

A fell stroke of endless impunity

How heavy a price to pay

WE are anguished, shocked and outraged by the targeted grenade attacks that bled the life out of the highly respected opposition figure SAMS Kibria along with that of four AL men.

Our consternation is absolute in the realisation that the dastardly political assault was just waiting to happen. Security vigil, far less precautionary arrangement, on the part of the local administrative or police authorities, was evidently not in place. A public meeting scheduled by the opposition has a lower security priority. In truth, whatever police presence might be observed at an opposition rally happened to be motivated mostly by a concern to hold the opposition in check rather than to provide a security ring around its leaders and followers.

What's particularly noticeable after each grenade attack on a public rally is the ease with which the perpetrators flee the scene. In the latest case, somebody was seen riding out of the scene unchallenged by the police at any point. There was also a temporary power black-out prior to grenade throwing to be apprehensive about. The point is, with the exception of suicide bombers, those who physically hurl a bomb at a public meeting or fire a bullet to assassinate somebody would be arrested as it had happened in some other countries. Noticeably not so in our context.

But principally it is the track-record of failed investigations into the 15 major explosions that have taken place since the grenade assault on Udichi in 1999 that made the 16th attack at Habiganj look inevitable.

The blame-game played by the ruling and opposition parties after each bombing incident tended to politicise the investigation with a ruling party slant even before it got off to a start, thus, in effect, predisposing its failed or hollow outcome. The mindset with the ruling party can get so prejudiced that even where opposition elements would be victims the finger might get pointed to them.

The resulting sense of impunity instilled in the minds of the extremists could only encourage them to go for more.

Honestly, as for the investigations, we are still unaware of the findings of Interpol, Scotland Yard or FBI, or of their suggestions, if any, to avert recurrence of bombing incidents.

Shah AMS Kibria has been a martyr at the altar of political extremism of the most heinous type. In his departure, we have lost a highly respected technocrat-turned political leader of great abilities and sterling qualities of consistency, grit, commitment and dedication to ideals. We held him in great esteem for his columns in our paper. The void he has left would be difficult to fill. May his soul rest in peace. We express our deepest condolences to the members of his family in the full knowledge that nothing can adequately solace their sense of loss.

Wetland turning into wasteland JS body does well to bring it up

THIS is an appalling sense of development. Manifestly, it is also an institutional aberration.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee meant for the water resources ministry has made a startling revelation to the effect that the wetland development board formed four years ago hasn't had a single meeting as yet. Now, the Prime Minister has been requested by the JS committee to convene the much awaited meeting of the governing body for haors and wetland development board to expeditiously attend to the problems of 423 haors there are. The first pressing agenda is to finalise the organogram of the board itself. The PM heads the body.

How important it is for the board to work is clearly underscored by the fact that floods last year had damaged a large number of embankments that protected the haors. Wetlands, lakes and marshes are good for profitable farming, both fish and crop, aside from being natural water reservoirs and drainage channels of enormous efficacy. Violation of wetland protection laws to grab lands is a common problem, let alone the ecological challenge posed by the drying up of the lowlands.

Parliamentary committees, now thankfully bipartisan bodies, are increasingly playing an oversight role that only makes us bemoan its previous uni-party composition. That is how the JS bodies should work as composite entities demanding accountability in governance and developmental pursuits. Bipartisan character of parliamentary committees no matter how unequal the representation of the opposition MPs in them maybe has a way of lifting their overall performance.

Post-MFA era and Bangladesh



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE last quarter of the past year saw major concern expressed by international analysts and their dire predictions for our RMG Industry. Serious anxiety surfaced over what might happen after the withdrawal of the textile quota system with effect from 1 January, 2005. Several seminars in Dhaka also dealt with the probable adverse impact on the Bangladesh economy after the end of the multi-fibre arrangements (MFA) that has ruled the global textile trade for three decades and helped this country to emerge as a major global player in the apparel sector.

Reports prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggested that Bangladesh ran the risk of losing about one and half million jobs, mostly women. They also pointed out that there was serious possibility that uneven competition from China would suffocate demand from Bangladesh.

The Cassandras however appear to have modified themselves somewhat now. Second thoughts, a month into the new year, are projecting more realistic assumptions. The UNDP has prepared a report entitled 'Potential Human Development Implications of MFA' which deals with Bangladesh from an integrated modelling approach. It suggests that 'Bangladesh may lose income or value addition of Tk. 8,000 crore in RMG sector of export demand declines due to the MFA phase-out, but income may rise by Tk 2,800 crore if export demand

increases'. This Report points out that the export demand variations might have more impact on the forward-linked sectors than on the backward-linked sectors. It also estimates that the total income losses for forward and backward linkage sectors would be around Tk 31.9 billion and Tk 12.2 billion respectively. These predictions and the dire connotations are also balanced by prospects on the other side of the

Bangladeshi products by foreign buyers in the past few months. There are signs of increase of orders in terms of volume. Two major daily newspapers in the United States, the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Times have both separately reported that the US based Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailing company, has stepped up its presence in Dhaka and increased its apparel imports from Bangladesh by 18 per cent during 2003. It has also

being translated into better profit. Foreign buyers, taking advantage of the sensitive situation are forcing local producers to reduce even further their price quotations. Such competition is marginalising many producers and affecting those who are burdened with loans. Fortunately, Bangladeshi textile products have been able to find a growing niche in the European Union. European countries imported products worth US\$ 4,278

backward linkage facilities at their disposal. Producers will also have to improve efficiency, reduce lead time and improve handling capacity at the Chittagong Port.

The government has announced that it is planning to undertake a comprehensive improvement in facilities in the Chittagong Port. One hopes that time is not lost in looking for investment partners. It has to be undertaken urgently, if necessary with local private sector capital. This

without wastage of time. These areas will have to be addressed successfully if we are to overcome post-MFA challenges.

The BGMEA, on their own have also been doing their homework. They have made certain suggestions and drawn the attention of the Government to certain demands. They have been stressing on the need for relaxation of rules of origin (for export to the EU) and the withdrawal on the ban imposed on the import of yarn through land ports. They have claimed that the latter factor in particular is necessary to reduce lead time and to make them more competitive. The BGMEA also wants the Government to provide 15 per cent cash incentives for encouraging backward linkages. There is some merit in their proposals and they deserve further scrutiny.

There is some merit in their proposals, but one should not agree without further scrutiny. The Government should set up a technical committee, consisting of both private sector representation as well as government representatives and carefully judge the financial implications.

The Government may also fully support the BGMEA initiative to persuade the US Congress to accord duty-free access to Bangladeshi products (as has been provided to 33 other sub-Saharan and Caribbean LDCs). Intense lobbying needs to be undertaken to point out that the USA cannot discriminate between LDCs. Bangladesh agreed with US demand to allow trade union activities in the EPZs. I believe it is now their turn to give Bangladeshi entrepreneurs a helping hand in the post-MFA era.

Strengthening the RMG sector in Bangladesh will ensure greater stability, gender empowerment and economic opportunities. These are the best weapons in the global fight against terrorists and terrorism. It is also cheaper and more effective.

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POST BREAKFAST

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coin. It asserts that in case of rise in export, the total income gains of forward and backward-linkage sectors may reach Tk 11.9 billion and Tk 4.3 billion respectively.

Readers will say that this is like betting on both sides of the coin. Others will say that the UNDP is hedging its bets. Such prognosis can be confusing.

It is true that the industry leaders belonging to the BGMEA have been exhibiting quiet confidence. They appear to be buoyant with regard to short-term predictions. The general consensus appears to be that the transition to the post-MFA period will be smooth and progressing well and will continue to be so, at least in 2005 and 2006. They believe that after this, continuing market share will depend on future internal policies (regarding indirect support) of the Government and political stability ahead of the next general elections. These are points I would tend to agree with.

Mixed signals have emanated because of greater interest in

been suggested that this Company which imported goods of about US dollar 900 million during 2003 is planning to increase its imports by additional 30 per cent during 2005. Wal-Mart executives have been quoted as saying that Bangladesh is very competitive because labour cost here is less by a third than what it is in China and also compares favourably with Fiji, Brunei, Macedonia and Turkmenistan.

This is indeed good news. This optimism was also shared by Mr. Michael U Klein, Vice President of the World Bank, during his recent visit to Dhaka. Speaking to reporters, he commented that the World Bank was happy to see that the abolition of the MFA had not, as yet, led to any adverse impact on the industry and that the Bank was willing to support Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry.

There is however a flip side to this situation. One swallow does not a summer make. Most of the industrial units are getting higher orders by volume but that is not necessarily

million in the 2003-04 fiscal year which was almost US dollar one billion more than the previous year. Zero-tariff, a stronger euro and quota-free access along with economic upturn in major importing countries within the EU - Germany, UK, France and Italy have been the main reasons for this increase in exports. Knitwear exports also went up in the EU because of the GSP (generalised system of preference) facility for LDC products. The stronger euro also translated into higher export figures in US dollars.

We however have very little room for complacency. One thing is very clear. The post-MFA period demands that the RMG sector improves not only its competitive edge in the global market but also the quality of its products by moving into the higher designer niche.

Fresh challenges require that apparel producers reduce the cost of production even further. This assumes particular importance given the edge enjoyed by some other countries who have better

assumes importance, given the fact, that more likely than not, there will be higher volume in exports because of more competitive prices.

Expansion, development and upgrading needs to take place with regard to the Port's loading and unloading efficiency, safety and security of the cargo, and its quick disposal to different destinations. Steps also need to be taken about improving the navigational channel and placement of ships in various docks without losing time. The turn-around factor is vital.

Relevant Port authorities also need to heighten efficiency through computerisation. This will enable the Port to interface different departments. Exporters can then get clearance of their documents within a few hours instead of days. Use of computers will also ease cargo identification in containers, location of ships at anchorage and the nature of their cargo. This will also reduce corruption, help security, placement of shipments at the Port and their loading and unloading

George Bush part II



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

helicopters patrolled, bomb-sniffing dogs searched vehicles, and 13,000 soldiers and police officers guarded the streets. The inaugural speech lasted 21 minutes, and the President of the United States used the word "freedom" 27 times, "liberty" 15 times and "free" seven times.

"We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success

Perhaps politics has it common with magic, because much of their success is rooted in illusion. Who doesn't remember the Teflon presidency of Ronald Reagan? The Iran-contra scandal, failed 'supply-side' economics, the ludicrous invasion of Grenada, death of 241 Marines in Lebanon, the cost of a military buildup named Star Wars, which kept America closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis and left it billions of

nation" would be predicated on how they treat their own people. Wish someone had said the same thing to Bush. How should the rest of the world deal with him for deceiving his own people? A survey of nearly 22,000 people in 21 countries by the BBC World Service last week found that 47 percent see US influence in the world today as largely negative and 58 percent believe Bush's reelection will make the world more dangerous. It is obvious that Bush's

tyranny in the world, it seemed to land somewhere between dreamy and disturbing. Because although tyranny was a very bad thing and quite wicked, one couldn't expect to eradicate it any time soon. She reminded us that we didn't live in heaven, we lived on earth. The hallmark of the first term of Bush presidency was unbridled mouth. The president and his mean said things they could never prove, the uranium, the WMD, link between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and much more. But the second term has started on a different note. It is unbridled thinking this time, the sky-is-the-limit type of soaring ideology such as spreading of freedom, ending of tyranny and success of liberty. This time Bush is aiming high perhaps to prove that he doesn't always imagine things, sometimes he can actually apply his mind. So he borrows ideas from a book and promises to change the world. Little does he know that others tried it before him, the communists, the fascists, the ideologues of the world, who learned it the hard way that the world couldn't be run from the pages of a book.

CROSS TALK

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of liberty in other lands," Bush declared. "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world," he said, and then added, "Freedom by its nature must be chosen and defended by citizens."

But perhaps never did the words of an American President, the presumed leader of the free world, ring so hollow before. A recent Post-ABC News poll found that George Bush is already anguishing in the minds of his countrymen. Only 45 percent said they wanted the country to go in the direction Bush wanted. Another 58 percent disapproved of the way he has handled the war in Iraq. George Bush never mentioned Iraq or terrorism in his inaugural speech.

dollars in debt. Yet when Reagan left office, he was recognised as one of the greatest American Presidents of all time.

Those who were disappointed last November were reminded last week that even bad guys could get a long life. Somehow luck played a big role here, and Bush got rewarded for the mistakes of his first term. He got more votes, a wider margin in Florida and more seats in both senate and Congress. He played politics with a sleight of hand. It happens in democracy, you can win elections by casting a spell on the people.

It is interesting that Bush said in his inaugural speech that America's relations with "every ruler and every

spell is not working outside of America.

By now it is no secret that the inspiration for much of what went into Bush's inaugural speech came from a book written by Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet political prisoner turned conservative Israeli politician. In that book called "The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror," Sharansky outlines what he calls the "town square test." It means that a country is not free if its citizens cannot go to a public place and express dissent from the ruling power without fear of reprisal.

Now that is understood. What about people who are free to say

everybody to believe in it. The Senator said that the actual number was 4,000. Richard Cohen, a columnist of The Washington Post retorted that he could explain what happened to the missing 116,000. Possibly they were guarding weapons of mass destruction in the Iraqi province of Oz.

If the first term of George Bush is the original movie, then his plot was thick with lies and deception. But the second term looks hefty already. Even former White House speechwriter Peggy Noonan, who wrote Bush's father's inaugural address, couldn't hold back her reaction. She wrote in the Wall Street Journal that while it was not wrong by any means to talk about ending

tyranny in the world, it seemed to land somewhere between dreamy and disturbing. Because although tyranny was a very bad thing and quite wicked, one couldn't expect to eradicate it any time soon. She reminded us that we didn't live in heaven, we lived on earth. The hallmark of the first term of Bush presidency was unbridled mouth. The president and his mean said things they could never prove, the uranium, the WMD, link between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and much more. But the second term has started on a different note. It is unbridled thinking this time, the sky-is-the-limit type of soaring ideology such as spreading of freedom, ending of tyranny and success of liberty. This time Bush is aiming high perhaps to prove that he doesn't always imagine things, sometimes he can actually apply his mind. So he borrows ideas from a book and promises to change the world. Little does he know that others tried it before him, the communists, the fascists, the ideologues of the world, who learned it the hard way that the world couldn't be run from the pages of a book.

Judging by the history of movies, sequels are seldom as interesting as originals. The first Bush term was wild goose chase. The second term looks like a mirage, since Bush is vowing to fix in four years what prophets and messiahs couldn't do in hundreds. So what? A man is always entitled to his dream. In his second term, George Bush will try to leave the mark of that dream on history. Only regret is that it will be nightmare for the rest of us. For four more years!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

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

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

"Investigation on the Secretariat vehicles"

I was totally shocked to read the two articles on The Daily Star recently. One was on the plush vehicles used by government officials and the other on the misuse of 4,000 government vehicles titled "Establishment Grilled for Failure to Submit Report".

The administrative cadres seem to be living in a totally different world from the rest of the nation. Do they really deserve to lead such a luxurious life, besides exercising their powerful roles? Especially when a greater percentage of the population is suffering from hunger, illiteracy, lack of shelter, lack of education etc.

We wholeheartedly admire such praiseworthy, investigative reports. A citizen One-mail

"Learning English"

For the last few days, we were reading a healthy debate on the importance of teaching grammar on the letter page. As a juvenile learner, I have something to say about it. Now-a-days English has become the language of top priority. But how grammar can help us being an expert in the language? Actually, considering English as a foreign language, we strictly believe that, we have to learn all the grammar techniques. But while learning mother tongue we don't need to do so and the fact is that we acquire command of our mother tongue spontaneously as well as implicitly. So, if we want to be fluent in English language like the native English speakers, we do not need to learn grammar rules as much. The major obstacle in our country is that, we do not have a proper environment to develop English language skills.

Sometimes we make desperate attempts to get the vocabulary by heart. It is okay as we cannot acquire it implicitly. But the problem therefore is that, we do not find enough opportunities to use them. As a result we lose our so far enriched stock of word early. So, my view about learning English is that, we should create a proper environment where young learners can practise the language. Debate on usefulness of grammar is not much fruitful today but the thing we have to concentrate on is to making an environment where we can practise the language more efficiently. Shoaib M. Siddiqui HSC 1st year, Dhaka City College Dhaka

Gratitude

I have written many mails complaining about many things but this is a mail where I am expressing my

extreme gratitude to 'The Daily Star'. I earnestly believe, if I don't do so it will be doing an injustice to the daily. The reason for thanking so is: I wrote regarding an arch bridge to be built on road no 3A Dhanmondi couple of months ago. I wrote about the difficulties the dwellers may come across and those who might be benefited from it. But I was surprised to see that as soon as it came to The Daily Star's 'letter to the editor page' it worked like elixir. To my utter surprise, after two days I started noticing the change. The temporary store (meant to keep all the materials for building the bridge) was demolished. All the materials were taken back. And now the whole place is very neat and clean. I think the government has decided to call off the decision. Whenever I look at the site where the bridge was supposed to be built makes me unbelievably elated

thinking how powerful a newspaper can be. Hats off to you 'The Daily Star' Badal Hasib Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka 1209

Missed calls

Mr. Wali Rulhi has presented the darker side of "missed calls" (DS: 26 Jan), but he has missed the other side of the picture. Missed calls are often deliberately sent as signals to confirm various prearranged actions like acceptance, reminders, waiting for some one and other such situation through this ingenious cost free action. Why this is done? The reason in all probability is the high call charge of mobile phones. Unless and until this is brought down to a reasonable level, tendency of missed calls will go on increasing. This innovative signaling system is yet another product of Bengali intelligence; or call it cunning!

One solution could be to allow a special rate which can be coded in by the caller for very short time calls say 25 paise for a twenty five second after which the caller is automatically cut off. This is possible, and could be a remedy that can be tried by the mobile phone companies to reduce the number of missed calls. I seriously wonder if this practice will ever go away. S.A. Mansoor Gulshan, Dhaka

Are the roads only for VIP's?

The decision taken by the government to make the Bangla Motor Crossing off-limits to rickshaws has brought great sufferings and miseries to thousands of commuters of the adjacent localities. According to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Traffic Department the main aim of

the Rickshaw ban was to reduce the traffic jam at the Bangla Motor and on VIP road. In their opinion hazardous movement of rickshaws through Bangla Motor creates traffic jam at the intersection and flows of traffic on the VIP road also slows down for it. It is manifested from the proposition given by the DMP that they are trying to clear the VIP road all time with the intention that the so-called VIPs can drive their luxury vehicles in full speed on the free road. The problems and sufferings of the common people for whom rickshaw is the only transport and those who can't avail luxury car never come to their consideration and therefore such arbitrary decision can be taken very easily without making any alternative arrangement of transport throwing thousands of commuters into miseries. The residents of Mogbar, Bangla Motor and the adjacent areas have now no alternative but to walk about one kilometer on way to Shahbag, Hatirpul, Elephant Road etc. Residents of Mogbar are affected the most by this decision as they are now totally isolated from the western side of the VIP road. We cannot deny the achievement of our independence through the blood and sacrifice of the common people but after 33 years of the independence they are the most neglected here. It seems that rules and regulations are formed in this country only for protecting the interest of VIPs and privileged groups. The government should remember that it is the common people who are the source of all power according to our constitution and the roads as well as the whole Bangladesh are their property not the property of only VIPs. Sonia Ahmed 2nd year, Dept of Law, DU