

Columbia crash

We mourn the deaths of the astronauts

TRAGEDY struck when the space shuttle Columbia was quite close to the end of its return journey to the earth. But then the seven astronauts on board had really no chance of surviving when the spacecraft was travelling at a speed of 20,000 kilometres per hour at an altitude of 200,000 feet.

So Columbia could not successfully complete what could have been another very interesting space mission by NASA. After it disappeared from the NASA radar screens, the scientists knew very well that the spacecraft would not be able to land safely. Only a miracle could have saved it and the lives of the astronauts, but that did not happen -- the harsh rules of mechanical operation got the better of the wishes of people around the world.

It was more than spaceship wreck -- a setback, one that the scientists will surely overcome, in an area which is believed to represent the future of mankind. Leading world scientists are convinced that man will colonise the planets in the neighbourhood of the earth within a foreseeable future. That will be a great breakthrough that the dreamers of the high-tech world of space travelling are eagerly looking forward to. So every space mission is significant, for it may push the future plans a bit forward with its successful completion.

The hint at the possibility of some terrorist act behind an accident taking place at that height sounded absurd. Nevertheless, it seems very unlikely that the terrorists could make inroads into the heart of the high-tech NASA space laboratories. An India born woman, Kalpana Chawla and an Israeli, Ilan Ramon, were also among the astronauts, which goes to show that even space travelling is no longer a private preserve of a particular country or countries. The efforts and contributions of the most talented people from around the world have made the forays into the vastness of space a truly collective human endeavour.

It is doubly painful to think that not only some precious lives have been lost, but the dead were highly enterprising humans leading the challenge of delving deeper and deeper into the mystery of the universe. They have indeed died for a noble cause. Our hearts go out in sympathy for their bereaved families.

Bank board reform

The recommendations merit early adoption

THE Wahiduddin Mahmud Committee formed last year to devise ways for grappling with the intractable loan default problem has hit the nail on its head. It has recommended a new eligibility criteria for assuming directorship of banks. Traditionally, a certain type of bank directors has been associated with anything from poor lending decisions to expropriating loans thereby bleeding many a bank white. The depositors felt betrayed while the economy suffered. Who sits on a bank board, therefore, ought to be a matter of pivotal importance.

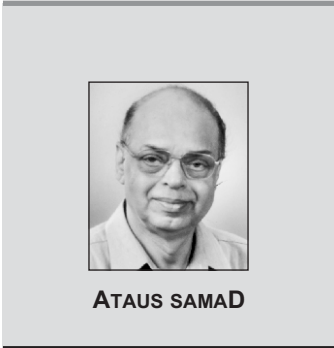
Leave aside scam-ridden stories at the international level, one has to only look at Bangladesh's banking history to test the truth of the statement that board directors' credentials can make or mar corporate institutions. That's why standard corporate practices will have to be applied to bank management. In view of this pressing need, Dr. Mahmud has spelt out a set of eligibility criteria for bank directorship. A person convicted of criminal charges or found involved in acts of fraudulence, financial crime or other irregularities cannot be director of any bank.

This is pretty much standard stipulation. But what sounds stringent is a court's adverse comment or observation against someone in any civil or criminal case being enough to disqualify him or her from directorship. Mere violation of banking rules or notifications and circulars of a regulatory body will have the same effect. A bank cannot have more than one member of a family on its board.

The idea of having two depositors' representatives on the board of directors is welcome, but on an 11-member body there is perhaps a case for more than two depositors to be accommodated. Then the question is: how do we exclude persons who are politically partisan or susceptible to influence-peddling?

A little more than a couple of years ago, some 43 directors were flushed out of different bank boards by recourse to court taken by the Bangladesh Bank. As a result, classified loans reduced by 15 per cent. The recommendations of the Wahiduddin Committee are now with the government. The sooner it implements them, the better it will be for the banking system of the country.

From dust to dust, unfortunately



ATAUS SAMAD

AT first there was one ball of fire and a long white plume of smoke behind it in the pristine sky over Texas. Then it became two, three and four streaks. Those who saw these could not initially figure what was happening, not even after some of them heard a booming sound. Some thought an aircraft had broken the sound barrier. One person, who was inside his apartment, guessed that it could be the ugly noise made by a garbage truck. Then came the traumatic news: space shuttle Columbia has disintegrated in the sky on its re-entry into earth's atmosphere.

While perplexed people in Texas were watching the sky and also looking for debris on the ground, here in Dhaka, friend Mueyedul Hasan's voice on the phone commanded urgently, "Go, tune on to BBC TV." I asked, "What happened?" Mueyed rebuked, "Just switch on the TV and you will know what is it?" That was enough. We rushed towards the TV.

But in those few seconds I searched my mind to think of any such event in Bangladesh on Saturday which BBC World could select to broadcast that evening. "Was there a fight at Bangla Academy when Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia was inaugurating the Ekushey Boi Mela?"

It was not a nice thought but one could recall that in 1996, opposition Awami League's student supporters had tried to stop her from coming to the Bangla Academy for the same purpose. They had resorted to violence. Police replied with even greater violence that led to the infamous Jagannath Hall raid; and that was the beginning of the opposition's street agitation that ultimately led to BNP's fall from power.

Were Awami League supporters trying to reenact that move? The Chhatra League leaders had said something like that.

Now, however, as we switched on the TV we saw the image of a burning object hurtling through the sky leaving a long white trail of smoke behind. Other white smoke plumes appeared alongside it in no time. The TV cameras followed the moving smoke.

Then we shuddered upon hearing the news presenter's remarks that a space shuttle of NASA had been lost. She said that the control

about our near and dear ones in New York when the Twin Towers were demolished by airborne suicide attackers who crashed into those with two big hijacked passenger planes on September 11, 2001.

Last Saturday when I spoke to my nephew, Ariful Huq, he was still optimistic. "Yes, some debris have fallen on Texas area but that has happened several hundred miles from here. Could be parts of the re-entry rockets. There is no trace of the shuttle yet." Note the remark about the space shuttle, again there is hoping here that astronauts may

gone.

I was also thinking about the seven astronauts aboard space ship Challenger, which exploded only a few seconds after launch. There was the girl, Sharon Christa McAuliffe, a school teacher among them. Her students had been watching the launch on TV. Sharon died within their view. The Challenger tragedy had shaken USA and the world. Sadness was going to envelop that country and others too, especially, India, for Kalpana (she was indeed from Punjab though she became an American citizen later),

I wondered if her comment did speak volumes about the impact on the American people of the Bush and Blair war cry against Iraq. But then in a few minutes a BBC correspondent in Washington was saying something quite similar. He said that the American people are going to be quite depressed for a while. He said that the Columbia space shuttle tragedy is a blow to the American people because the US space programme was a matter of national pride and it had symbolised to them that man can take care of any technological problem. Now that pride is

peace of her soul although she had become a US citizen. By doing that they were actually praising and admiring human excellence. Such excellence constructs, war destroys.

We condole the sad demise of the seven astronauts of the Columbia and stand with their bereaved families.

We also put on record our sorrow at the loss of the spacecraft Columbia which made 26 voyages. That was a magnificent boat.

Even in this state of shock and sadness we could not but feel annoyed at a certain question asked a number of times by BBC World's newscasters and reporters. This question was, "Could there be a hand of terrorists behind the disintegration of Columbia, especially in view of the fact that an Israeli was on board it?" A scientist of the NASA replied, "At that altitude (200,000 feet or about 39 miles), Columbia was a difficult target." Later on an official announcement had been made that there was no sign of a terrorist missile attack or anything like that. NASA has declared an emergency, cancelled all space flight programmes for the time being and have begun preparing for investigating into the cause of the disintegration of spacecraft Columbia. Maybe, some of the well known media of the world, which otherwise do such good work, could be less racist and less hysterical.

As we conclude this dispatch we are wondering about the resilience of the human body. When my wife remarked Saturday night that the astronauts, who were flying so high in the space would now mingle with the dust on earth's surface I told her that probably the heat of the burning spaceship had already burnt them and their ashes would be floating in the clean air high above us. But on Sunday morning we saw on TV that parts of the bodies of some of the astronauts have been found on the ground in Texas. Surely those will be identified, forensic science having progressed as much as it has, and last rites of the astronaut or astronauts, whose remains have been found, will be performed. What we can say with humility now is, "From dust to dust".

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room at Houston space centre had lost contact with the spacecraft Columbia. The fate of seven astronauts on board it was unknown.

It is in the nature of human beings to keep hoping against hope. Actually, in that message read on BBC there was an attempt to cling to the hope that maybe the shuttle spacecraft had wrenched itself free from the rockets; maybe it would be able to land somewhere! The BBC journalist even put this question to a NASA scientist. "Will the space shuttle be able to land?" The scientist was pessimistic. Space shuttle Columbia was like a glider and it would be difficult for it to manoeuvre safely at such great height.

The words that next streamed across the TV screen below the pictures made us sit up. Debris had been spotted falling over Texas. Now we were worried even more because some of our nearest and dearest ones were just now in Dallas. They were my wife, son, nephew and his family. It is a bit odd but suddenly the Columbia space shuttle disaster had been brought nearer home. It was just like so many of us Bangladeshis getting anxious

still be safe!

Within an hour we were phoning our people again because this time we heard a report on TV that some debris had fallen on Dallas-Fortworth area. Ariful Huq was now subdued. He told me that a piece of burning debris had fallen on an apartment only two miles from his home. The apartment had caught fire. The lady who used to live in it was unhurt because she had gone out fifteen minutes ago. Ariful Huq also quoted a local TV radio and said, debris had rained on a town called Nacogdoches (pronounced nakogoches).

By now, we had also heard reports that probably proud old space ship Columbia had disintegrated. No hope for the seven astronauts, including two women. One of the women was named Kalpana Chawla. Once again, the shocking event came near to home. "My God," I said, "that is Punjabi name. That girl must be Indian. Could she be the daughter of one of our neighbours in New Delhi when we used to live there?" Suddenly my anger at big neighbour India, for its push-out and water obstruction policies towards Bangladesh, was

and Israel for Ilan Ramon, a veteran fighter pilot of that country's air force who was to be the first Israeli astronaut. Ramon was the son of a holocaust survivor. For him and Israelis his journey into space was really going to be "something out of the world" to quote the ill-fated pilot.

Back in 1986 we had done a special cover story for a Bangla magazine on Challenger tragedy and Sharon. My wife had joined the research. I asked her how did she feel now, specially when she was at the place of occurrence. She was sad. She said, "All these brilliant people will now be a part of the dust. They were out there in the outer space for 16 days and they would be on the ground in 16 more minutes."

"How are your American neighbours feeling. Are they shocked? Are they very sad?" I asked her again. "Yes, they are sad. There is going to be national mourning. But it is difficult to gauge how much shocked they are. This is because so much talk has been going on here, day and night, about a possible war with Iraq, that the people here had been bracing themselves for some or the other tragedy."

This looming war isn't about chemical warheads or human rights, it's about oil

ROBERT FISK

I was sitting on the floor of an old concrete house in the suburbs of Amman, stuffing into my mouth vast heaps of lamb and boiled rice soaked in melted butter. The elderly, bearded, robed men from Maan -- the most Islamist and disobedient city in Jordan -- sat around me, plunging their hands into the meat and soaked rice, urging me to eat more and more of the great pile until I felt constrained to point out that we Brits had eaten so much of the Middle East these past 100 years that we were no longer hungry. There was a muttering of prayers until an old man replied. "The Americans eat us now," he said.

Through the open door, where rain splashed on the paving stones, a sharp east wind howled in from the east, from the Jordanian and Iraqi deserts. Every man in the room believed President Bush wanted Iraqi oil. Indeed, every Arab I've met in the past six months believes that this -- and this alone -- explains his enthusiasm for invading Iraq. Many Israelis think the same. So do I. Once an American regime is installed in Baghdad, our oil companies will have access to 112 billion barrels of oil. With unproven reserves, we might actually end up controlling almost a quarter of the world's total reserves. And this forthcoming war isn't about oil?

Along with the concern for 'vital interests' in the Gulf, this war was concocted five years ago by oil men such as Dick Cheney

The US Department of Energy announced at the beginning of this month that by 2025, US oil imports will account for perhaps 70 per cent of total US domestic demand. (It was 55 per cent two years ago.) As Michael Renner of the Worldwatch Institute put it bleakly, "US oil deposits are increasingly depleted, and many other non-Opec fields are beginning to run dry. The bulk of future supplies will have to come from the Gulf region." No wonder the whole Bush energy policy is based on the increasing consumption of oil. Some 70 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves are in the Middle East. And this forthcoming war isn't about oil?

Take a look at the statistics on the ratio of reserve to oil production -- the number of years that reserves of oil will last at current production rates -- compiled by Jeremy Rifkin in Hydrogen Economy. In the US, where more than 60 per cent of the recoverable oil has already been produced, the ratio is just 10 years, as it is in Norway. In Canada, it is 8:1. In Iran, it is 53:1, in Saudi Arabia 55:1, in the United Arab Emirates 75:1. In Kuwait, it's 116:1. But in Iraq, it's 526:1. And this forthcoming war isn't about oil?

Even if Donald Rumsfeld's hearty handshake with Saddam Hussein in 1983 -- just after the Great Father Figure had started using gas against his opponents -- didn't show how little the present master of the Pentagon cares about human rights or crimes against humanity, along comes Joost Hilterman's analysis of what was really going on in the Pentagon back in the late 1980s.

Hilterman, who is preparing a devastating book on the US and Iraq, has dug through piles of declassified US government documents -- only to discover that after Saddam gassed 6,800 Kurdish Iraqis at Halabja (that's well over twice the total of the World Trade Centre dead of 11 September 2001) the Pentagon set out to defend Saddam by partially blaming Iran for the atrocity.

A newly declassified State Department document proves that the idea was dreamed up by the Pentagon -- who had all along backed Saddam -- and states that US diplomats received instructions to push the line of Iran's culpability, but not to discuss details. No details, of course, because the story was a lie. This, remember, followed five years after US National Security

Decision Directive 114 -- concluded in 1983, the same year as Rumsfeld's friendly visit to Baghdad -- gave formal sanction to billions of dollars in loan guarantees and other credits to Baghdad. And this forthcoming war is about human rights?

Back in 1997, in the years of the Clinton administration, Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and a bunch of other right-wing men -- most involved in the oil business -- created the Project for the New American Century, a lobby group demanding "regime change" in Iraq. In a 1998 letter to President Clinton, they called for the removal of Saddam from power. In a letter to Newt Gingrich, who was then Speaker of the House, they wrote that "we should establish and maintain a strong US military presence in the region, and be prepared to use that force to protect our vital interests [sic] in the Gulf -- and, if necessary, to help remove Saddam from power".

The signatories of one or both letters included Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, now Rumsfeld's Pentagon deputy, John Bolton, now under-secretary of state for arms control, and Richard Armitage, Colin Powell's under-secretary at the State Department -- who called last

year for America to take up its "blood debt" with the Lebanese Hizbollah. They also included Richard Perle, a former assistant secretary of defence, currently chairman of the defence science board, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the former Unocal Corporation oil industry consultant who became US special envoy to Afghanistan -- where Unocal tried to cut a deal with the Taliban for a gas pipeline across Afghan territory -- and who now, miracle of miracles, has been appointed a special Bush official for -- you guessed it -- Iraq.

The signatories also included our old friend Elliott Abrams, one of the most pro-Sharon of pro-Israeli US officials, who was convicted for his part in the Iran-Contra scandal. Abrams it was who compared Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon -- held "personally responsible" by an Israeli commission for the slaughter of 1,700 Palestinian civilians in the 1982 Sabra and Chatila massacre -- to (wait for it) Winston Churchill. So this forthcoming war -- the whole shooting match, along with that concern for "vital interests" (ie oil) in the Gulf -- was concocted five years ago, by men like Cheney and Khalilzad who were oil men to their manicured fingertips.

In fact, I'm getting heartily sick of hearing the Second World War being dug up yet again to justify another killing field. It's not long ago that Bush was happy to be portrayed as Churchill standing up to the appeasement of the no-war-in-Iraq brigade. In fact, Bush's whole strategy with the odious and Stalinist-style Korea regime -- the "excellent" talks which US diplomats insist they are having with the Dear Leader's Korea which very definitely does have weapons of mass destruction -- reeks of the worst kind of Chamberlain-like appeasement. Even though Saddam and Bush deserve each other, Saddam is not Hitler. And Bush is certainly no Churchill. But now we are told that the UN inspectors have found what might be the vital evidence to go to war: 11 empty chemical warheads that just may be 20 years old.

The world went to war 88 years ago because an archduke was assassinated in Sarajevo. The world went to war 63 years ago because a Nazi dictator invaded Poland. But for 11 empty warheads? Give me oil any day. Even the old men sitting around the feast of mutton and rice would agree with that.

Courtesy: The Independent (UK)

OPINION

DAVOS unmask Washington

ABDUL ALIM

THE USA Attorney General John Ashcroft, faced a barrage of accusations at Davos, Switzerland where the world's rich, powerful and intellectuals gathered to participate in World Economic Forum. The policy of the Bush administration on tactics in its avowed war against terrorism, questionable moral grounds for targeting the most unlikely corners with allegations of fomenting terrorism and deliberate sidelining the main reasons for terrorism came under attack. In the process, Mr. Ashcroft, perceived as the main advocate and architect of draconian anti-terrorism legislations in the USA, faced unsavory questions at Davos, not all of them from the usual suspects.

Mr. Paul Sagan, an American technology executive from Cambridge, Massachusetts, for instance, told Mr. Ashcroft after lunch in a luxury hotel: "I'm concerned about the way Americans are perceived. Why do you think we are perceived as being not on the right side by a lot of the world? Often we are seen on the wrong side." A very valid perception as Washington is finding itself increasingly alienated from rest of the world. With the passing days, the process is picking up tempo and crescendo with the long time allies taking the stand on the wrong side of the fence.

In this important annual gathering of some 2,000-odd business, political, religious and other leaders, Mr. Kumi Naidoo, head of an umbrella organization of civil rights groups, took Mr. Ashcroft to task over the

way America has conducted its antiterrorism campaign since September 11. "We are seeing large levels of alienation across this planet from the war on terrorism," he said in one of several sharp exchanges with Mr. Ashcroft. "What we are saying is that certain fundamental tenets of democracy are being violated."

Mr. Kenneth Roth, who is the head of Human Rights Watch U.S.A, pointed out that America's "unwillingness to be bound by international standards has bred distrust and is harming the U.S.'s standing in the world and the war against terrorism."

At a separate session on 23rd January, Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor at Princeton, said the central issue being debated in the world now was American power and

the opposition to it. Recalling that the World Economic Forum met last year in New York City in part out of sympathy following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Professor Slaughter added, "The agenda has shifted."

In this Davos meet, the USA Attorney General has been rattled by no other people than the American participants themselves -- a sign that bids well for endangered world order. The criticism by American participants points to the Bush administration's duel role as protector and persecutor of the weak and unprotected. They shy away from powerful North Korea, suspected of already possessing at least two nuclear warheads as per CIA, sending signals across the world that the precondition to catch Bush administration by the hind leg is to

possess nukes.

"There may be many people who don't like the pre-eminence of America," said Mr. David Dreier, a Republican congressman from California, another participant at Davos. "But they do like Americans to be there" in times of crisis.

"The U.S. is essentially a provider of most of the building blocks of international peace and security," advocated Richard Haass, a State Department official. Or, as Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, added: "Nobody likes the big guy on the block. We are every country's problem and every country's solution."

As the United States prepares for possible war with Iraq, the challenge facing Mr. Ashcroft and other American officials is to counter the argument from critics in Europe and the

Arab and Muslim world that the twin wars on terror and Iraq will create so much resentment that it will breed a new generation of anti-American terrorists.

While Mr. Ashcroft said that the American aim was to prevent acts of terror before they took place rather than prosecute the perpetrators afterward, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister of Malaysia and an outspoken leader of Muslim world, turned to the attorney general across the stage and, in front of hundreds of participants, said, "To say you must do preventive actions irrespective of the causes is wrong." The terrorists who attacked the World Trade Centre "did it because they were incensed with something and we have to find out why they were incensed," Dr. Mahathir said. "We should try not to

amplify the situation, anger them more and lead more people to join this group of people." Mr. Ashcroft replied, "I am not prepared to say we have to give up values to appease the terrorist." What values? The values that tell to do a wrong to rectify another wrong? The values that divide the world into 'we and them' or 'Muslims and the rest of the world'?

Critics from the United States, Europe and the Muslim world specifically challenged many of the Bush administration's antiterrorism measures, including its detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, its refusal to identify by name people detained in the United States and its decision to register foreigners from selected, mostly Muslim, nations.

It is, however, the gathering cloud of war with Iraq that underpins a sense among some critics that Washington's overwhelming dominance as the world's only superpower has somehow lessened its standing in the world. "We expect more wise guy than big guy," said Mr. Amr Moussa, the secretary general of the Arab League.

Yet in his State of the Union speech last Tuesday night President Bush reiterated his stands "... let there be no misunderstanding: If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm, ... we will lead a coalition to disarm him."

Abdul Alim is a businessman