

## AL's decision to join JS

Let it be a durable engagement

It is good news that the Awami League lawmakers will join the budget session of parliament. The decision reflects the expectations of people looking forward to a parliament throbbing with life.

Hopefully, the move won't end up being a half measure of obviating the 90-day absence limit but go much beyond a token attendance. The MPs will be well advised to dynamically represent the voters, their constituencies and the whole nation through a sustained functioning in parliament. An alternative voice must be heard within the precincts of parliament to keep democracy moving and yielding its fruits to the people.

Much of the political malfunctioning in the country is ascribable to the opposition's boycott of parliament. This does not, however, preclude the responsibility of the Treasury Bench to afford full opportunity and space to the opposition on the floor of the House to play their due role.

Jatiya Sangsad is the platform where the opposition can bring into focus the mass of public grievances which cannot be ventilated through street agitation. Moreover, agitation spells violence and disorder which are not compatible with an elective democracy. After all, people watch their performances over the electronic media.

While we welcome the AL decision to join the next parliamentary session, we must urge them not to go back to the boycott mode again. People simply don't want any more parliamentary stand-off. As we have said many times in the past, parliament-centred politics should have the primacy it deserves.

The nation has been paying a heavy price through the parliament losing its relevance and efficacy. The parliament's full potential to deliver goods to the people remain unutilised halfway through its tenure. Let the remainder of the JS' term see a lively parliament making up for the lost time.

## CPJ's hazard rankings

Bangladesh cited as fifth

THE Committee to Protect Journalists released a list of the ten worst countries for journalists to work in to mark the World Press Freedom Day on Monday. Bangladesh has been identified as the worst in Asia for newsmen and the fifth on world listing.

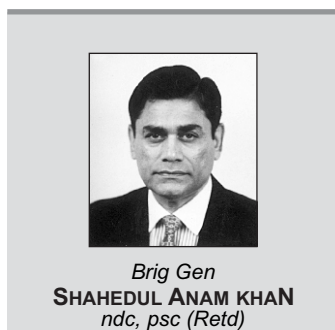
These kinds of global rankings that transnational organisations periodically produce are somewhat on the sweeping side. They often do not capture the nuances and complexities of the situation inside a country and the ranking systems they employ to rate countries often suffer from having to compare apples and oranges.

Nevertheless, we feel that there are more reasons to share the basic concerns of the CPJ than to differ with these. Let us forget about the rankings. Whether we are the fifth most dangerous country in the world for journalists or the tenth or the hundred and tenth is not important. What is important is the fact that the working conditions for journalists in Bangladesh have become extremely hazardous.

Who can dispute the fact that during the past decade majority of those responsible for attacks on journalists have gone unpunished. It is similarly undeniable that outside of Dhaka, the vulnerability of journalists is much greater and that the deep political divisions in the country expose newsmen to great risk. All of this contributes to the climate of fear in which many journalists operate in this country.

If the global rankings are flawed on the sweeping side, let's not be sweeping and dismissive in our reactions to the concerns raised. The government should take this opportunity to both acknowledge and put in place measures to demonstrate its commitment to making the country safe for newsmen.

# Iraq: Mission far from accomplished!



It was just about a year ago that the world witnessed a triumphant Bush 'the younger', standing on the deck of a US man of war, flamboyantly announce that the mission in Iraq was accomplished. A year later he is perhaps rueing ever uttering those words. He has reasons to be remorseful.

One year to the day that Mr. Bush haughtily proclaimed the end of combat, the war in Iraq is far from over. Cynics suggest that the actual war has only just begun, and the end does not appear to be in the horizon. A year ago, just before the US embarked on Iraq war, I had stated in an article that, while it was easy to start a war it was difficult to bring it to a conclusion, all by yourself. That, there are so many variables and imponderables in a conflict, particularly the one which is motivated by all the wrong reasons, and whose rationale is based on deceit, ending the war becomes all high impossible without effecting an honourable retreat.

We have been given to believe that milk and honey is about to flow in Iraq, that people in post Saddam have witnessed a growth in standard of living and the little resistance that the coalition forces are encountering are but the work of pro-Saddam Baathist

and foreign fighters, whose capitulation is but a matter of time only. As Paul Krugman commenting in the New York Times states, "The official story line portrayed a virtuous circle of nation-building, one that could eventually lead to a democratic Iraq, allied with the U.S." The reverse is the reality on ground, prompting many to wonder whether the situation can be saved at all.

A year after the 'Coalition'

before committing forces to ground. This really stems from the failure of the political masters to predict the exact nature of task that the troops were required to perform and assess the unforeseen eventualities that the troops would have to deal with. No wonder the US has sent additional heavy tanks and armoured vehicles to Iraq to combat the recent upsurge in attacks on its forces there.

construct the last eighty years. The US failed to understand that while an invading army can bring about 'liberation,' democracy and democratic and political institutions take much more than the wings of F-16s or the backs of Abraham tanks, to germinate. The most serious predicament for the US is that it cannot now leave Iraq without sorting out the mess that has been created, with or without outside assistance. It

according to one commentator, proves the fallacy of all the rationale offered by Mr. Bush. Falujjah and Najaf are but its latest illustration.

The carnage in Falujjah, reaching genocidal proportions, was so evident that the UN Secretary General was forced to call upon the US to reign in. The 'liberators' have now taken on the role of 'occupiers' arrayed against those that they claimed to have liber-

engage in urban anti-guerilla operations, which reduction of Falujjah would entail. The new Iraqi force would be set up under an agreement reached with local leaders to be known as the Falujjah Protection Army, made up of about 1,100 Iraqi soldiers led by a former general from the Saddam Hussein era. "The plan is that the whole of Falujjah will be under the control of the FPA," according to US sources. Analysts are not sure though just how much influence a new force would be able to exert over the rebel fighters in Falujjah - or how effective it would be in bringing about an end to the fighting.

The Najaf situation is even more complicated in that any disproportionate use of force will cause further loss of coalition credibility in the eyes of the majority population. No wonder that the US strategy in Najaf has been very different from that in Falujjah.

Mr. Bush is facing a Sisyphean task, having to finish a war whose conclusion was not properly planned. I am again tempted to quote Krugman because it encapsulates very crisply Bush's current predicament in Iraq. He says, "I don't have a plan for Iraq. I strongly suspect, however, that all the plans you hear now are irrelevant. If America's leaders hadn't made so many bad decisions, they might have had a chance to shape Iraq to their liking. But that window closed many months ago." While the American leaders are busy trying to salvage a no win situation in Iraq all the wretched Iraqis can do is 'pray, and bury the dead.'

The author is Editor, Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star

**The most serious predicament for the US is that it cannot now leave Iraq without sorting out the mess that has been created, with or without outside assistance. It just cannot leave Iraq to the Iraqis, in the current situation and call it quits, without creating serious consequences for the country as well as the region. Thus the frantic call to the UN to come to the aid of Bush and Blair. How the Brahimi plan would be set in motion remains to be seen.**

brought Iraq under its occupation, the US is faced with situations it did not foresee and were even less prepared to deal with. There are several predicaments that the US is currently faced with. First, its devious designs to exploit the Shia-Sunni divide has failed and indeed, backfired. By its actions in Najaf and Falujjah not only is the common Iraqi feeling alienated, the rift between the two communities have been mended, for the time being, at least.

Second, it has to contend with a full-blown insurgency situation, both in the 'Sunni Triangle' and now, lately, what the American cliché terms, the 'Shia Circle,' without adequate level of combat all high impossible without effecting an honourable retreat.

The Pentagon has failed to determine the troops-to-task ratio

Third, the 'coalition of the willing' is gradually becoming the 'coalition of the unwilling' as apparent from the thinning out process that has commenced, starting with Spain, of coming out of the league. Thus, the US finds itself more and more isolated in Iraq, and more and more under fire both literally and metaphorically, from the Iraqi freedom fighters and critics at home. More than 120 US troops have been killed in Iraq in the month of April alone - by far the highest casualty rate since the toppling of Saddam Hussein a year ago. There has been erosion in public support in the US. A new opinion poll shows only 47% of 1,042 Americans questioned believed invading Iraq was the right thing to do, the lowest support recorded in the polls since the war began.

Fourth, the predicament stemming from the compulsion of having to bring about a political dispensation in a country that was under a singular and monolithic

just cannot leave Iraq to the Iraqis, in the current situation and call it quits, without creating serious consequences for the country as well as the region. Thus the frantic call to the UN to come to the aid of Bush and Blair. How the Brahimi plan would be set in motion remains to be seen.

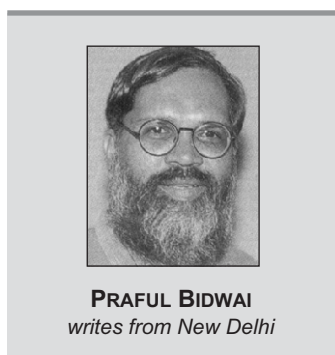
The US rationales of attacking Iraq have gone through constant changes, from WMD, to preempting Saddam, to human rights and democracy. Even if one were to pretend that all this was, "Justified on humanitarian grounds, given the controversy surrounding the decision to go to war, and, given the Bush administration's retrospective claims of humanitarian purpose, we might have expected greater attention to human rights concerns during the military occupation. What we saw instead was a failure to deploy sufficient forces trained and equipped for law enforcement responsibilities, contributing to the lamentable security situation that pervades Iraq today,"

ated. Seven hundred Iraqi civilian lives, mostly women and children (the US claims they were all insurgents), have been taken for the four US civilians who were killed gruesomely in Falujjah.

Although the US had brought to bear on the city the full brunt of US firepower, the town of three hundred thousand is yet to be reduced to submission. One could not agree more with a commentator who said, "The assault in Falujjah is a catastrophic mistake, because what the Americans wanted to present as a war against a dictatorial regime will be now seen as a war directly against the people of Iraq. This is the end of the little rest of credibility the US had there." The conflict in Falujjah has become the longest and costliest single engagement of the war in Iraq.

The new strategy of tackling Falujjah, through ex-Baathist generals, is an indication of Bremmer's volte-face; it is also an expression of reluctance of military commanders on ground, to

# NDA goes downhill Scramble for Muslim votes



If there's one issue that truly powered the BJP's rise in the 1980s and gave it middle-class credibility, it was its campaign against Muslim "appeasement" by "pseudo-secularists". Barring the Shah Bano casecountering a court judgment granting maintenance to a Muslim widow, "appeasement's" single greatest symbol was the Congress' cultivation of leaders like Syed Abdullah Bukhari, the "Shahi Imam" of Delhi's Jama Masjid.

The BJP publicised the fact that Congressmen would visit Mr Bukhari every week. What better proof of "appeasement"? In fact, the Congress cultivated conservatives from many different communities, including Sikhs and Hindus. But the Muslim "appeasement" charge stuck in middle-class minds.

Today, the BJP is shamelessly pursuing "appeasement" through opportunists like Arif Mohammed Khan and "Vajpayee Himayat" committees, and by wooing the "Shahi Imam's" son, Ahmed

Bukhari. This Mr Bukhari is a near-caricature of his father. He has suddenly discovered it's his "religious duty to raise my voice against the exploitation of Muslims" by the secular parties. He wants Muslims to "give the BJP a chance".

Mr Bukhari criticises the BJP for the Gujarat pogrom, but says "the Congress is responsible for 36,000 Gujarats (riots). This is downright false. The Gujarat carnage remains unmatched in magnitude and virulence in Independent

ogy", 141 BJP MPs want a temple at that very site.

It's easy to dismiss Mr Bukhari. But what of Mr Vajpayee himself? After shouting against "appeasement" from the rooftops, he's promising generous funding for madrassas and "2 crore" Urdu teachers' posts although the sangh parivar characterises madrassas as terrorism's nurseries.

The promise's frivolity was exposed when his own Office lowered the figure one hundred-fold. Even this is huge. India has

stan. This is fully in keeping with the sangh parivar's description of them as the "internal enemy", a Pakistani Fifth Column.

The rest of the speech is pious, sanctimonious blabber, contradicted by the BJP's practice and its Hindutva core-ideology, which privileges Hindus alone as "authentically" Indian.

The BJP's distinctiveness lies in rejecting India's multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic character. Mr Vajpayee's "sweet talk" has provoked anger amongst many

a pro-Congress surge thanks to Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi.

Trying to win India's 12 percent Muslim vote is the BJP's first line-of-defence. The second is to try to confuse Muslims.

Thus, the BJP recently said it has no "ideological differences" with the Samajwadi Party. This was meant to suggest that the SP is "soft" on the BJP and can't be trusted by Muslims. True, the SP accepted the BJP's tacit support while forming the government in Lucknow and failed to file a com-

died during the free distribution of sarees.

The event was organised by the BJP on its campaign-head Lajji Tandon's birthday. Advertisements for free sarees appeared in newspapers over five days, displaying Mr Tandon's pictures. The party also organised transport for the audience.

This was despicable feudal-style patronage, an offence against the election law, and downright corrupt. It's condemnable that the poor should be made to kill one another like this.

So ghastly is the episode that the Election Commission must take strong action on it including countermarching the Lucknow election.

The stampede will damage the BJP everywhere by highlighting its anti-poor character. The Opposition must doggedly pursue the issue.

It should be equally unpromising on former Socialist George Fernandes who, to win RSS support, has declared, "I have very old ties with the RSS."

The same Mr Fernandes gave a clean cut to Dara Singh for the gruesome killing of missionary Graham Staines and his children. His former associates say his new statement confirms that "he has sold his soul". They have floated a "George Harao Abhiyan" (campaign) to defeat "the traitor". One must wish them well.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

**While launching the "Himayat caravan", Mr Vajpayee told Muslims: "I need your support ... to see that Hindus and Muslims walk hand-in-hand, live in brotherhood, help one another, provide each other security ...[I have] a larger purpose. Firstly, to develop cordial relations with our neighbour. And, secondly, to develop a feeling ... that we have to live together ..."The first proposition insultingly equates Indian Muslims with Pakistan. This is fully in keeping with the sangh parivar's description of them as the "internal enemy", a Pakistani Fifth Column.**

India. It's our worst state-sponsored pogrom.

Mr Bukhari makes much of Mr Vajpayee's "apology" for the Babri demolition and his "condemnation" of the Gujarat violence, in March 2002. But within days, in Goa, Mr Vajpayee was back at Muslim-bashing.

Mr Vajpayee has all along defended Mr Modi's government and shared the campaign-dais with him for weeks. The BJP's stand on the Best Bakery case, rightly transferred by the Supreme Court for retrial in Maharashtra, speaks for itself. As for the Babri "apol-

only 6 lakh Urdu schools, of which just 2,000 are under the Centre. They cannot employ 2 lakh teachers!

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Muslims. It'll convince nobody.

The reason for this colossal hypocrisy? The BJP faces a bleak election prospect. Its own internal surveys say it can at maximum win 22 seats in Uttar Pradesh, and the NDA will fall short of the halfway Lok Sabha mark.

The latest five big opinion polls show a momentum building up away from the NDA, giving it an average of under 270 seats. The April 26 exit polls suggest the NDA's tally could be only 235.

The TD's likely to lose Andhra. In UP, the BJP is in bad shape. The Brahmins are deserting it. There's

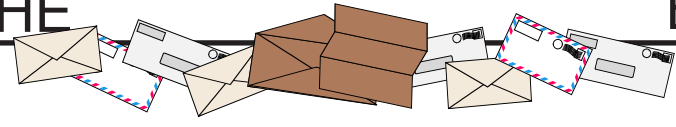
mon chargesheet against BJP-VHP leaders in the Babri case. But, despite compromises, it remains the BJP's strongest opponent in UP.

Then, on April 27, at Bakshi-Ka-Talab, Mr Vajpayee himself urged Muslims to "stick to the SP" and not vote for the Congressan amazing thing for the BJP's "star" to do.

The objective of the second line-of-defence is to divide the Muslim vote as much as possible. It's unlikely that it will work. So the BJP has taken to outright bribery.

Hence, the Lucknow stampede in which 22 women and 3 children

## 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.

### Our identity problem

Dhaka means covered. We keep our identity covered at the international level, and expose it nakedly at the local level. We are proud of our *deshi* outlook, full stop. Unlike the mighty United States (of America), we caricature the power of guns. We have become a trigger-happy society, and the right leaders at the right level are keeping rather quiet. That symbolises that life is cheap in the Third World; and the price of freedom is high, and it is not time-bound. Now the *shantash bahini* has taken over. How come? How's that? No appeals are allowed in political cricket, and one side wishes to bat non-stop. Fielding (as the opposition team) is rather demeaning, it appears. But one has to stoop to conquer, in every sphere of life, from planting to

harvesting, and while picking up the goods, or the baby. We are still in the national *dolna* (cradle). The mothering effect is rather confusing! Bangladesh cannot make it to the Western international media, as Dhaka cannot put up a united image of the nation. We use tools (like democracy and elections) to fool others. Some of our neighbours display unity in diversity, but look at the varieties offered at our campuses! We are impressed by the wrong type of versatility. In this deltaic region, the breeding of new chars and islands is a natural phenomenon. In the classics we read that each man is an island. We are good in disintegrating, but not in synthesising. The reason is clear enough: we are ruled by heart, although we have a good head. The body (of politics) is con-

fused. We do not mentally accept the concept of a Central Control Room. The MuktiBahini accepted it, and came out successful. The mass movement in 1990 (ousting of autocratic regime) succeeded in such a short period! looked effortless! That is the point: our politics is laborious, not effortless. The mind is willing, but the heart is not. Effortlessness comes from inner conviction, not outward physical mobilisation (hard, for example). Reap as you sow is an old maxim. Ad hoc attractions take the leaders (and the processions) away from the national goals. Temptation is a hard mistress, creating distress even for those not playing the game. "District-ism" plays a leading role in our lives, believe it or not. This basic issue needs more analysis, before a correct syn-

thesis can be arrived at. It is a sensitive issue, but the discussion on it is rather taboo. How to cultivate a cosmopolitan outlook? It should not be started at the grassroots level; as it is a top-down culture of imitation. The superior minds have some cultural responsibilities. The term does not mean medical treatment abroad or settling abroad. There is no objection to freedom of movement, provided the national ID card is shown at the right moment. In Dhaka, what has happened to the bond of human brotherhood? Every home is a castle, but defend against whom? Lawlessness prevails in a society when it is allowed to directly or indirectly. **Alif zabr Dhaka**

that we can purchase our text books," urged a school child at a question-and-answer session with the legislators at the LD hall of Jatiya Sangsad on April 22, 2004. Like this child, there were many children who got together to give us the simple message "Ensure Basic Education for All" to mark the Global Action Week, 2004. Most of them indicated poverty as the main impediment for every child to attain Basic Education. Besides, there were many problems as well that they identified for which they are deprived from the pleasure of school premises. Needless to say, our children are our future! Still we are not responsible enough to ensure a bright future for our next generation by providing a standard education system. The number of children who have never seen the inside of a classroom in Bangladesh is over half a

million. Though the government has introduced stipend for all girl students up to the HSC level, these students are suffering from irregularities in the distribution of stipend. That's why, they cannot get this money in right time, especially when this money is needed for purchasing text books and other learning materials. Here we expect that the government will ensure the proper implementation of the "Six Year Plan" in the primary education sector. Beyond the implementation of this plan, the government should be very sincere to take corrective and pragmatic measures. **Sadik Mahmud Department of Economics, Zahurul Haque Hall University of Dhaka BBC poll**

From the very beginning when I learned that BBC was going to hold an opinion poll to determine "who is the greatest Bengalee of all times" and place other famous Bengalees in a sequence, I wondered from whose fertile brain this absurd plan sprouted from, because great persons can never be judged in this manner and it will only create controversy. Recently, BBC announced the result of its survey but to me it seems meaningless and unacceptable because every one of them is unique in his or her field, they were not the students of the same class that their positions could be determined by their performances. It is very disappointing. We hope in the future BBC will show more wisdom in its enterprises. **Nur Jahan**

**Chittagong**  
**Corrupt nation**  
My attention has been drawn to the remarks made by Mr Gene George of US AID and Mr Mutsushiro Horiguchi, the Japanese Ambassador in Dhaka, published in your daily of April 21, 2004. We have been identified as the number one corrupt nation in the world. But did anyone bother to find out the root cause of the problem? We do not have any financial sovereignty. Donors dictate, while IMF formulates our financial management. Numerous examples can be cited to prove that donors and development partners are taking the crucial decisions in important sectors. **AK Azad South Banashree, Goran, Dhaka**