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### Rethink and reform politics

The compelling message from BDF

HIS year's BDF meeting stood out from the previous ones. There has been a marked stridency in the development partners' positioning on issues. Pleasantries were in short supply and even the customary scale of praise and brickbats was heavily tipped towards

What comes through the donor-Bangladesh government interface can be summed up as follows. First, by past standards, government's credibility with donors has touched a new low. Secondly, the donor community's observations have not been just acerbic, these even came with a hint of partial withdrawal or disengagement from programmes. Third, the discourse was dominated by noneconomic issues like never before. Fourth, a clear message rang out that non-economic factors like corruption, high cost of doing business and deepening insecurity reduced the annual growth rate by at least three percent. Fifth, the development partners stressed the paramount need for providing security to ordinary citizens who basically are the engine of national development.

To address the whole gamut of issues, the development partners have come out strongly with a commonsensical recipe, oft-suggested by our independent media and civil society as well, for the government's tolerance of dissent and allowing of space to the opposition. Given the stalemate, the fundamental responsibility is the government's to engage the opposition rather than distance itself from the latter, far less be exclusionary or dismissive about it. Hopefully, the ruling party has learned, perhaps the hard way, that it doesn't pay to go it alone in matters of presenting the country's case to the outside world. Furthermore, the idiom a government uses for domestic consumption to get around their follies can fall flat on expert foreign audience who have their own judgmental criteria. That is perhaps another lesson to draw.

The message is equally targeted to the opposition. They need to respond as a responsible opposition to a government offer for talks that will have travelled an extra mile. There is no discord between the government and the opposition on basic reform issues. Only growing political confrontation raises newer questions and causes hardening of positions. Thereby the potential for building a working relationship is wasted. Such a relationship would have paid equal dividends to both sides regardless of who were in power.

Setting aside the donor language or expressions which in some instances, were abrasive verging on being grated, we are in broad agreement with the thrust the BDF laid on priority concerns and issues before the nation. But the point we would like to highlight is that none of the issues will be properly addressed unless the opposition is given the space it deserves because of the public support it commands and no less because the Constitution of the country and the supreme national interest demand it.

### Search body at last Let's have a truly independent anti-graft commission

HE government has moved closer to setting up the much-awaited independent anti-corruption commission by forming a selection committee that will pick up the commissioners for it. It is believed that pressure from the development partners has expedited the process of setting up the commission. What civil society prodding and public anxiety to have an anti-graft body at the earliest couldn't do, has apparently been achieved for a

The fact remains, however, that a move has been made towards forming an anti-graft commission and that should be welcomed for what it is worth. The crucial follow-up concern is that persons with the right credentials in terms of impartial character, probity and honesty should be chosen to man the commission. We now look forward to an early constitution of the commission and the flagging off of its operations for the attainment of the objectives set for it.

The law minister said recently that an existing law needs to be amended to provide for a court to try the cases referred to it by the commission. However, the legal intricacies should not be difficult to overcome now that we stand committed to setting up the commission in full international glare

The intent of the government will be a crucially important factor in helping the commission attain its foremost goal -containing corruption which has earned the country not only immense misery but also bad reputation.

There should be an adequate delegation of financial authority to the chairman of the commission so that the statutory body can function smoothly. The personality of the chairman of the proposed commission will also have a bearing on its functioning.

### Iraq war gets dirtier with sadistic torture of prisoners



HARUN UR RASHID

RESIDENT Bush launched the Iraq war with a promise to Iraqi people of "no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone." The US troops did the opposite of what the President, as the Commanderin Chief of Armed Forces, promised. The images of brutalisation of Iraqi prisoners of war at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad have underscored the divide in Washington between action and promise.

The pictures of the abused prisoners demonstrate demeaning and uncivilised scenes. The images seem to give sadistic pleasure to the smirking US male and female soldiers in the suffering of Iraqi prisoners of war. It reminds of images of prisoners under Nero regime in Rome. On May 7th, the Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, while testifying before the US Armed Services Committee, said: "There are other photos that depict incidents of physical violence toward prisoners, acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic. cruel and inhuman.

#### Abuses on Iragi prisoners of war

The torture and gross abuses were divulged on May 3rd by Seymour Hersh for the New Yorker Magazine. (The same man broke the news of My Lai massacre in March 1968 in Vietnam where 347 unarmed Vietnamese, mostly women and children were killed). Images of atrocity of prisoners were shown on the CBS 60 Minutes II programme. On May 6th, a new batch of photographs by the Washington Post included more graphic images of apparent Iraqi prisoners. It is further reported that Pentagon has about 60 photographs from Abu Ghraib jail depicting abuse more violent than already

In Iragi culture, the most humiliate ing is to be naked in presence of others and in particular, in presence of women. Hyder Sabbar (36, married with five children), one of the Iraqis abused by US troops, revealed to the media that "after about two hours of beatings and writing on the detainees' bodies with marking pens, the soldiers forced the Iraqis to pile, naked and hooded, on top of each other in human

A picture shows a woman US soldier, grinning cockily at the camera, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, as she points in mockery at a group of naked Iragi prisoners. The Washington Post's picture

again shows the same female soldier holding the leash wrapped around the prisoner's neck and dragging him like a dog (dog in Iraqi culture is one of the vilest creatures on the earth).

Some other graphic details of abuse have been reported in the media. One Iraqi teenage boy was allegedly raped and photograph A 24-year old Iragi prisoner said that the US interrogator pulled his hair and peeled back his eye lids saying: "Do not ever abuses do not seem to be aberration given the reports in the media within the US. It is reported that two prisoners were murdered, one for throwing rocks at a US soldier. The two incidents were among 10 deaths in US military custody in Iraq investigated since December 2002.

It has now been revealed that contractors were hired from the US to interrogate Iraqi prisoners to save costs. No one knew that contractors were used by the US military to do this kind of sensitive tasks that contravention of the 1949 Geneva Convention for Occupying Powers.

Trial in US: A problem

The commanders and the US soldiers have committed "war crimes" under international law. Since the Bush administration has withdrawn from The Hague-based International Criminal Court, the suspected US troops and commanders will not face trial by international judges. Although the suspected US soldiers and command-

ers may face trial in the US under

the military court system, the poten-

tial problem is that the President, as

Commander-in-Chief and the

Defence Secretary, may end up

reviewing the charges against them.

that many of them may not finally be

The Bush administration scrambled

to try to stem the erosion of US

credibility caused by the abuse of

prisoners and to limit any further

political damage to President Bush.

All the high officials are now put on

Bush had to appear on Arabic TV to

quell the rage among Arabs. He did

not apologise but said the picture

were "abhorrent" and "do not repre-

sent America that I know." The

President missed an opportunity by

not apologising during the interview

to repair the damage in the Arab

World. A former Jordanian Foreign

Minister, Jawad al-Anani, reportedly

said: "This is not going to wash with

the Arab audience. It's a good

apologised." However, on May 6th.

gesture but he should have publicly

On May 5th, media-shy President

high gear for damage control.

Damage control actions

abuses, is still in the job, although he was reprimanded by the Pentagon. The private defence contractor who worked as an interrogator with the intelligence at the Abu Ghraib prison, Steven Stephanowicz, has not been removed from the job. Furthermore, the company CACI which appointed Stephanowicz has reportedly won more contracts with the Pentagon including one worth US\$ 600 million. All these facts raise doubt about any swift action on the high ladder of the troops, although a

few at the bottom ladder have been

The continuation of the sus-

pected culprits demonstrates

'business as usual" in Iraq and a

palpable gap between action and

Rumsfeld visited Iraq at least twice.

It is surprising that he did not know

of the abuse that was taking place in

the Abu Ghraib prison. Even more

surprising is that Rumsfeld and

Myers failed to realise the incalcula-

ble adverse impact of the abuses on

Iragi people and on the stated US

mission in that country. They failed

to recall that that the Bush adminis-

tration argued that the purpose of

waging a war in Iraq was to liberate

Iraqis from the tyrannical rule of

Saddam Hussein. These pictures

show exactly the opposite of the

is abuzz with questions on "who

knew what and when." The US high

command including the Defence

Secretary admitted at the hearing

that he knew of the gross abuses in

January and a report of internal

military investigations carried out by

Major-General Antonio Taguba was

submitted a 53-page report to the

Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

General Richard Myers. They did

not even bother to read the report

until the pictures were shown on TV

in the US. Rumsfeld provided a

strange excuse not to read the

report as he complained to Matt

Lauer that the report is "awfully

thick." Their attitude seems to be

that these things occur in war and

could be either kept secret or

The President said in the inter-

sidelined.

Reports indicate that Washington

stated purpose of the US.

words of the administration.

Who is accountable?

charged for the abuse.

Now Washington insiders are asking how high the blame will reach. With outrage growing over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, accountability is the key issue. There are noises that the Defence Secretary Rumsfeld should resign. However, Rumsfeld said at the Senate hearing that "Needless to say, if I thought I could not be effective, I would resign in a minute." The President has said his Defence Secretary is an important part of the Cabinet and will remain in his post.

Some observers believe that it would be a wise gesture for Rumsfeld to resign after he took responsibility for the absolute mess. He is one of the neo-conservatives who has masterminded the Iraqi Another fact is noted that hawkish Republican and President's mentor, Vice-President Dick Cheney, did not conspicuously say a single word until the time of writing. Why does he keep silent? He is the one who reportedly was the driving force in persuading malleable President Bush to go to war in

Mid-level military officers implicated in the case are accusing superiors of trying to avoid responsibility. A Democrat Senator Robert Byrd, a member of the armed services committee said: "It is not clear at this point who should be held to account. No one has stepped forward to take responsibility for the conditions in Iraqi prisons. Instead, fingers are being pointed in every direction. With whom does this buck

### Conclusion

Many Arab observers believe that the statements from the US leaders and commanders are too little and too late. The pictures raise many questions about how the US-British strategy is being applied in Iraq. Many Arabs believe that Washington preaches a contradiction, calling for freedom from tyranny but on the other hand, abuses and tortures Iragi prisoners

The political cost for the Bush administration both in the US and abroad is enormous and some say this stain will take decades to wipe it out from the memory of Arabs. Furthermore war on global terror seems to have been seriously compromised by the Bush administration by being complacent to the atrocity of Iraqi prisoners.

The images are likely to strengthen the view of many in the Arab and Muslim world that US and Britain's real agenda in Iraq is humiliation of Arabs. Some even say Osama Bin Laden must be laughing in his hiding place somewhere in Afghanistan because he does not need to do anything now because spontaneous anger and humiliation among Arabs due to images of Iraqi prisoners may likely induce many of them to join Al-Quaeda network that will continue and spread further.

## BOTTOM LINE

The images are likely to strengthen the view of many in the Arab and Muslim world that US and Britain's real agenda in Iraq is humiliation of Arabs. Some even say Osama Bin Laden must be laughing in his hiding place somewhere in Afghanistan because he does not need to do anything now because spontaneous anger and humiliation among Arabs due to images of Iraqi prisoners may likely induce many of them to join Al-Quaeda network that will continue and spread further.

imagine you will manage to get out of this; forget about your Jazeera; forget your future." Another incident involved a man and his son. They were both hooded and they were stripped naked and after that they were allowed to see each other Then the son was given female underwear. Another incident was that a prisoner's head was bashed against a wall until he fell unconscious. The prisoners are now telling their grim stories to the

Similar abuses occurred in Basra under the British troops. On May 5th, 14 Iraqi families lodged a legal suit for compensation in the High Court in London for unlawful deaths of their relatives at the hands of the British troops, London's Daily Mirror stood by the truth of the pictures and the story, although attempt was made to doubt the images by Ministry of Defence. The newspaper stated that it received the photos from two soldiers in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment who witnessed an eight-hour beating and torture session of the unidentified Iraqi. Tony Blair's high moral ground for going to war seems to have been severely tarnished.

One fact that needs to be noted that credit must go to a section of media, both in the US and Britain, to expose the abuse with vivid photographs so that the authorities may not be able to cover up the atrocities. Credit also should be extended to the US reservist in the 327 Military Police Company, reportedly named as John Darby, who with a sworn statement first sounded the alarm on abuse of Iragi prisoners in Baghdad. Darby's family spokesman said to media that: "I'm sure he wrestled with himself and decided to take the high road."

#### Abuses are reportedly widespread

Reports suggest that the abuse and torture are not isolated incidents. They are reportedly widespread and systematic to "soften" the prisoners. It seems that they were the norms, and not isolated incidents. These

ordinary falls within the duties of military personnel. The perpetrators reportedly told the media that they were told by the military intelligence unit to adopt these abusive tactics to extricate confessions from Iraqi

The Geneva-based International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) representative. Antonelle Notari told the BBC on May 6th that ICRC reported these abuses more than six months ago to the US authorities for corrective action. The ICRC's report, reportedly leaked to the Wall Street Journal, says the ill-treatment of Iraqi prisoners went beyond exceptional cases -- it was a practice widely tolerated. Amnesty International also cried foul of the treatment of Iragi prisoners from day one of the US occupation

#### Gross contravention of international law

The Defence Secretary in the TV interview on May 5th attempted to clumsily defend that these abuses were not "torture" under the definition of the 1984 UN Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Under Article 1 of the 1984 Convention, Torture has been defined as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession." If these pictures of abuses were not considered as "torture" what kind of abuses would amount to "torture" is indeed mystifying. The ICRC in its report indicated that in some cases the abuses were "tantamount to torture.'

The US and Britain are signatories to the UN Convention on Torture and is well aware of the prohibitions involved under the Convention Rumsfeld's explanation not to consider these abuses as torture or cruel degrading treatment within the definition of the Convention is strange, to say the least. Furthermore, these abuses are in gross

#### the President said "sorry" to King Abdullah of Jordan when they met in Rumsfeld said to the Senate

Armed Services Committee that he became aware of the abuses "about 13-14 January." He apologised to Iragi prisoners mistreated by US troops. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told Arabiya TV that the US was "deeply sorry" for the abuses. The US Major-General Geoffrey Miller, presently in charge of the Abu Ghraib prison, personally apologised for the abuse of the

#### Suspected culprits are still in office

Despite all the apologies from the highest political office, it is intriguing to learn from reports that Colonel Thomas Papas, the head of the military intelligence unit in Baghdad allegedly responsible for the

view at the Arabic channel that first time "I saw or heard about pictures was on TV." At the Senate hearing, Rumsfeld acknowledged that failed to recognise how important it was to elevate a matter of such gravity to the highest levels, includ-

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh

# The Bush White House: Is it unravelling?



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

HE world has just witnessed on live TV the astonishing spectacle of the appearance of Bush White House heavyweight Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld before a Senate Committee. The spectacle is anything but reassuring for the Bush White House.

The Senate Committee was concerned with the horrific images coming out of Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, involving brutality, torture and sex abuse of the worst kind on Iraqi prisoners. The torturers were

#### From the grilling within the Senate to which Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was subjected to, it looks pretty certain that his days at the Pentagon are numbered. Will it be the beginning of the unravelling of the Bush White House? Only time will tell. apparently enjoying the entire Pentagon. Every now and then they

These pictures were spread throughout the world media and shook the entire civilised world. In the more than year-long crisis surrounding Iraq, few events had an impact similar in intensity and scope. It has been compared with Guantanamo Bay and atrocities in My Lai in Vietnam. That US soldiers

could sink to this depth of depravity,

has been difficult to swallow by the

most hardened minds. What the US Senators have tried to get from Defence Secretary Rumsfeld, was when he first saw the reports, the pictures, whether he informed the President, and, if so, when. The Defense Secretary was appropriately flanked by the military top brass and Secretary of the

vere butting in to extricate the Defence Secretary from sticky situations. The sum total of the answers by Rumsfeld amounted to very little. He was unable to answer satisfactorily when he first saw the pictures and ended by the extraordinary assertion that he had first seen the pictures the day before, that is Thursday the sixth, and he was being interrogated on Friday the seventh! The whole world had seen those pictures for more than a week! Had he discussed those pictures with the President? He remained

Then some senators took up in earnest the question of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's stepping down as was being suggested from many important quarters. Donald Rumsfeld answered that if he felt that he was not capable of doing justice to the job, he would guit. He added that he would not leave under political pressure. Those of us watching TV late at night could not help feeling that he sounded less than convinc-

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

The horrendous pictures drama seems like the proverbial last straw. It is universally acknowledged that the Iraq misadventure of President George Bush has been going badly from the start. President Bush along with his faithful ally British Premier Tony Blair launched into a totally unprovoked war built on specious pretexts against President Saddam

Hussein of Iraq. The huge war machine of the US, aided by the British, pulverised the little resistance of Iraq and the coalition forces reached Baghdad easily. The Iraqi forces unable to face the Anglo-American attack mounted a very effective guerilla warfare and they continue to inflict intolerable losses on the US forces. Meanwhile the US representative in Iraq, Paul Bremer, is trying to stabilise the situation administratively by keeping to the target of handing over at least partial sovereignty to the Iraqis. In this, the US is aided by the Lakhdar Brahimi, representative of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The target date is June 30. President Bush would like to cut his losses and wind down his

The misery's cause lies in Israeli-

imposed closures and "anti-terrorist"

reduce Palestine to a cluster of Bantu-

military operation. The way the Iragi guerrillas continue to mount their campaign on an ever increasing scale, Bush's plan may be difficult to realise

Closely linked with the President Bush's military plan in Iraq is tied the question of his reelection as president next November Indeed for President Bush what overrides every other issue is his re-election. He is painfully aware that this is inextricably tied to finding a solution to the Iraq crisis. Iraq continues to hold centre spot in the election campaign and does not show any sign of going away US House of Congress which had cheerfully voted in favour of attack against

Iraq is having second thoughts. From the grilling within the Senate to which Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was subjected to, it looks pretty certain that his days at the Pentagon are numbered. Will it be the beginning of the unravelling of the Bush White House? Only time

Arshad-uz-Zaman is a former Ambassador

# Why Palestine is burning: Apartheid by another name



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

HE 60-percent negative vote in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party referendum has upset his plan for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The plan would have evacuated some 7,500 settlers (in a population of 1.5 million) who occupy 40 percent of Gaza's land. But that wouldn't have helped establish an independent

Mr Sharon's Gaza pullout had

Bank -- with 400,000 Israelis -- and prevent a sovereign Palestinian state's emergence.

Israeli writer Meron Benvenisti says this would have helped Mr Sharon "improve" the demographic situation by removing 1.5 million Palestinians from Israeli control" and reduce the danger that Israel "will cease to be a Jewish state.

"Disengagement" wouldn't have ended Israel's control over Gaza. It would continue to dominate its airspace and sea and land approaches, and could even send its troops back. The April 14 Bush-Sharon memoran dum explicitly provides for this.

"After the pullout, Gaza would have become a prison republic," says Azmi Bishara, a distinguished Israeli-Palestinian philosopher and ember of parliament.

The pullout would have furthered Palestine's occupation -- violating **UN Security Council resolutions 242** and 338, the Geneva Conventions, and global public opinion. Its rejection by a minuscule minority shows the clout of Israel's Hard-Right Settler

I surveyed the vitiated Palestine-Israel situation during a fortnight-long trip to several cities and West Bank villages (although not to Gaza, which was closed following Hamas leader Rantissi's assassination).

I witnessed "apartheid in practice" I don't use these words loosely. I was although Jews were only a third of the population. Israel turned the remaining Palestinians into second-class citizens. In 1967, it occupied the West Bank and Gaza, displacing 325,000 people

The key issue in this unhappy land is not Hamas-style terrorism, con-

water resources of the Occupied Territories (OT) and also lifts water from the Jordan River.

Israel's tyranny and human-rights violations have reduced the Palestinians' daily life to harassment and humiliation. They have no freedom of movement. The Palestinian Author-

ity, created by the Oslo accords,

represents municipal government. Its

writ doesn't run even in Ramallah.

Until a few weeks ago, the Israelis

Haram-al-Sharif. Israel's recent repression of resistance has been ferocious, and bled the Palestinian

Israel's military campaigns have

economy white.

killed 2,984 people, including 500 children. According to a UN estimate, closures and military operations have

kind of apartheid -- separateness. Mr. Sharon is killing the US-Europe-Russia-UN-sponsored "Road Map" Palestine's occupation is the worst legacy of colonialism -- like Vietnam in the 1970s or South although it was biased in Israel's Africa in the 1980s. Fighting it demands international solidarity. The global community won't find favour. He wants to confine the Palesit easy to rein in a roguish Išrael, backed closely by the US. Only a genuinely multilateral initiative tinians to tiny, depressed enclaves and keep them out of richer areas. He subjects them to harassment and drained \$2.4 billion out of the Paleseconomic punishment to break their

> Israel has established created 760 checkpoints to prevent people's movements in the West Bank and

Israel is demolishing peoples' homes to impose ethnic segregation. Over three years, 4,000 houses were destroyed, and 15,000 damaged. (Besides, lakhs of olive trees were

That's where the 700 km-long "Apartheid Wall" comes in. Israe

percent. Half its people require food started building this fence inside Palestinian territory to enclose the settlements into Israel. I visited the Wall at Abu Dis near Jerusalem. It cuts military operations. Israel's goal is to village after village into two, with the local school on one side, and the stans without contiguous territory. This cemetery on the other.

The monstrous \$2 billion Wall isn't a cannot be done except by practising a temporary structure. It's designed to tear Palestinian society into shreds.

The gravest immediate danger is that of Palestine becoming a cluster of Bantustans without contiguous territory, sovereignty or independence.

legacy of colonialism -- like Vietnam in the 1970s or South Africa in the 1980s. Fighting it demands international solidarity. The global community won't find it easy to rein in a roguish Israel, backed closely by the US. Only a genuinely multilateral initiative can change things. Much will depend on what happens

Palestine's occupation is the worst

in Iraq, where US plans for Empire face their gravest crisis. If the global balance-of-power changes, the US and Israel could yet be forced to see

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nothing to do with Palestinian independence. Rather, it would consolidate the 300 settlements in the West

active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s and closely followed the debates over the "pass laws" and "Bantustan" proposals. It's hard to demarcate Israel's Palestine policy from the ideology and politics of apartheid (literally, "separateness") based on ethnicity

can change things.

Israel's creation was meant to correct a terrible historic wrong, culminating in the Holocaust. Instead, it created another catastrophe -- the expulsion of 800,000 Palestinians. By 1948, Israel held 78 percent of historic Palestine's land

demnable as that is. The central issue is Israel's military occupation -brutal, oppressive and dehumanis-The occupation is worse than, say,

colonialism in South Asia. Over halfa-century, the British relaxed their iron-grip over India. During the past half-century, Israel has tightened its grip over the Palestinians. Israel has confiscated 24 percent

ments, highways and military instal-

lations. It controls four-fifths of the

occupation. Despite initial promise, the "peace process" became, in its Oslo format, an instrument of injusof West Bank-Gaza's and 89 percent of East Jerusalem's land for settle-

would shoot at its police if it wore Israel, backed as never before by Washington, isn't willing to end the

Events took an ugly turn in September 2000, when Mr. Sharon provocatively marched on the holy

lost more than \$4 billion in income. Israel is the world's 16th wealthiest country. The Palestinian economy is among the world's poorest. It has

tinian economy. Palestinians have

shrunk by one-half in three years. Agriculture and services are in acute distress. Seventy percent of firms have closed or severely reduced production

worsened gravely - from 20 to 75

Unemployment is 67 percent in Gaza and 50 percent in the West Bank. The OT poverty-ratio has

uprooted.)