

US honour over Iraq

America should say sorry and get out

US Vice President Dick Cheney has reiterated his country's resolve to finish its mission in Iraq and return home with honour. There are a couple of questions which instantly arise in light of the statement. The first one relates to what Cheney and the rest of the administration in Washington have regularly described as America's mission in Iraq. The second is intrinsically linked to the honour factor. Unfortunately, to none of the questions have Cheney and his friends been able to provide satisfactory answers.

The question about the US mission in Iraq continues to raise hackles around the world because of the duplicity President Bush (in company with Prime Minister Blair) applied in the job of invading the country in early 2003. Overall, there was a huge moral failing here owing to the fact that the weapons of mass destruction Washington said were in Saddam Hussein's possession never existed. The administration ought to have heeded the words of a former ambassador who, after a mission to Niger, refuted the claim that the Iraqi regime was engaged in developing WMD. But it is in the way Iraq has collapsed since the US-British invasion that makes a telling commentary on the difficult position Washington is in today. The White House and the Pentagon clearly had little sense of mission in Iraq save mouthing platitudes about the need for Iraqis to come by the benefits of democracy. Besides, the exposure of the WMD lie left Washington and London in a state of bankruptcy. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the past four years, as Mr. Cheney knows in his heart, America has been muddling through in the growing, deepening Iraqi quicksand.

The idea of a mission now being in a blurred state, it makes sense to turn to the honour question. Inevitably, and whether or not the neocons in Washington like it, comparisons will be drawn with the war in Vietnam. President Johnson went for an escalation through an infusion of new troops into the divided country, a policy which President Bush is clearly repeating in Iraq today. In the late 1960s, the new Nixon administration first spoke of establishing peace with honour in Vietnam. The results for America, in the end, were a catastrophe. It is regrettable that Dick Cheney does not spot the coming catastrophe in Iraq. The drubbing the Republicans got at the November mid-term elections ought to have caused a rethink in Iraq policy. Cheney's new remarks suggest the opposite. That is sad, for unless the Bush administration acknowledges its mistake in invading Iraq and prepares a time frame for withdrawal, Iraqis as well as Americans will go on paying a bad price for a terrible misadventure.

Shocking and bizarre incident

Pak woman minister shot dead by militant

We are outraged at the news that a 35-year old Pakistani minister from Punjab was shot dead while in a meeting with party workers in Gujranwala. A woman of substance, she was minister for Social Welfare and a well known women's rights activist. Apparently, as stated by the extremist who has since been taken into custody by the law-enforcing agencies, he had killed her since, "she had not observed the Islamic code of dress." It is also reported that this very man was arrested earlier in 2002 for killing two other women but was subsequently acquitted due to lack of evidence.

We are deeply shocked by the incident and express our heartfelt condolences for the bereaved family. Admittedly, the Pak administration is already struggling against religious bigotry, and the sooner it succeeds in that war the better it will be for the image of the country.

Such a killing, as we view it, is not a mere law and order issue nor can it be dismissed as the work of a mentally deranged person. This is the product of religious extremism at its worst. What gives anybody the right to take another's life just because someone considers that a woman is not observing a given "dress code."

Such extremism dehumanises people and turns religious beliefs into murderous rage. This must be confronted by religious leaders, who should take action to stem their dangerous tide.

Thus, alongside mounting security against such anti-social elements the administration may also seriously consider involving members of the civil society to launch a crusade against them. Without building a pro-active social awareness across the country women might continue to be vulnerable.

The counter-reformation



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

This is the answer to the question as to why so many of the most corrupt and criminal remain at large and outside the dragnet. It is important for the country to understand that there are split loyalties in the current administration and there remain four-party sympathisers at its core who are pulling out all the stops to protect their allies, and that their machinations need to be recognised for what they are and neutralised without delay if the country is to not descend into chaos.

current situation of unaccountability, right?

Not so fast. This kind of action is indeed a problem, but not for the reason that most think it is. It is not simply a case of the caretaker government acting in an authoritarian and unaccountable manner. The danger, I am afraid, is far more fundamental than that.

He was arrested by joint forces personnel and severely beaten up in the Phulbari market-place (in full public view) and then thrown in jail, with instructions to the local constabulary to hold him on whatever charges they could think of. It was only following protests and reporting of the incident in the media that he was released the next day.

So how should we understand this shocking incident? Yet another example of the caretaker government overstepping its brief and taking action that is both high-handed and unconscionable? This is exactly the problem with the

and who are using the confusion to try to bring about the downfall of the present government.

The current set-up is such that those within the government who wish for it to fail and be discredited are able to take actions and give orders that are actually harming the credibility of the government. Unchecked, they will only get bolder and more audacious.

This is how best to understand the bostee evictions and the anti-hawker drives. It is not a question of the caretaker government as a unified body being authoritarian and contemptuous of the public. Indeed, to this day, the caretaker government still cannot state with certainty on whose authority these policies were implemented, let alone on what grounds.

What is happening is that BNP loyalists are using the current confusion and the fact that there remain those within both the army and the administration who are sympathetic to the outgoing BNP administration

know will bring the current government into disrepute.

The idea is to create pockets of resistance against the current administration so that when the time comes to put 50,000 people out on the streets to protest power shortages (or whatever) it will have a ready supply of men and women with a bona fide grievance against the current government.

It is heart-breaking that many of the bostee dwellers who had known nothing except extortion and marginalisation and repression these many years and had cheered the coming of the new order on January 11 found themselves its first victims. Their euphoria has, of course, turned to disillusionment and anger. That's the idea.

Nowhere is the spectre of the BNP machinations more apparent than in the attorney general's office and the judiciary. The egregious handling of the corruption cases is not merely the work of an over-matched and over-extended prosecutorial team, but reflects the con-

certed efforts of BNP loyalists still in the attorney general's office to cast a pall of doubt over the entire process.

The loyalists know that they have a sympathetic judiciary that is ever happy to step in and hand down judgments that defy both rationality and established precedent and procedure, and that if there are any holes in the prosecution that these will be seized upon gratefully by both defence and arbiter.

In other words, the counter-reformation is very much alive and well. It would be a mistake to think that these people are going to lie down and play dead. They will not give up without a fight.

And as long as their bank accounts remain untouched and Tareq Rahman remains at large and the judiciary and attorney general's office remain in their hands and their people in every corner of the administration and army continue to sabotage the caretaker government, they will believe that they are still in with a fighting chance. And they would be right. Don't count them out just yet.

The stakes for the caretaker are unimaginable, the cost of failure unthinkable. If we are really to put in place the reforms necessary to make our democracy functional and really do something about the culture of corruption and criminality, and, most importantly, impunity that has flourished in the period of the Fourth Republic, then we have to be aware of this ferocious rear-guard action that is

being waged by the forces of the counter-reformation.

This is the answer to the question as to why so many of the most corrupt and criminal remain at large and outside the dragnet. It is important for the country to understand that there are split loyalties in the current administration and there remain four-party sympathisers at its core who are pulling out all the stops to protect their allies, and that their machinations need to be recognised for what they are and neutralised without delay if the country is to not descend into chaos.

It would thus be a mistake to think that these machinations are signs that the caretaker administration is even worse than what came before it or take these actions as evidence that we need to return to where we were on January 10. In fact, the opposite is true.

These actions are best understood as the desperate struggle of the ancien regime to try and sow the seeds of confusion to discredit the current administration and return itself to power by any means necessary. The danger is very real, and it is crucial that we all understand what is at stake.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

An open response



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Dear Nobel laureate, the ocean is your space, and you have the power to make the waves. Instead, you are choosing to let the waves make you. History will judge whether you will reform the politicians, or they will reform you. Meanwhile, I write to you for the rope. A snap at your end will have a ripple effect. Our hopes will ride on those ripples, because a man like you doesn't come everyday.

know something at your level, which I don't. Perhaps you see something at your level, which I don't. You have luck and courage. Perhaps you also have the Midas touch. It might turn our politics into gold.

I liked your idea of going to the people first. But the question is, which section of the people have you approached? Most of them are urban-based, people who can

read and write, form an opinion, understand the value of a Nobel Prize and send emails. Your letter may not have reached the teeming millions in the villages, except for the 6.91 million borrowers of Grameen Bank who are linked through your internal network. Nevertheless, I thank you. You have at least tried to make a connection and reach out to the people.

If you ask me whether it is the right decision, I don't know the answer. It is said that great minds are like mountaintops, which get the first light of dawn before it reaches the plains. Perhaps you

competition at Plymouth country fair where 800 fairgoers were asked to guess what a particular ox would weigh after it was slaughtered and dressed. When he averaged all the guesses, the number came to 1,197 lbs. Guess what was the weight of the ox once slaughtered and dressed? It was exactly 1,198 lbs.

This story is relevant because it underscores the power of collective wisdom. We have banished that wisdom from national life, our contentious and sordid politics splintering the political will of

people into many islets of vested interests. Politicians always ignored the people, because they could be taken for granted. Needless to say, democracy has been a futile exercise for us. It has been as if a village idiot watered the fertile soil without realizing that the tree wasn't going to grow if he didn't plant the seed.

Please allow me to share with you an historical instance. Hundred years ago, a British statistician named Francis Galton had attended a weight-judging

competition at Plymouth country fair where 800 fairgoers were asked to guess what a particular ox would weigh after it was slaughtered and dressed. When he averaged all the guesses, the number came to 1,197 lbs. Guess what was the weight of the ox once slaughtered and dressed? It was exactly 1,198 lbs.

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Time has come for us to plant the seed. Believe me, I can understand why a driven visionary like

you can't wait to change the world. But you also need to give people a chance to catch up, otherwise you will go far ahead while they fall behind. Some of your Nobel colleagues made that mistake, and they have paid the price. Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, first from Iran, appealed to the "Western democracies," in the International Herald Tribune on January 19, 2006, to intervene for human rights in her homeland. She has been bitterly criticized in her country and lost many admirers.

Orhan Pamuk, who won the first Nobel Prize for Turkey, came under attack for portraying a negative image of his country abroad. His unbridled comment on the Armenian issue dismayed his countrymen, and even his own mother contested his factual errors in the newspapers. Both Shirin Ebadi and Orhan Pamuk have been branded as being subservient to the west.

It comes from the bottom of my

heart that you need to watch before you get smeared with the stigma of that kind of image. You will have enemies who will push you into the mud. You will have sycophants who will pull you towards it. I know you don't mind criticism. I know you are ready to roll up your sleeves and get down to the mess. But it will be unfortunate and counterproductive if you get dragged into it.

Some people are opposed to your interest in politics, because they are worried that you might become successful. Others are opposed because they are worried that you might become a failure. I am not opposed to it for either reason. As a matter of fact I am not opposed to it at all. But I am worried whether this is going to help or hurt national reconciliation.

Rigoberta Menchu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. During the elections of 1995 in her native Guatemala, she said that when the population is fragmented it's wisest to play a unifying role. She claimed that she had the opportunity to unite many more people, or sectors, than any presidential candidate or political party.

Our people are already divided. They are also divided on whether or not you should come into politics. If The Daily Star online poll is taken as baseline, then the split is roughly 70% in favour and 30%

against or undecided. I am not sure how you could bring our people together more successfully, if you were to enter politics or stay out of it?

Rigoberta explained why that was true. A Nobel laureate should aspire to be a member of parliament, much less a cabinet minister, because he/she is fortunate to operate in a much wider space. She waited fifteen years before she agreed to weigh the possibility of running for presidency this year.

If great minds are like mountaintops, they are also like waves. The scientists tell us that a wave is energy that moves across the ocean's surface. It works like a long rope laid on the ground. If you pick up one end and give it a good snap, there is a ripple effect all the way to the other end.

Dear Nobel laureate, the ocean is your space, and you have the power to make the waves. Instead, you are choosing to let the waves make you. History will judge whether you will reform the politicians, or they will reform you. Meanwhile, I write to you for the rope. A snap at your end will have a ripple effect. Our hopes will ride on those ripples, because a man like you doesn't come everyday.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Palestine's impending stillbirth

The bloodletting, chaos and lawlessness in Gaza can only be curtailed, not through a national government, i.e. by insulting the will of the people by bringing the defeated politicians into government, but by respecting the rule of law, parliamentary sovereignty, independence of judiciary, and by a diplomatic endeavor to convince the world community that the Palestinians are capable of governing themselves.

SAAD S. KHAN

HE two problems that Alladin's legendary genie has declared to be beyond his capacity are the Middle East and the Balkans.

The former is a region where two nations, Israel and Palestine, by a magic of history, geography or divine wisdom, are destined to live together but cannot arrive at a formula for peaceful coexistence.

Recent developments, both in Israel and in Palestine, have once again demonstrated, if there was at all ever a doubt, that the nations are as much divided internally as with each other.

For years, Palestinians and Arab Muslims did not recognize the right of Jews to have a homeland, and so they remained stateless.

Then came a time when Israel

became a reality by the force of arms and came to find that a Palestinian nation "did not exist" (sic).

For decades they tried to keep the Palestinians stateless. A time arrived when Israel became too exhausted by the conflict and decided to reverse the counterfactual stance of denial.

The hardliners among the Israeli leadership had to conclude that, one day, the Palestinian state should exist, rather co-exist, with theirs.

Alas, the Palestinians had changed their mind by then. Today, with blood spilling over on the streets of Gaza, due not to Israeli bombardment but to Palestinian infighting, not calling it a civil war is an exercise in semantics.

True, the Makkah deal has been signed between President

it or saving it, is worth the whole of humanity, the Koran declares.

Those who did not care for human life in trying to achieve political ambitions are not likely to bother much about the perceived sanctity of the Harem in Makkah that is, theologically-speaking, lower in dignity than a human life.

Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and his Hamas movement in the holy city of Makkah.

The sanctity of the holy city of Makkah can probably be better kept by retaining its spiritual centrality for the Muslims, and not by dragging it into political bickering.

Over the past three decades, more precisely since the third Islamic Summit Conference held at Makkah and Taif in 1981, the city has seen many Makkah declarations; between the warlords of Somalia, those of Afghanistan and lately those of Palestine.

These Makkah declarations have only been observed in the breach by the political bigwigs of the Muslim states.

When Hamas won last year's general elections, it was time to

give it a chance to govern. After all, there could not be treason greater than insulting or torpedoing a national verdict.

Unfortunately, that is what the power-hungry mandarins of the former ruling party of Yasser Arafat, known as Al-Fatah, chose to do.

President Mahmoud Abbas, himself from Al-Fatah, started collaborating in the conspiracy to pull the rug from under the Hamas regime.

He chose not to assume the mantle of the father figure of the whole nation, above the political affiliations and factionalism, as his office obliged him to do.

He dabbled in petty conspiracies and arm-twisting with the present prime minister, in the same vein as president Yasser Arafat had done with him when he (Arafat) became the first ever prime minister of Palestine.

Arafat had not tried to murder Abbas, as Abbas has now, allegedly, tried to do with Haniyeh.

In Israel, never has been a party banned or debarred from government on account of its position on the peace process.

Neither should that have been the case in Palestine.

The party has a right to proceed with its electoral promises to the people, regarding the peace process or anything else, and the people have the right to throw the government out after five years if they are unsatisfied.

Ab