

Defending democracy

We are one with PM's objective but not with her method

WE express our full support for the Prime Minister's determination to defend democracy. We have had more than our share of experience with military dictatorships and autocratic rule and we never want any repetition of that. We also agree that no elected government can and should be changed in any undemocratic manner. Public demonstration and street agitation are all a part of the democratic norm. However threat to topple a government is not, and here we draw the line. We accept and support the opposition's right to criticise, demonstrate against and even demand early election. But not to topple -- the very word smacks of force and imposition and as such undemocratic.

But regrettably the story is not a simple one. The repressive actions of the government against its opponents force us to express our deep concern about government's own adherence to democratic norms. We strongly object to the method Khaleda Zia's government is using against those who are challenging her stay in power. Within the last few weeks, government and the ruling party activists have done more damage to the democratic image of the country and the party to which they belong, not to mention the PM's own reputation.

While we reiterate our firm commitment to democracy, representative government and elections as the only legitimate and acceptable means of choosing such a government, we feel compelled to point out that governments so elected must adhere to democratic norms. Winning elections cannot be taken as a licence to do whatever the winning party pleases. Prime Minister will be well advised to rethink her method of running the government, evaluate the performances of her cabinet and investigate the widespread public impression of high level corruption within her party and government.

The Prime Minister's claim that Awami League is conspiring to remove her government through extra-constitutional means -- and her reference to Sheikh Hasina's comment of 1982 leaves no doubt in anybody's mind as to what she is hinting at -- puts the burden of proof squarely on her shoulder. Khaleda Zia now must provide proof of what she has claimed. She owes to the nation and to herself. In the meantime we urge the AL and some others not to talk about 'toppling' the government and concentrate their energy on more democratic method of opposition politics.

Mosquitoes droning as usual

Surveillance failure behind infestation

MOSQUITOES are back and in full force. City dwellers were probably hoping for some respite from the menace this year. The concerned authorities had spoken about taking, in their words, 'necessary and timely actions' to save citizens from the painful bites of these notorious insects. But it was all in vain. Mosquitoes are making our lives unbearable and there are no signs of any concrete steps by the authorities to minimise the pain.

Officials at Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) are saying that work is going on in full swing -- 'larvicide is being sprayed in the morning and adulticide is being used with fogger machine in the evening'. But many areas of the capital are yet to witness any such activities. On top of that, as always, there are not enough pesticides to kill off flying mosquitoes. And the state of the machines is not also very encouraging -- either they are out of order or not repairable or simply not adequate.

What's frustrating is the lack of urgency on the part of DCC to combat the infestation of mosquitoes from the beginning of the breeding season. If the surveillance was initiated and efforts made earlier in the season, the menace could have been nipped in the bud. In fact, we are shocked to learn that a year-long project by DCC called Dengue Surveillance Project that began in August 2001 was not renewed by the authorities after it ended. May be constant surveillance would have exposed the lapses by the DCC officials for timely correction. It would not be wrong to say that the Mayor of Dhaka and his team have failed to keep their promise.

Now DCC has requested for more funds from the government to carry out a round-the-year mosquito eradication drive. We are glad they have realised at last that seasonal spraying of insecticide and larvicide is not the only answer to the problem. Regular cleaning up of the hyacinths, small lagoons and other ponds where the mosquitoes breed, is as important. We hope the authorities will be extra cautious and not misuse the funds, if granted, and provide some respite to the inhabitants of the city.

The US presidential election 2004: An outlook



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AS the mega-event of the year in the US -- the presidential election 2004 -- approaches fast it is no more a Bush-versus-Bush spectacle, although it so appeared till recently amidst persistent disarray in Democrats' camp. The incumbent president since decided to run as a 'war president' with his predominantly national security plank the centrepiece of which has been the war in Iraq. President Bush, virtually the product of 11 September tragedy which made him the 'man of the hour' enjoyed broad public endorsement for initiating war against terror, if not for the handling of that war. Not only that. A couple of recent developments dramatically added credibility to the doctrine of preemption espoused by him. These included the capture of Saddam on December 13 and later Col Gaddafi's decision not only to open his WMD programme to inspection but also to abandon the

programme itself. Both were billed as the result of 'shock and awe' of preemptive War. So the moods were upbeat in Republican White House till more body bags started arriving from Iraq. Add to these an enviable campaign chest available with the party, thanks to its long standing ties to big business, specially oil and career lobbyists for Israel.

All those equations went awry once after the Super Tuesday triumph a redoubtable senator

interests and holdovers from the Reagan-Senior Bush era. As the election campaign gets into full gear the going for Bush will be tougher particularly when the war of which he is the commander-in-chief is in shambles with increasing number of casualties.

Yet Bush's approach to the use of unchallenged and unrivalled American power in pursuit of maximum national interests and even to overreach any defined objective struck a chord with

Belying those speculations senator Kerry chose to tread a different path. In a surprise address he accepted the premise that the US faces fundamental threat and accused Mr Bush of being too soft in response.

This brings both the candidates on the same wavelength on the policy of preemption and with regards to the question of war in Iraq. So, as a matter of strategy and conviction (?) John Kerry espouses policies the Bush Administration is

toll in Iraq is well past 500 mark. Many of those killed died after their President famously declared the end official hostilities. An alarming number of suicide victims is a testimony to the massive stress faced by American soldiers occupying Iraq. The election outcome will be determined much by how senator Kerry exploits this bleak situation even by being on the same side of war rationale. As a result, even if the competition will be tough the choice will become

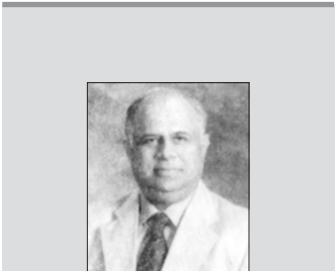
the war all the way without the slightest compunction. Kerry's only criticism of the war is that Bush went ahead without taking the US' allies along. As a matter of fact Kerry was a card carrying member of the war party. On October 11, 2002 he voted for the resolution authorising the use of force in Iraq. When war started he co-sponsored a Senate resolution stating that the invasion was "lawful and fully authorised by the Congress" and that he "commends and supports the efforts and leadership of the President."

Since then John Kerry never apologised for the stand he took. The democrats are not touching the Iraq war or facing up to it. Neither is Kerry himself interested in that exercise. There seems to be a bipartisan consensus simply to skip the issue and get on with other things. Mr Richard Holbrooke, the secretary of state-in-waiting for a Kerry-led administration is even more hawkish talking passionately of extremism and ruling out any deliberations on either Palestinian issue or Iraq war.

Indeed, having wrapped up Super Tuesday Kerry's problem now is to be able to show where precisely he differs from Bush. During the courses of a marathon campaign he may be able to evolve one, but for the moment there is little to choose between him and Bush.

Big (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

The plastic, boom or bust?



IKRAM SEHGAL

writes from Karachi

ONE of the lessons learnt rather late in our economic life was that the Harvard model for developing countries was flawed, economic emancipation does not come about by 'exports' alone, it is necessary to invigorate the domestic economic sectors and invest in the infrastructure to fuel growth. Financial modus operandi has two modes, "how to do it" and "how not to do it". Regrettably in Pakistan we usually go the "how not to do it" route, with disastrous results.

Concentrating on credit as fueling the domestic economy the target sectors are (1) electronic consumer market, (2) automobile and (3) housing. Commercial and personal loans play a major part in economic resurgence of any country. Because of competition financial institutions adopt innovative ways of packaging loans and selling it to the right clientele. Selecting the right client should have become an art form by now, this includes verifying his/her antecedents, this is followed by disbursement. However, problems usually occur because of circumventing of procedures and lax controls, the actual bouquet of problems vary thereof. With private commercial banks now actively pursuing the credits for individuals, it should be expected that things will remain within control because of more stringent checks and balances as opposed to

the rather laissez faire once-upon-a-time attitude of the national commercial banks (NCBs) where influence and patronage used to dictate the disbursement of loans rather than any merit criteria.

In the 70s and 80s cooperative scams fleeced the public. Then came the bank defaults mostly due to fraud, force-multiplying in the mid-80s with the first whiff of political rule. It took the best part of the 90s to get our financial institutions onto an even keel. According to a recent NEWSWEEK report the 21st century raison

to firm up their positions. The Asian currency crisis of 1997-98 highlighted the fact that Asia's economies were too reliant on foreign borrowing and demand. The almost total reliance on "exports" had to be replaced by development of a modern domestic consumer shopping culture, possible mainly through introducing credit cards on a mass scale. While the introduction of credit cards into consumer culture in Asian nations has been extremely successful, in South Korea this has backfired.

Those eclipse even mature economies like the US and UK. With still more than one million consumers paying off credit cards debt with credit cards (known in Pakistan as famous "Balance Transfer Facility" (BTF)), the situation may get worse before it gets better.

Korea's major debtors pre 1997-98 were corporations, they are now individual consumers. Both crises came to a head because the aggressive government drive to grow the economy went astray through reckless lending, badly

payments before loans were due, it put millions of families into turmoil. With 15 percent of the population technically insolvent, the number of South Koreans who are more than three months behind on payments is expected to rise from 3.7 million to 4 million by the end of 2004. Most are of the 30-40 age group, young people who used plastic to stock up on 'Gucci' and 'Armani' goods.

In Pakistan there are three areas of concern, viz (1) in the present climate of banks being awash with deposits without the commensu-

documented to SBP their culpability in BCCI's collapse?

The tragedy is that this is well known in the banking community. The bank's "success bubble" in 2003 is mostly artificial based on profits on "capital gains" in the stock market. What about actual banking profits? While the SBP has oversight regulations meant to exercise some control on the increase of this open-ended debt, why should we spend anything on any product that has material less than 75 per cent Pakistani in origin, mainly for automobiles, electronics and household electricals? Unless this is done "the deletion" programme will remain a subject of fiction.

South Korean economy was modelled largely on Pakistan of the 60s yet it outstripped Pakistan because it did not have to go through Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's disastrous nationalisation of everything in sight. Cynical humour has it that even "Bundoo Khan" is reported to have given tax officials rupees three lacs in 1973 to show a tax liability of only Rs.10,000 in order to avoid nationalisation. Yet the comparison is too close for comfort, twice within five years South Korea has got major economic problems of the nature that Pakistan could probably never sustain economically. While we must not do anything that will stunt economic growth, and there is a genuine fillip given to the economy because of credit cards, it is necessary to judiciously control the use of plastic in the economy. Without throwing the baby out with the water, we must exercise prudence in insisting that instead of the plastic eventually bouncing in Pakistan, it should be monitored so that it becomes an effective part of a caution-inspired boom.

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Eavesdroppers Inc.

Can anyone be immune from them?

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

APPARENTLY not. Not even such an august personage as the Secretary General of the United Nations, who everyone would automatically assume to be sacrosanct. But to the combined reach of the intelligence agencies of the USA and Britain no one, or nothing, seems to be sacred. The US eavesdropping organisation National Security Agency (NSA) and its British equivalent General Command Headquarters (GCHQ) together form the biggest and most sophisticated joint intelligence operation in the world and according to knowledgeable sources, their networks intercept, listen to and read millions of telephone calls, e-mails and fax messages every 60 minutes. In fact, every individual having access to any of these means of communication, ranging from high-ranking diplomats like Kofi Annan, members of various governments and international delegations of politicians to much smaller fry is probably being regularly spied on by the intelligence agencies. And the NSA and GCHQ make no distinction between enemies and allies and neutral countries -- in the run-up to the Iraq war last year, they targeted no less than six countries on the UN Security Council at the same time when, as alleged by the former British cabinet minister Claire Short, the offices of the UN Secretary General were bugged.

Both the NSA and GCHQ have

extremely powerful listening posts all over the world. A British listening post situated on a remote Mediterranean island, for example, is capable of intercepting and hearing air traffic, say, somewhere in China. However, eavesdropping of the premises of foreign powers and international bodies such as the UN is prohibited by the 1961 Vienna Convention. Not only that, the 1946 agreement on the general privileges and immunities of the UN dictates that "premises of the UN shall be inviolable." Therefore, if Claire Short's allegations are even partly true, bugging of Kofi Annan's offices by either British or American agencies would amount to a serious violation of this international agreement. But, as hinted by certain specialists in intelligence operations, one of the reasons why the USA wanted the UN headquarters to be located on its soil in the first place was that the eavesdroppers of the NSA could be accommodated. In British national law, GCHQ and M16 -- the latter being the British counterpart of America's CIA -- both fall under the jurisdiction of the Intelligence Services Act 1994 which rules that these two bodies can act only "in the interests of national security, with particular reference to the defence and foreign policies of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom."

But this Act also allows British intelligence agents to perform such acts, including bugging, abroad as would be illegal within Britain.

Technically, that would permit British intelligence agents to bug Kofi Annan's offices since they are not on British soil except for the fact that both the 1946 agreement and the 1961 Vienna Convention prohibit it. So what makes the situation arising out of Claire Short's allegations more bizarre is the British Prime Minister Tony Blair's reaction to his erstwhile cabinet colleague's claims. Allow me to quote a short extract from the

been involved in it?

CS: I know. I have seen transcripts of Anan's conversations. I have had conversations with Kofi in the run-up to war, thinking: Oh dear, there will be a transcript of this.

JH: In other words, British spies have been instructed to carry out operations within the UN on people like Kofi Annan?

CS: Yes, absolutely.

remarks were "entirely consistent" with her past record and that he did not have "a great deal of respect" for her. But the Prime Minister also desisted from confirming if he was considering any disciplinary action against Ms Short on a Party level or punishing her for breaching the 1989 Official Secrets Act which is binding on all ministers and ex-ministers. Pressed on that point he only said: "These are issues I will have to reflect upon." Perhaps he

trembling in my shoes." About Mr Blair's claim that her remarks could put British agents' lives at risk she said: "What is the prime minister going to say? Either he has to say: It is true, we are bugging Kofi Annan's office, which he does not want to say, or he has got to say: It's not true, and he'd be telling a lie. Or he is going to say something pompous about national security." She went on to add that there was "no national security involved" in

be aware, had also leaked information about an American spying operation at the UN in the run-up to the war. She was arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act and claimed that she had acted in order to try to prevent Britain illegally invading Iraq. But in view of new evidence coming to light that the legality of the war had been questioned by the British Foreign Office the prosecution decided to drop the case against her. As Ms Short said about her motive: "This is the journey of my conscience." Ms Gun had also declared: "I have no regrets and I would do it again." Thus, following the Hutton Inquiry Report absolving the Prime Minister of any wrongdoing in the tragic David Kelly affair, just as Mr Blair was perhaps beginning to feel that Iraq was finally behind him he was once more mired in fresh controversies and a rattled Downing Street had to announce an urgent review of the Official Secrets Act.

Whether Mr Blair will finally decide to discipline Ms Short one way or another remains to be seen. It is indeed a criminal offence for Crown servants, including ministers, to make unauthorised and damaging disclosures about national security and intelligence if they have obtained the relevant information through their official position. But Ms Short has others as well in her company in pointing an accusing finger at officially sanctioned spying on individuals in strategically important positions. Mr Von Sponek, a former

LONDON LETTER

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interview Ms Short gave to John Humphrys on BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme on February 26:

CS: The UK was spying on Kofi Annan's office and getting reports from him about what was going on.

JH: Spying in the United Nations is quite different, isn't it?

CS: Indeed. But these things are done and in the case of Kofi's office it has been done for sometime.

JH: Do you believe Britain has

JH: Is this legal?

CS: I presume so. It is odd. I don't know about the legalities.

And what was Mr Blair's reaction? He was obviously appalled and furious, but at his monthly Downing Street news conference he stopped short of categorically denying Ms Short's allegations. Instead he hedged around the question and accused her of being "totally irresponsible", putting British agents "in the firing line" and jeopardising national security. He said that Ms Short's

could not help feeling worried that attempting to punish Ms Short by withdrawing the Labour whip or expelling her from the Party would make her turn into a martyr and further alienate the significant number of Labour MPs who remain sharply dissatisfied about the Iraq war.

And asked in an interview with Channel 4 News shortly afterwards what her own response would be if she was subjected to disciplinary action, Ms Short nonchalantly replied: "We'll see. I'm not

revealing that Mr Annan's phone calls had been tapped. Asked about her motive in coming out with her revelations, Ms Short said: "It troubled me and I decided to bring it into the public domain and that's what I have done. This is the journey of my conscience."

Well, whatever might have been Claire Short's motive, conscientious or otherwise, her timing was almost lethal, coming hard on the heels of the collapse of the case against ex-GCHQ employee Katherine Gun who, as readers may

UN diplomat, who held the position of Humanitarian Co-ordinator of Iraq for 18 months until 2000 and witnessed the suffering of ordinary Iraqi people, blamed much of it on the sanctions imposed against Iraq and became a leading campaigner against the sanctions. This made him unpopular with US and British governments and a natural target for their joint intelligence operations. His phone was tapped and his mail was intercepted and this continued even after he had retired, making him feel "uncomfortable at times, without being paranoid."

Now Mr Sponek is, in his own words, "a small fish in all this", but Hans Blix, the former head of the weapons inspectors' team in Iraq is perhaps not so small. Following Claire Short's allegation of US-British bugging of the UN Secretary General's offices, Mr Blix claimed that his office and home had also been bugged by the US. He expressed disgust at such behaviour and said that he would have expected to be bugged by the Iraqis, but being spied upon by the US "feels like an intrusion into your integrity in a situation when you are actually on the same side." One thing, however, must be admitted in favour of Eavesdroppers Inc. -- they are not discriminatory in the least, they put everyone on the same footing, high or low, friend or foe. Perhaps they believe in following an Equal Opportunities policy in the line of business!