

PM's word of advice

Media has to report what's happening

THE prime minister has said, while addressing a meeting of Dhaka Reporters Unity, that journalists should refrain from publishing reports and photographs that blur the image of the country. We believe that this is an exhortation that needs to be examined in all its ramifications.

While sharing the PM's concern for national image, we would like to say that the independent media's objective role enhances the country's prestige rather than diminishing it. The fundamental point that needs to be stressed, however, is: if events, incidents and trends that undermine the image of the country do not happen, the journalist would not have been under the painful necessity of publishing reports and photographs on them. But incidents damaging the image of the country are taking place on a regular basis, and it is the bounden duty of journalists to cover things as they happen.

So if there is a sweeping expectation that the untoward incidents will not be reported, it would smack of a misplaced emphasis on journalistic do's and don't's.

The issue is not reporting or publishing photographs, but it is about stopping the free fall of law and order, corruption and malgovernance that automatically made news, like it or not. Why is the government not reining in the gun-toting cadres, thereby saving it the embarrassment of an avoidable exposure? And when we see political dissidents being manhandled and harassed, shall we not be failing in our duty if we do not report such incidents? The question is what is the status of the 'right to protest'? On the one hand, we see Jubo Dal elements occupying a road space to organise rallies; and on the other, we watch the opposition being denied the opportunity of organising similar things. It is this undemocratic attitude of the government that brings bad name to the country.

We mince no words when it comes to criticising the opposition for its faults. The media's commitment to upholding the image of the country should be understood in terms of its courage and professionalism in presenting the facts. It can hardly be overemphasized that in the midst of many negative things, it is the media's role based on truth and independence of judgement that has brightened the image of Bangladesh.

If the truth is blacked out, it is the government which will be the ultimate loser. The media must be looked upon as an objective and neutral channel for obtaining information. Otherwise, press freedom will not mean anything in practical terms.

Uprising spirals in Iraq

From haemorrhage to bloodbath?

THE US-led coalition troops are having to take on both Shia and Sunni fighters in what appears to be a lose-lose situation for the occupation forces.

While Shia militiamen controlled large swathes of three Iraqi cities, US marines were fighting insurgents around a mosque in the Sunni Muslim stronghold of Fallujah. All the emotive fuel to the fire is there to exacerbate the anti-occupation sentiments. Forty people assembled for prayers were killed in a airstrike on the mosque compound. Shia cleric-led fighting begun in the south has spread into central Iraq for the first time. Fighting this week alone has claimed 35 and 459 American and Iraqi lives, respectively. The pro-Saddam loyalists have joined in. Even the north could be engulfed.

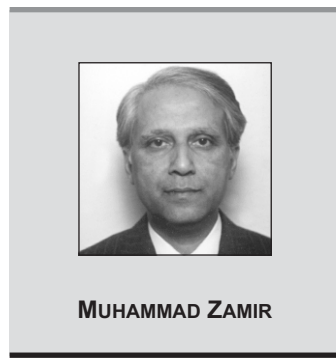
In the US perception, President Bush's stakes are growing heavier by the day. With more GIs dying and the psyche of being besieged all around ranking -- all that in an election year -- the current US impulses are to get more involved in Iraq.

There is talk of committing fresh US troops beyond the already high existent figure of 135,000 GIs in embattled Iraq. The so-called US plan of relaxing grip over Iraq has been turned upside down. The planned passing on of more security duties to Iraqi forces is on hold. More importantly, transfer of sovereignty scheduled for July, which has been in doubt as it is, looks consigned on to the backburner.

The Bush administration's make-believe world in Iraq is crumbling before its eyes. It has tried to capitalise on Shia-Sunni divide playing up the majority sentiments which is not washing anymore. Now, it will try to drive a wedge between the Shiite clerics forgetting that with Saddam gone it's loss of Iraqi sovereignty which is the sticking sore-point for the Iraqis in general.

The Bush administration has to realise that the best way to wriggle out of the Iraqi quagmire is to take the UN onboard in decision-making terms. World conscience and leadership must wake up to stop a fresh bloodbath in Iraq.

Japan's multi-layered involvement in the Middle East



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

JAPAN'S recent hands-on engagement in Iraq and earlier pro-active interaction in the Gulf has drawn attention of the world to its growing involvement in world peace. This is being interpreted as Japan's consistent belief that its interests are best served by 'peace and prosperity'. The Japanese leadership thinks that stability is the most important factor for economic well-being, not only for their country, but also for the rest of the world. In this context, they are beginning to move out of their shell.

Previously, their global interaction was limited. It was restricted solely to subjects which affected Japan directly -- the value of the yen, open markets and issues related to the balance of trade. Today, their area of concern is more international in nature and scope.

I am writing this column today to highlight a little known fact. When any one discusses the Middle East, they refer to Europe and the USA. Yes, they also include Russia and the UN. However, more often than not, we do not take cognizance of the silent and constructive role being played by Japan in that region. This association has steadily grown and now covers various facets in

different countries.

Tired of the many wars in the 20th century, the Japanese have tried to introduce the concept of dialogue as the essential harbinger of understanding among nations. It is this philosophy that has encouraged Japan since the end of the Nineties to seek the strengthening of their complementary relationship with the Middle East. They consider this to be mutually dependent in nature, particularly from the economic point of view. They have already tried to

the region. In this context, aware of the pernicious impact of global terrorism and the devastation caused by war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the determined to financially support the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and send troops to Iraq -- not to fight, but to render assistance in the restructuring of that war devastated country. These have been bold steps.

Contact between Japan and Islamic countries date back to the 13th century of the Gregorian

Palestine based on Japan's technical development. Japan decided to strengthen the pillars of politics and economics. This was done with the hope that partnership with a long term perspective would complement eco-social development within the region.

The Japanese leadership also initiated the idea of 'multi-layered relations' with the countries of the Middle East. In this regard, Japan started focussing not only on dialogue with the world of Islam, but

resources. This is a country which in all likelihood, will be included as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, if that body is ever expanded. They already have a significant presence in many of its subsidiary organs.

Over the last two years, the Japanese have embarked on their own road-map of assistance to the Palestinians. The are presently providing emergency humanitarian assistance materials, including vaccine, basic services and food to

expanded to include that county.

These have been positive factors aimed at transforming an ear of confrontation to that of coexistence and a sustainable economic development.

Analysts feel that Japan should now take on an enhanced role in the political arena in the Middle East and associate itself with other factors that govern that region's equation. They need to point out that dispossessed people will always remain susceptible and vulnerable to those espousing terror. Time has come for Japan to explain to the USA and to the Israeli leaders that existing agreements must be implemented. They should also urge Israel to stop targeted killings and undertaking unilateral actions. In this context, they should make it clear to the parties in the Quartet that peace will not be found unless UN Security Council Resolutions are implemented in letter and spirit. Their help in resolving the Middle East peace issue, in particular the Palestinian issue, in a fair manner, will endear them even further in the Muslim world.

The presence of Japanese troops in Iraq, I believe, will have a marginal influence with regard to restoration of security in that country. However, its participation in development cooperation will definitely ensure that the future elected governments in Iraq and Afghanistan are able to function competently.

I suggest such a course of action because I respect Japan for its discipline and traditions.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

Analysts feel that Japan should now take on an enhanced role in the political arena in the Middle East and associate itself with other factors that govern that region's equation. Time has come for Japan to explain to the USA and to the Israeli leaders that existing agreements must be implemented. They should also urge Israel to stop targeted killings and undertaking unilateral actions.

establish free trade agreements with several Arab countries and create an economic framework. In this, they have seen mutual benefit.

The entire ball game was however twisted with the tragic events of 11 September in New York. Japan was faced with a new scenario. The wider question of Japanese association with Islam and Muslim countries re-surfaced with all its connotations. Japan realised that there was more to their presence than just trade and limited political inter-action.

Fortunately, at that point of time, the Japanese leadership did not buckle. They decided to maintain their movement forward and strengthen the already existing linkages with different countries of

calendar. With the passage of time, the exchange which started with imports of glassware, decorative articles, musical instruments and medicines from the Arab world has expanded. This has been made possible through developments in the field of transportation. The relationship has continued to grow because of trade. It intensified further with successive discoveries of oil fields in the Gulf countries from the 1930s through the 1960s and the subsequent diplomatic recognition of the new Gulf countries by Japan.

This evolving interest in the region led eventually to initiate a serious effort in 2001 towards comprehensive partnership with the Gulf and other countries of the Middle East -- including Syria, Lebanon and

also in the solution of its two vital problems -- water resources development and waste water management.

Japan also correctly realised the dangers posed by globalisation in safeguarding cultures. Accordingly, Japan undertook efforts to create a network among knowledgeable people in Japan and Islamic countries so that this group could hold symposia and arrange academic exchanges between universities.

As an Asian, many of us feel reassured that Japan is making such an effort to be involved with the various problems affecting peace and stability in the Middle East. This is important. Japan not only has idealism but also possesses

the affected population in the occupied territories of Palestine. It has been reported that Japan is also supporting job creation in Palestinian territories through the restoration of infrastructure of local governments. They are also encouraging human resources development. Their scope of assistance has also included aid to contain worsening environmental damage. It is understood that Japan's economic assistance to Palestine over the past seven years has amounted to more than \$400 million. This has helped to build 14 hospitals in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. More than 50 schools have also received infrastructural assistance. They have a role to play in the Middle East and the Quartet Group should be

OPINION

Can we really hope for a better future?

K M ZUBAIR SADEQUE writes from Pittsburgh, USA

A lot of enthusiasm and optimism about the future of Bangladesh was expressed in an article by me published in the DS ('We have a bright future lying ahead!', January 15). In that article, I expressed my personal opinion about how our future looked bright because of the democratic system of government that we have. The arguments I had for the optimism was that with a representative government in place, there was a good chance that the elected government would address people's genuine concerns. It was my belief that the elected representatives were bound to listen to people's ordeals and take necessary steps to eliminate the causes of their sufferings. Unless they worked for the people while in power, the same people who elected them to office would throw them out of power through their votes.

I had the opportunity to discuss my assessment with some of the non-resident Bangladeshis living here. Most of them are now citizens of this so-called land of freedom, but they still have a genuine passion for the country where they were born and where they spent a good part of their lives. They in general did not share my optimism about Bangladesh. They pointed out many problems with our political system mainly the intolerance and immaturity of the current political leadership.

The frustration aired by the people I talked to did make me to ponder whether my assessment was truly correct. I began to wonder whether I was like those Wall Street Analysts giving a rosy outlook of

companies like Enron at a time when the company was in fact on the verge of collapse because of the fraudulent acts of its top executives. Still, I continued to believe that the country was on the right track for a better future.

Now that the people are made hostage once again to the vicious cycle of irrational political exuberance, I am forced to become less optimistic in my assessment of the future of our country. I know that my assessment does not matter much. After all, I am not the Wall Street Analyst drawing a six-figure salary and people are not betting their

retirement savings on my assessment! No one is going to start thinking of migrating to a foreign country based on my assessment about the future of Bangladesh. (In fact, people are already migrating in large numbers to Canada, which has its door opened to skilled immigrants but has no job prospects. UK has recently introduced a skilled immigration programme. We are surely going to observe a fresh exodus of skilled people to UK. Many are now going to Australia on student visa in the hope of becoming a Permanent Resident quickly.) Still I thought I should put forward my rationale for becoming less enthusiastic about the future of my country.

There has recently been some reason to become optimistic (albeit a cautious optimism given the past experiences) about the future political leadership of the country. If a true leadership with a vision and patriotism emerges from the 'Bikolpo Dhara' as is propagated by Dr B Chowdury, Dr. Kamal Hossain and others, that would surely be a great respite for the ordinary people. One can only hope that the latest attempt will survive the oppression of the ruling power and the infiltration by the corrupt political elements and will open the door for constructive politics

consecutive term (the one-party election of 1995 is not considered here for obvious reasons) testifies to the conscious decision making of the common people. Unfortunately, the leaders of the two major political parties do not seem to get the obvious facts.

We are observing the same old paradigm of giving false election pledges only to be forgotten once voted to power. Most of the election pledges of the current government are yet to be fulfilled. Before election, the government party solemnly pledged that once they are voted to power, they would remove the disgrace to the nation of being branded the most corrupt nation in the world. To date, corruption goes unabated and we are still the

sincere about it. It seems like the government is not yet ready to let go its control over the magistracy.

Instead of fulfilling its election pledges, government is busy oppressing the opposition parties following the same old tactics the past AL government used when it was in power. Being afraid of the emergence of a third force that might pose a threat to its power, the government is doing whatever it can to dissuade any voice of dissent, not sparing even its own founder secretary general or some of its own lawmakers.

The current opposition party is no different in its inertia to make real its promises. Instead of playing a constructive role as opposition in the parliament, AL holds the

reminded of the promise by airing the announcement; they take notes of every promise that is made only to be broken. The common people do not have such short memory, as the leaders of the two parties would like to believe.

I had always thought however that we should advertise to the whole world how progressive we are in terms of women empowerment that has resulted in the two top political positions going to women (having a woman PM and a woman Leader of the Opposition is indeed unique in the world). I take it a great pride to inform my American friends about this great fact (of course I do not belittle the glory by disclosing the fact of legacy. It is a different question altogether whether they

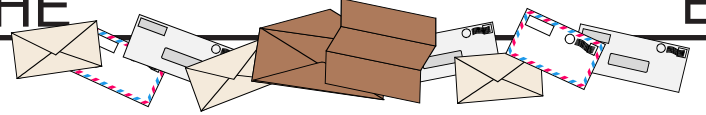
could have risen to the top of the leadership on their own.

No matter how degrading the current political situation has become, I still see a little ray of hope however when I think of the time when the two women leaders would retire from politics. After all, they are preparing the ground for their successors to take over. One is already in politics playing an important role. I guess the son of the other leader would enter politics anytime now. I heard that the two sons of the two leaders are in good terms with each other. Hopefully, in the absence of any personal grudge against one another, the two sons would bring with them a more restraining and tolerant political behaviour. That would indeed be a great relief to the common people who have had enough of the politics of the two leaders that is devoid of any wisdom or a vision!

There has recently been some reason to become optimistic (albeit a cautious optimism given the past experiences) about the future political leadership of the country. If a true leadership with a vision and patriotism emerges from the 'Bikolpo Dhara' as is propagated by Dr B Chowdury, Dr. Kamal Hossain and others, that would surely be a great respite for the ordinary people. Dr. Kamal Hossain tried it with his 'Gono Forum' but did not succeed. One can only hope that the latest attempt will survive the oppression of the ruling power and the infiltration by the corrupt political elements and will open the door for constructive politics aimed at presenting a bright future for the country.

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TO THE EDITOR 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.

Arms cache

On April 02, 2004 the largest ever arms haul in Bangladesh took place when police seized 10 truckloads of arms, including submachine-guns (1,290), Tommy Guns (100), semi-automatic rifles (400), rocket launchers (150), grenade launchers (2,000), rockets (840), hand grenades (25,020), magazines of SMG and others (6,392) and 18,40,000 bullets. In the most recent Bogra ammunition and explosive haul, police seized nearly 1,00,000 bullets and 200kg explosives. The Bogra ammo haul reports created confusion. On the first day of the cache seizure, the home minister told parliament that the Awami League was scheming to destabilise the government. The police headquarters in a statement echoed the home minister on July 4, 2003 in which it named an AL activist for possessing the huge stash of bullets. This time, too, the state minister for home described the haul as part of a 'big conspiracy' and did not rule out its possible links to the April 30 opposition deadline for the fall of the government.

But newspapers reported: The arms cache was unloaded in the 'presence of police', Urea Factory

effort leads to seizure of arms, gunrunners, workers hide unchallenged etc. Moreover, reports have it that a BNP lawmaker owns two of the eleven vessels that the intelligence agencies suspect as having carried the arms.

Though the signals are alarming, the political rhetoric shifted the focus of investigators nowhere and destroyed the cases one after another. Analysts believe that none of the arms hauls actually had anything to do with the internal politics of Bangladesh. There are indications that the real culprits have succeeded in remaining invisible because of the general lack of political will to uncover the truth, punish the real criminals and take effective measures to protect the nation from such a high risk bearing business.

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"On homosexuality"

I remember, quite a few days back, (though it is really late for a reply) a letter on homosexuality appeared in The Daily Star written by Mr. Farjad

Ahmed. The writer, with his notion on some famous homosexual writers and inquisitive reference on the origin of AIDS, somehow tried to show "homosexuality" as a natural phenomenon. However, his intention was a bit nebulous and shrouded in his naive logic, which may imply his de-facto acceptance of homosexuality. And of course he has that right, if I am correct.

However, I would like to say to Mr. Farjad that, basically the outcry against homosexuality is rooted mainly in the moral ground rather than in its tangible damages to society. It is worthwhile to mention one of radio talk show hosts' (in USA) comment on homosexuality.

Referring to recent incident of issuing marriage certificates to gay couples in San Francisco, he asked where we should draw the moral line in the name of "individual freedom". He asked the "champions of individuality" that if a brother wants to marry his sister in the name of "free will", weather it would be accepted or not. Needless to say, this is considered to be a shameful act in all the civilized societies not because scientifically it is harmful say, for a brother and sister to be tied in wedlock, rather morally this is

degrading and its repercussions are totally against the accepted norms of a civilised society that have been nurtured and protected since the creation of human civilisation.

Similarly homosexuality is such a phenomenon that is against the natural order of life and detrimental to one of the most important institutions of human civilisation, i.e. marriage. Homosexuality is like some century old diseases prevailing in our societies. Unlike finding a cure for those diseases, people like Mr. Farjad want homosexuality to be as it is just because it has been there over the centuries.

While talking about some famous homosexual writers, Mr. Farjad somehow was not able to differentiate between moral value and aesthetic value. A person's artworks might have stunning aesthetic value in the society; where as his personal conducts may be down below the accepted moral standards. In the annals of art and literature, we can see many such instances and we haven't necessarily tossed out the master pieces of many of such artists just because of their mental or behavioural disposition.
Zafar Hadi

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Politics

I had gone to a relative's house one day and while we were in the drawing room, I heard a great deal of noise outside. It sounded as if someone was trying to promote a movie (that was my first guess) or some new product. My uncle said "I hate politics," and turning to me he asked, "what do you think?". All I remembered was how annoying the noise was so I replied, "Yeah, I hate it too." From that day on, politics, to me, meant a lot of useless shouting about promises which would never be kept. It was a rather true description, wasn't it?

Bangladeshi politics have really helped out this country a lot. We can proudly say we rank Number One on a world survey. Of what, you ask? The survey of the most corrupted countries. Politics and politicians have corroded the moral fibre of this country. Though politics and corruption exist everywhere in the world, in Bangladesh it has reached ridiculous limits. It has turned into some sort of sport, some social event that most people love to participate in. It's become a game between various parties who just go

like someone so you just kill him without making it look like you were responsible. This feeling of sadistic power has enticed many other levels of the society to have political systems as well. As a result we have student politics. They say that student politics helps promote leadership qualities, the spirit of competition and a means of displaying one's talents. Even in Bangladesh that's true. The student politicians can become professional gang leaders and whenever they are faced by competition they can simply retaliate by having an old-fashioned shootout. As for talents, many of these political cadres can demonstrate their skill in wielding various weapons and having the ability to fight many people single-handedly. Being able to fund a political cause can make you a part of the mob easily. I believe these tactics were the same employed by the American gangs in the 1920s. Well now we proudly continue the "gang" legacy by doing the same things Al Capone did those many years ago. He would have loved Bangladesh.

As a result of these political conflicts there are thousands of casualties annually. But in this world, what's more shocking than

these statistics is honesty in politics. Honest politicians are like the proverbial, "needles in a haystack." Why? Because its so hard to find people who actually are willing to help the country and not themselves. I mean what would you rather do: toil over fighting extortion, or just let the offending people pay you so you do nothing? The second choice is rather enticing isn't it? As a result you're better off with a bulging pocket and new "friends". That's just how politics work.

But we shouldn't just point out at Bangladesh in these regards. Politics is an age old activity. It was politics that caused the assassination of Caesar and the eruption of civil war in Rome centuries ago. You see, corruption in politics has always been a part of mankind, it's just been more "refined" as time has passed on. I mean, look at George W Bush...

AIslam
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