



LONG DISTANCE EVENTS

HUMANITY WRAP

By Roger Beaumont

There's an intriguing "What if ?" going around. Imagine what would have happened if Yasser Arafat had reversed the letters of his surname and so became a star. He would have become Yasser Tafara, a completely different person, and history would have taken another turn. Yasser Tafara is a speciality act. A little magic, a romantic ballad, some jokes.

He would have played cruise ships and retirement hotels, had a face-lift, perhaps done a little late-night lounge spot in Las Vegas. "And now, alas, a sad song and the magic of Yasser Tafara and his performing dove." We can only guess at what Yasser is thinking about in heaven. Perhaps he's humming along to Kismet, the topical story of yearning and high jinks in Baghdad with the fabulously apposite show-stopper for today, "I'm a Stranger in Paradise".

Rebecca West: There's no such thing as a quiet meal in the Balkans.

HL Mencken (1880-1956) wrote: "As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron."

With Band Aid and then Live Aid, Bob Geldof wanted to raise a lot of money, but he wanted to do something else, too. He hoped he was going to change the world. As he watches the news and sees what is happening in Darfur and Fallujah, as he sees the pitiful human detritus left by endless conflict, as he gears up to bellyache

once more, that is the real sadness of reviving his finest hour: that it has to be done at all. In the two decades since we first heard his song, nothing has changed. They're still dying, and we still need Bob to tell us.

To which my old tutor agreed, then blew a rant: "The strongest force in international affairs is inertia. It's everywhere: a continuous pressure from the UN, the EU, the Chinese, the Arab League, the State Department and half the federal bureaucracy to do nothing about anything - do nothing about the Sudanese genocide until everyone's dead, do nothing about anything except hold meetings and issue statements of concern. To resist the allure of inertia will require enormous will."

Crack on, guys.

British officials believe that for the Americans, North Korea will take priority over Iran in the coming year. The Chinese fear a conflict and are working hard to persuade the Americans not to back Kim into a corner.

"When our former president, Jiang Zemin, was dealing with Kim, he told his secretaries to bring him the ancient histories of China's dealings with Korea," said an adviser to the Chinese foreign ministry. "Jiang read them and said, 'Phew, these people are tough!'"

Here is the purpose of the terrorist, perceptively defined by Lawrence Durrell in "Bitter Lemons", a classic account of the 1950s Eoka insurgency on Cyprus: "His primary objective is not battle. It is to bring down upon the community in general a reprisal for his wrongs, in the hope that fury

and resentment roused by punishment meted out to the innocent will gradually swell the ranks of those from whom he will draw further recruits."

Formula One is now truly boring, says motorhead Jeremy Clarkson. "But nobody is saying, 'Hey, let's sprinkle water onto one of the corners and see how they cope with that.' And to my certain knowledge nobody is suggesting that each driver has to race while under the influence of a different drug. Imagine that: Schumacher on acid, Coulthard on coke and Raikkonen on grass."

There is an alleged boom in writing about the iPod. The new Nick Hornby-esque volume by Dylan Jones, the editor of GQ, is entitled "iPod, Therefore I Am". Apparently British publishers reckon that celebrations of the iPod may soon make up a surging sub-genre. I think it might be the booze talking: next year, they may be pushing a more dismissive take on the pleasures of listening to songs in random order. In fact, I've got the title already: "As iPod Lay Dying".

Dear Mr Hum: "In political Olympics, corruption is a long-distance event. Rueful Thais half-joke that this country has the best legal system money can buy. But this government taking no action against corruption is reminiscent of the English conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, who said to a female cellist in the orchestra: "Madam, you have between your legs an instrument capable of giving great pleasure to millions - and all you can do is scratch it."
