

The trade access horizon

Diversify export or stagnate

At the third round of preferential trade negotiations under the Bangkok Agreement in March, China offered duty-and-quota-free access to 59 items from Bangladesh. At the next round of meet scheduled for August the 'privileged' items would be finalised. This adds to the existing quantum of trade access to China featured by Beijing having earlier allowed 20 to 50 per cent duty reduction on 739 items and zero tariff access to our jute and jute goods. With China joining the Bangkok Agreement Dhaka's exports to Beijing grew around 73 per cent during July-December 2002 compared with the level reached during the corresponding period of the year before. We earned \$11.54 million from exports to China in those six months mainly comprising leather and leather goods, frozen shrimps, jute, jute goods and camera parts. Bangladesh annually imports goods from China valued at \$600 million reflecting the extent of trade imbalance between the two countries. But the other way of looking at it would be that Chinese goods are in high demand in Bangladesh. So, we import more from Beijing. We have to diversify our production or manufacturing base so as to create new demands for our goods in China. That's how a balanced interpenetration of markets takes place.

We note that from China, Bangladesh had sought duty-and-quota-free access to a total of 129 items out of which 59 items are to receive the preferential treatment from the Chinese market. We also sought the same facility for 109 of our items to South Korea, 89 to India and 124 to Sri Lanka but the countries are yet to respond to our requests. As it is under the Bangkok Agreement, Bangladesh has got zero to 50 per cent duty reductions on 188 items to all the signatory countries. Now, the outpouring of all these statistics conjures up the vision of what an increased responsibility we are taking on our shoulders to expand the basket of our exports.

From another angle, the circumstances seem to be equally compelling for increasing our productivity within an export-led growth strategy. Under the Bangkok Agreement, Bangladesh has, for her part, allowed concessionary duties on several items from the member countries. On the whole, Bangladesh has been most generous in liberalising her trade terms for other countries. In the SAARC region, she was the first to lower her tariff and non-tariff barriers among the member countries. It has to be a two-way traffic. And that means whilst other countries reciprocate our gestures we raise our levels of productivity and export to benefit from freer trade.

Fresh push-in bid

The question is: why?

The fresh attempt by the BSF to push Indian citizens into Bangladesh territory is surprising, given the efforts made at the diplomatic level over the past few months to improve ties.

The push-in bids earlier on had put the bilateral relations under considerable strain, but subsequent developments, particularly Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha's visit to Bangladesh helped clear the air. The BSF and BDR chiefs held a meeting in Dhaka recently in the overall context of visits exchanged by ministers and secretaries of both countries. It appeared that the push-in bids were a thing of the past.

Even if a country starts thinking that some of its people were not bona fide citizens and decides that a certain country should take them back, there are well-laid out procedures for tackling such an issue. The procedures have not been followed in spite of Bangladesh's repeated assertion that all Bangladeshis who had crossed over to India in 1971 returned home after the Liberation War came to an end.

Some of the people who were assembled together this time around on the other side of the border and pushed into Bangladesh are reported to have spoken in fractured Bangla. So, how could they be of Bangladeshi origin? That is why verification of identity is important.

The push-in attempt has been made at a time when New Delhi and Dhaka are looking forward to a real breakthrough in bilateral trade. And, organised border trade is one of the components of the broader scheme of expanding economic ties. But such a plan will not work smoothly if the border temperature rises.

Clearly, the latest push-in bid does not sit in with the current bilateral ambience. Unpleasant incidents like exchange of fire should be the farthest from the two countries' thoughts. We believe such things are entirely avoidable, provided the standard inter-state practices are followed. Such adherence is needed not only to honour international law and norms but also to put an end to the sufferings of the victims of push-in.

The Palestinian state: 'Road map' for nowhere!



M ABDUL HAFIZ

In a surprise disclosure on March 14 when a war in Iraq had become almost a certainty President Bush conveyed his willingness to spell out the 'road map' for the Palestinian statehood as soon as President Yasser Arafat formally announced the appointment of his deputy, Mahmood Abbas, a moderate, as prime minister of Palestine. This is how the US now leading a quartet (the others forming it are the UN, the EU and Russia) that designed the road map as well as Israel wanted Arafat, the beleaguered President of the Palestinian Authority to perform his last ritual and then to be abandoned before the new peace journey is undertaken in conflict-torn Middle East. Then onward, there are enough indications from the both that they would have nothing to do with Arafat and instead deal with moderate Mahmood Abbas, better known as Abu Mazen.

The mood is in sharp contrast to what it was in 1993 when Yasser Arafat was in great demand by the peace brokers who virtually pitch forked him from Tunis where, after a series of PLO's setback, its redoubtable leader was licking his wounds. Arafat jettisoned his revolutionary path to give peace a chance. In hindsight, it can however be concluded to day that it was Arafat's fauxpas to be tricked into a vague Oslo peace process which like today's 'road map' was full of imponderables and could not possibly succeed with the US, a committed ally of Israel, playing the role of honest broker. As the Oslo process unravelled, Arafat painfully realised that even the peace was to be bargained from a position of strength and also that

how bereft he was of that in absence of all the compliments that constitute power.

However, in the meantime Arafat was fully utilised by the peace brokers in procuring PLO's crucial recognition to Israel and breaking the momentum of the long years of intifada which pre-

Bush's announcement of a 'road map' as the US' desperate attempt to offset the adverse effect of the US' President's blatantly pro-Israeli policies with a view to seeking the Arab Leaders' support on the eve of just-concluded war against Iraq. Bush's announcement was also timed to assuage the European Union which considered

'map' is already out with the approval of Prime Minister Mahmood Abbas and his government by Palestinian Parliament. On the face of it, the 'road map' is the most concerted effort to end Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1993 Oslo accords. Spread over next two or three years it has distinct phases -- the first of which is

ages new Palestinian election to be followed in the next stage by the setting up of a Palestinian state "with attributes of sovereignty", at first behind provisional borders covering as yet undefined areas. The state will then hold permanent agreement talks with Israel, hoping to resolve the familiar thorny issues of Jerusalem, settlements, borders

which made an effort at peace possible although it cost him some of his own popularity. That by itself was a great compromise on Arafat's part. Both the US and Israel are now well aware that Arafat cannot make compromises on the issue of Palestinian cause which he himself crafted and nourished. It was precisely the reason the Camp David II collapsed. They, therefore, do not want to waste time with Arafat and instead like to try a new Palestinian leader and possibly new set of interlocutors. They have obviously pinned their hope on a 'moderate' 'Abu Mazen' whom they may be able to mellow down to extract maximum concessions during final status negotiation.

But howsoever much the US and Israel try to bypass Arafat to put the 'road map' through, any deal based on it will lack legitimacy without the consent of Arafat who is still not only the elected President of Palestinian Authority but also the founding father of Palestinian movement and the symbol of its cause. It is true that Arafat has not always been above the boards in his official functions amidst tremendous limitations imposed on him and his strong arm tactics within the PLO as well as policies pursued by him might have been staple for criticism in several quarters. But few can deny that he and his functioning style were singularly responsible for the Palestinians getting their plights on the international agenda in the seventies and afterwards.

The Palestinians seldom forget that. Notwithstanding a fresh setback for the Palestinians in the aftermath of the 'shock of awe' of the second Gulf war and all attempted separation between Arafat and Palestinian cause it looks difficult for the 'quartet' to make them agree to a sham Palestinian state and thus bury the hatchet in the Middle East. The spirit for freedom is indeed indomitable. Once on full display, it can portend yet another phase of conflict in the Middle East which can be still more bloody, ugly and devastating.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES
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cisely compelled the Israelis to come to negotiating table through which they wanted to be relieved of the increasing cost of occupation and the ignominy that accompanied it. Notwithstanding his failures on several fronts Arafat remained faithful to the Palestinian cause and stubbornly defended it throughout the Oslo peace process causing annoyance for the western peace brokers who expected him only to sign on the dotted lines creating a kind of spotty 'bantustan' in the name of Palestinian state without Jerusalem, refugees' right to return, border, sovereignty or security. Arafat's fate was sealed when he, ignoring the pressure brought to bear on him by none other than President Clinton walked out of Camp David II in July, 2000.

The rest is history with the eruption of second intifada, Israel's reconquest of the occupied West Bank, naked Israeli repression of the Palestinians, neutralising Arafat's power to act while the Bush Administration lent its unqualified support to Israel's 'right to defend'. Yet the revival of Middle East peace process in a different garb has generated a good deal of curiosity about the motives of the peace brokers. The observers of the West Asian affairs view

the longstanding conflict between Israel and Palestinians a potential threat to international peace and security.

As scripted earlier the 'road

map' is already out with the approval of Prime Minister Mahmood Abbas and his government by Palestinian Parliament. On the face of it, the 'road map' is the most concerted effort to end Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1993 Oslo accords. Spread over next two or three years it has distinct phases -- the first of which is

where they were before the second and current intifada that erupted in September, 2000.

Thereafter the 'road map' envis-

and refugees to reach a fully fledged treaty in 2003. During the Oslo peace process when both the sides reached only the fringe of this explosive area, the final status agreement -- the peace process itself exploded only on the question of Jerusalem -- let alone the questions of other issues which were yet to be debated. Even this time there are already reservations on both sides who are awaiting the right time to vent out their grievances. The road map while focusing on its positive attributes obfuscates insurmountable road blocks that lie on the way.

In the first place there is the crisis of intent over the US' search for an alternative Palestinian leadership to do business with. There is deliberate attempt to isolate Yasser Arafat from any negotiation over the road map. The US' constant demonisation of Arafat and attempt to deny him a role in the new deal by themselves make the road map a suspect.

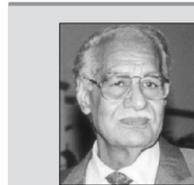
In early nineties when Israel was exasperated with the intensity of the first intifada, the hawks in Arafat's PLO as well as other extremist Palestinian groups were exuding confidence as to the success of the intifada and opposed any western-brokered peace process, it was Arafat's leadership



Coalition forces searching for Saddam's chemical weapons

-Relax, it's only one of his socks!

Hands across the border



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

ONE top Indian foreign ministry official asked me the other day: "What has people-to-people contact achieved so far?" It is difficult to quantify its achievement but it has sustained hope that the two countries will one day normalise their relations because people on both sides want to live in peace. This is despite the negative attitude of their governments.

People-to-people contact means contact between ordinary men and women on both sides, the freedom to come and go, without police surveillance and without a visa -- only an identity card should be required for entry. Obviously, this will take time because the mistrust has to go first.

But in the meanwhile, the so-called 'elite' groups have surfaced again. They are the same old people, who during their tenure, as military or civil servants, did their worst to spoil any attempt at conciliation. Blessed by the foreign office they went over the same exercise for years. They will repeat the same observations when they meet again. Even their faces have become a cliché.

What I have in mind is a soft border which Prime Minister Atal

Behari Vajpayee advocated when he was foreign minister (1977-79). Then Prime Minister Morarji Desai shot down the proposal on the plea that it would be an open invitation to spies to come in hordes. He did not know that spies do not use the checkpoints to enter each other's territory. They have their own 'checkpoints.' True, borders cannot be soft until cross-border terrorism stops. Islamabad has to be convinced about its futility. Certain quarters there believe a proxy war is the only way to make

some among the organisers on both sides did not agree to it. Their contention was that they wanted to utilise the presence of Indian parliamentarians in Delhi before the adjournment of the two houses on May 9. The Pakistani parliamentarians reached on the 8th night.

However, when the visit was mooted three months ago, the purpose was to create some movement in the otherwise static situation. Indian parliamentarians were to go to Pakistan first but this did

not materialise. MPs from both countries can cross over from any checkpoint without permission and without a visa under the SAARC rules. None knew then that Vajpayee would say at Srinagar that he wanted to have a dialogue with Pakistan. His observation provided the much-needed momentum. By the time the parliamentarians arrived the PM had initiated the thaw.

The general impression is that the parliamentarians came as a follow-up to Vajpayee's initiative. This is not factually correct. There was an independent visit, planned much earlier. Nonetheless, it has further helped soften the rigid position the two sides had taken. The response to the parliamentari-

ans in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata was electrifying. They were hard-pressed for time to attend the functions which people wanted to arrange in their honour. They themselves were touched by the love and affection shown. What it really means is that the natural reaction of the Indian people towards the people of Pakistan is that of closeness. They are sick and tired of the distance which has been growing for the last 55 years. People's attitude in Pakistan, which I visited three months ago, is

making up with Pakistan. Both the "pseudo-secularists" and the PM are on one side furthering the cause of building relations with Pakistan. The criticism may well be the party's polite tick-off which the Prime Minister must have noted. The BJP is the ruling party. It should not be seen taking conflicting postures in public. It cannot commend the PM's initiative on the one hand and criticise those who involved the parliamentarians on the other. The effort is to strengthen the initiative. If the

that position? The military face another problem: if there is a settlement there will be demands for a drastic cut on defence spending. Is the fauj prepared for it? Will the National Security Council which has the three service chiefs as its members be adequate for the military to safeguard its interests? It is difficult to imagine it at this point of time. Still this is the scenario which will take shape one day. The armed forces will have to go back to the barracks. The pressure of public opinion will make it happen.

India, too, is under pressure. There is increasing realisation that the majority of its problems stem from its relations with Pakistan. The enthusiasm with which the parliamentarians were received shows how anxious the people are to bury the hatchet. In fact, people in both countries seem to be ahead of their governments.

Maybe, wide and frequent contact will throw up a solution of Kashmir as well. The first requirement is to open borders to all those who want to visit each other's country. How to facilitate and sustain the contact is the core of the problem. Since everyone is talking about roadmap these days, let the line of control (LoC) be the "line of peace," as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto suggested to me in an interview before the Shimla conference.

India bleed. The situation has to be normal to have normal relations. Guns, open or secret, do not make for peace. However, we should hasten the process to restore the status quo, the state of relationship prevailing before the attack on the Indian parliament. After having done so, New Delhi should take stock of cross-border terrorism which from all accounts is less than before. The Pakistan parliamentarians came to India a bit too soon. The government distanced itself from them, not because it was unwilling, but because it was unprepared. It wanted to let the fallout from Vajpayee's initiative settle down. Indeed, a request was made to defer the visit by a few days. But

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES
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no different. When just a speech by Vajpayee and a telephone call from Pakistan Prime Minister Jamali can change the entire climate, it is obvious that the hostility is a forcibly contrived thing. People on both sides want to be friends. Their desire for proximity will force their governments to sit across the table soon.

Unfortunately, the BJP's spokesman has thrown cold water on all the optimism that Vajpayee has generated. The spokesman runs down those who arranged the visit of parliamentarians. He used the sneering phrase "pseudo secularists" about the organisers. It indicates that the party is far from happy over their visit. In fact, a battle is raging within the party on

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"Exam hazards"

I like to respond to both Mr. Bartholomew's and Ms. Luncelord's view (May 23) on "Exam hazards". Whichever way they would like to justify it, it is not palatable. If you have the capacity to arrange for 200 candidates then there is no justification to take 1700 candidates without making pre-arrangement for the same. That is simply not British or as my old school principal Col. Smitherman would say, "Old chap that is not cricket".

Regarding finance, over the years British Council has increased the fee manifold but failed in providing facilities, here again my economics teacher always mentioned "economy of scale" large the number smaller is the overhead expense.

Suggestion, please form a consultative committee with the principals and senior teachers of "O" & "A" level schools. Involve NGOs like BRAAC, UCEP, Proshika etc even involve armed forces if necessary, they have some of the

best education facilities. Imagine if you could get Shenakunja as the venue it would sit all the candidates under one roof. Congestion, pollution, security all taken care of.

M. K. Zaman
Banani, Dhaka

"Anti-American double standards"

Mr. Mahmood Elahi appears to be upset with the "liberal/leftist" people for criticising USA for "liberating" Iraq from Saddam Hussein ("Anti-American double standards", May 24). It seems to be a noble cause to help "liberate" people of Iraq from a "brutal" dictator. But the problem comes and suspicions grow when the "liberator" is USA.

Anybody who has slightest understanding of Middle East history has hard time accepting USA as a "liberator" instead of occupier. Let's have a look at the history of Iraq. We know from the history that it was CIA who brought Saddam Hussein to power. It was

mostly USA and UK which provided the so-called "Weapon of Mass Destruction" to Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule. It was USA who encouraged and supported Saddam Hussein to attack Iran. There is a lot of circumstantial evidence to suggest that it was USA who tricked Saddam Hussein into attacking Kuwait and then used it as a pretext to invade Iraq and secure military presence in Middle East. It was USA and UK who imposed and maintained draconian sanction on Iraq which instead of hurting Saddam Hussein destroyed civil society in Iraq and killed one and a half million innocent Iraqis. After considering these facts one find it very hard to believe that USA has invaded Iraq to "liberate" its people from a person who was planted and nourished by the USA.

Irfan Ahmad
Dallas, Texas, USA

From frying pan to fire

Gyalson
Sylhet

The mighty of the world declared war and won the war in Iraq. But the dust in Iraq is yet to settle. The innocent people have been put in a situation where they are to choose between the frying pan and the fire. They have lost everything. Their sufferings of the past regime have undoubtedly been aggravated. The saying that "The first casualty of war is truth" has been proved yet again. Let alone the people of Iraq, the whole world is confused and suffering in various ways. Everything at this moment seems like standing on a slippery ground and people are not sure whom to trust. Our sense of right and wrong has been severely impaired.

Now the 'might is right' leaders are busy trying to justify their purpose of war. William Shakespeare has rightly said in one of his plays, "Man may construe things after their fashion" and "Evil do make themselves strong by evil means". Let's hope and pray that time will reveal the truth and the mankind will learn from their mistakes.

Gyalson
Sylhet

Administrative reform is a must

Administration is the vitality of a government. A good administration can iron out many more wrinkles of complexity with a dextrous astuteness. If we glance through the administrative muscle of developed countries, we could easily notice that they are trying their utmost to strengthen their administrative brilliance and leaving no stone unturned to cement it form mental, moral, ethical and patriotic platform.

In Bangladesh, we are now having a transition period if administrative shortsightedness is taken into account. From the top to the bottom, everywhere a cycle of disarray has been shaped and as a result, the whole administrative body lacks the chain of command and the lust for power has increased beyond any question. The pillars that are considered to be the main implements of administrative smoothness such as loyalty to constitution, non-cooperation in illegal activities,

being against the nepotism, stick to developing professional skill, impartial role and patriotism seem to have been on the decline steadily. That is why our administrative body has now been divided in various category and everyone is engrossed in making oneself full up beyond the ethical and moral ground or rules and regulation.

Corruption has been an area where the members of administration bow down to, quite greedily and obnoxiously. Believe it or not, we are on the top of the chart of corruption and that directly indicates how corrupt our administrators are. They are oblivious of the cruel truth that still 45% people of our country live below the extreme poverty line and they cannot afford even a meal a day always. In such a terrible state of people's lifestyle, when we come across the news of corruption by our members of administration, then the ethical and moral question of whether they are fit to become administrators, easily arises.

At this junction, the only solution is making a plan to reform the administration. From top to bottom, we need a shake-up so that the administration could come back to efficiency level and most importantly, they could think of the country rather than anything else. No bowing down to political pressure, no nepotism, no corruption, no illegal utilisation of power, rather, the members of our administration develop the sense that the development of our country is their foremost priority.

Sulav Barua
Middlesex University, London, UK

Telephone numbers

It is really a hassle to memorise or recalling a seven-digit telephone number during urgent hours. I have also heard some people uttering numbers, say 9127558, as 91 lakh 27 thousand and five hundred and fifty eight. And, if a foreigner needs to call somewhere in Dhaka, he has to call 88029127558 and may need to look at his reference a number of times.

But if we adopt a simple method then it would be easier for us in dealing this matter. We all know that there are exchange codes, like 912, 911, 801, 811 etc. If we simply write those exchange codes separately then the entire number would look like 88-02-912-7558 and it would be much more convenient to remember the number. Also, people can get an idea about the location of calling through the numbers (i.e. if someone dials a number starting with 912, then he would realise that he is dialling a number at Tejgaon). We can see a similar kind of practice among the cell phone users. So why don't we apply it for the T&T numbers as well?

Gullive
Indira Road, Dhaka

NOTICE
Under unavoidable circumstances the full-page letters could not be published today.
-Editor