

Fischer's visit cements ties

Resolve expressed to create a better world

GERMAN foreign minister Joschka Fischer's visit to Dhaka as part of his five-nation Asian tour has provided a fillip to Berlin-Dhaka relationship. His characterisation of Bangladesh as the third largest Muslim majority country with a democratic political system having a vibrant civil society and an independent press shows the high esteem in which Germany holds Bangladesh. We appreciate the words of praise that the German foreign minister had for our country, particularly for our part against 'war on terror' as well as for our role in the SAARC and UN peace-keeping operations.

Germany is one of our trusted friends and there is a long history of diplomatic and economic relationship between the two countries. We are a big recipient of German aid, particularly her technical assistance. She remains a thriving market for our exports.

Insofar as international issues are concerned there is an accord of views on most of them. In particular, our full commitment to the UN as being the sole arbiter in all conflictive international issues, as well as to multilateralism, found resonance in German pronouncements in the UN.

Germany has been playing a most significant role in the UN, particularly in the Security Council, in the run-up to the US-UK invasion of Iraq. Germany's role has been one of a balancing influence in the war in Iraq and afterwards which prevented the USA and the UK steamrolling some resolutions in the Council.

In the light of the experience of the Iraq invasion and its aftermath we fully appreciate the statements of the two foreign ministers on the urgent need for reforming the UN, particularly the Security Council.

An institution such as the UN, built on the consensus of nations of the world cannot afford the luxury of veto power of the permanent five, a prerogative that we consider unjust. If we are to build a global order based on justice and fairness, the process of decision-making at the UN Security Council must be freed from the threat of veto.

Inferno in Indian school

Heartfelt condolences to families

NO words can console the anguished parents of those ninety children who died in a horrific school blaze in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu last Friday. None can imagine school-going children being snuffed out like it happened in the small town of Kumbakonam where the burning thatched roof of a primary school fell like fire-balls on them. It was almost like an entire generation being wiped off from the small town. No wonder, not just the parents and their relatives, the whole world felt the pain of losing them in those tragic circumstances.

We express our heartfelt sympathies and condolences to the bereaved parents, if it brings any consolation at all to the unexpected loss that they have experienced. But couldn't it have been avoided? Couldn't the parents be spared the agony of burying the charred bodies of their children? Didn't the children themselves deserve a chance to live and fulfil their dreams? May be yes, at least that's what the avoidable chain of events indicates. First of all, the school did not seem to have more than one entrance; in fact, the same path was being used for entering and exiting the premises. Secondly, the school also did not seem to have any fire alarm system. And lastly, the role of the teachers came under a question-mark. What has shocked people most is that every single teacher in the school escaped unscathed even as the students were battling to find an escape route.

We are glad to learn that all the schools with thatched roofs in the same state have been shut down by government orders until alternative arrangements are made. But no amount of post-crisis action or monetary compensation announced by the Indian central government can compensate the loss. All these are signals that remind us of the possible danger the school-going children of Bangladesh might have been exposed to. We wonder whether the schools that have been mushrooming all over Bangladesh have learnt a lesson from this tragic accident. We don't know whether these schools have fire extinguishers in the first place, leave alone any marked fire exit. We urge the authorities to take immediate precautionary measures after inspecting the schools for their fire safety status so that the gaps may be filled in good time for averting accidental fires.

Mission accomplished in Iraq!



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER months of speculation the 'sovereignty' was at long last restored to the people of Iraq -- and that too before the scheduled 30 June last. What was expected to be a red letter day in the history of modern Iraq with 'freedom' ushering in the country that remained shackled by Saddam's long dictatorial rule and, of course, celebratory at that, turned out to be a shady and hush-hush affair with the transfer of sovereignty advanced by 48 hours and the ceremony perfunctorily carried out in a hurry before the US pro-consul Paul Bremer stealthily left -- albeit fled -- Iraq in a standby C-130. However, 'full' sovereignty was handed over to Iraq provided we close our eye to an odd 160,000 foreign troops whom prime minister Iyad Allawi, a former CIA agent,

had apparently asked to stay on in Iraq.

Poor Allawi! How can one really blame the man, 'shouldering such a great responsibility', delivering as a conduit the democracy to the people hankering for freedom -- for his little indulgence! How else could he, after all, save his skin from the wrath of the ones ignorant of the virtues of the democracy and

Britain just in a few months. It was again Bremer's contribution that the Islamist terrorism hitherto unknown in Iraq sprouted all over the occupied country. But then Allawi was Bremer's discovery after he dumped a redoubtable Chalabi. It was not an easy task to baptise a Saddam loyalist and quench the thirst for money of a man who have been on the payroll of as many as

twelve intelligence agencies including M-16 and CIA.

How has Allawi done his masters' bidding? Of late, he profusely talked of a historical day when the Iraqis would enjoy 'full sovereignty'. Even if the day passed off in whimper amidst anxiety and fear Allawi seems to have mastered his masters' voice when he unmistakably echoes their sentiments and follows their pattern. Allawi's demand that 'mercenaries who

are behind Iraq's ever intensifying insurgency which cannot be allowed to go unabated. After all, democratic election will be held in the country, it is hoped, within five months. It is to be conducted at cost and even by imposing martial law, if required. But what could have been than Allawi's exhortation to Iraqis to fight the enemies of the people. By all indication Allawi has been picking up well.

Yet more remarkable is the new prime minister's stern warning that might have come from George Bush himself. He warned the 'forces of terror' that 'we will not forget who stood with us and against us in this crisis.' Few are however impressed and took his warning seriously. Moreover Allawi has his own predicament.

His problem is that he has to be

America's satraps have been known to turn traitors before. Yet the painful equation in Baghdad today is that Allawi is relying on the forces whose evacuation he needs to prove his own credibility.

Worse still are a raft of dubious legislation left behind in Iraq by the occupation powers imposing tremendous limitations on the maneuverability of Allawi's dispensation. Much of it allows western companies to suck up the profits of reconstruction in Iraq -- an issue over which Iraqis have no choice -- and many people in the country have no interest in continuing Bremer's occupation laws. Why should the US and other western businesses have legal immunity from Iraqi laws, they ask.

But Allawi relies upon the same mercenaries. Which is why inevitably he and his government will fail. Also the ongoing insurgency has an underpinning of national liberation war which never failed in history. While in Istanbul as Bremer was leaving Baghdad George orchestrated the events well to impress his NATO colleagues that all was hunky-dory in Iraq and his mission in Iraq was accomplished well by this time. It is now to be seen how well has he indeed accomplished his mission in Iraq!

Bkg (relat) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

If Allawi really wants to lead Iraq he must demonstrate that he can demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces. He would be instantly a hero in Iraq. However, America's satraps have been known to turn traitors before. Yet the painful equation in Baghdad today is that Allawi is relying on the forces whose evacuation he needs to prove his own credibility. Worse still are a raft of dubious legislation left behind in Iraq by the occupation powers imposing tremendous limitations on the maneuverability of Allawi's dispensation.

unappreciative of the bounty it would bring forth. But few except the people of Iraq could understand the cruel paradox inherent in the whole episode.

Paul Bremer came to Iraq a year ago on the consideration of his being a counter terrorism expert. It was during his stint in Iraq however that the 'dead enders' -- the Baathist diehards, so referred to by Bremer -- could turn an entire population and the United States

and Britain just in a few months.

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an independent leader while relying on an alien force to support his rule. He cannot produce security at his own without the assistance of an alien force. But he has no control over the same force. He cannot order the Americans to leave. But that's the real question.

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Political intolerance: How can we overcome?

DR. M. ATAUR RAHMAN

THE contemporary democratic politics in Bangladesh suffers from a seemingly inescapable paradox: leaders of political parties and activists profess a belief in the principles of democracy, but they are unwilling to tolerate opponents' views. In fact, intolerance in political life has increased over the past thirteen years of democratic rule in Bangladesh. We are now facing serious difficulties in moving beyond mere platitudes of democratic principles of freedom of expression. We are unable to tolerate divergent perspectives of social and political beliefs. But without political tolerance, coexistence of contending views cannot occur and peaceful resolution of conflicts becomes a far cry. As a result, the system of democracy degrades, and leads to instability and disharmony in the state.

Why tolerance is important?

Political tolerance is important at the individual as well as group and party levels for the evolution of a democratic society. If the major parties in a political system do not obey tolerant principles, democracy is in trouble. This does not, however, mean universal tolerance is required or even desired for the success of democracy. What is argued here is that by its nature democracy is a system of institutionalised competition of power, but if the competition becomes too intense, the system can break down entirely. Democracies therefore, must find mechanisms to mitigate conflict and divisions with consensus. This may happen in some societies over time with the emergence of a civic culture, but it does not happen automatically. Initiatives must be taken by the stakeholders of democracy to institute appropriate structures and agreements, such as constitutional sharing of power or agreements to manage and mitigate conflicts. In fact, the danger of continuing to live in a conflict-prone system leads to insecurity, social decay and reversals of democracy.

Roots of intolerance

Political intolerance in Bangladesh has a long history, but manifested

conspicuously during the past thirty-three years in assassinations, coups, counter-coups, mass-urgency, repression against the opposition, and dysfunctional mobilisations against the government, and parties holding power. In fact, political intolerance has become a permanent feature in our political landscape. The democratisation process, rather than achieving greater tolerance, seems to have created a new culture of political intolerance where there has developed a high level of enmity and a strong sense of seeing political opponents as threats. Today, there is a widespread disillusionment with the government and the main opposition. The gap between the citizens' expectations and delivery by politi-

'hentials' is a desperate manifestation of such mental state of the opposition.

The language used in the speeches of political leaders and activists in a democratic system needs to be cautious and courteous. In Bangladesh, these are lacking -- the language that is used to address leaders or describe the activities or the record of the political contenders becomes extremely provocative and objectionable. The speeches of the political leaders can be described as 'hate speeches' devoid of substance, and full of rhetoric and revenge. These speeches create adverse impact on inter-party relations and often incite violence and political enmity. In the process, the practice of tolerance and respect for

others' rights and views are ignored. In such an environment, peaceful resolution of conflicts and coexistence of opponents become difficult. Politics becomes essentially a conflict rather than a mode of cooperation for common good. Political values relegate to the background, and survival as 'party man' becomes the dominant objective or purpose. The process becomes a 'winner-takes-all' game, degrading the process of fair competition.

How to overcome?

Today, Bangladesh is at an important crossroads in its political journey as a democratic state. Will the country march towards meaningful democratisation and greater economic stability, or will it go along increased political polarisation and relapse into a chaotic and ungovernable state? Much depends on overcoming the current level of political intolerance to a manageable level. This is not easy in Bangladesh given the historical legacy of bitterness, lack of vision of top political leaders and power-centric nature of the political parties.

Short-term measures: In Bangladesh, political parties hardly want to

enlightened citizenry. Civic education that includes orientation of political behaviour linking the individual to the polity and social institutions needs to be vigorously pursued. This civic education should take into account the people's direct experience in working together. In fact, the art of association in political and social life is an essential requirement for political tolerance and peaceful society. Education, should cultivate, more than anything else, congenial civic dispositions of people, and loyalty to nation's fundamental values and principles.

Political socialisation and training: Historically, the people of Bangladesh have good religious tolerance unless it is used politically to whip up the sentiment to gain political dividend. Intolerance against religious groups is often viewed as regressive, nonetheless religious conflicts sometimes come to the surface. The elite opinion-makers and central political leaders of major political parties can contribute greatly to religious harmony in Bangladesh. Religious intolerance among a section of Muslim community exists, particularly in

the medium term, younger people should be targeted to impart them with a culture of tolerance. Most young people develop the capacity to apply abstract principles to concrete situations. They have a heightened curiosity about social and political issues and, are keenly interested in their rights and responsibilities. Education should aim not only to create technocrats, but most importantly to create a framework where people with different ideas and values can interact. This experiential learning is more important for developing civic virtues in people at younger age.

Today, education in Bangladesh is in an extremely chaotic situation. It is not addressed to creating an

trying to enforce religious obligations, and showing righteousness of their cause in social context.

The most volatile section where socialisation is needed for political tolerance is the 'party leaders' who are intensely involved in party activities at various levels. These leaders and activists of major parties act mostly for personal and party interests. The actions they undertake in the name of the people or country often violate ethics of public life. Their motivations and integrity are often questioned. Today, political violence may not be at the level of civil war in Bangladesh, but deaths of more than three thousand people in a year with political motives, give Bangladesh a bad name. The current ambitious, ruthless and morally indifferent political leaders need to be socialised to the values of tolerance, moderation and service to the people.

Concluding observations

We are not born tolerant, but must learn to be tolerant. Bangladesh has now entered a new phase of democratic politics where it has to deal with the 'values and processes' that are essential for the consolidation of democracy. Tolerant politicians and people tend to make connections between principles and concrete situations, take multiple perspectives, and see alternative solutions to problems. Intolerant, on the other hand, face difficulties in relating principles to practice, and seeing beyond their own viewpoint. They often define problems in absolute terms, with clear 'right' or 'wrong'. Tolerance and Trust are, therefore, vital at this stage of Bangladesh's democratisation. It is in this context, intra and inter-party relations must take on new routes of cooperation, exchange and mutuality of interests. If these are not forthcoming, if political parties continue to clash and thrive on conflicts, the foundation of democracy will collapse. People will increasingly lose freedom, and live in uncertainty and fear in a 'degraded democracy'.

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Reading beyond the numbers: India's Budget 2004

GHALIB CHAUDHURI

THE money managers both of foreign and domestic kind were apprehensive of the budget, which the new Government of Dr. Manmohan Singh unveiled on 8th July 2004. After all they were the ones that orchestrated the biggest one-day fall of the stock markets, soon after the election result. Doubting, as they did then, the true colours of the Congress led coalition. They chose to sell the market en masse, signalling at least for the few days that it lasted, an end to India's liberalisation ambitions.

Similarly the left parties of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) were also equally apprehensive: would the Finance Minister Mr. P. Chidambaram respect their views and cater to the needs of the more deprived? After all, partly harbouring this very suspicion is what led to some of them supporting the ruling alliance from the outside than by a formal agreement.

Lo and behold, the actual budget turned out to have satisfied both camps, at least for the time being. The market rallied, albeit marginally, and the left have not

threatened any serious retaliation.

A budget of US\$ 105 billion couldn't really have been better balanced between the business communities of the cities and the remaining two third of the population that live in rural India. In fact, the fine balancing was only possible because the new government is fortunate to have inherited an economy that is already on an accelerated growth path, having registered 8.2 percent GDP growth last year. However, this climate of an economic boom is largely generated and enjoyed in the cities, which is why rural India voted so glaringly against the incumbent despite the apparent feel-good environment.

Industries like software services and business process outsourcing (BPO), driven by global growth, growing at a 30 percent annual rate. Mortgage housing, clocking an equally similar rate of advance driven by rising domestic affordability. And mobile telephony adding 2.2 million new subscribers every month are just few examples of sectors that are registering blistering surge. They are also largely responsible for switching the Indian economy to an auto-pilot

mode. Helping balancing of policies lot easier for the government.

All that the finance minister Mr. P. Chidambaram had to do is reinforce and help sustain this momentum through a little bit more of the same. So he raised the foreign investor's limit on telecommunications from 49 percent to 74 percent, civil aviation from 40 percent to 49 percent and insurance from 26 percent to 49

pledge made at the budget was the resolve to balance it by 2009, adding stability to the declared economic reform process of growth reinforced by equity. Balancing the budget has good future implication. For a starter it helps build confidence with foreign investors who are putting money in the economy, it also profiles lower interest rate structure in the future on the back of the government

Interestingly, despite the communist influence with the government and the Congress's new found base for a mandate, the budget was not exactly promising to throw money at the rural sector. There wasn't an obvious thank you note in the form of large frees to the rural electorate. Instead, more thought and effort is being promised on the efficacy of the existing rural programmes. In a recent

programmes are lost in leakage through corruption and inefficiency, perhaps a touch exaggerated but the current government believes that the number is not too far from the truth. It is this that Dr. Singh's government wants to put right. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, a seasoned senior bureaucrat who had just returned from the IMF to join the Planning Commission refers to 'subsidiarity' as a means

Chidambaram, through his more effective policies on education, health care, agriculture and food for work programmes in rural India has this vision of bringing the 700 million people from the villages of India connect with the cities. He strongly believes that they must be brought into the growth net interacting with the other vibrant parts of the economy. He has imposed a 2 percent surcharge on tax to raise an extra US\$ 1 billion for developing education in rural areas. The budget also had the usual populist measures of easier rural credit and subsidised prices for the poor.

Businesses are pleased to see the emphasis in bringing rural India into the mainstream. Why shouldn't they be? As it means bolting on the demand of an additional 700 million people to the existing buying capacity of the urban middle class. This is really the new frontier of consumer India that had already excited the private sector, long before the current government saw the light by winning this election. The cigarette giant ITC of India is on an ambitious plan of bringing rural India on-line by placing a computer connected to the net at every choupal (village meeting place), through which the villagers can check prices and transact almost all their needs from

The last budget of Mr. P. Chidambaram in his previous incarnation in an earlier government was billed as a "dream budget" with lots of tax cuts and concessions, this one was nowhere near. But then he is not really kick starting a moribund economy, he has fortunately inherited a buoyant one, all he has to do now is nourish it further and build more equity in the wealth distribution process.

competing less and less for the precious personal savings pool. Historically debt for the private sector had always been at a high cost, hopefully with lower borrowing needs by the government will ensure the cost coming down.

While India's urban based economy, if we can call it that with a bit of levity, is on more or less self generating momentum, the rural economy is still in backwater and needed desperate reviving. Perhaps the most important

speech the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh stated, "You have sought a change in the manner in which this country is run, reform of administration to improve the quality of services will be our immediate priority. We will pursue economic reform but we cannot forsake the obligation of running a government that works for the people."

Rajiv Gandhi had once commented, that 85 percent of rural

of providing better and effective governance through devolving decision making authority to the most appropriate level. This means delegating authority to the level of the village Panchayat, the most basic elected unit in an Indian village. The hope is that it will do lot better than the decisions made in Delhi or at least it can't do any worse than the present system- ineffective, remote and prone to corruption.

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