

## SUNDAY POUCH

### War crimes trial a must

*However, nothing can be above criticism*

WE as a newspaper from the very outset have been strongly supportive of the war crimes trial not only because it will establish supremacy of law, heal the wounds of the nation but also because it will vindicate the right to justice of those on whom crimes against humanity were perpetrated. That is what we owe to our hapless victims during the liberation struggle. However, we cannot accept the position, adopted in the resolution in the parliament and subsequently supported by the law minister that anybody who criticizes the tribunal and the trial will face legal action. This is misuse of law and amounts to stifling freedom of speech and expression.

Both the resolution in the parliament and the law minister do not seem to understand the purpose of criticizing or raising objection. They both assume that criticizing is meant to impede the trial. It is our view that criticism may and can also help the trial process by pointing out its flaws and weaknesses which will enable us to make the trial even better.

We also want to raise a more fundamental question. In a democracy nothing can be and should be above scrutiny. It has been an age old learning that criticizing is the best form of scrutiny and helps strengthen what is the truth.

We also wonder how something which constitutes a legal process can ever be above question. Actually, questioning can strengthen and perfect the process rather than weaken it because the whole purpose is to hold a transparent and fair trial.

We want to loudly proclaim that the war crimes trial is meant to establish the truth, to right a massive wrong committed against our freedom loving people.

Let's make it clear once again that we have embarked on the trial from an unflinching belief in the supremacy of law and an inherent respect for the rule of law. We believe that both the resolution in the parliament and the law minister's remarks will appear as trying to suppress the critical opinion and create suspicion in the minds of the international community about the trial process. After four decades of waiting, we want a trial which will not only punish the culprits and establish justice, but will become an example of fairness and transparency admired by all.

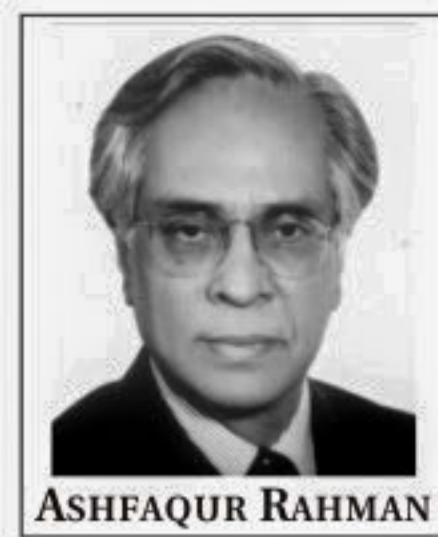
### Scheming behind relief schemes

*Let the guilty pay...*

IMAGES of corruption in relation to relief schemes have generally been a matter of deep concern in Bangladesh. Even so, one would have thought that with democracy taking roots, in however tenuous a manner, in the country, such corruption were fast getting to be a thing of the past. The belief now turns out to have been rather misplaced. As a report in this newspaper yesterday pointed out, as many as 67 tonnes of rice and wheat earmarked for a test relief programme in Sadullapur of Gaibandha district have been made use of, on paper. In other words, the items were not distributed and the projects under the programme --- small-scale repairs of schools and mosques --- were not undertaken.

That begs the question: where did these 67 tonnes of rice and wheat go? The sales of the foodgrains would have fetched Tk. 25 lakh which would have gone into the repair work. That simply did not happen because those who won the contracts for the job happily received the foodgrains and then did nothing. The chairmen of the 57 project committees involved have no answer at all to the question of what they did with the rice and wheat and why the repairs were not undertaken. Despite the food and disaster management ministry's serving several notices on the committee presidents, no answers have come forth. Worse, at least one government official who had the courage to inquire into the corruption was conveniently moved to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This is a clear sign of powerful elements among the political circles influencing decision, or the lack of it, on the disappearance of the foodgrains. Obviously, the food ministry has clear notions of what happened here and has even instituted inquiries into the scandal. Those inquiries have then been stymied in mysterious manner.

It is a matter which calls for a serious investigation, for two clear reasons. The first is to uncover the truth of what the 57 committee leaders did with the foodgrains; and the second is to have the guilty face the law even if they cough up the money that could have accrued from the sales of the rice and wheat. Let the inquiry be thorough and let all the facts associated with the disappearance of the foodgrains be made public. Such scandals must make



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

TO those of us who are familiar with Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a king punished by the gods and tasked

to roll a huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it slide down again and to repeat the task throughout eternity. King Sisyphus was also known as the craftiest of men.

In the Middle East, President Assad is thought of as a modern day Sisyphus. If we are to believe what the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton says, or even what the western media tells us, then Assad should have long gone or is on his way out. But what is the reality? Assad is very much there as the president of Syria. He continues to push the boulder and after a short spell Syria is pushed downward by violence and anarchy. The cycle seems to be repeating itself endlessly.

Syria for many years has been one of the most stable states in the region. But political activists there, from March of last year, inspired by revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, pushed for the ouster of President Bashar Assad who had assumed the presidency from his father Hafiz Assad eleven years ago.

So far more than 5,000 people have died due to clashes between pro and anti government forces. The president disputes this figure and says that 2,000 were Syrian soldiers carrying out government orders to quell the rebellion. He refers to a foreign conspiracy that is trying to remove him from power.

So what is really happening in Syria? Why did Russia and China veto the UN Security Council resolution that called for a stop to violence in the streets and for President Assad to step down? Why is the Arab League up against Assad, and has passed its own resolutions that seeks the toppling of the president? The League, which had sent an observer mission to Damascus, could not report back the correct

picture. Last week, in a high level meeting in Cairo, the League had failed to agree to send a monitoring mission to Syria. The UN General Assembly, however, could pass a non-binding resolution again last week to stop the violence.

Let us, therefore, try to understand why President Assad, in spite of persistent clashes for a year with opposition groups, could not be dislodged from power.

First, the majority of the Syrian population still supports the president. Two months back, the Qatar Foundation funded an opinion poll which revealed that 55% of Syrians still support him.

Assad's supporters include the Syrian army, business leaders and the middle class coming from the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. Besides the educated and secular Sunnis as well as the Christians, the

Syrian, has not imposed sanctions.

Today, Russia has become a strong supporter of Assad. This is because Russia maintains a naval base in Tartus, a Syrian port in the Mediterranean Sea. The other major power supporting Assad is China. China has trade interest in Syria. Both these countries are however chafing and are upset with the way the west broke up Gaddafi's Libya. So they are not keen to provide the US and Europe another opportunity to have easy sailing in Syria.

China also wants the US to remain engaged in the Middle East. By dismantling the regime in Damascus, the US wants a pliant government there, who will do its bidding. So China feels Assad must stay. This will keep the US engaged there and not turn its attention to China and the Pacific region. The

The USA and the western countries are therefore trying hard to buttress the opposition. But they have not made much headway. So they are now trying covert methods. In Iskenderun, southern Turkey, the British and the French special forces are training fighters in order for them to infiltrate into Syria. The US through the CIA is also supplying intelligence to the opposition and boosting their communications.

President Assad, in the meantime, has ordered that a new constitution for Syria be written and national elections be held this summer. A referendum will be held soon on this. But the fear is that at the prompting of the USA, Nato and the GCC could militarily attack Syria. Then this could be Assad's undoing. There is clear evidence that the West is provoking Assad by simulating military games. If the West unilaterally attacks Syria then the United Nations could be bypassed.

It is now a waiting game in Syria. The West had it good in Libya by causing a regime change there under the guise of humanitarian bombing. So why can't they do the same in Syria now through a direct military intervention? President Assad had made mistakes in the past by continuing his father's autocratic practices and by denying human rights to his people. But Syria is not Libya. It has stronger fundamentals and powerful international friends like Russia and China. They are not willing to see Syria go Libya's way so easily.

A wise man had said a long time back: "Do not taunt the alligator until you have crossed the stream." Until President Assad and his opponents should take serious note of this dictum. There are known and unknown dangers that both the sides face as the situation in Syria slides downward. It may be difficult for Assad the Sisyphus to push the boulder up again. The task could be even harder for the opposition if it can in course of time grab power.

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Kurds and the Druze population are in his favour. He himself is an Alawite, and people of his group continue to give their allegiance.

But does the toll of human lives there mean that President Assad is now getting internationally isolated? Analysts say that this is not necessarily so. Only the countries belonging to the Nato alliance and the countries that are members of the Gulf Co-operation Council have agreed with the USA to turn their faces away from President Assad. Even Turkey, which is a crucial player in that region, is ambivalent about Assad and has not sought to show him the door.

Assad's greatest allies are Iran and Iraq. Iran has a clear goal of keeping USA out of the region while Iraq has shown its displeasure by not joining the sanctions regime against Syria. Even Lebanon, whose population is known for some years to be anti-

new US strategic policy to focus more in the Pacific will then not see the light of day.

But who are opposing President Assad inside Syria? They are a disparate group under an umbrella called the Syrian National Council (SNC) led by a Paris based exile, Barhoun Galyan. The SNC is also linked to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This is composed of armed defectors from the Syrian army coming from the lower ranks. They have been joined by mercenaries sent by the Gulf sheikhdoms.

The opposition is using every opportunity to damage the infrastructure of Syria and kill the military where possible. But it is, till now, not working under a central command. The civilian component of the opposition also does not have a political programme and remains divided.

## Pakistan's nuclear arsenal

MICHAEL KREPON

PAKISTAN is blocking the start of negotiations of a global halt to the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.

The Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) can't begin, Pakistani diplomats say, because existing stockpiles won't be covered. But Pakistan would be loath to reveal its existing stocks, and no one in any position of authority would permit foreign inspectors to verify their locations and extent.

And if, by some miraculous event, existing stocks were covered in the treaty, an absolutely necessary first step would be to verify a freeze on existing production -- the very agreement that Pakistan wholeheartedly resists.

Another problem with an FMCT, Pakistani officials say, is the civil nuclear deal offered to India by the United States. This deal, they assert, will allow Indian authorities many new sources of fissile material to make bombs. But foreign companies aren't rushing into the Indian nuclear power market. Instead, they are keeping their distance because of meagre liability protections passed by the Indian Parliament.

Even if, in the future, Indian liability laws are changed and foreign companies build dozens of new power plants, the diversion of electricity into bombs is very unlikely. India has facilities dedicated to military production, and no longer needs to poach on power plants to make weapons.

A related Pakistani argument used to block the start-up of FMCT

negotiations is that India's breeder reactor programme will provide an open-ended source of fissile material for weapons. This presumes that India's breeder programme, unlike that of the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan and Russia, will actually prove to be worth its considerable investment.

Even if New Delhi continues to subsidise the breeder programme, there will be severe domestic political penalties for diverting electricity into bombs. Pakistani analysts who warn of this outcome are projecting their own civil-military relations onto India.

***Pakistan's current position on the FMCT, calling for the inclusion of existing stockpiles, would pose a greater threat to Pakistan's nuclear deterrent than the negotiating mandate it is resisting, which would leave current stocks untouched.***

Pakistani officials have suggested that they will lift their veto on FMCT negotiations if they are offered a civil nuclear deal similar to the one granted to India. This argument undercuts all others against the FMCT: if status trumps security, then the security-related arguments against the FMCT can't be very serious. Besides, calling for a similar civil-nuclear deal is wishful thinking.

Pakistan can't afford nuclear power plants unless they are offered at concessionary rates, as China has done for two plants. Everyone else will invest only with profit in mind, and Pakistan now figures to be a very risky place for multi-billion

dollar investments.

Foreign investment can become more attractive with greater domestic tranquillity, sustained economic growth and normal ties with neighbours, but even then, nuclear power will not be an attractive sector for investment.

If Pakistan's stand on the FMCT is about foreign investment, status and pique about India's civil nuclear deal, blocking the FMCT negotiations is an especially unwise strategy, since it confirms Pakistan's diplomatic isolation.

Another argument against the FMCT is that Pakistan can better resist outside pressures -- espe-

cially Indian adventurism -- by having more nuclear weapons. But Pakistan's susceptibility to pressure comes from its domestic and economic weaknesses, not from the number of nuclear weapons it possesses.

For the last two decades, Indian governments have concluded that sustained economic growth is more important than fighting Pakistan. Attempts to seize and hold Pakistani territory would result in severe trials. Pakistan's nuclear inventory has also helped dissuade Indian leaders from engaging in military adventurism.

If this has been the case when Pakistan possessed fewer weapons,

why would a larger inventory be required -- especially if an FMCT would constrain a parallel Indian build-up?

Besides, the threat of an Indian conventional offensive would only be prompted by spectacular attacks on Indian soil carried out by individuals trained and based in Pakistan. Preventing the groups that engage in these tactics would also prevent unwanted Indian military responses.

Yet another argument against the FMCT is that nuclear weapons are not that big a drain on the Pakistani treasury. But Pakistan has so many unmet needs that any opportunity to meet some of them would appear to be worthwhile. The clinching argument against the FMCT in Pakistan is that it is a thinly disguised attempt by outsiders to take away Pakistan's nuclear deterrent.

In actuality, Pakistan's current position on the FMCT, calling for the inclusion of existing stockpiles, would pose a greater threat to Pakistan's nuclear deterrent than the negotiating mandate Pakistan is resisting, which would leave current stocks untouched.

With or without the FMCT, Pakistan will retain nuclear weapons. So, too, will India. Pakistan can compete with India to increase its nuclear stockpile. But the country with a weak economy loses in this competition. Nuclear weapons are a poor substitute for the growing disparity in Indian and Pakistani economic fortunes.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 19

- 1878** Thomas Edison patents the phonograph.
- 1921** Reza Shâh takes control of Tehran during a successful coup.
- 1942** World War II: President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the executive order 9066, allowing the United States military to relocate Japanese-Americans to Japanese internment camps.
- 1959** The United Kingdom grants Cyprus independence, which is then formally proclaimed on August 16, 1960.