

Saarc action plan on climate change

We need political will to implement it

THE issue of climate change in South Asia, we are happy to note, is today the focus of deliberations not just in the wider world beyond our frontiers but in the Saarc region as well. That becomes obvious from the action plan that experts from the member states of Saarc agreed on at their just-concluded meeting in Dhaka. It is now our expectation that the recommendations made by these experts will be adopted at the conference of Saarc ministers that went underway in the capital yesterday.

One need hardly re-emphasise the crucial nature of the issue here. With global warming having come to acquire a sense of urgency around the world, it is clear what the nations of South Asia must do in order to protect the future of their peoples. And these peoples, we might add, stand at a total of no fewer than 1.5 billion. What the experts' meeting has now come up with is a programme that should encourage everyone into thinking that concrete steps will finally be underway to handle the crisis. For instance, the willingness of development partners of the various Saarc nations to provide grants toward the creation of a regional climate fund is a sure boost in morale. It is now for the Saarc nations themselves to devise the ways and means by which such a fund can be set up and can be maintained through a regular augmentation of funds that will go into dealing with climate change in the region. However, the caveat here is that such an action plan calls for a significant degree of cooperation between Saarc and other countries in the region. That becomes important because quite a few states, other than countries in the West, have of late become known as contributors to global warming. Emission of greenhouse gases is a factor now also associated with countries like China and India. Efforts toward having them agree to a cut in emissions could likely be compounded by the thought that industrial growth, in their view, also requires to be carried on at existing levels. It is such problems that could hold up progress in the job of saving the environment in South Asia.

But matters do not have to be this way. With progress in science going on apace, ways could be devised to have new technology come in to deal with the problem, especially in countries that emit a high volume of gases. Meanwhile, a capacity building programme aimed at developing clean development mechanisms, as the Dhaka conference recognises, takes on importance. We expect a concerted action plan to emerge from the concluding session of the on-going environment ministers' conference.

CA's intervention welcome

Road digging nuisance to stop

THE directive of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed to the ministries that they immediately put a stop to any further road digging in the capital in the monsoon could not have come a day later. How much the public suffering enormously through the indiscriminate road digging activities of the utility organisations craved for a break! They wondered what really happened to the commitment of the Dhaka city mayor during the BNP-led coalition rule that thenceforward no road digging would take place during rainy season.

What seems baffling though, the chief adviser had to at all issue such orders to the ministries concerned viz. Local Government, T&T and Energy when they should have themselves made it a point to formulate, get sanction for, and implement public works projects -- all in the dry season. Equally money disbursement from the finance ministry should have synchronised with a winter season-focused timetable of the ministries. Obviously coordination was lacking.

On another level too, any concept of synchronisation was conspicuous by its absence. This relates to uncoordinated digging by various utility organisations with the result that nearly the whole city is riddled with trenches and ditches, as it were. The DCC which is in charge of filling the roads back in shape could care less. The need for a unified authority is highlighted again.

As it is, midterm reviews of ADP implementation have invariably showed that not until the fag end of a financial year would the ministries shake off their somnolence to try and utilise allocations made to them. Little wonder, therefore, that public works projects are undertaken hurriedly resulting in poor quality work which needed to be mended again and again.

Granted, politicisation of work allotment processes in the past resulted in incomplete projects or wasteful expenditure on public works, but what of now? When an apolitical interim government is on the driver's seat, the ministries should have worked professionally and delivered accordingly, untainted by politics? Perhaps stringent formalities including cast-iron procurement policy had something to do with the delay in undertaking the projects.

The chief adviser has asked to be apprised of the reasons for delay. We endorse his idea of forming a committee to go into the causes of public work projects being dragged into the monsoon. To our mind, the committee should recommend a set of corrective steps so that there is no recurrence of the nuisance under any government.

A nation for sale?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CORPORATE raiders are notorious people. They orchestrate hostile takeover of companies and break up their assets to generate huge profit. This time a similar raid is being launched on this country. Private companies are taking it apart piece by piece to make more money. I don't oppose their right to do business, but what their business is doing to our rights as people is appalling.

Since Rousseau wrote the social contract theories, people are given the right to be the legitimate sovereign of their country. There seems to be a mad scramble over this inalienable right as commercial interests are trouncing over national interests. Right now we are living in "a payable situation" in this country. We are ready to sell, if anybody likes to pay.

So, a private company has agreed to pay for the beautification, modernisation and maintenance of the cafeteria and the

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surrounding areas of the Teachers Students Centre of Dhaka University.

The benefits are obviously mutual. The 30-year agreement includes a 10-year provision to strengthen the sponsor's network on the campus. In return, the university gets a modern cafeteria with central air-cooling facilities and funds to support some of its annual activities.

That is only one piece of the puzzle. Television talk shows are sponsored by private companies, where sensitive issues of national interest are discussed and the government is regularly assailed under the sponsorship of a foreign company.

At Dhaka international airport the immigration counters are branded by corporate houses. It's difficult to tell whether those are bank counters staffed by government employees.

That leaves us with bus stations, shopping centres and over-bridges, which are also plastered with corporate colours and logos,

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creating confusion if one is walking through familiar neighbourhoods or new corporate premises.

If people of this country matter anywhere, it's in the squeeze between the power of publicity and publicity of power. Needless to say, the commercial bodies are busy with publicity and government bodies are busy with power.

This is how a sovereign nation is being dismembered, not limb by limb but frame by frame, its pride auctioned in the name of beautification, modernisation and maintenance. The university can't afford amenities; the civil aviation is cash short, the city corporations and others are eager to make quick bucks.

Hence, what ought to happen is happening. This country is like an open house. Anyone who pays is free to pick a part of choice and promote his business.

We are looking at a family situation projected on a national scale. What happens in a cash-strapped family living in their own house? They rent out a few rooms to generate additional income. The

tenants often share the kitchen and toilet facilities with the landlord, and the arrangement leads to scandals in many cases as intimacy erodes into privacy.

Similarly, there are certain things which are sacrosanct in a nation's life. These are non-negotiable, non-transferable aspects of sovereign existence, which must be guarded like family honour. I am talking about the sanctity of an entity for the same reason an Urdu musical night at the Central Shaheed Minar should smear the memories of our language martyrs.

Likewise, a gala reception in a graveyard is outrageous, and idol worship inside a mosque is sacrilegious. Everything has a place in life, and some of these places are enshrined with apportioned gravitas. For example, a private organisation shouldn't pay for the modernisation of the prime minister's office and install their sponsorship plaque. For the same reason, nobody should sponsor and use his logo on the national

We need a wartime president



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

GEORGE W. Bush is fond of describing himself as a "war president." And he has made many decisions involving soldiers and battle. But does this make the description an appropriate one? For many people the answer is obvious. We're engaged in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, after all. But Bill Clinton initiated hostilities in the Balkans twice, George H.W. Bush invaded Panama and Iraq, and neither president ever described himself as a "war president."

For a superpower, being involved in a military conflict somewhere is more the norm than the exception. Since 1945, only one president has not presided over combat that engaged American troops -- Jimmy Carter. (Between the Bay of Pigs operation and the American "advisers" in South Vietnam, John F. Kennedy doesn't make the cut.)

America remains the world's dominant military-political power, so local crises often engage American allies or interests. Britain was in a somewhat similar position in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As a result, British forces were fighting someone, somewhere for most of that period. But Britain did not think of itself as "at war," nor would British prime ministers have described themselves as "wartime" leaders. (In fact, Tony Blair has never described himself

We are in a struggle against Islamic extremism, but it is more like the cold war than a hot war -- a long, mostly peacetime challenge in which a leader must be willing to use military power but also know when not to do so. Perhaps the wisest American president during the cold war was Dwight Eisenhower, and his greatest virtues were those of balance, judgment and restraint.

as such, even though he presided over British military involvement in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq.)

America (and before it, Britain) has felt it was "at war" when the conflict threatened the country's basic security -- not merely its interests or its allies abroad. This is the common-sense way in which we define a wartime leader, and by that definition the politicians in charge during World Wars I and II -- Wilson, Lloyd George, Roosevelt, Churchill -- are often described as such. It's not a perfect definition.

The United States has been so far removed from most conflicts that even the effects of World War I could be described as indirect (incorrectly in my view). But it conjures up the image of a threat to society as a whole, which then requires a national response.

By any of these criteria, we are not at war. At some level, we all know it. Life in America today is surprisingly normal for a country with troops in two battle zones. The country may be engaged in wars, but it is not at war.

Consider as evidence the behaviour of our "war president." Bush recently explained that for the last few years he has given up golf, because "to play the sport in a time of war" would send the wrong signal.

Compare Bush's "sacrifice" to those made by Americans during World War II, when most able-bodied men were drafted, food was rationed and industries were commandeered to produce military equipment. For example, there were no civilian cars manu-

factured in the United States from 1941 to 1945.

Of course, there are people, including Bush, who would argue that we are at war even in this deeper sense. In its June 23 issue, Fortune magazine asked Sen. John McCain what the gravest long-term threat to the U.S. economy was.

He took a while to answer -- an 11-second pause, by Fortune's count -- but then said: "Well, I would think that the absolute gravest threat is the struggle that we're in against radical Islamic extremism, which can affect, if they prevail, our very existence."

It is by now overwhelmingly clear that al Qaeda and its philosophy are not the worldwide levitation that they were once portrayed to be. Both have been losing support over the last seven years. The terrorist organisation's ability to plan large-scale operations has crumbled; their funding streams are smaller and more closely tracked.

Of course, small groups of people can still cause great havoc, but is this movement an "existential threat" to the United States or the Western world? No, because it is fundamentally weak.

Al Qaeda and its ilk comprise a few thousand jihadists, with no country as a base, almost no territory and limited funds. Most crucially, they lack an ideology that has mass appeal. They are fighting not just America but the vast majority of the Muslim world. In fact, they are fighting modernity itself.

The evidence supporting this

view of the threat was already growing by 2003. Scholars like Benjamin Friedman, Marc Sageman and John Mueller collected much of it. I've been making a similar case in columns and a book since 2004. James Fallows wrote a fine cover essay in The Atlantic in September 2006 arguing that if there was ever a war against militant Islam, it was now over and the latter had lost.

These writings never really changed the debate because they fell into a political vacuum. The right wanted to argue that we lived in scary times and that this justified the aggressive unilateralism of George W. Bush. And the left was wedded to the idea that Bush had screwed everything up and created a frighteningly dangerous world in which the ranks of jihadists had grown.

But these days, the director of the CIA himself has testified that al Qaeda is on the ropes. The journalist Peter Bergen, who in 2007 wrote a cover essay in The New Republic titled "The Return of al Qaeda," recently wrote another cover essay, "The Unravelling," about the group's decline. The neo-conservative Weekly Standard finally recognises that "the enemy," as it likes to say ominously, is much weaker now, but quickly notes that Bush deserves all the credit.

Terrorism is down in virtually every country, including ones that took a much less militaristic approach to the struggle. (Ironically, the two countries where terrorism persists and in some cases has grown as a threat are Iraq

and Afghanistan.)

The administration does deserve some credit for its counter-terrorism activities. The combined efforts of most governments since 9/11 -- busting cells in Europe and Asia, tracking money, hunting down jihadist groups -- have been extremely effective. But how you see the world determines how you will respond, and the administration has greatly inflated the threat, casting it as an existential and imminent danger.

As a result, we've massively overreacted. Bush and his circle have conceived of the problem as military and urgent when it's more of a long-term political and cultural problem.

The massive expansion of the military budget, the unilateral rush to war in Iraq, the creation of the cumbersome Department of Homeland Security, the new restrictions on visas and travel can all be chalked up to this sense that we are at war. No cost-benefit analysis has been done.

John Mueller points out that in response to a total of five deaths from anthrax, the US government has spent \$5 billion on new security procedures.

Of course, this is actually what Osama bin Laden hoped for. Despite his current weakness, he has always been an extremely shrewd strategist. In explaining the goal of the 9/11 attacks, he pointed out that they inflicted about \$500 billion worth of damage to the American economy and yet cost only \$500,000. He was describing an LTA, a leveraged terrorist attack.

But by the same token, the 9/11 attacks caused an economic swoon because of their scope, and because they were the first of their kind. Since then, each successive terrorist attack -- in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, Britain -- has had a much

smaller effect on the world economy.

Even distribution of national flags can be encouraged on the Independence Day to spread nationalistic feelings amongst us. For that matter, we shall find many interested sponsors if we allow them to print their logos in one corner of the red and green. Pardon me if you find these ideas offensive. In that case you are too late, because similar transgressions of our national honour have taken place already.

There is a silent sale going on in this country. Immigration counters, university campuses, roads, parks, and walls are already taken. In the next wave we might give the national parliament, martyrs' memorial, national museum, secretariat and other government establishments. The sky is the limit. Pay and pick before the stock runs out!

About 400 years ago, a similar drama had unfolded in this part of the world. Mughal emperor Jahangir granted the right to do business to the East India Company, which eventually conquered the land and subjugated its people.

In the modern Company Raj there is a twist. Minds of people are conquered through brand-building and product promotion. The subjugation of the land gradually follows, like a fisherman reels in his catch.

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We are in a struggle against Islamic extremism, but it is more like the cold war than a hot war -- a long, mostly peacetime challenge in which a leader must be willing to use military power but also know when not to do so.

Perhaps the wisest American president during the cold war was Dwight Eisenhower, and his greatest virtues were those of balance, judgment and restraint. He knew we were in a contest with the Soviet Union, but -- at a time when the rest of the country was vastly inflating the threat -- he put it in considerable perspective.

Eisenhower refused to follow the French into Vietnam or support the British at Suez. He turned down several requests for new weapons systems and missiles, and instead used defence dollars to build the interstate highway system and make other investments in improving America's economic competitiveness. Those are the kinds of challenges that the next president truly needs to address.

In a sense, the warriors are pessimists. In the old days they were scared that communists would destroy America. Today, they rail that al Qaeda and Iran threaten our way of life.

In fact, America is an extremely powerful country, with a unique and extraordinary set of strengths. The only way that position can truly be eroded is by its own actions and overreactions -- by unwise and imprudent leadership. A good way to start correcting the errors of the past would be to recognise that we are not at war.

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Making education work

Shampa and Saroj are valuable members of this country's labour force. Education has given them additional useful skills while augmenting the labour force's productivity. A country's labour force is its human capital; and the better educated that labour force is, the greater is the value of the human capital.

SHAHID MALIK

A saying in Bangla goes *lekha pora kore je gari ghora chore shey* -- which roughly translates as those that are successful in their studies will be successful in life. Ask any parent anywhere in the world and the chances are that they will agree and will go on to tell you that education offers their children the best possible opportunity to improve their lives and get better jobs.

Education is one of the greatest assets we can give our children, and can change lives dramatically for the better. In the following

paragraphs I will try to outline the relationships between quality education, individual income and national economic growth. I will also talk about our efforts in strengthening this relationship in Bangladesh.

The UK government, through the Department for International Development (DFID), works actively to help many countries throughout the world -- including Bangladesh -- ensure that children have access to quality education.

By quality education, I mean a system of teaching and learning that enables children to read and write, and to solve problems cre-

atively. Look at Shampa Akhter, a girl from a very poor family in Bangladesh, who went to a technical school where she learned how to operate printing machines. Shampa now earns enough from her job to support her family.

Then there's Saroj Chowdhury, also from a poor family in Hamzerbagh, Chittagang. He was already working at an age when others were at school. But he managed to get admitted to a school for working children, where he learned to be an electrician. Today Saroj is chief electrician of a textile mill.

Both examples show clearly the direct relationship between an

individual's capacity to earn and his or her ability to read, write and solve mathematical and other problems. As the information age has succeeded the industrial age, education has arguably become the most important asset for generating income for individuals.

Shampa and Saroj are valuable members of this country's labour force. Education has given them additional useful skills while augmenting the labour force's productivity. A country's labour force is its human capital; and the better educated that labour force is, the greater is the value of the human capital.

Imagine a country that has a hundred textile mills, but no electricians, or a printing industry that has no press operators. The economy of such a country would be in a real mess. Rising primary and secondary enrolment trans-

lates into economic growth.

The relationship between education and economic growth of a country not only exists, but also has a great deal of power.

But that relationship also contains a stark warning. The more unequal the distribution of education, the more negative is the impact on economic growth. So, if a country cannot ensure equal access to quality education for all its children, its economic performance will suffer.

To emphasise that link, it is useful to contrast the experiences of Latin America with South-East Asia. Only a fairly small proportion of the total Latin American population has completed secondary and higher education. That small minority earns a substantial high wage, because it is in such short supply.

In this case, a very unequal distribution of education has led

to high-income inequality. But in South-East Asia, equal access to education has ensured a large supply of skilled workers. And driven by the increasing productivity of a previously poor workforce, South-East Asian countries have been able to grow at high and sustained rates over more than three decades. Latin American economies, meanwhile, have not grown as sufficiently. Education is not only an asset for a country but is also a great leveller.

This relationship is at the heart of DFID's work. We believe that equitable growth is more rapid and more sustainable than growth based on wealth and productivity confined to certain sectors or groups.

Let me go back to my first point that education should be able to equip children with certain skills. This doesn't just happen automatically. Bangladesh has a very

high enrolment rate and has achieved gender parity in enrolment. The country can be rightly proud of those achievements.

But at the same time, there are many children who do not complete their education. Those that complete their primary schooling often do so without great accomplishment. This is a bottleneck that Bangladesh must address, because that is the foundation on which a child's future education -- and, consequently, his or her contribution to the country -- is built.

Lekha pora, to read and to write, is key to a human being's ability to provide for his or her family, and to contribute positively to the economy of his or her country. J. K. Galbraith, one of the greatest economists of our time, once said: "There is no literate society that is poor and no illiterate society that is nothing but poor." Few other

words can express so aptly the relationship between education and prosperity of individuals and of the nation as expressed in this quote and in the Bangla proverb.

The UK government is the largest contributor to Bangladesh's Second Primary Education Development Programme. We also support Brac's education program and the Underprivileged Children's Education Programme. The UK government is proud to announce increased support to education and skills development in Bangladesh. Through a 9 year £50 million program we will provide opportunities to develop English language skills for a wide range of learners. These will help pave the way for a more prosperous and equal Bangladesh.

Shahid Malik is the UK Development Minister for South Asia. He visited Bangladesh recently.