

WTO talks in trouble

Once again developed world shows little interest in fair trade

FROM the perspective of Bangladesh and other Least Developed Countries (LDCs) the key issues going into the latest round of WTO talks in Hong Kong had to do with the lowering of agricultural subsidies by the developed countries and quota and duty-free access to developed markets for goods and service from the LDCs.

As the meeting winds down, it seems more and more likely that there will be no breakthrough on these issues, and as a result no advancement towards the creation of a free and fair global market that is anywhere near a level playing field.

The concern over agricultural subsidies has been a long-standing one and was catapulted to the forefront of the world's consciousness during the acrimonious WTO summit in Cancun two years ago. The intervening two years and simple notions of fairness, justice, and equity have not however ameliorated the problem. The developed countries are still refusing to lower their agricultural subsidies so that farmers in Africa and Asia are able to compete.

Given the tiny proportion of the developed world economy that comprises its agricultural sector, compared to the rather large part of the economy the sector comprises in the developing world, this continued intransigence is regrettable and calls into question whether the developed countries have any agenda other than self-interest.

Similarly, the push for quota and duty-free access to markets of the developing countries that 15 LDCs had made as a bloc seems destined for defeat. These measures have been granted by the US to certain African and Caribbean countries, and would have gone some distance towards alleviating poverty and providing opportunity in the countries that had requested them.

In short, it seems that we are back to square one. When the chips are down, the developed world seems content to circle the wagons to maintain its position of privilege and advantage, gained through centuries of exploitation of the developing world. The fact that their policies are unfair and that the burden is put on impoverished third world farmers and labourers seems not to concern them at all.

If this attitude of narrow self-interest at the expense of the interests of the billions of the world's poor is maintained, it will be a long time before we see anything approaching a free and fair trading regimen that allows all countries to compete in the world market on a level playing field and gain from it equitably.

Kolkata IT fair

Bangladesh stalls draw attention

BANGLADESH pavilion at the IT fair in Kolkata was a point of attraction, as our products were highly appreciated by software experts. Indians have evinced interest in the processes our IT buffs presented at the fair. Some visitors to the pavilion over TV channels marveled at the professional finesse going into Bangladeshi presentation.

Only the other day we commented on Bangladesh having featured in the US securities and investment firm Goldman Sachs' list of Eleven Economies with a high potential for growth through investment. The Goldman report has termed Bangladesh as a tiny economy capable of making an impact on global economy in its own way.

There is more good news. The ADB has identified Bangladesh as the potential regional hub of communications and transport. The bank is ready to put money up front to help build the key infrastructures provided the issue of transit rights is sorted out within the region.

So, Bangladesh watchers are sending positive signals about us though the country is grappling with political turmoil and rise of religious extremism of the most violent kind.

The lesson to be drawn here is that our potential is being recognised through the smokescreens of the recent image-denting incidents. The performance of Bangladesh in some sectors against stunning odds breeds confidence in the minds of investors about how much more the country could have done without the troubles facing her. Bangladesh is valued for its intrinsic worth and the task on our hands is to make the most of the new-found interest in us.

IT is one sector where the country's future is bound to be bright given some built-in advantages we have over most other developing countries. Our boys and girls have knack for computers and a great emphasis is laid on IT education in the country. The recognition that came from Kolkata should inspire our professionals to excel further in the software business with an eye on outsourcing prospects.

Tackling the terror threat

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

TO begin with let us try to understand the pos and cons of terrorism. The kind of terrorism we are faced with is now a global phenomenon. However, rapid rise of terrorist acts in Bangladesh has taken a dramatic turn particularly over the past three to four years, to put it bluntly during the present regime.

Without going into the details of what led to that extraordinary rise in terror incidences, suffice it to say that it is due to many lapses on the part of the administration. Of late even lawmakers from within BNP-led ruling coalition have also criticized the administration for its actions and inactions which have had the effect of lending support to the terrorists.

One could argue, counter argue, and raise storms over the matter, but the truth is that, like in other countries of the world, religious terrorism is here to stay.

Religious terrorism has several dimensions to it: social, political, economic, and administrative. Concentrating merely on the policing and administrative aspects of it all will yield but little results in its containment. Behind each terrorist act among others there is an element of extreme anger working within the mind of the individual perpetrator.

The all round failures of our politicians, whether in or out of power, combined with their most irresponsible behaviour, have paved the way for the masterminds of terror to catch these young men from the poorer and illiterate section of our population and brainwash them into being prospective terrorists. For long our politicians and political management has toyed with, used, and abused religion to meet their narrow political goals.

With no exception, from Jinnah to Ayub Khan down to our two major political parties, all are equally guilty.

On the social front, too, there are too many contradictions, which have also brought about a drastic change in our otherwise moderate cultural heritage, mainly influenced by the arrival of the cable network in the electronic media. This is also seen and perceived by the so-called religious clerics and fundamentalists as threat to their understanding of Islam.

On the economic front, there are a number of issues that have angered the terrorists. You will notice that many of the perpetrators nabbed so far come from relatively poorer economic background. Had it not been so, many of them would not have risked their lives for a meager sum of Tk 800 to 2,000 only.

Terrorism, besides the idealistic aspect of it all, has also become a profitable enterprise. On the other hand extreme religiosity is directly related to poverty. Poor people often take to religion as an alternative outlet to all their deprivations. It is thus easier for the masterminds to exploit them more than the relatively well to do section of the people.

Therefore people and the state machinery should be proactively involved in the economic upliftment of our poor who happen to be over 60 percent of the population. The administration must simply work its utmost towards eradication of corrupt practices of bribery and grafts and switch to pro-people economic policy from the existing pro-rich policies.

Economic discrimination and disparities are also directly linked to all forms of terrorism including the ongoing ones. The richer and the well to do section of our population must simultaneously come forward and join hands with the administra-

tion in improving the quality of life of the poor, not by giving hand outs, but by being actively involved in their lives.

There is yet another vital factor that is vigorously contributing to the continuous growth of these religious terrorists – the phenomenal growth of madrassahs that are virtually serving as breeding grounds.

Any strategic plan of action must be based in the light of the above. There is no set formula for dealing with religious terrorism. It is a long drawn process. It requires total commitment. Above all, it requires active participation of the public at large. Whatever strategic plan is set in motion it must be remembered that policing and the intelligence gathering along with severe punishment to perpetrators must continue at all times. I am placing below an 11 point strategic plan of action:

1. The administration should immediately call for an all-party meeting to discuss and decide upon a plan of action for tackling the rising incidences of terrorism in the country (done).

2. The administration should arrange to close down forthwith all religious organizations/NGOs on which intelligence information is available regarding their involvement in financing terror acts.

3. The administration should impose visa restrictions for foreign visitors coming to participate in such religious gatherings like the Bishwa Ijtima or other religious sites and shrines.

4. The administration should gear up intelligence monitoring of Tabligh Jamaat like activities all over the country like the one at the Kakrail Masjid.

5. The administration should arrange to register madrassahs all over the country. Create an independent national commission for recasting and modernizing of the



Rapid Action Battalion members carry a box of explosive material from a house in Dhaka. Security forces recently seized a major arms and explosives cache in Dhaka during a crackdown on banned Islamic militants.

curriculum for the madrassahs, which should be a unified one and mandatory for madrassahs all over the country.

6. With immediate effect, the focus of the electronic media on religious programs should be recast to reflect upon the various humanistic aspects of our religion, like our duties as Muslims towards our fellow beings, responsibilities of the rich and the well to do towards the poor, the importance of acquiring knowledge not just religious, but also in other branches of modern day education, including tolerance to people of other faiths and religious beliefs, the meaning and essence of the life and living of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and its relevance to our life as a whole.

7. The administration should enter into a network of collaborative agreements with other international agencies or countries of the region. Specific collaborative agreements should also be drawn with such well-known international intelligence agencies like the Scotland Yard, Interpol, and FBI.

8. Serious consideration should also be given of working out extradition agreements between our neighbour India and other selected countries of South Asia.

9. As a part of our long-term strategy we should routinely send our intelligence and members of the regular police force for training aimed at enhancing their professional expertise.

10. The ruling coalition must, with immediate effect, purge out any and

all lawmakers within the government implicated in supporting religious extremism and terror acts, directly or indirectly.

11. Last but not least in importance, plans should be put in place right now with due ratification by the Parliament for separating religion from politics.

I would also like to emphasize here that given the will and sincerity of purpose we should be able to contain terrorism and bring it down almost to a negligible level in the not too distant a future.

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In praise of the caliphate

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The Bush administration's doublespeak is undermining America's credibility in the world. On one hand it floats the idea of troop reduction in Iraq; on the other, it keeps on building American military bases at a furious pace, which guarantees a permanent US military presence in Iraq. On one hand it sends the President's personal emissary Karen Hughes to Muslim nations to improve America's image there; on the other, it attempts to scare the Americans by reminding them that the Muslims are out to re-establish the 7th century and 13th century caliphates.

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

CYNICS have always maintained that President Bush's strategy since September 11, 2001 has been to scare the American public into supporting his agenda. Initially, unsuspecting Americans bought into the President's fictitious claims of imminent Iraq threats to America – Iraq's WMDs, "mushroom cloud" threat, links with Al Qaeda and the 9/11 hijackers – and supported the invasion of Iraq.

When these claims turned out to be false, to buy time the Bush administration invented new rationales: the imperative to overthrow the tyrant Saddam Hussein and the urgent necessity of planting the seeds of democracy in the Middle East. Those too have run their course and morphed into stale excuses. Additionally, it is now becoming increasingly difficult for the administration to hide from the public the fact that up to fourteen US military bases are being constructed in Iraq, which implies a permanent US military presence there.

With American death toll in Iraq nearing 2,200, Americans are

getting angrier by the day, as illustrated by a letter published in The New York Times on December 9: "As much as I respect General (Wesley) Clark and appreciate his views on our situation in Iraq, I fear he's making the same mistake that's been made before by so many others: expounding thoughtful, complex answers to a non-existent question. We invaded Iraq on false pretences, and that gives us no authority or expertise to make things right here. We're certainly responsible for the damage and carnage in Iraq, and we are obligated to pay for it. But stabilizing and repairing Iraq will have to be done by someone else. We're the invaders, the occupiers, the problem -- we're not going to fix anything by remaining there. The country that we Americans need to make right is our own, because our disastrous invasion was based on cherry-picked intelligence, exaggerations, innuendo, relentless badgering and outright lies. General Clark looks toward Iraq for an answer to the war, but the truth lies within our own borders."

According to The New York Times (December 12), the Bush administration has found one perfect word to scare the Americans

once again: "caliphate." The Times adds that although policy hawks in the Pentagon have used the term "caliphate" internally since the planning stage of the war in Iraq, the administration's public use of the word has increased this summer and fall.

Referring to Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, Vice President Dick Cheney said in Lake Elmo: "They talk about wanting to re-establish what you could refer to as a seventh century caliphate" to be "governed by Shariah, the most rigid interpretation of the Koran." Added Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld last Monday: "Iraq would serve as the base of a new Islamic caliphate to extend throughout the Middle East, and which would threaten legitimate governments in Europe, Africa, and Asia."

The Times notes: "Specialists on Islam say the word ('caliphate') is a mysterious and ominous one for many Americans, and that the administration knows it. They recognise that there is a lot of resonance when they use the term 'caliphate,'" said Kenneth M. Pollack, a former CIA analyst and now a scholar at the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, said that the word had an "almost instinctive fearful impact." President Bush, who probably has difficulty pronouncing the word "caliphate," the Times adds, repeatedly describes the caliphate in his speeches, as he did in a speech last week when he said that the terrorists want to establish "a totalitarian Islamic empire that reaches from Indonesia to Spain." Not surprisingly, Mr. Bush's approval rating shot up five percentage points last week to 42 percent.

It is unfortunate that as an antidote to falling poll numbers for the war in Iraq and for the President himself, the Bush administration has decided to once again resort to outlandish tactics to scare Americans into supporting its war in Iraq. President Bush's claim that the Al Qaeda terrorists are bent on establishing "a totalitarian Islamic empire that reaches from Indonesia to Spain," stretches the bounds of absurdity. Yet, as the Times points out, from Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, key administration officials keep on repeating the message. The inclusion of Christian Spain, which was under Muslim rule in the Middle Ages and is now a member of the European Union, into the terrorists' "caliphate," is a deliberate attempt to tap into the reservoir of anti-Muslim bigotry that exists in the western world.

According to the Zogby International poll quoted in the Times, only 6 percent of people in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates sympathise with Al Qaeda. If Osama Bin Laden is so popular in the Islamic world, why is he hiding in

some remote area since 2001? The world of Islam is not monolithic. Muslim "East Pakistan" and "West Pakistan" could not remain as one nation, not more than 24 years. Osama Bin Laden, and Al Qaeda, which has little or no support in most Muslim countries, do not have the capability to whip a racially, culturally, and linguistically disparate Muslim world into an Islamic empire.

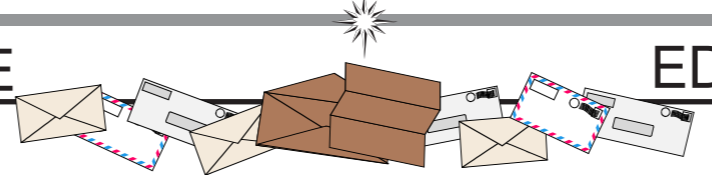
The bogey of a "totalitarian Islamic empire that reaches from Indonesia to Spain," is another cruel hoax the Bush administration is perpetrating on the American public to justify the war in Iraq. For the Bush administration to peddle the theory that this fringe Sunni Islamic group, Al Qaeda, with little popular support, can establish a "caliphate" or empire that includes Christian Spain, Shia Iran, Hindu India, Buddhist Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, is absurd. This is reminiscent of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's now infamous warning in the pages of The New York Times in 2002 that American vacillation on attacking Iraq could result in a "mushroom cloud" response from Iraq.

The Bush administration's doublespeak is undermining America's credibility in the world. On one hand it floats the idea of troop reduction in Iraq; on the other, it keeps on building American military bases at a furious pace, which guarantees a permanent US military presence in Iraq. On one hand it sends the President's personal emissary Karen Hughes to Muslim nations to improve America's image there; on the other, it attempts to scare the Americans by reminding them that the Muslims are out to re-establish the 7th century and 13th century caliphates.

This clumsy attempt could not have been more misguided. Islam had two Golden Ages: in the 7th and 13th centuries. Europe was in the Dark Ages in the 13th century. It was the Islamic world, with Baghdad at its centre, which spearheaded the world's thirst for knowledge. Intellectually starved Europeans made the hazardous trip to Baghdad in pursuit of knowledge. All that ended with the invasion of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. The 13th century Islam was good for the world, Mr. President!

The 7th century Islam was even better. It was not only Islam's first golden age; it was the world's too. Europe at that time was oscillating between paganism and Christianity. As Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was revolutionising Arabia through the new religion of Islam, Europe was content with the legends of King Arthur. As Islam was granting hitherto unheard of rights to women, such as the right to inherit property and divorce their husbands, concepts unthinkable in Europe, Europeans were content to amuse themselves with monster epics such as "Beowulf." Ironically, what the Bush crowd do not seem to realise is that they should be praising, promoting, and begging the Muslims to emulate the 7th and the 13th centuries, not condemning them.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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U.S. Democrats

Many of the comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam used by democrats are illogical. Our brave soldiers are volunteers, and not largely draftees as in the Vietnam War. In addition, the presence of US troops in Iraq has now evolved into more of a "police action" than an actual war. In his decision to invade Iraq, President Bush's only mistake was to trust incorrect intelligence reports. But many from the US Democratic Party made the same type of mistake. For example: "If Saddam rejects peace and we have to use force, our purpose is clear. We want to seriously diminish the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program." President Clinton, Feb. 17, 1998.

"We know that he has stored secret supplies of biological and chemical weapons throughout his country."

Al Gore, Sept. 23, 2002 (Vice-President under Clinton - ran for President in the year 2000)

"We have known for many years that Saddam Hussein is developing weapons of mass destruction." Senator Ted Kennedy (Massachusetts), Sept. 27, 2002.

"I will be voting to give the President of the United States the authority to use force - if necessary - to disarm Saddam Hussein because I believe that a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his hands is a real and grave threat to our security." Senator John F. Kerry (Massachusetts), Oct. 9, 2002.

"He (Saddam Hussein) has also given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members....Left unchecked, Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep

trying to develop nuclear weapons." Senator Hillary Clinton (New York), Oct 10, 2002

As you can see from the above, many democrats have very short memories when it comes to the judgments of leaders in their own political party.

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Terrorist attacks

In the series of bomb attacks throughout the country another incident, which claimed the lives of two judges, has thrown the lives of the citizens into insecurity and uncertainty. Mamun, one of the suicide bombers, was caught red-handed. He himself was also seriously injured. The news and media men took his statement. When asked why he had killed the judges, he said judges implement

the laws of men. When asked what would happen to him as he himself had been seriously injured. He answered that he would be a Shaheed. This is the ideal on the basis of which the religious zealots and fanatics wage attacks in different parts of the country and the world. This ideology leads them to create chaos and anarchy in different states. The simple and straight-forward youths represent hundreds and thousands of innocent youths who fall in the trap laid by some vested quarters who want to attain some particular objectives. This situation has not only affected the lives of peace-loving citizens of the country but also religion, particularly Islam is becoming the subject of debate. These attackers in the garb of religion don't belong to the actual path of Islam.

During the advent of Islam it had to wage war against so many evils.

But the situation, society, perspective have undergone a tremendous changes. So, the same war against the evils cannot be described or considered in the present situation as Jihad. Now most countries of the world enjoy democracy which originates from the same ideal as Islam preached to run state affairs. With the passage of time and occurrence of many events, it has got some new or a little bit different shape. But those who don't want to see religion in its true perspective become furious and wage attacks in different places on the plea that man made laws have replaced the original ones of Islam. But that is not true.

The way our religious zealots respond and react to the changed situation of the world has threatened the lives of the Muslims all over the world.

Serving the ailing humanity is

religion. Helping the neighbours is religion. One third of the whole population of the world go to bed with empty stomach. To satisfy their hunger and quench their thirst is religion. Millions of people die without any treatment. Giving them treatment is religion. The people who are throwing bombs on their fellow humans think what they are doing is religion. But definitely it is not. Nobody has any right to kill his/her fellow human being as he/she never can create a life which is only at the disposal of the Supreme Creator of the universe.

This kind of incidents in the name and shade of religion confuse us, religious minded and peace loving people every time they occur. The manner and way the incidents are taking place indicate that they are carried out by madrassah (religious school) students and teachers. By this time several madrassah stu-

dents and teachers have been arrested. Creation of acrimony between religious minded people and the government might be another reason behind such activities. Finally, a bitter relation and confusion may develop between the public and the government. Any third party may take advantage of this situation. If really some religious groups are responsible for such incidents, I must say that these people are harming religion. Millions of common people belonging to different religions, particularly Islam, may get a wrong impression about religion. They may misunderstand and even the followers of other religions will have the scope to think about Islam in a different way.

The Muslims living in European countries particularly in Britain and also those who live in America are passing their days in anxiety for fear of being harassed by the police

mentally, physically, psychologically and socially. Islam forbids causing even a little trouble to others. If someone does so God will never forgive him until the afflicted person forgives him. In the same way if somebody cheats another person he must be forgiven by the aggrieved person, otherwise God will never forgive him.

Now time has come to review the situation the present world is passing through. Leaders and scholars of the Muslim community should play a vital role in serving the cause of humanity in general.

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