

Chittagong tremors serve a notice

Quake preparedness under question-mark

THE tremors that jolted Chittagong City on Sunday have once again exposed the country's vulnerability to earthquake. They have been a fresh reminder of the ominous possibility that the country might be devastated by a seismic howler anytime in the days ahead.

The earthquake of 'moderate intensity' damaged at least five hundred buildings and 25 people are reported to have been injured. People in the port city came out of their homes after the second quake struck at noon. So the impact of the tremors was not negligible. We may recall here that an earthquake killed 22 people at Chittagong in 1997, the zone being the most tremor-prone in the country.

So the warnings given by the experts that a major quake might strike Bangladesh in the very near future have to be heeded, if we want to minimise the losses in the event of such a disaster. Though earthquakes are far from predictable, it is a matter of great worry that Dhaka city is situated on the same tectonic plate as the western Indian town of Bhuj, which was battered by a major earthquake a few years back.

The question of earthquake preparedness especially arises at this point in time, as seismic surveys suggest that Bangladesh is at risk of being rocked by a major earthquake. But apart from the meetings and seminars, where the experts cry hoarse to make us realise that the danger is far more potent than is generally perceived to be, few steps have been taken to brace up for the devastating impact of a severe earthquake.

Few builders feel the necessity of making the new buildings resistant to earthquakes, and even if they do, the number of buildings constructed with such safety provisions is still very small. So, the scale of devastation predictably can be huge.

The government should attach due importance to earthquake preparedness and raise special teams of rescue operators in advance to minimise the losses in terms of human lives and property in the event of major tremors.

Higher retirement age

We are for it

A bill to raise the retirement age of government servants from 57 to 60 is on the anvil. The talk of upward revision in the service tenure has been going on, if only intermittently. Despite the on-going, off-going nature of the confabulation, very few are in any doubt about the underlying rationale for raising the retirement age.

The traditional state sector role as the biggest employer is in for a cut-back with the down-sizing of the government so that a cap is automatically put on fresh recruitment. In that context, whatever reservoir of skilled, experienced and seasoned bureaucracy we have needs to be optimally utilised. If government officials were to superannuate later, let's say by three years, we could more than stay the course in a difficult, complex and challenging world. We have to compete man-to-man in an increasingly demanding knowledge-based global society. Speaking of being selective there, the option for compulsory or voluntary retirement remains.

In normal circumstances, how do we prematurely retire a government servant? The resource-constrained state has invested in him or her through his or her long career; training the incumbent up on the job or through higher studies abroad or otherwise giving him global exposure. Just when he or she has reached the height of maturity and acquired diverse experience, with a lot of fight still left in him or her, we rather foolishly see the back of the person.

The national longevity is sixty plus now. A radical improvement in access to modern medicare facilities, topped off by a growing health consciousness on the part of educated people in particular, has increased their energetic life-span. And with experience and skill as the icing on the cake, we have a whole feisty generation waiting to be harnessed at a time when we need their services the most. The argument that relaxing the age limit will block promotion prospects for mid-level officials cannot wash; because they, too, will be the beneficiary of the upward age revision.

Throughout the world the trend is now towards raising the superannuation age so as to blend energy with experience for a maximisation of human resource utilisation. Why should we be an exception?

However, if the age limit is raised, at the end of the day, we might well have a residual genre of officials at the very top, who were recruited with a political slant and not entirely on merit. But that is a calculated risk we have to take for the long-term good.

But what we fail to understand is the mixing up of retirement age with abolition of contractual appointment. The disappearing line between the private sector and the state one, calls for the former to co-opt into the latter, if only on a selective basis. We are for a consultative process invigorating the government and governance.

A defiant Iraq: Digging in for a long war of attrition?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld has lately acknowledged the gravity of military situation in Iraq when he said that "No one has the foggiest idea how long the American and British armies will have to stay in Iraq. But it is clear that it won't be just six months as some had initially hoped." As a series of 'hit and run' attacks started soon after May 1 when the major combat part of Iraq Operation was officially declared by the US to be over, they were considered stray incidents. Overall, the impression was created that the problems arising put of those attacks were manageable and with the passage of time the remnants of Saddam loyalists would be wiped out. It did not so happen and the explanation put forward by allied forces were disproved. When the resistance further stiffened, the theories involving the ubiquitous external hand were brought into play in which the usual suspect, Al-Qaeda, figured prominently, as did a mysterious new Wahabi force that was supposed to have come in from Saudi Arabia. The US and British leaderships were tragically far from the point at which they will begin to acknowledge that the resistance is a direct consequence of their occupation of Iraq and that no external forces need sustain it.

In the meantime, the post-combat level of force not only remained big, it's rather growing. Washington is also at pain in pressing the friendly countries to offer troops to carry out what is called 'stabilisation' tasks, an euphemism for the pacification of the sullen and uncooperative people of Iraq. That may help it reduce its force commitment, to an extent.

In military term, the Iraq war

was successful. But it neglected the imperatives of running the country and maintaining it as the British, for example, did in the classic colonial model of India. Instead what the Americans aimed at was to go to war, leave friendly government behind and then go home. But even here they do not seem to have a post war plan in place. The emptiness of their post-war administration policy was clear from the way the war aims were put forward in public relation terms.

Bremer, the US President's viceroy for Iraq has set up a consultative council comprised of himself, his US and British advisers and a clutch of Iraqi technocrats to run the ministries. The council will be assisted in time by an advisory body comprising 'respectable' Iraqis who will enter their charge not in any representative capacity but as nominees of Bremer. The steps convinced the skeptics among the Iraqis that they were now onward a subject people.

for 45 years everyone of consequence would have been a Baathist. No wonder in the process of a blanket purge of the administration, it simply disappeared overnight. Out also went the law-enforcing agencies and came in the looters and depredators. All the 'liberators' brought to Iraq was chaos.

By the end of May as no WMDs were found and prospects of democracy and a liberal order in Iraq as promised by the coalition

borne by the Iraqis out of their oil revenues. The country's oil industry was already put under the control of Kellogg Brown & Root, a subsidiary of the American oil services giant, Halliburton. The arrangement reinforced the Iraqi perception, enhanced their worries and with it aroused their patriotism out of which grew an organised resistance to the occupiers' predatory acts. Much of the ensuing resistance was directed towards ensuring that the Ameri-

know how to finish.

How potent is the Iraqi resistance to the occupation? The question is aptly asked as it was done even when the US-British invasion was launched. Few thought at that time that the Iraqis could withstand the onslaught of the world's most formidable power. True to the prediction the Iraqi Army did not fight very hard, but did not surrender either. Instead, it took its weapons and melted into the civilian population. Neither did they have intention of handing in those enormous weapons even later. On June 15, the last day for the surrender of weapons, Iraqis had handed in only 123 pistols, 76 semiautomatics, 435 automatic rifles, 46 machine guns, 11 anti-aircraft weapons and 381 grenades -- a drop in the Iraq's ocean of weaponry. A document recovered by the Americans suggested that the post-war hit-and-run tactics were planned even when the war was on. Apparently the Iraqi forces did not put up their optimum resistance potential in the war because they realised they could not fight so formidable an enemy as US conventionally. It now appears that they preserved their potential as much as it was possible.

There is no black and white answer to whether Iraqis will succeed to driving out the occupation forces. But if history is any guide no liberation struggle ever failed and the Iraqis are under no illusion that they are put under the yoke of foreign domination once again in their chequered history. True, America is a formidable power; but still more indomitable is human spirit -- particularly that for freedom. It is not a distant history that the Americans were forced to quit Vietnam, Somalia and Lebanon -- although under different circumstances. The spirit for freedom has its self-sustaining dynamics to propel the resistance which was never contingent upon the leadership of Uday or Qusay, the slain sons of Saddam. It is doubtful that even a similar fate for Saddam himself will make any difference in this protracted war for survival as a free nation.

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

PERSPECTIVES

It is not a distant history that the Americans were forced to quit Vietnam, Somalia and Lebanon -- although under different circumstances. The spirit for freedom has its self-sustaining dynamics to propel the resistance which was never contingent upon the leadership of Uday or Qusay, the slain sons of Saddam. It is doubtful that even a similar fate for Saddam himself will make any difference in this protracted war for survival as a free nation.

The phrases like the 'axis of evil' or 'roadmap' are really no policy statement but merely sound bites. As a result, even if they won the war they seem to be losing the peace which is at the moment clumsy and chaotic.

The occupation forces ostensibly believed that after being received with great jubilation by the local people happy at the demise of Saddam's tyranny, it would be possible with the help of Iraqi exiles to set up a pliant interim administration. If nothing of that kind happened as yet it is presumably because the exiles who followed the US invaders in the latter's wagon train soon realised that they had no support base within the country. The scheme was flawed from the outset and bound to be doomed.

In the absence of an Iraqi 'cover' so to say for American occupation, the presence of the US and British troops in Iraq had begun to resemble an old fashioned colonial enterprise. In place of genuine democracy for which Iraqis are suddenly deemed unready, Paul

The little did the occupiers understand the psyche of a defeated people who had to be reassured first that they were free to carry on with the business as usual. Instead the swanky forces of occupation went on witch-hunting to weed out the suspect elements within the administration. They failed to realise that in a country that had been ruled by one party

stood indefinitely postponed, the Iraqis were convinced that they had been invaded and occupied mainly for their oil and their country was up for the grab. In the name of rebuilding of the infrastructure the trans-national firms belonging only to the countries that joined the coalition of the willing will be given all the lucrative contracts. The bulk of the expenditure will be

cans were unable to pump Iraqi oil out of ground. The oil pipelines have been sabotaged and power lines cut. The pipe line to Banias port in Syria was blown up on the first day of pumping of oil through it. The power supply to Baghdad dwindled to 800 MW in mid June from 1300 MW in early May as a result. As the resistance gained momentum it also started targeting the American and British soldiers. The full cost of their occupation of Iraq in terms of lives in May and June alone comes to 64.

As the guerilla attacks multiply anger builds up on occupation soldiers against the civilians. The nervous soldiers therefore shoot down more and more of them on slightest suspicion. This is just what Iraqi resistance looks for. At present rate 400 US soldiers will die in Iraq in a year. That will be enough to put at stake the reelection of Bush. That is why he is so keen to get involved the troops of other countries in Iraq -- to die in place of the Americans in a war he started but does not



The battle continues

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

THE Iraq war is not really over yet -- since May 1, when US President George Bush triumphantly declared that the "major combat operations were over", nearly fifty American soldiers have been killed in guerrilla attacks in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, bringing the toll from Operation Iraqi Freedom so far to more than the total number of casualties in the last Gulf war. And the war is also not over for the British Prime Minister and his Cabinet -- it has just moved to an entirely new and domestic front. Readers of London Letter should already be aware of the ongoing row between Downing Street and the BBC which was triggered by the latter's allegation that the Government had "sexed up" a dossier on Saddam Hussein's weapons capabilities.

As BBC Radio 4 reporter Andrew Gilligan's despatch claimed, apparently with the backing of his editors at the Today programme and managers at BBC News, information supplied by an intelligence source -- unnamed at the time -- showed that in February Mr Blair had presented a "dodgy dossier" to the Parliament as "further intelligence" on the threat posed by Iraq. This dossier claimed that the Iraqi President possessed significant quantities of WMD -- weapons of mass destruction -- which were capable of hitting US and British targets within 45 minutes of the issue of launch order. The Government, of course, strongly insisted that all the information in the dossier was based on hard facts assimilated by reliable intelligence sources. Alastair Campbell, Mr Blair's Director of Communications, was in charge of producing the dossier and although it was mainly against him that the BBC's allegations were directed, they also raised questions, albeit indirectly, about the roles of a number of other high-profile members of the Government including the Prime Minister. The Government categorically denied everything and demanded that the BBC must

withdraw its allegations and broadcast an apology. In turn, the BBC not only refused to capitulate, its governors came out with a pugilistic statement demanding that Downing Street retract its claim of bias against the Corporation's journalism. The stand-off between the Government and the BBC became even more volatile when the Cultural Secretary Tessa Jowell hinted that the row could jeopardise the renewal of the BBC's Royal Charter.

For the benefit of those who may not be quite familiar with the significance of the Royal Charter, it

pany the British Broadcasting Corporation and granting it the rights it currently enjoys.

This Charter also defines the Corporation's public service remit, to produce educational shows dealing with current affairs and the arts, as well as entertainment, and states that it is the duty of the programme makers to treat "controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality." In the current row between Downing Street and the BBC, the Government has been trying to use this very directive to force the Corporation to retract its allegations, claiming that

similar changes but thought better of it when the entire BBC Board threatened to resign only months before the general election. This time, however, no one is very sure yet what the Government will finally do. The Cultural Secretary insisted that the BBC has a "constitutional responsibility for the accuracy and impartiality of its news coverage. The BBC is not in a position simply to make allegations unless it is absolutely clear those allegations are true." The Prime Minister too insisted that the BBC must retract its allegations completely because they were "absurd".

LONDON LETTER

Andrew Gilligan's intelligence source did not remain "unnamed" for long and turned out to be Dr David Kelly, a well-respected, soft-spoken 59-year-old Ministry of Defence weapons expert who had played a key role in assisting the UN Weapons Inspection Team in Iraq. Dr Kelly apparently volunteered to give evidence before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee where he was "mercilessly grilled", according to the media, and accused of breaching the official code of secrecy. The pressure he was subjected to was evidently too much... and, no doubt driven beyond breaking point, he ended his own life...

is the agreement which allows the BBC to broadcast independently without interference from the Government and to raise money through a licence fee, currently £116 annually, charged for every TV set used in the country, yielding £2.9 billion a year. The BBC was originally called the British Broadcasting Company when it was formed on 18th October 1922, by Lord Reith who visualised an independent broadcaster to "educate, inform and entertain" the nation free from any political interference and commercial pressure. In 1926 when Winston Churchill was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, there was a General Strike in England. During this time, the broadcaster's cautious style of reporting prompted Churchill to call for a Government take-over, but he was overruled by the then Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. The following year, King George V signed the first Royal Charter renaming the com-

it has not dealt with issues concerning the Iraq war dossier with due accuracy and impartiality". The BBC, of course, insists that it has never deviated from any directive contained in the Charter.

The current tenure of the BBC's Royal Charter is for ten years which is due to expire on 31st December 2006. Negotiations on renewing it are expected to open later this year. But the Cultural Secretary's veiled threat -- which she could hardly have made without tacit permission from Downing Street -- is being interpreted in some quarters as part of the Government's bullying tactics to cut the BBC down to size. Without the Charter, the BBC could lose its proud heritage of independence, and the governors who currently oversee whether the Corporation is fulfilling its public service role could be replaced by the newly-created broadcasting watchdog OFCOM. In fact, back in 2001, Mr Blair wanted to make

Reacting to questions whether Alastair Campbell had indeed been responsible for inserting false data in the dossier and the suggestion that the Prime Minister might have been aware of it, Mr Blair told the Sunday broadsheet *The Observer*: "There couldn't be a more serious charge, that I ordered our troops into conflict on the basis of intelligence evidence that I falsified. You could not make a more serious charge against a Prime Minister." On the other hand, the BBC's Board of Governors are also equally adamant in their stance that the Corporation has done nothing in breach of the underlying principles of the Royal Charter as Andrew Gilligan's story was broadcast "in the public interest". A statement issued on behalf of the BBC governors said: "The Board reiterates that the BBC's overall coverage of the (Iraq) war, and the political issues surrounding it, has been entirely impartial, and it emphati-

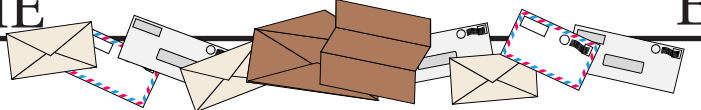
played a key role in assisting the UN Weapons Inspection Team in Iraq. Dr Kelly apparently volunteered to give evidence before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee where he was "mercilessly grilled" according to the media, and accused of breaching the official code of secrecy. The pressure he was subjected to was evidently too much for the man described by friends as "honest and decent" and, no doubt driven beyond breaking point, he ended his own life by taking an overdose of painkillers and slashing a vein in his wrist. Thus the row that had already reached the highly volatile stage where the BBC and Downing Street were both locked in a battle of accusations and counter-accusations culminated in real tragedy. Now that gives rise to the question: Who was responsible for leaking Dr Kelly's identity?

Neither the Government nor the BBC is inclined to accept the

responsibility. The BBC bosses have since revealed that they have a tape recording of David Kelly expressing serious concern about how Downing Street made the case for war and believe the tape is the "smoking gun" that will exonerate Andrew Gilligan as well as the Corporation of any wrong-doing in the handling of the "sexed-up dossier" story. On the other hand, Prime Minister Tony Blair also denied that he had anything to do with the deliberate leaking of the MoD expert's name: "Emphatically not," he retorted angrily. "I did not authorise the leaking of the name of David Kelly." He also reportedly assured Alastair Campbell that he retained his full confidence and could stay at his post as long as he wanted, although right at the moment there are discreet whispers circulating in the upper reaches of Whitehall that Mr Campbell may not remain at his post after September at the latest.

At his monthly press conference, the Prime Minister will certainly have to answer questions about Mr Campbell's future, and he is under increasing pressure to use his Director of Communications' eventual departure as a means of proving that New Labour is not really obsessed with spin and not as intrinsically untrustworthy as ever-increasing numbers of people seem to believe. Mr Blair's own position too is extremely tenuous, to say the least, with the Chancellor Gordon Brown covertly eyeing the Prime Minister's chair. Meanwhile, the circumstances leading to Dr Kelly's suicide still remain shrouded in mystery -- the only thing that is clear is that he took his life 24 hours after being called to give evidence in private to the Intelligence and Security Committee in Westminster. Thus, for the time being, we are faced with the classic question: "Did he fall, or was he pushed?" The answer may be forthcoming in the next few days, but then, it may not, leaving us with the intriguing speculation: "Perhaps he was pushed first, and then he fell?"

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.

Let us change

Recently I visited India for my mother's treatment and stayed in Kolkata for a few days. I really liked the place as we have so much in common. But the difference that I noticed from our country is that they are more disciplined. Like, if you want to ride a rickshaw then you have to maintain a serial if there are to many passengers. And in my opinion women are more secured there, they don't suffer the daily humiliations on the roads on their way to work or anything. And that was quite refreshing.

Saumitra Sarder Piklu
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Allow 'one-subject failures' to study collegiate levels

A news published recently in the newspapers has drawn my attention. It says those who failed in one subject in the SSC exam this year would not be allowed to get themselves admitted into colleges. In the previous years, such students were allowed to study in colleges. However, they were required to sit for re-examination and had to obtain a pass mark, otherwise their collegiate studentship would be cancelled. I think the system of

allowing one-subject failure cases to continue is more practical and pragmatic in the socio-economic scenario of Bangladesh. It may be noted that computer errors, which may happen due to wrong data entries, are one of the causes of mishaps. Examples of computer related errors are not rare in the country; stories like a student getting 16 turned out to be 76 after revision of the script is quite often heard. In some cases, parents do not have the means to defray their children's expenses for another one year. So, allowing one-subject failures to continue in colleges is a noble idea.

Another thing that the government must consider is 'flexibility' of the education system. All grading system exams, O/A level GCE are much more flexible -- one may take one subject or more than one at a time and that depend on the student's capability or choice. Moreover they have a variety of subject options, but we don't have such options. As a result our students are forced to take up the subjects that they don't like nor have any knack for. And the end result is, obviously, bad performance.

Considering all these factors, we request the government to revise

the decision and allow the one-subject-failures to get admission in colleges as in the previous years.

Ulfat Hussain
Dhaka

Poor performance of ministers

A few days after forming the government in 2001, Khaleda Zia said that the ministers would be given six months to one-year time to improve their performance. If anyone fails, he would be removed. We became happy and

thought that now the BNP government would not repeat the same mistakes as they did in the past. But all our hopes disappeared in the skylike vapour.

What do we see in reality? Some ministers have remained in the cabinet despite their poor performance.

Iqbal Ahmed
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Eradicate poverty and lessen crime rate

The relation of poverty with rising of crime is very close. About 50 per

cent people live below the poverty line in Bangladesh. Their standard of living is so low that they easily tend to commit illegal activities for money. They don't get a job, get no opportunities for work. To get a good job, one needs to pay a large amount of bribe. And they simply cannot afford the money; so they can't get the job. As a result, unemployment occurs in the society. Unemployment leads to frustration, consequently frustration leads committing crimes like theft, robbery, snatching and so on.

Who is responsible for this situation? A class of people, including

the dishonest political leaders, is behind this social disruption. They are actually destroying the nation's economy. And the poor people probably do not have many options rather than committing crimes. So the government and the rich people should consider the unbearable situation of the poor. If they become able to eradicate poverty, the rate of crime ultimately go down.

Palash Podder
Sociology, DU