

## WORLD RIVERS DAY

# Revisit your river, save your river

SHUDIPTA SHARMA

IT is hard to find anyone in the country who does not have any memory of a river. Someone may have a lot of memories of swimming in a river while someone else may have memories of journey by boat or launch on rivers. On the other hand, many of us also experience the cruel face of rivers during flood. But, memory of river is a common characteristic of the people of Bangladesh, a country crisscrossed by rivers.

Actually, the rivers of Bangladesh mark both the psychology of the nation and the life of the people. But, unfortunately, our memories of rivers are declining day by day. In this age of commercialisation we do not have enough time to pass a moment with rivers. Many of us struggle to recall our last memory of a river. The condition of most of the rivers is also very bad now. If we look back we will find that the state of our rivers has been worsening since we became callous regarding their condition.

To highlight the many values of rivers and to increase public awareness while encouraging the improved stewardship of rivers around the world, today, on the last Sunday of September, World Rivers Day is going to be observed in Bangladesh as well as the rest of world. The Day, established in 2005, is a global celebration of the world's waterways. This Day has been endorsed by various agencies of the United Nations and is intended to complement the broader efforts of the United Nations Water for Life Decade.

Originally, World Rivers Day was based on the great success of BC Rivers Day, which started in 1980 in British Columbia, Canada. The BC event was founded by the acclaimed river conservationist Mark Angelo. This year, for the third time, World Rivers Day, with the theme "Revisit Your River," is going to be observed in Bangladesh by a volunteer initiative to revive rivers, and other organisations

As a riverine country, Bangladesh's economy is dependent on rivers. About 800 rivers including tributaries flow

stand the importance of rivers. The worldwide demand for drinking water is doubling every 20 years. Scientists say that 1,900-5,000 litre and 900-2,000 litre water is needed to produce 1 kg of rice and wheat, respectively. Out of the total amount of sweet water in the world about 63% is used in crop production while 23% is used in industries and 8% in domestic use.

However, rivers, the main source of drinking water, are facing an array of threats in Bangladesh as well as around the world. But, unfortunately, we are not

ment to Ashulia along the Buriganga.

Actually, we do not care about rivers since most of the people do not know the importance of a healthy river. In a sentence, if the dying out of rivers continues it will affect our food supply, ecosystem linkages and livelihood activities.

Building on this year's theme of World Rivers Day, a local volunteer organisation for saving rivers wants to encourage people to think about the sorry state of the rivers and their necessity, and to remind them of their responsibility. It also called on media, organisations and agencies to observe the day, specially by going to see the condition of the rivers.

The river loving members of the organisation believe that our callousness is one of the main reasons behind the bad condition of our rivers. If we visit our rivers regularly and engage in different activities such as swimming, travelling, holding boat races and other cultural and traditional programmes, as in the past, the condition of the rivers will improve because we will be forced to keep their flow normal.

Rivers are the lifeline of the country and our overall development is dependent on their condition. Do we really care about rivers? Do we know our rivers really need our assistance for their existence? Can't we visit our rivers for a day to experience the real situation? Can't we, at least, organise a party on a river on this day?

The writer is a staff correspondent of *The Daily Star* and a member of Riverine People, a volunteer initiative to revive rivers.

| **The New York Times** **EXCLUSIVE**

# America's inevitable retreat from the Middle East

PANKAJ MISHRA

THE murder of four Americans in Libya and mob assaults on the US embassies across the Muslim world this month have reminded many of 1979, when radical Islamists seized the US mission in Tehran. There, too, extremists running wild after the fall of a pro-American tyrant had found a cheap way of empowering themselves.

But the obsession with radical Islam misses a more meaningful analogy for the current state of siege in the Middle East and Afghanistan: the helicopters hovering above the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon in 1975 as North Vietnamese tanks rolled into the city.

That hasty departure ended America's long and costly involvement in Indochina, which, like the Middle East today, the United States had inherited from defunct European empires. Of course, Southeast Asia had no natural resources to tempt the United States and no ally like Israel to defend. But it appeared to be at the front line of the worldwide battle against communism, and US policymakers had unsuccessfully tried both proxy despots and military firepower to make the locals advance their strategic interests.

The violent protests provoked by the film "Innocence of Muslims" will soon subside, and US embassies will return to normal business. But the symbolic import of the violence, which included a Taliban assault on one of the most highly secured US bases in Afghanistan, is unmistakable. The drama of waning US power is being re-enacted in the Middle East and South Asia after two futile wars and the collapse or weakening of pro-American regimes.

In Afghanistan, local soldiers and policemen have killed their Western trainers, and demonstrations have erupted there and in Pakistan against US drone strikes and reported desecrations of the Quran. Amazingly, this surge in historically rooted hatred and distrust of powerful Western invaders, meddlers and remote controllers has come yet again as a shock to many US policymakers and commentators, who have promptly retreated into a lazy "they hate our freedoms" narrative.

It is as though the United States, lulled by such ideological foils as Nazism and

communism into an exalted notion of its moral power and mission, missed the central event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the steady, and often violent, political awakening of peoples who had been exposed for decades to the sharp edges of Western power. This strange oversight explains why US policymakers kept missing their chances for peaceful post-imperial settlements in Asia.

As early as 1919, Ho Chi Minh, dressed in a morning suit and armed with quotations from the Declaration of Independence, had tried to petition President Woodrow Wilson for an end to French rule over Indochina. Ho did not get anywhere with Wilson. Indian, Egyptian, Iranian and Turkish nationalists hoping for the liberal internationalist president to promulgate a new "morality" in global affairs were similarly disappointed.

*It is the world's newly ascendant nations and awakened peoples that will increasingly shape events in the post-Western era. America's retrenchment is inevitable. The only question is whether it will be as protracted and violent as Europe's mid-20th century retreat from a newly assertive Asia and Africa.*

None of these anti-imperialists would have bothered if they had known that Wilson, a Southerner fond of jokes about "darkies," believed in maintaining "white civilisation and its domination over the world." Franklin D. Roosevelt was only slightly more conciliatory when, in 1940, he proposed mollifying dispossessed Palestinian Arabs with a "little bak-sheesh."

Roosevelt changed his mind after meeting the Saudi leader Ibn Saud and learning of oil's importance to the post-war US economy. But the Cold War, and America's obsession with the chimera of monolithic communism, again obscured the unstoppable momentum of decolonisation, which was fueled by an intense desire among humiliated peoples for equality and dignity in a world controlled by a small minority of white men.

Ho Chi Minh's post-World War II appeals for assistance to another US

president -- Harry S. Truman -- again went unanswered; and Ho, who had worked with US intelligence agents during the war, was ostracised as a dangerous communist. But many people in Asia saw that it was only a matter of time before the Vietnamese ended foreign domination of their country.

For the world had entered a new "revolutionary age," as the American critic Irving Howe wrote in 1954, in which the intense longing for change among millions of politicised people in Asia was the dominant force. "Whoever gains control of them," Howe warned, "whether in legitimate or distorted forms, will triumph." This mass longing for political transformation was repressed longer by Cold War despotism in the Arab world; it has now exploded, profoundly damaging America's ability to dictate events there.

Given its long history of complicity

with dictators in the region, from the Shah of Iran to Saddam Hussein and Hosni Mubarak, the United States faces a huge deficit of trust. The belief that this deep-seated suspicion can be overcome by a few soothing presidential speeches betrays only more condescending ignorance of the Arab mind, which until recently was believed to be receptive only to brute force.

It is not just extremist Salafis who think Americans always have malevolent intentions: the Egyptian anti-Islamist demonstrators who pelted Hillary Rodham Clinton's motorcade in Alexandria with rotten eggs in July were convinced that America was making shady deals with the Muslim Brotherhood. And few people in the Muslim world have missed the Israeli prime minister's blatant manipulation of American politics for the sake of a pre-emptive assault on Iran.

There is little doubt that years of disorder lie ahead in the Middle East as different factions try to gain control. The murder of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Libya, the one American success story of the Arab Spring, is an early sign of the chaos to come; it also points to the unpredictable consequences likely to follow any Western intervention in Syria - or Iran.

As in Southeast Asia in 1975, the limits of both US firepower and diplomacy have been exposed. Financial leverage, or *baksheesh*, can work only up to a point with leaders struggling to control the bewilderingly diverse and ferocious energies unleashed by the Arab Spring. Although it's politically unpalatable to mention it during an election campaign, the case for a strategic US retreat from the Middle East and Afghanistan has rarely been more compelling. It's especially strong as growing energy independence reduces America's burden for policing the region, and its supposed ally, Israel, shows alarming signs of turning into a loose cannon.

All will not be lost if America scales back its politically volatile presence in the Muslim world. It could one day return, as it has with its former enemy, Vietnam, to a relationship of mutually assured dignity. (Although the recent military buildup in the Pacific -- part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" -- hints at fresh overestimations of US power in that region.)

Republicans calling for President Barack Obama to "grow" a "big stick" seem to think they live in the world of Teddy Roosevelt. Liberal internationalists arguing for even deeper American engagement with the Middle East inhabit a similar time warp; and both have an exaggerated idea of America's financial clout after the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s.

It is the world's newly ascendant nations and awakened peoples that will increasingly shape events in the post-Western era. America's retrenchment is inevitable. The only question is whether it will be as protracted and violent as Europe's mid-20th century retreat from a newly assertive Asia and Africa.

The writer is the author of *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia*. © *New York Times*. Distributed by the *New York Times* Syndicate.

## Tourism promotion: An innovative suggestion

S.M. RUHUL ALAM

"WHY do you stay in rain? When there is no rain in Ukraine." When I read these lines, I thought it was rhyme. But later I realised that it was an advertisement to attract British tourists to Ukraine, a very cold country of Eastern Europe. The weather of the UK is famous because of the sudden rain and wind! Can you imagine wet and windy weather in winter? It's common in the UK, which is why many people go overseas to get relief. You will find such advertisements for tourist attractions of some small countries like St. Lucia, the Maldives, and Mauritius in public transports in London. Unfortunately, no tourist will find any information regarding Bangladesh though many British people know about Bangladesh because of our restaurants.

What do European tourists look for? Obviously they look for sunlight, and Bangladesh winter means lovely sunny day. Moreover, in Bangladesh, the days are comparatively longer than in Europe in winter. We have the longest sandy beach in the world where tourists can even drive a car. It's God's gift to us. Brighton beach is a very famous tourist attraction in the UK. There are many facilities for tourists and everything is very organised. But it is a struggle to walk on the beach as it is full of stones, not sand. I talked to some of my British colleagues about our beach; they were surprised to hear that there is nice sandy beach in Bangladesh where they can run and even can drive car. While attracting overseas tourists, we have to highlight 'the advantages of our sandy beach. So far we have ignored it. Malaga of Spain is the most attractive tourist place in Europe but it is only suitable for summer. But Bangladesh can welcome tourists throughout the year. How many overseas tourists know of it?

How to attract the British or European tourists? Do we need lots of money to advertise? It's very easy to attract them if we use Bangladeshi restaurants as tools for tourism

*If the government can successfully involve Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK as tool of tourist attraction, the same can be applied in Italy, Germany, the US, Ireland, Canada and other places.*

promotion in the UK. There are ten thousand Bangladeshi restaurants (though these are known as Indian restaurants) in the UK. If ten customers come to eat at each restaurant everyday, there will be 100,000 people visiting these restaurants per day. We must grab this opportunity. We can put up pictures of our tourist attractions on the restaurants' walls and keep flyers to inform tourists. Waiters may also give flyers to the customers while delivering menu. I talked to some restaurant owners and community leaders and they appreciated the idea. They said that if the government of Bangladesh took any initiative, they would think seriously about it. The great news is that the restaurant owners will not ask for any money for the use of restaurants as a tool for advertisement. They will do it voluntarily as they love their country. The government can take the initiative by inviting the leaders of the Bangladeshi restaurant owners association, community leaders (Mayors of London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Camden and Croydon), and Ruksana Ali MP to Bangladesh to discuss development of tourism sector.

By presenting a project proposal, the government can seek their advice and opinion. It must be remembered that the role of the private sector is also very important to run the tourism industry. So while preparing a project proposal on overseas tourists, the views of the private tour operators should be considered. As the restaurant owners and leaders of the Bangladeshi community have been helping the country generously, their involvement in the tourism sector will be a big boost for the sector.

There are Bangladeshi restaurants throughout Western Europe, the US and Canada too. If the government can successfully involve Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK as tool of tourist attraction, the same can be applied in Italy, Germany, the US, Ireland, Canada and other places.

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