

Jhilmil project

Ensure transparency in allotment

IT is for the third time that the RAJUK is going to invite applications for plots in their latest residential area project, Jhilmil, on the outskirts of the capital which has taken more than 14 years to be completed.

While one must appreciate the government's effort to address the problems of housing and the ever increasing population pressure on the capital, the agencies concerned should ensure that the applicants are spared the hassles that they have to go through before, during and after having put in their applications.

It is creditable that the government has gone for construction of flats of various sizes, including many of them between 600 and 800 sq ft, which should be affordable by the middle and low income groups. We feel that in this context, keeping in mind the dwindling land area of the country, the government may consider building flats only, in particular of smaller sizes and doing away with large plots altogether. Efficient management of space is what the agencies must strive for in order to strike a balance between demand and available real estate. It also commendable that those who have been affected by the project would be given either plots or flats depending on how much of land they had to cede.

However, there are a few things that must be handled with utmost clarity. Allocation of plots must be done in a transparent manner and the eligibility criteria must be strictly followed so that that no one that owns a flat or land in any other part of the country is eligible for it here; and this should also be applicable to those that would qualify directly. There should not be inordinate delay in handing over plots to the applicants after the final payment.

We would also like to remind RAJUK that it must strictly enforce its building code through constant supervision, particularly the aspect of earthquake vulnerability. It is regrettable but true that illegal cost-saving measures are resorted to by builders, often through the connivance of a few corrupt RAJUK officials.

The UGC's pledge

No compromise on quality

WE welcome the pledge by Prof A. K. Azad Choudhury, the newly appointed chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC), to expand the country's higher education system while not compromising on quality.

In order to transform the pledge into action, however, a number of matters must be taken into consideration. As the chairman has duly noted, while universities have increased in number in the country, the quality of education provided by them has not seen a concomitant rise. The politicisation of public universities and commercialisation of private universities are possibly the greatest barriers in this regard. Both evils have led to a steady decline in the quality of education imparted at the highest seats of learning in the country. Political unrest leading to session jams and violence at public universities and "business mentality" causing substandard teaching and grading at private universities are common concerns.

A more recent rising trend has been the consultancy phenomenon and part-time migration of public university teachers to private universities where the label of the former creates opportunities for higher incomes in the latter. In terms of quality research, too, there is a shortage due not only to limited funding but also lack of motivation for faculty members. The lack of modern technological facilities such as fully computerised library systems also hinders the academic process.

It is important that the UGC set, implement and effectively enforce its own standards and rules in order to maintain and increase the quality of higher education in the country. This includes infrastructural and technological developments at the institutions as well as increased research opportunities for faculty members. The first step towards "education oriented to life and livelihood", as promised by the new chairman, would be to give education itself top priority through foregoing politics, business and anything else which is an obstacle to higher

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 10

1857

Indian Mutiny: In India, the first war of Independence begins. Sepoys revolt against their commanding officers at Meerut.

1877

Romania declares itself independent from the Ottoman Empire following the Senate adoption of Mihail Kogălniceanu's Declaration of Independence. This act is recognised on March 26, 1881 after the end of the Romanian War of Independence.

1941

World War II: Rudolf Hess parachutes into Scotland to try to negotiate a peace deal between the United Kingdom and Nazi Germany.

1969

Vietnam War: The Battle of Dong Ap Bia begins with an assault on Hill 937. It will ultimately become known as Hamburger Hill.

1994

Nelson Mandela is inaugurated as South Africa's first black president.

ENIGMATTERS

New twist in West Asian politics



MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR

THE understanding between two rival factions of Palestine -- Fatah and Hamas -- that took place in Cairo last week is a significant event in more ways than one. Peace lovers world over will pin some hope in the reconciliatory meet between the two rivals fighting for the same cause -- an independent state of Palestine. However, the US holds deep resentment and for Israel it's an embarrassing time. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu termed the unity pact as a tremendous blow to peace and victory for terrorism.

The Israeli concern is understandable because it has been intolerant to anything Palestinian. Fatah and Hamas do not make any difference to Israeli leaders. They were forced by the US to sit with Fattah to talk peace. They shook hands with Fatah leaders with reluctance and disbelief. They consider Hamas a terror group.

The Middle East Quartet, comprising the EU, the US, the UN and Russia, has also demanded that Hamas recognise Israel's right to exist and abolish the clause in its charter that calls for its destruction, cease terror activities against Israel and honour all agreements signed between Israel and the Palestinians.

In Cairo, Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority (which controls the West Bank), and Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas (which controls the Gaza Strip), signed an agreement to form an interim government to rule both parts of the would-be country.

It was further agreed upon by the two that no member either of Hamas or of Fatah could be part of the provisional government. That government would pave the way for free elections next year that would reinstate Palestinian national unity in both parts of the rambling state.

For the Palestinians it is a good omen. However tough may be the situation on the ground, trouble-torn Palestinians can hope to gain something out of this harmony. Over the years, factional fighting between them only strengthened the hands of the enemy.

A rough and long ground has to be

Other religious groups in the Arab world, who were not heard by their previous regimes, will have the carpets rolled out before them. A new and vibrant political scenario in West Asia is in the making, for sure.

covered. The journey to unity, peace and freedom will be a daunting assignment. Many battles will have to be fought within and outside. This may take time but, given the will, is attainable. Putting an end to their four-year-old breach and getting back together is itself a giant step towards peace and freedom. The hatred between the two has disappeared for now, it appears.

Both leaders need to show patience and wisdom in their handling of the situation. Internal problems in their respective governments need to be addressed, tag of corruption needs to be removed, authoritarian and repressive minds have to change.

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

New challenges for India



PRAFUL BIDWAI

DID the United States achieve "justice" for the 9/11 victims, as President Barack Obama claimed, by killing Osama bin Laden?

The honest answer is no: the US accomplished retribution or revenge, not full justice. This is not to shed tears for Osama or trivialise the elimination of the world's most wanted criminal.

However, full justice would mean punishing the 9/11 culprits after conclusively establishing their guilt in a fair public trial. It would also demand humane redressal of the genuine grievances that jihadi terrorists exploit, about the West's global hegemony project, its demonisation of Islam, and Israel's occupation of Palestine.

In a far cry from this, many Americans are revelling in an aggressive reaffirmation of the US's military power and influence. That's why the Republicans are lavishing praise upon Obama, who now seems certain to win his second presidential term.

Yet, the US's post-9/11 anti-terror achievements are meagre.

Immediately after the attack, Washington launched an unlimited Global War on Terror (GWOt) and invaded Afghanistan. In 2003, it invaded Iraq after citing al-Qaeda's growing influence and the existence of weapons of mass destruction -- a patent falsehood. GWOt then spread to Africa and Southeast Asia.

GWOt has caused an estimated 1.2 million civilian casualties in Iraq and another 20,000 in Afghanistan, besides 6,000 US military casualties (double the number of civilians killed in 9/11). The US has spent \$1.3 trillion on GWOt.

Politically, the war against Iraq alienated the US's key allies. Even tiny Guinea, Angola and Cameroon resisted US pressure and refused to vote for the Iraq war in the Security Council. Allies who supported

President Bush lost domestic elections.

Not least, GWOt perverted justice. The US violated its own citizens' civil liberties and resorted to torture. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay will remain abiding reminders of inhuman detention and extremely coercive interrogation. Washington also instigated "rendition" of terror suspects to third countries with scant regard for legality.

The US bypassed its own courts and international crimes tribunals and branded terror suspects enemy "combatants" who didn't deserve regular trial.

GWOt has thus extracted an exorbitant price. Yet, President Obama declared victory after Operation

Geronimo, deplorably and insensitively named after an American-Indian hero.

In Abbottabad, the US conducted a targeted assassination, when it could have captured Osama, who was unarmed. It could have punished him after a scrupulously fair trial. This would have highlighted Osama's demonic ideology and excesses before the whole world, including millions of Muslims.

Ironically, President Obama, a Nobel peace laureate, boasted on May 1: "We are once again reminded that America can do whatever we set our mind to." The menacing potential for abuse of power contained in this is worrisome.

Many people would treat the US covert action in Abbottabad as legitimate because of Washington's distrust of Pakistan and the risk that the ISI would alert Osama if it got to know of the operation. Yet, it involved a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and penetration of spies into its territory.

The two organisations need to show their ability to establish democracy in the unified state of Palestine. For these two never got the opportunity to work in peace, as they have been at war for decades. They must have learnt that corrupt regimes are no more welcome by the new generation.

There will be attempts from known quarters to derail the train which is on a possible peace trail after a long wait. Foremost will be the question whether or how to make peace with Israel. Fatah is already in peace practice with Israel, while Hamas is opposed to any friendship with the

Jewish State. Unless they can agree on this the gap will remain, and that's exactly what the Jewish leaders want. Palestinian and Arab leaders should know that an independent Palestinian state would also mean a weakened Jewish state.

Some quarters in the US and the West have laughed away the meet. They opine that this unity is unlikely to last as long as there remains a huge gap between the two. This cannot be bridged with a single dialogue session.

In all likelihood, all the Arab countries will lend their moral support to the deal. Whatever might be the US policy of these states, their standing regarding Israel is the same. Iran and

Extension of this logic to other countries could produce horrendous illegalities -- witness the Nato invasion of Libya.

Osama's killing will weaken al-Qaeda, which already stands marginalised in the Arab world. But it won't decisively defeat it. It may still be capable of launching murderous attacks in Pakistan, and Mumbai-type operations against India. This should be a sobering thought.

Osama's killing has impelled some Indian hardliners to clamour for "taking out" Pakistan-based jihadi extremists like Hafiz Mohammad Saeed through "covert operations." But, contrary to its military leaders' claims, India lacks the military-technological capability for this. It shouldn't consider imitating the US in invading other countries.

The Abbottabad episode highlights numerous truths about al-Qaeda and Pakistan. It's inconceivable that Osama could have stayed for five to six years next door to the Pakistan Military Academy without the knowledge and tacit support of some factions of army/ISI. That suggests complicity and unwillingness to conduct anti-terror operations sincerely.

If the army/ISI was unaware of Osama's hideout and the US operation, that would reflect poorly on its intelligence-gathering ability. If it was aware, that would suggest its acceptance of US violations of Pakistan's sovereignty.

At any rate, the Pakistan Army's duplicity in hunting with US hounds and running with the al-Qaeda-Taliban hare stands exposed. This has damaged Pakistan's global image and weakened its bargaining power vis-à-vis the US.

Egypt are likely to be the main supporters of this move. So-called moderate Arab regimes will also have to come out with a clear manifesto with regards to the recent developments in Palestine and other Arab states. Days of indifference are gone.

The US is opposed to all kinds of deal with the Hamas for it views Hamas as a terror group. So any deal between Fatah and Hamas is expected to be rejected by the US. If the US turns away from the truce, peace with Israel will be left in the lurch. In that case, it will be back to square one -- conflict and war.

The new government in Egypt may not be a confident ally of the US any time soon. Hosni Mubarak was a strong US ally and he carried out the US dictation in letter and spirit. But the new Egyptian government is not likely to toe Mubarak's line. Egypt is also warming towards Iran. A new US-Egypt and US-Palestine relationship will emerge soon.

In another likely development, the militant groups of Arab countries will surface and make themselves available to be legalised as genuine political players. They would not like to be treated like al-Qaeda. They should like to be in mainstream politics sooner than later. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been recognised by the new government. Other religious groups in the Arab world, who were not heard by their previous regimes, will have the carpets rolled out before them. A new and vibrant political scenario in West Asia is in the making, for sure.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.
Email: md.sattar@thedailystar.net

For many Americans, the Osama manhunt was GWOt's only rationale. Osama's elimination will allow Mr. Obama to begin rapid troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Before it withdraws, the US will try to cut a deal with the "moderate" Taliban to put them in power in Afghanistan.

Last year, the ISI showed its desperation to be part of any negotiation with the Taliban. It tracked down "moderate" Taliban Mullah Baradar with the US's technical help. But it kidnapped him and sabotaged US plans to talk to him.

A purely Taliban-based settlement involving the Pashtuns, only one of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, won't hold. What's needed is a broad-based settlement, which includes the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, endorsed by the regional powers, including Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran.

This will require India to demand a regional approach, and Pakistan to accept it because of India's legitimate historical ties with Afghanistan.

Simultaneously, India must continue the dialogue process with Islamabad and strengthen Pakistan's domestic pro-peace constituency, which wants the army under civilian control and the ISI reined in.

The first task entails that India take a fiercely independent foreign policy stance vis-à-vis the US, especially on Iran's inclusion, which Washington will dogmatically oppose.

The alternative is colluding with Washington and worsening the mess in Afghanistan. Extremist forces will thrive in this and turn the country into a cauldron of discontent and violence, in which jihadis can threaten India's (and Pakistan's) security.

The Afghanistan challenge will test India's diplomacy. India must evolve a mature, moral and bold policy. The security, stability and democratic evolution of the north-western part of South Asia are at stake.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.
E-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in