

Independence Day

People's aspirations not yet fulfilled

THE nation is celebrating today the 32nd anniversary of its independence -- a glorious occasion that people of this country are enormously proud of.

However, the nation should also take stock of what it has achieved for the economic and social emancipation of the masses. The widely held view on this point is that we should have achieved more than we actually have in terms of attaining economic and social advancement during more than three decades of independent existence. Some other nations with comparable economic standing at the time that we had founded our state have surpassed us by miles.

One has to admit that the political parties, entrusted with the sacred task of improving the lot of citizens, have failed to live up to the expectations of the nation. The biggest disappointment is that despite the restoration of a democratic order in 1991 -- after the nation bumped along the rugged terrain of political uncertainty for most part of its existence -- we do not yet have a democratic culture. And that is at the root of all other failures. Our politics is not yet guided by a set of rules honoured by the parties, and good governance in the democratic sense still remains an elusive goal.

There are other visible aspects of political malfunctioning that have not yet been attended to. The parliament, losing its efficacy in many ways, is dominated by one party; there is often very thin attendance and the failure to work through the parliamentary standing committees -- not in place even 18 months after the present government took over -- accounts for the loss of transparency.

This is not to, however, overlook the areas where our performance has been quite good. The country has achieved near self-sufficiency in production of foodgrains in the face of many odds; child mortality has declined considerably and enrolment in primary schools has increased to a great extent. Broadly, we have maintained a GDP growth rate of 5 plus per cent which speaks volumes for the sustainability of our development process.

The political parties will have to now reach a broad consensus on core issues and play their due role in revitalising what is at the present moment a highly polarised political atmosphere that allows nothing positive to grow in the country.

By default the democracy we practise today is more a matter of form than of substance. Unless we improve the political culture radically there is no way we can change the lot of the common man to offset the losses he has suffered so far.

Arab League resolution

A firmer stance was expected

WE are greatly disappointed by the outcome of the Arab League meet. The draft resolution adopted by its members has turned out to be ritualistic. Though it called for immediate withdrawal of US and British forces and criticized the invasion as 'an armed aggression that aims to occupy a member-state of the League', the resolution lacked the boldness with which the Arab world could have made a real difference. Since this was the first meeting after the war began, more stern reaction was expected from the League.

But then again, there doesn't seem to be unity among the Arab countries themselves while opposing this war. They seem to have forgotten that it was their responsibility to have done something concrete in terms of reaching a consensual position on the common threat they face in the shape of an escalated war. Some countries have already offered bases, some have committed troops to the US-British war effort. So, something more than a mere condemnation was called for, because waging a war against a sovereign country without a UN resolution is totally unacceptable.

The draft resolution sounds hollow, but it should not have been the case with the Arab League since it has all the ingredients for an effective resolution to be arrived at, given its comprehensive representative character. They were in the best position to create an atmosphere that could have diminished the plight and horror of the Iraqi people who have been suffering intensely for no fault of theirs since the bombing began. Just giving lip service like 'we are supporting our brothers in Iraq' is not really going to make any difference to their lives.

In fact, if the Arab League maintains such a facade, then where does the Muslim world seem to be any necessity for such an organisation to operate. It was a big disappointment for all of us that it could not come to a more solid and realistic decision on an issue that affects innocent people of a member country.

Frustrated hopes and shattered dreams



ABUL MAAL A MUHITH

lowest at around 4 percent. Millionaires and billionaires are there in droves and yet the population below the poverty line is over 11 percent and over 15 percent is without any medical insurance.

In our young days we used to read a lot of British and related European history in school. It was there that we learn about colonization of America by the British, overpowering of Red Indian tribes by the British governors and generals, the great American War of Independence. We were particularly aware of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis to George Washington at Yorktown in 1781, whom we knew as a successful Governor-General in British India. Soon after the transfer of power in British India we also vaguely learnt about an American positive role in decolonisation.

I took an interest in the United Nations soon after one of the leaders from Sylhet, Mudabir Husain Chowdhury, MLA, attended the UN General Assembly session in Paris in 1948 and came to know of the contribution of US leadership in its formation and in the shaping

murderous Yahya regime in every possible way. But they were held in check by the American people, by the academia, by the civil society, by religious groups, by conscientious civil servants, by the press and the electronic media, and by the US legislators in particular, both the Senate and the House of Representatives. A number of us functioned on behalf of the Mujibnagar government as registered foreign agents with full freedom. I traveled to about thirty states speaking at different forum for Bangladesh and appeared in numerous press conferences and television and radio programmes. In April 1972 I almost decided to be an active participant in US politics and joined a Presidential campaign team. What is impressive is the abundance of countervailing forces in the society that ensue democracy and fundamental rights of individuals.

In a way I took shelter in USA in 1987 to escape the wrath of the arbitrary regime of General H M Ershad in Bangladesh without actually seeking political asylum there. I closely followed the thaw in

the future of mankind. That was four months before the dastardly Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and consequent US direct participation in the War.

The Atlantic Charter on the one hand committed the two nations to no territorial and other aggrandisement and on the other hand sought the right of self-determination for all nations. Its other elements were the right of every nation to choose the form of government it wants; the freedom of nations, great or small and victors and vanquished alike, to trade and travel; the cooperation of all nations for improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security; the assurance to all the men in all the lands to live out their lives in freedom from fear and want; and the abandonment of the use of force and ultimate disarmament of nations.

As I step into my seventieth year I tend to be a little cynical. Is it because the course of robust optimism has run out or have the objective conditions changed? The first reason for cynicism is the debilitating politico-economic environment in my own country under an evil regime bent upon persecution of the opposition forces and dominated in its policy stance by the collaborators of the

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of a just international system in post-war world. Sylhet had some contact with USA mainly through sailors who started settling in that country since 1930s. Our students also started going to USA for higher studies after the War. One of the first of them that I personally knew was Engr. Dr A Rashid, who later became the first Vice Chancellor of BUET and a Minister in Bangladesh Government.

Those were the incidents of first exposure to USA, a land that was so far away from home. Remember that although airplane was invented air service was still some years away. Youthful admiration for socialism developed somewhat adverse feeling towards USA when its containment policy gave rise to regional defence treaties and Pakistan entered into a Mutual Defence Treaty with USA on 19 May 1954. But on the whole I believe our generation looked up to USA as a great nation with high ideals, a citadel of liberty and freedom, a home of scientific and technological miracles, and a country of unlimited economic opportunities.

I visited USA for the first time in 1963 and I entered the country through the western route at Honolulu. Soon after my arrival USA witnessed the great tragedy of the assassination of the young and idealistic popular President John F. Kennedy. I was hopeful at last for the peace dividend for global economic welfare. I extolled the universality of the western civilization

the cold war, the summit meeting between the leaders of USA and USSR in Washington in 1987 and the great speech of Mikhail Gorbachev in the UN General Assembly in 1988 that I thought ended the ideological divide began in 1945. Perestroika and Glasnost really meant no more of doctrinaire economic management and end of economic autarky of the communist block. It also meant that Soviet forces would not move into a satellite state if it decides to open up its borders or change its government. So came the inevitable collapse of the Berlin Wall on 11 November 1989. The ideologically divided world disappeared and dreamers planned of an arms-free world, a world of democracy and an integrated prosperous global economy.

It was so taken by the propitious developments that I thought of Costa Rica kind of states devoted to education, devoid of regular armed force and dedicated to sustainable development. I pleaded for CSCE (Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe) type of organization to guarantee the territorial integrity, amicable settlement of disputes and protection of human rights in other regions. I was hopeful at last for the peace dividend for global economic welfare. I extolled the universality of the western civilization

It is a war whose grounds have been fabricated on falsehoods. It is a war against a nation that has been starved for an age and also bombed at will during this period... It is a war that has ended the political existence of the United Nations.

Kennedy on 22 November 1963. A month later took my family and some friends about four hours in a queue with snow all around us to pay respects at the grave of President Kennedy at Arlington. I travelled to the southern region and witnessed racial discrimination. It was to the credit of President Lyndon Johnson and his able Attorney General Robert Kennedy that far-reaching and comprehensive Civil Rights legislation was introduced in 1964. The assassinations of Martin Luther King followed by that of Robert Kennedy in 1968 by a strange twist split the end of racial segregation in USA. In the northeastern region I was exposed to liberal America. What appealed to me most was a national identity with all the diversity of its people. Liberalism and conservatism coexisted and above all there was freedom of association and speech. I also witnessed coexistence of Puritanism and social permissiveness.

I was posted in USA in the Pakistani embassy in 1969 and I happened to be there at the time of our Liberation War. I transferred my allegiance to Bangladesh government on 30 June 1971 and sought political asylum on 22 July for my family and myself. It was promptly granted and I was issued a 'green card' that enabled me to travel to Canada on 18 August to attend the Toronto conference of concerned people. President Richard Nixon and his Security Advisor Henry Kissinger opposed the emergence of Bangladesh and tried to help the

and despite Huntington thought that for the first time there was the chance for one civilization encompassing all nations and all denizens of the world. In my view the world in the past had compartmentalized civilizations that lost their vigour at various points of time. Such civilizations were many such as Sumerian civilization, Phoenician civilization, Hittite civilization, Egyptian Pharaoh dynasty, Ming empire of China, Greek democracy, Maurya civilization of India, Roman civilization, Maya civilization, Islamic civilization of Arabia, Mughal empire, Moorish civilization, Hanover empire of Great Britain, Ottoman empire of Turkey, Byzantine civilization, Hapsburg dynasty of Austria, or Napoleonic empire of France.

Unfortunately my expectations proved rather premature and unrealistic. Ethnic strife engulfed so many regions and then Iraq in the gangster style just occupied Kuwait. But the response by the world inspired hopes once again even though the process was rather protracted and human sufferings were too much. Kuwait was liberated and Iraq was being disarmed. UN peace missions were gaining in strength and effectiveness and a system of conflict resolution as well as cease-fire in the event of break-out of hostilities followed by nation building was being developed. Developments in respect of nuclear disarmament, banning of chemical weapons, demobilization of military personnel in many countries and conversion of military

out months ago. The endless occupation of territories and settlement of new colonies there and the relentless and cruel military campaigns against unarmed people in Palestine leave very little choice to the oppressed and the deprived. The setting of the Millennial goals of development has been a step in the right direction to remedy the frustration of the poor of the world. But the financing gap in its implementation does not bid well for the elimination of terrorism. Third, the rise of fascism in the name of suppression of terrorism in all countries is a crucial threat to civilization. Justice is abridged for the sake of expediency, fair play is mutilated in the name of emergency and human rights are just denied for the sake of secrecy. This cannot be acceptable in the world of the twenty-first century. Finally, 9/11 has been made the pretext for reorienting US security policy taking a 180-degree turn. As Robert Byrd said the doctrine of pre-emption is understood by few and feared by many and the world, therefore, has become a much more dangerous place. Friends do not trust the US, its word is disputed and its intentions are questioned. What a dramatic change in the image of USA. On the other hand, Saddam Hussein, a much-disliked dictator and an impudent adventurer, has suddenly been transformed into a popular hero, a David standing against a Goliath.

Above all, in a unipolar world the only institution that could reflect

international will has been bypassed by the arrogance of power. The United Nations, set up to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, has peremptorily been dismissed by USA and UK, who are even inclined to call the General Assembly to unite for peace. Over twelve years USA and UK, with the tacit support of the world, have bombed Iraq, destroyed its military establishments, deployed inspectors for disarming the nation, organized the opposition forces, denied the nation supplies of all kinds including medicines and food, and appropriated their natural resources but did not unseat Saddam Hussein. Now suddenly they realize the need for regime change and elimination of Saddam.

President George Bush and Tony Blair have thrown the world into turmoil by launching an unjust and meaningless war when it was not considered necessary by the comity of nations as well as vast masses of protesters all over the world. The US Congress and the British Parliament could not vote rationally when patriotism was put on the line, even though it was done awfully wrongly. So we have an unequal and unjust war in Iraq since the black day of March 20.

What a farcical war it is! The most modern technology is used against a disarmed defence establishment. To be sure it will provide a wide field laboratory for trying out new weapons of mass destruction and precision targeting. It is said to be an attack on weapons of mass destruction that, in fact, do not exist at all.

economic order whose goals were growth in production and full employment based on accelerated investment in all countries, free flow of international capital, free international trade and unimpeded international transactions. USA instituted the first foreign aid programme for the reconstruction of Europe, East Asia and the Pacific region and goaded the revived economies of Europe and Japan to share the burden of global development investment. President Dwight Eisenhower was the first person to speak of peace dividend for development as early as 1954. The basic tenet of US foreign policy has been defensive action and preparedness to meet aggression. The events of 9/11 demonstrated the vulnerability to terrorism and naturally the response against it has been strong and determined. An international coalition could be easily formed to tackle the threat.

But the downside of it is the absence of acknowledgement of the failure of the US and international intelligence mechanism. No heads have rolled in the wake of the disaster nor a well-articulated strategy has been enunciated to tackle international terrorism. Second, no attempt has been made to identify and strike at the roots of terrorism as the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien has pointed

The war should be over in a few days. The wave of missiles and the barrage of bombs can easily flatten the country. How much more can you kill in the land of a killed people, starved children and homeless families? But what comes next is the big question? Instability in a volatile region can be guaranteed for years. Redrawing of the political map and reorganization of governments will be a long and arduous process. Exploitation of natural resources by the mighty will usher in the law of the jungle. The superpower and its lackeys so far only four -- UK, Spain, Australia and Israel -- will be mortally feared by all and sundry. The doctrine of preemptive strike will reorder the world according to the sweet but resentful will of USA. Will it end terrorism? Will it finish off rogue states? Or shouldn't we expect the end of western civilization?

I feel very sorry for three actors. Claire Short, reputed to be a friend of the poor, was expected to resign from the Blair cabinet. She did not. She thinks that she can mobilize and properly channel humanitarian aid. What a false hope! Kofi Annan, with no chance of a further term, spoke bravely and well. But as the UN did he failed to resign in protest or in sympathy. There is no way the UN can stage a comeback without giving a nod to the unjust and illegal war. General Colin Powell is the Secretary of State but not reported to be a confidante of President Bush. When the image of the great country he serves is tarnished an honourable exit would have been so much better.

Abul Maal A Muhiith, a former civil servant and finance minister, is a reputed columnist.

The stake is very high

MUYEEDUL HASAN

DURING the first five days of American led aggressive war, Iraq has surprised many by the display of its stamina and tactics. It has no doubt increased their national self-esteem, and is generating new respectability and greater support for Iraq in the Arab world and beyond.

If the war lingers till mid-April, the harsh desert summer is likely to set in, and the war will be prolonged further. With grim fight in and around Baghdad, both civilian causality and number of body bags will go up. Peace marches in

America will be longer and more militant. Stock markets would go for deeper dips. Popular rating for Bush would start sliding down fast. Democrats may at last find it opportune to charge Bush for reckless acts including wrecking the western alliance and ruining the economy.

Other factors may start working against Bush as well. If the war is dragged along and become bloody, Tony Blair is making Bush's 'alliance of willing' totally useless as a platform for promoting alternative international arrangement.

It is the time for the leaders of

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