

## The war enters a most crucial phase

*Stem the tide of casualties, reach humanitarian succour*

THE allied command is claiming that it has moved within a striking range of invading Baghdad. The Iraqi authorities are saying the US-British-Australian combine is suffering from the delusions of military advances. Whatever the war of words, realities on the ground seem to be pointing to one direction: direct military confrontation or a show-down between the allied troops and the Iraqi Republican Army units is imminent. By contrast, it has hitherto been 'hurrying the tail' by the Anglo-American troops in the face of hit-and-run guerilla assaults by Iraqi defenders.

On the whole, the earlier prognostication of the Iraqi defence minister that the allied troops could encircle parts of Baghdad in five to ten days' time is proving right. The other half of his prediction that such an encirclement would be immediately followed by the fiercest kind of battles in the streets of Iraqi capital is about to come true.

Baghdad with its five to six million people is bracing for the terrible showdown. But one could not say with any degree of certainty that it will mark the climactic phase in the war. There are reasons to believe that the guerilla-style resistance is likely to continue against the operations of US-British ground forces that are regarded by all the indigenous people as an alien invading and occupying power.

One notable feature of the war has been the demolition of the myth that the allied bombardments would trigger a massive exodus of Iraqis from the cities. Barring Basra which has seen some of its inhabitants trickling out of the northern perimeter, other cities in southern and central Iraq have not been abandoned by their populations. Even the Shia-Sunni divide is subsumed in the greater concern over losing national identity and sovereignty to an occupying power.

They are presenting a united front from within as the surge of Arab sentiments in the face of mounting civilian casualties translates into suicide bomber squads from some neighbouring Middle East countries volunteering to fight for their Iraqi brethren. As against the threat issued by the Iraqi authorities to their enemies in the wake of the lethal suicide bomber attack on an American checkpoint that it was only 'the beginning', ten innocent women and children have lost their lives in a shooting incident at an allied checkpoint. And with their nerves gone taut, the US has admitted that checkpoint troops have become 'more aggressive.'

But this is only a side-point to the trail of death and destruction already left by the war which is only past its fortnight mark. So much more is left to the war with heightened physical confrontations lying in store. The Human Rights Watch, an internationally reputed monitoring organisation, has voiced its deep concern over 'the indiscriminate use' of the controversial cluster bombs in Iraq by the American troops. There has been a steep rise in the number of civilian casualties lately; hospitals and civilian structures have been bombed in reckless desperation, including a Red Crescent maternity infirmary and an annual trade fair venue.

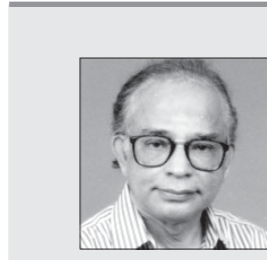
The question is: will the world be a mute spectator to Iraq being turned into a graveyard?

Will the still surviving Iraqi children, women and men go without food, shelter, water and medicines only because succour cannot reach them in a state of belligerency? The UN must be able to take a humanitarian role in Iraq alongside the Red Cross and Red Crescent; for, they have a greater acceptability to the Iraqis than the hand-outs being doled out by the Anglo-American troops after they have captured a particular place to the humiliation of the besieged.

Simultaneously, the UNSC needs to be moved to pass a resolution seeking an early end to the war with a ceasefire brokered between the parties at once. This will help save lives on all sides besides preserving precious cultural and religious sites in Iraq which are the heritage of mankind. Above all, there is the question of civilised conduct in international affairs.

To our mind, there is an added rationale for all this to happen. So far the allied operations have drawn a blank on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. Is it not a big irony that the US is warning Syria against its alleged supply of conventional weapons to the Iraqi regime when it was suspected to be possessing WMD?

## Baghdad calling



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

BAGHDAD is ablaze at night with streetlights and blinding flashes from relentless bombing by B52s. It burns and smoulders during daylight hours. The billowing plumes of smokes are trompe l'oeil of so many mushroom clouds. Baghdad could very well be under nuclear attack, so sanguinary and cruel has been the intent of the aggressors.

In the midst of such apocalyptic onslaught talks of precision bombing sounds hollow and cynical. Even if the bombing is targeted the violent shock effects are bound to cause widespread collateral damages, as indeed they have. The mendacity of the aggressor leads them to take refuge behind dissimulation of the most blatant kind. They tell the world, with deadpan expression, that it is an Iraqi missile gone berserk that wreaked havoc in the market place in Baghdad, killing people in scores and wounding hundreds. When innocent civilian women travelling in bus are gunned down without any provocation, the aggressors blame the Iraqi 'terrorists' for making their mercenaries nervous and circumspect. They accuse Iraq of treating POWs inhumanly, violating Geneva Convention because some of them were shown on TV screen. When they themselves show Iraqi POWs with their hands tied behind and made to lie on ground face down, there is no consideration of humane treatment or observing Geneva Convention. This barbaric treatment of POWs has now been exceeded by the act of hooding of POWs in sack clothes, without any hole to see or breathe. If such conduct does

not violate Geneva Convention and all norms of treating war prisoners, one wonders what does.

Not everything has gone according to the expectations of the invading army and their masters at home. Much to the embarrassment, surprise and shock of the aggressors there has been no cheering crowd, not even in Basra, the stronghold of the Shiites, to welcome the liberators. Now the propaganda tack is to assure the world that the Iraqi people are waiting for the collapse of the regime before opening

places. America has already given notice to Iran and Syria for their alleged hostile acts and has made insinuating remarks about Russia's clandestine arms sales to Iraq. With the future of oil and strategic interests up for grabs, a stampede can very well be expected among the present onlookers. Countries don't fight a war, even a just war, only for the sake of stretching their limbs and to support their defence industry. Underlying belligerence and raging war are hard facts of economic and strategic interests.

ican censorship is palpable. They have not hesitated to fire a world-renowned Pulitzer Prize winning war correspondent like Peter Arnette, for airing his free and frank views on the war. Several notable public figures have been arrested in America for criticizing the war. Meanwhile, the war of words and propaganda offensive continue unabated. Irked at the cool but abrasive comments and news briefings by the Iraqi Information Minister, cruise missiles were fired several times to destroy the transmission infrastruc-

call is not only in words to be heard over TV. It can be 'heard' vividly through images of relentless bombardment, day and night, round the clock, of dead and dying children, of women gunned down in cold blood, of inhuman treatment to Iraqi POWs, of civilian areas devastated into moon-cape and of hundreds of thousands rendered homeless overnight. The world has responded to these images in TV and in newspapers and reacted indignantly, angrily and sometimes violently. It is not a war where one can

world. The strong and principled stand of Bangladesh Government was again demonstrated when it refused to accede to the American request to downsize the Iraqi Embassy. The American request, part of a worldwide campaign to isolate Iraq, is absurd and illegal because the present Iraqi Government is very much in power and the Iraqi Embassies in the world capitals represent that government.

Bangladesh has also decided to send food and medicine worth 2 million US dollars in emergency relief supply for Iraqi civilians. This, too, is a timely and forthright stand. In times of cataclysmic events solidarity of the world community with the victims is crucial, if not for anything, to demoralise the aggressors. Bangladesh has unequivocally opted for human rights and international law knowing very well that this principled stand will be galling to the American government which may not hesitate to take punitive measures. The nation feels proud that the government has not sacrificed moral principles and righteousness for selfish interests. It is by bold moral stands like this that a nation is judged by history. The main opposition party also deserves appreciation for its stand over the unjust war.

For the public demonstrating against war something more concrete needs to be shown. Concerned bodies should collect fund, medicine, baby food and clothes to help the civilian population in Iraq affected by the war. Even volunteers can go to work as relief workers, paramedics, health technicians, civilian ambulance drivers, in short anything that helps the Iraqi civilians. There is report about international lawyers helping the Iraqi government to file a case against America for crimes against humanity. Many more private initiatives are reportedly in the offing. Baghdad is calling to the whole world in one of the darkest moments of human history. Mere condemnation of the war is not enough of a response. This is the time to act.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

**Bangladesh has unequivocally opted for human rights and international law knowing very well that this principled stand will be galling to the American government which may not hesitate to take punitive measures. The nation feels proud that the government has not sacrificed moral principles and righteousness for selfish interests. It is by bold moral stands like this that a nation is judged by history. The main opposition party also deserves appreciation for its stand over the unjust war... Baghdad is calling to the whole world in one of the darkest moments of human history. Mere condemnation of the war is not enough of a response.**

their hearts to the beloved aggressors. Of course, after their triumphal entry in razed down cities they will be able to organise such 'receptions' without much difficulty. But they should know that even many of those waving flags will be hating them deep down in their hearts. They will be muttering under their breath: After this what forgiveness?

But the war is not yet over and the script for reception for the 'liberators' may appear not only premature, but unrealistic, too. The way the war of aggression and the counter-war of defence is progressing, there is no telling which way it will turn. It has now all the signs of a major regional war and may even escalate into the third world war. Baghdad is not just in the Middle East; it is at the centre of a fragile and phlegmatic balance of power in the world to day. The stakes are high for many countries in the shape of things that are about to emerge in this most strategic of all

Otherwise, why should America get busy in awarding contracts to their firms even before the war is over and their General in Doha should declare that his troops have secured the oil wells? Unwittingly, Americans have given away the not-so-tightly-secured 'secret' viz. that it is oil (stupid!), not liberation of Iraqis or weapons of mass destruction, that is the casus belli for the war. To live upto their new incarnation as the latest imperial power on earth, the Americans have also completed plans of setting up a government in Iraq with American Generals as Ministers and Iraqi dissidents (quislings) as advisers. For the lucrative reconstruction business they want to go alone monopolising all the gravy from oil revenue. How brazen and uncouth can one be?

Thanks to TV coverage the world is watching the war in real time. Once again journalists have shown their courage and dedication to report on what they see and think. But the Amer-

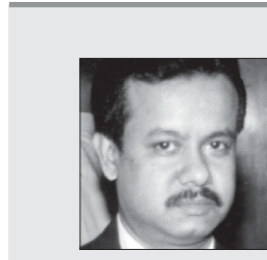
tures, even while foreign journalists were being briefed there. Something must have gone awry with precision targeting again because the Iraqi Information Minister is continuing with his unflattering references to Americans as international criminals and comparing them to Al Capon, the latter having been a favourite example of the modern day Dracula, Rumsfeld. But the Iraqis need not worry and bother about the propaganda war. The world already knows who has committed the most grievous and heinous of crimes. No amount of smoke screen and diversionary tactics is going to convince the world about what is being said by the aggressors. If that was the case worldwide demonstrations would not have continued day after day. In street fights in all the major cities of the world the aggressors have already lost. Can that be a portent for the looming street fight in Baghdad?

Baghdad is calling the world with a rallying cry: stop the aggressors. This

stand and stare or sit on the fence. At least in the case of this war Bush is right: Either you are with US or against. The majority of the countries and the overwhelming majority of the people, irrespective of religion and politics, are against America because the war is unjust, immoral and illegal.

It is a matter of pride that the Government of Bangladesh has risen to the occasion and expressed concern over the war that has caused civilian deaths. Dhaka asserted its position on the war after the Prime Minister had a meeting with cabinet members when she expressed deep concern at the killing of civilians, including women and children and destruction of non-military establishments in Iraq. Later, the Foreign Minister told newsmen, "We are never in favour of war. The war must come to a halt immediately. We are anguished and this (civilian deaths) is unacceptable to us". He was echoing the sentiments of the peace loving people of Bangladesh and of the

## The public opinion has responded to Saddam



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

MORAL authority, like water, has a top-down approach, which means it flows from highs to lows, leaders to followers, superiors to subordinates, elders to youths, parents to children and nations to people. The United States has gone to war in Iraq to bring democracy for the Iraqi people. But it has ignored the world opinion and the United Nations, creating a moral crisis for its action. How does a country, which has no regard for the opinion of others, claim that others didn't do the same?

If Saddam rules Iraq like a dictator and the United States, which once brought him to power, wants to topple him now, neither has regard for the Iraqi people. Saddam burns the oil wells for the Iraqi people and the US protects those wells for them. The United States vows to remove Saddam for the liberation of the Iraqi people and Saddam vows to destroy the infidels to protect their freedom. The United States accuses Saddam of using civilians as shield for his soldiers and Saddam blames the United States for killing civilians, missing military targets.

It is the Iraqi people who are getting crushed between two intransigent

forces. The images of ordinary Iraqis running for shelter, lying in hospital beds or slamming their foreheads in grief over death of their loved ones, conjure the prospect of hell they haven't chosen for themselves. Yet they suffer and will continue to suffer the death and destruction of a war that is likely to change nothing in their lives, if not from one dictator to another. The United States had earlier brought to power a leader for the Iraqi people, who turned into a dictator. If the United

States, because America has an issue with Saddam. The American missiles are hitting targets, raining down on buildings, bridges, installations, mosques, and hospitals, the wrath of a superpower roaring in the explosions. Where does one hear freedom ringing for the Iraqi people in the wailing sirens, screaming people and pattering gunshots? Torn limbs, splattered blood and ruins of houses imprecate the horror that a superpower exacts the price of its blood at a usurious price.

Terrorism is war of the weak, and war is terrorism of the strong. Osama bin Laden executed the blast of the century in the Twin Towers to let out the pent-up rage over the US policy in the Middle East. But what did Saddam do wrong? He had invaded Kuwait, and got himself clobbered in 1991. What happened after that?

The United States claimed that Saddam was developing the chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction. Another accusation is that

down, the United States used 17 million gallons of agent Orange in Vietnam. Saddam was an American recruit, and he followed the footsteps of his mentor until Frankenstein challenged its maker.

As the coalition force, which is primarily US and British with a dash of Australians, enter deeper into the Iraqi territory, it reveals the inanity of the American accusations. No sign of chemical weapons yet, and no sign of relief from Iraqi people "liberated" by

old-fashioned gun or an Iraqi fisherman hitting a drone plane in the Iraqi sky, the contrast looks all the more strident.

Nearly half of the stockpiles of missiles in US warships have been already fired. Before the other half is exhausted, the coalition forces are likely to capture Baghdad. The United States will have Iraq and its oil, the British companies will get business contracts and the Australians will get the hyena's share of the lion's kill. A country, homeland of many ancient civilizations, will lose its glory and the Iraqi people their freedom.

Many years later, Saddam will be dead, his sons, if still alive, will be old and decrepit, and Iraq's resources will be depleted from plunder. Bush and Blair will be long gone from office, while the experts will still analyze the outcome of this war. The people around the world will debate how democratic governments could behave like monsters.

If the United States promises to liberate the Iraqi people and bring democracy in Iraq, it has already lost the moral ground to do it. If Saddam is a dictator, who was once viewed as some military crackpot, if not an American stooge, he is now the hero of the Muslim world. He may be ousted from power, but he has been put in the hearts of millions of men, women and children around the world.

The public opinion has responded to Saddam. If democratic governments respond to public opinion, America might take a few tips about democracy from him. It must learn to respond to global public opinion, and not to the American public opinion alone, if it must retain its place as a superpower.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

**If the United States promises to liberate the Iraqi people and bring democracy in Iraq, it has already lost the moral ground to do it. If Saddam is a dictator, who was once viewed as some military crackpot, if not an American stooge, he is now the hero of the Muslim world. He may be ousted from power, but he has been put in the hearts of millions of men, women and children around the world. The public opinion has responded to Saddam. If democratic governments respond to public opinion, America might take a few tips about democracy from him. It must learn to respond to global public opinion, and not to the American public opinion alone**

States now wants to change him and bring another leader for them, there is no guarantee that it will not repeat the same mistake.

But the biggest question is where is democracy if nobody is heeding the voice of the Iraqi people? "Operation Iraqi Freedom" ought to go down in history as the most absurd oxymoron of all times. It's like Al-Qaeda calling the 9/11 "Operation American Freedom" to liberate the American people from the tyranny of their minority president. If asked the Iraqi people wouldn't approve of US military action in the same way the American people haven't approved of 9/11.

Yet the ruthless attack on Iraq goes

The devastation in Afghanistan, and now in Iraq, all tied to the terror unleashed on the American territory on 9/11, are the logical conclusion of reprisal tactics taken too far. The innocent civilians, who died in Afghanistan, and now dying in Iraq, are no less the victims of mindless carnage than those, who died on 9/11. But there is a terrible calculus perpetuated in the lengthening trail of these retributions. Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Saddam Hussein, idolaters of brute force, have equally misjudged that death and destruction are the only way to settle differences.

On close scrutiny, there is very little difference between the two sides.

Saddam killed 5000 of his own people, meaning the Kurds, in 1988 using poison gas in the Kurdish town of Halabia. In 1991, 6000 retreating Iraqi soldiers were buried alive by the US army with ploughs mounted on the front of tanks. If you further peel off the layers of hypocrisy, the materials and technology to develop WMD were supplied by the US and British governments along with some private corporations.

In the next layer, there was no condemnation when the Kurds died. If one peels the onion even more, not a single word of condemnation came from the US government after Iraq had used gas in its war against Iran. Further

their coalition "friends". The Iraqi people haven't streamed out on the streets to greet their liberators and we are yet to see the groundswell of popular support for the coalition force in Iraq.

Washington and London have an explanation for that: the Iraqi people are not showing their true emotions, because they are afraid of Saddam's goons. Television images of coalition soldiers putting bandage on a wounded child or giving water to scrambling Iraqis show contrived situations of desperate bid to win some hearts. When juxtaposed with the images of an Iraqi farmer shooting down an Apache helicopter with an

## OPINION

## Thoughts of an imaginary Iraqi youth

SHAYAN KHAN

A few days ago, Mahfuz Anam wrote a touching commentary on the thoughts that might be going through the mind of an Iraqi father at this time of war. It captured their mental framework as closely as one might hope. As a young man just out of his teens, it got me thinking about what would be going through the heads of the people in my age group in Iraq. They are arguably the most important segment in the demography, just beginning to define their dreams for themselves, for their country and for their people. Disillusionment at this stage of life leads many to go astray, and a supposedly 'liberated' but ravaged post-war Iraq cannot be rebuilt unless the young men and women in their late teens and early twenties are active

participants in the rebuilding process. This is my account of what I think, and what I fear they might be going through.

Walking along a road leading out of Baghdad, Roger Waters' lyrics from his early nineties hit 'It's a miracle' float down to me like birds on Francis of Assisi's shoulders. 'Between the Tigris and the Euphrates, there's a leisure centre now. It's a miracle.' A miracle indeed it will be. If it ever happens. Lying between those two great rivers is my home, my city, my Baghdad. Far from a leisure centre, it now resembles an incinerated morgue. Piles of smoke make their way towards the sky, as if trying to get as far away as possible from this God-forsaken land. Debris cover the ground like leaves under a tree in autumn. Dead bodies, some in full, some in parts, make people turn their

eyes away in disgust. Loved ones weep though, and they do not turn away. Humanity thrives on hope, and these people can never let go of the hope that perhaps somewhere inside a ripped-off hand, or a torn-off leg, or a blown-off head, might reside the soul of someone they loved. The world might sing the old tune of 'every man for himself' all it wants, but in reality, we all live for and because of each other. Our lives, past, present and future are forever entwined with those of the people around us.

I had my future ahead of me. But I have lost it. It is hard to think of something more frustrating than losing your future. Just about to enroll in college. Always received good grades. Nothing spectacular, but solid. Saddam Hussein's regime cast a dark shadow over us with its despicable behaviour towards dissidents, but we

all knew that as long as we kept our mouths shut, we were safe and they would leave us alone. The 'Butcher of Baghdad' could not go on reigning forever, and once he was gone, we could slowly start changing things in our beloved homeland. Neither of his sons, nor his other deputies, are assumed to be half as bit as cruel and demented as he is. In the meantime, we and coming generations would slowly build up our stock. I have already lost my father to an American bomb. Not to talk of the infinite hole it has left in my heart in terms of love, which I cannot express in words, it has robbed me of my future. In literal terms, I still do have a future but it is not my future. It is a future George W Bush has set out for me, and I don't want that future to eventuate into my present.

Once the war is over, and Saddam

is gone, and American oil companies have received the contracts they crave, there is talk of a new Iraq. An Iraq where the people's voice is heard. Will we really be so much better off I ask myself? Is President Bush trying to tell me that I was willing to lose my father without even getting the chance to bury him properly because his parts lie scattered all over Baghdad just so that my voice could be heard? Will my orphaned cousin not miss being kissed before going to bed by her mother just because her voice would be heard? Is losing the girl he loved the price my best friend was willing to pay so that his voice could be heard? The answer is irrelevant because in reality, no-one's voice is heard. We heard of the wonders of a democratic system, but if democracy really is about governance 'of the people, for the people and by the

people,' then how come despite the millions of people protesting all over the world, including the United States, American planes are bombing us with gay abandon? The truth is, democracy is a mythical, imperfect concept the way it is practiced. The only voice that counts is of the one who is most powerful. And it is my, and every Iraqi's misfortune that George W Bush rose to that position.

Who will pay for my education in Bush's Iraq? Who will guide me when I'm lost? Who will inspire me to get up when I'm down? Foreign aid will flow in, but how many of us crave the money which cost a father, or a mother, or a brother or a sister? I do not, and I know few who do. Especially the money of those who kill our people and describe them as 'collateral damage.' The disdain with which they view human life other than their

own is encapsulated in that term. There will be two roads ahead of me after the war. Live in and try to rebuild an Iraq that I can never call my own again (it would be different if my father was a martyr who died fighting Saddam, which is far from the case) or leave these shores and live with the memories of an Iraq that was mine. The latter is my preferred choice. I will try not to cultivate revenge in my heart, but I know many will. They are the ones I feel most sad for. So many young men I played soccer with on the streets of Baghdad with youthful innocence have been changed by this conflict. They left with anger accompanying their sadness, and left behind their innocence. They shall join the growing army of terrorist organisations to harm the Americans, and their vendettas will not be settled until they do so or die trying. I cannot really

blame them. Bush led them off the paths they had defined for themselves, took the lives of their near and dear ones and then expected them to walk his path. It is a case of having the proverbial cake and eating it too, and as we all know, you cannot do that. The cycle of violence this world is caught up in is guaranteed perpetuation, and the only losers will be the thousands who will lose their lives and those whose lives are connected to them. As long as those who are in positions of power are safe, everything will be fine and everything can be swept under the carpet. They are putting different values on lives these days. Valuation is at the discretion of the most powerful, and sadly, Iraqi life is only valued at 'collateral damage.'

Shayan Khan of Baridhara, Dhaka is a student.