

A year of regression and dashed hopes

Statesmanship on global and national level can take us forward

NOSTALGIA is what we usually feel at the end of a year. But even that natural emotion of a longing for the past -- unfortunately and exceptionally -- is in for dilution insofar as the year 2002 went. What nine/eleven had done a year before by way of drastically changing the threat perception about networked terrorism clearly called for a patient, internationally perceived and adopted series of measures to combat it on a durable basis.

The very act terrorism spelled out the terms of reference for counteraction which conceptually could be broken into two parts: first, tracking down the group of ultra-extremists responsible for the attack on US mainland; and secondly, dismantling their networks wherever these might be found. The separation of those terrorists from their countries of origin, countries they took refuge in and their religious faith was an imperative necessity for the counter-action to be focussed and, consequently, effective. They being terrorists first and last, there need not have been a needle-in-the-haystack search for them especially when: (a) their dastardly inhuman act had alienated themselves from their co-religionists; (b) with such vulnerability, sooner or later, the actual culprits as distinguished from the innocents would have been caught; and (c) potential universal cooperation was just there to be had and used to apprehend them.

But in spite of all these advantages, Bush took it all into his hands to fight terrorism as a predominantly US war scowling at the UN now and at the NATO then. His unidirectional ruthlessness gave rise to all sorts of sinister speculations, some of which were even dubbed by his detractors as being a confirmation of the US agenda for Pax Americana. A litany of charges got reeled off against her: the US was pegging its hat on to terrorism for a broad spectrum domination of the world as the global policeman, the primary motive being protection of oil and broader geopolitical interests.

George Bush was instrumental in whipping up US chauvinism before he embarked upon the Afghan war. But this jingoistic policy of his got focused soon on Iraq; and even on North Korea which is being threatened now with military action for its nuclear programme, a perceived brand of terrorism which has nothing in common with what had happened on nine/eleven.

The US is so possessed with the thought of fighting terrorism its way that it has kept out of the international criminal court covenant just in case any question is asked about its military conduct abroad.

The central issue is the free-hand given by the US to Israel to deal with the Palestinians in the most barbaric fashion. The US knows more than any other country that if the Middle East question is solved on the basis of justice and fair play to the Palestinians there won't be any propensity to extremism in dealing with Tel Aviv's brand of state terrorism.

The Kyoto protocol for environmental protection remains a non-starter. The US leads the way to resisting self-binding limits on CFC emissions on the part of developed world.

Then, we ask: how realistic is the resolution adopted at the 50th anniversary of the UN to reduce the number of absolute poor in the world by half in a decade's time? The developed countries' commitments to ODA keeping more or less at previous levels, that sounds like a cruel joke.

In summation, the year 2002 has been internationally very disappointing; it set a patently negative trend for any minimally just and fair world order.

The national despondency in the year has been as great, if not more, for the simple reason that with the change of government, hardly anything changed for the better. The national parliament has seen-sawed between a comatose to semi-comatose state. On the whole, it remains dysfunctional basically going through the motions without the standing committees in place and frequent lack of quorum, thanks to increasing disinterest on the part of treasury and opposition benches. One more disappointment that also gave a body-blow to the constitutional system is the treatment the ruling party meted out to the former president of the Republic.

Most of the national focus was on law and order. With the Army called out in aid of civil authority to deal with crimes as a contingency, most people had heaved a sigh of relief. But the custodial deaths have tainted the Operation Clean Heart.

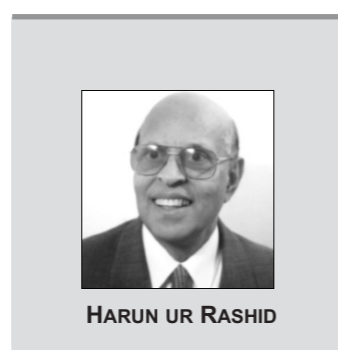
Finally, the year ended with oppression on journalists and writers.

We look forward to a determined commitment from the government to effect a behavioural change to provide space to the opposition and dissenting views. Much the same way the opposition should abjure its policy of 'toppling the government' and abide by legal and constitutional methods in playing its role.

Our hopes for the new year are: let there be a radical improvement in terms of a democratic culture and greater delivery of economic benefits to the people.

A happy New Year to our readers.

A few thoughts for the new year



HARUN UR RASHID

THE New Year is always a time out with the old and in with the new. New Year resolutions are one of the traditional ways to begin a New Year in personal lives. There are many psychologists who believe that the making of New Year resolutions is detrimental to one's health. The reasons they claim are that not only do resolutions largely encourage one to focus on the negative elements of one's life but also resolutions may induce feelings of low esteem and failure if one breaks them. One inevitably does break some of the New Year resolutions.

One is tempted to predict the likely events in national and international scene. Many believe that imagining the likely events in 2003 is like visiting a dental surgeon. It is going to happen whether one likes it or not in a dental surgery. So some say why does one waste time beforehand? Despite this it is an interesting guess to foresee, not to predict (like weather forecast) some of the events that are likely to occur in the country and in the world.

National Sector

In Bangladesh the New Year will usher in the deployment of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) to maintain or restore law and order. It implies that gradually RDF will take over from armed personnel who have been called since mid October of 2002 to bring some kind of stability in day-to-day life and personal safety of citizens in the country.

Almost every one sighed a relief on the outcome of the army-drive in the country.

However there has been some visible "collateral damage" in bringing army in assistance to civilian administration. Some arrested or detained died in custody of the authorities and it provoked a negative reaction in some quarters within the country and in Europe. The European Union asked the government to conduct an independent investigation into the matter and to

the country and hopefully the year 2003 will see these institutions in action. The separation of Judiciary from the executive organs of the state is incorporated in Article 22 of the Bangladesh Constitution of 1972, while Article 77 provides for the establishment of the office of Ombudsman with investigative powers into complaints about the administrative actions of government departments and agencies or public authority with the aim of raising standards in public adminis-

tration across the board. The Ombudsman's duty is to defend the rights of the ordinary people in dispute with the government or public authority.

The National Commission of Human Rights will be a body that will deal with complaints of invasion of human rights of an individual. Although an individual is empowered under Article 44 of the Constitution to move the High Court Division for the enforcement of fundamental rights, the Commission will be an additional agency to ensure compliance of human rights under national and international humanitarian laws. The functions of the Commission will be different from those of the High Court because the Commission will exercise powers of inquiry, conciliation and settlement of human rights complaint under the law of our Parliament.

International Sector

In his address to the UN General Assembly on 12 September, 2002, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan identified "four" current threats to world peace. First, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, second

its proper job. The US has raised the stakes in its face-off with Iraq over disarmament, reportedly ordered two more aircraft-carrier groups and a 1000-bed hospital ship to the Gulf. The White House said recently that it had yet to see evidence from Iraq that it would comply with a UN disarmament ultimatum and shed its weapons of mass destruction. All indications seem to suggest that in early part of the year 2003, an armed confrontation is likely against Iraq.

North Korea's brinkmanship on its intention to resume nuclear plants may be resolved through a diplomatic dialogue. The US Secretary of State reportedly ruled out any pre-emptive strike on North Korea's nuclear installations because it will have damaging impact on the region from radiation. Furthermore right now the focus of the US is on Iraq.

Israel-Palestinian conflict is likely to continue until the "Quatrel" Britain, the US, European Union and Russia, meet and lay definite plans for a viable Palestine state in 2005. The death toll since the present 'intifada' (uprising) of Palestin-

ians against Israeli occupation rose to more than 2300, by the end of 2002, including about 1700 Palestinians and about 600 Israelis.

Hopefully global terrorism will be contained by active cooperation of all countries. Furthermore the causes of terrorism may simultaneously be addressed. The feeling of rage and anger among the poor may lead some of them to join extremist organisations and to a dangerous path. The widening gap of rich and poor nations is unaccept-

able. Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen said: "We live in a world incomparably richer than ever before.....Ours is also a world of extraordinary deprivation and staggering inequality. An astonishing number of children are ill-nourished and illiterate as well as ill-cared for and needlessly ill."

With regard to the Multilateral Trade talks (Doha Round), the Ministerial meeting in Mexico in March 2003 may provide a forum for fair and free trade for developing countries. The New Year may see more entrenched positions for and against globalisation.

Africa is likely to be a better place in 2003. Kenya has recently demonstrated its commitment to a peaceful transfer of power. The conflicts in Africa seem to be resolved through negotiations such as in Congo and Angola. Zimbabwe may come to initiate a sensible policy in the country, in particular to the white farmers. The famine of 14 million people encompassing five southern states of Africa may not take its toll because of adequate supply of food by rich nations as a gesture of humanitarian spirit. The New Part-

nership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a blue print to develop Africa, will hopefully be implemented on the ground on the basis of three "opens"-- open economies, open societies and open governments.

In Latin America, the present internal conflict in Venezuela may see its end in 2003. The economies of Brazil and Argentina that took a battering in 2002 may regain their confidence. Although military governments ended in that part of the world, the relationship between Communist Cuba and other Latin American countries may continue to be the dividing factors in that continent.

In Europe the expansion of the European Union by 2005 will capture the imagination and debate among the member-countries as to its merits and demerits. The establishment of a new European Union military force of 60,000 in 2003 will for the first time be its new arm of flexing muscles. The EU force will take over peacekeeping operation in early months of 2003 in Macedonia and Bosnia from NATO forces.

In South Asia, Bangladesh's relations with our neighbour India will hopefully ride out the present difficulties and will be mutually supportive and beneficial. India-Pakistan relations are likely to go on their traditional path of animosity. SAARC has become a victim to the strained relations between India and Pakistan and 2003 does not look promising for the SAARC as the 12th Summit in Islamabad had been postponed by Pakistan.

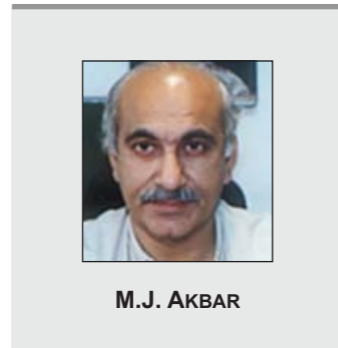
As they say whatever will be will be in 2003. However, one may approach the New Year with hope and optimism. One hopes that 2003 will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness, equality and justice to all human activities.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

As they say whatever will be will be in 2003. However, one may approach the New Year with hope and optimism. One hopes that 2003 will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness, equality and justice to all human activities.

Agricultural forecast for 2003



M.J. AKBAR

STAND on the edge of every decade and go berserk. Make the wildest predictions you can imagine, and check them out with facts as they unfold through the years. How many of us, of those who claim to be sane, would have predicted on the last day of 1989 that within two years the Soviet Union would be heaving mass of rubble, surviving as the original Mother Russia but deprived now of the many sons she had forced into her nest by war and chicanery over the previous two hundred years. Who could have foreseen the international retreat and economic collapse of the United States in the Seventies, the birth of Bangladesh, the rise of oil power, or the collapse of the Shah of Iran? In India, who could have predicted the assault on the Golden Temple and the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi in the Eighties and indeed the eventual collapse of the Congress as a national political force? The Nineties were as dramatic, starting with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the conversion of Kashmir into a deathly cauldron, and ending with the war over Kargil and the decimation of the Congress.

Do you still want to predict what India and the world will look like in 2010?

For that matter who would have had the gall to suggest, this time last year, a Narendra Modi sweep in Gujarat? But a hinge event occurs, and events twist like a tornado; in the subsequent havoc the world is so rearranged that Prime Ministers in waiting are wondering how to fend off exile. Who said the future was easy...

I am sure you see the point of this preamble. I am merely protecting

myself in case I get all my predictions wrong, as I am of course I predict I will do.

Assembly elections: The Congress will win in Himachal Pradesh, for the usual reason: because it does not expect to. It does not have to do anything to win this state, apart from hang around. Anti-incumbency is so strong in these hills that the voter will replace the BJP with the nearest alternative. The BJP's attempts to create a pseudo-Gujarat will fail in Himachal, and all talk of "Himachali pride" raise little more

progress will find this one attitude unacceptable, just as Sonia Gandhi will find anything other than this unacceptable. Growing distance will lead to drift, which will become a rift. Government will crumble under the weight of contradictions, particularly as Sharad Pawar begins to chart an independent route to the 2004 general elections.

Gujarat: Narendra Modi is likely to get so much stability he won't know what to do with it. He is a political player, not an administrator. Running a government will bore

attempts to use his moral authority to stress government energies in the direction of a vision (infrastructure, peace in South Asia or disinvestments) but since no one will entertain any idea that entails electoral risk, nothing much will happen. Politically, the PM will give his personal attention to Jammu and Kashmir, attempting to find solutions through the elected state government. Pakistan will respond by intensifying its sporadic jihad. Expect a crisis in summer that will once again be neutralised, not by

time as surrogate editor of a friendly newspaper.

George Bush: Will match his father in the speed of decline just as he emulated his dad in his crisis-driven rise in popularity. Has told everyone that he will go to war against Saddam Hussein in February, and is now contemplating whether Saddam will be killed within two days of this war by advancing American troops or missiles, or whether it will take longer. Will have no idea what to do in victory, and even less about what to do in a

non-sequitur. New Zealand: just non. Pakistan: brittle. England requires two words, though: utterly hopeless.

India joins Canada, Kenya, Zimbabwe etc as one of the countries who can no longer be considered among the serious claimants for next year's World Cup. The team has now been reduced to three fully functioning players (Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and Zahir Khan), and another couple who look good in comparison to the rest. The others are injured. Most of the injuries are to the head, so recovery is unlikely. The captain, Saurav Ganguly, for instance, is suffering from a bloated head, and there is no medical assistance that can remedy that. He also has a severe case of immaturity and mental cramps, both inflated by large amounts of advertising cash. If Indian players took their cricket as seriously as they take their advertising plugs, we would be better placed than Australia. Our national eleven destroyed Indian cricket in stages. It first convicted Test match innings into one-dayers, barely surviving fifty overs in an innings. Now it has turned one-dayers into half-dayers, barely getting through 25 overs before being bowled out by New Zealand. Australia's main enemy will be complacency, or a maverick performance by another team in an elimination round. In regular sustained play, there is no team that comes close to Australia. There is the faint chance that the Australians may have peaked too early, but that is really hoping against hope. So my prediction for the World Cup final (unless they are on the same side of the rounds and therefore meet in the semi; I have not checked) is Australia versus South Africa with the final decision in the hands of the third umpire, who of course is God. Irrespective of the outcome, my man of this match is Nitni. No bowler in world cricket has improved as much as him and he will have a few personal things to prove if he plays on that dream occasion before a home crowd.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

There will be no challenge to the benign supremacy of Atal Behari Vajpayee, the fluctuating authority of Lal Krishna Advani or the status of all the status-quoists who constitute the Cabinet. Token changes will be recorded on page one of newspapers: as for instance the induction of Farooq Abdullah into the Cabinet, possibly as minister without portfolio so that he can get his perks without actually having to do a job. The politics of sludge, fudge and drudge will continue, as the tried and tested formula for survival in a coalition.

than a snigger. This will not be a vote for Sonia Gandhi, although her closed-circuit intelligentsia will try to present it as the "answer" to the drubbing in Gujarat. This will be a vote for a new chief minister who comes from Himachal rather than Italy. Proof that Sonia Gandhi cannot change the prevailing mood, either way, will come from Rajasthan, where the BJP will win easily and Vasundhara Scindia take over as chief minister. And despite his charms, Digvijay Singh could find it difficult to win a third term in Madhya Pradesh, completing the Congress retreat from the Hindi heartland.

Maharashtra: More dismal news for the Congress. Since there is no Assembly election scheduled in this state, the Congress can't lose one. But it could lose the government, because of the increasing disenchantment of Sharad Pawar with the Congress. Sonia Gandhi will not bend from the arrogant stance she has taken towards Congressmen who are seen to be wary of permanent family rule, because her personal future means more to her than the future of the party. Those who could have been allies of the Con-

him. Fresh pastures will drum up his adrenalin. Sonia Gandhi, by making him a superhero, has also put him onto a different trajectory. He will not waste his year by worrying over a mere Gujarat. He will make a bid to become president of the BJP after Venkaiah Naidu, and lead his party into the general elections of 2004. The major resistance to him will come not from the elderly triumvirate of Vajpayee, Advani and Joshi but the younger crowd: Pramod Mahajan, Sushma Swaraj and company, who, naturally, will be the first victims of Modi's ambitions.

Atal Behari Vajpayee: There will be no challenge to the benign supremacy of Atal Behari Vajpayee, the fluctuating authority of Lal Krishna Advani or the status of all the status-quoists who constitute the Cabinet. Token changes will be recorded on page one of newspapers: as for instance the induction of Farooq Abdullah into the Cabinet, possibly as minister without portfolio so that he can get his perks without actually having to do a job. The politics of sludge, fudge and drudge will continue, as the tried and tested formula for survival in a coalition. Periodically the Prime Minister

the armed forces, but by telephone calls. (Thank God for instant international dialling.) The Prime Minister will have a perfectly contented 2003 and holiday in Andamans in the last week of December 2003.

Sonia Gandhi: What happens when an irresistible demand for common sense encounters an immovable object at the head of the Congress? The immovable object wins. Sonia Gandhi will remain the president of the Congress and claimant to the prime ministership. Not even a miserable performance in the Assembly elections will persuade her to see where the good of her party lies. She will lead the Congress to its worst ever performance in the general elections of 2004 (probably in the spring), after which she will tearfully admit that she has to take responsibility and then suggest that the party makes her daughter its president.

Congress Leadership: What's that?

Left: Will preserve what's left.

Arun Shourie: With any serious policy initiative placed on hold as the last phase of this government's term begins, he will increasingly turn to his first love, and spend even more

stalemate. Under pressure will manufacture Bushisms at pre-election rate. Democrats will quietly turn to the Clintons to give them a candidate for 2004. The Clintons might make an unsurprising offer for the Democratic nomination.

Saddam Hussein: This time he will not make a speech promising the mother of all battles. This time, while there will be sympathy for his plight in the Muslim world, the Muslim street will not erupt in his favour. Just before the promised American invasion of Iraq, a group of Saddam sympathisers (probably led by Russia) will persuade him to leave Baghdad and go into exile where his life will be protected. He may be tempted, although he will be reluctant to accept the validity of any such guarantee. After all, which country is safe from the long reach of an American-backed war crimes tribunal?

World Cup: This will essentially be a bilateral between Australia and South Africa, the latter making up for deficiencies in batting with home support and knowledge of local conditions. The other alleged claimants are single-word dismissals. West Indies: non-starter. Sri Lanka:

OPINION

How good (or bad) are our roads and highways?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

NEEDLESS to say that roads and waterways play a pivotal role in boosting economy of a country. The government should, therefore, pay more attention to building strong road and waterway infrastructure in the country. There is no substitute to strong communication infrastructure. Economy of the country will continue to suffer if there is no necessary improvement in the communication sector. Country's northern part remains neglected since long. No government has attached importance to the economic development of northern part of the country. There is no denying the fact that the construction of Jamuna bridge has shortened the

road distance between the north and east of the country, which certainly facilitates the movement of goods from northern part. Some roads, however, were constructed in northern districts during Ershad regime.

Northern part is also connected with southern side through road communication. Kushtia-Bheramara highway is very important underconnector to link northern part with the south. The distance between Kushtia and Bheramara is about twenty kilometres. The condition of the road is deplorable. Recently I visited Bheramara by road from Kushtia but I became sick after returning from Bheramara. The microbus took about an hour to cross the bumpy and worn out road. The road appears to be so bad that one feels to walk twenty kilometres

rather than travelling by jeep, car or microbus. Actually I had the taste of a hell by travelling on Bheramara-Kushtia highway.

It may be mentioned that this road is used daily by hundred thousand people to and from northern districts. I understand that bus and truck drivers had registered their protest two years back by resorting to strike on the condition of this important road. In spite of this no effort has apparently been made to reconstruct this road. Only repair work will not bring any improvement to the road. There is hardly any need to emphasise on the importance of maintenance of roads. It seems proper maintenance of road has not been taken care of. When the construction of Paksey Road Bridge over the river Padma will be completed the importance of Kushtia-

Bheramara highway would hardly be overemphasized. The process on the work of the bridge has already begun. Therefore, the reconstruction of Kushtia-Bheramara highway will be required on an urgent basis.

This country is crisscrossed by many rivers. Which has made the country riverine. Waterways also constitute another important communication. Another link is ferry ghat at Gorai River near Kushtia-Kumarkhal. From this ferry ghat a few thousand people are crossing over daily to the other side to go to Rajbari, Fariapur and Dhaka. This ghat practically has now become ineffective following closure of operation of ferry due to siltation of the riverbed. I was told by the people at Gorai ghat that dredging of the river bed had been carried out by a

foreign firm, possibly a Korean company, a year or two back but silts were piled up in such a way that rain waters washed them down to the river again. Therefore, the huge amount of money was simply wasted, lamented the local people. A thorough inquiry should be conducted to identify the company or person responsible for such colossal waste.

To my utter surprise I saw car and microbus were being ferried by local boat, apart from people and cattlehead. I confronted this ridiculous situation when I myself crossed the river with a car on board the boat. It is very risky ferrying indeed but people accept such risk as they acccomplish to go to their destination.

As a result of closing down ferry as many as five trucks loaded with sugarcane were stranded. If the

trucks could not cross over to the other side, the sugarcane will be wasted. This is the situation the people of Kushtia district are facing presently. Dredging of Gorai river is a must to make it navigable to rescue the ferry service. Alternatively, Bailey bridge should be set up for crossing the river. Foundation was laid recently for the construction of road bridge near Gorai Railway bridge. Only two huge pillars were constructed but no further progress has been made to complete the bridge. Had the road bridge been constructed unnecessary suffering of the people could have been avoided.

Good road communication generally facilitates movement of food grains and vegetables from agricultural fields to market places for the benefit of consumers. If the

supply of food grains and vegetables do not meet the requirement of the market, there is likely to be a crisis, which might lead to even acute suffering in certain areas. Besides, bad roads or highways contribute to the deterioration of the condition of vehicles. On my way to Bheramara I came across a number of trucks, which were stranded on the roadside because tyres were damaged.

In view of the worst condition of roads in such a short time (hardly a road or highway completed more than four years back) it is felt that system of floating tender should be changed for the construction of roads and highways to bring about strong disciplinary action against contractor and assigned engineer for any lapse in the standard of construction work. Materials sub-

mitted during the test should be subject to inspection also after completion of construction. Bid band money should be increased to 20 per cent from the existing 10 per cent of the bill to be submitted by the contractor. Final payment will be made only after the physical checking by the head of road division on the basis of report of the field engineer which means responsibility should be shared by contractor, field engineer and head of road division for any lapse in the construction work. The authorities concerned should consider increasing liability period also. People call for such stringent measures in the interests of the country.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain is a former diplomat.