

Israel celebrates independence, Palestinians mourn nakba

What is a joyous celebration to Israeli's is nakba, or catastrophe, to the Palestinians. The real catastrophe is not the failed Palestinian leadership or inept Arab regimes of the time, but the "impossibility of blocking the project for the Jewish state after the Holocaust."

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

ISRAEL celebrated the 60th anniversary of its independence last week. President Bush addressed the Israeli parliament, Knesset, to mark the occasion, condemning the appeasers, with a not so subtle dig at Barack Obama who wants not only to talk to America's friends, but also to its adversaries, such as Iran. However, Obama's generosity does not extend to the democratically elected representatives of the Palestinian people, Hamas.

Newspapers brought out special supplements. Columnists were effusive in their praise of the Israeli miracle. No American commentator articulated the Palestinian point of view.

On the contrary, well-known neoconservative Zionist, Charles Krauthammer of *The Washington Post*, bemoaned the suffering of the Jews during the period. As usual, he started with a blatant lie: "Six months before Israel's birth, the United Nations had decided by a two-thirds majority that the only

just solution from the British departure from Palestine would be establishment of a Jewish state and an Arab state side by side."

What Mr. Krauthammer does not mention is that the wishes of the Palestinians, the overwhelming majority living in Palestine at that time, were not taken into account, and that the protestations of the Arab states were dismissed out of hand by the western powers eager to hand Palestine to the Jews. This is like western powers handing over Bangladesh to a minority without consulting the wishes of the Bengali majority.

Mr. Krauthammer adds: "Palestinian dispossession is a direct result of the Arab rejection, then and now, of a Jewish state of any size on any part of the vast lands that Arabs claim as their exclusive patrimony." What a brilliant derogatory anti-Arab phrase, "the vast lands that Arabs claim as their exclusive patrimony." Mr. Krauthammer neglects to mention that the cause of Palestinian dispossession was their brutal expulsion by Israel.

For example, early on the morning of April 9, 1948, commandos of the Irgun (headed by Menachem Begin) and the Stern Gang attacked Deir Yassin, a village of about 750 Palestinian residents. The village lay outside the area assigned by the United Nations to the Jewish State.

But it was located on high ground in the corridor between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Deir Yassin was targeted for occupation under Plan Dalet, and the mainstream Jewish defense force, the Haganah, authorised the irregular terrorist forces of the Irgun and the Stern Gang to execute takeover.

In all, over 100 men, women, and children were systematically murdered. Fifty-three orphaned children were literally dumped along the wall of the Old City, where they were found by Miss Hind Hussein and brought to her home behind the American Colony Hotel, which was to become the Dar El-Tifl El-Arabi orphanage. The writer knows an orphan of the Deir Yassin massacre.

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phe is not the failed Palestinian leadership or inept Arab regimes of the time, but the "impossibility of blocking the project for the Jewish state after the Holocaust." The Palestinians paid the ultimate price, with their lands, possessions and lives, for the crimes the Europeans committed against their Jews.

Lebanese journalist Elias Khoury gave the Palestinian version in an op-ed in *The New York Times* on May 18: "In the alleys and passages of the Shatila camp, I discovered the truth of the catastrophe. Villagers expelled from the Galilee had suddenly found themselves living in huts set up hastily to provide temporary shelter. But the temporary became permanent, and the people were forced to construct a nation for themselves out of words and memories. They gave the various sections of their camps the names of the villages they had fled, and they lived, as they said, 'waiting' in a suspended time. Even when the waiting went on too long and became 'exile,' they still refused to believe that one would recognise and authenticate their tragedy.

"These peasant farmers, who made up the majority of the Arab population of Palestine in 1948, did not discover that they had had a

nation of their own until they lost it. They had been living in a historical continuity for hundreds of years, as a succession of invaders of different nationalities and ethnicities took control of their lands and communities. They were astonished to discover that these new invaders did not wish to control the land in the manner of the former invaders; instead they wanted it emptied of its inhabitants.

"The consternation of the Palestinians who told me the stories of their destroyed villages derives, essentially, from the absence of the world's acknowledgment of them, the lack of credence given to what happened to them. After the Holocaust, it became virtually impossible to condemn any action of the Israeli state. In establishing the state of Israel, the West had found a solution to its moral obligations and a release from the disastrous burden of Nazism."

No one wishes to hear the Palestinian story. Their history has been written by the victors: Israel has thus succeeded in blotting out its "original sin," as the French author Dominique Vidal referred to the situation. Were it not for the courageous voices of Israeli "new historians" like Ilan Pappé, the world would not have come to

admit that a people had been expelled from their land in a comprehensive ethnic cleansing operation, given the name "Plan D" by Israelis.

As Israel celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence, it is pointedly ignoring two truths: First, that there is another people, composed of the previous inhabitants of the country, who consider that anniversary to be a day of national disaster, and consider the nation of Jewish immigrants to have been built on the rubble of another nation, Palestine.

Second, that Israel's continued occupation of the remaining portions of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza has transformed the nakba from an historic incident to a daily reality, experienced by Palestinians through the invasive settlements, the wall of separation, and the checkpoints that disconnect their lands and sever the links between them, making their lives a hell on earth.

The peace process has failed, Yasir Arafat has died, and the iron fist policy put in place by Ariel Sharon has led to the nearly total defeat of the Palestinian national movement. That defeat is also a product of the short-sightedness of the architects of the Oslo Accords, a framework for future relations

between Israel and the anticipated state of Palestine, and the failure of the Palestinian leadership to find new methods of confronting the occupation in keeping with this two-state solution.

The defeat of the secular leaders of the Palestinian national movement has not given Israel the "peace of strength" it has sought since its foundation. Rather, it has brought the region to the brink of the abyss of fundamentalist tendencies.

What successive Israeli governments pretend to forget is that pushing the Palestinians to this destructive brink is not without a cost. Indeed, the Palestinians could drag Israel to the brink along with them. This would mean an open-ended state of war. Unfortunately, this is the direction in which rapidly unfolding developments are now propelling us, as witnessed in Gaza and now in Beirut, with Iran through its allies edging closer to a direct confrontation with Israel.

Israel has depicted the problem as rooted in the Arab world's refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist. But even after the majority of Arab states demonstrated their recognition of this right by supporting the Saudi peace initiative of 2002, nothing changed; in fact, things became worse.

To Palestinians, the true problem lies in Israel's rejection of the Palestinian right to an independent state, and in the prevailing Israeli culture's refusal to recognise that Palestinians were themselves victims of forced expulsion from their lands.

Recognising the sufferings of the victim, even if they are of the victim of a victim, is the necessary condition for an exit from this long and tragic tunnel. However, as the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci suggests, it is difficult to maintain the optimism of the will in the face of the pessimism of the intellect.

Pessimism of the will is what we are living today in the Middle East. It is a pessimism that warns not only of the danger of recurring episodes of catastrophe as Arab societies break apart, but also of the dismal prospect of an endless war that will provoke future tragedies in the 21st century.

Permanent wars and occupations have costs. Israel is finding out that even with 100% support of the world's lone superpower, the US, it does not have what it cherishes most -- peace and security. Might does not always make right.

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

Traffic congestion-free Dhaka -- a dream?

A congestion-free Dhaka city will ever remain a dream unless strict discipline and rule of law are enforced, together with ruthlessly limiting the number of rickshaws. The plea that rickshaws are environment friendly vehicles and a means of livelihood for thousands of families will only add to the number of people going down the poverty line, albeit some NGOs and a section of so-called human rights activists may differ.

M. SHOWKAT ALI

AT last, the much-desired DUTIF, as a local daily reports, has been shoved off into the shelf, leaving a traffic congestion-free Dhaka city a fading dream. Actually, it was no wonder that such would be the fate of plans and projects hatched not upon the consideration of the availability of fund, feasibility and pragmatism but upon the amount of kick-backs to be retrieved in the end.

The pernicious tendency to undertake ambitious and imprudent plans and projects has been a congenital disease in this country. Don't bother about money; it's no problem. Aren't there the 'stupid' illiterate people overcrowding the country? What of expertise? Don't worry. The donors themselves will look after that, no matter if the lion's share of the loan/aid goes back to them.

It's really astounding to think that to make Dhaka city clean, disciplined and traffic congestion free should be a far cry. But the sheer lack of intellect, courage in decision-making, foresight and, above all, statesmanship, side by side with incorrigible self-seeking crookedness, has rendered almost everything impossible. Most unfortunately for us, people of all levels here think that intelligence, bravery, wisdom and foresight emanate only from power and position. This is why there are always all-wise speakers, and seldom listeners.

One capricious ex-minister declared he would introduce Maglev train on the Dhaka-Chittagong line. Just imagine! Where trains with a maximum speed of 30/40 km often go off-track because of age-worn and faulty rail-tracks, he dreamt of Maglev trains running between Dhaka and Chittagong at 300 km/hour! Another boasted of a Jatrabari-Gulistan fly-over, and a few days ago someone proposed a Metro-rail.

What they could do with utmost ease and least expenditure was

establish strict discipline and rule of law on the roads and highways, abolish rickshaws from highways at all cost, and introduce computer-based data of all kinds of drivers. Another thing, which involves a reasonable amount of fund, is either elevating the railway line running through Dhaka city over the road crossings, or shifting it to the east of the city -- bypassing Dhaka city along the proposed flood control embankment -- thereby linking Kamalapur and Airport stations.

A congestion-free Dhaka city will ever remain a dream unless strict discipline and rule of law are enforced, together with ruthlessly limiting the number of rickshaws. The plea that rickshaws are environment friendly vehicles and a means of livelihood for thousands of families will only add to the number of people going down the poverty line, albeit some NGOs and a section of so-called human rights activists may differ. But can they say how many rickshaw pullers have been owners of a rickshaw, and how many of them have been suffering from incurable diseases and becoming disabled within a working span of 8/9 years?

It is a mystery that, in spite of abundant scope still existing to rehabilitate landless people in the rural areas with opportunities of self-

employment through microcredit, training in different handicraft and small scale cottage industries, raising poultry, fishery, producing fruits and vegetables on the uncultivated government *khas* land and so on, the so-called human rights groups, NGOs and political parties prefer them to establish slums in the city for their vested interests.

The overcrowding of Dhaka city is, in fact, the result of the stubborn and feudal mentality of the politicians and bureaucracy alike. For their own coterie interest they do not want decentralisation and prefer to keep everything centered in Dhaka. One of the brazen examples of this shamelessly coterie mentality is manifest in the reluctance to establish nine zonal offices of the Director General of Intermediate and Higher Education under the Ministry of Education, though the decision in that regard was declared in a seminar titled *Shushikshar jonyo shikshok* (Teachers for quality education) in 2002 by the then education minister.

These people never think why a teacher should come from Teknafor Tetulia to Dhaka to pursue his case of enlisting his name in the MPO, and move about helplessly in this unfriendly city for days and weeks together. They do not understand why every little thing must be done



in Dhaka, where the relevant files move only after palm-greasing at every table. Had those people in power and position had the slightest concern about the tribulations our common people have to suffer, they would have thought about reasonable alternatives long ago. And it would not really take a Newton or Einstein to figure it out.

For the kind and generous consideration of those running the government machinery, I as, an ordinary man with common sense, would suggest the following:

- To please decentralise administration. Make the divisional headquarters sub-centres of administration, including the judiciary. Set up the benches of High Court at the divisional headquarters. Save the poor common people from the limitless harassment they suffer in this unkind city.
- To curb the ever-increasing stream of rural landless people towards the capital, expand youth development programs in rural areas to train youths for self-employment, and provide micro-credit where necessary.
- To lease out government land to the real landless people, and water bodies to real fishermen to enable them to make substantial contribution to the national economy.
- To arrest recession of limited arable land of the country, and restrict random, unplanned (mis) use of land everywhere in the country. A pragmatic and far-sighted land policy is overdue. Indiscriminate (mis) use of arable land will very soon tell very adversely upon our food supply, and then what will happen to our poor masses?
- To set up planned residential accommodation with modern facilities for the poor and middle class people in all municipal areas, and also in villages. The real estate businesses should be encouraged to shift from the metropolises.
- To lessen the suffocating traffic jam of Dhaka city; Ease the congestion on the city roads and highways, replace small vehicles such as tempos, human-haulers and minibuses with more double-decker buses or light rail. Please, for God's sake, resist temptation of commission earning from importing junk vehicles from the



neighbouring country. The owners and people engaged in the transport business may be given the opportunity to own double-deckers through co-operatives and transport loans.

Remove rickshaws from the main streets and limit the number of the manually driven vehicles such as push-carts, rickshaw vans etc from the main streets. Provide training for the rickshaw-drivers on traffic rules and impose strict punishment on the violators of traffic rules.

It must be noted that only by keeping a computer data-base of rickshaw-pullers, the number of ever increasing rickshaws can be checked. In this respect, the assistance of NGOs and human rights groups can be sought.

Remove age-worn vehicles from the streets, and impose taxes, insurance premiums etc with rates according to their registration date, side by side minimise registration fees for the imported/reconditioned vehicles.

Revive, reinvigorate and expand train services on an emergency basis. Activate the full capacity of the railway workshops to build,

renovate and repair rail coaches, and resist the temptation of importing rail coaches from abroad.

Please refrain from shifting Kamalapur Railway station to Tongi, for that will be an unpardonable wastage of both money and land. Instead, join Kamalapur with airport by a rail track bypassing Rampura TV station along the east, and introduce light sky-train on the old rail tracks. Or elevate the existing rail line in the city over the road crossing points, as has been done in our neighbouring country, at a much lower cost than extravagant flyovers.

Set up satellite towns on the outskirts of Dhaka city and connect them with commuter trains or double-decker buses.

I earnestly hope that the present caretaker government will give a serious thought over the points, and get to work soon because there is great doubt that a political government will ever do it, for obvious reasons.

M. Showkat Ali is freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Go meet them, Senator

HAROLD FORD JR.

THE night Barack Obama is expected to accept the Democratic nomination will be Aug. 28, the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" address from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. King had a dream, and Barack Obama is part of its fulfillment.

We live in a more just and open country than we did 45 years ago, a country where an African-American may be elected president. That doesn't mean the country is perfectly just, or that we live in a new, post-racial era. But concerns about race in this election are overstated.

Do many rural or working-class

people have questions about Obama? Sure. But these are less about race than about culture. Obama has not lived their lives.

That's OK. In the weeks and months ahead, he just needs to show that he respects them and understands the issues that matter to them -- that he can make their lives better. Obama has run a first-rate primary campaign, energising countless new voters. Now he's got to get off the big stage more often and meet with people where they work, play and pray. That means getting out to schools and factories, coffee shops, fairgrounds and houses of worship. He needs to earn their trust.

That lesson was driven home for

me during my run for Senate in 2006, at a little bar-restaurant called the Lil' Rebel in Jackson, Tenn. I'd been to church, and during a morning prayer, Pastor Nathaniel Bond held my hands. "There are more Davids than Goliaths, and more answers than there are problems," he said. Later that day, as I was driving past the Lil' Rebel for the second time, heading out of town, I decided that I had heard those words for a reason. We turned the car around and pulled in. I wasn't scared, but my aide -- a white guy -- was slightly nervous. He told me that "if things don't go right, we'll just go."

When I walked in, the people couldn't have been nicer. They let us

put bumper stickers on their vehicles -- some next to Confederate flags and BUSH '04 STICKERS. They told me about another patron who was a big fan, and how upset he'd be that he had missed me. Well, about a week later, that guy approached me at a campaign event. "You should stop at every little place," he said. "You'll be surprised." I only regret the clock ran out on me before I could do more of that.

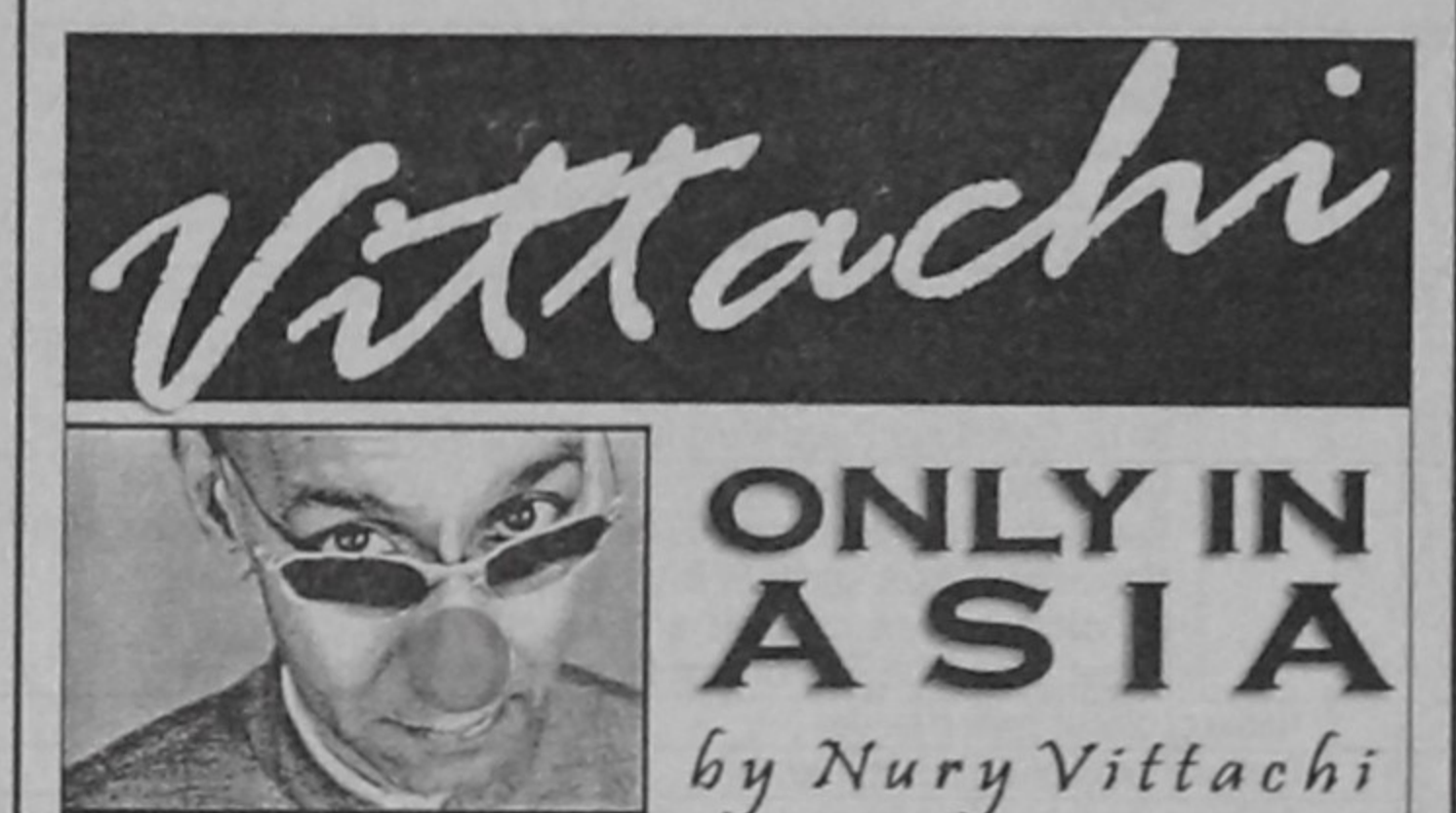
Obama has lots of time. He doesn't need to ride rodeo, or hunt if he doesn't like hunting. People know that the candidates running for president don't live just the way they live. But they want to know that they're understood, and that their daily struggles are respected.

Obama should mingle. He should go to the states where he lost big: walk across Kentucky and West Virginia. He should take half a day and work as a fireman, a waiter, a mechanic.

He can't shy away from embarrassing himself. When Obama went bowling and shot a 37 (for seven frames, with the help of some small children), he should have seen that as an opportunity. He could have returned to the same bowling alley the next day to show how determined he was to improve. "I told you I'd come back," he could have said with a smile. "We're all going to come back and improve. We just need to address our challenges honestly and head on."

No Democrat has won a majority of the working-class white vote since LBJ in 1964. That's partly because some have been smeared as elitists. But Barack Obama is no elitist. He was raised by his mother and grandparents. Nothing was spoon-fed to him; he had to work, and he took advantage of educational opportunities. More than that, he used what he learned to help working-class people. He has to tell that story, an authentic American story that hardworking people can relate to. He just needs to get out there and meet them.

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Forget the beer and knock back a nice glass of salad

I received a fascinating letter from a reader in Singapore. "Dear columnist, I read that the Japanese beverage firm Sapporo has launched a drink called Diet Water, which has no calories. I thought water had no calories anyway. What's the deal here?"

Ah, now this reader has stumbled upon a popular strategy in modern business known as "Marketing to the Terminally Stupid." By virtue of the fact that he reads this newspaper, we can tell that he is a highly intelligent person and knows that all water is diet water. But the sad truth is that many, many people have the same brain capacity as single-cell bacteria. Proof of this is the existence of thousands of people who buy Diet Water.

By coincidence, this just happens to be the anniversary of the day that John Pemberton first advertised his new drink Coca-Cola, way back in 1886, so let's look at unusual soft drinks from Asia and elsewhere on the planet.

Pepsi Cucumber: The American beverage maker Pepsi, looking for flavours that would appeal to the Asian palate, launched this in Asia only. It is not green. That's the only nice thing I can think of to say about it.

Future Cola: This is the Chinese copy of Coca-Cola, made by Wahaha Group. It is basically Coke with yummy added Chinese herbs and spices, bits of root and bark from the cassia tree. The slogan is "The Chinese People's Own Cola." Extensive attempts have been made to export it, but the rest of the planet's reaction appears to be: "And they can keep it."

Coolpis: If you think the name is bad, just wait till you hear about the contents. Every carton contains a whole litre of liquidized

fermented cabbage. It comes from South Korea, but mysteriously has also failed to attract a big following in the international market.

Kidsbeer: This is a Japanese drink for pre-teens. It looks like beer and has a nice foamy head, but instead of alcohol, has large amounts of nice, healthy white sugar. It is advertised with television commercials of small children chugging it down like Mel Gibson with a barrel of Carlsberg.

Red Can Pepsi: In the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games, the Pepsi-Cola company re-launched their drinks in red cans. They said they wanted to be more patriotic. Coca-Cola spokesman Kelly Brooks told the *Wall Street Journal*: "Red? Great idea. Why didn't we think of that?"

Water Salad: This, believe it or not, is a lettuce flavoured drink made for the Asian market by the Coca-Cola Company.

Incidentally, the Coke folk make all sorts of strange drinks most people know nothing about. They make Love Body (a red tea-flavoured drink sold in Japan), Maaza (a Bangladeshi fruit drink) and Mr. Pibb (a fizzy cherry drink sold in the Marianas Islands). Other Coca-Cola drinks include Jolly Juice, Old Colony, Pocket Dr, Relentless, Safety First, Scorpion, Urin, and Sparkling Yoghurt.

In the Philippines, Coke makes a drink called Eight O'Clock Fun Chum. That would have been a good nickname for a friendly Manila bar-girl I used to know in my younger days. The only thing she ever drank was "Ladies' Drink," which guys had to buy for her at a vastly inflated price.

But it was still better value than Diet Water.

You'll find lots more unpalatable material at www.vittachi.com

