

What the warriors cannot do



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

In the last weeks, the violence in Baghdad has moved from ghastly to merely grim, and we are told that the tide has turned. President Bush says the surge of U.S. troops is producing "encouraging signs." Many of his neoconservative supporters have been less circumspect. "It may well be that General [David] Petraeus is going to lead us to victory in Iraq," declared William Kristol last week. The obstacle now is apparently not in Iraq but in Washington, where Congress has been making efforts to bring American combat forces home. The president's spokesman Tony Snow describes these as recipes for "failure, not victory."

To speak of victory in Iraq might sound like a cruel joke. This is a nation that is now devastated, where 2 million people have fled, another 2 million are internal refugees, militias run large parts

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of the country and the government sanctions religious repression, ethnic cleansing and vigilante violence. What does "victory" mean in such circumstances?

When the president

announced his new policy of a "surge" in January, I argued that it was likely to have a positive military effect. Petraeus, the new commander in Iraq, is all that he has been advertised to be: an unusually smart and strategic

general. His first moves in Baghdad show that. He has begun securing neighborhoods and is trying to prove to Iraqis that U.S. forces will go after both Sunni and Shiite extremists (though the latter have mostly melted away).

But by his own estimation these achievements, even if they expand, are not enough. "Any student of history recognizes there is no military solution to a problem like that in Iraq," he said recently. "A political resolution of various differences ... of various senses that people do not have a stake in the successes of Iraq ... is crucial." The new secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, echoed this analysis, explaining that the role of the U.S. military in Iraq was to buy time for national reconciliation.

It would seem reasonable, then, to measure progress not just by neighborhoods secured and militants killed, but in political terms as well. And as it happens we have a series of benchmarks that have been set out at various points by the Bush administration and the Iraqi government.

Just before the referendum on Iraq's Constitution in October 2005, U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad brokered a deal that secured Sunni participation in exchange for the Iraqi government's promising to set up a committee to amend the Constitution to incorporate Sunni concerns later. This was to have been done four months after the formation of Iraq's elected government in other words, by

September 2006. Nothing has happened. When he took office, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki announced plans for an ambitious program of national reconciliation. Nothing has happened.

In January, after persistent inquiries from Sen. Carl Levin, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote to Levin setting out the benchmarks and timeline that the Iraqi government had signed off on. They included new election laws, the scheduling of provincial elections, laws on investment and oil-revenue sharing, the disbanding of militias, the reversal of de-Baathification and the granting of amnesty. In supporting the surge, Sen. John McCain also listed these goals as crucial to progress. But none of them has taken place. The revenue-sharing law has passed the cabinet but not yet moved through Parliament. The Los Angeles Times reported in February that Baghdad had abandoned plans to reverse de-Baathification. It quoted a U.S. official who said that the reform, far from advancing as promised, was "moving backward" and was "almost dead in the water." The amnesty law also appears moribund.

These two measures have historically proved crucial in almost any political process that has ended a civil war. Without

some kind of amnesty and prospect for rehabilitation, there is little incentive for insurgents to lay down their arms and join the political process. Last week the Sunni vice president of Iraq urged his own government to begin talks with the insurgents, a position that General Petraeus has also taken.

There are less formal benchmarks that are also not being met. Maliki was to have reshuffled his cabinet to remove members who actively fomented civil war. That has not happened. The government was to, finally, start spending money in Sunni areas. That has not happened. Militias were to be demobilized. Instead, one of their most notorious leaders has been released from prison and publicly embraced by Maliki.

For four years President Bush has given Iraq's leaders unconditional support. They have not interpreted it as a reason to make compromises. In fact, talking to both U.S. officials in Iraq and Iraqi politicians, it appears that the chief reason there has been some movement on a few of these issues is the oil laws and noninterference in U.S. military operations, for instance, the fear that Congress was going to force a withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The Democratic bills in

Congress have two features: timeline and benchmarks. The rigid timelines the House bill imposes are problematic because they give the United States little room to maneuver in a highly volatile situation. But the benchmarks to measure Iraq's political progress prominent in the Senate bill are entirely in keeping with the basic strategy being outlined by Gates, Petraeus and, indeed, Bush. The only difference is that this is a strategy with teeth. If the Iraqi government does not do what the administration itself has argued is crucial to success, then American troops should begin withdrawing. (There will still be a need for a reduced force to fight Al Qaeda, secure Kurdistan and prevent major refugee flows.)

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A framework for transit

With the given milieu the daunting task is to find a practical approach to resolve the problem of transit facility. At one end of the spectrum of conceivable approaches one can delve in a broad framework under which all sub-regional countries will be involved in the cooperation on all the issues simultaneously -- a wishful proposition.

ASHRAF UDDIN CHOWDHURY

THE much talked-about transit route in Bangladesh is a matter of time. The mode and scale of public and private vehicle services available currently between the cities of Bangladesh and those of India were unthinkable a few years ago. Transit facility is one step forward to the existing system of transports.

India has recently signed an agreement with Myanmar to develop a port at Sitwe in Myanmar situated on the edge of the Bay of Bengal to find an alternate transit route through Myanmar to carry products from India's northeast to South Asian markets. The agreement to invest 130 million dollars for development of Myanmar's Sitwe port is awaiting approval of India's cabinet.

Despite India's above mentioned initiative, the potentiality of transit route through Bangladesh has not died down and India's interest in this

regard remains as keen as ever. Bangladesh has a strategic locational advantage in the sub-region consisting of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan. India's northeast states (popularly known as seven sisters) are virtually landlocked between Nepal and Bhutan on the northeast and Bangladesh on the west.

Land route(s) through Bangladesh is (are) the natural shortcut passage between the seven sisters and the remaining states of India. A transit route to India will solve its critical problem of communication with these states.

Again, Nepal and Bhutan are literally landlocked and surrounded by Indian territory. But these two countries are located very close to Bangladesh border such that Chittagong and Mongla ports are their natural nearest exit and entry seaports for the outside world.

Under these locational condition transit and transshipment facilities simultaneously to India, and Nepal and Bhutan

by Bangladesh and the needed corridor facilities to Nepal and Bhutan by India would benefit all these countries.

In fact, the Asian Highway system from which the erstwhile government decided to keep Bangladesh isolated, is a roadmap for various regional, sub-regional and bilateral cooperation involving transnational projects, transshipment, transit, port development, etc. In broad terms, specific necessities are left to be worked out at the appropriate level(s) warranted by the situation.

For example, the potential Calcutta-Benapole-Mawa-Dhaka-Tamabil-Guwahati transit route was part of the Asian Highway No. 1 which originates on the border of Turkey and Iran to go all the way through the region to end in Vietnam. Likewise, the potential Nepal to Bangladesh via India route was part of the Asian Highway No. 2 that begins on the border of Iraq and Iran and ends in Singapore. Perhaps the door of negotiation to join the

grand network system has not been closed quite yet.

Worth cooperation

The median value of revenue from freight and fees due to the use of road and current port facilities from available studies is about 4000 crore taka. The gives rise to an increase of about 26 percent of our development expenditure of 2002-03. In addition the value of expanded exports to the northeast states of India from Bangladesh is estimated to be about 2000 crore taka.

An equal amount of exports to Nepal can be expected, if India offers the needed corridor facility to Nepal. Thus with transit facility and a trade regime absolved from tariff and non-tariff barriers, our exports earnings to India are likely to pay about 60 percent instead of currently 2.5 percent of our import from India.

Issues of cooperation

The issue of how to go about transit is complicated due to the persistence of some outstanding issues like water management on common rivers for flood control and irrigation, trade and investment relations, etc. Moreover, a variety of highly beneficial transnational projects of water management

on common rivers and energy exist to the four sub-regional countries.

This part of the world has one of the richest resource of hydroelectric power in the world. The seasonal peak demand in the supply-short Bangladesh and India coincides with the surplus hydroelectric power plants of Nepal and Bhutan. India has a feasibility study as regards a synchronous national grid by interconnecting Bangladesh, north-eastern region of India, Nepal and Bhutan.

In the early 1970s, negotiation for highly conducive joint investments involving Bangladesh and India and framework of cooperation with the inclusion of other countries like Nepal and Bhutan reached an advanced stage. Later on political and psychological reasons thwarted the process. Also there has been an apprehension that India might take advantage of its bargaining position with its mighty size, strategic position, advancement in science and technology, information, and expertise, etc.

A framework for transit cooperation

With the given milieu the daunting task is to find a practical approach to resolve the

problem of transit facility. At one end of the spectrum of conceivable approaches one can delve in a broad framework under which all sub-regional countries will be involved in the cooperation on all the issues simultaneously -- a wishful proposition.

So also is the proposition at the other end of the spectrum that just Bangladesh and India would be involved on transit issue only keeping aside all other sub-regional countries and all other issues including the trade issue. A rational, workable and balancing approach can be a framework wherein the sub-regional countries will be involved for transit and transshipment facilities and the needed corridor facilities accompanied by measures of removal of trade barriers and such terms and conditions the fulfillment of which will gradually open the door of cooperation on other areas on priority basis.

Even the beginning may be with a limited movement of men and material for dispelling psychological barrier and then gradually move on, on the basis of confidence building, to more full-blown cooperation.

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A singular man

The opposite and equal admirer and detractor in me converge to wish him healthy life and uninterrupted creative time and energy. I fervently hope that he will complete these two monumental projects with his customary skill, sizzle, good sense and proficiency. Long live Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury!

OMAR KHASRU

ABDUL Gaffar Chowdhury, eminent columnist and well-known Bangla political commentator is on a short visit to Bangladesh. This long time permanent UK resident is here after a nine-year hiatus. Gaffar Chowdhury has many fans and admirers. I am an avid fan of his writing. He has numerous detractors. I am a staunch critic of many of his opinions.

That is not such a contradiction or gimmick. It is sort of like "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" syndrome in A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. There was a time in pre-Watergate US, when Nixon was the most admired and the most detested person in America. Gaffar Chowdhury, similarly, has avid followers, admirers and supporters. He also has strong adversaries, critics and cynics. One can be in both categories without fear of contradiction.

Many like his writing, consider it a must read for political analysis and scrutiny. Many dislike his viewpoints, inherent beliefs, incessant proselytizing and what may be construed as rampant double standard. There are allegations that he plays fast and loose with facts if it suits his fancy and supports his assertion.

Gaffar Chowdhury abhors Bush and Blair passionately but seems to believe in the Bush tenet that "either you are with us or you are against us." Even if an old friend crosses paths with him, he is brutal and spiteful in his denunciation and admonition.

Mark Antony in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar said, "I am here to bury Caesar not to praise him." I am not necessarily here to bury or malign Gaffar Chowdhury. I want to extol his contributions to Bangla literature, and enhancing our political awareness, perhaps in creating a slew of political pundits and commentators, some his clones and others his antagonists.

You may like him or detest him but you just cannot ignore him. In Hollywood, they say any publicity, good or bad, is better than no publicity at all. Gaffar Chowdhury gets more than his share of publicity, mention and reference, some favorable even reverential but others quite adversarial.

People, mostly familiar with and enamored by his political

columns, are often unaware of the fact that he is a prolific writer of fiction as well. He is a great novelist and poet, and actually and originally made his mark as a fiction writer and novelist.

Gaffar Chowdhury was featured at a recent "Meet the press" program in a private TV channel with journalists and a live interactive audience on March 12. He answered a variety of questions on crucial parts of our history and his participation in various historical events, most notably the 1952 Language Movement and his eventual inscription of the Mother language day anthem, "Amar Bhaer Rokte Rangano Ekushe February."

Here is a talented man with living, breathing, talking history. His famous poem, written after the February 21, 1952 Language Martyr's Day massacre and actually witnessing the corpse of Shaheed Rafiq, has stood the test of history, time, rulers and circumstances. A person like him should be respected and treasured.

Unlike his lofty columns, he came across in the TV interview as modest and unassuming, full of humility and acutely aware of his limitations. Whatever shortcomings he may possess, these should be dealt tenderly and gently, metaphorically with a soft feather rather than a hard and firm brush.

That is not to say that Gaffar Chowdhury is old and haggard, and should be preserved in a museum. He is still very active with keen sense, splendid writing skill and profound observation prowess. He writes regular columns for 4 or 5 Bangla dailies.

He mentioned that he has two major projects at hand. One is a movie on Bangabandhu with Amitava Bachan in the lead role. The epic project sounded quite intriguing. Another is a historical novel, starting from the Khelafat movement to movement for Pakistan and concluding in Bangladesh liberation war.

The opposite and equal admirer and detractor in me converge to wish him healthy life and uninterrupted creative time and energy. I fervently hope that he will complete these two monumental projects with his customary skill, sizzle, good sense and proficiency. Long live Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury!

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Public office for private gain

There is a glimmer of hope that the opportunities that we have now in the new environment will be used toward not only effectively pursuing the cases of sleaze that have surfaced, but also end in results that forbid repetition of such criminal conduct in the future. Three essential parts of anti graft measures are investigation, prosecution and education. We are witnessing only the first part.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

IN 1972 after forming the Constituent Assembly with members of the former National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly (elected in then East Pakistan in 1970), Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman boldly expelled in two installments some forty-five or so members of the Assembly from the Awami League. The expelled party members automatically lost their Assembly seats since the constitution mandated so.

While some of these members were expelled on charges of collaboration with Pakistan and other political reasons, a good number of them were expelled on charges of corruption. Perhaps I should say "reputation" of corruption, since I do not think any of these expelled members was later prosecuted in a court of law.

To the contrary, most of these "corrupt" members thrived very well using their ill-gotten possessions to buy political influence and expand their wealth.

There is a special reason for

this anecdotal reference. This was a classic case where a political action (taken in apparently good faith failed or was allowed to fail because there was no administrative follow up. I do not believe the 1972 action of Bangabandhu was a political hype, or a rhetorical act to chastise fellow party members and warn them against political dissent, although lack of any serious follow up to this bold act may have us think so.

It was an earnest act taken in response to mounting criticisms of corruption and other foul charges against many of the Awami League members by a vociferous section of the party that were widely believed to be true.

The dramatic nature of the act, and the public euphoria that it had generated, however, fizzled out as the expelled members would strut their stuff in public no sooner than the initial noise had died down. We can only offer some conjectures why there was no follow up to this bold act.

These could have been internal resistances from the political

party, fear that the expelled members would join a growing opposition or simply a change of heart in the leader himself. Whatever be the reasons, the lesson that we take from this abortive "clean the house" campaign is any good faith action will derail without right back up.

I believe the 1972 action did not succeed because it lacked three important steps in an anti-corruption move that follow sequentially. These are probe, prove, and punish. In fact, the last step featured first, that is if we take expulsion from the Constituent Assembly to be a punishment.

In reality, however, it became the opposite. The expulsion became a seminal event for the bent politicians' later transition to enormous wealth, wielding of political influence, and for some, eventual return to the parliament.

It will perhaps be unfair to cite the 1972 incident as the only cause for the burgeoning corruption industry that would characterize our politics and bureaucracy in later years. But it is a

good starting point. It shaped the thinking of the political parties and a majority of the politicians that public offices are not for public service, and definitely not for altruistic acts.

These are lucrative, because they offer easy channels to private gains. Politics henceforth would be dominated by people who were in search of acquiring wealth at public expense. People, the ultimate victims of these shenanigans, also gradually began to accept this stoical view that politics and corruption are inseparable.

Unfortunately, nothing would happen in the subsequent three decades that could shake this stoical view. With each change in political government there would be hope that the next cast of characters would make some efforts to stem the tide. Indeed, there would be election promises of sorts to that effect.

In reality, the party that came to govern would use its newfound power to chase and harass its political foes from the past regime -- all in the name of fighting corruption. This charade would be so habitual with every new political government that even legitimate cases of corruption charges leveled against politicians became suspect in public view. They were seen as a vendetta of one political party against another.

This cynic view resulted not

only from past public experience but also in the inherent defect in the process that was followed in pursuing cases of corruption. In the three "P's" of pursuing corruption cases that I mentioned earlier -- probe, prove, and punish, it is important to follow their sequential pattern.

In 1972 the end result came first -- expulsion from the Assembly. Had this been otherwise, if the charges were first investigated, then proved before a court of law, the punishment would have been automatic. And this punishment could have gone beyond expulsion from the Assembly, with some jail time and other financial retribution.

Perhaps there was no political will to do so. Perhaps the party leader was constrained by circumstances. But our political future would have been curved in a different platform, had this action been handled another way.

The country is now hearing with awe the unfolding stories of some of our elected officials' unbounded greed, and unabashed amassing of wealth using their offices. Using public office for private gains takes a new meaning when the gains aim at amassing wealth at the level of King Croesus. But it is not just the officials; the gainers from their offices are their factotums and underlings -- perhaps more so.

The Pandora's Box has been laid open.

All this happened because we lived in a culture that considered use of public office for private gain as normal, almost as a perk. We may have a thousand and one rules that regulate a public official's conduct, that expressly prohibit a public official to use that office to benefit himself or those with whom he has a relationship outside the office.

But these have no meaning, nor have they any impact on the conduct of our officials because they know the mutually supportive environment they have created would help them transgress these rules blithely. Hence we have these cases, and we will continue to have these cases unless we have a way to stem this tide now.

There is a glimmer of hope that the opportunities that we have now in the new environment will be used toward not only effectively pursuing the cases of sleaze that have surfaced, but also end in results that forbid repetition of such criminal conduct in the future. Three essential parts of anti graft measures are investigation, prosecution and education. We are witnessing only the first part. But we will await with eagerness a successful follow up with the next two parts also.

Ziauddin Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.