

The situation on the campus

Detained teachers and students must be freed, unconditionally and soonest

It should be obvious to everyone that with each passing day the situation at Dhaka University keeps getting worse. This flies in the face of the earlier promise made by the government to the DU authorities that the detained teachers would be freed within a matter of weeks. That did not happen. And only the other day, the new adviser for education told the country that the teachers would be released within days no matter what the judicial judgement on the cases against them turns out to be. The vice-chancellor has been meeting the relevant governmental authorities and regularly coming back with assurances of the teachers' and students' release.

The stance that the authorities earlier seemed to adopt was one of a negotiated solution to the crisis. Such a position should have been maintained and quickly gone through in the overall interest of not only Dhaka University but of the government as well. The procrastination that has lately come to characterise the government's attitude to the issue has only ruffled feelings. The students of DU, under the banner of Students Against Repression (SAR), have been vocal in urging a quick, dignified release of their teachers and fellow students. On Tuesday, a gathering of students and family members of the detained at the DU campus was a clear pointer to the growing clamour for quick, positive action regarding freedom for the teachers and students on the part of the government. That the teachers of the university, including a number of widely respected, veteran academics, have expressed their solidarity with the students speaks volumes of how not just academia but the wider nation as well feels about the situation. And the authorities certainly ought not to take the controversial approach adopted recently in the matter of the detained (and eventually freed) teachers of Rajshahi University. If the government is waiting for the court to hand out punishment to the teachers and students before granting them 'amnesty', it will prove counter-productive. The detained should emerge free with their dignity intact. Nothing should be done that will antagonise teachers and students and so leave a bad legacy for the future.

A good, unqualified gesture should now be coming from the government. Let the detained teachers and the students now in custody be freed without any conditions or strings attached. All of them have suffered enough. They have already been in prison for more than four months without having been found guilty. It is the exalted position that our campuses have historically enjoyed which must be upheld, in the larger interest of the nation.

Violence in garment factories

A holistic approach needed urgently

THE situation in the garment sector continues to be cause for deep concern, as labour unrest, which once again turned violent on Tuesday, kept around 350 factories closed in Mirpur area throughout the day. The agitating workers clashed with the law enforcers, obstructed traffic and looters were seen taking advantage of the chaotic situation.

The commerce ministry has formed a committee to investigate the matter against the backdrop of the authorities maintaining that the situation is the handiwork of certain vested quarters and some of the instigators have been identified. If that were true, then a very important part of the government's job has been done. But merely pointing fingers at 'conspiracy' by some political elements or our competitors in international market would not really help unless this is substantiated and the instigators identified in public. Let the 'conspiracy theory' not obscure the fact that the workers have some genuine demands.

What is needed is a sense of urgency to settle the disputes before more damage is done. The latest flare-up had a lot to do with the detention of a workers' representative, who was finally released, but not before the agitation took a violent turn. There is a visible chasm between the workers and the owners, as no mutually acceptable mechanism for reaching any negotiated settlement appears to be in place. In the absence of CBAs some regular channel of communication between employees and employers will have to be established.

The owners are concerned about losing 'competitiveness' in the international market but protection of the workers' legitimate rights is also an element of competition having to do with compliance status. Depending on the law enforcers for solving their problems with the workers is certainly not the best option. So, the owners are supposed to demonstrate a better understanding of not only the genuine grievances of the workers, but also their mindset and psychology.

On the other hand, we are very perturbed by the lawlessness, vandalism and destructive behaviour of the workers in a sector on which depends the livelihood of 15-20 lakh garment workers and 70 percent of the country's export earnings.

We are of the view that the situation is too grave for tokenism or ad hoc measures to work. Along with some in-house troubleshooting mechanisms and a standby body to be activated on a short notice to deliver quick solutions, a holistic approach should be taken to come to grips with the whole array of problems that plague the garment sector.

Iran -- 'world's leading sponsor of terror'?



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

So commented the president of the most powerful state in history during his first, and certainly his last, visit as US president to the Middle East. But anyone with a correct perception of history would hesitate to accept the US president's characterisation of Iran.

Mr. Bush has repeated the same allegations made by a predecessor of his twenty years ago, exactly under similar circumstances, while launching the first war on terror, and terming Iran in very similar language. Iran was then termed as belonging to an evil empire along with several other Middle East and Latin American countries, against which precisely the war against terror in 1987 was directed.

George W also dispensed homilies to the Iranian people, telling them that they had the right to live under a government that listened to their wishes. The broad hint was not lost upon the observers. The Iranians could resort to any means to remove that government; suggesting that they need not necessarily conform to a normal political process to get a government that,

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Unfortunately for the US, it has become the victim of its own security policy, which seeks to execute a grand strategy that would prevent an adversary surpassing, or to being equal to, its own. According to specialists in international affairs, this has set a dangerous trend, which has rendered international norms of self-defense and international laws and institutions meaningless. Consequently, in a situation where the US's running of the international order becomes a fait accompli for other states, they seek their own way of countering it. What the US fails to realise is that not only does this situation divide the world, it also leaves the US and its surrogates less secure.

According to the US president, would be amenable to their demands. And when that happens, he assured the Iranians, they will have no greater friend than the US.

Human memory is short, but not that short as to allow the Iranians to forget the US hands of friendship extended to the Shah and Savak, which had come to be recognised as one of the most feared coercive state organisations at the disposal of one of the most repressive regimes in the world.

The US president's comments conform to the same pattern that had been used by successive US administrations to castigate those nationalist regimes all over the world that refused to share the US perception of the world. It was to give those a bad name and then hang it, as they did with Iraq and, literally, with Saddam, having given him all their support against a common enemy, Iran, for almost quarter of a century.

And what are the charges that the US administration levels against Iran?

According to Bush, Iran is the leading state sponsor of terror in the world and, with al-Qaeda, the main threat to the region's stability. Iran's action, he stated further, "threatened the security of nations everywhere. It seeks to threaten its neighbours with missiles and bellicose rhetoric."

If one were to supplant "US" with "Iran" the depiction would be a true description of what the US had been following as a part of its foreign policy since very soon after the end of the second World War. It is a pity that the US president lacks a sense of history, or chooses to deliberately ignore it while painting countries as evil and terrorist sponsors.

All the accusations levelled by the current US administration against Iran -- state sponsoring of terrorism, destabilising its neighbour by supporting a particular faction of the contestants, flaunting its weapon arsenal to intimidate, exporting its own ideology, disregarding UN resolutions and so on -- is more applicable to his own

administration. For now, let us take the issue of terrorism or, more specifically, state sponsored terrorism only, and look at the US record in this regard.

Interestingly, history shows that terrorism as a coercive weapon of powerful states to advance national interest is not a recent phenomenon. And since we are yet to agree on a universal definition of terrorism, many suggest that terrorism is what the US defines it to be. And its use has been fairly well recorded in history.

According to another scholar: "The United States and other great power allies, like Britain, have been the most ardent, and destructive, practitioners of terrorism. But because Western governments present their acts of terrorism as legitimate, necessary and sometimes even humanitarian, we don't see that the greatest terrorist acts of all haven't been incubated in Afghan caves, or refugee camps in the West Bank, but in richly appointed government offices in places like Washington, Tel Aviv

and London. And this is what a memorandum drafted by Winston Churchill to his chiefs of staff during WWII read: "The moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed."

While many American writers take pride in claiming victory in the "first war against terror," many wonder how that victory was achieved. It was achieved by sheer ruthless support of Latin American dictators and covert action against nationalist forces, beginning in the 1950s and '60s right up to recent times. There is Guatemala and Nicaragua, and Chile for whom 9/11 holds a different significance.

So profound was the effect of US supported state terror in Guatemala that it moved one journalist to say, on his return to his native land which he fled after his newspaper office was blown up by the government terrorists, "some people in the White House worship Aztec Gods -- with the offering of Central American blood."

And the US role in the Middle East in support of Israel has surpassed all records of state sponsored terrorism, which has witnessed the ruthless victimisation of the Arabs in the occupied territories and in Lebanon.

Regrettably, the US policy had been, and continues to be, motivated, according to an eminent US scholar, entirely by its "intention to maintain hegemony through the threat or use of force, the dimension of power in which it reigns supreme." In the case of Iran, it is a

matter of survival, of self-preservation from a giant power that has the capability to subsume it within its fold without the world even twitching so much of an eyelid.

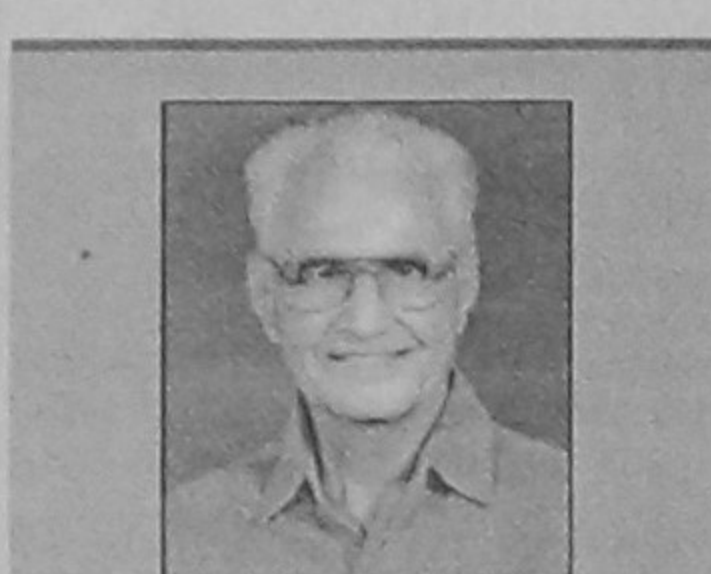
And this feeling is quite real, given the fact that the standoff distance between Iran and the US has been significantly reduced by the physical presence of the US across the immediate Iranian borders; added to it is the location and military clout of Israeli. Therefore, if Iran resorts to measures to protect its national interest the reasons are not far to seek -- Iran has been put under a great geo-strategic disadvantage since the US occupation of Iraq that will not end in the near future.

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

American purposes in Middle East



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

US President George Bush is in the Middle East. His first port of call was Tel Aviv. His visit was billed as one for trying to broker an Arab-Israeli peace in Palestine before he leaves office.

In the course of his stated peace efforts, he visited other important Arab capitals. While American interest in a settlement of the Palestinian question may be accepted, it is not necessarily the purpose that brought him to the Middle East. America has other strategic interests, preoccupations and personal predilections of this Republican US administration in its last year.

It will be odd if Mr. Bush were to devote himself to the Palestine problem alone, as it presents itself to the world today. He is spending a whole week in the area, and it is unlikely that he would leave other American preoccupations in ME. Everybody knows that America is weighed down by its commitments in, and current situation of, Iraq and Afghanistan.

American worries prominently include the supposed serious threat from Iran, supposedly with nuclear ambitions. The kind of propaganda that is emanating from western capitals against Iran indicates a coming war, either by Israel or by the US.

PLAIN WORDS

There is a lot of ballyhoo about Arab terrorism. Resistance against occupiers in the 41st year, with whatever means at hand, cannot be termed terrorism. The easy requirement of stopping "Arab terrorism" is to end the Israeli military occupation and letting Palestinians be in their own areas that America recognises to be Palestinian areas. The language and body language of Mr. Bush's first speech in Tel Aviv showed that he was more interested in Israel's security than in peace or the human rights of Arabs.

Insofar as American interest in the Palestine question is concerned, some aspects of it must be clearly kept in mind. First, America is not an honest broker. The record since 1967 shows that the US is now primarily the closest possible ally of Israel.

Peace-making requires the acceptance of the peacemaker's neutrality by both sides. It is true that America has actually become acceptable to much of the Arab (even Palestinian) side by default -- and not by choice. The position of the Arabs has so deteriorated, largely as a result of American and western machinations, that they now have no option but to look up to the US to ensure some minimal conditions on which the Israeli occupation can end -- so they can breathe a little more easily in their separated ghettos or cantons that the Israelis have confined them to.

Even so, it would be odd if, during the time left for Mr. Bush to conduct his diplomacy on the Palestinian question, he can succeed where all American administrations since 1967 have not been able to stitch up a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinian Authority after the Palestinians gave up their one-state solution

way back in early 1970s. It does look as if the Bush administration has chosen to bill the visit in the name of Palestinian-Israeli question on purpose; it is likely to have some other aim(s).

For assessing the current trip, one gets thrown back to considering America's strategic purposes and preoccupations. The highest preoccupation of America today -- strictly in accordance with the American perceptions of its strategic needs -- is the question of Iran. A regime change in Iran has to be brought about and, since it is not thought to be possible or feasible to effect it peacefully, a war is said to be built into the situation.

The whole world has been arguing against such a war with Iran. Iran can inflict a tremendous lot of damage of a non-military kind, i.e. economically. Stoppage of oil exports by Iran can amount to 4 million barrels a day less available oil. Such a shortage would upset the global oil market. Oil prices would shoot through the roof -- this time maybe \$200 a barrel or beyond, unimaginable as it is today.

True, on the purely military plane Iran stands no chance of winning against America, except

through perseverance in fighting hopeless battles and forcing the American soldiers to fight on its own territories.

Both aerial bombing or nuking have their problems. Nuking Iran on a large enough scale, whether by US or by Israel or by both, would not be acceptable to any Arab friend of America like Egypt, various Arab Sheikdoms and even Saudi Arabia. The political consequences would be too many, and not necessarily favourable to American and Israeli purposes.

While Iranian casualties can be unimaginably high if nukes are used, as they may have to be, a regime change without occupation of Iranian territories may still not be feasible. American and/or Israeli or western troops on Iranian soil will call forth a resistance that would be worse than what they have met in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US-Israel duo, despite their military superiority, look like failing in a regime change.

Question is: have the Americans given up their strategic goals in Asia after their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan? Bold would be the observer who would say that America has given up its long-term strategic goals in Asia. Indeed, the

destruction of the old Iraqi state and American military bases in Afghanistan without full pacification might even be a part of an American-desired map of Asia, no matter who rules in Kabul or Baghdad.

Whichever way one looks at the American ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is hard to accept that a sophisticated superpower can act on an Emperor's whim. The stated purposes simply do not stand up, neither for Iraq nor for Afghanistan. The Americans' ambivalence in dealing with the Taliban can scarcely be ignored. The emotional reasoning for attacking Afghanistan is too simplistic.

Anyway, the world will long remember the American efforts for a hoped for design of sewing up an anti-Iran alignment in the Middle East, that would largely be Sunni Arab states against a Shia Iran. No Sunni Arab seems to have any stomach for it. This is entirely unacceptable to America's Sunni friends because it will cause tremendous long-term instability and conflict. Many hereditary rulers will become altogether too insecure, and they seem to have told Bush so.

As for Palestine itself, America's unwillingness to put any meaningful pressure on Israel to vacate its clearly illegal and politically unjustifiable colonising of Palestinian territories in West Bank and Gaza area ensures all Palestinian interlocutors being discredited, as President Mahmoud Abbas has become. Israel is in the 41st year of its military occupation of these areas. The so-called freedom-loving western powers are not worried about the human rights of the Palestinians, or with Israeli treatment of Palestinians that is inconsistent with civilised standards of

behaviour even vis-à-vis military occupied territories.

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Insofar as Iran and other issues of American strategy for Asia are concerned, Pakistan needs to take up a consistent and honourable position on them. Pakistanis have no business remaining America's bag carriers. There is no reason why Pakistanis should do as Americans tell them to, even in matters of domestic politics.

True, Pakistan faces the problem of Islamic extremism. It is likely to destroy Pakistan polity's integrity; it can unravel the society, and cause a total collapse of the state.

This danger is real and cannot be denied. And yet, this is Pakistan's problem and Pakistan has to solve it mainly by itself. True, friends can lend support, if they are friends -- and not masters. American behaviour in recent years was one of a master toward his servant. This treatment, which was characteristic of a Suzerain-vassal state relationship, has been accepted by Pakistan's military rulers. This, too, would surely unravel Pakistan before long. A change in this relationship is urgent.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

PM in China

The visit laid emphasis on the development of trade and economic relations between the two countries. Accompanying the prime minister were a number of senior figures from commercial and industrial bodies, to drive home the importance of this area in the bilateral scheme of things. Trade targets have been driven upward, for the 2010 target of \$40 billion has already been more or less achieved.

SALMAN HAIDAR

THIS was the first visit to China in five years by an Indian prime minister. As is invariably the case, top-level visits from India to China create a wave of interest and encourage extensive commentaries about the issues to be addressed, the history of bilateral ties, and the future prospects for the relationship. This is only to be expected, for China always commands deep interest here and such visits bring out a variety of viewpoints on how Sino-Indian ties stand and where they may be headed.

In this respect, Dr. Manmohan Singh's journey to Beijing was no different from other earlier ones, being wreathed in speculation and anticipation when it began

and subject to close scrutiny when it was over. Each such visit yields a major document, in this case a "Vision Document" that the prime minister signed with his counterpart. These documents demand close reading, for they chart the path of advancement in mutual understanding on a wide variety of issues.

These are not dramatic statements with a rhetorical tinge, but calm, careful compilations that record the positions and commitments of the parties. These communiqués are milestones in a slowly advancing, incremental process.

The measured, steady path they have adopted tells us something about the current state of the relationship between these two large Asian countries. Relations

are on an even keel and progressing in an orderly fashion. Not all the shadows of the past have been dispelled, notably differences on the boundary, but yet there is sufficient mutual confidence to bring them together in some crucial areas. Thus, they have been able to make common cause in the WTO where it was once assumed that they were likely to be on opposite sides, as rivals for the same advantages.

True, they have their trade rivalries in certain areas, but they are also able to cooperate and stand together on some key trade issues. In forums other than trade, too, they have been able to harmonise their stands, conspicuously in the negotiations on climate change. The prime minister's Beijing

visit is to be assessed against this pattern of diplomatic contact between the two countries. Like earlier prime ministerial visits, it was not cast as something essentially innovative or path breaking. Even so, it has been pointed out that some sort of personal stamp can be discerned in the outcome, something to suggest that useful advances in some important matters have been achieved through the leader's high level intervention. Such are the references in the "Vision Document" to China's readiness to cooperate more closely with India in civilian nuclear matters.

Similarly, what China has to say about supporting India's aspirations to a greater role at the UN, including the Security Council, could be presented as a significant commitment. A closer, more critical reading might suggest that on these issues important to India there has been no real change of position by China. Nor, in truth, could any such change have been expected; the structure of the visit and the diplomatic procedures adopted by both sides virtually

preclude any basic innovations of this nature during a formal state visit. Nevertheless, the marginally more helpful formulations on these subjects in the final document are not without value.

How, then, to make an assessment of what transpired? Perhaps one can suggest that the visit itself was more important than any documents or agreements that came from it. Over the years, a regular exchange of visits of top-level leaders has come to be instituted as a feature of India-China relations. Through such means, the chill has gone from their ties. Instead, there is a deliberate projection of normality, of good and equitable relations.

The words and the agreements that accompany such occasions are, of course, important and valuable, but the real point is made by the steady and consistent leadership exchanges themselves. They bespeak a mutual willingness to maintain friendship and good relations, and a desire to advance them further. These formal state occasions are not to be seen in terms of any sort of leap

forward on the border, or the UN, or nuclear cooperation, important as all these subjects are, but as an affirmation of friendship and a willingness to develop closer ties.

The extra courtesies that were extended to the prime minister, like a private dinner by his opposite number in addition to the state banquet, reinforce the message. Dr. Singh's presence in Beijing will serve to keep the momentum going in the relationship, to underline the new opportunities that have arisen, and to encourage further effort by each side.

The boundary issue cannot be tucked out of sight in the course of a visit like that of Dr. Manmohan Singh's. It weighs more heavily here than it does in China, where the new generation may have little awareness of its implications. But it remains the most intractable problem between the two countries. Over the last two decades and more, negotiations between the two parties have been taking place, and gradually the pace and level of consultations has been stepped up.

It is now in the hands of senior special representatives to do something to bridge the gap. Maybe the prime minister's visit will speed up the process. This is bound to remain a sensitive and difficult matter and, even if the pace of the negotiations is stepped up, there is no guarantee of an early outcome. What is encouraging, nevertheless, is that the border issue has not prevented the growth of cooperation in security matters, as evidenced in the recent joint exercises by Indian and Chinese security personnel in Kunming. A further exercise is to take place before long in Rajasthan. On this front, the two countries have been able to identify a common enemy, terrorism, and to combine their effort to deal with it.

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So trade is booming, but, with it, new anxieties have surfaced. There is a substantial trade imbalance in favour of China, though not yet such as to induce alarm in India. What has been heard more loudly is the fear that China's pricing policies and currency management represent a threat to Indian manufacturers, now that freer access for Chinese goods has become available.

Similar complaints have been heard in the USA and elsewhere. It comes as a reminder that, as both countries grow and as globalisation advances, such economic issues will assume a higher profile in India-China relations.

The prime minister's China visit is yet another step in stabilising and consolidating relations with this important neighbour. That it went well and opened fresh avenues augurs well for the future.

Salman Haider is India's former Foreign Secretary. Courtesy: The Statesman.