

Troika mission

Interaction proves useful

THE continued interest of the European Union (EU) in the overall progress of Bangladesh found expression in the recent visit to Dhaka of the EU Troika delegation. The meetings they have had with the government, politicians and the army chief helped the team acquire valuable insight into the complex situation prevailing in the country. After the four-day visit it appears that the EU team returns better informed about the practicality of the reforms undertaken by the government and the latter's intentions to hold a free and fair election within the stipulated time, i.e. by 2008.

As a tested partner in our development endeavours, we feel the EU delegation has done the right thing by being here physically, instead of sermonising from abroad, as done by some others. We believe this is how information should be gathered about a situation in a country so that opinions can be based on ground realities rather than on perception from a distance.

We appreciate the comment of the team members that the reform process was on track and that it was important to build sound foundation before holding elections. The team took a positive note of the Election Commission's plan to announce an 'Election Roadmap' by 15 July. Troika delegation also urged the Bangladesh government to look at the early lifting of ban on politics paving the way for political parties to get involved in dialogues on reforms with the EC. It is worthwhile to note that they have also urged the political parties to play their role in taking the political reform process forward.

This however remains to be said that the concern of the Troika over human rights should be addressed immediately by the government in order to gain 'people's confidence in the anti-corruption drive.'

We are glad that the EU delegation is going back with positive impression about Bangladesh. We at the same time welcome the chief adviser reiterating his government's commitment to holding a credible election soon after the ongoing reforms.

Chargesheeting in UK High Commissioner's case

Complete the legal process expeditiously

LONG last headway seems to have been made in the case of grenade attack on British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury in Sylhet. The investigator has submitted chargesheet against four accused breaking the gridlock in the case for three years and 19 days.

It was with a feeling of pride and a sense of camaraderie that we greeted the arrival of Anwar Choudhury as British High Commissioner in Bangladesh on May 3, 2004. Then comes our utter shame on 21 May, 2004 when his visit to the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal(RA) in Sylhet in a thoughtfully conceived gesture to his place of birth was marked by a grenade attack. The High Commissioner's miraculous escape was relieving but the nation demurred at the deplorable state of security even for such a high dignitary thanks to unbridled fanatical extremism in the country.

The longwinded investigative process brought under question mark the credibility of the investigations and our investigative skill including forensic capabilities. Despite the helping hand extended by the Scotland Yard, Interpol and Federal Bureau of Investigation US, who made a visit to Sylhet, the investigation couldn't be speeded up. That was a shame.

Here is a case where no politics was involved and no pressure was conceivably brought to bear on the process of investigation; yet the approach had been so dilatory that it remains a blot on our investigative capacity. Let's not forget that the delay created a sense of impunity among extremists of the same ilk which is why closely on the heels we saw a few bombing attacks in Sylhet, especially the dastardly one on former finance minister SMS Kibria.

It is worthwhile to note that the investigations took a definite turn as late as on September 3, 2006 when Shahidul Alam Bipul and Delwar Hossain Ripon were arrested who gave useful leads about Harkatul Jihad's involvement in the incident under the supervision of Mufti Hannan. Incidentally though, one of the accused Abu Zandal alias Mufti Munir being still traceless has been dropped from the chargesheet.

Now we look forward to speedy conclusion of the rest of the legal process and conviction of the guilty. This would send a robust signal to the diplomatic community as to their safety and wellbeing in Bangladesh. Our apologies to the British High Commissioner and British government both for the untoward incident and the delay in bringing the case on to a definitive course.

The political casualties of Iraq war



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE war in Iraq continues to exact its heavy toll in the battlefields. Even four years after "mission accomplished" dozens of deaths remain the daily norm for the coalition forces. What, however, remains obfuscated from public view is the equally unsavoury fate of the politicians belonging to the coalition of the willing who led the charge and dispatched their countries' posses to be in the thick of the war.

Almost all of them reaped their whirlwind. The first to take the hit was Spain's Jose Maria Azner, who joined the fray in Iraq in the face of overwhelming popular opposition. He also made the cardinal mistake of attempting to blame Basque separatists after Muslim terrorists wreaked havoc in Madrid, presumably in retaliation to Azner's pro-American stance over Iraq. He was out on his posterior within days.

Italy's Silvio Berlusconi was the next to go. He had much to answer for, besides his unstinting moral support for the US aggression in the name of "war on terror." Meanwhile,

the prime mover behind the Iraq catastrophe, George Bush, has already seen his popular approval eventually plummeting from 90 percent to as low as 30 percent.

Unfortunately, he is going to be around American necks like an albatross for another 20 months, given that the congressional Democrats have neither numbers nor the inclination to impeach him. But his war wagon has lost its crucial wheels, including Collin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld and, not the least, Paul Wolfowitz whose failures at the Pentagon were rewarded with the coveted post of World Bank president.

It's another thing that he forfeited the post following a sleazy scandal. Australia's John Howard has incurred almost no damage as a consequence of his blindly following the US into Iraq, perhaps because of his country's minuscule involvement. But, according to physiologists, he has the least chance of being reelected when Australia goes to the polls at the

end of the year.

And then there's Tony Blair -- widely known as Bush's poodle. The British prime minister recently fixed a date for his departure at long last. That auspicious day -- June 27 -- is still weeks away for impatient Britons disgusted with Blair's Iraq policy. Among the multitude who want Blair to quit earlier, the majority attribute their attitude to their prime minister's obsequious role as Bush's cheerleader-in-chief.

Yet, the primary cause of Blair's undoing is -- as Professor Avi Shlaim, a noted Israeli historian wrote in the *Guardian* recently -- "He has the worst record on the Middle East of any British prime minister in the past century." But that is not the only reason why the end of Blair's tenure is looked upon as an unequivocally welcome prospect.

In spite of Blair having an impressive number of conservative and neo-conservative fans, a number of liberal commentators on both sides of the Atlantic lamented the fact that

the Iraq "mistake" will overshadow other aspects of Blair's legacy which were truly remarkable, and would make any leader proud.

Blair can be rightly proud of his record of winning three decisive electoral victories since 1997, and for giving the country the best economic years since the war. He redefined the Labour Party's philosophy, to make it friendlier for market economy and globalisation, while claiming that the party wouldn't lose its socialistic underpinnings. Sadly for Blair, according to the same commentators, it will not be Blair's economic achievements but his political mistakes (Iraq included) that will come to define his leadership.

In announcing his resignation in Mid May, he once again tried to justify some of his political decisions that were widely condemned.

In doing so, he went on excruciatingly to describe Britain as the "greatest nation on earth."

As a much more distinguished Englishman pointed out more than

two centuries ago, "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," obviously few were impressed by Blair's patriotic outburst. More so because he offered no apology for the plethora of half-truths and lies that he and his colleagues resorted to, to make the case for the Iraq war.

Blair's mendacity does not appear to have deterred "liberal" admirers who simply gloss over the Iraq mistake to designate Blair a good man and "a great politician," responsible for establishing a new political system. While this may be a reference to "new" or "liberal Labour" -- they are hailing a system in which it is increasingly difficult to differentiate Labour ideals from Tory fantasies. They are at odds with Simon Jenkins who pertinently pointed out in the *Guardian* last month that "Blairism," as such, did not exist and never had. It was all froth and miasma.

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In fact, neither Blair nor Gordon, his successor-to-be, possessed a guiding light. If they had any, it was Thatcherism. As a matter of fact, Blair's term in Downing Street has been the continuance of an ideological narrative that began in 1979, not 1997 when Tony Blair became prime minister.

E J Dionne, writing in the *Washington Post*, rightly confessed to "a deep sadness that (Blair) tarnished a formidable legacy by adapting himself to the third way," a euphemism for ditching social democracy. Blair's advent as Labour leader accentuated a rightward drift that dated back to the electoral debacle of 1983. The

crucial elements of the party hierarchy then pinned their hopes on the right-wing swing as the only realistic route to power.

The fresh-faced and remarkably young new leader of the Labour Party was indeed seen as an asset for the party after Neil Kinnock lost his way and John Smith died prematurely. Once his true intention and prediction became clear a new nickname was coined for him: Tony Blair. And he led his party into the 1997 election, armed with endorsements from Margaret Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch. Labour won by a landslide. But, unfortunately, after the Conservative rout at the end of its uninterrupted 18 years in power, it offered more of continuity than change.

Then came nine-eleven. And Iraq. The latter hasn't overshadowed Blair's achievement as it has eclipsed his other follies and failures. Blair's public endorsement of the pact between Bush and Sharon, that confirmed the permanence of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, is the most egregious British betrayal of Palestinians since the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

The last straw for many Labour MPs and ministers came last year when the prime minister refused to call for the cessation of hostilities in Lebanon, lest it be construed as a disloyalty to White House. That, and many other ignomies of his prime ministership, finally portended the beginning of his end.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

PERSPECTIVES

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Past forward



MJ AKBAR

ON the morning of the results of the elections for president of India in 1969, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had two speeches ready, one to be delivered in case her candidate, Varahagiri Venkata Giri, won, and the other to be delivered in case he lost.

The second was a resignation speech. But Giri won, thanks to about 10,000 second preference votes cast in his favour by a barely-remembered politician, Chaudhry Charan Singh, who became prime minister in 1979 with Mrs. Gandhi's help and lost his job without ever facing Parliament when Mrs. Gandhi withdrew support within a matter of weeks.

Giri's victory in 1969 launched the Indira Gandhi era in Indian politics. Before that she was her father's daughter; after that she became the head of a family that has given us at least one other prime minister and remains in politics in an effort to provide more.

It is likely, of course, that Indira Gandhi would have called for early elections in 1969 and might have pulled off the kind of victory she did in 1971, but not probable. She used the authority she derived

from the victory in the presidential elections to offer the country a new legislative, left-leaning program, and it was this that caught the imagination of the poor and enabled her to base her 1971 campaign on the remarkable, and undefeatable slogan: "Woh kahte hain mujhe hatao, main kahti hoon garibi hatao (They say, remove me; I say, remove poverty)."

Without a spate of decisions like bank nationalisation and the abolition of princely privileges, this claim would have been unsustainable. Indira Gandhi broke the mould of politics as usual.

Does this mean that a government that cannot ensure the victory of its candidate in the election to the office of President must resign? No. More specifically, Dr. Manmohan Singh will be under no compulsion to resign if the Congress candidate does not, by some mischance, become president of India in July.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was vulnerable only because she had taken a risk so volatile that it amounted to a gamble with her political future. She had split the Congress after the announcement of an official Congress candidate, and set up

her own nominee, V.V. Giri, as an independent.

Giri wasn't much of an independent; he was completely dependent on Mrs. Gandhi, but that takes us to another story. The culture of the president's office shifted subtly but sharply; presidents became personally beholden to their benefactors.

The prime minister of India is in office through the will of only the Lok Sabha, whose members are directly elected by voters. A government does not need a majority in the Rajya Sabha, whose members are elected indirectly, to survive.

The electorate for a presidential poll extends not only to the Rajya Sabha but also the assemblies in the states, which have no part to play in the creation of a union government. The president has a diffused constituency, relevant to the diffused nature of his responsibilities.

The prime minister has a specific constituency and he lives or dies by the will of just the Lok Sabha. A prime minister's majority could be on a totally different trajectory from the president's.

In fact, this is the emerging scenario of the next few years.

The Congress cannot take the

power at the centre will have little relation to power in the states. At one point, the Congress ruled 15 states while the NDA was in office at the centre; within three years of reaching Delhi, the Congress has been reduced to Andhra, Assam, Haryana, Delhi, and a bubble called Goa.

There is one simple message -- big power politics is over in Indian democracy. Or, more accurately, it has been suspended until the small powers self-destruct, which may take a while. Decisions will have to be made through consultation and cooperation, rather than imposition.

However, despite being honed down, a medium power the Congress still cannot quite get out of the big power mentality, whether in government or as a party. We have just witnessed the faintly ridiculous sight of the Manmohan Singh government describing India as a big power, and dictating to Sri Lanka the policies it would prefer a "small power" to adopt.

This is not the language of strength. It is the language a government uses when power has gone to its head, affecting it with cerebral malaria.

The Congress cannot take the

big power approach towards partners in government either. Patronage is not the best way to protect a long-term relationship, and an ego massage provides only very temporary relief from the headaches of co-existence. But if the Congress is tempted to insist upon a preferred party nominee, rather than a compromise consensus, for the next president, then there are good reasons.

The first, and most important, lies in the nature of the office. The president of India has, by the standards of Delhi, a sedentary job. His general requirement is to be nice, which one may add, not all presidents manage.

But at crucial moments in the political calendar, he has to rise above partisan concerns and protect the letter and spirit of the Constitution. Very often, it is the spirit that determines what the interpretation of the letter should be. The most important of these moments for the next president will come after the next general elections, when the new government will be patched out of post-result alliances. It will lie in the president's will to give the first option on the basis of whichever standard he selects. It could be on the basis of the largest single party, or the largest bloc -- the choice will be made.

If there is any erosion in moral authority, it will not trouble anyone's sleep. Political advantage, or necessity, is the glue that keeps a coalition together. No president, of any hue, would dare challenge a majority in the Lok Sabha.

There has been only one election for president that has shaped the future; every other president was elected without fuss, because he was a creature of the present, and represented the will of a consolidated establishment. The establishment was cracked open by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1969, and out of that split emerged President Giri. Comparisons are never exact, but this much is evident -- the centre is not holding in 2007. This, too, has become an election about the future.

Get ready to count those second preference votes.

That will be a very difficult task indeed, especially because our national politics is happily wedded to business, and consorts so blithely with the bullies, the artful benders of law, and the scavengers in the corridors of power. Unhappily, the CG is dealing with an "unweeded" garden, and a vial of stringent potion may literally strip off the garden! What I can readily think of is transparency right from top to bottom. Commonly speaking, keep them looking around. And, yes, highlight the "no" vote. Give it some teeth!

By Syed Maqsood Jamil is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Penance and political predators

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The deal was done for Taka 20 crores, with the full knowledge of our outgoing prime minister. Both Mr. Corleone and his brat are safely out of the country, sunning themselves in the pleasant summer of England.

Over here, the pomaded home minister was equally safe in his immunity, courtesy special ties with the American and British diplomats. The lady left, and his fortune perished. He is bringing out the skeletons from the cupboard, which makes us brood over the fate of our national politics.