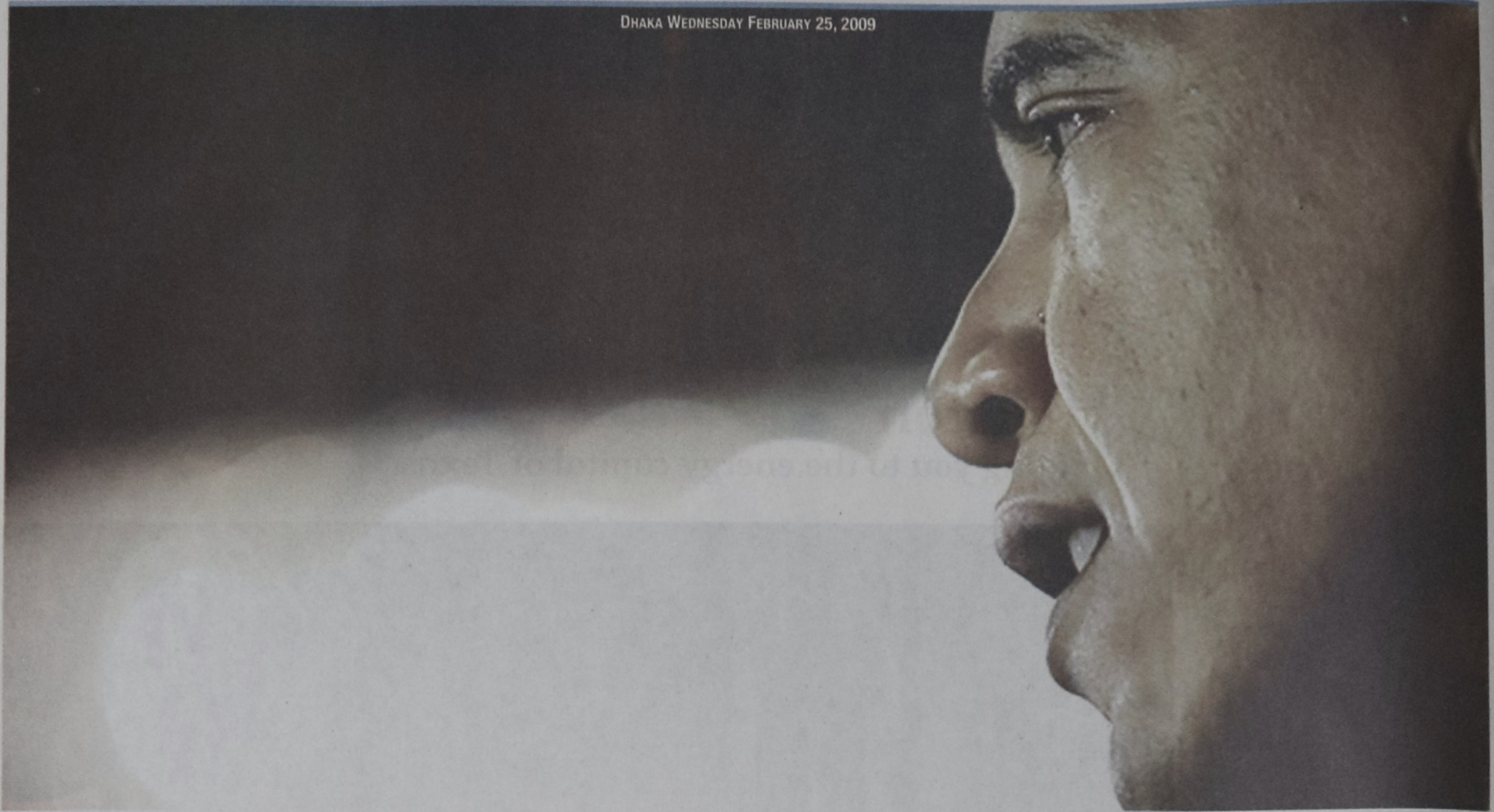


DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 25, 2009



America-Islam relations

MUNIR QUDDUS

IN a recent interview, President Obama said that the results of the US elections present the United States with an opportunity to reboot its strained relations with the Islamic world. During his inaugural address on January 20, the 44th president of the United States pleasantly surprised many American Muslims by his statement: "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." The new president has expressed his intention to give a major speech in a Muslim capital to share his vision. Symbolic steps do matter in improving relations between people and nations. However, real change can only come from substantive shifts in policy in order to reboot this critical but long-neglected relationship.

During the campaign, Mr. Obama expressed a desire to put greater emphasis on diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy, use force only as a last resort, work to achieve lasting

The average Muslim has come to believe that the war on terror is in fact a war on Islam. Headlines with stories of killings of innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, ghastly mistreatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison, documented violations of civil rights of Muslim immigrants, attacks on institutions like Islamic charities, and demonising Islam's prophet and holy book further inflamed the sentiments against the United States.

peace in the Middle-East, adopt a more compassionate domestic agenda, greater respect for civil rights for all citizens and immigrants, close Guantanamo Bay prison, end torture, eliminate racial and ethnic profiling, adopt a humane and effective immigration policy.

On his first day in the office, by signing executive orders to close the Guantanamo Bay prison and effectively ending torture, he has already taken giant steps in fulfilling his com-

mitments to the rule of law. If he is able to deliver on even a few of other promises, Mr. Obama would have made huge progress in rebuilding the fractured relations with the Muslim people.

The Pew Research surveys have shown that the image of the United States in the Muslim world, even in countries considered close allies like Turkey, have greatly suffered in recent years. Nor surprisingly, the Pew Research surveys of Americans show

that the American public also have come to develop a deep mistrust of Islam and Muslims.

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At home a stubbornly high percentage of Americans continue to believe that Saddam Hussein had a role in the September 11 attacks, that Al Qaeda has wide support in the Islamic world, and that the Islamic scriptures teach violence and worldwide domination.

This situation must change since how the world's Muslim community perceive the American government has direct bearing on the long-term security of the United States. Fortunately, even though the relations have been in a deep freeze for most of the past eight years, a few strategic moves taken in a timely manner have potential to thaw these relationships. It is critical that the United States and the global Muslim community develop a partnership based on mutual respect. How can America regain its lost stature as the moral leader of the free world among the billion plus Muslim citizens of the globe?

It will take time to regain the trust

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