

Journalists coming under increasing wrath

We condemn JCD's treatment of media professionals

JOURNALISTS, photojournalists in particular, while covering campus events, have been routinely at the receiving end of Police-JCD wrath. This is outrageous, alarming and simply not acceptable any more. They came under the attack while collecting news of the unprovoked attack on common students by the police and cadres of Chhatra Dal at Dhaka University campus on Wednesday. The Chhatra Dal cadres not only seriously injured the photojournalist of Prothom Alo, Firoze Choudhury and staff correspondent of Ajker Kagoj, Moinul Haq Choudhury, they even had the audacity to misbehave with other journalists and order them to leave the campus.

Much as the leaders of Chhatra Dal tried to deny they were involved in the attacks, accounts of witnesses conveyed a different impression. We want to know why the journalists were prohibited from either taking pictures or collecting news during the atrocious attacks on common students? If Chhatra Dal had nothing to hide, then why did they pounce on the journalists so ruthlessly? The journalists were simply doing their job. This was a clear illustration of attempting to sweep things under the carpet and that also by use of force. How can we allow such preposterous attitude in a free democratic society? The government has pledged to investigate any excessive action against the students on the part of the police on Wednesday, though unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, there has been no comment from the government about taking steps against those who attacked the journalists.

Attack on journalists is not a new phenomenon in our country. We can cite the recent murder of fearless journalist of Khulna, Manik Saha in this respect. In fact reporters in the mufassils have always been working under threats. However what's been alarming is the ascending order of such threats. And now with the rising temperature in the political arena, the journalists are set to be under further similar threats. We fail to understand why can they not take note of the inadequacies and wrongdoings that we reveal in our reports and take steps accordingly, instead of attacking us? Let us do our jobs without any fear of reprisal.

Kerry wraps it up

Let the US presidential campaign begin

WITH sweeping victories in the Super Tuesday primaries followed by the withdrawal from the race of his sole remaining credible challenger, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry is now the presumptive Democratic nominee for president. Kerry's wrapping up of the nomination ushers in a welcome eight-month debate with the incumbent president about the direction in which the US is going and its relation to the rest of the world.

The last three years have demonstrated to the world quite clearly what George W. Bush's vision for the US is. From this vantage point, Bush's vision does not look too appealing. In terms of domestic policy, Bush's tenure seems to have little to recommend it. The US economy has performed poorly under his stewardship and all policy decisions appear to have been subordinated to political calculation.

Internationally, US unilateralism coupled with a healthy contempt for the opinion of the world community seems to have been the hallmark of the Bush administration. This approach reached its apotheosis in his decision to invade and occupy Iraq in the teeth of world opinion. Most distressing of all, has been the deception and mendacity that has characterised the administration's approach to policy-making.

It is thus to be applauded that the Democrats have succeeded in putting up what looks to be a credible challenger who will provide the voters with a clear alternative.

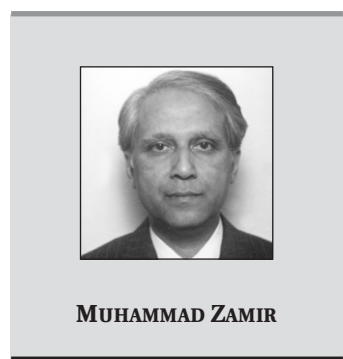
Kerry is a decorated war-hero. He is smart, dignified, and thoughtful, and has shown that he is not lacking in political skill. As a long-time Senator and member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he has the experience and the expertise that will be necessary to shepherd the US through the difficult days that doubtless lie ahead. He is, in every way, presidential.

Kerry provides an alternative vision of what the US should be for those Americans who are unhappy with their present leadership.

"George Bush has run the most arrogant, inept, reckless and ideological foreign policy in the modern history of our country," he said in a major address this week, "In a Kerry Administration, we will rejoin the community of nations and begin a proud new chapter in America's leadership in the world."

In November, the US electorate will have the opportunity to make a real and meaningful choice as to the kind of future they envision for themselves and the world. The serious debate on two such opposed visions that lies ahead will be good for the US and for the rest of the world, too.

The Israeli barrier and the future of Palestine



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

DISTURBING reports continue to emerge from Palestine and its Occupied Territories. Recent United Nations estimates indicate that more than 200,000 Palestinians are already suffering the humanitarian consequences of the separation Barrier that Israel is building in the West Bank.

Legality with regard to the construction of such a Barrier is currently the subject of judicial scrutiny by the International Court of Justice at The Hague. The Barrier is expected to eventually stretch more than 728 km by the time it is completed at the end of next year. The 180 km segment completed so far -- a montage of razor wire, electronic fencing, concrete and ditches -- has cut off villages from markets, medical services and schools in the northern West Bank. This has been particularly true of the areas around the town of Qalqilya, where villages are severed from the main social, education, economic and health service centers as a result of the 25 feet wall which encircles this town.

It has also resulted in the confiscation of more than 2,850 acres of privately -- owned Palestinian land and in the destruction of 102,320 trees. These statistics have been made available by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

This land, which employs one quarter of the population there, is some of the West Bank's most fertile. Some Civil Society Representatives have pointed out that the average yield of this area is around 900,000 US dollars per square kilometre, more than double the amount from other areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Barrier is also limiting

access to water in an area whose wells are some of the best of the western aquifer. It is estimated that by the time the proposed barrier is completed, it will affect nearly 40,000 acres of 'high income' Palestinian land.

The fact that any judicial hearing is taking place at all, is itself a miracle of sorts. The hearing has been instituted on the request of the United Nations General Assembly which has demanded that the Court give a

to debate' on the issue of the Barrier as it touches on 'Israel's basic right to self-defence.' Irit Kahan, an official from the office of Israel's State Prosecution also mentioned that the hearing was more of a political event that lacked juridical import.

Recently, on 18 February, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) came out with a statement that Israel's controversial West Bank barrier was a violation of international

responsibilities in the world today is that of the Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei. In more ways than one, he is being asked to walk on water. Such a feat is probably being thought of as probable as it was done once before nearly two thousand years ago.

Mr Qurei's many pleas appear to be falling on deaf ears. Mr Sharon has apparently proposed that he is willing to remove 17 of the 21 settlements in the Gaza

by the Quartet. This, I think, will encourage the peace process.

Secretary General Kofi Annan of the UN has correctly reacted to Israel's new proposal. He has pointed out that Israel would have to return land to the Palestinians in order to achieve peace and 'pulling out of the Gaza Strip would not be enough.'

I was talking a few days ago with Professor David B Burrell, the Head of the Faculty of Philosophy

Recent exchange of prisoners between Israel and Hizbullah have afforded the world a chink of light and suggested fresh windows of opportunity. It is true that the deal was long expected and took three years of haggling. However, at the end of the day, it did take place.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom has last week 'categorically rejected' the deployment of an international peace keeping force in the Gaza Strip after Israel evacuates most of the settlements there. He feels that this might lead to the internationalisation of the conflict. This is very difficult to understand given the fact that we are all talking of occupation and disregard of United Nations Security Council Resolutions. Such a track is also contrary to the welcome views of former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, who stated on 24 February that Israel has no moral claim to occupied territory or to Gaza and must give up every inch of the territories. In this context, he has made a significant observation -- "if you keep ten per cent of the land, you keep hundred per cent of the conflict."

It is being anticipated that the Arab countries might relaunch, with greater details, Saudi Crown Prince's peace plan, very soon. It is anticipated that the new offering will include more specific guarantees of security and formal acceptance in order to tempt Israel. It might also incorporate some of the elements that have been recently aired in the so-called Geneva accord, signed by left-of-centre Israelis and some senior Palestinians. Let us see what happens. In the meantime, the Palestinian Authority should also take more effective measures to stop attacks on unarmed Israeli civilians.

I would like to conclude today by recalling the views of the great Martin Luther King Jr. who sensibly, three and a half decades ago, pointed out that "the solution will have to be found in statesmanship by Israel and progressive Arab forces who, in concert with the great powers, recognise that fair and peaceful solutions are the concern of all of humanity."

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

It is being anticipated that the Arab countries might relaunch, with greater details, Saudi Crown Prince's peace plan, very soon. It is anticipated that the new offering will include more specific guarantees of security and formal acceptance in order to tempt Israel. It might also incorporate some of the elements that have been recently aired in the so-called Geneva accord, signed by left-of-centre Israelis and some senior Palestinians.

ruling as to whether Israel is legally obliged to tear down this Barrier. It is understood that the Arab League has been given necessary permission to take part in the proceedings in support of the Palestinians. One wonders why the Organisation of the Islamic Conference has not been as pro-active as it should have been.

Initially, the United States had raised concerns about the route being followed by the Barrier. However, when it came to a crunch, they appear to have faltered along with the European Union in their resolve. The US filed a brief with the ICJ saying that the UN referral could damage Middle East peace efforts and set a dangerous precedent. The US explained that the referral was inappropriate and could impede efforts to achieve progress towards a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. This approach would have made some sense if the US Government had persuaded the Israeli authorities to seriously start dismantling illegal settlements and put on hold the construction of the Barrier. Unfortunately, US abilities to persuade Israel appear to be limited given the fact that it is an election year in Washington.

Israel also submitted a declaration to the court on 30 January which stated that the court 'does not have the authority

humanitarian law in its current form. They have drawn the attention of the world to the fact that the barrier bars thousands of Palestinian residents, stranded on its western side, from adequate access to many basic services. They believe that the Barrier, in as far as its route deviates from the 'Green Line' into occupied territory, is contrary to law. In this context, the ICRC has also indicated that while it recognised the right of Israel to defend the security of its population, it felt that any such Barrier should be moved back to the Green Line -- the boundary before Israel seized the West Bank in the 1967 Middle East War. This, according to them, 'would solve many of the problems' as far as they were concerned. They have also reiterated and reminded Israel that such a Barrier would 'run counter to Israel's obligation... to ensure the humane treatment and well-being of the civilian population living under its occupation.' There is a lot of merit in the observations made by the ICRC. What the ICRC is talking about is a need by Israel to stop further humiliation of an already oppressed, poverty-stricken people. What they are reminding the Quartet (the US, the EU, the UN and Russia) is the need to restore the dignity of the Palestinian population.

One of the most difficult

strip. He has however not clarified what he intends to do about the other settlements in the Occupied Territories. He has also not denied concerns that this unilateral move in Gaza would not be followed by strengthening of other settlements in the West Bank. This situation reminds me of the proverbial problem of a snail climbing a greased pole, gaining one foot in the first minute and then losing two feet in the subsequent minute.

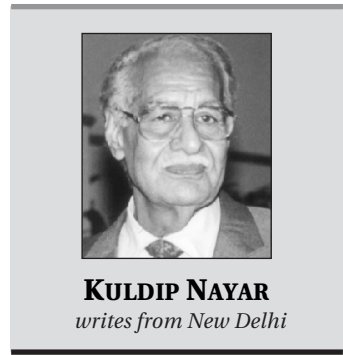
In the meantime, Mr Nabil Shaath, the Palestinian leader has made an interesting observation. He has suggested that the current leadership in Israel is being emboldened to test waters in its own way because of the prevailing situation on the ground. In this context he has drawn attention to the fact that the US is presently distracted from the peace process by various factors -- the upcoming presidential elections and troubles in Iraq. He feels that this equation is not only reducing the US attention span with regard to Palestine, but also affecting chances of serious progress of the road map. As such, he has urged Japan and other US allies to get more involved in the stalled Middle East peace process. This is a good idea. For the first time Japan is directly involved in the Middle East. That country has an important stake in that region and should really be brought on board

and Theology of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA. He was in Dhaka to attend an important function of the Jesuit Community. He is also associated with the Tantur Ecumenical Institute of Jerusalem. We had an interesting discussion about the Israeli perception of the problem and also about greater peace and security for the troubled region. He said something significant. He wished that Israel instead of always wanting to own land would associate itself with the idea of belonging to the land and the region. This he left would advance inter-faith understanding. He is a wise teacher.

I am an inveterate optimist. It is true that there is a 'bloody stalemate' between Israel and the Palestinians, but there is also hope. Love and peace might not break out this Spring in the troubled region, but the important fact is that the two sides are thinking of talking.

In this pursuit of peace, Israel has the major responsibility. It will not be enough to announce that Israel is going to tear down a small section of the controversial Barrier or that it might re-route some of the Barrier or that it will stage an alternative Barrier hearing. That is a public relations exercise and a superficial effort to score points. Israel through concrete action must strengthen the hands of Prime Minister Qurei.

Muslims' dilemma before elections



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

MUSLIMS in India number between 130 and 140 million. But they are spread in such a way that if they want to elect members of their own community, they can at best win 10 to 12 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha. However, the 13 per cent of their vote can tip the scales in some 100 constituencies because of joint electorate.

The community seldom looked beyond the Congress in the past. At best, a few regional parties caught its attention since it regarded them as secular. The Bhartiya Janata Party, or its earlier version, the Jana Sangh, was never in the picture because the Muslims found it biased against them. Still for first time, many in the community, particularly the educated lot, are fiercely discussing the BJP as an option for casting their vote in the election beginning April 20. Some of them are even toying with the idea of joining the party as Arif Mohammad Khan has done. They believe they can change its thinking from within. Also, the growing impression is that the BJP under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee is moving towards liberalism. There is yet another consideration: many Muslims

argue that since they have to live in India, they should cultivate the BJP which they consider is the most representative body of the Hindus.

The Muslims who have suffered the pangs of partition and they are still paying for it -- are justified in seeking a person or party to be their messiah in the difficult time they face. The Congress, its refuge, took the community for granted and left it to fend for itself. But that was the time when this attitude mattered little since India's temper was secular. Even seven to eight years

expected to convince them through the BJP that Muslims were not their adversaries. On the other hand, many Muslims have begun to say: If Hindutva is what the Hindus want they can have it since they constitute 80 per cent of the population.

If this is the approach, it is wrong. The majority of Hindus are pluralistic in their thinking. Only some in the upper caste have redefined Indian culture as Hindu. Still the challenge to pluralism is a challenge to all Indians -- the

constitution guaranteed equality to all before law, without making any difference on the basis of caste, creed or colour.

The ruling BJP believes that Hindutva and secularism are synonymous. The party cites a perverted Supreme Court judgement to buttress its contention. Vajpayee argues, "Secularism is pitted against Hindutva in the belief that the two are antithetical to one another. This is incorrect and untenable. L.K. Advani rejects the talk that the

particularly around partition. A climate of militant Hindu nationalism culminated in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS member. Jawaharlal Nehru took a series of steps which weakened Hinducommunalism.

The RSS revived its militancy in the 1960s by latching on to the demand that the government should ban cow slaughter. After a few years, the parivar took the line of moderation. Vajpayee was made the BJP president from 1969 to

The parivar adopted a low profile after destroying the Babri masjid. But militancy was back in full fury in 2002 when as many as 2000 Muslims were killed during the planned massacre in Gujarat. The complicity of the state government is proved and reproved almost everyday by the new evidence which is coming forth against the state police.

Still Vajpayee claims that during his regime there were no communal riots except the "chota" (small) ones. The Gujarat massacre was the biggest after partition. It was no "aberration," as the BJP leadership goes on saying. It was plain ethnic cleansing. And if Vajpayee is sincere about winning the confidence of Muslims, some action should still be taken against chief minister Narendra Modi.

Those who feel that Vajpayee is distancing the BJP away from the RSS should recall his words in America: "No one can take away my right to remain a swayamsevak". And those who differentiate between the BJP and the RSS should be wiser after the disclosure by Ram Vilas Paswan, a former minister in the Vajpayee cabinet: "There is no difference between the BJP, Viashwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal; they are all alike and work for the RSS." Still, it is up to the Muslims how they appraise the BJP. But they must remember that the Sangh parivar has always blown hot and cold. This is the period of moderation because the BJP badly wants the Muslim vote to cross even the figure of 200.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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

Ban hartal

It is said that a country gets the kind of leadership it deserves. Are we as a nation so dumb that we are rewarded (?) with two major parties that shun parliament and resort to hartal when in opposition and when in power, lecture the opposition to shun hartal and join parliament to make it effective? Do these two parties think that the electorate cannot see through their duplicity? The time of reckoning will come.

To Mr. (or Ms) SAM who tried to do the impossible (defend hartal) (Hartal: the flip side, DS, Feb. 25), I have a simple question, "As a result of the recent hartals, has the price of essentials come

down or has law and order improved or any of the other issues espoused by the AL has seen a positive change?" The answer is a big NO. Hartal simply punishes the common people, it has virtually no effect on the running of the government. One cannot claim to be championing the cause of the people by preventing them from going about their daily business or burning vehicles. Another of your correspondents tried to justify hartal by stating that loan defaulters also cause huge loss to the economy, so why blame hartal alone? Are we to judge our politicians (can't call them leaders) by the moral standard of

the loan sharks who essentially belong to the gutter?

Bangladesh has shown innovative skill in enacting and implementing the caretaker government concept. I believe it is within the capability of our constitutional experts to enact an enforceable law banning hartal by political parties while preserving the right of trade bodies to do so (the latter, for example, petroleum dealers simply refuse to provide their service to register their grievances, but do not force people or vehicles off the roads). Dr. Kamal Hossain is still around to lend his expertise. If the BNP will take the initiative to do this, they will at

least bind their hands from future destructive role. The electorate will, I believe, thankfully remember that when it matters. **NI**
Gutshan, Dhaka

DU teachers' strike

The protest is spontaneous, angry and widespread. The despicable and heinous attack on Humayun Azad -- a professor of Dhaka University -- has puzzled the university community. They are awaking to the reality of insecurity that the country is steeped in. So there are the angry processions, meetings, rallies, black badges, symbolic painting on roads and so many things.

Now what we feel about the announcement of DU Teachers' Union (suspension of academic activities until the trial and punishment of the guilty) in addition to the resignation of the ministers, is that the general students have to bear the brunt of it all. Does it sound selfish? Don't call me insensitive or selfish; better call me cynical.

The teachers are not affected the way we are when classes are not held. I hope the teachers will realise the truth and resume taking classes in the interest of all concerned.

Mohammad Nazmul Huq
MBA programme, IBA, Dhaka

University

I want to express my views on the strike called by the teachers of Dhaka University. While I appreciate the noble cause, I fail to understand the mode of protest.

As a student of DU, I am shocked and deeply disturbed by the attack on noted writer and teacher Dr. Humayun Azad. An attack on him is, in reality, an assault on the very culture of learning and intellectual community of the country.

Yet, putting a stop to the normal proceedings and classes of the premier educational institute is in no way a facilitat-

ing step either. As it is, session jams, political rivalry and unrest are taking a toll on the academic quality and calendar. A teachers' strike cannot help improve the situation. Externalities are hampering the normal functioning of DU and we can ill-afford to allow internal failures like this.

I, on behalf of my classmates, urge our respected teachers to consider the gravity of the situation and call the strike off. Let such deprivation prevail no further.

Adnan
Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka

Opposition leader

I really wonder how can the leader of the opposition (claiming always to be on our side) threaten the government to "think twice before attacking lawbreakers" and say they "will have their turn".

The known problems of our country (corruption, violence, price spiral, repression of all kinds etc.) need not be mentioned. But Sheikh Hasina's claim of peace and economic stability during her rule is a hoax and sounds ludicrous. Neither the Awami League nor the BNP could give us that solace of eradication of those menaces under the yoke of which we are born to suffer.

A F Rahman
Dhaka