

Roadmap for ME peace

Israel's acceptance provides 'basis' for talks

HERE is a positive dimension to the latest developments in the Middle East. Israel's acceptance of the US-backed roadmap for peace through creation of a Palestinian homeland should clear the course for talks to begin in quest of a durable solution to the Middle East crisis. But the conditions laid down by the Israeli cabinet stands in contrast to the Palestinian prime minister's acceptance of the roadmap without any preconditions. So, it may not be a smooth drive to the destination. While officially recognising for the first time the right to Palestinian statehood, Israelis deny the Palestinian refugees their right to return to their homes which they had abandoned during the Middle East war in the late forties. Perhaps the worry about the state's Jewish character to be challenged is still plaguing the Israeli government.

Nonetheless, Tel Aviv's acceptance of the plan, though grudgingly, does mark Israeli government's formal endorsement of the possibility for a solution through dialogues. That signifies the breaking of an impasse. Basically it should pave the way for a three-way summit next month between US President George W Bush, Mr Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. Here we would like to point out that Israel until now has been taking their decisions on the basis of its close ties with the US which the Palestinian leadership lacked. They had been the aggrieved party all along in the crisis and they had reasons to feel that way. They neither had their own solid strength nor any powerful backing. At the summit we would expect the Palestinians to negotiate not from a position of weakness but from that of strength.

Though the core issues like gradual withdrawal of Israeli military from areas occupied by them over the past three years and freezing of all settlement expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were not properly addressed in the cabinet, but Mr. Sharon's realisation that "time has come to divide this land between us and Palestinians" should be welcomed by everyone concerned. Yet, what we fail to understand is why Israel's as many as fourteen reservations on the roadmap are being closely kept 'secrets.' There should be transparency in the whole process. The Palestinian side has publicly accepted the roadmap; the Israelis should also place all their cards on the table.

We hope there will be a new approach for genuine peace in the region, one that is shorn of hypocrisy and geo-political muscle-flexing.

New job markets

Let's go for more

IT is good news that Bangladeshis are getting jobs in some countries which were not known as a potential job market in the past. What is most important is that job seekers may not have to depend on just three or four countries in the future for overseas employment.

The newfound job market exists in the countries like Tonga, Madagascar, Namibia and Botswana. These countries are reported to have shown much interest in recruiting people from Bangladesh. Statistics should make the point clear: manpower export from the country went up by 27.24 per cent in the first four months of the current year compared to the corresponding period of the last year.

The development is significant for many reasons. First, Malaysia and South Korea, which have for years been absorbing a sizeable number of Bangladeshi workers, are not showing the same kind of enthusiasm about recruiting people from Bangladesh. Second, the Iraq war has had a negative impact on the job market in some Middle Eastern countries. So there was a real threat that the scope for overseas employment would shrink, which, in turn, would mean a fall in remittance earning. But the new job opportunities in the hitherto unexplored job markets will certainly help the country attain its objective in this sector.

Now, the task on our hands is to make the best use of the available opportunities. Sometimes job-seekers walk into the trap laid by manpower racketeers and become cheated and pauperised in the process. So care must be taken against such eventualities.

The government has initiated a dialogue with the Saudi authorities on recruitment of nurses in that country. While cultivating the conventional sources of employment we must try to reach out to newer pastures.

Finding and taking full advantage of new job markets should be high on the government agenda since more employment of people abroad will give the economy the support that it needs to neutralise the ill effects of the worldwide recession.



ABDUL BAYES

On minister and marginal productivity

for a fault in the whole system as a result of which public sufferings tend to mount. In consequence, the axe might fall on the top brass -- the minister in charge. And, since an elected government comes to power with the commitment to serve better the public, any deviation therein could be faced with firing the respective minister. Examples to this effect are in abundance in different countries -- both developed and underdeveloped. In India, we heard of minis-

ters. What could be the interpretation? First, it could be that those who were dropped from the cabinet were more productive than those were not. The sum total productivities of the former might have outweighed that of the latter. Second, it could be the case that there are still ministers with negative or zero marginal productivity. To raise the output, there must be another reshuffle and downsizing till the cabinet comes to an optimal size with positive marginal produc-

excluding Honourable President, PM and the Speaker of the house. The total cost of the cabinet could be a rough indicator keeping in view the size of the economy, per capita income and other social indicators. The 'quick and dirty' estimate of Tk.20 million per head shows that the citizens of Bangladesh are paying Tk. 10 per head every year just to maintain a cabinet of 60.

The reaction to the reshuffle -- as newspaper reports suggest -- does

arguments". I went through the paper and found his heightened hypotheses justified. As could be learnt from various newspaper reports, even the Alliance leaders of the party in power expressed their utter surprise and disgust about the change and its dynamics. Some of them even hinted -- as also reported by papers -- that there are still people in the cabinet who nurture terrorism.

Whether the above allegation is true or not is yet to be verified. But

ministers who should have been the first to be fired.

In contrast to this, surprisingly, the dropped ones were not in much agony of the public. Admittedly, there might be one or two such cases. It appears that some of the ministers with a lot of charges against them relating to corruption and mismanagement of ministries survived this time. The calculus then was neither media mood nor efficiency measured in terms of quality of services or management, but something else.

And so long 'something else' dominates the actual performance criteria, the situation is unlikely to improve. The public has its own way of assessing things which people in power often fail to realise. Take an argument. During the past Awami League regime the cabinet size was under 40. The average growth rate of GDP (a sign of economic progress) was nearly 6 per cent per annum and other indicators were not atleast as bad as of today. Compared to that, the cabinet size now is sixty plus and GDP growth rate is yet to reach the earlier level. Could an increase in the size of the cabinet increase the size of the cake?

The size of the government and hence of the cabinet should be as minimum as possible. Big government results in smaller output and vice versa. This is an empirically tested observation. A government that vies to generate resources from the domestic front by taxing people on all sides, should not indulge in wasteful use of resources. A big cabinet is such a wasteful venture of scarce resources. I conclude with the impression that even a further downsizing of the cabinet would not affect the output of the government -- to say the least -- and hence the marginal productivity of some of the survived ministers might still be zero.

We hope that in future, the Honourable PM would give more importance to the performances of the ministries as revealed by the media, donors and public opinion polls published in some of the newspapers. That would, possibly, raise output of the government even if the size is small. Mere political and other considerations would result in lower level of output even with a big-bang!

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

The size of the government and hence of the cabinet should be as minimum as possible. Big government results in smaller output and vice versa. This is an empirically tested observation. A government that vies to generate resources from the domestic front by taxing people on all sides, should not indulge in wasteful use of resources. A big cabinet is such a wasteful venture of scarce resources.

ters resigning just because of a train accident in which the respective minister had probably a little role to play.

In economic jargon, there is a concept called "zero marginal productivity". If you harvest say 40 maunds of paddy with six labours which could be done by five labours, then the marginal contribution of the last labour must have been zero. In fact, you could have harvested more than 40 maunds with the withdrawal of that person.

In that case, the contribution or the marginal productivity of the last person would have been negative. I presume that when the donors disliked a fleet of 60 cabinet members, it must have been from marginal productivity point of view. In fact, it is quite possible that the exit of seven ministers from the cabinet is not going to reduce the output of Ministers, in the absence of more rigorous criteria, could be the level of services and their quality that the respective ministries are supposed to deliver to the public. APM can scan through newspaper reports on different ministerial activities for, say, atleast six months and then arrive at a decision. In developed countries, the mood of the media is said to be taken seriously before embarking on a change in the cabinet. It would, perhaps, not be an exaggeration to say that, in most cases, media sets the mind of the top executive in this respect. Thus, energy and power ministry or its minister could be held responsible

but suppose, with the exit of the seven, the output of the govern-

tivity. Of course the optimal size is difficult to determine quantitatively. Just bear in mind -- as available reports suggest -- that the government has to spend about Tk. 15 million per minister per year on account of just logistic support. If we add another Tk. 5 million on account of other costs, the total cost per minister comes to about Tk. 20 million per year or 1,200 million for the whole cabinet

not seem to be relieving either. My neighbor Professor Ahmed is a hard-boiled BNP supporter. I went to see him to get his reaction to the recent reshuffle of the cabinet. He seemed to be perturbed and kept mum fixing look on the TV screen (not on me). A little later, we went to his bedroom and opening before me a daily he said, "...see, even *Manab Jamin* is not happy with the reshuffle and I agree with their

what has so far been established is the fact that there were definite corruption charges raised by a particular donor against a particular minister (and ministry), the much maligned wheat and rice scam, the foul play with fuels, a worsening situation with regard to the security of the citizens etc. These allegations were widely published in news media and should point at the probable list of



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Pak-Afghan relations



M.J. ZAHEDI

After assuming the chairmanship of the new Afghan administration he chose Pakistan as first foreign destination and declared 'we, Afghans, have nothing but goodwill for Pakistan and it is from the heart'. Pakistan on its part has tried to reassure all factions in Afghanistan that it has a new outlook and it would neither side with any faction nor would it allow for

ment and cooptation of other Pashtuns into decision-making, power-sharing is better than any other time during the past twenty years. The Northern Front leaders who hold key positions in the new government have reassessed the need to forge relations with Pakistan on pragmatic grounds. In May 2002, Afghanistan released 400 Pakistani prisoners, in addition to

fight against terrorism and the prospects of Afghanistan's economic revival and stability. Pakistan too has made conscious efforts to cultivate relations with new Afghan leaders. It has pledged \$100 million in assistance over a period of five years. Besides already reimbursing \$18 million, it has allowed liberal donations and sale of wheat from its surplus stock and

has increased. In July-November 2002, Pakistan exported goods worth \$165 million to Afghanistan compared to \$185 million in the entire 2001-2002 financial year. Imports from Afghanistan also increased. The two countries have revived the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan gas pipeline project. The \$2.7 million project would immensely contribute to the

LETTER FROM KARACHI

There are a number of problems that the two countries are yet to resolve. Repatriation of refugees, release of Pakistani prisoners from Afghan jails and transit trade facility are going to be on the top of agenda in the coming years. Release of Pakistani prisoners is taking place (though at a slow pace), and Pakistan is willing to punish those who might be found involved in crimes against Afghan citizens; they have reached understanding to expedite the

any hostile action against the new government in Kabul.

It has also tried to seek assurances from the US and other partners in the war against terrorism that Afghanistan would not be neglected. Islamabad used its influence indirectly and pushing the idea that the neglect of Pashtun majority would not bring about peace and stability. The feeling of alienation among the Pashtuns does exist but with Hamid Karzai as head of the transitional govern-

500 released earlier. They understand better now than they did before that the economy of eastern and southern parts of Afghanistan is integrated with that of Pakistan, which offers the most economical, short and safe transit route and is a major source of supplies for the reconstruction of physical infrastructure. And there are still about two million refugees on Pakistani soil waiting to be repatriated. The existing problems are tied with Pakistan more than any other neighbours. The problem includes

other supplies on a regular basis and also allowed the use of its ports, roads and railways for all reconstruction activities. Relations between the two countries have improved, the government leaders of the two countries have been visiting each other and some of the distrust and bitterness is gone. But they have to work more for relations to become really friendly. For this they have to take the route of economic cooperation. There are good signs that they are succeeding in this respect. The bilateral trade

economy of Afghanistan. There are a number of problems that the two countries are yet to resolve. Repatriation of refugees, release of Pakistani prisoners from Afghan jails and transit trade facility are going to be on the top of agenda in the coming years. Release of Pakistani prisoners is taking place (though at a slow pace), and Pakistan is willing to punish those who might be found involved in crimes against Afghan citizens; they have reached understanding to expedite the process. The issue of refugees is

of course troublesome. There are an estimated 1.8 million in Pakistan; most of them wish to go back with or without UN help, as over 1.2 million who went earlier. But their return would cause problem for the Afghan government as it lacks resources. Whether refugees go back or stay in Pakistan will depend on conditions of war, peace and economic opportunity. Therefore Pakistan's vital interest lies in that country's stability and peace. The transit trade is as old as the independence of Pakistan. Afghanistan being a land-locked country has the right of transit through Pakistan, which it has through bilateral agreement of 1965. On occasions it has terminated this facility or tried to control the items that Afghanistan can import through Pakistan. The volume of this informal trade is estimated to be about \$3 billion. Afghanistan wants unfettered transit trade, while Pakistan wants to ensure that whatever is imported through Pakistan stays in Afghanistan and is consumed there. They have a dispute on the items Afghanistan can import, and this will be a continuing problem as most of these goods are sold in Pakistan. But this is a problem the two countries can solve.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the Khaleej Times.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"Exam hazards"

Alice Akram

Dhannondi, Dhaka

News on post war Iraq and mass killing

Always read anti-US story on Iraq, we could write something about all the killing and torture by Saddam regime performed on Shiite Muslims and billions of dollars he wasted and stole from his own people!

USA is not perfect but give them some credit. We always look the other way when Muslims kill Muslims.

K. Khan

Michigan, USA

Bangladeshi men need emancipator badly

This is in reference to Esam Sohail's article of May 23 'True women's emancipator' praising Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who 'liberated' Turkish women by forcing them to remove their veil, to cut short their hair, and to wear mini skirt. Now Mr. Sohail dreams to liberate Bangladeshi women.

The things we can and must learn from the westerners are efficiency, promptness and accountability.

CNG stations

The decision taken by the present government to withdraw polluting 2-stroke 3-wheelers as well as taxis, buses and trucks which more than 20 years old is indeed a praiseworthy step to control pollution.

However, due to inadequate filling stations public transport running on gas have to face serious problem. They have to wait long valuable hours in the available CNG stations which is really frustrating. Despite a push from the Communication as well as the Mineral Ministry the number of CNG station hasn't increased as per demand. Earlier, the authorities concerned announced that by June 2003, thirty new CNG stations will start functioning and 30 more will commence from September this year.

Can we really expect to have 30 new filling stations by the end of June this year? Would the concerned ministry monitor this and ensure that things go on smoothly and as per the commitment of the government?

Will the Foreign Minister please clarify?

Ahmad Kamal

Dhannondi, Dhaka

Passport fees

Sometime back I had written a letter about the above subject expecting a response. Unfortunately, no one (as is generally the case in Bangladesh) bothered to do anything. But I expect the general public like me to start a discussion on such a high handedness. May be then the powers that be wake up from their usual slumber. I am again writing on the subject of getting/renewing a passport here in the gulf countries.

It is with deep regret that we notice the high handedness in procuring/renewing a passport from any of our embassies. The embassy in the UAE is charging a whopping Dirhams 405.00 (Tk 6400.00 appx) for this. How - none knows. As against this the Indian embassy charges appx Dh 30.00 and the Pakistani embassy Dh 150.00. Are we one of the richest people from one of the richest nations that we have to be fleeced in such a cruel manner?

Will the Foreign Minister please

clarify?

Ahmad Kamal

Abu Dhabi, UAE

George W. Bush is a man of vision

When George W. Bush became the president of the United States after a controversial election in Florida, many critics on the liberal/left of the political spectrum depicted him as a bumbler, an amiable puppet with name recognition used by the Republican establishment that pulls the strings deep inside the White House. But events of September 11 proved that there is a man of steel behind the amiable Texas.

Bush rallied the American people and disposed of the brutal Taliban regime in Afghanistan in a matter of weeks. With the Taliban on the run, life is slowly but surely returning to normal in Afghanistan where girls can again go to schools without being molested by the Taliban, women can again aspire to become doctors and teachers, men can shave their beards and people can listen to *ghazals*. American military intervention made all this possible.

Next came the liberation of Iraq where a brutal dictator had been terrorising his people and the neighbouring countries for two

decades. As Saddam scurries from one rat hole to another if he is still alive, the Iraqi people are enjoying their first taste of freedom. Though law and order remains a problem under the current political vacuum, the Iraqis are now free from the shadow of a brutal dictator and Iraq no longer poses a threat to Iran and Kuwait. Bush's lightning-quick and low-casualty victory in the Second Gulf War should add to the lustre as a statesman, although the conflict has brought to head other issues like rebuilding Iraq from the scratch that a final verdict will have to wait. However, Bush has proved to be a man ahead of his adversaries and his re-election in 2004 seems to be assured.

Mahmood Elahi

Ottawa, Canada

"Chittagong - Jubilee Road Turns to Dustbin"

This phenomenon is most evident in Chittagong because the Mayor does not travel to his office by this road.

I happen to stay at the road