

Biman made into PLC

It should have a timeline to privatise

THE first step towards corporatisation of Biman has been taken by turning it into a public limited company. A management board consisting of six secretaries of the government is to run the affairs of the PLC. On the face of it, one may argue that in place of civil aviation minister, secretary and the Biman MD so far governing Biman Bangladesh Airlines, six secretaries would now rule the roost bureaucratising the organisation even more than before. Going deeper one finds that the decision making process may have been actually streamlined. Secretaries of the cabinet division and ministries of energy, commerce, finance, civil aviation and foreign affairs now coming under the same roof as board members, important decisions can be taken expeditiously without recourse to files moving up and down the labyrinthine structure of the government.

The idea is to clear the accumulated management mess in Biman and turn it into a reasonably commercially viable entity before its shares are offloaded to the private sector. The government which now controls 100 percent of the share has plans to make over 49 percent of it to the private sector and retain 51 percent to itself. But with Biman's annual financial hemorrhaging and high level of liabilities, especially to Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation(BPC), there would be few buyers of Biman's share if it were to be offered right away. So, one would find some logic behind the gradualistic approach.

It is of utmost importance, however, to raise the question as to whom the board would be accountable? True, it would be governed under the companies act; but after all the board members are government officials and a parliament is some way off. From this standpoint, it would have been better had there been some private sector representatives on the board.

The real problem lies with management. Professionals should be inducted in finances, marketing and operations departments with delegated authorities to act freely. There should be zero tolerance of politicisation, favouritism and enjoyment of undue privileges. The board members ought to refrain from creating personal fiefdoms.

Finally, the board must work with a definite timeline to clear the debts of the airlines, make it operationally efficient, privatise the shares, and turn it into a truly competitive, profitable and, above all, commercially viable entity. The timeframe should be made public.

High prices of essentials

A more comprehensive answer called for

THE BDR's plan to open 200 retail and five wholesale marketing centres in the city with a view to keeping the prices of essentials within tolerable limits during the holy month of Ramadan is an understandable, and to some extent, a welcome move.

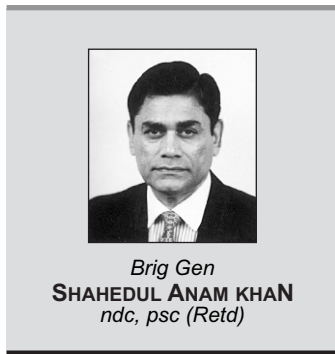
However, such temporary arrangements are likely to have a limited impact on the overall price situation. The solution lies in smoothening the operation of market forces through removing the factors hindering demand-supply equations. First, the procurement and supply that are heavily dependent on a small number of importers enjoying a complete sway over the whole process is responsible to a great extent for the erratic market behaviour. They have monopolized the supply business through forming cartels. The number of importers has to be increased and the TCB should play a hands-on role on the supply side. Secondly, the presence of too many middlemen in-between the growers and the retailers has traditionally been a major factor in the jacking of prices. In some instances, the consumers have to pay almost five times more than the prices at the growers' level. The supply chain has to function smoothly and efficiently to close the gap between the farmers and the retailers and there must also be effective market monitoring at various levels.

To strengthen the supply side we need to have more wholesale markets. We only have six in Dhaka city now for a population of more than 10 million, to say nothing of the other parts of the country.

Importantly, any further raise in the prices of fuel or electricity will push the production and transportation costs upwards thereby having an adverse impact on the already high price-line. This needs to be borne in mind by the decision makers.

We are heavily dependent on import for the supply of essentials, up to 60 to 70 percent of our demands, according to experts. A durable answer to price instability therefore lies in increasing local production and streamlining the distribution networks.

Captive to misperception and mind-set



WE have had four high-profile visits from India in the last six months, more than what we had in the five-years of the BNP alliance government, although we saw a very optimistic Bangladesh foreign minister rushing off to Delhi in early 2004, to felicitate the newly elected Congress-led alliance in New Delhi. It was all that the BNP had to show for the rest of its tenure, in the field of bilateral relationship. Neither the BJP-led NDA alliance nor the UPA alliance government that replaced it in early 2004, allow any "special dispensation" for our alliance government.

Perception had much to do in shaping the attitude displayed by both the governments in letting the relationship slide to a state that was merely "diplomatically correct," but only just. One wonders if, after thirty-five years of existing as independent neighbours, our interaction should be circumscribed by perceptions and not by the realities on the ground, the compulsions that each country has to contend with, and the constituencies that the two govern-

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

We will deal with the specific issues later, but, as for now, we need some brave people from both sides of the border who can muster the courage needed for breaking the shackles of our mind-set. We must talk straight, and make our positions clear. We must be sensitive to each others' compulsions, and offer help rather than exploit weakness. Trust can be built up through actions not merely words, and if there are apprehensions they must be put to rest through mutual understanding.

ments, whatever be their composition, have to satisfy while steering a foreign policy course relating to one another.

But while India has been able to articulate a clear and, even more importantly, consistent policy towards Bangladesh, we have had neither a robust nor a resilient policy vis a vis India. One doesn't need a von Metternich or a Talleyrand to tell one the reason. A divided house, with different political parties having different orientations, dictated more by party than national interest, which affected foreign policy planning, has prevented the charting of a consistent, robust, or resilient, foreign policy.

However, if it is a matter of perception, which in most cases is not the right perception anyway, it would be unfair to hold it entirely against Bangladesh. India, being the bigger of the two, has to take a major share of the responsibility for the current state of our bilateral relationship.

If diplomacy is the art of the possible, unfortunately, the job of our diplomats had been made complicated by factors that ensured that theirs became more a calling of

the art of making things difficult, and with some misplaced effort, making it altogether impossible, rather than the opposite.

While it is an acknowledged truth that our policies must obtain the maximum benefit for the country, we seem to forget that the other guy is looking for the same through his own foreign policy. There is the cut and thrust realist motivation, without the realisation that there must be a meeting point that would deliver the maximum benefit to the parties, a win-win situation for all rather than a zero-sum game.

We have, unfortunately, reversed the saying that war is the extension of politics by making our diplomacy an extension of war; the undercurrent of tension, despite the seemingly general aura of good relationship, is noticeable. This is neither good nor should it be allowed to continue.

But a good relationship is also built upon trust. Very few will contest the view that there is a deficit of it between the two neighbours. Why is it that we have to suffer the consequences of an environment in which everything bad that happens in India

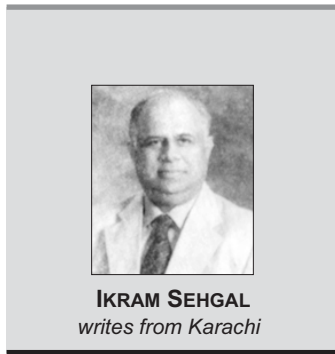
is attributed to the manipulation of foreign hands, and more often than not those hands are portrayed as belonging to Bangladesh.

And why is it that we feel, in every suggestion that India makes in terms of trade or cooperation in the field of infrastructure or any such venture, that it is motivated by some ulterior designs for its own long-term strategic benefits. Perhaps history has a lot to do with it. Regrettably, the mutual distrust has persisted in varying degrees, depending on who is holding the reins of power in the two countries.

The Indian perception about Bangladesh, we are told, is rather negative. Most Indians carry the impression that Bangladesh is in the grip of radicals, that the whole country is about to fall into the lap of the Taliban, and we are well embarked on the way to the situation that Afghanistan was in not very long ago.

Most of them, however, change their opinion when they get to visit Bangladesh, or have the opportunity to interact with Bangladeshis directly. Unfortunately, a section of the Indian media and a segment of

Preventing anarchy



A tragic incident highlights a major public concern in Pakistan, that of personal insecurity. On Saturday 20 July, a friend and a colleague, Maj (Retd) Saeed went for an after dinner walk. Less than 100 meters from his residence in Defence Officers Housing Colony in Mardan, he was accosted, ostensibly by a robber (or robbers) who tried to snatch at gunpoint the mobile he was using. Or were they trying to kidnap him, that being the lucrative business of the day in Sarhad Province? A courageous man having considerable pride, Saeed did the wrong thing, he resisted and was shot and killed, four bullets being pumped into him, at least two in the head. The number of bullets fired and the precision thereof would give credence to a hit by a hired assassin.

In Mardan for the funeral next day, one could feel the palpable fear and insecurity prevailing in the entire area, eloquently expressed by a number of mourners who gently mobbed me. My wonderful course-mate (34th PMA Long Course), someone who it is a privilege and

honour to call a close friend, Col (Retd) Iftikhar, runs both a private school and college in Mardan, giving also free education to many destitutes, accomplishing in his small way what many Madrassahs are doing. 34th PMA should be proud of Iftikhar! Poverty and unemployment being major reasons for crime in the area, the misuse of religion for political purposes is becoming a major force-multiplier for a rapid descent into anarchy. Providing education for the under-privileged is vital to getting out of this misery and crime cycle.

Pakistan has a major law and order problem, it is no comfort that it could have been worse. Professional criminals are taking advantage of the situation. Kidnappings are rampant in Mardan as is the occasional murder, hitmen not being hard to find. Operating from Takht Bai 10-12 kms away, criminal groups kidnap people for ransom and keep them 20-25 kms in Sakhakot, a safe haven for criminals and/or those escaping justice. Sakhakot boasts one-stop roadside stalls, an "Arms Bazaar" having weapons on display ranging from AK-47s to

anti-aircraft machine guns, as well as grenades, landmines, explosives of all kind, etc, and at very competitive prices. One can also place orders in this "Arms R US", with fairly short delivery time, and at your doorstep anywhere in Pakistan. So much for law enforcement, primarily a subject of the Provincial Government! One can understand the frustration of the US at our ineptitude, or as they maintain, why are we choosing to be blind?

One should not expect the MMA Government to act. North of Mardan in the Swat Valley Maulana Fazlullah, a follower of Maulana Sufi Mohammad (founder of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, TNSM) and a son-in-law of late Rasheed Ghazi, holds sway with his so-called "horse-army" comprising several hundred (even if one is skeptical about his claim of thousands) of followers. They do not hide their affiliation to Al-Qaeda. The challenge to the writ of the State is from an unholy alliance between politico-religious elements and outright criminals, the former into it for power and money, and the latter as

behooves all criminals, for money and money alone.

Given the Fazlullah connection, the weapons found in Jamia Hafsa could have come from Sakhakot, a strong Al-Qaeda connection. That explains not only the presence of hardened fighters but also the tactics used. Unless this logistics chain emanating from Sakhakot is eliminated and/or disrupted, we can expect many more explosions and suicide bombers. If any government surrenders its writ to vacillation, the lawlessness will lead to utter anarchy. How long before this expertise becomes urban homegrown with mayhem similar to cities of Iraq, specially in Baghdad? Bannu was attacked on Tuesday by rockets, 15 were killed, many more were seriously injured. One success for the security forces, a major Taliban Commander, Abdullah Mahsud, blew himself up in Zhob. What was he doing in Zhob in the residence of a JUI (F) leader, Ayub Mandokhel?

The administration's media team has been ham-handed, and that is being charitable. The extent of damage to can only be understood when

even sane and mature people who should know better question even facts, where is the credibility of the government? A chance encounter with those who actually took part in the final assault on the militants in Jamia Hafsa was fascinating, and frustrating. Words cannot describe the selfless bravery of the troopers of Zarrar Battalion in "close quarter battle" (CQB), fully one-third of the attacking force of 164 becoming casualties in the face of horrific fire from rooms made into well-sited and inter-connected bunkers. One incident stands out, Captain Salman Butt and two troopers obtaining Shahadat (with 5 others injured) in one room while evacuating the women and children by shielding them with their bodies. Every woman and child was got out safely. Mixed with the pride of having done their duty, there is consternation at not being recognized by the masses for their outstanding bravery, their absolute commitment at the price of their lives. Such men seldom need no eulogies, their raw courage stands out as eloquent witness of the sacrifice they gave (and are ready to give) for their nation. Those of us who have grown old without carrying the scars of battle owe a debt of gratitude to those who do. One may well ask, where have all the flowers gone?

For once there was good news for everyone, including the President, the restoration of the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) to his seat. The question was not whether the Reference was right or wrong but whether the CJP (or anyone in the judiciary) could be treated in this atrocious manner, and the supremacy of judiciary

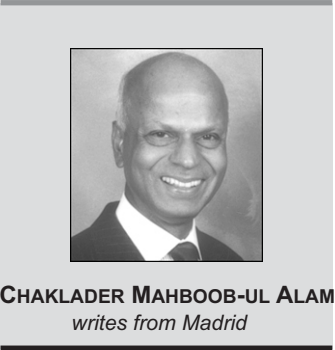
thereof. While the lawyers and political activists can certainly celebrate, the President should be ecstatic he thankfully lost this battle. This was the only way to get the CJP off the streets, the Reference succeeding would have invited mass reaction in the streets. Any good commander fights for time when he is under pressure, the legal fraternity may dish out all the sweets they want, Pervaz Musharraf has got the respite he badly needed. One hopes he will use this breather wisely, taking the initiative on a broad front in acting upon the mood of the people rather than abdicate that to the Supreme Court. Make no mistake, the CJP will come after him, tigers become maneaters on tasting human blood!

This country has all the portents of sliding into anarchy, this slide can only be stopped by ensuring the rule of law and eliminating aberrations like Sakhakot. The lawyers' celebrations were mostly joined by the intelligentsia (and the media), the silence in the streets was deafening, the primary concern of citizens centering on preventing explosions of the wrong kind. While dealing with the growing militancy, Pervaz Musharraf must restore unfettered democracy, starting by his doffing the uniform and holding free and fair elections. Having "lost" this tactical battle, Pervaz Musharraf (and the nation) could well come out better in the strategic sense by negotiating a genuine power-sharing arrangement.

As for Saeed, friend and colleague, rest in peace, soldier brave!

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

Give Blair a chance



I know that this is an unusual request from an unlikely quarter, but I have written enough on Tony Blair to prove that I do not belong to his fan club. I know many people consider Blair as a vain, deceitful man, a proven liar, a manipulator and a showman. But he is also a man of great courage and enthusiasm, with unrivalled powers of persuasion. Without these qualities, he could never have brought peace to Northern Ireland.

Unlike Bush, Blair has always defended the Palestinian cause. He is one of the few Western politicians who have given unequivocal support for the creation of a viable Palestinian state in accordance with the resolutions of the United

LETTER FROM EUROPE

At this stage, no one knows the answers to these questions. But one cannot lose hope. According to Rice, Bush has finally decided to hold an international peace conference on Palestine in the near future. If this is true, a lot of hard bargaining will take place. I know that Blair does not have a lot of credibility in the Arab-Muslim world, and that the Americans are jealous of him. But I am persuaded to think that Blair really wants to contribute to world peace by helping to cure this long-festering wound. If he is successful it will benefit everybody, including Bush himself. So why not give Blair a chance?

Nations.

As far back as 2002, Blair had said: "by this year's end, we must have revived final status negotiations and they must explicitly have as their aims: an Israeli state free from terror, recognised by the Arab world, and a viable Palestinian state based on the boundaries of 1967."

On the face of it, Blair has got a very limited mandate in his new job. Even though Rice, on her way to Lisbon, hailed Blair as a historic and passionate leader, she went so far as to make a public declaration that Blair was not going to be a peace envoy. He is being sent to the Middle East as the representative of the

Quartet -- the US, the EU, Russia and the United Nations -- to help build the institutions of the Palestinian Authority and promote the development of the Palestinian economy.

It is so ambiguous a mandate that it is difficult to understand what it really entails. After all, it was Sharon who, with the active support of the United States, systematically destroyed the institutions of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian economy. Now that Yasser Arafat is not in the scene, are we to understand that Blair is being sent to Palestine to help rebuild the governmental institutions so that

they are more docile and subservient to the interests of Israel?

Is Blair going there merely to distribute charity? Can he negotiate with the Israelis to make life easier for the Palestinians by reducing the constant harassment and humiliation suffered at innumerable military checkpoints? Can he put pressure on the Israelis to stop settlement activities in the West Bank? Can he talk to all the Palestinians? We do not know the answers to these questions, except one.

It was made abundantly clear by Rice that the Quartet would not deal with Hamas. Therefore, Blair will have no mandate to speak to any of

the Hamas leaders. In the execution of this short-sighted colonial policy, Israel's politicians and strategists have every reason to feel happy about the latest turn of events in Palestine. After all, this is what they had always wanted, to implement the age-old colonial policy of divide and rule.

They have successfully created a situation in which the lives of the Palestinians have been made so miserable that they have started killing each other. In a way, the strategy has worked out better than expected.

When the Americans and the Israelis started supplying arms and ammunition to President Abbas, the idea was to destroy Hamas and keep the West Bank and Gaza united under Abbas. But now that Gaza has come under the exclusive control of Hamas, the Israelis will always have an excuse for not starting serious peace negotiations with Abbas because, as long as there are two Palestinian entities, he will not be able to guarantee the security of Israel.

When Hamas won the internationally supervised elections in January 2006, the Quartet not only boycotted the Hamas government

but also cut off all aid to the Palestinians. The Quartet also did nothing to help the Palestinians when Israel froze all tax revenues collected by it on behalf of the Palestinians.

So much for giving lessons on democracy! Thus, Hamas was never given an opportunity to govern. Blair's predecessor in this job, the former president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, protested, but he was ignored by both Israel and the US. He resigned in frustration after less than a year in the job.

A few days ago, former secretary of state, Colin Powell, who is not a dove by any stretch of imagination, said that the Quartet should find a way to talk to Hamas. Powell said in a radio interview in Washington: "I don't think you can just cast them into darkness, and try to find a solution to the problems of the region without taking into account the standing that Hamas has in the Palestinian community. They won an election that we insisted upon having."

Unfortunately, it is Bush who, as the president of the United States, holds the trump card in this game. Does anybody know what his real intentions are? Does he now want to engage in real peacemaking, or

continue with his ideological war? How much influence can Blair exert on Bush?

Is Bush prepared to compensate Blair for his loyalty and unconditional support in his (Bush's) misbegotten adventures? Is Bush prepared to go back on the undertaking he gave to Sharon in 2004, that no Israeli-Palestinian agreement would go back to the 1967 borders, or recognise any "right of return" for Palestinians? Does Bush speak and act through Rice alone, or will Blair have a role in the negotiations as well?

If Bush and Rice think that by freeing only 250 prisoners of a total of approximately 11000, releasing a part of the frozen Palestinian tax money to Abbas, keeping most of the elected lawmakers of Hamas imprisoned, not engaging with Hamas, and strangling Gaza into submission, they will bring peace to the region, then they have not learnt anything from their past mistakes.

These are small political gestures, designed to strengthen Abbas's position among the Palestinians, which will not satisfy the real aspirations of the Palestinian nation. (In any case, everybody knows that Israel and the

way that our neighbour justifies its apprehension about us. Many in Bangladesh see an ulterior motive behind every single proposal that India makes (shaped greatly perhaps by the experiences of Farakka and the Tin Bigha). For example, many well informed Bangladeshis feel that the idea behind the Dhaka-Kolkata rail link is not as innocuous as some make it out to be, and that there must be an ulterior motive behind the exercise. It is the groundwork for providing transit to India eventually, they are convinced. This is an example of convoluted thought.

We will deal with the specific issues later, but, as for now, we need some brave people from both sides of the border who can muster the courage needed for breaking the shackles of our mind-set. We must talk straight, and make our positions clear. We must be sensitive to each others' compulsions, and offer help rather than exploit weakness.

Trust can be built up through actions not merely words, and if there are apprehensions they must be put to rest through mutual understanding. There must be greater movement of people between the two countries for more people to people contact, which is one way of removing misperceptions. We can no longer afford to remain a captive to misperception and a hackneyed mind-set.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.