

A peaceful way of making a point

Massive expression of solidarity

WE share the nation's profound sense of relief that the opposition programme designed to form a human chain to express its protest at various failings of the government, passed off peacefully.

Although there were attempts at some places to thwart the human chain programme, these did not prevent the mainstream programme from being staged. Admittedly, arrests of many opposition activists in the run-up to the event indicated a subtle attempt on the part of the government to put a damper on it. There were some stray incidents that could be construed as highhanded action by the law enforcing agencies. Even so, both the government and the opposition must be given credit for the day having passed off without any major incidents. However, deployment of more than 30 thousand security personnel was, by all standards, an unprecedented security arrangement, and it must have cost the exchequer dear.

We have always held the view that the opposition has the right to protest and ventilate their feelings against government policies. And, the human chain has been a peaceful way of airing public grievances and is so much better than hartals.

Even by very conservative estimates of what could be assessed from the press reports, the turnout on the streets was substantial, which to the discerning eye, could not have failed to indicate the tenor of public mood. We would go to the extent of suggesting that several messages were writ on the human chain such as those conveying public disenchantment with law and order, poor governance and the spiralling prices. The government must take these into account.

In fact, it was highly imaginative and creative on the part of the opposition alliance to have registered the protest with such an expression of solidarity. It could not have been an easy programme to stage for them, with all the organisational work and synchronisation that went into it.

Formation of a country-long human chain is a democratic method of protest, but to seek the toppling of a democratically elected government before the end of its tenure is something the opposition must eschew. Ultimately, it is the people's mandate through the ballot box that must project their voice.

Faruk's freedom from deadly captivity

Government's tenacity pays dividend

RELIEF -- is the only word that came to our mind when we first heard about the release of abducted Bangladeshi truck driver, Abul Kashem Faruk, in Baghdad. In fact, the instant reaction was one of pleasant surprise, because lately there hasn't been any news about him and it almost appeared as though the media has forgotten him. However, the concern about his welfare persisted inasmuch as there were no credible reports on his conditions at the hands of his captors, a group called Islamic Army of Iraq.

Happily in the end, the news is, he is safe and sound, and we have it on the authority of the foreign minister of Bangladesh that he has been released 'unconditionally'. The days of endless wait for any news of Faruk have come to an end. The trauma and worry his wife and other members of the family had to endure in the 42 days of his captivity could only be conjured up but never truly shared by others.

We are glad that all the efforts made by the government to get him released unharmed have met with success. We commend the foreign ministry for having engaged International Organisation for Migration and the Red Crescent Society in the rescue effort besides making use of the diplomatic channels. We hope that any Bangladeshi working in that region will be doubly careful about their safety from now on.

Let's express our gratitude to the Sri Lankan ambassador in Kuwait who helped in securing Faruk's release along with that of the abducted Sri Lankan truck driver. In the end, we can not help feel sad about those Nepalese hostages who were killed by their captors. Like Bangladesh, Nepal was not involved in any way with the invasion of Iraq, but some workers from the latter country paid a much heavier price. In any case, kidnapping and killing can never serve any useful purpose.

The making of another armageddon?



M. ABDULL HAFIZ

EVEN as the world is still adjusting to second Bush presidency, profound changes in the top echelons of the new administration are underway. The international community is busy interpreting the significance of those changes as the fresh crisis has been brewing up in the Gulf the contours of which are already broadly discernible. There was, of course, nothing even earlier to suggest that the events across the world would take a positive turn during the second term of Bush presidency. Now with Powell's exit from the State Department a 'hard edged ideological hawkishness' is introduced to the US foreign policy. On the other hand, Ms Condoleezza Rice, the abrasive new secretary of state, is like Bush, a firm believer in American power and had been the moving spirit behind National Security Strategy (NSS) which came to be known as Bush Doctrine during the last term wreaking havoc both in Afghan-

stan and Iraq. Even some of the retentions in the Cabinet like that of Donald Rumsfeld who is rumoured to be replaced later by much dreaded Paul Wolfowitz, one who had been in favour of a nuclear strike in Afghanistan, is simply ominous. There was huge demand for Rumsfeld's ouster after Al-Ghraib scandal came to light. Also other 'goings' and 'comings' reshaping the cabinet are not heartening.

Yet, the optimists believed that

cated on the supposition that the Bush administration's policy makers couldn't be completely immune to common sense.

However, the recent sabre-rattling over Iran points to the mood in Washington is yet to come out of the neocons' ideological bind and the hard stance the administration adopted during its full term. The trends that prevailed in the Pentagon during last four years are likely to be reinforced rather than relaxed. It may therefore be pre-posterous at

fact that the first time around it turned out that there was nothing to preempt. As a matter of fact in a deliberate overkill the aggressor's intention in Iraq was only to create 'shock and awe' which however evaporated much before it could have an impact.

The case is a bit different in Iran's context. The ostensible reason for the sudden heightening of US' hostility towards Tehran is precisely the element of Israel connected with the whole episode. Israel's Knesset

humiliation it suffered in the process.

That did not prevent the Americans during Reagan regime from secretly selling arms to the Ayatollahs (ironically via Israel) during Iran-Iraq war while assisting at the same time Iraq's Saddam in his aggression against Iran. The drama was enacted when the US wanted the help of Iran's Mullahs to rescue the release of American hostage held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. In this love-hate relationship even if

PERSPECTIVES

Iran already promised to suspend all uranium enrichment activities. But Iranian compliance, superficial or otherwise -- either with EU or IAEA -- hardly provides ground for complacency. If the Bushies are determined to 'get' Iran for host of other excuses, the chances are that they will go ahead and do so regardless of consequences. They won't care for European opposition. They won't be dampened even in the unlikely event of Tony Blair opting out of the fray.

the new appointments in the state department and other changes in the administration may actually provide an opportunity for renewed diplomacy. Both President Bush and his new secretary of state, they argued, wanted to improve the US' dismal image in the world and repair damaged relations with former allies. The one silver lining that some analysts espied around the cloud of smokes over Iraq was the prospect that the scale of disaster would inevitably mute its perpetrators against further misadventure. That presumption was, of course, predi-

this stage to have a lofty view of the pre-administration purely on presumption. The rhetorics from Washington are still laden with arrogance strongly flavoured with deja vu which suggests that a third Gulf war could be around the corner even as the second one is still raging. Reports at the weekend, citing the US official sources, said that the Pentagon's latest game plan for Iran involves not just the nuclear facilities but political targets as well. The presumption and regime change are thus likely to be recycled as a mantra in perpetuity, notwithstanding the

was informed by Israeli intelligence that Iraq posed the gravest threat to the Jewish state. That was enough to set in notice the Bush administration to take steps in extraordinary haste. (Earlier it was the preserve of Iraq though Saddam regime evidently had nothing to fight with.) Beyond the superficial stimulus for possible action there is of course a deep sense of animosity on the part of the US -- that runs all the way back to Shah's overthrow in 1979 which for the US was tantamount to the loss of an invaluable regional asset. The Americans seldom forgot the

many Iranians particularly the younger ones yearn for change in the polity stifled by hardline Mullahs it is extremely unlikely that a large number would have looked upon an American invasion of Iran as a panacea even before Iraq exploded in Uncle Sam's face.

The US ground forces in Iran would encounter bloodier resistance in its ruggedly mountainous terrain. Perhaps that is why Pentagon is contemplating an air strike only in a possible invasion of Iran. And that too will be delivered by Israeli forces together with the

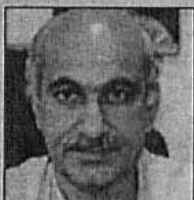
Americans. But is Bush administration oblivious of the sort of genies an Israeli attack on Iran would unleash right across the Muslim world -- even in the countries that don't care very much for Ayatollah's brand of Islamic rule. But Bush's is one administration that gives damn to such considerations. America's unchallengeable firepower is all that matters. If the hearts and minds cannot be won over, they can always be blown apart.

Here is however a snag. The confrontation with Iran is again going to pit the US against Europe. The offending American rhetoric has already undermined efforts by the European Union to resolve the nuclear row through diplomatic means. Iran already promised to suspend all uranium enrichment activities. But Iranian compliance, superficial or otherwise -- either with EU or IAEA -- hardly provides ground for complacency.

If the Bushies are determined to 'get' Iran for host of other excuses, the chances are that they will go ahead and do so regardless of consequences. They won't care for European opposition. They won't be dampened even in the unlikely event of Tony Blair opting out of the fray. Unless there is a miracle or a sudden change of heart the close-knit inner circle of Dubya, Dick, Rummy and Condi is sure to enact it, however much painful it may be to contemplate the shape of the world four years hence.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

Much ado about nothing



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT do you do when there is nothing to do? For normal people that is not a problem. We sleep. We laze. We bond. We read or, more probably, doze before the more mindless television junk. We might even indulge in some minor free-market crime, like watching pirated movies. There is lots to do when there is nothing to do. For normal people.

But since those who have once tasted power tend to be too grand to be normal, they have a problem when ejected out of office. After a spell of life during which every minute is allotted, either to work or to flatterers, the absence of a printed schedule (not to mention the absence of hangers-on) can be tormenting.

Politicians in other democracies have found solutions. In America they all sign up with agents who put them on lecture tours. America is a very audio-friendly society. Instead of falling asleep at lectures, people actually pay to hear them. An orator like Bill Clinton makes millions out of lectures. This may not sound surprising, given the number of women anxious for proximity; but even serious men are willing to lay out a budget for the privilege of hearing him speak. Clinton has a seat in the luxury class of this gravy train, but there is space for lesser lights as well. Even British politicians with some cache are begin-

ning to get on. Then there is membership of the board of companies. British politicians are far more adept at becoming directors. The city keeps a fair percentage of its space at the top for out-of-work politicians. This is also a means of reducing the income-deficit that all of them have to suffer when in office. Government salaries are significantly less than what they would have earned in the private sector, so this is an opportunity to compensate. The practice is understood even though it might never be stressed. For the crasser kind, this can become a pay-off.

in some societies a book remains a status symbol of some value. There is after all no scramble for signed DVDs of television serials. The second requirement is "revelation". The book must reveal something that can put it on the news stories. After that the celebrity-author can do his/her round of appearances and stroll all the way to the bank.

We can see instantly that almost none of this works in India. Who was the last Indian politician who wrote a best-seller? Who was the last Indian politician who wrote a book? I am not going to be nasty and ask

that you have to retire to write a memoir. You can't begin to dish out revelations about colleagues if you still intend to do business with them. Who was the last Indian politician who announced his retirement? If you can think of any do let me know (mjakbar@asianage.com will find me). Politics is a full-time job, and also therefore the only source of income. The only exceptions are those who were born rich, and brilliant professionals like Arun Jaitley or Kapil Sibal. No one, therefore, thinks of writing a book to reduce the income-deficit. (Minis-

quality of politics in his time, and for the sheer joy of reading excellent prose.

'And then came Gandhi... Much that he said we only partially accepted or sometimes did not accept at all. But all this was secondary. The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth ... *abhyaya*, fearlessness, not merely bodily courage but the absence of fear from the mind. Janaka and Yajnavalka had said, at the dawn of our history, that it was the function of the leaders of a people to make them fearless. But the dominant impulse in India

Sometimes the two sides in a match forget that there is an audience watching every move, and in the political game it is the audience that eventually decides who is the victor: there is no other referee.

Lal Krishna Advani has seen the weather change too often not to recognise this. If by some magic three quarters of the BJP top echelon had other things to do, he might have been a happier man. One gets the sense that sometimes he is compelled to create artificial activity where none is needed. He is latching on to issues that refuse to catch fire; and not enough thought is being put into examination and analysis, of cause and consequence. Even the campaign over the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswati, seems to have spluttered out. It is possible that the citizenry is over-sated with politics after the needlessly long election and simply wants the government to get on with its job and the Opposition to leave things alone for a while. There are no takers for any policy of confrontation. Lalu Yadav has only reaffirmed his image of irresponsibility by his sordid attempt to character-assassinate Advani. Indians do not like witch hunts, no matter who initiates them. (The subtle alteration in the meaning of that term shows how it has fallen into disgrace. It used to mean a hunt for a witch; it has now begun to imply a hunt by a witch.) Indians like it even less when a government uses its power to do so.

Shakespeare inevitably had a phrase that sums up the present, and welcomes, scratchy lull in Indian politics: Much ado about nothing. When there is nothing to do, the last thing one should do is make much ado about it.

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BYLINE

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firms that have benefited from a politician's influence in decision-making tend to possess a memory that can be lucrative at the right moment. Halliburton's expertise in such matters comes to mind.

Then of course there are books. The Clintons, Bill and Hillary, made, together, nearly twenty million dollars at the very least from their respective memoirs. Retired generals have a good market as well. Colin Powell saved himself from any chance of penury with his book about the first Bush-Gulf war. The trick of course is to be known well-enough to be a regular face on television. If you are seen on TV your book will be purchased by large numbers of suckers who have no desire whatsoever to open its pages, except perhaps to get the copy signed by the author. However, it is reassuring that

who was the last Indian politician who read a book, because all of them are literate and many of them do read. The only author-politicians who come to mind are foreign minister Natwar Singh, petroleum minister Mani Shankar Aiyar and former finance minister of Bengal, Ashok Mitra, and that is because politics is a second, post-retirement, occupation for them. (I can't include Arun Shourie in this category because there is some doubt as to whether he was ever a politician. He was in office but never in politics. He was and is a believer, occasionally of the fundamental variety.) Atal Behari Vajpayee writes good poetry, while poetry might fetch an audience it does not fetch royalties.

No best-sellers then to fill empty time zones. One reason for this is

ters, with honourable exceptions, quite often use office as an insurance policy against leaner times.) Ideology is the other reason for writing books, as in the case of Ram Manohar Lohia or Madhu Limaye. Since ideology is dead, ideological books are also dead.

It was different once, as the mention of Lohia and Limaye indicates. But all the greats of the freedom movement wrote. Mahatma Gandhi wrote incessantly. His collected works are nearing the century mark. The finest writer-politician was undeniably Jawaharlal Nehru, whose prose was as immaculate as his intellect; and both virtues took second place to integrity. Since they had integrity, they had the courage to have differences. Here is Nehru on Gandhi which should be read for at least two reasons: to glimpse the

under British rule was that of fear. Pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear... It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi's quiet and determined voice was raised: Be not afraid. Was it so simple as all that? Not quite. And yet fear builds its phantoms which are more fearsome than reality itself, and reality when calmly analysed and its consequences willingly accepted loses much of its terror.'

Is it the absence of anything else to do that makes politics a full-time activity in India? A political party naturally needs to function out of office, but opposition does not mean a full-time discordant chorus. Silence is not a virtue in any party's dictionary. Loss of power seems to induce a serious sense of insecurity that demands continual if not continuous confrontation.

OPINION

Biotechnology : Needed policy for patronage

MOHAMMAD TARIQUR RAHMAN

FINALLY a constructive debate on biotechnological research and its application in our country has started. Scientists, general people and politicians everywhere in this world are divided with ethical and environmental dilemma on biotechnological research. The recent arguments (D Star: November 01, November 11, November 18; Observer: November 21) have prompted me to focus on few primary aspects related to biotechnology education in Bangladesh.

Literally biotechnology can be considered as a collective concept dealing with advancement and application of technology for human health and ecology using knowledge and tools from all fields of biological sciences, e.g. biochemistry, microbiology, molecular biology, pharmaceutical science, zoology, botany, medicine, ecology, agro-technology, biophysics etc.

Biotechnology is often explained as a tree, root of which is extended in many fields of basic and applied sciences and branches with leaves are grown according to the advancement and application of all those knowledge. From the stem cell research to the genetically modified plants, animal cloning and eventually human cloning, everything has emerged due to the biotechnological advancements. Being concerned with ethical issues and environmental balance, application of some biotechnological achievements for example, human cloning, genetically modified food etc. has been put to debate specially for the last couple of years. Yet many other achievements like recombinant vaccine and other drug development, gene therapy etc. are solely contributing to our welfare.

Academic venture on biotechnology in Bangladesh started in 1995 from Khulna University. Few more public and private universities later have opened similar department.

An independent National Biotechnology Institute has also been established. Different other universities and institutes, however, have already been engaged in biotechnological research for agricultural sector from before that. Since biotechnology (BT) by definition is multidisciplinary, we should define the priority for biotechnological research or field of specialisation for the BT graduates, being educated in different universities, based on our national need, that eventually will resolve: (1) the extent and time limit for the development and subsequent application of biotechnological research required for our agricultural, industrial or environmental affairs and (2) the possible scope of career engagement of the BT graduates.

Most of the pioneer BT graduates of Khulna University have left the country with foreign scholarship for higher education. They may import advance knowledge and skill from developed countries, if they come

back. But the others who failed to do so are struggling to find inland job with proper recognition and/or application of their knowledge. This is why our students often ask what would they do after graduation. Many of my acquaintance and well-wishers whom I met as a microbiology student expressed their deep satisfaction: *khub valo subject*, with an immediate suspicious query: *pash korar por ki korba - tobe nishchoi khub shohoje bidesh jaoa jabe*. I can imagine students of BT have been facing similar situations. Unlike many microbiologists from Bangladesh who have been awarded with appropriate recognition in USA, Europe and Japan for their contributions, many others are still struggling to get a suitable job in Bangladesh. After all these years, since the first establishment of Microbiology Department at Dhaka University in mid 1970s, microbiologists are yet to achieve their professional recognition in our country.

A proper policy and planning will

help the BT graduates to serve and contribute to the biotechnological advancement of their country as well as encourage others, serving elsewhere, to return with skill and advance knowledge. Considering the fact that we are lagging much behind in every sector of biotechnological applications using our indigenous resources, it is better not to give emphasis on all the debatable issues rather focus on many other beneficial aspects. While it is important to research on salt/flood tolerant variety of cereals, it is also important to give more emphasis to combat water borne disease or disease related to malnutrition. Biotechnological research has indeed advanced in these fields even beyond our imagination. When it is a major concern for business monopoly by MNCs for GM crop seeds we may as well think the similar in the field of medicine or nutrition. It may not be difficult to extend further research initiatives on these topics in the existing public institutions,

universities or even in private organizations to provide room these graduates and make this venture successful. This in turn will not only reduce the brain drain (if this still is a concern) but will also strengthen our efforts for biotechnological advancements we need to assure health.

Although we have opened many avenues for biotechnology education, but, as I have mentioned, we have not yet given recognition to those having this knowledge. For example, since BT graduates have been following the obvious nature of multidisciplinary BT curriculum, often their little(?) knowledge of agrotechnology makes them least competent with the graduates of agrotechnology for a position in the respective field. For obvious reasons agrotechnology graduates would be preferred considering that BT graduates do not have comparable knowledge in the same field with only few related courses. Situation

gets even worse when the position is advertised with the requirement of university degree in a specific field but not BT, hence BT graduates are unable to apply.

This might at least partially be resolved if their certificates are distinctly marked with the field of specialisation or training, for example, major in microbiology or agrotechnology or pharmaceutical biotechnology or environmental biotechnology etc. This kind of certification will help both the graduates and employers to take decision whether the knowledge and skill of the BT graduates is comparable with their counterparts coming from say agrotechnology. With such a curriculum students would be able to choose additional courses with minimum credit requirements to obtain major(s) during their education. It also will help the students not to become merely a jack of all trades while mastering none.

Many students who have envisioned becoming biotechnologists having advance research skill for highest career optimism ended up with a job offering less than taka five/six thousand. Employment in some NGOs, shrimp or other fisheries, biomedical instruments and/or chemicals suppliers, with few exceptions, are the best examples of such kind, where the nature of their job is not beyond our imagination. If the situation remains unchanged prospective bright students may loose their interest to prefer this field of study for their career and eventually our dream for biotechnological advancement will never be realised.

Our academicians, researchers and policy makers all together should sit and think of a proper policy for the biotechnology education and its utilisation in our country. The sooner the better.

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