

Planners look ahead on food security

The dialogue with stakeholders provides a good recipe

APPARENTLY buoyed up by prospects of a record boro harvest, the Centre For Policy Dialogue (CPD) organised a dialogue session on 'Boro Procurement and Food Security Strategy: an Actionable Agenda'. High government functionaries, planners, academics, farmers, rice mill owners and rice importers spoke by turn putting together an action strategy to build a food buffer stock for this year and beyond.

A consensus emerged among the experts that to have a comfortable food reserve to see us through next financial year three crore 20 lakh metric tonnes of food grain would have to be produced in the country. There should be a standing food buffer stock worth 50 lakh tonnes. To this end, during the aman and boro seasons government has to ensure availability of adequate quantities of high quality seed and fertilizer to the farmers. Another critical input would be access to irrigation in view of the added necessity for bringing fallow land under cultivation. Such a scheme of things should be duly reflected and provided for in the next budget.

The declining productivity of food grains worldwide, bio-fuel claiming a good acreage of cultivable land, squeeze on export and the ever increasing prices of cereals in the international market leave us with no other alternative but to grow the food we need on our own.

We can take the cue from the boro success attained despite the initially flawed distribution of fertilizer. The subsidies provided for the inputs have paid dividends in terms of output. That is on the production side, the government intervention on the distribution side through OMS, VGD and VGF yielded results by way of crisis management.

The storage capacity of the government has decreased from 19 lakh tonnes to a maximum of 12-14 lakh tonnes. This is a major constraint in building food reserve to the tune of, let's say, 50 lakh tonnes. In fact, taking into account the task of preserving fertilizer, seeds etc, the private sector must be encouraged with bank loans and other financial incentives to build strings of silos at appropriate locations to be rented out to the government, if necessary.

Assault on newsmen

Media people must be free to do their job

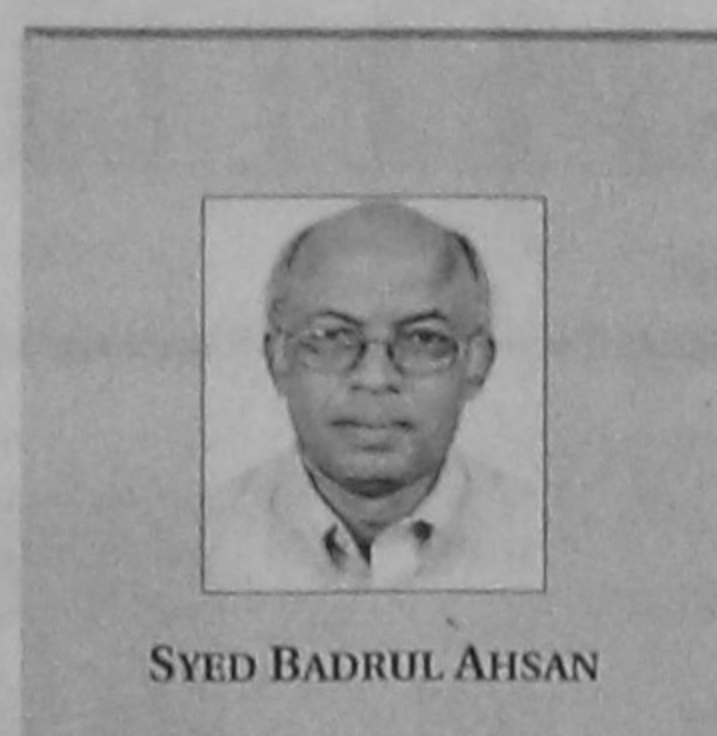
ON Sunday, activists of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and Bangladesh Chhatra League, student fronts respectively of the BNP and the Awami League, beat up the university correspondents of the Prothom Alo and Dainik Dinkal. It was behaviour that was as reprehensible as it was unwarranted, for it smacks of the authoritarian tendencies among certain classes of people which have regularly undermined our efforts to establish a proper democratic order. That these activists could pounce on these young reporters, themselves students of the university, without anyone reining them in is unbelievable.

In recent times, we have registered our protest at the way media people have been subjected to humiliation and assault by the police, religious extremists and others. Their cameras have been broken; they have been jostled and in many cases left severely hurt. What is clearly lost sight of is the fact that journalists are only doing their job and so carrying out the responsibilities they are expected to. Unfortunately, as the DU incident reveals yet once more, on duty they often find themselves in the line of fire. Such behaviour on the part of a section of students goes against the glorious traditions of Dhaka University, which has earned a coveted place in the history of Bangladesh. It is action which militates against the heritage we associate with DU.

Assaults on journalists have been a regular occurrence in Bangladesh for the last many years. There have been the many instances when global media watchdogs have noted with deep dissatisfaction the impunity with which media people have been pounced on. Besides, a number of journalists had been murdered only because they tried carrying out their professional responsibilities.

A free press is a prerequisite to the proper working of a democracy. It is therefore in the interest of all to see to it that newsmen, wherever they are and whatever events and incidents they happen to be covering, are allowed to do their work undisturbed. If it is democratic values we seek to uphold, let that task begin through recognising and upholding press freedom. Meanwhile, we share the sentiments of those who have demanded that the elements responsible for the assault on the young reporters at Dhaka University be identified and penalised for their manifestly culpable act.

Bengali women, equal rights and obscurantism



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HERE are questions you need to ask today about the ruckus whipped up by men unhappy about women enjoying the same rights as they, in this country. And the first question that you need to raise, and expect an answer to, relates to the equality enshrined in the nation's constitution for women. Obviously, if you hold absolute faith in democracy and everything that gives it a definitive flavour of the modern, you will not deny that Bangladesh's women do have a place in the political and social scheme of things. The constitution may have been tampered with in many ways and has, through years of arbitrary government, been rendered emasculated at places. But one truth it has upheld is the esteem in which Bengali women are held, and will be held in the times to be. That being so, you go on to the next question.

And it is a simple question. If the government of the day has been bold enough to make public a women development policy, why did it have to take two steps backward only because a handful of obscurantists are unable, because of their blinkered vision, to come to terms with women being regarded as part of the human race?

Note the recommendations put

GROUND REALITIES

They engaged in open dialogue with the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet, men unable to interpret his sayings consulted his wives, whose word was deemed to be final. So why are these obscurantists around us taking upon themselves the responsibility of interpreting Islam for us and, in their skewed interest, busily going about whipping up hysteria about our world coming to an end if our women share the same pedestal of rights with our men?

across to the administration by an ulama committee relating to the provisions of the proposed women development policy. Each and every recommendation made by the committee militates against the moral and political values we as a sovereign body of people have strenuously tried to uphold in all these years since we liberated ourselves from foreign rule.

And if you, if we, if the government were to treat these recommendations with the seriousness they do not deserve, you can be sure that women in this country -- your mother, my spouse, your sister, my aunt, your woman friend and mine -- will steadily be pushed back into an area of pitch darkness.

Do not forget that there was once a body of wildly parochial men called the Taliban, for whom the religion of Islam did not go beyond a certain length of beard for men and an all-enveloping, stifling dress code for women, in an unfortunate country called Afghanistan. And now observe the attitude of the ulama committee to women in this country. It has suggested that six of the provisions in the women development policy be scrapped altogether and that fifteen other provisions be rephrased.

The rephrasing will, as you may have guessed already, render the policy altogether meaningless. The acting khatib of Baitul Mukarram mosque tells the country that several sections of the policy are "very objectionable." Now you cannot but raise another question: are those aspects of the women development policy objectionable because they threaten the impunity with which men, guided so long by a motivated interpretation of Koranic laws, have so far lorded it over their families and communities?

There are men who speak of religion all day long and will leave no stone unturned to tell us that Islam accords the highest respect to women. That is fine, for history remains proof that the Prophet of Islam went out of his way to ensure that women occupied a place of great honour in society.

You try going back to the history of Islam and you do not come across a

single instance of the Prophet ever having pronounced judgment on the lowliness of women's birth. Women prayed in the mosques with men. They engaged in open dialogue with the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet, men unable to interpret his sayings consulted his wives, whose word was deemed to be final.

So why are these obscurantists around us taking upon themselves the responsibility of interpreting Islam for us and, in their skewed interest, busily going about whipping up hysteria about our world coming to an end if our women share the same pedestal of rights with our men?

The late khatib of Baitul Mukarram once inflamed the passions of his followers by openly declaring that Bangladesh was in crisis because it was being dominated by two women. That was a silly thing to do, for it obscured the fact that many of the problems the country has been facing all these decades have had their roots in the depredations of some of its unscrupulous male ruling classes.

Let us face facts. And the first one of these concerns the very constitution of the ulama committee itself. Whoever first conceived the idea of referring the draft women development policy to such a committee, indeed of helping to set this commit-

tee up, should have known that nothing enlightening would emerge from it. And nothing has. That is made obvious through the emphasis on "just rights that such a class of religious scholars has placed.

You know of justice and you know of equality. They have their own nuances and meanings. So why mislead people, in this day and age, through inventing a meaningless term and calling it "just rights?" But look at the issue in a deeper way. Advocating "just rights" is but another way of trying to maintain the entrenched, backward tradition, which has, so long, kept Bangladesh's women pinned to the ground, mud and all.

Recall all the ugly tales of men unable to contain their anger when Grameen and Brac initially undertook a campaign of women's empowerment in the villages. The bigots thought it was a bad idea, because the bigots have long looked down on women, placing them at a point where they have been nothing but sub-human.

The ulama committee has only echoed those primitive sentiments. We need to be able to forge the will and the courage in ourselves to put up strong, intellectual resistance to the committee.

It is a job that must begin through taking the initiative back from the extremist elements arrayed against our women, for the simple reason that Bangladesh's women have struggled long and hard to come by the rights that are now within their reach. Speak of CEDAW, speak of Beijing, speak of the feminist movement of these have been steps towards the creation of an enlightened society in this country and elsewhere.

Every citizen in this country has taken intense, sustained pride in the

determined way in which the movement for equality has taken shape and has forged ahead. Women in our civil service, in the labour movement, in teaching, in the armed forces and in politics have demonstrated an immense capacity to act as forces of change.

In the villages, in our small towns, in the cities, the social engineering that has gone into enabling our women to reach out for the skies must be allowed to go on without let or hindrance. The various tactics of intimidation currently being brought into play, indeed being refined, in order to thwart the march of Bengali women must be blunted through the concerted efforts of everyone who has striven for the establishment of a secular democratic order in this country.

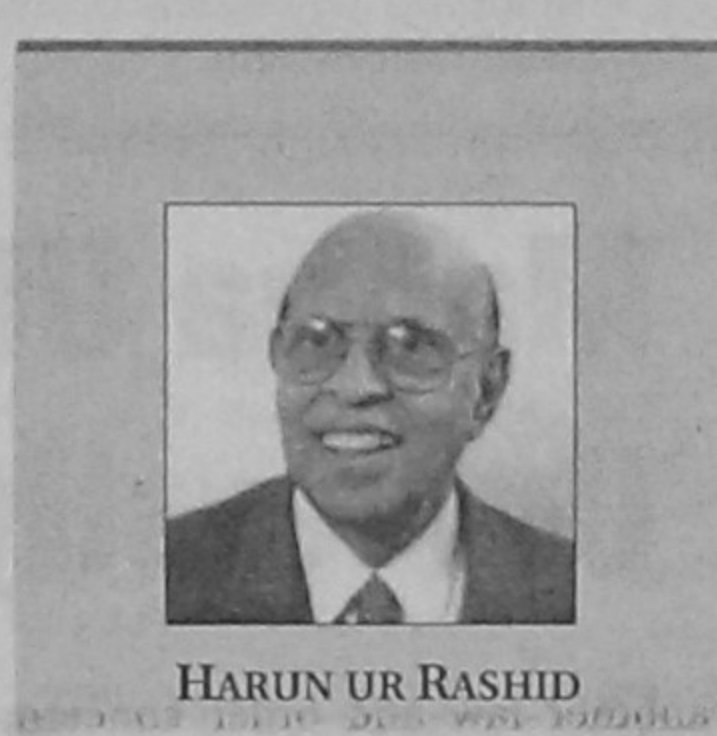
This is no country for people who would prefer to hold one half of its population in disrespect and abject misery. And let it not be a place where men with wrong notions about life, with convoluted ideas about the scheme of things in the universe, determine for us the manners and modalities along which we will carry ourselves. We will restore the values of faith in our mosques by taking politics and extremism out of them.

We will reassert the principles of social behaviour that bring men and women on a par, in every sense of the term. Bigotry cannot, and must not be allowed to mar the quality of life.

Just rights for women? Drop the idea, for nothing less than equal rights for them matters. Which is why a sustained campaign for an implementation of the provisions, all of them, of the national women development policy becomes an absolute and immediate necessity.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

'Peace train' between Dhaka and Kolkata



HARUN UR RASHID

THE opening of the passenger train service between Dhaka and Kolkata, on Bengali New Year's day, has ended the 43-year hiatus in Dhaka-Kolkata rail link. The service that was introduced during the British days was snapped in March 1965 due to the India-Pakistan war.

What a historic moment now. More than 40 years later this service has finally been revived. The first Friendship Train from Dhaka to Kolkata was filled with more than 400 passengers.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation welcomed the passengers from Kolkata through dance, songs and sprinkling of petals. Some Indian journalists were reportedly overwhelmed by such a welcome on the soil of Bangladesh.

The two countries already had connection by bus and air, but the meaning of this renewed passenger train service has its own importance. The inaugural day was the same day as the Bengali New Year's day, April 14. It was a deliberate choice.

An agreement for running the passenger train was concluded on July 12, 2001. After two trials, the two countries agreed to the technical feasibility of commencement of the passenger train service within a short time.

During the immediate-past government, the project was kept in hibernation. It was revived under the

BOTTOM LINE

What is needed now is new vision, free from the shackles of the old narrow mind-set, to put South Asia on a roadmap towards robust economic and development in an era of unprecedented political and economic transformation. Leaders must make a break with the past and march forward with a new sense of purpose and determination along the road of historic changes brought about by economic globalisation, market forces, and climate change in the 21st century.

caretaker government in March 2007.

Bangladesh-India relations are complex, sensitive and multi-dimensional. One must note that relations between the two countries exist independently of governments and policies.

Contemporary practice acknowledges that governments do not bear the whole burden of bilateral relations. Governments lay down policies and facilitate means of communication between the people of the two countries.

Bilateral relations are the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage relations between Bangladesh and India. Both countries need to make the same intellectual, educational, cultural, and media efforts on the positive features of each other to strengthen their relations.

Interconnectivity

One of the important efforts is the communication link between the people of the two countries, and the renewed passenger train service is one of the crucial tasks in achieving movement of people of both countries.

The passenger train service means a lot to the citizens of both nations. It symbolises peace and harmony. It gives hope for a new relationship and shows the growing esteem for each other. It demon-

strates reinforced relationship with each other on the basis of trust and confidence.

The passenger train service is consistent with the decision of the first meeting of the Saarc transport ministers in New Delhi. They agreed on the alternative of an Asian Development Bank-sponsored Saarc Regional Multi-modal Transport Studies, which suggested connecting the South Asian countries through all modes of transport under a regional agreement.

The idea of developing a regional motor vehicle agreement that was mooted at the 14th Saarc summit held in New Delhi last year has been taking shape, and a meeting among Saarc countries will be held this year.

The sooner a regional multi-modal system is agreed upon, the better it will be for the region in terms of peace, economic growth and development.

All South Asian countries must make a commitment to make travel freer and easier. Immigration formalities and customs are to be conducted in the train, as they do in Europe. The Orient Express runs from Singapore to Bangkok via Kuala Lumpur, and it has been a smooth service without any hassle. If others can do it, why can't we?

There are suggestions that passenger train services between Bangladesh and Assam, or Tripura or Meghalaya, in India may now be seriously considered. Most of eastern

Bangladesh and the northern states of India will be benefited from this rail link. What is needed is a change in the mind-set of the authorities in both countries.

In this context, two new lines of communication may be opened between the two countries:

The demand of Bangladesh TV cable operators to allow airing of their shows in West Bengal should be considered by Indian authorities. The acceptance of the demand is long overdue because Indian cable TV shows are aired in Bangladesh.

Newspapers of each country may be available to readers of both countries. Such a facility will go a long way in creating mutual trust and confidence among peoples of the two neighbouring nations.

South Asia will flourish most when all the countries are connected to each other. The train service demonstrates the importance of interconnectivity.

It is noted that China has built a railroad link to Lhasa (Tibet) from Beijing, and eventually it is to be connected with Kathmandu. China is also building a 2,000 kilometres long 6-lanes road from Kunming, capital of China's southwestern Yunnan province, to Bangkok.

If Bangladesh and India are connected through multi-modal transport, it will offer a great opportunity for both countries to be able to link with China's railroad in the north and roads in the south.

Economic globalisation and interconnectivity

Both nations need to be mindful that the geo-political scene around South Asia is changing. Economic globalisation has made it compelling that both countries must seriously consider integrating their economies; first between the two countries, and then with the region, including South East Asia and China.

In the days of economic globalisation, no country can remain outside its influence. Since 1991, Bangladesh has been deeply engaged in the process of integration with the regional and global economy.

The new era is "global," rather than "international." It is global because there are other operators now, such as inter-governmental organisations and NGOs, that are in the field, and national governments have steadily lost monopoly of power in controlling their economies and businesses.

There is a saying that "money makes the world go round." For commercial purposes, the boundaries that separate one state from another are no more real than the equator. They do not define business requirements or consumer trends. Global business has changed the pattern of economic relationships.

Speed and de-regulation are the "mantras" of globalisation and keys to success in economic growth and development. Inter-connectivity between the people of different countries is the basic building block of globalisation.

Strengthening of bilateral relations

Since the two countries are close neighbours, and share about 4,025 kilometres of a porous border, bilateral relations embrace people to people relations, separated from official relations. People to people relations are reinforced by the existence of regular service of passenger

trains. Bilateral relation is like a plant that has to be nurtured, and not taken for granted to grow. If India and Bangladesh nurture their relation with a heavy dose of common-sense, I am confident that Bangladesh and India will have lasting friendship and goodwill towards each other.

Under that environment, no issue will stand in the way between the two neighbours, and they will walk hand in hand in regional and global arenas for their mutual benefit.

There is a saying that one can choose friends but not neighbours. Bangladesh and India are neighbours, and they cannot re-fashion geography. The two countries are destined to live next to each other.

Therefore, both Bangladesh and India must establish a framework in which political, economic, social and environmental concerns are sorted out amicably to mutual satisfaction.

The opening of the passenger train service may act as catalyst in boosting close and cooperative relations between the two countries, and in gradually achieving inter-connectivity within and outside the region.

What is needed now is new vision, free from the shackles of the old narrow mind-set, to put South Asia on a roadmap towards robust economic and development in an era of unprecedented political and economic transformation.

Leaders must make a break with the past and march forward with a new sense of purpose and determination along the road of historic changes brought about by economic globalisation, market forces, and climate change in the 21st century.

Let me finally conclude about the implication of the passenger train in people's minds: It has brought joy, peace, harmony, and hope at a moment of great opportunity of bilateral relations.

Barister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

How to win in Iraq without losing to Iran

The fragile state of Iraq's security stems from the malevolent intentions of Iran, contended Petraeus. The greatest immediate threat to security came from the Tehran-backed "special groups" of Shiite radicals. Over the longer term there was also the prospect of the resurgence of al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Hence, the need for a post-surge pause before contemplating any further drawdown of US troops.

DILIP HIRO

THE testimonies of General David Petraeus, commander of the American forces in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador in Baghdad, to the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees have thrust the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq to the center of the presidential campaign.

The prime purpose of the hearings was to evaluate the effectiveness of the US troop surge, to reduce violence in Iraq, and examine the prospect of lowering American military presence in Iraq. "The progress, while real, is fragile and revers-

ible," reported Petraeus. So, once the additional five combat brigades deployed in Iraq are withdrawn by July, he plans a freeze, maintaining the US military presence at 140,000.

The fragile state of Iraq's security stems from the malevolent intentions of Iran, contended Petraeus. The greatest immediate threat to security came from the Tehran-backed "special groups" of Shiite radicals.

Over the longer term there was also the prospect of the resurgence of al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Hence, the need for a post-surge pause before contemplating any further drawdown of US troops. Ambassador Crocker concurred,

stressing the evil designs of Iran.

The Bush administration is obsessed with Iran and sees it as a greater threat than the Sunni al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. That switch of a primary enemy, however, has complicated the situation in Iraq.

Ignoring the basic fact that Sunni Arabs numbered only a third of the Shiite Arabs in Iraq, al Qaeda pursued relentless massacre of Shiite civilians, which turned off most Iraqis. Its policy: "if you are not with us, then you are against us" toward fellow-Sunnis alienated most Sunnis as well, particularly in the Anbar province, which occupies nearly a third of Iraq.

These blunders by al Qaeda in Mesopotamia provided the American policymakers an opportu-

nity to neutralise it. They offered guns and money to the Sunni tribal leaders to switch sides. The tribal sheikhs set up local "Awakening" councils, consisting of mencealed Sons of Iraq armed with weapons supplied by the Pentagon.

The relationship of the Sunni Sons of Iraq with the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki remains ill-defined. So too does their long-term future. Will they be absorbed fully or partially in the Iraqi security system run by Shiite ministers and officials, or will they be given jobs in the civilian sector?

Tehran watched quietly as the Bush administration, for its own reasons, overthrew Saddam Hussein. A sovereign state, Iran has the largest population in the region, with 90 percent of Iranians being Shiite. It is four times the size of Iraq, shares land and water borders with nine countries, and has a coast that runs the length of the Persian Gulf and part of the Arabian Sea, not to mention the landlocked Caspian Sea. It also has the second largest reserves of natural gas and conventional oil in the world.

Yet, for half a century preceding the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iran's regional ambitions were blocked by Iraq.

In the eight-year war between the two neighbors, started by Saddam's 1980 invasion of Iran, US President Ronald Reagan maintained a pretense of neutrality. In reality, he provided covert support to the Iraqi dictator, while some officials in his administration sold weapons to Iran to see its war with Iraq continue.

In the mid-1980s, when Saddam's defeat became a real possibility, the Pentagon introduced the US Navy into the conflict. While the ostensible purpose was to escort tankers carrying Kuwaiti oil through the Gulf to foreign destinations, this was an overt American tilt toward Iraq. The war ended in a draw.

Following the expulsion of the occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait in February 1991, President George H.W. Bush, leading a coalition of 28 nations, called on Iraqis to rise up against Saddam.

The Kurds in the north did, and so did the Shiites in the south. The US

came to the rescue of the Iraqi Kurds under the guise of the UN Security Council resolution 688 concerning "the repression of Iraqi civilian population."

By contrast, Saddam deployed helicopter gun ships and mowed down Shiite rebels in the south without anybody raising a finger.

Having broken the wall of a dam, the current Bush administration finds itself engaged in a zero-sum game, as a virtual equal, with Iran in the region. That is, America's loss has become Iran's automatic gain, and vice-versa. As such, reducing Iran's influence to zero in Iraq, as was the case during the long rule of the pan-Arab Baath Party, is a grossly unrealistic aim.

On the other side, Iran's leaders have made a realistic assessment of the Iraqi scene. They realise that, leaving aside a secular minority, Shiites are divided among four religious parties, two part of Maliki's coalition government and the other two in opposition. Iran treats all equally. That's why they succeeded in brokering a ceasefire between

Maliki's government and the Mahdi Army militia of Moqtada al Sadr in Basra on March 30.

The Iranian government is close to the leading members of Maliki's coalition government -- al Daawa, headed by Maliki, and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq of Ayatollah Abdul Aziz al Hakim. The latter was established in Tehran in 1982 during the Iran-Iraq War. Its militia, the Badr Brigades, was raised, trained and armed by Iran.

Al Daawa leaders, including Maliki, took refuge in Iran during the course of the Iran-Iraq war. Little wonder, that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad greeted Maliki as a long-lost brother during two visits to Tehran.

The Iranian government deplored the spectacle of Shiites killing one another when Maliki launched his offensive in Basra with the purported aim of disarming rogue militias, with the toll mounting to more than 300 in a week.

Once the Americans and the British had intervened on Maliki's side, Iran had no qualms about

assisting the Mahdi Army militia at a tactical command level. That apparently provided the latest evidence to Petraeus underscoring the "destructive role" of Iran.

US voters may be impatient to pull out of Iraq, but it's no longer an issue of securing Iraq. The scenario of an independent Iraq without the American military protection has become inextricably linked with regional power balance between rising Shiite Iran and the predominantly Sunni Arab Middle East.

If a Democratic candidate is elected president in November, he or she must devise a plan to bring the US troops home from Iraq which, somehow, deprives Iran from acquiring even greater influence in the region. Thus, due to the Bush administration's policy blunders, Iraq has now become an Iranian issue as well.

Dilip Hiro is the author of several books and most recently, *Blood of the Earth: The Battle for the World's Vanishing Oil Resources*, published by Nation Books.

©Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.