

Unutilised aid money

Capacity building imperative

SLOW pace of project implementation and return of the unutilised fund to its source is a very familiar feature of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) every year. The scenario is not different even in the case of foreign aid. And as a result, billions of dollar worth of scarce as well as precious foreign aid has created a pipeline bulge. This is not just a sad commentary on the project implementation agency's capacity to absorb foreign aid, it does also give a rather negative image of the government.

A report in this paper has brought to the fore afresh how we have failed to put a huge sum of aid money amounting 12 billion US dollars to good use. Though the economy receives some \$2 to \$3 billion annually in foreign aid, this fiscal it has swelled to \$6.5 billion. The Economic Relations Division (ERD) has attributed the increased aid fund to the donors' commitments for the Padma Multipurpose Bridge.

But there are still strong grounds for concern about meeting the project implementation target there. Even the finance ministry has cast doubts seeing that of the total aid commitment, only \$1.29b has been disbursed over the first nine months of the current FY. It is worthwhile to note that this is less than last year's disbursement figure. The delay has been due to the fresh conditions imposed by the World Bank relating to pre-qualification of bidders for Padma Bridge project.

The donors' conditionalities apart , it cannot be gain-said that deeply ingrained bureaucratic sloth, lack of decision-making authority of the of projects-in-charge, tardiness rooted in too many tables that a file has to shuttle between, alleged corruption and a plethora of lapses and foibles dog the entire project administration regime.

The hurdles mentioned bear down heavily on the capacity of the implementation agencies. Keeping the absorption capacity of the ministries in view, we should be more cautious and selective about accepting foreign aid. At the same time, the government must exercise its political will to rid the administration of sloth and waffling.

Post-Aila conditions

Meet environmental threat

THE good news, up to a point, is that the south-western districts of the country have been recovering gradually from the effects of the Aila devastation of two years ago. The bad news is that despite such recovery, a clear environmental threat now hovers over the region, especially Satkhira, Khulna and Bagerhat. As an exhaustive report in yesterday's issue of this newspaper notes, decades of shrimp cultivation have left the land in parlous conditions. It is now quite impossible for any agricultural crops to be grown on it. Aila destroyed all the shrimp enclosures in the region, of course. But now that a large segment of farmers previously engaged in shrimp cultivation are planning to return to their original occupation as growers of rice, the salinity of the ground, caused by intensive shrimp farming, has come in the way.

How badly the environment can be affected by thoughtless planning can be seen in the south-west of Bangladesh today. Shrimp cultivation has left 1,000,000 hectares of arable land badly affected by salinity. In all, 77 per cent of agricultural land in the region was given over to shrimp production. The consequences are now out there. Where farmers could, in pre-shrimp cultivation days, grow between 12 and 15 maunds of rice on a bigha of land, they can now expect no more than two maunds. The misery is compounded by the spectacle of trees and plants withering away owing to salinity. Deep tubewells pump out saline water, which poses an additional threat to health.

Damage control measures are called for. Policies which encourage pecuniary gains without taking note of environmental consequences clearly must be rethought. The damage caused to agricultural land in the south-western districts should be an eye-opener, both for the farming community and 'experts' who have encouraged the unbridled production of shrimp. We cannot afford to lose

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 27

1703

Tsar Peter the Great founds the city of Saint Petersburg.

1883

Alexander III is crowned Tsar of Russia.

1941

World War II: The German battleship Bismarck is sunk in the North Atlantic killing almost 2,100 men.

1964

Light goes out in India as Nehru dies. Jawaharlal Nehru, the founder of modern India and its current prime minister, dies suddenly at the age of 74.

1965

Vietnam War: American warships begin the first bombardment of National Liberation Front targets within South Vietnam.

1967

Australians vote in favor of a constitutional referendum granting the Australian government the power to make laws to benefit Indigenous Australians and to count them in the national census.

1996

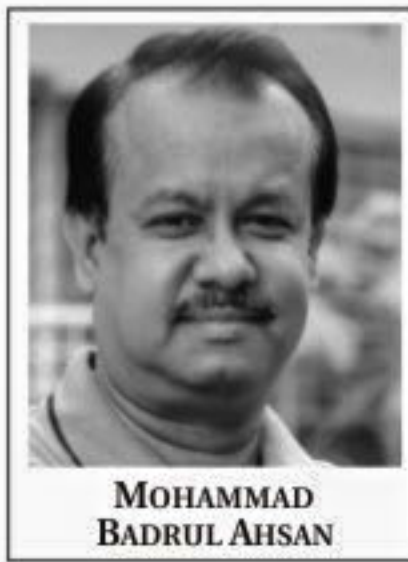
First Chechnya War: Russian President Boris Yeltsin meets with Chechnyan rebels for the first time and negotiates a cease-fire.

1999

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands indicts Slobodan Milošević and four others for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Kosovo.

CROSS TALK

The doomsday dilemma



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

lated that the biblical apocalypse was going to begin at 6:00 pm on that day. He advertised it through 6,000 billboards and 55 radio stations. The preacher made sure the doomsday was not doomed for lack of an adequate campaign.

The day came and went, but nothing happened. The world is still spinning on its axis. We are still going with the normal flow in life and business. What about those who believed in that prediction? Camping and his followers hoped they were among the 200 million lucky souls who would be sent to live in paradise forever. Now that their optimism has been proved wrong, they must be living in heart-break hell.

Camping, however, is an old pro of predictions. He had predicted the end of the world once before in 1994, which failed. But the false prophet didn't give up. He said he had misunderstood a key biblical passage, but was most certain that the doomsday was May 21, 2011. This time again he has pulled the same excuse. The apocalypse last Saturday was yet another misunderstanding, he said. The real Day of Judgment will occur on October 21.

Historians have recorded 242 end-of-the-world predictions since the beginning of the world. The earliest

was in the year 44 when Theudas declared himself the Messiah, taking 400 people with him into the desert. The latest is Harold Camping, who has promised to take his disciples to heaven. But that for sure cannot be the end of the end-of-the-world predictions.

Every religion propounds the cosmic struggle at the end of time in manifest signs such Gog and Magog, anti-Christ, Armageddon, and the

of the world was fast approaching.

An almost identical message had appeared as graffiti on a wall in Pompeii, the sinful Italian city destroyed by volcanic eruption at Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. We know about the Kingdoms of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were completely consumed by fire and brimstone because of their impertinent sins.

In that way, land is connected to people. When individuals indulge in

Harold Camping and doomsday seekers like him have tried in vain to reinvent the wheel. And they have been wrong again and again because in their desperate pursuit of heavenly life, they resorted to wishful thinking. In the end their prediction might come true.

second coming of Christ. For the Shiite Muslims, the long-awaited return of the Hidden Imam will mark the end in final victory of the forces of good and evil. It is said that the Iranian leader Mahmood Ahmedinejad and his followers strongly believe that time has already come in the terminal struggle against Israel and the United States.

It's interesting that people throughout history have thought about the end of the world. An Assyrian tablet from 2800 BCE read that the earth was degenerating, bribery and corruption was abound, children no longer obeyed their parents, every man wanted to write a book, all of which were indications that the end

moral degradations, it affects their countries, cities or places of abode. The soul has a bearing on the soil, conscience on the country. Cities have been ruined for the sins of their citizens.

That's divine wrath, but why are people inclined to predict doomsdays? Needless to say, the prophets of doom have never proved right, because if they did this world wouldn't have existed and this column wouldn't have materialised. Then again, not all predictors were deluded minds. According to a recently published letter, Sir Issac Newton was one of them. The genius, who worked out the laws of gravity and unraveled the motion of planets, professed the Apocalypse would

Obama's surrender at AIPAC

FEROZE MITHIBORWALA

FOR all those Israeli's who believed that Obama had introduced a new element into the rather stagnant peace process by mentioning the forbidden words "The 1967 Borders," were well placated by him, who in sentence after sentence received thunderous applause from an fanatical audience braying for Palestinian blood.

Obama challenged every UN resolution and international law that actually provide a basis for the solution of the Palestine-Israel conflict. He clearly restated Netanyahu's position that "the changes that have taken place over the last 44 years, including the new demographic realities on the ground" need to be taken into account. He clearly stated that the two sides will negotiate a border "that is different from the one that existed on June 4, 1967."

This is the precise position and words that Netanyahu has been scripting. Thus, Obama has accepted the fact that the illegal settlements that house 500,000 armed extremist settlers, that continue to be built on the Palestinian lands of 1967, are to be part of a future Jewish state of Israel.

Thus we have Obama negating UN Resolution 242, which calls upon Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied during the war of 1967 and for a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict so that a durable and just peace is ensured for all. This is true to his recent form at the UN, where the US vetoed the resolution condemning the Israeli settlements as illegal

This is also in direct contravention of UN Resolution 446 adopted on March 22, 1979, that stated that "the policy and practices of Israel in establishing settlements in the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967 have no legal validity and constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East."

There is a method to Obama's seeming madness, where we see how he has undermined the UN and inter-

national law to launch his very own war on Libya and the expansion of the conflict in Pakistan.

Obama went into his mundane ramble on Israel's security and the total commitment of America that the US will guarantee that Israel maintain the military edge with the latest weaponry to kill and maim more Palestinians, should have been added for good measure.

The next round of applause was guaranteed when Obama vilified Iran and said that the sanctions regime on Iran ensured its international isolation and that it would be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons. Then came the demonisation of

through his AIPAC report card and said that his administration had gone to all lengths to defend Israel in the international arena. He proudly stated why he boycotted the Durban Conference against racism, why he vetoed both the Goldstone Report (that dealt with the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza) and the UN resolution on the settlements. He said that "Israel's legitimacy is not up for debate." Here Obama seems blissfully oblivious that many countries of the world view Israel as a pariah nation.

Not once, while speaking about the two states living side-by-side, did he mention the core issue of Jerusalem, not once. Nor did he mention the

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Hamas and Hezbollah, and the crowd was on its feet.

Not once did Obama have the humanity (or is that too big a word for him) to even mention the 1.5 million Palestinians under siege in a Nazi-prison-cum-concentration camp called Gaza. Not once did he mention how US-made Israeli war planes and tanks killed thousands civilians when he mentioned the Hamas rockets that killed Israeli civilians. He demanded that Gilad Shalit be freed, but never once thought it right to mention that the 11,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails be freed as well. He mentioned how the Jews had a longing for their homeland, but never once mentioned that similarly, there are more than 7 million Palestinian refugees, who were ethnically cleansed from their country in 1948 and have both the moral and the legal "Right of Return" to their homes and hearths. Obama then shamelessly went

issue of the refugees, or the fact that the monstrous apartheid wall should be demolished, or that the 550 checkpoints should be dismantled, or that the control of the water resources should not be used as an instrument of coercion, or that the olive trees should not be uprooted and farms destroyed, or that the assassination and torture should end. That, due to Obama's own record in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, as well as the daily murder of civilians by the killer drones, we well understand.

He ended with two ominous warnings.

The first was that he rejected the participation of Hamas in the dialogue process and called upon Fatah to end the unity with Hamas. Obama is basically trying to drive a wedge between them, in order to weaken the resistance movement as well as the unity of the masses at the grass-roots. He never once mentioned that

come in 2060 -- 1,260 years after the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire.

The world-renowned physicist Stephen Hawkins gave his reaction to doomsday predictions, calling heaven a "fairytale" and claiming that there was no afterlife. He told the British newspaper *The Guardian* that he regarded the brain as a computer, which would stop working when its components failed. "There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers," he said.

Going by the birth and death rates, demographers have arrived at their rough estimates. About 354,000 of these "computers" are born and 156,000 die in the world daily. This world begins with every birth, and it ends with every death.

Harold Camping and doomsday seekers like him have tried in vain to reinvent the wheel. And they have been wrong again and again because in their desperate pursuit of heavenly life, they resorted to wishful thinking. In the end their prediction might come true. It did for the shepherd boy in Aesop's fable who cried wolf to trick the villagers and one day the wolf really came and devoured him.

Meanwhile suggests famous Charles Schultz, creator of the Peanuts comic strip: "Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia." This world is 4.55 billion years old. Every today is prediction of end. Every tomorrow is end of prediction.

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Hamas is willing to negotiate a 10 year truce offered by Khalid Mishal to Jimmy Carter in a meeting in Damascus. The political leader of Hamas made the offer along the same principles of the "1967 borders" and the "Right of Return." Thus every peaceful overture by the Hamas leadership has been rejected by the Israeli junta.

He stated that "no vote at the UN (which is scheduled for September) will create an independent Palestinian state." Here he once again reiterated Netanyahu's position that "only direct negotiations" can achieve the same.

President Mahmud Abbas said: "We have more than 130 nations set to recognise the Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, and even if we make no further efforts that number could be increased to 140 or 150." Both Obama and Netanyahu have clearly threatened President Mahmud Abbas with dire consequences if he took it up in the UN. It is utterly futile to believe that the US is an honest broker. And it is good that the chimera of Obama stands shattered for ever.

But the Arab Revolution presents new possibilities. The epic 94 year old struggle of the Palestinian people, which has inspired the world for generations, will finally see a new awakening and with it, a new hope, a new Intifada, the Third Intifada!!

It is only the resistance on the ground, within Palestine, across the Palestine diaspora, across the Arab nations and then across the entire world, will we finally witness the rebirth of a nation.

The people across the world are on the march. The millions at the Tahrir Square have inspired humanity to march again. And the teeming millions of Palestinians are on their way to the borders of the Holy Land, and we will be marching with them, shoulder to shoulder, holding their hands as we walk to Jerusalem. Freedom is nigh.

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The writer is a peace activist in Mumbai. He led the Asia to Gaza peace flotilla.
Courtesy : Countercurrents.org