

Pushing the country towards brink

Compromise is the key word

NOW the battle lines are drawn, even more clearly, between the ruling BNP and the opposition AL, with Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina taking diametrically opposite stands on the forthcoming general election.

To begin with, the prime minister has apparently dismissed the prospect of any dialogue on electoral reform issues that the opposition had raised in February and her own party's secretary general has been keen on. Then she addressed another thorny issue with the same nonchalance when she made it clear who will head the next caretaker government. Furthermore, she gave a clean chit to the chief election commissioner who has come under a barrage of criticism from different quarters for his inept handling of the voter list.

Finally, the prime minister has expressed her supreme confidence that the opposition has no chance of winning the next election and that is precisely the reason why they are out to foil it. Such a view, besides being presumptive, also borders on the impolitic, being clearly an affront to the opposition.

More ominously, the prime minister has also stated that the election would be held even if the opposition party does not participate in it. This is apparently a revival of the February 1996 election debacle spectre which cannot be treated as anything auspicious for the country.

As for the leader of the opposition, she is also confident that the election will be held, but with the proviso that the electoral reforms will have to be carried out before it. The opposition has been demanding reform of the caretaker government system and the Election Commission as a precondition for participating in the election. However, reforms cannot be brought about without a comprehensive dialogue between the two sides. But here again the opposition parties attach a precondition to the dialogue and want it to be held on their terms. So, where is the spirit of accommodation?

The already tricky political situation is getting trickier as the two major parties are yet to find a way to reach any common ground for a negotiated settlement to the impasse.

The country is being pushed towards a collision course which augurs ill for its democracy, polity, economy and institutions. Besides, it can only serve to reinforce the country's negative image to the outside world.

The two major parties have to climb down from the positions that they have adopted vis-à-vis each other and work out a compromise formula to avert political turmoil of an even greater magnitude that is staring us in the face.

An artificial fuel crisis

Resolve it without ado

FUEL distributors and the tank-lorry association have gone for an indefinite strike since Tuesday, demanding cancellation of rationing in the supply of petroleum products.

We are highly concerned about the strike and its possible impact on the consumers amongst the general public and others. Uninterrupted and adequate fuel supply is linked to our overall economic activities on a day-to-day basis, whether agricultural, industrial or otherwise. The strike has already disrupted life in no small measure.

As we see it, the dispute that led to this wildcat strike is based on claims and counter claims between the tank-lorry owners association including the fuel distributors and the supplying companies under the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC).

The dealers and distributors assert that there is a shortage of about 40 percent in the existing supply considering the increase in demand over time. The BPC, on the other hand, says that the sale has increased by 5.34 percent reflecting the rise in consumption recorded during the month of August 2006.

In other words, if anything, the demand has increased by 5.34 percent. There is no rationing in supply of petroleum to the distributors and dealers, the BPC asserts claiming that the stock position of petroleum products, including diesel, in the country, is "satisfactory."

Since authentic information is hard to come by, whatever little we have, makes us believe that the truth must lie somewhere between the two versions, one by the BPC and the other by the strikers. However, the onus is on the government and the concerned agencies to address the issue on an urgent basis; for left to itself, the conflict will only fester with the communications suffering and dealing a body blow to normal economic activities which we can ill afford at this juncture.

Five years on



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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

No doubt new strategies must be evolved, both for Iraq and the global war on terror. But for any strategy to succeed, the US must de-link the two. It is now established that the US-led Iraq war has come as a great boon to the Jihadi movement. How is one expected to defeat something that one's action created and is helping to feed in the first place?

September comes as a painful reminder. It has become a time, each year since 9/11, to take a stock of how the world has fared since the fatal day of September 11, 2001. It was from then that the existing world order changed, and a new one, ordered and tailored by the US, confronted the globe.

Thus it is the time which the media, the academics and analysts consider most appropriate to write up a report card on the performance of the Bush administration on the two fronts that have engaged his country, his people and himself, not necessarily in that order of priority or intensity of interest. And the grades are not very flattering. It is better left to history to determine which has been the worse, the disease or the antidote. As for us it will do for the time being merely to assess the consequences of the catastrophic event—five years on.

Let us start by considering to very significant comments made by the US president and vice-president regarding the Iraq operations and the war on terror.

Recall the historic remark of the US president on board a man of war, not located in the war zone, but

Without trying to pass a value judgment on these two issues, an

attempt will be made to look, in the light of the two aforementioned comments, into the consequence of, and how far has the effort to combat global terrorism succeeded, in reining in this scourge, and which way is America heading in Iraq, almost four years, 100,000 Iraqi and 3,000 US casualties later?

There is a common perception that terror, or to be more particular, the fear of terror, has been exploited politically by the Bush administration, not only to launch the global war on terror in the international front but also to push through many legislation in the home front that would otherwise not have been possible. And whenever things on either front had not gone as per plan, distractions were engineered to infuse the fear psychosis, to prop the sagging support at home. The June discovery of the Miami plot was one such instance to "expose" a plot of "full ground war" and the destruction of the Sears Tower, even though the alleged cell "had no concrete plans, no contacts with terrorist networks and no equipment, including boats" to quote an analyst.

And very recently, with the Pentagon predicting a grim future in

Iraq and the Lebanese venture by Israel having gone haywire, if not ending in a fiasco, the alleged terror plot to blow up American passenger airliners in air was discovered and dozens UK Muslims arrested. Some have expressed their scepticism because of the many incongruities of the would be terrorists' "plan." However, it is not the plot, but the very timing of its exposure that raises eyebrows. Yet the Americans are not willing to buy the administration's account. According to recent survey, terrorism, as "the most important problem" with 17%, came second to Iraq with 28%, and in another recent poll only 9% of Americans believed that the US involvement in Iraq was helping defeat terrorism. Many feel that Iraq has defiled the memories of the 9/11 victims if not diluted the efforts to combat global terrorism, by shifting focus from Afghanistan (war on terror) to Iraq.

Iraq continues to be the central point of the US global war on terror, and it is convinced that a US defeat here would mean an end to the prospect of a democratic Iraq and fulfillment of bin Laden's aspirations. The grim situation in Iraq has been amply highlighted in the recent Pentagon Report forecasting the frightful prospect of Iraq "tipping towards civil war."

The reality is that it is already in the state of civil war but the refrain of the Shia militia so far has prevented it from taking a more serious turn as yet. How long will this remain so is a matter of conjecture only.

Insurgency has increased in Iraq, both extensively and intensively. The incidents of attacks (792) per week against the US forces and Iraqis have seen a 24 percent jump from the previous quarter ending mid May 2006. Contrary to predictions, the death of al-Zarqawi has made no difference to the insurgents' activity in Iraq, which implies that the occupation forces have failed in one of the primary responsibilities that devolve on them, that of providing security in the occupied land.

So much has been the impact that the British in the south had to shift tactics and go for counter insurgency operations, vacating one of their bases, much to the delight of the al-Sadr camp that see it as a victory against the occupation forces. According to analysts, the US tactics of search and destroy is strengthening the guerrillas.

And what are the prospects that the region faces as a consequence?

No doubt there will be regional spillover, if not already, of the Iraq fiasco. Involvement of the neighbouring countries that have a stake in the developments in Iraq and opposed to US presence will increase.

There is real possibility of Iraq being governed by a weak center, if not becoming a failed state, with the present configuration of strength in the parlia-

ment and the newly acquired Kurdish clout.

Both the reconstruction of Iraq, and an acceptable level of stability that comes from a degree of internal security, have suffered and will continue to suffer as result of the US policy.

The general feeling in the US is that the sooner the US devises an exit strategy providing for a measured withdrawal from Iraq, the better position will it be in to combat global terrorism.

The fight against global terrorism has not fared any better either. As of now, little more than one-third of Americans believe the US is winning the war on terror. Therefore one is not surprised to see enunciation of a new strategy against terror: "President's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," released on September 5 by the administration.

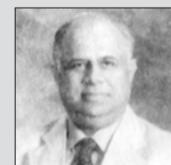
The report presents an optimistic picture by suggesting that the international terror network has been greatly degraded but many doubt whether the new strategy will be any more successful than the one of 2003.

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Post-Akbar Bugti



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

AS I SEE IT

The lines must be very clearly drawn as far as Khair Baksh Marri and Ataullah Mengal are concerned. Appeasement would be a counter-productive policy, their private militias must be disarmed forthwith. The GOP should not make the mistake of holding back against these two tribal chiefs (and their immediate families) if they show any sign of rebellion against the country. There will be no progress in Balochistan as long as these two sardars, and their families, remain in place to send others to their death, Bugti included! One can have no doubt that the Marris callously betrayed Nawab Akbar Bugti after setting him up.

nation.

Given to stubbornness, and indeed reveling in it, Bugti was an out-and-out tyrant. His well-documented terrorism had become a threat to economic Pakistan, in death he has become a threat to political Pakistan. The leader of his tribe, a former governor and a former CM, he cast a giant (if disruptive) shadow on the national stage. Notwithstanding open armed rebellion, the manner of his death was courageous. The brave must be given their due according to the adage: "Honour while you strike him down, the foe that comes with fearless eyes!"

The GOP had handled another anti-hero maturely. The "AQ Khan method" could have possibly been applied to Bugti, the pragmatism inherent adapted to suit the circumstances and the person. There is life in Balochistan after the death of Akbar Bugti, aggrieved and defiant it exists. That is the life the rulers of Pakistan, present and future, have not only to contend with

but also to deal with. The feelings of the Baloch in the streets have been expressed, convincingly on display they are now being exploited by the motivated in the drawing rooms.

Riding off into the sunset of his own choice, as controversial in death as he was in life, proud and arrogant Akbar Bugti would have been contemptuous of those protesting. There is a profound mystery here. To avoid discovery of their hideout, guerrillas will never fire on helicopters (or other aircraft) passing overhead. Why were the helicopters on routine flight, as well as the one that came later to locate the source of heavy firing, fired at, giving away Bugti's location?

The tragedy is that Akbar Bugti was invited to the "safe area" by the Marris, and promised due protection. The absence of more Bugtis around their Nawab meant that a Marri force must have been in the vicinity. How come not a single Marri died in the action in an area deep within Marri territory?

The only logic is that Akbar Bugti seems to have been callously betrayed by the Marris. The Marris not only got their revenge for 1973, when he targeted them as governor, but cynically set him up as a "Baloch martyr" for their own purpose. One feels genuinely sorry that this brave man went astray the way he did, and was betrayed in this manner. How come Khair Baksh Marri or Ataullah Mengal, and/or their sons, have never fought in the mountains, but have others do their fighting?

The men in khaki sacrificed a great deal in accomplishing the mission assigned to them, putting down an armed revolt that threatened the economic lifeline of the nation. Pro-rawa militarily, the armed insurrection in North and South Waziristan is many times more potent than militancy in Bugti and Marri areas. The critical importance of the Sui plant made the Bugti rebellion take on a seriousness far beyond its actual dimensions.

With tribals getting well-paid

jobs close to their homes who can better keep the peace than those who know the area like the back of their hands? A package is being successfully implemented in Kohlu; enlarge the scope and increase the pace!

If the MMA go ahead with their threat to walk out of the coalition in Balochistan, it may be a God-sent opportunity for the federal government to set things right in the province on a permanent basis by imposing Governor's Rule for at least one year, with all political factions, from all districts without exception, taken into confidence and given full representation in the interim administration. Development efforts on a war footing must include education, health, roads, etc., as well as the whole spectrum of socio-economic projects already in the works. Notwithstanding protests about the demise of Akbar Bugti, the wider resentment is against the perceived socio-economic deprivation of the Baloch.

With sincerity of intent and purpose, it is possible to salve the wounds by buying the way back into Baloch hearts and minds, only if the security situation is guaranteed. Prime responsibility must lie with the police, backed by the Frontier Corps (FC). A large number of Bugtis and Marris tribals who have surrendered can be inducted (after due screening) into FC Balochistan, making a Bugti FC Wing and a Marri FC Wing.

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Have Indo-Pakistan CBM's suffered a setback?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

Indo-Pakistan relations cannot be fully trouble-free, and such an expectation would be devoid of realism. The reasons are not far to seek. But a reasonably good relationship is imperative for healthy exchanges as well as for the success of collective endeavours aimed at the welfare and betterment of the region as a whole -- to which they are committed. Hopefully, India and Pakistan will set aside the misunderstandings as far as possible and revert to the process that characterized ties during the last three years.

Indo-Pakistan ties are at the moment stuck, once again, in the "blame game," and this is thwarting the development of relations that was witnessed till the Mumbai carnage. True, the two sides did exchange accusations with each other during the last three years, on a variety of issues. But these were the typical, occasional, swipes at each other. After all, the process of rapprochement is continuing without resolution of their main problems, hence neither side can do away with its principal complaints.

Nevertheless, what is remarkable is that promotion of bilateral relationship continues, keeping the main bone of contention, Kashmir, on the backburner, with

the pledge (from both sides) to address them with a view to reaching an acceptable settlement.

Such solutions of the complex problems obviously cannot come so easily, but this did not prevent cooperation at various levels, marked by increasing interactions, and rapport building exercises. Their rapprochement efforts not only helped improve bilateral ties, but also cast a sobering effect on the overall political climate in the South Asian region. Needless to say, a healthy regional environment is largely contingent upon the congenial relationship between the two key players in the region -- India and Pakistan.

Whenever Saarc's activities were adversely affected, it was mostly because of worsening Indo-Pakistan ties. Likewise, improvement in the Saarc ambience has also been mainly due to their friendly attitude.

The present, relatively action-oriented, program of Saarc is certainly an off-shoot of the reasonably good relations between New Delhi and Islamabad. Their mutual trust is important in the regional perspective. As such, other countries in the area, too, have an interest in improved Indo-Pakistan ties, and in a way this is the key to collective endeavours for social and economic development in South Asia.

A summit between Vajpayee and Musharraf in Agra had also failed, and all this brought bilateral ties to almost non-functioning level. The Vajpayee-Musharraf talks in Islamabad marked the end of that belliger-

ent phase, and happily both sides responded to the calls for normalization.

The new United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in India led by the Congress followed up the pattern, and in a way gave further impetus to the trend. Contacts increased to include many programs that directly involved and benefited the people.

A bus service along the Line of Control (LOC) in the disputed Kashmir region has been a remarkable development, while train and road links also brought the people closer. Cooperation in other areas, like sports and culture, along with easier visa issuing procedures, have been welcomed by both sides.

The trend has not been reversed by the recent developments, but undoubtedly it is no more moving at the same momentum as is evident from current conditions. A foreign secretary level meeting was called off by India after the Mumbai bomb blasts when New Delhi did not exactly accuse Pakistan, but did not hesitate to cast suspicion upon Islamabad. It implied, through several

statements from the highest level, that Pakistan could be encouraging the outfits that New Delhi suspected to be the masterminds behind the explosions. Expectedly, Islamabad denied the charge saying that Pakistan itself was a victim of terrorism, and not an abettor.

The Baluchistan unrest is nothing new, but acquired a new dimension with the death of elderly politician and rebel leader Bugti in fighting with the security forces. India was not keen on the development when it said that problems, like the one in that province of Pakistan, should not be resolved through force.

Not surprisingly, this invited a sharp reaction from Islamabad, which described the Indian position as amounting to interference in its internal affairs. Earlier, the unexpected expulsion of an Indian diplomat from Islamabad, and the fit-or-fiat action against a Pakistani diplomat in New Delhi, introduced elements of bitterness in their ties.

Following the postponement of the foreign secretaries meeting, contacts were established, both at ministerial and secretary level, Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Foreign Editor of BSS.

between them in Dhaka on the fringes of the Saarc meetings. When things looked a little better, the Baluchistan situation gave another jolt -- though not a major one.

The present phase is not a happy one, although bilateral ties have not nose-dived. The rumbles of displeasure from both sides need to be contained for the sake of a healthy relationship on the one hand, and for the South Asian political climate on the other.

Indo-Pakistan relations cannot be fully trouble-free, and such an expectation would be devoid of realism. The reasons are not far to seek. But a reasonably good relationship is imperative for healthy exchanges as well as for the success of collective endeavours aimed at the welfare and betterment of the region as a whole -- to which they are committed.

Hopefully, India and Pakistan will set aside the misunderstandings as far as possible and revert to the process that characterized ties during the last three years.