

President Bush's Asian trip

An American bid to reassert in the Pacific

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

PRESIDENT Bush has returned to Washington DC after a weeklong trip to Asia that took him to Japan, South Korea, China and Mongolia. The visit was primarily aimed at reasserting the US role in the Pacific region where China has considerably expanded her influence while Washington had remained bogged down in Iraq. Bush's agenda had included a variety of issues, namely trade imbalance, security concerns, human rights, greater political freedom, future of Taiwan, North Korean nuclear programme and launching of free trade area in the Pacific Rim. However, the trip produced no real breakthroughs as his National Security Adviser Stephen J Headley had anticipated.

Before the visit, Headley had indicated that the main objective was "to show the US commitment to Asia as an area of our interest" and "to indicate clearly that the President knows the United States has an important role to play in both the economic and security challenges in Asia and that he wants to play that role." However, in the wake of set-backs suffered during Bush's recent trip to Latin America, Headley tried to keep the public expectation at the minimum level.

In the first leg of his tour, Bush wanted Japan to lift its two-year ban on US beef imports. Tokyo is likely to take such an action soon in consideration of her own national interest. However, they did not declare their readiness during the visit, as they did not like it to be misinterpreted as having yielded to American pressure. In South Korea, Bush wanted to push forward the concept of free trade at the Annual Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. The Pacific Rim leaders did not agree to reduce tariffs, and merely agreed to continue with further talks. South Korea even created greater embarrassment for US when they decided to withdraw one-third of their current troops from Iraq.

The high point of the trip was, of course, the visit to China. His meetings with the Chinese President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jintao, however, produced no tangible results. While the Chinese leadership expressed their willingness to speed up the resolution of economic and trade differences with

Washington, they made no concessions on the vital questions of granting greater political freedom at home, and on the status of Taiwan. They also made it clear, through their words and actions that they have no intention of yielding to American pressure.

On trade and economic issues, Hu pledged "to gradually achieve balanced trade" between US and China, and reiterated his plans to allow the Chinese currency to float more freely in future, but he offered no plan to achieve any of these two objectives. The Bush Administration had sent a list of twenty-five factories, which were pirating DVDs in China. The Chinese authorities did not indicate whether they would shut down any one of them. They merely announced that they would be waging a vigorous campaign to enforce intellectual

the bilateral agenda, which was dominated by trade and economic issues and the North Korean nuclear programme.

Beijing also gave much less media coverage on state television to Bush's visit than his earlier trip in February 2002 when they had allowed live broadcast of his political speech to university students and a detailed news conference with former President Jiang Zemin. This time the reporters were not even allowed to ask questions during Bush's appearance at a joint news conference with Hu.

The Chinese, however, have learnt to play the capitalist game well, and they knew that the best way to contain American pressure was to dangle the lucrative \$4 billion deal for the purchase of 70 Boeing aircraft. Even on this issue there was no further progress. The

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property rights.

On human rights issues, Washington had passed on to Beijing a list of Chinese political prisoners before Bush had met Hu on the sideline of the UN Summit in New York two months ago. The Bush administration had hoped that at least some of these prisoners would be released before the arrival of Bush, as has been customary in the past. On the contrary, the Chinese authorities sentenced a Christian pastor and closed down the office of a well-known human rights lawyer.

While Bush was in China, the state security officials stopped and arrested a group of thirty Christian activists outside the Church where Bush had gone for Sunday service. The group member wanted to meet Bush to complain about the lack of political freedom in China. While Secretary of State Rice "quite vociferously" complained about the Chinese crack-down, Bush did not directly raise the issue with Hu. Interestingly enough, despite earlier tough statements aimed at China, political liberalisation or human rights were not at the top of

agreement, in principle, reached earlier had envisaged the current offer as a part of a larger deal of China's buying 150 Boeing airplanes from America, but the whole deal has still remained at the preliminary stage. Incidentally, a few years ago the Chinese had also neutralised the European pressure by placing a large order for the purchase of wide-bodied Airbus aircraft.

The US press has expressed its disappointment at the outcome of Bush's visit, which they thought exemplified the "rollback" on China. They pointed out that US has, in the past, always maintained balanced economic, security and political priorities with China, but they alleged that the balance was altered this time. They were disappointed at Bush's "light touch" with Hu who, they felt, was actually taking his country in the opposite direction instead of moving towards his declared policy of "transition to greater freedom".

On his way home after a weeklong visit, Bush paid a short visit to Mongolia, the first American President to do so. His basic objective

was to thank the Mongolian leadership for keeping their troops in Iraq. This once again demonstrated that Bush administration would go to any country to retain or enlist new allies in their shrinking "coalition of the willing" in Iraq.

Why did not President Bush reach his desired objectives during the Asian visit? Well, it is clear that Bush's plummeting popularity at home has sharply eroded his ability to exert influence abroad. Only three years ago, the situation was so different when he was imposing his will in various parts of the world. This power is all but gone. It is noteworthy that during his recent trip to Latin America, his adversaries had shot down his proposal for a free trade in the region while his other initiatives are in jeopardy.

Bush administration also failed in other areas recently. They could not convince the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to refer Iran's nuclear activities to Security Council for possible sanction; they met with obstacles in six-country talks to halt North Korea's nuclear build up; and they fought with the European allies on the question of keeping control over global internet. Furthermore, Bush's most loyal ally, Tony Blair, is currently under brutal political cloud at home.

Now there is a growing perception that Washington's capacity in the international arena has been badly eroded by its entanglement in the unending war in Iraq and the sharp disparity at home. This has made their adversaries like North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela less fearful about any possible military action from the US.

Even their friends try to distance themselves from Bush's ambitious agenda of spreading democracy to Iraq and other countries in the Middle East, and waging a global war against terror. The US forces are badly bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq with no exit routes in sight. At the same time Washington, every now and then, threatens to take fresh military actions against its other adversaries. America's allies feel that the Bush administration, at the moment, may not have the necessary resources or public support to carry out so many military operations at the same time.

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Who will put the front foot forward?

ALY ZAKER

SO there we go again. Transparency International has again found Bangladesh to be the most corrupt nation of the world. Well this has created a lot of commotion. Lot of people, ordinary and extraordinary, have dwelt upon the subject in vivid detail. I would, in my discourse, venture to veer off the beaten track.

We all know that we are corrupt. Almost all of us, adults, have direct experience of being subjected to corrupt practices at least once in our lifetime and, more often than not, oftener. So there is no debate about that. What bothers me though is that we often indulge in the exercise of generalization which can subjectively be termed as oversimplification.

On the pages of the newspapers we see picture of a traffic policeman collecting toll from the driver of a vehicle. This can happen even if your papers required to be on the road are in order. You may even see a picture of a petty clerk in an office receiving bribe from a client. These sure are despicable practices and, needless to say, must be abhorred. But there are many instances where our eyes cannot reach, let alone the lens of the camera.

These are the people whose activities cannot be seen. These are covert behind the back activities ostensibly indulged in the darkness of night. Though, somehow, even the people in the streets know about them all, talk about them, and helplessly try to keep themselves amused. When I compare the small time larceny with the misdeeds of the big and powerful I often feel that our effort at establishing a corruption free country seems misdirected. However, I am told that the small units of bribes are shared even by those that ornament the highest echelon of power.

Be it as it may the point is that we have to take a look at the changing mindset of the "ordinary corrupt" in the light of reality. These people, more often than not, come from the villages of Bangladesh in search of a livelihood.

They live in a dingy accommodation, and start their lives off on bare minimum amenities. They often have their families comprising wife and children. The families would either be living back in the villages from where most of them come or with them in those rat-holes. Back in the village they had to do a lot of back-breaking work which is why they travelled all the way down to the capital city where, they were told that, the luck favours every one equally. The luck however did not

judicial office takes bribe for buying Benson and Hedges cigarettes. I was a smoker in my younger days and as a junior executive in a commercial firm I could not afford to go beyond low priced cigarettes.

Not all are as blatant as the clerk that I have just talked about. Some of them take recourse to bribe to be able to eat better or educate their children. Quite frankly, ours is an absurd city. I can't really figure out how a family can live in a room or a thatch for a thousand or

Who in the end would set an example of normality as evolved through the onward journey of human civilization to combat this abnormal and absurd condition that we are travelling through? The politicians? The bureaucrats? The common people? I would say all those that are well off must reverse their attitude. Indeed they do not have a right to show an "attitude" when the whole nation languishes in such stark poverty, and the upper class in such misdemeanour.

favour every one equally. Some of them, through whatever means, landed some job that brought them luck. More often this was made possible by the political big-wigs from back home. They were not so big before but by expediently liaising with the power that be and built a position and the inevitable fortune here in the capital. They put in the right word at the right time to the right person and therefore the job was had. It was after this that the greed became all so pervasive.

In the circumstances that these otherwise innocent guys and their powerful country cousins grew up, there was no difference in class between them. But now the affluence of these high and mighty people are beyond comprehension of their friends and relatives from the village. This sets it off in them a kind of deviant hunger to acquire more of buyable worldly possessions, both tangible and intangible, as quickly as possible and at whatever the cost. I was once surprised to have learnt that a senior clerk in a

fifteen hundred takas a month when his known monthly income is five thousand takas. So, for whatever the reason, petty corruption is the order of the day. Push yourself a little higher in terms of income and the picture grows even more absurd. Even Samuel Becket, the epitome of absurdity in literature, would not be able to guess how in a city a person earning twenty five thousand takas a month actually pays thirty thousand for a rented apartment.

Coming down to the subject of petty corruption, a friend of mine was telling me the other day that this kind of corruption isn't so bad because the money circulates within the country. From a giver to a taker then to the market, so on and so forth. But the big time criminals apparently keep all of it stashed away abroad. So the money generated within the country travels to distant lands. While this keeps happening the rich get richer. The poor (except the ones already endowed with the magic wand) become poorer. Most of the time the immeasurable

wealth that we show off around comes through corruption of all kinds. Perhaps that is what induces them into corrupt practices.

This most amazing disparity itself can instigate the poor to take a plunge in the pool of sleaze. For example, a person languishing in the darkness of his dingy room during the load shading, walks out to breathe and finds that the super market around the corner is dazzling with all kinds of fancy lighting, the BMWs and Mercedes are queuing up to deposit their precious passengers eager to launch themselves off to a shopping binge. Could you blame him if he is then motivated to do something desperate. Would the well-off ever be sensitive to acknowledge how our ostentations may be viewed by the vast majority of our countrymen?

Most of the time the immeasurable wealth that we show off around comes through corruption of all kinds. He also finds, painfully though, that his benefactors from the village who helped him land up a job in the city through their political connections live in similar flamboyance while he has very little to expect from life. And, unfortunate though it may seem, this is directly connected, some how or the other, with our country's politics and bureaucracy. I think the sooner we realize this the better. Now comes the million dollar question, who will put the front foot forward? You? Me? Them? Who in the end would set an example of normality as evolved through the onward journey of human civilization to combat this abnormal and absurd condition that we are travelling through? The politicians? The bureaucrats? The common people? I would say all those that are well off must reverse their attitude. Indeed they do not have a right to show an "attitude" when the whole nation languishes in such stark poverty, and the upper class in such misdemeanour.

Aly Zaker is a leading theatre personality.

SAARC and the need for deep sea port

MD SAEEDUR RAHMAN

SAARC'S 13th summit while concluding on 13 November, has visibly awakened the South-Asia region and even beyond, by bringing us further closer on understanding the importance of regional cooperation and economy. Concerns, discussions and decisions for implementation were ambient to common goals evidencing once again that the political wills for resolving the transboundary issues are of prime importance.

At the dawn of this century it has been realised and recognised by everyone's neighbours in this region and worldwide that almost every natural, social, political, environmental, cultural and economic aspect is virtually transboundary; the best experienced examples being water, terrorism, information and media, trade and commerce, culture and heritage, disasters, epidemic and the climate change impacts. Realisation is axiomatically the precedence through actions to achievement. The surging unionism as such is becoming more and more inevitable for nations, small or big, across the world.

Slashing of barriers by entering into Free Trade Agreement by the South-Asian countries has been emphasised upon by the leaders of the region for injecting energies into the economy. Economy, cooperation, trade and ports are interdependent. At this point of illuminating regional cooperation, the techno-economic feasibility study for developing a deep-sea port on commercial basis in Bangladesh has been initiated that very timely fits in the summit vision. The objective is to emphasise upon diversifying nation's economy. The development of the deep sea port shall act as a driver for accelerated regional economic growth and employment opportunity. The study as it appears from the Terms of Reference (ToR) stresses upon the non-structural dimensions including carrying out the technical studies and will, identify the most advantageous site for establishing the port. The pre-feasibility level locations of the pro-

posed port are *Sonadia Island* and *Cox's Bazar* on the north-east and, *Akram Point* on the north-west of the Bay of Bengal, one of the world's 64 large marine ecosystems.

The ports where the land meets the sea are probably the most ancient institutions that triggered the regional and global economy by establishing link between inland and marine transport. Bangladesh has two sea ports, Chittagong in the south-east and Mongla in the south-west. History reveals that the nation's coastal waterfronts had been greatly used for over

resources are indifferent to man-made boundaries, but are sensitive to man-made influences with approximately 400 million in its catchment areas. The living geometry of the coast changes its images on day-to-day basis and is highly sensitive to hydraulic parameters.

The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna system tributated by 54 trans-boundary rivers constitutes 93 percent of Bangladesh's total inflow and, the rest 7 percent is generated within the country chiefly from annual average rainfall of 2300 mm. And again, 96

upland flow from the Himalayan rivers will result in saltwater intrusion further landward with the increasing sea level rise and will cause increased siltation in the coast as already seen in the south-west compared to that in the south-east. The proposed deep sea port will be designed chiefly to remove these technical problems. The location of the proposed deep sea port being thought at the Bay of Bengal may appear similar to that of the Gwader on the Lasbela coast at the Arabian Sea in Pakistan planned for construction by the Chinese assistance, in terms of its location off-main shipping line and the hinterland but to be borne in mind that those are largely differently characterised by their unique coastal hydro-morphology.

The complete development of a deep sea port may require 30-40 years after its ground breaking to become fully operational. During this period there is likely to be great change in the physiographic features across the coast depending on the status of macro-level management of the nation's water resources that includes detention, diversion and drainage of the freshwater flowing into the saltwater. Water globally labeled as the engine for the economic growth is the liquid software that keeps the ports' hardware operating. The planning of a deep sea port therefore will remain largely interlinked with the integration of freshwater flow from beyond the boundaries and, therefore dependent on regional cooperation.

The foreign consultants are due to submit their proposal for the study at the end of this year. The Ministry of Shipping will be responsible for overseeing the study. The approach and methodology of the study report may focus on exploring the Saarc potential particularly in analyzing the hydro-morphological aspects of the coast for selection of a sustainable location. National experts outside may compliment the investigation by tapping cooperation potential of the summit declaration.

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ZAM KHAIRUZZAMAN

SHAMSER Ali, Shamim, Manik and Sujal, four former tree fellers of Doluchhara, dropped their axes and whipsaws about three months ago and have become active members of a 20-member community patrol team in the Lawachara National Park.

Their committed decision, part of an innovative government initiative, has helped effect a dramatic change in the nature reserve, 160-kilometres northeast of the capital city of Dhaka.

"Illegal logging has stopped by 99 per cent," Ahad Ali, leader of the patrol team, told this scribe, who visited the previously shrinking forest recently. "Trees are now more safe here than ever before," Ahad said.

With a total area of about 1,531 hectares of Kamalganj and Srimangol upazilas in Moulvibazar district, Lawachara is famous for its abundant natural resources. But the National Park has been under threat from illegal logging over the last 30 years. Not only Lawachara, more than half of country's forest cover disappeared during that period.

But a new project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests -- with financing from USAID -- has intervened, turning a threatening trend into a protective process for the forest, at least at Lawachara.

Inadequate manpower, lack of logistics and sometimes unscrupulous dealings used to prevent the Forest Department from protecting the trees. Taking advantage of the situation, at least five organised gangs were engaged in tree felling every day for timber. Moreover, as many as 250 people from the adjacent villages used to enter the forest to collect fuel wood, each gathering around 25 kilograms. Another 25 people took away bamboo from the forest each day, according to a survey conducted during May-July, 2004.

But now the forest is gaining protection through the Nishorgo Support Project (NSP), supporting improved management by the Forest Department in protected areas. The project has also helped increase the number of staff at Lawchara to halt poaching besides illegal logging.

The ingenuity of the project involved motivating the surrounding villagers, including former tree fellers, to participate in forest patrolling. In return, project officials promised to help withdraw

cases lodged by the Forest Department against the fellers and extend support to other actions to improve local people's livelihoods.

The forest patrol team leader disclosed that each member of the team now receives Tk 50 per day from the NSP, which will be raised to Tk 75 shortly. Soon, these cash payments are to be replaced by other livelihood improvement opportunities.

"We were jobless and had no source of income, but now we can see a ray of hope for a better future," Ahad said, adding that the NSP staffers helped form a samity (association) where they deposit Tk 10 every day. "Not only that, the NSP personnel helped open an account in a local bank in the name of the samity, where Tk 4,500 has been deposited till now," he said.

Ahad's team is now given the charged of watching the southern part of Lawachara covering Chhonkhola, Segun Bagan and Akashmohla areas in shifts round the clock. Each member carries a stick. "We got a mobile phone, torch

light and whistle for the purpose," he said. NSP senior manager (communication) Lutfun Nahar told that the patrol team members will be provided with uniform with the NSP logo in the near future.

The patrols have drastically reduced tree felling. According to the Lawchara Beat Office, Srimangol, 322 instances of tree felling were recorded before the fieldwork. But the number dropped to 107 instances at its very inception, and has almost stopped in the zones where other community patrolling has been enforced. At least 13 offenders were caught and handed over to the Forest Department personnel.

The NSP official told that her organisation is developing alternative income-generating activities like cow rearing, fish culture, home gardening and other skill trainings to reduce poor people's dependence on the forest. At least 18 villagers were trained on cow rearing recently, she said.

A member of the patrol team, Abdul Hai, was also trained to

perform in Gano Natoks, people's dramas, to create awareness and motivation about conservation of forests.

NSP has formed a 50-member Co-Management Council to protect and regenerate Lawachara. The Council consists of 12 representatives from the local government institutions, nine representatives from the user groups, seven from the local elite, five from the resource owning group, three from the ethnic communities, two from the law enforcement authorities, two from the Forest Department, five from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/CBOs and five representatives from other government departments.

NSP officials hope these first patrols are the just the beginning of something bigger. Lutfun Nahar expressed her optimism that this initiative will be replicated also elsewhere and in the near future a massive people's movement will be created for protection of forests.

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