On a rudderless boat

MD. ANISUR RAHMAN

THE country is on a rudderless boat. It had come to the brink of disaster and has been saved for the time being. But its present direction seems aimless. It seems to be guided by some global forces whose emissaries are active visiting our political leaders, past and possible future, and inviting our civil society leaders to tea.

The fact that this violates all diplomatic norms has eluded most of the media reporting. But all this collusion seems to be leading to moves to reinstall the very forces which ruled the nation in turn in the past, and brought it to the brink of disaster.

But the ravaging of the nation all these years has not been due only to the top leaders -- their close associates, entourage, and the rank and file all have been knowing parties to all their misdeeds. While some individuals may have been relatively "clean," they were not heard protesting loudly enough from within the palace, and had, in effect, given cover to the unholy, creating an illusion in the minds of their admirers that at least they were there!

A number of the very corrupt have been arrested, or are in the process of being arrested. But why? From the point of view of the global masters, it has never mattered whether Marcos had ruled the Philippines, or Pinochet had ruled Chile.

The reason the corrupt are being arrested in Bangladesh is not because they are corrupt, but because they failed to rule, to give a minimum of order to the country conducive to the interests of these masters.

A Bangladeshi Marcos or Pinochet serving their interests, coming to power by ballot-dacoity, would have been perfectly acceptable as a champion of democracy if he/she could assure a minimum of required order in the society. This is where Khaleda, and Tarique -- the would-be Marcos of Bangladesh -- failed, for which they are being "minused."

But who is going to replace them if a national election is indeed held by the end of 2008?

As I have been saying, ours is a feudal society, particularly in its rural relations. The ordinary rural people, the majority of whom are dependent on the mercy of the rural overlords for their daily living, for survival in frequent crisis situations befalling them, and for the fairer sex among them even for their honour, do not have the power to vote for anyone except the de-facto overlords of their respective constituencies. Call these overlords "jotdars" if you like or, if some of them do not have enough "jots," "maliks" as they are actually called in the countryside.

These "maliks" control the overall economy in the countryside, by way of controlling production processes, input supplies, water management, job markets, product markets and rural credit markets, and, hence, the overall lives of the income-poor rural populace. With all their dominance and exploitation they are also the "helpers of the last resort" when these disadvantaged people are in the direst need for help, thus getting locked into a "patron-client" relationship with the overlords.

This relation does not permit independent voting by the rural disadvantaged, no matter how transparent the ballot box is. It is known that sometimes independent voting has been tried under spontaneous leaderships emerging from among the disadvantaged, and it has not been difficult for the overlords to isolate and strike at such leadership even after temporary setbacks in one or other election.

Our global masters who are calling the shots know all this through their first rate intelligence services. They also know that political democracy in the west came after abolishing feudalism and not before, and that genuine democracy under situations like those in Bangladesh calls for agrarian reform to liberate the rural producers from the stranglehold of their "maliks."

It is the global masters, in fact, who initiated such reform in South Korea and Taiwan to liberate the peasantry from feudal hold, and this they did to offer to these peasantries an alternative to communist rule. It is thus that South Korea and Taiwan became "East Asian Tigers." leading in high growth with greater relative equity.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh does not have such "threatening" neighbours as these countries have, so our global masters do not see the compulsion for ending feudalism in this country. Instead, they see Bangladesh as a haven for their investment, to exploit our resources and cheap labour if only we could offer them reasonably "good governance."

Along with this a facade of "fair election" is also needed to hoodwink the world, where "democracy" is the slogan of the day that the country is being ruled by "people's representatives."

And all this suits our own "civil society" leaders fine. That they have been making recommendations toward electoral norms and good governance without going to the people and asking them their views, under leaders keen to have a cup of tea at foreign emissaries' residences, eloquently speaks of which side they are on.

Some of them, including political leaders of the two major parties, are talking of "Bangabandhu's adarsha" or "Ziaur Rahman's adarsha," and no one is explaining what exactly these "adarshas" were, which led to paths of increasing social disparity, which is the very anti-thesis of the fundamental ethos of our very independence struggle and "muktijudher chetona."

While economists of the "shushil shamaj" are calculating that absolute "poverty" in the society is falling, they do not seem to be concerned that, first, the index of poverty does not include assets and, hence, fall-back security implying that the "poor" have to depend on the merciful patronage of their "maliks" to survive conditions of exigency thus implicitly endorsing the feudal relation in society.

Secondly, even with poverty thus counted falling, the number of people living in absolute poverty, which is above 40 percent today, is large enough to remain a destabilising factor. Nor are the poverty watchers concerned that it is relative poverty that produces discontent and resentment with the course of development -- one simple proof of this is the frequent hijacking of mobile phones, which is not in the "basic needs kit" of the poor.

In the end, the destabilising force created by the extent of absolute poverty, as well as increasing inequality, can be contained -- for how long one does not know.

It would be less wasteful and more rational and humane to seek to drastically reduce economic disparities, to give all humankind a sense of sharing the fruits of human civilization, but rationality and humaneness do not rule the world -- their opposites do.

The nation should be braced for a recycling of the wastes of the political leadership that it has had so far. "Minus two" or three or whatever the count will ultimately be, wastes that have participated wholeheartedly in ravaging and plundering the nation are now eager to get onto a new ship as the old ship is sinking.

"Noah's ark," alas, did not take on board only genuine "people's representatives," and the new civilisation recycled the old. This story will be repeated in our homeland unless fundamental social reform is initiated, of which no sign is visible.

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India's nuke deal

MUCHKUND DUBEY

THREE aspects of the Indo-US nuclear deal deserve particular attention. These are: its contribution to India's energy security; its strategic aspect or its implications for the development of India's nuclear weapon program; and its implications for Indo-US bilateral relations.

The most important gain from the deal is the contribution it will make to building India's energy security. With the operationalisation of the deal, the more than three-decade-old embargo on the export of nuclear reactor and fuel and related parts and technologies will be lifted, and India will be able to import these items freely from the cheapest source.

This will gradually lead to a sizeable expansion in India's capacity to generate nuclear energy. It is estimated that with this deal coming into operation, the contribution of nuclear energy to India's total energy supply would increase from the present level of less than 3 percent to 15-16 percent in the next 20-25 years.

Though, even after this, India will be required to tap other sources -- both conventional and non-conventional -- to meet the bulk of its energy demand, a 15-16 percent contribution would be still quite significant. In spite of the reservations frequently aired against reliance on nuclear energy, on the ground of uncertainty regarding the safety of nuclear installations and hazards in the disposal of the spent fuel, nuclear energy has come to be widely accepted as an environmentally clean energy option as compared to other options like coal, petroleum etc; and a number of countries, particularly France and Japan, have come to rely heavily on it for meeting a large proportion of their energy demand.

Therefore, in any scheme of building India's energy security, the country will have to rely on the nuclear option to meet the largest possible part of its future demand for energy, which is likely to grow exponentially in order to sustain and accelerate the current over 9 percent rate of growth of the economy.

PHOTO: ewworld.com

Tarapur nuclear power station near Mumbai.

At the same time, it must be ensured that easier access to nuclear reactors and fuel does not result in the slackening of the country's effort, or shelving of plans, to harness non-conventional energy resources, or in slowing down the effort for larger-scale exploitation and better utilisation of the abundant hydro and coal energy potential.

In the nuclear field itself, the government in power must ensure that the easy access to uranium and uranium-based reactors does not adversely affect our current fast breeder research program, which has the potential of unlocking the door of plentiful nuclear energy supply through the thorium route.

There is a real cause of anxiety on this score because there are people placed in high positions of power who are inclined to dismiss, purely on ideological grounds, any idea of self-reliance or autonomy in any sector of our national endeavour, and who are also instinctively in favour of conceding increased space to private players in most sectors of economic activity.

An article written by a former head of India's nuclear energy establishment, and published a few weeks ago in a national daily, hints at the possibility of rethinking and even scrapping the fast breeder alternative if the alternative of enriched uranium turns out to be a cheaper option.

The Left parties and other right-thinking sections of the population need to exercise strict vigilance on such a possible policy shift in order to ensure that there is no reduction in, or denial of funds for, pursuing research in fast breeder and thorium technology, and that the government in power is not allowed in any circumstance to jettison the vision of Dr. Bhabha for achieving self-reliance in nuclear energy through the thorium route.

Reprocessing to separate uranium from the spent fuel is a critical aspect of the plan to become self-reliant in nuclear energy supply. This is because we need to build a sizeable stock of plutonium for running the fast breeder reactors and, eventually, the thorium reactors. The 123 Agreement is quite satisfactory from this point of view.

It grants consent to India "to reprocess or otherwise alter in form or content nuclear material transferred pursuant to this Agreement ..." To bring this right into effect, it has been provided in the agreement that "India will establish a new national reprocessing facility dedicated to reprocessing safeguarded nuclear material under IAEA safeguards."

No doubt, building a new facility and bringing to this facility spent fuel from reactors located in different parts of the country, would be expensive and cumbersome. But given the understandable sensitivity of the other side and the supreme importance of reprocessing for India, this price is worth paying.

The Indo-US nuclear deal no doubt implies an informal recognition by the United States of India's position as a nuclear weapon power. The 123 Agreement, as well as the Hyde Act, leaves India free to pursue its weapon-related nuclear program in the separate military segment. Paragraph 4 states that the purpose of the agreement is "not to affect the un-safeguarded nuclear activities of either party."

The facilities in the un-safeguarded sector will remain outside the purview of the IAEA. The only constant will be that India will no longer be able to transfer fissile material from the civilian to the military side. But it can, on its own efforts and without seeking outside assistance, add on to the capacity on the military side.

Thus, the United States has, at long last, got reconciled to India's nuclear weapon status. This is the culmination of a long drawn-out effort initiated by the Vajpayee government following the Pokhran-II tests in 1998, to seek recognition, formal or informal, for India's status as a nuclear weapon power.

Yet there is no doubt that a principal purpose of the Indo-US nuclear deal is to contain India's nuclear weapon capability. This is sought to be achieved by the following devices:

- Preventing transfer of raw or fissile material from the civilian to the military side;
- Keeping surveillance through reporting under the Hyde Act and by IAEA, over the amount of such material transferred to the military side;
- India being expected under the Hyde Act to abide by the provisions of the Australia Group, Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and the Wissennar Agreement, without being allowed to become a member of these groups. This would mean that India will continue to be denied access to the whole range of dual-purpose material, substances and technologies related to the manufacturing of chemical weapons, missiles and high-technology conventional weapons;
- Non-resumption of trade in material and technology for refining, reprocessing, and manufacturing heavy water is not going to make things easy for India so far as the development of its nuclear weapon program is concerned.

The 123 Agreement has no provision preventing India from conducting nuclear tests. The International Treaty prohibiting nuclear tests is the CTBT which has not been ratified by the US or India and which is yet to be operational. India is also not a member of the NPT, which prevents non-nuclear weapon states from carrying out any activity, including tests, for acquiring nuclear weapons.

Besides, today every officially recognised nuclear weapon state, as well as those like India and Pakistan not so recognised, are observing voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing. Unless the international situation, particularly the relations between major powers, sharply deteriorates, it is very unlikely that there would be any breach in this moratorium in the near future.

A breach by a non-recognised nuclear weapon state like Pakistan, which may compel India also to give up its voluntary moratorium, is even less likely, as they would remain under tremendous pressure of the international community to maintain the status quo. Thus, India retaining its freedom to test nuclear weapons is basically a theoretical proposition in the short and medium run.

What is the long-term compulsion for India to test? There is a view, which the present author shares, that India can build its avowed minimum nuclear deterrent without further testing. Our scientists claimed after the Pokhran-II tests -- a claim that has been reiterated very recently -- that these tests have made available to India all the data required to design through computer simulation the types of nuclear weapons India needed for building its minimum deterrent.

Besides, India is also free to do sub-critical tests, which it has mastered. According to this view, India's minimum deterrence should be really minimum. Its main purpose should be to deter a nuclear attack from Pakistan. India need not get involved in a nuclear arms race with China, nor should it expand and improve its nuclear arsenal in order to acquire and maintain a great power status.

India would be able to acquire such a status by maintaining the dynamism of its economy and building a genuinely inclusive society, rather than by getting involved in a nuclear arms race with China or the USA. In fact, the latter course of action is likely to impose such a heavy burden on the nation's resources as to render it economically crippled and socially maimed.

The 123 Agreement does not prohibit nuclear testing, but it can have the effect of deterring such tests by imposing a heavy price for doing so, by virtue of its provision on right to return. According to this provision, the United States has the right to demand the return of the nuclear reactors, fuel, and related material and technology supplied by it in case India carries out a nuclear test or the agreement is prematurely terminated for other reasons. The exercise of this right can severely disrupt India's nuclear industry and, by chain reaction, the other sectors of its economy. This may prove to be a deterrent to nuclear testing.

Muchkund Dubey is India's former Foreign Secretary.

Future course of trade in South Asia

FARUK KHAN

THE Indian sub-continent, or South Asia as is geo-politically called today, has always influenced and enriched the world with its culture, philosophy and knowledge.

But the pursuit of knowledge, the love and care for human beings and the environment, which earned us the respect worldwide, are on the decline. Lack of pursuit of knowledge is taking us backward every day, every moment. We must get out of this situation.

One of the important products of knowledge is economic development. Although knowledge of agriculture brought human beings the early economic development, it got intensified with the new discoveries. We now lag behind the west by a vast margin in economic development.

PHOTO: AMIRUL RAJIV

This is because the west pursued knowledge more practically and vigorously, thus reaping greater benefits. It is time for us to start thinking more practically.

I was invited to a seminar on "Future of Trade in South Asia," organised by Sawtee (South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment), in Kathmandu, Nepal, on August 29-30. I realised once again the importance of knowledge, particularly in trade and economics, and its link with economic development.

Although our region, South Asia, is the home of one fourth of the world's population, we are involved with only 2% (2005) of world trade. Our regional trade is only 5.3% (2005). Trade between neighbours is also very small.

The main causes for this pathetic picture are lack of effective knowledge on trade, lack of confidence among the governments, and lack of infrastructure for trade. We all know the problems, and solutions. I am happy that I have not returned from Kathmandu with only the problems. I have also heard the solutions, and have seen light at the end of the tunnel.

In Kathmandu, my best reward has been meeting some very hard-working, promising, and progressive young researchers who are taking a very practical look at our trade and trade policies vis-a-vis the regional and world realities. Among them, I was impressed with the deliberations of Dr. Selim Raihan of Bangladesh, Dr. Ratnakar Adhikary and Navin Dahal of Nepal, Dr. Goutam Vhora of India, Dr. Suman Kelegama of Srilanka and Dr. Abid Suleri of Pakistan.

According to them, before intensely embarking upon world trade, we should increase regional and bilateral trade. To achieve this, we have to remove trade barriers, build capacity on trade negotiations, increase investment and trade in service along with trade in goods, operationalise Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM), and improve trade infrastructures. To achieve all these we must have political will.

I have to agree that, in my fourteen years in politics and ten years in parliament, I have not attended such practical and in-depth discussions on economics and trade. Having talked with these young professionals, I have realised that the time has come to look afresh at politics and business in our countries to get out of the politico-economic trap we are in. I think it is time for all politicians in Bangladesh and the region to wake up to reality.

A few days back, on June, 2-4, I attended a seminar entitled "Towards a South Asian Parliament" in Simla, India. The seminar was attended by about 85 honourable parliamentarians and 150 eminent journalists from the region. Mr. Pronab Mukharjee, the external affairs minister of India, Mr. Yashpal Shinha, former external affairs minister of India, speakers from the Indian and Sri Lankan parliaments, and ministers from the region also attended. In one of the sessions, we discussed at length about trade, but I have not yet seen any visible results.

In the seminar at Katmandu I, on behalf of all politicians of Bangladesh and the region, have promised that we the politicians will give utmost importance to trade and will discuss the matter in the parliaments for the greater benefit of the peoples, will take appropriate actions for capacity building on trade, and will form a "South Asian Parliamentary Caucus of Trade" with a view to removing the lack of confidence and the trade barriers. I hope we will receive the best of support from all stakeholders, specially from the governments and the media.

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Who's indispensable?

HUSAIN HAQQANI

PAKISTAN is going through many convulsions to ensure that General Pervez Musharraf remains in office. The general believes he is indispensable for Pakistan. His sycophants encourage him in that belief. As a result, the Supreme Court is hearing several petitions challenging the constitutionality of Musharraf's election bid, while the supremely docile Election Commission is busily amending and reinterpreting rules to approve a Musharraf candidacy.

The opposition says it would not accept Musharraf's election by an electoral college that has already endorsed him as president once before. Why, one wonders, can't Pakistan go through leadership changes like mature nations do, with a clearly defined election process that is periodically implemented by an undisputed mechanism?

The difference, of course, lays in Pakistan's failure to ensure constitutional governance and rule of law, which is, in turn, the result of frequent military interventions in the country's politics.

As a result of the military's culture of unified command flowing over into the political realm, Pakistan's governance revolves around the man in power and is not based on a political system.

Non-politicians who have spent their entire life in an environment where they are either boss or subordinate simply cannot understand the concept of being alternately elected and voted out by the people.

Military officers and bureaucrats join a service, get promoted at fixed intervals, and stay in their jobs until retirement. If they are extraordinary, their services are retained beyond retirement, especially if they are making the decision to re-employ themselves.

For politicians, elections are part of normal life; they win some and lose others. For coup-making generals and over-reaching bankers, it seems, an election is either war or a lucrative contract that must be won at all costs.

Historically, Pakistan's coup-makers have tried to avoid contesting an election for as long as possible. Whenever they have found it necessary to secure a vote from the nation, whose interest they claim they defend, several legal and constitutional juggling acts have preceded the actual poll.

Of course, the juggling has little to do with national interest and everything to do with the self-interest of the self-appointed bosses.

Pakistan's misfortune has been that almost every Pakistani ruler thinks himself to be indispensable.

Nations with evolved political systems do not always have great and charismatic leaders. But their constitutions, and the commitment of everyone to follow pre-determined rules, provide stability and continuity in their governance.

The first president of the United States, George Washington, served two four-year terms as head of state and went into retirement. His successors have been elected at four-year intervals, with several being turned out of office after only one term.

The founder of France's fifth republic, Charles de Gaulle, resigned office and preserved the constitutional order instead of seeking to prolong his rule at the expense of the constitution.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, laid the foundations of Indian democracy by being prepared to risk losing power in open elections held periodically.

The decisions of Washington, de Gaulle and Nehru have enabled their nations to evolve impressive political systems, even though not all their successors have been impressive personalities.

For almost eight years, apologists for the Pakistani establishment tried to project Musharraf's ad-hoc measures to consolidate his position in power as an elaborate plan to create a viable and self-sustaining political system in the country.

These efforts at ascribing long-term value to an immediate power grab were not new.

From Field Marshal Ayub Khan down to General Musharraf every Pakistani military leader proclaimed his desire to change the system.

The problem is, constitutional arrangements need national consensus and a willingness to submit one's self to their scheme. The political consensus in Pakistan remains in favour of the parliamentary system of government, with multiple political parties.

The Pakistani military establishment has repeatedly conjured new constitutional arrangements with the specific objective of staying in charge, not to submit to rule of law.

Instead of continuing to believe in his indispensability, Musharraf still has the option of setting a new precedent for Pakistan's. He could restore and abide by the constitution, respect the newly asserted independence of the judiciary, and revert to parliament its legislative authority after free and fair elections.

Musharraf could start abiding by the notion of fixed tenures, without extension, of army generals (including himself). He could also mandate special training programs for military officers so that the current military culture of contempt for civilians, politics, and constitutional governance is replaced by respect for democracy.

As a result of these reforms, Pakistan would gain the good fortune of a self-sustaining democratic system that has become an absolute pre-requisite for the viability of nation-states in the present age.

Only if Musharraf accepts the risk of political competition, and like France's General de Gaulle, is ready to compete for (and be prepared to lose) power, could he secure positive mention in Pakistan's chequered history.

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