

Massive anti-pollution drive in offing

Let it end up with a roar not any whimper

WE welcome the government's decision to go tough with industrial polluters wreaking havoc on environment. At the same time we would like to point out that the issue should have been resolved by elected governments. They have done a great disservice by not doing so. The issue that has defied solution all these years making city life considerably unlivable for us and more so for the progeny has to do with industries disgorging massive amounts of untreated effluents into the rivers girdling the capital.

The water quality has been so polluted that a study by Institute of Water Modelling (IWM) found out that dissolved oxygen level in the peripheral rivers has fallen much below the stipulated minimum. Another study conducted by the World Bank depicts the magnitude of the problem: 300 outlets of around 7000 industries in Dhaka metropolitan area continue to discharge untreated effluents to the water bodies.

One of the single largest polluters in the world is perhaps our tannery industries. The latest status on the relocation of Hazaribagh tanneries, a matter pending for more than a decade, is that the industrial owners have virtually scuttled the plan by asking for Tk 400crore for relocation work as well as waiver of hundreds of crores of taka they had borrowed from the banks to buy hides during Eid festivals. It is a very illogical position to take that while they damaged the environment they are asking to be paid for relocation rather than compensate for the loss.

The dying and garment industries have also polluted the water with their waste products.

The Daily Star has been consistently campaigning to save the rivers Buriganga, Balu, Turag and Sitalakkhya whose waters have been virtually stagnant with wastes. Unless the water is constantly flushed to the Jamuna river at Bangsi point, the surrounding rivers might one day die out. In that event, what a dreadful environmental disaster this would cause. We knew of good plans to rejuvenate the rivers by ensuring free flow of waters to be finally flushed out to Jamuna. Let the caretaker government negotiate with World Bank to revive the river survival plans.

World Cup exuberance

Enjoy cricket at its best

THE World Cup has generated, as it always did in the past, a tremendous amount of enthusiasm among the countless cricket lovers in Bangladesh and elsewhere, as it brings together almost all the cricket playing nations to the picturesque venues in the West Indies. The fans are looking forward to some highly exciting games that will be ample compensation for the time and money they are going to spend watching the matches. They have already watched the Pakistan-West Indies match, but it did not turn to be a keenly fought one because the Pakistani batsmen collapsed without putting up a real fight. The cavalier West Indians began the tournament on a happy note.

Most pundits believe that there are no clear favourites this year as the invincible Aussies have wilted a bit, and no other team is considered to be strong enough to have a smooth sailing up to the very last match. So the fans may conclude that it is their favourite team that will prevail in the long arduous struggle, where luck may also play a role. It is rather easy to predict which teams will not win the coveted Cup.

Our boys gave a very spirited display of positive cricket in the practice matches which included a win against New Zealand. Bangladesh will, however, have to win against either India or Sri Lanka in the group matches to keep alive their hopes of reaching the last eight -- not a very realistic proposition. But then anything can happen, particularly when they are playing so well. Our team is no longer treated with disdain even by the top sides as most of them have tasted defeat (at least once) to the Bangladeshis in the last 10 years. And what is even more impressive is that they are playing better and better against stronger sides.

So the local fans will have a lot to watch. We hope our matches against India and Sri Lanka will not be one-sided affairs having little to offer to the spectators.

Cricket lovers will enjoy every bit of cricket in the next six weeks that they have been waiting for since the last World Cup was held in South Africa. Let cricket convey the message of peace and friendship.

National Security Council -- need of the time



THE National Security Council (NSC) has come to be a subject of public discourse in Bangladesh once again. I say once again because sometime in the early eighties the idea was bandied about and some actions were taken to operationalise the concept, only to fail.

It failed primarily because of two reasons. One, because it was the brainchild of a military man (Ershad), ill motives were ascribed to the idea. It was projected by a section of the media and a segment of the political parties as a potential instrument to perpetuate military control over the major decision making process in Bangladesh. Two, the protagonists of the idea failed to push it through due to lack of conviction and, perhaps, also lack of a firm understanding of what the NSC would deliver.

The former was caused by the inherent distrust of the military and apprehensions about its intentions. The second was the result of ideas, concepts and plans conceptualized without sufficient thought.

What we saw then was a situa-

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The need to streamline our long-term security planning process and integrate all agencies for the purpose of higher security management cannot be overemphasised. But this must not be done without sufficient deliberations. It cannot be just another set-up in the decision-making hierarchy. It should be "the" decision making body on matters of national security.

tion where an idea was shot down by critics whose comprehension of the issue was hazy at best. There was no clear concept of what the NSC is, and what it can and might do. Subjective considerations influenced their comments more than any rational judgment.

The military regime, on the other hand, failed to depict properly the purpose behind the idea. And given the experience of military rule in Bangladesh, one can hardly fault the press or the political parties for being apprehensive of the military's intentions.

Formation of the NSC by the caretaker government is perhaps a matter of time. It is no longer a question of "if" but "when." And one assumes that the "when" will be very soon. However, the issue must be seen in the light of the prevailing situation in the country. It can neither be an instrument to satisfy a person's or a regime's ego, nor should the idea be discarded out of hand because of our lack of comprehension of the issue, or reservations about its raison d'être.

Whatever we do in this regard it must be germane to our need, and not because some in the think-

tanks or the strategic community are calling for setting up an NSC. We must also look around us to see what some neighbouring countries have done to address the issue of national security.

In India, it was only after it went nuclear in 1998 that the then BJP government decided to have an NSC. Why did India not have it sooner, in spite of the four wars that it fought with Pakistan and one with China, and the severe insurgency situation in Kashmir that betrayed a big dent in their long-term security planning capabilities?

It was primarily because of what one Indian analyst characterized as Nehru's, "misperceived distrust of the Indian Armed Forces arising from the then contemporary developments where the military in countries which had recently gained independence from colonial rule had taken over the reins of the government."

Nehru thought it wise to sideline the military from any role in the security decision-making process. In this, he found a willing bureaucracy whose convergence of interest, its unwillingness to tolerate a rival institution with access to political leadership, was of great

ately. It cannot be a knee-jerk reaction because it has become a common topic of discussion, and some retired brigadiers or generals or diplomats are espousing its cause. Not only must its responsibilities and tasks be fully spelt out, its organisation must also be so designed that the possibilities of any likely lacunae are removed at the very outset.

To me, gleaning through various literatures and talking to various people at various times, it seems that the NSC, led by the nodal man, and there must be one, like any other country that has an NSC, has four major roles that it should perform:

- Co-ordinate crisis management.
- Identify and assess short, medium and long-term threats to national security, facilitate a coordinated flow of intelligence, assessments, intellectual and operational inputs to the political decision-makers of the NSC, and help them in formulating an adequate policy and/or action response.
- Have the decisions of the NSC translated into action through appropriate directives and guidance to the departments concerned.
- Watch over the implementation process to identify and remove bottlenecks and departmental foot-dragging.

One thing must also be also cleared; it is a matter of apprehension in the minds of some segments of the civil society, and the media too, that the NSC will be hogged by the military which then will exercise control over the

national decision-making process. Would it be, as some analysts have suggested, "organisational overkill?"

While, no doubt, it is the armed forces and the intelligence machinery that will have an important role to play in any NSC set-up, they cannot have a predominant role for the reason that the core group will be composed of the political leadership headed by the chief executive, which will guide the composite elements who will do accordingly.

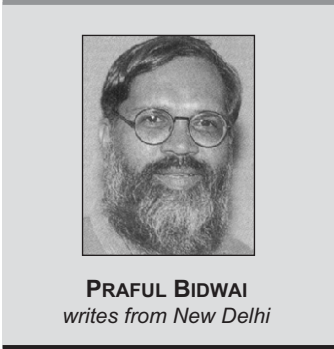
What the core group must not allow to happen is over-assessment of threat in order to over-ensure resources to deal with threats that, in the ultimate analysis, may devolve on the military to address and counter.

The need to streamline our long-term security planning process and integrate all agencies for the purpose of higher security management cannot be overemphasised. But this must not be done without sufficient deliberations. It cannot be just another set-up in the decision-making hierarchy.

It should be "the" decision making body on matters of national security. Experiences of our neighbours may be studied, not so much to replicate their system but to be aware of the shortcomings if any, and which we should take steps to avoid ourselves.

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The US has failed in Iraq



THE United States' failure in Iraq will have terrible consequences for the world. And the US seems to be failing -- badly. While its occupation forces continue their anti-insurgent offensive, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government appears shaky. Its collapse will signify the US's greatest political failure in Iraq. This could happen if al-Maliki yields to US pressure to end his dependence on Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The recent raid by coalition troops on the interior ministry's intelligence headquarters has further embarrassed the embattled prime minister. Their security sweep in Baghdad and Anbar province has had extremely limited success.

Former anti-insurgency experts advising US commander General David Petraeus have reportedly concluded that they have six months to win the war -- "or face a Vietnam-style collapse."

Washington has no Plan B in

Globally, there was a 607 percent rise in the yearly incidence of attacks and a 237 percent rise in fatalities. The first period witnessed 729 deaths. The second saw 5,420. Even excluding Iraq, terrorist attacks and fatalities rose sharply, by 265 percent and 58 percent. Iraq and Afghanistan account for 80 percent of all attacks and 67 percent of deaths.

case the "new way forward" strategy announced by President George W. Bush in January fails. According to reports, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Peter Pace, was asked at a high-level meeting about his back-up strategy. He answered: "I am a Marine and Marines don't talk about failure. They talk about victory."

This is part of a larger crisis of strategy. Earlier US plans all ran into rough weather. These included stabilising Iraq through the Coalition Provisional Authority; return of sovereignty in 2004 through a handpicked government; installation of an elected regime in 2005; and launching the anti-insurgency "Plan Baghdad."

The latest "new way forward" is an awkward, half-hearted attempt at a final "big push" by inducting 21,500 more US troops into Iraq.

US policy-makers are busy blaming one another for the Iraq fiasco. The Republicans accuse former CPA chief Paul Bremer for messing things. The Democrats blame the Republicans. And Bush blames Iran's Mahmood Ahmedinejad!

Worse, many US commentators blame the victims, the Iraqi people.

Leading Neoconservative and former Defence Planning Board chairman Richard Perle, who lobbied for war against Iraq even before 9/11, now says he "underestimated the depravity" in Iraq.

Right-wing columnist Charles Krauthammer says the Iraqis alone are responsible for the violence and strife. "We mid-wifed their freedom. They chose civil war." Even Fareed Zakaria, considered a liberal critic of the Bush administration says Iraq's Sunnis "have mostly behaved like self-defeating thugs."

These critics don't see the disaster's root-cause: the US's project of Empire.

The US waged war on Iraq out of choice. It knew Iraq didn't possess mass-destruction weapons, nor was its government in league with al-Qaeda. The US wanted to bring about "regime change" and "instill some democracy in the heart of the Middle East" -- as part of Bush's Greater Middle East Initiative.

Washington's core-objectives were to secure access to West Asia's energy resources, promote Israel's security, establish its global hegemony, and reduce the global spread of terrorism.

over 3,000 deaths among its troops, besides killing 650,000 Iraqis. But it has failed to contain the insurgency. The number of insurgents rose four-fold to 20,000 between 2003 and 2004, and has since risen to 30,000.

Even worse is the external impact of Iraq's occupation -- through the political radicalisation of Muslims and spread of jihadi terrorism the world over. The occupation has fomented anti-Western sentiment and made the world more unsafe.

It didn't take a prophetic vision to see that this would happen. Like the injustice heaped upon the Palestinian people by Israel, Iraq's occupation is seen as proof of the West's Islamophobia and racist attitude towards the Middle East. This has produced a backlash -- through terrorism.

A study by the Centre on Law and Security at the NYU Foundation for Mother Jones magazine proves this with hard numbers. The study looked at two periods, September 2001 to March 2003, and from March 2003 to September 2006.

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Iraq and Afghanistan account for

80 percent of all attacks and 67 percent of deaths. But even if they're excluded, there's still a 35 percent increase in terrorist attacks and a 12 percent rise in fatalities (to 554 per year).

The Iraq war has caused a precipitous drop in support for the US in Muslim countries: from 25 percent to 1 percent in Jordan, a major US ally; in Lebanon, from 30 to 15 percent; and in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, from 61 percent to 15.

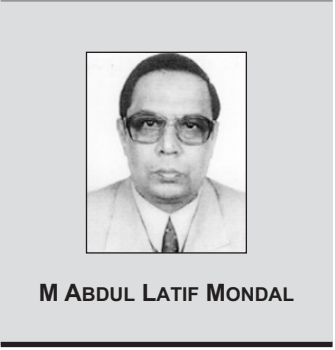
This has grave implications for the world -- not least India and Pakistan, where terrorism's fatalities have risen from 182 to 489.

It's in humanity's interest that jihadi forces don't gain. That will only produce more violence and insecurity -- and eventually, assaults on human rights and democracy. However, the way the US is acting will ensure precisely that outcome.

The US must be dissuaded from this catastrophic course. This poses a challenge before the global peace movement and progressive political forces.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Enactment of consumer protection law brooks no delay



WHILE addressing a discussion titled "Immediate Economic Challenges for the Caretaker Government" organized by Economic Reporters' Forum on February 15 at the Dhaka Reporters' Unity, Mirza Azizul Islam, finance & commerce adviser to the reconstituted caretaker government (CTG), disclosed that the CTG was working on enacting a consumer protection law to protect consumers' rights.

This is undoubtedly heartening news at a time when unabated rise in the prices of essential commodities including food, and adulteration of food and many other items, have made the lives of the people miserable.

It may be mentioned that, in view of the persistent demands from the

BARE FACTS

People expected that the present administration, with so much power and working under emergency, would take effective steps, including dismantling syndicates of businessmen close to the immediate past BNP-led alliance government, to bring down prices of essentials. But, contrary to their expectations, the prices of essentials have started spiraling.

consumer rights protection groups such as the Consumers' Trust, the Consumers' Association of Bangladesh, civil society members and the media, the cabinet of the immediate past BNP-led alliance government approved in principle the draft law on consumer protection in September 2004.

But, the draft law was not finally placed before parliament for its passage and enactment, although the BNP-led alliance had more than two-thirds of the total number of members in parliament. There is a history of struggle by consumers in many countries, particularly in the Western countries, to protect their rights.

The establishment of the International Organization of Consumers Unions attended by the consumers' organizations of the United States, Britain, Australia, Belgium, and some other countries

in April 1960 in The Hague, and the passing by the congress of the United States on March 15, 1962, of the historic bill comprising four rights of consumers namely right to safety, right to information, right to complain and represent, and right to select commodities according to one's choice accelerated the adoption by the UN General Assembly on April 16, 1985, of a resolution to protect seven rights of consumers, which include: (1) right to safety; (2) right to information or knowledge; (3) right to complain and make representations; (4) right to purchase commodities at a fair price according to one's choice; (5) right to get compensation; (6) right to learning on the part of the buyer; and (7) right to a healthy environment.

Pursuant to the above-mentioned UN resolution, consumer protection laws have been

enacted not only in developed countries but also in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. It is unfortunate that Bangladesh, being a member of the UN, has not yet been able to enact consumer protection laws.

Available information suggests that, among other things, the draft consumer protection law of Bangladesh:

- Defines appropriate laboratory, goods, defect, inadequacy, complainant, complaint, consumer dispute, manufacturer, businessman, unfair trade, and some other issues.
- Specifies the actions to be taken by the manufacturers and businessmen for the protection of the rights of consumers.
- Proposes establishment of National Consumer Council (NCC) and delineates its objectives, structure, responsibilities and functions.

Suggests establishment of consumer dispute redressing agencies such as Arbitration Board, Consumer Protection Tribunals.

Specifies offences, which include, inter alia, manufacture or sale of adulterated or sub-standard food; slaughter of animals at any unauthorized place; failure to imprint the date(s) of manufacture and expiry on the packet, wrapper, carton or paper cover of the goods; wrong prescription of medicine or pathological report that may cause death or disability of a person; failure to provide essential services like electricity, telephone, gas, water etc to the consumers' satisfaction.

Prescribes punishments, which may extend up to five years' imprisonment and fine of taka five hundred thousand.

Confers power on the government to make rules for carrying out the purposes of the act/ ordinance.

The question that now arises is: what necessitates immediate enactment of a consumer protection law in the country?

First, the laws inherited by Bangladesh as well as enacted by it -- namely Trade Mark Act 1940, The Pure Food Ordinance 1959, as amended up to 2005, The Animals Slaughter (Restriction) and Meat

Act 1957, The Standards of Weights and Measures Ordinance 1982, The Drugs (Control) Ordinance 1982, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute Ordinance 1985, The Narcotics (Control) Act 1990, Safe Blood Transfusion Act 2002 etc -- are piecemeal in character and mainly punitive and preventive in nature.

These laws lack effective mechanisms or institutional arrangements for the speedy redress of the grievances of the consumers. A consumer protection law may take care of these problems and limitations.

Second, unabated increase in the prices of essentials, including food-stuffs, has caused untold sufferings to the people of low and middle-income groups. More importantly, in the first week of March, the price of coarse rice in the retail market was between Tk 20 and Tk 22 per kg. Fine rice was selling at Tk 28 to Tk 29 a kg.

Available information suggests that the price of rice is higher than that of any previous year at this time. Coarse rice accounts for about 70 % of the total spending on food in poor households. Rising price of rice, thus, significantly lowers the real income of the poor households.

People expected that the pres-

ent administration, with so much power and working under emergency, would take effective steps, including dismantling syndicates of businessmen close to the immediate past BNP-led alliance government, to bring down prices of essentials.

But, contrary to their expectations, the prices of essentials have started spiraling. The present administration must not disappoint the people, particularly the low-income group and the poor, in arresting price of essentials and bringing it within their purchasing power. Enactment of a consumer protection law, and adoption of a realistic stocking policy of non-perishable essentials may be helpful in this regard.

Third, adulteration of different items of food and other items, including medicine, is a serious menace faced by the consumers. Confirmation of use of formalin in different varieties of fishes, big and small, has sent shivers down the spine of the people, rich and poor.

In the consumer protection law, institutional arrangements will have to be there to investigate allegations lodged by consumers, and if any proof is found, the case will be sent to the con-

sumer protection tribunal concerned to try the accused.

Fourth, there should be provision in the consumer protection law to educate the consumers about their rights and responsibilities. The consumers will have to be given facts that will protect them against dishonest or misleading advertising and labeling.

Last, but not the least, as a member of the UN, Bangladesh is under obligation to implement the UN resolution for protecting the rights of the consumers through enactment of laws.

It was reported in some newspapers last year that a powerful lobby was very active against enactment of consumer protection laws. They sensed that their days would come to an end with the coming into effect of such laws. That is why the draft law could not be placed in parliament for its passage, even though the cabinet approved it.

The present CTG will not have such problems. It may, however, review the draft law approved in principle by the previous government and make necessary amendments, if needed. Finally, a presidential ordinance may bring the law into effect.

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