

Home secretaries talk

Grounds for some optimism

HELD against the backdrop of tensions on our borders the home secretary level meetings between Bangladesh and India in New Delhi, from reports appearing in the media, has gone off well, and from which we may take heart. It is just as well and something that one expects from representatives of two close neighbouring countries. One understands that the negotiations were quite intense in that all contentious points were put on the table and discussed candidly.

It is apparent, from the fact that the meetings went into the wee hours of the night, and that the press briefings had to be postponed several times, that the core issues, which sometimes plague the friendly atmosphere, are still to be thoroughly worked out. However, no one expects the discordant issues to go away overnight, but that we ought to give ears to the sensitivities of the neighbour has been amply demonstrated in the manner in which the meeting was conducted.

The fact that there was agreement to provide consular access to one another's nationals held in the other's gaol, is a positive development. Also the fact that there was an agreement to share information on the insurgents' activities reflects the awareness that joint efforts are needed to tackle this menace effectively.

That the two neighbours have agreed to work closely on issues related to security is also a positive move towards addressing each other's concerns in this matter, which augurs well for peace and harmony between us. In this context one would hope that India would take effective action to address our concerns regarding illegal trade and smuggling of drugs and narcotics across the border. We would like to see the Joint Border Working Group commence work sooner rather than later. That would help mitigate some aspects of the border problems. And all these must be followed up with substantive action.

We must build sincerely on what has been achieved. Although much needs to be done, and not always will talks and negotiations be completely 'successful' we must never give up talking and negotiating. This is the only way good intentions can be translated into deeds.

Good sentiments are not enough

Take concrete steps for dialogue

EARLY last month, Khandaker Musharraf Hossain and Tofael Ahmed, two senior-most leaders of ruling BNP and opposition AL, attending a BATEXPO seminar, struck a common note saying that their parties need to come out of their 'bitter' relationship for the good of the nation. We welcomed the gesture, urging them to initiate a process of dialogue with the blessings of their top most leaders, so that their words do not dissolve into thin air as some empty rhetoric. Only day before yesterday came the news of Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Abdul Jalil, secretaries general respectively of BNP and AL shaking hands at a BGMEA Iftar party and pledging to jointly work for the betterment of garments industry in the post-MFA scenario.

They even said that they could solve the 'minor' problems between BNP and AL through discussion--hopefully to create an environment whereby major issues of conflict could be addressed. Good intent, but hardly enough; for, they are in a race against time, which is fast running out for taking the bull of their mutual confrontation by the horn, or else real trouble lies in store for Bangladesh democracy.

National elections are drawing nearer and many vital issues relating to the conduct of polls are crying for resolution. There will have to be a common understanding on questions like dealing with terrorism, use of black money and muscle power, which are important not only for successfully holding the national elections but also for administering the country in the post-election era irrespective of which party comes to occupy the seat of power.

It is high time, therefore, that the occasional bursts of agreeable sentiments being mutually voiced by senior leaders of both parties should be translated into concrete steps forward with multi-layered discussions leading to a national dialogue, one that will be productive of a national consensus on ways to hold free and fair elections.

Dark days at the White House



HARUN UR RASHID

THESE are dark days for the White House and some say they could get darker.

President Bush became president in 2001, pledging to "restore" morality and integrity of the White House after the Clinton era. Now it looks like the integrity of the White House itself is in the mud as it sweats over the verdict in the CIA identity leak inquiry.

On October 28, the Chief of Staff to the Vice President, Lewis Libby was indicted for perjury and obstruction of justice. Investigation has been going on by the independent no-nonsense prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald against Karl Rove, a very close aide of the President, and the investigation over insider share trading, against the Senate Republican leader Bill Frist.

On October 27, the President's embattled nominee to the Supreme Court, Harriet Miers, pulls out as she does not wish to "burden" the White House during the Congressional hearing for her confirmation.

On October 25, the US death toll in Iraq hit 2,000, a fresh reminder of the President's push to war over weapons of mass destruction that were never found. At the time of writing, the death toll had hit 2,007 and is rising every day.

Deaths in Iraq are coming quicker. It took 18 months for insurgents to kill

1,000 US forces, and now it took only 14 months to kill the second 1,000. 90 per cent of the US deaths have occurred since President Bush stood in May 2003 before a banner that read

"Mission Accomplished" and said major combat operations had ended in Iraq.

Protests against the war have been growing with Cindy Sheehan, mother of a dead US soldier, leading the protest. She has become the face of anti-Iraq protest. She courted arrest protesting in front of the White House.

included Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his former deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and former National Security Adviser Dr. Condoleezza Rice.

The former US Secretary of State Colin Powell was simply steam-rolled. He did not get the ear of the President.

Political observers say the secret process of decision-making on crucial national security matters by a few substituted for the traditional National Security Council process. Such departures in the past led into a host of

ratings -- at the 38 per cent mark, according to the latest polls.

The Vice-President speaks only on the radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and before military forces. The Defence Secretary Rumsfeld presides over the death of 2,000 US forces and another 15,000 wounded.

Insurgency surviving

The British press in October revealed that an opinion poll, commissioned secretly by the British military, found that 45 per cent of Iraqis believe attacks

on foreign troops are justified. More than 80 per cent across the country indicated strong opposition to the presence of foreign troops, and while 70 per cent said that they had no confidence in them, 67 per cent said the presence of foreign troops made them less secure, and 43 per cent considered peace and stability had deteriorated.

There is a view that such effective and widespread insurgency cannot survive for more than two and half years without the active cooperation and assistance of locals.

The British journalist Rory Carroll's account of his brief abduction in Baghdad in October provides a glimpse how unpopular the foreign forces are among Iraqis. He was put under the staircase in an ordinary Iraqi home where women went about their daily chores and children squealed with delight when he was brought out to eat and exercise.

Furthermore, whole families and wider circles of friends and acquaintances are reportedly in on the movement of thousands of rank-and-file insurgents, offering shelter, sympathy, and signals on what the Americans are up to. It is not the non-Iraqis who constitute the bulk of insurgents. It is the disaffected Iraqis themselves who carry out the insurgency against the foreign forces and the Iraqis who support the US.

Despite all Washington's promises of reconstruction, the Americans have failed to win the hearts and minds of most Iraqis and that is the big problem.

draw by stages from specific areas.

Kerry's proposed exit strategy

John Kerry, the defeated Democratic presidential candidate, in an address to Georgetown University in Washington, delivered the plain and simple exit strategy. Kerry called for withdrawing 20,000 troops from Iraq by the year-end and most forces within another year.

He called Iraq "one of the greatest foreign policy misadventures of all time. It is time for those of us who believe in a better course to say so plainly and unequivocally. I doubt there are many members of Congress who would give them the authority they abused so badly. I know I would not."

Some observers say that John Kerry is 51 weeks late in declaring his exit policy. During the campaign in 2004, he vacillated in giving a definitive policy on withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

Conclusion

The endorsement of a new Iraqi constitution is one of the few pieces of good news the US President has had this last month. On Iraq, he has given a series of speeches defending his war policies.

The mantle of leadership comes at a price -- the courage to listen to dissenting opinions and change, and to show how values stand for all time. It requires leaders to analyse, compare alternatives in terms of costs and effectiveness, and then to decide.

As French philosopher and the father of modern sociology, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) once said: "The world, including the political world, proceeds according to regular laws, and to understand any part of it, one must learn how it relates to the rest, according to those laws."

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

The mantle of leadership comes at a price -- the courage to listen to dissenting opinions and change, and to show how values stand for all time. As French philosopher and the father of modern sociology, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) once said: "The world, including the political world, proceeds according to regular laws, and to understand any part of it, one must learn how it relates to the rest, according to those laws."

Furthermore, the President has been facing a host of political challenges, including the corruption and conspiracy charges against the Republican House Majority leader Tom Delay, a Texan and a close ally of the President, and the investigation over insider share trading, against the Senate Republican leader Bill Frist.

disasters, including the last years of the Vietnam War, the national embarrassment of Watergate, and the Iran-Contra scandal. And now the failed policy on Iraq appears to be due to the secret process of decision-making.

As the buck stops at the desk of President Bush, he cannot get away from this poor process of decision-making process. The President apparently did not listen to people who had professional experience, for example, the views of the White House anti-terrorism expert, Richard Clarke, were either totally discounted or ignored, as recounted in his book, *Against All Enemies*.

Approval rating down
The latest Harris poll in the *Wall Street Journal* shows that for the first time most Americans, 53 per cent, believe military action in Iraq was wrong. Some 66 per cent say Bush is doing a "poor job or only a fair job" on Iraq. In the context of sliding general approval

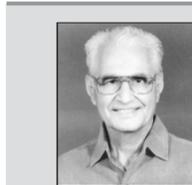
on foreign troops are justified. More than 80 per cent across the country indicated strong opposition to the presence of foreign troops, and while 70 per cent said that they had no confidence in them, 67 per cent said the presence of foreign troops made them less secure, and 43 per cent considered peace and stability had deteriorated.

There is a view that such effective and widespread insurgency cannot survive for more than two and half years without the active cooperation and assistance of locals.

The British journalist Rory Carroll's account of his brief abduction in Baghdad in October provides a glimpse how unpopular the foreign forces are among Iraqis. He was put under the staircase in an ordinary Iraqi home where women went about their daily chores and children squealed with delight when he was brought out to eat and exercise.

Furthermore, whole families and wider circles of friends and acquaintances are reportedly in on the movement of thousands of rank-and-file insurgents, offering shelter, sympathy, and signals on what the Americans are up to. It is not the non-Iraqis who constitute the bulk of insurgents. It is the disaffected Iraqis themselves who carry out the insurgency against the foreign forces and the Iraqis who support the US.

Middle East moving toward a conflagration



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

PEOPLE will be well advised not to dismiss the extra-strong statement of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad that Israel should be wiped off the map as a confirmed hardliner's extremist rhetoric. Twenty-six years into governing an Iran that has plenty of enemies, the Iranian government leader can scarcely afford to make ill-thought out or merely emotional statements. Ahmedinejad's election last June, for a start, in fact marked a return to the Khomeini Revolution's rigidities after two terms of a moderate reformist's rule. President Mohammed Khatemi was sensitive to the aspirations of marginalised sections -- women, students, workers, etc. He was tending away from religious orthodoxy's extra rigid practices and groping for more civil liberties.

Ahmedinejad's statement is a serious realpolitik position being adopted in a turbulent region. The US has been demonising and isolating Iran; America is intent on taking Iran to the UN Security Council, for being subjected to mandatory sanctions, depending upon votes in the UNSC. The threats of US or Israeli military action, in addition to full blown under-

cover subversion, are not hot air, either. Nor are Israeli/American threats against Syria, a virtual ally of Iran, hot air. The Iranian president's statement is to be seen against this complex background.

Remember, the Iranian orthodoxy was losing its hold on the loyalties of the unemployed, students, and women. This was what Americans did not appreciate. Had they done so, they could have resorted to masterful inactivity to let the dynamics of Iranian

the assumption that the US would attack, they had nothing more to lose. The efforts by Rafsanjani and Khatemi to emphasise inter-civilisational dialogue and also favouring Iranian/American negotiations, overt or secret, were ignored by the Americans, who seem to have prepared for action. Therefore some desperation is to be seen among Iranians. Thus the first requirement for Iran in this situation is to create national unity under the ruling orthodoxy. American actions have favoured the Iranian clergy

will succeed or not. But they are making an effort to mobilise Arab opinion.

This design can be interpreted as an essay in reviving the old Khomeini efforts to hammer out a modus operandi between Shias and Sunnis, politically bridging the historic schism. He almost shared the Indo-Pakistan concept of Pan-Islamism. The effort did not quite succeed largely because of the threat felt by Sunni regimes in ME to themselves. So they promoted anti-Iranian and anti-Shia sentiment,

do very little about it; the best course is to recognise a fact of life and live with it. The only conclusion that emerges from this is the Arabs must obey Israel and whatever treatment it metes out to the Palestinians is OK and whatever it leaves for the Arabs to pick up has to be accepted. That is supposedly realistic and pragmatic politics. It is a total denial of historic Arab rights over Palestine. Since Israel has the power and international support, it can impose any settlement it likes; that's OK.

deceit and lies by the British and Israelis. It is about time to revisit Israel's genesis and work for a fairer deal for the Arabs.

The Iranian leader knew what he was saying. What he said is that Iran is not Iraq or Afghanistan. What Ahmedinejad's meant was "come and get us." True, Americans and/or Israelis would be able to destroy much of Iranian infrastructure or state structures. But beyond that, what they can do amounts to nil. Iran itself would be ten times of Vietnam to conquer and incorporate into the western system. Sure, the Americans and the Israelis can get into Iran. But how will they get out?

Merely to rely on aerial or naval bombardment would leave smouldering Iran bereft of modern structures and probably will have to be nuked. The Iranian oil will disappear from the world market for God knows how long. The Americans will still not be able to restart the oil industry. It will create such a turmoil in the international oil market that a depression in the west may not remain avoidable. All in all, the destruction of Iran might be conceivable. But what others can gain from it is hard to imagine.

Iranians may be relying on a changed world. Other centres of influence are emerging. Americans are not very popular in Latin America and the rest of the third world, especially in Asia. Even Europe is tired of American leadership. Global opinion, operating through American opinion, may finally emerge as a countervailing force. Is Ahmedinejad right? Who can say.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Iranians may be relying on a changed world. Other centres of influence are emerging. Americans are not very popular in Latin America and the rest of the third world, especially in Asia. Even Europe is tired of American leadership. Global opinion, operating through American opinion, may finally emerge as a countervailing force. Is Ahmedinejad right? Who can say.

politics evolve its own path to a relaxed, if not democratic, dispensation. President Bush's recent hard-line stance against Iran strengthened the hands of the orthodoxy, which is now intent on wiping out expressions of dissatisfaction with its near totalitarian rule. With this hard statement, Ahmedinejad hopes to reunite the Iranians under the Islamic orthodoxy's banner. The gains the marginalised sections had made under Khatemi are at risk.

Comparison between the US power, competently assisted by powerful Israel, with Iran's is obviously unequal. Iran is incomparably inferior in military capabilities. Even so, the Iranian position is not foolish. The particular statement has to be seen in perspective of the Iranian perception. Starting with

against the forerunners of democracy.

The Iranians may also be aiming at Arab opinion. The Sunni Iraqis and Syrians may be sufficiently anti-American to listen to Iran. It may go some way toward recruiting Iraqis and strengthening the Arab forces that want political change in replacing old monarchical regimes with democratic ones. Iran is projecting itself as a strong and reliable anti-Israeli force. It wants the old enmity between the Arabs and Iranians to be subordinated to the anti-Israeli cause by supporting Iran. Instead of being foolish, Ahmedinejad is taking up a realpolitik position that challenges the American (and Israeli) colossus. Iran wants to play a dominant role in ME and win over the anti-Israeli Arab opinion. Who can say that they

particularly through blowing up territorial disputes over Gulf islands. Whether this effort will succeed is uncertain.

The statement goes far: it makes the genesis of Israel a proposition to be debated again. The role of British imperialism in the last century has to be revisited. What the British did through their Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a promise of creating a Jewish national home in Palestine with the specific proviso that it would not abridge Arab's social, cultural and political rights. How well did the British respect that proviso is a question that still needs to be asked.

There is the reasoning: Israel as a state exists; it is powerful; it has to be accepted as a fact of life; the Arabs can

Few fair-minded people can accept it. One does not have to be an Arab to appreciate this. True, Arabs do not endear themselves to outsiders. But that has nothing to do with their inherent human rights even in other Arab countries, particularly in Palestine. Palestinians' inherent rights have to be recognised. The stark historical fact is that Zionist leaders actually refused to recognise there were any people in Palestine. To Golda Meyer it was like an empty desert where a few Bedouins might have been there, but no Palestinian people as a nation existed. Do we have to accept in the 21st century this kind of realism?

The Arabs and other supporters of the Palestinians have not done a good PR job. The genesis of Israel only details

OPINION

Corruption : Misdeeds of favoured few

PROF. M. ANWAR HOSSAIN

THE editor of The Daily Star, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, deserves applause and felicitation from the readers as well as the people at large for his bold and timely commentary on corruption, immediately after branding Bangladesh as the most corrupt country for the fifth time by Transparency International. He has rightly pointed out, how the ministers and the government remain self-imposed blind, try to hide facts and always put blames on press and media, hiding their own misdeeds and involvement in corruption. Refuting the claim and argument of a minister that at least 50 countries are more corrupt than Bangladesh, the editor has correctly proved, giving some examples, that since the ministers and their families are beneficiaries of corruption, they are always prone to defend themselves and falsify the existence of corruption by blaming others for all their personal and collective failures. The editor also casts doubt, whether the ministers have any courage to agree to face any independent investigation into their personal and family wealth.

Through some examples, proofs of corruption have been cited from the experience of daily life, such as bribing for utility services, paying speed money for movement of files, paying commissions to very near and dear ones of high ups of the government and others. An attempt has been made by the editor to show that most of our offices, professionals and businesses have been polluted with corruption.

Really, it is a great humiliation for the people of Bangladesh that the country has been continuing to head the list in corruption. It is now time to see and find how Bangladesh is being grabbed by corruption day by day.

Leaving aside the report of TI, it is not true to say that the paws of corruption have spread throughout the nook and corner of the country and every people feel the pinch of corruption?. Even a poor farmer becomes the victim of corruption in times of procuring kerosene, diesel and fertilizer. People have already come to know through news papers about the mismanagement of VGF and VGD cards. The disease has been spread from the lowest clerk to the highest position. It is a matter of deep embarrassment and

shame for the nation. If we look around us, everywhere we see corruption. It is hard to find any office, department, institution, business or any establishment free from corruption.

The situation has become so grave that no one can expect to get appointment, transfer and promotion in normal official rules and procedures without political backing of the ruling party. In almost all government departments, ministries and autonomous bodies, the officers cannot or do not work on the basis of rules and policy framework. The ruling party cadres and stalwarts are found to put pressure on administration to get things done in their favour by illegal ways. The high officials in the secretariat are compelled to work allegedly on the direction of powerful groups who have links with ministers, high ups of the PM's secretariat and even outside power.

Implementation of project activities, appointment, promotion and transfer in almost all offices are being done on political consideration. There are hundreds of cases of promotions of juniors, superseding the seniors and in some cases even special rules are

framed to accommodate own people loyal to ruling party. The secretaries or the district administrations cannot take action against or come out from these corrupt practices believably because in that case their services will be at stake. These types of misdeeds in the form of politicisation of bureaucracy and judiciary, election engineering, politicisation of important institutions and establishments, satisfying the vested interest, all are illegal activities of the highest order and fall within the purview of corruption.

Corruption is nothing but the abuse of public office for personal gains and may be termed as misuse of public power for private benefit. Files are found to move to get things done only when the concerned officials are satisfied by speed money. Complaints of corruptions relating to CNG taxis, the Danish embassy's complain of corruption, the power ministry's decision to award unsolicited contracts for small power plants to different ministers and ruling party legislators, recruitment of election officers from among party cadres -- all these activities of demonstrate the glaring examples of corruption. According to an estimate, 75

percent of foreign aid and grant received for poverty reduction is misappropriated through corruption.

Corruption is a great hindrance and predicament to development. All pervading corruption is the major impediment to our economic growth and poverty reduction. A great harm is being done to the country in the form of wastage of time and energy, escalation of cost of production, price hike, decrease of agriculture and industrial production, increase of import cost, inefficiency in administration and management, unutilisation of human and natural resources. Poverty, misery and distress of the people increases, sliding of government's popularity occurs, quality of leadership deteriorates and above all image of the country is lost.

The World Bank chief Mr. Wolfowitz recently visited Bangladesh and remarked "Bangladesh can achieve even an 8 percent GDP growth instead of present 5 percent, if corruption is removed. Future assistance would depend on reducing corruption. We cannot commit money unless we are convinced it is going to be spent in the right way." He further commented

that without eradicating corruption, it is not possible to control political terrorism, militancy and poverty. The newly appointed EU ambassador Dr. Stefan Frowein has described "corruption is certainly dangerous and not a good thing for the reputation of a country.....Foreign direct investment is very much hampered by corruption."

Obviously, corruption has a direct link with governance. The absence of good governance breeds corruption. Since the government has been failed to establish rule of law through good governance in all spheres of national life, the country has been engulfed with corruption. The country has not seen any tangible efforts and approach yet by the government to fight and address corruption. The key to achieve good governance is the political commitment and motivation, patriotism, high degree of morality and ethical values and above all efficiency and ability of the leaders to run the government successfully.

In all offices and establishments, there exist a large scale, suppression, favoritism, suppression of opposition views, OSD's, forced or early retire-

ment etc. In the main functionaries like, administration and police, many efficient officers have been given early retirement or deprived of promotion only because they entered the service in 1973 during Awami League government. Again, very unusual in the history of Bangladesh, there is the introduction of contract service in a large scale. Officers, having the blessing of the ruling party, have been given extension on contract for year after year depriving the next aspirants. Is it the congenial atmosphere for good administration?

Now, it is in this situation of contract service and suppression, naturally, the question will arise -- how can the discipline and chain of command in the service be preserved and maintained? Is this the situation be called good governance?

Morality and ethical values are found to be totally absent among those who are absorbed in corruption and corrupt people are always running after making fortunes by amassing wealth through illegal means. They do not remember the old lesson of the famous story -- how much land does a man require. They do not even feel and

realise what harm they are inflicting on the country and the people. Only because of a few corrupt persons that the country has been deprived of economic development and as a result, the majority of the people are suffering utter hardship and misery due to the lack of daily necessities of life. What a pitiable life the people of northern district of Rangur, Dinajpur, Gaibanda and Kurigram are passing through during this present crisis called Mongla!

Corruption does not signify that the entire nation or all people are corrupt. The vast majority of people are honest and victims of corruption. Only a limited number of powerful favoured individuals are indulged in corruption. The age-old moral teaching "honesty is the best policy" has been replaced by corruption is the best means. It is only for corruption that Bangladesh today is at the crossroads of existence. Sooner the better, the country should be relieved of this scourge by establishing an efficient and transparent system of governance.

M Anwar Hossain is a former Director of Education and Professor of Economics.