

The Greater Middle East Project

Katrina has exposed the 'third world' in America

Bangladesh should offer some help

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE sole superpower America is a unique country. It is the most powerful and most developed industrialised country in the world. Nonetheless, behind the dazzling wealth lies a "third world" segment of underclass comprising of mainly African American and Hispanic population. Hurricane Katrina has suddenly removed the veil and exposed the stark reality. When one watches the nonstop television coverage of thousands of people asking for help, survivors wading through murky flood waters, dead bodies floating in the water or lying on the roadside even ten days after the hurricane, one gets the impression that New Orleans is located somewhere in Africa or a third world country in another part of the world.

The reality is that the historic city of New Orleans is a part of the United States. The city, known for its rich cultural heritage influenced by the French, Spanish and Caribbean traditions, has always maintained a delicate balance between the super rich and predominant poor. On one side were exotic night clubs, restaurants and the famous French Quarter, and on the other a picture of desperate poverty, ghettos and the lack of basic amenities of life.

Last week when Katrina was about to strike, the wealthy segment of the city, mostly white and making up roughly one third of the population, quickly left to places of safety. The other two thirds, the desperate poor and mostly black, had no cars or means to move out of the city nor were they provided with any official means for evacuation. Tens of thousands took shelter in the sports arena Superdome and in the absence of water and sanitation, the place soon turned uninhabitable. The rest stayed in their homes and waited for the worst. The aftermath of the Katrina is a picture of desperation, devastation and despair that almost solely comprises the African-American. [African-American is the politically correct name for the black population of US.]

It is true that Katrina has caused catastrophic damages and has devastated the entire gulf coast of the country, an area roughly equal to that of Great Britain. On the other hand, it is also true that America has the means to face this challenge. Unfortunately, the initial relief and rescue effort, as shown live on television around the world, was marked by callousness and incompetence. In the sultry heat of 90 degree Fahrenheit the stranded people in their homes or in overcrowded Superdome were languishing like animals with no food or water for days.

In their desperation, some hungry survivors started looting supermarkets and grocery stores to obtain food, water, ice and other necessities. And as to be expected, the criminals among them started looting electronic shops and depart-

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mental stores. Consequently, for a while the focus of the post-hurricane effort shifted from relief and rescue to maintaining law and order. All these could have been easily avoided if the survivors had been promptly supplied with food, water and other essential items.

After President Bush's visit to the affected areas, the relief and rescue operation has finally geared up and additional resources have been placed for the relief and evacuation of hurricane survivors to the neighboring states. The pivotal body in the operation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) failed miserably and today its Chief Michael Brown has been removed from the Katrina rescue operation and has been replaced by Vice Admiral Thud Allen. This should restore the credibility of the agency. Some experts believe that after 9/11, FEMA had focused too much on the possible terrorist-related disasters and did not pay enough attention to natural disasters. A comprehensive approach is clearly needed.

The damage caused to Louisiana and Mississippi is so

extensive that it will take years to rebuild them. The city of New Orleans lies below sea level, and the dykes and levees which protect the city are long overdue for comprehensive repairs. Incidentally, Hasan S Mashriqui, a Bangladeshi-born scientist at Louisiana State University, is playing an important role in this reconstruction project. The affected Southern states unfortunately are also the poorest in the United States, and they would require sustained and generous federal support to meet their long and short term reconstruction goals.

This year alone five deadly hurricanes have battered Florida and Caribbean states. Some reports suggest that global warming could be fueling these frequent natural disasters as warm oceans are such a critical ingredient in hurricane formation. If that is so, will Washington, which has so long opposed the international efforts on the global warming issue, re-evaluate its position now?

The people of Bangladesh, with more than their share of natural disasters, fully sympathise with the suffering humanity of the hurricane

affected areas in US. Thirty-five years ago, the misery that our people had suffered after the devastating cyclone had been compounded by the total apathy of the Pakistani authorities. International relief, spearheaded by the Americans had come to our rescue at that dismal moment. They had also immensely helped us later in rebuilding our war-damaged country.

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Despite serious resource constraints, our successive governments were able to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people during cyclones or floods. In 1998 two-third of our country was under water for three months and there were wide apprehension that twenty million people might die. Fortunately, due to timely intervention of the then government, millions were given shelter and food to tide over the catastrophe.

It is time for us to show that we too care for our friends and well wishers in their hours of distress. Nobody

expects anything big from us but at least we should come up with some token support. Yesterday, Mexican trucks moved in to Texas with relief supplies for the victims. More generous assistance will surely come from America's allies and friends. Even their adversaries, the Cuban President Castro has offered 1100 doctors and 26 tonnes of medicines, and the Socialist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has offered \$1 million to the American Red Cross. Our neighbour India has also given \$ 5 million to the American Red Cross and offered to send medical teams with experience in dealing with water-borne diseases to the affected areas.

We may not be able to match them but at least we can make a token contribution to the American Red Cross and also offer some assistance in kind. Cynics will probably say, what can poor Bangladesh do to help the richest country of the world? The truth is that on occasions like this even a small gesture of friendship would go a long way in cementing the bond of cooperation and understanding between our two countries. After all, in this hour of great human tragedy, something is always better than nothing.

Syed Muazzem Ali, a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, sent this article from United States.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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termind of the now famous 9/11. As usual in order to justify her attack on Afghanistan, the US imported into Afghanistan 'democracy' with very uneven result.

The US since the creation of Israel on Palestinian land has given total protection to this Jewish state although the emergence of Israel has given rise to untold upheavals in the region. The US because of her complete support of Israel, would like to see it at the centre of her new Greater Middle East Project. She is the only state which is reported to possess nuclear weapons, although the US has been threatening Iran against the possession of nuclear weapons. It must be on the suggestion of the US that Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon has withdrawn more than 8000 Israelis from Gaza, where they had built settlements nearly four decades ago. It must be admitted that this was an act of courage by the hawk. Now in order to prove that Sharon really means business he has to dismantle much larger settlements, where reside 200,000 Jews, from the verdant West Bank. These are territories that Israel annexed following the six-day war in 1967. From the way the events are moving the Israeli authorities seem determined to consolidate the state and the entire operation is unilateral with the affected party, Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas, more an onlooker than a participant.

In the Greater Middle East Project, Turkey has a special role. To begin with, Turkey has a special relationship with the US since the Second World War in 1945. The Soviet threats of the late forties forced Turkey to establish very close links with the US, who alone had the power and resources to

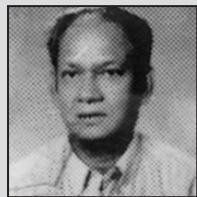
offer support and assistance. This situation has continued till today after five decades. Turkey has very important military links with the US and has US military bases on her soil. Some strains have appeared lately since the invasion of Iraq by the US. Of all her Arab neighbours Turkey has special friendship with Iraq. On her invasion plans of Iraq the US had counted completely on Turkey's cooperation and support since the invasion plans were drawn up by sending troops through Turkey into the north of Iraq. The invasion plan fell flat as it had to be redirected through the south via Basra. Turkey has taken no part in the sending of troops into Iraq causing profound unhappiness in the Pentagon.

There are three main communities in Iraq, The majority Shias in the south, the Kurds in the north and the Sunnis in the middle. Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq with an iron fist, keeping the Shias at bay and terrorising the Kurds. Thus an unwritten understanding existed between Saddam and Turkish authorities, who periodically sent their forces against Kurds in the north of Iraq, who continued hit and run tactics against Turkish forces. After nearly 30,000 Turkish soldiers dead and fifteen years of bloody uprising by the PKK guerillas, Turkey has tamed them and put behind bars the leader of the PKK Abdullah Ocalan.

In the US invasion of Iraq the Kurds have played the most important role and they invited the US forces into Iraq. The US has rewarded the Kurds by making the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani the President of new Iraq. The PKK appears to be rearing its head again and skirmishes have taken place in the Turkish south-east and the PKK. For two years Turkey has been pressing the US authorities to move against the PKK, who have their stronghold in northern Iraq. Alternatively Turkey has been asking the US to allow Turkish forces to cross into northern Iraq to flush out the PKK like they did during the time of Saddam Hussein. The US does not appear to buy the suggestion. Currently US General James Jones, Head of US command of Europe, is visiting Turkey. Press reports suggest that Turkey is unable to make any headway on the PKK question.

The overall situation in the Greater Middle East region does not appear to hold out any bright prospect for the grandiose plan of President George W. Bush.

Arshad-uz Zaman is a former Ambassador and Acting Secretary General, OIC

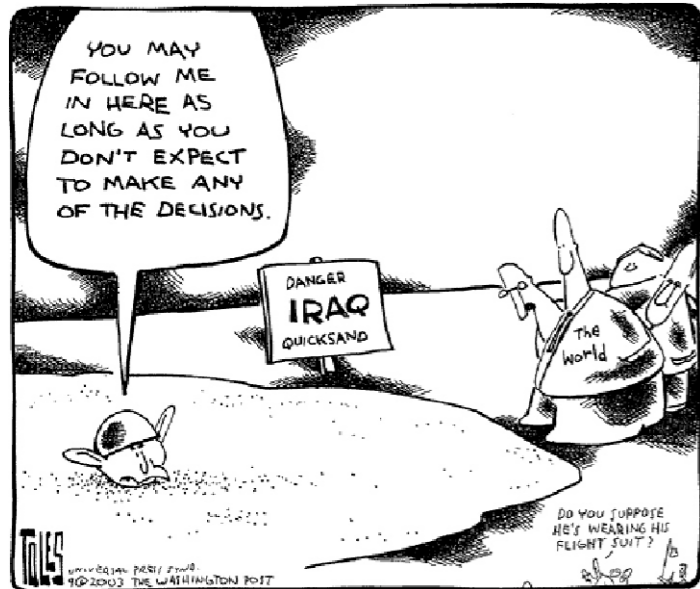


ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

LAST year US President George W. Bush launched his Greater Middle East Project. The contours of the project include the large area from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, that is the region which has nearly half of the world's proven reserve of gas and oil. The project has moved forward haltingly.

The US is used to thinking big. That must be the explanation for the adjective 'Greater'. As a first step to this goal, Iraq was invaded and pulverised. President Saddam Hussein of Iraq was overthrown and for more than a year now its hapless people are subject to barbarity of the worst kind. They have to live the ignominious existence of an occupied people and are subject to suicide bombings by their own people, where the largest number of victims are the Iraqis. There is no sign of an end to this cycle of violence. The US is continuing its effort to shore up the regime in Iraq, put in place by her bayonets, and nobody will claim legitimacy for this regime.

The US military while valiantly trying to pacify the situation in Iraq, has been trying to solidify the regime of their other puppet Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan. In a country where literacy is among the lowest of the world, the attempt to set up representative institutions, can by no means be an easy job. Fortunately for the US, the world has conveniently forgotten Afghanistan, as it did for centuries. Afghanistan came on the US radar because the previous regime led by Taleban leader Molla Omar gave shelter to Osama Bin Laden, mas-



Preparing an accurate voters list

BURHANUDDIN AHMED

In his keen desire to make the voters list as accurate as possible, the Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh disregarding the suggestion of his colleagues for revision of the existing voters list has taken a decision for the preparation of a new voters list. This decision is undoubtedly bold and commendable, but it alone shall not help achieve the cherished goals of the Chief Election Commissioner, unless he removes the impediments well before the start of preparation of the rolls those blocked the preparation of an accurate voters list in the past.

The existing law provides that if a person is qualified to become a voter, his name shall be enrolled, on application, by the registration staff in the electoral roll of the electoral area where he ordinarily resides. The law further provides that a government servant or a holder of public office not withstanding this provision may exercise his option for registration of his name at the place of his work. The law also provides that the spouse or the children of such a government servant or a holder of public office shall be eligible for registration in the electoral roll where he/she is enrolled as voter, if they are not otherwise disqualified for such enrolment.

The legal position for registration as mentioned in the foregoing paragraph clearly indicates that subject to the exercise of option only the government servants and the holders of public office along with their spouses and qualified children are entitled to enrolment at the place of their duty and not others. As per provision of the law, the persons outside the said two categories are entitled to enrolment in the voters list of the electoral area where their permanent homesteads are located.

quoted provision of the Ordinance, the names of the persons who did not fall within the categories of the government servants and the holders of public office, were registered by the registration staff as voters in the electoral rolls of the City Corporations or the Municipalities where they were temporarily residing in connection with their work or profession. This illegal registration had always taken place in the past due to lack of rigid enforcement of provisions of the law in this behalf.

The law as it stands today, does not permit enrolment of employees of the semi-government organisations, autonomous bodies, banks, insurance companies, NGOs, business organisations, firms, etc., in the electoral rolls of the electoral areas falling within the jurisdiction of the City Corporation or Municipalities where they are stationed temporarily in connection with their professions or business. Not withstanding this legal bar, a great majority of them were registered in the past by the registration staff in the electoral roll of the electoral areas forming the part and parcel of the City Corporation or Municipality. The matter did not end there.

In addition to their enrolment at the place of their work in the City Corporation or in the Municipality, a considerable number of them managed their enrolment fraudulently in the electoral areas where their permanent homesteads (place of ordinary residence) were situated by filing a false declaration with the registration staff to the effect that they had not filed application for registration in any other place of the country. This fraudulent practice did not only inflate the total number of voters in the country by millions, but also created vast opportunity for large scale impersonation which substantially affected the fairness of the poll. In the interest of free, fair and credible election, the Election Commission therefore must not allow the

continuance of this illegal practice while preparing fresh voters list for use in the up-coming general election.

The discontinuation of the said illegal practice might face vehement opposition from those who reaped its benefit in the past. In such a situation, the Commission shall have to take strong stand for the enforcement of the law. If the Commission can do it, the accuracy in the new voters list will enhance to a great extent.

The other remedy for the prevention of multiple registration of a person in more than one place lies in the amendment of Section 7 and 8 of the Electoral Rolls Ordinance 1982. If the Commission is unable

to implement the existing provision of the said sections in letter and spirit, it may amend the provisions of the said sections making eligible all citizen qualified for enrolment in the voters list of the electoral areas where they are physically and not hypothetically living for an indefinite period. As a measure of safeguard against multiple registration, a new provision should be inserted in the law providing that a person of a rural area when residing in the urban area in connection with his service or business or for any other reason he must, if he is interested in registration in the electoral area where his permanent homestead is located, produce a certificate from the Registration Officer under whose jurisdiction his urban resi-

dence is located stating that he has neither been registered nor has applied for registration at the place of his work. This will check multiple registration of the persons who have permanent houses at their birth place in the rural area, but residing in the urban area in connection with the earning of their livelihood.

The existing section 7 of the Ordinance prescribes the qualifications of a person necessary for registration in a voter list of an electoral area. According to the prescription contained in this section, the registration officer shall include a name of a person in the draft voters list if he, a) s a citizen of Bangladesh; b) is not less than 18 years of age; c) does not stand declared by a competent court to be of unsound mind; and d) is or is deemed to be a resident of that electoral area.

The provisions, contained in clause (c) and (d) are neither straight nor self-explanatory. Clause (c) states that a man declared mentally unsound by a competent court is ineligible for enrolment as a voter. This is an absurd provision. None can quote a single instance where the Court of its own has declared a person lunatic. Further, the provision under clause (d) is beyond the comprehension not only of the registration staff but also of the lawyers. The words "is deemed to be a resident" contained in this clause is alone responsible for

registration of a person in more than one electoral area. Then again sub-section (2) of section 8 which qualifies a government servant and the holder of a public office for registration at the place of his work is discriminatory because it hits article 19 of the Constitution which states that "The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens". It also hits section 27 of the Constitution which lays down that "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law". In order to remove the ambiguity as well as to ensure equal opportunity to all, Section 7 of the Ordinance should be substituted by the following: "7, The Registration Officer for

his registration in any electoral area under his jurisdiction."

In order to bring it in conformity with the above suggestion clause (1) of section 8 of the Ordinance which provides "save as hereinafter provided, a person shall be deemed to be resident in an electoral area or constituency if he ordinarily resides in that electoral area or constituency" shall be omitted from the existing law.

Further, sub-rule (3) of rule 10 of the Electoral Rolls Rules, 1982 which provides that "No person shall prefer an objection to the inclusion of any name in the electoral roll unless his name appears in the electoral roll for that electoral

ment are true and that he has not filed any other statement in addition to the one he is now submitting for registration of his name in any other electoral roll. Making of false declaration under section 18 of the Ordinance is an offence punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 6 months or with fine upto taka 1000/- or with both.

The punishment prescribed in the law is not enough to deter a person from making a false declaration for the purpose of inclusion of his name in more than one electoral roll. Hence, the term of punishment should be increased from 6 months to 3 years dropping the provision of fine. Further to this, the form prescribed for collection of information from a voter should indicate the term of imprisonment for making false declaration so that every person while filling the form may know the consequence of making false declaration. This will act as a safeguard to a larger extent.

The suggested measures if adopted will make the provisions of Section 7 and 8 of the Ordinance clear and easily understandable to the registration staff and others minimizing, at the sometime, the chances of multiple registration which is the root cause not only for exaggeration of the total number of voters by six to eight millions but also for impersonation or bogus voting. It will further solve the problem of registration of the dwellers of the slums in the city or town whose registration is not permissible under the existing provisions of the law.

The quality of the voters list shall further be improved if the Commission creates an atmosphere to monitor the registration process by the election monitoring organisations. Under the proposed arrangement, the Commission will have to supply a copy of the draft list to be published by it along with a copy of the voters list now in force to the

monitoring organisations. The volunteer to be involved in the monitoring of the registration process shall visit with one copy each of the draft list and the current list each household of a constituency and verify whether the names of every person eligible for enrolment as voter of that household has been included in the draft roll or not by the registration staff. He will, at the same time, check whether the draft roll includes the names of ineligible or dead persons. After completion of the verification, the monitor shall prepare a detailed report on his findings which will be sent by his organisation to the concerned Registration Officer as well as to the Commission to rectify the omissions and commissions in the draft list in a manner prescribed by the rules.

The aforementioned task involves expenditure which in the interest of accurate and flawless voters list may either be borne by the Election Commission itself out of the fund to provided to it by the government or by the development partners many of whom, it is believed, be pleased to do so in the interest of preparation of correct voters list for using in the upcoming general election. The co-operation of the Commission may help in getting the fund from the development partners by the monitoring organisations easily.

The recommendations made in this article if implemented will surely go a long way in creation of a voters list with maximum accuracy which could be the only basis for holding free, fair and credible election needed for the formation of legitimate and efficient government.

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Katrina turned New Orleans uninhabitable