equal in many countries in the

LATE S. M. ALI

**DHAKA MONDAY JULY 4. 2005** 

#### After the galvanising concert

G-8 affirmative action imperative

NE would hope that the largest musical extravaganza ever produced, held across 12 time zones in ten different locations of four continents, to draw the attention of super-rich countries to the plight of the world's poorest nations, especially in Africa, has marked a significant step towards 'making poverty history'. The concert participated by millions of people and watched over by a billion on TV is a sensitising forerunner to the forthcoming G-8 Summit next week in Gleneagles in Scotland where the major thrust will be Africa and climate change.

In spite of the huge symbolism of the concert, the second of the kind held almost twenty years after the first, the organisers must be commended for their efforts to remind the leaders of the rich eight nations that a situation, where the majority of the people of the world go hungry to bed every night, where almost fifty thousand die every day of it, cannot be allowed to persist for long.

Notwithstanding the razzmatazz of an event like this, and long after the hustle and bustle of the Live 8 Concerts will have settled down, and long after most of the many millions that attended the concerts will have returned to the comforts of their homes, the words of Nelson Mandela will hopefully reverberate in the policy planning circles of the G-8 nations that freedom from poverty was not a charity bestowed on the poor by the affluent but a matter of right.

However, there is merit in the comments of those who suggest that it is not poverty that ails the continent of Africa but more importantly, it is corruption that leads to poverty that must be eradicated first; thus one must not overlook the issue of governance that remains at the core of all developmental dynamics.

We would like to share the optimism of the UN secretary general that the focus on Africa and the fight against poverty will help move the world's concerns forward. Going by the reports there are good indications that the G8 heads of state will confirm the debt-relief matters being recommended by their foreign ministers and that they would also be forwardlooking and take some concrete steps on trade negotiations.

To seek freedom from poverty is not seeking charity but

#### **Another dastardly murder!** Perhaps, change of focus due

HE gruesome murder of a businessman in broad daylight on Saturday at Jigatola, a very busy spot in the city, is clearly indicative of how active the criminal network remains, despite occasional claims to the contrary by authorities. We are simply shocked to see how easily killers can enter someone's office, shoot him point blank and leave the scene in a cavalier fashion. Wasn't the law and order problem in the city supposed to have been contained to a considerable degree, especially after the elite forces like Rab and others came into picture?

Hired killers have been at work. We recall the murder of a cable operator not long ago which was put down to professional jealousy. There have been incidents of kidnapping, burglary and extortion as well.

So who are these criminals? Police apparently have no clue. According to newspaper reports, however, the wellknown criminals who controlled the crime world of Dhaka, have either been killed in 'crossfire' or arrested or in hiding. Some have even reportedly fled the country. Interestingly, the small timers, a few still teenagers, who had assisted the big shots in their criminal operations earlier on, have now taken the place of their 'bosses'.

The law enforcement agencies do not seem to have any knowledge about the criminals currently ruling the roost which explains why the police are groping in the dark to apprehend them. They are not on police dossier and their ranks are growing.

Would it, therefore, be wrong to suggest that the authorities' focus on big criminals is having small time offenders slip through the fingers? Clearly, an update of the criminals' list is required to bring the new entrants to the crime world under surveillance and control. Our hope is, this would be professionally done, devoid of any kind of influence being brought to bear on the listing process, so that they can be handled equally professionally.

## Graduating from camel jockeys to housemaids?

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

HERE was a time, probably not entirely bygone, when it was commonplace to see Bangladeshi children as little as seven years of age being used as jockeys in camel races in Arab lands for the pleasure of oil-rich sheikhs. The children weighed little, cost little, and earned a great deal more profit to their employers than more mature jockeys. We are told, under sharp criticism from human rights groups and some normally fussy liberals, this variety of child labour for pleasure is being phased out. There is as yet no evidence that it has ceased throughout the Arab

The use of child camel jockeys is among the worst kinds of servitude. It looks as though we are now actively substituting one kind of servitude for another for our citizens abroad. We are about to send Bangladeshi women abroad to do "household jobs' or, in plain language, to work as maid servants. According to news reports, the first batch of women will leave for Saudi Arabia soon. One supposes others will follow, and will be destined for other Arab countries as well.

The women in question who are going abroad to work as servants in households of the rich are not entirely on their own. They are being organised in groups and groomed, with the active support of Bangladesh government. They have been trained in household work at an "academy" in Bangladesh where the curriculum also includes hygiene as well as the English and Arabic languages. A high level interministerial meeting was recently held to discuss, among other things.

the terms and conditions of their employment and their welfare in general. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the project is that these housemaids have been designated Ansars, or helpers in Arabic.

This does call for some deep reflection. Since the idea of sending our women to foreign lands to work as housemaids has the underpinning of state policy, I believe this warrants introspection at the national level too.

At least some of us, though

temptuous of it when it comes to doing the manual labour themselves. A typical government functionary will be horrified at the thought of dusting his own living room. Second, if individuals in our society frequently deny the dignity owed to their own labour, the denial is even starker when it comes to work of the housemaid. It will be readily recognised that "you son of a housemaid!" is not an uncommon term of abuse (I refuse to use the

authentic Bengali expression here).

to send out Bangladeshi women to work as housemaids in the Middle East, and being excited about it? A good answer will be hard to find.

But there are a number of good reasons why sending of Bangladeshi women to work as household servants in the Middle East should be reconsidered. The first thing that comes to mind here is that, given our national attitude to domestic servants I mentioned above, it is plain hypocrisy to glorify the work of those who are being sent

our own? Given the social attitudes and mores in most Middle Eastern countries, it is highly unlikely that hey will

The women to be sent abroad are being trained in hygiene, housework, and language of the householders. Who is training the employers? Of course, no programme of training of the members of the household on how to treat servants exists. Such a programme is not even practicable.

world. In the present context I must point out in particular that the role of women in our society stands head and shoulders above that of their counterparts in Middle Eastern societies. Need I mention that not only do our women vote. and give evidence in courts of law. as equals of men, they do a host of other things, from driving a car to being prime minister of the country? There is a lot that still needs to be done to improve the status of women in Bangladesh. But compared to the position of women in other Muslim majority countries, the role of women in Bangladesh is something we can be proud of. Why must we send our women, with a national seal of approval, to societies where the place of women is distinctly inferior to that in Bangladesh? And yes, a sense of national pride

should have stopped all those whose desian it is to send our women to servitude in foreign lands.

The international standing of Bangladesh is not high. Dakar, capital of a small African country, is more often found on international maps than Dhaka, capital of a country of 140 million. Kolkata, a provincial capital, is more often found on maps of Asia than the capital of sovereign Bangladesh. Sending housemaids to Arab lands is hardly a way to lift our standing

Let us continue sending our troops on peace keeping missions abroad, where they have done a great job. Let us keep our women in.

Mahfuzur Rahman is an economist

There is a lot that still needs to be done to improve the status of women in Bangladesh. But compared to the position of women in other Muslim majority countries, the role of women in Bangladesh is something we can be proud of. Why must we send our women, with a national seal of approval, to societies where the place of women is distinctly inferior to that in Bangladesh?

certainly all, are familiar with the term "dignity of labour." The venerable term implies that no form of honest human labour should be deserving of contempt. It should not be beneath me to carry my own suitcase at, say, a railway station. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar demonstrated this well when he carried the luggage of a babu who was clearly dying of shame at the prospect of having to carry it himself. I have seen petty officials using peons and servants to carry their tiny little briefcases. An elementary appreciation of dignity of labour would have induced them to carry their own

I call attention to the concept of dignity of labour for two reasons. First, many of us, especially our own babus and elites, are plainly con-

briefcases. Neither is cleaning one's

own toilet anything to be ashamed

We simply do not care about the dignity of the housemaid's labour. Trumpeting the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God would make no difference to our ingrained disdain of the profession of the housemaid, never mind that life in a typical well-to-do Bangladeshi family would grind to a halt if by some magic this breed of servants were to disappear

country is plain servitude. Individual decisions to work as housemaids are not open to question. An individual should be free to choose whatever profession she or he likes. But in the present case, a national decision appears to have been taken. The question then arises: if the work of the housemaid is so looked down on in our society, as well as in other Asian societies, why are we getting ourselves organised

The work of maid servants in our

work. The prospective housemaids are being sent to Arab lands as "Ansars." Historically, that term was applied to the people of Medina who made enormous sacrifices to come to the assistance of the Prophet (SM) of Islam and his companions when they migrated to that city from Mecca in dire straits. There are few episodes of Islam's history that carried greater significance for the nascent religion. The use of the term for a batch of women we are sending abroad to help in housework is certainly tendentious and seems to mask some ulterior design.

abroad. And we are glorifying the

But there are other, and equally weighty, considerations as well. Will these women be treated with the respect that the concept of dignity of labour warranted? Will they be treated any differently in Arab lands than maid servants are treated in

a typical rich Middle Eastern family treating its housemaid with the respect that comes with acceptance of dignity of labour as a major determinant of human relations. Societies there, and elsewhere, have still very far to go for that to happen. Neither is there any reason to expect that these women will return to their home country as

Without a radical change in social

attitudes, it is impossible to visualise

better members of the society. It might seem strange that one needs to point this out from time to time: Bangladesh is culturally as rich as it is economically poor. Despite our many faults, the country's democratic institutions, its faith in individual freedom and secular ideology that spurred its independence movement, and its

### A Santorini diary



M.J. AKBAR

HE cat came free. Everything else had a price, except the The cat, brown-grey with blue eyes, Ottoman whiskers, sat upright on the white stone wall, her body silhouetted half against a blue sky and half against a blue sea, and checked me out impassively. Satisfied with what she saw, or tempted by the breakfast on the table of my neighbour across the wall at the Canaves Oia resort, she scurried off, leaving nothing between me and a horizon indistinguishable from the

terraced rooms set up on a cliff rising above the Aegean, on the island of Santorini, the diamond in a cluster of thousands of jewels collectively known as the Cyclades. Its special claim to fame is that it is volcanic, the last eruption being in 1939. But the Big Bang came in 1500 BC. The truth is buried in legend; the line between the two is in any case delicate in a land with as much history as Greece. The Athenian statesman Solon (6th century BC) made the first recorded suggestion that this Santorini-based volcano-cum-tsunami sent the fabled city of Atlantis to the bottom of the ocean. Since then it has been settled/ruled by a circle of neighbours, all of whom took their turn:

Phoenicians (today's Lebanese), Spartans, Egyptians (under the Byzantines and Ottomans until Greece won her independence in 1821. The past appears in the most unexpected forms: the Ottomans are visible in a local variation of the shalwarkameez, still worn by a few middleaged women in an era of tops and

YOU know you are ageing when your head gets fried.

volcano I was ready to believe every

When we cruised around the

sunburn. I appreciate the desire of the white person to turn brown, a much better colour, but we are already there. Back on shore it took me time to understand the slight scratchy itch on my head. I had forgotten to wear a cap, because had forgotten I was bald. My scalp now looks like a map of the world with more than five continents, and I can't even hide it with hair.

WE were in Greece for the annual conference of the New York Times' worldwide partners, and in Santorini

Santorini. You can hire a donkey from the capital, Fira, to the old port, Yialos, for three euros, or take the quaintly name Funicular for two. The latter takes only five minutes for the journey, but if you are counting minutes, don't go to Santorini. The Funicular was a gift to the island from a certain Evangelos Nomicos but not before the trade union of donkey drivers had made its point: 20 percent of the gross receipts (gross, not net) from the Funicular

SOCIALISM is alive and well in

and gave them Roman names. And so Ares, the god of war, became Mars, Aphrodite became Venus, and Hephaestus became Vulcan. It has been wisely noted that the ancient Greeks did not have a religion; they turned their fears into gods, and then made the gods behave like themselves. The Odyssey narrates the story of how Hephaestus (Vulcan) trapped his wife, Aphrodite (Venus), when she was making love to Ares (Mars) by ensnaring them in his net.

literature and music, have no

Lysistrata won the day by shutting down the night. Anyone, incidentally, who thinks boyfriends are a modern idea should read the ancient Greeks.

home without sexual activity. I will not

raise my legs towards the ceiling" and

IT was not only Lysistrata who saved the Greeks from speaking Persian. The oracle at Delphi, which was always consulted before any great event, played its part as well When Xerxes threatened to overwhelm Athens in 480 BC the oracle advised Athenians to put their "trust in the wooden walls." The general interpretation was to take a stand behind the city walls but Thermistocles argued that the wooden walls meant their ships made of wood. And so Athens challenged Persia on the sea, and won the historic battle of Salamis. The oracle succeeded because, like an

Indian astrologer, it left more than one

option open. I often wonder why Greece is hyphenated with western civilisation when it is so eastern. At the airport immigration counter a corpulent official lounges behind another sitting at the desk. The latter is doing the work: the former having served the nation in his prime, is preparing for retirement. which is only ten years or so away What could be more eastern than this? On a road to the Acropolis. one municipal worker is busy repairing a drainage outlet while three others stand around him, chatting and smoking. This is not injustice. They will work in turns, one at a time. But work together to finish the job in a quarter of the

more Indian than that? No wonder, as I left Athens airport

time? No chance. What could be

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age

# BYLINE

On a road to the Acropolis, one municipal worker is busy repairing a drainage outlet while three others stand around him, chatting and smoking. This is not injustice. They will work in turns, one at a time. But work together to finish the job in a quarter of the time? No chance. What could be more Indian than that?

story told in every folk song about these magical waters, of mermaids and demons and ghosts and sailors enchanted into stone in mysterious caves inside a sea of heavenly blue. (It is heavenly; water is colourless, and adopts the hue of the sky.) Our gentle timber boat might have been from the past as well, except for the motor and the absence of sails. I kept wondering why it seemed familiar, since my sole previous trip to Greece had been restricted to Athens and a ride to the oracle at Delphi, until it struck me that I might have seen something similar in The Guns of Navarone. Gregory Peck was not around, but I did espy a couple of Anthony Quinns. My fellow quests, unmindful of age, were happy to plunge into the cool waters when we rested under the shade of a volcano. I remained on deck. in shirt and trousers, not out of modesty, but inability and caution. I can't swim, and have no appetite for

as the weekend quests of Themis Alafouzos, scion of a great Greek family and owner of a great newspaper, Kathemirini. I have rarely met anyone as gracious and charming as his mother. Pearls of a dazzle I have never seen, nor am likely to see, might have set her apart at first glance, but as a hostess she was in and out of the kitchen of the Katina taverna on the seaside, personally supervising the food, and then attending to each guest with elegance and charm. A gang of newspaper managers and editors can be as cynical as any lot in the world, but we melted: everyone wanted a picture with her. At one point she turned to me, her voice full of paternal censure. looked disdainfully at my robust cigar and asked. "Why do you smoke?" All potential wisecracks about helping Comrade Castro's economy froze on my lips. meekly put the cigar away, delighted to experience schoolboy guilt after

The trade union lives! So does communism, which gets about 8 percent of the vote in every election. The spirit extends beyond the 8 percent. The graffiti in Athens attests to a strong tradition of antiimperialism. Some of the graffiti about George Bush and Osama bin Laden in a quiet street just below the Acropolis cannot be printed. It would get me into trouble with America's Homeland Security.

go to the Fira Union of Mule Drivers.

THERE is an incidental, but entertaining, connection between Greece and the George Bush presidency. About two years before Bush was first elected, a small group of intellectual-activists sat down to fashion the agenda that could bring him to power (Condoleezza Rice is the starring survivor of that group). They called themselves the Vulcans after the Greco-Roman god. As is wellknown, the Romans absorbed the Greek pantheon into their worship

after a cuckold? And what happens when a Vulcan tries to emulate his wife's lover, Mars? Is this an explanation for the misadventure known as the Iraq war? IF the Greeks understood war, their dramatists also understood the futility of it, and no one better that

Why on earth did George Bush's

intellectual mentors name their group

Aristophanes who wrote Lysistrata in 411 BC. She found the perfect solution to the bitter and unending wars between Athens and Sparta, who continued to fight even when the hated enemy, the Medes (today's Persians) were at their door. Lysistrata organised what might be called the first women's trade union, and struck work in a unique way. They decided to deny their men sex until the Athenians and Spartans had stopped fighting. The oath that Lysistrata made the women take is worth repeating: "I will not allow either boyfriend or husband to approach me in erect condition. I will live at

that unless we stop it today, it is

going to destroy us tomorrow.

Secondly, Iraq was behind Septem-

ber 11. The American media ran its

propaganda along with these lies.

for Delhi. I felt was leaving home to come home.

## Imperial diplomacy of the western media

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

OAM Chomsky in one of his interviews with David Barsamian(the author of Confronting Empire with Eqbal Ahmed and Culture and Resistance with Edward Said) published in Z Mag zine (July-August 2003, Vol.16, No.7/8) under the title 'Collateral Language' sharply slams the Western/American media for its imperial diplomacy. Chomsky draws our attention to the adoption of the term 'collateral damage' by the Western/American media to describe the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq and the role of language in shaping and forming people's understanding of events. The dictionary meaning of the term 'collateral damage' is 'unintentional injury to civilians or damage to civilian buildings which occurs during a military operation' (Collins Cobuild). But the paradox is that the wholesale killing (not simply 'death') of the people in Afghanistan and Iraq in American military operation was not, of course, 'unintentional'. The fact is that American media here acts as an ideological apparatus or as a discursive institution, fabricating/distorting 'messages', manufacturing public consent for discursive purposes, acting as a government propaganda machine or serving the 'corporate power' (to use a term of Arundhuti Rov) of a vested party. Here the media, within its purview of print and

electronic media, refers to literature texts, books, journals, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, documentaries, all kinds of electronic media outlets, and, on the whole, the whole establishment of intellectual culture.

In his 1964 book Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, Marshal McLuhan stated: 'The medium is the message'. Considering the present day context of the role the western media (BBC, CNN, ABC News, NBC, CBS, FOX News, Foreign Affairs, The National Interest, The Atlantic Monthly, The Washington Post, The Economist etc.) is playing, this statement can be re-written as 'The medium is power'. The message that is manufactured by the western media has become a product of the power discourse of western hegemony. Edward Said excellently spoke about this in his book Covering Islam (1981), exploring the cover age of Islam in western media as a fundamentalist religion provoking terror, anti-American and antidemocratic sentiments around the world. Such use of the media should be called its abuse. A very recent example of media abuse is the video game Consul 3 made by Sony Computers Entertainment America Incorporated representing Bangladesh-- along with Morocco and Poland-- as a terrorist state. The use of media in representing Islam and Muslims discursively, seeking support for Bush's 'war on terror', fashioning out diplomatically maneuvered euphemistic terminologies like 'Operation Enduring Freedom' by suppressing their original meanings to validate Bush's imperial aggression into Iraq and Afghanistan speaks volumes about how the media is abused by the Americanized western media empire. Islam appears in the media as almost synonymous with terrorism/evil. Hence, the abusive use of

the European society) and immigrant communities like Muslims that refuse to 'align their values to those of western democracy are a ticking time-bomb'.

The American/Western media has always played a 'diplomatic' role in laying (pseudo) justified claims to Bush's war on 'terrorism' or 'Islamic evil', applying Huntington's theory of the 'clash of civilizations' which

countries, giving the clear impression that America is justified in launching its 'war on terrorism' against them. The cover page title of The Economist following America's Afghanistan attack read: 'A heartrending but just war'. Max Boot, one of the Bush administration's policy makers, has recently published a book entitled The Savage Wars of Peace (Basic Books, May 2003).

'freedom' meant 'occupation' (as Arundhuti Rov stated). Regrettably. the media never questions what kind of freedom it is that America was trying to achieve. Interestingly, the media has rather sent journalists 'embedded' with the armed forces to report on the war successes of their patrons, and not the horrors of the American attack. The one term that the media repeatedly uses to justify

The BBC and the CNN churns out lexical constructions such as 'Operation Enduring Freedom', 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', blackmailing people by not telling them that here 'freedom' meant 'occupation' (as Arundhuti Roy stated). Regrettably, the media never questions what kind of freedom it is that America was trying to achieve. Interestingly, the media has rather sent journalists 'embedded' with the armed forces to report on the war successes of their patrons, and not the horrors of the American attack.

'Islamist extremism',' Islamist fundamentalism', 'Islamist antidemocracy', 'Militant Islam' and 'unlawful combatant' became norms. BBC News. a collection of BBC reports on America's 'war on terrorism', (published by BBC in 2003, edited by Sara Back and Malcolm Downing) can be consulted in this respect. Referring to Islam as 'Islamist Extremism', a special report of The Economist (2 April 2005,p.22) entitled 'Living with Islam: The New Dutch Model?' writes that Muslims should know many things for living in ' an open and law-governed society' (which is

such terms like 'Radical Islam'.

reveals that the clashes in future would be not between nations but between cultures, more specifically between Islamic and Western culture. 'America under attack' was the 'breaking news' title of BBC and CNN following the 9/11 plane attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. No doubt, the attack was unbelievable and unprecedented (BBC and CNN title also says this) and the effort is there, in using such a title, to enlarge its scope thousand times, telling people how the most impossible thing happened. These media outlets never used a caption like 'Afghanistan/Irag under attack' when America attacked these What a farce! Who will believe that America wants to bring peace in the world through war? The Americanized western media believes in this 'peace' policy and is telling us about so. Mr. Boot says in his book that the American soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere are 'social workers'. He argues that America should not be afraid to fight 'the savage wars of peace' if necessary 'to enlarge the empire of liberty'. Look at Mr. Boot's language!

The BBC and the CNN churns out lexical constructions such as 'Operation Enduring Freedom', 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', blackmailing people by not telling them that here

the American attack upon Iraq is WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) that Saddam possesses as if America and its allies have no such WMD. America pre-empted attacks upon Afghanistan and Irag to stop them midway before they could strike it further. In fact, the American 'war on

terrorism' is a mask for occupying geo-politically important regions like the Middle East and the Central Asia to feed its hegemonic purposes. The Iraq war was the result of two 'big' lies, as Chomsky says in the interview mentioned above. Firstly, Iraq was an imminent threat to the security of the US and the logic was

The media never asked why 9/11 happened or challenged the Bush administration for its fabricated or manufactured account of 9/11. They never told the American public about the trans-Afghanistan pipeline deal signed in December 2002, which was the real reason Bush and Co. bombed Afghanistan to smithereens. They seemed to be totally oblivious of the fact that the oil of the Middle East was the ultimate cause of American 'war on terrorism'. One thing they did most perfectly: they brainwashed the American people and the like-minded world community into believing a heap of lies regarding burgeoning Islamic terror and Iraqi WMD, among others. Few days back, I was reading an issue of Current History (vol.101, January 2002) at the DU Library. I found all the articles here speaking for and about the security and freedom of Americans as well as America's place in the world in the wake of 9/11, America's just 'war on terrorism'. The first line of an article entitled 'America's Approch to the Middle East: Legacies, Questions and Possibilities', written by Augustus Richard Norton reads: ' How prudently will the United States spend the momentum it has won in the impressive defeat of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan?' The writer

with decisive tone says: " the onslaught of September 11 sprang from the Middle East". I was left with this impression: the American/western media is playing a complicitous role with the CIA and the Pentagon in building up an American empire. The media here is embedded in American imperial hegemony: it is an effective tool of imperialism.

Playing such a role, the Americanized western media has implanted 'fear' in the minds of the American public. Rather than asking the Bush Administration why 9/11 happened or challenging its manufactured account of the happening, it is bent on giving the impression that the hands of Islamic terror are behind the attack. By acting in this manner, the media also helped Bush to come to power for the second time. Few days before the presidential election, the media released a simulated image of Laden in a videotape blurting out his threat to America and we know that it acted as a great manufacturer of public support for Bush. It sold Laden to the Americans to buy the presidential berth for jingoist Bush. The whole thing is rooted in America's imperial discourse.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is Lecturer in English, Eastern University, Dhaka