

President Obama

We wish him the best, and hope that his presidency lives up to its promise

WE welcome and congratulate Barack Hussein Obama on his assumption of the office of the 44th president of the United States. President Obama takes up his grave responsibility at a time of extraordinary turmoil and peril, both for America and the entire world, and we hope that he will succeed in leading his country with the integrity, vision, and sagacity that his remarkable rise promises.

President Obama's ascension to the US presidency is a historic event. The fact that an African-American is now the leader of the most powerful nation on Earth reflects how much America has matured and is both a shining example to all other countries around the world as well as a signal to them that a new day is dawning.

However, the significance of Obama's presidency lies in far more than just his race. The recent horrific events in Gaza, as well as the continuing turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan, merely serve to underscore the dangers of the world today and how bold and visionary American leadership is now more necessary than ever before.

There are other dangers before the world as well, most notably the global financial crisis which threatens to decimate economies and has already thrown millions into poverty, with no respite in sight.

Both America and the world are in desperate need of visionary leadership that will take the country in a new direction away from the failed policies of the out-going Bush administration that has brought the US and the world to the brink of catastrophe.

President Obama's inaugural address gives us great hope. In it he has pledged a new direction for America under his leadership and has vowed to fundamentally alter America's relationship with the rest of the world. Especially for those of us watching from overseas, it was heartening to hear him talk in the language of inclusiveness and amity, of partnership and mutual respect.

We in South Asia who greatly welcomed his electoral victory look forward to his close attention in promoting peace in the region and advancing the cause of rapid poverty alleviation. As for Bangladesh we expect closer cooperation with the USA and her greater investment in our economy.

The promise of an Obama presidency is that the most powerful nation on the planet will be a beacon of liberty and justice around the globe, that it will take the lead in peacemaking and development, that it will re-take its seat among the community of nations, earning the respect and admiration of all.

President Obama's inaugural address hit all the right notes. We sincerely hope that he will be able to live up to his soaring and inspiring rhetoric, and that he will succeed in his quest to usher in an era of fundamental change for the good of his country and the whole world.

On to the upazila polls

These have potential to unlock new possibilities

THE upazila elections, being held today across the country after long 19 years, are indeed a major event having a huge potential to trigger people-oriented balanced development. Upazila Parishads to be constituted by elected public figures are going to be a highly important tier of the local government system.

The upazila parishad being placed in the middle of the local government structure is ideally suited to avert any disconnect between the top and the grassroots tier of the system. This could effect a breakthrough for a country with a highly centralised administrative and decision making system where the role of local organisations has been traditionally marginalised. But it is now universally accepted that any administrative action or service delivery plan or development project that doesn't relate to people, or fail to ensure their participation, turns out to be a futile exercise. This is particularly true about a country like Bangladesh which is very big in terms of population. So, effective decentralisation is a powerful method to reach out to the people.

Obviously, mere presence of the upazilas will not help the country attain the twin goal of participatory democracy and development process. Unless the local agencies of the government have the delegated authority to complement the efforts of the elected parishads, the latter could turn out to be mere show-cases.

The upazila infrastructure could really be the platform from which the government can launch its plan of bringing about major changes, as promised by Sheikh Hasina, with a view to bringing administrative decision making closer to the people and making the upazilas the epicentres of growth and development. This is an imperative that has to be given due importance to avoid the lopsided development in the past which benefited the cities only. It will create new avenues for the people living in upazilas to get involved with development activities designed and implemented locally and to benefit thereby rather than chasing the mirage of employment in the urban areas.

An idea whose time has come

I, for one, feel that the idea of a regional task force is an eminently good idea that should help in fulfilling the provisions of Saarc agreements related to terrorism. However, given the peculiar strategic orientation of the region and geopolitical compulsion, one may well ask how effective the proposed task force would be. That is a subject we shall address later.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE Awami League's commitment to fighting terrorism has been clearly defined in its election manifesto. One could assume that a part of its strategy would be effected through a collaborative effort regionally to combat the scourge, as enunciated by the party leader.

There is every reason for the Awami League to take the issue of terrorism very seriously given the fact that its top leadership were targets of terrorist attacks on more than one occasion, but even more because the short shrift that the issue was given by the erstwhile 4-party alliance regime, one of whose constituents is alleged to have been directly responsible for the rise of the indigenous religious terrorist groups in Bangladesh in recent times.

It bears repetition that a policy of denial by the erstwhile BNP-Jamaat regime had put the country's security at stake till such time pressure from both home and abroad compelled it to move against these elements. We have to face up to the reality that there are strongly motivated groups who would want to impose their political philosophy that they feel stems from religious motivation, by force.

It would be a folly to think that the phenomenon of ideologically motivated terrorism in Bangladesh is entirely an indigenous occurrence, and an even greater mistake would be to think that it can be addressed by us alone through entirely our own efforts. For one thing, the terrorist groups in our country are not without their ideological sponsors although there may not be a fully established organic international link. There is also the issue of funding and regional networking

between these elements motivated primarily by survival instinct.

The fact that regional resources must be combined to address terrorism had been acknowledged long ago when the Saarc Convention on Terrorism was adopted in 1987 and reinforced by the adoption of Additional Protocol on terrorism at the 12th Summit whose modalities were finalised in the Dhaka Summit the next year.

The comments of the then foreign minister of Bangladesh on that occasion, "The modalities of the protocol are being discussed and (will be) finalised here for taking collective measures to eradicate terrorism from the region. We have built up an institutional framework, which can be utilised by the member countries to initiate effective actions. Combatting terrorism is a task that South Asia needs to pursue relentlessly," attest to the need for a regional approach.

However, some controversy has been whipped up in the wake of the prime minister's re-articulation of her party's election manifesto regarding setting up of a task force at regional level to combat terrorism. What one can gather from comments posited in opposition to the idea of a regional task force is primarily regarding the character of the said task force.

The idea that one can form from reading these comments is that the task force might assume the form of a standing military force ready to be employed against the terrorists (something like the ISAF in Afghanistan). The issue of sovereignty as well the wider strategic ramifications has also been alluded to should this become a part of the so-called US war on terror.

I feel that a task force is not necessarily a



Tools of terrorism.

standing military force. There are many examples of regional task forces, like the APEC Counter-Terrorism Task Force, established to address terrorism, have nothing to do with military force. A very significant case in point is the UN task force on terrorism set up in 2006.

The terms of reference of APEC Counter-Terrorism Task Force, set up in 2003, are to coordinate the implementation of the anti-terror strategy enunciated by its leaders, assist economies to identify and assess counter-terrorism needs, coordinate capacity building and technical assistance programs, cooperate with the international organisations to implement the strategy, and facilitate cooperation between APEC fora on counter-terrorism issues.

And those who deal with the issue of terrorism cannot be oblivious of the UN strategy to combat terrorism and the establishment of the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, whose some tasks among the many are: helping member states in implementing

the strategy in an integrated manner; factoring counter-terrorism prevention into conflict prevention, through the use of envoys and special representatives; providing a forum for addressing political and economic exclusion, in particular among youth.

I, for one, feel that the idea of a regional task force is an eminently good idea that should help in fulfilling the provisions of Saarc agreements related to terrorism. However, given the peculiar strategic orientation of the region and geopolitical compulsion, one may well ask how effective the proposed task force would be. That is a subject we shall address later.

However, since doubts and apprehension have been raised by some quarters, either deliberately for the sake of opposing an idea or out of genuine concern, it is for the government to expand and elucidate on the idea and put the controversy to rest.

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Worlds apart

For four decades an investment in ignorance has nurtured an incremental interest in hatred. Pakistan has become a breeding ground for permanent war against India. Indians have developed a deep aversion for Pakistan. If a poll were taken in India asking whether Pakistan should be relocated in Latin America, the answer would be a unanimous yes.

M.J. AKBAR

L947 divided us, but did not separate us. We still met, through family and media. Separation came with war in 1965, instigated by fantasists like General Ayub Khan and Z. A. Bhutto. It extinguished the flickering embers of trust. Walls of regulations were raised to block knowledge, and then vision. If you do not see a neighbour he is not a neighbour. There are no neighbours in the huge apartment blocks of Mumbai, only adjacent numbers.

The middle class Indian's true neighbour is America, sharing culture, language, consumerism, celebrity-worship, and an insatiable desire for upward mobility. He knows more about the intricate processes that make Obama president than it does about the hop, skip and jump that Zardari used to acquire the same title.

India and Pakistan share a past but not a

present; the future is vulnerable to imagined realities. Those with goodwill sell notions of excessive, even emotional hospitality. Those with ill-will, the preponderant majority, provoke images of demonic horror. The young Pakistani men sent to Mumbai on a killing spree were fed on lies salted with evil; they had no independent reality check.

For four decades an investment in ignorance has nurtured an incremental interest in hatred. Pakistan has become a breeding ground for permanent war against India. Indians have developed a deep aversion for Pakistan. If a poll were taken in India asking whether Pakistan should be relocated in Latin America, the answer would be a unanimous yes.

Neighbours do not need to be permanent friends. France and Germany fought each other with a deadly bitterness that was once synonymous with Europe, but there was always individual, social and intellectual

discourse between the two.

Neighbours do not need to be equals. The US and Britain have been the best of neighbours since 1918, dining and hunting together. They have replaced each other as emperor of most of the world worth ruling, and the relationship has survived the trauma of self-appraisal.

Neighbours may not share the same language, but they must know how to communicate, to understand what the other is doing, and why. Peace is impossible without understanding. The fog of ignorance only induces conflict through the illusion of victory. Ironically, the real deception is that the deceiver never knows how much he has deceived himself.

Knowledge of the other is impossible without free flow of media. Newspapers and television stations may be terrible, but they are not terrorists. They may occasionally bore you to death, but they do not actually kill anyone. Indians and Pakistanis can see CNN at the flick of a finger but not each other's channels. So what if media sometimes gets hysterical; it never takes too long for hysterics to make fools of themselves.

Sadly, hysteria can also influence policy, so it is important to know what the other is ranting about. Moreover, information cannot really be kept in solitary confinement; it always dribbles out as misinformation. It makes sense to offer it as information.

I saw the January 10 issue of Pakistan's

most important English newspaper, Dawn, purely by accident. Page 1 had a report from Lahore about five low-intensity explosions that ripped through five theatres. This was the work of the same fundamentalist minds that sent terrorists to India; their enemy was not just India, but any sign of modernity in Pakistan. No one accused these bombers of being RAW agents.

From Kohat came a story of heavily-armed Sunnis attacking a Shia procession with rockets. Five died. Communal riots do not necessarily need men of different faiths.

The edit page had a brilliant piece by Shandana Khan Mohmand. It asked Pakistan to get real, and acknowledge that terrorist organisations were sustained by popular funds. It also noted, calmly, that "Pakistan needs to accept a very harsh reality: it is not India's equal."

Far from being banned, Dawn should be made compulsory reading in India. The United States and the Soviet Union also blocked information during their Cold War, and paid good money to mislead. But distance reduced flashpoints to a minimum. India and Pakistan have become enemies cursed by a common frontier.

The ground has been frozen on the frontier into a glacier, but the air is still free, albeit polluted. If we want to clear the air, we have no option except to use that inconsistent broom called media.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.

President of the world!

President Obama will face enormous challenges, some may prove insurmountable; but Americans do not want to think about it now. They just want to celebrate the end of their nightmare and the beginning of a dream.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IT took four hundred years, but on January 20, 2009, America atoned for its sin of slavery. This was America's third coming. In the first, Thomas Jefferson declared that "all men are created equal." Of course, Jefferson meant only white men who owned property.

Four score and seven years later, Abraham Lincoln reiterated Jefferson's declaration through the emancipation of the slaves. Another hundred and forty-five years elapsed before the American public elected its first African-American president.

It all happened so suddenly! Before Democratic nominee John Kerry picked him to deliver the keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Party convention, very few people outside Chicago had heard of this obscure Illinois state senator.

This is the beauty of the American system. Unlike parliamentary democracies, where a potential prime minister has to come up through the ranks, in the American presiden-

tial system, candidates can come from nowhere and win the presidency. Carter and Clinton were also relatively unknowns when they ran for the presidency. American presidency is a far more powerful institution than the office of a prime minister. It is a combination of royalty and the office of the highest executive.

Over two million Americans braved a frozen Washington, DC to attend Obama's inauguration. Many will pay a price through sickness, reminiscent of the ninth US president William Henry Harrison, who delivered a rather boring 2-hour inauguration speech in bitter cold in 1841, and died of pneumonia a month later! These days, wisely, presidents speak for about 20 minutes, just as Barack Obama did!

In his brilliant inaugural address, appropriately, Obama addressed the world, especially the Muslim world: "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on

the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." How refreshing to hear about "respect" and a possible handshake from a US president!

Of course the theme of change ran through the whole speech. Who would have thought that an American president would say in his inaugural speech: "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace."

America is at war on two fronts, the economy is on the verge of depression, yet, Americans are so optimistic! I have never seen Americans so proud of their country and their president! I have never seen African-Americans wave the

American flag with so much gusto!

Volumes will be written about the magic Obama's election brought to America. It is as though Obama pulled out the sword Excalibur from a stone, as in the Legends of King Arthur, and cast a spell over the whole nation!

America is celebrating not only Barack Obama's proverbial ascension to the throne, but also the end of its 8-year nightmare in the form of the catastrophic George W. Bush presidency. The audience boomed as President Obama thanked the former president, who went home to Texas with a laughable 22% approval rating!

President Obama will face enormous challenges, some may prove insurmountable; but Americans do not want to think about it now. They just want to celebrate the end of their nightmare and the beginning of a dream.

The whole world got caught up in the Obama-mania. The French First Lady Carla Bruni was on David Letterman show a few weeks ago and said that she, along with the French nation stayed awake very late into the night to watch Obama win the presidency on November 4. Barack Obama was the world's presidential candidate. Now he is the world's president!

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