

IMF loan conditions

Once again external pressure exerted on government

In a recent meeting with the finance minister, the executive director of the IMF raised the possibility that the IMF may not release the fourth tranche of an anti-poverty loan that was scheduled for disbursement in December if Bangladesh persists in failing to fulfil the reform conditions on which the loan was predicated.

The government's non-fulfilment of reform conditions for receiving development assistance and the resulting unhappiness of the donor agencies is an annual ritual in Bangladesh, but the current differences between the IMF and the government lead us to a few observations.

The first point we would like to raise is that it is high time that the revenue collection is enhanced to the level that Bangladesh is not so dependent on development assistance to fund its projects. No one likes to have pressure exerted on oneself or to be told what to do, but this is an unavoidable corollary of dependence on aid from others. It is true that our dependence on development assistance is far lower than it once was, but as the present case indicates, we are still too dependent on aid to be able to ignore the chiding that comes along with assistance.

The second point is that the reform conditions alluded to by the IMF are conditions that the government has agreed to and which are in fact very necessary for the nation's advancement. It should not require the IMF hinting that it will withhold loan disbursement for the government to move quicker to enact reforms. The government's position that the recent floods have held up the reform process is well taken, but there can be little doubt that, flood or no flood, the reforms are moving much too slowly.

In recent months the government has had pressure exerted upon it from a number of external sources. This pressure is, of course, unwelcome for a sovereign nation, and the government should not make accommodating other countries and international agencies the corner-stone of its domestic policy. Less reliance on development assistance and greater fidelity to the reform process for its own sake would greatly diminish the external pressure under which the government continually finds itself.

Image of the country

Why always put the media on the dock?

COMMENTS made by our Foreign Minister after the first ever meeting of the Strategic Country Promotional Council, a public-private body recently formed to develop ways to better the country's image, have caught our attention. The minister seemed to be under the impression that it is the media, which is responsible for the country's negative image abroad. He even cited examples of some international incidents, which did not get as much media coverage, but, in his words, local media blow similar news out of proportion, causing severe dent in the country's image. Let us analyse some of the examples he reportedly cited.

Are we to understand, from what he has said, that the news of a threat to blow up Sylhet airport should have been ignored by the media? And that too, only a few days after twin-bomb blasts in cinema halls and on the City Mayor's car? If someone did make the threat as fun, as mentioned by the minister, why did the authorities take up elaborate steps to secure all the three international airports of the country after the threat? Surely the authorities didn't take it as just a crank call?

Even some members of the Council joined voices with the minister in saying that the media overplayed the news of the recent devastating flood!

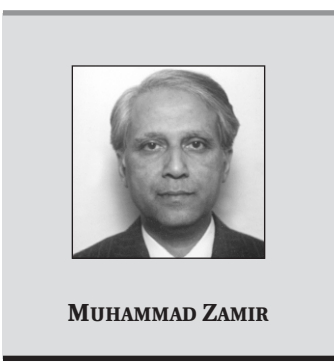
We fail to understand how, reporting the plights and sufferings of hundreds of thousands of people, who lost all their belongings in the devastation, could be termed as 'overplaying'?

In fact the wide coverage by the media of flood of this magnitude helped to generate pledges of international aid, which in fact the government itself sought, to rehabilitate the affected people.

The government must not think that the media has an axe to grind with them. It is simply doing what it is supposed to do - serve people's right to know.

The government must ensure a positive environment in the country before blaming others for tarnishing the image.

Palestine and Israel continue their war of attrition



RECENT advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, the decision of Israel's High Court and the vote in the UN General Assembly on the infamous barrier being built in the occupied territories of the West Bank has had very little effect on Israel.

This is US Presidential election year and strategists in Israel know that. Consequently, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon can defy world opinion and not care two bits about it.

The remote control of Israel and the Jewish lobby pertaining to US foreign policy has been reflected recently in an in-depth article published in the *International Herald Tribune*. It refers to how Democratic Presidential nominee Senator Kerry has been forced to change track and adopt a stronger pro-Israel stance compared to a few months ago. In a paper entitled 'strengthening Israel's Security and Bolstering the US-Israel Special Relationship,' prepared by his policy advisers, Kerry attempts to re-introduce himself to Jewish voters through concessions. As opposed to last October when he referred to the illegal barrier as a "barrier to peace," this time round, it is different.

The above paper points out how Kerry has been at the forefront of the fight for Israel's security during his 19 years in the US Senate and affirms that 'his pro-Israel voting record is second to none.' In an example of political desperation, the paper goes on and -- calls for more forceful action to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons, fully backs Israel's construction of

the barrier in the West Bank and pledges to work to push for a new Palestinian political class to replace Yasser Arafat, who is referred to as a 'failed leader.'

One presumes that the Democratic Party is scared that they might lose their traditional Jewish vote-bank to the clear pro-Israeli stand that has been demonstrated for the last few years by President Bush. It may be noted here that recent polls have suggested that unlike 2000, when only 19 percent Jewish voters voted for

Minister to state on 30 July that the United States backs Israel in keeping control of main West Bank settlements, drawing secure borders that includes parts of the West Bank in Israel and banning Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes in Israel. In the same vein, Sharon has also been reported as having claimed that the United States recognises that "Israel faces an existential threat, and it must be able to defend itself by itself by preserving its deterrent capability." Reading between the lines, anyone can

prevailing situation within Palestine ahead of possible withdrawal by Israel from Gaza.

Palestine is passing through a crisis. The economic situation has deteriorated alarmingly within its territory. Unemployment rate in the West Bank has risen from 10 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2003 and in Gaza to 29 percent from 17 percent. Similarly, UN surveys indicate that the poverty rate in the West Bank has increased from 13 percent to 37 percent and in Gaza from 32 percent to 65 percent.

The Israeli agenda is being assisted by the fact that since 1995, no meaningful election has taken place in Palestine. There is also lack of clarity and accountability in the manner in which governance and expenditure takes place. Donors, more than once have already asked for stringent reforms. The Palestinian Authority has claimed that it is difficult to hold elections in the West Bank and Gaza under a state of Israeli occupation. This approach is self-defeating.

To such a scenario has been added

the only superpower to be more even-handed in the coming years.

The USA will also do well to heed the advice given recently by former President Clinton in his interview on 10 July to Christiane Amanpour of the CNN. He has correctly pointed out that going to war in Iraq has not aided the peace process in the Middle East. He has noted most interestingly that 'the road to peace in the Middle East does not go through Baghdad, but rather through resolving the differences between the Palestinians and the Israelis.' Clinton rightly believes that peace requires that Palestinians have their own country on the West Bank with their capital in the eastern part of Jerusalem.

One can only agree with him that this, more than anything else, will not only reduce the impulse of terror around the world but also in the region in particular, and give the Middle East a peaceful future.

Both USA and Israel have to grasp this basic factor. Another historic opportunity will arrive after the US Presidential elections in November. This time round, both Israel and the USA, without being too concerned about Israel's security and existence (given its open admission about possessing nuclear deterrent capability), should try to help the moderate elements in Palestine to gain the necessary support for a peaceful transition to a sovereign democratic State.

the constant tension between Chairman Arafat and successive Prime Ministers. From Abu Mazen to Qurei, frustration has been the common element. The question of responsibility with regard to security matters have unfortunately led to bitter rows. Israel has been the only winner.

The blame cannot however just stop there. The Arab and Palestinian leadership must also take responsibility for part of this 'mess'. Such a sorry state of affairs might not have emerged had the then Arab leadership exercised their influence to persuade Arafat to accept the deal brokered by Clinton.

This might have been the first step. Other areas could have been addressed subsequently. It is however no use crying now for the water that has already flown down the Jordan river.

Currently, Israel seems to be holding all the cards. The changed situation in the region has created their own dynamics. The Palestinians need to set aside emotion and carefully examine what can be done that might persuade

POST BREAKFAST

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Bush, this time round, that support might rise to 30 percent or more. This, analysts believe, could prove critical in swing states such as Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Such an approach on the part of Kerry has disappointed many who have watched with disappointment the gradual marginalisation of Arafat by the current US Administration.

This trend is also not good news for the Palestinian leadership in general and Arafat in particular.

In the world of real-politick, where events do not always conform to high moral standards and international law, the immediate future facing Palestine is less than satisfactory. It is true that the non-binding ICJ opinion and the UNGA vote will have moral value but one can hardly expect anything more than that. There is practically no chance of a Resolution being adopted in the UN Security Council in this regard. The USA's position on this issue is already quite clear.

It is this sort of clear indirect support that emboldened the Israeli Prime

understand that Israel is referring to its nuclear capability that was revealed by Israeli nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu to the London 'Sunday Times' in 1987.

The Palestinian leadership has to understand that it is no longer a question of scoring points and obtaining international merit badges. Support from the powers that be, will require serious re-evaluation. They have to do this and now -- not wait for the November US Presidential election. Current evidence does not suggest that there will be any particular change of direction in US foreign policy after this important event.

The Palestinian hierarchy needs to use the intervening months to work out their existing problems. They cannot waste time gloating on their victory in the Hague or in the Hall of the UN General Assembly. They have to prepare themselves for the next US Administration and also take note of the changing scenario in the Israeli domestic political arena.

They also have to take stock of the

During the 1990s, the Palestinians made a lot of economic progress and managed to organise a government that was fairly successful. There were allegations of nepotism and corruption but these were largely overlooked given the fragmented nature of the governance process.

The situation has come to a head now. Israel is now using the anger within Palestine to achieve its own ends. We have witnessed in recent weeks the confusion that exists within the Palestinian Authority and its inability to ensure security for the Palestinians. Today, the economically challenged Palestinians are openly protesting against decisions that are being taken by the shattered and corrupt political leadership. The Israeli game plan of creating chaos within the occupied territories is coming full circle. They are being successful in portraying the Palestinian Authority as being ineffective and incapable in leading and participating in any dialogue that can result in peace between the two sides.

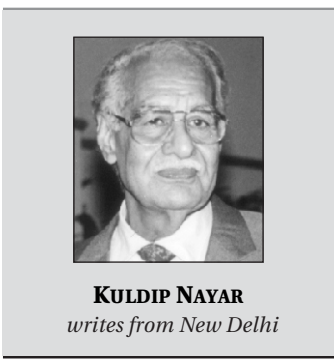
withdraw.

The two unofficial committees, which Sonia Gandhi heads, dilutes the authority of the cabinet. The first one to ensure the implementation of CMP enjoys untrammelled authority. It is an extension of the PMO, maybe, because of financial and procedural difficulties. But the result is that the PMO as such has suffered. So much so, the Congress leaders, including ministers, pursue the committee members who reportedly enjoy the real power.

I recall Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru constituting a Citizens Com-

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Unimportance of being Manmohan Singh



THE Manmohan Singh's government is 100 days old. It is too short a period to judge its performance, particularly when the BJP has not allowed even parliament, much less the administration, to settle down to normal functioning. Another limitation the Congress has faced is that since it has never been part of a coalition it has not been aware of its constraints. Still 100 days are 100 days.

What strikes one straightaway is that there is no focus in governance. Manmohan Singh is the prime minister but Congress president Sonia Gandhi is all over. She is the main power and her policy, tailored by the coterie around her, counts. Long before the elections, whenever people thought of ousting the BJP-led government, they would wish if Sonia Gandhi were to stay as the Congress president and nominate Manmohan Singh the prime minister, things would work perfectly. Both are in position.

But what has raised the eyebrows is that Sonia Gandhi has come to combine the two positions, the Congress presidency officially and the prime ministership unofficially. People want to see Manmohan Singh visibly ruling. But when she goes to Chennai to release a stamp in memory of Murosali

Maran, she usurps the territory which belongs to the prime minister. An official function becomes the DMK show. It is not a healthy precedent to set.

The real criterion to assess 100 days is to find out how far the common minimum programme (CMP) has been implemented. How many jobs have been created and how less arduous is the life of the common man than before? Inflation has nearly doubled since the new government has taken over. The budget was supposed to be cutting new grounds. But it has not set

ments, the list has not exhausted yet. The inner party quarrel continues over the distribution of loaves.

There is some weight in the allegation that those who have been loyal to Sonia Gandhi have been rewarded, whether in or outside the party. Some old hands have come to be preferred because they were the ones who came into contact with her when her husband was prime minister more than 15 years ago.

But the biggest problem is that Sonia Gandhi is restricting the space of the prime minister. One, the process of

Manmohan Singh can never be a threat to her. He does not even have a political base. Nor has he ever sought to build one. He has been a civil servant all his life, disciplined and devoted to file work. He has more facets, not merely an economist. But Sonia Gandhi's attitude has not given him a level-playing field. He knows that the party president is above the prime minister but this does not have to be dinned in every time. On the Independence Day, when all eyes were fixed on the prime minister, she arranged the Congress session in Delhi. It is to the media's

credit that it did not give her publicity but otherwise she imagined that her speech would have more prominence than that of Manmohan Singh.

The Congress president trying to assert supremacy over the prime minister is nothing new. Congress president K Kamaraj made Lal Bahadur Shastri the prime minister but the latter was soon pushed into the background. Indira Gandhi did even worse. She ousted the old guard, including Congress president Nijalingappa, and reduced the party to a personal fiefdom. Sonia Gandhi has no such compulsions because Manmohan Singh has no ambition to build his own base. He would serve the government as long as she wants him to do and then

mittee during the India-China war in 1962. He made Indira Gandhi as its chairperson and former Madhya Pradesh chief minister D P Mishra secretary. As days went by, the committee became powerful because it basked in the glory of Nehru. This was not to the liking of Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri never but he could not help it.

Still another unofficial committee is for coordination. The Prime Minister is only a member. What message it is supposed to send? When the ruling United Progressive Alliance is already there, discussing and debating the implementation of CMP, the creation of the coordination committee only suggests that key decisions will be

taken there first and in the cabinet later. Sonia Gandhi's authority comes to be entrenched further because she is the chairperson. On the other hand, Manmohan Singh's own diffidence comes in the way. He does not let any minister feel that the prime minister is more than a leader among the equals. Even otherwise, Congress leaders like HRD Minister Arjun Singh and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee do not think that they are answerable to the prime minister. They consider Manmohan Singh much junior to them.

Manmohan Singh should realise that he represents the tone and tenor of governance. It is his business to ensure that the government does not give the public a distorted picture. At present, the government looks too dispersed, too disseminated and too diffused. Sonia Gandhi's pre-eminence does not do any good. But the unfortunate part is that the prime minister prefers to take the back seat. This affects the government's prestige.

This makes it all the more necessary that Manmohan Singh should seek election to the Lok Sabha which represents the House of people. He will not be challenging Sonia Gandhi but only proving his popularity among the people. A prime minister cannot stay as the Rajya Sabha member for long. Nonetheless, Sonia Gandhi did well by standing in the line of ministers and some other VIPs for saying bon voyage to Manmohan Singh on his first trip abroad as prime minister. Such gestures are necessary because the unimportance of Manmohan Singh is beginning to be noticed.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Don't read only for pleasure

At first I should admit that I was bewildered by the piece written by DU economics student Ms Durdana Ghias (Aug 11, 2004) in response to Mahfuzul Haque's letter (Aug 02, 2004)

Probably, Ms Durdana persuaded us not to impose restriction on explicit reading materials for the young generation in the name of personal choice and instincts. What she said using excerpts from her first high school texts is alright for adults. But I vehemently oppose her ultra-liberal view to open each and every reading material to non-adults according to their inexperienced 'choice' and vulnerable 'instincts'.

I do not want to describe your idea as jobbery. But you know very well that even indecent exposure of normal private life through books creates

many adults of easy virtue.

Every human being has instincts. They are more than one. But raw basic instincts are not very good for any society, let alone for our conservative one. Instincts should be polished and have to be regulated by laws, conventions, social norms and morality.

If Durdana's liberal view compels us to lift restrictions off raunchy genre for befoffed non-adults the effect will be devastating. Consequently, pin-up magazines (Huh! It is also a reading material!) will be a household chore. Parents and siblings might discuss among themselves in detail about the lewd extramarital affairs and perverted sexual practices.

Some adolescents might ask Durdana why she solicits only for read-as-you-like and why not for see-as-you-like which includes all branches of Art. I think you know that art is a suave form of sexual instinct

and you have seen sensual pictures, photographs, portraits, murals, sculptures, movies and other artifacts. Some of them are even world-famous. Adolescents are usually besotted to these. Do not you feel that these should not be shrouded from them? If a tender young is audacious enough to ask you to let him to read Ms Faria Alam's story of bedroom escapade with Goran Eriksson, what would you do?

I request you not to be very liberal and to give up your 'liberal reading provision for adolescents' theory. Please keep some conservative views that your mum imposed upon you in your green days for your betterment.

Shafquat Wabeed
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Divide and rule policy

It looks to me, (born and brought up in

British India before partition before migrating to Dhaka), that Uncle Sam is imitating the old and tried British divide-and-rule policy in Muslim (and oil-rich) Iran, taking advantage of the Shia-Sunni internal problems in the local society (Saddam was also trying hard to deal with the same problem, with some hard options).

There is another basic reason for pulverizing Saddam's Iraq, the most powerful Islamic country militarily, with the US global policies siding with Israel, as the Jews have powerful leverage in the United States of America (even former President Bill Clinton mentions this pro-Jewish mentality in the US in his book My Life). This US open partiality is an open secret naked and unashamed. "Champion" of freedom US is losing its public image internationally. The White House has become desperate, especially on the eve of the coming Presi-

dential election, (as contesting candidate Kerry is pointing out).

The US, as expected, is bogged down in Iraq, and getting out of this vicious circle is not that easy, keeping a straight face. It is time for the dozing Islamic world to put on a united front, for regeneration of Islam (check the past historical records of the rise and fall).

Today's politics is heavily tinged with religion, and there is no point in being diplomatic about it. But Islamic unity is not possible with the monarchies standing in the way in many Muslim nations, which follow old traditional ways of governance, not in tune with the changing times and tempo of the 21st century.

This phase has to chan, regardless of controversial opinions and policies. The economic divide between the rich and under-developed Muslim countries is too wide, for communication

and joint actions to be effective, notwithstanding of the paper presence of OIC at time-wasting conferences. It is the economic, social and cultural gaps keeping the Muslims apart in times of crisis for survival against declining industrialized powers. The US, EU and Japan are facing sunset years, and rescue missions have been failing during the receding decades. The signs of desperation are being pointed out by the analysts.

Hit the iron while it is hot. It applies both ways.

**AZ
Dhaka**

Learning from Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton's book My Life is a best seller on the Dhaka streets. I bought Clinton for a mere one hundred Taka, and started noting quotable quotes.

Here is the first installment of musings. "We campaign in poetry, but govern in prose" (Bill Clinton). Here in Dhaka we campaign too vigorously, displaying too many muscles, teeth, fangs, and cold barrel or knife; and govern too earnestly, blocking the way for others. Can political ideas be patented? 'lies hurt, but occasional truth hurt more'. The readers can cite many examples from personal and public lives. [the opposition party] had a heart, but their head was in the wrong place'. Apply to parties in Dhaka and compare and contrast. When a politician uses the head and heart together in sync, it works privately, but not in public service. In serving people, the heart is taken out and displayed prominently, but what goes inside the head is confidential. Of the five core American beliefs, one is asking the citizens to give something back to the country. What our leaders