

What next on the Middle East peace process

Where have our democratic values gone?

Right of peaceful protests cannot be denied

WE are dismayed to learn of the large number of people hurt in clashes on the first two days of hartal. Former home minister Mohd Nasim, AL MP Ekabbar Hossain was bludgeoned yesterday while AL leader Abaidul Kader was so done on the first day of hartal. A number of photojournalists trying to take snap of the proceedings were injured while evidently discharging their professional duties.

It appears from the reports available that the opposition was totally fenced off and prevented from staging protest and demonstrate by taking out processions beyond many fixed points, something that was their democratic right to do.

Yes, destruction of public property cannot be condoned nor should any party activist resort to such acts by way of imposing their will against anybody. That is not democratic. But, one cannot understand the repressive policy of the authorities in obstructing by force the opposition's right to ventilate its grievances so long as they do not break the norms of peace.

What is difficult to rationalise in an elective democracy is the excessively preemptive approach whereby opposition followers were prevented from emerging out of their party offices and come on to the streets. Dissent must be allowed space so long as it is voiced in a peaceful manner.

We cannot but wonder whether the ill advised strategy, of confining the opposition to one place and to their party office premises, that the law enforcing agencies have thought fit to employ, will not prove to be more counterproductive and will not in the long run precipitate a situation that might become more difficult to control eventually.

The opposition cannot be denied its political rights of which the right to assemble and that to protest are but a few, and which must be allowed as long as it remains peaceful.

An overly administrative approach to politics cannot only be a cynical attempt to rein in the opposition but also be counter-productive, which might actually give a fillip to those irresponsible elements who neither have the time nor love for democracy or democratic norms and practices.

Security alert

Can we overdo it?

A news item in the Bangla daily, Prothom Alo, about special security alert at the Zia International Airport caught our eyes. It says that a large number of people waiting to receive their friends and relatives were not allowed to even enter the compound of the airport, because of a special security 'Yellow' alert in and around the airport area prior to the Saarc summit to be held in Dhaka early next month.

We understand that the authority must ensure smooth operations in all the aspects of hosting an international conference of such a regional import. They have all our support in making sure that it is held without any unexpected slippage, mainly because the goodwill of our country is involved here. But somewhere along the line it seems like an 'alert overkill'. For example, we fail to understand what security concerns would those have raised who went to receive their elderly relatives returning after performing the Hajj with very little experience in air travel. The entry to the concourse could be selective, but why restrictive at the outer rim of the compound which has been happening for quite sometime now.

As the summit approaches, movement along some thoroughfares may be restricted; hopefully, this will be done extremely selectively and sparingly, strictly on need basis, so that public mobility is not affected.

The pioneering Saarc summit was held in Dhaka a decade ago followed by our hosting of some other international conferences so that we must be knowing what the standard security drill is in the run-up to such events. And, if there are any special circumstances, these must also be attended to. There cannot be any second opinion about it, but we urge the authorities to keep the convenience of common public in mind as well.



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE observers of Middle East conflict scenario have been overly optimistic about Israeli-Palestinian settlement this time around with a successor to redoubtable Yasser Arafat in place. Mahmood Abbas, the President of Palestinian Authority (PA) elected recently in a peaceful and democratic transition of power, is expected to revive the stalled peace process. Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister, has already congratulated Abbas on his victory -- a sign that in all probability the talk will be in motion soon. The US, Israel's strategic ally in the Middle has also given a positive nod by inviting Abbas to the White House. Both Bush and Sharon once called Yasser Arafat the only obstacle to peace. With that obstacle now removed the road ahead for peace has, according to conventional wisdom, no barrier whatsoever.

Yet the disturbing questions are raised by the sceptics if Abbas is equal to trading the tract Arafat was unable to do. As with the talk's formulae and the peace processes in pursuit of 'land for peace' shibboleth it is highly unlikely that new round of talks, if any, will yield much in ending bloodshed in the holyland. The idea of 'land for peace', reportedly first broached by Late King Hussein of Jordan, spawned a large series of talks, summit conferences, partial agreement, ceasefire, accords and whole-sale treaties. The most important among them was, of course, the Oslo accord, co-sponsored by the US and Russia with Norway being the host.

When talks around Oslo accord

led to the signing of historic declaration of principles (DOP) on the lawn of White House on September 13, 1993 an euphoric Bill Clinton called it a peace of the braves. It was supposed to be the beginning of the end of Arab-Israeli conflict and the start of a new era with donors pledging billions of dollars in aid to reconstruct a war-ravaged Palestine.

Ironically for the Israelis, however, the DOP negated the very *raison d'être* of Israel. The highly secretive Zionists led few know of the basic assumption behind the Zionist movement and the founding of

fact when the declaration was issued in the form of Balfour's letter to British banker Rothchild, the Jews constituted only 10 percent of Palestine's population. This included the European Jews who had settled there during the Ottoman period. The local Arab speaking Jews were only 6 percent who had no problem with local Muslims or Christians.

Once the British occupied Palestine in 1917 Jewish migration from Europe began in earnest, the aim being to occupy as much of Palestine's land as possible and create the base of a future Jewish state while

Palestinians at this stage?

Yes the peace process can be revived by Abbas because America in her greater interest will egg Sharon on to revive the peace talks. As a result the status quo can not hold on indefinitely. But what is indeed important is the quality of peace and in whose term the peace will be established or a settlement effected.

1993 onward two stalwarts of Middle East politics -- Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin -- occupied the centre stage of the peace process. After Yitzhak was gunned down by

resume talks but the way the talk will be told cannot be different from Shamir and Begin once did. Both used to say that they would 'create facts' while the talks dragged on. By 'creating facts' the Israeli leaders meant getting more Jewish migrants. Establishing more Jewish settlements, shrinking or where possible uprooting Arab villages and farms, building highways and security installations through and in Arab land itself. Israel's infamous security wall encroaching Arab land is one of the examples. Diverting water resources and destroying Arab

remorseless butcher of Sabra and Shatila, said: I don't know something called international principles. I will burn every Palestinian child (that) will be born in this area. The Palestinian child and woman are more dangerous than man because the Palestinian child's existence infers that the generation will go on... It is with this kind of man with bestial instinct that poor Abbas would be negotiating with.

If it were in Sharon's power he would create a greater Israel by annexing West Bank and Gaza. The US and EU would make a lot of angry noises over it. Even the US controlled Security Council would pass a resolution condemning the move. But in the long run both the US and EU would accept the fait accompli. Yet Sharon wouldn't do it for different reasons. His problem is that of demography. At present Israelis enjoy a small majority when Israel and occupied territories are taken together. It is crucial for Israel to maintain that majority.

However what Sharon can and indeed wants to do is to carve up West Bank into Bantustan in which the only freedom the Palestinians will have is to collect garbage and sweep streets. If Abbas does not opt for this, all Sharon will do is to drag on the peace process while 'creating facts'.

And then Mahmood Abbas is certainly not an Yasser Arafat who had been statesman of stature. He knew from this bitter experience of intra-Arab politics that in certain point of conflict and in certain milieu the peace is not attainable without resorting to negotiation. He shunned the first Intifada while signing DOP in 1993. But he also knew that peace is never given on the platter. It is to be negotiated from a position of strength. With the skillful combination of both he could keep alive the Palestinian cause till his death. We have to wait to see what stratagem is followed by Abbas to deal with a deadly opponent.

Big (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Mahmood Abbas is certainly not an Yasser Arafat who knew from bitter experience of intra-Arab politics that at certain point of conflict and in certain milieu the peace is not attainable without resorting to negotiation. He shunned the first Intifada while signing DOP in 1993. But he also knew that peace is never given on the platter. It is to be negotiated from a position of strength. We have to wait to see what stratagem is followed by Abbas.

Israel. One historical falsehood of monumental proportion: that Palestine was a land without human habitation, a land without any population and for that reason "a people without land" (the Jewish diaspora) had a proprietary right to it. Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionist movement never touched upon the question of Palestine's existing population when he published his book *Judaestaat* (the Jewish state) in 1896. The British statesman who offered Palestine to the Zionists on a silver platter behaved no differently.

The truth was however that when the Balfour declaration was signed in 1917 with a view to considering with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people the declaration was charitable enough to point out that nothing would be done to jeopardise the rights of existing non-Jewish communities -- another shenanigans of British diplomacy which wanted to show that Palestine already had a Jewish majority. But in

the mandate lasted. This was nearly done by setting up Jewish agency operating with full British cooperation. Its ostensible purpose was to look after the Jews arriving for settlement. In actual fact it was a government all put in name for it maintained well armed thugs who terrorised and massacred Arab civilians. The moment the British pulled out in May 1948 this Jewish agency converted into full fledged government and proclaimed the independence of Israel.

After coming into being Israel, as a matter of state policy, denied the very existence of Palestinian people at any stage of Palestine's history. All that the world knew of was an Arab refugee problem -- a myth shattered by Arafat when following the battle of Karameh he infused a new life into his Fatah movement and put the Palestinian question in the fast track of world politics.

Let us now come back to the question asked earlier. Can Abbas revive the peace process? Or why will Sharon negotiate peace with the

an Israeli fanatic, Arafat dragged on with the peace process negotiating with Rabin's successors: Netanyahu and Ehud Barak who were not willing to fulfil their obligations under 1993 accord. They reneged on solemn international treaties and UNSC resolutions. Small wonder, the Oslo accord ended in fiasco with the outbreak of second Intifada in 2000. George Bush came to White House the same year and Sharon seized power the next year. Ever since both the US and Israel shunned all contacts with Arafat. Because negotiating with Arafat any longer would have meant conceding the basic principles behind Oslo accord: Israel's painful process of decolonisation occupied territories which were already coming in clash with the founding assumption of Israel and the emergence of an independent Palestinian state. Neither was acceptable to Bush's America or Sharon's Israel.

But now with no visible excuse Sharon will be under pressure to

orchards by felling thousands of olive and citrus trees are other examples of creating facts. Few people know an Arab in occupied territory cannot dig a well and if he stores rain water in a pond the Israeli authority destroys it.

Sharon will thus negotiate in this fashion. He will prolong the process by obfuscating facts, focussing on non-issues and re-opening settled issues because he is at the giving end and enjoys all the initiatives. All along the western media would blame Abbas for failing to clinch a peace deal even if it is a rubbish while Sharon will go about creating facts. He is on record to have said that the Gaza disengagement does not mean that he will quit West Bank because he intends to enlarge the existing Jewish settlements there and accommodate all those to be pulled out of Gaza. He is learnt to have obtained prior approval for it from president Bush who fondly calls him 'my friend'.

Back in 1956 in an interview with general Outze Merham, Sharon, a

From near self-sufficiency to deficiency

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

OF late, the food situation of the country is in the news. Available information reveals that this year's (2004-2005) Aman production will fall short of its target by 15 percent. The government's internal Aman procurement drive has completely failed because the market price is higher than the government-administered price. There has been a sharp decrease in food aid in the recent years. The government's food reserve at the moment is below the minimum required level. The price of rice during the on going Aman harvesting season is all time high. Against this backdrop, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs in a meeting on January 5 last decided to amend food procurement regulation to shorten the time frame for importation of food. The revised time for procurement tender would be 21 days in place of the existing 45 days. The decision was taken to quicken the food procurement process 'amidst apprehension that depleting food reserve and a low Aman output might necessitate emergency import of food in the shortest possible time.'

Availability of food is the first component of food security, the other two being access to food and utilisation of food. Food availability in Bangladesh has four components and domestic food production is the most important of these compo-

nents. The other three components are commercial imports, food aid and government security stocks. After nearly thirty years of independence, Bangladesh attained near self-sufficiency in foodgrain (rice and wheat) in 1999-2000 when gross production of rice and wheat reached 249.07 lakh metric tons and wheat 18.40 lakh metric tons and net quantity available for human consumption stood at 224.16 lakh metric tons (after deducting 10% for seed, feed and wastage).

Mentionable that rice provides

and net foodgrain available for human consumption stood at 240.83 lakh metric tons, the highest production since independence in 1971. This could meet the HIES-2000 requirement of 227.59 lakh metric tons for a population of 131 millions.

The increasing trend in foodgrain production could not be sustained. Food Ministry's *Database on Food Situation Bangladesh-2003* reveals that gross foodgrain production in 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 stood respectively at 259.05 lakh metric tons (rice 242.99 lakh metric tons and

increase of only 6.85 lakh metric tons compared with the production level of 2000-2001. This is a negative growth if we take into account the population increase of 6 million-plus between 2001 and 2004.

This year's (2004-2005) Aman production target was fixed at 127 lakh metric tons. It is reported that Aman output will fall short of its target by 15 percent due to massive floods of August-September last. It means that there will be a short fall of 19 lakh metric tons against the target.

The internal procurement of Aman ends on 31 January. Informa-

tion available from the food and disaster management ministry reveals that till January 25 only 2 (two) metric tons of rice could be procured against the target of 2 lakh metric tons. This has happened because of the big gap between the market price and the government offered price.

Food aid in the recent years has sharply decreased. While the average yearly food aid amounted to 16 lakh metric tons, 12.2 lakh metric tons and 9.3 lakh metric tons in the seventies, eighties and nineties respectively, the

More foodgrains may have to be imported this year unless there is a record production of wheat and boro.

The decline in domestic foodgrain production and the sharp decrease in food aid have resulted in the rise of foodgrain price. December-January is the Aman harvesting season in the country. The price of rice in the market generally shows a declining trend during the harvesting period and the government thus goes for internal procurement of rice to keep the price stable. This is done to provide price incentive to the growers. But the situation is just reverse this year. During this harvesting season, the price of rice in the open market has surpassed all previous records. While the per quintal price of rice in the fourth week of January in 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004 was taka 1268, 1347 and 1309 respectively the price of rice during the same period this year was taka 1611 per quintal. The rise in the price of rice has led to the increase in the price of flour also.

To conclude, unless effective steps are taken to increase at geometrical progression the domestic production of foodgrain, non-foodgrain crops such as pulses, oil-seeds, fruits, vegetables etc. and non-crop food products i.e. milk, meat, fish and eggs, Bangladesh from its position of near self-sufficiency in food is most likely to become again a food deficit and import dependent country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary, Ministry of Food.

Unless effective steps are taken to increase at geometrical progression the domestic production of foodgrain, non-foodgrain crops such as pulses, oil-seeds, fruits, vegetables etc. and non-crop food products i.e. milk, meat, fish and eggs, Bangladesh from its position of near self-sufficiency in food is most likely to become again a food deficit and import dependent country.

The New York Times slanders Bangladesh again!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

THROUGHOUT a factual error-ridden, untruthful to the core and shamelessly biased article in its Sunday Magazine entitled, "The Next Islamist Revolution," by Eliza Griswold, on January 23, *The New York Times* has slandered Bangladesh once again! The readers may recall that in December 2003, in an editorial *The New York Times* had blasted Bangladesh for detaining a pro-Israeli so-called journalist, after he boarded a plane to illegally travel from Dhaka to Tel Aviv. Since Bangladesh and Israel do not have diplomatic relations, it is illegal for a Bangladeshi citizen to travel to Israel. Bangladesh's 'audacity' in arresting an Israeli-bound Bangladeshi was, apparently, too much for *The New York Times*, which uncharacteristically devoted a full editorial promoting the virtues and pleading the innocence (How did *The New York Times* know he was innocent?) of an obscure 'journalist' most Bangladeshis had not heard of!

Recently, *The New York Times'* Eliza Griswold traveled to Bangladesh, went God knows where, met only those who said what she wanted to hear and reported back to those who needed to reinforce their anti-Bangladesh prejudice and told the world that Bangladesh is all about Bangla Bhai and his thugs. This is as insightful as claiming that the most important thing about America is the racist Ku Klux Klan! Supremely confident that her lies will not be refuted in the pages of *The New York Times*, Ms. Griswold

spewed her anti-Bangladesh venom with obvious delight. In her six-page article, complete with photographs of fierce-looking Tupi-clad men and boys shouting at the top of their voice, Ms. Griswold does not utter a single word of praise for Bangladesh. Any fair-minded person will conclude, therefore, that Ms. Griswold was in Bangladesh at the behest of the enemies of Bangladesh, not to seek the truth, but to paint Bangladesh, an emerging democracy, as negatively as possible. From the get-go, Ms. Griswold sets a decisively negative tone. One does not have to peruse more than a few lines of her diatribe to realise that Ms. Griswold came not to praise Bangladesh but to bury it!

Factual errors, which Ms. Griswold's article is replete with, destroy the credibility of a journalist because it becomes apparent that the writer is not truth-driven, but agenda-driven. For example, Ms. Griswold commits factual error when she claims, "In Bangla Bhai's (the author's) patch of northwestern Bangladesh, poverty is so pervasive that, for many children in the region, privately subsidised madrassas are the only educational option." Fact: Primary education (up to the fifth grade) is free in Bangladesh for boys and girls; girls' education is free up to the Intermediate (12' grade). Those who study in the madrassa, choose to do so. The percentage of boys attending the madrassas is negligible. Because of their lack of formal education, no madrassa-educated man holds any position of influence in the bureaucracy.

Ms. Griswold further erroneously states: "Most (madrassas) follow a

form of the Deobandi Islam taught in the 1950's by the intellectual and activist Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, who was born in India in 1903 and defined Muslim politics in opposition to Indian nationalism." This is absolute nonsense! Ms. Griswold does not know what she is talking about! There is nothing called, "Deobandi Islam," and Maududi had nothing to do with the Deobandi movement which pre-dates his birth! "The Deobandis arose in British India, not as a reac-

tionary but as a forward-looking movement that would reform and unite Muslim society as it struggled to within the confines of a colonial state ruled by non-Muslims. Its main ideologues were Mohammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-77) and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1829-1905), who founded the first madrassa in Deoband near New Delhi. All these reformers saw education as the key creating a new, modern Muslim. The Deobandis aimed to train a new generation of learned Muslims who would revive Islamic values based on intellectual learning, spiritual experience, Sharia law and Tariqah or the path." As to why Maududi is famous, Ms. Griswold should refer to Karen Armstrong's "The Battle for God." The basis of Mawduudi's ideology was the doctrine of God's sovereignty: It is neither for us to decide the aim and purpose of our existence nor to prescribe the limits of

omitting the better half. Instead of complimenting Bangladesh for having two women, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, as the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition alternately for the last fifteen years, Ms. Griswold only mentions their "legendary animosity towards each other." And commenting on the atrocious events of August 21, she says, "Zia's government has been unable to identify the assassins." This is too cute by half. Ms. Griswold, at the Bangladesh government's request, Interpol from Europe and the FBI from America came to investigate the crime; they too could not identify the assassins.

Logic is clearly not Ms. Griswold's strong suit. Her whole article is predicated on the terror emanating from Bangla Bhai, yet she makes a statement that negates her whole theory: "Thuggery has been a constant feature of political life in Bangladesh) since then (1971) and is increasingly so today. This has made it difficult to get an accurate picture of phenomena like Bangla Bhai." So Ms. Griswold, you are not sure about the premise of your theory, yet you are very confident of it! Ms. Griswold claims, "foreign journalists in Bangladesh are followed by intelligence agents; people that reporters interview are questioned afterwards." Bangladeshis would have been proud if their intelligence had the wherewithal to track someone as smart as you, Ms. Griswold! Unfortunately, this is not true! If what you say is true, however, you should be happy, because you did interview some Bangla Bhai types; and if Bangladesh intelligence agents interview and abuse them because you talked to them, it is great news all around! Unfortunately you contradict yourself in the next line by saying, "Nevertheless, it is possible to travel to Bangladesh and observe the increased political and religious repression in every day life, and to verify the simple remark by one journalist there: 'We are losing our freedom.' At least you give the Bangladeshis a back-handed compliment: they have 'freedom' now!"

Ms. Griswold does make laughable statements when she refers to "Islamist separatist groups in India's northeast." Ms. Griswold, the only Muslim insurgency in India is in Kashmir. In the "seven sisters" of India's northeast region, only in Assam there are some Muslims; in the other six, the number of Muslims is negligible and certainly there are no "Islamist separatist groups" there! Those seven states are populated predominantly by the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, tribals and animists.

Ms. Griswold also demonstrates a carnal desire for sweeping statements (I am sorry, when a lady kicks you in the groin, chivalry goes out of

perfection from Bangladesh when no one else is perfect!

Are you aware Ms. Griswold that a Cornell University survey found 44 percent of the Americans in favour of restricting the rights of Muslim Americans? Are you aware that arrangements have been made to intern Muslim Americans to camps in case of (God forbid) another 9/11, just as Japanese Americans were interned during WWII? The last time I checked, no Muslim American was involved in 9/11. Do you know that Muslim Americans face discrimination in jobs, as they travel and even in public places? Are you aware that some American talk radios refer to Muslim Americans as Islamofascists? Yet, you have the nerve to go to, and lecture Bangladesh? American press has become so docile that they report only the official version of what is happening in Iraq. Bangladesh press is freer to and does criticise the government more.

We have a saying in Bangla: "Shashon Korā Tare Shajē, Shohag Korā Je" (It is more appropriate for ones to admonish someone, who loves the latter.) Bangladeshis loved the previous US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Ms. Mary Ann Peters, who loved Bangladesh. When the TIME magazine wrongly claimed in March 2003 that Osama Bin Laden's deputy was hiding in Bangladesh, Madam Ambassador Peters disputed the assertion. Your sole purpose in visiting Bangladesh, Ms. Griswold, was to find fault with and discredit Bangladesh. I have one final question for you, Ms. Griswold: Why are you so angry at Bangladesh? Has Bangladesh done something to earn your ire?

LETTER FROM AMERICA

track someone as smart as you, Ms. Griswold! Unfortunately, this is not true! If what you say is true, however, you should be happy, because you did interview some Bangla Bhai types; and if Bangladesh intelligence agents interview and abuse them because you talked to them, it is great news all around! Unfortunately you contradict yourself in the next line by saying, "Nevertheless, it is possible to travel to Bangladesh and observe the increased political and religious repression in every day life, and to verify the simple remark by one journalist there: 'We are losing our freedom.' At least you give the Bangladeshis a back-handed compliment: they have 'freedom' now!"

Ms. Griswold does make laughable statements when she refers to "Islamist separatist groups in India's northeast." Ms. Griswold, the only Muslim insurgency in India is in Kashmir. In the "seven sisters" of India's northeast, only in Assam there are some Muslims; in the other six, the number of Muslims is negligible and certainly there are no "Islamist separatist groups" there! Those seven states are populated predominantly by the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, tribals and animists.

Ms. Griswold also demonstrates a carnal desire for sweeping statements (I am sorry, when a lady kicks you in the groin, chivalry goes out of

regardless of religion and ethnicity every citizen is treated equally, and we must honour the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997 in letter and in spirit. While there is ample scope for religious debate as to whether the Ahmadiyyas can be considered Muslims, there is no debate that the Ahmadiyyas and their places of worship must be protected. One only has to read *The Daily Star* to appreciate that the Bangladeshis fully support minority rights of Ahmadiyyas, the Hindus and the tribals. The *Daily Star* and the writer have severely criticised the government for the security lapse that has resulted in the carnage of August 21 and January 26, and have demanded that Bangla Bhai and his goons be arrested and brought to justice. Over the last few decades, Bangladeshis in general have become more secular. Bangladesh is an open society. Bangladeshis private satellite television channel is beamed to America. Interested viewers in America can find out what is going on in Bangladesh instantly, without depending on investigative reporters. Ms. Griswold, Bangladeshis do not need charlatans like you to tell them what to do!

Your outrage is selective, Ms. Griswold! Are you aware of the Indian government report of January 17, 2005 that found the killing of 59 Hindu pilgrims at Godhra in February, 2002 to be an accident; not the work of a Muslim mob. Have you been to Gujarat to do investigative reporting on the carnage that followed? Of course you would not dare! You find it so much easier to beat up on tiny Bangladesh than to take on mighty India? You demand