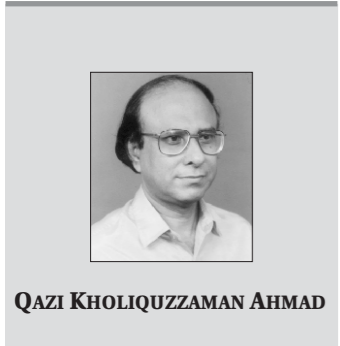


An anatomy of SAARC Dhaka Declaration

Panic is not the solution



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

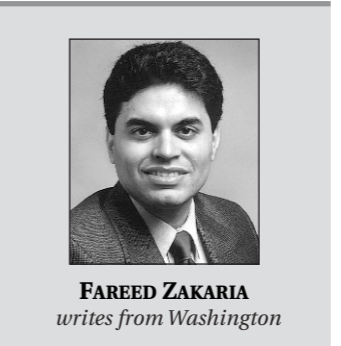
THE two-day 13th SAARC Summit held in Dhaka ended on November 13 with the issuance of the Dhaka Declaration...

ever. Given that people are not consulted in any of the countries through available democratic means in respect of SAARC matters...

centred than otherwise and the political leaders may be expected to be genuinely committed to deliver on the regional commitments made and agreements reached

can be undertaken along with how much costs will be incurred by whom and how much benefits will accrue to whom, and recommend possible solutions to other related questions.

to include and empower the excluded (i.e. the poor and the disadvantaged). But, without adoption and implementation of strategies to that effect sustained poverty reduction is not possible.



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

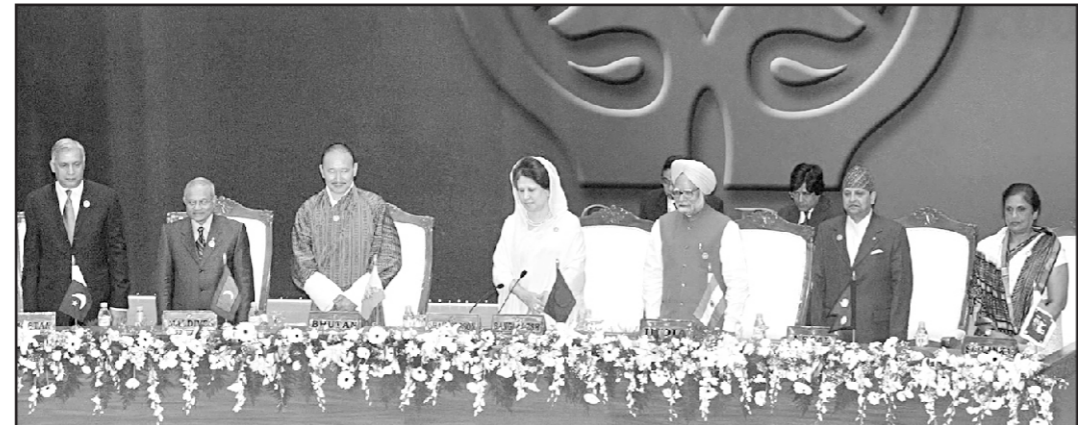
THE rising clamour in Washington to get out of Iraq may be right or may be wrong, but one thing is certain: its timing has little to do with events in that country.

The United States needs to be able to maintain a stable set of policies in Iraq that do not appear to be the product of panic or politics. That alone will yield success, which will allow American troops to return home having achieved something.

footing, the political dynamic in Washington could move toward a panicked withdrawal. To oversimplify, after two years of pretending that it was not engaged in nation-building in Iraq, the administration has accepted reality.

BEHIND THE FACADE

If a people-first, inclusive, and equal-opportunity approach is adopted by the SAARC member countries, a people-based driving force would emanate across the countries that would propel the various pertinent agreements and pledges made by the summiteers at the 13th as well as the previous summits and those that may be adopted later into proper implementation for the mutual benefit of the peoples of the member countries.



either shaping the regional cooperation or holding the leaders responsible for the non-fulfilment of the regional commitments made. Once the top political leaders go back to the countries following a summit, the bureaucrats and technical people take over, who are usually cocooned into narrow national and subject-matter perspectives.

costs of non-cooperation. But they remain, as indicated above, excluded in South Asia from all the processes (social, economic political) of national evolution. Among the SAARC member countries, there is a wide variety of governance types such as monarchy, military or military mediated rule, democratic autocracy; and functioning, although perhaps not fully satisfactory, democracy.

flourishing SAARC. The Dhaka Declaration states: "The Heads of State or Government reiterated that the peoples of South Asia are the real source of strength and driving force for SAARC and resolved to make regional cooperation more responsive to their hopes and aspirations"

It may be recalled here that the various key commitments and agreements reiterated, renewed or made at the 13th summit include those that relate to such important matters as combating terrorism; establishment of South Asian Free Trade Area and expansion of the agreement in this regard to include services, enhanced investments, and harmonized standards; promotion of education (primary and secondary in particular, but also science, technology and higher education); control of trafficking in women and children; strengthening transport and communication links across the region; establishment of a SAARC Development Fund (SDF) and a SAARC Poverty Alleviation Fund (SPAF); collective SAARC response to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS; a regional initiative with regard to basic health care services and sanitation; cultural exchanges bringing the peoples of South Asia closer; promotion of tourism in South Asia; working together in international forums to enhance the interest of the regional countries; and carrying the cooperation process further through SAFTA and South Asian Customs Union to South Asian Economic Union.

But has SAARC arrived? The answer is an emphatic no. The summiteers themselves have also recognized as much, as reflected in the following statement in the Dhaka Declaration (Para 51): "In view of the new challenges facing the region, pledges and commitments made in the last two decades should be translated into concrete actions in the form of regional projects and programmes and innovative initiatives."

That is so despite the fact that people of the regional countries are keen to visit neighbouring countries, read books and newspapers from other countries, their civil society organizations want to work together, and their academics and researchers are keen to develop ways for the regional countries to work together for mutual benefits. It is plausible that, left to themselves, people, academicians and academic institutions, civil society organizations, experts in various fields, and news media may come together to construct people's SAARC. But they, being outside the governments, often known as Track 2, cannot decide. They can only identify what can be done, and analyze and specify how the potential activities

Poverty alleviation has been identified as the top priority commitment of the SAARC, both at the national and the regional level. But, given the glaring and accentuating socio-economic disparity being the principal cause behind poverty persisting at high levels in all the regional countries, one would have expected to see a strong commitment made to reducing disparity and bringing it down to tolerable levels quickly. But, no such commitment has been expressed. Also, there is no mention of the need

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Lady by the lake Burma's democracy hero to spend another year in detention

LARRY JAGAN

ON Sunday Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the founder of modern Burma, General Aung San, had her house arrest extended for a further year. Local police officials visited the pro-democracy leader in her lakeside residence in Rangoon and read a statement outlining the government's decision to renew the detention order for another year, according to a source in the interior ministry.

successfully led Burma's independence movement. But as far as the future is concerned both sides remain diametrically opposed to each other.

While the army Aung San created still holds tightly onto power, the multi-ethnic democracy he envisaged at the time appears to be as far away as ever. The general's only daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, currently under house arrest in Rangoon, remains pitted against the army -- a national symbol of freedom and democracy.

For the Burmese people, trampled for more than forty years by a repressive military regime, she represents their aspirations, and above all their desire for freedom and democracy.

There has always been a self-effacing touch to Aung San Suu Kyi. Since her return to Rangoon to look after her ill mother in 1987, she has always put her personal concerns aside for the sake of the Burmese people.

"I draw inspiration from the courage and sacrifice of the ordinary Burmese people," she often said to me in interviews on the phone during the few years she was freed from house arrest for the first time in July 10, 1995, after six years under house arrest.

But Burma's military leader, senior General Than Shwe cannot even abide hearing her name. "The mere mention of her name sends the old man into a silent rage," according to a senior military source close to the top General.

Both Burma's military leaders and the country's pro-democracy parties owe their allegiance to the man who

Aung San Suu Kyi is undeterred by the years of incarceration. When I met Aung San Suu Kyi on the day she was last released -- May 6, 2002 -- she confided that the isolation gave her plenty of time for reading, reflection, and meditation. As she sits alone in her Rangoon residence now, I am certain she is continuing to draw inspiration from her father and the sacrifices of the Burmese people.



name in front of the top general.

Indonesia's foreign minister Dr Hasan Wirajuda confided to UN officials that there was a marked change in Than Shwe's demeanour when he mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi. "His eyes glazed over and his facial muscles tensed; clearly our discussion had come to an end," he reportedly said.

This remains one of the key obstacles to resolving Burma's political deadlock. Burma's top generals are not interested in a concrete dialogue with the pro-democracy leader. "We've been trying to get them to the negotiating table for fourteen years but they have never been keen on the idea," she told me the last time we met in March 2003.

Aung San Suu Kyi on the other hand has repeatedly offered to discuss the country's political future with the Generals. Everything is negotiable if

they start meaningful talks, she told me weeks before she was detained for the third time more than two years ago following an attack on her and her entourage by pro-government thugs in what is now called Black Friday.

"We are in opposition to each other at the moment but we should work together for the sake of the country. We certainly bare no grudges against them. We are not out for vengeance. We want to reach the kind of settlement which will be beneficial to everybody, including the members of the military," Aung San Suu Kyi said to me in one of her last interviews before her fateful trip in 2003.

During Aung San Suu Kyi's second long period of house arrest, after she was detained trying to travel out of Rangoon in late 2000, the regime started tentative contact with the pro-democracy leader. The secret talks were largely brokered by the UN special envoy for Burma Razali Ismail. Although this contact was never really substantive, it raised hopes inside Burma and abroad that political reform may be the agenda.

A process of national reconciliation was started, ostensibly involving senior representatives of the military regime, pro-democracy leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic rebel groups, many of whom have been fighting for some form of autonomy for more than five decades.

At the time there were high hopes,

although many leading Burmese dissidents abroad and diplomats in Rangoon remained highly sceptical, believing the Burmese generals had no intentions of negotiating and were only concerned about hanging on to power at any cost.

In 2001 the Singaporean prime minister, Goh Chok Tong told me privately that the generals were incorrigible and would never give up power voluntarily.

Most Asian leaders probably did not disagree with the eminent Singaporean politician at the time -- or even now -- but all of them preferred to coax Burma's top military leaders to change, rather than pressure them.

Even East Timor's foreign minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta has suggested that pressuring the generals in Rangoon was counter-productive.

"Threats and deadlines have had no effect on the junta except hardening their position and forcing them to retreat into isolation," the former ASEAN general secretary Rudolfo Severino told me at the World Economic Forum in Kuala Lumpur shortly before he retired.

But Aung San Suu Kyi has persisted in trying to convince the regime that she at least was prepared to negotiate and that meant making concessions. "What we've always said is that dialogue is not a competition," she told me as we chatted in Rangoon over two years ago.



A US armoured vehicle came under roadside bomb attack near Baghdad on 28 November

era of cooperation. It fell on deaf ears. Burma's top general is convinced that by keeping Aung San Suu Kyi in detention he can marginalise her and reduce her influence in the country. It is a vain hope as the protests and parties across the world will testify to. Aung San Suu Kyi is not only a massive icon in Burma, but throughout the globe.

Shortly after Kofi Annan took over as the UN secretary general he had to find some-one to lead the UN Commission on Human Rights. "I have a great idea," he told a close mutual friend, "We'll make Aung San Suu Kyi the head of the human rights commission." Whether he really meant it or not we may never know.

But of course Aung San Suu Kyi who at the time had just been released from house arrest for the first time would never have taken the post as her overriding commitment is to the cause of democracy in Burma.

At present Aung San Suu Kyi is being detained in intolerable conditions -- though conditions which she is coping with admirably. She is in virtual solitary confinement -- she has not seen anyone other than her doctor for more than a year.

The Red Cross has been denied access to her for nearly two years despite concerted efforts to be allowed to meet her. The UN envoy Razali was the last international person to visit her in the first week of March last year.

Her fellow NLD leaders were allowed to meet her several times early last year in the lead up to the opening of National Convention on May 17 but since then they have been forbidden to see her. The doctor now only sees her around roughly once a month and is thoroughly searched as he enters and leaves the

house. Her two maids are not allowed to leave the family compound, and are photographed as they hand their shopping lists to the military guards at the front gate. The six young NLD activists who guarded his house inside the compound were removed by the authorities last November.

It now seems certain that Aung San Suu Kyi will remain under house arrest until after a new constitution is drafted and put to a referendum. So it is more than likely she will be under house arrest for at least another year.

But Aung San Suu Kyi is undeterred by the years of incarceration. When I met Aung San Suu Kyi on the day she was last released -- May 6, 2002 -- she confided that the isolation gave her plenty of time for reading, reflection, and meditation.

As she sits alone in her Rangoon residence now, I am certain she is continuing to draw inspiration from her father and the sacrifices of the Burmese people.

"I always have been strengthened and inspired by my father. Even now, sometimes when I go over his old speeches, they are as relevant now as they were then -- he was indeed a man of vision," she confided to me as I left the NLD headquarters in March 2003.

It is this humility, charisma, commitment and strength that make Aung San Suu Kyi the inspirational icon she has become for the NLD and the Burmese battle for democracy.

Larry Jagan, former BBC World Service News and Current Affairs Editor for Asia and the Pacific, has covered Burma for more than 20 years.