

SUNDAY POUCH

Khaleda Zia's concerns are welcome

But will the BNP reassess its own role?

IT is rather good to hear Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia call the government to account over what she believes are its inefficiency, corruption and mismanagement, all of which have now contributed to the making of an economic crisis for the country. That not everything is right with the country, that indeed our politicians both in government and in opposition have a grave responsibility to turn things around has never been in doubt. We at this newspaper have consistently reiterated our view that a smooth, transparent and therefore accountable practice of democracy in Bangladesh is a sine qua non for progress. That indeed has also been the great desire of the people of the country.

It is a message that has been going out to the government. That said, it is the considered feeling among citizens that such concerns on the part of the opposition can better be addressed in the place where it truly matters. And we speak, of course, of the Jatiyo Sangsad. It is regrettable that despite calls and demands from citizens across the country for it to return to parliament, the BNP has kept ignoring these sentiments even though these are the very issues it keeps talking about outside the House. Therefore, in order for Begum Zia's worries to be given the seriousness they deserve, her party should return to the JS. It owes it to its constituents to do so.

On a more significant level, we cannot but recall the chaos which defined the economy and administration during the last term of the BNP in office. There are perfectly clear reasons to think that a cavalier attitude to governance was what Begum Zia's government demonstrated between 2001 and 2006, with the result that politics could not but take a nosedive. To our amazement, the party has never reassessed its performance and has never acknowledged its failures in public. And if the BNP now pounces on the Awami League-led government for the latter's manifest shortcomings, it should at the same time be prepared to inform citizens of the reforms it means to initiate should it ride back to power. That is the least one expects from the party.

Community health in jeopardy

Get the clinics up and running

A leading Bangla daily has found an appalling set of anomalies in state-funded community clinics all over the country. While some clinics are open only from two to three days a week, others don't open at all and have been left derelict. In many cases doctors are not available and health workers do not turn up for work on a regular basis.

The most disturbing factor this investigation has revealed is shameful pettiness of a successor government to undo any kind of development work initiated by the previous party in power, no matter how beneficial for the public. The report has found that in 1998 when the Awami League was in power they had planned to set up a community clinic for every 6000 people giving a total of 13,000 such clinics for the whole country. Till 2001, more than 10,000 clinics had been built with 1000 of them running. But then in 2001, with a change in government when the BNP-led coalition came to power, the entire project was abandoned. The clinics became derelict buildings with no staff to provide care to the people.

The AL, then the opposition, predictably promised that all the clinics would resume functioning once they came back to power. Yet now that they are in power, and health and family planning Minister Ruhul Huq says community clinic is at the top of the list of priorities of the health sector, what's stopping the turnaround from happening? Actually his job seems cut out. Some of the clinics, especially in remote areas, don't have any staff at all. Others, according to the report, are filled with AL supporters and their relatives to run them. Inaccessibility to the clinics because of lack of proper roads, unlawful prescribing of antibiotics are a few added thorns in the system.

It goes without saying that community health clinics play a crucial role serving low-cost health care to the underprivileged. Such gross negligence and waste of public resources will result in millions of people being deprived of basic health care, without which many lives will be prematurely cut short. The govern-



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

OUR prime minister will be travelling to Myanmar tomorrow. Last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was there. She

went to assess whether it is in the throes of fundamental change after 49 years of harsh military rule. Our prime minister, however, will be there primarily to deepen bilateral relations between the two neighbours.

There is a sudden worldwide interest in the developments in that country. This is natural because after the elections last year a new Parliament and a president are in place. And though the president is a retired general, he has introduced changes that are attracting the attention of world leaders. Perhaps this time, Myanmar could be changing for the better.

But what has President Thein Sein done that is exciting everyone?

The new leadership has from the early days shown interest in broad reforms and rehabilitation of the country. For too long Myanmar had remained stuck in the past as its neighbours moved ahead both politically and economically. Due to international isolation it is also deep in the embrace of big neighbour China. All this does not seem to go well for Myanmar.

One of the noticeable steps the president took was to stop the construction of a controversial hydroelectric dam on the Irrawaddy river in the north of the country. China had signed an agreement in 2006 to finance this \$3.6 billion project. But it was a highly unpopular enterprise. If built, it would flood an area the size of Singapore. Then, when completed, about 90% of the electricity generated would have gone to China. The Chinese would have also monopolised the construction jobs in the project. The president, by stopping the construction, has gained much popularity as he is seen to be protecting the interest of the people.

He is now keen to show that his government is much better than those in the past and more transparent. So he has loosened the viselike grip on the Myanmar media as well on the

internet. Today, journalists there are able to write without fear or reprisal from the government.

The next step the president took was to free 200 out of the 2,000 political prisoners, who under the military rule were called "criminals." Among those freed was the famous comedian Zarganar, who was sentenced to 35 years in jail for criticising the then government for poor handling of Cyclone Nargis, which killed 140,000 people in 2008. In this context, the government has also established a Human Rights Commission.

What has further surprised the people of Myanmar was that a business magazine called *The Future* was allowed to print a full page photo of the democracy icon Ms. Aung San Suu Kiyi and a lengthy interview with her. This showed that the president is willing to engage politically with her.

In Myanmar as well as around the world there are sceptics who view the changes taking place as only cosmetic. They would like many more things to happen before the reforms would be like a blaze of flame and burn away the past inequities and injustices.

Soon after, the Parliament took steps to change the law on political parties, thereby allowing Suu Kiyi and her National Democratic League to officially rejoin the Myanmar political process.

The latest move by the Parliament was to approve a law guaranteeing the people the right to protest.

All these developments were closely monitored by the European Union and the US. President Obama described these changes as "flickers of progress" when we went to Bali recently to attend a summit meeting. He promised to send Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Myanmar to investigate and to engage with the leaders. The last time a US secretary of state visited Myanmar was John Foster Dulles, more than fifty years back. In the meantime, Myanmar was rewarded by the South East Asian nations when they agreed to have it take over the

rotating chair of the Association of South East Asian nations (Asean) when its turn comes in 2014.

But the US wants Myanmar to open the closed political system there. It also wants the Myanmar government to release all political prisoners as soon as possible and to start "real" political process with elections. It also wants to see improvement in the treatment of minorities in Myanmar.

Unless all these take place, the US will not end sanctions. It will continue to follow what policy wonks call "parallel engagement" -- talking with the government as well as with Suu Kiyi.

If this is what the US wants in Myanmar then what does the country's democracy icon Suu Kiyi want? For the moment she is encouraged by the progress made. But to have her fully on board the government, among other measures, has to reform the

the third most corrupt country in the world after Somalia and North Korea, by Transparency International.

Besides the economy, the people seem also to be concerned about the treatment of minorities, who constitute 1/3rd of the total 55 million population. About 140,000 minorities are now refugees in Thailand as well as over 20,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

In Myanmar as well as around the world there are sceptics who view the changes taking place as only cosmetic. They would like many more things to happen before the reforms would be like a blaze of flame and burn away the past inequities and injustices. Some of them are of the opinion that the government is doing all this to save some past military leaders from being prosecuted in the future for their past misdeeds.

When our prime minister lands in Myanmar she is likely to come face to face with a changing Myanmar. But she must understand that it is a country now in a slow flux. If things move as the people and the democracy icon want, then the changes are likely to be swift and historic in the future. By talking to the leaders she will be able to understand firsthand whether the government there is keen to bring fundamental changes that will make Myanmar a democratic and pluralistic nation. Her visit to Myanmar is therefore timely.

The question that now arises is, will our prime minister, besides meeting the new government leaders, also meet with Ms. Aung San Suu Kiyi? It would be only appropriate that she meet the democracy icon. Both of them possess strong democratic credentials and both had charismatic fathers from whom they had inherited their political DNA.

A changing Myanmar is likely to be receptive to our diplomatic overtures. Besides the Rovingya refugee problem we should engage their leaders to cooperate in a host of economic and social initiatives. Our prime minister should encourage Myanmar to finally open a window to their west into Bangladesh.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies. E-mail: ashfaq303@hotmail.com

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

The real lesson of Iraq

MALFRID BRAUT HEGGHAMMER

PARALLELS between Iraq's former nuclear weapons programme and the Iranian nuclear programme have shaped policy debates for nearly a decade. We are still paying the costs of failing in Iraq. Israel now seems determined to make similar mistakes in Iran.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu now claims that the real Iranian threat is hidden from view, and that it is necessary to act before the window of opportunity closes for good. His solution is straightforward -- a targeted strike.

Many will agree with the diagnosis, even if they are reluctant to support the proposed solution. However, these claims are misleading on historical and logical grounds. Let us start with history.

Netanyahu's recent statements about the Iranian nuclear programme mirror the arguments that were made about Iraq's alleged nuclear weapons programme before the 2003 invasion. Netanyahu claims that the International Atomic Energy Agency's report of November 8 does not reveal the full scope of the Iranian nuclear threat, as it only contains information that the Agency can independently verify.

Two implications follow from this statement. First, the I.A.E.A.'s judgment is not trustworthy. Instead, we must rely on intelligence assessments whose sources cannot be verified. Second, the real Iranian threat is not their known enrichment capacity: their apparent efforts to hide information and bury facilities underground con-

stitute evidence of a growing threat.

Such logic played a key role in bringing about the US-led war in Iraq in 2003. Following extensive Iraqi concealment of their past weapons of mass destruction programmes between 1991 and 1995, international organisations and intelligence agencies began to assume that what could not be verified was hidden. Furthermore, the UN investigation of the so-called Iraqi concealment mechanism contributed to Iraq's expulsion of U.N. inspectors in late 1998.

After the 2003 war, we discovered that Iraq's smoke and mirrors

attack -- also builds on a historical lesson from Iraq.

Unfortunately, it is the wrong lesson. In 1981, Israeli pilots destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor complex as it stood on the verge of becoming operational. As Avner Cohen, an expert on nuclear weapons, recently wrote in *Haaretz*, this decision resulted from Prime Minister Menachem Begin's flawed interpretation of intelligence. (His decision was strongly opposed by Shimon Peres, then defense minister and deputy prime minister.)

Israelis tend to credit this attack for denying Iraq a nuclear weapons capa-

In the case of Iraq, fears of what was presumed to be hidden distracted analysts and decision-makers from the facts on the ground. In the case of Iran, facts on the ground suggest that the best course of action is to resist the temptation of pushing the red button.

amounted to just that -- there was no trace of a smoking gun. As it turned out, the I.A.E.A.'s 1997 assessment was correct: Iraq's nuclear weapons programme had been dismantled shortly after the 1991 Gulf War.

The I.A.E.A.'s recent assessment of Iran's nuclear programme judges that Iran studied several applications of a weapons programme prior to 2004. It suggests that Iran is slowly moving closer to a nuclear capability. However, the report does not contain a smoking gun.

Netanyahu's proposed solution for dealing with Iran -- a targeted

ability. However, sources that have emerged since 2003 demonstrate that the attack created an unprecedented Iraqi consensus about the need for a nuclear deterrent and triggered a more intensive effort to acquire them. By the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq stood on the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability.

What is known about Iran's nuclear programme suggests an attack could have similar consequences. Iran's erratic nuclear advances over the past decade suggest that there is no consensus about whether and when to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

While it is possible that Iran could develop fissile material for a nuclear weapon within weeks or months, such a high-risk move would require a consensus that does not currently exist in Tehran. Instead, Iran is edging closer toward a nuclear weapons option. An attack is one of the very few events that could create consensus in Tehran that it is necessary to develop nuclear weapons sooner rather than later.

Netanyahu further claims that it is necessary to strike against Iran now because it may not be possible to carry out such an attack once the underground Fordow enrichment facility is fully operational. That argument obscures a simple fact -- a military strike will make this problem more difficult to deal with in the long term.

In the case of Iraq, fears of what was presumed to be hidden distracted analysts and decision-makers from the facts on the ground. In the case of Iran, facts on the ground suggest that the best course of action is to resist the temptation of pushing the red button.

A more logical course of action would be to focus efforts on ensuring that Iran will abstain from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold. In fact, this is the most likely outcome if Iran is not attacked. An Iranian nuclear test would entail further isolation from the international community, which Tehran could ill afford. Not striking against Iran would be the better containment policy.

The writer is an Assistant Professor at the Norwegian Defense University College, Oslo.

©New York Times. Distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 4

1110

First Crusade: The Crusaders sack Sidon.

1791

The first edition of *The Observer*, the world's first Sunday newspaper, is published.

1829

In the face of fierce local opposition, British governor Lord William Bentinck issues a regulation declaring that all who abet suttee in India are guilty of culpable homicide.

1881

The first edition of the *Los Angeles Times* is published.

1943

World War II: In Yugoslavia, resistance leader Marshal Josip Broz Tito proclaims a provisional democratic Yugoslav government in-exile.

1945

By a vote of 65 to 7, the United States Senate approves United States participation in the United Nations (the UN is established on October 24, 1945).

1971 The United Nations Security Council calls an emergency session to consider the deteriorating situation between India and Pakistan.

1971

The Indian Navy attacks the Pakistan Navy and Karachi.

1982

The People's Republic of China adopts its current constitution.