

Migrants' rights bodies weigh in on Kuwait imbroglio

Good to know that the world is watching

WE applaud the strong stand taken by a growing number of migrants' rights groups and the ILO, who have spoken out in support of the Bangladeshi workers who have been struggling for their rights in Kuwait, and criticised the host authorities for their handling of the issue. This stance sends the long overdue message to the relevant authorities that its high-handed treatment of its migrant labour force will have to cease.

To date 757 Bangladeshis have been deported from Kuwait for allegedly participating in and instigating strikes, though many of the deportees have denied participation, credibly claiming that they have been victims of arbitrary arrest for being Bangladeshi, and, as we have seen in photographs in this and other publications, many have been abused by the Kuwaiti police prior to their deportation.

The fact that migrants rights groups as well as the ILO have also now raised their voice is welcomed. There is no question that allegations of underpayment and mistreatment need to be investigated fully. The Kuwait government has fixed minimum wages for the migrant workers, but much more needs to be done to ensure that workers get what is their due and that both the employers who cheat them and the authorities who have been involved in the recent abuses are brought to justice.

We are especially gratified to see action taken by rights groups formed by members of the Bangladeshi diaspora who are rallying behind their fellow countrymen. This kind of involvement is a truly meaningful way for them to help their country and demonstrates admirable solidarity with their less fortunate brethren.

The groups have also singled out Bangladesh embassy officials for not better protecting migrant workers, and this echoes concerns within Bangladesh. No doubt, there is much that needs to be done on the Bangladeshi side, as well. In addition to the role of the embassies, it has been pointed out that Bangladesh needs also to ratify the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families, and also to sign protocols to protect workers with 16 countries, as promised by the government at the start of its tenure.

The time has come for our government to protect our migrant workers better and for the host governments to ensure that underpayment and abuse are a thing of the past.

Recruitment at RU

The tale of politics getting the better of merit

A University Grants Commission probe has revealed that over 700 teachers, officials and employees were recruited by the Rajshahi University authorities in violation of the University Act and UGC rules over the last 10 years. Political consideration is reported to have influenced the recruitment process, while merit was a sad casualty.

It is no secret that party politics had its more than fair share of influence in almost all public organisations or institutions when political governments were in power. The extent of such political control or intrusion was so great that some important organisations like the PSC were badly debilitated. The report from Rajshahi University further corroborates the widely held view that the political governments didn't even spare the highest seats of learning. Obviously, it is just not an issue of providing some party loyalists with jobs that they didn't deserve. The colossal damage that such party-based thinking has caused to the standard of education or other services rendered to the students at the university cannot be overlooked. And there is the question of unfair treatment meted out to the meritorious who fell victim to the highly politicised system of recruitment in a major public university.

There was violation of rules in various forms. In 2004, the university authorities appointed 544 third and fourth class employees against 255 vacant posts. That obviously meant extra expenditure for which nobody was held responsible.

The issue has a direct bearing on smooth functioning of the public universities on which depend, let us not forget, a large majority of students for higher education at affordable costs. It is a sad truth that the political parties, which were in power when all such irregularities plagued the recruitment process at the universities, showed a poor understanding of the potential efficacy of public universities in the career building processes of a vast majority of the student community. Apparently, they failed to realise that destroying a university amounted to crippling the nation.

There is no dearth of rules and regulations for ensuring the quality of recruitment to the institutions of higher learning. All we have to make sure now is to devise ways and means to implement them to the fullest.

Whither police reform?



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THE police are yet to get the go ahead for the implementation of the proposed "Draft Police Ordinance-2007." It might interest the readers to know that Pakistan had formulated an entirely new police act in 2002, and in India, although the police Act of 1861 has not been totally replaced, efforts have been made to do away with it through a "Model Police Act" that its National Police Commission formulated in 1981. This has acted as a guideline for many Indian states that have attempted to make the police act relevant to the need at the time.

The proposed police ordinance has been lying with the home ministry since middle of June 2007, and the fact that a 32-member committee had been formed some time back to "review" the proposals gives the impression that the issue has been successfully shelved, and that it will not be cleared during the tenure of the caretaker government, which in other words, means it may never see the light of day.

The reluctance -- to address the

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very pressing issue of police reform through a new police act, for the drafting of which a lot of time has been spent, and which one understands is informed by extensive deliberations and exchanges of opinions between the police and a wide cross-section of the people -- is difficult to understand. Just for the record, a roundtable on the Draft was organised by The Daily Star on August 11, 2007, participated by a large number of expeditors, eminent lawyers, and members of the civil society and human rights groups. As many as 32 major suggestions were made, many of which have been incorporated in the final draft.

When the police want reform why can't they have it? The answer, one must admit, is not so simple. One must go back to the antecedents of the institution of the police in our country and the Act of 1861 to understand the psyche that predominates the minds of those on whom rests the responsibility of bringing in the necessary changes.

It is sad but true that the colonial legislation that has guided the

function of the police in Bangladesh has served the successive governments -- the military, pseudo-democratic, and the democratically elected -- very well. It is worth keeping in mind that the 1861 Act was legislated very soon after 1857; the motivation was not the love for the people of India but to crush dissent and the irredentist aspirations of the Indians. The parameters under which the police in Bangladesh function are a relic of the colonial past, a relic that, regrettably, some would like to continue even now.

Colonial laws infuse colonial mentality -- and this was eminently clear in the attitude of the policemen so far, although one must admit that there is an effort of late by the police leadership to purge that mind-set through motivational training of all ranks of the force.

But more than the attitudinal problems of the police, the institution was never allowed to function even within the parameters of the old laws. The deep extent of political control showed in the way it was

used as a handmaiden of the political party in power to go after its political opponents. Almost all its agencies were dysfunctional, most of all the investigative agencies, which were compelled to alter the course of many criminal investigations. An example of this is the ex-home minister's role in influencing a criminal case, which was so clearly revealed recently in the final report, related to an SSP who was framed by none other than the minister himself for investigating criminal activities of some of his party apparatchiks.

The way the erstwhile alliance government had the police conduct the investigation of the August 21 bomb attack on the AL meeting has exposed the inability of the force to resist political pressure, even though the Act of 1861 clearly lays down that the force would be answerable only to the lawful authority and follow legal orders only. No wonder then that some police chiefs could do little except raise their hands in despair and helplessness, although some past IGP's had felt obliged to remain

beholden to the party at the cost of state interest.

There was no chain of command, and it is to the political leaders that the lower level officers declared their fealty -- doing at the behest of the bhabans and sadans to demonstrate their efficiency. Whatever few had the gall to go by the book, suffered the inevitable fate. Therefore, if the police did not live up to the expectation of the people, it is the politicians that must also shoulder the blame.

Surely, such a situation cannot continue any longer. The police functions have to conform to the democratic values and the principle of universal human rights. The "Draft Police Ordinance-2007" indeed enshrines those in the very lofty preamble of the proposed policy. It enjoins upon the police, among other things, to be answerable to the people, who want policing by consent and not something imposed upon them. There are some very important features of the draft policy, including that of the provision of a "police commission" which among other things will oversee the workings of the force and also recommend a panel of names to the government for selecting the IGP. The proposed ordinance makes illegal interference into police operations a criminal offence.

We cannot overlook the fact that the police play an important role in the socio-economic development of the country. If they have not played that role so far, the state

must ensure that the situation is changed. It is our painful experience that bad policing has often led to promulgation of more stringent laws that were basically "bad laws" to begin with. This must not happen.

But the essential point is that alongside police reform, there is a need to reform the police too. Of essence is the need to change the mindset, both of the police and its political masters. Political interference must end. And the police must be endowed with adequate resources to perform up to par. Without fulfilling these conditions, even the best of legislations will fail to deliver.

It is worth reproducing the last of the "Nine Principles" composed by Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne, as the first and joint Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police, contained in the "General Instructions" for the London Metropolitan police, in 1829. It says: "The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, and not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them."

No new proposal, particularly one that seeks to replace old regulations, can be entirely without flaw. But whatever shortcomings might be present can only be found out after it is put into effect. The issue is too important to brook any further delay.

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The cloud hanging over Beijing Olympics

Air pollution, abuse of human rights, lack of freedom of press, and political persecution figure in the criticism that has been aired for some time. The recent crackdown on Tibetans has caused unease in some capitals, which resulted in a call for boycotting the Games.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE People's Republic of China is poised to host the Olympics Games in the world's most polluted city, Beijing, in spite of political rumbling and criticism by non-governmental organisations, including Amnesty International.

Air pollution, abuse of human rights, lack of freedom of press, and political persecution figure in the criticism that has been aired for some time. The recent crackdown on Tibetans has caused unease in some capitals, which resulted in a call for boycotting the Games. At least two European leaders had decided not to attend the inauguration of the Games, but French President Nicolas Sarkozy reversed his decision. US President George W. Bush, however, did not succumb to political pressure from opposition political parties and human rights activists to boycott Olympics games, although he gave audience to Dalai Lama in the Oval office following the crackdown on Tibetans.

It is true that the Bush administration could not afford to ignore the Beijing Olympics as the US is indebted to Beijing on many counts. With the world's largest reserves of dollars, China has been a major investor in US treasury bonds and debt securities. It is the second largest holder of US government debt next to Japan. The US is now paying \$60 million a day as interest on the debt.

The history of the Olympic Games traces back to 1896, when Athens first hosted the summer Games. They are held every four years. The theme of this year's Games is "a journey of harmony," bringing the message of peace to people of different nationalities, cultures and creeds.

The Olympics village, will house 16,000 athletes and representatives from 200 countries, was opened in Beijing by Mayor Chen Zhili on July 27. 20,000 accredited media personnel, both print and broadcast, will witness the games. High-tech facilities will be in place in the press center to allow journalists

to report on the Olympics Games. Beijing authorities unblocked the Amnesty International web site after discussions with officials of the International Olympics Committee, while the spiritual movement Falun Gong site remains blocked. Some web sites relating to Tibet were opened, but others in the restive region in the west of China were not.

The Washington Times reported that about 400,000 public security volunteers will be in place, apart from 180,000 police and counter-terrorism troops. 300,000 surveillance cameras are being installed. Beijing authorities are reported to be apprehending sabotage of the Olympics Games from the Falun Gong religious group and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.

One group of analysts agrees with Beijing Olympics authorities that security measures are in line with the threat posed while another group thinks security preparations are disproportionate to the alleged threat, which has not been established. This is

reflected in a 71-page report, compiled by Human Rights Watch, on news media censorship. The allegations are: obstruction, harassment, threats to deny accreditation, and jailing of journalists. Reporters without borders -- an international journalists' rights group -- reported that the occasional good news, such as the unblocking of access to certain foreign web sites and reopening of Tibet, have been eclipsed by a series of outrageous arrests and increased surveillance of human rights activists.

This is one side of the coin. The other side is that China promised to meet the World Health Organisation's air quality standard when it won the bid to hold the Olympics. It is certainly trying to meet the requirements as can be seen from the shutting down or relocation of 200 notoriously polluting plants and factories. It is understood that the authorities have temporarily closed 1,000 coal-mines and 144 gas stations. From July 20, half of Beijing's automobiles were banned from plying in the city for the duration of Olympics games, and all construction has been stopped. These measures did not solve the problem, although the Olympics Organising committee admitted that pollution levels have dropped 13.8 percent since 2001.

A recent study by London Times reveal that Beijing's pollution is up to five times worse than levels deemed safe by the World Health Organisation. Beijing's own environmental protection bureau, however, considers the current air quality as fair.

Many competing countries are staying clear of Beijing as far as possible. For example, the US track and field team is training in the eastern port of Dalian, and coaches are advising athletes to wear masks when they are in Beijing. The entire British delegation is holed up in Macau, while the Canadian delegation will remain in Singapore until a few days before the events. The Australian team will remain outside China until competitions begin.

China has been facing shortage of pure drinking water for quite sometime. A Canadian public interest research group, Probe International, gave a graphic picture of the water crisis in Beijing. Beijing's growing population and industrial expansion in recent years have increased water demand, but below average rainfall since 1980 coupled with nine consecutive dry years resulted in less surface run-off to rivers -- most of them dried up -- and reservoirs, and less water available for ground

water recharge.

It is true that restrictions and industrial shutdown may have cut down air pollution, but it has not as yet had an impact on Beijing's air. The president of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge, is reported to have remarked that, "Games have always had to contend with weather and other external forces. If the atmospheric conditions are too cold for cross country, or it's too hot for a marathon, we change the dates. It is true that the pollution in Beijing is today a question mark. But we adapt."

In spite of all difficulties Beijing is prepared to welcome the world on August 8 for the Olympics Games, which will continue until August 27. The inaugural ceremony of the Olympics Games -- on the eighth day of the eighth month of 2008 -- will coincide with mass marriages as Chinese believe the number eight brings good luck. Beijing Olympics Games will go down as one of the well-organised games in recent memory, with covert and overt surveillance which would mar the fun of the games.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat writes from Virginia.

Why Israel won't change

It's fairly clear that across the political spectrum in the United States and Israel, there is agreement that Iran poses the greatest threat -- and that the Jewish state's other options are limited.

MICHAEL HIRSH

SOME things will change for Israel and its chief ally, the United States, when Prime Minister Ehud Olmert resigns. But most things won't -- especially the big things. Israel still faces at least four major strategic choices: how to resolve the faltering peace talks with the Palestinians, how to deal with the growing power of Hezbollah in Lebanon, whether to maintain the fragmentary ceasefire with Hamas, and above all whether to take military action against Iran. And it doesn't much matter who the next prime minister is -- or even the next US president: the choices that Israel makes will likely be the same.

Perhaps that sounds like a bold prediction. But it may be the safest one. One substantial piece of evidence is the conversation that

occurred earlier last week at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem between two men some might think are on opposite sides of the spectrum: the supposedly diplomatic Barack Obama and the uber-hawkish Bibi Netanyahu, head of the Likud Party and a fair bet to return to the prime minister's office.

According to Netanyahu advisor Uzi Arad -- a former Mossad official who was present at the 45-minute talk -- Obama agreed with Netanyahu that "the paramount and most urgent issue is Iran," and that "a nuclear Iran is unacceptable not only to Israel but also to the United States." Netanyahu "also made it clear to him that on the Iranian threat there is no dissension in Israel; this is a national attitude."

In telephone interview on Thursday, Arad told me that he

believed that the Democratic candidate for president concurred with Netanyahu as well about the sequence of events that must occur.

On Iran "the clocks and centrifuges are clicking and spinning, and not only is time of the essence but the order of things is as well. Should one fail to neutralise that Iranian threat now, it would undercut anything that would be achieved with the Palestinians, Syria or Lebanon."

As Arad put it: "If you follow that logic, the current efforts to move on the Palestinian issue are pathetic, because they would not be worth the paper they're written on if Iran is not contained. If Iran became nuclear it would mean the victory of the militants in Hamas and Hezbollah and undercut the moderates."

Obama, for his part, said he was

for the use of "more carrots and sticks" and wanted to have dialogue and engagement policy with Iran before taking any other action, according to Arad. "Netanyahu reacted by saying that what is essential here are not means but the ends... They are in agreement about the overall objective. Then Netanyahu added his considered judgment that the more credible the military option, the more likely it is that diplomacy with sanction will succeed."

Obama's "body language conveyed" that he agreed with that as well, Arad said. He added that the two did not discuss whether a president Obama would support Israel if the Jewish state came to think it necessary to strike Iran.

Asked about Arad's account, one member of the Obama team present at the meeting -- a senior advisor to the candidate -- said he could not recall the discussion about sequencing. But this source, who requested anonymity in discussing private conversations, said that Obama and Netanyahu "were in complete agreement on the goal

of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon... They certainly agreed that the Iran threat is the paramount concern and that a nuclear bomb is unacceptable to both countries."

Another top adviser who accompanied Obama on the Middle East trip, former US envoy Dennis Ross, said that the candidate met with senior officials from the major Israeli parties, and "I would say that among those within the government the one issue on which there was absolute unanimity was Iran."

"Obama," Ross added, "basically made it very clear that this was a... critical national security interest of the United States."

The various contenders to replace Olmert, who announced Wednesday that he would resign in September in the face of a criminal probe of his finances, take different foreign policy stances.

Tzipi Livni of the Kadima Party, the current foreign minister, is more dovish; her rival Shaul Mofaz is center-right, and former prime minister Ehud Barak of the Labour

Party, another top contender, has grown notably more hawkish over the years.

On the Palestinian-Israeli issue, a prime minister Livni would probably try to reach an overall "final-status" agreement on statehood; Arad says Netanyahu would revert back to a much slower, more incremental approach.

There is also a lingering sense of doubt in Israeli security circles about Obama's firmness on Iran; if it looks like he'll win the presidency, Israel could decide to strike Iran before he's sworn in to assure the necessary support of the Pentagon.

But the Democratic candidate seems to be working hard to address those doubts. The most Israel could expect would be marginal U.S. support, even from George W. Bush. The current defense secretary, Robert Gates, recently wrote that a war with Iran would be "disastrous on a number of levels."

Other wild cards could come into play in the next few months. There's every chance that Olmert, besmirched both by his feeble

performance in the 2006 Lebanon war and his alleged corruption, might try to make a desperate play for the history books and cut a deal with the Palestinians before he leaves office in disgrace.

But even in the best case, that is likely to be a fuzzy framework agreement that leaves the hardest issues -- Jerusalem, borders and a Palestinian right of return -- undressed.

According to former US negotiator Aaron David Miller, author of The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace, any such pact would be "half-baked" and would likely fail because of Olmert's lame-duck status. "There's a big difference between a piece of paper and the capacity to sell it," he says.

On the other issues, though, Israel's security establishment is already in the process of deciding things collectively. And it's fairly clear that across the political spectrum in the United States and Israel, there is agreement that Iran poses the greatest threat -- and that the Jewish state's other options are limited.

"Whatever the different [Israeli] candidates say in advance of the campaign, the choices that are going to face them are pretty much the same: 40,000 rockets in the north, military options in Gaza that are limited, the overriding threat that Iran presents, and the question of what's possible with the Palestinians," says Ross.

As Ron Tira, an Israeli security expert, puts it: "If you look at the really big picture, there's not only an Iranian aircraft carrier in Lebanon (Hezbollah), but there's another one 45 kilometers from Tel Aviv in Gaza (Hamas). With those two Iranian aircraft carriers in place and Iran proceeding with its nuclear program, with the prospect of America withdrawing from Iraq in the next two years, and Iran becoming a dominant force there... Israel is in position where it needs to act unilaterally and pay whatever the cost."

Miller adds that these huge problems will remain the same "not only for Olmert's successor but also for Bush's."

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