

Asian Highway debacle

Bangladesh left on outside of network

NOW that the December 31, 2005 deadline for signing up to join the Asian Highway network has come and gone with Bangladesh declining to sign, it is fair to say that as far as Bangladesh and the highway is concerned, the die is cast.

The issue at hand for the government is the route the highway will take through Bangladesh. Bangladesh has not succeeded in convincing the relevant parties at the eleventh hour to amend the route of the highway that has been painstakingly negotiated.

However, once it was clear that we would not get the route the government wanted, there were two options.

Option one would be to sign up for the highway and thereby retain voting rights, in the hope that we could persuade the others to include the southern route as part of the network at a later date, or at least to ensure that we would have access to the network.

However, option two that the government has chosen sounds catastrophic. The worst case scenario is that Bangladesh never joins, thus permanently leaving us on the outside of the network.

On the other hand, if we do sign up at any time in the future, we will now no longer have voting rights, and will have to comply with decisions made earlier. Thus the chances of the southern route ever being included in the network are now virtually zero.

In addition, India, Myanmar and Thailand are building a tripartite road that bypasses Bangladesh, which they may well lobby to have included in the network, leaving us permanently out in the cold.

The push for the southern route has been myopic from the first, but at the very least we should have signed the agreement to keep our options open and our plan viable. Refusing to sign can only be considered an appalling blunder.

The hospital needs resuscitation

Its potential fractionally used now

SHAHEED Suhrawardy Hospital has been making news, on and off, for all sorts of negative reasons. It is ironic, to say the least, that the 375-bed hospital, equipped with some of the latest gadgets and machines, is now facing scarcity of patients when the medical facilities available in the country are far from adequate for the population.

All of this because the hospital is beset with problems like criminals and commission agents raring to lure the patients away to private clinics. Obviously, a hospital cannot render services if incoming patients and their escorts have to worry about security. It seems that outsiders have introduced some kind of an invisible management and the loser is the poor patient and the hospital itself which could have otherwise provided much better medical services.

The management of the hospital being run under a project is tentative in nature which stands in the way of administering the hospital effectively. But senior doctors believe that it has the infrastructure to be transformed into a medical university. We endorse their views. Actually, the health ministry had a plan to set up a medical college at the hospital, but nothing tangible has happened so far, except for the formation of a 16-member committee to deal with the issue.

Now, a country with our resource constraints can ill afford to leave a hospital having such a vast potential to serve patients in this kind of disarray.

The poor performance of the hospital stems basically from management inadequacies. The project status of the hospital has to be ended to let it acquire a permanent footing. And then the hospital can be developed with a long term plan and vision. For the time being, the irritants plaguing the hospital will have to be removed by adopting the necessary administrative measures.

Real men go to Tehran

M. SHAHID ALAM

'Anyone can go to Baghdad. Real men go to Tehran.'
-- Bush administration official, May 2003

tered at Camp David, and Iraq and Iran locked in a bloody war, Israel was free during the 1980s to do what it pleased. It expanded its settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak, expelled the Palestinian fighters from Lebanon, and established a long-term occupation over much of Southern Lebanon. Israel was closer to its goal of commanding unchallenged power over the Middle East.

The end of the Cold War in 1990 offered a bigger opening to the United States and Israel. Freed from the Soviet check on their ambitions, and with Iran devastated by the war, the United States began working on plans to establish a military control over the region, in the style of earlier colonial empires. This happened

fits of their aftermath.

The Likud plans were more ambitious. They wanted to redraw the map of the Middle East, using ethnic, sectarian, and religious differences to carve up the existing states in the region into weak micro-states that could be easily bullied by Israel. This was the *Kiunim* plan first made public in 1982. It would give Israel a thousand years of dominance over the Middle East.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 were the "catalyzing event" that put these plans into motion. The US wasted no time in seizing the moment. Instantly, President George Bush declared a global war against terrorism. The first target of this war was Afghanistan, but this was only a sideshow. On January 29, 2002, the President announced his

real men in Washington and Tel Aviv? One reason of course is that the cake walk very quickly turned into a quagmire. The apparent Iraqi welcome was replaced by a growing and hardy insurgency, which has exacted a high toll on US plans for Iraq even though it was led mostly by Sunni Arabs. As a result, close to 150,000 US troops remain tied down in Iraq, with little prospect that they can be freed soon for action against Iran. Most Shi'ite aren't resisting the American occupation, but they are ready to take power in Iraq, and want the Americans to leave.

While the US cannot mount a full-scale invasion of Iran without a draft, it does possess the capability -- despite the Iraqi quagmire -- to launch air and missile strikes at Iranian targets, using nuclear weapons

for its own war game on this question. The architect of these games, Sam Gardner, concluded: "You have no military solution for the issues of Iran."

What is the damage Iran can inflict? Since preparations for any US strike could not be kept secret, Iran may choose to preempt such a strike. According to the participants in the *Atlantic Monthly* war game, Iran could attack American troops across the border in Iraq. In responding to these attacks, the US troops would become even more vulnerable to the Iraqi insurgency. One participant expressed the view that Iran "may decide that a bloody defeat for the United States, even if it means chaos in Iraq, is something they actually prefer." Iran could also join hands with al-Qaeda to mount

the region appears to be at its peak; when its troops occupy a key Arab country; when it has Iran sandwiched between US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan; and when it has trapped Iran inside a ring of US military bases running from Qatar, through Turkey and Tajikistan, to Pakistan.

Could it be that al-Qaeda's gambit is beginning to pay off? It had hoped that the attacks of September 11 would provoke the US into invading the Islamic heartland. That the US did, but the mass upheaval al-Qaeda had expected in the Arab streets did not materialize. Instead, it is Iran that has been the chief beneficiary of the US invasion. As a result, it is Iran that now possesses the leverage to oppose US-Israeli aims in the region. Al-Qaeda had not planned on a Shi'ite country leading the Islamic world.

It is possible that the US, choosing to ignore the colossal risks, may yet launch air attacks against Iran. President Bush could be pushed into this by pressure from messianic Christians, by Israelis, or by the illusion that he needs to do something bold and desperate to save his presidency. By refusing to waltz under US-Israeli threats, it appears that the Iranians too may be following al-Qaeda's logic. We cannot tell if this is what motivates Iran. But that is where matters will go if the US decides to attack or invade Iran.

No one has yet remarked on some eerie parallels between the US determination to deepen its intervention in the Islamic world and Napoleon's relentless pursuit of the Russian forces, retreating, drawing him into the trap of the Russian winter. It would appear that the United States too is irretrievably committed to pursuing its Islamic foe to the finish, to keep moving forward even if this risks getting caught in a harsh Islamic winter.

M. Shahid Alam teaches economics at a university in Boston. Some of his previous essays are available in a book *Is There An Islamic Problem* (IBT Books, 2004).

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quickly when, with American assurance of non-intervention in intra-Arab conflicts, Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

The US response was massive. The Middle East had won a great victory in 1978. At Camp David, the leading Arab country, Egypt, chose to surrender its leadership of the Arab world, and signed a separate "peace" with Israel. This freed Israel to pursue its plans to annex the West Bank and Gaza, and to project unchecked power over the entire region. The Arab world could now be squeezed between Israel to the West and Iran to the East, the twin pillars of US hegemony over the region's peoples and resources.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ended this partnership. At that point, real men in Washington would have loved to take back Tehran from the mullahs but for the inconvenience of Soviet opposition. But great powers are rarely stymied by any single development however adverse. It took little encouragement from Washington to get Iraq to mount an unprovoked invasion of Iran. In the twentieth century, few Arab leaders have seen the difference between entrapment and opportunity.

The war between Iran and Iraq served the United States and Israel quite well. It blunted the energies of Iran, diverting it from any serious attempts to export the revolution, or challenging American influence in the region. The Israeli gains were more substantial. With Egypt neu-

initial targets for regime change: the "axis of evil" that included Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

The plan was to invade and consolidate control over Iraq as a base for operations against Iran, Syria, and perhaps Saudi Arabia. This sequencing was based on two assumptions: that the invasion of Iraq would be a cake-walk and American troops would be greeted as liberators. The US invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003 and Baghdad fell on April 9, 2003. It was indeed a cake-walk, and it appeared to television audiences that American troops were also being greeted as liberators. Understandably, the mood in Washington and Tel Aviv was triumphant. The US is unstoppable: it was time for real men now to go to Tehran.

Nearly three years after the Iraqi invasion, the real men are still stuck in Baghdad. Yes, there has been a great deal of talk about attacking Iran; plans in place for air strikes on Iran's revolutionary guards, on its nuclear installations and other WMD sites, and even talk of a ground invasion. There have been reports of spy flights over Iran and operations by special forces inside Iran. Israel too has been goading the US to strike, and if the US shrinks from this duty, threatening to go solo.

What has been holding back the

ons to destroy underground weapon sites. On the other hand, despite its saber rattling, most analysts agree that Israel does not possess this capability on its own. Unlike Iraq, Iran has dispersed its nuclear assets to dozens of sites, some unknown. Then, why hasn't the US mounted air attacks against Iran yet? Or will it any time soon?

More and more, as the Americans have taken a more sober reckoning of Iran's political and military capabilities, they realize that Iran is not Iraq. When Osirak was attacked by Israel in June 1981, Iraq did nothing: it could do nothing. One thing is nearly certain: Iran will respond to any attack on its nuclear sites. Iran's nuclear program has the broadest public support: as a result, the Iranian Revolution would suffer a serious loss of prestige if it did nothing to punish the attacks. The question is: what can Iran do in retaliation?

Both the CIA and DIA have conducted war games to determine the consequences of an American air attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. According to *Newsweek* (September 27, 2004): "No one liked the outcome." According to an Air Force source: "The war games were unsuccessful at preventing the conflict from escalating." In December 2004, *The Atlantic Monthly* reported similar results

attacks on civilian targets within the US. If Iranian losses mount, Iran may launch missiles against Israel or decide to block the flow of oil from the Gulf, options not considered in the *Atlantic Monthly* war game.

What are the realistic options available to the US? It could drag Iran to the UN Security Council and, if Russia and China climb on board, pass a motion for limited economic sanctions. Most likely, the US will not be asking for an Iraq-style oil embargo. Not only would this roll the markets for oil, Iran will respond by ending inspections, and accelerate its uranium enrichment. If Iran is indeed pursuing a nuclear program, then it will, perhaps sooner rather than later, have its bomb. Once that happens, one Israeli official in the *Newsweek* report said, "Look ways to make sure it's not the mullahs who have their finger on the trigger." But the US and Israel have been pursuing that option since 1979.

It would appear that US-Israeli power over the Middle East, which had been growing since World War II, may have finally run into an obstacle. And that obstacle is Iran, a country the CIA had returned to a despotic monarch in 1953. Paradoxically, this has happened when American dominance over

Stemming politics of violence

ABM S ZAHUR

DESPITE a tireless attempt by the state minister for home affairs Mr. Lutfuzzaman Barai to convince us that Islamists are under control and their activities are narrowing down we do not and cannot feel safe. It is clear that these perpetrators of violence have a thorough knowledge of the government's strong and weak points. There must be some people who are constantly in touch with those militants. Such people are certainly providing enough support to these moon-struck militants to change their plans and strategy continuously often to the disadvantage of the law enforcing agencies whose behaviour pattern leaves little doubt that they are utilised by the present government only to look after its own interest and not the interest of the people though they are maintained at the expense of the people's money to look after the interest of the people. In such a situation how dare we claim to be living under a democratic government! Holding absolute majority in the parliament should not empower the government to behave in an autocratic manner. If the opposition parties point out the failures of the government how can it threaten to brand them as seditionists? Did the people allow the majority party to rule like a dictator? Can the people be compelled not to see any evil in the democracy?

The present government must not be under any illusion that through its sheer arrogance and exploiting the religious sentiment of God-fearing semi-literate or illiterate population

in the national election would enable it to prolong its period of remaining in power. It may take some lesson from the experience of Indian Congress in West Bengal. During the last 27 years the Congress party could not make much headway in West Bengal despite various tricks played by the central government on the state government and though the left parties continue to support Congress party at the centre. Politics is compromise and adjustment. We do not know as to when our major political parties will realise this truth.

We must not overlook the fact that pro-Islami parties may not be large but they are certainly more organised and disciplined than other bigger parties in Bangladesh. There is no denying the fact that a disciplined small army is more effective than a large indisciplined one. Thus it would be advisable for

Khaleda Zia to consult closely with Ershad and Hasina to control the militants. But her liking for a controlled dialogue with these leaders cannot solve this problem.

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public property will not help them to establish Islamic rules. These people must be advised that this is a world of interdependence and we are in a global village. Economic supremacy is more important than mere religious sentiment. A poor least developed country like Bangladesh, overwhelmed by tremendous pressure of population can never flourish without adequate economic and technical support from the advanced world where Muslims do not constitute majority of the population. The actions of

outlook because without active support from the common men the freedom fighters would not have been successful against a large modern army of Pakistan. They may have deep sympathy for the suffering Muslims in the Middle East but they certainly do not like to bother either for establishing Islamic rules or Taliban type of regime in Bangladesh.

Demand of AL for dissociation with the JI may not be very important for BNP, what is important is to be

No state except Bhutan in the SAARC region is free from political violence. But the situation in Bangladesh is awful. It has reached a stage where no government, particularly a limping democratic government can bring back normal situation in the country. However, this is only possible through formation of a national government based on consensus. Formation of such a government depends on the sincere initiative of the existing government. It is unfortunate that no such attempt has yet been made by the present government because it is bent upon completing its tenure. As it seems it wishes to win the next election through active and questionable support from the Green Zone in Baghdad.

In the present situation we may see repetition of holding a national election similar to that of 1996 if not worse. How long a situation can continue and to what effect when a highly politicised corrupt administration is incapable of handling a crisis efficiently, when there prevails a sense of insecurity, when the people's representatives do not bother about the people? It is becoming increasingly clear that Bangladesh may face a very damaging consequence if the present situation continued. Our only hope is early realisation of this harsh truth. There is no time for long statements on political ideology or hero worship. We have to act quickly to save our freedom, our democracy and our country.

ABM S Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.

It would be wrong to put all the blame on the present government for emergence of the so-called Islamic militant. Tempering of the constitution to give it an Islamic look presented the Islam fundamentalists the unique opportunity to review their power. Ershad regime allowed opportunity to the fundamentalists to prolong its grip of power. Similar thinking is seen now to an extent though during the first term of Khaleda Zia the fundamentalists could not flourish. The regime of Hasina almost failed to realise the danger of emergence of militancy. Perhaps it concentrated more on 'controlling' BNP and at the same time maintaining some relationship with the Jamaat so that it can maintain an image of a party not hostile to Islami parties. Thus it would be the only option for

Osama bin Laden are regarded as terrorist activities. The Islami militants must be advised that if Bangladesh cannot solve its economic problems it will not only lag behind, but more problems will be created. Changing secular rules to Islamic rules without taking proper measures to eradicate poverty or to solve economic problems will bring misery to the lives of the commonmen.

Though Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country it is populated by more than 10 million people from the minority communities. Apart from that Bangladesh won independence (participated by both Muslims and non-Muslims) against a Muslim country. There is no doubt. That vast majority of Muslims in Bangladesh are secular in their

careful about its association so that their image as a moderate party is not tarnished. We also see less possibility of stoppage of terrorist activities by the militants if any party other than BNP wins the next election. Only the well concerted joint effort of the major parties can control terrorist activities because unless terrorists are convinced that the majority of the people of Bangladesh do not appreciate their heinous crimes they may continue their activities. Our friendly developed countries, our donor agencies are rightly advising us to obtain consensus on controlling terrorism in Bangladesh. We hope days are not far when the major parties realise fully the need for mutual cooperation in controlling the destructive activities by Jamaat-e-Mujahideen (JMB).

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

IBA lapse

I appeared in the admission test for the MBA Program of IBA (Institute of Business Administration), on 6 January 2006, which I think is the most competitive exam of Bangladesh. I took a comprehensive preparation for a long time for the exam. After finishing the exam, I was stunned by an announcement, which was made in other exam halls but not in ours, that negative marking would be dropped for this year. Mine was the IBA exam hall. I'm so upset since IBA shouldn't have provided us wrong information in the admission leaflet that 25% marks will be deducted for each wrong answer. Yes, it'd be right to change or modify any rules; however the announcement should be made earlier.

Mahbubul Haque
Central Bashabo, Dhaka
One-mail

Doctor's 'negligence'

I am extremely distressed to learn about the shocking incident that occurred at the NHH Saleha Memorial (Diabetic) Centre, Gulshan 2 through your newspaper report entitled "Doctor's negligence costs Shamsher Mahmud's life" printed on 23/12/05. The report stressed that the doctor who treated the patient during his illness displayed "laxness and indifference." Reading about the accusation of negligence pointed at the doctor saddened me very much.

I happen to know the doctor fairly closely, and have always been impressed with his professionalism and efficiency as a physician. However, I feel extremely sad for the untimely death of the patient. Dr. K.M. Maqsudur Rahman
One-mail

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Saurav Ganguly

Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion on the future of the Indian Test cricketer, Saurav Ganguly. Any kind of discussion on Ganguly ought to be dictated by what he can offer to Indian cricket. Emotions on display in Kolkata are understandable. He loved America, and praised President George W. Bush's moral leadership (Zenit News - June 4, 2004). Cardinal Ratzinger later confirmed: "There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion, even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia" (Italian magazine "L'Espresso", June 2004).

Would Pope John Paul II have considered it a "Just War" if France, England, and the US had disarmed Germany, preventing Hitler from invading Poland and other coun-

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