

## The road march

Follow it up with a dialogue

**T**HE road march organised by the 14-party opposition combine ended on an upbeat note, with the demonstrators walking along the streets of the city and seeking support for the opposition in the forthcoming elections. The prime objective of the peaceful road march, which did not invite any police action of the usual kind, was to mobilise public opinion in favour of electoral reforms -- an issue high on the opposition agenda at the moment. The whole programme proceeded generally smoothly with no provocation or intimidation from either side. They maintained a safe distance from each other, which was indeed a welcome shift from the confrontational course that the two sides almost always catapulted on to in the recent past.

However, the point that we want to make is that there should be an immediate dialogue between the government and the opposition. The proposal for a meeting between BNP Secretary General and LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil has been on the table for long with the people expectantly awaiting its materialisation. There is a visible communication gap between the two major parties which needs to be bridged for stabilising the political ambience before the polls.

The AL claims that its long march has drummed up public support for electoral and caretaker government reforms. If that is the AL perception, then they must feel the necessity for holding a meeting with the government even more acutely, since time is a very important factor here. Nothing would be more wholesome for the prevailing disorderly politics than a negotiated settlement to the issues that still keep the two sides far apart. And nobody will be more benefited by such a deal than the people in general who have been badly affected by violent politics.

If the least dislocation to public life is what the political parties want to ensure while pursuing their goals, the road march was a fairly successful programme. Nevertheless, its organisers should not overlook that there were traffic jams in many parts of the city when the march was on.

Anything peaceful in the political arena is appreciated by the people who are tired of having to endure seemingly endless political bickering and violence. So, the two major parties have to agree to hold a dialogue and hammer out a mutually acceptable solution to the problems existing between them.

## Returnees from Lebanon

So much more needs to be done

**F**OLLOWING the incursions and blatant atrocities carried out through Israeli bombings of civilian targets in Lebanon, as many as 132 expatriate Bangladeshi workers have returned home courtesy joint efforts of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Qatar Charity under active support by our Mission in Lebanon. Of the 15000 Bangladeshi workers in Lebanon about 10 thousand are said to be women.

Although there is no official confirmation of deaths of Bangladeshi, the fact remains that many of them are passing their days in total desperation. It is learnt that with some of the employers having fled their homes for safety, many of the workers are living in utter fear, totally disillusioned without money and have no place to go for shelter and safety. Many of the returnees had to leave behind most of their belongings and could not even collect their monies and other valuables.

Our Non-Resident Bangladeshi (NRBs) working overseas are one of the most valuable assets for the country earning and remitting valuable foreign exchange to our exchequer. The government should, therefore, make every effort for the speedy return of those left behind and at the same time make arrangements for rehabilitation of the returnees.

The programme of rehabilitation should be two-fold. First, on an immediate basis, the returnees should be provided with financial and other kinds of support to help them overcome the trauma and losses to the maximum extent possible. All the returnees should be sent to their respective village homes or any other place they might wish to go to. Secondly, the government ought to draw up a plan in advance and think of sending these unfortunate workers back to Lebanon when the dusts will have settled. They must be helped to get their financial dues.

In the meantime, we express our solidarity with all those men, women and children who are dying and suffering due to Israeli bombings of civilian targets inside Lebanon.

## Khulna needs attention



ABDUL BAYES

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

I would like to see Khulna develop for strategic reasons also. The growth of extremists in that part of Bangladesh could possibly be curtailed through massive investments in roads, highways and education. Both physical and human infrastructure of Khulna need a boost to fight against socio-economic odds prevailing there. Khulna division needs to be integrated with Bangladesh and overseas markets through the construction of bridges and dissemination of emerging technologies. To go back to its glorious past, Khulna needs more attention from the government, at least more than it has received so far.

corruption of the management -- as elsewhere -- the poor workers have to pay the price in terms of losing jobs following the closure of business. We have noticed that many industries in Bangladesh closed down over the years on the plea of non-profitability, but no actions have so far been taken to punish the main actors responsible for such an outcome.

Before I tell the sad story about Khulna, I shall draw a few statistics from the Statistical Year Book 2004. As can be gleaned, Khulna Division embraces 10 districts: Bagerhat, Chuadanga, Jessore, Jhinaidah, Khulna, Kushtia, Magura, Meherpur, Narail and Satkhira.

The total area is 22,274 sq km -- roughly one fifth of Bangladesh's total area -- and holds 15.36 million

people. The total GDP is about 12 per cent of Bangladesh GDP, and population is also 12 per cent. The per capita GDP is roughly \$355 compared to the national average of \$363. According to Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2000, Khulna Division (including Barisal) is the home of roughly 18 per cent of the poor people in Bangladesh. Poverty level (head count) is 48 per cent.

Khulna holds historic ramifications also. For example, the first provisional Government of Independent Bangladesh took its oath in Meherpur mango orchard under Meherpur district. The historic inputs should have induced more enthusiasm for the development of that part of the country. The major trading point with India, called

Benapole, lies in Jessore. Roughly two-thirds of the trade with India takes place through that border. The famous Sundarban, and the second sea port, Mongla, belong to Khulna. More importantly, perhaps, a large portion of shrimp export is made from Khulna. Paper and sugar mills are located in that part of the country.

However, the pervasive presence of extremists in that region tends to stall much of the progress and prosperity that could easily take place. Khulna's development is also being deterred by the exploitation of water bodies for shrimp cultivation by an unscrupulous few. In fact, the poor need protection from the state against the grabbing of their ponds by the powerful.

Now it takes about seven hours

## Massacre of the innocents in Qana



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

### SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

From now on the Arab street is likely to be very hot. The radicals will continue to gain strength and ultimately they will take over. Whether it would lead to democracy or anything else, nobody can say at this stage, but the US and Israel would be mainly responsible for such turn of events. For Israel it could be still more unpredictable.

to consider the Lebanese request for immediate ceasefire. He also reportedly said that she was not welcome to Beirut and that apparently led her to say that she cancelled her visit.

After the Israeli attack resulting in the death of so many civilians, Israeli spokeswoman said: "We are deeply saddened and sorrowful" at the death of so many people. This was a mistake." But she did try to justify by saying that Hezbollah deliberately operates under civilian cover and sends rockets from civilian areas, which often leads to civilian casualties. She tried to emphasize that Israel did not target this 4-storey apartment building.

She has, however, not yet come out with the statement that there has to be an immediate ceasefire. She was already in Israel and talking to the Israeli defense minister when this ghastly attack took place. The question is, did this deliberate attack take place with the immediate approval of the defense minister? Secretary Rice, however, later said she was deeply saddened by the death of so many people and would continue to talk to Israeli officials to find a set of elements that could lead to the end of hostilities.

She said she had cancelled her visit to Beirut though the reports show that Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora earlier called her up immediately after Qana massacre and asked for an immediate ceasefire adding that there could be no talks before the ceasefire takes place. He said that the "situation is unbearable" and asked immediate meeting of the UN Security Council

Arab world. In Beirut, thousands of Lebanese agitating against Israeli attack forcefully broke the security barrier and entered the UN compound and damaged the windows, doors and other structures. Their anger at the UN was probably for the reason that it could not stop the Israeli onslaught that led to such a massacre. This appears true as UNSC itself said pointing to Beirut protest that "People have noticed [UN] failure to act firmly and quickly during this crisis."

But after a while Hezbollah leaders appeared at the scene and asked the agitating crowd to vacate the compound which they did after a while. This only shows the power controlling authority of Hezbollah and its ability to stop unruly behaviour. This further confirms what the CNN reporter said earlier that Hezbollah do not involve civilians in their attacks against Israel. Israel, however, always projects to the outside world that Hezbollah operates under civilian cover which appears to be nothing but Israeli falsehood to cover up their heinous crimes.

There was global uproar against and condemnation of Israeli air attack that killed innocent women and children who took shelter at the basement of an apartment building at Qana town of Lebanon. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said "nothing can justify" the deadly bombing of Qana by Israel. "I have talked to the prime minister of Lebanon, Mr. Fuad Siniora. I have expressed to him my profound dismay and deep sorrow at the

attack and the death of innocent civilians in Qana. I have transmitted to him that the European Union is continuously working to reach an immediate ceasefire."

The United Nations spokesperson condemned the Israeli attack, saying he was "deeply shocked and saddened by the killing of tens of Lebanese civilians including many children in Qana, south Lebanon, and calls for immediate ceasefire and investigations. Civilians have been paying the heavy price for this war and I reiterate calls by the secretary general of the United Nations to all parties concerned to respect international humanitarian laws and spare the civilians further suffering and loss."

The US, however, said that US position has not changed. Israel has the "right to defend." President Bush was still insisting on "sustainable peace" and so far had no word on this horrific Israeli bombing killing women and children. British PM Tony Blair also apparently continued to support President Bush and talked about longer term solution of the conflict. Every body wants longer term solution but it is absolutely necessary to have the immediate ceasefire so that people could sit and talk about the longer term solution. If the massacre continues how could one have discussions on resolution of the conflict? French President Chirac condemned the "unjustified action" by Israel. Jordan's King Abdullah termed it an "ugly crime." Spain condemned the attack.

The emergency meeting of the

UN Security Council talked for hours but failed to agree to condemn Israel for this ghastly attack. The US was opposing any specific mention of Israel in the condemnation. Ultimately, a watered down statement from the president of the UN was agreed saying "extreme shock and distress" at the death. There was no call for immediate ceasefire though the UNSC earlier called for it. The US was still resisting the call for an immediate ceasefire. This is what is the UN today; it is all US affair. What ever the US wants, it can get it done. The whole world is helpless against the US veto.

The problems get compounded because of Israel and its occupation and the unilateral policies of the US that led to devastations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is the veto that has crippled the UN. This organization has turned out to be something useless for the world in general. It is high time to dismantle the UN and go for a new UN without veto; else there should be regional organizations without veto that can take care of the problems regionally without the influence of the veto wielding powers.

Israel has agreed to go for 48 hours cessation of bombing to allow the UN to arrange transfer of residents of south Lebanon to a safer place and provide aid to displaced Lebanese which has reached over 800,000. It could also be a temporary halt as Israel probably wanted to replenish its stock of precision bombs that can kill more people in Lebanon and Palestinian territory.

The US has already sent the stock by air. The 747 flight from Texas (is it a special one from Bush's own state?) to Tel Aviv with all these arms and ammunitions and precision bombs will land, with the government permission, at Glasgow Prestwick airport. British people are generally against such flights and there was a plan to hold demonstration against the flight and its landing at a British

airport.

If the US can directly supply such weapons to Israel during the war, then why should Syria and Iran be blamed for supply of rockets to Hezbollah? Hezbollah said it would avenge the Qana massacre. One does not know whether any ceasefire would at all be in place in the near future or free style killing of civilians would continue unabated leading to a "New Middle East."

If the US is really interested to have a "New Middle East" with "sustainable peace" then occupation must end. It should be the end of occupation by both Israel and the US.

So far as Lebanon and Palestine are concerned, Israel has to withdraw and go beyond 1967 border with some small land adjustments around East Jerusalem (ref. my detailed suggestions on the land adjustments in my earlier comments) and handing over of Sheba Farms to Lebanon.

The Middle East also includes Iraq and there the US has to end its occupation. In short, all occupations must end to have a "New Middle East." The alternative would be a disaster for everyone including the present regimes in the region. From now on the Arab street is likely to be very hot. The radicals will continue to gain strength and ultimately they will take over. Whether it would lead to democracy or anything else, nobody can say at this stage, but the US and Israel would be mainly responsible for such turn of events.

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## Getting tough on ODA fraud

### CLOSEUP JAPAN

In a policy speech on ODA matters delivered in January this year at Japan National Press Club, Foreign Minister Taro Aso made it clear as he said: "ODA will serve no good if implemented without a warm-hearted concern for others. However, it must not be forgotten that in the end ODA is implemented for Japan's own sake." This resulted in some new thinking in Japanese foreign ministry on how ODA is being implemented and how far the process can be improved to make sure that tax-payer money is not wasted simply for the benefit of a few vested interest groups.

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

**J**APAN'S spectacular metamorphosis from an aid recipient to one of the leading donor countries of the world in less than four decades is one of the most significant development initiatives of the late twentieth century. The defeat in World War II plunged Japan into serious crisis that eventually turned this once powerful Asian nation into an aid recipient. Elder generations of Japanese still remember how they were waiting for food assistance provided first by the occupying US forces and then by

Unicef and other donors. Long gone are those days of hunger and want for Japan. As the country firmly moved towards economic advancement throughout 1960s, the income of the Japanese people first doubled, then tripled and continued to take an upward turn until the unexpected burst of the bubble economy in late 1980s reminded some of them of the bitter memories of the past.

The Charter was later revised in 2003 to ensure transparency of Japanese ODA, to improve its efficiency and also to allow public participation in the process of selecting and implementing ODA projects. The revised Charter describes the objectives of ODA as

measures to "contribute to the peace and development of international community, and thereby to help ensure Japan's own security and prosperity."

To ensure that ODA achieves these goals, it is essential for Japan to stop the possibility of pilferage of huge amount of budget that Japan's ODA is entrusted with. In 2002 Japan ranked number two in the world, next to the United States, in the amount of net disbursement of ODA. The ODA budget for the year amounted to \$9.283 billion.

But despite such a huge budget and somehow clear commitments expressed in the ODA Charter, Japan's ODA policy had been subjected to serious criticism in the past, both at home and abroad. Critics tend to describe Japan's aid practices as being an essential tool of Tokyo's business expansion. The shifting trend became obvious, as Japan did not hide her intention to use the precious money first and foremost for the benefit of the Japanese people in the long run.

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he said: "ODA will serve no good if implemented without a warm-hearted concern for others. However, it must not be forgotten that in the end ODA is implemented for Japan's own sake."

This resulted in some new thinking in Japanese foreign ministry on how ODA is being implemented and how far the process can be improved to make sure that tax-payer money is not wasted simply for the benefit of a few vested interest groups. As the Japanese foreign ministry has started to take necessary measures against companies that have been proven evidences of engagement in corrupt or fraudulent practices in Japan's ODA related projects. The ministry has recently published a list of five companies that have been branded ineligible for various ranges of periods to be awarded contract funded by Japanese grant.

The five companies against whom punitive actions have been taken are: ICONS International Cooperation Inc., NBK Corporation, Fujita Corporation, Nippon Koei Company Ltd., and Central Consultant Inc. The ministry has

also ordered Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) to take equivalent measures against the companies with respect to technical cooperation projects and loan-aid projects.

Both ICONS International Cooperation Inc. and NBK Corporation are accused of receiving funds allocated for a project in Kiribati before its completion. In case of Nippon Koei and Fujita Corporation, the charges are of a much more serious nature as the two companies received a completion certificate from the project executing agency of Papua New Guinea to the effect that all the works had been completed. It was later revealed that part of the construction remained incomplete.

Such malpractice in projects funded by Japanese ODA is nothing new as most of the people familiar with the mechanism of project implementations know perfectly well how things are being done. But what are new are the punitive actions now being taken against companies resorting to this kind of

malpractice. A much more effective way to put a firm control over the possibilities of any repetition of fraudulence would definitely be extending the punitive measures to the other end as well.

But since in ODA projects, despite being a two-way mechanism where both donors and recipient participate, such actions remain the domain of one-way decision-making process, Japan obviously cannot take any action against the concerned project executing agency of Papua New Guinea for issuing a completion certificate of a project despite part of the work remained incomplete.

Hence, time is probably ripe now to find a way out where punitive measures too would become of trans-border nature. Unless that can be ensured, pilferages of huge amount of money would continue in one form or another, creating extreme difficulty for ODA to reach its target.