

Pro-poor food programme

A good initiative going awry

IN a classic example of how mismanagement can hijack the benefits of a well-intentioned government programme, subsidised rice meant for the ultra poor is ending up in the market in four districts due to corruption by officials, dealers and local influential people. Last month the government launched a programme targeted at the extreme poor and people with disabilities under which 5 million families would have been able to purchase 30 kgs of rice per month at the rate of Taka 10 per kg. It was a laudable move and everyone appreciated it. That the programme would meet such a fate within just one month is unthinkable.

The food-for-poor initiative, if well executed, has the potential of elevating people from absolute poverty and providing nutrition to a large number of malnourished children. It has the commitment of the highest policymakers. What then explains the gross irregularities that have cropped up within days of initiating the project? How have names of affluent people been included in the list of the poor? Why is it being sold in the market at higher prices? It is obvious that the government launched the ambitious project without putting in place a proper mechanism for monitoring and evaluation.

The international community today knows Bangladesh for its impressive economic growth and significant progress in various social sectors. But beneath this impressive story the fact remains that about 20 million people still live in abject poverty. What does development mean to someone who goes to bed hungry at night?

The food aid programme is a good initiative. The concerned authorities should plug leaks in the distribution system by forming monitoring committees.

Waterlogged Bhabodaha

Resolve the nagging problem

FIVE upazilas in Paira union falling under Jessore district remain in various stages of submersion as the 21 sluice gates in Bhabodaha have remained inoperable for many years. Hence, a serious downpour recently closed over 200 schools and students suffer the consequences. With heavy rains since the third week of August, students are facing disruption of normal studies and the near-constant water logging problem is posing health risks and sanitation problems for the greater populace of the area. One would have thought that the local authorities would take steps to make urgent repairs of the broken sluice gates that have inundated vast areas of three upazilas in the district, but that has not been forthcoming.

It is natural for local communities to feel neglected, but we are astonished to see the police baton charge a peaceful sit in on October 5 at Abhaynagar ventilating their feelings at the hardship caused by water logging. Was this action really necessary? These were peaceful protests and the use of unnecessary force was hardly called for. Why have authorities turned a blind eye to the protests that have been staged off and on for some two months now to what is obviously a nagging problem in the area? If drainage of the river requires more than one excavator, why have provisions not been made to bring in more to get the excess silt removed from Bhabodaha River and facilitate repair work? Instead of using strong arm tactics, we hope authorities will do the needful to get the sluice gates repaired and running as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Society becoming more selfish

Badrul Alam's attack on Khadiza in Sylhet is proof of the ferocious behaviour of some of our citizens. The bystanders who watched the attack happen reflect the selfishness of our society. As Badrul delivered blows on Khadiza Akter's head with a machete, people just stood there shouting; nobody dared to prevent the killing.

Do we not care about others anymore?
Md. Rashid
 On Email

An impressive waste management initiative

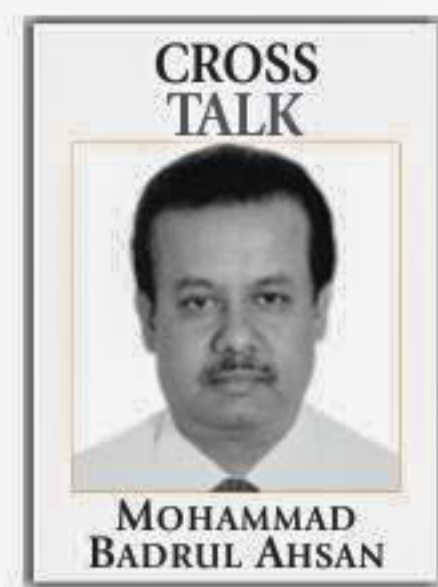
I commend Mishkat Khan on such a well written write-up titled "Waste is Money" and fully endorse his opinions. I along with many others dream of a clean, well maintained Dhaka city and it really hurts me when I see people littering the streets without any consideration for others or the environment.

The fact that employees of private companies are collecting garbage from door to door, sorting them out for recycling and reselling them for cash is an extremely appreciative move. If this could be done on a larger scale, the amount of recyclable material collected could bring in a huge amount of revenue. It would also ensure better waste management.

This initiative by private companies is highly praiseworthy. I urge the government to take this up on a wider scale covering households in the entire city.

Aminur Rahim
 Mohakhali

Development without democracy isn't a happy solution



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

PERSISTENT indignation may point to the cancer of esophagus, throat or stomach. This prognosis is a sufficient hint for the wise to understand why development

without democracy isn't good for a nation. It's no solace for people to know that highways and bridges are being built unless they also feel connected to their country, because it altogether misses the point. A free country is desirable so that people can enjoy, not the freedom of luxury, but the luxury of freedom.

This is the reason why people are ready to die thwarting foreign subjugation. This is why Pakistan sought independence from the British Empire in 1947, and Bangladesh sought independence from Pakistan in 1971. This is why millions have shed their blood across the world fighting for the felicity of making their own decisions. Independence of a country isn't so much about minding the projects as it's about projecting the minds.

Birds in captivity forever cherish the open sky despite the safety and comfort of a cage. Scotland wants to leave the UK. The Kashmiris want to break from India. The Palestinians refuse to accept Israeli occupation. The human desire for the right to self-determination is as natural as the reflex of an eye blinking or puff of air.

The US Declaration of Independence gives three examples of the inalienable rights given to all human beings by their Creator. Thomas Jefferson, who

composed the original draft of this document, argued that governments are created to protect these rights.

Throughout history though, despotic rulers have always turned that game on its head. They have crushed the rights of people to protect unlawful governments.

It goes without saying that people must work hard to build their country. The GDP is definitely an unmistakable indicator of that correlation between

amusement park run by governments elected every five years. And these governments are like the park management, whose job is to keep the park clean, enforce security services, maintain rides, sell tickets, and plan expansion. The management should not tell visitors which rides to take unless certain rides are risky or temporarily out of order.

That idea has lately dawned on countries other than Bhutan. The

when people have dissatisfaction bottled up inside them. Nobody can be wise on an empty stomach, and neither can a full stomach make people wise.

The best balance to strike is having happy people build a happy nation. Happiness doesn't mean high level of development for the same reason money can't buy sleep. Nothing satisfies like satisfaction, which is a measure of contentment like the proof of the

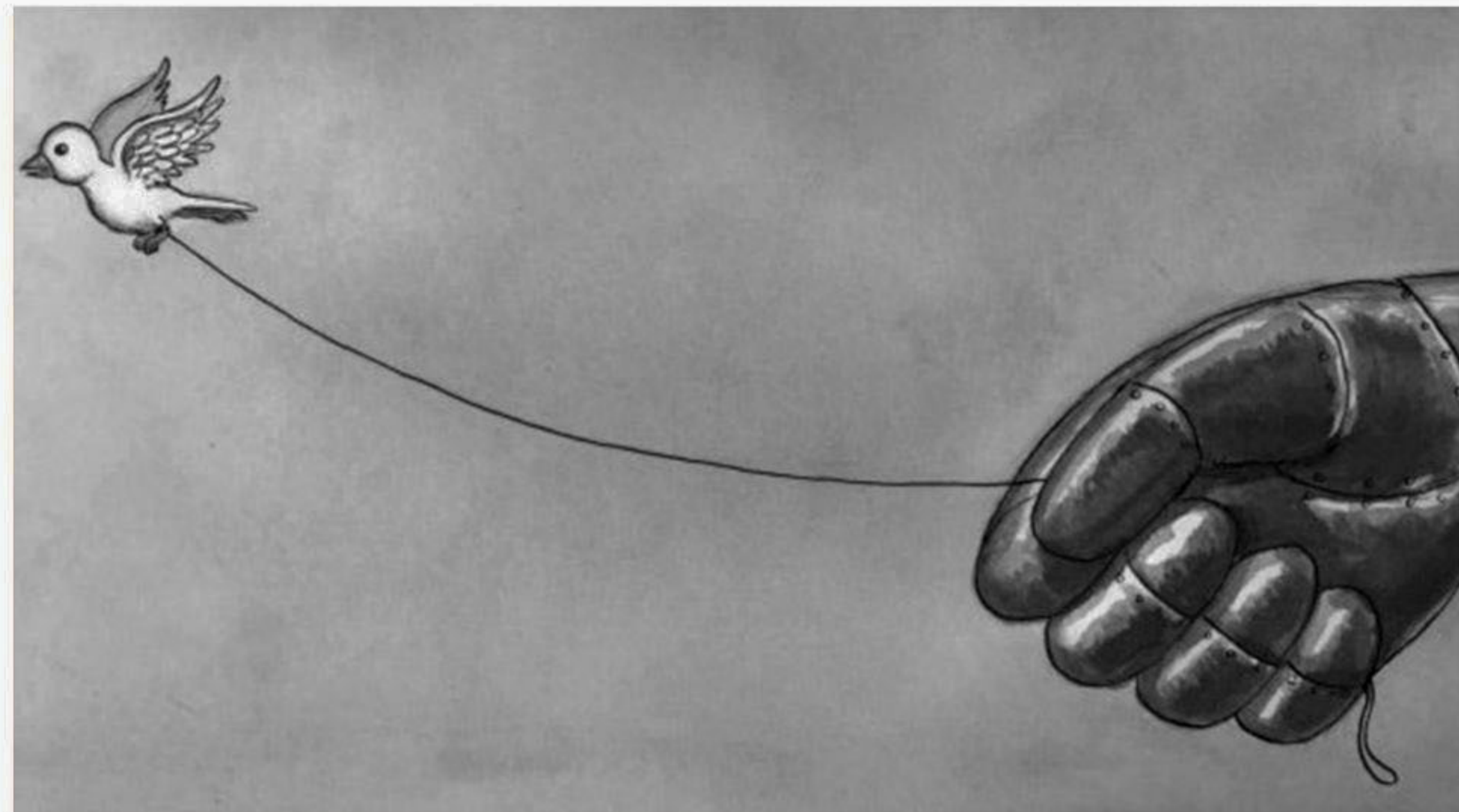


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN SHAKESPEARE

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human endeavour and growth of an economy. The plantation economy ran on that underlying principle that justified slave trade. It's believed that there are more slaves in the world today than any other time in history; an estimated 45 million.

An idea must start somewhere, and it did in a tiny kingdom named Bhutan, which since the 1970s has rejected traditional development indicators such as GDP. Instead it measures its citizens' gross national happiness. The kingdom values the mental and spiritual well-being of its citizens more than their material growth, and the results look impressive. Between 1970 and 2000, the average life expectancy doubled and net primary school enrolment increased from 23 percent in 1978 to 86 percent in 2014.

Ideally, a nation should be like an

United Arab Emirates has appointed its first-ever minister of happiness to oversee "plans, projects, programmes and indices" that improve the country's overall mood. Last July, Madhya Pradesh in India decided to create a Ministry of Happiness. The Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur is supposed to open a centre this month to study the science of happiness where students will be able to take a 12-14 hour microcredit course on happiness. India's unhappiness problem is reflected in the mental health of its citizens. One in five to one in 10 Indians suffer from depression at some point in their lives.

American economist Jeffrey Sachs pioneered the idea that the satisfaction of citizens was an important part of economic development. That brings the issue of development to contentment

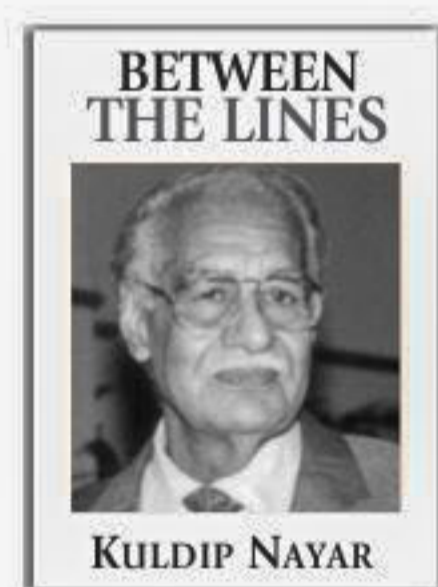
pudding lies in the eating.

One of the biggest satisfactions of free citizens in a free country is drawn from their right to choose their own government. Development without democracy puts the cart before the horse. It gives people a creeping sense that they are strangers in their own land.

People can be fed through tube, or they can eat with their own hands. While both may ensure nutrition, the latter is much more fun. When people cast their votes, they feel empowered and recognised. Nothing gives the taste of freedom like this small exercise, which is why development without democracy is an absurd proposition. It forces people to enjoy a delicious meal while their hands are tied.

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Relevance of surgical strikes



BETWEEN THE LINES

KULDEEP NAYAR

I was against surgical strikes because I thought they would escalate matters and probably go to a point of no return. But now that the strikes have been made, I

back the government. I am reminded of George Bernard Shaw, eminent literary personality, who said that he was the worst critic of the British government but since it was in the midst of war, he supported it.

Probably, India had no option. Terrorists, who were taking shelter on the Pakistan soil and operated from there, had to be punished. Islamabad did not do anything to stop or foil their activities. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has said that his country would retaliate and perhaps the attack near Baramulla area was what he meant.

As India's Chief of Air Staff Air Marshal Arup Raha has said, the reply to what happened at Uri where 19 Indian soldiers were killed by terrorists is being given and the Uri operation is not yet complete. He said, "It is still live," without commenting on the surgical strikes. I don't think that both India and Pakistan, the nuclear powers, will cross the red line. Escalation on the border can be controlled up to a point but when events take over, it will be difficult to say what will happen on the war theatre.

National Security Advisors of the two countries, Ajit Doval and Sartaj Aziz, have met and agreed to bring down tensions. Why couldn't they have done it before the surgical strikes took place? Aziz must have gauged the depth of anger in India with all political parties backing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. Nawaz Sharif, too, has got sanctions from the political parties in Pakistan. He had convened a special meeting to appraise the opposition of the situation.

Public opinion in both the countries has become hawkish. It's unfortunate that Pakistan is prepared even for a nuclear war if it comes to that. The people on both sides wish the end of daily tension and want the government of their country to ensure that they don't have to live with such constant fears. The SAARC summit would have been

an occasion when things could have been discussed across the table. But all the countries have pulled out from the meeting at Islamabad. They say that the climate is not conducive for SAARC to meet. Still, there is no other venue where all the countries in the region could have met and talked on the situation threadbare.

Pakistan should realise that its behaviour is such that other countries in

As a result, the deadlock continues to the detriment of democratic India. The situation can escalate to dangerous proportions at any time, because Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is always overlooked by the army. This means that the army does not have to go to the front literally and yet lead the elected Nawaz Sharif from its headquarters at Rawalpindi.

The problem that Pakistan has to

Baloch leader Brahmdagh Bugti, who has been offered asylum in India. Following his example, many Balochis who are at the moment residing in Europe and elsewhere will seek to come to India. This will open another front against Pakistan which India can utilise to tell the world that the uprising in Baluchistan was like the one in East Pakistan, which liberated itself to become Bangladesh in 1971.

The rebellion is a warning to Islamabad that Baluchistan could secede. In fact, it has Shias as a majority like Iran, and does not fit into the Pushto region. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, is from the region. When I met him years ago, his complaint was that Jawaharlal Nehru had not kept his promise to establish an independent country for the Pushto-speaking people.

Nehru was helpless because Baluchistan was part of Pakistan and he had accepted the establishment of Pakistan at the time of Partition. Badshah Khan, as Frontier Gandhi was called, was now a citizen of Pakistan. Any step from Nehru would have amounted to a war and he naturally was not prepared for it.

Prime Minister Modi is a different kettle of fish. Yet, his policy so far has been give-and-take. He was the one who invited all leaders of the SAARC countries to his swearing-in ceremony. Modi also stopped at Islamabad while returning from Afghanistan to extend a friendly hand despite furore at home. But today, the situation on the ground is different and may force Modi to look at things from another perspective.

The surgical strikes are one such option which he has exercised. Nawaz Sharif's threat of further retaliation could lead to a worse situation. Even Modi may not be able to control when events take over. They have their own ways of expressing themselves and can mean anything. It's time that Pakistan pulls itself back from the abyss because it can fall off the cliff.

That will be too dangerous for the country. After all, Pakistan should know by now that after having fought three wars—in 1948, 1965 and 1971—its loss has been far greater than it could inflict on India. In fact, it had to seek the good offices of President Clinton to get the Pakistani soldiers, who had infiltrated the territory, from the Kargil heights.

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PHOTO: JAIPAL SINGH/FLICKR

the region are not willing to accept its doings. But terrorists like Hafiz Sayeed are openly operating from the Pakistani soil. India took the case to the UN but China, Pakistan's ally, used the veto power and did not allow the UN to formally declare Hafiz Sayeed as a terrorist. It was an unfortunate use of veto power but China seems willing to go to any lengths to stand by its ally.

reckon with is the uprising in Baluchistan and the attack from Afghanistan. Since both do not have a full-fledged army to back them, the war would be a limited one. No doubt, the Americans have withdrawn their troops from Afghanistan but a small contingent has stayed there at the specific request of Kabul.

New Delhi is now openly supporting