

Bank robbery one time too many

Depositors' money getting insecure

VAULTS of some banks may have lost the impregnability they once were known for, with robbers or inside operators spiriting away money in a cakewalk. A city branch of the Pubali Bank is the latest casualty of a hefty amount disappearing from its vault along with a security guard of the bank itself.

So it looks like being a chink in the internal armoury, as it usually is. The circumstances in which the vault of the bank was unlocked appear to have been inherently vulnerable -- two of the three security personnel of the bank were reportedly away from their posts with just one man left to himself on that night.

The upshot of it all is not hard to predict. People will begin to feel that their money is not safe even in a bank. Only the other day, there was an incident of dacoity in another branch of the same bank signalling a fresh need for alert which apparently went unheeded. Banks as the custodians of public money have to have fool-proof internal safeguards against all kinds of security breaches. Externally, it is expected at the same time that law enforcers would keep vigil around banks and financial institutions, especially at night-time. But the recent incidents of robbery and theft do not suggest that they have been keeping tab on what has been going on in certain areas. Even in the case of an insider's job, their night-time surveillance could be preemptive. Pragmatically speaking however, banks should have the best security arrangements of their own for the safe-keeping of public money.

Bank robbery or mysterious disappearance of money from vaults must not be treated as ordinary crimes. Rather, the decision-makers need realising that criminals have managed to make inroads into the heart of our financial transaction system, that is, the banks. Most of these are organised crimes, which can only be prevented if the law enforcers succeeded in gathering prior information about a criminal act in the making so as to freeze them on their tracks. That said, bank robberies must be checkmated before they further erode public confidence in financial institutions.

New initiative in the Hill Tracts

All concerned must cooperate

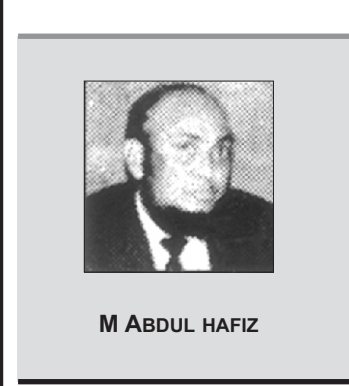
AT the inaugural of the government-UNDP project called *promotion of development and confidence-building in CHT* on Saturday Santu Larma spoke as the chief guest. He did so in his important capacity as chairman of the Interim Regional Council. As chief of the PCJSS he had been a signatory to the peace accord on the tribal side nearly half a decade ago kindling hopes for an all round development of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Apparently in the risk assessment report by UNDP, Mr Larma's party has been mentioned as a 'terror group', whereas, according to Mr. Larma, the group opposed to the peace treaty was portrayed in good light in the same report. We understand his sentiment on the issue, especially at a time when he is heading the interim council in the area, but we also think that his reaction to the points made in the report tantamount to an overreaction.

Let's get a few things clear. UNDP based the risk assessment report on various factors in order to initiate the development work that had long been suspended. They not only tried to tap the development potential but also weighed the risk factor. It was the kidnapping of three foreigners from the area in early 2001 which caused the suspension of development work. Therefore before making the allegation that only his party was singled out in the report, Mr. Larma should see the report from the right perspective. Also, quite a few non-government organisations are involved in the programme, so that it will be erroneous to suggest that in the selection of projects they were biased towards the settlers as opposed to the tribals. There couldn't have been such partiality so far as the donor community and NGOs went. It is the development potential of the areas that must have been the chosen criterion.

UNDP is resuming work in the region after two years, not only because much time has already been wasted, but also because they think the time is right: security has markedly improved in the area. The government seems keen to break the stalemate, too. Therefore, any discordant voice from the top leader of the area could only prove to be counter-productive which no one wants. Maybe the regional council should have been consulted more intensely before drawing up the programme; the process is not over yet. But let no one mix development with politics. It is of the essence though, that the government hold council elections so that a truly representative regional council can be formed to coordinate with the development partners when necessary to avoid any misunderstanding.

What's being planned in Iraq isn't reconstruction



M ABDUL HAFIZ

ON April 6 US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz spelled it out: there will be no role for the UN in setting up an interim government in Iraq. The US-run regime will last at least six months. And by the time the Iraqi people have a say in choosing a government the key economic decisions about their country's future will have been made by their occupiers. Wolfowitz further said that the people needed food and medicine from the day one of the interim administration and that the sewerage and electricity had to work with immediate effect and thus everything relating to them was also the coalition's responsibility.

Obviously, it had to be like this. Even if unpalatable these were all expected. After all it was not for nothing that the coalition did the war's all the dirty work. So it is a time for windfall. People do understand that the process of how they will get all these infrastructures to work is usually called reconstruction. But American plans for Iraq's future economy go well beyond that. Rather than rebuilding, the country is treated as a blank slate on which the Washington's neo-liberals can design their dream economy: fully

PERSPECTIVES

A people starved and sickened by sanction, then pulverised by war is going to emerge from the trauma to find that their new-found "freedom" -- for which so many of their loved ones perished -- comes pre-shackled by irreversible economic decision that were made in board rooms while the bombs were still falling.

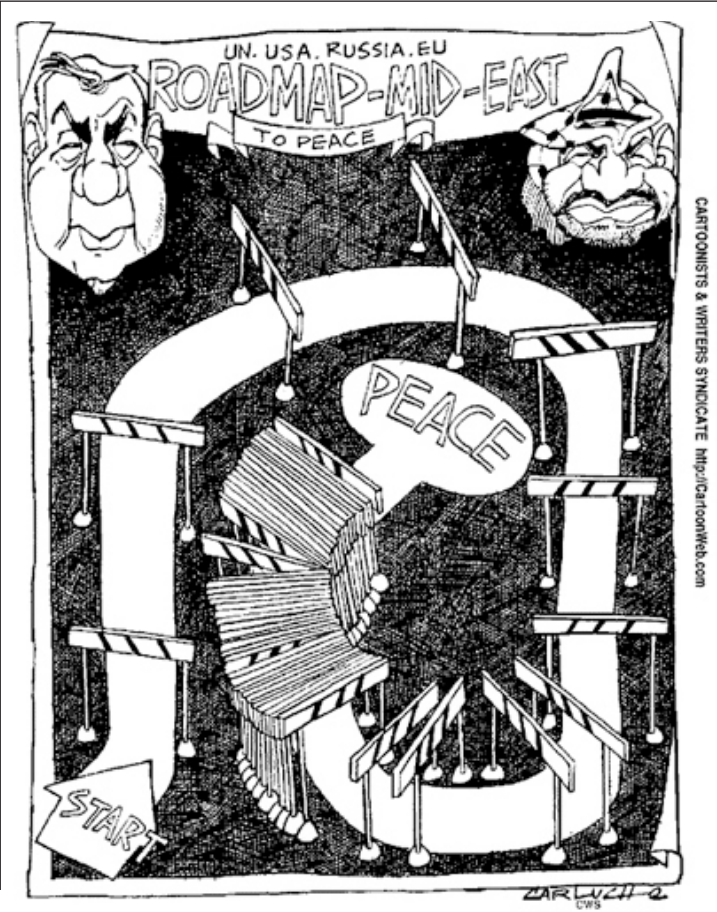
privatised, foreign-owned and open for business. The United States' Agency for International Development has already invited US multinationals to bid on anything from rebuilding roads and bridges to distributing textbooks. The length of time these contracts will last remains unspecified. So pervasive is its scope. There is a real chance that the reconstruction turn into privatisation in disguise.

Then there's oil. The Bush administration knows it can't talk openly about selling Iraq's oil resources to Exxon-Mobil and Shell -- the owner of Iraqi oil before its nationalisation. The administration leaves it to people like Fadhil Chalabi, a former Iraqi petroleum minister. "We need to have a huge amount of money coming into the country -- the only way to partially privatise the industry", Chalabi says.

Chalabi is a part of the group of Iraqi exiles that has been advising the State Department on how to implement privatisation in such a way that it isn't seen to be coming from the US. The group held a conference in London on April 6 and called on Iraq to open itself up to oil multinationals shortly after the war. Needless to say, the Bush Administration has shown its gratitude by promising that there will be plenty of

posts for Iraqi exiles in the interim government. There are arguments

that it's too simplistic to say that the Iraq war is about oil. As a matter of



facts it's about oil, water, roads, trains, phones, ports and drugs and what not. And if this process of prolonging the list is not halted "free Iraq" will be the most sold country on earth.

It's not surprising that so many multinationals are longing for Iraq's untapped market. It's not just the reconstruction will be worth as much as \$100 bn; it's also that "free trade" by less violent means hasn't been going that well lately when more and more developing countries are rejecting privatisation these days while Free Trade Areas of the Americas is wildly unpopular across Latin America. So what will a recessionary, growth addicted superpower do? How about upgrading from Free Trade Lite which wrestles market access through the backroom bullying at the WTO to Free Trade Super Charged, which seizes new markets on the battlefields of preemptive wars? After all, negotiation with sovereign countries is always a bit hard. It's far easier to tear up the country, occupy it, then rebuild the way you want.

The investors are already openly predicting that once privatisation takes root in Iraq -- Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait will all be forced to compete by privatising their oil. Pretty soon US may have bombed

Discarding terrorists from political parties: A wishful thinking?

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

IN a recently concluded forum co-organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo applause reverberated loudly when BNP Secretary-General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and General Secretary of the AL Abdul Jalil declared to throw out the criminals from their parties on condition that a criminal discarded from one party would not have any place in the other party.

Indeed the need for such a move is so pressing that this declaration cannot afford to fizzle out on a note of parody.

How did our politics get embedded in criminalisation?

Election to the National Assembly is supposed to be won by the wishes of the voters. But now in many cases it is bought by the grace of the goons. There was hardly any parliamentary election in our country in recent years that was free from a taint of money and muscle.

It was believed in the past that mass vote could not be purchased because the voters were huge in number and no candidate could have such a gigantic network as to collect their vote against money. It also needed so big an amount of money that an individual just could not afford to spend. That's why democracy stood supreme.

But drastic changes have been wrought in recent times by brandishing black money to make the poor voters stand on their feet to fill in the ballot boxes. A constituency consists of pockets of voters, quite some being outrightly vulnerable to gratifications. Those found immune from being gained over with a seemingly tilt towards the opponent bloc by choice or richer counter allure-

ments are treated with muscle flexing lethal therapy like attack, arson, loot etc.

True there is an Election Commission to oversee all those affairs to ensure that polls are free and fair. There is also a prescribed expenditure ceiling for a parliamentary election. It is probably Tk four lac only. But it is always exceeded and in many cases by several crore. There is a proviso to submit returns of elections expenditures to the Commission. The Election Commission knows the traditional practice of

for men of erudition which quality the business community generally lacked. Secondly, politics was never a tool of earning money. But in course of time politics has degenerated being increasingly manned greedy elements downgrading it to an avenue of earning. So the businessmen turned out to be active purchasers of party tickets for the parliamentary polls instead of remaining content with supporting a party candidate. Becoming MPs themselves is much more profitable than returning their nominees

view that marshalling the retired civil servants in their party will help the party control the civil administration through the hangover influence of the retired civil servants.

Most of our political leaders are pleasure-loving. Gone are the sort of politicians who had the genius of enduring infinite pains in their struggle for establishing rights and privileges of the downtrodden. Now-a-days our politicians have developed a hankering for posh living. They have no idea of 'plain living and high thinking'. Even our two martyred

officials transfer etc at control.

At present many political leaders rear armed cadres as private force. On their advice the police and their private cadres move as complementary to one another. These cadres perform special kind of jobs like capturing a market, an apartment, a chunk of land, collecting tenders, tolls etc. Political opponents are also scared away, beaten and if needed even liquidated by these cadres. In such cases police is seen used as a back-up force preventing opponents from offering

This situation withholds foreign investment, even local investment, and destroys peace and tranquility of the country.

All government attempts to improve the law and order situation have met with scant success. Deployment of army in the 'operation clean heart' brought marked improvement in that area but army in civil administration could not be continued for long and the process was also involved with grave consequences.

What is heartening is that recently both the two major political parties have shown maturity and a part of party leadership, mostly consisting of old guards, and large number of grassroots level activists have voiced, in both BNP and AL, to eliminate terrorists from their parties to save the image of their respective organisations. Moreover, it is getting clear day by day that unless the terrorists in both the parties are contained right now they may even pull down the party stalwarts to guard up their loins.

Frankenstein has a peculiar habit of biting its creator. The unscrupulous politicians let it loose to serve their nefarious design of eliminating opponents and expediting aggrandisement. By now it has grown stronger seemingly capable of striking at their masters. It gives the creators anxious thoughts.

Let us see if there is really any attempt by the two major political parties to drop the terrorists or the proud declaration of the two stalwarts of the BNP and the AL evaporates as a wishful thinking.

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Whither parliamentary democracy ?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

ACCORDING to Bangladesh constitution, the parliament i.e. Jatiya Sangsad has been vested with legislative powers of the Republic. People of the country elect members of parliament to reflect the problem of the constituencies they represent. In the parliament members have the right to speak on any issue they deem necessary in the interest of the people of their respective constituencies. This is an inalienable right in the parliamentary democracy.

The speaker or deputy speaker should rise above party affiliation to maintain dignity of the parliament. The partisan attitude of the speaker as we have witnessed in the previous sessions undermines independence of the legislative body. Let all of them speak on any subject they wish to. Members belonging to ruling and opposition parties may subject any action taken by the government to criticism. But the speaker and ruling party MPs are encouraging opposition lawmakers to speak in the street and use other platforms to air their opinions.

In this connection, may I draw attention of the speaker and ruling party MPs to the debate in the House of Commons on 17-18 March

2003 on the issue of war against Iraq? More than 120 members belonging to the ruling British Labour Party criticised the role of Prime Minister Tony Blair followed by resignation by two junior ministers and a leader in the House of Commons protesting the policy pursued by Labour Government. On the other hand, the leader of the Conservative party (opposition party in Britain) took the floor to defend the Prime Minister unconditionally to save the position of the government on its commitment for deployment of troops in the war against Iraq. This is role model of the parliamentary democracy. The leader of the Conservative party avoided temptation to embarrass the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister even won the motion with the blessing of the Conservative party. In fact, the leader of the Conservative party showed his sagacity and magnanimity in support of the Prime Minister, who was under tremendous pressure from his own party members.

In Bangladesh, both ruling and opposition party should set up at least one such example in the interest of the country. There are so many issues to take on. Provision 70 (1) of the constitution states that parliament shall appoint standing

committees. And the main purposes of these committees are to a) examine draft bills and other legislative proposals; b) review enforcement of laws and propose measures for such enforcement; c) conduct investigation or inquiry if necessary into the activities or administration of a ministry. The members of these committees are empowered to

by a standing committee.

In the seventh session 11 Parliamentary Standing Committees were formed without the majority opposition party in the parliament. This is violation of democratic norm. In some foreign countries a member from the opposition party generally heads Public Accounts Committee. As pointed out by opposition Chief

immunities, apart from remuneration and allowances for participation in the session of the parliament. It would be rather interesting to have a glance of the survey recently conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh, which indicated that none of the thirty-eight working days' sittings during the fourth, fifth and sixth sessions could start due to

parliamentarians from both the ruling and opposition parties answerable to the voters of their constituencies. The British Prime Minister speaks once a week in parliament for thirty minutes to answer questions of the parliamentarians. The Prime Minister meets the convenience of the leader of the opposition and the leader of the

parties gave unconditional nod to the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's offer of friendship to Pakistan.

It is regrettable to note that Jatiya Sangsad has refrained from discussing serious international issue of invasion of Iraq by America and Britain violating international law and the charter of the United Nations. President Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive attack is a dangerous one, which may cause a serious threat to small neighbouring countries. Indian parliament and Pakistan's assembly discussed the invasion of Iraq. It may be noted that a statement was made in Jatiya Sangsad by the ruling party on the carnage of Muslim minority in Gujarat in India. That was an internal affair of India, but Sangsad did not find it relevant to condemn the event in Iraq where thousands of innocent Iraqis were massacred by the coalition forces led by the United States.

What is the purpose of having parliament then if major international and national issues of importance are not debated there? Parliament is not meant for eulogising the performance of the leader of the house or discussing the speech of the president only.

The following suggestions are made for consideration in making

parliament effective: a) The speaker should play an independent and neutral role; b) More time should be allocated to the members of the opposition to speak on national and international issues of importance; c) The Chief Whips of the ruling party and the opposition should be made effective and answerable to the speaker; d) The Prime Minister should answer the questions put up by any member of the parliament once a week; e) Parliamentary Standing Committees on budget and finance and public accounts should be headed by members from the opposition; f) All political parties in the parliament should conduct refresher courses for their legislators on the preparation of speeches, etiquette and manner, apart from rules of procedure and constitutional provisions. The lawmakers of the country should not turn this prestigious institution into an object of mockery by delivering only flattering or sycophantic speeches about their respective leaders. There is enough space outside for such speeches to be made for larger audiences as well.

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