

## Indo-Pak dialogue off to a good start

### No looking back from here

BY past standards, it would almost seem like a miracle having happened between India and Pakistan. But not so in the atmospherics of congeniality both sides have carefully nurtured in the recent months for turning a table on their hostile relationship. New Delhi and Islamabad have announced the basic roadmap for a goal-oriented peace process to ensue between them.

The frame-work of a dialogue adopted after three days of official level talks in Islamabad envisages a series of meetings over the next six months. The foreign secretaries are to meet again in May or June to herald the 'composite dialogue.' Then the foreign ministers meet in August to review the progress made in the FS level talks with Kashmir and nuclear security issues topping the agenda.

In chronological -- or shall we say clinical -- terms, the latest initiative takes up where the two countries left off when a composite dialogue over some eight issues ran aground in 1999. This was to eventually collapse at a summit in Agra in July 2001. But there is more to it; the present initiative represents a fresh bid for peace swathed in a new realisation that they are too fatigued with hostilities to be only craving for a break. More so, when they have turned nuclear with all the attendant dangers to their security.

We are looking forward to a speedy resolution of their disputes culminating in an era of durable peace between the two hitherto inimical countries. We take heart in the fact that they have expressed a genuine intent to take the peace-process forward as reflected by their cautious avoidance of past pitfalls. It's heartening to note that the momentum generated by the last month's meeting between Mosharraf and Vajpayee has only been furthered. There has been no let-up in that basic build-up process.

Still, it is only a start and 'the hard part is yet to come'. The attitude they have shown to come to terms with each other needs to be sustained.

## Train blast in Iran

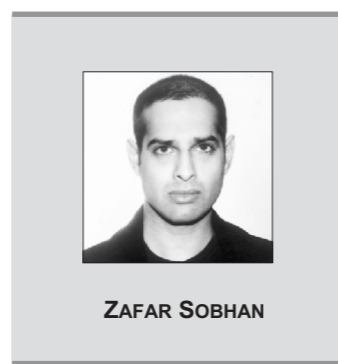
### Iranians must stick together in such trying times

A country that is still reeling under the shock and devastation of a severe earthquake that killed almost 40, 000 people, would definitely find it more than difficult to cope with another disaster caused by a freak accident. The death toll is rising from the scene of the train derailment and subsequent explosions that shook the surrounding areas of Neyshabur town which incidentally is the home town of great Persian poet Omar Khayyam. Our heart goes out to all those who lost their lives and got injured in the blasts. We express our deep sympathy and condolences to the family members of the bereaved.

An accident which causes widespread devastation and loss of innocent lives is unfortunate. That's why the burning question in cases like the one in Iran would be whether such freak accidents could have been avoided. Questions are likely to be raised about how such a volatile and deadly mix of materials could have been transported in the same convoy without adequate precautions. According to Iranian TV, the train -- which included 17 wagons of sulphur, six wagons of petrol, seven wagons of fertilisers and 10 wagons of cotton wool -- broke loose from a station and rolled about 20km. Then they derailed and caught fire followed by huge explosions. Anyone surviving such a huge flame of fire would have to be extremely lucky.

As it has been reported, some 200 firefighters were not so lucky and perished while doing their professional duties. The Iranians must not lose strength in the face of ordeals -- natural or manmade. We know that coping with two huge and deadly disasters in two months is not an easy task, but people of Iran should be able to draw strength from the Bam earthquake experience and hold on to each other to face the latest tragedy.

# Blues for Bush



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE new year has not been kind to US President George W. Bush, and it is possible that the tide has finally begun to turn against him. A recent *Time*/CNN poll revealed that fully 55 per cent of the American public have reservations as to his trustworthiness. The same poll put him only two percentage points ahead of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, the front-runner for the Democratic nomination, in a head-to-head match up for the presidency, and other polls have shown him trailing Kerry by as much as six points.

That poll showing that a majority of Americans no longer consider Bush trustworthy is enormously significant. This is the man, after all, who campaigned on the promise that he would "restore honour and dignity to the White House." Paul Krugman has been penning devastating pieces in the *New York Times* on a weekly basis, detailing the mendacity and dishonesty of the Bush administration, but, astonishing though this may sound to the rest of the world, until very recently, most Americans continued to consider Bush honest and trustworthy, and it was this belief in his fundamental decency that formed the basis for his popularity.

It was this perception that allowed Bush to escape responsibility for the continuing economic downturn. It was this perception that allowed Bush to exploit the fear

and hatred generated by 9/11 to persuade the US public to support the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. It was this perception that allowed Bush to escape unscathed from one fiasco after another.

The one-two punch of cashiered Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's tell-all memoir, in which he revealed Bush was as incompetent and mendacious as his political adversaries have long maintained, and the bombshell admission by chief weapons inspector David Kay that Saddam Hussein did not possess

and influential out of Vietnam (other members of the unit included the sons of Texas Senators Lloyd Bentsen and John Connolly and several members of the Dallas Cowboys football team) has, perhaps unsurprisingly considering their cravenness, never been considered particularly newsworthy by the US press corps. Bush has never been excoriated for ducking out of fighting a war he professed to support, though, of course, the press corps famously raked Bill Clinton over the coals in 1992 for

untrustworthy is significant.

Whether the matter of Bush's national guard service will ever be satisfactorily resolved remains unclear. But there is no question that the resurrection of the issue has cast Bush in a poor light, specially in comparison to Kerry, who opposed the Vietnam war but fought anyway out of a sense of duty to his country, and was decorated for extreme gallantry in the face of the enemy.

Bush's teflon is beginning to wear off. Due to the lessening of his credibility, charges that would

be anything wrong with abortion, but if this allegation proves to be true (and it certainly looks like Flynt has the goods), it once again demonstrates the depths of Bush's hypocrisy and mendacity, and will inflict devastating damage to him with his hard-right core constituency which considers abortion a mortal sin.

But it would be a mistake to count Bush out quite yet. The administration controls the news cycle and so it should not be hard for them to manufacture a couple of months of positive news in the run-up to the

he had had an affair with a young AP reporter. A doctored photograph showing Kerry sharing a stage with Jane Fonda at an anti-war rally in the 1970s received prominent coverage by the major news publications before it was discovered that the picture was a fake. The Bush administration has already signaled that it intends to use Kerry's founding of the anti-war group Vietnam Veterans Against the War, to try to depict Kerry as an anti-American peacenik, his Purple Hearts and Silver Star notwithstanding.

Kerry for his part, though he has yet to sew up the Democratic nomination, and is facing a surprisingly formidable challenge from Edwards now that Howard Dean has dropped out of the race, is made of stern stuff and welcomes the challenge. To reports that the Republicans plan to spend millions attacking his liberal voting record in the Senate, his opposition to the Vietnam war, and what critics contend is his equivocal and uncertain vision of American foreign policy and the US role on the world stage, Kerry has three words which he believes that the Bush administration understands very well: "Bring it on!"

It has long been apparent that the 2004 US Presidential elections are the most crucial to ever have been held in that republic. Never before has so much been at stake, both for the American public and for the world. Never before have two such starkly contrasting visions of what America should stand for both at home and abroad been in the balance. In this context, the recent signs that the shine is finally wearing off of Bush's presidency and that he is vulnerable against either John Kerry or John Edwards, are noteworthy. Come November, the US is going to have a real election on its hands. If you thought that the 2000 presidential election was ugly, you haven't seen anything yet.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

It has long been apparent that the 2004 US Presidential elections are the most crucial to ever have been held in that republic. Never before has so much been at stake, both for the American public and for the world. Never before have two such starkly contrasting visions of what America should stand for both at home and abroad been in the balance. In this context, the recent signs that the shine is finally wearing off of Bush's presidency and that he is vulnerable against either John Kerry or John Edwards, are noteworthy.

weapons of mass destruction, appear to finally, at long last, have shaken the American public's misplaced and mystifying faith in their president's credibility.

Now that Bush's defences have been breached, everything is on the table. The last couple of weeks have swirled with the resurrection of the story that Bush went AWOL from his national guard unit in 1972-1973 and never satisfactorily completed his tour of duty.

Bush's national guard service record has always been questionable, but the US media has, by and large, never pursued the matter as diligently as they would have had Bush been a Democrat. The fact that Bush received preferential treatment to be admitted into a unit of the Texas National Guard that operated as a sort of underground railroad to keep the sons of the rich

ducking out of fighting a war he did not support.

That Bush apparently never even bothered to finish his national guard tour of duty has long been public knowledge, but it is only recently that the media has begun to focus on the issue and give Bush a hard time about it. The evidence is sketchy -- a sort of Rorschach test for how you view Bush.

To supporters of Bush, the incomplete records indicate that there is no evidence Bush did not fulfil his duties. To those who consider Bush dishonest and untrustworthy, the lack of available documentation suggests equally clearly that his guard record has been scrubbed, that he did not complete his service as required, and that there may be even more damning evidence of misconduct hidden beneath the surface. This is why the number of Americans who now consider Bush

previously have slipped off him are now beginning to stick. The American public is growing increasingly weary of his rosy speeches on economic recovery which are so starkly at odds with the facts before their face. Americans are now no longer willing to accept the administration's bald-faced deceptions about matters such as the economy, the ballooning deficit, the irresponsible and deceitful budgets which do not include the billions needed for post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

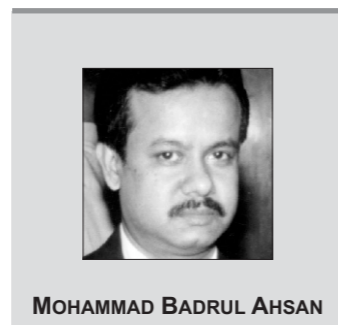
The latest blow to Bush comes from *Hustler* magazine publisher Larry Flynt, who claims that he has rock-solid and irrefutable evidence that Bush paid for a girlfriend's abortion in 1970s (back when abortion was illegal in the state of Texas). This is not to say that there

election in November. The capture of Osama bin Laden would alone most likely propel Bush to victory in November.

Bush has amassed a formidable campaign war-chest which he will use to try to paint John Kerry as an unreconstructed Massachusetts liberal with no political convictions (the fact that these two charges are mutually exclusive never seems to deter Republicans who unsuccessfully tried to use the same tactics with Bill Clinton) or to paint North Carolina Senator John Edwards (if he wins the nomination) as a greedy trail lawyer (Edwards made millions in private practice suing doctors and HMOs who negligently destroying people's lives) who is too callow and inexperienced for the presidency.

The negative campaigning has already begun. Last week Kerry was forced to deny the rumour that

# A death on the road



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HIS son died in the middle of the road, just about where the manhole sat like a belly button. He surveyed the spot from the shoulder of the road, squatting on the slope of a concrete block like a brooding bird, balancing his weight with the umbrella stumped on the ground. The road has got new carpeting, shining in its stretch like the taut and sleek hide of a fattened animal. A new divider ran in the middle like the spine of a reptile and encroached upon a portion of where his son lay soaked in blood many years ago.

The road has grown busier over the years, more cars plying on it than before and more people crossing it from one side to another. He sat on the concrete block and counted that at least two hundred people must have crossed the road in the past half an hour. His son died in this concourse of life like a drop spilled from a bucket of water.

The words of the village Imam rang in his ears like the sound of a

distant bell. It was God's wish to send his son to this world and it was God's wish to take him back. Why would God have the cruel wish to take away the jewel of a man's eye? It was easy for others to comfort him, because there is no pain for someone who doesn't get hurt. He took his eyes off the road for a moment and looked at the gray sunny sky, as if to see if God was paying attention to his thoughts. The concrete block wobbled in the force of distraction before he quickly

buried their fathers in peacetime, while fathers buried sons during war. As he sat on the shoulder of the road where his son died like a crushed pumpkin, his head cracked open like smashed porcelain, he realised that his life had been nothing but a war. He has lived in the minefield of memories, bruised by explosions that crippled him every day. There is no prosthetics for a man, who is torn by his memories, haunted by the ghost of a fond wish that was not going to happen.

youth shone like the calm light of the morning sun.

Ever since he received the wrecked body of his son from the hospital morgue, he has lived in the desolation of a tree that has lost its fruits. The shroud, which covered the body, had patches of red on it, looking as if it was a gift, which was wrapped by the clumsy hands of a paint worker. He thought every inch of the way to the village that the soul of his son had gone home in a hurry, and he needed to take the body to

darkness. He thought of his son throughout the night, the broken body buried under the earth like a hidden treasure. His wife fainted many times, insisting, whenever she regained her senses, to dig out the body from the grave so that she could look at her son for one last time.

He picked up the hem of his shirt and wiped his tears, which blinded his eyes with the vapours of sorrow that rose from the secret chambers of his heart. The concrete block

learned to accept his fate and prepared to die. But he has spent a good part of life looking for what was missing, a sense of loss etched in his bones by an accident right here in the middle of this road.

Every time he comes to visit this place, he goes back with the fear that he might not return again. His son came here once and never went home, and the reverse might happen to him. One day he would go back home, and not come back. Will anybody think of him like he has been thinking of his son? Will anybody miss him after he was gone?

He looked at the road, and thought all his hopes were crushed here. His wife was never the same after that shock and she died five years later. He has lived alone since then, facing each day as it came. He never wanted to marry again, never had the courage to covet and love because he was afraid to lose again.

A bus pulled in on the other side of the road as a scuffle broke out at one of its doors, choked by people who were struggling to get in as well as to get out. The concrete block moved again as he felt a little tension inside him. What was the big rush for those people, he asked himself. Where do they think they are going after all? Hasn't his son gone there already?

Life was an accident every minute, he thought before he fell down from the concrete block.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

Every time he comes to visit this place, he goes back with the fear that he might not return again. His son came here once and never went home, and the reverse might happen to him. One day he would go back home, and not come back. Will anybody think of him like he has been thinking of his son? Will anybody miss him after he was gone? He looked at the road, and thought all his hopes were crushed here.

regained his balance.

He wondered if the monstrous bus, which ran over his son, was still running on the road. Was the driver still alive after so many years? The boy would have been forty today, if he were living, a stout pillar, who could support the dwindling world of his aging father. The concrete block trembled again as his body jolted in the gust of tears.

His son returned from college one afternoon and told him he had learned something funny in the class. The teacher said that sons

How much he has wished that his son were alive! Every time he saw a young man, every time he saw a father with his son, every time he went to a wedding, he wished his son were alive. Every time he saw a man playing with his grandchildren, he thought of his son. Every time he thought of the future, fell sick, rode a bus, walked on a carpeted road, he thought of him. Every time he heard the screeching sound of a car coming to a halt, a shriek of pain, or news of an accident, he remembered the face of his son where the vigour of

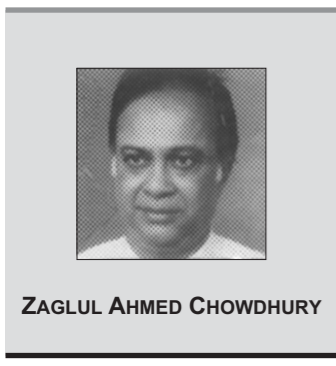
his son so that he could live again. He repeatedly asked the driver of the minibus to drive slowly, so that jerks and bumps wouldn't take it apart.

Until the body was lowered in the grave and covered with earth, he was convinced that the soul would come back to it any moment and his son was going to spring up on his feet again, asking his mother to serve dinner. It was a night of the new moon, when he returned from the graveyard and the entire village had slipped under a dense layer of

quavered again, and he tightened his grip on the umbrella to keep him from rolling down the slope. The sun was now hanging over his head and the road was steaming in the scorching heat as its surface started to melt.

Why did his life have to turn out like this, having the resounding void of a midday spell? He remembered what was gone and pined for it for a number of years, arriving at the end of his own life. Old age was meant for reconciliation, for coming to terms with life when at long last man

# How much dent the opposition can cause to ruling NDA domination ?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE sound and fury of electioneering in world's largest democracy India is very much palpable. The lower house (Lok Sabha) has been dissolved as a logical corollary to the unexpected success in the state assembly polls by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main partner of the national democratic alliance (NDA), the rainbow coalition that has been in control of the country for the last more than four years.

Earlier the BJP had lost ground substantially in several states raising prospects of a return to power at the centre by the main opposition Congress. But the latest in the series of the Vidhansabha polls reversed the trend since the BJP took control of two key states -- Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan belying predictions. Furthermore,

the range of its victory in both the states has been remarkably wide pushing the party there in power, Congress, to a humiliating defeat. However, Congress managed to retain power in Delhi which came as a consolation for the India's oldest political organisation.

It is the success of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan that has changed the political map of India as far as the next national elections are concerned. The party leadership was earlier favourably disposed to holding polls on schedule, which is later this year. But the outcome of the state assembly voting made the BJP leaders sit up and take a new look on the election timing as they felt early polls would help the party and the NDA since it can cash in on the mood reflected in the state elections. The differences within the BJP notwithstanding, the party opted for advancing the process of hustling. The dissolution of the Lok Sabha was only a matter of time and specific dates for the coming polls were being considered at the time of writing this piece.

Political parties have swung in electioneering and are busy in evolving their strategies. Not unexpectedly, polarisation is taking place among the political forces centering the coming national polls, and new alignments are shaping up. Major parties are looking for new allies while some hitherto known partners are deserting old camps. Indeed,

this is the typical scenario in a multi-party democracy and more so in a country like India where coalition politics has become the order of the day since no single party is capable of capturing power by its own strength.

One interesting alliance that has already been forged is the seat sharing arrangement between the

ally not long ago, has forged electoral understanding with the Congress of the Sonia Gandhi.

Many other alliances or understandings are in the offing while smaller parties are weighing pros and cons before taking a decision. Some are still ambivalent. The Samajwadi Party of chief minister Mulyam Singh Yadav in key Uttar

## MATTERS AROUND US

The success of the opposition... lies in their ability to forge alliance among the secular and regional parties most of whom are called as third front. If the Congress and the third force can avoid split of votes in most of the constituencies, this may put the NDA in a difficult situation. However, so far little has been achieved in this direction and the task is proving daunting.

BJP and the AIDMK in the southern Tamil Nadu state. AIDMK supremo Jayaram Jayalalitha was once an ally of prime minister Vajpayee's BJP but fell apart before the last general elections. In fact, it was Jayalalitha's desertion from the NDA that had triggered the fall of the NDA government necessitating snap polls. However, the NDA returned to power with bigger majority. Now AIDMK has gone to BJP's fold once again while its rival in the state DMK of Karunanidhi, an NDA

Pradesh seems too cautious in reaching any arrangement in the coming polls. He says his party would not align itself with any party. However, it is possible that Singh may change strategy depending on the conditions that would prevail just before the filing of nominations. All these are normal features of electoral milieu in Asian democracies where political organisations are galore even if main platforms may be restricted to two or three parties or groups.

has completed a full term in the office. If the polls have been advanced by a few months, it is not by any compulsion or problem but by own choice of the ruling alliance and hence it is being described as completion of the term. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was twice premier before - first, only for twelve days of a BJP government and later had to quit office halfway through the term as NDA coalition head of the government. This time he and his government faced no major problem, let

However, the Congress and other opposition parties have to produce extra bounce and accuracy. The predictions have not always been correct as evidenced from the recent state assembly voting when Congress and the BJP were seen as neck-and-neck by media in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. But the result was a near landslide for the BJP. There is no reason that an easy BJP-led alliance victory should be taken as granted although the omens are positive for it. Many

calculations may get shattered and developments leading to the polls may work decisively in determining the outcome. Congress lost in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan because of anti-incumbency mood as it was in power in both the states. The BJP is in power at the centre and it may face similar situation.

However, it is true that a good economy, foreign policy success with two major neighbours Pakistan and China, a relatively better law and order situation and finally a charismatic leader despite his failing health at the head of the government have placed the ruling alliance at comfortable condition. Undoubtedly Vajpayee is the main strength of the BJP and the NDA who helped them come to power earlier and will play a similar role this time too. The headline communal force in the BJP often mounts pressure on the government for following a Hindu line but Vajpayee, seen as a liberal, has succeeded in confronting this and in the process gained greater acceptability of people. However, he also at times blows hot and cold on issues like "Ram Janmabhumi" obviously to keep the zealots pacified. A liberal image of the main leader will help NDA in the polls.

On the other hand, Congress is handicapped by the "foreign origin" issue of its leader Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, who is fighting a tough

battle as most Indians are believed to be unwilling to see a "fundamentally non-Indian" as prime minister. To offset this situation, Congress is drafting her and late Rajiv Gandhi's son and daughter into politics keeping an eye on the coming polls. At least one senior BJP leader, Promod Mahajan, has questioned their credentials as "true Indians" as their mother is a "foreigner". While a virulent attack on Sonia may not be unwise for those people, he asked Priyanka as "foreigners" may be counter-productive.

The success of the opposition also lies in their ability to forge alliance among the secular and regional parties most of whom are called as third front. If the Congress and the third force can avoid split of votes in most of the constituencies, this may put the NDA in a difficult situation. However, so far little has been achieved in this direction and the task is proving daunting. Unquestionably, the NDA is approaching the polls with an easy condition but no wave exists as some would like to see an "Atal or Vajpayee wave" sweeping Indian electoral scene. The ability of the contending parties to reach out to the voters and successfully taking on opponent's citadels would be crucial and mood of the electorate may swing sides to the line-up of the polls.

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