

Contribute your ideas and opinions to the debate.
E-mail us at letters@thenational.ae

A dangerous but vital task in Waziristan

As US forces scale back aerial attacks in Afghanistan in an effort to reduce civilian casualties, what is happening over the border in Pakistan? A co-ordinated offensive bombs funerals and takes the fight into Waziristan led by helicopter gunships. It makes some difference that the ground forces are not American, but for the Pashtun tribes any interlopers in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas are effectively foreigners. Islamabad risks yet more civilian casualties, further alienating the tribes and getting bogged down in an unwinnable war in treacherous terrain.

But the offensive is as necessary as it is dangerous. There are signs that President Asif Ali Zardari and, more importantly, the army have learnt the lessons of successive failures to pacify the tribes. First, the goal of this offensive is not pacification. The central government has made it as clear as it possibly can that the target is limited to one man: Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the loose-knit Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. The army has gone so far as to assure some of Mehsud's closest allies, equally intractable enemies of the state, that they are not being targeted.

This focus on one man is in large part symbolic, but symbolism is important. Mr Zardari's administration, beset by a host of internal threats, simply cannot maintain credibility if it fails to go after the man accused of murdering the former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto. Mehsud is also the strongest of the Pakistan Taliban commanders with the largest force fighting in Afghanistan. More importantly to Islamabad, what further distinguishes Mehsud from other hardline groups in Pakistan opposed to India or the US is that he has brought the fight to the state with terrorist attacks in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

Diplomacy will be part of the eventual solution, but the series of treaties with Taliban-related groups since the elections has emasculated the government in exchange for false promises. The deal signed with militants in the Swat Valley ended in their push towards Islamabad and the army having to retake territory it should never have conceded. While Mr Zardari is vulnerable to charges that he is acting at the behest of the US, a deeply unpopular move inside Pakistan, the militants overplayed their hand in Swat and have given the president a window of opportunity in public opinion.

Waziristan is not Swat, however. Federal incursions into the tribal areas cannot be taken lightly, and a permanent troop presence would spark a hundred tribal insurgencies that would have very little to do with Mehsud or the Taliban. For the time being Mr Zardari will have to try to live with non-state armies inside Pakistan; the long-term solution will be to undermine the hardline groups where they are weakest, co-opting the tribal leaders one at a time and offering economic development.

That work cannot even begin if the central government is not a credible force. There are valid grounds to doubt whether the army can find and defeat Mehsud in the hostile terrain of South Waziristan. As other Taliban leaders formally cancelled a 16-month ceasefire in the region's north yesterday, efforts to isolate Mehsud seemed to be failing. Perhaps what is needed is a bit of luck – the US drone strike on his lieutenant's funeral may have missed him by only hours. Regardless, there is more to be lost from inaction than failure. If Mehsud is allowed to wage an open insurgency with impunity, there is very little left to protect anyway.

Iraqis in control of their own destiny

More than a week of bombings by insurgents appeared to do little to deter Iraqis from celebrating the United States's withdrawal yesterday from the country's urban areas. Thousands attended a concert at the Baghdad zoo and saw firework displays. What is significant is that while many ordinary Iraqis took to the streets in celebration, they were protected by the nation's own domestic security forces: it is on them, not the Americans, that the burden of civil protection now falls.

While Iraq must now take the lead role in ensuring its own security and stability, the US is not leaving the country entirely to fend for itself. Iraq is no Vietnam, and this is no April 30, 1975, when the last Americans beat a hasty and ignominious helicopter retreat from the roof of their embassy as the North Vietnamese army pounded at the gates of Saigon. The US is not leaving Iraq, merely its cities. A majority of the 140,000 US troops will remain until the final deadline for withdrawal in 2011.

It is unclear, and will probably remain so for some time, whether Iraq's army and police are capable of defending the nation from its enemies. They will continue to be supported by US air and ground forces a phone call away. This has been the case since the beginning of the year, when the Status of Forces agreement was implemented. Under the agreement, Iraqi forces have taken the lead, and US operations require prior approval from the Iraqi government. With Iraq already having been handed formal responsibility for its own security, the key difference will be in appearances: no longer will US troops be the most visible security force on the country's streets. But appearances count. It will be to the nation's army and police that Iraqis turn to keep them safe, not the US.

Judging by the elation of the revellers, most Iraqis want to rebuild their nation, free of foreign troops and influences. Yesterday was a celebration of Iraqi sovereignty and nationalism. Both Iraq's sovereignty and national unity will be achieved by the work of individual Iraqis and their own security forces. Let June 30, 2009, be remembered as the day Iraqis took the first major step towards realising their goals.

It ain't half hot

You may feel that with organisations from Dubai Cares to the Red Crescent Society making constant demands on your natural charitable instincts, enough is enough. But today we urge you to dig even deeper to help people in a country not accustomed to facing a humanitarian crisis: Britain.

As you move from air-conditioned home to air-conditioned office via air-conditioned car, spare a thought for Brits wintering in temperatures as high as a mercury-melting 32C. Granted, in this country that might be viewed as unseasonably chilly, but in Britain – where air conditioning is undoing the top button of your shirt – parents have been told to keep babies indoors, over-75s and those with heart problems have been advised to stay out of the heat, and hospitals are on standby for sunstroke victims.

Clearly there is a role for the relief agencies, which is where you come in. All donations are welcome, except maybe blankets: search your store-room or garage for anything from an ice-tray to an electric fan, a cold compress to a mobile A/C unit. Oh, and breathing equipment. Personal hygiene on the London Underground is erratic at the best of times: in a heatwave, standing next to a Tube strap-hanger can bring on respiratory collapse.

letters to the editor

More work ahead after Abu Dhabi wins Irena HQ

A thousand congratulations to the UAE for this ambitious international achievement, *The UAE wins Irena HQ* (June 30). Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, Sheikhha Lubna Al Qasimi and Dr Anwar Gargash are to be congratulated for successfully leading the UAE team forward.

It goes to show what is possible given a clear focus, leadership and determination to make a goal happen.

The supreme effort to bring Irena to Abu Dhabi, however laudable, is only just the beginning. Now the real hard work begins.

Mohamed Kanoo, Abu Dhabi

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the UAE had won the right to host Irena, *The UAE wins Irena HQ* (June 30).

Congratulations and kudos should go to all those from the UAE who are involved in this project.

I do have nagging doubts, however over the alarming anomalies that this prestigious "award" highlights.

Public transport was only introduced in this country in 2008 in the capital city; it is almost impossible to find recycling facilities; household waste is neither sorted nor recycled; this is the country with the highest per capita water usage on the planet, where endless dredging and coastal development has effectively disrupted and killed off near-shore marine ecosystems; a large six- or eight-cylinder SUV gas guzzler is the norm; petrol is exceedingly cheap; car-pooling is illegal; the greenery is watered in the heat of the day instead of at night or very early morning; the Fujairah coast is regularly ravaged by oil spills; I see people chucking rubbish from their cars without a care in the world; we see in our supermarket fruits and vegetables flown in from all over western Europe, the US and Australia (surely the Middle East, North Africa and the subtropical can provide perfectly good fruit and vegetables).

I only just hope we are not trying to run before learning to walk.

Prove me wrong UAE, let's change our attitudes and grass-roots culture before we get on our high horses about prestigious international awards and new carbon-neutral desert cities.

M Adil Ali, Abu Dhabi

Fighting fit



The recent trend towards military-style fitness regimes are a good step forward, one reader says. Jaime Puebla / The National

Congratulations to the UAE for hosting the headquarters for Irena. They showed a real commitment in winning the right to host the headquarters.

I hope to see this as a big driving force for the UAE to proceed into more work and development in renewable energy research. Congratulations again and keep up the good work.

Mohamed Alshehhi, Vienna

More care needed to avert fires

This is in reference to the recent fire on June 29 in Ajman: what a sad event. In recent months the UAE's incidence of accidents related to fire has shown a sad state of affairs.

These accidents are mainly due to improper maintenance and negligence. Because of the increase in incidents, many insurers are reluctant to underwrite the risk.

In spite of periodical inspections by civil authorities, it is unfortunate that these incidents continue to occur. The cause of the recent fire was found to be a spark from a welding unit. Companies should be more careful to avoid these types of risks in the future.

K Ragavan, Ajman

Boot camps are a winning strategy

In reference to *Boot camp heads for the beach* (June 23), I know from experience this kind approach to exercise gets amazing results. I just wish it was closer to my home, as I would love to take part.

Joanne Diggles, Abu Dhabi

Still mourning the King of Pop

Michael Jackson was always my favourite. I would perform to his music during my college days. I love his music as it was always unique and had a different beat pattern that nobody else could come up with.

I wanted to pay my heartiest respect to the King of Pop and so I decided to put his photo on the front page of my website. We will always miss him forever because he was one of a kind.

Taufeeq, Karnataka, India

I am a diehard fan of Michael Jackson; I consider myself even the biggest fan in the UAE as I rarely meet anyone as devoted as I am to his music and art.

I was lucky to have met "the

gloved one" in 2005 in Dubai, along with Chris Tucker, the nanny and children. He was so polite, respectful and a man of charisma that would grab your attention from miles: words can't describe his unique personality. I am thankful I was able to shake his hand, a day not to be forgotten.

I am saddened that I will miss the chance to see him perform live. In the end, he will always be in my heart as much as anyone else's around the world.

Elie Ataya, Abu Dhabi

how to reach us

Send letters to the editor to PO Box 111434, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Or e-mail them to: letters@thenational.ae. Please include a daytime phone number where you can be reached. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

The National is copyrighted and trademarked by Abu Dhabi Media Company. Its postal address is PO Box 111434, Abu Dhabi. To Advertise e-mail today@thenational.ae. For new subscriptions call toll free 8002220. To contact the newsroom call 02-414-5328.

Comment on the web at www.thenational.ae

arabic news digest

Hamas shows signs of new pragmatism

The latest speech by Khaled Meshaal, the political head of Hamas, before the sixth round of talks between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo, addressed four major issues. He demonstrated a pragmatism that has become characteristic of the group for quite a while now, argued Ali Bedwan in the opinion pages of the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat*.

First, Mr Meshaal hailed "the new tone" from the US in the Arab world, but also called for tangible action to accompany words.

"In the name of Hamas, Mr Meshaal has declared a willingness to reach a settlement with the Israelis whereby a sovereign Palestinian state will be established within the 1967 borders."

His second point was addressed to the Arab world, calling for a stronger official Arab stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mr Meshaal then lampooned Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign policy speech, which he claimed "reiterated Zionist principles in arrogant, boastful and insolent language".

Fourth, Hamas claimed that no inter-Palestinian settlement would be reached unless three steps were taken: Hamas political detainees had to be released by Fatah; the Palestinian dialogue must become separate from so-called "commitments to Israel"; finally they had to stop focusing on partial, temporary solutions and address "the predicament as a whole".

After Neda, Iran has no choice but to change

Those protesting against the results of the presidential elections in Iran have not been trying to overthrow the regime established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. Nor is there any clear evidence that the system will indeed collapse, as the power of the country's institutions remains stronger than that of the activists, wrote Ali Ibrahim, in his regular column for the pan-Arab daily *Asharq al Awsat*.

But, the widespread popular anger at the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, while it looks like it is going to abate soon, makes it quite inconceivable that the system will come out of it "unscathed".

Internationally media attention via new technologies, the "green anger" and the ensuing violence by riot police have forced the Iranian regime to make a number of concessions. So far, it has agreed to recount 10 per cent of the ballots, accept the presidential candidates' complaints and negotiate proposals to solve the crisis with the rival candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, in addition to Mr Ahmadinejad's latest decision to investigate the murder of the young Neda Sultani, who became an icon of the green revolution.

Thus, Iran is now living through a decisive arm-wrestling between pragmatists and conservatives which will set the tone for a balanced Iranian political platform in the near future.

Kuwait: democracy is still misunderstood

In the wake of a motion to question the Kuwaiti interior minister Sheikh Jaber al Khalid last week by the MP Muslim al Barrak, parliamentarians have taken the subject of the motion outside the walls of parliament into the street, wrote Shamlan Youssef al Issi, a regular commentator for the Kuwaiti daily *Al Watan*.

The fact that the minister's interrogation was intentionally vulgar marks the beginning of it as a way to wield exclusive power and make key decisions without taking the societal landscape into account. While the people and their representatives in parliament think of it as a means to make the most profits from the state's wealth.

Now, action must be taken against Kuwait's pseudo-politicians, legislators and executives alike, who are simply after wealth and influence, only claiming to uphold the people's interests.

Israel is not being sincere in peace process

The Emirati daily *Al Bayane* described the latest Israeli offer to freeze the settlements for three months as "nothing more than a cheap, deceitful buzz".

This bid by Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet aims to deviously respond to two demands from the US and the Arab world: halt settlement activity and resume peace talks with the Palestinians, the newspaper said.

Far from proving Israel's goodwill, the three-month deadline rather confirms its insincerity. The settlement freeze is becoming not a preliminary move towards solving the Middle East crisis but a precondition to it, while, on the Palestinian side, the freeze has no value whatsoever unless it is maintained, at least as long as the negotiations last.

According to the Israeli press, the defence minister, Ehud Barak, will pitch this new offer during his current visit to Washington. In a long statement he made before his departure, Mr Barak reiterated his purported support for the "comprehensive solution initiative" without once mentioning a Palestinian "state."

What *Al Bayane* finds most outrageous is the Israeli government's claim that "it has no legal prerogative to stop the construction" as some 2,000 new housing units are "in a very advanced stage."

★ Digest compiled by Achraf El Bahi aebahi@thenational.ae