

Bangladesh-Singapore ties

A new horizon opens for cooperation

It was a very significant visit that Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong paid to Bangladesh over the last three days. For one thing, it was the first ever trip made to Dhaka by any Singaporean head of government. For another, his Bangladesh itinerary was part of an Asian Odyssey he embarked upon with the purpose of broadening the horizon of understanding in a highly volatile global context.

The summitry between Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and her Singaporean counterpart has produced a mutually satisfactory outcome of a far-reaching import to top it off.

A new, or shall we say, an overarching element of understanding has been forged as a result of Goh's visit. It consists in Bangladesh accepting an offer by Singapore to join an eight-country Nucleus Steering Committee (NSC) in a bid to remove misperceptions of Islam in the west. Of the eight four will be Arab countries. And, given the preliminary or conceptual stages in which the Goh initiative happens to be, the names of all eight likely partners in the endeavour await finalisation.

The post-nine-eleven stereo-profiling of Islam with a terrorist stigma has to go. And, the countries with large Muslim populations and traditions of moderation anchored in the true spirit of their faith, could take a role in removing the 'misperceptions' of Islam'. But the initiative will have to be complemented by appropriate policy changes in the western world to bear fruit. That a non-Muslim state Singapore has taken up the cause adds a cathartic value to the initiative. This is welcome.

Bangladesh and Singapore being co-signatories to various UN conventions and resolutions against terrorism have very rightly agreed to share intelligence and information 'as the first step' towards combating terrorism in the region and beyond.

On the strictly bilateral plane, the two governments have signed an agreement on protection of investment and a protocol on foreign secretary-level annual consultations. In addition to agreements, a good number of assurances have been given by the Singaporean side to reduce the trade gap tilted towards the city state, increase manpower import from Bangladesh, and help Dhaka become a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Free Trade Agreement related negotiations are also on the horizon.

What will be keenly awaited in Bangladesh from here on is a growing and intense interaction between the private sectors of both countries.

A triumph of international law

US shows some realism

THE US withdrawal of a resolution for exempting its peacekeepers from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court has done a world of good for the UNSC's credibility. It has also marked a triumph of principle over short-run expediency.

One must credit the UN Secretary General for his very forthright view on the potential negative consequences of providing a special dispensation to a UN member. The resolution was withdrawn in the face of potential opposition from an overwhelming majority of the UN Security Council members.

However, we sit up and take note of the words of the US deputy representative at UN when he said that in future the US would take into account the risk of ICC review when determining contributions to UN authorised or established operations.

It would be recalled that the US had obtained from UN immunity for its troops in 2002, by threatening to block UN peacekeeping operations, if its demand for exemption from ICC prosecution was not met.

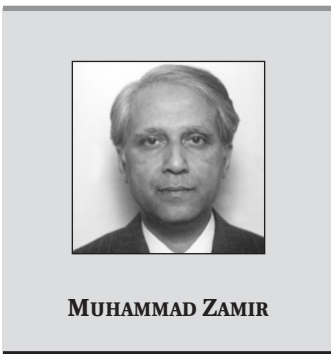
That the exemption was not renewed this time around is indeed a triumph of international law. We would also like to think that this is also an acknowledgement of the fact that the US cannot ride roughshod over world opinion.

Interestingly, the US had played a leading role, when the Rome Statute was first mooted, in 1996. The whole treaty was 'unsigned' two years after the president of the United States had put his signature on it in 2000, fearing that the court might be used by its opponents, to pursue politically motivated cases.

The US apprehensions are predicated on its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But then, neither Afghanistan nor Iraq was a peace operation.

Hopefully, it has been made clear that when it came to the question of rights and justice even the US must subject itself to the dictates of international law.

Iraq: Problems and prospects



A small step was taken on 8 June with the United Nations Security Council adopting unanimously Resolution 1546, as put forward by the USA and the UK. The new Resolution related to the new Interim Administration in Iraq. It not only opened doors but also generated further questions about the continuing problems facing that country and its future prospects over the coming months till the end of 2005.

This Resolution was important because it attempted to paper over the cracks that appeared within the international community over the unilateral decision to invade Iraq bypassing existing international law.

Security Council Resolution 1546 has addressed some significant elements. It promises eventual Iraq transition to a democratically elected government with the help of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).

The basis for this role has been evoked from a request made to the President of the Security Council on 5 June by the Prime Minister of the Interim Government of Iraq. Under this Resolution, the United Nations is expected to play a 'leading role' in the convening of a national conference to select a Consultative Council during July

2004, advise and support the process for holding elections, promote national dialogue and consensus building on the drafting of a national constitution, help to create conditions for development of effective civil and social services, contribute to the coordination and delivery of reconstruction, arrange for a comprehensive census and also arrange judicial and legal reform.

I do not know what else is left. I guess, it is the arranging of security, not only for the war affected people

being a party to international criminal court stipulations will enable their presence to be outside ICC principles. There is a reference of 'unified command,' but one presumes that the nature of such a command will hardly be so.

Secondly, will such a multinational force be under the regular UN blue helmet command? This is the only format and the usual practice that can be described as being in the service of peace-keeping. Any ambiguity in the nature of the composition of this

Encouraged by the unanimous acceptance of the Security Council Resolution both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair tried to persuade the other leaders of the G-8 to work together with other NATO member states 'to at least continue the role that now exists, and hopefully expand it somewhat for the new Iraqi government and... to work out how, over time, the Iraqi capability for security can be established and built up.' Unfortunately, for Blair and Bush, despite the apparent bonhomie among the

the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq but also in his efforts to boost economic growth. Bush is still seen as being better able to defend the United States against terrorism, but his disapproval ratings are climbing. Similarly, Iraq is beginning to give Blair a black eye. The ruling Labour Party has suffered heavy reverses in the recently concluded local elections in England and Wales with several city councils changing hands. While Labour has globally lost more than 315 seats. Conservatives

have shown that this country continues to be in a terrible state. Administration and governance outside Kabul is still severely impaired. Many involved in the process of reconstruction have died needlessly.

It is in this context that the Interim Government of Iraq has to find the right balance that will ensure the performance of the several tasks expected of them after 30 June.

They already have a lack of credibility factor as most of its members, particularly the President and the Prime Minister were US appointees and former members of the controversial Iraq Governing Council. The current arrangement will reduce the frontline controversy for the USA and the UK, but will in all likelihood, be less than successful in keeping the time frame.

The important question is trust and faith in the expected process. Unless this is brought into place, the chance of effective participation will remain remote.

It might be useful for the interim government to be bold and request Ayatullah Sistani and other important informal leaders within Iraq to come forward and nominate some additional representatives. Let the democratic process reflect true involvement. If the nascent development of democracy has to succeed in Iraq, it has to be a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down directive. It should include as many branches of opinion as possible. Without this, the Transitional National Assembly and the Transitional Government of Iraq will have a constitution and a constitutionally elected government that will neither be universally acceptable nor stable.

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POST BREAKFAST

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of Iraq, but also for the hundreds of UN officials who will have to implement plans on the ground to make this Resolution meaningful.

More than one preambular paragraph recognises the consent of the 'sovereign' government of Iraq with regard to the presence of the multinational force in Iraq territory and also the need for close coordination between the multinational force and that government to promote the maintenance of security and stability. Apparently, such engagement will include obligations to function in accordance with international law, international humanitarian law and cooperation with relevant international organisations.

It is here that questions have arisen. It has been obvious from the start that any US contingent in such a multinational force is unlikely to be under the command of any officer other than from the US armed forces. Similarly, not

force will not encourage greater participation.

Thirdly, who or which coordinating body will be responsible for identifying strategy or priorities in the functional matrix of such a force charged with the specific task of preventing and deterring terrorism? Vagueness in this area will not help in obtaining military forces from UN member states and regional organisations.

Hesitation with regard to participation in such a multinational force has already been reflected during Rumsfeld's recent visit to Bangladesh and Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh's meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington.

This caution and scepticism has also been perceived in the disagreements that have surfaced at the end of the recently concluded G-8 Summit held in Sea Island, USA.

G-8 leadership, objection arose from French President Chirac. In clear terms, he not only indicated that he did 'not think it is NATO's purpose to intervene in Iraq' but also mentioned that he was 'totally reserved about this initiative.' One presumes that despite this splash of cold water, fresh efforts will be made towards broad agreement about NATO and the multinational force in Iraq, during the forthcoming NATO Summit to be convened at the end of June in Istanbul, Turkey.

In the meantime, both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are understanding the dire effects of their Iraq policy within their domestic political arenas. Successive polls carried out by several news agencies, including Fox News and the LA Times, after taking note of the Ralph Nader factor, have revealed that John Keery is ahead of Bush in opinion polls. The dissatisfaction quotient relates not only to

have gained 108 seats and the Liberal Democrats (who opposed the war) gained 62 seats. As a consequence, the British Home Secretary Blunkett has been forced to acknowledge that the government's policy on Iraq is being disliked by the voters.

This steady erosion of support for the Iraqi war (as part of the global war on terrorism) has also not been helped with a recent revelation from the US State Department that its past report indicating that the number of international terrorist attacks had fallen last year was wrong. Such an admission has denied the claim by President Bush's administration that Washington is winning the war on terrorism.

It is time for the powers that be to understand that mere resolutions in the Security Council will not ensure a peaceful and gradual transition in Iraq. Recent events in Afghanistan, despite US claims,

OPINION

Good democracy and bad democracy

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

PEOPLE are dog-tired. They are tired of bad governance, inefficiency and mismanagement. The nation faces multifarious problems like unbridled corruption, extortion, lawlessness, brutality, nepotism, communalism, religious fundamentalism, absenteeism, bureaucraticism, poverty and unemployment. Neither the government nor the opposition seems to have been bothered about this catastrophic situation not to mention of willingness to face the challenge.

Democracies are mainly of two kinds: good and liberal democracy, and bad and illiberal democracy. According to non-Marxist liberal thinkers, of different forms of government there are no better alternatives to democracy. The salient features of good democracy are known to all. At present around 120 of the world's countries are democratic -- at least governments there are elected by people's votes. People of Bangladesh have had a long experience of military dictatorship. For the last 13 years they have been experiencing a kind of democracy that can not perhaps be ranked as good and liberal.

Because: In a bad democracy, the party in power does not care to honour its election commitments, and does whatever it likes for the benefit of the party-men and leaders. In a bad democracy, the leader of the House and the leader of the Opposition are not in talking terms. The sittings of the parliament rarely commence on time due to absence of quorum. MPs are busy otherwise; they do not like to go to the parliament often. But they draw pay and allowances without fail.

In a bad democracy, the leaders have no control over their tongue and the terms like 'ultimatum,'

'deadline,' 'trump card,' 'mass arrest' dominate the politics. In April this year, the people of Bangladesh experienced the outcome of the 'first call' of the 'ultimatum' given by the Opposition to the government for resignation. The leader of the Opposition said that it was the first of a series of ultimatums. And we are sure that many such things will continue to happen in the days to come.

In a bad democracy, the police are hyper-active, and to flagrant violation of human rights, arrest and send passers-by to prisons for offences they have never committed.

Bengalis took control of their own destinies 32 years back. During the freedom movement people had hoped that the independence would mark the end of exploitation, repression and oppression they endured for 190 years of British domination and 24 years of Pakistani rule...Before independence our nationalist leaders had played excellent role, but they followed mainly political agenda and completely ignored moral, social and economic questions. Now many people believe that we were not ready for independence at the time we got it at a cost of a river of blood.

ted. In such a system, students and youths are used as weapons of party politics.

In a bad democracy, the Opposition boycotts the parliament, and the boycotting lawmakers have the pleasure of joining parliament session for a few moments only to 'save' their membership before 'expiry of the absence limit'. Their allegation is that they are not allowed to say whatever they like.

'Any opposition can tell anything to the government, nobody should stop voicing their concern, but there are rules and procedures of the game', a visiting member of the EU delegation exhorted our law-makers, adding 'continuing violent politics is not solution to the problems in the country.'

In a bad democracy, MPs are provided with tax-free luxury cars,

and their perks are enhanced by 100 to 600 percent at the expense of the national exchequer and despite existence of poverty among more than half of the population.

We can cite another classic example of a bad democracy: 771 MP's from first parliament to the current one owe Taka 8 crore 60 lakh 95 thousand and 774 to the BT&TB as telephone bills. The bill defaulters include a former president and two prime ministers of the 1980's. 'Deputy speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui and 159 sitting parliament members are on this list of defaulters while some

ists and bigot political hoodlums get the upper hand.

In a bad democracy, Ahmadiyas are asked to shut down their places of worship. In a bad democratic governance, a self-styled vigilante Islamic group kills and tortures people in its 'punishment cell' in the name of anti-outlaw operation, even forces women to wear burkha and men to grow beard under direct police support. In a bad democracy, supporters of listed criminals erect arches at a cost of hundreds of thousands of taka on the stretches of roads leading to the venue of a meeting to be addressed

ular feel insecure. Such as, in the meanwhile, several businessmen have been abducted for ransom and some are still missing. Wealthy section especially the business people have been facing extortionists every day. The government is unable to prevent such occurrences.

In a nasty democracy, every institutions -- government and semi-government -- are politicised. The government party men seem to hold licence to commit crimes as they are virtually given immunity from prosecution. 'Democratically elected regimes,

near-tyrannies like Kazakhstan and Belarus, with countries like Romania and Bangladesh in between. Along much of the spectrum, elections are rarely free and fair as in the West today, but they do reflect the reality of popular participation in politics and support for those elected.' (bid)

Bengalis took control of their own destinies 32 years back. During the freedom movement people had hoped that the independence would mark the end of exploitation, repression and oppression they endured for 190 years of British domination and 24 years of Pakistani rule. But the reality turned out to be diametrically opposite. The socioeconomic conditions and even the composite cultural traditions have worsened since the independence. The short-sightedness of the leadership and the incompetence of the leaders have been responsible for this mismanagement. Sufferings of the people multiplied over the years.

Before independence our nationalist leaders had played excellent role, but they followed mainly political agenda and completely ignored moral, social and economic questions. Now many people believe that we were not ready for independence at the time we got it at a cost of a river of blood. Now we have a constitution of our own -- the national flag, the national anthem, diplomatic representatives in the capitals of different countries symbolising national independence and sovereignty. But because of gross mismanagement a question lurks in the minds of the conscious citizens of the country: Are we on a devastating journey to a hopeless future with no exit?

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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.

The politics-bureaucracy interface

The stories appearing in the press (DS, June 6, and earlier), on the tussle between the powerful political bosses' in the PMO, and the senior civil service offices and the bureaucratic network is nothing new.

The root issue is simple enough, but evil: misuse of power and influence (at the vertical and horizontal levels for 3-D effect). It is independent of social or economic hierarchy, urban or rural environment, or time and place. As all landlords or zamindars are not saints, so all politicians are not that honest not to misuse their status or influence. It does not matter whether the society is developed, evolving, or changing. Local culture has its own flavour, but the intention is the same -- exploitation. Note the Finance Minister's audit discovery: petrol bill of Tk

two lakh per month for one Pajero jeep used in a public sector organisation.

The Prime Minister has to be tough and impartial, and show the way to acceptable cultures in social styles in the public arena. The cultural bias takes time to eradicate, as confirmed by the visiting US professor on journalism (DS interview, June 6).

Our politicians pay too much attention and waste time on political approaches (one-way mindset), and neglect the other sectors for the improvement of the society (before trying to 'improve' the self). We lack political moralists, and have too many finger-pointers.

Time to cut down the size of the PMO, and that of the Cabinet it's economy of style, as some one pointed out in this column.

AMawaz Dhaka

Political infighting

Bangladesh is 'lice in a wonderland country', politically speaking. The politicians have no sense of humour, and play with the private lives of the citizens while indulging in in-fighting with the political opponents. When this shot in culture will evaporate? So easy to buy power, in different models, eh.

The opposition '5-year itch' is contagious to all parties demoted (yes, demoted, say the disgruntled politicians) into the opposition camp by the voters. It is not possible to clap with one hand, hence the role of the opposition has to be appreciated by the 'undisciplined' players themselves.

The electorate is bugged with two kinds of hunger: the hunger of the belly, and the hunger for power. Then the various kinds of thirst have to be quenched (who will make the list of the drinks or sherbet available through the back

doors?). More requisitions: the ornaments and adornments displayed by this exclusive clan of the enriched-coated society -- certainly beyond the means of a poor MP of a poor country, hawking poor politics to the poor voters!

The pre-budget deliberations are useless: who cares for the guidelines when the going is good (just read the story of 180-year jail sentence to a former high officer of BTB for embezzling Tk ten crore from several projects). The right hand does not see what the left hand does.

That is the lure -- materialistic temptations galore. Later I could decipher the message -- why the politicians are so fond of mentioning bridges, roads and culverts in their public speeches. Perhaps the attitude has something to do with the high rate of launch capsize -- the unofficial investment return in the IWT sector is not brighter.

Why not decentralise into provinces with governors and more MPs at the provincial level -- more democratic dispensation of the black goodies. Not share power, then how about sharing sympathy? No deal, no human element in the maddening chase.

What are the voters supposed to do? Copy the neighbour at the next general elections in Bangladesh? Tit for tat.

AlifZabar Dhaka

Wooing the minorities

The minorities are getting noticed in democratic India -- fittingly the world's largest. The President and Prime Minister are from the minorities. If it is a trend taking root under democratic soil, then it is a good signal for the neighbouring countries. The effort of half a century is bearing some fruit.

In Bangladesh, politics is still far from stable. Both the voters and the major political parties need orientation. Political egotism gets nasty time and again. A party is not above the nation, but there is too much self-importance being pedaled around. This mania is being circulated in a closed channel, otherwise known as a vicious circle. Is the society going to accept it? Too much time has been lost on lightening the burden of the yoke.

To many files around the nose. The gaze has to go up to widen the horizon. The other banks of the three mighty rivers flowing through Bangladesh cannot be seen. But the politicians are caught in petty actions. Parochialism is still clinging to the adornment of leadership. Waked truth is nothing to be ashamed of, but naked cheating and short-changing is the order of the day, through unethical practices in the public service sector.

In Dhaka, a sort of minority is also ruling, but the cadre has a different definition, the top minority of privileged class who are completely isolated from the masses. This communication and economic gap are huge, and it is widening year by year. Democracy has become an obstacle race for the handicapped, but the leaders opt for the marathon rather than 100m sprint.

This fascination for power and influence is hiding many vices. It won't go if covetousness is the yardstick for greatness. Throw away the milk, and keep the cream. The share market (of political trading) is sending the message: adulterated milk and tainted goods and services would do for the time being. Grab, and hoard, and hound the unprivileged. It is plain and simple exploitation at the national level. Democracy is a multi-faced trading currency for international and local use. It hides vices, not

virtues.

Go through the proper channel. There is only one channel, without any option: bad politics. The society is suffering from unwanted environmental effect. Take it or leave it, is the message from feudal democracy'. The transition period always lingers, because the leaders in power wish to linger. None can enter the closed circle. Hungry masses watch the gladiators.

No several acronyms are appearing in the political arena. There is a fondness for symbolism in politics (like tattoos and totems). This stage is not passing away even after half a century of crawling by toddler democracy. When grown-ups behave like children, it is not artlessness.

The show must go on, is the stage slogan. Where does it go?
AHusnain Dhaka