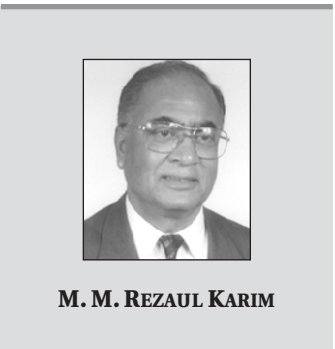


Rejuvenation of SAARC

A harbinger of peace and cooperation in the trouble-torn South Asia



THE 12th session of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation ended on January 6 at Islamabad with a degree of optimism, which its mentors had so long had great difficulty to profess. The repeated attempts to hold the Summit in due time and place had been thwarted in the past due to developments arising out of the perpetual mistrust and bitterness that characterise relations between two of its ace players, India and Pakistan. It was the refusal of Indian leaders to sit with the Pakistani military ruler, following the shooting incident at the Indian Parliament almost two years ago, in a close conference that created the Gordian knot, which was finally cut satisfacto-

rily. Yet, the inertia of an inactive organisation, which had been originally designed for vigorous action, was also broken by the same leader of India. Aging Prime Minister Vajpayee saw it fit to make a final bid to establish peace with the close neighbour, rival, friend and foe, Pakistan. The Kashmir issue, which marred relations between the two countries from their very inception and caused two all-out wars between them, has always been the most difficult hurdle to scale. The sheer wastage of massive resources by the two countries criminally deprived their peoples of their urgent need for a better life by removing the scourge of poverty, disease, illiteracy and malnutrition. The two countries also developed nuclear power and brought the weapons of mass destruction rattling at the doorsteps of nations of the region, to their utter consternation and fear. This was again done at a staggering cost, which they could ill afford in terms of alternative priority. Was it aimed to marginalise mutual fear of each other or to serve false vanity to become a member of the exclusive and prestigious nuclear club? Anyway, the success of the 12th session of

the SAARC appears largely due to the offshoot of these two countries' decision in favour of creating a thaw in their relations.

The SAARC session accomplished some of its cherished objectives. It has brought about realisation of some of

tions and the spirit of camaraderie that pervaded the conference became a matter of deep satisfaction for all concerned. The next step would be to use the SAARC machinery as an important instrument for negotiations with other groups of countries and international

in the economic, commercial, industrial, technical, social and all other possible fields. The conclusion of a Treaty on SAFTA, with the pledge of establishing a free trade zone in the region by January 2006, helped implement an important programme of the envisaged cooperation. It was,

worthy. Nevertheless, the decision of establishing a free trade area will have to be followed up by agreements on measures for its implementation. This will call for tough negotiations and members have to be prepared for it in due course.

The decision of taking various

tion constituted other highlights of the conference. The addresses of Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, in particular her invitation to hold the next conference in Dhaka, were endorsed with appreciation. But the other big achievement of the conference took place outside the ambit of the conference itself, as its offshoot, in the political field.

The SAARC Charter deliberately and carefully avoided the provision of deliberation on political and disputed issues among member states. The reason was to prevent avoidable debates on such issues that might not only hinder the purposes and objectives of the SAARC but might jeopardise its very existence itself. This is also the practice of the Commonwealth and some other conferences, though not of the United Nations which can endure anything and everything, except perhaps the mandate or agenda of some of its permanent members.

Anyway, the meeting between President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of India took the limelight away from the conference, albeit briefly, during the currency of the conference.

The outcome was enormously positive. The two leaders not only decided to meet in February to discuss bilateral issues but agreed to include Kashmir on the agenda. It was a big, a very big, step forward. Whether it will resolve the dispute or not on this vexed issue is a moot question. Political observers are, however, cautious in predicting a positive outcome. But given goodwill, sincerity of purpose and statesmanship, a miracle can happen. To achieve a positive result, both sides must be reasonable, appreciative of each other's susceptibilities and accommodative in spirit. They must be pragmatic. They must dwell on those aspects of the issue on which some progress could be envisaged, leaving the difficult principled stands aside. The latter may be taken up as and when possible. That way and only that way the people of South Asia would be able to witness and enjoy the much-awaited peace, progress and cooperation among themselves.

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Bush administration's radical constitutional agenda suffers legal setbacks

RON CHEPESIUK

LAST December appeared to be a good month for the Bush administration. Economic indicators showed signs that the ailing economy was finally recovering. The Democrats were on the defensive, as Bush moved quickly to grab credit for the economic upswing. Meanwhile, the President's approval ratings climbed slowly upward after the capture of one of the spokes in his Axis of Evil, Saddam Hussein. While these stories made the news, some major legal developments presented a different story. Three developments set back the Bush administration's radical agenda to re-order fundamental constitutional matters in the Age of Terrorism.

The first setback took place in Detroit, the scene of the Bush administration's first major prosecution of suspected terrorists after 9-11. Last June, a federal court found two men, Abdellah Elmardoudi and Karim Koubriti, guilty of conspiracy to provide material support for terrorism and for document fraud, a third man, Ahmed Haman, was convicted for document fraud, but acquitted of terrorist charges, while a fourth,

Farouk All-Haimou, was acquitted of all charges.

The case looked like a victory for our country in the War on Terrorism. The government had broken up a major al-Qaeda terrorist cell in the American heartland. Or so it seemed. But early last month the U.S. Justice Department revealed that it had failed to turn over evidence to the defence that might have helped its case.

The evidence involved an imprisoned leader of a drug gang named Milton "Butch" Jones who accused the government's chief witness, Yousef Hmimssa, a Moroccan and self confessed scam artist, of having confided to him that he had made up a part of his story.

Lawyers for the three convicted men asked that their convictions be thrown out. The judge in their trial scheduled an emergency meeting, demanding that the government provide an explanation.

And that's not all. On December 18, a judge publicly rebuked US Attorney General John Ashcroft for exhibiting a "distressing lack of care" in violating a gag order in the District trial. Ashcroft, who is turning to be a

walking legal disaster, had publicly praised the star government witness in the case. Fortunately for our judicial point man in the War on Terrorism, he will no have to face criminal contempt charges.

The case is now in turmoil. As of January 1, US District Judge

held on foreign soil.

In a 2-1 decision, the US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Bush administration's contention that the prisoners had no rights ran contrary to American ideals. Judge Stephen Reinhardt wrote for the majority thus: "Even in times of national emergency --

Century stood rebuked.

And the legal blows kept reigning on the Bush administration. At about the same time, the US judicial system rejected the Bush administration's claim that it had the right to detain Jose Padilla, an American citizen, without charge or counsel, because he was an

the glitz and hype stopped, it appeared that evidence against Padilla was not as solid as the American public was led to believe. In fact, Padilla's case is looking like another example of how Ashcroft and other law enforcement officials have been hyping their "successes" in anti-

only five got sentences of at least 20 years.

Incredibly, just five out of the 6400 charged got any meaningful jail time. In its defence, the Justice Department said that terrorist suspects are being arrested before they can attack. But that feeble justification is not only arrogant in its intention but also doesn't make any sense. Does that mean a lot of guilty people with terrorist intentions have been let out of prison and are now roaming the streets of America? What are we going to do now? Go into poor minority neighborhoods and start rounding up minding-their-own-business citizens in the hopes of catching a few crack dealers?

Actually, the Transactional Clearinghouse report verifies what many of us suspected: many innocents are getting caught up in what amounts to a Bush administration dragnet. This policy raises three questions: 1) does the Bush administration has what it takes to lead in the War on Terrorism; 2) how good is its intelligence on the home front; 3) assuming most of the 6400 released suspects are Muslims, how eager will these "suspects" be willing to cooperate on the War on Terrorism after languishing in jail for no good

reason?

The US government will appeal all three cases, but the scary thought is that more cases like these will surely arise in the future. There is no guarantee the US Constitution can be protected from the radical neo-conservative assault it is now experiencing.

It's a good bet that whoever wins the presidential election this November will likely pick two, maybe three, new lifetime Supreme Court appointees during his four-year term of office. If Bush is the winner he gets the chance to pick justices that share his views on constitutional power, and the American people will lose more freedom and civil liberties. That's why the year's election is shaping up to be perhaps the most important in US history.

Yet, the Democratic presidential candidates seem more intent on beating up Howard Dean rather than exploiting the Bush administration's weaknesses and incompetence. One can only wonder if we Americans have anybody to lead us during this seminal period of our history.

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The maddening Mad Cow

A. K. AZAD

ABOUT eight years back the cover story of one of the issues of 'The Economist' was 'Made in Britain' where the letter e was crossed. Yes, the issue of mad cow has surfaced again. But not in the same country or continent, it is now on the other side of the Atlantic; in the mightiest country of the world. The culprit has been able to camouflage to trick the vigilant eyes of experts and technologies of the USA.

USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) declared on the 23rd December last that they had found a presumptive case of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) in an adult Holstein cow in Washington. Members of BSE surveillance team sent the sample from the suspected case for diagnosis to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory, Ames, Iowa. The BSE diagnosis was made on December 22 and 23 by histopathology and immuno-histochemical testing.

For further and cross confirmation, the sample was sent to Britain. They have also confirmed the case as BSE. The reaction to the events were instant both at home and abroad. Japan and some other countries have already imposed a ban on import of US meat, the share index of McDonalds has fallen and economists are forecasting a loss of about 27,000 million USD from down cut of meat export. The media hype has brought panic into global arena as 'world leader' is going to be affected by the disease.

Turning to history: BSE popularly known as 'Mad Cow' is not a very old disease. It was first identified in Britain in November 1986 as a separate disease entity. Since, then about one million cattle have been affected by the malady. The epi-

demic peaked in January 1993 approximately 1,000 new cases were reported per week. Though BSE is not a very old disease but diseases with similar clinical manifestation, pathological lesions and nature are known from centuries. The group of disease generally termed as TSE (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy) includes scrapie, which affects sheep and goats; transmissible minkencephalopathy; feline spongiform encephalopathy; chronic wasting disease of deer and elk; and in humans, kuru, both classic and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Gerstmann-Straussler-Scheinker syndrome, and fatal familial insomnia.

BSE was known to concerned scientific community since 1986 but the problem created panic across the world when on March 20, 1996, the United Kingdom's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) announced the identification of 10 cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (VCJD). These 10 cases had a characteristic clinical and pathological phenotype which differed from other routinely diagnosed cases of classic CJD. SEAC concluded that the cases were linked to exposure to BSE before the introduction of a specified bovine offal (SBO) ban at slaughter in 1989. The SBO ban excluded brain, spinal cord, and other organs with potential BSE infectivity from human consumption. Since then 153 cases of VCJD was diagnosed and 143 cases were from Great Britain.

Root of the evil: BSE in Great Britain may have been caused by feeding cattle rendered protein produced from the carcasses of scrapie-infected sheep or cattle with a previously unidentified TSE. The practice of using products such as meat-and-bone meal as a source of protein in cattle rations

has been common for several decades. During 1970-80s feeding cattle meat-meal prepared at low temperature called Carvers Green Field became very popular in Britain. Changes in such rendering operations during that time may have played a part in the appearance of the disease. Whatever may be the route, prion of scrapy succeeded in overcoming species barrier and became a new disease entity in cattle.

The agent responsible for BSE

protein known as PrPc (for cellular). This protein is found predominantly on the surface of neurones. The modified form of PrPc which may cause disease i.e. the prion is known as PrPsc or PrPbse (for scrapie/ BSE) which is relatively resistant to proteases and accumulates in cytoplasmic vesicles of diseased individuals.

It has been proposed that PrPsc when introduced into a normal cell causes the conversion of PrPc into PrPsc. The exact nature of the

usually takes from 2 weeks to 6 months. Most cases in Great Britain have occurred in dairy cows between 3 and 6 years of age.

Human form of mad cow: The human form of VCJD differs from classical CJD. It predominantly affects younger people and average age of people has atypical clinical features, with prominent psychiatric sign at the time of clinical presentation and delayed onset of neurologic abnormalities, a duration of illness of at least

cases (1994-1996) is consistent with known incubation periods for CJD.

An experimental study reported in June 1996 showed that three cynomolgus macaque monkeys inoculated with brain tissue obtained from cattle with BSE had clinical and neuropathological features strikingly similar to those of variant CJD (Nature, 1996).

A study published in 1996 indicated that a Western blot

We are fortunate that our cattle farmers do not use MBM for their animals. Bangladesh does usually import cattle or meat from countries having BSE, but no BSE case was identified both among local and imported cattle. However, we must admit that we have some weakness also that may be proved sufficient to put us in great trouble. The country does not have any quarantine law and obviously no quarantine system is in practice. There is no veterinary control over import of MBM. Moreover, The Animal Disease Act is very old and has become almost obsolete. The level of awareness regarding food safety is very low and system of abattoir control is almost non-existent.

and other TSEs is smaller than the smallest known virus and has not been completely characterised. There are three main theories on the nature of the agent: (1) the agent is a virus with unusual characteristics, (2) the agent is a prion -- and (3) the agent is a virino -- a small, noncoding regulatory nucleic acid coated with a host-derived protective protein. Among the hypothesis mentioned the second one has been able to draw the attention of scientific community as well as the media. Dr. Stanley Prusiner was awarded noble prize for the prion theory. Prion is defined as small proteinaceous infectious particles which resist inactivation by procedures that modify nucleic acids. The discovery that proteins alone can transmit an infectious disease has come as a considerable surprise to the scientific community. Evidence suggests that a prion is a modified form of a normal cellular

process is unknown but it could involve a chemical or conformational modification. The ultimate result is conversion of brain material to a spongy state.

Clinical symptoms of BSE: Cattle affected by BSE experience progressive degeneration of the nervous system. Affected animals may display changes in temperament, such as nervousness or aggression, abnormal posture, incoordination and difficulty in rising, decreased milk production, or loss of body weight despite continued appetite and affected cow dies finally. There is neither any treatment nor a vaccine to prevent the disease.

The incubation period (the time from when an animal becomes infected until it first shows disease signs) is from 2 to 8 years. Following the onset of clinical signs, the animal's condition deteriorates until it either dies or is destroyed. This process

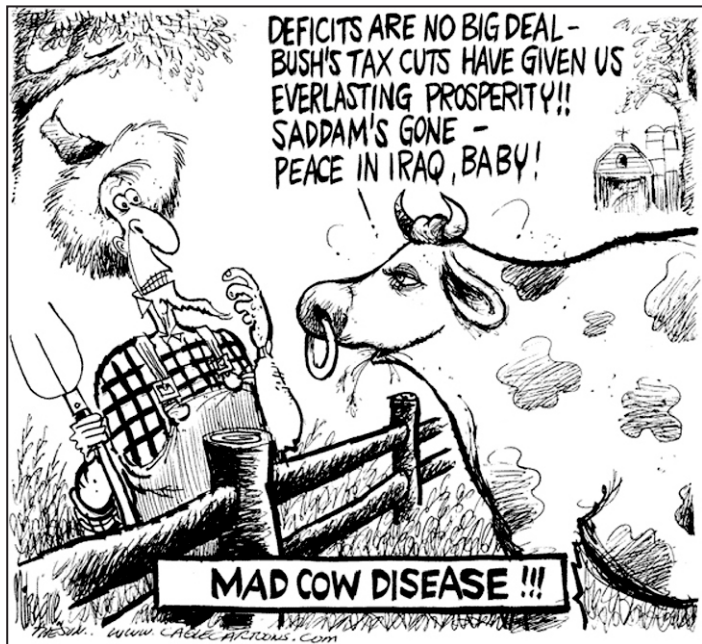
6 months, and a diffusely abnormal non-diffusely electroencephalogram.

Bridging the gap: The question of probable transmission of BSE from cow to human was in the mind of every skeptic but the public bodies always denied the probability. At the onset of the crisis, the Agriculture Minister of Britain talked to newsmen while having British beef with her daughter to build confidence among people about safety of British meat. However, scientists now have strong evidences that supports the link between two diseases. The absence of confirmed cases of variant CJD in other geographic areas free of BSE supports a causal association.

In addition, the interval between the most likely period for the initial extended exposure of the population to potentially BSE-contaminated food (1984-1986) and onset of initial variant CJD

analysis of infecting prions obtained from 10 variant CJD patients and BSE-infected animals had similar molecular characteristics that were distinct from prions obtained from patients with other types.

Steps taken to control BSE and CJD: In Great Britain, the disease was first detected, the human form was first identified and the cattle industry suffered most. The experience of Great Britain is of immense importance. To control the disease they took many initiatives and the number of cases are declining. UK introduced Over Thirty Months (OTM) cattle slaughter rule. The rule bans the sale of meat for human consumption from most cattle aged over thirty months at slaughter. It was introduced by the government to protect public health from the risk of BSE and to safeguard consumer confidence in beef. The rule is applied strictly to all British cattle



and for imported beef. A total of nearly 4.6 million cattle in the UK have been excluded from the food chain, mostly under the Over Thirty Month Slaughter Scheme (OTMS). They have also restricted the use of certain specified bovine offals (SBO) including brain and spinal cord for human consumption.

Under The Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy Order 1988, sale, supply and use of Meat and Bone Meal (MBM) for feeding ruminants was banned and a scheme was taken to recall all the MBM for ruminant use.

Status of Bangladesh and needed steps: We are fortunate that our cattle farmers do not use MBM for their animals. The sheep population is very low and no case of scrapie was recorded. Moreover, Bangladesh does usually import cattle or meat from countries having BSE, but no BSE case was identified both among local and

imported cattle. However, we must admit that we have some weakness also that may be proved sufficient to put us in great trouble. The country does not have any quarantine law and obviously no quarantine system is in practice. There is no veterinary control over import of MBM. Moreover, The Animal Disease Act is very old and has become almost obsolete under present context. The level of awareness regarding food safety is very low and system of abattoir control is almost non-existent. Although city corporations and municipalities run some ante mortem and post-mortem inspection programme but they are strained by many factors. These areas need immediate attention not only for preventing entry of BSE but also for safeguarding human and animal health.

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