

**BNP-AL**

*Was it just a photo opportunity?*

**T**WO key leaders of BNP and Awami League in a rare show of cordiality met on Monday. Going a step further, both of them emphasised the need for starting a dialogue between the government and the opposition with a view to ending the political impasse.

That was a welcome departure from trading of accusations which has raised questions regarding the efficacy of the parliamentary form of government in our context. In the past we saw the two parties intermittently responding to peace overtures only to shy away from them when a breakthrough seemed likely.

The two top leaders spoke on the need for reactivating parliament, which has not delivered much in the last 30 months or so. It is heartening to learn that BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has said that "the job of uniting the divided society rests primarily with the political parties." He has, in fact, divulged a truth that the political parties cannot evade without causing great harm to the nation at large.

It is, however, not clear why the two political parties need some kind of persuasion to talk to each other. On this occasion also the leaders met at a ceremony organised by Dhaka Reporters Unity. They know better than others that the country is passing through a political crisis which has a crippling effect on every sector. So it was expected that they would make some sincere efforts to break the deadlock. Such an initiative, we believe, must come from the ruling party.

The political parties must also realise that they have wasted too much time on politics of bickering that has pushed the country further down as far as its international standing is concerned. Regrettably, there is yet no sign of the stand-off coming to an end.

There are many issues -- the debate over government's plan to extend JS seats, for example -- for the two sides to open a dialogue with. The absence of the opposition in parliament virtually turns every action of the government into a unilateral one -- something not permitted under democratic dispensation. So, a dialogue for the opposition's return to parliament must be initiated immediately, and the government should be ready to concede the space that the opposition needs to work in parliament. We hope the bonhomie won't be short-lived and that some real progress would be made towards a working relationship between the BNP-led ruling coalition and the opposition.

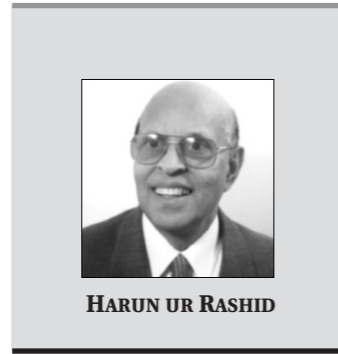
**Mystery disease**

*Why are we still in the dark about it?*

**A**FTER SARS it is the Asian bird flu that has set off alarm bell to health authorities in Asia. Viruses from the blue are wreaking havoc on human lives throwing formidable challenges to find antidotes to them. Times are bad, putting epidemiology to the severest of tests. No sooner had one unknown viral attack been contained another followed suit.

Against this backdrop, a mystery disease has taken a toll of 19 souls, mostly children, in Rajbari, Manikganj and Tangail. The fatalities have occurred over the last two weeks. But the patients are said to be recovering 'with supportive treatment alone', meaning use of antibiotic and antiviral medicines. No immediate link is established to bird flu but what is important to note is that we do not have adequate equipment to identify the virus or diagnose the disease. We are, of course, quarantining the patients and reportedly they are recovering through the administration of standard procedures. But have we woken up to the stupendous challenges of new viral infections that defy borders, however impregnable these might have been thought off? Let our health authorities keep in constant touch with their counterparts in the neighbouring countries to obtain the latest information about how they are dealing with the scourges. The WHO is expected to coordinate the findings and issue the do's and don'ts. But basically we must have a national infrastructural capacity to deal with any health crisis. With the dengue we ignored some early warning signals, let us not do the same with the current one. We must brace up to meet the challenge squarely.

**Is America any safer as claimed by President Bush?**



HARUN UR RASHID

**O**N 20 January, in a 54-minute address before a joint session of the Congress, President Bush claimed that his policies made America safer from terrorist attacks. He made a defiant defence of the Iraqi war and urged the Americans to stick to him for his policy to keep America safe and secure.

The question is will the majority of Americans be convinced with his claims? His address is of a leader who is seen to be vulnerable. The latest polls show that he commands 49 percent of popular vote dropping him from 53 percent in mid-December.

One of the Democratic contenders and winner of Iowa primary Senator John Kerry immediately criticised his address and said: "There's just two different worlds here -- the world the President talks about and the world that Americans are living." Another Democratic contender North Carolina's John Edwards (second place in Iowa) said:

"The President is not talking about two Americas we have: the two public school systems, the two health care systems, two different governments, and how we're going to build one America that works for

everybody."

It seems that President's claim stands on shaky grounds. Although American mainland has not been subject to any terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001, it is doubtful whether America is safe and in this connection the following four factors deserve mention: First, the President makes links between capture of Saddam Hussein and America being a safer place from terrorist attacks. However the reality is that war on Iraq to

The Grand Shi'ite Cleric Ayatollah Ali al Hussein al Sistani has demanded election before transfer of power to Iraqi people in June. In recent days it is reported that CIA officers warned the administration that Iraq might be on a path to civil war unless the demand is peacefully sorted out. The US has landed itself in a catch 22 situation. If the US administration bows to Shi'ite demands, a fundamentalist Islamic regime is likely to emerge. If it does not, a civil war may engulf Iraq. That is the last thing the Bush

Arab Muslim people in the region turn against America. Israel has been deploying US-supplied lethal weapons against them. Frustration and desperation among many Arabs are growing and the explosive situation makes for a potential breeding ground for recruitment by Al-Qaeda network.

Fourth, Osama bin Laden and his number two Egyptian Ayman Al-Zawahiri who are alleged to be behind the September 11 attacks have not been captured. The Taliban chief Mollah Omar has also

to many people in his country. Trust and credibility of politicians are paramount. Once credibility is lost, it is very hard to restore it. David Corn, the Washington editor of "The Nation" published a book titled "The Lies of G.W. Bush" (Crown Publishers, New York: 2003) and in that book he listed the following:

Mischaracterising intelligence and resorting to deceptive arguments to whip up public support for war on Iraq.

Many American people appear to realise that President's policy on war against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction is deeply flawed. Fighting terror with war is like fighting fire with petrol. War is fuel to terrorism, not a deterrent and cannot make America safe from attacks. American people now travel abroad less and live under permanent threat of terror. Many perceive that the world has become less safe with unwanted war on Iraq.

In the past, the Presidential elections were fought primarily on domestic issues. Rarely security issues were the subjects of debate in election campaigns. This election seems to depart from the earlier ones because security has become one of the dominant themes that will engage voters. One writer after listening to the State of Union address reportedly said that President Bush has attempted to sell that "war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength".

There is no doubt that President Bush's penchant for unilateralism has made the world order upside down. At the World Economic Forum at Davos (Switzerland) on 23rd January UN Secretary General Kofi Annan alluded to the present volatile world situation in the following words: "In just a few short years, the prevailing atmosphere has shifted from belief in the near-inevitability of globalisation to deep uncertainty about the very survival of our tenuous global order. Collective security and the role of the world body itself were under serious strain." Once again the proponent of unilateralism in fighting global terrorism is censured.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

**BOTTOM LINE**

**Many American people appear to realise that President's policy on war against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction is deeply flawed. Fighting terror with war is like fighting fire with petrol. War is fuel to terrorism, not a deterrent and cannot make America safe from attacks. American people now travel abroad less and live under permanent threat of terror. Many perceive that the world has become less safe with unwanted war on Iraq.**

depose Saddam Hussein was planned long before. Early this month, the former US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill of the Bush administration has revealed that President Bush began planning to forcibly oust Saddam Hussein within days of becoming President in January 2001, nine months before the attacks of September 11. This clearly demonstrates that there was no link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda terrorist network.

Second, despite the upbeat assessment given by the President on Iraq, the country is indeed in a mess. It has become a safe haven for Islamic militants including Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters. Almost every day American soldiers are killed. US policy in Iraq has first annoyed Sunnis and now the majority Shi'ites.

administration had envisioned in Iraq.

Third, it is imperative to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if there is any hope left to make America safer. The American "road map" to peace for Israel-Palestinian conflict is in tatters. President Bush cannot afford to annoy Israeli Prime Minister Sharon who is being strongly supported by US Jewish and Christian Right lobbies in the US. Thomas Friedman in The New York Times recently wrote: "The Bush team destroyed the Iraqi regime in three weeks and has not persuaded Israel to give up one settlement in three years. To think the US can practise that sort of hypocrisy and win the war of ideas in the Arab Muslim world is a truly dangerous fantasy."

Israel's defiance has made most

eluded capture. The elimination of Talibans appears to be short-lived because they are regrouping and fighting back against the Karzai government in Afghanistan.

Outside of Kabul, people in rural areas live in fear of attacks by Talibans. Even Kabul is not free from Taliban attacks and in recent times a bomb exploded near the UN office in Kabul. More significantly there are recorded tapes alleged to be the voice of Bin Laden promising future attacks on American interests. The UN officers in Kabul reportedly said that Taliban was likely to return with vigour unless funds were made available to the Karzai government. Only 20 percent of the promised funds have been disbursed.

In addition to the above, the greatest weakness of President Bush appears to be his credibility

Misrepresenting the provisions and effects of the tax cuts.

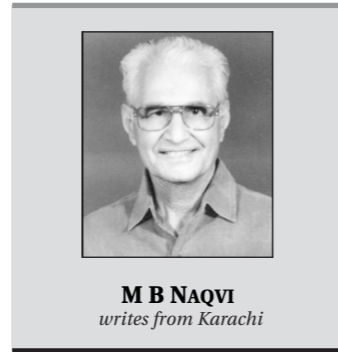
Offering misleading explanations -- instead of telling the full truth -- about the September 11 attacks.

Misleading statements about connections to corporate crooks.

Presenting deceptive claims to sell controversial policies on environment, missile defence, social security, medicare and energy.

The author in his introduction of the book records a damning verdict that the President "has mugged the truth, not merely in honest error, but deliberately, consistently and repeatedly." To the author, all American Presidents have often lied, but President Bush appears to relentlessly abuse the truth and thereby misled the American people to advance his own political interests and agenda.

**Transparency is the word**



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

**R**ECENT disclosures, including those by Iran, have been extremely embarrassing for the government led by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who is also the Army Chief. It is the Army, as a whole, that was wholly in charge of the country's nuclear programme. Since the Army prides itself on its discipline and efficiency and has been asserting that the Command and Control System it has devised to protect nuclear assets is fool proof, the ability of the recently discovered nuclear under-world is causing endless astonishment.

Talking of nuclear technology, especially a centrifuge assembly (with its protective covers and accessories) weighs several tons. If one or more of them could be secretly sold, so could other nuclear "assets". The fear of their falling into undesirable hands is therefore a reasonable proposition. And such hands can have more than one connotation or context. In addition to the terrorists buying the bomb or bombs from nuclear black marketeers, these could, and apparently did, go to other governments also that were intent on acquiring these fashionable weapons. After such a stunning development, which government can believe Islamabad's assertions of innocence; and such a loss of credibility is not easily made good.

But one is not so much concerned with the state or the government losing credibility and being embarrassed. The people of this country are now bewildered and feel betrayed that the supervision of the Army and the government in general was so lax as to permit such huge-scale pilferage. Also the

spectacle of those who were projected for so long and so much as national heroes stealing high value nuclear know-how and technology and selling them to either the new-found black market (underworld) or foreign governments for personal gain is traumatic. The thought that these gentlemen could be so un-patriotic as to amass crores of dollars in their foreign accounts, in addition to possessing massive amounts of real estate, at the cost of the nation is appalling and painful.

The rightwing, including the

already a marked man, with several attempts on his life having been made in the recent past. As one who still questions his legitimacy; he is forced to pray for his long life in office for the immediate future. The reason is the stern necessity as well as justification of his decisions that are being opposed by the rightwing. So long as his stature and legitimacy remain controversial, the national situation will remain vulnerable and dicey.

It is however still possible for him to acquire legitimacy. Stature is an ineffable phenomenon. It is

ing the Accountability Bureau in its tracks and for reorienting it; a general amnesty for all politics-related prisoners and detainees; and allowing PPP's and PML(N)'s leaders to return safely as a preliminary to forming a government of national consensus. Such a government, with all powers, is necessary to tackle the difficult situation facing the nation. If Mr. Musharraf lets such a government function freely and takes a dignified backseat, he would become a statesman after a while. One does not expect such a necessary change to take place. Army as the most

of ancillary to other issues. It must be coolly examined by keeping all pros and cons in view. One aspect can however be mentioned in passing. The idea of developing nuclear weapons in earnest had arisen after the 1971 defeat: two strands were woven into it: One was the notion that exigencies of Kashmir dispute will occasion a war with India which cannot be faced without having a nuclear deterrent. The second un-avowed idea was to get even with India somehow; the honour of Pak Army was tarnished by 1971 defeat; therefore, one way or another, the

scientists and engineers of KRL being made scapegoats. What foreign governments are likely to do now and later (after Pakistan's utility concerning Afghanistan is over) is anybody's guess.

But one guess can be made. Like many Pakistanis, the major powers, led by the US, will not close this account when Islamabad formally arrests these accused and tries them under the antiquated Official Secrets Act of 1923. They will want Pakistan to adequately atone for this offence of having actually proliferated the nuclear know-how and technology. It does not matter whether a few persons did it and remained uncaught until Iran blew the whistle or Islamabad officially did it. They will want to both punish Islamabad for this 'crime' as well as to plug all possibilities of repetition. Major powers can enforce such unbearable sanctions as may convince Islamabad that getting rid of this useless deterrent is necessary that is the cause of so much pain. Anyhow, the winning of the trust and goodwill of major powers will be difficult, not to mention the political cost to today's rulers. But having a national government and constitutional reforms would help in coping with the pressures.

Pakistan is in treacherous waters. Trying to be clever by half will have dangerous consequences. The safest course is to come clean with all the facts. Transparency should be the operative word. This hush-hush debriefing, with suggestions of usual military ham-handedness and political myopia, will not do. It is necessary to have a truly high-powered judicial commission to inquire into the whole affair. It should have the power to subpoena anyone, no matter who, or any document, no matter from which department. The inquiry should be open to foreign as well as local media. All those found guilty of conspiracy not only to sell the knowledge and technology for personal profit but also to knowingly indulge in nuclear proliferation need to be punished severely through due process of law.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

**PLAIN WORDS**

**Pakistan is in treacherous waters. Trying to be clever by half will have dangerous consequences. The safest course is to come clean with all the facts. Transparency should be the operative word. This hush-hush debriefing, with suggestions of usual military ham-handedness and political myopia, will not do. It is necessary to have a truly high-powered judicial commission to inquire into the whole affair. It should have the power to subpoena anyone, no matter who, or any document, no matter from which department.**

government's veritable ally the MMA, is going hammer and tong for the government being run by the Army chief. The campaign is however misconceived. Insofar as the specific decisions of Gen. Pervez Musharraf -- in taking two major U turns on Taliban and Kashmir's Jihad and now arresting the thieving nuclear scientists and their proposed trial - are concerned, they were simply unavoidable as well as right. Given the huge dimensions of these decisions and their suddenness, it can be said that the status and stature of the general was not equal to the big task. But this is now in the past tense; it is perhaps too late for him to acquire the requisite stature through legitimacy and experience.

This aspect of the matter is not unrelated to the rights and wrongs of what the international situation and pressures forced him to do, perhaps against his own inclination. Policy reversals of this order require a statesman with impeccable legitimacy. Otherwise, an unpredictable backlash from various opponents can build up over time. Now, Gen. Musharraf is

conferred on the beneficiary by common people on the basis of widely held perception that what he has done was right and the direction he gave the country was a history-making event. It can't be had by asking or buying or through mere propaganda. It is gained only by acting right and convincing others of it. A course can still be recommended through which legitimacy, a stern prerequisite for possible eventual stature, can be obtained.

Only two related steps are crucially important: first, let Mr. Musharraf withdraw his LFO along with National Security Council proposal as an earnest

of Army's withdrawal from politics; it will be credible after it has happened or when a change is seen: emergence of a truly autonomous PM with a non-rubber stamp Cabinet and a sovereign Parliament. Section 58(2)(b), the mother of all ills and the guarantee of Army's supremacy, must go forthwith and the President should be ready to do what Parliament may demand - after necessary measures of national reconciliation: arrest-

powerful political party with a stranglehold on power is unlikely to let go; it now needs so much of national resources that their availability requires its effective control over the government or its decision-making by one means or another to ensure a growing share for itself. If this remains true, none of what one has recommended here will be acceptable to the officer corps of the Army - and to Mr. Musharraf. In which case, nothing will change at Islamabad and its vulnerability to foreign pressures will grow. As will its loss of credibility. In the immediate future the determinant of all, or most, policies will remain foreign powers. One tends to feel totally helpless and forced to say what will be will be.

But one cannot stay silent, even though there is simply no effect of what one says. Two issues have come at the head of national agenda. One is the crucial question of the place of nuclear weapons in the so-called national security. The people should examine whether they promote Pakistan's security or detract from it. This matter cannot be tackled as a sort

bomb was to redeem this honour. Well, none of it is applicable after the experience of 2002's grand confrontation with India, the sequel to which crisis was the joint statement of Jan 6 this year and the paradigm shift that has been forced on this country. The bomb is now irrelevant to either Kashmir or to the relations with India in general.

The second major issue is immediate. It is by no means simply a question of half a dozen or so scientists, engineers and an odd administrator of KRL having stolen crucially-important technology and selling it along with their knowledge abroad. No one has accepted this account in Pakistan. Nor will anyone abroad be satisfied with this narrative. Everyone knows that the security surrounding KRL personnel was provided by the Army and it was said to have been many-layered. So many and such criminal activities over a fair amount of time could not have taken place without some involvement of high-ups, indeed very high-ups. The crisis that has hit Islamabad is neither simple nor short-term. There is already an uproar in the country against a few

**OPINION**

**Martyrs of a different kind**

ANGELA ROBINSON

**T**HOSE of us in the business of preparing the next generation for its future life (I guess that goes for most of us, actually) are naturally concerned about role-models. I am concerned lest the word 'martyrs' gets taken over entirely by those who died in war or in revolution -- or (as in the tragic plane crash that killed those peace-keepers) in the course of their armed service. Of course such men and women must be honoured. I have been taking Remembrance Day services for 25 years in the UK, and led two here at one of the Commonwealth Graveyards so please don't accuse me of going soft on war! But I wonder if we can widen the concept of 'martyrs for Bangladesh'.

I started making a list of them about four years ago -- but it got too long. Recently, we think of Manik Saha and other journalists. Then there was Johnny Haq, murdered by those he rebuked for persistently harassing his two sisters as they went to and from their school and several village guards, who did their job well -- and were murdered. I think of a little tea-stall worker who refused to sell drugs for a gang and paid for it with his life -- and so we could go on.

Why should not the idea gain ground that a list of such people (maybe just those dead in the past year or having special local meaning) should be read out, every year, at the local war memorial, great or small, on February 21st? Painful listening but why not? The unspoken message would be eloquent. Would it not place before the public ear and eye the disapproval of people of prestige and repute against those who perpetrate such crimes and make clear that these deaths must be publicly acknowledged and grieved? Moreover, by publicly declaring that these people also are 'martyrs', we are collectively resolving that their deaths should not be in vain. Would that not send a clear message, on behalf of the silent majority, that they are on the side of those who face evil with good and who risk -- and pay -- the price?

Of course, it would take courage, but how do you think any society becomes law-abiding -- or relatively so? History tells us that it takes a massive, and persistent, collective effort to break the control of local thugs and 'barons' of all kinds -- including the powers of the state, when it behaves no better than such. Law and order does not drop out of the sky nor does it come automatically with growing wealth. It has to be fought for, in peace-time as well as war and, very often, standing up for what is right, among your

neighbours and on your street, demands more courage than taking to the streets in a crowd or going to war. But how will Bangladesh win through to peace and prosperity except via those prepared to risk sacrifice as in every other country?

The breakdown of law and order is beginning to have a paralysing effect. Acts of Remembrance for a wider range of the fallen in the struggle to true independence might be the sort of collective action that could help to keep fear at bay, steady the nerves and encourage united and effective action. Without a radical change of heart and attitude, reforms in the law and its systems, courts and enforcement agencies are merely re-arranging the deck-chairs on the 'Titanic'. Moreover, the young people of the next generation -- our most precious resource -- need role-models out of the real world. I fear that some of them may be getting the idea that living in the Millennium means knowing how to play computer games and wear designer clothes. We need to equip them to be strong people in a difficult world and have to be a great deal more creative in our ideas and more dedicated about putting them into action, if we are going to give them a reason for living in a way that will truly serve their country.

So, if this idea is no good, what's yours?

**HIV/AIDS, trafficking and SAARC**

UMMEE SAILA

**S**OUTH Asia is a densely populated region. Majority of the 1.4 billion people of this area poor and illiterate. Living standard and per capita income are very low. Poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, lack of awareness about health, sanitation and pure water are a common scenario in this part of the world. The status of women and the condition of children are not sound at all. One estimation shows that over the last 30 years trafficking for sexual exploitation alone has violated some 30 million Asian women and children. Every year one to two million people are trafficked worldwide of which 225,000 are from South Asia. Unfortunately trafficking of children and women is a 'profitable' trade in South Asia. The demands behind this human trade are prostitution, camel race, organ transplant, domestic work, forced labour, drug smuggling, begging, forced marriage and other exploitative works.

HIV/AIDS which is now a major obsta-

cle to the social and economic progress could become a curse for the region. UNAID at the end of 2001 estimated that 4.1 million people were already living with HIV/AIDS in South Asia. India with 3.97 million people living with HIV is second only to South Africa in the total number of people infected.

SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) was formed in 1985 to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia, to improve their quality of life, to accelerate economic growth, and their social progress and cultural development. We are proud to say that the idea of regional cooperation was first proposed by Bangladesh in 1980. Twelfth summit of the head of the governments of SAARC member countries Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives took place from 4 to 6 January, 2004. This union is considered most successful in the history of SAARC.

The outcome of this conference are: 1) Islamabad declaration; 2) Social Charter;

3) Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA); 4) Additional Protocol to SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism Social Charter consisted of thirteen points. This charter discussed about women empowerment, ensuring congenial atmosphere for children, removing illiteracy, eliminating tuberculosis, stopping environmental destruction, ascertaining health care to all etc. Two major decisions like stopping women and children trafficking and spread of AIDS were also taken in this meeting.

If all the member countries are sincere enough to cooperate among themselves, they can create awareness against HIV and human trade. Most of the illiterate people of the region are unaware about how easily HIV virus can infect people and what are the easy steps which can stop the spread of AIDS. We hope all the heads of the government of SAARC can realise the strength of cooperation and unite in the true sense to eliminate all the social curse from this region.