

## Choicest plots to ministers and MPs!

### Outright abuse of elective offices

WE are surprised to learn that a large number of ministers, state ministers, ruling party MPs and other favourites are to get allotments of premier government land in the posh Gulshan-Banani and Uttara enclaves. But our surprise turned into a shock the other day when the Minister for Works and Housing Mirza Abbas quipped in response to a newsmen's query: what's wrong if a minister gets a plot? Our natural reaction to this will be that a minister and MP were elected to serve the people not themselves.

Need we state the obvious about a whole lot of perks and privileges going with the positions of ministers, state ministers and MPs already? They have duty-free cars, and not long ago, we also witnessed salary increases effected for them, just to mention two of the latest additions to their package of remuneration and facilities. The BNP government has been at it for quite a while now without apparently recognising how much the ministers and MPs already have in term of acquired real assets.

We suggest that you just reassess their 'needs' vis-a-vis those who have genuine necessity for and a natural claim to such land allotment. This is highly disgusting and immoral.

This tendency of utilising elective offices to take extraordinary advantage of public property which is but an outright denial of the same to people who have genuine need and demand for it, had in the past blighted many governments' image beyond repair. And it even caused their doom.

During the AL government there was a smack of similar spoils system. However, it goes to their credit that they stopped short of allotting premier plots to party favourites in the face of strident public criticism. We urge the BNP government to be sensitive to public feelings about sweeping grant of favours, lest it appears as something of an act of expropriation.

## Giving up search for WMD in Iraq

### A conclusive indictment

THE decision to stop looking for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq has only proven the fact that the reasoning behind invading the country was totally based on lies. The whole world has been coming to the conclusion that there were no WMDs at all. It was attested by various reports, agencies, task forces who were given the job to find WMDs. It may have taken longer than expected for the US to reach this point, but the bottom line is most of us are not surprised by the announcement that the US has discontinued the search. We would have been more surprised if they had found any.

President Bush had long ago changed his tune to removing Saddam. But the fact remains that the world was duped into believing a lie. Thousands of innocent people were killed, prisoners were tortured, completely disregarding human rights, and the country is now in a condition of total instability. It wouldn't be wrong to say that the credibility of the US as a superpower has been highly diminished.

This was probably the only case where an armed invasion on a sovereign country was initiated on artificial justification based on some figment of imagination by some high US officials. It makes the invasion not only illegal, but also unjustified and immoral.

Now the question is -- who will be held responsible for all the lies, false statements and wrong evidences that were dished out by the US and its allies to justify one of the most unjustified invasion in the recent history? Would President Bush and Prime Minister Blair publicly acknowledge that their justifications for invading Iraq were based on wrong evidences? Would it be possible to make any one of them stand trial for lying -- about Saddam possessing WMD hence the country needed to be invaded -- not only to their own citizens but also to the rest of the world?

Would the common Iraqis get justice for the injustice meted out to them? Would they ever be compensated for the trauma they encountered in last two years? We pray that they do.

# The post-tsunami perspective



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE Sunday after Christmas, a severe earthquake shifted two giant tectonic plates in the Indian ocean, not far from the western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. It lifted one plate perhaps sixty feet along a 1,000 mile ridge. This seismic bump created a wall of water that pushed outward in all directions at over two hundred miles per hour. This produced large waves and eventually a tsunami.

It led to the death of more than 1,60,000 persons and injuries to over a million -- all scattered in different countries of the Indian Ocean Rim, stretching from Malaysia in the east to Somalia in the west. This unprecedented catastrophe left in its wake indiscriminate devastation. The destruction caused has been variously estimated at being around US dollars ten billion.

Bangladesh, at the northern most point of the event, suffered the least -- three deaths and very negligible impact. Geologists subsequently indicated that the extended continental shelf in its coastline protected it from harm.

The citizens of this country, who have experienced major natural disasters over the last few decades reacted with great compassion. People from all walks of life expressed their respect for the tsunami victims. Candles were lit at the Central Shaheed Minar, prayers offered in different places of worship and token silence observed in meetings. In addition, as the US Ambassador in Dhaka observed, resource starved Bangladesh, 'as-

sumed the role of donor by sending relief supplies and personnel to Sri Lanka aboard giant C-130 aircraft provided by the US government to support Bangladesh's contribution to peacekeeping and humanitarian missions.' Another small medical detachment was also sent to the Maldives, a fellow member of the SAARC community.

Unfortunately however, no representative of Bangladesh was sent to Jakarta to attend the Tsunami Sum-

mit live near the coasts -- and that population is expected to double by the end of the century.

In this context, we could have also highlighted several ecological factors that are disturbing the natural balance -- ranging from disturbance of natural sand dunes to clearing of mangrove swamps. Our presence would have permitted us to participate more actively in future action and research that will be undertaken to protect affected Indian Ocean

India, Thailand and Sri Lanka to have taken pre-emptive safety measures.

This unprecedented disaster has clearly evidenced the extreme vulnerability of coastal areas in the Indian ocean. A functional early warning system would have been able to avert at least some of the enormous losses.

Today, after the disastrous tsunami, there is need for Indian Ocean Rim countries to seriously examine

lose sight of the quality of aid' and 'how aid will be used in affected areas'.

United States has made available contingents of its global armed forces' presence for relief operations. That is commendable. We remember with gratitude the relief efforts undertaken by General Stackpole after our own disastrous cyclone in 1991. Similarly, one must also praise the Japanese decision this time round to despatch nearly

ery assessment missions.

The United Nations might consider initiating the following steps immediately:

- Providing housing and restoring basic services such as water and access roads;

- providing short-term employment in the reconstruction/construction of small scale fisheries in tsunami affected areas;

- restoring critical small-scale infrastructure to enable the commencement of longer term recovery activities;

- strengthening the capacity of local organisations and local government in the coastal areas to develop recovery programmes;

- supporting local communities by establishing new and/or expanded microfinance systems that can facilitate access to credit for affected families requiring boats and essential equipment;

- restoring critical small-scale infrastructure like minor irrigation systems, pedestrian bridges, minor sanitation and drainage systems and community buildings (which can act as temporary educational units);

- providing technical partners for capacity re-building;

- repairing critical infrastructures like jetties and harbours;

- ensuring that the UNICEF takes the lead in interfacing with other civil society representatives in setting up a computerised data base of children/orphans who have been separated from relatives. This is particularly required not only for eventual re-unification with families but also to avoid these children being targeted by criminal gangs;

- using a community based approach that incorporates skills training, peer counselling and joint ownership; and

- helping to establish not only an early-warning system but also facilitating the creation of national stakeholders required for a comprehensive national disaster prevention and reduction framework.

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## POST BREAKFAST

**This unprecedented disaster has clearly evidenced the extreme vulnerability of coastal areas in the Indian ocean. A functional early warning system would have been able to avert at least some of the enormous losses. Today, after the disastrous tsunami, there is need for Indian Ocean Rim countries to seriously examine how best they can organise their regional resources to prepare and also combat after-effects of massive natural disasters -- be they cyclones or tsunamis.**

Rim countries.

Natural disasters affect every part of the world. It is just that the developed world, with greater resources, are able to pre-empt disasters and also plan necessary post-disaster mechanisms ahead of time. This helps them to suitably tackle and overcome relief and rehabilitation problems. We have witnessed this time and again in Florida last year. We have also seen how over the last three decades, facilities like the Hawaii Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre have helped the Pacific Rim countries.

Geologists argue that tsunamis represent a double uncertainty. They point out that tsunamis depend essentially on two unknowable factors -- the exact topography of the seabed at the epicentre of a quake and precise prediction of the earthquakes that cause them. Some geologists have also noted that it would have been extremely difficult to predict that the earthquake near Sumatra would affect far-away Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, a Centre like that in Hawaii, might have enabled

how best they can organise their regional resources to prepare and also combat after-effects of massive natural disasters -- be they cyclones or tsunamis. Cash strapped developing countries will have to coordinate a multiple response system and a regional plan of action.

This time round, Bangladesh escaped this unfortunate dance of death. This might not happen the second time round. We need to play an active role in this regard.

The Jakarta Conference has most wisely decided to make the United Nations the focal point for post-disaster management and reconstruction efforts. The European Union, United States, Canada and Japan have all shown great maturity in their handling of this humanitarian situation. They recognise that the task ahead requires sustained effort for months. Billions of US dollars have been pledged and moratoriums granted for debt repayments. Louis Michel, the EU Development Commissioner from Belgium, has also aptly pointed out that donor governments 'should not

1000 military personnel to Indonesia in that country's biggest overseas deployment since the Second World War. These troops are expected to provide medical aid and transport support and also help victims of the tsunami disaster. By this step, the Japanese government has further re-enforced its claim as a suitable contender for the permanent membership of the UN Security Council from Asia.

One feels that caution is needed, but that should not affect or delay the actual disbursement and the rebuilding of infrastructure in important sectors like education, health, tele-communications, transportation and housing. The main thrust of the recovery efforts has to start now using local expertise. It should not have to depend on foreign consultants. What is vital is that the United Nations re-establish people's livelihoods and their coastal environments.

The UNDP should also begin supporting national authorities in recovery planning and, sooner than later, undertake inter-agency recov-

# Better half worse



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THEY sat on the beach along the water's edge, looking like silhouettes against the crimson sea, which was flat at sunset like a metal sheet. She turned around with scornful eyes and said to him with spite in her voice that a husband was living proof that a wife could take a joke.

It was not clear why he shuddered right after she finished, if it was the chill of the wind or his reflex to let her insult slide down his back. Holding his hands like a shield in front of his face, he said to her with an impish smile that although he had married her for looks, it was not for the same one she was giving him today.

Then like a wrestler striking down his opponent with repeated blows, he told her another joke to hurt her again. "My wife is an angel", said a man. "Lucky you. Mine's still alive", replied his friend. She hissed like a snake and snarled at him that anybody who told sick jokes like that should drown in shame. But he was not ready to give up yet, and took another swipe at his mate. A

woman is unpredictable, he said. Before marriage she expects a man, after marriage she suspects him and after death she respects him. Then like an orator finishing his speech with a punch line, he said to her in a sombre voice that he should die if that was the only way to get her respect.

Before she could catch her breath, he came down with yet another blow of joke. A man is incomplete until he is married, after that he is finished. He spit out

only in self-defense! He wished to tell her this amusing thought, but gave up the idea because she was already mad.

He looked at the sky and heaved a deep sigh. How could Anton Chekhov be so right on the money when he warned that if anyone was afraid of loneliness, he must not get married! He felt that loneliness inside him in the middle of this crowded beach. His wife was standing close to him, yet she looked so distant from him!

completely different human being, who was married to him as though one half of something was attached to other half of it. He stared at her for some time, waiting for her to turn around and look at him. But her eyes were fixed on the boundless darkness rolling over the waters, a lonely soul facing the enormity of life in the stretch of the sea.

On his wedding night, his brother-in-law had whispered into his ear that in marriage, the bride

riage, the 'y' becomes silent. Jokes are funny because they capture the essence of truth. Marriage is when love is turned into an obligation, when a thing of nature is turned into a spectator sport. A man would go through hell for his love, but marriage puts him through that hell as if to test his resolve. The woman, who stood on the water's edge, was the living, breathing embodiment of his fancy in flesh. Love was nothing but lust for life. He loved her because he loved himself, because she attracted

woman, his wife appeared out of nowhere.

He was surprised that it worked, and her lips parted in a quiet smile. Howling winds swirled in the silence as gathering tides whipped up the sea. She looked at him with eyes wide open, and asked why he got married if marriage was a joke to him. Then she said with tears in her eyes that this marriage meant a lot to her because she was in love with him. It wounded her every time he cracked a joke, because he should not trivialise what was precious to her.

Marriages were made in heaven, he told her in jest, then pouted his lips to add that so were thunder, lightning, tornadoes and hail. She sniffled as her face trembled in the wind, and she asked him not to be silly like that again. He put his arm around her and held her tightly against him, then looked her in the eye as if to convince her to listen to him. There was no freedom in bondage, he said and marriage was bondage, when man and woman must take each other for granted. That is why, he said further with a mysterious smile in his face, husband and wife need to have their regular spats for the same reason wars and battles keep history fresh.

She was ready to smile again when he asked if she knew what was common between war and marriage. Man is always the casualty in both, he said. A married man might live longer, but he is more willing to die than a single man, he added after a pause. She decided to go ahead and smile anyway.f

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## CROSS TALK

**She wiggled to get out of his grip, her face still facing the dense darkness, which hung over the sea. He leaned in front of her and told her a joke. A man approached a very beautiful woman in a large supermarket and said to her that he had lost his wife. Then he asked her to talk to him for couple of minutes. When the woman wanted to know why she should talk to him, he replied that every time he talked to a beautiful woman, his wife appeared out of nowhere. He was surprised that it worked, and her lips parted in a quiet smile.**

the words with a roar of laughter that quivered in the wind across the waters. She stood up in a fit of anger and said to him that this time he went too far to hurt her feelings.

They would not speak to each other for a while, and looked into the gathering darkness as if to find each other. The beach was crowded and noisy as children and hawkers screamed and shouted, and unmindful men and women walked about holding their hands. How a man holds the hand of a woman in love before marriage, and after marriage the same man holds the hand of the same woman

Another joke came to his mind. A son asked his father if it was true that in China a man did not know his wife until she was married to him. The father replied that it happened in every country. Marriage was a mousetrap, he said to himself, because those who were outside wanted to get in and those who were inside wanted to get out. A strong wind swept over the beach as if to resonate the raging emptiness inside his chest.

She was facing the sea, her saree fluttering in the wind, and her hairs blowing like tangles of thread. She looked like a stranger to him, a

gets a shower; but for the groom, it is curtains! His life changed since he got married, loss of freedom, adjustments, the new emotional balance, responsibility of another life, the realisation of going lockstep with another person sharing life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. At times he wished he could go back to his old self, the freedom of choice to wake up on either side of the bed, making his own coffee in the silence of the morning, and taking his own decisions without any interference.

Before marriage, a man 'years' for the woman he loves. After mar-

him like the sun and the moon pulled water in the ocean.

He walked up to her and held her hand, which was stiff and cold like a frozen clam. She wiggled to get out of his grip, her face still facing the dense darkness, which hung over the sea. He leaned in front of her and told her a joke. A man approached a very beautiful woman in a large supermarket and said to her that he had lost his wife. Then he asked her to talk to him for couple of minutes. When the woman wanted to know why she should talk to him, he replied that every time he talked to a beautiful

# Palestine state: What happened to 1988 declaration?

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

THE Palestine National Council (PNC), the legislative body of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), proclaimed in November 1988 the establishment of the independent state of Palestine and, very surprisingly, the UN General Assembly (UNGA), while acknowledging the proclamation, decided to designate the PLO as 'Palestine' (P), instead of recognising Palestine as an independent state, as proclaimed by the PNC, and, to add salt to injury, UN granted PLO the status of an ordinary "Observer" at the UNGA, a position a number of international NGOs enjoy at the UN. Palestinians are carrying that burden of shame till to-day. On the other hand, a Jewish agency that was fighting for a Jewish state, declared independence and establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 when the Palestinian leaders rejected a partition plan presented by the UN in 1947 to create two separate States -- Palestine and Israel, and subsequently Israel became a full-

fledged member of the UN in 1949.

The question becomes more puzzling, rather more mysterious, as to why the Palestinian leadership had never raised the issue at the UN during the last sixteen years since the Independence Declaration, nor they had behaved like an independent state, although they had been carrying on continuous struggle against the occupying Israeli forces to liberate the occupied territories, like a minority community struggling against a majority-dominated state! And they project their government as "Palestine Authority", instead of "Palestine government". And now after the sad and mysterious death of Yasser Arafat, America and Israel had come forward to offer a 'Palestine State to the Palestinian' leadership, provided they follow the dotted lines in the US-Israeli-brokered peace-map for the Middle East.

**Israeli threats to Arafat**

There seems to be a sign of relief in the Jewish circle, after the planned removal of the "main obstacle" to Middle East peace! Oflate, Israel had

been threatening repeatedly to 'remove' Arafat from political arena of Palestine, as if they were not happy after putting him under 'house arrest' at his Ramallah HQ for last three years or so. And strangely, there was not even a murmur of protest from either the Palestine leadership or the leaders of the Arab League member states.

The basic questions, therefore, stand out more clearly. Where lies the rut? Who is at fault -- the UN or the so-called 'Palestine Authority'? What prevents UN to admit Palestine as a member state as it had done in hundred such cases, including Israel? Who is putting the clog in the wheel? Is it the fault of the Palestine Authority, which on one hand, follows methodically a text-book procedure of having a democratically elected 'President', a 'Prime Minister', a 'cabinet', a 'Parliament' and even 'Ambassadors', and on the other, it does not call itself the "government of Palestine" or "state of Palestine" officially.

**Never applied for UN**

**membership?**

It is unbelievable that the Palestine leadership didn't apply to UN for its membership. UN has an open record to show that Palestine never approached for UN membership since its declaration of independence by the PNC in 1988, for some reason or other. Who are then the 'advisers' that prevented Palestine Authority, or the then newly independent 'Palestine government' (unfortunately, the term 'Palestine government' is never used by the Palestine leadership) that prevented Palestine leadership not to fulfil the basic formality on the part of a new state for its admission in the UN as a member? Of course, there was a possibility of veto-wielding by some permanent members, particularly USA and UK. But that doesn't mean that Palestine leadership would not behave as representatives of an independent state.

**Where Palestine stands to-day?**

The present day Palestine had come a long way since 1947. Before

secession by Israel as an independent state from mainland Palestine, the Palestinian Arabs were 66pc of its total population of two million of which Jews constituted 34pc. Now, as an irony of fate, it is the minority Jewish state which is dictating terms and conditions to guarantee the establishment of a Palestine state! Being then majority, the Palestine Arabs, assisted by some neighbouring Arab states, attacked on 15 May 1948 the newly declared state of Israel but it misfired. The Israelis were already better equipped, better armed and better trained to meet such a situation. So, the Palestine Arabs had to retreat with an additional burden of some 750,000 Palestine refugees, uprooted from Israel, after a ceasefire agreed upon by them. The Palestinians are still leaking their old wounds.

During the last five decades or so, the Palestinian-Israeli hostilities continued, erupting from time to time on bigger scales, particularly in 1953, 1967 and 1973. Of them, the 1967 Israeli attack became the most fatal and disastrous for Palestine.

when Israel occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip which Israel still continues to control, showing the worst contempt to relevant UN resolutions. Israel had built thousands of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and is now busy in constructing the 700-mile long so-called "separation barrier", or perhaps to be known in future as the "Great Israeli Wall". And Israel is doing this defying the recent World Court verdict, declaring the construction as "illegal", urging UN further action to "dismantle" it. What the UN will do is a foregone conclusion.

However, the Palestine authority should have raised the question of its admission in the UN during the last sixteen years, since it declared independence without fear or favour from any quarters. At least it would have exposed the evil intentions of some big powers that might have come forward to obstruct Palestine's admission in the UN, in order to protect the vested interests of Israel. Palestine would have also behaved like an

independent state to face Israeli aggressions on its territory. It is a sad story that the Palestine leadership couldn't move even an inch the Israeli occupation forces from occupied territories during the last thirty-seven years since 1967 when Israel occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip although they had suffered immense loss of lives and properties. And the most shameful chapter of Palestinians' history of struggle against Israel is that they miserably failed to free their leader Yasser Arafat from the most humiliating confinement by the Israeli forces at his Ramallah headquarters for long three years till his mysterious death in November last.

**What a Jewish journalist says**

A former Jerusalem Bureau Chief of US weekly, Newsweek, Joshua Hammer, himself an American Jew, in one of his recent articles in the weekly, had said that whatever Sharon is doing in the name of peace in the Middle East, has the "blessings" of Bush administration.

Referring to the much-hyped Israel's partial withdrawal of Israeli settlements from Gaza, Mr Hammer had exposed Sharon's new game, when he said that "Sharon plans to withdraw from Gaza only to focus on his real goal: permanent occupation of West Bank". Mr Hammer, further commenting on this shrewd game of Sharon, added: "Sharon promised military victory and it seems he has delivered it. The terrorist group Hamas has been driven underground and the old leadership destroyed". Does the new Palestine leadership get the message about the shape of things to come?

However, the deck for Israel's fulfilment of Mid-East peace-mission seems to be now clear after the death of Arafat, and thus removal of the "main obstacle" to US-Israeli brokered peace plan. Will Israel get a walk-over? How long the UN, the Arab League and the OIC play deaf, dumb and blind to the grotesque scene of bleeding Palestine?

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