

How long will it take for American withdrawal from Iraq?



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

THE title is a moot question. The issue was discussed at length all over the world since the invasion of Iraq two years ago. Notwithstanding the propriety and desirability of the appropriate decision, no one was left with any illusion that America's de facto occupation of Iraq would end soon, at least not until the desired goal is achieved.

What was the real objective of the Bush Administration to invade Iraq, along with its trusted ally and some friends across the Atlantic? The ostensible purpose was to strip Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction, restore democracy by removing its autocratic ruler, and rid the land of terrorists. While weapons of mass destruction were never found, the tyrant Saddam Hussein has since been apprehended, and a process of democracy initiated.

But others allege that the real reason was to prevent a security threat perception by Iraq against Israel, the most trusted ally of the United States in that region, and an interest in Iraq's oil resources. Also a share in the reconstruction pie of the war-ravaged country by American contractors was cited as an additional motive.

For this, the US administration for the first time defied the authority of the UN Security Council by invading Iraq on the pretext of searching for elusive WMDs and a non-existent Al-Qaeda network in that country. Consequently, dictator Saddam Hussein was toppled, an interim election was held and the well publicised march on the road to democracy, it was claimed, was in progress. The new government is scheduled to frame a constitution for the country by 15th of the next month, or within another 6-month period, before holding a general election under the new constitution.

President Bush came out with a statement on Iraq last week, reiter-

ating his earlier refusal of setting a time-table for American troops' withdrawal before Iraqis are well-prepared to defend themselves and sustained his claim on the desired progress towards democracy. Out of the estimated requirement of 165,000 Iraqi troops, only 3,000 were reported to have been well-trained and equipped so far. But the administration was severely criticised a few days earlier in a Senate hearing on the war in Iraq. Having found no trace of the WMD and no connection of Saddam with the Al-Qaeda network, President Bush's

of the crime and the most sought after terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, is still at large, roaming the hills and deserts as a free man.

The American opinion polls against the war in Iraq plummeted sharply against the Bush regime. 61 percent of the American people now opine against going to war in Iraq, a rise from 39 percent registered at the beginning of the war. The Senate hearing on the war went against the administration. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's assertion that "the insurgents were in their last throes" was not vindicated

People also had to endure severe political and ethnic suppression during the centuries of Persian domination. The Hashemite kingdom set up in Iraq in 1932 following British occupation under the League of Nation's mandate at the end of the First World War lasted till 1958 when the military dictator Abdul Karim Kassem brutally killed King Faisal. The other branch of the Hashemite dynasty, however, still reigns in neighbouring Jordan.

Abdul Karim Kassem was later killed in 1963 and his body, tied

leader, Abdus Salam Aref, was also killed in a mysterious helicopter crash. Saddam's ascendancy to leadership and his brutal methods of retaining power is, however, known to all, and I was a part witness to the scenario as an Ambassador there in the early eighties.

The purpose of the fleeting review of the land, which is commonly known as the fertile crescent of Islam, bounded by the two great rivers, Tigris and the Euphrates, is to show that it has a record of war, violence, and assassination which is perhaps unparalleled in the

character or volatile nature of the people, it appears unlikely that the current insurgency in that country would end within a reasonable period of time by resorting only to force. The Sunnis, though a minority, have ruled the country for long and are unlikely to give up their struggle easily and promptly, unless their interests are taken into account. This calls for dialogues and negotiations aimed at a compromise for the establishment of a political and ruling apparatus where interests of all the three major ethnic and religious groups would be safeguarded. There could be a power-sharing process by way of forming a true national government.

Also, one may try to evolve a formula similar to the Lebanese one as embodied in its constitution wherein President would be a Maronite Christian, Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and Speaker of the Parliament a representative of the Shia community. When will the time be more opportune than now to initiate a process of reconciliation as the new constitution is in the process of being framed?

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CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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claim that Iraq without Saddam Hussein was a safer place now was not substantiated. There was no doubt that Saddam acted as a ruthless dictator and liquidated thousands of his personal enemies and Kurdish activists demanding autonomy. But since a year ago when the interim government was set up, not a single day has passed when some Iraqi civilians and American soldiers have not been killed, maimed, or injured. The insurgents blew themselves up in order to oppose the present regime and presence of the occupation forces. The country is in ruins, the bulk of the people remain unemployed and people are most unsafe to roam around the street. The acute shortage of electricity, safe drinking water, and basic necessities of life as well as lack of sanitation poses a stark contrast to the days of the Saddam regime.

The American people are in the process of being utterly dismayed at the continuation of the war, which has so far cost them over 1,700 lives, 12,000 maimed or injured soldiers and \$230 billion in taxpayers' money. Of course, the unprecedented devastations of 9/11 would evidently prompt any people to demand revenge and due punishment for the perpetrators of this heinous crime. But the administration went to war against the wrong country and people, whereas the perpetrator

acted by the top generals of the Pentagon who told the Senate Committee that the insurgents were as strong as before and being reinforced from across the borders. Senator Edward Kennedy demanded Rumsfeld's resignation. But the Senate Committee urged the President to have well-chalked about policy on Iraq. The President's emphasis that America must complete its mission before withdrawal after beating the insurgents by force has not produced the desired result. Yet, a sudden and precipitous withdrawal of American troops might veer the country to a civil war. Many, therefore, believe that political rather a military solution would bring peace to the war-torn country and allow a graceful withdrawal of American troops.

Iraq has long been a country with a record of wars and assassinations. In the 7th century the Holy Prophet's (SA) grandson, Imam Hossein, was killed with his family and supporters in Kerbala. His father, Hazrat Ali was stabbed to death while praying in a mosque in Kufa. A series of wars and devastations had taken place on this land at the time of establishment and destruction of the great ancient civilisations, namely the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. Blood baths were rampant in Baghdad and were committed by the ferocious Mongol marauder, Halaku Khan, in the Middle Ages.

behind a truck, was paraded in the streets of Baghdad. I was a witness to that horrific scene as a young diplomat. The secular Baath Party thereafter assumed power, but their

history of the world. Iraqi people not only brutally killed others but also were subjected to such killings and repression.

Given Iraq's history and the



White smoke billows from the site where a roadside bomb exploded near the Iranian embassy in central Baghdad, 05 July 2005. A US convoy was hit by the bomb.

AFP PHOTO/MARWAN NAAMANI

Ageing: A creeping problem for future society?

MESBAH-US-SALEHEEN

IN most gerontological literature, people above 60 years of age are considered as 'old' and taken to be the 'elderly' segment of the population of a country. United Nations has also categorised the age segments as: between 60-69 belong to 'young old', 70-79 'old old' and 80+ are 'older' respectively. Manu, in his Dharmashastra divided the span of human life into four stages - brahmacharya (student life), grihastha (family life), vanaprastha (in young old stage moving to forest) and finally sanyasa (asceticism). HelpAge International, an organisation of global action on ageing defines that the symbols of old age are: a) gray hair, b) wrinkles, c) loss of eyesight, d) loss of memory, e) ill health, f) dependency, g) physical limitations that hampers daily activities, h) walking with stick, i) menopause.

In last two decades, Bangladesh has been experiencing two transformations and has passed through two demographic changes. They are firstly, the rapid population growth in urban areas and secondly, the demographic transition having lower fertility with higher longevity. Rapid growth of urbanisation and the growth of population in urban areas are mostly occurred due to rural-urban migration. In this process of rural-urban migration, mostly young and young adults are prone to migrate, leaving aged people behind, causing more aged people in rural areas. This is in conformity with the situation faced by many developing countries of the world. With the increase of urban population, particularly to the larger urban areas, Bangladesh have also gone through the consequences of demographic transition affecting the age structure and also experiencing more aged people in rural areas.

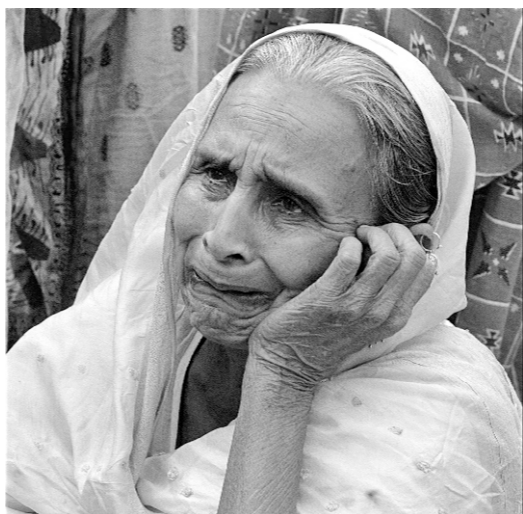
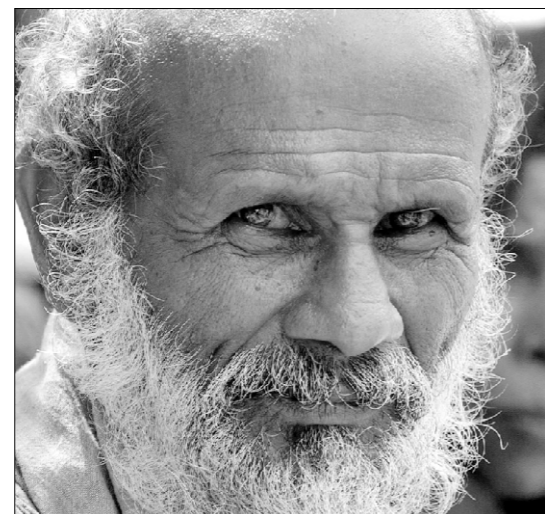
Fifty years before, life expectancy was around 38 years. Gradual improvements in public health and medical services have led to substantial control of specific infectious diseases, which translated into significant decreases in mortality rates. Government, NGOs and private institutions sponsored family

Our country having passing through both demographic and economic transition needs special attention to the ageing urban population. Policies for the betterment of ageing population both in urban as well as rural areas should be taken into consideration. Policies on social networks, economic security, health and housing for ageing population will strengthen the demographic scenario of the country.

planning made some impact on fertility. On top of it better sanitation, increased attention to maternal health and improved childcare facilities also reduced infant mortality. Life expectancy at birth rose steadily and in the Economic Review of 2005, published during last budget had reached nearly 65.4 years for females and 64.5 for males, and the average is 64.9 years. While the retirement age from a government position is 57 and from the private sector 60 years old, "formal retirement" is not an option for poor older people in Bangladesh, as they must work to survive. The majority of poor older people, both men and women either work or have worked in the non-formal sector and do not "retire" until they are no longer physically capable of working.

In our country, population above the age of sixty has reached over 7.2 million. The life expectancy is increasing on account of improved health services education and technology. The ageing is also becoming a subject of concern for the national planners dealing with socio-economic programmes. In Bangladesh older people are revered and they hold a prominent position within the family and society based on our cultural values. Our population is moving from rural to urban areas and creating social gap and more and more old people are being isolated in the villages.

The percentage of population aged 60 and over in Bangladesh was nearly 6 per cent in 2000 (Table 1). It will increase to 8.4 per cent and 16 per cent in 2025 and 2050, respectively. The percentage of older females will be higher than the older males in coming decades (Table 1). In the ageing index which indicates the number of persons 60 years old or over per hundred persons under age 15, will also affect the demographic structure of Bangladesh population. In 2000, the ageing index



was 12.8, and it will increase to 29.8 per cent and 72.9 per cent in 2025 and 2050, respectively.

Although the total dependency ratio of population of the country will come down from 71.9 per cent in 2000 to 50 per cent and 49 per cent in 2025 and 2050, respectively, the old-age dependency ratio will be tripled. It will increase from 5.4 per cent in 2000 to 7.8 and 16.2 per cent in 2025 and 2050 respectively. In the same periods the youth dependency ratio will come down to 66.5, 42.2 and 32.8, respectively. Both the growth rates of older persons and life expectancy will increase in future. The total life expectancy will grow from 60.7 in 2000-2005 period to 70.6 and 75.0 in 2025-2030 and 2045-2050 periods, while the survival rate will also be increased to 66.2, 82.1 and 88.7 per cent respectively for those periods of time. The median age of the country's population will also increase from 20.2 in 2000 to 26.9 and 34.8 in 2025 and 2050 respectively. The potential support ratio, which indicates the number of persons, aged 15 to 64 per every person aged 65 or older will decrease from 18.6 in 2000 to 12.9 in 2025 and 6.2 in 2050. On the contrary the labour force participation was decreased from 50.9 per cent in 1990 to 46.6 per cent in 2000 and it will further decrease to 42.9 per cent in 2010.

Traditionally, Bengali society had a structure of caring the life of older people. It was common in the joint families of our culture. The situation has been changing. Complexities of the societies with rapid urbanisation are influencing the traditional

respects and caring structure of the elderly persons. Low wages, high living cost and employment insecurities make some of the urban dwellers not to meet the requirements of their ageing parents both living with them or living in rural areas. At present most people feel that respect for the elderly in society is diminishing. They suggested that reasons for this decline include poverty, the dowry system, and poor family education (e.g. children are not taught to respect their elders). Older people suggested that family relationships are now more based on the older person's contribution of land or money, rather than on respect. Older people, particularly men, feel that there is a direct correlation between their income earning ability and level of respect. This again highlights the role of poverty in the lives of older people in Bangladesh.

Older persons are often negatively perceived as being physically frail, and dependent. These perceptions can often leave older persons neglected. Improvements in medical care and nutrition have contributed to the fact that older persons today are generally healthy than two to three decades ago. In Bangladesh, most of the older people, particularly the poor, are not defined old according to chronological age. In general older people are defined "old" according to physical characteristics and limitations that affect their ability to function in daily life in both household and income generation work. In Islam, serving one's parents is a duty second only to prayer, and it is their right to expect it. It is considered hateful to

express any irritation when, through no fault of his own, an old person is considered to be difficult. The Holy Quran says; Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not say 'uff' to them or admonish them, but speak to them in terms of honour and kindness. Treat them with humility, and say, 'My Lord! Have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little'. (17.23-4).

In general older people feel that young people see them as being unable to earn income, dependent on their families for survival, and therefore as a burden. Even in rural areas where social and technological changes are less rapid, many younger people did not value the contributions of older people to the family and community. Many indicated that they see older people as difficult and irksome. In our society children living with parents would be expected to support their parents. Previously in most of the cases sons/sons-in-law would take a role in looking after the parents from son's side. Since 1990s things have been changing and daughter/daughter-in-law is now coming to the picture. From empirical studies, it has been observed that the elderly people, who are disabled, prefer to live with daughter than son, because of caring facilities. They could have stayed with their sons but they feel free at their daughter's house for their personal day to day affairs (going to the bathroom, shower etc as a helping hand).

It is true that in our country, ageing is increasing in rural areas due to the

rural out-migration of young adults. But it has been observed in several studies that the urban setting is less favourable to sustain the traditional extended family networks and linkages system than are in rural areas. Often the older rural-urban migrants have to face loss of social networks and lack of footing in urban areas that can lead to their aspiration of better living. It is found in several studies that countries with a history of rural to urban migration and the expansion of underdeveloped cities have a growing population of poor older persons. Our country having passing through both demographic and economic transition needs special attention to the ageing urban population. Policies for the betterment of ageing population both in urban as well as rural areas should be taken into consideration. Policies on social networks, economic security, health and housing for ageing population will strengthen the demographic scenario of the country. A long-term policy options need to be considered to ensure the affordable solutions of future ageing problems.

In present socio-economic conditions, the practical implications of the ageing population are far-reaching. The number of aged people is increasing in absolute term within limited resources. The response to such creeping problems has to be well planned. The first step is the advocacy, to raise policy makers' aware of the multiple issues related to ageing in the country. Professionals, politicians, NGOs and the general public need to be aware to ageing problems. Since economic security is of prime importance, though not sufficient, the government has rightly introduced an Old Age Pension Scheme (OAPS) for some. The existing pensions need to be enhanced and the scheme should be elaborated especially to the rural aged, widows and people in urban slums. Sooner this will be achieved will be better, though the government is grappling with economic problems.

The problem of caring for a vast elderly population is complex and there are no immediate and easy answers. The government alone cannot solve this problem. Participation of NGOs and community assistance providing necessary care and support to the elderly within the community is recommended on top of opening old age homes. Projects to keep old people economically active have also to be taken. Some incentives in the form of tax exemption for families providing care to old family members can also be recommended.

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Some thoughts on caretaker govt

A R KHANDAKER

THE concept of a care taker government is an uncommon phenomenon possibly obtaining only in Bangladesh. This was introduced in our country after the fall of Ershad regime in 1991. Needless to say that the creed of a care taker government grew out of mistrust on our ability to govern ourselves neutrally. The story goes that this fertile idea was the brain child of a Jamaat leader backed by the Bangladesh Awami League.

There were multiple views on this. The Daily Star had conducted a pro-long debate on the subject. Many had then given their views for and against. I myself for one wrote a column opposing the idea being incompatible with democratic norm which is electing a government by the people (eligible voters on the basis of adult franchise) and the government so formed shall be responsible to the people through the parliament. Mine of course was a common sense view but fact remains that common sense is a sense which is not common to all. The care taker government having tenure of three months or even if made a 'king for a day' is not responsible to any one! The initial selection was made by a few individuals of mainly two political parties - the question remained as to from where they got the emporium to make such a decision and the selection of personnel? The entire matter seems to have been arbitrary and not according to law.

The president of the country is elected by the members of the parliament. He need not be member of a political party, in any case, once elected he is supposed to become a non partisan symbolic head of the state. He does not have any significant day to day role in the functioning of the government excepting as head of the state to provide continuity of governance. As the head of the state he is not sovereign. He only fulfills constitutional requirement like the monarchy in U.K. or the President of India. But unfortunately, for reasons which I refrain to explain, the position of the president has been made controversial. Possibly because of this reason Article 58E the provisions in the constitution requiring the president to act on the advice of the prime minister or upon his prior counter-signature shall be ineffective.

The care taker government is expected to be non party government (Article 58B of the constitution). The president shall appoint the chief adviser and not more than ten other advisers (Article 58C). The current dispute was largely created by the ruling party. The last retired chief justice is alleged to have been groomed by the BNP to be the chief adviser of the next care taker government. He was made an ambassador to Turkey and on return made a judge of the Hon'ble High court by the BNP government and then he retired as chief justice. The present chief justice was also due to retire in the mean time but suddenly the retirement age of the appellate judges have been extended by another two years (67) so that the present incumbent remains in service and the earlier one remains the last retired chief justice, hence eligible for the post of chief adviser to next care taker government. This sudden increase of retiring age of all the judges of the appellate division only while for other judges the same remaining as before (65) and for all other government servants ten years less at fifty seven, looks palpably inequitable. This seems to be over stepping the democratic norm. This is the whole crux of the issue which has made the opposition parties so much vehemently opposed to it and demanding reforms of the system.

I would, however, like to stick to my earlier views. Moreover it was given to understand that the care taker system of government would be temporary, may be for conducting two to three elections. So it should be now be done away with. Making provision for a care taker government by an amendment in the constitution does not perhaps give it a legal status as basically the thing is ultravires. If it is difficult to do it this time then the post the chief adviser, which is the bone of contention, should be abolished and the president should appoint a council of advisers, taking suggestions from all the political parties and run the day to day administration till a new government is elected. This may possibly help us to avoid a crisis without much of a dislocation within the existing legal framework (Clause 6 of Article 58C of the constitution). The post of the president being a constitutional one is acceptable to all, so no political party should have any reservation to accept the president ungrudgingly. It is high time that without causing any more sufferings to the life of the people the political parties should give up their intransigence and bury their hatchet.

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Falling walls

Africa needs more aid. Without it, we're not going to make a quantum leap. Maintaining what we've got now--about 5 percent growth off a low base--can be sustained. But that's clearly insufficient. We must wrench change by broadening the base of economies. This would mean diversifying, and you can only diversify if you have a flow of investment capital, and the necessary human resources.

TREVOR MANUEL

NO, Tony Blair's Commission for Africa won't immediately reach its goal to dramatically raise foreign aid to Africa. But it's not a failure. We're on a very good wicket. Look at the G-8 finance ministers' decision last month on debt relief to 14 African countries. The IMF, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank all are good to go. Clearly we need to press ahead. Some of the indicators, such as the debt-to-GDP ratios and the export-to-GDP ratios that countries need to qualify, can easily be blown out by changes like a fall in the price of coffee in a single-commodity economy. But the commitment to write off capital sums is very important. And we'll now see the new revenues go to work in the poorest countries.

On financing new aid, we can do better. The commitment by four European G-8 countries to an international financing facility is very important. Skeptics should look at the broad backing we now have for the Swedish-led Global Alliance on Vaccines and Inoculations, GAVI. That entails long-term financial support. Other countries will come in. They need to convince taxpayers that this kind of certainty is good. That would reward Africa for such initiatives as the African peer-review mechanism, which enforces good governance. Countries need budgetary support rather than support for individual projects, which are frequently administered by civil servants in donor states. Going forward, we must sharpen the approaches to donor aid.

The finance ministers' resolution on reducing trade barriers constitutes a real breakthrough. Trade traditionally has been halved ground, left to trade ministers and the World Trade Organization. Now there's a commitment to a timetable for phasing out subsidies. It sets the scene for the WTO's Hong Kong round. The agreement also recognises that poorer countries suffer in the short

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