

Getting back smuggled out wealth and money

British assistance offer welcome

THE Anti-Corruption Commission's efforts to strike a deal with Scotland Yard to secure return of money and wealth stashed away abroad by suspected high profile corrupt Bangladeshis, with the famous law enforcement agency's help, have received an impetus. It came with British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury and Director for Asia at the UK foreign and Commonwealth office John Dennis visiting the ACC chief and assuring him of continuing assistance in recovering smuggled wealth.

They will sign a treaty whereby a legal framework will be provided for the Yard's sustained assistance in helping us investigate trans-border financial crimes and secure return of the money having been illegally taken out of the country. The British dignitaries think if provided with specific and authentic information the assistance could materialise tangibly and meaningfully. Bangladesh had already received some of Scotland Yard's help in the investigation of bombing incidents and now they have offered to share their expertise in probing sophisticated financial crimes.

Cooperation with Great Britain would hopefully be followed up with new avenues opened to other countries, especially of the Commonwealth, for mutual assistance in recovering money laundered by top graft suspects. We should also seek the assistance of the USA, some other North American and European countries in an effort to get back stashed away money, if any. Our authorities are understandably in contact with Singapore and Malaysia where suspected ill-gotten money might have landed up.

At this stage, we need technical support and cooperation for the ACC's planned efforts for initiating a drive against institutional corruption likely to begin in December this year all over the country. It augurs well that some important foreign embassies and missions in Dhaka have expressed their willingness to come forward in extending a helping hand.

Pakistan scene

Horse-trading can't help democracy

PRESIDENT Pervez Musharraf crossed a legal hurdle when the Pakistani Supreme Court ruling on his bid to seek reelection went his way, but the General-turned-President's worries are yet to be over as his rivals look determined to thwart his plans. Eighty-five opposition MPs have resigned as part of their plan to oust Musharraf from the political arena.

Musharraf may have finally decided to give up the position of army chief as it appears by his naming a successor in former ISI chief Ashfaq Kiyani -- a move that might have given him a little more credibility to seek reelection. But he has made his stepping down as army chief contingent upon his reelection as president in a vote on Saturday. He has apparently been able to draw former prime minister Benazir Bhutto into a power-sharing deal; of course only after paying a heavy price for it. The former premier is likely to get graft amnesty when she returns home this month. The horse-trading has brought the two arch rivals together, confirming once more that politics can indeed be a strange proposition where the key players act more out of expediency than principle -- especially when individual interests seem to outweigh the collective ones. Musharraf's move might have been a clever one, but he has clearly violated his own avowed policy of giving 'corrupt elements' no place in politics. If graft charges against Benazir are withdrawn without her undergoing a legal process, it will set another bad example in Pakistan's politics. True, politics is not always guided by the principles that its major stakeholders often talk about, but some questions cannot be evaded. For Benazir, it may present an opportunity to stage a comeback, but should she be oblivious of the fact that she is striking a deal with the man who didn't allow her to return to Pakistan for so many years?

The latest developments are not a good omen for the future of democracy in Pakistan. It is the politicians who have been marginalised in this murky situation created by and large by their failure to keep politics under their control. If restoration of people's rule is what they are striving for, then they have to make politics a lot more transparent and not dominated by any individual's plan to perpetuate his or her rule.

If politics becomes a business where the leaders become more concerned about getting their share of the booty, it will be a serious setback to the political process. We want the people of Pakistan to win in their struggle for restoring democracy, but the politicians will have to play a united and assertive role to make this happen. Up till now, they have failed to neutralise Musharraf's plan to stay in power.

Rumble in the graveyard

Japan was the first market that China swiped from India during the 1990s, but only after India had benefited from the closure of many traditional Japanese firms during an economic recession. At first, Chinese manufacturers were emboldened by the fact that the elegant Japanese models relied on black and gray. These were colours that China could quarry within its own borders. Soon, Japanese entrepreneurs pitched in to develop the industry by setting up joint ventures in China.

MARGOT COHEN

THE palette of Indian granite summons an ethereal world beyond: Blue Galaxy, Paradiso, Indian Aurora and Himalayan Black are just a few of the hues on offer from this mineral-rich nation.

Such colours have long been India's biggest selling point in the global gravestone business, or as insiders call it, the 'monument and memorial industry.' As bereaved Western consumers opted for diverse tombstones during the 1980s and 1990s, Indian manufacturers expected to earn an eternal place of pride in the graveyards of the US and Europe.

But Chinese competition has shattered these serene projections. Over the past six years, manufacturers in China have managed to

import rough blocks of the coveted coloured granite from India, craft the tombstones at home, ship them all over the world, and still sell them at prices 10 to 30 percent below those of markers made in India. This increasingly successful Chinese strategy has left the Indians scrambling to boost productivity, hone customer ties and reclaim market share.

For Indian pioneers who recall relentless hours spent lugging 30 kilos of granite samples through airports and haunting international trade fairs, the competition is troubling. "The market was ready and built by the Indians," says R. Veeramani, chairman of the Chennai-based Gem Group, one of India's leading exporters of monuments and granite blocks. "The Chinese walked into it."

The move underscores China's

Likely attack on Iran?



ALTHOUGH plans had been on the anvil for a strike against Iran at least since 2004, President Bush is still in a quandary over it.

Reportedly, the Bush administration had seriously considered this option but shelved it, only for the time being as experts aver. That the USAF set up a highly confidential strategic planning group by the name of "Project Checkmate" in June indicates that the option of air strikes on Iranian targets has not been forgotten.

While, so far, the likely targets in Iran were the 3 major nuclear sites, reportedly there has been a shift in US strategy, where Iran's Revolutionary Guards are now being listed as likely targets, their training, logistic depots, and command and control centers being the main focus. The change in tack is necessitated by the fact that the Bush administration hopes that the counter terrorism and "Iran in war against US" approach, rather than the nuclear threat from Iran, would at this moment appear more convincing and saleable to the American people.

The Iran attack option, in what-

ever form, may seem obvious, but it is neither easy nor simple. It is not easy because evidently a ground offensive is out of the question, with nearly a quarter million of US forces engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq. And simple it isn't because Mr. Bush must find a "coalition of the willing" against Iran like he did with Iraq, to lend a moral shed to his actions. And an air strike has multiple ramifications, the least uncomfortable of which is that it may strengthen Iran's rationale for going nuclear even more.

And that is why he Mr. Bush looking for allies to come on board. It is, therefore, hard to believe that there is no connection between the currently exaggerated anti-Iran hype that was generated by the Bush administration in 2004 and the recent comments emanating from the French president as well its foreign minister that they are no longer willing to put up with a nuclear capable Iran.

The West, including the French, does not accept Iran's argument that its enrichment program is for peaceful purposes, and that the worst option -- war -- may have to be adopted to see that Iran does not pose a threat to the region (read Israel). To many, the Bush administration is "recycling its hype over Hussein's supposed WMD threat into rhetoric about Iran, well aware of where the charade had got the US last time: tens of thousands of dead Iraqi civilians, a country teetering on civil war and increased global terrorism."

One cannot say with certainty whether the French position indicates a marked change in the French foreign policy, as articulated by the newly elected French president vis-à-vis the Middle East, but that he is not willing to carry the baggage of his predecessor's Middle East policy, certainly Iran policy, is clear. (Reportedly, France is contemplating rejoining the Nato Military Committee, which it left in 1966).

The changed policy certainly shows in the French foreign minister's comments that there are but two alternatives -- allow Iran the bomb or bomb Iran. It also shows the

AS I SEE IT

Eight years after military rule commenced without draconian measures, with the vociferous backing of all sections of society except for the handful they had removed, the regime is inexorably moving towards imposition of a harsh martial law, or at the least an emergency. While it is anyone's right to disagree with the 6-3 verdict of the 9-member SC Bench, and vehemently perhaps, it is rank contempt to besmirch the integrity of the judges. The media is also guilty of this excess by allowing this to be aired; disparaging the SC amounts to encouraging anarchy.

The Supreme Court (SC) Sep 28 judgment has given a rather ambiguous "exit strategy" from the uniform. Since July 20, politicians and lawyers have been hailing repeated judgments of the SC in their favour. With one adverse judgment, that also on the technical point of maintainability, the SC is being reviled like never before in its history. Those who supposedly want pure democracy are hell-bent on de-railling the entire process.

Memories are selectively short, and one must put the record straight, "the doctrine of necessity" was resorted to initially by the bureaucracy. The notorious announcement came to life with the Maulvi Tamizuddin case in 1954, the precedent being repeatedly used by military rulers (or presidents, pun intended) ever since.

To quote from an article by respected lawyer (and Tehrik-i-Insaf leader) Mr. Hamid Khan: "In 1951, a vacancy in the Federal Court of Pakistan (FCP) was to be filled from West Pakistan, the obvious choice was the senior-most judge available, Chief Justice (CJ) Munir of Lahore High Court (LHC).

Munir used his political contacts to ensure that he retained (in his view) the more powerful and prestigious position as CJ LHC. Justice Cornelius, junior to him, was appointed to the FCP."

Mr Hamid Khan goes on: "In 1954, with Justice Rashid retiring as CJ FCP, the obvious replacement was the senior-most judge, Justice Abu Saleh Muhammad Akram, a Bengali. The most powerful man in Pakistan since unceremoniously dismissing Khawaja Nazimuddin as prime minister and appointing Muhammad Ali Bogra in his place, Governor General (GG) Ghulam Muhammad was, luckily for Munir, an old friend belonging to his clan. The Central Law Ministry proposed that Pakistan, then being a British dominion, request the British government to nominate a Law Lord to act as CJ FCP on retirement of Justice Rashid. It was expected that Justice Akram, a true Pakistani and patriot, would not approve of this proposal. Akram asked the GG not to appoint a Britisher to head the judiciary because, he said, it was after a long struggle that we had gotten rid of

the Britishers. By offering to forego his claim if a Pakistani was appointed, Justice Akram fell right into the trap laid for him and Munir became the chief justice."

To quote further: "In October 1954, Ghulam Muhammad dissolved the Constituent Assembly in retaliation for being stripped of many of his powers under the Government of India Act, 1935. The Sindh Chief Court struck down the dissolution order. Ghulam Muhammad turned to Munir to help him. Munir feared that, with Shahabuddin and Cornelius together on the Court, they could carry Akram with them and he (Munir) would be in a minority. Ghulam Muhammad very cleverly persuaded Shahabuddin to be acting governor of East Bengal. He remained acting governor when the case of Maulvi Tamizuddin was heard by the FCP, being substituted by Justice S.A. Rahman who was CJ LHC taken as an ad hoc judge for attending the Federal Court hearings. Cornelius was the sole dissenter. Justices Sharif and Rahman were with Munir, Justice

cautious in their willingness to consider war against Iran a viable option, not to speak of the two other big powers Russia and China who do not only think that attacking Iran is a bad idea, they are also unwilling to endorse new sanctions on it, which the US and France are trying to slap on Iran.

Iran has been on the US radar screen since the threat of "Soviet expansionism" vanished with the demise of the Soviet Union, and as history records, US aversion to indigenous nationalism had made many countries who attempted to assert it, including Iran, US's targets. Thus, doctrinal adjustments were made in US policy, which reckoned increasingly non-soviet threats to US interest in the Middle East as its prime concern. And it is not too difficult to surmise who posed the major threat to its interest in the Middle East. That is why many observers, as far back as in the early nineties, had made a worst-case forecast of a war between Iran and US as being not impossible. That the Bush administration now considers the war in Iraq as increasingly a strategic battle between the US and Iran, according to Seymour Hersh, makes the forecast more likely than not to eventuate.

However, if the US had kept the Iran attack option on the back burner, it was purely out of strategic interests.

It is perhaps for good reasons that the likely targets have been changed. Given the lack of evidence of an Iranian nuclear program, an attack on Iran will likely to be seen as an act of aggression. However, replicating an Osirisk in Iran will be

Akram choosing not to join the camp of dissenters."

Contrary to the euphoria flooding the ranks of the Musharraf regime, the Sep 28 SC judgment has given Pervez Musharraf only temporary (and dubious) reprieve. The SC was technically right in dismissing maintainability, but by avoiding the spirit of the law in deciding on merit they opened up a legal Pandora's Box.

Having tasted victory once (in the CJ's Reference) by successfully inflaming the streets, the lawyer community is going the same route, instigating the public to join them in the streets and thus pressuring the courts. The lawyers' outburst outside the SC courtroom on announcement of the Sep 28 judgment was only the start of a concerted process of coercion. With the stakes so high, the Marquess of Queensbury rules do not apply.

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While it is anyone's right to disagree with the 6-3 verdict of the 9-member SC Bench, and vehemently perhaps, it is rank contempt to besmirch the integrity of the judges. The media is also guilty of this excess by allowing this to be aired; disparaging the SC amounts to encouraging anarchy. Only 250 or so lawyers created mayhem outside the Federal Election Commission and the SC in Islamabad, how many more will

counterproductive. Indeed, it will further reinforce Iran's argument of not only going nuclear but also seeking more conventional weapons.

As for addressing what the US administration has claimed to be the root of all its troubles, "Iran's war" against the US in Iraq, very little conclusive evidence has been provided by the Bush administration of Iranian involvement against US troops. And as for Iranian support to various factions in Iraq a very weird situation exists. Those factions that Iran is involved with are those that support the Maliki government, which the US wants to not only survive but be strong enough to take on the security and administrative responsibilities of Iraq. It is convoluted logic to blame Iran for being not supportive enough on one hand and blame it for supporting those factions that are helping prop up the current Iraqi regime.

As for finding Iranian weapons in the hands of Iraqi factions, experts argue that there are variety of ways that such weapons could find their way into Iraq; these do not indicate a deliberate act on the part of the Iranians any more than the 190,000 American small arms gone missing indicate direction from the US administration.

Keeping the option on the back burner permanently is the best choice for Mr. Bush. Attacking Iran will be catastrophic. But the US cares very little for international opinion and is hardly worried about the possible diplomatic isolation it might face.

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now join them in the streets?

The Sep 29 fracas was unnecessary and obnoxious. The lessons of May 12 have not been learnt. Provoking more-loyal-than-the-king minions into rank overkill seems to have become a piece of cake. By displaying that Pervez Musharraf is a bloody dictator, something he is not, are those who perpetrated this outrage really his sympathisers? Instead of a smooth, trouble-free presidential election on Oct 6, and I am still hoping he will take part without wearing his uniform, Musharraf's "advisors" have inadvertently laid the groundwork for his eventual downfall.

A confrontation course with two important sections of society, the lawyer community and the media, dangerous to go up against separately, can be lethal. Conversely, this confrontation can also put-paid to a return to civilian rule. In 1969, the crowds got rid of Ayub Khan, they got Yahya Khan for another three years. In 1977, a mass political movement forced the downfall of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Gen Ziaul Haq promised 90 days and stayed more than 4000. Where is the surety that bidding goodbye to Gen Musharraf will not mean replacement by another four-star (or worse, someone much junior), not as liberal and tolerant, at least till now?

All this is grist to those waiting patiently in the wings to test "the doctrine of necessity" all over again "in the national interest." When will those of us who have had the benefit of real-politik education and (bitter) experience get educated by that experience?

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Europe, the US and Japan bowed to India and China. Like the arbitrage underway in the international seafaring community -- where waves of British, Russian, Polish, Indian, Filipino, Chinese and Vietnamese seamen have come and gone at the whim of market forces -- the search for the bargain tombstone is likely to persist.

A British sailor first slipped the idea to an Indian mining friend in Andhra Pradesh that he might start exporting monuments to England. The year was 1942, the height of World War II with its grim schedule of daily burials.

At first, the new company, Evershine, produced the grave-stones in traditional fashion, polishing and chiseling by hand. Eventually, in the 1970s, the company began importing some basic machinery from Europe and the business spread to the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Today, among India's 100 or so gravestone factories, the import of sophisticated machinery from Europe and Japan is seen as key to trumping their Chinese rivals on quality.

But some Chinese industrialists

scoff at the notion that imported machinery guarantees superior workmanship. They make their own equipment, thereby helping to undercut Indian wholesale prices. "The machinery from Europe is not working efficiently," says Antony Ma, general director of Tianjin Zhongjian Wanli Stone Co., Ltd., which sent 300 containers filled with tombstones in 2006 to varied ports in the US, Europe and Japan.

Japan was the first market that China swiped from India during the 1990s, but only after India had benefited from the closure of many traditional Japanese firms during an economic recession. At first, Chinese manufacturers were emboldened by the fact that the elegant Japanese models relied on black and gray. These were colours that China could quarry within its own borders. Soon, Japanese entrepreneurs pitched in to develop the industry by setting up joint ventures in China.

But so many firms jumped into the fray that prices dropped and profits shrank. Even though China commanded 97 percent of the Japanese market by 1999, the Western graveyards looked more enticing. After some calculations,

the Chinese figured out that raw materials would comprise only 20 to 25 percent of the finished product's cost.

On almost every other score -- labour and fuel prices, worker productivity, infrastructure development and credit availability -- the Chinese could beat the Indians at their own game. Moreover, they knew they could achieve a faster delivery time, due to geography and shipping schedules.

To compete, the Indian managers leaned on their sculptors. Long praised for carrying on India's tradition of intricate temple carving, they suddenly felt a blast of industrial time-management. "Our managers told me, there is competition with China, so you have to work fast," recounts D. Asalan, a sculptor employed at Gem Granite in Chennai. "But quality is also important."

Asalan recently put the finishing touches on a huge grave-marker resembling a pagoda, fashioned from India's Imperial Red granite. The firm plans to ship it to a Chinese family in California -- one order that didn't fall into Tianjin's lap.

Of course, there are limits to this global supply chain. Monuments

from India or China are typically shipped without the name of the departed carved into the stone. Manufacturers fear that employees might misspell an unfamiliar foreign name, swiftly ruining an item that sells for thousands of dollars or euros. So the delicate work is completed after delivery.

Market divisions remain unclear. Indian officials say that the European tombstone import market is about 65 percent from India and 35 percent from China -- as French and German masons struggle to stay in business. For North America, the estimated divide is 60 percent from India and 40 percent from China -- while domestic tombstones are still fashioned in Georgia and Vermont. But the Chinese argue that they are emerging on top in the US, while the Japanese market remains firmly in their hands.

Businessmen like Ma are not crowing just yet. Chinese companies are concerned about rising taxes and greater investments to comply with official anti-pollution campaigns. Such factors could shave the price differential.

Meanwhile, the Indian contingent expresses optimism. "They

cannot crush us," declares K. Subba Reddy, chairman of the Chennai-based Pallava Group, another top exporter of monuments and granite blocks, adding that India can still select the choice blocks of granite in its own quarries, thereby determining superior quality.

Ironically, some of India's major gravestone manufacturers have reason to thank the Chinese. Since they also run their own quarries, they know that China essentially rescued the Indian granite industry from the doldrums it faced just seven years ago. With breathtaking speed and volume, China has sourced Indian granite to construct airports, apartments, offices, and other structures, especially in the run-up to the Olympics. Today, China buys 45 percent of all Indian granite.

Overall, India still struggles to understand China's dual role as competitor and customer. Like the speckled veneer of Himalayan Green granite, global trade can't be reduced to a single colour.

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