

## Grabbed canals

Launch a vigorous, relentless recovery drive

It is welcome news that the government is going to start on August 12 the drive to recover 26 canals in the city from illegal possession -- a task that has long been overdue.

There is hardly any doubt that grabbing and filling up of canals by the encroachers has rendered the city's drainage system almost inoperative and is responsible to great extent for water-logging during the rainy season. Worse still, many areas in the city are flooded every year as the canals have been encroached upon or reduced to trickles. This year also flood water is finding no natural outlet to flow through and people in the low-lying localities are already facing serious problems. Yet, all this is due to illegal grabbing of canals and the failure of the authorities concerned to counter it. It is a story of public interest getting buried under the clout of muscle and money.

Environmentalists have long been telling us that loss of the natural channels of drainage is a hazardous proposition for a city with such a huge population. But successive governments failed to address the issue in the collective interest of citizens and the canals were grabbed one by one by the local musclemen or politically influential elements. It seems the decision makers never fully realised, or were reluctant to admit, that the canals had to be protected to avert a possible environmental disaster. The pressure on living space has always been enormous here, but the solution to that problem never lay in occupying the canals which amounted to destroying the city's natural drainage system. It is highly regrettable that despite the problem being identified as an environmental concern of great magnitude, precious little has been done so far to set things right.

The government's plan to reclaim the canals lost to the grabbers needs some determined and quick action to achieve the goal set by the decision makers. Obviously, the readiness to adopt seemingly harsh measures was reflected in some of the schemes initiated by the caretaker government. And now it is dealing with a gross violation of the law that also has a great negative impact on city life. So the only option is to evict the illegal occupants as quickly as possible and allow the canals to come to life once again.

## Our indigenous people

Their cultural diversity is our asset

DECades have gone by, yet the rights of the indigenous people of the country continue to be ignored despite the fact that they have been living on this very soil for ages and generation after generation.

Although some progress, though insignificant, has been made in the last couple of years, such critical aspects of their rights like recognition of their status by the constitution, formation of a separate land commission and introduction of primary education in their own language are yet to be resolved.

At a recent discussion meeting held at the capital, jointly sponsored by Bangladesh Adivasi Odhikar Andolok and Bangladeshi Adivasi Forum ahead of the International Indigenous Peoples' Day being observed today, it was also noted that the indigenous people are still facing all round discrimination in all sectors, including education and employment. On the other hand despite their significant contribution to our war of liberation they are yet to attain constitutional recognition. Serious concerns were also voiced about the insecurity that persists, amongst the ethnic people living in the various regions of the country.

The tale of woes of the indigenous people continues to grow longer by the day since successive governments failed to address their problems with any degree of seriousness or commitment. On the contrary, our ethnic people have been continually used and abused by various vested groups to meet their selfish goal, political or otherwise.

It is thus unfortunate that even to this day they stand marginalised. We simply must restore their cultural identity along with dignity as any other citizens of the country. We also urge the government to take all necessary measures to protect their properties, including their homes.

Our indigenous community is part of our proud heritage. They also continue to enrich the cultural tapestry of the country, in more ways than one. It should be for the state to ensure that they develop within the rubric of our nation state without having to shed their ethnic identity.

Let also not forget that the issues at stake with our indigenous people include those of morality and ethics linking the entire nation.

## Of banners, party flags and the flood hit



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

As for the political parties, several contradictory statements from some of the advisors have created confusion. Initially, it was suggested that the political parties, as parties, will not be allowed to undertake relief operation. That was then watered down to allow relief work by political parties but without party banners. Another impediment, some feel, is the instruction to route all efforts through the armed forces that are deployed all over the country. (This is necessary to make distribution of relief more efficient).

having chosen to build up habitat in low lying areas, or exaggerating the actual situation. In fact, there was difference of opinion between different agencies of the government as to how many districts fitted the definition of "flood-affected" area.

Floods, like all other calamities that are perennially with us or visit us on a yearly basis, some years with more intensity than others, provide an opportunity for a particular segment of the society to reap dividends. There are the traders (with exceptions of course) for whom floods come as a good opportunity to mark up the prices of their merchandise many times more than what is justified.

Then there are those who go out of their way to demonstrate their sympathy for the affected by undertaking relief activities; most are driven genuinely by fellow feelings, some do so to profit in some form or the other. Then there are the people's representatives who undertake relief activities, mostly, as per the admission of a senior member of a major political party, for reaping political dividends.

Then there are the NGOs who, by

the very nature of their work and their organisational set-ups that run down to the village level, are more adept than most outside the government agencies in providing planned relief to the affected.

But whatever be the basic motivation, their act of providing relief supplements the government's efforts in this regard and alleviates the sufferings of the flood-hit people.

This time, the situation is somewhat different. We have never had floods during the tenure of any previous caretaker government. (This is one of the natural hazards that caretaker governments must be prepared to face if their stay is prolonged unnecessarily). Political activities are banned and we have an emergency. (Is there a need to declare another emergency, this time for flood?). There is another thing that is different, too. There is no opposition party to criticize the government for not doing enough for the flood-affected people.

Some feel that providing relief and other post-flood rehabilitation support is the duty of the state. True, but when have we ever had floods and not have people of all walks of life

come to the aid of the distressed? Memories of the floods since 1988 are still vivid in our minds. People came together during natural disasters, brushing aside party lines; their only concern was for the humanity in distress.

The CA has called upon the people to come forward to support the relief work. Regrettably, not many private or charitable organisations or NGOs, and certainly no political party, have come forward in any large number as yet. One is disappointed at the less than enthusiastic response.

The government is yet to see the flood as a disaster, and, therefore, does not see the situation as warranting declaration of a "disaster situation." And perhaps dignity and self-respect prevent the caretaker government from seeking foreign help. That is all fine and good, but our sense of dignity must be backed by our ability and efficiency to provide timely assistance to the stricken people.

Every time we see an advisor confronted with questions about relief work the answer one hears is that there is enough stock of everything and there is no need to worry.

Having enough of everything stocked up in government godowns is of little comfort to those who are up to their necks, literally, in floodwaters. The need is to get the materials to the needy. That is made difficult with roads going under water.

We have requisite resources with the air force and boats and river crafts with the other services to transport emergency relief material and evacuate the marooned from the outlying areas. Have they been used optimally so far? The emphasis should be on distribution of dry food since there is very little scope of cooking anything in the circumstances that the flood-stricken people find themselves in.

As for the political parties, several contradictory statements from some of the advisors have created confusion. Initially, it was suggested that the political parties, as parties, will not be allowed to undertake relief operation. That was then watered down to allow relief work by political parties but without party banners.

Another impediment, some feel, is the instruction to route all efforts through the armed forces that are deployed all over the country. (This is necessary to make distribution of relief more efficient).

One is not sure about the logic behind the respective positions. That a moratorium on political activity should automatically debar the political parties from carrying party banners during relief work.

The time we waste squabbling over insignificant matters can be better spent at the services of the suffering masses.

always the party identity that reinforces their claims to donation of their supporters.

Don't overlook the media coverage that gives additional mileage. But, must all humanitarian acts be motivated by ulterior gains? Why is there a need to assert one's political identity when the main consideration must really be the plight of the distressed, who carry no identity of any sort except that they are at the mercy of nature and of those that are more fortunate than they are at that particular time.

A rigid position is bound to create misgivings such as the one expressed by the CAS in respect of the motive of political parties in withholding their participation in flood-relief operations.

There is no reason for the government to be apprehensive that flood relief work would turn into political rallies. It should rely on its insistence on not allowing party flag or banners during relief work. As for the political parties, it should be their actions that should really speak louder than a thousand banners and party flags.

The time we waste squabbling over insignificant matters can be better spent at the services of the suffering masses.

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

## A staged wrestling match?



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

## AS I SEE IT

In the face of devastating erosion of the image of the army, a genuine alternative, having the army's trust and respect as a credible check and balance in the working of our democracy, could be a real challenge for Pervez Musharraf even if he comes safely through the legal minefield. The "star choice" is Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, who displayed courage and tenacity (and remarkable physical endurance) in standing up to the Reference.

Reference toothless?

Wily and seasoned politician Chaudhry Shujaat advised the president to withdraw the Reference and make the PM the fall guy, resigning "in the best interests of the country." Chaudhry Shujaat was tasked with broaching this with Shaukat Aziz as his (Shujaat's) own suggestion.

Shaukat probably took former PM Zafarullah Jamali's "sacrifice" in being sent out into the cold as the example to emulate; no resignation was forthcoming. Shaukat's refusal to fall on his sword should have served as an indicator of things to come. Compromises notwithstanding, Musharraf is not the type to fade silently away into the night. Still, why is he bent on being elected while still in uniform, despite what is surely a legal inevitability?

So what is Pervez Musharraf up to, appointing volatile Malik Qayyum as the Attorney General (AG) of Pakistan in place of cerebral and sedate Makhdoom Ali Khan? Does the sea-change in personalities signal, as when Tikka Khan was sent to replace Lt Gen Sahibzada Yaqub in early March 1971 in (then) East Pakistan, a deliberate intent for confrontation?

His legal acumen notwithstanding, Malik Qayyum was the point-man for the government in the CJP Reference, or is there more to it than meets the eye? The question is not one of legality; it is one of morality.

The proposition of fighting the election in uniform will force those who see a continued role for him

as a civilian president to oppose this. With the survival of his presidency at stake, why should Pervez Musharraf care?

On October 12, 1999, Pervez Musharraf had the die-hard support of a handful of senior officers of the army, most put into crucial appointments within hours of his appointment as COAS. A vast majority of the army will always follow their chief anywhere.

To quote my article, "Power Play" of October 17, 1998, only 10 days after he took over as COAS: "A power play did take place on October 7, 1998, and even though Mian Nawaz Sharif seems to have come out ahead, he should thank his lucky stars that he had Gen Jehangir Karamat (JK) to contend with, a mild man of gentlemanly demeanour, known not only for his superior intellect but also for his firm commitment to democracy. If the inclination of the politicians to indulge in power play in the uniformed ranks persists, the PM may well have sufficient cause to remember JK with a lot of nostalgia, sooner rather than later."

Only a year later, on Oct 12, 1999, when Mian Sahib tried again, he tangled with the wrong guys, they were ready for him. Zarrar Company made it to GHQ

from Tarbela in 90 minutes, another SSG company was held up from Mangla to the back of the PM's house many minutes less than that, beating (then) Comd 10 Corps Mahmood and Salahuddin Satti's III Bde to the PM's gate.

After 9/11, as Musharraf became comfortable in the presidency, his die-hard supporters became dispensable, being sent out to pasture one by one. Satti, presently CGS, is the solitary survivor; Rashid Qureshi has just made a "comeback."

The last of the "Mohicans," Lt Gen Ghulam Ahmed (GA), as Musharraf's Principal Staff Officer (PSO), was the traffic policeman to the presidential office. His untimely death in a car accident opening the floodgates for "nouveaux friends."

Musharraf valued GA's advice, sometimes quite contrary to Musharraf's own inclinations, till mid-2002; that was his strong point. As his domestic and international stature grew, Musharraf, surrounded by "yesmen" and blatant sycophants, tended to shrug off good advice; the "shooting of messengers" bringing bad tidings" resulting in a series of gaffes beginning with the referen-

dum in 2002. At the core of any leadership lies the ability of the leader to be amenable to good advice, and, thereof, the leader's courage to go against his own perceptions.

Most people do want a democracy, and many would prefer an equitable power-sharing arrangement where politicians do not run riot, as they have done in the past. This must be institutionalised, not dependant on individuals.

To quote my article, "Inevitable Power Play," as for back as October 16, 1999: "Involvement in the governance will have a debilitating effect on their (the army's) efficiency and in the performance of their primary mission of defending the integrity and sovereignty of the nation. A country's (and its army's) good is always best served by the armed forces staying away from running the country on a day-to-day basis. That said, circumstances beyond their control were forced onto the army, the inevitable power-play being triggered by the attempted civilian coup by the former PM (formulated by his incredible "think-tank" on board the aircraft, enroute to Abu Dhabi). When the die was cast, there were no options except to either act or sit back and see a split in the army lead to possible civil war. While democracy is always preferable to the most benign of military rules, it is better to have military rule than to have no country at all."

The last of the "Mohicans," Lt Gen Ghulam Ahmed (GA), as Musharraf's Principal Staff Officer (PSO), was the traffic policeman to the presidential office. His untimely death in a car accident opening the floodgates for "nouveaux friends."

Musharraf valued GA's advice, sometimes quite contrary to Musharraf's own inclinations, till mid-2002; that was his strong point. As his domestic and international stature grew, Musharraf, surrounded by "yesmen" and blatant sycophants, tended to shrug off good advice; the "shooting of messengers" bringing bad tidings" resulting in a series of gaffes beginning with the referen-

be a real challenge for Pervez Musharraf even if he comes safely through the legal minefield.

The "star choice" is Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, who displayed courage and tenacity (and remarkable physical endurance) in standing up to the Reference. If the COAS can avail an office of profit and fight the elections in or out of uniform, how is the two year's restriction going to stop the CJP's eligibility?

Or someone non-controversial, of the stature and integrity of Air Marshal Asghar Khan, or non-political like Pervez Musharraf's course-mate Lt Gen Ali Kuli Khan, still widely respected and admired in the army as a principled person and an outstanding combat soldier who actually took part in two wars for Pakistan.

And what about Lt Gen Lehrasab Khan, another unsung hero of two wars for Pakistan, a veteran of "Operation Gibraltar" exactly 42 years ago to the day? There is no dearth of suitable candidates!

Notwithstanding Malik Qayyum, or the commitment Ms Benazir is supposed to have made, all the best plans laid by men and women can come to naught.

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

## Interrupting a history of tolerance (part three)

Saudi authorities must reevaluate the utility of religious police, officially known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The notion that Muslims have a duty to ensure that the correct religious mores and codes are followed is controversial in Islam, especially if it implies the use of force. The recent deaths of two citizens in the custody of the Mutawa invited fresh condemnation from both Saudis and human-rights organizations.

FAHAD NAZER

THE daily atrocities that are committed in the name of Islam in Iraq and elsewhere and the increase in violence in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban attempts to re-impose its draconian rule on the country, are a constant reminder to Muslims worldwide that the Muslim community might face an existential threat from within.

The potential of a spillover of sectarian violence from Iraq to its neighbours, along with the ability of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates to survive despite the international community's best effort to eradicate it, has led some to assert that the Muslim community is in dire need of effective leadership. Saudi Arabia is best positioned to assume this mantle. However, to do so, it must begin by

changing its own policies on religious freedom.

As the birthplace of Islam and the location of two of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia holds special standing in the Muslim world. Religious edicts from its scholars hold sway with many of the 1.3 billion Muslims around the globe, especially the majority Sunnis. Its eminence puts it in a unique position to influence how many Muslims think and act.

The terrorist acts committed by militant Islamist groups as well as the violence and hysteria that followed the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers in 2006, highlight the perverseness of militancy, radicalism and intolerance among many Muslims.

positive role than any mere declaration.

If the Saudis truly want to fulfill their role as the "custodians of the Holy Mosques," they must take immediate steps not only to save Saudi youths from falling prey to the lure of Islamist militants, but also to provide much needed leadership to a worldwide Muslim community that is moving perilously close to allowing hate-filled proclamations and bloodthirsty acts of violence in the name of Islam seem like the norm and not the exception.

First, the Saudis need to come to terms with the fact that millions of non-Muslims live and work in the kingdom and that they should have the freedom to worship, even in a communal setting, without fear of harassment or arrest.

The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, commonly known as the Mutawa, still sends henchmen in search of people violating the codes of behaviour and dress that conform to its own austere interpretation of Islam. Non-Muslims should also be allowed to bring in religious scriptures and symbols used in performing religious rituals.

Officials must also reevaluate

their ban on clergy entering the kingdom. The notion that lifting such restrictions would somehow lead Muslims to leave their faith in droves is preposterous, and patently offensive to Muslims everywhere.

After all, Saudis and other Muslims are allowed to worship freely and publicly in Western countries, and many fill local mosques on a daily basis.

The argument that the kingdom is the equivalent of the Muslim Vatican is not convincing. The Vatican isn't home to millions of Muslims, while millions of non-Muslims do live in Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, although the kingdom has made progress in recognising some religious minorities -- such as the Shias of the eastern province, the Ismailis of the south and the Sufis of western Hijaz -- it must take more concrete steps toward including them in the political system by increasing their representation in governmental bodies and opening professions largely closed to them, such as education, the diplomatic corps, and a daily basis.