

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

World headed for order or disorder?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE joint air command of the US, UK and France enforcing UN authorised "no-fly-zone" over Libya is content with having achieved complete impunity over the country's air space. Just five days into operation, Gaddafi's ground installations are laid open to attack, whatever little left of them, that is.

Quite clearly, the US, UK and France have gone beyond the scope of "no-fly-zone" that would have normally meant keeping the Libyan sky free of Gaddafi's air power or other foreign planes intruding into the air space. They are set to invoke "all necessary measures to protect civilian population," as have been authorised under the UN Security Council resolution. No endgame, let alone any exit plan! Would Libya go the way of Afghanistan or Iraq?

The signals are amazingly contradictory to the nature of things let loose with the interventionist approach. For example, statements that no regime change is on the agenda nor any attack on the life of Gaddafi, have left the world confused. Are all options being kept open?

When a wave of revolution is sweeping through the minds of peoples across the Middle East and the Arab world, intimation is in the air for a change in the course of history, particularly in that region. There is thus an auspicious note to these developments. In these

moments of expectancy and cautious upbeat, there is an element of delicacy and even a risk perception as to the direction the upheavals might take. In other words, discretion would have been the better part of valour on the part of the international community. But such a course has been spurned.

After all, spontaneity of collective protests is the prime mover with no steward at the helm of the rocking ship to steer it safely to the shore. Of course, such movements have their own dynamics and any invasive interference with these is only likely to complicate the situation and, with that, influence the outcome that might not find favour with the people.

Rhetoric regardless, sovereignty over national skies is a principal attribute of territorial integrity of a country. This has been trampled as though it were a centipede. This is for the third time in a row in recent years that national skies have been conquered without scruples. People of even a deeply troubled and divided country are entitled to sanctity of sovereignty. They cannot at heart reconcile to the humiliation of any foreign invasion of their territorial integrity, whatever grounds for such an intervention might be. This has been shown up in Afghanistan, Iraq and even Pakistan.

However much the proposers and enforcers of the UN Security Council resolution try to save their conscience saying they were standing by the people of Libya, are they in effect doing it? For the bombardments are exacting collateral damages in human lives and property.



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Have they considered how it would weigh on the people's hearts? Experience shows that such injudicious action without giving peaceful means and diplomacy a chance can lead to rise of a quisling or two, raring to seize the opportunity of going to power on the crutch of coalescing international powers. In such a context, the people's lot

couldn't change for the better. There was no bin Laden and al-Qaeda as in Afghanistan, or WMD bogey to bandy about like in Iraq, yet a ghost was made out of Gaddafi of Libya. Yes, he was about to storm and retake the last stronghold of the protesters in the East. Yes, he has reached that frontier by killing his own people. He would have snuffed

out more people if he had his ways. But was military intervention the only way to stop him? And at what cost?

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their natural death.

On balance, the interpretation of jumping to armed action can be three-fold: first, the Western powers were apprehensive of the popular movements passing into the hands of Islamist extremists; secondly, control over Libya, an oil-rich country made a geo-political sense; and thirdly, the new-vintage firepower perhaps needed to be tested -- and perfected. There is nothing altruistic about all these.

Who are they trying to fool? I suppose as much their own people as those of the rest of the world. Ultimately, it is their taxpayers who would be the losers and the soldiers who will be dying along with those they are fighting against.

Gaddafi was virtually in a hedgehog position bristling, yet vulnerable to any tweak of a last push to be dumped. Already, his regime had been hemmed in by sanctions, travel bans on those who recruited mercenaries for him and asset freeze on seven individuals who included his immediate relatives and his close aides and five entities or organisations loyal to him. He was internationally so cornered even before the "no-fly-zone" was slapped that he would have been amenable to almost any terms of negotiation.

All said and done, legitimately it should have for the Arab League and the African Union to try and exercise the diplomatic option to settle the civil war in Libya under UN watch.

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Discernible growth going unaccounted for



DR SAADAT HUSAIN

Ido not travel a lot inside the country in my present position. It was after a long time that I traveled to the northern region via Gazipur and Tangail. Dhaka city limit ends at Tongi, and I thought that traffic jam would be over once we crossed Uttara or at best Tongi.

Unfortunately that was not to be the case; there was no let up of traffic jam. Streams of vehicles flowed along. There was no room to have the feel of driving on a highway. You drive for ten meters and slow down or halt for ten minutes. Experience on the by-pass was no different.

When we reached Konabari, a rural business centre in Gazipur district, we could not proceed further. It was a chaotic deadlock. The police escort could not help much because hundreds of vehicles coming from both directions blocked the road in such a way that it would take at least twenty minutes to bring the traffic back on track. We had to suffer the waiting before our car snaked through the thicket of other vehicles.

The stream of vehicles was almost the same up to Hattikamrul on the west side of the Jamuna. During this whole period I never felt that I was on the highway. At Hattikamrul vehicles dispersed to three directions and the road was comparatively free. The journey was smooth, irritation was over. Finally we reached Rajshahi.

I wondered where all these vehicles had come from and why. I realised that they were carrying food and consumer items, raw materials and intermediate inputs, small capital equipment and human agents. The vehicles, therefore, generated economic activities contributing to growth of the country. The colossal growth of vehicular traffic signaled high volume of economic activities on the road.

the road but also alongside. Roadsides were dotted with shops and establishments, which were stuffed with merchandise. Fancy consumer items previously meant for the elite city dwellers were sported in the rural shops. Each marketplace had a sizable zone for imported fruits. Roadside buildings were fashionable, newly built in most cases. Plantation along the

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road was also impressive: green belt assured wads of timber resources for the future. People on the road and along the road did not look unhealthy. They were not in tattered clothes either.

When traveling by road, I usually say my prayer in a roadside mosque. I have seen the transformation of mosques in the last two decades. The thatched room has been replaced by a palatial building with modern gadgets. This phenomenon is visible all over the country. If a religious person on average spends 1.5 hours a day in a mosque, he remains in a cozy environment for about 9% of active time (16 hours), a perceptible improvement in the quality of his life. I also noticed that almost every pedestrian on the road or every person in the market place had a mobile phone in his hand. The same picture would be true for any locality.

A decade back no one could think that the penetration of mobile phone would be so deep in the country. Now the number of mobile phone users has exceeded 70 million, a staggering figure for a country like Bangladesh. Adjusting for multiple ownership, one can easily say that every third person in the coun-

try possesses a mobile set, not a mean achievement by any standard. I can cite many other phenomena on and along the road which will readily convince us that activities and production had tremendously increased all over Bangladesh. One need not be an exceptionally keen observer to appreciate the development.

If that be the case why should we

feel so uncomfortable sitting in an air conditioned car on a highway. Why should we fret about the trend of development in the country. We are worried because any chaotic situation creates discomfort and leads to inefficiency. We are not sure if all the economic activities will ultimately lead to positive value added, that is growth. If not, we have no reason to be upbeat about the activities that create so many hazards on the road, resulting in huge loss of time and psychological turning off.

Activities that yield positive value added but impose high social cost need to be carefully evaluated to ascertain if they are worth continuing from the national point of view. Growth must not be taken at face value. Growth should result in higher comfort, smoother transaction, healthier life, harmonious living and better assured future.

Unabated threat to life and property, chaotic social order, debased environment and natural resources, unfair treatment by state agencies, corrupt manipulation of prices, supplies and entitlements by powerful oligarchy, and hazards in the locality and outside can make life miserable despite brisk economic

activities and growth.

Many of the activities that create so many problems on the road and in the locality are not properly reflected in the accounts book of the firms or the relevant agencies. The country and its citizens are deprived of tax benefits out of these activities. As a result, tax-GDP ratio in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world. The number of tax payers is incredibly low. Tax free income is only Tk.165,000 annually, which means monthly income of Tk.13,750.

Houses, shops and establishments along the roadsides, people using mobile phones, and the bounty of agricultural products in the fields clearly indicate that the number of people earning more than Tk.13,750 a month will be at least 10 million, which is many times the number of present tax payers. We should re-examine the statistics relating to production, employment and income with cool erudition to arrive at the correct assessment of the economic situation obtaining in the country.

Some growth may indeed be categorised as dirty growth. The ultimate aim of growth is to enrich our life comprehensively. While growth must improve our economic wellbeing it has to be accompanied by inclusiveness, reduction of exploitation, conservation of environment, increased contentment, reduced transaction cost and increased social harmony.

Unmanaged growth often breeds excruciating suffering for the excluded citizens, social opprobrium, physical hazards and discomfort of millions, debilitating insecurity and last of all political instability and devastating violence. If that be the situation growth would descend as a curse to common citizens. It would asphyxiate their expectation for a decent living. It is urgent that we guard against such trends in our growth path.

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Does anyone have an answer?

AMEERAH HAQ

I have served in the United Nations for over three decades. In the course of my various assignments and travels in many nations, I have found that Bangladesh is synonymous with Grameen Bank, Prof. Yunus and Sir Fazle Abed. The awarding of the Nobel Peace prize only served to catapult the position of Bangladesh even higher in development circles. Bangladesh has much to celebrate in the role that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society and the micro-finance sector have played in poverty alleviation and the empowerment of women. I am baffled at the decision of

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the government to oust a national hero. Here is a person who had the courage to walk into a bank and state that the poor are credit-worthy. While ridiculed at first, and with many sceptics, he persevered with this idea. The result is that, today, from Peru to Malawi to Malaysia to Chicago, the micro-credit concept of Grameen Bank from Bangladesh has taken firm root. This great son of our soil should be honoured and revered for his pioneering vision and the impact that it has had on the lives of so many. Let me briefly mention just two anecdotes to illustrate how as a Bangladeshi, I have swelled with pride because of Prof.

Mohd. Yunus. In 1995, Prof. Yunus visited Malaysia where I was the Resident Coordinator of the UN. It was my privilege to arrange a meeting for Prof. Yunus with Dr. Mahathir, then prime minister of Malaysia, and to accompany him. When Dr. Mahathir entered the room, I said: "Mr. Prime Minister, allow me to present ..." Prime Minister Mahathir cut me off, saying: "Prof. Yunus needs no introduction. I have followed his work and know all about him."

The second incident was when I was on a transcontinental flight to the USA and happened to be seated beside a CEO of a European Bank. When the time came for the meal to be served, we spoke to each other and he learned that I was from Bangladesh. Immediately, he reached for his briefcase and pulled out the book "Banker to the Poor" by Prof. Yunus and told me how inspired he was by the vision of this man.

Is micro-credit the panacea for poverty alleviation? No. Is it fool-proof in its design and in the way it is reproduced? No. These are all issues for public discourse, evaluations, studies, adjustments and improvements. It is a work-in-progress. But micro-credit has put Bangladesh squarely on the map. Rather than celebrating a national treasure, what kind of spectacle of destruction are we engaged in for the world to see? My question is, why? Is it because he attempted to form a new political party in a multi-party democracy? Is it his age? He turned 62 eight years ago. So now, when I get queries from many quarters as to what is happening to Prof. Mohd. Yunus in my country, I am at a loss to explain. Does anyone have an answer?

The writer is Under-Secretary-General, United Nations. (The opinions expressed are the writer's own.)