

## Flood damage assessment

*The sooner the debate is over the better*

THE task of assessing the flood damage accurately has to be accomplished before a successful rehabilitation drive can be launched across the country.

It has been reported that the finance minister has rejected the flood damage estimates of the UN and other organisations as 'mere guess-work', an indication that a clear picture of the damage would take some more time to emerge.

He has further said that the government will work with the donors to assess the extent of the damage, and finalise a rehabilitation plan accordingly. It is not really surprising that the damage estimates of the UN, the government and the private research organisations vary widely, given their respective methodologies and channels of information collection. But it is imperative that a consensual estimate is arrived at without wasting any more time. Time is a crucially important factor. The agriculture sector needs quick logistic support in the form of inputs as farmers have been hit hard. The industries sector has also been dealt a body-blow and only quick measures can help it recover. Finally, the communications system and other infrastructures have been damaged in many places. So, the rehabilitation plan has to be implemented as quickly as possible.

The hazards associated with having inflated, flawed, or deflated damage estimates are obvious. An over-estimation could send wrong signals to the donors and somewhat dampen the investment climate for the country. The government is planning to send its teams to the flood-stricken areas to assess the situation after the floodwaters recede fully. True, the situation in some places is still not suitable for starting rehabilitation operations. However, there is no point in wasting time when it comes to the areas where floods have subsided.

It is of utmost importance that the government of Bangladesh, the donors, UN agencies and NGO organisations have better cooperation and coordination at the needs assessment stage which will facilitate an all-round implementation of the rehabilitation programmes we undertake. From this point of view, it is essential that the wrangling over the real extent of the damage be put behind us as soon as possible.

## Crackdown in the Maldives

*Democracy's time has come*

THE recent arrest of at least 185 pro-democracy activists in the Maldives including former senior members of the government is cause for great concern. According to an anti-government spokesman, the 185 people the government has admitted to detaining is merely the tip of the ice-berg, and hundreds more have been detained with many more in hiding to avoid arrest.

Among those arrested are former Attorney General Mohamed Munavvar, and, most significantly for Bangladesh and the rest of Saarc, ex-minister and former Secretary General of Saarc, Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, both of whom were sacked from the government in November due to their pro-reformist leanings.

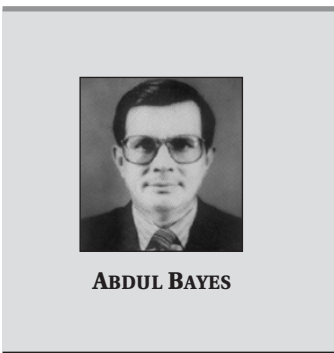
The Maldives has been ruled by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom with an iron fist for the past twenty-six years, and it is not merely the lack of democracy which is the problem in this idyllic country, it is the lack of democratic forums for debate and the continued suppression of dissent and repression of dissidents that is most troubling.

The recent arrests come hard on the heels of the declaration of a state of emergency on Friday after police had to fire tear gas to disperse about 3,000 people who had gathered to demand the release of political prisoners and the sacking of hard-line members of the cabinet.

Demonstrations in the Maldives are rare, and the fact that this latest one is considered so threatening by the government and has been joined by former senior members of the government indicates that perhaps now public opposition to the *status quo* and desire for democracy has reached a critical mass. It is high time that the Maldives government accepts that the democratic inclinations of its people cannot be contained indefinitely.

It is true that the Maldives is not the only Saarc country that is not a democracy, and that Saarc has hitherto kept itself detached from the domestic affairs of its member states. However, when it is the basic human rights of the people that are being denied and repressive means are used to maintain autocratic rule, as is the case here, we urge President Gayoom to have more respect for the rights and sensibilities of his people as a well-wisher of the Maldives and a co-traveller in Saarc.

# Cooking history and booking a berth!



ABDUL BAYES

ON 15 August every year since 1975, the nation mourns the death of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. People from all walks of life remember the day with sadness and pray for the departed souls. Available documents on liberation movement that sparked off in 1971, clearly crown Sheikh Mujib as the undisputed leader of independence of Bangladesh. He was adorned with the title "Bangabandhu" in presence of millions of people at the then race course maidan (Suhrawardy Udyan) from where he declared a departure from a state called Pakistan. He roared from the race course, people reacted across the country and the then administration reeled under a collapse. For nine months, people from all walks of life under his name fought the occupation Pakistan army and ultimately clinched a victory home. Unfortunately, however, within four years of independence, he and his family members were brutally killed by a gang of goons, perhaps not in

comfort with the establishment of an independent country.

Of late, the ruling BNP-Jamaat alliance government has reprinted the documents of the liberation war. We see no harm in a reprint provided the demands for the documents exceed the supply.

Readers should be aware of the fact that it was late President Ziaur Rahman who constituted a committee to collect the available documents on

liberation war, certain modifications/alterations were made to suit the will of the parties in power. And that is to show that the independence of Bangladesh was declared first by the late president Ziaur Rahman.

Those who have read carefully Loshak's "Pakistan Crisis", Robert Pane's "The Massacre" and Siddiq Sale's "Witness to Surrender" -- written on the basis of eye witnesses and personal interviews at that time --

of Pakistani leaders at that time.

The committee seems to have solely banked on points provided by the party in power. Our suspicions loom large on the heels of an absence of interviews, broadcasts, documents and other indicators as depicted in international platforms of that time. Since America and China were aggressively engaged in the whole game, submissions from the respective foreign ministries and departments

sector commanders and freedom fighters rejected the reprint on the plea that history was heinously distorted. The parties in power now have two types of commanders. Coming from two extreme poles during the liberation war, it is not surprising that we shall now have a 'cocktail' history of our liberation struggle with contributions of both the groups in the 'fight' for a 'free' Bangladesh.

several questions. First, if he (Bangabandhu) had surrendered to the Pakistan army, why the then government of Pakistan or the media in the US and China had not broadcast it to subdue the movement? Second, if he had surrendered, then why the people should fight for their freedom in the name of a person that left them in crisis? Third, if he had surrendered, why did he not surrender with a post of the Prime Minister or any other position to further his fortunes? And finally, if he had surrendered, why do the documents of that time ascribe him as arrested?

Thus when the 'surrender' hypothesis was mercilessly rejected by history, attempts started to gear up surrounding the "declaration of independence" hypothesis. But by the brutal law of history that takes time and contemporary tales into due consideration, both the hypotheses have been rejected. Just to establish a rejected fact by the brute force of power would not be able to stop history from singing its own song of truth. There is an adage: you can fool some people for some time, but not all people for all times. So long Bangladesh exists, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman will exist as its founding father. He made history for us and hopefully history will protect him from pernicious propaganda. Cooking history might book a berth but possibly in the dustbins.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

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the liberation war. Late lamented poet Hasan Hafizur Rahman headed the editorial board and submitted the documents in 15 volumes. From an independent angle, the editorial board worked hard to present the actual happenings heavily drawn from actual stories of that time. As far as we know, there were no complaints lodged against the volumes for two decades or so, not even during the period BNP ruled the country -- 1991-1996.

On a fine morning, this time during the BNP-Jamaat coalition government, the nation finds that in the name of reprint of the documents on

should immediately discover the 'devilish' drive towards the attempts to downsize the contributions of the greatest Bengali of all times -- the Great Sheikh. The US state department documents of that time, and now released for public consumption, also show the same by repeatedly mentioning Sheikh Mujib as the villain of peace for Pakistan. For long 25 years he was in jail in punishment for his protests against the oppressions inflicted by Pakistanis on his fellow Bengalis. The fact that Sheikh Mujib declared independence has been clearly acknowledged by the speeches

should have been on board to clear the fog.

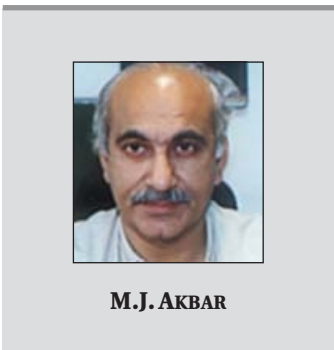
When President Ziaur Rahman was alive, we hardly heard about this new history. We also heard his voice on the air saying "I on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman hereby....". Major General Mir Shawkat Ali -- a freedom fighter -- also reported recently to have heard the voice of Hannan first. Eminent historian Professor Muntasir Mamun gave an eloquent exposition of how the so-called intellectuals shifted their positions over time.

It appears that a major portion of

But as is well known, history has its own course. We think even president Ziaur Rahman would have reacted to downgrading the role of a leader that he himself placed on the pinnacle of prominence during his tenure.

Outside the power politics, there are a number of "history writers" who propagate the false fact that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman -- in their views -- "surrendered" to the Pakistan Army on the eve of the liberation struggle. Therefore, this group tends to hold that, the declaration came from others. The 'surrender' hypothesis is seriously subjected to

## Have some faith



M.J. AKBAR

RELIGION has many dimensions. For most people it is simply a matter of fact. They were born in a particular faith and see no reason to step outside their ancestral code of belief. The belief hinges on the two mysteries that cap either side of life: birth and death. People find a meaning in life only in the answer to two questions: why are we born and what happens after death? There is no mystery in either for the Muslim. The answer lies in the verse that is recited at the funeral of every Muslim: From Allah we come, to Allah we go. Similarly, the Christian believer or the Hindu believer has a definition for existence. There is a day of judgment for the Christian (as indeed there is for the Muslim); there are the cycles of *karma* for the Hindu and the eventual liberation.

Litany and ritual become the hallmarks of identity: baptism, a thread ceremony, or circumcision (a Jewish ritual adopted by Islam, for Muslims, Christians and Jews are children of the same God even if they choose to define Him differently). For most believers, of any religion, the practice of faith is an occasional commitment rather than a consuming one. The majority of Muslims do not pray five times a day, although this does not make them any less convinced of their belief in the unity of Allah and that Muhammad, on whom they wish peace, is Allah's last Prophet. It may seem a paradox, but while consistent prayer may arguably

strengthen your faith, its absence does not necessarily weaken it. People find their own balance and are comfortable with it. Most Muslims who do not pray five times a day will go for Friday prayers. Faith is not a burden on the mind; it is a comfort for the soul.

What turns a normal believer into a soldier of a shadow army, or, in an extreme case, a potential suicide-missionary? The answer does not lie in rocket science, but in common sense, commonly visible. It must be stressed,

has been erased and beyond that moral line wait suicide-missionaries ready to give their lives. It might be perfectly legitimate to condemn Saddam Hussein as a despot, but when anger against despotism becomes selective, and when Saddam becomes an excuse for occupation and neo-colonialism, then we know that a moral line has been crossed.

It is perfectly natural that a believer should find his source of inspiration in faith, for faith is his measure of the

you'd have to do."

Ordinary people. They would do what they would have to do. Patriotism is the strength of ordinary people, young men who once had no desire except for a decent job, a pretty wife and wonderful children. Ordinary men with ordinary dreams have become the extraordinary fighters of Najaf and Falluja. Propagandist theories will not fit them, not if they are repeated a million times over compliant media. Where is the great Shia-Sunni divide

catchment area is widening to include nation after nation in the Western alliance. The case of a Bangladeshi in Tokyo, Mohamed Islam, is relevant. In May he, along with four other Muslim men, was spreadeagled on the front pages of the Japanese media, through a nudge from the authorities, as the sinister heart of Al Qaeda in Japan. After 43 days in jail, all they could find against him was that he had hired two illegal migrants, one of them his brother. He was fined \$3,000.

and Noble means that it has the support of people who would not consider themselves fringe-fanatics.

Muslims find it difficult to fathom why such fanatics take particular pleasure in abuse against the person of the Prophet. Muslims have their fair share of fanatics too, but you will not come across a virulent attack on Jesus Christ. In India and Asia, Hindus and Muslims have lived together for upwards of a thousand years. I cannot think of a single instance of a Hindu writer indulging in such prurience against the person of the Prophet. Neither will you find a single instance of a Muslim writer being malicious about Hindu gods. They may target Muslim rulers and Hindu rulers. But there is inherent respect for the others' religion.

Issues that would have been dismissed with a shrug five years ago are not becoming pieces of a looming, dark jigsaw puzzle. History is the ebb and flow of wars of dominance and empire. For a thousand years the tide flowed in a particular direction; reversal was inevitable. Where there are men there will be ambition, greed and conflict. But when hatreds enter the political space then conflict acquires a raw, personal dimension.

The technology of war has improved for both the state and the individual. If the United States Air Force can precision bomb a small part of an apartment block to hit a specific target, then a cell of individuals can also assemble a weapon of mass destruction. George Bush invaded Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction of the past. All of us, together, as nations, as societies, as creeds and races, need to sit together, act together, now, this moment, to abort the weapons of mass destruction that are being conceived in minds inflamed by anger.

If George Bush does not see the urgency, perhaps his successor will.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

**BYLINE**

**Issues that would have been dismissed with a shrug five years ago are not becoming pieces of a looming, dark jigsaw puzzle. History is the ebb and flow of wars of dominance and empire. For a thousand years the tide flowed in a particular direction; reversal was inevitable. Where there are men there will be ambition, greed and conflict. But when hatreds enter the political space then conflict acquires a raw, personal dimension.**

at this point, that we are discussing the ordinary individual, and not the fringe fanatic. Every faith, every society, every nationality has its share of fringe fanatics -- racists, or berserk ideologues who believe they can achieve their fantasies by the arbitrary use of terror. Normal Americans know, for instance, that a white supremacist is morally wrong. No one goes to school to learn that. Perhaps the Bush White House has forgotten how much genuine sympathy America received from Muslim peoples and nations after 9/11. No sane person supports mayhem and the death of innocents. No cause can justify injustice.

So why are television screens exploding with images of normal young Muslims who have picked up the gun? The answer may lie in the sentence just used: No cause can justify injustice.

There is always more than one side to a story. Israel has as much right to exist as any Arab nation, but the moment the defence of Israel becomes an exercise in brutal injustice against Palestinians, we know that a moral line

moral code. This is true of all religions. When a Hindu soldier of the Indian Army seeks courage from the temple he has every right to do so, just as his Sikh counterpart takes the name of Wah-e-Guru and his Muslim comrade in the same Army takes the name of Allah. Who else will Syed Moqtada al-Sadr turn to except Allah? He has at least as much right to turn to Allah as George Bush when he claims that God asked him to invade Iraq.

There is an increasing sense that whatever little justification there might have been for the occupation of Iraq disappeared with the ouster of Saddam. Anne Barnard, in an incisive story (12 August, *International Herald Tribune*), reported the mood among the Marines who have gone to save Iraq for democracy etc. The headline of the report from Ramadi was an answer rather than a question: *GIs in Iraq are asking: Why are we here?* Lance Corporal Anthony Robert, 21 years old, understood who he was facing. "People are tired of us being here. It's the same as if someone came to the US and started taking over. You'd do what

through which Pentagon strategists had hoped gleefully to march? Such divisions have melted in the heat of a common cause. They did exist, but in a different context. They might return, but only after this fire has been quenched.

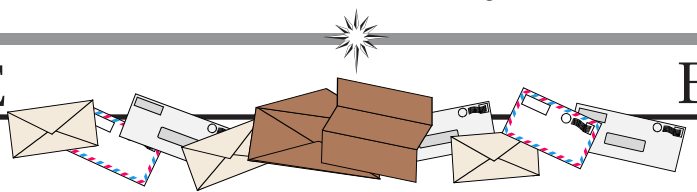
Even "pliant" media has a way of turning counterproductive. The Americans uprooted the television channel Al Jazeera from Iraq because they did not want its stark and scathing reportage about the offensive against Moqtada Sadr and the mosque of Hazrat Imam Ali. So what does a "cooperative" channel like Al Arabiya do on the morning of Friday the 13th? It mentions "Syed Moqtada Sadr" every five seconds. Do I hear a stress on "Syed", which indicates that Sadr comes from the family of the Prophet? His "jihad" dominates the news and sure enough there are anti-American demonstrations through the Arab world after Friday prayers. In the meantime Al Jazeera has lost a story but reinforced its credibility.

The sense of siege that began in Palestine has now seized Iraq. But its

The problem is not the mistake. Mistakes will occur. The problem is that his innocence was not considered news. For the mass of the Japanese that untruth is still the truth, while the injustice turns yet another normal person into a man with a mission, even as he becomes a symbol for those Muslims who would like to paint the world in black and white.

The indifference of governments to Muslim sentiment indicates a barely concealed contempt. Governments are supposed to be responsible, and if this is their cue who can blame those unburdened by intelligence or decency from indulging in hate campaigns that get increasingly more hateful? I learn from friends that a new book is now available at Barnes and Noble, America's largest chain of bookstores, and through Amazon, called *Muhammad: Prophet of Doom*, written by a certain Craig Winn. Those who have read this book describe it as a turgid, inaccurate diatribe. I suppose you cannot stop fringe-fanatics from writing junk, but to find such a book on the august shelves of Barnes

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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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.

### Projecting politics

The politics in Bangladesh is too complex for the majority of the people to grasp. Hence the local analysts have to display more patience and offer more tutorials (in popular style, compared to the academic approach for the well-informed) to analyze the different phases of changing politics in the national life, and its impact in the following decades. The deadlocks, one after another, have to be clearly explained to the electorate through the mass media (in contrast to the high profile professional seminars). Why popular style writing is not popular in this society? There should be no inferiority complex, as this craft is very much specialized. It is difficult to write simply.

The background changed drastically twice within the span of mere one generation: the partition of British India in 1947; and the break up of Pakistan in 1971, with the emer-

gence of Bangladesh. For more than 30 years, Dhaka politics is in unstable equilibrium, veering away time and again from the bandwidth of so-called democracy.

More neutral observers are needed to present all sides of the complex picture, otherwise the younger generation tend to become polarized in the approach to politics; and get lost or bogged down inside the forest, sometimes losing sight of the light at the end of the tunnel. The perspective view is not being encouraged.

It is necessary (as a voter) to demarcate some areas for elucidation. What is political elasticity or flexibility, and how these parameters are handled by the political parties (in and out of power)? What is readily visible is the hostile and antagonistic approach, not benefiting the people. How to spot when subjective and oriented views are projected at the national level? In a two-party war,

passion has no place for the outside observers (the voters); hence hartals and corrective actions leave many unmoved.

What are the equalizers (tools) in politics, and how these are manipulated when taking position and stands? Public support cannot be expected voluntary until the objectives are well understood, accepted, and supported. There is no point in resorting to hartal at the slightest pretext; or for the ruling party, to unleash repressive measures. The solid foundation behind any movement is not well publicized. This patronizing attitude by the leaders cannot enhance the development of good politics.

There are mainly two types of communication gaps in politics: one between the political parties (players); and the other between the politicians and the masses. The political circles of different hues have to over-

lap somewhat, some of the time, otherwise the communication gap will remain or widen. The politics in a free sovereign country is different from the politics for freedom or independence from foreign or autocratic rule (the 1971 phase).

In a homogenous society such as the one prevailing in Bangladesh, the high passion displayed is completely out of place, as the end goals have a broad undisputed commonality, which recedes and merges into the background, as solid foundation for building up of the developing structures, and later, infrastructure. One factor: internal embedded impurities create disruptions, delays and noise. These are not secret, but escape formal identification for removal. The unofficial line that "the others are the sinners or culprits" is neither politics nor honesty. Only neutral critics have a role to play in enhancing the correct image of Bangladesh.

**A Mahasen Dhaka**

### Educating the leaders

"The education of George Bush (the US President) has been mighty costly", according to the editor of Newsweek magazine (DS, Aug 8). Corollary: how are the inflated leaders in Dhaka learn their lessons? Mighty costly too, but dissipated in fissiparous dissipations!

History also teaches us many lessons, but its intransigence is notorious. Leaders in the making have high Brownian movement, specially in the newly emerging nations, as seen readily in Africa and S America (Bangladesh is in Asia!). Passing the toddler's stage is critical. But the supporting staff (pun intended) is dragged along, because a long leader is rather apprehensive of travelling alone in the unknown path. When a leader needs company, he is no leader.

There are two types of liberation: liberation of the self (from the winking

eyes of the ego); and the liberation of the society. Beggars use crutches, and there are styles and modes in begging (at different levels, including begging for votes, once in five years).

There are no tutorial schools for the budding politicians, because the tutors in the classrooms cannot attract respect for this type of entrepreneurship, which goes by the name of political opportunism. Interns or *chela* enjoy high investment return, as no income-tax forms have to be filled in. It is free for all in the limited circle.

Where to draw the line? Unfortunately, our politics has no boundary conditions, and those who are affected are not bothered. Make hay while the sun is shining or not. The compatibility of political vices are enormous, and the rival virtues have to pull the veil for survival.

How long this game of political musical chairs will continue in Dhaka? The forecast is unpredictable, because

Nature (moral ethics) has been left out of the human machinations. Those (in the right path) who suffer with patience might go to heaven, according to the holy scripture; while the unscrupulous create their own temporary heaven on Earth, and think they were the blessed, regardless of the duration of the trial. It is the subsequent trial which is unbearable; and leaves its ugly marks on men and matters.

Time for a break.

**Alif Zabr Dhaka**

### Palestinians face an unlikely enemy

So far the enemy was defined and distinct -- the occupying forces. Sharon's "disengagement" plan has given a new twist to the whole story. Never had been the fighting so fierce among the Palestinians. Qorei has resigned and rejoined. Now two more

ministers have decided to go. It is really hard time for Yasser Arafat, his movement, Hamas and other groups.

Yasser Arafat can and should stand tall as a true leader and lead his people to the cherished destination.

**Joy Dhaka**

### A doctor's mind

We are busy with patients, those injured in the two bomb blasts in Sylhet within 24 hours. But yet I am writing to you because we are accustomed to seeing this kind of patients. We don't feel anything! Some detective appears for investigation, an announcement for red alert, the two main political leader blame each other, all the dailies report the blasts and so on.

But we, here at the hospital, have forgotten to be afraid of grisly deaths.

**Zakir OMC**