

Voices under siege

Since July 12, Israel has been conducting a massive offensive against Lebanon, bombing bridges, airports, power plants, cell phone towers, TV stations and other civilian infrastructure. To date, air raids and missile strikes have killed at least 359 Lebanese civilians, injured thousands, and displaced half a million in the name of "fighting terrorism." We sample here, 4 web-logs (online journals) from Lebanon and Gaza that tell of the endless suffering the hapless inhabitants of Lebanon and occupied Palestine are enduring.



Nora Barrows-Friedman, electronicintifada.net July 17, Deheisheh Refugee Camp, occupied Palestine.

There will be no statistics in this journal entry because what difference does 10 shredded children in Gaza, or 15 sliced children in Lebanon, or 40 smashed children in Iraq make to the international community anyway? What difference does it make when the twisted and sick US corporate



Rami Almeghari, electronicintifada.net July 17, Maghazi refugee camp.

"I have lost a total of \$1,000 since the power supply has been cut, the number of my customers has decreased to minimum, I stay idle at my shop for long hours; what shall I do?" asked 31-year-old Alaa' Salahat, a local vendor of frozen foods from the central Gaza Strip refugee camp of Maghazi. He spoke of his experience while sitting in the darkness with only a kerosene lamp illuminating the worry lines in his face. Why such darkness? Because three weeks ago, Israeli aircrafts bombed Gaza's power plant. "This is really a very terrible situation; we are civilians - what does Israel want? This is really a collective punishment against an entire people," said Alaa'. "When I get back home each day having earned only a few shekels [Israeli currency - 5 shekels = \$1] in my pocket, I rush to find candles to light the house for my wife. We stay idle, until our turn for electricity current comes. This 'luxury' happens no more than three nights a week," he continued. "This is a really unbearable situation that nobody on this earth can tolerate. What do the Israelis want us to do? To die, to give up, or what? However, we are steadfast. You know why we are steadfast? Because we know we have the same right to exist as the Israelis. These are our ancestors' lands,



Zena, beirutupdate.blogspot.com July 24, Beirut.

There is a very strong smell in the air tonight. I have smelled it before. I was in NYC during the 9/11 attacks. For two months after the attacks,



Nahla, lebanonupdates.blogspot.com July 24, Beirut

Minute by minute: July 24. 09:55 Israeli tanks penetrate into periphery of Maroun al-Ras. 09:02 Israeli army announces that nine of its troops wounded in clashes with Hizbullah near Bint Jbeil. 08:58 Two killed and two wounded in Israeli air strike on al-Halousiyeh. 08:57 Israeli air strike on Hay al-Bayad in Nabatiyeh destroys two homes.

media doesn't even mention their names, or their ages, or their favorite color -- something to put a human face on the mangled mess made by the latest US-manufactured, Israeli-fired missile that destroyed what used to be a nose, a mouth, two eyes, freckles, cheek, or forehead? Yes, there were "escalations" today in Gaza and Lebanon. There were "military strikes" and "retaliatory attacks" and "intensifications" and "deaths." there were "officials" and "spokespeople" and "leaders" joining in the finger-pointing and the name-calling. Meanwhile, Arab people are burning. Numbers and statistics become, therefore, irrelevant. Language loses its meaning on the tongue, becomes sludge and dribbles down one's chin. My dear friend Siham said today, "What does the term 'civilized society' mean when they are killing people like this?" What becomes of a language that has lost its original meaning? Does it shrivel up and slink into an abyss to mingle with the ghosts of these headless, armless, forgotten brown-skinned kids? And as we watch the footage, as we hear on the phone from friends witnessing the carnage in their backyards, as we read the articles, how many times can we use the words "unbelievable," "disgusting," "horrific"? They have lost all meaning as well. We need a new language to describe these nightmares. We need a new vehicle to convey the disbelief and the disgust and the horror as Gaza burns, as Lebanon smolders, as Iraq collapses. As we rub our eyes tonight, bleary from thick cigarette smoke and too many hours of being glued to the television, my friend Mustafa says, "No one notices, no one cares. We are alone in this world." This is the aloneness. The isolation. Gazan and Lebanese and Iraqi children are huddled in their beds tonight, screaming out to the wall of silence in a sore-throated language, isolated in their terror.

and we will remain living here -- even if it is difficult, even if we don't want to stay. Because this is our land." At this last sentence, Alaa' emphasized each word, to make sure I understood what he meant. In the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis, where the same problem exists, a Palestinian mother, Taraji Qdaih, 32, said, "For a very long time, we have been calling on the world to help us get rid of the Israeli occupation, but all our appeals fall on deaf ears. The Israelis are committing massacres; from the girl Huda Ghalia's family, massacred on Beit Lahia beach a few weeks ago, to the missiles fired at us from the air by night and day. And there is not any condemnation from the world at all. Yet when an Israeli soldier has been held, all the countries want to intervene to free him without any concessions. We are always the ones blamed, we are always the ones blamed." Visiting the ruins of the bombed power plant brings to light the reality of Israeli shelling. Dr. Derar Abu Sasi, the plant's operations director said during a visit to his wrecked office at the base of the plant, "We only have one power plant in Gaza. Now that Israel has destroyed it, we can't produce a single megawatt, or even a kilowatt for our customers. The Israeli bombs destroyed all four main transformers, the only transformers that feed Gaza residents with electricity." Israeli warplanes have been bombarding and destroying major infrastructure in the Gaza Strip such as governmental buildings for three weeks straight -- the latest was the foreign affairs ministry, hit early in the morning of Monday, July 17, for the second time in a week. Water treatment plants and greenhouses, bridges and homes, have also been the major targets of Israeli bombs in "Operation Summer Rain," the code name for the Israeli military invasion of Gaza that began June 27. Israeli leaders claim that their actions across Gaza are intended at freeing an Israeli soldier who has been held by some Palestinian resistance groups for the past three weeks after he was captured in an unprecedented resistance attack on an Israeli army base south of the Gaza Strip. The United States, Israel's strategic ally, has considered Israel's ongoing attacks on Gaza Strip as "self defense," while the death toll amongst Palestinians since then has risen to nearly 100, with over 300 others wounded, some of them are very critical. Some of the injured have lost limbs or have been paralyzed for life. In contrast, a sole Israeli soldier was killed in the Gaza invasion, and although Israeli forces at first blamed Palestinian resistance fighters, they later determined that the soldier had been shot by "friendly fire."

NYC smelled like Beirut smells like tonight. It is a mixture of burnt buildings, electric fires, and charred bodies. It is a putrid and nauseating smell. I closed all the windows in the apartment, but now we are choking from this sweltering heat. I went to see Maya today and she commented on how everyday in Beirut these days is like a Sunday... no one on the streets... all the shops closed... but really, it is a lot worse than that. Tonight the electricity was out... Beirut was so dark and silent. Today I thought about my students in the Burj Al Barajini Palestinian Refugee Camp. They are caught in the middle of it all. Located right between the airport and Dahiye, I cannot imagine what they are going through. They already had water, medical and electrical shortages. It must be so bad right now. My heart is breaking... My sister, Lana, and I had started a class to economically empower young women of the camp. Lana organized it so that each month an artist would come in and teach the women of the camp a craft or artisan skill, so they could make crafts they could sell in order to help support their families. At the end of the classes we were going to have an exhibition of the works made. My month was July. I was only able to give two classes until this madness erupted. We were making objects out of paper mache. The last time I saw them, we were making mini people that represented different people of the camps. We used balloons to make the head, and chicken wire for the bodies... then we covered them with newspaper and glue. Today I also thought about world domination. About how a few people control so much of what goes on today. It was too scary to continue the thought. So, I stopped.

08:56 Five wounded and three homes destroyed in Israeli air strike on al-Duwayr. 08:44 Rice calls for urgent ceasefire that puts stop to Hizbullah threats to Israel. 08:34 Two killed and seven wounded in Israeli air strike on car in al-Ma'liyeh near Sour (Tyre). 07:50 Fierce clashes between Hizbullah and Israeli army near Bint Jbeil. 04:05 Hizbullah Secretary General, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah tells al-Safir newspaper that Israeli ground incursion into Lebanon will have no political implications if it does not stop shelling of settlements in north occupied Palestine, something that has not and will not happen in the future. Nasrallah pointed out that during Israeli aggression in April 1996, resistance capabilities were lower, both in quality and quality, while Israel occupied entire border strip in Lebanon, and still could not stop shelling of settlements. Nasrallah announced that priority now is stopping of Israeli aggression, and when time is right for serious discussion of ideas and initiatives, we will be ready to voice our opinions in framework adopted for solution. 03:04 Precarious calm envelops Lebanese regions. 02:42 Bolton refuses Syria's offer for negotiations. 02:29 Israeli airplanes circle over South Lebanon. 01:30 Al-Jazeera: Israeli army announces capture of two Hizbullah fighters in Maroun al-Ras. 01:25 381 Killed in Israeli aggression on Lebanon until now. 0:55 Israeli rockets target al-Rashidiyeh Palestinian refugee camp. 00:30 Israeli air strike on two Red Cross ambulances in Sour (Tyre) transporting three wounded; all six ambulance medical personnel wounded.

A fair selection process?

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

ELECTIONS are no longer about representation, or people's democratic participation. We've left those aspirations behind as we see political parties vying with each other to edge themselves into power. The temptation is very strong because power means patronage, power means accumulation, and power means control. What better way to do so than make it appear as if elections spell the will of the people. This is why the role of the Chief Election Commissioner is so crucial. It is supposed to make the elections credible, and to conceal its vulnerability to manipulations. With an arbitrary wave of a wand the Prime Minister selected the CEC. No questions were asked, no choices expressed. The person therefore became beholden to the executive in more ways than one.

The selection owed itself to one powerful person or a powerful party. The EC budget was dependent upon the whims of the Finance Ministry and staff were subordinate to the executive. The Bangladesh Constitution, we are told, provides no safeguards against arbitrary selection. That may be so, but it certainly does violate the principle of fair play. It is no wonder that so many deviations have taken place on the path to a fair and free election. The present CEC has from the very beginning refused to recognize the elections as a modality for citizens' participation. Instead, the EC involved itself in endless games with voter registration, and even trumped court judgments. The fault lies not so much in the individual but in the mode of his selection. The crisis will thus repeat itself unless the political parties are willing to ensure that this constitu-

tional position is protected from political manipulations. So, as the major political parties cry themselves hoarse for a fair and free election and demand the immediate resignation of the present chief election commissioner, they would do well to formulate a consensual modality for this constitutional office. While we are talking of reforms, we may do well to look at how the 17th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution visualized selection by a Constitutional Council comprising of the Speaker as Chairperson, the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Appointee of the President, five persons nominated jointly by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition and one person nominated upon agreement by majority of members belonging to political parties other than the parties to which the PM or

Opposition Leader belong and appointed by the President. Except the ex-officio members, the term of office of other members is 3 years. The functions of the Constitutional Council are solely to make suitable appointments to the Election Commission and other constitutional commissions. This is supposed to ensure a neutral, level playing field and to avoid an arbitrary choice. Of course many other reforms are needed, but this may be a starting point. It is ironic, however, that the President of Sri Lanka has ignored his constitutional obligations to abide by recommendation by the Constitutional Council. Let us take this as a warning and formulate further safeguards to maintain the total independence and integrity of the Election Commission.

Hameeda Hossain is a human rights activist.

Always politics

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THE complaint of politicisation against the current government is ubiquitous these days. The government has allegedly surpassed the previous records in awarding and punishing civil servants on political considerations, and such news items have found their permanent place in the media. It may be mentioned here that the last government filled 40 per cent of the of Secretary posts with civil servants on contract after retirement, or Additional Secretaries made in charge of Secretaries. It, allegedly, neither promoted senior officers as Secretaries nor did it take initiative to solve the inter-cadre seniority problems. The current government has promoted 153 Deputy Secretaries to the post of Joint Secretary as late as July 13, depriving around 100 eligible officers along with 5 Additional Secretaries promoted to the post of Secretary. In fact, politicisation in promotion has a long history during the current regime. According to media reports, massive promotions took place on a good number of occasions with a good number of civil servants being deprived despite having qualifications. On June 13, 2002, 170 were promoted to the post of Joint Secretary, depriving 200. In 2003, on February 10 and 16, 493 were promoted to the post of Deputy Secretary, depriving 322,

on August 27, 97 were promoted to the post of Additional Secretary, depriving 104, and 49 were promoted to the post of Joint Secretary, depriving 277. On June 15, 2004, 84 were promoted to the post of Joint Secretary, depriving 78. Last year, on February 15, 18 were promoted to the post of Secretary, depriving 5, and on April 21, 327 were promoted to the post of Deputy Secretary, depriving 50. On January 26, 378 Senior Assistant Secretaries were promoted to the post of Deputy Secretary, depriving around 200 others. Interestingly enough, 39 Additional Secretaries were reported to have been promoted to the highest rank of Secretary. Seniority was alleged to have been violated in the cases of 14 civil servants, and 30 civil servants were alleged to have been promoted to the highest rank of Secretary in only 3 years. Over and above, BPSC is a constitutional body. It is an institution which is supposed to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the countrymen in terms of filling up of the vacant posts in the state civil service in the most impartial manner. Unfortunately, however, arrays of controversies have engulfed it and sent its credibility to the precipice time and again. Alleged leakage of question papers of the BPSC exams, on a good number of occasions, must have raised many eyebrows. The role of Bangladesh Police cannot be overemphasised in

maintaining law and order in the country. Attempted politicisation of the police force has been alleged on many occasions and has been criticised even by the former police high officials who pointed out its severe fallout such as destruction of the morale and morality of the police force. The rise in crimes committed by police personnel, perhaps, corroborates the allegation. In fact, sort of politicisation is there in many developed countries. For example, 10% of the posts in higher administration are still reserved for spoils system recruitment and thus a sort of politicisation is still maintained by the US constitution. Once the cronies of the president-elect would have been recruited, but the criteria for recruitment are sheer quality, efficiency and commitment these days, with special emphasis upon honesty. In UK, the presence of special, or political, advisers to strengthen the hands of the ministers, in both policy-making and routine affairs, is well-known since 1964. This sort of politicisation was based upon lack of commitment, and passive detachment, of the permanent bureaucrats, which applies to almost every cultural setting. Though it may have smacked of partisan bureaucracy, it is still in place facilitating the political government's stance and strength. Meanwhile, in France where bureaucracy has consistently been a stabilising factor in the country's volatile history, the members of

ministerial cabinets represent the politicised bureaucracy for long. The ministerial cabinets, comprising political and administrative officials, help ministers gain the upper hand in the state of affairs and try to direct things the way the ministers want for the betterment of the ministry and the state. Sophisticated and committed people have been manning the ministerial cabinets for ages. In the backdrop of stated phenomena of the three developed nations, however, it is difficult to find their counterparts in Bangladesh. What I am attempting to convey is that permanent bureaucracy is not politicised in the stated countries. Anyway, the bottom line is that partial politicisation -- superimposing committed and dedicated people following the models of developed nations -- is not that bad but is rather useful as it provides leeway to the political governments in implementing their policies. However, politicisation of permanent bureaucracy creates a rot in all spheres, hurting both morale and morality of the incumbents of concerned sectors. Unfortunately, however, our leadership has failed to grasp the severe consequences of blanket politicisation because it not only takes away quality but also demoralises the efficient and committed ones to the core.

Kazi SM Khasrul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

Tibet rides the rails

MELINDA LIU

LHASA is not quite hot enough to have its own stock exchange, not yet. But on the trading floor of the Tibet Securities Company, a large hall where share prices from the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges roll across giant screens, the action has been heavy since Beijing's much touted railway to Tibet neared completion. Between mid-May and July 1 -- when the Qinghai-Tibet rail line was inaugurated -- trading volume jumped from \$1.25 million to nearly \$2 million a day. "Business shot up because of the opening of the railway," says director Wang Deqiang. "And now, more and more people are opening new accounts." What a difference a train makes. The new line has cut transport costs by a third and is expected to bring 4,000 additional visitors to Lhasa each day. That's a shot in the arm for tourism and restaurants; in

2004, Park Hyatt contracted to build Lhasa's first five-star hotel, and a \$1,000-a-day luxury train service is slated to start by 2008. But the more subtle effects are what make the new train a big growth-multiplier for Tibet's once cloistered economy. Because more aviation fuel can now be brought into Tibet by rail, for example, all three Chinese airlines flying into Lhasa recently announced new flights to the roof of the world. Nor are all those trains leaving Lhasa empty. Newly minted businesses plan to export everything from yak yogurt to iron. Construction began in May on a major copper mine at Yulong, which will supply inland China by rail. Since March, shares for Tibet companies listed on the China exchanges have been rising fast: up 200 percent for Tibet Mining, 100 percent for a tourism company called Tibet Holy Land, and 50 percent for appliance firm Wuzhou Development. With falling transport costs expected to cut cement

prices by up to a third, shares in the Tibet Heavenly Road construction company more than tripled. "With the railway, economic growth will accelerate," Tibet's government chairman Champa Phuntsok said recently, "And people will be more and more optimistic about publicly listed companies." Just half a decade ago, most Tibet officials thought "bulls" were simply male yaks. Now even tiny businesses are thinking big. In Naqu county outside Lhasa, a new rural co-op selling yak-milk yogurt and cheese plans to "put our products on the train" for sale in Lhasa and inland China, says deputy county head Ceren, 45, who says the co-op has raised cash incomes for 300 yak-herding households from virtually nothing to \$300 per year. "The rail will be a huge benefit." Some of the biggest bulls are entrepreneurs involved in earlier Tibet ventures. After investing in the Lhasa brewery three years ago, Hong Kong businessman Wallace Yu saw beer sales rise steadily. So

when work began on the new railway in 2001, Yu started a new project: selling a spring water called "5100" for its source, a breathtaking 5,100 meters above sea level. (The bottling plant is so high it needs special machines to prevent bottles from imploding at lower altitudes.) A key to making the project work is that the site is just 23 kilometers from a train station. Now another partner in the brewery, Denmark's Carlsberg Group, is exploring opportunities to bring the water ("from thousands of years of natural rainfall and melted mountain glacier") to the outside world. Already on sale in Tibet, 5100 will soon be available in Beijing. With rail-transport costs a fraction of those by road, Lhasa brewery even plans to begin exporting its Lhasa Ice Beer to other Asian countries later this year. The market on top of the world no longer seems so far away.

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Biman passenger ordeal

ABU IMRAN

I used to hear of the low image of Biman in matters of flight operation. There is general observation that flight mostly are delayed and rarely operate on time, putting the passengers to a lot of inconvenience. I had personal experience of the same when I recently traveled to Pakistan. The onward journey was on May 28. That day the flight was delayed by an hour. That, in the international context was understandable and hence ignored. It however caused some inconvenience to the persons who had come to receive us at the Karachi Airport. But the real ordeal was faced between July 8 and 11 during the return journey. It was awful. The flight was scheduled for 7:25pm on the 8th. Accordingly, we prepared to leave residence to board the plane. But at the last moment a brother and

friend who was also travelling together informed us over phone that the flight was cancelled until the 10th with the flight time as 3am on July 11. Being wary, before reporting to the airport, we checked up from the flight information about the status of the flight. To our surprise we were informed that the flight was further delayed and the new schedule was around 12 noon. Accordingly we reported at the airport only to know that the plane was further delayed by around two hours. We had no option but to wait at the airport until we were allowed to check in. Having completed the immigration and customs formalities we waited in the lounge up to the boarding time. We were allowed to board around 3 pm. In the plane, the passengers were not comfortable because the air conditioner did not work and there was no water in the toilet. The worst effected passengers were

the ones who reported at the airport the previous night since they were uninformed about the delay. They passed a sleepless night with little or no food. Some complained that hardly any Biman official enquired about their plight or welfare. It was really unfortunate that the Biman officials failed to extend the minimum courtesy or assistance. In such a situation (cancelled or delayed flights) the foreign airlines officials not only express their regret for the inconvenience but extend all out cooperation and assistance (hotel accommodation, food, etc). I remember when I boarded a British Airways flight for London earlier at Dhaka airport, there was delay in the flight for some reasons. The airline officials not only took reasonable care of the passengers, but even sent a cheque of about 28 pound sterling after a few weeks to me (and probably to other passengers) as a token

compensation for the inconvenience suffered. The above being a sad personal experience with Biman, I would suggest that appropriate steps both by the government and Biman should be taken to improve its performance so that confidence in passengers could be restored and Biman regain its image as a competitive airline. I may also suggest that Biman should pay some monetary compensation to the passengers of the flight discussed above. This is the minimum that Biman can do. Further Biman should ground its planes which are old and not trouble-free. It should replace and update its fleet with new planes and should never go for old or second hand ones. Biman has already suffered a lot due to the old planes and should not buy problems any more.