

Pre-election budget worries

Consultations welcome

FINANCE and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman's pre-budget discussions with economists, technocrats and journalists have gone down well with the intelligentsia. But they now look forward to seeing the consensual elements of the outcome internalised on actual budget formulation. The minister sounded forthright in his expectation, he having urged the economists to persuade the politicians to keep from exerting pressure on him to provide for increased expenditure in the next budget ahead of the parliamentary elections.

Private sector dynamism is a welcome development. But Bangladesh Bank's attempt to raise interest rate on private sector borrowing can only lead to a dampening of the new-found buoyancy in the sector such as is based on credit expansion. Furthermore, revenue shortfall and reductions in GDP growth, employment creation and investment are likely to be encountered.

It is thus necessary for the central bank that they encourage private sector lending by scaling down the interest rate instead of raising it further to precipitate a credit squeeze. In neighbouring India and Pakistan the rates on borrowing are half of those in Bangladesh.

Of course, inflation is a concern. But its current rather high rate is not the outcome of the upward credit trend; the increase in inflation is actually the upshot of higher commodity prices. The salary increase in the government sector which was an imperative necessity might well add to the inflationary pressure but the staggered payment approach is likely to keep it reasonably in check.

This being the penultimate pre-election budget, set against the backdrop of increased inflationary pressure to top it off, the government needs to be extra-cautious in maintaining financial discipline. This would require extensive expenditure control measures. Elections have a way of tempting the ruling party to go for mega-projects, constituency-nurturing ventures and a degree of unproductive grandstanding in terms of development expenditure, albeit with scopes for corruption, misuse of funds and pay offs dovetailed to the approach. Let's not forget, the last two elected governments had stepped up development spending at the fag end of their tenure thereby fuelling corruption and feeding the spoil system.

Election expediency should not be allowed to upset the macro-economic stability which has earned the finance minister plaudits and provided the base for a five percent plus GDP growth rate.

Laid back diplomacy

Wish the PM had gone there

TO be sure, Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia was missed by her counterparts at the Afro-Asian Summit in Jakarta. Important heads of government and state of many countries in the continents of Asia and Africa made themselves available for the high-profile conference. In our case though, it was Foreign Minister Morshed Khan who represented Bangladesh. We wish our PM had attended that international conference of both commemorative and real-time import.

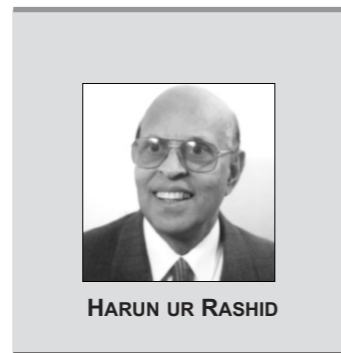
For had she gone there, she could have taken the opportunity and advantage of meeting leaders like Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and even King Gyanendra of Nepal, who were in attendance, and themselves met each other on the sidelines of the summit. With the Saarc summit on the cards and leaders of Saarc countries on hand, the occasion held out a valuable opportunity for Begum Zia to exchange notes with the top leaders of South Asia. They could have had bilateral talks away from the preoccupations of running their states.

In fact, these days it has become a favourite practice with top leaders who usually remain exceedingly busy with their state duties to have tête-à-têtes in retreats which give them a rare opportunity of unwinding themselves with a salubrious effect felt not only on bilateral affairs but also on inter- and intra-regional relationships. Our PM had so much to exchange views on, mainly with the Indian premier and Pakistani president with whom we have important issues to discuss and perceptions to share. It was all the more important because of the wind of change blowing between India and Pakistan on the one hand, and between India and China on the other, in their respective relationships.

And most significantly taking the recent escalation of tension along the Indo-Bangla border, we have no doubt that an informal meet on the sidelines of the summit between the prime ministers of India and Bangladesh would have proved useful.

We recall that our PM could not make it to the last conference of Commonwealth heads of state and government because of some pressing circumstances. We think any such big event should not be missed; for, the absence of the topmost leader from it might send a signal across that we could be taking a nonchalant approach to high-profile diplomacy. It is in the country's best interest that we implore the prime minister to be present in international events attended by top dignitaries, especially leaders from the region.

Wen Jinbao's visit to India: US-China cold war in the offing ?



HARUN UR RASHID

THE visit of China's Prime Minister Wen Jinbao to New Delhi has been declared "historic" and its implications may have an impact on shaping the world order in the 21st century. Two economic giants in Asia—China and India—are rising on their feet and with the growing independence of Europe from shackles of the US, a counter-weight to the supremacy of the US looms large in the coming decades.

Once Napoleon said about China: "There lies a sleeping giant. Let him sleep, for when he awakens he will shake the world". Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India wrote in his book "The Discovery of India" (1946) that America, Russia, China and India would be great powers in the world.

A conference was held in the second week of April in Washington, based around a new book titled "China's Rise in Asia", in which the author, Robert Sutter, argues that the term "China Rising" is dangerously misleading because it implies a zero-sum game, where, if China is rising, America must be declining.

Another American author Charles Kupchan in his book "The End of the America Era" (2002) predicted the end of America's superpower status and drew a new map of the world. He wrote: "Combine the rise of Europe and Asia with a declining and prickly internationalism in the US, it becomes clear that America's unipolar moment is not long for this world. American dominance and its political appetite for projecting its power globally have peaked, and both will be dissipating over the course of coming decades."

The above paragraphs are intended to demonstrate that the nation that has most to lose than other states against China's great awakening is the US.

A strategic competitor for the US

President Bush took office in 2001 promising to take a harder line towards all Communist countries (China, Cuba and North Korea). His former National Security Adviser, now Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, an academic on Russia's Communism, was known to be behind the US policy considering

After 9/11, although the focus has diminished on China, it seems that the Bush administration now has turned its attention to China and from Beijing's view, it is not the sort of attention it enjoys.

The US is adopting a harder line toward China. It opposes sale of arms to China by the European Union. Furthermore, observers believe that the US has been using two of the great powers in Asia—India and Japan—as an attempt at strategic containment of China.

Like the US, Japan appears not to be prepared psychologically to lose its

encirclement. No analogy is perfect but it appears at present India is being cast in the role of China of the 70s.

As Japan feels threatened economically and militarily by China, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has been a passionate advocate of US alliance (they don't call it military alliance publicly). Japan has decisively moved to side with the US against China by enlarging the scope of its alliance with the US explicitly to include the Taiwan Strait. It simply means that if China invades Taiwan, in the event of its declaring independence, the US and

First, it has launched charm offensive and the visit of China's Prime Minister to India is one of such steps. China's Premier declared the visit as "historic" moment and agreed on principles of settling the border dispute. He said: "The flower of India-China has bloomed again today. India, China are brothers. We want to elevate the strategic relationship". India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh offered similar sentiment: "India and China can together reshape the world order". The two countries announced to work on a number of joint initiatives and as many

and products are shipped to Japan.

With regard to Japan, China is playing a hard line. The recent demonstrations against the Japanese interests in China for glossing over Japan's past atrocities in China in their school textbooks and the tension generated by Japan's move for oil exploration over the disputed island are only symptoms of a deep growing mistrust between China and Japan, partly engineered by the US policy. China reportedly opposes Japan securing a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Its opposition, being a veto-carrying permanent member of the Council, against Japan seems to be end of Japan's attempt to become a permanent member.

Third, China reversed its earlier policy and now supports multilateralism and the UN. This means that international rules must be adhered to by all states, big and small, powerful and weak. This is obviously directed partly against the US which went to war in Iraq without explicit approval of the UN. It will be interesting to see how China reacts to the reforms of the UN, suggested by the UN Secretary General and also by the US Secretary of State.

Conclusion

As China is emerging a global power, it seems both the US and Japan do not know how to handle this unpalatable fact. Initially they were in a denial mode that China would emerge a global power soon. Now both have realised that China's rise is unstoppable and the old game of balance of power is being played in Asia-Pacific region.

It seems that a cold war between the US and China is under way as both countries are seeking to draw into its sphere of influence as many countries as possible, especially those of the Asia-Pacific region. Pragmatic China sees that if India moves away from the US and cooperates with China, it will definitely shift the geographical distribution of global power to Asia and force a restructuring of Western-dominated international bodies including the UN, World Bank, IMF and WTO.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

It seems that a cold war between the US and China is under way as both countries are seeking to draw into its sphere of influence as many countries as possible, especially those of the Asia-Pacific region. Pragmatic China sees that if India moves away from the US and cooperates with China, it will definitely shift the geographical distribution of global power to Asia.

China as a "strategic competitor", reversing the Clinton administration's policy as a "strategic partner".

In April of that year, the Bush administration had to eat a "humble pie" when one of its surveillance (Spy) planes strayed in Chinese airspace and had to land after a dog-fight into a Chinese island and agreed to the Chinese demands of inspecting the plane and of access to any equipment on board. The US warning "Do not touch the plane" was totally ignored by the Chinese authorities. The plane was released after the Chinese inspected it inside and had access to the equipments on board.

In fact China's then President Jiang Zemin did not bother "hue and cry" of Washington and took a 12-day trip to South America. The calmness and insouciance of Chinese leaders to demands of the Bush administration to release the plane untampered revealed China's new confidence against the superpower—the US.

The Bush administration probably for the first time realised that they could not dictate a situation with China and found that they were not in the driver's seat and could only wait for Chinese response.

supreme economic place in Asia. China's economy is half of the world's GDP and its foreign reserves are heading past US\$750 billion dollars. Its overall trade is returning surplus, thanks to the lifting of textile quotas which have seen exports to the US surge by 60 per cent or more since January.

In the coming decades, China will surpass the economy of Japan and the US. After sustaining 8 per cent inflation-adjusted average economic growth for 25 years—with annual peaks thought to be up to 15 per cent—it is destined to be the biggest economy in the world in future.

US' strategic move to contain China

Japan and India are being used by the US to contain China's influence. Both countries are being lured by the Bush administration to engage in military cooperation with the US. It seems that the diplomacy of the 70s by the Nixon administration is again being played by the neo-conservatives of the Bush administration.

During the Cold War, America's strategy was to contain the Soviet Union and Nixon's rapprochement with China in the 70s gave the Russians a feeling of

Japan would be involved to protect Taiwan. Beijing sees the move as an aggressive act in its internal affairs.

The US Secretary of State visited India last March and made unprecedented offers of arms sales and cooperation in once-taboo areas such as nuclear technology. She reportedly told the Prime Minister Dr. Singh that it was now America's policy to "help India become a major world power in the 21st century".

India would be allowed to buy the next generation of advanced combat aircraft from the US which would provide India edge over both China and Pakistan. The strength of cooperation between India and the US is demonstrated by the fact that President Bush is scheduled to visit India later this year.

China's strategic move to counter US

China feels encircled by the US strategic move. China has not been watching idly the growing alliance in defence among the US, India and Japan. How to stall the growing alliance between India and the US is of importance to China. Observers believe that China has a three-pronged strategy.

as nine agreements have been concluded.

In the statements, two phrases employed by the leaders are of immense significance. One is China's desire to elevate "strategic" relationship with India and India's aspiration to "reshape" the world order.

This implies that both China and India are on the same boat because they do not feel comfortable with the existing bipolar world, where the US is the lone superpower and dictates the world order. Therefore by cultivating with India, China hopes to keep India from moving into the US embrace. China is reportedly lending support to India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

Second, China's new charm is economic. China can invest in other countries, sell high technology and in return other countries can sell their products to China. That is why China is focusing on free trade agreements with South East Asian nations. This initiative will provide a substantial foothold of China in the 10-ASEAN countries. Malaysia and Indonesia are very strategically located because of the Malacca Straits, through which all the oil

Killing field of Polashbari

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

NINE days after the collapse of the factory building of Spectrum Industries Ltd. at Polashbari, Savar on 11 April, Brigadier General Nizam Ahmed announced the end of the rescue operation carried out by the Military Engineer Corps and the Fire Service. Their efforts had recovered 73 dead bodies, including that of 4 Ansars, rescued 97 workers, out of whom two had died subsequently in hospital and 84 had been admitted to hospitals for injuries. Why there was no single consolidated list is perplexing. The figure of victims and survivors arrived at a total of 225. So what became of the rest of the 300-350 night shift workers who were assumed to be working on the seventh, fourth and third floors of the building that night? This question has been asked by the long line of families standing outside in the hot sun, day after day, hoping that their relatives—major bread earners—would emerge from the debris. They stood there holding their relatives' photographs hoping that it would help recognition by the rescue party. They stood there even after the military drove away, hoping for a miracle!

The public has a right to know

Since the first day, news of the collapse and its aftermath has been inadequate, confusing and contradictory. The management was conspicuous by its absence, even though there was activity in the adjoining factory which shares the same owner. There has been no single, authoritative government spokesperson to inform the public accurately of the number of workers employed in both shifts, and those in the night shift who were trapped inside. The BGMEA too has been unable to calculate near accurate estimates from the production capacity of the factory.

The official response to the building collapse has been hesitant and has raised misgivings on several counts: the first is the issue of culpability for the collapse and for workers' lives, the second is the efficacy of the rescue operation, the third is the compensation for the dead, the injured and the long term rehabilitation and re-employment of all workers employed in this factory.

Accountability for industrial deaths

The first news on the electronic channel and later in a small column in the print media described it as an accident. However, these were no ordi-

nary deaths, workers did not succumb by chance or accident. Their deaths amount to culpable homicide. We need to recognise the responsibility of the management, the engineering and construction firm for defaults in construction, and the negligence of the regulatory agencies in not checking the construction. What is called for is a prompt, independent and effective investigation, resulting in prosecution and punishment of those responsible.

A day or so earlier a boiler explosion had killed one worker. But that warning went unheeded. Most experts and even officials of the BGMEA have recognised that the fault lay with the construction itself. Permission from the Cantonment Board was given for a four-storey building that was constructed two years ago on 9,374 square feet. We are told that the owner had bought land from Habibur Rahman six years ago. The construction extended onto the Baipol Khai (canal) which is marshy, public land.

the adjoining factory facing the highway. The first step should have been to seize all documents in this factory, and, in fact in the Baridhara office. Should one attribute this default on the part of the government agencies or BGMEA to inefficiency or a cover up?

What became of the missing workers

Three hundred and fifty workers buried under debris of a collapsing building would be a national disaster in any country, demanding immediate and large scale rescue. But although the Military Engineer Corps and Fire Service arrived three hours later, on 11 April, there was little they could do without proper equipment. A crane had to be borrowed from a private company in Naogaon, and it took around 40 hours to reach the site. By 13 April, the media reported that rescue and removal of debris was carried out with 3 concrete drillers, welding equipment, rotary saws, tripping hands, spades,

expected was some effective action. The BGMEA President said the association would pay for medical treatment and a compensation not exceeding Tk 100,000.00. It's not certain how this sum has been arrived at. Up till a few years ago, when workers died in fire accidents a lump sum of Tk 25,000.00 was used to buy off the families. This has gone up to match inflation no doubt, but even so the promised sum does not seem to tally with any legally calculated needs of the workers. The 1895 Workers' Compensation Act as amended in 1955 argues for a calculation of claims on the number of years a worker would have been employed plus other factors. A garment worker is more than often the only means of support or the main means of support for a family, and would have been so for many years to come. How is a family expected to survive with Tk 100,000.00, and for how long? Even now they are totally penniless,

export, mainly to Canada, France, US, Belgium, Spain and Germany. These companies have by now learned of the disaster and have expressed more concern than has been forthcoming from the factory owner. Mismanagement or lack of compliance on workers' safety in this case may reflect upon the entire industry, and Bangladesh can hardly afford to give the global competitive practice. This is yet another reason why there has to be a credible move to attribute responsibility for the disaster.

Criminal charges

What steps have been taken to hold the owner responsible for compensating the workers, for loss of jobs, medical care, etc. and the bereaved families of dead workers? While the police have filed an FIR under section 308A (case no 48) in Savar thana, they are moving at a snail's pace to trace the accused or seize evidentiary docu-

These were no ordinary deaths, workers did not succumb by chance or accident. Their deaths amount to culpable homicide. We need to recognise the responsibility of the management, the engineering and construction firm for defaults in construction, and the negligence of the regulatory agencies in not checking the construction. What is called for is a prompt, independent and effective investigation, resulting in prosecution and punishment of those responsible.

Interviews with different officials as reported in the media have identified insufficient piling in the foundation and beams to support an eight storey structure. This was not done presumably for cost saving. Who was the architect or engineer who drafted these plans? Enquiries relating to their competence are of utmost importance.

The Cantonment Board admitted that they had not given permission for the last four storeys, then how come no one took any action when they saw this tall building rising just behind the Cantonment Office in Polashbari? As is usual in such cases several enquiry committees have been set up. RAJUK has set up a five-member committee, to investigate the causes of the collapse, but it has yet to submit a report, and there is no mention of testing the soil, mode of construction, use of material, etc. BGMEA too has set up a separate enquiry and some of its members have been on the site. But when will its report be made public? Have similar investigations been made into the purchase of land? The absence of records is supposed to be hampering the investigative work. But we know that the owner Shahrar Syed Hossain also owned Shahrar Fabrics,

reciprocating saws and crow bars and three cranes and two bull dozers.

Many civic, labour, environment and human rights organisations have voiced concern with the rescue operation. Was it not possible to borrow more equipment? Or to request expertise from neighbouring countries if local expertise was not available? Shouldn't saving lives have been priority number one? From morning till night workers' families lined up on open grounds, being baked in the hot sun, waiting interminably to see if their relative would emerge. Although there were several government agencies, BGMEA and some voluntary groups, there was no one to cope with the trauma of these families. No one had thought of providing some sustenance or even water to them. Identification of dead bodies also seemed a very cumbersome and insensitive affair, with bodies spread on the ground attracting flies.

Compensation

There has been much show of sympathy for the workers. The Prime Minister and President both went to the site, and left with prayers for the dead. But more than exhortations what was

as there is no one from the management to pay them their dues for last month. Does BGMEA not have a responsibility to make sure that payments are made from its member's account? The adjoining factory was functioning, orders were processed, some payments must have come into the company's accounts, which need to be offset against workers' dues.

It was gathered that 84 injured were admitted into different hospitals. In the Orthopaedic Hospital alone there are patients who may need long term physical rehabilitation for loss of limbs. Who will stand guarantee for their treatment and for their physical rehabilitation? What has been the contribution of the government, BGMEA and the employer to hospital charges? Promises of intent are not enough, the workers need written agreements so that they are not ignored once the publicity cameras are switched off Spectrum. A large number of workers are now without jobs because of the collapse, which raises the question of their compensation as well.

The collapsed Spectrum Industries and its sister Shahrar Fabrics produced nearly 80,000 items of clothing for

ments. Why this hesitation? Their first port of call should be his father-in-law, who happens to be a member of Parliament and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Land, and his wife who was recently appointed a High Court judge. Surely, since both have taken an oath, under the constitution, to maintain the law, they could not very well appear to act against the law in this matter. They are oath bound to speak the truth.

In order to pursue compensation cases, a prime need is to recover records of workers and other relevant factory files. Some of these records may have been maintained in Shahrar Fabrics, and a court order should have been obtained to seal all documents. If the public prosecutor's office is unable to invest energy and expertise into this case of corporate culpability, it could perhaps draw upon legal expertise in the country as was done in the case of rape and murder of Yasmin in 1995.

Building a strong industry

The garment industry is by far the country's most important manufacturer, earning around \$5 billion annually and accounting for about two thirds of all exports. Dare we

admit that a large share of this is the contribution of the workers? Bangladesh has about 2,500 garment factories employing almost 1.8 million workers, about 80 per cent of them being women. While the manufacturers have had access to credit and other facilities, little has been done to improve conditions of work. Is it because we feel workers are expendable?

An industry cannot develop stability and strength to compete globally unless the workers are guaranteed security and safety. A few months ago a good example was shown by the government to honour those who lost their lives in the service of the country. When twelve army officers were killed in the Congo, they were given a state funeral, flags flew half mast, a national period of mourning was declared, and the families were compensated with substantial amounts. This is as it should be. However, contrast this with the case of the victims in the killing fields at Spectrum, where the families were given little consideration to bury their dead, the injured lie in hospitals wondering who will pay their bills, and no workers have received their dues, leave alone compensation.

In these days of competitive trade and consumer consciousness, Bangladesh cannot afford to be careless about its working environment. Many buyers have instituted compliance conditions which need to be observed. Even if there is a scarcity of information within the country, Spectrum buyers have a reputation to protect. Consumer organisations such as Clean Clothes Campaign have already raised concerns about workers' rights in this case in particular and in the industry in general. Next week, in Washington, a BGMEA delegation is due to participate in discussions on duty free access for garment exports to them. Their argument will no doubt be that Bangladesh is a poor country and needs such support. We too agree that the garment industry in Bangladesh needs to be sustained, but not only in the interest of the manufacturers. An equally important stake is that of the workers, and therefore the industry must provide a safe work place. To prove that they intend to do so, the culpability for Spectrum must be addressed.

Hameeda Hossain is founder-member of Ain-O-Salish Kendro.

Is this an attempt at 'reforming' Islam?

DR FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

DESPITE the euphoria of the organisers, the spectacle that took place in the basement of a New York City church on March 18—a Muslim woman leading a mixed gender Friday congregational prayer—is not a cataclysmic event in the world of Islam. This is merely another example of ritual trumping worship. Muslim women do lead prayers, but only in an all-women gathering. And the Friday mid-day prayers are not obligatory for women.

For spiritual inspiration, the Muslims study the holy Quran, which sets down the laws, and for temporal guidance they consult the Sunnah or the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, who is the best embodiment of those laws. The tradi-

tion of a male leading the prayers dates back to Prophet Muhammad. There are some practical reasons for it. Women are excused from prayers and fasting during their menstrual cycles. It would disrupt the functioning of a mosque to have the Imam absent for a few days every month.

While there is something to be said for providing Muslim women with the same, if not better facilities than men in the mosque, to think that a woman leading a mixed congregation prayer, with males and females worshipping side by side, is one way to achieve women's equality is misguided. A distinction must be made between the tenets of the faith and the misdeeds of some followers. For example, if a Muslim man abuses a Muslim woman, it is the flaw in the man's character, not

Islam, which is responsible.

While it is reasonable, indeed commendable, to demand equal facilities for women at the mosques, to use that as a springboard for "reforming" Islam is sacrilegious. For over fourteen hundred years Islam has served about 25 per cent of peace-loving humanity very well. Just because Osama bin Laden and his fanatical maniacs have carried out terrorist acts in the name of Islam does not mean Islam needs to "reform". If the organisers of the March 18 event believe that changes must be made in Islam for it to be good enough for them, they are out of step with 1.3 billion followers of Islam spread over every continent on Earth.

Islam does recognise differences

LETTER FROM AMERICA

between men and women and assign them specific responsibilities. While each has advantages over the other in certain areas, neither is "superior". It was Islam that stopped the practice of burying the female child alive, allowed women to own and inherit property, receive education and divorce their husbands. Prophet Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a business woman who hired the prophet for his honesty. A woman (Khadija) was the first convert to Islam. In more recent times, over the last decade, five Muslim women have

headed democratically-elected governments in Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. Men are providers and protectors of women in Islam. If a woman earns an income, she is not obligated to spend one cent of it for supporting the household, that is the husband's responsibility. Islam does advise women (and men) to dress modestly, and not to flaunt their beauty. Muslim men and women are instructed to confine their sexuality within the privacy of their homes.

Non-Muslims ask: if Islam is a religion of peace, how does it explain

Osama bin Laden? That Muslims repudiate everything bin Laden stands for does not seem to register. Insinuations abound that there must be something in the religion itself which promotes terrorists like bin Laden. There is no such thing in Islam. The bin Ladens of the world practice what author Karen Armstrong calls "militant piety", which is not shared by the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims.

Muslims complain that Judaism is never blamed for Israel's repression of the Palestinians. Hinduism is exonerated in India's suppression of the Kashmiris, and Christianity is never faulted for the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims by the Serbs in the 1990s or the continued Russian butchery of the Muslim Chechens. There is muted

outrage when Muslims are under attack in Afghanistan, Iraq and several other places in the world; when Muslims fight back, the universal condemnation is vociferous!

Increasingly, there are innuendoes that Islam is the reason for the Muslim world's backwardness. It is true that after the two Golden Ages in the 7th and 13th centuries, Muslims have not led the world in human accomplishments. However, today's Muslims are no more backward than the Hindus of India, the Buddhists of the Far East or the non-Western Christians the world over, yet the indictment is reserved solely for the Muslims.

Those who would like to make Islam "progressive" should be careful not to confuse rituals with the core tenets of the faith. They can do Muslims a great

favour by demonstrating how the faith ought to be practiced according to the Quran and the Sunnah, instead of the distorted version some Muslims have embraced. Worship of one God, compassion for all of God's creations, non-compulsion in religion, sharing of wealth, and creation of a just society are the foundations of Islam.

Although absolutely vital, five daily prayers are not the only manifestation of what makes Islam unique. After questioning the dead about their faith, on the Day of Judgement, God will ask Muslims whether they have taken care of the orphans, the widows, the needy, and the oppressed. If they have not, there is little hope for paradise.