

### 21 August grenade attack

New facts coming to light

HERE is plenty to be worried about the recent revelations regarding the grenade attack on the AL leaders on 21 August 2004. The disclosures of a former state minister have brought to light several startling and at the same time disconcerting facts.

It has, for one thing, validated the concerns of the media expressed during the course of investigation that the alliance government was not handling the matter with the import that it deserved. Moreover, there was more than a palpable evidence of an attempt to divert the course of the investigation, if not of sweeping it under the carpet altogether.

Not only was the main opposition party made to look as the likely perpetrator, there was also a dubious effort to implicate some of its leaders. The report of the one-man probe body, set up to investigate the incident, has not been made public. We are not sure whether the report was able to give a pointer towards which the government agencies could focus their attention on to identify the real culprits.

The statement of the erstwhile state minister for information, exposing the purported involvement of people in the then government, is highly alarming. It seems that the findings of the main investigating agency and discovery of 'George Mia' were nothing but red herrings to mislead the public. It was a diabolical exercise to divert the public attention from one of the most heinous terror acts in Bangladesh. And this is what is most disturbing. Persons belonging to the ruling coalition and holding public office, according to recent reports, were not only complicit in the blast, they had been criminally involved in covering up the act.

One is not certain that we would have ever known the truth had there not been the changes of 1/11. We demand that the caretaker government spare no efforts to find the real culprits behind the incident and also bring to book those who colluded with the culprits to contort the course of justice.

### Outbreak of bird flu

Need is for quick, calm measures to handle it

THE latest outbreak of avian flu in fifteen countries, as the FAO notes, is deeply worrying. The worry takes on added dimensions considering that Bangladesh is among these countries and has, in the past week, been struggling to contain the spread of the disease. With 4,700 poultry birds culled in Dinajpur, 3,000 in Patuakhali and 4,000 in Barguna, the picture is rather disquieting. And now comes news that crows in large numbers have met with sudden, inexplicable death in Dinajpur and Patuakhali.

At this point, no fewer than 26 of the country's 64 districts have been more or less affected by the malaise, with large scale culling of poultry going on in them. That only confirms the FAO finding that the avian influenza outbreak in the countries it mentions demonstrates that the H5N1 strain of the virus remains potent and therefore a global threat. For Bangladesh, the very urgent need now is to roll back the crisis as early as possible. Before that, however, it will be more important to contain the situation and prevent it from taking over other, so far unaffected areas of the country. Since any outbreak of bird flu, especially in communities that are poor and have little access to education and sanitation, is a hazard to public health, all efforts must now be geared to enhancing the awareness of the people about the do's and don'ts to combat the situation. People, particularly in the rural interior, for that is where families traditionally have had domesticated poultry for ages, must be provided with know-how on an emergency basis on what they must do should avian flu affect their stocks of poultry. Overall, it is a matter of saving the poultry industry. But such a step must also make sure that a sense of panic does not come into dealing with the problem. The experience gained during the last outbreak of bird flu should be put to good use. In this context, the print as well as electronic media must be utilised to focus on the issue and so help people handle the situation in their backyards.

Finally, it will be important to bear in mind the best practices followed by the global community in dealing with present and earlier instances of bird flu. The FAO's experience is noteworthy here. Such experience needs to be utilised to the full.

## Avoiding the burden of conflict



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ONE wonders whether the end of the cold war has truly brought about a change in the world system that can claim that the peace Immanuel Kant had dreamt of, or a society devoid of inequity between the rich and the poor that Marx and Engels had thought about, could be realised.

If the Greek, the Roman and the ancient Egyptian civilisations prospered on slave labour, as claimed by some theorists, then the American civilisation of the deep South till the civil war was no less a product of slave labour. Indeed, the whole period of colonialism based on metropolitan-periphery relationship in which the white man's burden voluntarily sought out by the colonials did introduce the colonies to some of the fruits of modernity, both material and in arts and culture (though Edward Said termed the Orient as the cultural contestant West), but at the same time robbed the colonies of their riches that ornamented the metropolis.

The subalterns did revolt from time to time, though in vain, against the injustices imposed upon them by the colonial masters, but failed because the weapons of conquests used by the

intruders were much superior to the ones then possessed by those defeated and later occupied. It is difficult to believe that things have changed in any fundamental way from the time of the bygone days, because the North continues to dominate the South as it had for centuries.

Despite skepticism, the dependency theory would be applicable in trade relations between many developing and developed countries as the exporting developing countries with small export baskets find that the control of trade, insurance, banking and port facilities passing to foreigners who are often associated with local elites.

These economies suffer from adverse terms of trade, the exportable being mostly primary products, and imports that are costly in dollar terms, more so if the exporting developing countries resort to devaluation coupled with inelastic demand for their exports. The resulting deterioration in their industrial sector pushes the labour involved in the primary and intermediate industries into the subsistence sector.

A lot is being said about the

### GOING DEEPER

One would, therefore, to his peril, dismiss Samuel Huntington's thesis that future conflicts between civilisations could also be along religious lines because the Gareth Evans chaired International Conference on Intervention that contributed to a change in the concept of sovereignty from being illimitable and un-encroachable to one that puts the responsibility to prevent large scale violation of human rights on the government of the day in order to retain sovereignty that hangs like the sword of Democles over aberrant nations that incidentally are constitutive of some developing nations.

garment export of Bangladesh that ranks as the second foreign exchange earner. In our euphoria, we tend to forget that the income received from tailoring, and now for some accessories associated with the RMG sector, the value added amount is not that significant and the sector remains vulnerable.

The European Union's allowance given to the LDCs under the slogan "all but arms," giving zero duty to our readymade garments and other exportables as a LDC country is very beneficial to us. But the US stance taken in the WTO Hong Kong round of talks, terming Bangladeshi garment sector as globally competitive, and its refusal to grant zero duty to our RMG export is discouraging.

One hopes that, though foreign aid receives practically no importance in presidential primaries and elections the American voters, given a possible trillion dollars expenditure in Iraq as atonement for Bush's folly and his strident advocacy for democratic reform in Muslim countries to confront the Islamic extremists, will ask for an account from the administration as to why the Defense Department

gets more than \$400 billion dollars as against less than \$50 billion for the State Department reflecting Bush administration's prioritisation of utilizing soft power including foreign assistance as against hard power.

Besides, the developing world, having unified under the banner of "trade and not aid," is now insisting on "concessions" (if they can be so called) from the developed world in the WTO negotiations on non-reciprocal basis. It is generally agreed that globalisation has become an irreversible process, with unequal distribution of benefits.

Unfortunately, in the real world, writes Dennis O'Hearn, "transition to (or intensification of) globalisation has made access to, and control over, technologies and resources more unequal than ever. The rise of supranational global institutions and market oriented global networks has increased the power of core capitals to subjugate the peripheral regions in the age of 'post-modernism' and 'post-developmentalism'."

If we hope to achieve socialisation of the economy, that is

demarginalisation of what has not been valued in orthodox economics, we still require an understanding of how a small minority of people within a minority of regions of the world control the vast majority of material resources and technologies (Tigers and Transnational Corporations)."

This is not only in the bread and butter issues but in socio-political issues as well, albeit it is difficult to separate the Siamese twins, that the developing countries have to remain alert in safe guarding their interests because, as Ziauddin Sardar feels, the Euro-centric idea of a nation state has played havoc with non-Western societies by targeting, for example, Islam as an "enemy" though the faith is intrinsically universal, breaking all barriers of colour, creed and language.

But then, a counter argument had been advanced by Tony Blair that Christians fought for the Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo against Christian Serbs. But the opposition to Turkey's entry into the European Union by eminent politicians and the general people because, in that case, Muslim Turkey would become a heavy weight in the EU decision making process, testifies once again to historian Bernard Lewis' remarks about eternal conflict between Christianity and Islam as the latter does not decree "give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."

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Perhaps, from the inner most recess of the Western mind Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, giving "advanced" nations responsibility of putting under their tutelage the people "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world... as a sacred trust of civilization" has not totally been eliminated.

But, then again, sociologist Vincent Tucker's criticism of the West that "for a society to claim universal desirability, while turning its back from others from which it is convinced it has nothing to learn is not only cultural elitism but also cultural racism" reminds one of the significant inroads made by the social movements from the Third World, e.g. the non-violent movement against the British launched by Mahatma Gandhi, and by Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela for freedom from minority rule and social injustice.

In Bangladesh, we are on a quest for elections to correct an aberration that was pushing the country to the brink of civil war and state failure to a state that would hopefully provide a crop of politicians more dedicated to serving the people.

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## The crucial dialogue



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE decision of the caretaker government (CTG) to open dialogues with political parties to find a formula for holding the stalled parliamentary election in a free and fair manner is a good one indeed.

The chief advisor (CA) of the CTG, in his nationwide address on January 12 marking one-year of his government, said that he would take steps soon to open dialogue with the political parties, which received an encouraging response from the political circle.

But no progress has been made so far for holding the proposed political dialogue. The CA said on January 21 that the government would start the dialogues with the political parties when both sides were ready, as they needed time for preparation. He said that talks between the Election Commission (EC) and the political parties are going well and hoped that they would end soon, facilitating dialogue between the government and the political parties.

There is not an iota of doubt in our minds that the political parties in the country need substantive reforms for transition from totalitarian rule to democracy. The political parties have collectively failed to uphold the secular democratic aspirations that drove the nation to fight the Liberation War. Political leaders now need to reach an understanding across party lines to rid politics of the influence of black money and muscle power.

There was a suggestion from the politicians and development activists speaking at a roundtable discussion on January 22 that the political parties should sit together to strike an agreement to establish a durable democracy to avert any crisis.

The EC is now trying to wrap-up the first phase of its electoral reform dialogue with the parties by holding a meeting with BNP leaders within this month. After the talks, the EC plans to meet two political leaders each from different political parties to finalise its electoral reform-related proposals.

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The council of advisers is likely to form a three-member committee to design the format and agenda for the dialogue. Though it is not clear what specific agenda the dialogue will discuss, the government must try to convince the political parties to go for necessary political reforms that cannot be imposed.

The agenda for the dialogue should be carefully determined, attaching the highest priority to burning political issues like boycotting of parliament, imposing of hartal and blockade, igniting conflicts, and the blame game. The political parties must agree to nominate clean candidates, and to continue anti-corruption measures if they are elected to power. Issues like trial of war criminals, skyrocketing prices of essentials, and release of detained former prime ministers should also be discussed in the dialogue.

The proposed dialogue is surely a crucial one, as it is aimed at reducing the ever-widening gap between the government and the political parties, and at removing all obstacles to holding the stalled parliamentary election in a peaceful manner to give democracy a lasting form. Therefore, the government and the politicians should be open-minded in the discussions, without taking rigid stands, for making the dialogue effectual.

### BY THE NUMBERS

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It is too early to speculate on the outcome of the dialogue as it is still in rudimentary stage. But bitter experience has taught us to believe that political stalemates are hardly resolved through dialogue because of the rigid stands of the politicians.

Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy in India, who had dealt vigorously with the Bengal famine, exercising his control over the whole food administration, had failed miserably in a wholly different task -- political dialogue. He initiated a dialogue in June 1945 with the leading political leaders of the sub-continent with a view to easing the withdrawal of British power.

But the dialogue broke down on the allotment of seats in the Executive Council as the

Congress leaders refused to accept the Muslim League's claim of being the sole representatives of Muslim opinion.

In a last-ditch effort to break the deadlock, the British government called Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Sardar Baldev Singh and some other leaders to London in December 1946 for another dialogue. But the dialogue was as fruitless as before.

A good number of dialogues held between the partition of India in 1947 and creation of Bangladesh in 1971 also ended without any fruitful outcome.

The political dialogue between former ruling BNP and opposition AL under Prof Iajuddin's CTG failed, causing great frustration among the people. The one-to-one dialogue between BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil, held in a situation when the country was reeling from one deep crisis after another, to restore the political order also failed.

The CTG has a clear constitutional mandate to prepare the ground for holding a free and fair general election, and to supervise it. It will have to shoulder an overwhelming responsibility to lead the country towards a qualitative change in the nature of politics and democracy.

Much harm had been done to the economy, creating a pervasive sense of fear among the businessmen. In order to find a way out of such a situation, the CTG now needs to take deter-

mined efforts to revitalise politics for developing a rapport with the political parties. An effective dialogue can also help a lot to get back the situation on the right track.

A free and fair election is what millions in Bangladesh are now craving for, with the 9th parliamentary election less than a year away, as it has a greater significance for peaceful transition to a democratically elected government. Not only that, the watchful eyes across the world are also set on Bangladesh to observe the way it holds its election, which is meaningful for its future development and stability.

Holding of the parliamentary election in a proper and credible manner is the most critical exercise for the government in a country like Bangladesh, where democratic institutions are fragile and vulnerable. Several factors may contribute to the success of an election but the crucial factor is the participation of all political parties, who are the stakeholders in the election process.

The onerous responsibility of leading the country toward normalcy now rests on the shoulder of the CTG. The advisers, including the CA, must remember that any step undermining the credibility of the CTG can plunge the nation into more troubles, and a very high price may have to be paid by the nation.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

With the dollar so weak, America will turn into an investment haven in 2008, says Moises Naim, the editor of Foreign Policy magazine. "There will be a massive flow of foreigners buying into the US, not as supplicants but because it's a bargain place to do business."

With these investments being so diverse -- it's not just the Japanese this time -- America will once again be able to get away with its fiscal irresponsibility and poor savings habits, with little loss of global power. The sovereign wealth funds, after all, still represent only a fraction of overall foreign investment flows.

Perhaps. But other experts, like Kenneth Rogoff of Harvard, a former economist at the International Monetary Fund, suggest that America might suffer a more permanent loss of prestige and power. "There is something deeper going on here. The dollar might never be the same."

The US has had an incredible bull run since the mid 1980s. It's been one big, long boom. People have gotten used to it, and it

elevated the position of the United States in the world." Today the humiliation of Wall Street because of the subprime scandal "is quite a coup-punch," he says. And Bush's lack of leverage with the Arabs may be symptomatic of a chronic condition.

Many U.S. analysts this week are indulging in a kind of told-you-so triumphalism. They are gleefully pointing out that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the global economy is not in the least "decoupled" from the US market. They say the brief plunge of Europe's and Asia's markets in response to fears of a US recession proves, yet again, that America remains the dominant force on the world stage.

The underlying story, however, is that we are out there begging for help on every front. Hillary may consider this pathetic. But whoever wins the White House will be in the same quandary next year.

Some experts think that as long as Washington and other governments don't interfere, the mar-

necessarily friendly foreign officials in Moscow, Beijing and Riyadh, rather than neutral investors, will have a significant say in our economic strength.

Also, some of today's investment targets might be considered to be among America's strategic assets -- Wall Street's biggest firms, for starters -- in a way that Peble Beach never was. With Democrats threatening to take over the White House and boost their control of Congress in '08, there is reason to fear a rise in protectionism that could curb foreign capital in the name of "economic security."

Certainly Bush himself heard an earful about this on his trip. A "universal concern" he heard from foreigners, the president told us at that long chat session, was that "the United States will not welcome foreign capital... I heard it from entrepreneurs. I've heard it from government leaders. They are concerned about reinvestment of dollars back into the United States."

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## The supplicant-in-chief

Bush was here to plead, in what Hillary Clinton called a "pathetic" display, for help on oil prices. It was a dramatic change in the balance of power from the time of Bush's father, who protected the Saudis from Saddam. Today the younger Bush "needs the world's biggest exporter of crude more than it needs him," writes Bloomberg's Janine Zacharia. The commander-in-chief has become supplicant-in-chief. The leader of the free world has become the schnorrer of the free world.

MICHAEL HIRSH

POWER tends to be a zero-sum thing. That is, only one person can wield it -- and be in charge -- at a time. I saw an illustration of this principle as I traveled with President Bush in Saudi Arabia last week. Midway through his two-day stay in Riyadh, a small group of us got the word: the president wanted to sit down and talk. An aide led some of the reporters in his "travel pool" into a gilded conference room, and Bush soon appeared (joking, at the door, "Do I really want to be here?").

The president was clearly in no rush. The session went on -- past the half-hour mark, past an hour. I kept expecting Bush's press

secretary, Dana Perino, to call a halt and usher him off to his next event; this was, after all, the most powerful man in the world, no? Didn't he have other Saudis to meet? Maybe even a Saudi dissident or two, since he'd just given a major speech in Abu Dhabi two days before pressing his "freedom agenda" on the Arab world? But Perino said nothing, and the leisurely session rambled on.

Then it occurred to me: George W. Bush literally had nothing else to do on this afternoon. He was waiting for the late-sleeping King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia's ruler, to wake up, so he could go to his ranch to talk to him about oil.

Bush wasn't about to embarrass the Saudi king by seeking a meeting with would-be demo-

crats, jailed bloggers or the thousands of other dissidents who are kept under wraps in this deeply repressed society. Bush was here to plead, in what Hillary Clinton called a "pathetic" display, for help on oil prices.

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This will be an increasingly familiar role for American presi-

dents -- not to mention American consumers and businesses -- no matter who is elected this year.

With global markets in turmoil over the prospect of a US recession, Wall Street's best and brightest in semidiscipline over their disastrous misreading of the subprime mortgage debacle, and US deficits looming large, the United States is in a weaker position vis-a-vis its international creditors than it has been in memory.

The next president will inherit this weakness and find his or her maneuvering room as limited as Bush's was in Riyadh. With America having done virtually nothing to wean itself off foreign energy, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the OPEC nations hold the whip hand over oil production.

US credit markets are intimately dependent on what finance ministries in Beijing, Tokyo and Singapore will decide to do with their surplus dollars. The Wall Street giants that once set the course for global financial markets are now begging for help as well; witness the bailout of Citigroup and Merrill Lynch led

by government-controlled funds out of Singapore, Kuwait and South Korea.

Some analysts insist there is little new about this problem. After all, nearly a generation ago it was the Japanese who supported America's economic bad habits -- notoriously using their surplus dollars to overpay for Rockefeller Center, Pebble Beach and other American icons. What difference does it make if the Chinese and Arabs are overpaying for Citigroup and Merrill Lynch today? Doesn't that still work to our advantage, as it did with all that Japanese money that got recycled back into the good ole USA?

It does work in our favor, on the whole, but there are a few worrisome differences. For starters, the dependency is so much larger -- nearly double what it was in the late '80s, with the current account deficit (the amount of foreign capital coming in) now at 5 to 6 percent of GDP. And much more of this investment is coming in the form of government-controlled "sovereign wealth funds," which means that not

necessarily friendly foreign officials in Moscow, Beijing and Riyadh, rather than neutral investors, will have a significant say in our economic strength.

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