

Garos protest

Their grievances must be addressed

THE Modhupur incident in which a Garo was killed has created a great sense of insecurity among the indigenous people. Matters have been made worse by the activities of the local BNP men, who are reportedly resorting to intimidatory tactics to dissuade the Garos from agitating against the government plan to build an eco-park in Modhupur forests.

The desperation of the indigenous men and women was quite manifest when they attended a protest rally at the Central Shaheed Minar on Thursday. The point that they are trying to make is obvious -- they believe that the planned eco-park will take away the forests that they have to rely on for their livelihood.

Now, there are certain things that must be taken note of. First, the plan to set up an eco-park may not be bad in itself, but the government could ill afford to ignore its impact on the lives of the local people. Participation of people in any development plan is an essential prerequisite for its success. This principle has been clearly laid down in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. But that did not quite happen in Modhupur. The result is that the locals are viewing the government plan with great suspicion. Second, it is not clear why a development issue has been allowed to assume a political overtone. The activists of any political party cannot have a role in the plan of building an eco-park. Any intervention by political elements will only add to the worries of the affected people.

The rights of citizens are a sacred thing that cannot be violated on the pretext of undertaking a development project. The development planners should not only admit but also insist on the point that all their endeavours will have a common goal -- welfare of people. There is absolutely no room for coercion in such matters.

The victims of Modhupur excesses must be rehabilitated and those responsible for their sufferings brought to justice.

'Misrepresented' WMD threat

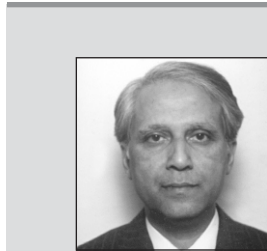
The process of prevarication must come to an end

THE observation by a US think tank that the Bush administration 'systematically' misrepresented the danger of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programme is a revelation one can't just brush aside. It only reiterates our view, and in broader terms, of a big community around the world opposing the invasion in Iraq, that the premise under which the military action was propagated was not strong enough. In fact day by day it is being proven that the reasoning behind bombing Iraq, killing innocent Iraqis were as feeble as a thin paper. This wasn't the first time that the experts had differed with US's view on Iraq's weaponry, and sure it's not going to be the last.

Even a military team, comprising of American experts who had been desperately searching for weapons in Iraq, has been withdrawn after finding nothing of substance. What else does the US administration need to believe the inevitable truth? However, another team remains in Iraq because, according to reports, the missile programme 'appeared' to have been in active development in 2002 and Iraq was supposedly planning to build missiles with ranges that exceeded UN limits. Is there really no limit to assumption? We want an end to this process of prevarication once and for all.

So far, all we have heard was about Iraq's intention to build long range missiles, but when would the US administration understand that intention is not a verifiable thing, only physical presence is. Therefore the sooner the US realises this, the better it is for all of us. No matter how hard they keep on trying to find weapons of mass destruction, the stark reality will only stare on their faces. And the withdrawal of the US search team rings the finality for any further such operations in Iraq. We hope the US will get the message and put an end to all kinds of prevarication in order to justify their unjust actions so far.

Moving forward after the 12th SAARC Summit



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

FOR a change South Asia has witnessed cooperation and understanding. Originally scheduled to be held in January 2003, the postponed SAARC Summit has finally concluded earlier this week amidst amity, with arch-rivals staying away from contentious issues. Charges and counter-charges have been avoided. Genuine efforts have been undertaken to identify least common denominators with regard to outstanding and unresolved questions. In more ways than one, it has been a positive step forward.

The fact that the Summit took place despite two attempts on the life of the President of Pakistan underlined the importance of the SAARC process. It was good that this window of opportunity was accessed to. It will make South Asian efforts that much more relevant in the international arena. It will also denote the seriousness with which we view the resolution of our outstanding problems.

The Islamabad Declaration and other reports coming out after the conclusion of the Summit Meeting indicate that all parties in principle agree on certain concerns raised by them during their respective interventions.

In this context one needs to recall some of the salient points that were stressed upon by these South Asian leaders.

Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee significantly called for an end to "mutual suspicions and rivalries"

that have "haunted" the South Asian region. He also suggested the need for "greater sensitivity" among the SAARC nations to the security concerns of each other. This was further emphasized by "history can remind us, guide us or warn us. It should not shackle us. We have to look forward now with a collective approach in mind."

Similarly, Pakistan's Prime Minister Jamali underscored that political disputes should be addressed in a just and realistic manner, failing which ideas like a common economic and monetary union would remain a distant

lead to relaxation of tension in the region and provide a new and meaningful impetus to cooperation among SAARC countries". He also stressed on the need for member states to act "resolutely" in their efforts to combat the menace of terrorism.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Thinley spoke of "winds of rapprochement" blowing across the region. In this regard he drew the attention of the other leaders to the recent joint operations carried out in Bhutan against the ULFA and the other terrorist groups.

Bangladesh Prime Minister

measure for South Asia. Such elements of continuity in foreign policy are required.

A new beginning has been made this week in Islamabad. It is already being referred to as a "watershed" for future South Asian cooperation. The "future oriented" Islamabad Declaration has been described by the Pakistani Prime Minister as containing "the roadmap for regional cooperation under SAARC". It probably does. However, one has to be careful that this exuberance does not evaporate due to internal domestic compulsions.

leaderships (after each country's respective nuclear explosions) to step back from the brink, restrain themselves and resolve problems through dialogue.

It is equally important that the Declaration consisting of 42 Articles, recognised the importance of informal political consultations in promoting mutual understanding and reinforcing the confidence building process among member states. This will address the security concerns of small South Asian states arising from their particular vulnerabilities. It will

to five and then to zero per cent. Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Nepal, with weaker economies, have received concessions to avail of a longer deadline that would end by 2013. In the meantime, each member state would be allowed to maintain a sensitive list of products on which tariff would not be reduced. Such a measure is not unreasonable given the genuine apprehension that Indian cheap goods may overwhelm the markets of smaller countries in the South Asian region and thereby ruin their domestic industries.

It would however be worthwhile for the South Asian leadership to understand that such a free trade initiative has also to be seen as being fair. As in Europe, in the long run, the effort should eventually move towards complementarities of economies where industrial products through joint investment could emerge from several countries of the region. For example, parts of a car or any other machine may in due course be manufactured in different countries of the region. Such an activity will generate cross-border investment rather than cross-border terrorism. It will provide employment and remove suspicion. It will bring us together by generating stakes that cannot be overlooked. North America is a case in point.

The movement forward in SAARC has been slow because of several political factors. Nevertheless, the maturity displayed this month has given birth to hope. We can and should grow confidence in the process. What is important is that this momentum is not lost.

Necessary studies will have to be carried out by the SAARC Secretariat to identify the requisite follow-up mechanisms. It will be difficult but this has to be done. The Secretariat will probably need to be strengthened with greater resources. Given the proper political will, this should not be impossible.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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dream.

President Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka hailed the peace overtures between India and Pakistan and expressed the belief that this evolving situation would not only "boost chances of saving South Asia from global marginalization" but would also "give rise to confidence."

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of Maldives made a strong plea for security cooperation among the SAARC countries and asked them to seek observer status in the United Nations as a regional grouping". In this context he reminded others that it would not be possible to have regional security cooperation unless it is viewed as being of common interest rather than a contentious issue. Very relevant indeed.

Nepalese Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa mentioned that "improvement of relations between India and Pakistan would

Khaleda Zia in addition to pointing out the harsh reality and inertia that SAARC has been facing in recent years also focussed on poverty reduction in South Asia hinging around social mobilisation, decentralisation and human resource development. In this context, she also called for an exclusive Regional Centre for Information Technology, establishing a regional energy grid and use of alternative energy sources. She also urged the early adoption of an interregional investment agreement to generate employment, reduction of trade imbalance and promotion of South Asia as a common investment area. The other important element was her suggestion that there should be increased people-to-people contact, specially strong cultural and sports-exchange programmes. It was good that this was reiterated because Sheikh Hasina, our former Prime Minister also emphasized this factor as a confidence building

The leaders have jointly vowed to make South Asia a peaceful and stable region where each nation is at peace with itself and with its neighbours. This may be construed as significant given the constant charges of cross-border terrorism and pre-emptive display of aggression potential. The decision, in this context, of resuming talks next month between India and Pakistan at the level of Officials is a movement forward. Such composite dialogue can only ease tension all around and act as a confidence building measure.

Bangladesh has always believed in such a process and the present Government has very correctly welcomed this development. This approach is consistent with that of the previous Government. It may be recalled that Sheikh Hasina, during a sensitive period, acted most maturely by taking the initiative of visiting New Delhi and Islamabad and urging the two

also enable them to address such anxieties within the perspective of the UN Charter and rules of international law related to sovereign rights and territorial integrity of all states.

SAFTA should also ensure the movement towards broadening of economic cooperation to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of trade and catering to the special need of the small and the least developed member states by providing them special and differential treatment. SAFTA will take effect from January 1, 2006 in all SAARC countries simultaneously, but the implementation of the new tariff regime judiciously, will offer three sets of deadlines according to member states' varying economic prowess.

Pakistan and India are expected to complete SAFTA implementation by the year 2009 whereas Sri Lanka will take another year (2010) to bring its tariff down

The question of loyalty

MEGASTHENES

A friend of many years told me recently that a part of my last published column had given him much pleasure, the part that touched upon the arts. He has no particular claims to expertise on art but, as with innumerable others, it appeals to his aesthetic sense and he enjoys it. He concedes readily enough that an informed appreciation of the finer points of the arcane world of art will always be the preserve of the privileged few, the cognoscenti. And yet there is clearly a human aspect to art, one that could be a catalyst in enhancing its interest, appreciation and appeal among the uninitiated. He related two tales, with the anything but subtle suggestion that I might use them in a future column to underscore this point. I agreed for two good reasons. First I had no wish to disoblige an old friend and secondly I thought that perhaps he did have a valid point to make.

The first tale was anecdotal and related to one of the most respected artists of Bangladesh, whom we may call Q. I have no means of ascertaining its absolute accuracy though. Some time after the emergence of Bangladesh, Q had occasion to visit Paris. A former student of his, whom for the sake of convenience we may call S, was in Paris at that time, pursuing higher studies in art. Naturally enough, S took it upon himself to escort his former professor around Paris. It was even more natural that the Louvre, the inevitable destination of any "pilgrimage" by artists and art lovers, should be one of the first places to take Q. The artist was absolutely enthralled for some time, after which he looked distinctly ill at ease, almost in discomfort and unwell. S, thinking that the confines of a somewhat crowded room was perhaps too stifling, suggested that they step out for some fresh air. Q assented and seemed to pick up after a few minutes in the open. S proposed that they might go back for a quick look at some of the more celebrated paintings. To his surprise, Q declined, wearily, almost wistfully. It was of little use, he felt, at that stage of his artistic career to savour the treasures of the Louvre. A tour of the Louvre three decades or so earlier, would have made such a difference to his thinking and work. Now it would simply emphasize to him poignantly what might have been.

The second tale, by some unknown writer, was one that my friend had come across years back in an obscure anthology. An artist had achieved immense wealth and renown by pioneering a new school of abstract painting. He was popularly known as the Maestro. Critics and experts took pains to interpret his works, which were recognised as profound in meaning and something refreshingly new. As he grew in stature, the Maestro, who lived in well-earned comfort, accepted promising young artists as live-in students on his vast estate. His favourite pupil was one X, who possessed a rare sensitivity and talent and clearly had a bright future as an artist to look forward to. Then one day something totally unexpected happened. In a gathering of artists and art lovers, X denounced the Maestro as a charlatan whose paintings, so widely

with, Time passed and in art circles the Maestro went from strength to strength. X, of course, was finished in the world of art and moved from one makeshift job to another. He did have a few friends from old times who saw in him a once promising artist with a great future behind him. Privately he wondered sometimes why he had behaved as he did. His only explanation to himself: he really believed what he had said in anger and disappointment; he could not at any cost suffer the burlesquing of true art.

The years rolled by. X became injured to a pedestrian existence; hopes and ambitions of celebrity and fortune were only a distant memory. It was a surprise thus when he received word that the Maestro was holidaying by the sea-side, a short train ride from where

absolutely correct! In his younger days Maestro had tried to contribute to art but had given up on it. He had to survive and thrive. To be a pioneer, one had to bear with fortitude hardships from which, to be sure, benefits would accrue to posterity. This was beyond his mettle. He was content to observe human nature and give pleasure of a sort to others. This afforded, if not a sense of accomplishment, a certain satisfaction and fun. In well-modulated and mellifluous tones and gentle irony, Maestro added that there were no witnesses to this conversation and X's credibility already in shreds would be non-existent if he tried to make it public. X was transfixed and then overwhelmed by a sense of elation; the meeting with Maestro was his epiphany.

A few months later Maestro was

LIGHTEN UP

Loyalty did not weigh much with Mir Zafar but then he was not aware of Pandit Nehru or the Cambridge Five and possibly not Seneca either. Going by media reports that ascribe the capture of Saddam Hussein and the grisly fate of two of his sons to betrayal by close collaborators, it would seem that the Talleyrand variety of loyalty does have adherents in Iraq and possibly elsewhere as well.

acclaimed, had as much significance or meaning as would the results of a donkey dipping its tail randomly into cans of paint and then slapping a canvas with it. Those assembled were appalled and incensed. The Maestro was beyond reproach, an untouchable in the world of art; and now this, from his favourite pupil too. The unseemly and wholly unprovoked outburst did not in any way ruffle the Maestro's equanimity. He calmed his admirers with a gesture and responded equably without a hint of hurt or anger. He had always let his pictures speak for themselves and would continue to do so. It was for art lovers ultimately to judge whether or not they liked what his pictures had to say. Assuredly he would not interpose himself between his pictures and lovers of art and thus had no comment to make. Indeed a dignified response, truly worthy of a Maestro, to an almost obscene and inexplicable provocation.

The incident was over and done

he was living, and wished to see him. X turned up duly at the Maestro's rented villa and was taken to the great man who was relaxing on the lawns. Maestro seemed pleased and asked all others to withdraw. He wanted to speak to X alone. It was an awkward moment for X. Here was his former mentor, who had given him nothing but affection and encouragement. Was he an ingrate to denounce him as he did? Perhaps, but then he had only said what he genuinely believed as an artist. The Maestro looked peaked as he greeted X with a smile. A few moments of desultory conversation followed before Maestro said what was on his mind. He always believed that X had all the makings of a great artist, the steady hand, the sure touch, the discerning eye and above all else something indefinable and elusive, almost intuitive -- the insight and instinct that distinguished the great artist from lesser ones. X had proved this beyond doubt when he denounced the Maestro, because what he had said was

dead and within days of his passing his solicitors forwarded to X a letter written to him by the great man weeks before, with instructions that it be handed over after his death. The letter was chatty. It recapitulated their last conversation and confirmed what the Maestro had told him, namely his celebrated paintings denoted nothing beyond colour on canvas. Maestro was happy that he had over the years provided grist to the mill for art critics and pleasure to art lovers. In a sense he had been a public benefactor. His one regret, this great joke could not be shared with anyone else.

X was faced with a dilemma. He had in his hand his vindication. True it had come too late to revive his own art career but it should do something for his credibility. But then did he really want to dismantle a loving old fraud, someone who had showered affection on him, had never hurt anyone and had admitted of his own accord and volition to something that no critic or

will with X to this purpose, for a consideration, of course, namely a gift of four of the Maestro's paintings from the gallery to him? I agreed promptly and the next day Y persuaded X to destroy the lethal letter. X himself was increasingly moving toward such a decision in any case. He felt vindicated and it was not essential to make this public, especially if the price was a scandal in the art world and the reputation of his kindly old mentor.

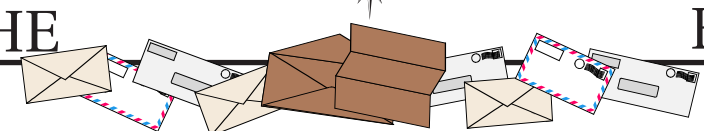
Three months elapsed before a second letter from Maestro's solicitors reached X, forwarding, under instructions, yet another letter from the Maestro, a communication from beyond the grave. The second letter, bearing the same date as the first, posed a question and conveyed a message. The question: what had X done with the first letter? Did he make it public or did he suppress or destroy it? The message: Maestro had bequeathed 20 of his paintings from his personal collection to X! Depending on what X did with the earlier

letter, he would either be wealthy beyond dreams or would be the beneficiary of a worthless bequest! Maestro prided himself on his judgment of people and if he had it right as he believed he did, X would be a happy man on reading this letter. X felt a touch of moistness as he closed his eyes and thought of his mentor, his smile so often mocking gently at pomposity and affectation and yet also so full of understanding and warmth, the kindly fraud who had played his greatest joke from the great beyond.

Centuries back Seneca, among the wisest of Romans in his time, had written: "Fides sanctissimum humani pectoris bonum est" or in English: "Loyalty is the holiest good in the human heart." In more recent times Pandit Nehru was emphatic that "No policy or manoeuvre can ever be a right one if it involves the forsaking of a colleague." And the famous or infamous Cambridge Five -- Philby, Maclean, Burgess, Blunt and Cairncross -- lived by a creed: "If we ever have to choose between betraying our country or a friend, may God grant us the courage to betray our country." Not too many people would concur or go quite that far! Prince Talleyrand, one-time seminary, diplomat, statesman and above all survivor par excellence who thrived during the French revolution, under Napoleon, at the Bourbon restoration and also under Louis-Philippe had his own characteristic concept of loyalty. Discussing fidelity with Czar Alexander of Russia, Talleyrand had observed: "That sire is a question of dates."

Loyalty did not weigh much with Mir Zafar but then he was not aware of Pandit Nehru or the Cambridge Five and possibly not Seneca either. Going by media reports that ascribe the capture of Saddam Hussein and the grisly fate of two of his sons to betrayal by close collaborators, it would seem that the Talleyrand variety of loyalty does have adherents in Iraq and possibly elsewhere as well. In its true sense, of course, loyalty will always be among the kindest of human attributes, and, possibly for this reason mainly, something rare in this world. More is the pity.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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

The year that was

I liked Mr. Mahfuz Anam's candid commentary on the state of the nation (DS January 1). He was apolitical, and the scenes moved him through history. He set the right tone for entering the new year, bereft of hope and expectation from the political masters. The latter have let down the nation representing the impoverished masses. Divine refuge is available, but not political protection from the elected representatives.

I had watched horse races on the race course, now *Suhrawardy Uddyan*, while I was in school in Dhaka. I can still visualize the fireworks at the old High Court building in the mid-1930s, celebrating the coronation or an anniversary of the royal head of the Raj (if I remember correctly). As a schoolboy, I

used to walk to the Sir Salimullah Hall to the residence of Dr Shadiullah residing in a corner of the Hall as a teacher looking after the Hall. Today, if any of my relatives stayed in the Hall, I would be scared of going there. Even today I avoid the rickshaw ride through the public roads passing through the DU campus.

The politicians are teaching us the education of fear if that is the right term to use. The future of the young generation has been maimed permanently the very foundation for entry into life has been distorted. From where the future leadership would emerge? The branches are moving the trunk! The leaders cannot come out of the central core. Who are dependent on whom? We have inward-looking politics. What's for the voters? Politics and democracy have failed; we are ruled by slogans

which have no roots. The boycott of the august parliament is a moral lapse; an institution is being ignored for petty upmanship.

The curse on the young nation is the destructive politics, cultivated by our leading political parties. The two leading political parties since 1991, are led, strangely enough, by same leaders. The party comes first, then the nation. It is an absurd political philosophy. The nation has to pay for it, sooner than later. The student community has been brain-washed. We had a fine civil service, now it has been tarnished; it is neither service nor civil. Politics has become a business, and public service is a hostage to political gunmen. Opportunism reigns the day. We live in the past and in the materialism of the present moment. The beckoning of

the future does not hit us. Since we do not take notice, it will hit us later. There is a time for each and every event, and we are shackled, to what we call fate or destiny. We are slaves to our own doings. It is too late for the politicians to control it or reduce it. When the silence of the millions break, it would be thunderous!

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UN vs US

I read the recent New York Times editorial urging the U.S. to hand over political authority of Iraq to the UN. The editorialists at the New York Times, like other critics of US President George W Bush on Iraq, fail to realise that the United Nations can hardly do anything to improve the security situation in Iraq. The United Nations never

sanctioned the war against Iraq and still it was attacked. Why? The answer lies in the fact that the UN's presence was seen as legitimising the US occupation of Iraq.

Leftover Saddam loyalists and religious fanatics have obviously joined forces against what they always considered as their common enemy -- the United States. Anything and anyone is fair game if it disrupts the working of American forces and ultimately drives them out. "This is the strategy of making things worse," says David Rudd, director of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies. "Make life so painful that the UN can't do its work, that the Military fails and all outsiders withdraw," Mr Rudd added.

Seen in this light, it is obvious that the United Nations would be impotent in Iraq, even if it is given political authority. This means that even if America gives up its

control of Iraq, the UN will be incapable of providing any stability as it will come under renewed attacks by heavily-armed Baathist loyalists and their allies. No other country would be willing and able to sustain military casualties for long. Turkey has agreed to provide 10,000-strong peace-keeping force. But it is not clear what type of security the Turkish troops would be able to provide if they suffer daily combat casualties. It is more likely that Turkey would beat a hasty retreat if its troops suffer casualties like the US troops.

Considering all this, the United States may be the only power which can defeat the Saddam loyalists and their allies and bring Iraq back to normalcy. It is the UN which needs the US and not other way around. The United States, with the help of the Iraqi allies, will have to restore law and order

before the United Nations can move in and help in the reconstruction of Iraq.

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Smoking in public vehicle

Smoking is detrimental to health. Medical science is trying to explore the remedial line of treating injurious elevation of smoking but failed still now. In most of the public transports, it is not written, "Please do not smoke in the vehicle", but unfortunately many passengers do not pay any heed to that.

One year back, Indian Supreme Court issued a decree that smoking in public transport is entirely prohibited and if anyone would go against this verdict, then he/she would be given

pecuniary punishment. Can we expect such an outcome from our Supreme Court/ Government to make smoking in the public transport illegal?

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"Freedom of pen"

I don't want to put the headline "Ka again", as penned by Tayanta Mira (DS Dec.24) on Taslima Nasreen, but only want to point out that 'freedom of pen' does not mean that you be allowed to write anything and against anybody you wish and thus encroach upon someone's human rights. There we must draw a line between decent literature and offensive writings. There always are ethics that all should follow.

AF Rahman,
Dhaka.