

National Mourning Day

Our chief adviser and the chief of army are respectful of Sheikh Mujib. It is time that we settle the issue of observing August 15 as a National Mourning Day and public holiday once for all. We may believe in different ideologies but we must respect the founder of the nation for our own dignity.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

BAKLADESH came into existence because of the folly of the pro-establishment politicians and the misjudgment of the ruling military junta, who were in power between 1958 and 1971. During this period, the people of Pakistan were ignored by the military regimes. Naturally enough, there was no participatory democracy. The Basic Democracy of Gen. Ayub was a mockery of democracy. Nothing better could be expected of the military rulers of the then Pakistan.

Common people of the then West Pakistan were indifferent to the politics of Pakistan. They were totally controlled by the chiefs in

NWFP and Baluchistan, Vaderas (big landlords) in Sind and Shajis (landlords) in Punjab. In the then East Pakistan the common people, though largely poor and illiterate, were fairly conscious about their rights. Huge congregations in meetings and big rallies on the streets prove this point.

Right from the inception of Pakistan, the leaders of West Pakistan misread the sentiment of the common people of the then East Pakistan. The leading political party, the Muslim League, was almost totally dominated by drawing room politicians. A majority of the members of the party did not have enough understanding of the people's sentiment, or enough courage to face the leading politicians of West Pakistan. As such,

the West Pakistani politicians developed that part of the country as quickly as possible because they were aware that, with the economic and social development in East Pakistan, the voice of the people would be stronger and louder and they might have to concede to them their legitimate rights.

East Pakistanis who strongly felt for the interest of the East wing started organising as a party, and Awami League came into being as a voice of protest against exploitation of the people of East Pakistan in the name of religion. After all, religion cannot be the only factor for emergence or existence of an independent state. The effect of opium gradually went away and Awami League started making the

people aware of the nefarious political game of West Pakistani politicians and the ruling junta.

The rehabilitation and reconstruction of a totally destroyed economy (due to war of liberation), with very little stock of food for about 80 million people, was a stupendous task. This was tackled with assistance from India, Soviet Russia and some donor countries at the initial stage. There is hardly any doubt that we received sympathy and assistance because of deft handling of the crisis by a leaderlike Bangabandhu.

It is unfortunate that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who spent about 33 years of his life (1938-71) in political struggle for Bangladesh, was assassinated by a group of misguided army personnel. A true inquiry into this sad event was never made because of the fear of exposing some well-known faces. There are good reasons to suspect that some foreign powers that were not in favour of independence of Bangladesh were behind this heinous crime. Instead of

attempting a proper inquiry some people were busy in assisting the persons directly or indirectly involved in the murder.

It would be relevant to recall the observation made by Sheikh Mujib in the AL Council meeting on January 18, 1974 that Bangladesh attained independence through fighting enemies who could be identified; after independence it was difficult for them to identify their enemies within the country. He further added that he was afraid of three things, namely, snakes, crocodiles and the treacherous. In fact, we have to remain careful about these elements in future.

To face AL, Zia established BNP by recruiting heterogeneous elements from different parties and reviving the fundamentalist party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which did not believe in the independence of Bangladesh.

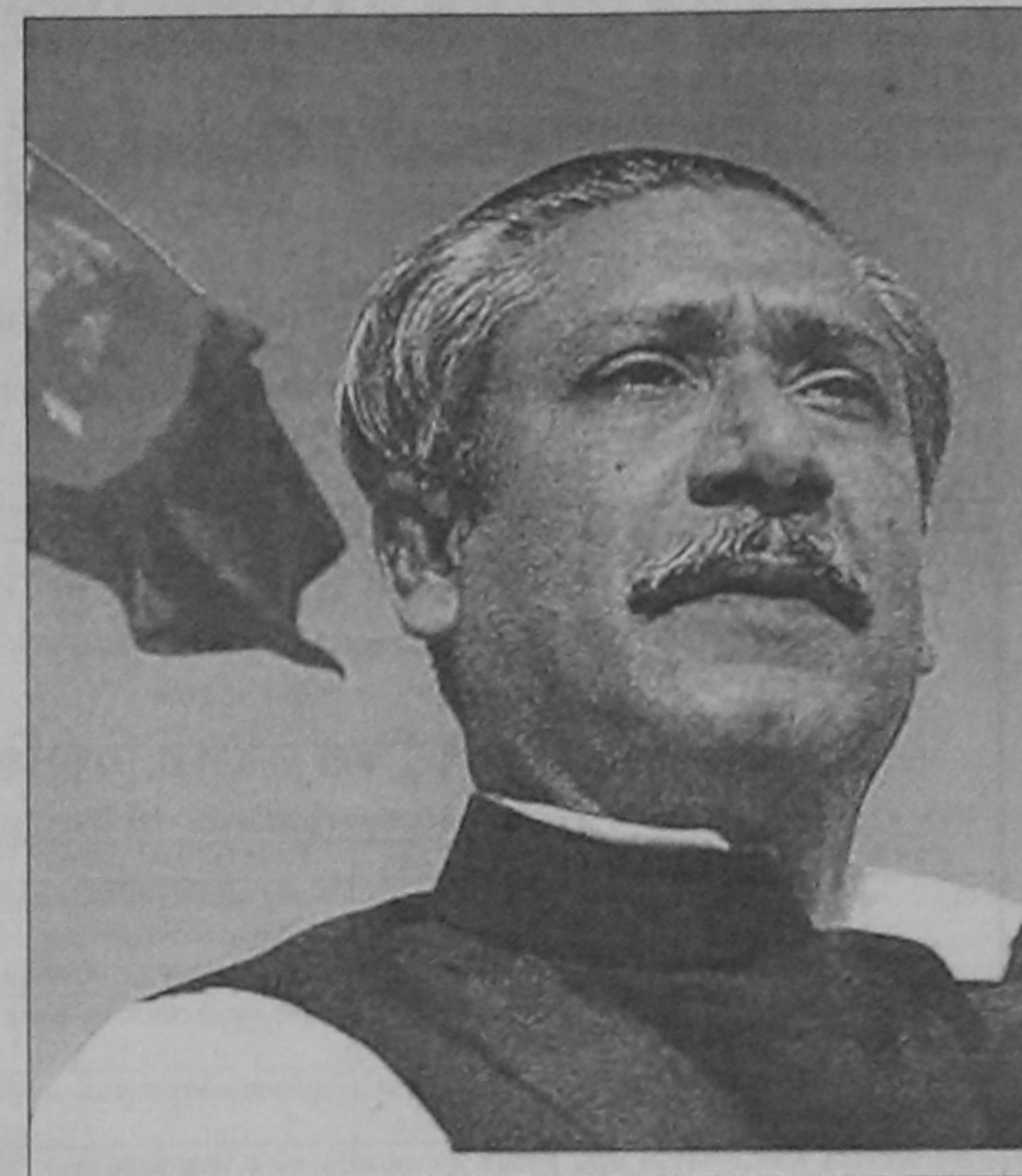
Due to introduction of retaliatory politics the four-party alliance government started downgrading Sheikh Mujib to upgrade

Zia. No sane element in Bangladesh can compare Sheikh Mujib with any other leader in Bangladesh.

It is known throughout the world that Bangladesh achieved freedom under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib. There is no other leader who could earn such respect and love from the people, irrespective of religion, caste and creed. BNP is a big party; but it owes its existence to AL because without AL there could not have been a BNP. It may be pointed out that a considerable number of members of BNP are respectful of Bangabandhu.

Our chief adviser and the chief of army are respectful of Sheikh Mujib. It is time that we settle the issue of observing August 15 as a National Mourning Day and public holiday once for all. We may believe in different ideologies but we must respect the founder of the nation for our own dignity.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.



Autumn sonata

Retirement, well-earned at that, is not without virtues. For the wages of work takes a toll in toils and trials. There are people, and many of them, that thrive when they no longer have to go out to earn their bread. They find new pursuits to gladden their hearts and to put their minds on newer flights. Shakespeare visualise the flights as such: "Our life exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books, in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."

SYED MAQSUUD JAMIL

IT was a get-together of my school friends. The host, a retired engineer, like the rest of us is in his autumn age. More precisely, we are in our sixties. One of the guests, a self-employed friend of ours, asked our host the engineer what he did with his

time. Our host replied that he had earned the retirement and he did not intend to make mincemeat out of it. Besides, with so many television channels, it is no longer a task.

Indeed, the number of satellite channels will soon be over one hundred. The self-employed among the middle aged are a

privileged class that remains active and also enjoys the mid-day siesta.

There are, however, the fortunate ones that gets the opportunity of extending their career by a decade or even 15 years by a stroke of luck. The incurably optimistic blithely say that the autumn age is in fact the youth of the old age. No matter what we say and how we look at it this is the time to send them home. For the world sings the tune of the youth. Or else who would love the fate of becoming redundant. Perhaps that is the reason a career diplomat friend of mine loves his "splendid loneliness" after retirement.

Bill Gates is in his mid-fifties, and is the most prosperous among the self-employed of the world. Yet he has retired because, for him, it is a matter of changing his priorities. Possibly the world will see a welfare program of a level befitting to Microsoft. Unlike Bill Gates, for most of the retirees it is not a question of choice but a matter of bowing to the needs of the time.

There is however no precise reason to believe that senility begins at 60 along with decline of

physical fitness and sharpness of mind. If one wills one can be as fit and as sound to lengthen one's active life. Harrison Ford in his mid-sixties is as vigorous and nimble as he was ten years back. The list of geriatric actors is growing with such names as Robert Redford et al. We have a geriatric business tycoon, too, in 70-year old Ratan Tata who is thinking of retiring.

Then there is so special about reaching retirement age. It is more or less like they have arrived for a journey to the sunset. Within a decade the margin of vulnerability will no longer be comfortable. It is the loss of elders that will make the desolation forbidding. The protective instinct finds comfort in having elders around. The tree of life looks scraggly in a season of falling leaves. More and more, it will become a journey of a solitary traveller.

Indeed the woods will get dark but it will be lovely and deep to only those that learn to be happy alone. It is not the ideal age for participatory pursuits but for pursuits of personal nature that engage the mind and becalm it.

Celebrated music director Naushad Ali, who lived to be 85, was fond of angling. The solitary nature of it and the meditative attention it demands empties the mind and quiets it. Naushad was no longer in favour as a music director because Bombay movies had, by that time, found Rahul Dev Burman and Bappi Lahiri to suit the screen personalities of a new generation of actors.

It was a kind of retirement, although not by his choice, when

his career virtually ended in the last 20 years of his life. But the poise and dignity of his personality and the mellifluous quality of his expression were remarkably absorbing as a talk show host. Nostalgia is much in favour in this time of life. A sense of loss takes the mind on wistful journeys to dwell on the past. How the thespians Dilip and Uttam Kumar used to mesmerise cine-goers with memorable performances; how Suchitra Sen used to bewitch tender hearts with romantic looks, how Rafi used to reach lofty heights with his gifted voice. Or who could forget the charm of debonair Gregory Peck's screen persona and the beatific grace of Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday.

Nostalgia can be blissful, but it is equally sensible to establish ties with the time we live in. Suchitra Sen has hermetically sealed herself from the eyes of the media after retiring from films. She wants the iconic image of Suchitra to live without the scars of old age.

For some, life begins at 60 if the heavens look down propitiously. Ronald Reagan became the US president at the retirement age. But what followed after he left was tragic. Alzheimer scripted the rest. Anwar Ibrahim became deputy prime minister of Malaysia when he was 46. For the better part of his fifties he suffered imprisonment and now, at 60, he is perhaps set to become the next prime minister of Malaysia.

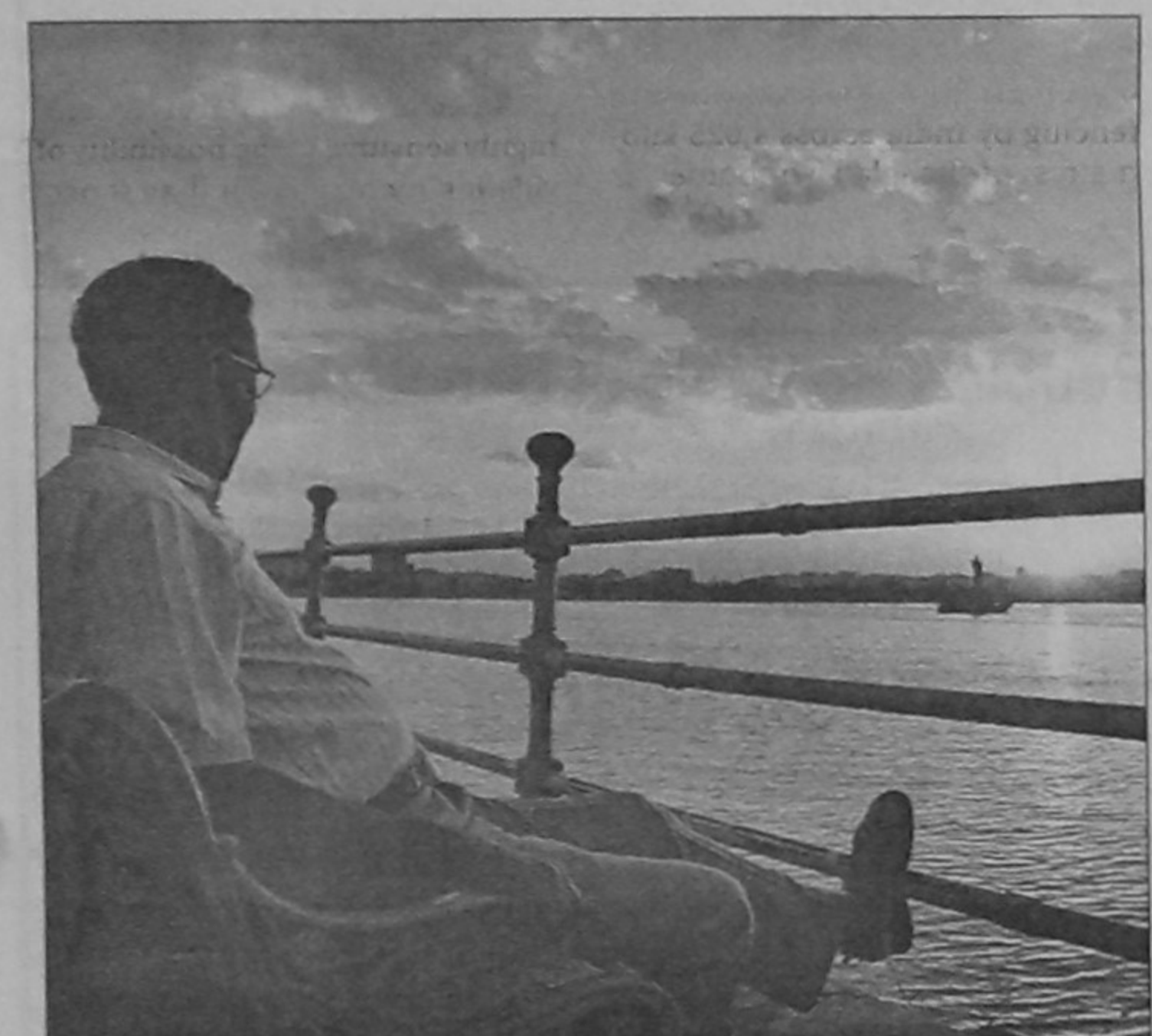
For a man in any society, his career is his badge of honour. It nurses his self-esteem and gives

the assurance that he is needed. The end of a career, or what we call retirement, therefore, does not always augur well for all people. Simone De Beauvoir, the noted existentialist philosopher-writer, encapsulates this loss by extolling the merits of work and castigating retirement by observing that: "Retirement may be looked upon either as a prolonged holiday or as a rejection, a being thrown on to scrapheap."

It is the sense of self-worth that drives men to extend their career as long as possible and as long as they can. For some, the sense of self-worth degenerates into insatiable need for personal aggrandisement. That is why the world has an octogenarian head of state in Robert Mugabe, who would stoop to any level to hold on to power. Nelson Mandela retired at the first opportunity, and lives today as the most celebrated nonagenarian of the world.

Retirement, well-earned at that, is not without virtues. For the wages of work takes a toll in toils and trials. There are people, and many of them, that thrive when they no longer have to go out to earn their bread. They find new pursuits to gladden their hearts and to put their minds on newer flights. Shakespeare visualise the flights as such: "Our life exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books, in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."

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Retirement: The evening of life

Revisiting the "Axis of Evil"

In the diplomatic arena, however, the key missing element is the security guarantee for Iran. It was left to Thomas Fingar, director of the US National Intelligence Council, to point out this lacuna. "Iran has real security needs," he said July 9, adding "We are part of the reason Iran feels insecure."

DILIP HIRO

AS the debate on Iran rages in the United States, the hawks need to examine the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath, pondering the wisdom of George Santayana: "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Defeating President Saddam Hussein's army was the easy part; what followed proved catastrophic for both the United States and Iraq.

Now, the Pentagon's two aircraft carriers stationed in the Persian Gulf have the coordinates for the Iranian targets. So, too, has the Israeli air force. As for the timing, some hawks see a window of opportunity for US President George Bush to strike Iran between the US presidential election November 4 and the inauguration of his successor on January 20, 2009.

But, no matter whether the US or Israel accomplishes its self-appointed mission, the key question remains: What then? The short answer is Iran's response will be intense and all-encompassing.

The warnings about Tehran's all-out backlash have come from high officials in the US and outside. "I think everybody recognises what the consequences of any kind of conflict [in Iran] would

be," said US Defense Secretary Robert Gates. His "everybody" includes Admiral William Fallon, former commander of the Central Command (CENTCOM), in charge of waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fallon's premature retirement in April resulted from an article based on his interview in Esquire magazine, which portrayed him as the man standing between Bush and military strikes on Iran.

In his interview, Fallon said that "five or six pots boiling over [in the Middle East], our nation can't afford to be mesmerised by one problem [of Iran]." Earlier, on Al Jazeera satellite channel, he was more direct: "...is not helpful and not useful," he said. "I expect that there will be no war, and that is what we ought to be working for."

Tehran's military commanders have reiterated that they would promptly fire missiles not only at Israel but also US targets in the region, as well as those of Gulf monarchies complicit in any attack on Iran. With the Pentagon maintaining 32 military bases in the area, its forces are vulnerable to hits by Iran's short-range missiles.

After Iran's immediate military response will come asymmetrical warfare, which would destabilise the US-backed governments in

Iraq and Afghanistan, endanger output and shipment of oil in the region, and trigger rocket attacks on Israel by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

As the first Shiite Islamic state on the planet, the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys fervent loyalty of most Shiites in the Muslim world. In particular, Shiites in the Middle East and Afghanistan hold Iran's theocratic regime in high esteem. Shiites are 60 percent of the population in Iraq and 65 percent in Bahrain, where the US Fifth Fleet is based. In Kuwait, smaller in area than New Jersey, Shiites are 25 percent of the population. Shiites, though only 10 percent of Saudi nationals, are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

It is widely known that Iran's intelligence service has sleeper cells throughout the Gulf region and Afghanistan, and could activate these cells to wreck US military facilities.

The currently quiescent Shiite militias in Iraq will resume their militant resistance against the US forces in Iraq. The fragile government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, a staunch Shiite, who at crucial moments has journeyed to Tehran for consultations, will find itself struggling to survive. Already the Sunni president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, has

opposed the idea of his country being used to attack Iran.

Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, forecast the whole region turning into "a fire zone" following military strikes against Iran. "When one starts such actions in the Middle East, one cannot manage reactions that can spread over years or even 'decades,'" warned Syrian President Bashar al Assad.

Then there's oil, the life blood of the world's economies. Iran is the second largest producer in the Organisation of Oil Exporting Countries. A military conflict involving Iran, warned Opec's Secretary General Abdalla Salem El Badri, would see an "unlimited" rise in oil price: Any reduction of shipments through the narrow Straits of Hormuz could not be replaced. Hostilities in the Gulf of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of world oil supplies flow, would sharply reduce oil supplies.

Oil futures are extremely sensitive to the state of play in the hydrocarbon-rich Persian Gulf. Within days of the news that William Burns, a US State Department official, would join the diplomatic team led by the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, for July 19 talks with Iran's Saeed Jalili in Geneva, the price of oil fell by 12 percent.

With the soaring price of oil leading to a spurt in the cost of everything, from food to consumer items, the scene is set for the inflation to climb. Buffeted by the sub-prime mortgage crisis for the past year, a slump in the hous-

ing market and rising inflation, US Federal Reserve Bank and Treasury Department chiefs are scrambling to defuse one crisis after another and keep recession at bay.

Recent history shows that when the US is in recession, the party in power in Washington loses. That's what happened to President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, in 1980 and to George H.W. Bush, a Republican, in 1992.

A decline in oil price is a prerequisite for circumventing recession. And that's linked with excluding military action against Iran.

As it is, of the four topmost policymakers in Washington, Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remain committed to pursuing diplomacy, with Vice-President Dick Cheney favouring military strikes. Bush continues to display a split mind--a contrast to what happened in 2003, when Bush, Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were all for invading Iraq, and ignored the ambivalent Secretary of State Colin Powell. Now, fearing a calamitous petroleum price hike caused by nervous oil traders, Bush is tilted toward a multilateral approach to Tehran.

In the diplomatic arena, however, the key missing element is the security guarantee for Iran. It was left to Thomas Fingar, director of the US National Intelligence Council, to point out this lacuna. "Iran has real security needs," he said July 9, adding "We are part of the reason Iran feels insecure."

In the course of preparing a package of incentives for Iran by

six nations in mid-May, Russia raised the idea that the group should give Iran security guarantees to ease Middle East tensions. Bush dismissed the idea summarily.

As a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia counts. Its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, has pointed out that neither the US nor Israel offers any evidence that Iran is pursuing a nuclear-weapons program. Indeed, Washington's own National Intelligence Estimate, released in December, stated that Iran had ceased working on a nuclear military program in autumn 2003.

While politicians and experts dabble in speculation, military commanders are mandated to prepare plans for dealing with worst scenarios.

So what retired General John Abizaid, commander of CENTCOM from July 2003 to March 2007, has to say is worth pondering. "I believe that we have the power to deter Iran, should it become nuclear," he said in his talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank. "There are ways to live with a nuclear Iran. We lived with a nuclear Soviet Union, we've lived with a nuclear China, and we're living with [other] nuclear powers as well."

Dilip Hiro is the author of "Blood of the Earth: The Battle for the World's Vanishing Oil Resources," published by Nation Books, New York; Pollock's Publishing, London; and Penguin Books, New Delhi.

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The difference between Eastern and Western bosses

SOME critics have accused this column of being anti-Western. Not true! When I describe Western civilisation as "a loathsome, suppurating planet-sized disease blighting the planet" I mean it as a compliment.

Okay, I admit to being a little more sympathetic to the Asia-Pacific point of view, but Western civilisation receives high praise in a large number of my articles (two, if you include this one).

For example, one area in which the West definitely beats the East is in employment laws, a subject which has been much in the news lately. Asian workers are treated like dirt, and those are the lucky ones. The unlucky ones dream of being treated like dirt.

For example, recruitment ads in Asian newspapers are often sexist, ageist, racist and every other-ist. I once saw an ad which said: "Wanted: young, beautiful female auditor." I'm sure thousands were killed in the rush.

When an Asian employer wants to get rid of staff, he just turns off their entry access cards, leaving them stranded outside the office. They mill around, mystified for a while, but he knows they will go home eventually.

Western companies are different. Employment is taken very seriously and workers are protected by powerful unions and employment laws.

I'm proud to say that I have worked for some of the world's most famous companies, Eastern and Western, and been sacked by them. So it's easy for me to compare them.

Sacking people Western-style: "I'm terribly sorry but we're having to downsize and have no option but to let you go."

Sacking people Eastern-style: "You: out."

Hiring people Western-style: "After the second round of interviews, there will be a four-hour aptitude test followed by a panel interview with the board."

Hiring people Eastern-style: "You: in."

Reaction to a request for

better working conditions, Western-style: "We'll get the ergonomics experts in to make you more comfortable."

Reaction to a request for better working conditions, Eastern-style: "Ha ha ha ha."

Reaction to a request for a pay-rise in the West: "Gee, that's a lot to ask, but I'll speak to the finance director."

Reaction to a request for a pay-rise in the East: "Ha ha ha ha."

Reaction to internal criticism, Western-style: "If staff want to give feedback, we want to hear it."

Reaction to internal criticism, Eastern-style: "You: out."

Encouragement, Western-style: "The deadline's tight, but let's try our very best to hit it."

Encouragement, Eastern-style: "You: out, you out."

Overtime, Western-style: "Can I have volunteers to stay an extra hour or two? We'll pay you double-time."

Overtime, Eastern-style: "Lock the doors."

Dealing with the victim of an industrial accident, Western-style: "The good news is that you do get some medical coverage, although it is not unlimited."

Dealing with the victim of an industrial accident, Eastern-style: "You: out."

Staff incentive program, Western style: "We've organised an off-site staff meeting at a resort in Bali."

Staff incentive program, Eastern style: "Work harder or you out."

Dealing with a request for compassionate leave, Western-style: "Take the day off and come in tomorrow if you are feeling better."

Dealing with a request for compassionate leave, Eastern-style: "Ha ha ha ha ha."

Now of course you may say that I am being overly cynical about Eastern employers. I'll deal with that issue later, if my door access card still works.

Tell your work anecdotes to our columnist at www.vittachi.com.

