The tragedy of Chittagong port

Ironically, less than sixty years following the departure of Imperial Britain from India, the then excellent Chittagong port became the victims of piracy and power politics. No sooner Dr. Yunus came forward with a visionary suggestion for turning the port into a first class regional or continental port for greater economic interest of Bangladesh, than the Nobel Laureate became the target of stinging criticism.

HABIBUR RAHMAN

THE recent attacks on the Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus on radio, television, and on other media for his suggestion to redevelop the Chittagong port has encouraged me to write about the port and its past and present economic as well as strategic values.

If Egypt is the gift of the Nile, Chittagong in particular and Bangladesh in general, is the gift of the dancing Karnaphuli River, which itself originated from the Lusai hill. The port is just on the northwestern end of the Karnaphuli River joining the Bay of Bengal. Without going into a detailed history of the Chittagong port, it is sufficient to say that the British East India Company had first upgraded this historic port to serve their commercial interests following their occupation of Bengal.

The spread of the Second World War in the Far East had enhanced the strategic and commercial importance of the port to British South East Asia and the Far Eastern war strategy. In 1943, the port became the vital link of communication with the Far East and a vital supply point for the British troops in the Burma front.

The British left India in August 1947, without taking any parts of the port or its sovereignty, leaving behind a first class administration of the port under the Port Trust Authority of Chittagong.

Ironically, less than sixty years following the departure of Imperial Britain from India, the then excellent Chittagong port became the victims of piracy and power politics. No sooner Dr. Yunus came forward with a visionary suggestion for turning the port into a first class regional or continental port for greater economic interest of Bangladesh, than the Nobel Laureate became the target of stinging criticism.

Illogically, the antagonists of the port maintain that "protection and expansion of capitalism is the ultimate goal" of Dr. Yunus' campaign for the redevelopment of the port. One should remember that those days of the socialism had gone with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the breaking up of the Berlin Wall. The authors of the socialism themselves embraced capitalism opening their doors for foreign entrepreneurship.

Look to the economic boom in China, the mother of communism and Bangladesh's next-door neighbour India, which has already emerged as the third economic power in Asia because of its adoption of market economy and massive foreign investments. Bangladesh has already been in the global village with market economy well before India or China's entry to the global club.

It is difficult to understand the assertion of the critics of Dr. Yunus that redevelopment of the port with foreign investment and technology would "endanger national security" of Bangladesh because of its location within the boundary of the naval zone.

If so, Britain would not have upgraded the port or established the naval headquarters including an air port not very far from the port premises to defend India and fight against Japan during the Second World War.

The location of the military installations or naval bases within the commercial complex has always been based on military consideration. So, the development or modernization of a port with foreign management and financial assistance does not endanger the sovereignty of a nation.

There are evidences of operation of commercial ports in some countries by the foreign entrepreneurs without jeopardizing national security. Last year, Dubai, a member of the United Arab Emirates wanted to buy leasehold for a port in the United States of America. It is important to note in this context that in 1995 British Thames Water, the counterpart of the Bangladeshi WASA, got water management contracts in Thailand, China and Australia.
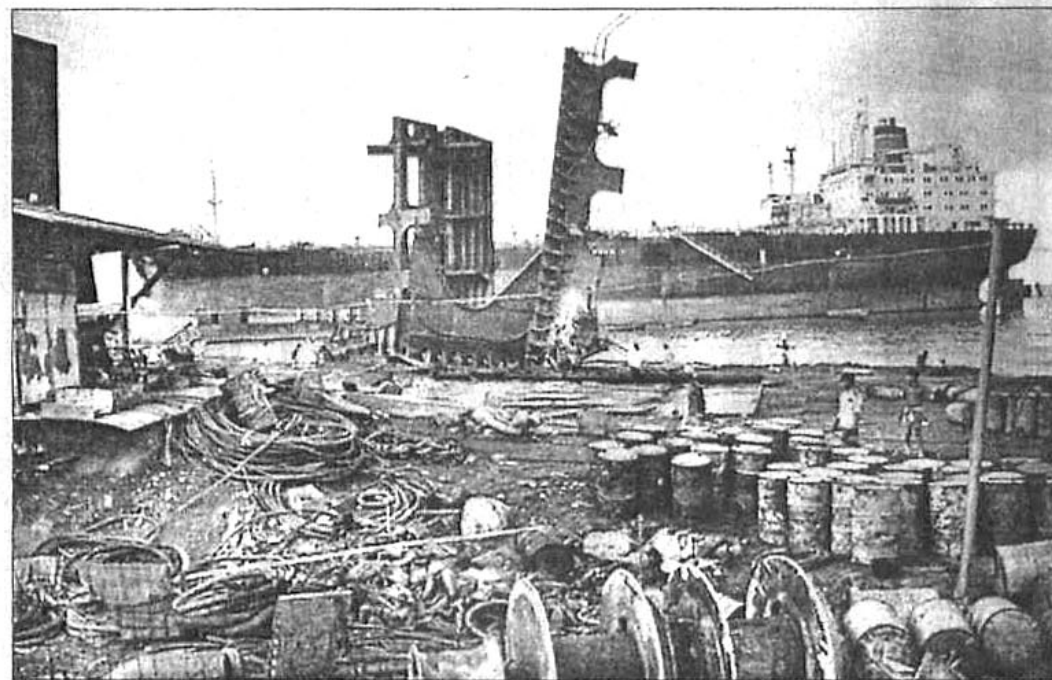
In 1996, it won the contract to manage the water supply infrastructure in Turkey and in Indonesia in 1997. In December 2006, some countries including the State of Qatar tried to buy the Thames Water and Australia won the bid. Does it imply that the sovereignty of the water of England belong to Australia?

More importantly, two EPZ owned by the foreign investors either fully or partially are housed close to the Chittagong port area. Are these EPZ threatening the national security of Bangladesh? If not, there is no justification for misleading the readers and giving wrong signal to the prospective foreign port developers by mixing up the matter of economic development with that of the security issue of the country.

It is high time for Bangladesh to move forward and redevelop the port including granting of transit right to the interested neighbouring countries on commercial and strategic grounds. The upgraded port with first class services and management can be used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations with interested transit right seekers and gain concessions from them in other fields.

Moreover, the Chittagong port can also play a role for building the image of Bangladesh once it emerges as a first class South East Asian port with excellent services. In addition to the port, Bangladesh should also take effective steps under the umbrella of emergency to privatise the Bangladesh Biman, the Bangladesh Railways, and the electricity and water resources for over all benefit of the country.

Following the Nobel Laureate's farsighted advice, the present interim government's decision to establish a deep-sea harbour is praiseworthy and a step forward to promote Bangladesh as a regional economic hub. It will also be another brand negotiation of Bangladesh in addition to the upgraded Chittagong port.

However, it is important to conclude the feasibility study soon and set up the deep sea harbour before the southern neighbour of Bangladesh -- Myanmar sets up its desired deep sea harbour with Chinese collaboration not very far from the Bangladesh waters. The suitable location for the proposed deep-sea harbour is on the belt from Sonadia to Saint Martin's Island as Dr. Yunus suggested. A natural harbour called Badar Makam, in fact, existed on the channel between Shahparir Dip and Saint Martin's Island and this harbour has been submerged under water since early 1960s.

It is important for all of us to extend our wholehearted support to the interim government under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, in their efforts for creating a new corruption-free Bangladesh. So, let the derailed train, which has been put on the right track, keep moving until it reaches its destination.

Dr. Habibur Rahman is the Chairman of New Horizons of Bangladesh.


TB strategy not working?

BOBBY JOHN AND TIM FRANCE

A much larger TB drug resistance problem exists than researchers previously thought. New global data on TB, published this week by the World Health Organization (WHO), highlights serious weaknesses in many national TB programs, increasing the potential for widespread TB drug resistance. How did we reach this precarious state?

Ask a WHO expert this question and they assert that increasing levels of TB drug resistance "reflects a failure to implement the WHO Stop TB Strategy." The strategy hopefully maps out the steps that national TB control programs need to take. By all accounts then, our national TB programs are failing us.

The bacterium that causes tuberculosis (TB), Mycobacterium tuberculosis, is naturally sensitive to the antibiotic drugs used to treat the disease. The accepted truth about how TB drug resistance starts is that it is mostly "acquired" in individual patients because of inadequate treatment with TB drugs, now at least 40 years old.

Poor patient drug adherence, or the use of too few drugs leads -- the story goes -- to arious forms of drug resistant TB. Multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) is a specific type that does not respond to the two most powerful anti-TB drugs. Latest estimates are that MDR-TB makes up about 4% of all new and previously treated TB globally.
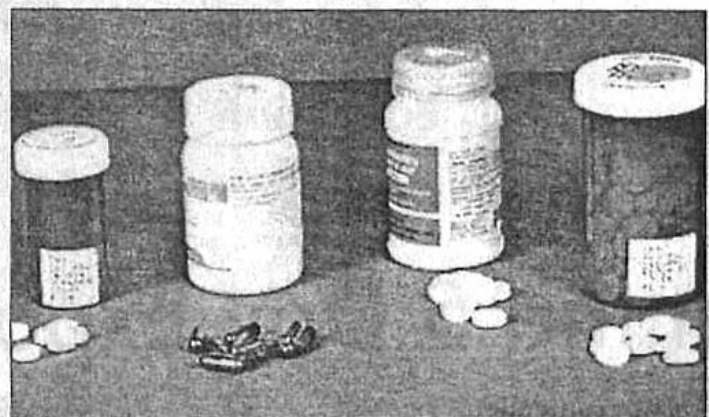
Apparently, our antiquated TB drugs are failing us too.

Drug resistant TB is already geographically widespread, including in places where TB control programs have been in place for many years. But incredibly little is known about just how much TB drug resistance there is outside of capital cities, for example, and even in some entire countries where drug resistance may be common because of historically poor TB control.

No progress can be made if the TB clinics are there but the patients are not. Today's standard test for TB uses a technique (sputum microscopy) invented over a hundred years ago. It provides no information about drug resistance. Apparently TB diagnosis is also failing us.

Too many weak points to deal with? A further litany of vital TB program components has also been ignored for years, in favour of a single jewel in the TB strategy's crown: irectly-observed treatment short course, or DOTS. In many places, a consistent lack of focus and investment has led to:

- Chronically weak TB diagnostic and laboratory services.
- Infrequent and incomplete TB drug resistance surveillance.
- Inadequate management of individual drug resistant TB cases.
- Paltry TB infection control measures, including in health care settings.

Predictably, many TB-endemic countries have indeed failed to meet the exacting standards of the WHO Stop TB Strategy. Given the circumstances in many countries where TB is rife, what is surprising is that they should be asked to pursue such a pipedream.

DOTS was supposed to stem TB drug resistance. Because of sloppy and unimaginative implementation, it is evidently failing us. As the full extent of TB drug resistance comes to light, prioritising TB drug delivery above all other areas of TB diagnosis and care looks increasingly like WHO has been building a house, just without foundations.

We cannot now claim to be surprised when a decade of overlooking the systemic challenges faced by high TB countries brings the entire house tumbling down.

Promoting policy frameworks is no replacement for working together to achieve what needs to be done to address TB. The Global Plan to Stop TB, (2006-2015), launched by the Stop TB Partnership just over a year ago, is a road map for such a coordinated action.

WHO urgently needs to look beyond their Stop TB Strategy to help promote and coordinate the comprehensive range of actions set out in the plan -- and to recognise the track record of over five hundred global partners who put their name behind it.

When she took office just a few months ago, the new WHO Director-General, Dr. Margaret Chan, identified the organisation's many partnerships as one of her immediate priorities. "Either the partnerships have to change or we have to change or both of us have to change to be more relevant," she said. "What is important to me is, are we getting the results that matter? In the case of controlling TB drug resistance, the answer is an unequivocal no.

Dr. Bobby John, is the Executive Director of the Center for Sustainable Health & Development, India, and President of Global Health Advocates, and Dr Tim France, is Technical and Policy Adviser to Health & Development Networks, and Chairman of the Stop TB Partnership Media and Events Task Force.

Rough road for Hillary

IMRAN KHALID

HILLARY Rodham Clinton, perhaps one of the most potential hopefuls for the Oval Office, is passing through the most crucial phase of her presidential campaign. In the first place, she is faced with a grueling challenge of winning the nomination as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party against a bevy of strong candidates like Senator Barack Obama, Senator Joseph Biden, Senator Chris Dodd and Nex Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. Her battle with fellow Democrat candidates over the nomination has suddenly become fiercely intense -- much to the disdain of her campaign managers who were expecting a smooth and easy home run for her.

Her media advisers had been expecting to exploit the existing "gender gap" by attracting the women voters to support a female presidential candidate with liberal credentials. In this effort, they kept the tenor of her initial campaign more towards social and women-oriented issues and persistently tried to appeal to the women voters to create a differentiation in the presidential race.

For initial few months, this tactic appeared to be working as per Hillary's expectations, but soon Barack Obama entered the fray with a bang and Hillary was forced to overhaul her campaign strategy.

Obama's swift emergence on the scene literally put Hillary Clinton on the back foot. She was not expecting any real challenger from within the ranks of the Democratic Party to cause a major threat to her almost-granted presidential nomination.

Barack Obama, charismatic and outspoken senator from Illinois, is indubitably one of the most potential Democrats with a serious chance to become the first African-American to win the presidency. His outspoken demeanor and blunt style has made him one of the most talked-about political personalities in the American media.

In a very short time, he has emerged as a real challenger to long-time front-runner Hillary Clinton, who was considered to be a sure-fire lock to win the Democratic presidential nomination. Obama, the first term senator, is a new face in US national politics but has been trying hard to distinguish himself by his stern opposition to the Iraq war. In fact, he has shrewdly used his lack of political experience and extreme opposition to Bush's Iraq policy as the main differentiating point to attract the American voters. It is his astute usage of the Iraq card that has put Hillary Clinton in a tight corner.

Hillary has been consistently challenged to explain her 2002 Senate vote to send US troops to Iraq. Obama and other detractors have been constantly targeting this aspect of Hillary, who, despite all loud rhetoric to end the Iraq war and call back the Marines there, is not been able to satisfy the American voters about her position on the Iraq war.

Very tactfully, Obama has diverted all the attention to Hillary's 2002 vote. So much so that in every public appearance she has made it a point to broach her "new" stance on the Iraq war. To the extent of obsession, Hillary has been working hard to clarify her current anti-Iraq-war stand. But the more she talks about the Iraq war, the more controversy she gathers.

Ironically, in October 2002, when the Congress passed the Iraq war resolution, all the other Democratic senators who are now running for the White House -- excluding Obama who was not member of the Senate at that time -- along with Hillary Clinton voted for the war, but it is only Hillary who is being subjected to open media trial of her view of the Iraq war.

Obama's media managers have very successfully trapped Hillary into the Iraq quandary and she is finding it very difficult to clarify her position. Now she is showing the signs of exhaustion and irritation over the inordinate attention being given to her Iraq policy.

Last month, in one of his campaign stop at New Hampshire, she irritatingly said that voters could choose another candidate if her answers does not suffice. This incongruous gesticulation is reflecting her growing frustration. This is not a good omen for Hillary who has been trying hard to project herself as a dynamic, cool and visionary politician.

Obama has very effectively managed to keep the public attention on Clinton's Iraq views by deliberately fanning the war of words with her over the Iraq war. He has given her a real headache over this matter and diverted her from promoting her actual political and economic agenda.

This is certainly a testing time for her to keep her campaign on the track at this critical phase -- the credit for which also goes to her own over-reaction to her opponents particularly Obama.

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The poisonous legacy of the Iraq war -- Part I

FAWAZ A GERGES

FOUR years ago the US and its coalition of the willing plunged into Iraq to punish it among others for an alleged connection with the 9/11 attacks. In a self-fulfilling prophesy, what was not true then has come to pass: Iraq has become the Mecca of terrorism against people of all faith. It is as good as an occasion as any to examine the roots of an American blunder and its consequences.

The US has long viewed terrorism as ahistorical and apolitical, more of a moral mutation than a social phenomenon, which can be battered away with military might. Analyzing jihadists as social actors driven by political, religious and geostrategic concerns may prove beneficial to the US and the world at large in seeking a lasting and nuanced political-diplomatic strategy to deal with this essentially social phenomenon.

Three background points are in order:

- The jihadist enterprise represents a tiny fraction of the larger Islamist movement, which renounced violence in the early 1970s and which dominates the social and political space in most Muslim societies.

- From the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s, the jihadist movement targeted Arab and Muslim governments, particularly in Egypt and Algeria, and labeled them as the "near enemy."

- It was not until the second half of the 1990s that a small fraction of jihadists, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, decided to target the US and some of its Western allies, and labeled them as the "far enemy."

After September 11, 2001, some simple questions were not fully addressed: Why did bin Laden and his associates suddenly turn their guns on the "far enemy" after having been in the same trenches during the 1980s and 1990s? Why did they target civilians, when up to the mid-1990s bin Laden went on record saying that he opposed targeting Western civilians?

I ask these questions to understand the reasons behind the shift in tactics and strategy on the part of Al Qaeda jihadists -- the shift away from attacking local Arab and Muslim governments to attacking the US and its allies, and the shift to using terrorism and attacking civilians on a large scale.

Understanding the changing geopolitical and geostrategic contexts, and how they motivated jihadists, is essential to understanding two fundamental shifts in Al Qaeda's conduct.

When I began interviewing mainstream and militant Islamists in the 1990s, I could not find documents that made a case for targeting the US and its citizens. Jihadist manifestos focused on the "near enemy." Ayman Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second in charge, advised followers as late as 1995 that "The road to Jerusalem goes through Cairo."

However, after US military intervention in the 1990 Gulf War and the subsequent decision to permanently station troops in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, in 1991, bin Laden left Saudi Arabia on a murderous journey. Of course, other factors were involved, such as the defeat of Russian forces in Afghanistan, the emboldening of the Afghan Arabs and the defeat of jihadists on their home fronts, Egypt and Algeria, in the late 1990s. Without a doubt, geopolitics was instrumental in motivating jihadists to attack the American homeland.

As to why bin Laden and his associates decided to target civilians by carrying out suicide bombings, three factors were pivotal -- first, Zawahiri, ideologue and theoretician of jihadism, was instrumental in convincing bin Laden to go suicidal; second, bin Laden blamed his expulsion from Sudan to Afghanistan in the 1990s on Saudi Arabia and the US; and finally, bin Laden miscalculated by thinking that killing Americans would force the US to change its Mideast policies.

Sadly, the dominant narrative in Washington neglects the role of politics and foreign policy in driving violence and constantly downplays political means in combating it. In fact, the Bush administration, while paying lip service to public diplomacy, has relied excessively on militarism to wage all-out war against an unconventional and fractured foe.

The irony is that bin Laden and Zawahiri had actually failed to draw the bulk of former jihadists into their war against the US. Many former jihadists, whom I interviewed in the late 1990s and after 9/11, said that while delighted at America's humiliation, they also feared that bin Laden and Zawahiri recklessly endangered survival of the Islamist movement. Instead of the river of recruits to Afghanistan, only a trickle of volunteers signed up to defend the Taliban and Al Qaeda after 9/11.

Widespread empathy for the victims came from the Arab and Muslim world. Leading Muslim clerics and opinion makers condemned Al Qaeda's terrorist tactics and exposed the falsity on which Al Qaeda based its jihad. An historic moment was lost, as the Bush administration declared war against both real and imagined enemies.

What if the Bush administration, after toppling the Taliban and pursuing Al Qaeda, had constructed a political vision, one that sought to resolve the region's simmering conflicts, particularly the Arab-Israeli dispute? What if the Bush administration had built alliances with Muslim civil societies as opposed to relying on corrupt, oppressive local regimes?

What if the Bush administration had developed a marshall plan, with European and Asian partners, to rejuvenate stagnant Middle Eastern economies? Imagine if the American foreign-policy elite had the vision to allocate $400 billion -- US Congressional appropriations for the war so far -- to the building of institutions and civil societies in the Muslim world, healing historic wounds.

Imagine if the Bush administration had genuinely made the democratic paradigm the foundation of its foreign policy toward Muslim societies, using carrots and sticks, rather than guns and bombs, to persuade dictators to open political systems.

The rhetoric of democracy amounts to little unless translated into concrete actions like institution building, reducing the huge existing socio-economic inequities, trying to resolve regional conflicts and showing a universal commitment to human rights and the rule of law. A political approach would have been more effective in combating extremism. Terrorism could have been reduced to an inconsequential phenomenon.

Expansion of the so-called "war on terror" has radicalized mainstream Muslim public opinion and provided ideological ammunition to militants. In particular, the US-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent violations of human rights have created a new generation of radicals who search for ways to join the jihad caravan.

In my travels in the Arab world, I have met young Muslim teens, with no prior Islamist or jihadist background, desperately trying to raise a meager sum of money to take a bus ride or an airline flight to the Syrian-Iraqi border and join the fight.

The reverberations of the Iraq war are heard on European streets and could soon reach American shores if Iraq fractures and sinks into an all-out civil war. A consensus is emerging within the European and US intelligence communities that the Iraq war is strengthening global jihad.

Tragically, the Iraq war has given rise to a new generation of militants who use terrorism as a rule, not an exception. More youngsters are deeply affected by what they see as external aggression perpetrated against their religion.

Thus, the Bush administration, instead of countering extremism with creative political initiatives, relied on militarism. By exacerbating regional fault lines, already shaking with tension, the decision may have caused irreparable damage, not just to US global strategy, but international peace and security.

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