

Time to rethink food security

Global food crisis requires upheaval in conventional wisdom

THE statement made by the head of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) last week that the global food crisis could lead to civil war in some countries and requires a complete revamping of the international food system is both timely and welcome.

For too long, the conventional wisdom peddled, and sometimes imposed, by international organisations such as the World Bank and IMF has had a detrimental impact on agriculture in the developing world, and it is long overdue for fresh thinking that puts the needs of the hundreds of millions in the developing world for whom food security is of paramount concern front and centre.

If there is to be a silver lining in the current global food crisis it is this. At least now we can see how unsustainable was the prevailing mind-set, with its emphasis (if not coercion) on developing countries cutting their subsidies and opening their markets, while the developed countries continue to subsidise and protect with tariff and para-tariff barriers their own agricultural sectors.

The FAO chief correctly pointed out that part of the problem in the past, and even today, was the competing politics of different international organisations and the grafting of political solutions onto what is essentially an economic problem. The suggestion that politics should have no place in addressing the issue of food security is salutary, especially coming from the head of an organisation such as the FAO.

The current food crisis calls for serious measures and it also calls for policy-makers and international bureaucrats to change their thinking. The first thing is to acknowledge that this is a global problem that requires a global solution, in much the same way as we have fought diseases and terrorism. The second is to acknowledge that many of the ideas propounded over the past few decades have made things worse not better, and that countries, especially those in the developing world must not be have their hands tied in their efforts to avert hunger and misery.

Thus, governments must be free to put in place measures such as agricultural subsidies, government procurement, and guaranteed minimum prices for farmers, without interference or coercion from outside. And most importantly, let us never play politics with food security again.

Knowledge-based society

DU Teachers should give emphasis on research

THERE is no alternative to creation and application of high quality knowledge through research for a nation to progress and prosper. It is widely believed that the future world will be shaped by the knowledge of science. Therefore, a community that will lag behind in updating itself through accumulation and imparting of knowledge will perish in the long run. It is true that many of today's problems have been created through the wrong use of scientific knowledge, but it is also true that it is this knowledge again that will solve them. Therefore, a balance has to be maintained in the application of knowledge.

Leading universities of the world and competent faculties have been playing a significant role in identifying areas where research was needed to create knowledge. Their findings have helped the modern world in accelerating the engine of progress. Therefore, a higher seat of learning like a university should spend more time in doing research than just dishing out degrees. In the same light it can be said that Dhaka University (DU) has the potential of undertaking worthy research endeavours to contribute to the knowledge bank of the world. And DU has an enviable tradition of excelling in many of such works. In this respect the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government has also urged the Dhaka University teachers to lead from the front in creating a knowledge-based society to meet the challenges of the future.

Bangladesh has a number of problems that need to be addressed immediately if we want to overcome perpetuation of poverty. River erosion, controlling of a burgeoning population and increasing food production are some of the fundamental issues that can be addressed through continued and quality research. We believe there is no dearth of researchers in the country who are capable of undertaking such tasks. Dhaka University can come forward to initiate such research endeavours that would leave a long-lasting impact on society.

Another Armageddon in the Gulf?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THERE are speculations galore that between now and June, before things slide into the thick of American election, Israel is likely to attack Iran, with the latter reacting with a quick ripostethus starting a mutually bruising war in the gulf. We couldn't care less if either Democrats or Republicans benefit from the possible catastrophe, but it does worry us in this region as to what might happen to Afghanistan and Pakistan both Iran's neighbours but closely aligned to the United States. India, another US ally whom the US administration has been able to have on her side in its stand-off with Iran, will also matter in the ensuing conflict. How the next armageddon in a region close to ours will be eventually

played out in the present milieu is of profound interests to observers. To make matters complex, a number of ethnic economic factors are also involved. Thus, the scenario appears alarmist and, hopefully, it is just that.

The June deadline for a possible Israeli assault on Iran has come from diplomats who watch the Middle East closely, some of them having been interacting with Israeli officials, others with Iran and its neighbours in the region. Their lunch matches the circumstantial evidence, not excluding, of course, the increased chatter within the media community about Dick Cheney's visit to the Gulf.

PERSPECTIVES

There are several other indications of the looming disaster. Apart from frequent alerts about Israel distributing gas masks to its citizens, there was the wire agency story during the week from Jerusalem. It quoted Israel's National Infrastructure Minister Ben Eliezer as warning that Israel would respond to any Iranian attack by destroying that country. Ben Eliezer's ominous remark was carried on Israel's public radio. Referring to an ongoing five-day home front defence exercise he claimed that it was not meant to threaten Israel's neighbours, but the "scenarios considered in the exercise could be reality tomorrow."

Cheney's swing tour included Oman and Israel, and is thought to be of significance. In Israel, he is believed to have given the proverbial green light to Prime Minister Olmert to take the course that best suited him vis-a-vis Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon. Oman, on the other hand offers the best view of the perennially vulnerable Hormuz straits, from where much of the world gets its oil supply. The month of June provides the last clear-weather military opportunity to Israel to pick targets in Iran before rains arrive there in July. Soon after, there will be the excitement of US elections.

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tions of the looming disaster. Apart from frequent alerts about Israel distributing gas masks to its citizens, there was the wire agency story during the week from Jerusalem. It quoted Israel's National Infrastructure Minister Ben Eliezer as warning that Israel would respond to any Iranian attack by destroying that country. Ben Eliezer's ominous remark was carried on Israel's public radio. Referring to an ongoing five-day home front defence exercise he claimed that it was not meant to threaten Israel's neighbours, but the "scenarios considered in the exercise could be reality tomorrow."

Dick Cheney, while visiting

Israel last month, was told by Defence Minister Ehud Barak that "no option would be ruled out in Israel's attempt to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons," yet there seems to be a unanimity of opinion with regard to the consequences of an Israeli attack on Tehran's nuclear target. Almost everyone agrees that it will be different from the 1981 destructions of the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq. Israel may not be able to get away with it in case of Iran, whose response can be seriously debilitating for the entire gulf region and beyond. This brings us to the question; what impact would it have on South Asia that would be different from 1990, when "Desert Storm" the first gulf war was enacted in the wake of Saddam Hussain's occupation of Kuwait?

Removed from the equation this time around are Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, both outspoken critics of imperialism that greatly worried the US-led coalition, with their parties no longer evidently keen to challenge the US game plan even if it brings rack and ruin. The coast should be clear for any strategic help that might be needed, after the advent of Dr Manmohan Singh as the

economic messiah for corporate India, which he still remain in addition to his being at the helm of the ruling UPA government. In Pakistan, a West-friendly Nawaz Sharif also a part of new coalition government will provide ballast to the emerging equation in South Asia in favour of a new US adventure in the gulf.

However, in the West's disavow, the only flaw in the scenario is that the on-going war on terror has not quite accomplished anything that resembles a victory for its mainly pro-western advocates. And that has the potential of disturbing all calculations, including the ones favoured by India and Pakistan in recent days of their rare thaw. Afghanistan, with its huge problems under its US protected and Kabul-bound chieftain Hamid Karzai, is more of a liability for the West than an asset.

Often, the tectonic effects of a seemingly distant conflict are closer to us than we imagine. Sometimes, on the other hand, we imagine these effects when there is none. It all depends on how the impending armageddon will be played out.

Erly (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISS

A real test coming for new democracy in Pakistan

A debate is going on within the ruling coalition that if the Sindh government could withdraw its appeal from superior courts in the Major Kaleem case against MQM leaders, then why couldn't the case against the Baluch leader be withdrawn? MQM leader Altaf Hussain was convicted in absentia by an anti-terrorist court in 1994, but the case was withdrawn in 2007 by the Sindh government. This case has become a real litmus test for the new democracy in Pakistan.

HAMID MIR

RELEASE of deposed judges was so easy, but the withdrawal of fake cases against Baluch leaders is becoming difficult for the new government of Pakistan. The new Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani ordered the release of detained judges immediately after getting majority in the National Assembly of Pakistan last month. His orders were implemented by the police within an hour. All Supreme Court judges were released after four months of detention ordered by President Pervez Musharraf in November 2007.

The same Yousaf Raza Gilani has asked for the withdrawal of cases against Baluch leader Akhtar Mengal, but his orders have not been implemented because the army is involved against Baluch leader. Despite his desire, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani is finding it difficult to establish his writ in Baluchistan province. The election was nakedly rigged in Baluchistan. Pro-Musharraf Muslim League got a majority only in Baluchistan, but all the Musharrafite leaders extended their support to Gilani's Peoples Party after they were routed in three other provinces.

People's Party formed the government in Baluchistan. The new Chief Minister of Baluchistan, Mr. Raisani, demanded a halt to military operations in his province. He sent flowers to Akhtar Mengal in Karachi central jail. PM Gilani also ordered withdrawal of cases against the well-respected Baluch leader, but the administration has raised some legal excuses in this regard.

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government could withdraw its appeal from superior courts in the Major Kaleem case against MQM leaders, then why couldn't the case against the Baluch leader be withdrawn? MQM leader Altaf Hussain was convicted in absentia by an anti-terrorist court in 1994, but the case was withdrawn in 2007 by the Sindh government. This case has become a real litmus test for the new democracy in Pakistan.

The adviser to the prime minister on home affairs, Rehman Malik, met Akhtar Mengal in the central jail Karachi recently and offered him release on bail, but the former chief minister and president of Baluchistan National Party (BNP) refused to come out of jail without his guards and party workers who were arrested and convicted by the previous regime on the complaint of a Pakistan Army Havaladar, Qurban Hussain. Mengal demanded release of his 25 party workers and return of at least 800 missing persons belonging to Baluchistan. These people disappeared after a military operation was started in the province in 2005.

Akhtar Mengal was implicated in many cases, including a treason case that was registered against him due to his public speeches against the military operation.

He was arrested two years ago on the orders of the then Director General Military Intelligence Major General Nadeem Ijaz. He was produced in an anti-terrorist court in an iron cage. He was not arrested under the charges of firing missiles on government installations, rather he was arrested because his guards detained some intelligence officials who were trying to harass him and his school-going children.

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On April 5, 2006, while Mengal was taking his son to a school in Karachi, two motorcyclists followed his car. On his way back home, still being followed, Akhtar stopped his car and asked them who they were and why he was being followed, and what they wanted of him. They failed to give any satisfactory answer. Asadullah Mengal, brother of Akhtar Mengal, was kidnapped and killed in Karachi in 1977 when a military operation was being conducted in Baluchistan. Keeping in mind the past experience, Akhtar decided to take some action against the mysterious motorcyclists.

Four of his tribesmen guards picked up the two riders, took them to Akhtar's house and threatened to hand them over to the police. At this stage, the two admitted being army personnel. Almost immediately, a large number of a law enforcement agency men arrived at the house, took away their two companions and laid siege to the house and its occupants.

On April 11, Iqbal Haider, Secretary-General of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP), along with a group of fellow commission members, visited Akhtar's house and was allowed entry by the security officials. That same night, all personnel were withdrawn from the house and Akhtar and his family were free to go out.

A Havaladar of the Pakistan army, Qurban Hussain, filed an FIR (170/06) at Darakshan Police Station against Akhtar Mengal and his four guards on April 5, 2006. On the basis of this FIR, a case (8/06) was registered in the Anti-Terrorism Court-V (ATC), Karachi.

When Akhtar's relatives

attempted to file an FIR against those who were following school-going children, it was refused. A constitutional petition (D-1917/06) was filed on Akhtar's behalf in the Sindh High Court, asking that the FIR be accepted and registered. On October 13, the court restrained the ATC from pronouncing a judgment against the four accused.

Despite this restraining order, Akhtar's four arrested guards named in the FIR were convicted on December 9, 2006, by the ATC and sentenced to several terms of imprisonment, including life, and each was fined Rs140,000.

Akhtar himself remained free to move, and continued his political activities. He tried to mobilise the Baluch people against the military operation in which former Chief Minister Akbar Bugti was killed. President Pervez Musharraf was chief of the army staff at the time of the operation.

Akhtar Mengal was arrested on November 28, 2006, together with 14 of his party men, by the Baluchistan police and taken to Lassi Farm House in Hub Town, which was declared a sub-jail. He was kept there until December 26, when his arrest was disclosed and he was produced before the ATC. His 14 companions were removed to an undisclosed destination. Their whereabouts remained unknown.

Akhtar's trial in the ATC started in the usual court premises, but it was later decided that he would be tried in Central Prison, Karachi, from January 8.

In the courtroom, he was forced to sit in an iron cage away from his counsel. This treatment was a reflection of the hatred of the establishment for Akhtar Mengal.

Late PPP Chairperson Benazir Bhutto always demanded withdrawal of cases against Akhtar. Just a few days before her assassination, she addressed a public meeting in Quetta and again demanded his release.

New PPP Co-Chairman Asif Ali Zardari is determined to withdraw all cases against him, but some active components of the old

establishment are coming up with a number of legal excuses. Zardari has asked the Interior Ministry to coordinate with the provincial governments of Sindh and Baluchistan for the release of Akhtar Mengal.

The Interior Ministry informed Zardari about some sensitivities involved in cases against Akhtar Mengal. A senior leader of BNP, Abdul Rauf Mengal, confirmed that an offer was made to Akhtar Mengal that he could come out of the jail on bail. Akhtar was assured that the government would not oppose his bail application in the court, but he said he would not come out without his guards and workers who were convicted in 2006. He is demanding withdrawal of cases against him and the return of missing people in Baluchistan.

The new ruling coalition is under immense pressure from the new Baluchistan government to release Akhtar Mengal. A federal minister has reminded his colleagues that a case was registered against pro-Musharraf MQM chief Altaf Hussain and his colleagues in 1991 on the complaint of one Major Kaleem who was kidnapped at gun-point during a military operation in Karachi. Altaf Hussain and Dr Imran Farooq were sentenced for 27 years imprisonment in absentia by an Anti-Terrorist Court of Karachi in 1994.

Later, the Sindh High Court found all defendants innocent in 1998, but the Sindh government filed an appeal against the SHC decision in the Supreme Court. The Sindh government withdrew its appeal from SC on August 13, 2007, and the whole case was closed. The government has been advised to act in the same manner, but some legal experts have the view that the Major Kaleem case is different from the Havaladar Qurban case.

The advisor for the interior, Rehman Malik, will meet members of the parliament from Baluchistan soon and will take them into confidence about the cases against Akhtar Mengal. He is trying his level best to meet the

demands of Akhtar without annoying the army. Rehman Malik told this correspondent: "We are determined to release Akhtar Mengal and his workers, but we need a few days for our homework."

It is learnt that the government is thinking about a general amnesty for all the Baluch militants except Barahmad Bugti, who is reportedly hiding in Afghanistan. Security outfits have reports that a grandson of Akbar Bugti is in contact with Indian authorities and is receiving support from them.

Family sources of late Akbar Bugti have always denied these reports. Some members of the parliament from Baluchistan have advised the prime minister that Barahmad Bugti should also be given amnesty. The government is trying to get an assurance from Akhtar Mengal that he will not support Barahmad Bugti, but the former chief minister has not given any assurance in this regard.

Akhtar Mengal is waiting for the restoration of the deposed judges. He is confident that they will give him justice. Very few people know that it was "traitor" Akbar Bugti who appointed Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry as the advocate general of Baluchistan in 1988 after becoming chief minister of the province. Later on, Chaudhry was made judge of the Baluchistan High Court and then the Supreme Court.

Bugti was killed by the Pakistan army in 2006 when Chaudhry was chief justice. He remained silent, but he should not remain silent after his restoration. The people of Baluchistan expect a lot from him. He will be restored by parliament in the last week of April (may be on April 25th), and it is expected that he will try to establish the writ of the constitution in his own province immediately after restoration. He has to initiate an inquiry into the murder cases of Akbar Bugti and Benazir Bhutto, and he must provide justice to Akhtar Mengal.

Hamid Mir writes from Pakistan.

9% for 9%



M.J. AKBAR

THERE are two dangerous moments in the life of any politician. One comes when he has the misfortune to be the messenger of bad news. Good news is brought by a crowd; bad news is borne by an individual, for the crowd suddenly discovers it has other things to do. The messenger's loyalty and courage are always praised -- he may even, in some circumstances, be awarded the Padma Vibhushan -- before his tongue is sliced off and deposited in a very cold icebox. Bad news may

be necessary, but that does not mean that it is welcome.

The Left Front, which is the raft on which the UPA government has been sailing for four years, decided that it would carry the news about inflation-turmoil to the closed mind into which every government retreats under pressure. The Left, which is still anxious to save the Manmohan Singh government from self-inflicted wounds, wanted to hear prescriptions. Instead, it got a snuffy sermon based on the extraordinary assertion that "political parties should not politicise the misery of the people."

Living in Delhi is sufficient to addle what little brains the Almighty has allotted to me, but I find this quite incomprehensible. If political parties do not politicise the misery, what should they politicise? What are they in politics for? To celebrate Diwali every week? Heaven knows, enough politicians do that already. Corruption is so rampant that minimal proprieties have been abandoned. One example is sufficient. The Prime Minister's Office has written eight letters between November 2007 and February 2008 to the petroleum ministry, headed by Murli

Deora, demanding that gas supplies to companies owned by shipping and transport minister T.R. Baalu's family be expedited. Questions arise: for starters, it would be nice to know how many letters the Prime Minister's Office has written to finance minister P. Chidambaram demanding that inflation be brought under control. But, of course, the prime minister believes that inflation cannot bring down his government, while the DMK can, and, therefore, its ministers must be appeased.

More interesting: why does it need eight letters on the same

subject? The PMO contains the most powerful bureaucrats in the country, backed by the authority of the prime minister. No letter can leave the PMO without the PM's personal sanction, even if he does not sign the missive himself. Murli Deora is not famous for being subversive, or revolutionary. Why would he need to be told eight times? There can be only one reason: because the PMO's directive demanded that the petroleum ministry flout a rule in order to help the family of a fellow cabinet minister. The sheer persistence -- eight letters in four months -- tells its own story.

If only such persistence had been shown, and during the same period, in the effort to curb inflation, the Left might have not needed to remind the government that the Finance Bill had still not been passed, and it could not be passed without the Left's support.

But, at least, the prime minister's formulation recognises that the people are indeed miserable.

And when they are miserable it is hardly surprising that they tend to vote against those who have made them miserable. The Congress did have an opportunity in Karnataka to recover in the coming Assembly elections, but inflation seems to have punctured its chances.

Here is a fact of life that Prime Minister Singh and Mrs Sonia Gandhi, his mentor, may want to remember: it is the people who politicise misery when they convert their anger into a vote.

Which brings us to the second danger in the career of a politician. This is visited upon the more fortunate, for only someone who has been permitted to roar as a lion can be castrated into bleating like a scapegoat. You can't make a scapegoat out of a goat, can you?

When the political price of inflation becomes even more evident, there will be clamour within Congress ranks for a public sacrifice. There is already talk that this sacrificial lamb, or goat, will be Finance Minister Chidambaram.

Since no prime minister offers his own head as sacrifice, Dr Manmohan Singh will gracefully step aside so that the chap down the pecking order can take the hit.

It is difficult for finance ministers to last the course; the portfolio is simply too demanding. By such norms, Chidambaram has done better than most. He can be pleased at the fact that he has presented every budget since the UPA came to power, and even if he ends up on the political platter his successor will inherit all the problems without the satisfaction of delivering the annual budget in February. By then, the general elections will be upon us, even if they are not brought forward.

But what he should be angry about is that it will be his head on the platter when the responsibility for inflation is not his alone, even among his peers. He might be particularly irritated by the fact that no one is raising a finger at his bete noire, Kamal Nath, for instance (the two ministers have

been sparring with less courtesy than wrestlers in Haryana). One factor in the rise of steel prices is because Kamal Nath has pushed the export of iron ore at virtually any cost, both to the exchequer and the environment, and even now refuses to increase export duties. Or Chidambaram might legitimately ask why the DMK ministers, who are the well-heeled guardians and dons of the cement industry in Tamil Nadu, do not get blamed when cement prices rise.

There has always been a disconnect between the misery of the people and the joy of the winners in the 9% growth lottery, as the BJP-led NDA discovered to its horror in the last general election, and as the present government could find out in the next election. As someone archly remarked, India has 9% growth for 9% of its people. Unfortunately for the political and business elite, India has 100% democracy for 100% of its people.

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