

I keep worrying!

SHAMSER CHOWDHURY

I am no longer worried about the enquiry into the bombings of August 21. I am no longer worried about the traffic jam in the capital city. I am no longer worried about the criminal acts by a section of the people who have wrongfully occupied lakes and other water bodies and have constructed some monstrous and ugly structures ringing the death bell of our environment. I am no longer worried about the law and order situation. I am no longer worried about the disastrous state of our education. I am no longer worried about the continuous miscarriage of justice and violation of human rights. I am no longer worried about the water logging in the city and the continuous deteriorating state of civic amenities. I am no longer worried nor do I care if the opening ceremony of some bridge or a high-profile shopping complex or an industry by the Hon'ble Prime Minister is delayed or even cancelled.

The government says it is arranging the security of the members of the public during the Ramadan. I no longer care. Government and the high-profile businessmen of the country are busy in assessing the feasibility of the \$2 billion investment by Tata. I could not be bothered in the least nor am I too excited about it. I could neither care less nor be worried by the ugly "faces" of our politicians and their cheap and senseless bickering. I am not worried about our cricket team creating the legacy of a champion loser!

I am not worried about which intellectual belongs to which of the two major political parties. I am not worried about which newspaper represents which of the political parties. I am not worried about the F-28 repeating the accident at Sylhet. For all I care if our ministry of aviation in collusion with corrupt officials and business houses could go ahead and buy more of these obsolete aircrafts and ensure more deaths and disasters in the future. I am not worried about the pitiable state and the rocketing costs of medical services. I am neither interested nor care whether the Judiciary is separated from the Executive or not.

One is thus likely to ask as to what is it that I am worried about? Yes, I am right at this time extremely worried about the spiraling of prices of essentials. I am worried since this concerns about 70 percent of our population belonging to the so-called middle class and the poorer section. It is a shame for a country of which 87 percent of the people are Muslims when the rising of prices takes place every time during the Ramadan and the Eid festival. Is this the kind of spirit

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Demonstrating for monga relief.

of Islam we are pursuing? This should alone be a matter of shame for the entire nation. Is this a part and parcel of our proud heritage of so-called democratic traditions? Believe me if that is what it represents I do not wish to be a part of any such fake slogans! I wonder whatever happened to these poor and the so-called middle class that they too have taken the backseat and have decided to do nothing about it and continue to suffer silently? How can all these corrupt and unscrupulous traders and businessmen in collusion with some top bureaucrats and individual lawmakers continue to operate year after year? I see every year serious meetings are held prior to the advent of Ramadan. Senior civil bureaucrats of various ministries and lawmakers come to these meetings in the comforts of luxurious Pajeros and Nissan Patrols and return home after making tall promises and measures assuring stable prices. Yet nothing happens. Why should they worry

when they can buy anything and everything no matter what the prices are? Will no one take them to task? While the present regime is engaged in celebrating its four years of success, the opposition is busy trying to bring down the government and be in the seat of power. No one ever thinks of these unfortunate people. At times I have this feeling that this country has been custom-tailored for the corrupt, the rich, and the unscrupulous. The Pajeros and the BMW owners are not only destined to be the king of our roads, but also to lead a life worthy of kings. But do they also realise that their kingdom will someday sooner than later crumble like a pack of cards? It is over three decades since we gained our independence and yet these (the poor and the vanishing middle class) people continue to barely survive, without any visible improvements in their lifestyle, year after year.

The difference between the violent

deaths caused by small arms and criminals as against the choking death due to rising prices is that, this is a process in which millions will die a slow death due to hunger and malnutrition.

The government will do nothing about it. The rich and the affluent will do nothing about it. The politicians and our lawmakers will do nothing about it. The civil society will do nothing about it. Strangest of all, the affected will also do nothing about it. I say boycott the traders, gherao the wholesalers, and take out silent processions across market places in order to create a kind of awareness both amongst the traders and the buyers at large.

One can perhaps survive without high priced red meat or fancy dates or some such items, but not without rice, pulses, or such basic vegetables like the aubergine. How can anyone be quiet and watch the buying and selling of aubergine at Tk 40 and 60 per kilogram in a country like Bangladesh?

Let us for God's sake for once at least think of the well-being of the day labourers, the rickshaw-pullers, people in the lowest bracket of fixed wages, both of government and private organisations like the bricklayers, the cobblers, and the boatmen in our countryside, etc.

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Thou shall not kill but we will

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

THE September 11 attacks have changed American law and foreign policy regarding political murders. Since the 1970s, when a Congressional committee exposed the CIA plots to murder Fidel Castro and other foreign leaders, the president's law embodied in executive orders has prohibited government employees from directly or indirectly engaging in assassinations. That law seems to have been secretly revoked. The president may do so for national security reasons. Even if the executive order prohibiting assassinations is still good law, its language is not. Given bad faith interpretations that government lawyers have made to undermine the laws of war and torture, do not be surprised if the executive order is reinterpreted to allow domestic, yes domestic, and foreign political murders. If the law has indeed been revoked, the president's hand is freer.

Not only the law, but also US foreign policy has changed with respect to political murders, casting away years of international efforts to forbid extra-judicial killings. The new US commandment is:

Thou shall not kill but we will. The word "thou" in the commandment is a bit convoluted. It means Syria and other disfavoured states. It does not include Israel and other allies. The US as the singular superpower is of course above and beyond all commandments. Under the new commandment, the US reserves the right to murder whomever it pleases, condemn political murders whenever it pleases, and condone political murders as it pleases. Here are three episodes that illuminate the new commandment.

Condemning political murder

Take the political murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. A UN investigation commission has concluded that since the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services were closely allied in Lebanon, "it would be difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination plot could have been carried out without their knowledge." The commission also accuses Syrian security officials of giving false or inaccurate information. However, the commission is emphatic in saying that the investigation is incomplete and that "the full picture of the assassination can only be reached through an extensive and credible investiga-

These three episodes demonstrate that the US is evolving into a capricious monster. It no longer respects the rule of law. Away from luminous halls on the Capitol Hill where democracy is showcased for the American public and the world, lawless and arbitrary decisions are made in dim caves accessible only to select members of the ruling group. The world must demand that the Bush administration make an unequivocal statement in the UN Security Council that the US upholds the law against all political murders, with no exceptions.



Sheikh Yassin and Rafiq Hariri: Double standard on assassination?



tion."

The UN report provides a basis, never mind if it is razor thin, for the US ruling group to slash the Syrian throat. After Iraq, Syria has been the perfect next target for a while. The US ruling group needs new subterfuges to sustain the failing war on terror. Pouncing on the opportunity, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has already convicted the entire Syrian government. The UN report cannot be "left lying on the table," she said. The military option is always there, President Bush announced on Al Arabiya television. Neo-cons agree wholeheartedly. Punishing Syria would also delight Prime Minister Sharon whose own involvement in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon was not even referred to any UN investigation commission.

Condoning political murder

That takes us to Sharon sponsored political murders. In March 2004, Sharon ordered the murder of blind quadriplegic Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, who had previously suffered years of torture in Israeli prisons. Yasin was blasted out of his wheelchair as he was returning from the Gaza mosque after the morning prayer. Sharon chose the delicacies of time and place of murder to reinforce a favourite Israeli theme that not even God helps the Palestinians. Israel accepted

of an armed encounter with the US army. But the circumstances under which the murders took place revealed intent and premeditation. The targets were trapped in a villa and had nowhere to go. Their limited cache of bullets had been completely exhausted. Several hours after the fire from the villa had stopped, US Special Forces under the cover of overwhelming force of missiles, helicopters, rockets, and grenades, entered the building not to take prisoners but, per order, to murder Saddam's children.

responsibility, arguing that the Sheikh, as the godfather of terrorism, deserved to die.

Reacting to the murder news, the US State Department had no words of condemnation. Its spokesman urged "all parties to remain calm and exercise restraint." This urging for calm was obviously aimed at Palestinians and not Israelis who, after the assassination, had every reason to be serene. President Bush further mitigated the murder by saying that Israel had the right to defend itself, but should take into account the consequences of its actions. When the matter was brought before the UN Security Council, the same Council where the US is actively seeking a resolution against Syria, Israel faced no consequences for the political murder. The US vetoed the resolution drafted to condemn the political murder. "How do the Israelis continue with what they are saying and what they are doing unless there is this unfortunate automatic protection by the superpower of the world?" remarked the Palestinian UN observer.

Perpetrating political murder

But the superpower of the world was even more blatant in committing political murders. In July 2003, the US murdered Saddam Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay, and his 14-year old grandson, Mustapha. The murders were justified as the outcome

of an armed encounter with the US army. But the circumstances under which the murders took place revealed intent and premeditation. The targets were trapped in a villa and had nowhere to go. Their limited cache of bullets had been completely exhausted. Several hours after the fire from the villa had stopped, US Special Forces under the cover of overwhelming force of missiles, helicopters, rockets, and grenades, entered the building not to take prisoners but, per order, to murder Saddam's children.

Back home, particularly in Washington, the air was drenched with morbidity. Deaths of the enemy's children were seen as rare trophies. Contrary to Pentagon wishes and contrary to the laws of war, the broken faces of Uday and Qusay were reconstructed with plastic pudding for a grand display. Gruesome pictures of the brothers were shown to the world as proof of their death. Major newspapers, including the New York Times, celebrated the murders and congratulated the Bush administration for a heroic undertaking. So widespread was the joy of murders that even some liberal Senators were bathing their hands in the blood.

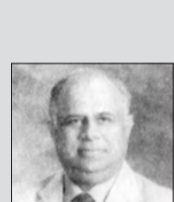
Conclusion

These three episodes demonstrate that the US is evolving into a capricious monster. It no longer respects the rule of law. Away from luminous halls on the Capitol Hill where democracy is showcased for the American public and the world, lawless and arbitrary decisions are made in dim caves accessible only to select members of the ruling group. The world must demand that the Bush administration make an unequivocal statement in the UN Security Council that the US upholds the law against all political murders, with no exceptions.

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One small step for Kashmir

And possibly one giant step for South Asia?



IKRAM SEHGAL writes from Karachi

PARAPHRASING Neil Armstrong's remarks on setting foot on the moon -- "one small step for man, one giant step for mankind" -- is a regular pastime for commentators. Since more than one fifth (22 percent) of the world's population live in the sub-continent, the Musharraf initiative to allow people to cross over from both sides of the LOC in alleviating the miseries wrought by the earthquake on their kith and kin would truly mean walking on the moon for South Asians. Responding to the offer positively, India said it would negotiate the modalities, but would restrict the movement to a few crossing points. Subject to successful negotiations Kashmiris would be able to mingle among themselves without somebody squinting at them through gun sights. The guns were already silent, or almost, a year or so before the devastating earthquake, hopefully this senseless will remain deafening for the foreseeable future, maybe even forever.

They say that death is a great equaliser, at least the enormity of the destruction has stunned the two great antagonists into trying to dovetail the relief and rehabilitation effort into one common melting pot of cooperation in ameliorating the lot of the wretched and the dead. Compared to India, the casualties and damage was far more on the Pakistani side of Kashmir, it extended to the adjacent districts of NWFP. In the first flush of the tragedy, the sincere offer for assistance from India was very welcome. It did not take long for political overtones to creep in, viz the offer of helicopters for heavy

AS I SEE IT

In the absence of a relief we need an arrangement over Kashmir, one that will keep intact each other's legal reservations but will facilitate the Kashmiri people to mingle with each other as is their God-given right. The earthquake has forced the issue, are the two governments up to it? Neil Armstrong took one small step on the moon and called it a giant step for mankind, Musharraf's offer may become a first step in bringing joy and happiness to the Kashmiri people, for them mixing with each other freely will be like walking on the moon. Other than the leaders of the two countries, can the people seize this moment, this fleeting moment of opportunity derived from dire adversity?

airlift of relief and evacuation of casualties became a sensitive issue. For a number of reasons this was rather improbable, not the least being that while India was making the offer for its military aviation crews to operate in the affected areas of Azad Kashmir, it only reluctantly allowed relief agencies from within India, what to talk of permitting international agencies, to provide succour to those affected on their side of the LOC. Even on their side of the LOC inaccessible places had yet to be reached. Other than security concerns, the subject of Indian helicopters operating in Azad Kashmir is a politically sensitive issue, and some extremists could have reacted adversely to it. Suppose an Indian helicopter had been brought down by some idiot, the world's attention would have turned from relief and rehabilitation to focus on terrorism. Would Pakistan be able to take such a risk at this time?

Some armchair strategists without any knowledge of the terrain or conditions obtaining in the upper reaches of Kashmir or NWFP have even suggested that Indian troops should have been allowed to cross the LOC to reach inaccessible heights. Most communications in these areas are North to South, the East-West axis (crossing the LOC) is still blocked at many places. What is being suggested borders on the ridiculous. It would involve first the concentration of supplies in Srinagar, then taken to forward dumps, and then after clearing of roads and bridges, to reach at best Rawalakot-Bagh area. As a contiguous

part of Punjab, pre-partition, all the main communication links flow through Sialkot, Jehlum, Rawalpindi, and Abbottabad. The only existing road to Srinagar for India proper is through Akhnoor. Even knowledgeable circles will find it difficult to understand the limitations imposed by geography, it is both tragic and disappointing to hear people who should know better to play with the emotions of the people by regaling them with false premises. Despite lack of knowledge people tend to espouse absurd theories and propositions with great confidence. In some cases where there is good knowledge, one must question the motivation.

Why not let the people on both sides of the LOC mingle with each other and thus alleviate both their physical and emotional suffering, accentuated by the devastating earthquake? Musharraf has called for the LOC to become irrelevant and people on both sides to cross freely, an expansion on his offer for people from Indian-held Kashmir coming across to help in the rehabilitation and reconstruction. Maybe this initiative can be expanded into permanence, free movement could also facilitate trade. Since many areas of the Occupied Territory are easily accessible to the Pakistan side rather than the lone tenuous link through Jammu with India, this would also be logistically feasible. As for the LOC becoming irrelevant, this can only happen if troops on both sides pull back and concentrate on peacetime locations. In many discussions with Indians of all

ilk, official and private citizens, poor, middle class, or affluent, no one has ever come close to ceding even one inch of territory, to expect India will abandon its hold on Kashmir is being over-optimistic. Despite this, many of the same Indians were perturbed about the state of affairs within Kashmir as well as the head to head confrontation with Pakistan. As such, even if one cannot come to a solution on Kashmir one can come to an arrangement. The first move on this arrangement was the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and vice-versa bus service. The heavens did not fall when the service started, and it operated till the earthquake made the roads impassable.

The earthquake has overtaken events and provided India and Pakistan both with an opportunity and a challenge. With good faith and goodwill, this initiative of free crossings can become a permanent feature as can two-way trade. If the earthquake can put a hiatus on the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between the two governments up to it? Neil Armstrong took one small step on the moon and called it a giant step for mankind, Musharraf's offer may become a first step in bringing joy and happiness to the Kashmiri people, for them mixing with each other freely will be like walking on the moon. Other than the leaders of the two countries, can the people seize this moment, this fleeting moment of opportunity derived from dire adversity?

The Federation of the Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI), Chaudhry Mohd Saad, sent me as a special emissary to the FPCCI counterpart organisations, FBCCI in Bangladesh and FICCI, CII, and ASSOCHAM in India, to apprise them personally about the death and destruction caused by the massive earthquake and request mobilisation of relief effort in the private sector. While the immediate response ranged from very good to excellent, future trade initiatives will have to be measured with their response, or otherwise. Some individuals have been very forthcoming spontaneously, Narayan Murthy of Infosys donated Rs. 10 million, the jury is still waiting to give their verdict on others.

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The oil shock with no pain

The world can live with higher oil prices if it listens to market signals: oil companies need to invest more in exploration and emerging markets need to allow more realistic retail prices. While all that may be in the works, be careful what you wish for. Yes, the old link between high prices and slow growth appears to be broken. But it has been inverted in a way that is almost as worrisome: the surest way oil prices will fall significantly is if global economic growth slows dramatically.

RUCHIR SHARMA

THE inevitable never happens, the unexpected always does. Economists long believed a good price for the global economy was that every time the price of oil doubled or exceeded \$35 a barrel, the world would enter a recessionary phase. Even today, news coverage continues to project the image of a world besieged by higher oil prices, and economists think a major global economic slowdown is inevitable. Instead, one of the biggest surprises of this decade is that a 200 percent surge in crude prices hasn't hurt the global economy.

Even as spending on petroleum as a percentage of the world's gross domestic product has risen to 4.5 percent levels last seen during the 1979-80 oil crisis the global economy continues to expand at a more than decent clip of 4.5 percent. To be sure, there's greater recognition of the fact that, unlike the past, when oil-price surges were driven by supply shocks, the current rally in oil is mainly the result of a demand shock. The jump in oil prices is triggered by a very strong global economy, with increased contribution to growth coming from emerging markets, which tend to demand more oil than developed peers for a similar expansion in output.

The "demand-led" nature of the shock implies incomes in countries such as China and India are rising along with oil prices. That works to neutralise the traditional negative impact of higher crude prices. But the underappreciated story of the ongoing episode is how oil-producing countries are better using their revenue from exports of the commodity. Theoretically, an increase in the price of oil represents a transfer of wealth from oil-consuming countries to oil-producing nations. In the past this was a big net negative for the global economy as oil-producing countries were inefficient users of capital, and oil money lined a few select pockets rather than contributing to economic activity in those countries.

This time around, the crude-producing nations have done a much better job of recycling oil money into the global economy. The trade-balance numbers of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, as well as those of Europe and some emerging markets, support that notion. The OPEC countries, for instance, are running only a slight trade surplus with China where they are buying a lot of low-cost goods. At the same time, China is using more oil to manufacture those goods for export.

The economics team at UBS estimates that OPEC is now consuming 83 percent of its export revenues from oil, compared with 1974, when it was spending only 27 percent of its petrodollars. The much higher propensity of the

OPEC members to consume is one of the most important reasons behind the resilience of the global economy in the face of a mega bull market in oil.

Oil-producing countries have also been more active in the international investment arena, using their windfall revenue to buy stocks and bonds in various countries, thereby keeping the global cost of capital low. That phenomenon is reflected in record-low bond yields and is an important factor in financing sizable current-account deficits in large oil-consuming countries, such as the United States.

Still, demand has held up well for many reasons, not all positive. There are distortions in the pricing mechanism, which are cushioning the impact of higher crude prices. Normally, higher prices should eventually slow demand as part of a self-regulating market process. This time, based on a worldwide average, only a third of the price increase has been passed on to end-users even as oil prices have doubled over the past three years. In fact, the United States is probably the only country where the rise in energy costs has been matched by an increase in end-user prices. In Europe and Japan, the very high flat taxes on oil consumption mean the rise in oil prices only has limited impact on the overall retail price, and in many developing countries, governments are subsidizing oil prices outright.

We are now beginning to see responses from various market participants that should make the present run in oil prices self-correcting and, it is hoped, prevent it from reaching a boiling point. Governments are increasingly forced to pass on global oil-price rises, while spending by oil companies on exploration is picking up as the realization sinks in that the current price cycle is more than just another boom-bust one. Anecdotally, consumers are starting to respond to the high prices of crude, with sales of SUVs in the United States plummeting, sales of hybrids and bicycles increasing worldwide and the customer base for premium gasoline at fuel pumps drying up.

The world can live with higher oil prices if it listens to market signals: oil companies need to invest more in exploration and emerging markets need to allow more realistic retail prices. While all that may be in the works, be careful what you wish for. Yes, the old link between high prices and slow growth appears to be broken. But it has been inverted in a way that is almost as worrisome: the surest way oil prices will fall significantly is if global economic growth slows dramatically.

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