

LDC concerns voiced in Dhaka

Job cut out for Cancun

TRADE ministers of the least developed countries (LDCs) are attending a three-day conference in Dhaka to arrive at a common set of agenda for the WTO ministerial meeting to be held at Cancun next September.

The deliberations were focused mainly on trade barriers that products from the LDCs have to face. Also, non-fulfilment of other pledges regarding facilitation of trade made by the developed countries also came under sharp criticism.

The LDCs have been losing ground in world trade despite the repeated emphasis on creation of favourable conditions for them. The LDCs' share of the total volume of world trade was two per cent in 1960; one per cent in 1970; 0.8 per cent in 1980; and in 2001 it came further down to 0.4 per cent. Obviously, they could not improve their position in a trade regime dominated by the highly industrialised economies.

The WTO trade ministers' meets at Marrakesh, Singapore, Brussels and Doha committed themselves to allowing duty-free market access of products from the LDCs and integrating them into the multilateral trading system. But in spite of all that, the LDCs are worse off today than they were 40 years ago.

While the LDC expectations thus remain unfulfilled, their obligations are sought to be increased by the developed countries through compliance requirements relating to rules of origin, and labour, workplace and environmental standards.

There have been more discrepancies, which have put the LDCs at a great disadvantage. The developing nations are giving subsidy on their agricultural products but they are asking the LDCs to refrain from doing so. A glaring example of double standard. They are denying access to technology with regard to life-saving drugs whilst transfer of high-grade technology has been totally shut out by self-serving, protectionist barriers.

The LDCs have been very rightly demanding predictable and stable market access in order to increase their share of world trade--an essential prerequisite for removing trade imbalance between the rich and the poor countries. The Cancun conference should address the issue not as a point of theoretical debate, but as a logical demand of the LDCs.

Suu Kyi taken into 'custody'

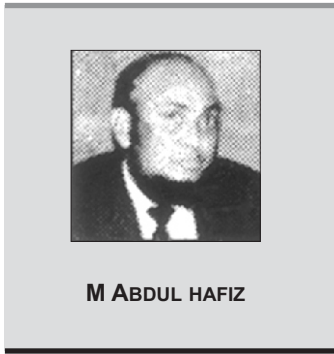
Zero-tolerance for dissent again

THE arrest of Myanmar opposition leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi after a year of her release from house arrest has sent shock waves across the democratic world. The sudden denial of freedom to her comes in the thick of the opposition leader's embarking on a month-long political tour of the country's north. Her meet-the-people programme could not be looked kindly on by the military regime. In the latest incident, Suu Kyi's supporters clashing with members of the junta-sponsored Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), four persons died and 50 were injured. This led to her arrest. But when a year ago she was released from house arrest, the military leaders gave her a guarantee for free movement.

It is difficult to assume that the Myanmar opposition leader will be released any time soon given a new spurt in her movement. If this surmise proves right then the process of dialogue between the democracy leader and the military regime started in October 2000 under the UN auspices will have received a serious setback. Junta's spokesman Brigadier General Than Tun hoped 'the events would not completely derail the political reconciliation process'. But the talks have stalled anyway for the last few months. If Tun's wishes are genuine then perhaps labour minister Tinn Win should not have blamed Aung Sun Suu Kyi 'for the outbreak of violence'. Such criticism is not conciliatory.

Her National League for Democracy is being berated for disturbing peace and Suu Kyi faulted with having given anti-government public speeches -- all of this basically reflecting a military regime's attitude to political dissent. An electoral verdict delivered in favour of Suu Kyi more than two decades ago remains consigned to oblivion and the democracy leader has been incarcerated for the better part of nearly two and a half decades. To save Myanmar from violence and give the voice of people its rightful place, the process of national reconciliation brokered by UN special envoy Razali Ismail will have to be revived. Meanwhile, the opposition leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi must be set free.

The Damocles' sword now hangs on Iran?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE speculation 'over who's the next in Washington's firing line' was rife even during the Operation Iraqi Freedom. Now the conquest of Iraq seems to have whetted the US' 'imperial' appetite. The easy victory in Iraq gives the 'emperor' the halo of new glory so that the prospects of his being re-elected are enhanced immeasurably. The further conquests will add to his power to be able to clip the wings of any indulgent rival. Even before the embers have died down in Iraq the emperor has already started to blow the trumpet for the next conquest. The formula that 'you have weapons of mass destruction and that you are harbouring terrorists' is already being applied to Iraq's neighbour, Syria. This tiny Arab state in Israel's immediate neighbourhood has been dealt with several warnings by the US right from the time of its invasion in Iraq. Surrounded on three sides by enemies -- Israel, Turkey and to some extent the US' sixth fleet off the coast of Jordan -- the noose around Syria has ominously tightened also with the US' Iraq conquest.

While many in the global media have been projecting Syria as the country, the US forces could move in next for 'regime change', the tensions that are far more serious had already developed between Washington and Tehran over the future of Iraq. The blunt-speaking US' Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was the first who brought this building up of tension into the open during the initial heat of the war on Iraq. Talking to the press in late March he had warned Iran to refrain from launching Al-Badr militants into Iraq. Rumsfeld's warning ostensibly grew out of the

US' frustration in the absence of any visible welcome for its forces in the southern cities of Iraq having overwhelming Shia majority. Rather a stiff resistance put up in these areas belied the claims of the spin-doctors of the allied forces that their entry would be heartily welcomed by the Shias comprising the dominant majority in southern Iraq.

Since the Turkish takeover of these areas in 1638 the Shias have always been discriminated against. The British continued to patronise the Sunni elite as collaborators after

pendent thinking' of Ali Majid Khoi who was eventually murdered by an anti-American mob in Najaf on April 10.

In the meantime, the Al-Badr whom Rumsfeld mentioned in his accusation had been an armed group of Iran-based Shia dissidents from Iraq who sought guidance from Ayatollah Baqir Hakim and his Supreme Council of Islami Revolution (SCIRI). The US took time to understand that Baqir Hakim and his patrons in Tehran were not for sustaining Saddam and his regime

slipped in there through the long and porous border with Iran. Syed Ayatollah Abdul Aziz Hakim, a brother of Baqir Hakim suddenly surfaced in Al-Kut which was already taken over by SCIRI loyalists.

Even if the US troops preferred to ignore it what really set the alarms amongst the US generals were the huge groups of ordinary folks walking to the holy city of Karbala from southern Iraq. They were essentially marching to the city to observe 'Arbaeen', the 40th day of the martyr-

interim administration'. But the 'Arbaeen' gathering at Karbala remained more of a religious congregation yet, Iran was publicly accused of 'pouring thousand of Al-Badr troops into Iraq in advance of the pilgrimage and in breach of its understandings to Washington. Through the 'deep throats', some western journalists also wrote stories "elaborating" details of alleged "penetration". A section of Israeli media went a step further to remind the world that the Badr brigades "are in fact an undercover

land region against the American military presence". In addition to moving Badr Brigade's units into Iraq's Shia centres, the Iranians were also accused of pumping thousands of trained and well-armed guerrilla fighters through Basra and Al-Amara into Najaf and Karbala regions to mingle with the pilgrims and manipulate the mood of the crowds from within. Allegations are also leveled that the Iranians are delivering weapons, explosives and cash to pro-Iranian Iraqi leaders with a view to fighting pro-American and even moderate elements of Shia community.

After accusing Baqir Hakim for 'inciting and managing' the murder of Ali Majid Khoi, the unnamed sources of some western journalists also projected the real or perceived activities of his brother, Abdul Aziz, very alarmingly. On this count, apart from coalition forces going on a high alert Washington also forwarded a stern warning to Iran through the spokesperson of the White House. Iran strongly rejected the US allegations that Tehran was interfering in Iraq and categorically stated that it was not seeking to promote the political role of fellow Shias in its western neighbourhood. Baqir Hakim also kept asserting that his group did not want to establish an 'Iran-styled Islamic Republic in Iraq', but sincerely wanted to work towards a "national democratic government elected by the Iraqis".

Notwithstanding Iranian clarifications the American accusations are indeed serious and have the potentials of snowballing into a major crisis -- given the unsavoury background of Tehran inflicting a deep scar on American psyche in the wake of its Islamic revolution almost a quarter of a century back. It was Iran, a non-Arab Middle East country that gave a bloody nose to the Americans who totally failed to bend a revolutionary Iran to their dictate -- an ignominy they can never forget. Whether or not that would constitute a factor for a possible pre-emption, many more can be created in an era when the wishes of the mightiest is the rule of the game.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Notwithstanding Iranian clarifications the American accusations are indeed serious and have the potentials of snowballing into a major crisis -- given the unsavoury background of Tehran inflicting a deep scar on American psyche in the wake of its Islamic revolution almost a quarter of a century back. It was Iran, a non-Arab Middle East country that gave a bloody nose to the Americans who totally failed to bend a revolutionary Iran to their dictate.

getting their mandate over Iraq in 1918. Things did not change even after Iraq's independence. After consolidating its control of Iraq by early 1970s the secular Baath Party was rather more systematic in the repression of Shias. Yet, instead of an anticipated 'welcome' of the allied forces by 'disgruntled' Shia what had been witnessed was a spirited resistance by the citizenry that, of course, included Shias when the allied troops reached Basra. Hundreds of Irani dissidents, living in camps allotted to intensely trained urban guerillas of Mujahideen-e-Khalq also joined. Historically, the Shias always closed ranks with other forces fighting the aliens -- a fact totally ignored by the Anglo-American invaders.

For stirring the 'welcoming feelings' among the Shia majority of Basra and adjacent areas the British intelligence also launched some pro-west activists who had been living abroad and owed their allegiance to late Ayatollah Al-Qasim Khoi -- a Shia religious scholar. His son, Ali Majid had organised the expatriate Shias under the banner of Al-Khoi Foundation. Despite very desperate attempts Khoi-loyalists failed to spark a 'popular welcome' of the allied forces, for the majority Shias were suspicious of the 'inde-

in power. Maintaining studied inactivity during the heat of the war they rather preferred waiting for the demise of their immediate enemy -- Ethe Baathist regime. It was only to fill the political vacuum that ensued in the wake of Saddam's fall that Baqir Hakim loyalists and cadres began surfacing in the cities of southern Iraq. Many had indeed

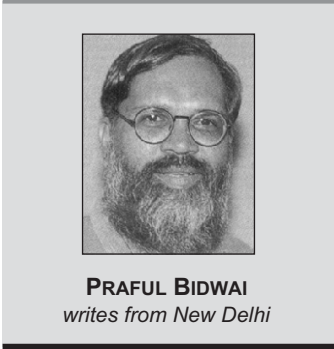
dom of Imam Husain. An overwhelming majority of the pilgrims were not interested to send any political message through their long march and the eventual gathering at Karbala. However, some of their political leaders decided to show the depth of their grassroots support. Ayatollah Baqir Hakim also called on his followers 'to oppose a US-led

elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. They are made of foreign elements, mostly Iraqi and Afghan Shiites."

Such stories insisted that the Badr Brigade's thrust into Iraq was "in effect an Iranian military movement timed to coincide with Karbala celebration and spearhead the rise of local Shia militias in Iraq's heart-



BJP, thirteenth time lucky? Reshuffle saffronises NDA



IF a Prime Minister's test of leadership is that s/he must have her/his way in reshuffling the Cabinet, then Mr Vajpayee has all but failed it. His "routine" reshuffle -- for the 13th time -- has mutated into a first rate crisis for the National Democratic Alliance.

Mr Vajpayee promised an "NDA-centric" reshuffle: Ms Mamata Banerjee would be (certainly) and Farooq Abdullah (probably) be inducted; a DMK nominee would replace the critically ill Muralis Maran, and "overburdened" ministers would shed multiple portfolios.

However, the heavily BJP-dominated reshuffle saw Mr Ajit Singh quit, the DMK reduced to irrelevance, the "overburdened" ministers continuing, and relations between the BJP and its allies souring.

The reshuffle has produced India's largest-ever Council of Ministers (81 members), but no finality. Mr Vajpayee says: "There will be another reshuffle soon". Mr Vajpayee allowed himself to

be outmanoeuvred by Mr L.K. Advani, backed by party president Venkaiah Naidu. He made big concessions to *Hindutva* hardliners by inducting Swami Chinmayananda and Mr Prahlad Patel, and placating *Senapati* Bal Thackeray.

The BJP's credibility has further eroded. The NDA has been so weakened that it might not fight the next Lok Sabha elections unitedly.

Mr Vajpayee's original reshuffle scheme fell apart when the Advani-

enough.

That, and the decision to nominate Mr Mohite, come from the *senapati*'s new distrust of all those with non-Sena backgrounds. Mr Thackeray is also under pressure from the Sena's "Maharashtra-only" lobby to replace the party's non-Marathi representatives (e.g. Sanjay Nirupam and Pritish Nandy). It matters little that Mr Mohite totally lacks political or administrative experience.

The reshuffle shows that allies

Paswan and Ramakrishna Hegde, while mauling the JD(U) with repeated raids.

What happened to Mr Haren Pandya, who revolted against Mr Narendra Modi, remains a gory mystery.

The BJP's "secular allies" are partly to blame for this. They have been mute spectators to *Hindutva*'s brazen takeover of education, culture and more -- and to the Gujarat pogrom.

With the reshuffle, the BJP has

Of these *Hindutva* hardliners, Mr Vajpayee himself admitted: "I have taken a step. You may draw your own conclusions."

An even stronger indication of the BJP's pro-*Hindutva* turn is its support to the *trishul* campaign and Mr Vinay Katiyar's fiery *jagran yatra* in UP. The *yatra* is a desperate attempt to garner votes while maintaining the alliance with Ms Mayawati despite its problems --including a virtual Rajput revolt and upper-caste backlash.

hold two portfolios and of course, the two Aruns, who are among the handful of faces whom the BJP can showcase as its "modern", "competent" men attuned to industry lobbies in telecom, information technology, etc.

The BJP has now all the major ministries barring Defence and all the plum portfolios too -- Rural Development (budget, Rs. 14,000 crores), Civil Aviation, Commerce... Mr Ajit Singh was sacked for voicing farmers' problems, which are indeed vital in UP.

Mr Singh wasn't the first NDA minister to speak at cross-purposes with his colleagues. He was removed so that the BJP can consolidate its badly fraying upper-caste base. The *savarnas* are so important to the BJP that it has ardently endorsed Mr Ashok Gehlot's upper-caste "economic quota" after first calling it a mere "political gimmick".

The BJP has consolidated its grip on the NDA -- year after year, issue by issue, reshuffle after Cabinet reshuffle. But it has demonstrated the limits of Mr Vajpayee's leadership -- and its own boundless opportunism. This could cost it heavily in the coming Assembly elections.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

A place in the sun?

Tony Blair, the tireless "attorney" to the lone warrior (against the world opinion) George Bush earned a questionable reputation. And now his ex-minister Claire Short, said Blair wants a "place in history". Minister Short resigned at last: she should have done so earlier, but then better late than never.

Tony Blair did neither dignify the British public by defying their opinion on war on Iraq nor did elevate his personal prestige by his ceaseless incoherent babbling defence of the indefensible in the process of which he took recourse to some cheap untruths. That is down the Thames now.

Now his visit to Iraq smacks more like the "emperor no more" taking some cryptic and pervert joy to return to the scene of original crime of British Empire in history when it was in occupation of Iraq in bygone days. What a "victory march" by the ruler of a long gone empire!

Hussain
Dhaka

"George W. Bush is a man of vision"

I am writing with reference to the letter by Mr. Irfan Ahmed complaining that I never reply about their comments on my letters (May 31).

Most comments on my letter commending U.S. President George W. Bush for liberating Iraq and Afghanistan are so contrived and so much anti-American that nothing can be said about them. Such rabid anti-Americanism is also common here in Canada. As Prof. Salim Mansur, professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario, pointed out in an op-ed in The Free Press, London, Ontario: "Such writings, which indicate the sort of insidious anti-Americanism festering in our political realm, fed by the imaginings of those who do not know better about our tradition of respectful partnership with our worthy neighbour. ... Those most distant from Iraq, such as many people engaged in anti-war

demonstrations in Canada, were concerned more with opposing American power out of anti-Americanism than with thinking about the condition of Iraqis under tyranny."

Now the Iraqi voices are speaking out. Hamid Ali Alkifaey, an Iraqi journalist who returned to Baghdad after years of exile in London, recently wrote a long column in The London Guardian on May 16. After recounting the horrors his family and friends had suffered during Saddam's brutal yoke, Mr. Alkifaey concluded: "However, looking on the bright side of life, Iraq is now a free country thanks to the courage of U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the U.S. and British people who backed them."

This should answer all criticism of anti-American political groups and individuals.

Mahmood Elahi
Ottawa, Canada

Water crisis and India-Bangladesh

relation

When the Farrakah barrage was built, the government of Bangladesh fell prey to the Indian persuasion that the sharing of water would be a bilateral issue. During the thirty years that have passed since then, the promised bilateralism has proved to be a sham and a one sided affair each and every time, with Bangladesh being deprived of her fair share.

Recently, the Indian Government has been developing plans to interconnect several major rivers and canals in India by building permanent structures similar to the Farrakah Barrage. Implementation of this scheme will lower the water levels further in rivers flowing through Bangladesh from India. This, in turn, will aggravate the problems created by the Farrakah Barrage initially, such as the desertification in the northern regions of Bangladesh, and the scarcity of irrigation and navigable waters in the rivers and canals throughout our country.

We, as a sovereign nation, have

the right to an uninterrupted supply of water of rivers common with India. We should have no qualms in taking our case to international bodies having jurisdiction on such matters in order to ensure that India is prevented from implementing such a monstrosity. I would urge *The Daily Star* to look into this matter and inform us further and take the lead in mobilising public and political opinion so that we are not duped for the second time.

Shomit Chowdhury
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Black out

My letter to you is regarding the frequent blackouts in the city. In this hot, humid season it is impossible to live without electricity. And once again the government has failed to control this situation.

Firstly it is hot and secondly it disturbs our studies. Just when every one sits down to study, they city goes black. Many exams have started including the HSC and this power failure causes nightmare to all the examinees. Why can't the

government control the flashing lights used in advertising markets and billboards? Of course these are not necessary and can be controlled which might help in decreasing the systems loss. It is high time the authorities took some effective steps in this regard.

Nabila Rahman
Student, SD, Dhak

Roadside tree plantation

The monsoon is about to set in, like the previous years, the Forest Department will launch a tree plantation programme soon with a lot of fanfare. The Forest Department plants a large number of saplings on important roadside every year. But after a few months most of these saplings either die or are eaten up by cattle. So the next year some more saplings are planted in the same place at a huge cost. This leads to a lot of wastage of govt. fund. But with a little imagination and planning this can be avoided.

If man height plants are planted on the roadside these will grow up soon and become an asset for the nation. Trees provide shade, greenery, beauty and glamour. Although initial cost of planting man height plants will be a little high, but eventually this will appear more economical. Moreover, the purpose of tree plantation will be served thereby.

I therefore appeal to Ministry of Forest to ponder over the matter and take this realistic approach from the current season.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
D.O.H.S, Mohakhali, Dhaka

Millionaire meter-reader

Can anyone shed some light on what happened to the millionaire meter-reader Mahubb? I was just wondering whether he managed to bribe his way out of the limelight or whether he is still facing trials etc.

After single-handedly managing to deprive the country of millions of dollars in revenue, I for one, would not be surprised if he is leading a

comfortable life in Bangladesh, and I am also certain there are many of them, like this individual in the 'system'. What a sad cycle we are in!

Hasnain Ibrahim
Bangkok

Meters in Mishuk a must!

Why are meters now required in every individual form of motorised public transport in Dhaka City--but are not required in the Mishuks? Over the same distance, a wild, bumpy, and back-breaking ride in a mishuk is often more costly than a smooth CNG ride, and even sometimes rivals the cost of riding in an AC yellow taxi! And Mishuks are even lacking in such things as shock absorbers. It is high time that meters are required for Mishuks. I propose a daylong countrywide hartal to press forward my one-point demand.

Ali
Dhaka