

Passing away of the Pontiff

World will miss this man of peace

WE join the rest of the world in offering our condolences at the death of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian Pope in the last 450 years, the first Polish Pope, the spiritual leader of more than a billion Catholics over the world. With his death the curtain has come down on the third longest papacy in history.

While Pope John Paul II was a man of God he was equally the people's Pope. That he touched the hearts of everyone, Catholics non-Catholics, non-Christians and pagans alike, is demonstrated by the overflow of reactions from all over the world. Here was a man who brought message of peace to the world, who abhorred distinction between race, creed and colour, and believed in the equality of man.

What was striking in him was that he did not confine himself within the church, or, to only the work ordained by the scripture. He contained in himself both the compunction of a spiritual guide as well as the qualities and conviction of a world leader committed to the well being of the poor and the deprived. He emerged as an unequivocal champion for the cause of the poor and those that were left behind in the development process.

No less was his interest in political developments in the world and he unhesitatingly made his position known on world events as he did when the United States and Britain invaded Iraq, which the Pope described as an act that would bring sufferings to human beings.

His efforts to bring all religions of the world together through dialogue and discourse demonstrate his innate belief in the underlying message of peace that all religions advocate.

Love for his fellow men took him around the world to more than 120 countries during his 26-year papacy. One such visit brought him to Bangladesh also, that endeared him to our people.

We believe that the only fitting tribute to the late Pope's legacy would be for all to work for greater harmony among mankind and for better understanding among the religions of the world.

Land Commission inactivity

CHT people deserve greater attention

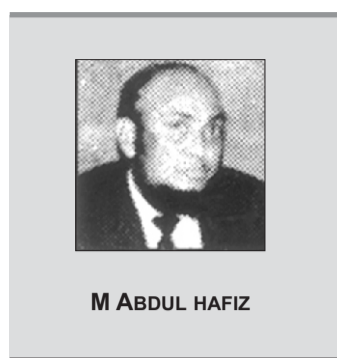
IT is indeed a shame that the Commission, set up to settle land disputes in the three hill districts of Chittagong has not done anything tangible since its formation three years ago. The prime objective of this commission was to begin a process whereby the disputed lands could be handed over to genuine owners within the shortest possible time, thus paving the way for peaceful co-existence between communities. In that sense, it is pivotal to the implementation of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) accord.

We think the decision of the parliamentary standing committee on CHT affairs ministry to convene an emergency meeting to identify the reasons behind the virtual non-functioning of the land commission couldn't have come a day later. Hopefully, the right answers would be found to the state of hibernation the commission finds itself in. These are not only important for the sake of peace but also for safeguarding the tribal rights. Resolving the land disputes is directly linked to preparing an authentic voters' list for the region. The delay in holding local elections for lack of an acceptable voter-list is only putting off proper representation of both tribal and non-tribal communities on the councils.

We understand the complexity of the issue of land disputes, especially when Bengali settlers, returnee tribal refugees from India and the rest of the tribal community have conflicting claims to ownership in different places. In some cases, both parties have papers to show while in others, there are no documents at all to claim ownership. So, the issue is basically land records and the ownership cannot be authentically documented to the satisfaction of all parties without having a comprehensive land survey done in the first place. The survey process has to be speedily completed now.

Three years was a long enough time for the commission to show some positive results in terms of having most of the land disputes settled. We simply do not understand why, as the parliamentary standing committee said in a statement, the commission failed to do so. The people of the hill districts still have high hopes from the peace accord. Though a significant part of the accord has yet to materialise, setting up of the Land Commission was, in their eyes, something that could unlock the creative potential of the hill tracts people by settling their land rights once and for all. Their hopes should not be dashed.

The Independence Day thoughts of the year



M ABDUL HAFIZ

A MIDST independence day celebrations the city walls were pasted with graffiti claiming that there was no alternative to the ruling regime in carrying forward the politics of development and production. So the regime must be catapulted to power also next time to maintain the momentum and continuity of that politics. There is nothing dissimilar in the refrains of the alliance leaders showing a fresh alacrity in their party activities. They allege that anybody else in power will put the country in reverse gear and bring back the terror and anarchy. Speaking little about their performances they lament that things would be hunky-dory but for the oppositions' perfidy. Blah, blah,

blah. Few found the claims worth contesting lest even an iota of credibility is attributed to them.

It is an irony that on the 34th anniversary of our great independence we were to put up with the platitudes repeated ad infinitum by the wielders of state power and the claims which ring hollow even with their utterances. The wielders of power invariably

where it is at the most the repairing of a culvert or the building of a stretch of road. Yet in accomplishing those paltry patch works of development things are mired in sleaze and graft. But for the wielder of power it is a great feat of development if some part of the project is rescued.

The development has, on the otherhand, a civilizational conno-

The production is intricately linked with the development of industrial backup. Even if we inherited some of them we were incapable of running them efficiently. Because they also require multiple other sources of backup. Our production, therefore, stops at the best in multiplying our population in an over-populated country. There is, however, a

any, in this regard is since exploded as the country inexorably slides more and more towards stark poverty. The trend could have perhaps been arrested by a measure of austerity and with grip over the country's financial management: minimising overhead costs and by trimming an unwieldy administration and jumbo cabinet

our celebration of Independence gone? Apart from celebration it is also a day for retrospection, soul searching and taking stock. While taking stock of 34 years of independence the balance sheet was as before found in red. Even if our souls are preserved by the stroke of fortune, the soul of the nation is desecrated. And the introspection throws open a plethora of angsts to torment our heart and deep wounds to suffer from its anguish.

By taking away some of the glorious features of our past marking the finest moments of our independence struggle from the celebration what it produced was a faceless deity out of our glorious history. Alas! Our upcoming generation will never know the heroes to whom we owe so much for our emancipation. They will never know the heroes to whom we owe so much for our emancipation. They will never know the sacrifices of those unknown fighters destined to be in obscurity forever. Instead the stories were woven only to shift the focus elsewhere to obfuscate the hero central to independence, our history and everything else.

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

PERSPECTIVES

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consider the public at the most a bunch of morons who could be fed with anything shoveled through their throats.

However, the claims of indispensability often signals the beginning of the end. It can be remembered that a powerful Ayub era came crashing down when the regime started celebrating its 'decade of development'. The development is often misconstrued in Third World country

governing the perennially belligerent ties between India and Pakistan become a matter of discussion not only in the region but also at the larger international arena for the simple reason that a glimmer of hope has arisen on the possibility of a better Indo-Pak relation. An unalloyed optimism exists in many quarters that the two nuclear-powered inimical neighbours may now be able to find common grounds to improve

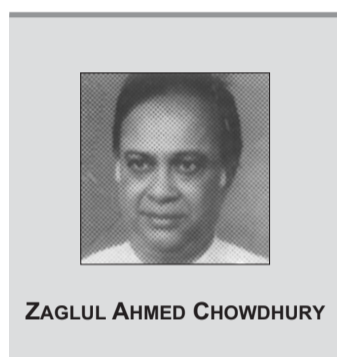
scope for developing even the human resources which can indeed be turned into an asset. But the performance provided by the agencies concerned show that achievements even there are disappointing.

The impression was somehow been created that the development and production are the alliances' forte and indeed the twin pillars of the regime's singular achievement. But the myth, if

which is still there or by reining in reckless corruption. The ideas were of no avail to a bunch of consumption oriented hedonistic people at the helm. As the nation's ailments are not remedied the poverty, hunger and disease rage in full fury in the paradise of development and production where there's supposed to be flow of milk together with honey.

So far, so good. But how has

Will F-16 dent the positive trend in Indo-Pak ties?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

U NDoubtedly, the recent decision by the United States to sell unspecified number of sophisticated F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan has caused some fissures in the current reconciliatory phase of the Indo-Pak relationship. The decision by Bush administration apparently took India somewhat by surprise as it came close on the heels of the first visit of the new American secretary of state Dr. Condoleezza Rice to both India and Pakistan when she spoke to leaders of the two countries on bilateral and other issue of common interest. True, the US has also offered military assistance to New Delhi along with readiness to help India in other areas to strengthen its capability in economic and other fields as well, but the bottom line is that the decision has resulted in glee in Islamabad and some frustration in New Delhi. When president Bush conveyed the decision to Indian prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, clearly the mood in the recipient's end was not anything relishing. Later, when the American offer to India was unveiled, the Indian prime minister was circumspect, saying they would weigh pros and cons of the US proposal. However, there is a sense of disappointment in India since it felt Pakistan would be benefited by the decision which was a kind of sore point in US-Pakistan ties since the later was asking for these aircraft for long.

Indo-Pak rapprochement efforts are continuing for more than a year. As a part of the initiative Pakistan prime minister Shaukat Aziz paid a visit to India and also foreign minister Mahmud Kasuri. Indian external affairs minister K. Natwar Singh was in Pakistan while a visit by Manmohan Singh to Islamabad is awaited. Furthermore, Pakistan president General Pervez Musharraf is expected to be in

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caught international attention as that were seen as opportunities for a breakthrough in the icy bilateral ties but the euphoria disappeared much sooner than many had expected. As such, contacts at high level do produce some sobriety in complicated and even tension-ridden ties but the moot point is how long can it last and how far can it go? In any case, these help improve relations even if not for long duration.

heads of government also appear to be keen to give a push in the peace process. President Musharraf has urged the presently most powerful politician in India Mrs. Sonia Gandhi -- although not in government but she heads the Congress and ruling UPA alliance -- to take further interest on bilateral reconciliation. Prime minister Dr. Singh has favourably responded to this observation of the Pakistan president. But, not

Pakistan attained atomic prowess, which India achieved before. Meanwhile, the Afghan crisis brought Pakistan as almost an integral part of Washington's anti-terror drive in the aftermath of the 9/11 and this has largely changed the Pak-American relations taking it on a more sound footing. President Musharraf, in America's view, has taken a bold step by continuing his drive against Osama Bin Laden and others even risking at least some support at home. It is as such, not unexpected that Islamabad will be rewarded by Washington for the role it is playing.

Indo-Pak arms race is no new phenomenon and two nuclear rivals spare no effort to further enrich their conventional military strength. The acquisition of the "F-16" by Pakistan falls in the same line and it is clear that by this decision the US did not want to annoy India as evidenced by Washington's offer to New Delhi as well. Probably, the United States wants to send a clear signal that it does not want to disappoint an ally that took painstaking efforts in siding with it in its anti-terror campaign. It seems that the US is also cautious that ties with India did not suffer by this decision. The present trend of Indo-Pak reconciliation is unlikely to be much affected by the American decision on "F-16" to Pakistan. Because, it is not as such anything against India as much as it is rewarding a strategic ally and India will not be oblivious of this point despite expressing disappointment.

Zaglul Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

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New Delhi shortly in connection with a cricket match between his country and India, but the visit will not be devoid of political significance. All these augur well for better bilateral relations even though the crux of their hostility remains unresolved and no such roadway is being made towards that direction.

The contacts received a boost following talks between president General Pervez Musharraf and prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of multilateral conferences. Discussions at various levels are continuing between the two South Asian rivals after a thaw was witnessed in their hostile ties during the last days of the previous NDA government in India and followed up in a greater spirit under new UPA government. Developments in their relations since last about a year and a half have considerably reversed the trend of unfriendliness and enmity, raising hopes of a reasonably good bilateral relationship. All these happy developments

their badly ruptured ties. However, this feeling is "cautious" and also "guarded" in the quarters familiar with the character of their bilateral ties though the positive omens are not being downplayed. Such optimism did exist before as well, but unfortunately mostly fell short of expectations resulting in the dismay of those who genuinely look for better relationship between the two, a pre-requisite to a healthy political climate in the south Asian region.

Earlier, summits between leaders of two countries in recent years had produced mixed results. The Nawaz Sharif-Vajpayee summit in Lahore generated hype for good ties but only to be belied by the "Kargil" conflict. Both the heads of government are not in the scene now. Later, the "Agra" summit between former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan president Musharraf failed to produce much results even though expectation centering the occasion had raised some hopes. Such summits

Undoubtedly, the main bone of contention in their is "Kashmir", which is defying a settlement for decades ever since two countries had emerged as a sovereign nations from British-ruled India. The issue is well known for its complexity and diametrically opposite positions held by New Delhi and Islamabad. Of late, some new thinking are dawning on this seemingly intractable tangle with both sides indicating readiness for shift from the hitherto held positions -- albeit no concrete and clear statements from either side.

As the two nations are dealing with not too different issues, hopes naturally soared for productive exchanges and this has received further impetus by support of international world including powerful nations welcoming the developments. Unquestionably, this has put pressure on both sides to carry forward with positive side while both countries seem convinced their people barring the zealots largely favour reconciliation. Two

surprisingly, no tangible progress has been made for talks on "Kashmir" even as two sides decided to launch Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service as a gesture of good neighbourliness.

Against this background, some quarters feel that the American decision to sell "F-16" combat aircraft to Pakistan, which has seemingly annoyed India, may dampen the present spirit of reconciliation. But it appears that this decision will not much affect either Indo-Pak or the Indo-US ties since this cannot be viewed as out of blue for the simple reason that Islamabad needs to be rewarded for its cooperation extended to the United States as a key ally of its anti-terror campaign. Pakistan was supposed to get these fighters long time ago as it had also made a part payment for the deal. It received one installment of the fighters but rest was stalled because of American suspicion about Islamabad's nuclear ambitions. In any case,

Bremer, the Bretton Woods institutions and the neo-liberal experiment in Iraq

YANATUL ISLAM

O N January 30, a path-breaking election in Iraq was held under the auspices of the US. But a government is yet to be formed. The violent Iraqi resistance movement shows no sign of waning. A few days ago, an attempt to convene the newly elected Iraqi parliament in order to nominate a speaker and a president ended in chaos and acrimony. This prompted an exasperated Iraqi to observe that in the past a dictator ruled the country, but now "clowns" are ruling it.

As the world watches the tragicomic spectacle of a democratic transition in Iraq under the watchful gaze of the world's most powerful nation, it is easy to overlook the fact that a similar experiment by the Bush administration was undertaken between 2003 and 2004 in the sphere of economics.

Soon after the military invasion of Iraq, an ambitious attempt was made to transform it into a model free market economy. The idea was to painlessly attain a neo-

liberal economist's dream: open borders, a largely privatized economy, minimal taxes and a government wedded to the principles of fiscal and monetary conservatism.

This was based on the so-called "big bang" approach to reform, that is, market-oriented reforms should be rapidly implemented before vested interests can coalesce to block any significant change. This credible commitment to a bold reform agenda would send a clear signal to foreign investors that the country was "open for business." External resources would pour in, sparking an investment-led economic boom. This in turn would erase adjustment problems associated with the transition to a market economy.

When Jay Garner was initially appointed to look after the Iraq project, the ideologues embedded in Washington soon found him unsuitable for their grand plan. He was unceremoniously dumped and replaced by Paul Bremer who was one of the true believers.

Paul Bremer is back in the United States. He was duly awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Bretton Woods institutions are unlikely to be so lucky. It seems to be their unenviable destiny to play the role of handmaidens to a handful of ideologues embedded in Washington. One suspects that the Bank and the Fund will make a valiant attempt to rescue the remnants of Bremer's reforms.

A month before the invasion of Iraq, he reportedly said that Iraq would have to be run, at least temporarily, as a "little colony." Soon after the fall of Baghdad, he declared that Iraq was "open for business." And he tried gallantly to ensure that Iraq was indeed open for business.

Through a series of decrees that Bremer issued in his capacity as the head of the CPA (Constitutional Provisional Authority), import duties were replaced with a "reconstruction levy" of 5 per cent and both corporate and marginal tax rates were reduced to a flat rate of 15 per cent. To this he added the decree that, with the exception of the oil sector, all parts of the Iraqi economy would

be open to foreign investors who could look forward to the prospect of instantaneous repatriation of profits. An ambitious plan to privatize Iraq's large number of state enterprises was drawn up, but it is at this point that Bremer encountered his first stumbling block. Even the Iraqi accomplices that he assembled in an advisory council balked at the idea, while popular hostility to large-scale and rapid privatization became quite evident. The plan was shelved, at least temporarily.

It is under such contentious circumstances that the Bretton Woods institutions got involved in facilitating Iraq's transition to a market economy. In October

2003, the World Bank, in conjunction with UN agencies, released the results of a "needs assessment" exercise. The revelations were stark.

Decades of misrule, two wars, and a prolonged regime of deadly economic sanctions approved by the UN and led by the US had decimated a country that was once one of the most advanced in the Arab world. The invasion of March 2003 and the chaos that ensued turned out to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

GDP contracted by more than 30 per cent between 2002 and 2003, rivaling the depth of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unemployment and underemploy-

ment were estimated to be around 50 per cent of the workforce. The World Bank concluded that about \$36 billion would be needed for reconstruction and rehabilitation -- a sum that is about 72 per cent of the total annual aid bill for all developing countries.

The Bank called for large-scale job creation programs and social safety nets to cope with the trauma of the transition to a market economy. Yet, in subsequent reports released in 2004, the Bank could not restrain itself from paying homage to the "significant reforms" that were undertaken under Bremer's regime (although his name was not mentioned in the reports).

It was the IMF that, much to

one's pleasant surprise, appeared more circumspect than the Bank. In its 2003 macroeconomic assessment, it noted that the reform agenda was "very ambitious" and drew on the lessons of other transition economies to suggest that the success of the agenda depended on building broad-based political support and institutional capacity for effective implementation. Despite these reservations, the IMF drew up a Letter of Intent on September 24, 2004 with the interim Iraqi government.

What has happened since then? A report issued by Jim Krane of the Associated Press on March 22 notes that production in the key oil sector was below the 2004 level. But the report drew attention to a "free-wheeling consumer economy" and cited an IMF source to suggest that GDP grew by 52 per cent in 2004. Unfortunately, Jim Krane seems to have conflated projected with actual GDP figures.

Whether recovery will take place in 2005 and beyond remains to be seen. For the time being at least the much-heralded investment boom that was supposed to be unleashed by the reform agenda has not yet materialized. The best and brightest in corporate America and elsewhere have apparently decided that while Iraq may be open for business, they are not yet ready for doing business in Baghdad.

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