

Decommissioning and re-commissioning of a Navy ship

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AMONG the navies all over the world, Commissioning is the act or ceremony of placing a warship on active duty with the country's naval force. The commissioning ceremony marks the acceptance of a warship as a unit of the operating forces in the Bangladesh Navy. Thereafter the ship is officially referred to as the Bangladesh Navy Ship (BNS). A commission is the fixed period of time in which a warship, with its full complement of officers and men, is allocated to specific duties as a part of a fleet/squadron/flotilla.

The ceremonies involved are rooted in centuries old naval traditions. BNS Khalid Bin Walid (Bangabandhu) was launched in Korea in 1999 and was endowed a ship hull with her identity. The engineering plant, weapon and electronic systems, galley, and multitude of other equipment, required to transform the new hull into an operating and habitable warship were installed and tested. The commanding officer, ship's officers, the non commissioned officers and seamen were selected and sent to Korea for training and intensive familiarization with their new ship. The new ship underwent sea trials during which deficiencies were rectified and it finally arrived in Bangladesh after a sea passage of almost 17000 km. Through custom and usage, however, a fairly standard practice was followed to commission her, the essentials of which were officers and crew members of the new ship were assembled on the naval jetty area.

Formal transfer of the ship to the

prospective commanding officer was done ceremonially by the then PM on behalf of the honourable President. The Chief Guest read the commissioning directive, the national anthem was played, the jack and ensign were hoisted, and distinctive commissioning pennant broken at the mast head, and the ship was placed in commission as the BNS Bangabandhu in June 2001 through a public ceremony.

Normally, after a ship is commissioned she is supposed to continue in that state until she is paid off, at which time her ships company is dispersed. Decommissioning of a warship is normally overseen by the commander of the fleet and is usually attended by other senior officers and government officials. After the Chief Guest's arrival honours are rendered, the national anthem is played to commence the ceremony, a résumé of the ship's history is read out, and after receiving the last report from various departments the commanding officer asks his superior officer for permission to decommission the ship. After granting it, the attending officers and guests are piped ashore with appropriate honours. Once the crew is ashore, the commanding officer orders, "Strike eight bells," and all present salute as the national ensign and jack are lowered. The commissioning pennant is hauled down last. The commanding officer is presented the last commissioning pennant to fly over the ship to keep as a memento, and the crew member with the most years of service keeps the last ensign flown by the ship.

The sequence of events in the Navy after BNS Bangabandhu's commission was totally dictated by those close to the seats of power. PM's office, without going through MOD or Armed Forces Division, formed a committee to investigate the ships purchase. President of one of the original selection committee was appointed the president of this committee, totally disregarding navy rules and other rules of the country. The rule clearly states that anybody associated with the purchase before, cannot be appointed in such investigation committee. But this was intentionally done with ulterior motives.

All the committee members were then promoted to higher rank and the President of the Committee was rewarded with the highest appointment in the service. Events were dictated in such a fashion that the ship could remain in active service only till Feb 2002 and disregarding all norms, the BNS Bangabandhu was decommissioned, without following any rules of the navy and placed into Reserve class iii without any justification.

According to Bangladesh Navy Regulations, Reserve class iii means "Ships with major defect requiring refit before service and therefore at extended notice and normally not stored". It was not known for what reasons the brand new ship was decommissioned after only 8 months of active duty. She was not due for major refit at all as required by the Navy Regulation and did not have chronic major problems which needed such out of proportion action by the navy. Warranty repairs were supposed to be done even during its commis-



sion.

Point to note is that the navy lowered the commissioning pennant of the ship but did not hand over the same as part of a proper decommissioning. Contrary to any existing rule, the Navy allowed the ship to sail to the sea with her ensign without commissioning pennant, ship's commanding officer and full ship's crew remained onboard. Although it is not supposed to be stored, she must have been provided with all types of stores, food, clothing and even arms and ammunitions. It has been reliably learnt that

the ship has been fitted with Chinese missile system against the original selection, which is yet to be functional with the ship's system. It is alleged that the system cost the navy almost half of the total ships price.

We congratulate the caretaker government and all others associated with the decision of putting the ship into commission, which is the only state of art ship Bangladesh Navy has acquired so far. But an important question remains why the name of the ship has been changed. It would be quite difficult to find another

instance of changing a ship's name in the same navy unless it was transferred to some other navy. Members of the public have every right to know the real reasons for changing the name of the ship. It would have been only proper for the government to keep the same name which would have set a good precedence for our future generations. But the good initiative of the present government to commission the ship must be followed up with some other actions as to who and what prompted the authority to take the brand new ship out of commis-

sion. Was it proper as per Navy Rules or were the rules manipulated to satisfy some individual at the cost of the service and the nation?

The nation has a right to know how and why more than five years of the ship's useful life have been wasted. She could not be used for protection of the sea resources for which the nation has paid and the officers and men were deprived from getting much needed training from the only state of art ship of BN. Persons responsible for such action must answer as to what made them place the ship in

reserve class three, why she was allowed to proceed to sea violating the rules and regulations, allowed installation of missiles system against the original selection which is yet to be operational, how the ship officers and men were paid and the stores were issued to a decommissioned ship. It would be an injustice if such questions are not answered in right earnest and those responsible are not brought to book. Otherwise, tendency to violate rules for achieving their egoistic whims would continue.

The author is a freelancer.

Arabs in Israel

DR.ABDUL RUFF COLACHAL

FOR many decades the conflict between Arab states and Israel has remained an explosive issue revolving around the creation of a homeland for the Palestinians. Emboldened by the economic as well as military support it receives from the USA, led west and other nations like India by way of selling weapons to them, Israel has successfully retained most of Palestine and conducted campaigns on Palestine. Intermittent wars by Israel on the Palestinians on one hand and on Lebanon on the other not only made the issue more and more complicated but the very existence of the Palestinians also became a question mark. In recent years, however, many Arab League member states have adopted a more conciliatory tone toward Israel, as they became more concerned about the rising influence of Iran's hard-line regime and al-Qaida's brand of extremist Islam. Moderate Arab countries and the West have been pushing for renewed Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking since Gaza fell to Hamas, a group that refuses to recognize Israel.

After the first ever visit by Israeli leaders to Saudi Arabia, the Arab leaders have also made a similar trip to Israel. Led by the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, the Arab delegation representing 22 countries was taken deep into Israel's political heartland. The delegates met the prime minister and the president and visited parliament, bringing a proposal for full recognition of Israel by the Arab and Islamic world in return for Israel's withdrawal from all lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war. "This serious offer constitutes a major opportunity of historical levels," Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdullah Khalib said at a news conference alongside his Israeli and Egyptian counterparts. "It will provide Israel with the security, recognition and acceptance in this region which Israel has long aspired to." He said the plan was endorsed not only by the Arab League, but also by non-Arab Muslim states. At the outset, Israel has welcomed the proposal as a basis for negotiations but says parts of it are unacceptable.

Both Jordan and Egypt already have peace treaties with Israel and have sent their leaders to the country before, but never on the Arab League's behalf. The delegates themselves said they were sent by the Arab League and would report back to it on Monday. "We are not being asked to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians," Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said. "We will be helping both the Palestinians and the Israelis to negotiate among themselves." He cautioned against any expectation of a quick resolution to the dispute. "I don't expect that we shall see a Palestinian state established tomorrow," he said. The Arab states, according to Amr Moussa, the secretary general of the Arab League, expressed his reservations and skepticism stating: "We are not convinced at all that Israel is ready to embark on a serious peace

process, citing continued settlement building and construction of barriers in the West Bank." However, it has agreed to open a dialogue with Israel for the first time in its history. The decision to send a delegation to Israel to discuss the peace plan is seen as being reflective of the weakness of Arab countries, having no bargaining position.

It may be recalled that an Arab Summit held in Saudi Arabia in March 2007 revived the Abdullah Peace Plan, approved in the Beirut Summit of 2002. The Saudi peace plan was based on the principle of land for peace and mutual recognition. It is, however, a measure of the Arabs' weakness that they have reversed themselves, offering peace, recognition and negotiations in return for Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders. What Israel rejected in 2002 could hardly form the basis of negotiations in 2007. The emergence of Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, deemed

Arab League, on its part, declined to redraft the plan. The Arab League initiative thus failed to make any headway. The Abdullah Plan is based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338. It declares that a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the strategic option of Arab nations. Under the plan, Israel must confirm that it too seeks peace and in return for recognition and security, it must withdraw from territories occupied during the 1967 War, accept the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and achieve a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem under the terms of UN Resolution 194.

With Israel rejecting the Arab Peace proposal to create a Palestine by following the required conditions by Israel in exchange for better cooperation with Arab states, the prospects of peace in the Middle East remains a bleak proposition. Israel presented the one-day

Arab world while seeking a bilateral solution to core issues such as the refugees and the status of Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have been undergoing one trouble after another engineered by Israel. The plot envisaged aimed at the creation of two Palestines, one for Hamas and another for Fatah; accordingly, Abbas has overthrown the Hamas government and installed his own. Since Hamas took over Gaza in mid-June, Israel has only permitted shipments of food and basic supplies into Gaza through two smaller passages. Israel, which shuns Hamas as a terrorist organization, says it cannot reopen Karni passage. Israel will be ready to reopen the crossings when the Palestinians get their house together regarding security at the crossings," he added. Tel Aviv is using the passage as a weapon to punish the Palestinians.

The U.N. Mideast envoy Michael

pro-Western prime minister, Salam Fayyad. He said Gaza and the West Bank cannot remain separated in the long term, but there are no immediate prospects for reconciliation between the two sides, either. "Unless the crossings are open for imports and exports, the downward economic spiral will lead to extensive hardship for an already impoverished Gaza Strip," Williams told the U.N. Security Council in his regular monthly briefing on the Middle East. Israel says that it is fully cooperating with the relative U.N. agencies to ensure the constant flow of foodstuff and medicine into Gaza to ensure there are no humanitarian shortages, and the international community confirms that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said in Jerusalem.

A new vague Bush plan is being promoted in the Middle East. In a surprise move, President Bush in a nationally televised speech on July 16 proposed an international conference for reviving the Middle East peace process. President Bush's naiveté in putting across the proposal in such stark terms is typical of him. He also announced \$190 million assistance for the Palestinians and clearly wants the Palestinians to shed the Hamas by calling Hamas terrorists, and Fatah, a patriotic front with Mahmoud Abbas, a visionary of "a peaceful state", called Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people". Bush's 2003 road-map visualizing a two-state solution also talked of territorial adjustments, showing that the US did not support Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied territories. Bush's characterization of Hamas as more "devoted to extremism and murder than to serving the Palestinian people" would further deepen the conflict. The proposal for convening an international conference, to be chaired by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in November 2007, involving Israel, the Palestinian Authority and some Arab states, would only complicate the issue further and also intensify the conflict between Hamas and Fatah. It is not only the Hamas alone but Israel's leadership too is against Bush's proposal. "We are not willing to discuss at this stage the three core issues of borders, refugees, and Jerusalem," declared Olmert's spokesman. Little wonder that Middle East observers are skeptical of the success of Bush's initiative. Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator, has rightly observed, "The two-state solution will need to deliver and have legitimacy on both sides to be sustainable. This cannot be based on an irreconcilable Palestinian political division."

In the meantime, the former British Premier also undertook a trip to Jerusalem. President Mahmoud Abbas and his pro-Western prime minister, Salam Fayyad, urged Blair to push a political agenda that would help restart direct talks with Israel on the core issues. Blair recognizes and understands that Gaza can't be separated. He understands that the Gaza economy is important and vital for the West Bank economy. Palestinian busi-

ness leaders told Blair that Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank have stifled the economy. "Reform and economy can't be tackled without Gaza being an integral component." Israel says the barrier, about two-thirds complete along its planned 425-mile route, is meant to stop suicide bombers; but the Palestinians call it a land grab. The UN's International Court of Justice in The Hague has declared the structure illegal.

Hamas has understandably denounced both Blair and the new Middle East peace plan, "which aims to serve the interests of the Zionist enemy" and will separate the Gaza Strip more deeply from the West Bank while increasing divisions among the Palestinians. The supporters of Abbas' Fatah and the rival Hamas movement keep clashing and killing each other. People are injured and killed in regular Israeli air raids in Gaza. As Blair visited Ramallah, riots erupted at the An Najah University in Nablus, about 30 miles away. A Palestinian student was shot and seriously wounded. The rejection of Blair mediation by Hamas is quite understandable because they don't trust him. But the fact remains that he had to sacrifice his Premiership of UK only when he announced a plan to withdraw the troops from Israel in opposition to USA stand for continuity. Bush is a different matter altogether.

Under emerging situation in the region, whether or not a delegation sent to Israel by the Arab League is in fact an Arab League delegation, the visit is part of a flurry of diplomatic efforts meant to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks after a seven-year lull. The international community's Mid-east envoy, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, made his first trip in his new role to the region this week, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is expected next week. While the Israeli and Arab officials greeted each other with smiles, jokes and what looked like genuine warmth, both sides acknowledged that the Arab League peace proposal couldn't bypass direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

It seems no Israeli government will sign an agreement with a Palestinian leader who is not authoritative, peace-seeking, residing over a unified populace and in control of all guns. Both the West and Israel have groomed Abbas to initiate a two-nation agenda for the Palestinians, but that would be dangerous for the Palestinians themselves even if that solves the "Israeli problem". No Palestinian government can sign an accord with Israel that does not resolve the core issues of Jerusalem, borders and refugees. Neither the US-led West wholeheartedly supports the Palestinian cause nor is Israel, on the strength of US support, keen to resolve the Palestine crisis. One thus does not really know, if all these delegations, big-power visits and peace plans could only essentially mean going back to square one with no tangible results!

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by Israel as its implacable enemies, has led Israel to intensify the conflict between Fatah and Hamas and lead them on to bloody confrontation. Such a strategy will enable Israel to declare that it has no negotiating partner. Bush's plan is based on isolation of Hamas politically and its marginalization financially. The plan has been offered in the twilight years of Bush's presidency.

The plan once again has offered Israel an Arab peace initiative and the opportunity to resume the process of direct and serious negotiations on all tracks. The UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338, which held the inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by use of force and had urged Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in the June 1967 War. Israel, as expected, rejected the peace plan and reiterated its opposition to the right of the Palestinians to return to their homes within Israel proper. The

visit as an unprecedented conciliatory gesture by the Arab League which actively pursued the destruction of the Jewish state when it was established in 1948, refused to recognize it for decades afterward and suspended Egypt for a decade after it became the first Arab state to make peace with Israel in 1979. After pulling out of the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel still rejects a full withdrawal from the West Bank and east Jerusalem, hoping to retain areas heavily settled by Israelis. And Israel strenuously objects to the plan's apparent call for the repatriation to Israel of Palestinians who became refugees in the 1948 Mid-east war and their descendants some 4.4 million people, according to the United Nations. Israel says any influx of refugees would mean the end of Israel as a Jewish state. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said the way ahead was to look for points of agreement between Israel and the

Williams warned on July 25 of impending economic collapse in the Gaza Strip unless Israel reopens the Hamas-led territory's main commercial crossing to the outside world to ease international isolation. Williams said the closure of the Karni crossing in early June has prevented the export of agricultural and industrial goods to Israel, the West Bank and elsewhere, as well as the import of materials needed for manufacturing and construction. The restriction has brought the Gaza economy to a standstill. The World Bank estimates that 75 percent of Gaza's factories have closed and more than 68,000 Palestinian workers have been laid off as a result, he said. In his report, Williams praised the quick response of the international community to provide financial aid and political support to the Fatah-led government set up in the West Bank by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his

The US-Arab alliance to contain Iran

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On 30 June 2007, the Bush administration announced an arms package of US\$63 billion to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States along with Israel, aimed at containing Iran's growing influence. The deal was justified by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, at a conference in the Gulf when she said: "There isn't a doubt that Iran constitutes the single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of Middle East we want to see." The arms package involves US\$20 billion for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, US\$13 billion for Egypt, US\$30 billion for Israel, including warships for the Saudis' eastern fleet that faces the Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf.

As can be inferred from the above statement, the US is increasingly concerned with Iran's growing political influence, not least interference, in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. American (as well as Israel's) suspicion of Iranian motives stems from a number of factors. To begin with, the US views Iran's nuclear gambit with extreme caution, firm in its belief that the latter is pursuing a nuclear weapons programme. The second most pressing concern for the US is Iran's alleged provocative role in fueling the insurgency in Iraq by buttressing Shia militants (whether militarily or financially), thereby undermining American efforts to stabilize the nation. Finally, Iran's support for anti-Israeli militant organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, widely considered to be Iranian proxies.

Many Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, fear sectarian violence (if unchecked) may spill over into neighbouring states, thereby threatening their Arab identity (vis-a-vis Sunni dominance). Subsequently, Saudi Arabia, has bolstered Sunni insurgents against Shia militias. The US, for the first time, recently voiced its contempt against the weapons, finances and personnel flowing into Iraq from many Arab states in support of Sunni insurgents, arguing it undermines stabilization efforts. In essence, the deal may be considered a quid pro quo for Saudi restraint. Top US officials have in fact stressed the deal is an attempt to reassure their Arab allies by insuring them against a possible fallout of the ongoing sectarian war. It may also be viewed as a contingency against retaliatory attacks from Iran, should there be a US or US-Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities or the Revolutionary Guard Units aiding Shia insurgents in Iraq. Finally, the deal also provides a security-blanket to Israel should the new arms supplied to the Arab states be turned against the former. Most importantly, the deal is an indication that the United States intends to keep a presence in the region in case of an eventual withdrawal from Iraq.

Many analysts, however, have criticized this deal and see it as a last resort in anticipation of failure of Washington's policies with regard to Iraq and Iran. An emerging American-led alliance comprising of so-called 'moderate' Arab regimes can be likened to a Middle Eastern version of NATO. This strategy to counter Iran appears to have drawn inspiration from the Cold War text. Washington is simultaneously aiming to contain Iran and compel it to squander money on an arms race, thereby further jeopardizing Tehran's economy. The Washington-Tehran antagonism may run parallel to the Moscow-Washington fiasco, however, the US is overlooking certain imperatives. Iran's increasing clout in the region is not because of its military muscle but the manner in which it has wielded power by way of supporting militias throughout the region, thereby challenging the Israeli and American command. Moreover, Iran is the only state in the region apart from the US, bolstering a Shia government in Iraq. A Time magazine story in August 2005 reported that the Iranian assistance to Shiite insurgents was "dwarfed by the amount of money and material flowing in from Iraq's Arab neighbours to Sunni insurgents". Therefore, arming Iran's Sunni-Arab neighbours does nothing to resolve the conundrum, especially when there have been reports that most of the suicide bombers in Iraq are Saudi citizens.

If the US finalizes the deal, the weapons sales will undoubtedly encourage Iran to hurry in developing its arms technology. Iran may also seek weapons from Russia and China more aggressively. Consequently the American dream of promoting democracy in the region will witness a premature death. A US-Iran confrontation is likely to unleash greater upheaval in the region and accelerate the course of sectarian aggression in Iraq. The US would do well by realizing that this deal will provide more breeding space for radical Sunni groups vehemently opposed to American, Iranian and Shiite influence. Moreover, given the manner in which arms have been previously proliferated across borders in the region, the probability of their being stashed by militant groups remain high. It is time Washington appreciates that massive military equipment induction is not the road to peace in the region. Instead, it should work in cooperation with all of Iraq's neighbours, including Iran and Syria, to counter the consequences of withdrawing from Iraq.

Courtesy: IPCS