

Another gasfield blowout

What's the matter?

WE have suffered another gas field blowout in Sylhet which some say could have been of the same proportion, if not bigger, than that of the Magurchhara tragedy of 1999. Almost ten thousand people have been displaced in this mishap, while almost 30-40 lakh taka worth of gas is going up in flames every day.

While it would be presumptuous to pinpoint the causes of the fire at this point in time, we cannot but wonder at the reported lacunae that were prevalent in the whole operations. First, the Tengratila gas field has been lying derelict for close to two decades when last October, a company, considered unsuitable for gas exploration, was awarded the contract for drilling this gas field in an arbitrary manner. Second, it appears that not all safety measures were in place to ensure mishaps were prevented, or contained should any occur.

The recent accident brings to mind the spectre of Magurchhara that cost Bangladesh the entire gas reserve of Magurchhara, approximately 245 Bcf, amounting to almost 700 million USD. But the cost is more than in terms of gas lost, the effect such mishaps have on the ecology, the economy and the social life of the people of the area which is longer lasting, and, therefore, causes a far-reaching concern.

We urge the authorities to urgently determine the causes of the blowout and fix the responsibility for it, with the best expert opinion available on the subject, lest an attempt is made by any quarter to resort to prevarication.

Merely saying that the disaster was "a human error" or "simply an accident" as Occidental did in denying the allegation of negligence on their part in the Magurchhara disaster will not do, and the people or companies responsible must recompense adequately all the affected parties.

Yet another purposeless hartal

But why the outrageous police action?

WITHIN a fortnight of each other, out came from the blue, a countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal called by seven front organisations of the Awami League on Saturday. Though previously announced, it fell entirely out of sync with the post-tsunami mood that had ruled out a Saarc Summit scheduled for January 9 in Dhaka. Besides, the last hartal announced by a lesser number of AL party wings to protest diesel and kerosene price hikes had basically fallen flat, this having been predisposed to failure by a lack of conviction. A cue should have been taken from the sharp dip in the public enthusiasm for hartal on the last occasion so as to avoid reenacting the same fiasco.

The Saturday's call for standstill was to protest fuel price rise and to demand the trial of those involved in the August 21 grenade attacks and a provision for special security to the family of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Such demands could be articulated by other means than hartal which made the call for it not only misplaced but also an imposition on people's right to free choice.

That is as far as the bane of hartal goes. But what about the police hamhandedness and indecently ruthless behaviour with the Jubo Mohila and Mohila Awami League activists, pickets and processionists. The police were not content with setting up barricades only, they went on to baton-charge the women activists, hurt several of them, hauled them up to police station and allegedly mistreated them. There are allegations that some of the women taken to the police station did not receive medical attention. Furthermore, journalists were harassed and mistreated when they sought information about the arrestees. All this is highly reprehensible.

We have never failed to voice our utter dislike of the fact that the administration has been obstructionist in its approach to opposition demonstrations, including such peaceful programmes as forming of human chains or holding of protest rallies which are publicly acclaimed as much better options than hartal. That the ruling party is not giving the opposition its due space to perform its legitimate role is an obvious fact, but the use of force made by the police on women activists on Saturday as also some other previous occasions, is the crudest form of political obstructionism. We want an end to it.

The citizens of nowhere: Their agony and anxiety



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

WATCHING the preparations for the Palestinian presidential election from their squalid homes in refugee camps spread all over the Middle East where live the majority of the Palestinians in diaspora since their expulsion from their ancestral homes with the creation of Israel, those citizens of nowhere worry that a new Palestinian leadership could leave them exiles forever. The diaspora consisting of almost five million are already excluded from voting next month and they genuinely fear that the election result could dash their hopes of ever returning home.

While many refugees were critical of Arafat for abandoning them by signing the 1993 Oslo accord without a refugee return clause, but he was still seen as an icon by Palestinian exiles. They now see his possible successor as the man who may sell them out for good. By all indications, the favourite to take over as next Palestinian leader is Mahmoud Abbas -- the present Fatah chief and seen by many -- thanks to his acceptance by the US -- as the candidate capable of reviving the peace process, now all but written off following the past four years of Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed. Most refugees would however prefer a less pliant candidate. They are afraid that Mahmoud Abbas is likely to trade off their rights, including that of their return. Although Abbas has not said anything to this effect, the Palestinians, aware of his mettle, are indeed anxious.

It they were permitted to participate in the election, the refugees

Mahmoud Abbas. The great people of Palestine just need a true leader who could appreciate the sacrifices made by their compatriots during their long struggle to regain their homeland.

Few understand the Palestinian refugees' plight. In exile, the country concerned is a reluctant host which constantly looks upon them with suspicion, sees the Muslim refugees as a threat to its frail religious and sectarian peace, and

what is the real danger, it is not just an illusion.

"Yasser Arafat was a great leader for the people, but Abbas was never a leader for the people. He is only interested in winning the presidency," he further said.

The Palestinian diaspora, particularly its military wings like the Hamas and Islamic Jihad, is sore about an inconclusive Oslo process which they think denied the refugees their role in the forthcoming

ing the puppet Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and the equally servile Iyad Allawi in Iraq. Next is the turn of Mahmoud Abbas in Palestine. The millions of Palestinians spread all over the Middle East fear that their exclusion from the vote will jeopardise their chance of seeing leadership in the PA that reflects their wishes, not those of Washington.

Although the fire of the Iraq crises is yet to be doused, interna-

cally self-serving this US-led "liberation" has turned out to be, the more it is seen as another quasi-colonial Western aggression in the region: another Palestine, in fact. Blair perhaps realised that it would have been a very good idea to persuade the Palestinians that some redress was at hand. There are problems, however, with the Bush administration's neo-conservatives who insisted that the path to peace in the holy lands went through Baghdad.

Moreover, if the Palestinians were to secure redress as the other colonised people have, there would either be no Israel or it would lose its exclusively Jewish character. It is not that the US presidents ever underestimated the importance of an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The trouble is that thanks to partisanship rooted in the Pentagon, they can never acknowledge the real nature of the problem, which is essentially that of decolonisation.

To make the decolonisation less painful for the colonialists, the Palestinians did not demand either the end of Israel or its exclusive Jewish character. They have committed themselves via Oslo to the loss of 78 per cent of their original homeland and it was done under the auspices of a lion hearted Arafat only to make the "peace of the brave" a reality. Yet the US called Arafat an obstacle to peace who had to be replaced by some "moderate" leader like Abbas who would persuade his people to yield even more. Is the election an exercise to prepare the ground for that fateful transaction -- may be at the cost of the citizens of nowhere?

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS

PERSPECTIVES

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would have chosen Marwan Barghout, now in Israeli prison. Barghout, the jailed leader of Palestinian uprisings once declared his candidature, but his later withdrawal from the arena saddened his advisers who saw a certain spark in him. It nevertheless illustrates where the people's preference lies, as well as their political mood. Obviously Barghout is trusted more by the Palestinians to uphold their cause.

So far as the disillusioned lot of Palestinians are concerned, they know that everything is settled up and in a stage managed election (even if from behind the curtain) the winner also is already known:

consequently denies them citizenship, property rights, and even work. For the refugees, the biggest nightmare would be to find themselves excluded from a Palestinian state created through negotiation by the biased peace brokers. Though bitter experience, they know to view the peace process as an instrument to sideline their rights and are as such scared of being forgotten or left behind.

"Excluding us from the election to be run in January next years will cause a drop in the whole profile of refugees," said Osama Hamdan, the Lebanon representative of militant group Hamas which has decided to boycott the vote. "This is

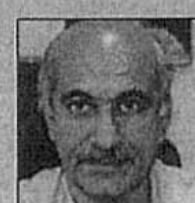
election, and those embittered people are of the view that no road map or further agreements could guarantee their rights with Mahmoud Abbas at the helm of the Fatah movement and a fledgling Palestinian Authority (PA).

According to them, Arafat did commit mistakes, but not the one that could seal their fate. They also feel that the forthcoming election as set up by the US and Israel is stage one, and aimed at imposing their will not only on them, but on entire Arab world. Both the US and Israel are bent upon preventing the diaspora from the vote, putting in place their game-plan similar to the one the US adopted by install-

tional attention has again shifted to other, older, and most imperishable of Middle East crises -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Britain's Tony Blair who recently arrived in Ramallah to talk to Palestinian leaders has, for example, urged President Bush to revitalise the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, calling it "the most pressing political challenge in our world today."

Yet, for the Arabs and Muslims, the remarkable thing is the way the West has repeated ignored the centrality of Palestine, with Iraq now dominating their psyche. But the more strategically and economi-

Conscience management



M.J. AKBAR

WHY do we need a disaster to provoke generosity? Why is generosity accompanied by PR pictures? It is entirely commendable that the victims of tsunami (now, incidentally, a Hindi word) are being nursed by the rich and the powerful. But do we need an earthquake under the ocean to bring clean water to the children of the coast? Have the owners of this world and spenders of its wealth ever checked the shoreline to find out what kind of water is drunk by the poor when there is no tsunami?

Pardon my cynicism, but is free bottled water another seed being planted in the vast forest of forward marketing? The rich are already being made to pay for what was once considered a natural gift of nature. The poor will pay for water only after the rich have made it standard practice, because imitation is the best form of profitability. Governments of course have formally abdicated from any intervention into profitability, so there is no reason to suppose that those who have sold water mixed with sugar and carbon as a health drink will not sell plain water as medicine. (If it's good for pesticide, it can't be bad for human beings, can it?)

The morality of donors who refuse to give a cheque without a clutch of photographers at their side is only one side of the story. But why do Prime Ministers and destiny-dispensers queue up to accept cheques that are cashing in on

publicity? Is it because governments have converted disaster into another instance of taxation? The condom over this tax is that it is "voluntary." It takes a great deal to make this "voluntary" -- most of all media hype. I wonder whether governments actually need this money. What happens to the cash that goes into the Prime Minister's Relief Fund? Does it fund help or does it fund only disaster-management?

Rajiv Gandhi became deeply unpopular with powerful sections of the country when he spoke the truth

equally stupid figure. It now wants to save the world by raising that to some hundred million dollars. How much is the United States spending on the military occupation of Iraq every day? Check out a relevant website; these figures are now posted on the net by the watchful. Let me offer a ballpark figure; even if it is an overestimate, it will not be by much. Would a figure of one billion dollars a day surprise, perhaps shock you? That is one thousand million dollars a day. This may even be an underestimate, because which accountant has the courage to

case you misunderstand. This gesture alone will save the affected countries some five billion dollars in interest and repayment. You can calculate, if inclined, what the total debt must be. Now to the really bad news. What do you think the governments of countries like Sri Lanka and Indonesia will do with the money saved? Spend it on the victims? What makes me doubt that? Trust me, most of the money will disappear into that curse called government glutony.

Now to the real question. Why doesn't the world mobilise on a

New York and Berlin? Is it because the poor don't rise up to kill the well-fed? When will that great multinational which controls cricket organise special one-dayers to fund food for children who cannot get one meal a day, for girls who succumb to prostitution as their only hope, for parents who cannot convert their only asset, sweat, into minimum subsistence levels of a few calories a day?

Have you noticed any difference in the pictures emanating from the disaster areas in the last couple of days? The initial images of shock, at

the poor are also alive. Tomorrow -- tomorrow, not the day after, for I am in the news business and know how ephemeral is the nature of news -- the tsunami will ebb from the headlines. The poor will remain with us. The privileged will return to their indifference. That is why the poor are chuckling today. They are not cynical. They are simple and practical. They are enjoying the brief luxury of disaster while it lasts. The privileged, in the meanwhile, are wallowing in conscience-management. Every so often the rich need a tsunami after another glut of Christmas shopping, or Eid wastage, or Puja excess. What on earth would we do if we could not find a tsunami to be sombre about?

Why are we indifferent to poverty? First, since the poor are not one of us, why bother. But I suspect there is more. We also have a politically incorrect and therefore publicly inadmissible contempt for the poor, as if they deserve their poverty because they are lazy, or worthless, or stupid. This is the theory of the caste system, by which the untouchables are condemned to be where they are because they are considered too stupid to be of any other use to society except the disposal of waste.

One of the five pillars of Islam is charity, or *zakat*. It means purification and is, therefore, a form of the Great Jihad, the struggle for self-purification, to cleanse oneself from within. But when the Holy Quran mentions charity (as in Verse 162 of Al Nisa or Verse 55 of Al Maidah) it always adds a qualification -- it asks for "regular" charity, not occasional charity, not mere tsunami charity. It insists on charity as a way of life, not as a balm for death. There is another very real and very realistic instruction from the Holy Book. It says, "If you disclose charity, it is well. But if you conceal it, it is better."

If only the Muslims of this world understood at least this much.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

One of the five pillars of Islam is charity, or *zakat*. It means purification and is, therefore, a form of the Great Jihad, the struggle for self-purification, to cleanse oneself from within. But when the Holy Quran mentions charity (as in Verse 162 of Al Nisa or Verse 55 of Al Maidah) it always adds a qualification -- it asks for "regular" charity, not occasional charity, not mere tsunami charity. It insists on charity as a way of life, not as a balm for death. There is another very real and very realistic instruction from the Holy Book. It says, "If you disclose charity, it is well. But if you conceal it, it is better."

and said that 85 per cent of development spending went into that curse called the government rather than to the poor. Since then the situation has changed, but by how much? It was at least partly due to Rajiv Gandhi's honest rhetoric that the climate was created for privatisation. The model is equally valid for disaster-management. What the government can do -- send out navies for instance -- the private sector cannot, and there is no donors' budget that can pay for navies. What the private sector can do the government should not. The PM's relief fund has an average balance of about Rs 300 crores. Compare this with what the government spends on itself each year. Rs 477829 crores. Put the commas into that number wherever you want because I have lost count of commas.

Extend the analogy. The United States started by offering some twenty million dollars, or some such

evaluate what the Pentagon really costs? I am not making value judgments. I am merely drawing attention to the pitiful fact that Kofi Annan has to appeal for a billion dollars and then add that he wants the money in cash because he does not trust commitments that are made for public consumption in the heat of publicity, and then never honoured. This is not an underground anarchist making the accusation. It is the most respected and I daresay respectful man in the system doing so. And he is asking for money for what is visibly the worst disaster in memory, a disaster that has set off unease among seaside property developers from Dubai to New York.

Appalling? Don't be appalled so easily. The European Union, more practical, has announced that it will suspend debt repayments from the affected countries for a year. Suspend the debt, not cancel it, just in

much larger scale, every day of the year, to tackle a much bigger tragedy than the tsunami, that tragedy called poverty? There are at least three hundred million people in India alone who live below the poverty line. Does any reader of a newspaper know what that means? Why is hunger -- hunger as a permanent reality day after day, night after night, with gnawing, restless, tired sleep as the only relief from hunger -- less of a tragedy than a tsunami? Why doesn't President George Bush send his brother Jeb (clearly his preferred successor in the White House) to slums so that he can mobilise the overfed to fight the world war against hunger? Is it because hunger isn't as glamorous as a thirty-foot wave chasing you like a beast from some horror movie? Is it because there are no tourists enjoying the sun outside hotels, and therefore have no stories to tell their local newspapers in London and

the horror, and grief, at the loss of relative, has given way to smiles and even the occasional laugh. I am looking at a picture distributed by Associated Press of women sitting in a group awaiting rations, one of them being prodded by a police baton to chuckles all around as all of them wait for the wheel of charity to grind in their direction. Why shouldn't they laugh? Suddenly there is food available without the pressure of unending effort. Suddenly the children of Aceh and Sri Lanka can try on a dress and choose a colour they prefer. Have you ever thought about this? About the luxury of choice? Do the poor ever have a choice? They wear what they get. The only choice they have is to find something cheaper. Does anyone below the poverty line know what it means to prefer even one vegetable to another?

Disaster then becomes a luxury to the poor. The rich discover that

OPINION

Caretaker government: The incumbency and the incumbent

SATYEN ADITYA

KING Vikramaditya was an illustrious king of ancient times. Legend has it that in recognition of his greatness, Lord Indra presented him with a throne, which was built on the heads of thirty-two dolls. After his death, none of his descendants was considered eligible for the throne. So it was kept away in a secure place by a divine order from heaven.

After many centuries, King Bhojraj recovered the throne and made preparations to use it in his court. But the dolls of the throne objected. Thirty-two dolls told as many stories to depict the greatness of Vikramaditya. All of them asked Bhojraj one question: Do you consider yourself eligible for a throne, which was given to a king of such greatness? The stories depicted the wisdom, courage, sense of justice, love for people, and perspicacity of the great king. Bhojraj considered himself ineligible for the throne and

kept it away again and built a temple over it as a mark of reverence.

The legends of Vikramaditya and Bhojraj describe the concept of the incumbency and incumbency. Incumbency originates from the state, which gives power and authority to it. But, respect and trust have to be earned by the incumbent. Perhaps, Justice Latifur Rahman has missed this point.

Power and authority provide the drive and stability respectively to an incumbency. But if the incumbent fails to earn the respect from the people, the incumbency, and through that the state, becomes unstable and weak. A person who cannot acquire respect cannot command authority, and ultimately loses grip on power.

Respect has to be earned. One cannot command it. It is earned in return for love of the people. Power without love and commitment to the welfare generates fear, which is returned as hatred. We have seen the

exercise of power without discretion as well as the people's reaction to that, time and again, in this country. Do we need any new experience?

Fear begets hatred. Hatred for the incumbent is transformed into that for the incumbency. This ultimately breaks down the chain of command.

An incumbent in the highest responsibility of the government should keep aside his or her ideological considerations. The incumbency puts on one the onus to serve the whole people, not a party. But that is not in practice in Bangladesh.

The law of the Caretaker Government does not speak well of our practice of democracy. This is politically a regressive step. In Bangladesh, there are serious deficiencies in the understanding of the nature of the society, state and government, and their relationship to each other. The state is an organ of the society. Government is meant to run this organ in the interest of the whole people. For this, the people give

mandate to a party or a group. This is a sacred trust. But when in power, parties or alliances are in the habit of forgetting this. The government and the state are treated as private domains.

To frame a perfect law is impossible, and to have laws without many flaws is difficult. This is remedied by judicious application of discretion. That perhaps is the reason why the person in charge is called a justice.

In his rejoinder, Justice Latifur Rahman could not conceal his dislike for the party which had been in power before his assumption of the responsibility of the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government. In his reaction he openly expressed his wrath against the party by declaring that it is the repository of "misdeeds (criminality, corruption, terrorism)." A biased mind seldom succeeds in grasping the reality.

Just as that the principles of justice operate from behind a veil of ignorance. When awareness in

unavoidable, technical ignorance is called for. Justice Latifur Rahman, might have too many things in mind. For the sake of honesty in the concrete sense, he could have avoided the job because with all those things in mind, it was impossible to be impartial.

Once a Bangladeshi politician said that only a child or a lunatic can remain neutral. However, the incumbent of the Chief Advisor here needs impartiality and a spirit of bipartisanship, not neutrality. Justice Latifur Rahman was fortunate to have two very eminent predecessors: Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Justice Habibur Rahman. They were rather admired after successful completion of their tenures as Chief Advisors of the Caretaker Governments. Justice Habibur Rahman averted a crisis created by the Head of the State. There was admiration for him all around. But Justice Latifur Rahman, immediately after assuming the reins of power created tumult in the

society. Wasn't it deviation from the tradition created by his eminent predecessors?

To break a tradition is risky. It needs courage as well as caution. One should not be rash to drift far enough to lose one's credibility. One should end in view. Such acts should be explainable rationally. He has not explained his position before this. His rejoinder does not exonerate him but rather entangles him more.

The Election Commission is a constitutional organ of the state. This is not the property either of the government or the party in power. But astonishingly, the incumbents in charge of this commission and all other constitutional organs of the state yield to the pressure of the government and the party in power. Is it due to lack of understanding of the relationship between the incumbent and the incumbency or disregard?

An all-pervading sense of partisanship appears to have over-

whelmed us. The society is divided between "we" and "they." The prime identity of a citizen today is "our man" or "their man." The "man of the people" has no place. This is too bad.

In 1972, we had a near-perfect constitution. But for us, it appeared to be too hot to handle. We started to amend it. Amendments and modifications have changed the constitution beyond recognition. The law of the Caretaker Government, if further changed, would not be of much significance under the circumstances.

When the law was passed, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was considered to be a "safe" incumbent for the incumbency of the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government. Wrongly or rightly, Justice Latifur Rahman as the incumbent has created uncertainty in this regard in certain circles.

They now look for a "safe"

incumbent. It would be unjust to blame them of opportunism. That the credibility of such a high incumbency has been questioned has unearthed some deep-seated malady. Since long back, in Bangladesh, the incumbents have not been doing justice to their incumbencies. That may be the crux of the problem.

Mr. Kibria has put forward his party's standpoint. The Awami League was in the government during the last term. There are critics of AL. But amongst the people of Bangladesh, there are millions who do not agree with Justice Latifur Rahman and look forward to the leadership of this party to bring forth a significant change in the country for the welfare of the people. No one, however important, should forget that. For in democracy, only the people are supreme.

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