

Sector Commanders' Forum and war crimes trial

The caretaker government can set the ball rolling

THE Sector Commanders' Forum, after a period of uncertainty finally has had an opportunity of organising its much-awaited convention. On Friday, a well-attended and, needless to say, well-publicised convention made it clear that the SCF is today determined that the war criminals of 1971 are prosecuted and punished under the relevant national and international laws. It is a goal which surely resonates with the vast majority of the people of Bangladesh. All of us, naturally and for very good reasons, hold the view that the principles around which the nation waged the War of Liberation must be upheld as the core upon which we build our future.

It goes without saying that we at this newspaper, and with us the 140 million people of the country, unreservedly endorse the demands put forward by the Sector Commanders' Forum at its convention. Like everyone else conscious of the nation's political legacy, we agree with the SCF that those who collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army and so committed crimes against humanity should be tried in the interest of morality and justice. At the same time, we must sound the caveat that great care should be taken that these trials, once they get underway, are not reduced to being witch-hunts or are seen to be politically motivated in any way. Clear lines need to be drawn, and clear cases made out, about those who actually participated in the genocide against Bengalis. The criminality of the supporters of the Pakistan army -- and we mean those who committed as well as helped to commit murder, rape, torture, abduction and arson -- only strengthens the moral and legal case for a war crimes trial. Apart from the national argument for such a trial, there are the international precedents (read here Cambodia, Rwanda and former Yugoslavia) upon which the case against the war criminals can be built.

We realise that the process of initiating and prosecuting such a trial may well be a long-drawn one. The caretaker government has given the nation to understand that its time-bound period in office does not allow it to undertake the move. It is heartening, though, that in principle the government has expressed itself in favour of a trial of the war criminals. Our view, therefore, is that since this very administration has initiated some commendable moves in various areas in the last one year, we think it can set the ball rolling by initiating the trial process which may subsequently be taken to a logical conclusion by a future elected government. That way, this nation can at least have the satisfaction that justice will finally be done and that the sacrifices of three million martyrs will not have gone in vain.

Blasé attitude to human lives

Recklessly installed overhead billboards spell deaths

WE are dumbfounded at the observation made by a supposedly responsible office bearer of Outdoor Advertisement Owners' Association about the lethality caused to pedestrians by fledgling rooftop billboards. He is quoted in the report as saying, "When a lot of people are getting killed in various accidents... a few deaths due to billboard collapse are not something exceptional." It amounts to saying, so what if some people die from collapsing billboards! Even though human lives have become cheap these days, his statement is patently outrageous because of the odious way he made light of a palpable danger to human life. Such men are a shame to the humankind. Should he not be taken to task for his remarks.

Rods, bars, poles, pieces of tin and other metals fell like missiles hitting stationary people or passersby, especially during gales or storm. Such accidents took lives and injured many. The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) in a belated spurt of wisdom replacing its get-revenue-made-easy style woke up to launch a demolition drive. Owners of billboard filing writs with the High Court, this is now stayed -- since 2006. But for all we know, a ban was imposed in 2005 on rooftop billboards. And owners of the buildings having billboards installed on them have also been warned. It is important that the adjudication process is completed soon with the DCC taking the initiative to expedite it.

The question remains, however, why in the first place the DCC and, for that matter, the Rajdhanī Unnayan Kartipakkha (RAJUK) allowed such risky hoardings to be installed on rooftops, know as they do how unpredictable our weather conditions are. Leave aside weather, even from the standpoint of common sense, why must loosely installed structure be allowed to overhang the traffic beeline below. In major cities of the world, large billboards and hoardings are fixed to the ground while lighter ones are affixed with the scaffolding of the building, never atop it like a sword opened from the scabbard.

Can the strains be overlooked?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

DESPITE the authorities' strong denial that a state of silent famine exists in the country, the concern expressed by the country director of the World Food Program about the lack of access of the poor and ultra-poor to the food necessary to survive has to be taken note of.

International organisations are reportedly worried that lack of food may lead to civil disturbance that for a country like Bangladesh, eagerly waiting for transition to democratic rule, would be disastrous.

Complacency over major economic indicators being satisfactory, while a sizeable portion of the population is unable to eat two meals a day, is a recipe for a revolution that is not guided by political ideology, but is a demonstration of the failure of the government to provide the basic necessities of life.

In 1992, USAID gave a broad definition of food security as a situation "when all people at all

times have both physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life."

The international community had concluded that about half of the Bangladeshis remain below the established food-based poverty line, and about one-fourth of the population cannot consume minimum caloric requirement to be food secure. Given the reduction in real income of the middle class and the poor, Bangladesh is faced with Amartya Sen's "entitlement theory," that basically rests upon the inability of the poor to command resources to purchase essential commodities.

Unfortunately, in countries like Bangladesh, the market does not operate on the basis of demand and supply alone. There are other factors also, like an oligopolistic type of market structure in which a few firms indulge in collusion to fix an artificial price by creating artificial demand, and in which the consumers are treated as

GOING DEEPER

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hostages, particularly for essentials that have inelastic demand.

In the absence of enforceable regulatory mechanisms, people remain at the mercy of unscrupulous business people who have shed their social responsibility in preference to their greed for reaping abnormal profit.

Strangely the authorities have remained indifferent to the woes of the common people, perhaps because they are sanguine of their "erudition" of decades old western education that has confined them in a glass cage, throwing up coloured images that have no connection with reality.

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was no import of some commodities.

There is no denying the fact that Eurocentric globalisation is a fact of life, despite the opposition by some who detect in it a form of domination by the First World countries over the Third World countries and see globalism as "a teleological doctrine which provides, explains and justifies an international system of world trade" and has "ideological overtones of historical inevitability."

The good side of globalism has been demonstrated by the quick import of rice from India, and proposed import from Vietnam and other South Asian countries. One must, however, be prepared to face the situation that the global population is increasing at an alarming rate, particularly in the poorer countries, and that the effects of climate change will put a part of countries like Bangladesh under water while its population will continue to increase and

arable land will continue to decrease.

The Green Revolution that had transformed agriculture around the globe between 1950-1984 with hybrid strains of high-yielding crops may have reached its peak, and may not be able to feed the growing number of people in regions like South Asia.

Indian and Chinese economic growth is expected to contribute to increased cost of inputs of agricultural production throughout the world, increase the price of oil, worsen the effects of climate change and of the other bad effects of fast economic development from which these countries too will not remain immune.

But then, when the largest polluters are the western developed nations, it would be difficult to argue that the pace of development currently taking place in China and India should be arrested.

Yet, the tragedy of both these countries is the large populations they are saddled with and the abject poverty that a significant segment of their populations is doomed to live in for generations despite a growing middle class with disposable income in the two countries.

Bangladesh already has huge trade imbalances with both India and China, though, in statistical terms, Bangladesh's export to

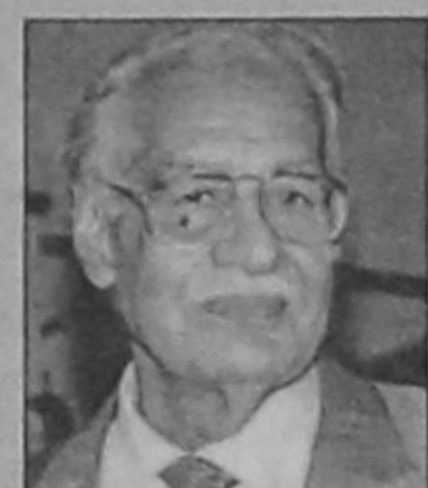
India has increased considerably. The point that has to be considered is that, in the future, prices of essentials are not going to go down, and the more we remain import-dependent the more pronounced will be our import imbalance and, as we are not rich enough to emulate European Union's Common Agricultural Policy or the US Farm Act by doling out subsidy to the agricultural sector, the spectre of hunger and grinding poverty will remain.

We, therefore, have to use every inch of arable land and provide agricultural inputs to the farmers at affordable price to prevent students and hungry people from marching on our streets, shouting for an end to speeches and assurances given by the authorities that all will be well and demanding that the government get down to the business of providing essentials to the middle class, poor and ultra-poor who are indeed going through the pangs of a "silent famine" engulfing the country.

One hopes that the extreme poverty does not become a breeding ground for Islamic extremists who, some believe, have only gone underground after the execution of JMB leaders and the arrest of Huji while their cadres continue their aberrant struggle for the soul of Islam.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Where do we go from here?



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

I wish I had an answer to what I call the Sarabjit Singh problem. He is awaiting execution in Pakistan. The media has once again taken the matter to such a pitch that it has got linked with the country's sizzat (pride).

Even otherwise, India and Pakistan are always sitting on a sack of chilli, and they jump up at the minutest irritation. Instead of talking to each other, they are talking at each other. Even after 60 years of estrangement -- enmity may be a better word -- the two are as inconsiderate, as irresponsible, and as distant as they were when they became independent in August 1947.

The Sarabjit Singh problem is a symptom, not a disease. The disease is distrust, bias, and something verging on hatred. You solve the Sarabjit Singh problem today and you will have another one like it tomorrow.

Both countries are neighbours, and neither can ignore the geography and history they share. But they seem to have developed a vested interest in spitting at each

other. Even after three wars, apart from hostilities like the one at Kargil, they have not learnt how to solve their problems between themselves and how to live in peace.

It is good that Islamabad took a larger view on the release of Kashmiri Singh. However, I do not understand why he had to serialise "his achievements" in the press. It is difficult to separate chaff from the grain, but I have taken his account with a spoonful of salt.

He has created ill-will among the Pakistanis, who have come to link him with Sarabjit Singh. Kashmiri Singh has let down the many people who worked hard for his release. To gloat over his deeds is demeaning.

To be a spy is not a matter of pride. Spies do not add to the knowledge of governments. They may, at best, confirm certain reports. When the chanceries of both countries, like the rest of the world's, have men from the intelligence agencies in the garb of counselors or attachés, who should spies be considered

important? They, in fact, are irrelevant in an age where satellites and other sophisticated contraptions collect even the regimental badge on a soldier's uniform.

I think where India can be faulted is in the death of Khalid Mahmood, a visitor to a cricket match at Mohali, Punjab. His dead body was sent to the Pakistani side in a sack. One, it is a hell of an indignity to a human being. A body of the dead demands respect, and it should be handed over with respect. Two, there is no explanation from this side on how Khalid Mahmood died. He is reported to have "loitered" in Punjab and elsewhere, and overstayed.

Apparently, the police picked him up and he died in their custody. It is surmised that his death was due to torture by the police. If this is so, why has no human rights organisation in India made any noise about it?

The National Human Rights Commission could have taken a suo moto notice of death -- it can still do that -- when it caused a

furor in Pakistan, and it happened under suspicious circumstances. There has to be an inquiry by the government to go into the case of Khalid Mahmood. Any unnatural death has to be probed under the law.

Yet, to link Khalid Mahmood's death with Sarabjit Singh is not fair. I can understand the feeling of outrage in Pakistan. I can also understand the prevailing opinion that Sarabjit Singh's execution will be the rightful reply to the treatment meted out to Khalid Mahmood. But it seems to be a tit-for-tat case. I do not know the Sarabjit Singh case in detail. But should he be hanged?

I am, in principle, against the death sentence. As many as 130 countries have abolished it. Unfortunately, both India and Pakistan retain the draconian death penalty in their statute books. They should have fallen in line with the civilised countries long ago. I hope they will do so before long.

I was not surprised to find an element of hypocrisy in the speech given by BJP chief Rajnath

Singh. He gave a lengthy argument on why Sarabjit Singh should not be hanged. But, at the same time, he said that Afzal Guru, sentenced to death for the attack on the Indian parliament, should be hanged immediately.

In fact, he took the Manmohan Singh government to task for the delay. Must the BJP politicise as serious a matter as that of Sarabjit Singh?

To take Sarabjit Singh's case out of the arena of politics, more so from the arena of sour India-Pakistan relations, is important, and his case should be viewed from the humanitarian angle. Legally, what Pakistan says is correct. He has been punished by the highest court, and the matter ends there. Does it really end if the mercy angle is brought in?

After the interview by Saluddin, chief of Hizbul, that Pakistan has been helping him and other militants diplomatically, morally and militarily, it does not behove Islamabad to occupy the moral high ground. Indian opinion became infuriated after this disclosure. The pressure on the relations between the two countries may increase. On the other hand, a generous gesture can help.

I know one thing: such cases tell upon relations between India and Pakistan. In Sarabjit Singh's case, the government of India has sought clemency from the government of Pakistan. It has not happened since the creation of the two countries. That the Indian parliament has given

unanimous support to his case should carry more weight than otherwise.

External Affairs Minister of State Anand Sharma said: "In the Sarabjit Singh case, we have conveyed to Pakistan the strong sentiments of our people, and requested for clemency and reprieve to him. We hope that considering the humanitarian aspects some leniency will be shown to him."

I am glad that Sharma said that those prisoners who have completed their sentences in both countries should be released without delay. This is something overdue.

It is hard on those who have been building up relations between India and Pakistan through people-to-people contact. One case like that of Sarabjit Singh washes away what has been collected bit by bit, day after day. It helps the process if the governments on both sides vow not to make prisoners instruments of their machinations.

The new government, which has come in the wake of elections in Pakistan, is representative enough to make a departure from the past, an era of hatred and revenge. The list of people killed by both sides, unknowingly or purposely, is a long one. Somewhere, some time, it must stop. Let it be with the commutation of Sarabjit Singh's death sentence.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Internal power struggle in the offing in Tehran



HARUN UR RASHID

IRAN held parliamentary elections on March 14. About 4,500 candidates ran for the 290 seats. Many voters in Tehran were reportedly perplexed at having to choose 30 candidates out of hundreds, and some arrived at the polling station with written lists.

Officials closely monitored the balloting, fearing that a low turnout would embarrass the country internationally and underscore the rising dissatisfaction over the government's handling of the economy, and were relieved because this time the voter turnout was 60 per cent, much higher than it was in the last election (51 per cent) in 2004.

After the voting, the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reportedly said: "Your epic and

BOTTOM LINE

The outcome of the elections has further consolidated the power of the conservatives in the country. There will be much speculation about its impact on President Ahmadinejad. It remains to be seen how supportive of the president the new parliament will be. Many analysts suggest that the flawed policy of the US towards Iran on its nuclear program has strengthened the conservatives. The Bush administration made a gigantic mistake when it rejected Iran's past president Khatemi's desire to have a dialogue with the US.

powerful presence overcame the enemy's tricks, and turned the enemy's high-profile psychological war aimed at encouraging a low turnout into a vain bubble."

Win for conservatives

Conservatives claimed victory by securing four times as many seats as the reformists in the parliament (Majlis).

No doubt they will take it as an endorsement of their nuclear program and of Iran's assertive foreign policy.

It is good news for President Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is now well positioned for next year's presidential election. He is expected to tighten his grip in the country, with the support of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei, who is constitutionally supposed to be above party politics.

The Iranian leadership portrayed the result as an act of popular defiance in the face of international sanctions over the country's nuclear program. Iran has recently cancelled all talks with the Group of 6 (five Security Council members plus Germany) headed by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. Iran will now talk with the UN agency IAEA in Vienna on its nuclear program.

The outcome of the election is bad for the Western governments that were hoping for the moderates to temper the assertive.

The possibility that Iran might suspend its enrichment of uranium, in line with UN Security

Council demands, is now negligible, Iranian political analysts said.

As expected, the EU presidency issued a statement on March 16th, expressing "its deep regret and disappointment that over a third of prospective candidates were prevented from standing in elections. As a result, the election was neither fair nor free."

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman dismissed the EU allegations on elections as "hasty, politically motivated, opportunistic, and unacceptable."

The result of the election has deepened the divide between Tehran and the West.

Power struggle among conservatives

The result has caused an internal

battle between political hardliners who support the populism of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and those who blame him for policies that have led to high inflation, unemployment, and fuel shortages.

Although conservatives have won the parliamentary elections, analysts believe that it has set up a new power game struggle within the conservative group.

In Iran, there are many shades of conservatives, such as "hardline conservatives," "pragmatic conservatives" and "reformist conservatives." Analysts say that the power struggle may revolve around these groups of conservatives.

It is widely believed that President Ahmadinejad leads the "hardline conservatives," while the former nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, who fell out with the president last January, secured an impressive victory in the holy city of Qom.

Ali Larijani blames the president for what he calls his overheated rhetoric against the international community and his inability to solve the country's financial problems despite a surge in oil prices. He complained that Ahmadinejad's public statements

often undercut his (Larijani's) talks with Western officials on Iran's nuclear enrichment program.

Larijani's campaign against Ahmadinejad, however, is mainly concentrated on domestic financial issues; hardliners are unified on most policies, including relations with Washington.

"The criticism of Ahmadinejad among the hardliners started months ago, and this election is a portrait of that," said Nader Karimijori, a political analyst and editor of a conservative newspaper.

Larijani is expected to lead a powerful bloc of "pragmatic conservatives" in the parliament. Analysts expect that he might be appointed as speaker of the parliament. Some observers say that the position would be an important power base for Larijani to launch a challenge against the incumbent president at next year's presidential election.

Another challenger could be the current mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Qalibaf, who heads the "reformist conservatives." His presidential ambition is no longer a secret. Like another former mayor, President

Ahmadinejad, he will mount a challenge against the current incumbent.

Observers believe that the big winner is the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has secured a parliament more loyal to him than the previous one. And the internal battle within the conservatives may suit him.

It is widely reported in the Western press that Khamenei undermined President Rafsanjani's and President Khatemi's attempts to usher in a more pragmatic and liberal approach to statecraft. The conservative Guardian Council, an unelected body of clerics and jurists, systematically opposed any legislation that would permit relaxation of social mores and dress codes.

The conservative factions are believed to be beholden to the supreme leader as they have no independent power base or sufficient stature to challenge the supreme leader's prerogatives.

Conclusion

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Ahmadinejad. It remains to be seen how supportive of the president the new parliament will be.

Many analysts suggest that the flawed policy of the US towards Iran on its nuclear program has strengthened the conservatives. The Bush administration made a gigantic mistake when it rejected Iran's past president Khatemi's desire to have a dialogue with the US.

One should not forget that Iran has emerged as a regional power in the region. Nothing seems to be in order in that region unless Iran supports and engages in it.

It is noted Iran had gone through many invasions by foreigners. It was invaded by Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Afghans, British and Russians. The 1953 coup that removed its popular Prime Minister Mossadeq was attributed to the CIA. Iranians have overcome all these attacks and interferences. Moreover, Iran can claim 2,500 years of history, civilisation and culture. Iranians are conscious of the past, and have grown with an impressive cultural self-consciousness.

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