

## Agonising tales of Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait

At least do something now!

**T**HIS is screaming for attention. Five thousand Bangladeshis working in a Kuwaiti company couldn't put up with the ignominy anymore. They had to go on strike protesting underpayment and irregularity of wages in a gross breach of contract.

The details read horrific and would bear repetition just to bring out the essence of crudity associated with the degree of exploitation and deprivation our expatriate workers are subjected to in some fraternal countries. The Kuwaiti company in question pays them 18 dinars instead of the promised 50 a month; workers are made to work for 16hrs a day without overtime and weekly holiday; five dinars are deducted per day for absence due to illness; some have gone without leave for eight to ten years; a number of workers were not paid two months' wages - the list is endless. To top it all, just to be able to deny their basic rights, the company officials force workers to sign contracts at variance with those they had signed before coming to Kuwait.

The Kuwaiti company, local intermediaries and host authorities have an obvious share of the blame for the turn of events. For, their attitudes have caused the degeneracy of Bangladeshi workers into modern day slavery and bonded labour conditions. Equally blame-worthy would be our recruitment agencies, the ministries of expatriate welfare and foreign affairs and to that extent the government for allowing such maltreatment of our labour in foreign lands.

The hurling of insults and looking down upon expatriate Bangladeshi workers abroad is a discrimination that does not behoove the spirit of twenty-first century. Why are we so weak in protecting the legitimate rights of our workers in foreign countries? Why the manpower and expatriate welfare ministry has failed to make the recruitment agencies negotiate the right terms and conditions for our workers. What makes our missions abroad sit over complaints lodged with them by the aggrieved workers, let alone supervise their conditions by paying visit to their workplaces? They have earned a notoriety for their incompetence in taking issue with the host governments.

Our economy is critically dependent on the largesse of remittances from Bangladesh wage earners abroad amounting to dollar six billion annually already. We never tire of sounding upbeat with a twinkle in the eye that it is possible to raise the figure to Tk12 billion in a few years' time.

What are we giving them in return? Not even minimum dignity. To our mind, they are being exploited not just by the companies in host countries but also by us.

## Chief Adviser's views on lifting of emergency

The dialogue process needs a shot in the arm

**T**HE Chief Adviser thinks that the time is not ripe for a full lifting of the emergency. That statement will certainly leave politicians across the spectrum disappointed, for they have been demanding an end to the emergency in the run-up to the promised elections in December this year. That said, the CA's remarks in Sylhet on Monday throw fresh new light on the political situation obtaining in the country and what the caretaker government plans on doing about it. A significant point Fakhruddin Ahmed has made relates to the need for a consensus in the on-going dialogue between the government and the political parties. He believes, and so do a whole range of others in the country, that the politics of the future must be based on an agreement by all to make Parliament effective and to consign hartals to history.

The point is well made, but for such a consensus to be reached requires some serious transfusion of blood into the dialogue process. The feeling has grown that of late the dialogue has taken a backseat to more tangible realities, such as the matter of the release or projected release of some individuals. Besides, while parties like the Awami League have engaged in talks with the government, others such as the BNP have been looking for a quid pro quo in the form of the freedom of its detained chairperson and her sons, one of whom has already flown abroad on bail for treatment. The expectation (and it has been raised to certain levels by the pronouncements of government figures) is that Begum Zia's release is imminent and that in itself is a hint of the BNP soon agreeing to join the dialogue. The CA has noted that the government is in no mood to be partial any political party because it is not a rival to any one. That only argues the case for a revitalised dialogue process before the general elections eventually take place. The priorities before the country say it all; and those priorities, as an adviser put it recently, will involve a spirit of give-and-take on the part of both the administration and the parties. Lifting of emergency, an end to the hartal culture, a functional parliament, selection of individuals of manifest probity as parliamentary candidates, et cetera, are some of the issues that the dialogue can handle effectively.

It is our hope, given the realities, that the dialogue initiated with the parties by the government will throw up some much needed ideas on how we mean to govern ourselves from here on.

## Legacy II: Afghanistan

**The Bush legacy in Afghanistan is the inevitable consequence of the September 11 attack on the United States. This whole enterprise will eventually be abandoned by the US and Nato, leaving it to others to continue the conflicts. The most worthwhile action to take is to destroy the poppy fields using chemicals. Such an act is in the genuine interest of Europe and the United States.**

FORREST COOKSON

**O**N September 11, 2001 a team of al Qaeda operatives hijacked four planes in the United States, two planes destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, one damaged the Pentagon in Washington, and one crashed when the passengers attacked the hijackers.

The United States, demanding justice, requested the Taliban Afghan government to hand over the criminals who planned, financed, and directed the attack. The Afghan government refused. The United States went to war, rapidly destroying the Taliban government, driving it out of Afghanistan.

The chief criminal of the plot, Osama bin Laden, escaped. At

this point, attempts to capture the criminal Bin Laden were subordinated to rebuilding Afghanistan. For the past six years the United States and its allies have struggled to establish a democratic government in Afghanistan able to provide security to the people and achieve development of the economy.

What has President Bush achieved? Historically, Afghanistan has been a nation extraordinarily difficult to conquer or to govern. The slogans and arguments of growth, democracy, governance seem of limited relevance for Afghanistan.

The Taliban who survived the American attack fled to Pakistan; over the past six years the movement re-armed and rebuilt itself. The group has made modest

# This natural yearning for elected government...



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

## GROUND REALITIES

**It is from such a perspective that we understand our yearning for an elected government to be in charge when this caretaker administration decides, as soon it must, to call it a day. But there are, for all our optimism, the worries that assail us. And those worries come wrapped in the emergency question. An adviser sought to remind the nation a few days ago about the imperative for a continuation of the emergency even when elections to Parliament are held later this year.**

**I**F everything goes well, and nothing should go wrong, a new government should be in office in Bangladesh come January. Never before in the history of this country has this desire for elected government been as intense as it is today. For obvious reasons, of course. In these last eighteen months, much has happened, much has not happened, and some of what has happened has been rolled back, and all of that has only whipped up this wonderful, excitable political frenzy in us for a return to democratic governance.

You might ask if democracy in this country has ever been an unambiguously healthy affair, if it has not periodically been put through the twister and so rendered enervating. And that would be a perfectly good question to ask, for there have always been those moments and those men and women who have often, in the name of democracy, left us all reeling from the damage they have caused democracy. No, we do not presume to tell ourselves, to tell the world, that in the hands of the politicians pluralism has been a beautiful experience. They could have, after 1990, made this country

a beacon of hope. They ended up snuffing out hope.

History remains our point of reference. You start off with the early 1970s, when Bangladesh sought to project a viable, vibrant democratic image for itself on the global stage. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spoke to us of this country aiming at being the Switzerland of the East. Tajuddin Ahmed reminded us of the values inherent in socialism, for the socialistic experiment was a guarantee that our people would eat well, sleep well and build layers of dreams for themselves and for their children. And then things went awry. We will not go into that. Neither will we recapitulate the old tales of constitutional government being undermined by ambitious men ready to push such government into the wayside ditch as they planned to seize the state by force.

We have seen it all happening in our lifetime. We who have consistently condemned the soldiers of the Pakistan army for repeatedly commandeering the state have, in moments of supreme irony, been witness to the Bangladesh state going under the sway of men whose brutality in the defence of

ill-gotten power has threatened to undermine our belief in ourselves. Our struggles against our indigenous dictators and autocrats have gone on, for the simple reason that our faith in democracy has never wavered.

It is from such a perspective that we understand our yearning for an elected government to be in charge when this caretaker administration decides, as soon it must, to call it a day. But there are, for all our optimism, the worries that assail us. And those worries come wrapped in the emergency question. An adviser sought to remind the nation a few days ago about the imperative for a continuation of the emergency even when elections to Parliament are held later this year. You wonder if that is the right approach.

With a whole lot of individuals, the latest being the speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad, already berating the caretakers over all the things they ought not to have done in these many months since the imposition of the emergency, you have a sense that new political complications are around the corner. The fact that we have ignored these complications or

spent little time reflecting on them makes things even worse. And they do that because of the irritants that have already come in the way.

Jamiruddin Sircar and so many others have questioned the authority of the caretaker administration to hold local or municipal elections before national elections. They have a point. And they have a point, too, when they keep directing our gaze at the three-month tenure-related factor of a caretaker regime. And then comes this emergency which should go, but no one is quite sure how it will cease to be or when. There is then the huge question of what could happen were the government to do away with the emergency altogether. Fakhruddin Ahmed remains aware of the pitfalls associated with a withdrawal of the emergency. Which is why he thinks it cannot be done away with any time soon. Which is a pity!

The reality speaks for itself. It is the emergency that has kept this government together. And yet it is not the same thing as the martial regulations which provided a legal basis, of a kind, to military regimes in the past. General Yahya Khan organised elections on the basis of a Legal Framework Order. General

Ziaur Rahman and General Hussein Muhammad Ershad kept martial law in operation until the day an elected Jatiyo Sangsad convened to inaugurate a transition, however questionable, to legally constituted government. Neither of those conditions is to be spotted in today's circumstances. The problems are more complex, given that the caretaker government, moving beyond its constitutionally-stipulated authority, has taken on its plate a lot more food than it can properly digest.

But, then, it did begin well. The drive against corruption was a defining moment. The emphasis on political party reforms, for all the reservations entertained about the move, was seen as reasonable across the country, by and large. Operations against bad businessmen were thought of as a sign of the country getting back in working shape. And then the centre began to crack, if it did not exactly fall apart. The swiftness employed in detaining major politicians minutes into an issuance of arrest warrants against them and carting them off to prison; a clear propensity toward promoting a so-called minus-two formula by pushing the president of the Awami League and the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party out of politics and perhaps out of the country; and looking the other way when organisations such as the PDP and the Kalyan Party took shape despite the emergency, were to prove a damper on expectations. The Truth Commission has been a disappointing affair. And disappointing has been the reluctance of the political parties to go for change

within themselves. And outrageous has been the growing tendency to place the blame for everything going wrong in the country on the political classes, to demonise them as it were.

We are at a fork in the road. We are at the crossroads. A clear sense of drift within the corridors of power is palpable. The determination and clear purpose that underscored the administration when it first took charge have gone missing. You see it in the tenuous, almost apologetic way the advisers speak to the country. You spot it in the men who manage the Election Commission, in their discomfiture over the return of men with criminal record, or intent, into the corporation and municipal electoral fray. You feel it in the certain listlessness that seems to have come into the Anti-Corruption Commission. And you see it writ large on the face of a government unable to whiplash bad traders into decency or convince citizens that they can buy food and eat it with nary a care in the world.

Which is a statement in defence of popularly sanctioned government. Which is an incontrovertible argument for government that is elected and so accountable to the country for all it does and everything it does not do. We wait at the bend of the river, for those elections that will take us to the democracy we thought we would build brick by brick when we went to war long ago in defence of our inalienable right to liberty and the pursuit of collective happiness.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. Email: bahsan@rediffmail.com

## Mediterranean pomp

**While many Parisians have been en vacances, heads of states and governments of Mediterranean countries gathered here for a summit at the invitation of President Nicolas Sarkozy. With leaders from both north and south present, the final summit could be viewed as a success. But on the home stages those leaders are weak -- and now the difficult task begins -- turning hope into reality. Otherwise the first summit of a Mediterranean union may turn out to be pomp without substance.**

PASCAL BONIFACE

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Otherwise the first summit of a Mediterranean union may turn out to be pomp without substance. While nobody doubts the critical strategic importance of an oil-rich region mired in historic conflict, the plan to develop multifarious cooperation without settling the core Israeli-Palestinian dispute amounts to putting the cart before the horse.

Sarkozy first spoke about this project during his presidential electoral campaign in February 2007, then mentioning it again in May and August, after his election. He remained elusive, avoiding specifics, though this project was

presented as a priority of his presidency.

Some observers were dubious. They thought that this project was aimed at softening Sarkozy's self-proclaimed image of "Israel's friend" in Maghreb countries, which were also alarmed by Sarkozy's ongoing immigration battle. On the domestic front, Sarkozy had infuriated the French Arab community by linking insecurity, troubles in the suburbs and their young Arab-Muslim inhabitants.

In a speech given in Tangier last year, Sarkozy officially proposed a Mediterranean Union, stating his belief that what happens in the region is not only crucial for its residents, but also for the rest of humankind. According to Sarkozy, it is "in the Mediterranean that will be decided whether or not civilizations and religions will wage the most terrible of wars, whether or not the North and the South will clash, whether or not terrorism, fanaticism and fundamentalism will succeed in imposing their violence and intolerance."

Thereby, Sarkozy makes the Mediterranean rim the epicentre of

North-South relations and of the Muslim world and the West. Inspired by the achievements of the EU, Sarkozy wants to make strides by implementing concrete cooperation and projects. At first, the creation of the European Community was based on the idea of pooling coal and iron -- strategic resources in 1951 -- by France and Germany. As Jean Monnet stated, the aim of such a process was to "make war unthinkable and materially impossible" for countries that would fight against one another. The European Community did not start with a global plan but with a few empirical projects, and then turned out to stretch far beyond initial expectations.

Sarkozy doesn't want to imitate the European institutional pattern, but the practical approach that led to its creation, putting forward the idea of a diversified Mediterranean region where common projects would concern the contemporary equivalents of coal and iron -- environmental issues, energy, transportation and water. It would be, as Sarkozy stated, a "union of projects."

According to some, the plan appears visionary, while others perceive it as overly vague. His approach raises questions: How would this plan differ from the Barcelona Process, launched by Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers in 1995, already blocked by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? When he compares his plan to the European example, Sarkozy argues that the European Community was not based on the exploitation of the Germans but instead on Europeans envisioning the future. The president was right, considering that one should not constantly live in the past -- however, if Europe managed to reconcile after WWII, it was because Germany reckoned with Nazi crimes.

Most of all, Europe succeeded because it was at peace. The common projects consolidated peace, but peace existed in Europe before them. Sarkozy's project must determine what kind of common projects could involve both Israelis and Palestinians. Is it possible for Arab countries and Israel to engage themselves in such projects without having first resolved this conflict? Cleaning the Mediterranean Sea of pollution, for instance, would benefit the area. Yet, how do shared benefits emerge, considering Palestine's lack of access to the sea and Lebanon's dilapidation caused by its 2007 war with Israel?

If, as Sarkozy emphasises, the Mediterranean region has huge strategic importance, it is because of the Israel-Palestine conflict,

which lies at the heart of the relationship between the Muslim world and the West. As long as the conflict goes unresolved, Sarkozy's ambitious plans confront obstacles.

This is certainly the main flaw in the president's approach: He wants to speed the process so as not to be blocked by the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but as long as this problem exists, it's difficult to achieve anything major. No matter how useful all the cooperation projects may be, they won't overcome the central conflict, nor can they hide nor make up for the absence of peace there.

Sarkozy is presented as one of Israel's closest friends, never having been in the Palestinian territories and continually stating that Israel's security is of the utmost priority. He has never expressed much concern over the fate of the Palestinian people.

Yet, Sarkozy's positions on this issue have evolved. He now links the development of terrorism and the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still unresolved. He warns that the continuation of the conflict will play in favor of Islamism, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. A fair solution is needed to keep these extremist movements from increasing their political impact.

Usually, Israel's closest friends avoid drawing such a link between the development of radical Islamism and Israeli occupation of

Palestinian territories.

Sarkozy must also fight on another front -- the European one. If, at first, European leaders were grateful to Sarkozy for putting an end to the European treaty deadlock thanks to the promotion of the "mini-treaty," they are now slightly upset by his methods. They tend to consider him as self-centered, when he tries to present himself as the main, if not the only, reason for success. His handling of the release of the Bulgarian nurses from Libyan jails -- attributing the outcome to his work and dismissing European collective efforts -- irritated his European colleagues.

Sarkozy is considered a free rider, not a team player. The same is said about the Mediterranean project. It's perceived as a French national project, launched without European consultation.

Earlier, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, Secretary for European Affairs, warned that the Mediterranean project is on the wrong path, perceived as a competitor to other existing European projects including the Barcelona process and the neighborhood policy.

Grandiose projects, like charity, must begin at home, and for Sarkozy, Europe is that home.

Pascal Boniface is director of the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS). He has published or edited more than 40 books on French foreign policy, nuclear affairs and other strategic issues.

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trolling narcotics led to a resurgence of Afghanistan's participation in world drug markets.

Thus, in Afghanistan, Bush has failed to achieve his objectives. Success seems remote: The Taliban remains strong and have not and will not give up. So long as they have refuge in Pakistan, largely beyond the reach of the United States, it will prove very difficult to completely destroy the Taliban movement.

The importance of narcotics has increased, in sharp contrast with the period of Taliban rule when the narcotics business was virtually closed. The rule of the central government is weak.

Apart from the Kabul government, Afghans do not really support the presence of Americans and her allies. In particular, the leaders of the drug industry fear the Americans will soon turn on the poppy fields, destroying them with chemicals.

There is fatigue setting in among the United States and its allies; a feeling that the task is endless and the direction wrong. Pakistan's role is ever more

obscure; originally a founder of the Taliban, now an enemy?

The governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan are at loggerheads, unwilling to get along, their rhetoric growing by the day. While Iraq has a quite sophisticated population with a long history of culture, education and achievement, Afghanistan is far less developed, with a lower level of education, urbanisation, and only about one-tenth of the per capita income.

The failure of the Bush administration in Afghanistan is twofold. First, the inability to limit the growth of the narcotics industry. The drug business fundamentally corrupts the society, undermines social cohesion, promotes drug use and addiction, and builds illegal activity as the dominant part of the economy. Second, the inability to build a central government that is able to rule. Bush's failure in Afghanistan is not unusual, rather it follows a history of similar failures of persons and nations who believed that they could manipulate and change that part of our globe.

Where is Afghanistan going? Bush and his allies have no clear purpose, only meaningless slogans. Nato will probably continue for a few more years to try and solve the security and development problems and then declare success and go home.

The narcotics business will thrive, bringing increasing heroin to the streets of America, Europe and Asia. Some version of the Taliban will gain influence in southern Afghanistan.

Low key fighting in the provinces will continue. The Afghan government will rule the enclave of Kabul, but most of the population will not pay much attention. Donor organisations will strive without success to establish an effective central government.

Without a revenue base, interference by all neighbours and an unwillingness to conform to rule by the centre, none of these aspirations will be achieved. The total impact of all this effort on the average family in Afghanistan will be virtually zero.

After the attack of 9/11, and the Afghan government's refusal to

turn the criminals over to the United States, the consequences were inevitable. Any US president would have done the same. Events have developed more or less as expected, not because of Bush but because of the attack on the United States.

Afghanistan faces a bleak future: poverty, internal conflict, growing drug addiction and steady criminalisation of the society. The condition is not the consequence of Bush's policies but rather more of the same in the long line of Afghan history, along with the wealth and personal alienation of much of the west.

Afghanistan is one of the better examples where the world's leaders have substituted theology for reality. The secular theology to promote democracy is perhaps only a cover for the use of military force, but there are many who take the development of democracy very seriously. But the use of military force in Afghanistan is likely to lead only to perpetual fighting, an unsustainable undertaking. Without the western military forces, Afghanistan will plunge into continuous low-level

conflict.

The Bush legacy in Afghanistan is the inevitable consequence of the September 11 attack on the United States. This whole enterprise will eventually be abandoned by the US and Nato, leaving it to others to continue the conflicts. The most worthwhile action to take is to destroy the poppy fields using chemicals. Such an act is in the genuine interest of Europe and the United States.

Forget nation building, recognise that governance is an intractable problem, and go after the poppy fields. If there is any aggression here it is the Afghan production of drugs sent to the rest of the world. Ironically, it seems to me, the evidence indicates that the reality is the opposite of common belief -- Iraq is a success, Afghanistan a failure. The policy implications, for the United States are: stay in Iraq, get out of Afghanistan. But the West must first protect its citizens from the Afghan aggression in harming its citizen with drugs.

Forrest Cookson is an economist.