

A refreshing occasion

Let's strive for a better future

PAHELA Baishakh is a special day in the life of Bengalees as it ushers in a new year of hope and promise. It marks a happy beginning leaving behind all that was stale and worn out in the year gone by. The mood of celebration and festivity is writ everywhere.

Deeper down, the day is a statement on our rich cultural heritage anchored in social homogeneity and time-tested secular ethos. It is also a bridge between the urban and the rural populace, a symbol of social and communal harmony and an epitome of national unity. Occasionally though, our pristine value system faces hostility from assorted quarters demanding that we stand united in defence of our traditional ethos.

It is on a gloomy note that this year's celebrations are set against the backdrop of the Savar factory tragedy which saw a few hundred garment workers perish under the rubble of a massive building collapse. We must take a fresh vow not to let it happen again. We cannot afford to lose men and women who play a pivotal role in a very important sector which has been the lifeline to our economy. It is not only a humanitarian tragedy but one that could earn bad name for the country through the folly of a few. If it doesn't awaken us to the need for taking corrective steps, what else would?

The political arena is showing signs of heating up over the electoral reforms including caretaker government issues. Some accommodative spirit cutting across party lines will have to come into play so that all boats are not burnt to political reconciliation and social equanimity doesn't receive any serious jolt. What could be a more auspicious time than this day to look at things from a positive angle?

People in general have the intent to surge ahead in the new year. The businessmen and agriculturists celebrate the day and look forward to a better future. Why must not the politicians do the same and work for it?

Let Pahela Baishakh be the harbinger of peace and prosperity for the nation.

We wish our readers Shuvo Nababarsha.

Dhaka signs on

Embracing UN anti-terror conventions augurs well

THE approval on Monday of eight anti-terrorism conventions by the cabinet, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1137 passed on September 28, 2001, is a welcome step taken by the government. Bangladesh has already ratified three other anti-terrorism conventions, leaving only one out of the 12 such UNSC conventions unsigned, and the foreign minister has said that the 12th will be signed soon.

It is about time. The fact of the matter is that for Bangladesh terrorism is not merely a distant threat. This is no academic exercise on our part to show good faith and signal that we are a conscientious member of the international community with concern for the problems of others.

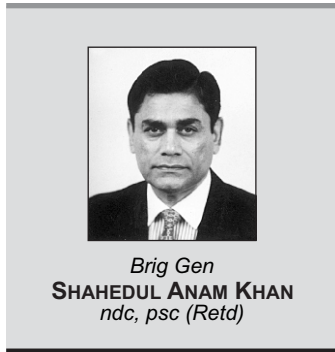
Terrorism being no respecter of national boundaries is perhaps the biggest single problem that the world faces right now. By signing up to the anti-terrorism conventions, the government is signaling that its commitment to fighting terrorism in all its manifestations in accord with UN principles and under its aegis remains unwavering.

It should be helpful to us here in Bangladesh as well. We remain woefully unprepared to deal with the scourge of terrorism. Signing on to the conventions should help with capacity building and information sharing, and help us to formulate a workable programme to combat the threat. The government still has apparently no clue as to the perpetrators of the August 21 massacre, and other investigations into terrorist activities seem to be going nowhere. Perhaps now both the will and the means to get to the bottom of the problem will begin to emerge.

Let this merely be the first step. The government must use the signing as a spring-board to begin aggressively tackling the menace. The fear of terrorist attack cannot be permitted to stalk the country.

Now is the time for the government to take further steps to reverse the perception, both inside the country and abroad, that it is not concerned with addressing the issue, and prove that it is serious about turning things around.

Of strategic partnership and being a world power



RECENT visits by two very high profile personalities to South Asia demonstrate its ever-increasing importance in the international geopolitical landscape. Condoleezza Rice's visit, though restricted to the two bigger countries, has conveyed renewed American interest in the region, particularly in the "big two," much to the consternation of the smaller nations of the region, according to some analysts. The more recently concluded visit by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao was his first to the region as the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China as well as the head of the PRC Military Commission. There are strong strategic motivations for Chinese interest in South Asia too.

It will not have escaped the notice of even the most casual observer that the centrepiece of attention of the two visitors was India. As Scott Baldauff writing recently in the Christian Science Monitor says: "Like the prettiest girl at a fairy-tale ball or in a Bollywood movie, India suddenly has lots of suitors calling."

What catches one's attention is

not only the US Secretary of State's articulation of India's growing international clout that has caused the US to look afresh at the region, particularly at India, but also Washington's official pronouncement to help India become a world power. And China, India's largest neighbour has sought a larger "strategic partnership" with it, to forge a new era of cooperation and peace. It, however, remains to be seen how

prompted Lee Kuan Yew, Asia's elder statesman to prophesy that it will "shake the world." But even more, the air of harmony that now pervades Sino-Indian relations demonstrates the predominance of economic interests in the formulation of the foreign policies of the two countries, rather than mere rhetoric or raw emotion. In other words, it is realpolitik that has dictated policy. It is an object lesson for those that would allow

since the time Deng Xiao Ping opened up and reformed the Chinese economy to make economic growth China's principle objective. And, in keeping with it, as the recent visit, as well as the declarations of the two previous visits to China, that of Rajeev Gandhi in 1986 and Atal Bihari Bajpai in 2003, all show, all the contentious issues that have defied resolution so far have been kept under the carpet for the

the US wants a strategic relationship with India would be too premature to suggest at this stage. But some Indian analysts like Subramanian Swamy suggest that neither is the time appropriate nor is the situation ripe to seek a strategic linkage with big powers without running the risk of being consigned to the role of playing second fiddle, having to be ready at all times to do the biddings of the stronger partner. Whether

the two countries. For at least two decades, Chinese economic growth necessitates a relaxed US attitude. Hence, whatever the atmospheric generated by the visit of the Chinese Premier to India and however sweet he sounds, the bottom line is that China will, for the foreseeable future, not cross the US."

Moreover, it would also be a matter of more intense academic study to ascertain whether India at this point in time aspires to be a world power, something that the US is so keen to see it become. It is not merely the question of acquiring power, it is also a matter of being able to project power, well beyond one's national and regional boundaries for the purpose of safeguarding one's national interest. Merely patrolling a stretch of international water does not accord one a power projection capability. However, even if India had the capability, one wonders whether it would be willing to do so. It is also pertinent to ask whether India has the will to fulfill the responsibilities that is expected of a world power.

It may not also be out of place to suggest that perhaps it is time that India also took on board the idea of fulfilling its responsibilities as a regional power first, something that critics say it has overlooked for long in its urge to become a world power.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Whether or not by implication the US wants a strategic relationship with India would be too premature to suggest at this stage. But some Indian analysts like Subramanian Swamy suggest that neither is the time appropriate nor is the situation ripe to seek a strategic linkage with big powers without running the risk of being consigned to the role of playing second fiddle, having to be ready at all times to do the biddings of the stronger partner.

India's transformation into a "world power" would come about, and what that would mean, since power has many determinants and dimensions and is not merely a single construct, whether it is soft power or the Morgenthauian description that the US has in mind?

However, the strategic motivations for US and China to seek closer ties with India are quite different, although economic interest remains the guiding force in their policy formulation. And that is the quandary that India finds itself in.

Sino-Indian rapprochement indicates a thaw in the relationship between the two neighbours that have between them almost 40 percent of the world's population and 18 percent of the world's GDP. And the prospect of a burgeoning Indian and Chinese economy has

the baggage of history to mar the growth of normal relations between nations.

The US motivation has both geo-political and geo-economic dimensions. India is ranked by many analysts as Asia's third great power, and, given India's economic prospects, that has the potential, according to a recent report, of propelling it to one of the leading economies in the world by 2030, its consequent power potential is not lost on the US strategic planners. And it is this potential that the US wants to make use of to counterweight the growing Chinese influence in the East and South East Asian region. (Indian domination of South Asia is a reality, which the US accepts and acquiesces in.)

For China, closer economic interaction with India is very much in line with its strategic policy,

greater interest of economic cooperation between the two countries. The vexing border dispute has been addressed in the most pragmatic manner while at the same time making sure that it did not come in the way of cooperation in other fields while the issue was being tackled.

It is also in China's strategic interest to see a concrete relationship mature between it and India. Given the time-line of history, the two countries had the best of relations over many centuries except perhaps for a very brief period between 1962 and 1978. In a display of true statesmanship, the Chinese Premier Wen himself calls on both countries to "refuse to let questions left over from history disrupt and impede the development of bilateral relations."

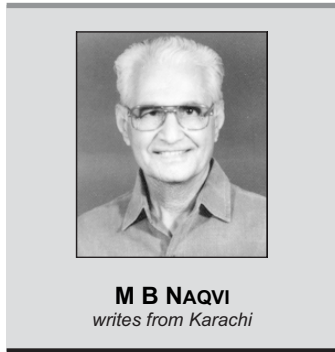
Whether or not by implication

India would be prepared to do that is doubtful, more so if it were pitted directly in a confrontational role with China.

It would therefore not be wrong to assume that rather than feeling elated about the prospect of being propelled to the rank of a world power, India finds itself in an unenviable position of having to weigh between the two big powers.

India's current trend of GDP growth rate of more than 6 per cent will make India external resource dependent, in which, according to experts, US will be a "controlling factor." And insofar as the Sino-Indian economic dimension is concerned, again, according to Subramanian Swamy: "[A] partnership between India and China will for long remain highly diluted because of a fundamental fault line that divides

Helplessness before medieval mindsets



AUTHORITY'S frequent retreat from boasts of leading Pakistan towards enlightened moderation is making obscurantists more powerful. President Pervez Musharraf had wanted to amend Hudood laws. Nothing happened. He tried to amend blasphemy law but could not. Later, he intensified the verbal campaign for enlightened moderation against moribund traditionalism and misguided fundamentalism that enslave women and result in abuses like vinni, karo kari and sectarianism. It has failed to put down sectarian terror or support for Islamic militants.

Enemies of enlightened moderation can be identified as traditional mind sets, erroneously confused with Islamic orthodoxy. They take medieval customs and mores to be Islam of medieval period. Current facts are that Islam presents one cultural face in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. In Egypt it wears a different look; in Cairo meet the eastern and western traditions just as they do in Pakistan with superimposition of Indian customs. In Far East it is yet another face. The position of women in Pakistan is somewhat different from that in the Maghreb or Egypt.

Women suffer more disabilities in Pakistan. Latest example is the

religious parties' attack on women who ran in a mini-marathon race in Gujranwala. Islamic rioters beat some women and misbehaved with others. When the police tried to save women there was a regular riot against the police with casualties. The net result was that scheduled marathon races in many cities were cancelled or their locations changed to inside the sports stadia. The basically military government's retreats all along the line can become a route.

Why is the government so

required to obey them. Lower down the scale, common men are superior to their women folk. Indeed, women are treated as chattel. They are disposed of in marriage by male guardians. They remain inferior throughout life, having to do the bidding of their fathers, brothers or husbands or even uncles.

How can a change be effected is the question. Historically in Europe enlightened moderation resulted from the Enlightenment movement and also partly from

through society's democratic leveling and abolition of medieval forms of land holding. So long as the social supremacy of landed aristocracy lasts, human equality cannot be practised. Attacks by MMA zealots on women point to this inequality fomenting society's refusal to embrace gender equality. More such troubles lie ahead.

The morale of the Mullahs is high now. Pakistan has a democracy of sorts. It is not one in which the voter is sovereign, making and breaking governments. Express-

what laws and Constitution say, or what democratic norms and practices demand, will of the Army prevails. Task in Pakistan is to ensure that soldiers remain confined to their barracks and parade grounds. How to ensure that is not clear. In Pakistan, Army rule is based on ignorance and docility of common man and the open or secret support to, and from, religious leaders. How to change these two bases?

One way is persuasion and the other is forcing the change. Now

in the germination of the very idea of MMA the COAS seemed to have had a role. There is also the long history of cooperation between religious parties and the military all these decades.

There are morphological reasons sustaining this alliance, with its family quarrels. Both forces are deeply conservative, committed to preserve the social structures that sustain both. Military needs Mullahs to help indoctrinate troops besides leading prayers. Moreover, Pakistan Army has been in politics; lacking in legitimacy, soldiers in power are always on the defensive. They rely on Mullahs, the prayer leaders, to mitigate some of it. The most glaring examples of Military-Mullah alliance was seen in East Pakistan during 1971 and in Gen. Zia's regime during 1970s and 1980s. Even President Musharraf preferred JUI Chief as a safer leader of Opposition. The two are natural and historical allies.

It is thus hard to be optimistic about the future; enlightened moderation cannot visit Pakistan so long as authoritarianism prevails here. Why would Army relinquish power, if it cannot be forced to do so? Can we rely on religious parties to establish the ultimate supremacy of free voters? Is civil society or democratic forces strong enough to send the Army back to barracks? The more Pakistan changes the more it remains the same.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistan Army has been in politics; lacking in legitimacy, soldiers in power are always on the defensive. They rely on Mullahs, the prayer leaders, to mitigate some of it. The most glaring examples of Military-Mullah alliance was seen in East Pakistan during 1971 and in Gen. Zia's regime during 1970s and 1980s. Even President Musharraf preferred JUI Chief as a safer leader of Opposition. The two are natural and historical allies.

helpless? What common people see is a contest between the Maulvi and the sarkar. The Mullah is seen as gaining the upper hand. The government has nothing to show for its endeavour to promote enlightened moderation. Reasons for it are several. A priori, governments do not reform societies. Law and the police cannot enforce a social reform that has grown from within the society. Intellectuals, artists, writers et al lead the moment. Social reform is also a function of education and culture.

Crudely, the central element of the whole trouble is attitude towards women. Enlightened moderation gives equal human rights to women, with freedom to engage in any profession or work. This is not acceptable to medieval minds that abound. Medieval societies are generally hierarchical. At the top of the heap are landed aristocrats while others are

Reformation. The way to enlighten people is paved with the effort to change the hierarchical society by leveling down the social field. Such a change is associated with human rights' concept; ordinary men and women are empowered by abolishing the domination of landed aristocracy. In short, a liberal democratic revolution is the main means through which an enlightened and egalitarian society is created. Women's emancipation is a necessary part of that revolution.

It is not achieved by a government passing a law or enforcing its preconceived notions of social reform. There has to be a concrete social basis for creating human equalities between the sexes and to all minorities without discrimination of sex, race, sect or religion or class. In short, democracy is the outward sign of a liberated society. Thus, the road to progress lies

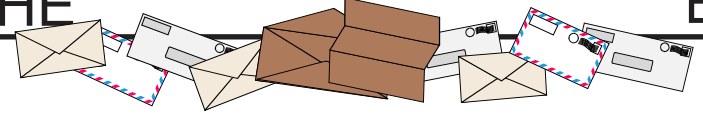
of Musharraf's power is actually independent of voters that held the election and managed results. While there are physical institutions of a democracy, they lack norms and spirit of true democracy. Behold: there is the hardware of democracy but no software inside. Spirit of democracy is expressed through Parliament's sovereignty in the parliamentary system and sovereignty of Constitution and laws in presidential types. Both are democratic, if the administrative apparatus does not queer the pitch for voters. Free, fair and transparent elections, reflecting supremacy of Parliament-made laws, become the chief manifestation of democracy in which the government is totally subordinated to the Constitution and laws made under it.

Current facts are that the Army as an institution is the true locus of power and authority. No matter

forcing involves some kind of a violent revolution. And that is not about to happen. There are no revolution-making leaders in Pakistan; the Army's image of power is a guarantee that power will stay with it. Persuasion is perhaps the only way that might do the trick, though it has its limitations. Why should Army listen to sermons about giving up power? Pakistanis may be fated to see the final results of an unavowed Military-Mullah alliance to preserve basically Medieval social structures. Enlightened moderation is just fine rhetoric - for foreigners.

Some MMA leaders indignantly deny there is a Military-Mullah alliance. Many others tersely comment that they are protesting too much. Didn't MMA vote for Musharraf's LFO? The opposition to Musharraf retaining the job of COAS looks suspect after so substantially supporting the mili-

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.

Repulsive!

Just imagine that someone was having dinner while watching TV, suddenly he saw a famous actor entering a house, challenging the landlady that there cannot be anything else more efficient than the thing he was carrying. Then he enters her toilet, the camera man focusing on the dirty yellow commode. And he makes it clean and clear (ekdom notuner moto!) within a few seconds with the blessing of the magic washing material.

Do you think there is nothing wrong with it? The sight of the yellow commode is indeed repulsive.

Cantara Wali Ruhl
BBA, Dept of Mgmt, DU

Zia International Airport

I congratulate Zia International Airport on its improvements. It is a much less frightening place, especially for foreigners, than it used to

be. However, may I suggest a further improvement?

I recently made a total idiot of myself, trying to meet a friend of the flight from the UK. It was her first visit and she was alone so I was anxious to 'be there for her' as the great phrase is nowadays. I jumped up and down behind the railings, waving, according to current practice, peering through two layers of distorting glass, at the distant figures at passport control and saw her disappearing leftwards to collect her luggage. I walked up and down for a very long time and, somehow, missed her coming through.

After a long time, I took myself to the main and sole - exit door and heard, from a couple of passengers on the same flight, that their luggage had been held up for an hour and a half. Assuming she too was having luggage problems, I sat myself down on the nice, clean, tiled floor,

with my back against a pillar, determined not to miss her. (No chairs of course.) After another hour, I asked the Emirates office to do a search and they discovered she was NOT in the luggage section and, asking around more widely, discovered she had been walking up and down, looking for ME, for over two hours, outside the arrival hall.

In most other airports, there is a space with a large notice board marked 'Meeting point' and a few chairs. Would that be possible, please?

Angela Robinson
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Rab's one year

The introduction of Rab to control the law and order situation last year aroused much expectation among the people of Bangladesh. People hoped that the situation would change slowly, if not dramatically. And, in fact, the overall situation has

changed. But most of the changes are negative, rather than positive. It is true that after Rab began his operations, some criminals did not dare to continue their crimes. But then we saw Rab's showcase of crossfire in which hundreds of 'listed criminals' were killed. Crossfire is a violation of human rights.

Even after much criticism it did not stop. We did not like the idea much. If crossfire could do justice to the criminals, then what are the functions of the court? Sometimes Rab misused its powers and tried to take advantage of the situation.

A recent example proves the point. That is really not expected of Rab. Some code of conduct must be provided for the operations of Rab so that it can work more systematically and satisfactorily in future. Rab must not have the feeling that it is the supreme power holder in the country and that it can do whatever it likes.

Wajahat Anwar
IBA, DU

Learning English

Initially I wanted to improve my English but was a bit reluctant to study it in the traditional way. I would become bored easily with grammar-cramming method and it was not working for me. So I decided to learn English in some unconventional way which would not bore me. I had been a student of Bangla medium and I had learned a little English from my schooldays. English wasn't a favorite subject of mine. I had studied it only to pass the exams and that too without knowing it fundamentally. So I decided to read English newspapers every day and at that time I discovered The Daily Star!

Now I cannot imagine a day without it. One of the most memorable days of my life was when my letter got published in your paper. It

was no small achievement for me.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all.

Sohel
Gulshan, Dhaka 1212

Feeling the tremor

It was a fine morning just like other days. We were attending the class of our training programme in Kapitai. All of a sudden, I felt a vibration in the floor (a distinct vertical, up and down movement) and also saw the projector screen moving abruptly. I could sense what was happening but my brain seemed not to work. As soon as a friend uttered the word 'tremor', we, the 28 trainees, and the trainer frantically rushed out of the class.

According to news reports, it was a "mild tremor" of only 3.8 on Richter Scale. However, the 'mild tremor' shook my belief about our preparedness against any kind of earthquake. This is a kind of a

phenomenon which has always been neglected. Due to geographical location we are living with the reality that it is a matter of when rather than if.

I knew what to do during a quake. But I forgot everything and acted foolishly just like others. In the event of a major earthquake (God forbid) what will happen to the closely packed buildings and the people who do not have any idea about it. I wonder how effective will be our ancient infrastructure and technology to predict a tremor while it cannot yet properly locate the epicentre of a quake.

Some effective steps should be taken to minimise damage and also a comprehensive awareness programme should be launched. The devastation that a tremor can cause is beyond our imagination. We better do something fast. Is there anyone listening?

Saif, Dhaka

First elected PM of Nepal

I am writing in response to the various news articles related to the former Nepalese prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, published in The Daily Star.

He has been described as the first elected prime minister of Nepal, but it is not true. The first elected premier was his elder brother the late Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala. Girija Prasad Koirala became prime minister only after democracy was brought back in the early nineties.

Umesh Gauta

BUEI