries ago a desolate open patch of desert on the bank of the river Euphrates (locally called Forat). Imam Hussain bin Ali (Ra.), was most treacherously invited to Kufa, and on the way to Kufa was intercepted at Kerbala. Within days, the Imam along with more than a hundred companions and family members embraced martyrdom in the hands of the soldiers of Yazid bin Muabia who had usurped the caliphate. The shrines of Imam Hussain (Ra.) and others at Kerbala recall sentimental and historic memories and strengthen resolve to stand against the evil. Some 400 km northwest of Baghdad lies Mosul city, on the bank of river Tigris locally known as Dijla. The shrine of Prophet Yunus(As:) (biblical name Jonah) lies here in Mosul. Muslims all over the world recite the Doa-e-Yunus "La-ihaha, illa anta subhanaka, inni kuntu minaz-zualemin" in Quranic words. When in difficulty, the prayer or doa helps create resolve in favour of truth, honesty and self-criticism. Within the city of Baghdad itself, the shrines of Prophet Yuasha (As:) (biblical name Joshua), widely known and universally respected spiritual leaders-scholars-jurists Abdul Kader Gilani (Ra.), Junaid Baghdadi (Ra.) and Imam Abu Hanifa (Ra.) attract the body and soul of thousands and thousands of Muslims from near and distant lands. These keep Iraq in the emotional frame of most Muslims.

Four months ago once, and in this October for the second time, I had an opportunity to visit Iraq. The second visit was in connection with the Presidential referendum scheduled for fifteenth October. I discovered veteran editors of Dhaka Mr. Baha Uddin and Mr. Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury and veteran Mayor of Chittagong Mr. Mohi Uddin Chowdhury also there at Baghdad. Iraq and Saddam Hussain have been made synonymous by the western media - although it should not have been. Saddam Hussain was born in April 1937, an orphan, in the town of Tikrit in the 'al Hara' region northwest of Baghdad on the bank of river Tigris. The birth of political awareness in Saddam Hussain was in the fifties of the last century. Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt was the symbol of Arab unity in those days. In the mid-fifties, after BANDUNG, the Arab Liberation Movement gathered strength. Saddam Hussain got into the 'Arab Baath Socialist Party' in late 1956. By 1957 the five major political parties of Iraq got

bound into one front. On 14th July 1958 the political volcano in Baghdad erupted and the puppet regime was overthrown. One of the twelve bridges which span the Tigris in Baghdad city is named 14th July Bridge. It was severely damaged due to allied bombing in February 1991. It was repaired at the earliest. It simultaneously symbolizes the freedom achieved in 1958 and the spirit of survival. While the Baath Party is ruling the country since the famous July Revolution of 1968, Saddam Hussain is the President for 23 years or so now. Let us now turn our eyes to the anxiety and concern about Iraq.

"Everything is last minute, everything is an emergency..... It's exhausting everyone" - this is the complaint of a Pentagon bureaucrat quoted by NEWS WEEK (28th October 2002). Indeed the Bush administration is exhausting the

cent of total US rice exports went to Iraq and 60 per cent of Iraq's oil exports went to the United States. US exports to Iraq also included agricultural machinery and equipment, electrical appliances, automobile caravans and other US products. Iraq also agreed and began working on a project with GM to set up auto assembly plant near Baghdad to produce 90 thousand Oldsmobile saloon cars a year. Production would have started in 1992 and would have generated annual sales worth 1.5 billion dollars. Before the Gulf war of 1991, one Iraqi Dinar was equal to three US Dollars while now one Dollar equals 170 to 200 Dinars.

Even after the imposition of sanctions, when the Oil-for-Food Programme went into effect in 1997, Iraq maintained trade with US firms and signed 45 contracts worth 227 million dollars including programme for the supply of food,

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whole world by imposing anxiety and fear of a war that American government intends to wage against Iraq very soon. This mongering is recent. If one is to record for history examples of high-pitched animosity, then US-Iraq relationship of the last decade would possibly rank as number one. What was the relationship before 1990 like? Some reports are worth assessing, only as example.

In 1987 the US Administration was pushing vigorously to conclude a trade agreement with Iraq and on August 26th 1987, a major Commercial and Technical Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Iraq and the Government of the United States of America was concluded and signed by the Trade Minister of Iraq and by the Acting Secretary of the US Department of Commerce when Mr. George Bush (Senior) was Vice President of the United States. According to that agreement, the two countries agreed to strengthen economic and technical cooperation between them on the basis of equality and mutual benefit in commerce, industry, agriculture, finance, energy, transfer of technology, transportation and health. Accordingly, Iraq became a major importer of US agricultural products. Twenty per-

centage of total US rice exports went to Iraq and 60 per cent of Iraq's oil exports went to the United States. US exports to Iraq also included agricultural machinery and equipment, electrical appliances, automobile caravans and other US products. Iraq also agreed and began working on a project with GM to set up auto assembly plant near Baghdad to produce 90 thousand Oldsmobile saloon cars a year. Production would have started in 1992 and would have generated annual sales worth 1.5 billion dollars. Before the Gulf war of 1991, one Iraqi Dinar was equal to three US Dollars while now one Dollar equals 170 to 200 Dinars.

In view of its desire to improve relations with Iraq, the US Administration provided loans to Iraq worth five billion dollars from 1982 up until 1990 through the Agricultural Loan and EXIM Bank. When attempts were made to block some of these loans, the President of the United States at the time George Bush (Senior) sent a White House Presidential Determination in January 1990 to the Secretary of State that "with respect to Iraq's application of prohibition in that section to the Export-Import Bank or its agent not in the national interest of the United States".

If one assumes that President George W Bush's claims in his speech at the UN General Assembly on the 12th September 2002 about Iraq before 1990 were true, then how can one explain this desire by the US Administration to have such high level of cooperation between the US and Iraq before 1990? In the backdrop of the above, Iraqis (at least the few we had a chance to talk

to) feel that something has or had gone drastically wrong in the 'strategic calculations' of the US Administration which has forced them now to be dead against Iraq. On the day of referendum in Iraq, we saw people enthusiastically crowding voting centres and voting, even with finger-prints of blood which they let out from the thumb. Of course, we are taken to some centres only. Most Iraqis seemed united rock-solid behind President Saddam. After 1990 and before the beginning of the Oil for Food programme, millions of Iraqi (old persons and children) died due to lack of food, nutrition and medicine. After food became available, the government ensures that every household across the whole Iraq gets its monthly ration. There is not an ounce of pilferage and not an iota of doubt on the honest process, even the few foreigners staying in Baghdad for sometime, whom we encountered, confirmed this.

President Saddam is feared for his dictatorial style but respected for his honesty. The minority Christians feel very secure in the secular policy of the Baath Party. President Saddam has also patronized Islamic heritage and culture lavishly. Irrigation and other support for agriculture has directly benefited the peasants, which in turn has helped them survive in these days or economic hardship.

Most Iraqis are anxious about the forthcoming war. They are annoyed on President Bush. They feel that even if Saddam has done something wrong, he is not the only one in the world, so why is America focusing on him only. President Saddam's latest offer to UN Inspectors has been welcome by the countrymen.

Most Iraqis believe, that USA is not interested in 'Iraq over ground', rather it is interested in 'Iraq under the ground'. Everyone knows Iraq has the second largest reserve of oil in the world, after Saudi Arabia. The government's public relations activities in Iraq are very successful and it has helped keep up people's morale to a large degree. Morale is an important prerequisite for successful war effort. Iraqis seem to be anxious and worried about the damages of any future war, but equally convinced that President Bush is not the saviour.

In Bangladesh, most people have a soft corner for the land and people of Iraq. On the contrary, Bangladesh as a country is much dependent on USA for economic and other reasons. Which way do we go? The wise-men's way is the UNITED NATION'S way. If the 'United Nations' falls *dis-united*, we may have to choose one of the ways in any case.

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Agenda for urban concern: To save a century-old heritage building

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Shops

The existing shops in the Zohur Hawkers Market will be removed in phases and relocated on the slopes and plains on the western portion in two or three tiers. Spaces will be left open for pedestrian movement, loading/unloading of goods. The possibility of creating a more formal entry into the shopping area from the west will have to be investigated. Existing entry from the northeast may also be provided.

PHASING OF ACTIVITIES

Three broad phases of activities are:
· Decision Making Phase
· Design Phase
· Construction Phase

Decision Making Phase

All concerned departments of the government will have to meet and agree on the conceptual plan. The Government will have to discuss the matter with private stakeholders and citizens group.

Design Phase

During preparation of Project Concept Paper, through complete design process of the project, and prior to final approval discussion will be held with all stakeholders.

Construction/Relocation Phase

Subsequent to acceptance of the conceptual plan and approval of final design, the following actions will be taken:

§ Remove portion of shops on the north eastern part of the Zohur Hawkers Market and relocate them temporarily elsewhere (for a maximum period of two years)
§ Start construction of the New Court

Building

§ Remove shops from the western portion of the Zohur Hawkers Market and relocate them temporarily in the ground floor of the new building
§ Start construction of shops in the western area thus vacated - in two to three tiers

§ Relocate displaced shops in phases into the newly constructed planned shops permanently

§ Relocate offices of the District Administration and the CMM Court in the New Building

§ Remove the haphazardly constructed shops/ canteens (supporting court activities) in and around the hill, and relocate them to designated spaces in the New Building.

§ Undertake landscaping and other aesthetic and architectural improvements to other buildings and the site overall.

REDEVELOPMENT OF A WIDER AREA

Opportunity exists to look into a much wider area surrounded by the major roads which includes the Shaheed Minar, the Rifle Club, the adjacent hill now lying unused, the shops on the western periphery and prepare an urban design scheme. This would cater to the need for enhancing the urban environment of the whole area as well as the possibility of creating employment opportunities and recreational facilities.

LONG TERM ACTION: LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL:
Formation Of Heritage Conservation Committee

In the long term conservation must

form a part of the overall planning process. This is a stated policy of the approved Chittagong Metropolitan Master Plan (CMMP) 1995. A starting point had been made in the Plan by identifying important buildings. The Planning and Development Authority of Chittagong was to establish a process to identify and list buildings and sites, and subsequently draw up a programme for conservation. No action has been taken by CDA as yet.

Immediate Term Action

While the mechanism for introducing this element in the Building Rules is being formulated, A **Heritage Conservation Committee** may be formed at the local level. The committee will be responsible to identify and list buildings/sites and recommend conservation and preservation. The committee may constitute of:

- the Chairman of the Development Authority
- representative of the district administration
- a historian
- an artist
- an architect
- an environmentalist
- an engineer
- a physical planner

Any other person may be opted from time to time depending on the building /site in question.

Long Term Action

In the long term policies have to be formulated on all the issues involved with heritage buildings and sites, and must be incorporated in the Building Construction Rules under the Building Construction Act 1952. The City Corporation, with the Mayor as the

Chairman of the Committee, may be delegated the responsibility of identifying and listing the buildings.

PAST WORKSHOP ON ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION

A workshop in Architectural Conservation was held in Dhaka in March 1989, sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. The Workshop held training sessions where participants looked into various aspects of conservation of important architectural and historic sites. Participants included Architects from BUET and the government. Various recommendations advocated aspects of conservation including formation of a Cultural Heritage Council and training of professionals. The recommendations are given below. It is evident that little, if any, of these recommendations have been considered by the government.

· That a Cultural Heritage Council be formed in which relevant public and private bodies are represented, to help formulate policies and programmes for conservation and to encourage both governmental or private enterprises as the case may merit.

· That opportunities be developed for the training of professionals and craftsmen in building conservation.

· That the preparation of an inventory of building and sites of national architectural significance be undertaken.

· That a provision be made for on-site information at historic sites to create local awareness and pride as well as for continued mass media presentation and publication to create general awareness of the significance of the country's architectural heritage.

· That the existing legislation be reviewed to allow the above recommendations to be supported and implemented.

CONCLUSIONS

Conservation of buildings and sites is little understood and less valued. It is important to establish a mechanism for this activity - one that works. Providing planning guidelines and recommending buildings and sites for conservation and preservation must form part of the normal planning and development activity. It is also important to train professionals in this respect.

It is our ardent appeal to the government to declare the Chittagong Court Building a heritage building due to its historical importance, and work towards its preservation and conservation instead of its demolition. A new building built on the same style does not fulfil this appeal. Finally, the FPC earnestly appeals to all citizens to

extend their full support towards conservation of the Chittagong Court building, which as stated in the approved Master Plan - 'is an important legacy of the past and gives an increased sense of civic pride to the city.'

Structure Plan - Chittagong Metropolitan Master Plan 1995
PRS. 02 CONSERVE BUILDINGS AND MONUMENTS OF CULTURAL, ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORIC INTEREST.

Such buildings and monuments are an important legacy of the past,

reflecting different historical, cultural and national influences.

The Authority will arrange for such buildings and monuments to be identified and listed. Following this it will be necessary to draw up a programme for their conservation.

This programme will need to consider the scope for enhancing the settings of the buildings and monuments, as well as ensuring preservation of their fabric.

Examples of buildings that could be included in the list are:

- Central Railway Buildings;

- Court Building;
- Government Circuit House;
- Hill top Railway Bungalows;
- Islamic Intermediate College;
- Holy Rosary Cathedral;
- Shahi Jami Masjid;
- Chandanpura Mosque

Forum for Planned Chittagong is a body comprising of citizens of Chittagong, many of them professionals, who are devoted to seeing a planned City, and are committed to work as a motivation group to support the congruent acts of all government and other agencies.

In memoriam

My grandma

ZEEZHAN KHAN

I wish you knew my grandmother
For she truly was grand
She was larger than this little life
And stronger than lead

If you never met my grandmother then you missed a legend passing
For she never stood for anything
Except all things true

I wish you had met my grandmother
Then you would've seen what dignity is
And what it means to keep your head held high
And your eyes open
Even when you're blind

I wish I knew my grandmother
Then I might have known
What it means to have complete control
Over everything I own
I would know what it means to be regular
And regulated
And to be dedicated
To my every thought
And word and action
If I really knew Dadan
Then I should know what it is
To laugh at myself
And to take myself deadly serious.

If you knew my grandmother you must know
That courage is walking up a driveway with pot-holes
Or up a flight of stairs
Without sight or strength
Trusting yourself
Taking a bus to Tangail at 80 something
Nearly blind
Trusting yourself

And if you wanted to know what resilience is
You only needed to watch her
Try again
After falling and breaking some fragile bone or the other
Never quitting, never fearing, never faltering.

And so it was with everything
There wasn't anything that she wanted to do but



didn't
If she could have, she would have
Driven herself around town
Singing with joy.
And no chance that you could have stopped her.

And if you knew Dadan
then you know that she loved, completely
and that she felt for everyone
and that she so dearly loved her son
If you only knew how much she suffered
because she could feel people's pain
But what joy she got from people!
she loved to feel
she loved conversation
and she so loved affection

And how she loved Allah
despite it all
and stayed true to Him
I am not sad anymore that she has left
for I know Allah will enjoy having her with Him
almost as much as we enjoyed having her among us.
May she now grace heaven with her presence as she once did earth.