

Health scare

Public confidence must be restored

WE are shocked and saddened by the tragic death of a six-year old girl in Munshiganj, and concerned about reports of another four hundred children who have also fallen sick in the past few days. The first order of the day must be to ensure the welfare of the sick children, and ensure that they receive the treatment necessary to regain their health.

We also commend the government's formation of a probe body to look into the causes of this health scare, especially in light of the widespread belief among parents of the affected children that the sickness has been caused by Vitamin A capsules and deworming tablets provided through a government campaign.

The authorities have stated categorically that the capsules and pills cannot be the reason for the sicknesses, that there is no problem with respect to their storage, expiry date, or quality control, and thus far we have no reason to doubt their word.

Nevertheless, it is important for the government to get all the relevant facts out in the open in front of the public and to share with the public whatever information is available, both about its public health campaign that has come under scrutiny and the current health scare.

Indeed, there appears to be what can only be called a propaganda campaign, or, at the very least, a campaign of disinformation about the intention of the government and the donor agencies behind the initiative to provide the Vitamin A capsules and deworming tablets to children. The government must take very step to counter such propaganda and ensure that the disinformation is dispelled.

In short, public confidence needs to be restored as soon as possible. Thus, much now depends on how the government handles this scare, and we would hope that sagacious and mature handling of the crisis will go a long way to restoring the public confidence which will in turn minimise any negative fallout.

Furthermore, if the government does not handle the situation efficiently and with transparency, this will run the risk of jeopardising much-needed future nutrition and public health programs. It is thus imperative that the government do everything in its power to bring this crisis to a swift close and restore public confidence in full.

Our cricket and our shame

We demand accountability from the BCB

BANGLADESH has crashed out of the World Twenty20 in Nottingham. It was wiped out by a resolute Ireland, raising questions about what could have contributed to Bangladesh's embarrassment. The answers to those questions, as far as we are concerned, are not difficult to find. A defeat as shameful as the one our cricketers have just earned for themselves appears to have become the norm for our cricket. Where this particular match against Ireland is concerned, the sheer cavalier manner in which our players carried themselves during the course of the game makes us wonder if they were at all serious about what they were doing. Not a bit of worry seemed to be there and no hint came of a need for a change in strategy once the wickets began to fall rapidly.

We think the time has come for some hard thinking to be done about our cricket. And part of that thinking must be a swift departure of the captain. The defeat with Ireland has exposed Ashraful's weakness and incompetence as the captain of the national team. Not only has he demonstrated glaring shortcomings in strategizing the game but his own poor, irresponsible batting has also been setting the tone for the match. It appeared as though the Bangladesh team was waiting for a miracle to lift it out of the morass when what was needed was a considered, judicious approach to batting. In other words, the Ashraful captaincy has been symbolic of a glaring absence of leadership in the national team. Making such realities worse is the impression that the captain has not been listening to or has been ignoring the coach. Which brings us to the very important question of the role of the coach in training our cricketers to tackle reputed teams from around the world. Obviously, huge chunks of money have gone into pampering the players and in maintaining the coach. It is time for the Bangladesh Cricket Board to come clean about the depressing nature of our cricket. We as a nation now demand accountability from our cricket circles.

Let us take our cricket seriously. Occasionally the national team has won games at the international level and has even felled some giants. However, where bringing the team to an acceptable, credible and sustained standard is concerned, there is yet a very long way to go. That is what the embarrassing defeat against Ireland has proved once again.

Of ministerial explanations

Resignations from government are serious affairs. And reports of attempted resignations are a trifle more disconcerting. Individuals holding high office in the service of the republic owe it to the country to make matters clear any time people get down to this business of talking about their unhappiness in government.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

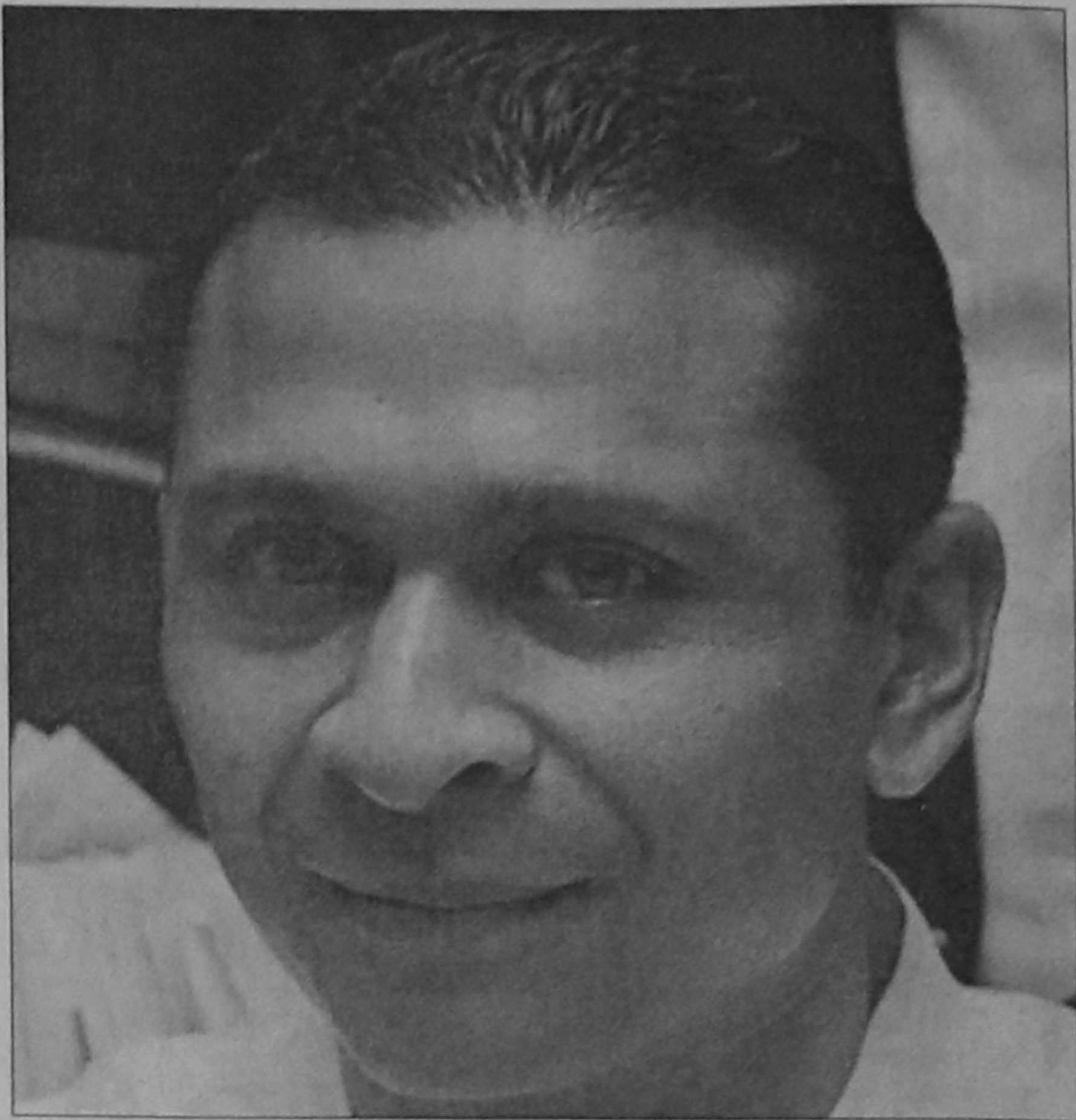
BEING disingenuous is often a disturbing part of political behaviour. In this past week, the very enterprising and the very dynamic Tanzim Ahmed Sohel Taj has given us reason to think he could have been a little more frank with us. He has informed us that in the past five months, which means since the Awami League-led grand alliance government assumed office, there have been no extra-judicial killings in the country. That is pretty upsetting, for the minister of state for home affairs knows only too well that what he says is quite a deviation from the truth. Of course, he has gone to great lengths to distinguish between extra-judicial killings and deaths in crossfire. He has the right to explain matters in his own way. We have the right to disagree with him. The truth right now, though, is this: the killing of two students of Dhaka Polytechnic by the Rapid Action Battalion is yet too fresh to be forgotten, unless the minister would like to believe that fast-enveloping amnesia is what we the people suffer from these days.

Let us (and that includes Minister Sohel Taj) face facts. Those two young men were killed in cold blood. At this point, it does not matter whether or not they were criminals. And that they had no record of earlier criminality has been attested to by the police themselves. Even criminals have a right to justice, to be heard. That said, in these post-modern times, it is inconceivable that men and women will be killed vigilante fashion only because someone or some people suspect them of criminality. The term "crossfire," in case anyone has missed the point, involves two sides. The reality for us, over the past many years and especially since the Rapid Action Battalion was forged into shape and put into operation, is that in these "crossfires"

only one side has been dispatched or, in a very few instances, received injuries. The other side has remained hale and hearty. Imagination has thus been stretched to the point of incredulity.

The minister of state for home informs us further -- and this touches the Polytechnic students again -- that if a case is filed in connection with the killings, action will be taken against those responsible for the tragedy. That attitude lacks logic and so cannot be acceptable. There are reasons why we do not accept such an argument. In the first place, given the systematically harsh manner in which individuals have died in "crossfires," few will be willing to file any case in this present instance. Fear is part of life. It assumes an even more gruesome shape when it tends to be symbolised by the state or an agency of the state. In the second place (and this follows from the preceding observation), the very fact that two young men have been shot ought to have set the government machinery rolling towards eliciting the truth. The state being the supreme repository of citizens' interests, it follows that the state will on its own inquire into the sudden, swift death of two of its constituents. Must we really believe that if there is no case filed against the death of these two young men, the entire matter will in time be forgotten or swept under the rug?

Now comes that other disingenuous characterisation of facts. In the week gone by, the minister of state sent politics into quite a spin with reports of his resignation from the cabinet. He was nowhere to be spotted; neither he nor anyone else on his behalf was there to respond to media inquiries about his bid, or so it was given out, to leave government. He did not attend office. People from his electoral area converged on his residence, vowing not to go back home unless he went back to work at the home



Tanzim Ahmed Sohel Taj

ministry. Two senior ministers tried persuading him to take back the resignation letter he had sent to the prime minister. Then they met him, took him to the prime minister and everything ended on a happy note. The next day Minister Taj told newsmen that he had not resigned and had indeed not submitted his resignation letter. That raises a big question here: if he had not resigned, if indeed reports of his resignation had been grossly exaggerated, why did he not nip those reports in the bud on the very first day that he went missing? He or his office could have come forth with a swift denial of the resignation "rumours." That, of course, did not happen.

Resignations from government are serious

affairs. And reports of attempted resignations are a trifle more disconcerting. Individuals holding high office in the service of the republic owe it to the country to make matters clear any time people get down to this business of talking about their unhappiness in government. The point is simple: if your principles clash with those of the administration you are a part of, leave and do not look back. Or, given reassurances that your authority will not be undermined, stay on. Avoid disappearances. Avoid giving a new spin to the resignation tale once you are back.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanlarea@yahoo.co.uk

Obama's message of "respect" to Islam

The tone -- even the vocabulary -- he used will have the greatest impact, because the golden thread that ran through every paragraph was a simple but a new idea, respect for the Arab and the Muslim worlds.

HARUN UR RASHID

THERE was a great deal of excitement in the Muslim community about what a US president, who shares his middle name "Hussein" with the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (sm), had to say in Cairo.

With his Muslim background and his personification of the American dream, Obama is singularly placed to recast America's relations with Muslims. And he did not fail the latter's expectations.

On June 4, it was extraordinary for the audience in the hall room of Cairo University to hear a US President commence his speech with an Islamic salutation: Assalamo Alaikum (Peace be upon you).

When President Obama extended his Islamic greetings; Muslims around the world were surprised, euphoric and thrilled.

He quoted the Holy Quran -- "Be conscious of God and always speak the truth" -- to underscore his call for a new relationship based on mutual interest and respect.

"As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan (prayer call) at the break of dawn and the fall

of dusk," he said. "As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith."

Obama declared that America had a common cause with Islam and would never be at war with the faith -- an overture intently watched by the Muslim world and welcomed in unlikely quarters.

"America and Islam are not exclusive," he said, "and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."

He pledged a "new beginning between the US and Muslims around the world." He urged America and the Islamic world to drop their suspicions of one another and forge new alliances to confront violent extremism and heal religious divides.

Obama spoke for 55-minutes. His address was laced with respect for touchstones of the religion. He said that the time had come to "speak the truth" and "seek a new beginning."

Like a professor, he touched on several themes in the speech, namely, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights and economic development and opportunity.

As regards women's rights, he cited Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia -- Muslim-majority countries that have elected women as heads of government.

Obama made substantial efforts to reach out to the Islamic community and rebuild bridges after the disastrous legacy of his predecessor George W. Bush. He signalled a willingness to re-establish diplomatic ties with Iran, made some comments in sympathy with the Palestinians, and called for an end to Israel's expansion of settlements in the West Bank. Obama used and spoke of "Palestine," not a "future Palestinian state." This is very significant in political terms.

He referred to Iran by its full name, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and said that Islamic countries had been victimised by colonialism as well as the Cold War era struggle between US and the former Soviet Union.

Most importantly, in a speech he gave to the Turkish Parliament last April, Obama repeatedly used a word that Muslims were anxious to hear from American leaders; "respect." The word signals an acceptance that mutual respect is the cornerstone of building a new relationship between the West and the Islamic world.

The tone -- even the vocabulary -- he used will have the greatest impact, because the golden thread that ran through every paragraph was a simple but a new idea, respect for the Arab and the Muslim worlds.

Muslims may take inspiration from Obama's address. But ignorance has been the worst enemy for Muslims. The Muslim world faces very stark realities and challenges.

Although the Muslim world controls 60%

of the world's known oil reserves, its gross GDP stands at \$1,200 billion, a paltry sum compared with Germany's \$3,322 billion and Japan's \$4,800 billion.

Majority Muslim countries suffer severe economic sclerosis, because most scholars believe that they pay little attention to educational and scientific development.

It will be the Muslims that will have to bear the burden of making the painful reforms to revitalise the Muslim world with scientific and technological knowledge.

About the Islamic community, former PM of Malaysia Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, at the OIC Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2003, said: "Some believe that poverty is Islamic, sufferings and being oppressed are Islamic. Some preach that the world is not for us. Ours are the joys of heaven in the afterlife. All we have to do is to perform certain rituals, wear certain garments and put up a certain appearance."

What is often overlooked is that the Islamic world is in an uncertain position in the 21st century. There are at least two groups -- supporters of the orthodox interpretation of Islam and supporters of a moderate and tolerant version of Islam.

The strength of the debate between the two groups is likely to determine the future of Islam. Ultimately, Muslims must take responsibility for themselves in bringing Islam back to its true destiny -- to be a beacon of hope, progress and leadership for the world.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

What was special in Obama's Cairo speech?

These are historic and heroic statements indeed to realise Obama's vision for a better future for humanity of all religious hue and political persuasions. It remains to be seen if he can turn his words into deeds.

ABDUL HANNAN

PRESIDENT Obama's speech at Cairo University was remarkably direct and honest. It was a carefully crafted balanced message to his Muslim audience around the world; Israelis and his listeners back home in the United States.

He spoke of rebuilding bridges and repairing damaged relations with the Muslim world caused by a cycle of suspicion and discord arising of George W Bush's obsession with America's war on terror precisely directed against Muslims. Throughout his speech there was not a single mention of terror or Islamic terrorists but instead only extremists.

In his quest of rapport and rapprochement with the Muslim audience 'to seek a new beginning of relationship with "Muslims around the world" based on mutual interest and mutual respect,' Obama displayed masterly of touch and proved himself a quintessentially charming orator at his best with extreme sensitivity and suppleness.

While not announcing any new initiatives on the Middle East or distancing himself adequately from his predecessor on Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama made daring, frank and forth right statements on Israeli Palestinian conflict, Islam, democracy Iran and nuclear weapons. He greeted his audience in Muslim style, quoted 4 times from the holy koran, spoke about his middle name, Hussain, his Muslim connection in kenya and Indonesia, his fascination with listening Azan in his boyhood in Indonesia.

After 8 years of open conflict between America and Islam demonstrated by Bush's infamous comment 'you are with us or against us in our war on terror,' he declared to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam and dismissed the so called myth of 'clash of civilization.' He showed empathy for Muslims when he said colonialism and cold war had denied rights and opportunity of Muslims being 'treated as proxies with regard to their own aspirations.' He demolished misperception in the west that women in Islamic societies do not have equality of

status when he mentioned Muslim women leadership in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia and Turkey.

His remarks on Israeli Palestinian conflict marked one of biggest shifts in American foreign policy on the Middle East. There is no more carte blanche support to Israel. He said America would not turn its back on legitimate aspirations of Palestinians for dignity and a state of their own.

He demanded a 2 state solution to the conflict. He was blunt when he said US does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements in West Bank adding the constructions violates agreements and undermines peace efforts and destroys hopes of a Palestine state and must sop. He said the 'daily humiliation of occupation was intolerable.' He spoke of 60 years of Palestinian dislocation and dispossession, which implicitly acknowledged close to what the Palestinians call Naqba, catastrophe of 1947. However, Obama asserted 'unbreakable bond' with Israel, traced its tragic past persecution in Europe and described denial of holocaust, an obvious dig at Iranian President Ahmadinejad, as baseless, ignorant and hateful, words pleasing to Israeli ears.

He acknowledged Iran's right to access peaceful nuclear power within the frame work of nuclear non proliferation treaty and reaffirmed America's commitment to seek a world where no nation hold nuclear weapons. He pointed to the danger nuclear arms

race in the region and hoped all countries in the region shared this goal. Earlier, US Asst secretary of state for verification and compliance said 'America would like every nation including Israel to sign NPT. Israel's estimated 264 nuclear warheads and huge arsenal of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction may not be a secret to United States.

Obama showed remarkable understanding and even handedness of the matrix of what he described as 'tumultuous history' of Iran-US conflict over, Obama confessed, America's role in overthrowing elected Iranian government in 1954 and US hostages held by Iranians after the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Obama's harshest remarks were reserved for Arab autocratic and authoritarian leaders, tacitly including his host, when he asked them to reform and embrace the rule of law, equal administration of justice, transparency and 'freedom to live as you choose.'

These are historic and heroic statements indeed to realise Obama's vision for a better future for humanity of all religious hue and political persuasions.

It remains to be seen if he can turn his words into deeds faced with stubborn intransigence of extreme right Israeli leader Benyamin Netanyahu and his strong Israeli lobby backers in Washington.

Abdul Hannan is a former press counselor, Bangladesh UN mission in New York