

Of private arms

Gaps in information and vigil disturbing

THE news that the government is contemplating returning about 25 thousand private arms that were declared illegal, will go down well with those who were dispossessed of them. But it could not help raise some questions. Why were these arms declared illegal in the first place and what has merited these weapons to be returned to the original owners, having once been declared illegal?

Self-protection is a citizen's right which no one can deny, and which everyone has the right to ensure, through legal means. It is thus that the right to possess authorised arms for personal security has been guaranteed in a free society.

What is of concern, however, is the utter lack of control and oversight in respect of issue and record of private weapons, on the part of the authority concerned. The fact that a large number of weapons or their owners are untraceable demonstrates the poor state of control and check in this regard. A large proportion of these arms, reportedly, has been issued on political consideration. Many of the licences were issued without proper verification. In fact, a near anarchy prevails regarding issue of valid licence for private arms.

Our concern stems primarily from the report that out of a total of 1 lakh 89 thousand licensed weapons in the country, as many as 1 lakh 35 thousand are untraceable. Some of these have also gone missing from some government organisations. It is feared that many of these might have found their way into the hands of criminals and anti-state elements.

It merits repetition that proliferation of weapons in Bangladesh has had the most destabilising impact on the society, which has taken a heavy toll of lives and caused severe deterioration of law and order. The UN and other organisations, taken up with the issue of proliferation of small arms, have identified administrative slack in this regard as one of the major contributors to diffusion of illegal weapons.

Given that this fact was evidenced sometimes ago, the government should have acted with promptitude to get to the bottom of the matter of untraceable arms. Equally important is the need for the government to be more innovative in bringing about a regimen of strict control and oversight on this matter in an objective and non-partisan manner.

Criminality within prison

Can jail reform wait anymore?

THE news about drug peddlers continuing with their business inside Dhaka Central Jail was more than just shocking. The ingenious methods used by some criminal elements to bring the drugs from outside by fooling the guards and also often allegedly in collusion with them raise but one concern: whether the jail is for chastening convicts or a place for drug dealers? The reported physical clash between godfathers trying to establish control over the drug business has sordidly exposed the way in which the jail is run.

Why just drugs, many other products are reportedly available inside the jail compound in exchange for money. The alleged use of mobile telephone by inmates is the height of indiscretion on the part of authorities; it points to a security faultline that is too gaping to be overlooked any more. Someone should be able to tell us how this is happening. Mere disciplinary action taken against some jail employees cannot bring about a wholesale change in prison administration. That's why human rights activists, civil society members, lawyers, media -- all have been speaking aloud for a radical change in the way the jails are currently managed and run. Reform is a buzz word one hears about different sectors and institutions, but jail reform is perhaps at the bottommost shelf of the government. The latter deserves to be prioritised at the earliest.

First of all, overcrowding of the jails must be reduced to manageability by quickly disposing of the cases of undertrial prisoners who have been languishing in there for years. Secondly, regular internal monitoring, duly complemented by supervision from a higher oversight body can help streamline jail administration to a reasonable extent. In the ultimate analysis, we need comprehensive jail reform to turn things around in a domain which is part and parcel of the justice system.

The US pursuing Israel's agenda in the Levant?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

religious harmony the Arab League summit at Taif in 1989 provided for a 50:50 share of parliamentary seats for the Christians, in spite of its minority status by then, and the Muslims and armed the prime minister with more power. Rafik Hariri, a self-made Lebanese-Saudi businessman and the prime minister of his country till last year who rebuilt his strife torn country, of course with Saudi money, had been a privy to this arrangement. Hariri's murder once again highlights the old

deal brokered by Reagan administration both PLO and Israelis were to vacate Lebanese territory, the Israelis, however, continued to occupy south Lebanon in defiance of the UNSC resolution 425 demanding prompt pull out of the occupying Armies. Neither the US nor French pressed Tel Aviv to evacuate the occupied Lebanese territory until Israelis were defeated in the hands of Hezbollah and thrown out of Lebanon in May 2000. However, emboldened by US support

with the Taif Accord, the handiwork of Arab League as endorsed by Lebanese National Assembly on October 22, 1989.

In Lebanon's complex polity where so many foreign powers are interested and too many ethno-religious and sectarian groups are required to interact with each other the political murders are nothing unusual as evident from the killings in the past of Kamal Jumblat, Progressive Socialist Party leader; Rashid Karame, the former prime

rally mostly comprised of Shiites was organised by Hezbollah, the military and political outfit that is a 'sort of third rail in Lebanon's complex political and social network'. The Hezbollah angrily denounced the powers hobnobbing in Lebanon from outside and insisted that the US and allies stay out of Lebanese affair. Nasrullah, its leader, then warned Bush saying, 'If the Americans can't land in Lebanon, it will be defeated.'

The Americans can not afford to

remain virulently anti-American and anti-Israel and its leaders have dismissed the US and UN demand that its fighters lay down their arms. This perhaps negates the possibility of their being the catalyst of incipient changes in Lebanon. But Hezbollah is redefining itself -- edging away from the militancy and steadily raising its political profile. It already has 11 members in the parliament and the number will, the analysts reckon, increase manifold in the election in May.

The subtle change the Hezbollah has been undergoing should placate much of US' concern. But in the meantime there is no matching change in American stance particularly in disarming the Hezbollah which has by now come of an age after witnessing many ups and downs of its fortune. They can neither be browbeaten or arm-twisted, nor can they be neutralised in Lebanon's politics. That the US is aware of it is adequately reflected in its decision not to pick a fight with Hezbollah.

Bush administration favours rather a moderate approach now to Hezbollah which can in turn persuade the group to seek and perhaps find some common ground with the Lebanese opposition despite Syria's tactical retreat in pulling back her troops from Lebanon.

The yet more crucial for Lebanon at the moment is to leave her alone to sort out her problems arising out of Hariri's death. Notwithstanding an US-Israeli game plan Lebanon's asset to preserve her sovereignty should be an increasingly political Hezbollah, of course, with her potent guerrilla forces. The signs are already visible that, Hezbollah is already turning more nationalistic and less ideological. Apparently Hezbollah's future is in Lebanon and vice versa.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISI.

PERSPECTIVES

The yet more crucial for Lebanon at the moment is to leave her alone to sort out her problems arising out of Hariri's death. Notwithstanding an US-Israeli game plan Lebanon's asset to preserve her sovereignty should be an increasingly political Hezbollah, of course, with her potent guerrilla forces. The signs are already visible that, Hezbollah is already turning more nationalistic and less ideological. Apparently Hezbollah's future is in Lebanon and vice versa.

question: Can Lebanon's multi-religious population coexist peacefully and work democracy and who in the present vacuum would catalyse the change the country is set for? The question is indeed rendered more complex with a number of external factors -- prominent being the undue Israeli interests fanned by the Americans.

Because of its large Christian population Israel too dreamt of creating a Christian Lebanon and turning it into a vassal state. In 1982 when the civil war in Lebanon was still raging Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin invaded Lebanon underestimating the Lebanese people's commitment to Arab nationalism. Although he could take Beirut and made Yasser Arafat and his PLO leave Lebanon but was hopelessly bogged down in a guerrilla war with the PLO lasting 11 weeks -- the longest in the history of Arab-Israeli conflict. Although, in a

Israel expelled half a million natives of Golan Heights to make space for Jewish immigrants in violation of Fourth Geneva Convention.

Israel grudges that they are driven out of Lebanon (not totally because she still holds Sheba farm area in South Lebanon) while Syrian army is still in occupation of Lebanon wielding both military and political power. The US is not only instigating the Israelis on this count, in demanding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon she is also creating an impression that Syria's an occupation force like the Americans themselves are one in Iraq and Israelis are in West Bank and Gaza. On the contrary, the Syrian troops are the guest of Lebanese government which invited them during the civil war (1975-90) to restore peace and order in that embattled country and their further stay and redeployment in the present location were brought about in strict compliance

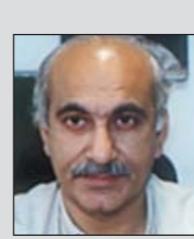
minister and Bashir Gemayal, the Phalange leader and the country's president elect. Yet to exploit the situation surrounding Hariri's death the interested quarters particularly the US and its ally Israel are obliquely hinting at the complicity of Syria and its supporters in Lebanon. An unprecedented furore has been created over the tragedy by the US president who's been badgering Syria for weeks of pull out its troops from Lebanon. The pressure built up on the pro-Syrian elements galvanised the opposition's mix of Christian, Druze and Sunni Muslims to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops who were asked not to meddle in Lebanese affair. In many years the opposition was able to hold high-energy rallies in Beirut.

But soon in an anti-climax the pro-Syrian Hezbollah put up a massive demonstration and gave vent to their strong anti-US and anti-Israel sentiments. The half a million strong

take these warnings lightly. Although the US' marine landings in Lebanon dates back to mid-1958 it was in early 1980s that the US deployed its marines while France sent its troops at the height of the civil war to prevent what they feared to be Lebanon's take over by the Arab national movement. The American and French military HQ in Beirut were simultaneously subjected to lorry bomb attacks by the militants in 1983 killing 250 US marines and about 150 French troops. They both fled the country leaving it in ruins. Islamic Jihad the fore-runner of today's Hezbollah claimed the responsibility.

The Americans call the members of Hezbollah terrorists but grudgingly recognise their virtues: the grassroots popularity, their courage, discipline, patriotism and selfless social service -- all rolled up in one. They are the only Arab force to inflict defeat on Israelis. The organisation

Cheque the books



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT does the military-industrial complex do when it runs out of enemies? No problem, darling. It still has friends. And with friends like India and Pakistan, who needs enemies?

Military hardware is surely the most astonishingly brilliant con ever devised. You spend millions on creating a fabulous death machine, often to one side in the name of security/superiority, and then make it a must-buy for the other in the name of parity. Talk of a win-win situation. By the time you've created an F-16 it's a no-brainer.

The only concern about the F-16s that the United States is finally delivering to Pakistan (they were sold) is whether all these years of disuse have converted them into F-15s. However, Pakistan's defence establishment will ensure that what it receives is in mint-shape. India's parallel purchasing force must have already measured out what is needed for strategic compensation. Money, of course, is no object. It rarely is for governments. It never is for governments spending on patriotism. Have you ever stopped to consider why governments on principle have no respect for money?

Because a government is the only body, apart from the awkwardly named Non-Government Organisa-

tion, or NGO, which does not have to earn what it spends. A government simply orders us to pay a large percentage of what we have earned, legitimately, and gives that arbitrary order the force of law through the will of parliament. Governments do not earn, they spend. And patriotic spending is the ultimate holy cow: he who challenges it does so at serious risk. Pakistan's defence budget is passed as a one-line item. The one section that is never questioned in

True, the F-16s can carry nuclear weapons. And if George Bush has decided to go ahead with the delivery of these planes, then this means official American recognition of Pakistan, and by corollary, India, as acceptable and mature nuclear powers. This is the most welcome aspect of this arms deal. America cannot now revert to the non-proliferation regime. If it has sold some of its finest weapons-delivery means to nuclear powers then it cannot pretend that it still expects

sales.

Since one consequence of nuclear capability is the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) syndrome, the presence of F-16s in both countries might, paradoxically, strengthen notions of security among the insecure, and contribute further to the search for peace. Peace has never been a problem for sensible people. One assumes that insensible opinion in Pakistan has now concluded that Kashmir cannot be solved by war, and insensible

the arms bazaar. They have no ideology. Their faith is written with the ink on a chequebook. Their inspiration is fear, and their catechism is the spread of suspicion.

The fear does not have to be real; imaginary will do, as long as it can be sustained in the imagination.

Morality does not enter this game. Morality is for nerds. As long as you have the wherewithal, weapons are available, whether it be a flying machine or flying mortar. During a conversation the other day

BYLINE

It is possible that someone in Washington has calculated that both India and Pakistan need a weapons upgrade from the West; that India's defence budget is too Russia-centric; and that the best way to force India to turn west for arms is to supply Pakistan with them. This seems possible if only because it sounds logical. But is it the logic of a think tank strategist or a defence contractor? I only have the questions. I wish I had the answers.

an Indian finance minister's speech is any rise in defence spending.

Bill Clinton was the only politician I can recall who actually took advantage of the peace dividend following the collapse of the Soviet empire, and cut the budgets of both the Pentagon and the CIA. But Clinton was an unusual man. With George Bush, life is back to normal. To be fair, 9/11 did not take place under Clinton's watch, but Bush is a traditionalist of the military-industrial complex cadre who would have found ways and means to strengthen its profitability.

How useful are those F-16s going to be to Pakistan? Will they serve any practical purpose or will their death rate be the familiar story of fighter planes crashing out of the blue during routine runs taking yet another young pilot's life? The attrition rate of air force officers is the highest of any service because new technology promises only to be newer, not necessarily safer.

them to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

Clinton put serious pressure on both countries to disband their nuclear arms, as Strobe Talbott's excellent memoir on the subcontinent, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb*, reveals. Clinton had bullied Narasimha Rao into inaction when Rao wanted to declare India's nuclear status, and thought, mistakenly, that he could repeat his performance. (Choice morsel from Talbott's book, always worth re-savouring: the Clinton White House learnt of Pokhran 2 from CNN rather than the CIA. The CIA therefore got all the three Bigs of the last 15 years wrong. It failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union. It failed to predict India's bomb. And of course it got Iraq hopelessly wrong. Clinton must have cut the CIA budget with special glee.) Bush has ended that element of Clinton's policy, for there is no endorsement better than arms

opinion in India has decided that Pakistan cannot be destroyed by military aggression. Hawks will always search for better claws, but is there any ceiling to an arms race? Just recently President Pervez Musharraf declared that Pakistan had crossed a vital threshold when it achieved more than minimum deterrence capability. Indian defence ministers have always been blunt about their ability to deliver maximum punishment on the enemy in case India becomes the victim of a first strike. So what has the policy become now? Maximum deterrence? Mid-level deterrence?

The truth may be simpler. There is a visceral attraction to new weapons systems which defence establishments might find impossible to resist. War is fought between enemies, but the puppeteers of war, the arms manufacturers have no enemies. They only have friends. Any

and every customer is welcome in

Inder Malhotra, one of the greats of Indian journalism, mentioned that the 16 months of ceasefire that had held between India and Pakistan must be the longest uninterrupted trouble-free period in memory. The one incident of exchange of mortar, he added, was by "non-state" sources. Was mortar of such calibre so freely available to "non-state" sources, "I wondered. He laughed at my naivete. Had I seen the news on television, he asked, the previous evening? All I had to do was see the weapons that had been seized from an Indian Rajdhani train to realise what was available on our subcontinent from "non-state" sources.

Some arms manufacturer somewhere must be thanking God for creating Indians and Pakistanis of a particular variety.

A basic question must be addressed even if it cannot be adequately, or convincingly, answered: do India and Pakistan need any more hi-tech, exorbitantly

One presumes that the American decision is part of a larger scenario in which Pakistan is a pro-American fortress guarding the eastern walls of the Middle East region. This would in turn fit in well with the American desire to see peace between India and Pakistan, so that Pakistan stops being a hostage in its mind, to the Indian threat. The problem with such formulations is that they are drawn on shifting sand, vulnerable to passing storms. It is possible that someone in Washington has calculated that both India and Pakistan need a weapons upgrade from the West; that India's defence budget is too Russia-centric; and that the best way to force India to turn west for arms is to supply Pakistan with them. This seems possible if only because it sounds logical. But is it the logic of a think tank strategist or a defence contractor?

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OPINION

Reflections on our 34th Independence Day

Md. MASUM BILLAH

THE nation has just finished celebrating its 34th Independence Day, beginning with the roaring of canons at dawn on the 26th. The government, the opposition, and other political parties and different cultural organisations chalked out elaborate programmes to celebrate the day with pomp, grandeur, and festivity.

Though BTV has lost its spectators due to regularly monotonous programmes, on March 26 we watch BTV to see how the day is observed throughout the country.

We are baffled to see how historically distorted programmes are aired by the national TV channel. It seems that the party which occupies the state power retains the right to show the countrymen whatever they like through the TV screen. It tends to consider that the people of this country are devoid of rationality and history, they show no difference. But we, the unfortunate nation, have yet to distort history when we say these things.

We witnessed five years of BTV programmes on national issues from 1996 to 2001. The party in power aired all the programmes in such a way as to suggest that the late Shahid President Ziaur Rahman made no contribution to our freedom movement. From everywhere his name was rubbed out.

Due share must be apportioned to those who deserve it, otherwise history will never pardon us. To make our independence meaningful, we must forget party and petty interest. We must love the country in the truest sense. Genuine patriotism never allows anyone to ignore the real heroes of the country.

In the same way, the present government observes the Independence Day without uttering even a single time the name of the undisputed leader of this nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It seems he did nothing for the people of this country. It seems he had no patriotism. It seems he was an alien to this nation and independence of this country. Don't we distort history when we say these things?

Both the AL and BNP took their birth to respond to the needs of the time. Both the parties enjoyed the state power duly managed by the people of this country. The country has witnessed and known the weaknesses and positive sides of both the parties. Necessarily there must have been dissenting views and ideals of both the parties. Both

ignored. Since the birth of this nation, more than one hundred and eighty thousand crore taka has come to the country as donation from different countries of the world, but poverty still reigns supreme at every step and in every sector. We have miserably failed to utilize the money for public welfare. Definitely this country could have been turned into Golden Bengal had the decision makers of this country utilized the money properly.

If the BNP recognizes the contribution of Bangabandhu and AL of Ziaur Rahman would they lose anything? Would they loss their party supporters? No. The people of this country are politically more conscious. They must not be fooled by any means of exploitation. The people of this country generally support either BNP or AL as no

national heroes whose sacrifice for the nation is incomparable, and who are resting peace in their eternal place. If we cannot come out of this meanness, how can we expect our future generation to deal with truth?

Evaluate public opinion, give weight to public demands. Try to win their heart not with any falsehood, rather with some genuine phenomenon. For the national interest employ all of your efforts, ends, and needs. Definitely people will evaluate you. Don't try to speak ill against nation going outside the country just to gain political ends and party benefits. People will never spare you. Don't try to distort history and devalue public opinion. Don't try to find fault with others only. Try to find your own faults also through looking glass. Let the national interest above everything. The nation will evaluate you. Much time has passed, it will never come again. Start building the nation in its true perspective. Try to address the genuine problems of the country in the truest sense of the term. Don't divide the nation into two. Give a unique shape to the nation. Avoid