

Ijtema ends on a benign note

A tribute to camaraderie

ALL roads led to the massive Biswa Ijtema ground on the bank of river Turag on Sunday for the *Akheri munajat*, the final prayer that culminated the three-day congregation of Muslims, the biggest after the Hajj. Its international character is borne out by the fact that close to four thousand foreign delegates from 54 countries participated in the great event.

We, in Bangladesh, are proud to host the pilgrimage by a sea of humanity every year. This time around, over three million people, including thousands of women, raised their hands in prayer on the final day with a million and a half devotees having attended the Juma congregation a couple of days back.

That it passed off without any untoward incident earns credit for the government which left nothing to be desired in terms of security arrangements and a whole range of basic amenities provided. The organisers are also congratulated on their successful management of a huge affair that undoubtedly captivated the imagination of not only Bangladeshis but also Muslims around the world.

The messages of brotherhood, communion, harmony and peace which the Biswa Ijtema underlined should now reach out and help foster *esprit de corps* between followers of different religions cutting across geographical borders.

In national contexts, the spirit of brotherhood should now be turned into collective social endeavours for the achievement of common good. All forms of social injustice must go.

The lesson we need to draw in a conflict-ridden world is that global peace is attainable only through harmony between and coexistence of different communities, ethnic groups and cultures.

Deaths on the road

Preventable tragedies

IT is mind boggling that a staggering number of 4000 people died and an equal number were maimed and injured in road accidents in Bangladesh last year. And these too are only official figures. Many more accidents, one suspects, went unreported and unregistered. The recital of causes behind road accidents by the minister and the BRTA would hardly come as a solace to the injured and those that have lost their dear ones to reckless driving by drivers, holding fake driving-licences, plying unfit vehicles.

Going by the figures appearing in a Daily Star report, deaths in road accidents are perhaps one of the largest cause of fatality in the country, if not the largest. And most of these deaths could well have been prevented, had all concerned played their part honestly.

What boggles one's mind also is the acknowledgment by the authorities of the lacunae and yet the absence of tangible and worthwhile measures to address the same by them.

We are dismayed to note the utter helplessness of none other than the minister for transport himself in stymieing the cause of these avoidable deaths and injuries. The shameful admission by the BRTA of 90 percent licences being fake only demonstrates the collusive role of the authorities and the drivers. If there are self-styled gangs issuing fake licences, it will not be wrong to say that they have political links as well as have truck with the law enforcing agencies, since they are plying their illegal trade with impunity. What keeps the authorities from hauling them up?

If many of the vehicles plying on the roads and the highways are unfit it is so because of connivance of some of the unscrupulous officials of the BRTA with the vehicle owners.

What ails the system is diagnosed spot-on by the minister himself: "when the police stop a vehicle on the road, we all know it is not for implementing the laws but to do other things." The question is, what is he going to do about it?

The bottomline is that most of the deaths and injuries that occur on our roads can be prevented if each element in the regulatory cycle plays its part honestly.

Challenges ahead of Bush presidency's second term



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

NOW that George W Bush is back in the saddle of presidency -- and much more firmly -- the speculation abounds as to what his triumphant return would mean for the world aghast at an apparent victory, in other words, of the hubris, hypocrisies and hoaxes pursued by the reelected president in his first term. The questions are asked what Mr Bush do with his historic victory and how will the rest of the world react? Will he take his reelection as an endorsement of his first term and continue to pursue his strong arm methods also in the second term? It is a bit early to find concrete answers to these questions. But traditionally during the second term US presidents are more interested in making their mark on history than on pandering to vested interests or wooing the electorate.

The conventional wisdom dictates that President Bush with all his platitudes and bromides will not wish to be remembered as a bumpkin who messed up things in Iraq. Even he is aware that an Israeli-Palestinian solution could be suffi-

ciently momentous to overshadow that disaster and more importantly he is capable of delivering it only if he wants. The neat theory goes that he may be willing to put pressure on Ariel Sharon to achieve an outcome acceptable to all -- thus improving his cachet in Europe and Islamic world. But unfortunately this possibility is contingent upon the assumption of a rational behaviour which Bush presidency driven by neocon ideology seldom practised.

armageddon his 'voters' are seemingly fond of. There may be a proxy attack on Iran's nuclear facility at the US' behest -- of course with a nod from Washington. Perhaps that's not all. The world has entered its most dangerous phase since the Cuban missile crisis as an old balance of terror has been replaced by an ominous imbalance of terror where no nation comes even close to rivalling American military strength. And the last month's US

the invention of a nexus between Saddam's Iraq and 9/11 terrorist attack in the US or the presence of WMO in pre-invasion Iraq are the masterpieces of the neocons. They successfully sold those lies to confused and traumatised voters of post 9/11 America by playing on their fears and doubts.

Notwithstanding the diabolical campaign strategy helping Bush to reenter White House the man is not entirely unlikely to address some of

these are not the issues that can be shelved indefinitely.

Although there is no obvious connection between Bush's reelection and an incipient Middle East initiative it is assumed in some quarters that such an initiative will figure prominently in Bush Administration's second term foreign policy. But then there are snags. Because for more than a couple of years the US and Britain have helped to sustain Ariel Sharon's self serving

tiveness and corruption but that could not dent his image as an indispensable symbol of Palestinian national identity. From Palestinians' point of view Arafat's decision back in 1988 to recognise Israel and restrict demand for a homeland only to West Bank and Gaza Strip -- about one fifth of historical Palestine -- was a monumental concession. No other Palestinian leader could authoritatively have submitted to the compromises he was able to risk. Although much of his stature diminished since his days as a revolutionary he was still left with so much of loyalty and trust of his people.

Yet the Bush-Blair duo in tune with Ariel Sharon did this great leader nothing worth talking to. Because Arafat also knew where to draw the line. He was widely excoriated in the west for turning down the package offered by Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000 which was, according to 'peace brokers', most reasonable the Palestinians could hope for. But Arafat knew that a territory divided into 'bantustans' would be unviable as a sovereign state.

A great responsibility lies with Bush presidency during his second term to present America to the world in its true colours: a generous and humane America concerned with suffering humanity due to her omission and commission in its ruthless war on terror without addressing its causes. Amidst murky legacies on both sides how will she do it will be keenly watched by the world. But its compulsions are indeed enormous.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BILIS.

PERSPECTIVES

A great responsibility lies with Bush presidency during his second term to present America to the world in its true colours: a generous and humane America concerned with suffering humanity due to her omission and commission in its ruthless war on terror without addressing its causes. Amidst murky legacies on both sides how will she do it will be keenly watched by the world. But its compulsions are indeed enormous.

What was, after all, the rational basis of Iraq invasion? The whole world stands testimony to the fact that the president did it arrogantly -- bypassing the world body, giving a damn to the views of his traditional European allies and flouting the international law. He fondly calls Sharon, the butcher of Sabra and Shatilla and author of so many targeted killings of the Palestinians, 'a man of peace' which even his Likudite compatriots will be unwilling to do. Moreover, Sharon's Gaza plan as well as his effective annexation of West Bank already enjoy Washington's imprimatur.

Against such a backdrop what is of grater likelihood is Bush's another act of insanity -- another

election outcome means that for the next four years the finger on the button that can unleash that military's colossal fire power will belong to a fanatic who considers himself a messiah!

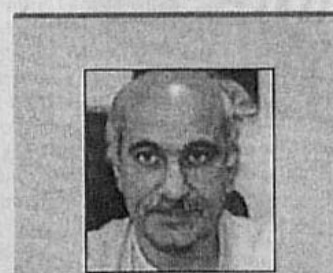
President Bush and his Republican faithfuls are, on their anti-abortion stance, strictly adherent to Christian morality of a 'right to live'. But their "thou shalt not kill" applies only to American foetuses but not to numerous children in Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan. The born-again Christian evangelists have no qualm not only in killing those children but also in killing mothers carrying the foetuses in their chosen battle zones of the war on terror. And hoax? Contrary to all available evidences

the burning international issues in Islamic world or elsewhere. The Muslim intellectuals have long been venting their grievances with regard to injustices meted out particularly to the Palestinians and a freehand given to the Israelis in doing whatever they intended to do to consolidate their hold in the region. Now both Afghanistan and Iraq are also sore points that agitate Muslim minds the world over and produce willing volunteers to be recruited by Al-Qaeda. According to International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) even after beatings in Iraq and Afghanistan Al-Qaeda can still draw on 18,000 operatives in 60 countries and the organisation has been galvanised by Iraq war. Therefore

fiction that the negotiation with the Palestinians would be pointless as there was no one to talk to. They found Arafat who was very much there to lead the Palestinians in any peace negotiation as he did earlier -- unyielding to their design of imposing a settlement on the Palestinians. Therefore they wanted to bypass him and looked for a pliant partner to deal with.

More pliable leaders were not hard to find in the past and in the present milieu there wouldn't be any dearth of them but they wouldn't be able to carry the majority of Palestinians with them. As the head of a Palestinian Authority with so many limitations imposed on him Arafat drew much flak for its ineffec-

Churn is in the air



M.J. AKBAR

THE traffic in Dhaka is not irrational; it is merely Bengali. Witness the desire, for instance, to overtake when there is nothing to take over there. All the familiar problems of travel on the subcontinent accompany you. Bangladesh Biman tends to have an illegitimate relationship with its timetable, so every journey encourages whispers from those with inside knowledge, particularly if you are catching an en route flight. So it depends on how you view a three-hour delay at Bangkok airport, from where I flew into Dhaka: it is, of course, much worse than being on time, but far better than being six hours late, which was the situation on the previous evening.

But let us stress the fact that the destination is far more attractive than the journey. A visiting Indian must, of course, get through the angst barrier. It is not just hawks who carry chips rather than epaulettes on their shoulder. Perfectly normal people do not feel that they have done their good deed for the day unless they can throw a bit of ritual cold water on an Indian but this is soon forgotten in the sunshine of natural hospitality, the cool edge of high intelligence, and, for those who know Bengali, the joy of a shared language.

We were in Dhaka at the command of an old friend Farooq Sobhan, and there is always something mildly uplifting about a worthy mission. Farooq had brought together young journalists from

Bangladesh and India on the valid assumption that ignorance and absence of human contact were the major reasons for the trust-deficit that plagues media on both sides of a complicated border. The generation that covered the 1971 war, and through it discovered each other (not always for the good), has gone the way of most journalists. That generation is tired even if it has not retired. The younger lot are fed with that familiar, evil, disinformation masquerading as nationalism.

The dialogue opened on an

Islam, were missed. One sentence cried out for greater attention. "Changing concepts of sovereignty, humanitarian law, the nature of security, the role of multilateralism all have brought about dynamic changes (in geo-politics)," he said.

He was making this argument against a specific context. He had said earlier: "The balance between politics and economics always remains a vital one. Our two countries (Bangladesh and India) are bound by history and geography that have left many cobwebs and

geopolitics was shaped by the outcome of two world wars. If Germany and Turkey had won the First World War -- and they were close enough to doing so, until America intervened -- the map of the Arab world, and the nature of its polity, would have been significantly different. The Arabs, who had helped Britain in that war after they had been promised freedom from the Ottoman Empire, were dumped into the quagmire of neo-colonisation while pliant regimes handed over their precious oil to the masters of the world at

any other nuclear power as "irresponsible" or potentially "evil". Israel, under the divine protection of the United States, is permitted not-so-secret nuclear arsenal without comment or question. While there is grudging acceptance of India and Pakistan as nuclear powers, the last word has not been said on the subject, and those on the subcontinent with apprehensions are wise to be apprehensive.

When there were differences between matched powers among the Big Five, as during the Cold War,

dour, for India will be a member of any altered Security Council. The Indian foreign minister, Natwar Singh, has very coolly, and correctly, said that India was not impressed by any second-class status offer.

Churn is in the air. A cynic, or even a realist, could argue that there has been perpetual war since 1945, and if this is what the Big Five have delivered in the name of stability then it is time to return to the drawing board. Most wars have been fought over conflicting definitions of nationalism, creating fertile options for superpowers interested in their own security as well as domination of natural resources.

It is significant that if Mr Shamsul Islam's comments had been made by an Indian minister in Dhaka, he or she would have been accused of hegemony. Suspicions die hard, and votes can be milked out of fear. Mr Islam spoke above both temptations. Twenty years ago General Ziaur Rahman set the subcontinent on a new curve by suggesting cooperation among seven South Asian nations through SAARC. As someone wryly pointed out, Pakistan's first reaction was to wonder whether this was a version of the Hindutva brigade's "Akhand Bharat" and India wondered whether it would mean a gang of six against one. The 13th summit, fortuitously in Dhaka next month, is building up huge expectations of further breakthroughs in regional prosperity. (Peace may not always bring prosperity, but prosperity does tend to bring peace.) SAARC leaders, having travelled so far along the pragmatic, must also seek to spend a little time once again on the conceptual, for each horizon is only a means to the next.

There is enough time to pencil Mr Islam's phrases into the agenda. It will take a long while for the pencil to become ink, but there is no harm in putting a little more writing on the wall.

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BYLINE

Twenty years ago General Ziaur Rahman set the subcontinent on a new curve by suggesting cooperation among seven South Asian nations through SAARC. The 13th summit, fortuitously in Dhaka next month, is building up huge expectations of further breakthroughs in regional prosperity. (Peace may not always bring prosperity, but prosperity does tend to bring peace.) SAARC leaders, having travelled so far along the pragmatic, must also seek to spend a little time once again on the conceptual, for each horizon is only a means to the next.

expected note: a speech by a minister. Journalists of any age and generation very quickly develop a Nelson's ear to speeches by ministers. Admiral Nelson, saviour of England and victor of critical battles against Napoleon's France, made his blind eye famous by turning it towards anything he did not want to see. Similarly, journalists turn a Nelson's ear towards any speech they do not want to hear. This does not imply any disrespect towards the dignity concerned. It is simply one of those immutable laws of media life. When reporters have to do a report on a speech they did not therefore hear, they check the text, put something from the opening paragraphs at the top of their story, and go home, confident that even if the story is published no one will bother.

Perhaps this was the reason why some interesting, and perhaps even remarkable, points in the speech delivered by the Bangladesh minister for information, M. Shamsul

irritants. We are also tied by many enduring commonalities -- ideas, traditions, culture and a shared past covering centuries. All the factors that divide us can also unite us."

As a fully paid-up member of the Press Club (Dyspepsia Department) let me first turn to scepticism. Politicians don't mean what they say, do they? A bureaucrat checks out the biases of the audience for whom the speech is meant, and writes down the right noises for them to deliver and survive another day. So why make a fuss? In any case the track record of the present government in Dhaka towards India is more knee-jerk than level-headed, so why treat a whiff of honey as anything more than ephemeral scent?

Because you do not have to be thoughtful when platitudes will serve. Mr Islam used the opportunity to suggest ideas that were both above the India-Bangladesh equation as well as relevant to it.

We are living in a world whose

ridiculous prices. And though Britain was too weakened by the Second World War to hold on to its most important colony, India, a divisive legacy continues to extract a heavy toll. So many nationalisms were derived from the politics of the colonial period.

Even as the old world order collapsed a new one was fashioned through the creation of the United Nations (a term coined by President Franklin Roosevelt to define the allies against the fascist axis of Germany, Japan and Italy) with a veto for the five nations who won the Second World War: the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China. (Communist China and Russia are successor states to the nations that fought the war.) This club of five, sits in the Security Council because it defines security as an extension of its interests. That is why these states consider their possession of nuclear arms as legitimate, and condemn

the world seemed to rest on a more balanced keel. By the early Nineties one half of the post-1945 arrangements had collapsed, with the crumble of the Soviet empire. With Moscow unable to pull its former weight, unilateralism moved into a vacuum. Militarily, the European Union power is a myth; politically, it is easily divided, as Washington proved, taking time off only to sneer at France's pretensions. But is this sustainable? Questions that were unthinkable during the Cold War, and dormant in the Nineties are being asked with vigour now. One of the issues that Vladimir Putin had to address during his visit to Delhi last week was the possibility of an expanded Security Council. His response would have pleased any Tsar. Putin argued that any restructuring that extended the right of veto to a new member would lead to confusion and collapse of the United Nations. He knew that he was being a trifle indelicate in his can-

OPINION

Beautification of Dhaka city: At what cost?

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

MY experience tells me that project like temporary cosmetic changes is a part of a syndrome typical of third world countries. It is very real though insofar as squandering of state finance is concerned. Of late you come across a vigorous campaign for the beautification of our capital city. The areas which seem to be receiving special attention are the main thoroughfares from the ZIA Airport leading to, perhaps, the Bangabhaban. The beautification covers the road dividers, major road islands on main intersections, the footpaths etc. Clearly "apple-polishing", when hundreds of other projects both short and long-term lie in cold storage. Let us take a stock of works being undertaken. Let us start from the Airport and proceed

towards the city.

The very first thing that strikes you as you go in or come out of the Airport, is the island on the main thoroughfare. The entire structural works including the spiral steel pipes or at least what it seems to be, is absolutely ordinary and all it does to a sensitive viewer, at best, is arouse his curiosity. To most of the viewers the sight would appear to be "meaningless and funny". To top it all it even has a dedication plaque, probably under the name of our venerable minister for tourism. In the civilized world only major structural works or land marks of national significance bear dedication plaques.

Now keep moving forward and as you drive through that wide Airport Road which is also called the VIP Road (God alone knows why) towards downtown, on both sides of

Not too long ago Dhaka was one of the most eco-friendly towns in this part of the world. That couldn't be sustained due to our indifference. So late in the day we have all too suddenly become too conscious about the beautification of this city of ours. In about less than three decades we have destroyed most of our prized parks, lakes and various other water bodies. And now in the name of beautification we are continually on the path of creating monstrous and senseless infrastructures.

the road you come across artificial lush green elevation with decorative designs of coloured creeper like plants. Also at places you do find some large white goblet style concrete flower bowls fixed at regular intervals. This pattern goes on, right through to the intersection of Dhaka Gate until it meets the western end of Kamal Ataturk Avenue and on the right along the road leading to old DOHS passed the railway crossing. This interplay of decorative designs

continue with minor variations here and there, through out the entire VIP Road and a number of other arterial thoroughfares.

In streets of lesser significance around the city the main element of beautification is widening of road dividers and raising plants on the same. In some instances it has eased traffic congestion but through regulation of vehicles' movement.

I presume that the redecorating of the innumerable footpaths with

fancy brick tiles is also a part of the overall scheme.

Now come to yet a specific sight, the Sonargaon Extension Road, which begins at the fountain near hotel Sonargaon ending at Hatirpool. The only sight that has attracted my attention year after year is the makeshift plastic covered shanties on the entire footpath stretching alongside the Park with filth spread all around and smoke billowing out of the shanties.

I am told that all these beautification ventures are part of a special drive to give a befitting welcome to the delegates arriving sometime in early January for the SAARC Summit.

Just consider this: if our government lives up to its reputation, most of the plants and the decorative creepers including all other forms of vegetations will simply die and wither away before this winter takes leave of us and the next monsoon

sets on. What will be the fate of the redecorated footpaths with fancy bricks? They will serve as they did in years gone by as platform for makeshift tea stalls and vendors of all kinds of merchandise catering to mostly rickshaw pullers. These tea stalls and cigarette shops are generally located on the narrower sections of street corners creating undue problems in the free flow of the traffic due to haphazard parking of rickshaws.

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beautification we are continually on the path of creating monstrous and senseless infrastructures. May I ask to whose benefit? Just consider the ugly sight of the aircraft placed on one end of the Bjoy Sarani? What happened to the Doyel Chattar and the two concrete birds representing a fairly serene sight? Is it that insurmountable a task to just keep it clean and in good condition? The portion of the Suhrawardy Uddyan facing the Dhaka University campus is in a deplorable state. Let us stop constructing senseless monstrous structures of all dimensions, keep the water bodies free flowing and unpolluted, keep the garbage disposal orderly, let the ugly sight of old buses emitting poisonous fumes be out of sight. These alone would be sufficient to keep the city beautiful.

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