

Natwar visit improves atmospherics

Now the turn for focused dialogue

THAT the Indian Foreign Minister's visit to Dhaka is more of turning a corner than a turning point in the current stage of our bilateral relations is perhaps the only accurate characterisation that one can make of the trip. We welcome the good opening that Natwar Singh's talks in Bangladesh have made. This has brought the importance of bilateral relations and the salience of continuous dialogue in resolving contentious issues, to the fore.

It would be unfair to hope a single round of talks would produce miracles. But what one can certainly hope is that the visit has engendered such an environment as would allow future dialogues to produce tangible results. That is why the recent round of talks is to be welcomed, all the more because we feel that it has indeed created a congenial atmosphere by bringing down the level of tension and given a fresh start towards harmonious neighbourly coexistence.

Not surprisingly, a catalogue of issues was laid on the table. But there were no new issues from either side, and much as one would like to have seen more concrete outcome, yet we are far from disappointed at what little has been achieved.

It is quite natural that when a vast array of issues are taken up for discussion there would be a dilution of focus. The catalogue of issues that are vexing in nature is indeed long and it is only appropriate that the entire range of priority concerns is handled with patience and care, but in an unfavourably positive frame of mind. Unless that is done it will not be possible for the parties to get a fix on each other's perception of the concerns, only after which, one hopes, would solutions to those seemingly intractable problems emerge.

We are happy to note that there are several high-level bilateral visits on the cards, which should address the issues more comprehensively and help in forging the right kind of political will for resolution of some of the outstanding problems leading to a better understanding and cementing of ties between the two next-door neighbouring countries.

We have lost a deal of time in realising the tremendous potential both the countries have to move forward towards building up a mutually productive and beneficial relationship. We hold Dr Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Natwar Singh in great esteem and hope they would make an inspirational leap in their leadership to usher in a new era in Indo-Bangla ties.

Human life cheapened further

Even saline adulterated!

S PURIOUS life saving oral saline is being produced and marketed, needless to say, posing a grave threat to public health. A mobile court has discovered a factory called ARA Enterprise packaging in a most unhygienic manner ORS which is regarded as the most effective and affordable antidote to diarrhoea and dehydration. So far we have seen only kitchen-based purveying of dangerous food, which itself was a big concern for public health; but now we are witnessing something that poses even a bigger health hazard -- factory-based adulteration of a vital public health product.

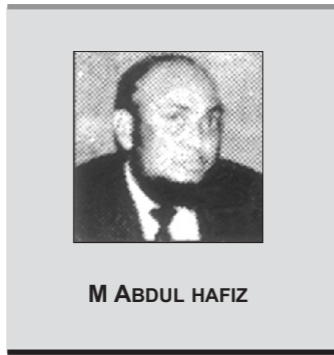
The unscrupulous businessmen are so manipulative that they have been faking the packaging; at times, even the brand names of reputed products, thereby shortchanging the unsuspecting consumers. But how could they be throwing dust in the eyes of the drug administration people, or the BSTI? And that's not all, some of the brands of oral saline are not even registered with the concerned authority. We are simply horrified by the level of infiltration of thugs into the consumer market.

All of this points to a total absence of monitoring of industrial and health products by the designated regulatory bodies. Had the concerned authorities been alert and dutiful, these fake factories would have been discovered much earlier, with the consumers keeping from all sorts of health risks and, of course, waste of money.

What should be done now? We are glad that the mobile court is continuing with its drive to catch adulterators of different denominations. But we now feel that simply fining the culprits and their humiliation through media reports are not going to put their ilk out of action. Much more stringent measures need to be taken against the criminals and the factories manufacturing spurious drugs should be closed down at once.

The illegal manufacture and sale of products hazardous to life cannot be tackled by occasional raids. We have to root out corruption on which such abominable businesses thrive.

Far-right neocons: Contemplating World War IV?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IT'S difficult to play defence and offence the same time.

But when the geo-political ground is shifting beneath someone's feet and damaging leaks are spurring out of the White House and Downing Street is plumbing it's more difficult than usual. That's the notion one frames after watching the alacrity of late of far-right and neo-conservative personalities who found themselves trying, on the one hand, to persuade their compatriots to prepare to take on new enemies in what they call 'World War IV' (Third World War, the cold war -- the longest in history -- has since been fought and won by the Americans) while, on the other, mounting rear guard actions against faint hearted allies who want to be out of Iraq and the Democrats who are after the blood of Karl Rove, known to be the 'brain' of George Bush.

Judging by their editorials, columns and television appearances these days most of them are

focussed on defending Rove from the charges that he may have compromised national security by relieving a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer as an immediate priority. Through the week the cabal was on the map -- almost literally -- for most of the past couple of days, the neocons were dispensing a never ending stream of geo-strategic advice for all and sundry. Some of them were entirely

leader. There are thus reasons for disappointments in Washington. The responses also are ominous when Jeffrey Gedmin, director of Aspen Institute, declared in 'Weekly Standard' that "the regime has to go". He went on arguing that what with the constitutional process stalemated and the impending political demise of Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder, Bush should be able to line up the

"I do not know if the Iranians were involved in London bombings, but it hardly matters, for Iran is the most potent force in the terror network from which the killers in London must have drawn inspiration.... We cannot possibly have decent security in Iraq unless we end the murderous gangs in Tehran and Damascus," wrote Ledeen, a staunch neo-conservative while these were all quite familiar the

Europe, Australia, Israel, Japan and most emphatically India, the world's largest democracy.

Clifford May, who would later in the week devote his considerable polemical talent to defending Rove duly joined by Kenneth Timmerman, the author of "Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran," far right activist Paul Weyrich and AEI's Thomas Donnelly -- all of whom argued that Delhi should play a

tee to argue that Washington should prevent the sale of Unocal most of whose assets are found on China's doorstep in Asia to the China National Offshore Oil Company because oil is a national security issue rather than a simple commodity that should be subject to the free market. According to James Woolsey, a former CIA director, China is pursuing a national strategy of domination of the energy market and strategic dominance of western Pacific. Woolsey, a prominent neo-conservative who popularised the 'World War IV', slogan but who until now had confined its use to the war on 'Islamic fascism' in which China is supposedly on Washington's side.

Notwithstanding such paradoxes while propagating their hawkish geo-strategic worldview the same activists and their comrades are also forced to play defence for damage inflicted on White House by the growing scandal over Rove. In the meantime the war clouds are hovering over West to Central Asia to Western Pacific. Whether the armageddon, now being prepared by the arrant warmongers will snowball into World War IV is contingent upon the efficacy of diplomacy, still prevalent good sense among the nations of the world and most importantly the role of American people.

Big (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Notwithstanding paradoxes while propagating their hawkish geo-strategic worldview the same activists and their comrades are also forced to play defence for damage inflicted on White House by the growing scandal over Rove. In the meantime the war clouds are hovering over West to Central Asia to Western Pacific. Whether the armageddon, now being prepared by the arrant warmongers will snowball into World War IV is contingent upon the efficacy of diplomacy, still prevalent good sense among the nations of the world and most importantly the role of American people.

familiar, especially with respect to Iran and Syria, highly preferred neo-conservative targets for the next phase of the global war on terror.

Even if the regimes of Rafsanjani and Khatami raised hope for a liberal transformation of politics in Iran these hopes were shattered by last month's surprise victory of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran's presidential election. The first non-Ayatollah president of Iran, Ahmadinejad however enjoys personal blessings of Ali Khameni, the supreme

European Union behind support for the "democracy movement in Iran."

And if that strategy should fail, noted Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), "Bush may decide that pinpoint military strikes are the only mechanism by which to undercut the Ayatollah's nuclear ambition. AEI's Michael Ledeen took much of the same line in several articles in National Review Online, arguing that new and 'abundant' evidence has surfaced over Iranian ties to Al-Qaeda and to the continuing insur-

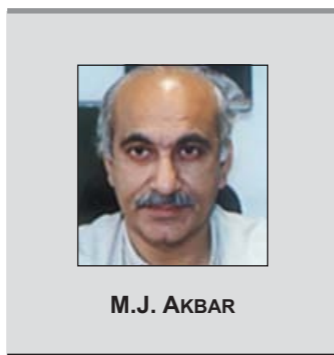
gery in Iraq. war-hawks tried to take advantage recently of congressional concern over an attempted Chinese takeover of the US' oil giant Unocal and current visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to mount a broader strategic vision of allies and enemies.

This was encapsulated in a brief talk by the neo-conservative Foundation for the Defence of Democracies director Clifford May to the "US-India League" in which he called on the US to "forge new alliances appropriate to a new era" that would include Eastern

key role note in countering China's strategic ambition. And so should Japan, Washington Times editor Rich Lowry quickly added in a column titled, 'Unleash Japan' in which he made almost a common argument that Tokyo should tear up its post-war constitution and become a reliable partner of the US in checking Beijing.

As for China which never lettered a word against the US' preemptive aggressive policy is in no way spared by the neo-conservative who appeared before a Congressional commit-

The prude and prudence



M.J. AKBAR

So that's been done. What do we do next? At which moment the versifier justifies his salary. "Don't worry, boss. I'll fill the song with salacious puns simple enough for Salman Khan and Bipasha Basu to understand. Every music channel will lap it up and every bar girl in Mumbai will make it her theme number. Just get me a tune."

"Tune? That's no problem. There are hundreds lying in the same cupboard. We'll mix bhanga beat in it, I think. That's the rage now."

the mass idiom and this idiom, along with popular mythology, shapes mass culture. Let's leave good and bad out of this. Yesterday always puns today as immoral, and today doubtless will have the same thing to say about tomorrow. The relevant point is that mass culture creates its own set of consequences, upon attitudes, thought processes, politics and the economy.

The print media still abjures the use of an unmentionable four-letter

for editorials and maidan-speak for news. The most powerful, if not the most important, mass medium of the moment, television, speaks in just one language, with the bar being constantly lowered. Some of it must be driven by the democratic urge, the need to be explicable to all men. Most of it is driven by the compulsion for higher ratings, which we cannot condemn. But if as Marshall McLuhan noted, the medium is the message, then the message is bacchanalia. Salman Khan,

there is only one way to reach her children today, by appealing to their self-interest. Self-interest is the governing philosophy.

Equally important, the practical age of consent has collapsed in India. Or perhaps it would be more relevant to say that it has returned to the arranged-marriage era, when love was permissible at the age of 16 and girls were married by the time they were 18. You do recall Dev Anand's classic film with Asha Parekh, *Solva Saal*. The sixteenth

number of pretty girls, not together but sequentially, answer "Yes!" -- each "Yes" more orgasmic than the other -- until the crescendo reaches late-night movie pitch, and Mr Siddhartha hides his reddening face. All very contemporary and modern. Women are at least as aggressive as men in the battle of sexes, as long as the battle is treated as one between equals and there is no brutish physical aggression involved. There is absolutely no reason why they should not ogle as freely as men once did, or demand satisfaction, or shrug off the one-for-one approach of traditional true love. Half a dozen girls were getting orgasmic about one Siddhartha after all.

What upset me a great deal was not any collapse of morality, but the collapse of grammar. The sign-off line of the advertisement was "How many you have?" Excuse me? I know the line of watches is called Fastrack. You can fast-track a "t" from the word on an agency's advice, but you can't fast-track a verb out of a sentence. One expects certain standards from the Tata House. The protection of correct English is among them. Incidentally, this is not good economics either. How?

Television language slips easily into conversation. I can hear giggles across college canteens as a first year student gurgles to another, "How many you have?" Let that young man get a job as an outsourced voice, relapse into "How many you have?" and the company will lose the contract.

Every new layer in a language is welcome. Language has to be flexible, proactive to survive, and English has always lived in a virtuous cycle. But change needs the yeast of good sense. Don't throw the prudent out with the prude.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

The most powerful, if not the most important, mass medium of the moment, television, speaks in just one language, with the bar being constantly lowered. But if, as Marshall McLuhan noted, the medium is the message, then the message is bacchanalia. Salman Khan, Bipasha Basu and Anil Kapoor's entry theme on MTV is followed immediately by an advertisement warning a middle class family about Aids, and no one sees the irony.

"Punjabi? I better put in a Punjabi word somewhere. Everyone sings only the opening line, who remembers a song after its 15 seconds of fame? Here you are. *Ishq*. Not true love, boss; true sex. *Di galli*. Love's tunnel. Geddit geddit geddit?" Uproarious laughter all around. "Vich." That's Punjabi taken care of. "No entry!" Everyone keels over laughing and a hit is born.

And when Salman Khan ends the song by pleading with Anil Kapoor to "Kar entry (Please enter)" the tunnel of Bipasha Basu's love, he makes absolutely sure that even the dumbest idiot in the audience has got the point by acting out the process with a vigorous hand.

You can't blame the censor board. They thought this song was about traffic policemen. To be prudent is not the same thing as being a prude. Television controls

word, which is why it is not being used in this column. But its absence is a fiction. It has become part of everyday conversation, among all generations, and no one is particularly shocked. Certainly no one is ignorant of its meaning.

All mass communication has found space for high and low language. Theatre was the medium of Shakespeare's age; he created the movies of his time. And so while Macbeth could fantasise or tremble in sonorous iambic pentameter, the jester would complain or joke in the earthy language of a mean pub. In journalism, till recently, it was quite common for the language of the editorial to be different from that of the news, not just in pace (which is necessary) but in attitude (which may not be).

Bengali newspapers used what might be called the priest's language

Bipasha Basu and Anil Kapoor's entry theme on MTV is followed immediately by an advertisement warning a middle class family about Aids, and no one sees the irony.

This advertisement is part of a strong campaign being conducted by the government of India against Aids. It is aimed at the middle class, the people next door who, 20 years ago, hinted to their kids, in the unlikely event of the subject coming up, that sex was something that Rekha did. The worried mother is thoroughly unglamorous, protective, loving and concerned about children who are just entering their teens. She recognises that the environment will have more impact upon her children than all her homilies, or religious morality, or indeed Dad's threats if there is any Dad left who can successfully browbeat his children anymore. She knows that

year. A girl was considered a woman at 16. In fact, the children in the anti-Aids government advertisement are below 16, which is refreshingly honest. Sex is happening in some schools at less than that age; and awareness about its perils needs to be communicated early. (They are aware of its joys.) Government advertising tends to be as boring as government. It is unusual to see a professionally-crafted campaign that does not get tempted towards flashiness and misses the point.

If sex sells for the moviemakers, then it must also sell for the Tatas. The image of the giant House of Tata is synonymous with integrity, and may that never change. That integrity was not the least bit besmirched by the Titan ad for a new range of watches aimed at students. A teacher is taking a roll call, and calls out "Siddhartha." In response, a

OPINION

Performance of BNP and the ruling coalition: A dent in public expectations

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THE general members of the public remain disillusioned with the performance of BNP. People are weary of both the mainstream political parties of the country. The current state of governance by BNP and the ruling coalition can be described as the famous saying goes, "democracy is often tyranny by the majority." It governs and administers without taking into consideration the realities on the ground. Its actions are short sighted and are reflective of any strategic planning whatsoever. Many major decisions of national significance are undertaken on the basis of "individual influence of powerful favourites of the head of the party and the government", and not through collective wisdom and considerations of its team of lawmakers. Most of its actions to date are anti-poor and pro-rich. It is extremely intolerant of its opponents. Not that its predecessors and other parties did not indulge in corrupt practices but to my mind the lawmakers and other cadres of BNP have broken all past records. It seems that BNP is of BNP, by BNP and for BNP. The party consists of diverse heterogeneous elements. To that extent one wonders as to how it held itself together for such a long time. My assess-

ment is that it was possible simply due to the fallout of mistakes by other parties including the Awami League.

Let us now make an objective and dispassionate review of the performance of BNP as main driving force of the ruling coalition.

First and foremost amongst its failures is its inability to deal with the rising prices of essentials making it extremely difficult if not impossible for the poor and the moderately fixed income groups to make both ends meet. This has indeed critically affected the largest section of the country's population. None in the Administration including its Chief Executive appear to be least concerned. On the contrary the lawmakers in charge when asked keep insisting, "every thing is under control". This is simply lack of government's sincerity and commitment to the welfare of the "people". Surely as a first step it could revitalise the operations of the state-trading agency, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). The strategy had worked in the past and might as well work again. Should one suspect that this is not being done in order to protect the interests of hoarders and black marketers allegedly linked to some influential party cadres?

As the principal partner in the ruling coalition, BNP is undoubt-

edly responsible for tarnishing the moderate and secular image of the country. It is not only harbouring but also tacitly involved in protecting the hard-line religious extremists. Cases in example are: the terror being carried out time and again by Bangla Bhai and his gang and the continued desecration of mosques and other places of worship of the Ahmadiyas. At a time when it is high on suppressing all elements of terrorists and terrorism, it is not understood as to how it is unable to deal with such marked and well-known criminals who continue with their heinous acts?

We have on record acts of previous governments sidelining, vandalizing and undermining the independence of Judiciary, but in all honesty, may I most humbly say that no other government has done it so openly and shamelessly like the present regime. Just consider the issue of separation of Judiciary from the Executive, the appointment of the judges, worst of all the known violations of court directives. Clearly this government stands out most prominently in causing maximum damage to the institution of Judiciary.

It has also destroyed the backbone of our education. One only has to recall and make an honest review of the recent incidents at the University of Dhaka, the aftermath

of which persists even to this day. At the primary and other school level education the scenario is not much encouraging either. Examination results are allegedly doctored and the environment continues to be highly politicised. On the other hand to this day no one really knows as to how many Madrassas are in operation? Some sources quote the number to be no less than 35 thousand. No one has any record of registration of the spurious and mushroom growth of Madrassas. No one knows about the funding sources of most of these so-called religious schools. Some continue to operate with a curriculum and agenda allegedly detrimental to our national interests. No point in going into further details, one has to simply turn to the Madrassas in Pakistan and see the havoc caused to the image and stability of Pakistan.

This commentary would be seriously flawed if we do not say a few words about the Media. It has to its record innumerable incidences of actually "terrorising" working journalists while discharging their duties. Journalists today feel most vulnerable. On many occasions while discharging their duties outdoors many Journalists time and again have been physically manhandled, a few of them have even been brutally murdered.

There are also incidences of intimidation undermining the community of journalists by both cabinet members and other ranks of lawmakers.

The state of the civic amenities in the capital city is in a total mess. The water logging has become acute. A few hours or even less of rains cause water logging in many parts of the city making living unbearable for thousands of dwellers. All that the Administration and the city corporation bosses do year after year, is tell the people as to "what has caused it" and then assure them that "appropriate measures are being taken", and nothing thereafter neither is seen nor heard of.

The story of the RAJUK beats them all! Building collapses, innocent lives are lost, its "experts" identify the cause, which ranges from faulty design to use of sub-standard construction materials and then "wait" for the next building to collapse. No one is made accountable, everybody is exonerated. Innumerable high-rise buildings have come up without adherence to basic building codes. Experts are now saying that most of the structures may not withstand the impact of a moderate earthquake. In the meantime, people continue to pass their days in fear of the impending disaster. Various constructions have come up

through deliberate earth filling of vital water bodies. They say all these structures have "due clearance and approval" of the RJUK. One could go on but it stinks all the way.

About the traffic jam on the city streets, I do not know where to begin. It is like a jigsaw puzzle, nobody knows "who is doing what to whom." The honourable minister orders removal of vehicles certain number of years old, it worked for a while and now these very vehicles seem to have returned with a vengeance. Certain streets are banned for rickshaws only to make other streets completely inoperative causing bigger traffic jam. Rickshaws, cars and push carts are parked anywhere and everywhere making movement of traffic all the more difficult. It is, however, a matter of collective failure, the traffic police on duty, the owners of vehicles, the unruly drivers of buses particularly the minibuses. Yet it must be said that the relevant agencies of the government have failed miserably. Given proper planning and sincere efforts one could make an improvement over the existing state by at least 30 to 40 percent.

My heart continues to bleed for the innumerable lives lost in launch capsizes on various occasions. Many of these deaths by accident

could be avoided but for the careless and inefficient handling of our river traffic. How tragic and shameful it is that in these modern times we are unable to salvage a sunken vessel due to lack of proper equipment. One could go on analysing the causes and effects but what is the use. Each time a repetition of the incident takes place none other than the concerned minister himself emerges as more confident and gratified with his performance!

Although there has been some improvement of late in containing the critical aspects of high profile crimes involving armed gangs of organised criminals the overall situation still continues to be far from satisfactory. Not only that, people are also disillusioned and angry about the prevalence of widespread corruption amongst the police and on their involvement in actual criminal acts. Furthermore the operations of RAB are seriously flawed and highly questionable. RAB stands guilty of taking lives in what is known as "crossfire".

I am not an economist but this much I dare say that the overall micro economic situation is in a critical state. The entire consumer economy is aimed at "pleasing" and protecting the interests of the rich and the elite. The gap between the rich and the poor has simply widened because of the govern-

ment's pro-rich policies. It is ironical that, today, Bangladesh, one of the poorest of the third world countries, has more luxury cars on its streets and shopping complexes full of fancy goods and non-essential merchandise than many other such better off countries.

What is good about BNP and the ruling coalition? Though few and far between, these commentaries would remain incomplete without mentioning them. Unlike any other previous government it has successfully dealt with a series of high profile murder and criminal cases through the speedy trial courts. Though belated the move to check and control food adulteration has caught our attention. It has finally put in place an independent ACC, although it remains to be seen how effective and independent it is? It is to the credit of the present regime that it has largely succeeded in tackling the scourge of copying in examination halls. And it dealt well with polybag and two-stroke engine pollution. We only wish it overcomes the non-performed and failures soon to public relief and its benefit as well.

Shamsher Chowdhury is a freelance writer