

The Chuadanga jail break

Thorough review of prison security is called for

THE incredibly disturbing manner in which four prisoners managed to make good their escape from Chuadanga jail on Thursday night inevitably brings up the question of the state of prison security. To be sure, it can easily be argued, and for good reason, that the prevailing electricity crisis in the country was a contributory factor in the escape by the four men, all of whom have the bad reputation of being feared outlaws. What cannot be overlooked, though, is the sheer incompetence and lack of alertness on the part of the jail authorities here. It is on this issue that the authorities, especially those responsible for jail administration, must now focus. If prisoners can escape so easily, and that too from a secure jail as Chuadanga's, one can legitimately raise the issue of the lapses that might lead to similar incidents in other prisons around the country.

We feel, as surely others around the country do, that a thorough, definitive review of the situation has become necessary. There ought to be two aspects to such a review. In the first place, a thorough assessment of administrative and security conditions must be undertaken in Chuadanga jail. The objective must be one of digging into the roots of how long the four prisoners were engaged in plans to break out of jail without anyone noticing what they were up to. Or there is the other, more crucial question: is it possible that these convicts could have been assisted by individuals on the staff of Chuadanga prison? In the second place, a scooping inquiry into prevailing security conditions in other jails all over Bangladesh has also become a necessity. Such issues as neglect of duty, poor construction of buildings, et cetera, should be brought within the scope of inquiry and remedial actions taken without sitting on the findings.

The biggest element of surprise about the Chuadanga jail incident is the ease with which the prisoners were able to get away. The jail has been known to be a fortified structure. If now such so-called fortified structures are so easily proved to be vulnerable, a whole new area of problems comes up before us. With the law and order situation in the country not in a state that can cheer us, the Chuadanga jail break only increases our sense of foreboding. We wait for the Home Ministry to come up with a statement on the incident.

More Bush doctrine

How is that working out?

SPEAKING in front of the Knesset on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the birth of Israel, US President George W. Bush once again demonstrated just how shallow and myopic his understanding of world affairs is.

In his speech he ridiculed the idea of "negotiat[ing] with terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them they have been wrong all along" and suggested that such "appeasement" would be akin to negotiating with the Nazis in 1939.

Sadly, this narrow, inflexible, pseudo-tough-guy posturing has long been the position of the Bush administration, and has remained unchanged even as the abject failure of his foreign policy misadventures becomes more apparent by the day.

In the first instance, it should be pointed out that Bush's childish insistence on dubbing this or that world leader a "radical" or an "extremist," and refusing to have anything to do with him, has proved spectacularly counter-productive. It has done nothing to resolve the US's thorny issues with countries such as Iran, North Korea, or Cuba, and the US is today farther from its goal of isolating them and containing whatever threat they might pose than it has ever been before.

In the second, merely sitting down to speak with an antagonistic world leader is merely a recognition of the fact that while two nations might have divergent values and interests, that, often, there can be an area of convergence of interests such that communication can help defuse tensions and benefit both parties as well as the world at large. Did US presidents never sit with their Soviet counterparts?

The use of the word "appeasement" to define this kind of diplomacy is the most worrisome of all the Bush administration's approach to world affairs. This is a world view that equates dialogue and discussion with weakness and unilateralism and bullying with strength. It is precisely this kind of blinkered thinking that has got the US into the fiasco in Iraq and made the world a radically less safe place than it was eight years ago.

Bush's latest comments show that he has learned nothing over the past eight years. The planet will heave a sigh of relief when he exits office next year.

The right to food



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE United Nations has warned that 82 countries, including China and India, face food emergencies this year as cereal stocks are at an all-time low. Stockpiles of grains such as rice and wheat have dropped to their lowest levels, sufficient to feed the world for only 54 days, after which millions may face starvation.

The World Bank and IMF have sounded a bigger alarm. The WB president, Robert Zoellick, said that 100 million people in low-income countries could be pushed deeper into poverty because of surging food prices caused directly by the imbalance between demand and supply. IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn says: "As we know, learning from the past, these kinds of situations sometimes end in war."

Food riots have already erupted in many countries, including Egypt, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Mozambique, Yemen, Mexico, Mauritania, Indonesia, Bolivia, the Philippines, India, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Uzbekistan.

From the rice of Asia to the wheat of Australia, the surging prices of foods are breaking the budget of the poor and raising the spectres of hunger and unrest. Ironically, affluent countries of the world, including US, UK, Canada and Brazil, are bringing into force measures to increase the use of bio-fuels, when soaring food prices are threatening famine in at least 37 countries in Asia and Africa.

The industrialised countries have started the bio-fuel boom by fixing ambitious targets for its use. The European Union has set a goal for its member states, who should use at least 5.75 percent bio-fuel as fuel by 2010, and 10 percent by 2020. The US wants 35 billion gallons of bio-fuel a year.

President George W. Bush has blamed the changing food habits of the people of India and China for the crisis, and said that increasing demands for meat in these two countries was behind the crisis. In fact, Mr. Bush has refused to accept the harsh truth that his own doings have played a significant role in fuelling the crisis.

The use of US corn for ethanol is forecasted to increase to 114 million tons in the next year, which is almost a third of the total projected US crops. Cars in the US now burn corn equal to the total import needs of 82 food-deficit countries. The entire corn and soybean harvest of the US would need to be processed into ethanol and bio-diesel.

Hundreds of thousands have already been displaced by the soybean plantations on 50 million hectares of land in southern Brazil, northern Argentina, eastern Bolivia and Paraguay. Farmers are being forced to give up their land to grow fuel crops for export. Converting most of the earth's arable land for growing fuel crops threatens to divert the world's grain supply from food to fuel.

UK farmers each year produce 3.5 million tons of grains, which is more than they need. If these surplus grains are sold to bio-fuel industries instead of the hungry world, it would certainly lead to mass starvation in the poor countries. Any foodstuff used for fuel is taken out of the world's food chain, when millions of people are

starving.

The recent UN report on biofuel has raised issues regarding food security and bio-fuel production. Jean Ziegler, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, has described the transforming of wheat and maize crops into biofuel as an absolute catastrophe, and termed the diversion of arable land away from food crops a crime against humanity. Ziegler has called for a five-year moratorium on bio-fuel production.

Bio-fuel champions assure us that because fuel crops are renewable, they are environment friendly, can reduce global warming and will foster rural development. But environmental scientists differ with this statement. According to them, every ton of palm oil, which is used for making bio-fuel, generates 33 tons of carbon dioxide emission -- 10 times more than petroleum.

The 2007 study by scientists from Britain, US, Germany and Switzerland, including Professor Paul Crutzen who won a Nobel Prize for his work on ozone, have reported that emissions from the burning of bio-fuels derived from

rapeseed and corn have been found to produce more greenhouse gases than they save. Tropical forests cleared for sugarcane ethanol emit 50 percent more greenhouse gases than the production and use of the same amount of gasoline.

According to a UN report, 25,000 people die of hunger or hunger-related causes every day across the world. Even when the price of foodstuff was low, 850 million people had to go hungry only because they could not afford to buy any. Millions of people are now pushed below the breadline with the rapid rise in food prices because of low global food reserves and the soaring demand for bio-fuel.

A study by the European Union shows that the 100 litres of ethanol, which are needed to fill the oil tank of a sports utility car, require some 240 kilograms of corn, enough to feed a person for a year. In fact, bio-fuel industries are snatching food from the mouths of the hungry people to run the cars of the rich.

A bio-fuel frenzy and other misguided policies have led to the global food crisis in which prices have soared and rice consumption has out-paced production, threatening a billion people with starvation. The IMF has taken a stand against bio-fuels, which pose a moral problem, and has also called for a moratorium on the use of foodgrain-powered vehicles.

A bio-fuel backlash has erupted in the major ethanol producer, the

US, as lawmakers and experts debate the merits of converting food to fuel to support America's age-old love for cars.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has formed a top-level task force to tackle the global food crisis. The first meeting of the task force was held on May 13, with an urging to the global leaders for help in tackling the food crisis. The task force has also planned to hold a high level meeting of FAO in Rome from June 3 to 5 to tackle the crisis.

It is almost sure that the affluent countries will brush-off the demands and protests of the poor nations, and continue to pollute the environment and divert corn for bio-fuel. The time is ripe for the leaders of the Third World countries to unite and resist this existential threat.

The World Food Summit in November 1996 reaffirmed the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger. One of FAO's main objectives is ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger, and its Right to Food unit is committed to the realisation of the right to food for the hungry millions across the world. The forthcoming meeting of FAO should also promote the human right to food.

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

Passage to democracy



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

MOST Muslims would hesitate to quote Daniel Pipes, an outspoken promoter of the "Islamofascism threat" theory who urges a broad war on terror by the US on regimes from Syria to Iran, and regards Muslim immigrants as "brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and not exactly maintaining Germanic standard of hygiene."

He is criticised by scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt for founding Campus Watch, which encourages students to report on professors who do not match the standard of the pro-Israeli policy of the Bush administration.

He is a friend of neo-con patriarch David Kagan and columnist Charles Krauthammer.

His vitriolic anti-Muslim campaign notwithstanding, he was not off the mark in an article where he wrote that the American dream of spreading democracy includes much more than ballots: "Elections are usually a long term process of change that includes an effective rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and much more... It requires 10, 20, 30 years of elections for full fledged democracy to come into existence."

Paradoxically, the Asian expe-

riences of Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and now of China, do not support the thesis that democracy, as commonly understood, would necessarily bring about economic development.

On the contrary, emphasis is put more on stability and rule by law, unless it transcends the limit of tolerance of moral imperatives as has happened in Burma. There, the military authorities preferred to hold a referendum instead of opening up the country to international aid, which is sorely needed by the cyclone devastated people who are ill-fed, ill-clad, and living under the open sky.

One is not sure whether such callous treatment of one's own citizens merits action under the now internationally accepted (through the 2005 UN Summit) concept of the duty to protect and prevent, in disregard of the concepts of territorial integrity and Westphalian sovereignty that, in any case, has been transformed considerably.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner had suggested that the United Nations invoke the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect" civilians as the basis for a resolution to allow the delivery of international aid even without the permission of the

Burmese military government.

But the French proposal faced opposition from Security Council members Russia, China, and South Africa. If the military government's stranglehold on the Burmese people since 1962 does not ignite a cry for democracy in the Western world, as it does to rectify "democracy deficit" in the Islamic world, then one may have to reluctantly accept Daniel Pipes' opinion that "WMD was never the basic reason for the war. Nor was it the horrid repression in Iraq. Or the danger Saddam posed to his neighbours... The campaign in Iraq is about keeping promises to the United States or paying the consequences... Keep your promises or you are gone."

If it were the policy the US intends to use, even in the short term, then despite its unquestionable military domination over the globe, the soft power that had made the US the guardian angel in the post-War period, or even before, would surely decline.

But since the US would remain the most powerful player on the global stage, even in an increasingly multi-polar world, the international community cannot afford to remain angry with the

US simply because one president believed more in muscle than in diplomacy.

As Professor Leila Sadat (of Washington University in St. Louis) points out: "The real war against international terrorism is far from over, as recent events in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan have demonstrated. To win what is likely to be a long, slow, and difficult struggle the United States needs to be perceived as a credible, fair and a supporter of the rule of law."

Former CIA officer Bruce Riedel calls Pakistan the most dangerous country in the world today: "There the forces that threaten global peace and security all come together: proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, poverty, dictatorship, radical Islam and narcotics." Though the plot for the destruction wrought in 9/11 was hatched in Afghanistan, its tactical mastermind Khaled Mohammed was arrested in Pakistan.

In addition, Riedel says, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mullah Omar are believed to be hiding in the mountainous region of Pak-Afghan bordering badlands. If the cold war dynamics dictated presi-

dents Eisenhower, Jack Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to be friends of Generals Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Huq, it is not easily explicable as to why, when Pakistan has taken a few faltering steps towards democracy through a free and fair election that resoundingly defeated President Musharraf's party PML (Q) and his popularity was at an all time low, the Bush administration would continue to call Musharraf as "the indispensable man" in Pakistan.

Perhaps the next US administration would accept Senator Joseph Biden's proposal of a "democracy bonus" that would increase the aid level every year. The US president would certify that Pakistan continued to remain a democracy, and also heed the call by Barack Obama and some congressmen that Bush administration should follow a Pakistan policy and not a Musharraf policy.

Debate over Pakistan policy apart, the Chinese argument that a successful democracy comes only after a considerable amount of economic development tallies with Francis Fukuyama's. One of the conditions that an uninterrupted transition to sustainable democracy requires, in addition to other factors, is a degree of economic development that produces a property owning middle class, which would have a stake in maintaining a stable democratic dispensation.

But the collective will for social coordination leading to democracy, however imperfect it may be, in most of the countries still under authoritarian rule ruling against the will of the people cannot ensure stability and would, in the ultimate analysis,

promote conditions of threat and insecurity in both the prosperous and the underdeveloped parts of the world.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Western powers' representatives in Bangladesh are insistent that democracy be reestablished in Bangladesh without further delay. Perhaps at the back of their minds these powers are convinced of linkage among the militants of Bangladesh and Pakistan.

According to Bruce Riedel, 80% of the suicide bombers attacking US and Nato forces in Afghanistan are trained in Pakistan by the Taliban or al-Qaida, and that the British trial of the abortive plane high-jacking has shown that the plot was linked directly to the al-Qaida leadership in Pakistan.

As it appears from the address of the chief advisor to the nation on May 12, the administration is indecisive on the question of the trial of war criminals, a demand voiced by almost the entire nation.

In the light of Afghanistan-returned "warriors" now embedded around the country who bared their teeth during their violent protest over the proposed Women's Development Policy, and of Jamaat's labeling the war of independence as a "civil war" and denying the existence of any "war criminals" in Bangladesh, it would serve us well to be on guard and not dismiss reports of Eliza Griswold, Bertil Lintner and of others as a "conspiracy" to degrade the image of Bangladesh abroad.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is former secretary and ambassador.

Racism stalks Obama

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Many people do not like to think or find things out for themselves. They would rather listen to their favourite talk radio host or television commentators, many of whom are right-wingers. These "ditto-heads" take their cue from what radio's Rush Limbaugh and Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity have to say about "Barack Hussein Obama."

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

STUDIES have shown that the first thing people notice about a person is not gender, but race. Comfort level is higher within one's racial group. People talk differently within their racial group than in a mixed racial company.

Racism has been stalking Barack Obama just below the surface. As he becomes the favourite to win the Democratic nomination and the US presidency, racial opposition to Obama is intensifying.

The primary in West Virginia primary on May 13, with Hillary trounced Obama by 41% (67% to

26%; it would have been worse if John Edwards, still on the ballot, had not siphoned away 7%), was only the milder, electoral version of the racial polarization.

Education and wealth strips off racism. West Virginia is 95% white. It ranks near the bottom in education and income. Its working class whites overwhelmingly chose Hillary Clinton. While some of Hillary's support is attributable to her better connection with the working class, the exit polls divulged a lot more.

Over 22% of the voters said that race was important in their decision: 80% of those voted for Hillary. About 50% of the white voters said

that Obama shares Rev. Wright's views, even though he has denounced and repudiated those.

People understand what someone from their own race says, but attribute the worst motives to those of another race. White Americans understand that Senator McCain does not share the opinions of Rev. John Hagee, whose endorsement he sought, and who has denounced the Catholics and blamed the sinners for hurricane Katrina. However, many white remain adamant that Obama shares Rev. Wright's beliefs.

Many people do not like to think or find things out for themselves. They would rather listen to their

favourite talk radio host or television commentators, many of whom are right-wingers. These "ditto-heads" take their cue from what radio's Rush Limbaugh and Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity have to say about "Barack Hussein Obama." Limbaugh successfully asked Republicans to vote for Hillary in the open primaries so that she, rather than Obama, is the Democratic nominee, calculating that Hillary is more beatable in November.

Ever since Sean Hannity aired the Rev. Wright tapes in March, that's all he has been running on his show. He single-handedly wants to destroy Obama's candidacy by linking him with Wright, and thus painting Obama as anti-American, anti-white, anti-Semite, unpatriotic and a friend of the terrorists. Such hate-mongering is beginning to have results.

As Obama was pumping flesh in a diner in Indiana, a white man waived him off and told reporters that he did not want to shake the

hands of a Muslim. Prior to the primary in every state, Obama campaign found that rumours were being circulating in that state through the internet that Obama is a Muslim. Consequently, 13% of Americans believe that Obama is a Muslim.

The Washington Post chronicled more episodes: "For all the hope and excitement Obama's candidacy is generating, some of his field workers, phone-bank volunteers and campaign surrogates are encountering a raw racism and hostility that have gone largely unnoticed -- and unreported -- this election season. Doors have been slammed in their faces. They've been called racially derogatory names. And they've endured malicious rants and ugly stereotyping from people who can't fathom that the senator from Illinois could become the first African-American president."

Victoria Switzer, a retired social studies teacher, was on phone-bank duty one night during the

Pennsylvania primary campaign. One night was all she could take: "It wasn't pretty." She made 60 calls to prospective voters in Susquehanna County, her home county, which is 98 percent white. The responses were dispiriting. One caller, Switzer remembers, said he couldn't possibly vote for Obama and concluded: "Hang that darky from a tree!"

Documentary filmmaker Rory Kennedy, the daughter of the late Robert F. Kennedy, said she, too, came across "a lot of racism" when campaigning for Obama in Pennsylvania. One Pittsburgh union organiser told her he would not vote for Obama because he is black, and a white voter said: "White people look out for white people, and black people look out for black people."

In Vincennes, the Obama campaign office was vandalized at 2 a.m. on the eve of the primary. A large plate-glass window was smashed, an American flag stolen. Other windows were spray-painted with political messages: "Hamas votes

BHO" and "We don't cling to guns or religion. Goddamn Wright."

Gillian Bergeron, 23, was in charge of a five-county regional operation in northeastern Pennsylvania. At Scranton's annual Saint Patrick's Day parade some of the green Obama signs distributed by staffers were burned along the parade route.

Tunkhannock Borough Mayor Norm published a letter in a local paper: "Barack Hussein Obama and all of his talk will do nothing for our country. There is so much that people don't know about his upbringing in the Muslim world. His stepfather was a radical Muslim and the ranting of his minister against the white America, you can't convince me that some of that didn't rub off on him. 'No, I want a president that will salute our flag, and put their hand on the Bible when they take the oath of office.'"

Karen Seifert, a volunteer from New York, was outside of the largest polling location in Lackawanna County, Pa., on primary day when

she was pressed by a Clinton volunteer to explain her backing of Obama. "I trust him," Seifert replied. According to Seifert, the woman pointed to Obama's face on Seifert's T-shirt and said: "He's a half-breed and he's a Muslim. How can you trust that?"

On May 16, former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee made a bizarre joke during his speech at the National Rifle Association conference. Explaining an unexpected noise, Huckabee said (I paraphrase): It is the sound of Barack Obama hitting the ground when he thought someone shot at him.

The Secret Service has done an excellent job of protecting Barack Obama so far. Race-baiting by the likes of Sean Hannity may inspire some crazies to act out their racism. If Barack Obama were to be assassinated by a white man, America may be in for a race war.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.