

Submarine cable link

Stay connected, reap maximum benefit

AFTER years of chest-beating sighs and moans over our failure to seize the opportunity of logging on to the submarine cable and being consequently left by the wayside of the fast track IT, at long last we are almost there. Bangladesh is finally poised -- thanks a government decision to sign an agreement on March 27 with 12 countries -- to open a whole express-way to the connective tissues of the massive world of knowledge, information, communication and business.

Do we need to state the obvious about the multiple benefits of opening such a gateway being so enormous? Perhaps we do, given the way we have denied the services to ourselves for an inordinately long time. Internet usage and long-distance telephone calls will cost much less than being charged now; internet access and data transfer will be infinitely more speedy; and there is even the scope for IT-enabled value-added services e.g. call centre, tele-medicine, distance education at overseas universities in the horizon.

Better late than never. It's laudable on the part of the government that it is going to provide our IT infrastructure with a vital tool, a hugely missed link so far. Now, as for garnering funds, it's important that we value transparency and competitiveness in obtaining the best of terms.

Access is not enough by itself; an opportunity is as good as its utilisation, and fuller the utilisation, greater evidently will be the value extracted from it. We have two specific suggestions to offer by way of ensuring maximisation of benefit from submarine cable networking: first, a level playing-field will have to be provided for the operators through a rationalised, consistent regulatory mechanism; and secondly, it will be of strategic importance for us to try and draw upon the experiences of successful international operators of the consortium we are going to be a part of.

Katka Beach tragedy

Lessons learnt, application awaited

THE authorities have responded to the tragedy of 11 university students drowning off of Katka Beach last Saturday by imposing stringent restrictions on tourists swimming and bathing in the treacherous seas that makes up the southern boundary of the Sundarbans. It seems that this common-sense restriction was imposed only in the aftermath of Saturday's tragedy and we feel that it is not too much to ask that this kind of measures be contemplated before catastrophe strikes and not after.

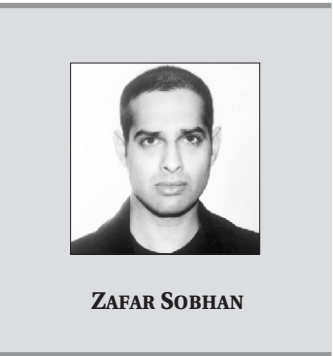
The seas south of the Sundarbans are not the only dangerous waters within Bangladesh's territorial boundaries. Indeed, the entire Bay of Bengal region is well-known for its inclement weather and often turbulent tidal conditions. Sadly, incidents of drowning are all too common.

A few simple rules as to when and how these dangerous waters can be ventured into, and a concerted effort on the part of the authorities to implement these rules would go a long way towards eliminating horrific incidents like last Saturday's drowning. The forest authorities in the case of the Sundarbans, and the relevant authorities elsewhere, must be vigilant in policing the region and ensuring that all rules are complied with, both for the safety of the tourists and visitors and for the continued health of the area concerned.

The authorities should be empowered to act to rein in those who are acting in a manner that might bring harm to tourists. Nor should there be any hesitation or inability on the part of the authorities to enforce the rules. It is no point having rules if they are not enforced. The companies that run trips to the Sundarbans and elsewhere also have a responsibility to see that the people they take are protected and kept away from risk.

Let us not have to wait for another calamity before we have common-sense rules for navigating and swimming in the hazardous stretches of the Bay of Bengal in place and fully implemented.

Lessons from Spain



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE battle to determine the meaning of the Spanish people's election of the anti-Iraq war Socialist Party in apparent response to the terrorist strikes in Madrid has begun. Faced with such a direct and politically damaging repudiation of the Iraq war by one of its main coalition partners, the Bush administration and its supporters in the US media have been scrambling to put their spin on the events of the past week.

The conservative commentariat in the US wasted little time in establishing the party line interpretation of the election results in Spain as tantamount to appeasement of Al Qaeda.

"Bin Laden's Victory in Spain" thundered the headline of Andrew Sullivan's piece published on his influential web-site the day after the Spanish election: "In yesterday's election victory for the socialists, Al Qaeda got even more than it could have dreamed of. It has removed a government intent on fighting terrorism and installed another intent on appeasing it."

John Ellis, cousin to the US president, one-time news analyst for Fox News, and heavyweight Washington pundit confidently asserted in the aftermath of the bomb blasts: "Europe is in now. That's what 3/11 means. [Eight million people]

took to the streets because they were furious about what happened in Madrid. Game on. The game is to kill every terrorist that walks."

The unexpected triumph of the socialists forced him to reassess in record time and within days he was sounding the official note from Washington: "The Spaniards just handed Al Qaeda a huge political victory two days after Al Qaeda attacked their country and killed 200 Spanish citizens."

terror party?"

Today, it is Thomas Friedman, the page's supposedly liberal foreign policy voice, with his piece: "Axis of Appeasement." Enough said.

The conservative Washington consensus, hurriedly put together in the aftermath of this devastating denunciation of its prosecution of the war on terror, is that the events in Spain signal a big win for Al Qaeda. The terrorists, the argument goes, have succeeded in getting rid

whether the Iraq war was an effective means to combat international terror. From the start, the Bush administration has tried to equate the Iraq war with the war on terror. In the eyes of the Bush administration, the two are inextricably linked, and the invasion of Iraq was sold to the world as a crucial front on the war on terror.

Indeed, it was argued at the time by those who were opposed to the invasion of Iraq, both inside the US and outside, that the invasion of

The Spanish voters reaffirmed that they were serious about combating terror. Upwards of ten million marched through the streets following the terrorist strikes in Madrid to show the unity of the Spanish people and their determination to stand up and not be cowed by terror. The election results reflected the national consensus that the invasion of Iraq was wrong, that its support for an unjust war had made Spain less safe not more, and that it was the government of Jose Maria Aznar that was to blame.

comfort to the terrorists has been very effective in marginalising opposition to Bush. The Bush reelection strategy seems to be to plant the idea in the minds of the electorate that a vote for Kerry is a vote for Bin Laden. The Bush campaign has already begun to run an advertisement portraying Kerry as soft on terror that has caused a furore due to its flashing of a menacing picture of a Middle-Eastern looking male on the screen to help make the point.

Bush's team has long attempted to establish the principle that to question the invasion and occupation of Iraq is tantamount to being soft on terror. The results of the election in Spain mean that it will now be possible to question the war on Iraq without being accused of questioning the war on terror. Sure, the Bush team will continue to try to make that argument, but as people begin to digest and make sense for themselves what happened last week in Spain, this position of theirs is becoming increasingly untenable.

It is no wonder that Bush and his supporters are worried. This is why they are all over the media, tarring the Spanish people as appeasers and cowards. The puerility of their name calling reveals the depth of their fear. What the Bush team are beginning to sense is that the confidence game they have been pulling on the US public is running out of suckers. The false choice that they have put before the public -- between Bush and Bin Laden -- has been revealed as a sham. The Spanish elections have shown us all the cracks in the Bush world view. The Bush administration is running scared -- and it's beginning to tell.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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Even the op-ed pages of the so-called liberal *New York Times* echoed the conventional wisdom of the conservative consensus. The day after the election, two of three op-ed pieces excoriated the "cowardice" of the Spanish voters, and it was left to the invaluable Paul Krugman to serve once again as the sole voice of sanity and reason on the page.

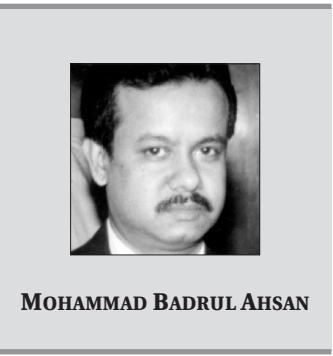
David Brooks' column squarely accused the Spanish of appeasement in the war on terror. "You do not give terrorists the chance to think that their methods work," he huffed, before drawing an offensive and incorrect comparison between Europe and the US: "If a terrorist group attacked the US three days before an election, does anyone doubt that the American public would rally behind the president or at least the most aggressively anti-

Iraq was actually counter-productive to the war on terror. The invasion and occupation of Iraq diverted crucial resources from Afghanistan, where the Taliban has regained control of roughly one-third of the country, and allowed Al Qaeda to regroup and rededicate itself to its deadly mission, which they appear to have done with spectacular efficiency.

The second argument against the Iraq war was that it was an unjust war that would muddy the moral high ground in the war on terror, and give ammunition to, and re-ignite the deadliest instincts of, the terrorists.

This is the context within which the election results in Spain must be understood. It was not a vote for "appeasement." It was a vote against the Iraq war.

Monkey's uncle



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

If you are hovering in the range between early-thirties and beyond, if your hair and moustache are spiked with gray, and if your face shows scratches of age, you would know what I mean by what I am going to say. You are proud as a peacock, your clothes crisp, shoes shined and hairs brushed like a flower in bloom. Then you walk into a store or a fish market, and hear that dreadful word that ruins your mood. Suddenly, you feel all your adornments are stripped away, as if you are a dressed chicken hanging from a hook. One word can squeeze you hard and make you feel puckered and crestfallen.

It happens when you hear people you never met, call you uncle. You feel a jolt somewhere in your mind when you hear that word. If you hear it for the first time, it would derail the train of your thoughts with a loud explosion. You would feel aged as if a single word, like a time machine, sped up your biological clock.

You would like to get used to it after protesting a few times. Because every time you protest, it turns into a burlesque act. The callers are amused by your irritation and repeat their calls to irritate you even more. You feel trapped in the comedy of terror, because it forces upon you an avuncular obligation. You feel like an uncle who has been the butt of a joke.

But then the frustration seethes within you, because you cannot reconcile what you believe with what you hear. You don't mind

no wound in sight. It forces you to take a stock of your life, waking up like Rip Van Winkle, suddenly realising that so much time had whizzed you by. It bothers you like a thorn in your head. You don't want to believe it, but it pricks you in the conscience.

There are days when you hear the dreaded word more than once. If you are out on an Eid shopping or a regular shopping spree, you hear it so much that you might actually come home convinced. You would feel old and weak, wondering if one

seldom know that it could put you through so much anguish, that one word could send you on such an intense emotional trip. You think of age, you think of the end, you think as if you have started to live from the finishing line of a race. It deflects your life and puts it on a reverse course.

So this one word like a seed grows into a tree. It overshadows your personality, and takes the bite out of your confidence, which was there until you heard that call. You find yourself in the grip of disap-

CROSS TALK

You don't want that respect which humiliates you, one that takes your dignity and puts a dent in it. Instead you wish you were addressed as brother, one that has the fresh smell of youth and places you at par with the caller. The word brother also pours honey into ears, because it shows you the consideration you expect from others. Brother is egalitarian, uncle is authoritarian. Brother is endearing, uncle is mind shearing. Brother is eternal, uncle is time bound. Brotherhood means solidarity, unclehood means nothing.

when your nephews and nieces call you uncle, because it is a relationship thing that has nothing to do with age. That is not true when strangers call you uncle. It has nothing to do with relationship but everything to do with age. It basically means you are old enough to be a father figure, it means you are over the hill, someone who shows the sign of age.

Believe me, one word does it all, changing in one phonetic flip, the way you used to look at the world. It reminds of the cruelty of boys who pelted stones at the frogs in a river. What is play to some is death to others. People who call you uncle

should not be as good as what others think. You would stand in front of the mirror and examine your face, the streaks of white in hair and moustache, sign of wrinkles, bags under eyes, anything and everything that is mark of age.

pointment, which characterises a disguised man who has been recognised. The hair dye doesn't do the trick, neither do the skincare lotion and the puff of hair spooled atop the forehead with the vigour of a cotton candy. You feel embarrassed like a man who was exposed after he had gone into hiding.

Mind it, this is your private suffering, which means you cannot share it with others, because they would find it silly. This one word sets you ablaze in your own sensi-

dent in it. Instead you wish you were addressed as brother, one that has the fresh smell of youth and places you at par with the caller. The word brother also pours honey into ears, because it shows you the consideration you expect from others. Brother is egalitarian, uncle is authoritarian. Brother is endearing, uncle is mind shearing. Brother is eternal, uncle is time bound. Brotherhood means solidarity, unclehood means nothing.

You think about it, wishful

US Elections 2004

Bush vs Kerry: No stones being left unturned

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

THE forthcoming US Presidential elections has generated a great deal of interest and media attention. In 2000, the eight year Clinton-Gore administration came to an end on a high note. America was strong, with a flourishing economy, a declining trade deficit and a foreign policy that sought cooperation as opposed to isolation. As Texas Governor George W. Bush became the 43rd President of the United States of America, it was hoped that the same optimism would continue. But much has changed since the last elections, with dreadful terrorist attacks, two wars, global recession, and a future full of uncertainties. The optimism of the past has faded, replaced by a harsh reality of unemployment, security fears and depleting social benefits.

The last presidential election focused primarily on domestic issues. But this election will also emphasise greatly on international issues. The times have changed. The two candidates will have to address a wide range of issues both domestic and international. How these issues are addressed and the ability to find effective solutions to existing problems would form the core of the 2004 US Presidential election. This may mean a long and

hard battle, closer than the one fought in 2000.

The Democratic party that ended up as the runner-up the last time round seems to have learned a lesson or two along the way. Two weeks prior to the first primary caucus held in Iowa, Howard Dean was a front-runner and expected to win the primaries. But Senator John Kerry's victory changed all that and since then the Democrats have not faltered in their choice for the next Democratic candidate to challenge the incumbent President. At the end, Senator John Kerry's victory was predictable with the Democrats having much hope to change the tide of this elections in their favour.

The Democratic primaries were not about candidates bickering at each other and trying hard to find a significant difference where very little existed. This is not to say criticism were not traded, for what would politics be without them but simply the tirades were more measured and polite to say the least. It was a primary that focussed on what they saw as the weakness of the Bush administration from the wear in Iraq to the growing trade deficit. Therefore, it was apparent from the very beginning that the exercise was to search for an effective leader and not just a candidate with good oratory skills and likeability among voters. At the

The election in the US will also have an impact on the present global scenario. Both President Bush and Senator John Kerry have a different outlook on the role the US should play in the global arena. Iraq is an important component of that role. Senator Kerry had voted for the War in Iraq but since then has maintained that he had been misled by the President.

end, voters decided Senator John Kerry had the quality of a leader to lead them victory.

The Democratic primaries have ended and now the very candidates that stood on opposing lines will rally together united in their single objective to win the Presidential race, and erase the defeat of the past. For the Republicans, it is a challenge to contest the accusations of its opponent with effectiveness and create optimism where there is none. For the Democrats it is to bring attention to all that is wrong and what they can do to make it right. As for the voters, it is an onslaught of speeches, interviews, advertisements and more false promises and hopes that things will be better. It is their vote that would decide whether they would give President Bush another opportunity to continue or Senator John Kerry a chance to show what he has to give.

The election in the US will also

have an impact on the present global scenario. Both President Bush and Senator John Kerry have a different outlook on the role the US should play in the global arena. Iraq is an important component of that role. Senator Kerry had voted for the War in Iraq but since then has maintained that he had been misled by the President. He does not regret his decision to vote in favour of the war but regrets the way President Bush has gone about handling it. While President Bush still seems unsure about the UN role in Iraq, Senator Kerry says that the UN involvement is a necessity to make the operation in Iraq more international. The reconstruction of Afghanistan will also figure prominently in the elections with the Bush administration already pledging \$1 billion towards reconstruction in Afghanistan. Senator Kerry has argued that it is not enough to a situation that requires greater international involvement and attention. As for Middle East,



President Bush has encouraged a "road map" plan while Senator Kerry feels it is necessary to first address the social, political and

economic circumstances truly to have lasting peace in the region.

Elections are not simply about international issues but also cru-

cial domestic ones. Health care will figure largely in debates. President Bush will defend his stance to have prescription drugs benefits added to medicare while Senator Kerry plans to make tougher laws for drug companies and create better benefits for veterans and seniors. As recession continues, Taxes and Spending will be an important part of domestic issues. President Bush during his administration has already signed two bills cutting taxes but it is very doubtful that another tax cut can be afforded with a growing deficit and security expenses. Senator John Kerry believe he can change that by providing child tax credit and revoking tax cuts to the rich by narrowing the deficit with decreased spending and addressing corporate ambiguities. President Bush states that the tax cuts made in 2001 and 2003 has allowed the economy to grow and new jobs to be created. Senator Kerry does not share this optimism and would use latest unemployment statistics to demonstrate the faltering economy. Senator Kerry will emphasise his plan to encourage workers to be trained, help small businesses and offer incentives and tax credits to those businesses that will employ or shift to struggling smaller rural communities.

These are only some of the vast number of issue that the candi-

dates would have to address in the coming months. It does not matter if the candidates will be able to effectively deliver what they promise in the end as long as the people are able to assess where they are going with it all.

At the end the question remains can Senator John Kerry truly make a difference to a Presidential race that seems a forgone conclusion by some? After all primaries are starkly different from a Presidential race. The politeness and measured criticisms maintained in a primary will give way to open disparagement and downright meanness. Every word will come under scrutiny and the very motives of the candidates explored on every issue.

Skeletons, if any will tumble from the past and no stones will be left unturned by either side for the victory to come at last.

Fatima Chowdhury is a freelance journalist staying in Kolkata.