

Woeful tales of victims

Why were they arrested at all?

YESTERDAY we commented on 'blanket arrest' in the light of High Court injunction. The miserably stories of the victims of the insensate police action now compel us to dilate on the same issue twice in two days. Listening to the victims' sorrowful tales makes one wonder whether we are relapsing to the days when the laws of the jungle dictated human relationships and accountability to the law of the land was an unknown precept.

Unsuspecting people were picked up from the streets like a city authority would pick up a stray animal. They were herded on to the police trucks only to be thrown inside overcrowded prisons, whose capacity was only one sixth the number that they were made to hold. The indiscriminate nature and total insensitivity of the action are laid bare by the fact that many of the arrestees were either students, day labourers, small traders or street vendors; none of them was visibly any professional criminal or lumpen element. And this was done ostensibly to preempt the opposition's long march and the rally that was to follow at the end of the programme. And when the home secretary said that there was no ulterior motive behind the arrests he was perhaps ignorant of what his police force was doing or he was deliberately not being candid.

The fact that out of the almost ten thousand picked up randomly, a large number had to be released, immediately after their arrest, there being no ground for holding them, shows the dubious irrationality behind the action. This was a patent violation of not only the basic rights of a citizen, it was the very worst example of the flouting of the law by a state organ that is supposed to be its defender. Even worse is the allegation from several of the released victims that policemen found in their plight an opportunity to make a quick buck. Many were implicated in cases, out of just nowhere.

One wonders whether the government is capable of comprehending the immense long-term damage that has been wreaked upon these people? Who will answer for the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on them and the economic loss that most of them have had to suffer, other than the government of the day?

The police action has made the state look like a predatory monster which is antipodal to even any semblance of democracy. If after all this, anyone points to the 'crudity' of our image, could he or she be blamed for it?

Too many beggars

Indeed, a question of dignity

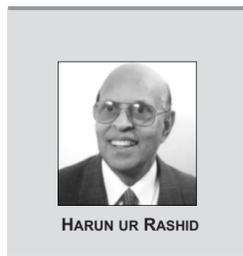
IT is good to see at last that a tiny but significant step has got underway to help a few thousand amongst the teeming ultra-poor to their feet. The Citigroup Foundation and Grameen Trust have joined hands in providing alternatives to 2500 beggars under a micro-credit programme being very aptly styled "Project Dignity -- Honourable Opportunities for the Poorest."

The funds for the three-year collateral and interest-free micro-credit project will be provided by Citigroup while implementation will be the job of Grameen Trust through its country-wide partner network. It is not just one-off job opportunity envisaged for the poor; they will be equipped for sustainable income generation activities. Besides imparting basic literacy and financial education to them, they will be counselled to set up small businesses like fruit or vegetable vending outfits and food processing and livestock raising units. The scheme will work as an extended welfare package with an insurance cover for the family of the beneficiary in the event of the latter's death.

How important it is to provide viable alternatives to begging can hardly be overemphasised. There is no dearth of verbiage about creating new opportunities for the poor but few have come forward to help the so-called hopeless segment of the poor. There are some who would approach the problem with the remark that 'begging has become a trade' or 'believe me they have a stake in staying as beggar'. But Citigroup and Grameen Trust are providing them with something concrete to work on. Note that under the Grameen's Struggling Members' Project, some 500 beggars have already given up begging. Projects such as these need only to be replicated.

It is basically an issue of dignity at two levels: indignity for those who do the begging and those who watch them do it as an insult to humanity. That is why, the stake is so high in bringing the ultra-poor into the mainstream of micro-credit activities. We think it is an understatement of the task to say that there are only three lakh ultra-poor in the country; there must be many more.

Bangla-Pak relations and the PM's trip to Pakistan



HARUN UR RASHID

BANGLADESH Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is scheduled to visit Pakistan on February 12 at the invitation of her nominal counterpart of Pakistan, Shaukat Aziz. There is a difference in status of both Prime Ministers.

Many in Bangladesh feel it would have been desirable that the invitation should have come from President Musharraf who is the chief executive of Pakistan, not the Prime Minister Aziz. It is perceived widely that the all-powerful military President (current army chief as well) is trying to make the civilian Prime Minister's political profile high enough to provide the image of democracy in the country.

The bottom line is that the Pakistan Prime Minister's position is comparable to that of French Prime Minister and genuine democracy as we understand today does not exist because the President can dismiss the Prime Minister and dissolve parliament as he wishes.

The Bangladeshi Prime Minister's bilateral trip to Pakistan, one of the important members of Saarc, constitutes a good gesture. Furthermore Bangladesh's Prime Minister is currently holding the post of Chairperson of Saarc.

No doubt the visit of the Prime Minister to Islamabad is likely to strengthen the existing ties between the two countries. Over the years Bangladesh and Pakistan have come to terms to normalise and consolidate their relations to the mutual benefit of the people of both the countries.

Brief background of bilateral relations

The relations commenced on a wrong foot in 1974 with Bangladesh when Pakistan, under pressure from Islamic countries, had to finally recognize Bangladesh. During the same year in June, Prime Minister

BOTTOM LINE

Political leaders of Bangladesh may move forward in beneficial relations with Pakistan, ensuring that they carry the people with them by not moving too quickly against the background of 1971. The leaders must only move so far ahead of the people that the shift in public opinion required is achievable. They carry the burden to persuade people that the nature of relations they wish to build is acceptable to the majority of people in Bangladesh.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's visit to Bangladesh has been described as a "diplomatic debacle" for his arrogance. Bhutto failed to seize the opportunity given by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to normalise bilateral relations because of his inadequate leadership.

Full diplomatic relations commenced only in 1976 during Khondaker Mostaque Ahmed's regime. Pakistan sent a very senior retired civil servant M. Khurshid (who had worked in former East Pakistan) as Pakistan's first Ambassador.

Since then there have been exchange of several visits at the highest political level. The first visit was undertaken by President Ziaur Rahman to Pakistan in September 1977 and the last visit of Pakistan's military President Pervez Musharraf to Bangladesh took place in July 2002.

Some underlying factors in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations

With Pakistan, many political observers believe Bangladesh has to take a slow but steady path in developing relations. There are some factors that underpin relations with Pakistan against the background of 1971:

An apology is a genuine expression of regret and is the key element of reconciliation. An apology represents a repentant mind and helps to heal past wounds. While apology relates to past activities, reconciliation ushers in a new relation.

There is a strong feeling among most people of Bangladesh that Pakistan should publicly apologise to the people of Bangladesh for the atrocities perpetrated by Pakistan army in 1971.

According to an interview in 1998 by a Bangladeshi historian and journalists with General Niazi who surrendered Pakistani army to Joint

Indian and Bangladeshi forces on December 16, 1971, he admitted that approximately thirty thousand Hindus were killed and many more Bangladeshi freedom fighters in 1971 (Bangladesh Liberation War: Views from Pakistan, 2005 UPL, Dhaka) In the same book, General Rao Forman Ali, one of the architects of the military action on Bangladesh people on March 26, 1971 acknowledged that between 40,000 to 50,000 Bangladeshis were killed.

No clear cut official apology was ever made by Pakistan. Public apology to victims or their relatives is nothing new. Germany and Japan expressed several times apology and regret for the horrors on people of the occupied countries during the Second World War.

Although regret was expressed by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1998 and President Musharraf in 2002, the words used by both of them were vague and meant just about whatever anyone wanted them to mean. Many interpreted their words as if both sides made mistakes in 1971. This is neither acceptable to the people of Bangladesh nor a true version of events of 1971.

It is not understood why Pakistan is hesitant to offer an apology to the people of Bangladesh. Pakistan army consists of a new generation and regret for past actions by the military in 1971 does not reflect their actions as current senior military officers are not likely to be involved in the sorry saga of 1971. Then why the hesitation for a public apology from Pakistan government?

Another important aspect of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations is the release of the Report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission on the 1971 tragedy. Bangladesh people together with many people of Pakistan want to know exactly who were responsible for the appalling events in 1971. The secrecy of the

report by Pakistan government does not reflect well for them and this action could be interpreted to mean that the successive Pakistan governments have not been sincere to the people of Bangladesh to repair the relations.

It is reported that one senior retired Pakistani civil servant Syed Alamdar Raza (CSP of 1951 batch, he was retired in 1988) filed a writ petition to the High Court some years ago for release of the report but the writ petition has not yet been disposed of until this day.

On the South Asian political scene, one may not forget that the rivalry between India and Pakistan casts a shadow on bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan. To overlook this aspect is to ignore a cold political reality.

Too close relations with Bangladesh with Pakistan may not be comfortable or welcome to India against the background of India's supporting role in the war of independence of Bangladesh. It would not be incorrect to say that the more India is perceived, either rightly or wrongly to dominate Bangladesh, the more Bangladesh is likely to offset it by moving closer to Pakistan. If that occurs, India is likely to consider it an unfriendly act on its interests.

Another development we may not lose sight of is the existence of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan together with the continuing support of some section for the Taliban, despite President Musharraf's brave efforts to steer Pakistan towards religious moderation. The growing emergence of Islamic orthodoxy in politics is not comfortable for the majority of people in Bangladesh at a time when Bangladesh's national security is being rocked by Islamic extremist organizations in the country.

Some political observers view that the prevalence of Islamic extremism in Pakistan and in Ban-

gladesh may work against closer relations with Bangladesh, which is a multi-religious country with more than 12 million non-Muslims. Furthermore, many Bangladeshi women fear that their new-found freedom to work in public places will be threatened to the detriment of their rights if close relations develop between fanatic Islamic groups of both countries.

Current bilateral relations

The existing bilateral relations may be described as diplomatically correct. One of the important yardsticks of growing relations is to look at the statistics of bilateral trade. Trade between the two countries as of 2004 stood at \$100 million. Pakistan has established 54 ventures in Bangladesh and they concentrate on a range of non-metallic products, electric bulbs, tube-lights, marble and stone products, food, beverages, tobacco, and packages for goods.

It is expected that with the ratification of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (Safta), bilateral trade is expected to substantially grow because both countries are bound under Safta to reduce gradually their custom duties to 5 percent (seven years for Pakistan and ten years for Bangladesh). Safta culminates clear commitments of Saarc countries made at the Kathmandu Summit in October 2002 about a South Asian Economic Union.

Since the inception of diplomatic relations, both countries concluded several agreements such as Joint Economic Commission, joint business agreements, agreement on air and shipping lines, and cultural agreements.

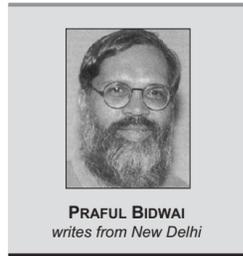
Pending bilateral issues

There are two issues that need to be amicably resolved. They are: (a) division of assets of united Pakistan, and (b) repatriation of stranded Pakistanis (so-called "Biharis") to Pakistan.

On the division of assets, successive governments in Pakistan were reluctant to discuss the substance of the issue. According to a moderate estimate, Bangladesh has a claim of at least \$4 billion, and the estimate has been based some years ago on assumptions with respect to retention of financial assets, creation of internal capital, and external debt settlement.

In the past, Pakistan did not agree to constitute a Bangladesh-Pakistan committee to examine the

Manmohan sacrifices sovereignty



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

WHAT is the real highlight of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's first major Cabinet reshuffle? It's not the expansion of the Council of Ministers by 19 members or the greater representation for Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. The Council's character remains unchanged.

Nor does it lie in the creation of a new portfolio like Minority Affairs (whose effectiveness might be limited), and the induction of old Gandhi-family loyalists like Messrs SK Shinde and AR Antulay, with a few younger faces like Mr. Jairam Ramesh.

The true highlight is the removal of the Petroleum portfolio from Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar's charge. With this, Dr. Singh has signalled that he is willing to sacrifice India's sover-

Washington has never treated India more contemptuously than now. The US ambassador in New Delhi increasingly resembles his counterpart in Islamabad, where he is frankly called "The Viceroy." This is happening not because India is weaker today than under Nehru or Indira Gandhi, but because its rulers have decided to be Washington's supplicants.

ein right to determine her energy policy. He's kowtowing to the United States like no other Indian Prime Minister has done.

This is happening just when the US is issuing *fatwas* to India. Dr. Singh has inflicted grievous damage upon the nation's sovereignty.

Mr. Aiyar was undoubtedly one of Dr. Singh's most dynamic and highly thought-of ministers. He dedicatedly pursued two vital agendas: secure India's oil/gas supplies, and promote energy cooperation within Asia, including a hydrocarbon grid stretching all the way from Turkey to Japan.

Mr. Aiyar was responsible for launching Sino-Indian energy cooperation, including joint bids for oil exploration in third countries. The story grabbed a front-page banner headline in *The Financial Times*.

Even Mr. Aiyar's detractors praise his extraordinary dynamism, vision, and grasp of his complex subject. He was rated the best minister by *The Hindustan Times* and *India Today* (a magazine hostile to Centre-Left causes and ideas).

Mr. Aiyar has been a strong votary of the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, which the Americans oppose -- "absolutely," in Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's words. US policy-makers have linked Iran to the July 18 nuclear cooperation deal with India. They want India to join them in isolating Iran. Under their pressure, Dr. Singh has been dithering on the pipeline. He has expressed unreasonable doubts about its viability.

In September, India broke ranks with the Non-Aligned Group at the International Atomic Energy Agency and voted for a US-sponsored resolution against Iran. Since then, India has shed all pretence of independence and tailed Washington.

On January 25, US ambassador David Mulford violated all norms of diplomatic conduct and warned: if India doesn't vote against Iran at the IAEA, the consequences would be "devastating" for the nuclear deal.

The furor caused by this hadn't subsided when another disclosure came: the US opposes India's decision to buy a Syrian oilfield in

partnership with China. A senior official said: "We are being told whom to do business with. Today, it is Iran, tomorrow it may be Sudan or Venezuela. At stake is our right to take decisions by ourselves." Such meddling in India's sovereign policy-space is unprecedented.

It's against this background of interference in India's affairs that Mr. Aiyar was stripped of Petroleum. The decision was either taken under US pressure, or driven by a desire to please Washington. Both damage sovereignty and diminish India to the status of a Banana Republic which must dance to Washington's tune.

Unless India resists, the US will interfere in more and more ministries, including policies and personnel. Demarches will follow on trade, education, telecom, power, and UN organisations. This would be correlative of democracy itself.

One needn't be a fire-breathing nationalist to say this (This writer certainly isn't). But all policy decisions in a country must be taken by its people. This principle is sacrosanct. It

was violated in Mr. Aiyar's case. This represents erosion or wilful sacrifice of sovereignty.

Dr. Singh calculates that no price is too high to pay for the nuclear deal. On its ratification hinge three things: "normalisation" and legitimisation of India's nuclear arsenal, her energy security, and the India-US "strategic partnership."

These goals are questionable. As this column has often argued, India does not need nuclear weapons for security. No one does. In 1998, Dr. Singh himself expounded on their irrelevance to security and on the dangers of an arms race.

Nuclear power is a dubious route to energy security. It bristles with safety problems, including hazards from wastes that remain radioactive for thousands of years. More centralised power generation cannot be the answer to global warming.

Under the US-India strategic alliance, New Delhi will contribute to making the world a worse place. Globally, the US is not a force for good. It has had a profoundly destabilising influence, and made war, military conflict, and social strife endemic. The globe's -- and India's -- interest lies in a multi-polar world and a weaker US. That's the way to expand the space for independent development, global economic balance, and security.

Dr. Singh has played his cards

badly in dealing with Washington as if India-US relations were a one-way street.

He has compounded the blunder made in taking Petroleum away deal. On Mr. Aiyar by handing it over to Mr. Deora. Mr. Deora is known for his proximity to business houses, and to Washington. He's a provincial politician and fund-collector who cannot be accused of a vision. Under him, India can bid goodbye to the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline.

Washington has never treated India more contemptuously than now. The US ambassador in New Delhi increasingly resembles his counterpart in Islamabad, where he is frankly called "The Viceroy." This is happening not because India is weaker today than under Nehru or Indira Gandhi, but because its rulers have decided to be Washington's supplicants.

Dr. Manmohan Singh stands warned. He has no mandate to do what he's doing. The people elected the UPA in protest against the NDA's communal, neo-liberal, and pro-US policies. Dr. Singh's party, with its 145 Lok Sabha seats, shouldn't behave as if it had 345. He must cease and desist -- or face withdrawal of support.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

OPINION

Facing the challenge of holding credible elections

The quarrels and conflicts between the two major political parties create the opportunities for others to get involved, or in other words, intervene in our domestic matters. No self-respecting person can take such remarks or observations by others about the country's domestic politics in good spirit. It is being asked whether and for how long our political leaders would welcome prescriptions from outsiders for resolving our domestic matters. Is it not shameful for us to be told by others to become tolerant and find solutions to conflicts through participation in parliamentary proceedings sitting together?

NURUL HUDA

ALL eyes, as it appears, have been focused on Bangladesh's coming general elections. The reasons are not far to seek as the country has been witnessing confrontational politics since switching over to parliamentary democracy in 1991. The parliament is at times rendered virtually a show of the ruling party following abstention by the mainstream opposition on different pretexts.

When BNP is in power, Awami League (AL) boycotts the parliament, and almost in identical manner BNP remains outside the

House when AL is in power. This cannot be a good sign for the country's fledgling democracy. There is urgent need for an end to this practices. That is why teeming millions of the country on one hand and the development partners on the other have been keeping watchful eyes on the next elections in early 2007.

It is being questioned in different forums whether and to what extent the parliament has been delivering the goods in absence of the opposition. The daily expenditure when it is in session, is also quite big. The people have a right to know whether their elected representatives are doing the job for which

they were elected.

The opposition, instead of participating in parliamentary proceedings, resorts to street agitation and enforces general strikes, causing paralyzing effects on the economy and disruption of normal life. The loss of the economy for a day's countrywide strike has been quantified to the tune of millions of dollars. Investors shift their business from Bangladesh and new investments are discouraged following such disruptive programs over the years.

In this backdrop, the development partners of Bangladesh like the US and the EU have been showing concern over the coun-

try's confrontational politics. They have been issuing statements following talks

with major political parties, including the BNP-led ruling alliance and the AL-led opposition combine to turn the parliament into a useful forum for resolving all disputes between the ruling party and the mainstream opposition.

Recently US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca and four-member EU delegation headed by Nikolaus Scherk, Director for Asia, representing the European Commission, were here for spot assessment of the prevailing situation. The statements made by them reflected identical views as regards the confrontational politics of the country and importance of the next elections for strengthening democracy.

Rocca said, "Parts of reason that the elections next year are so critical are that only a level playing field and elections that are free and fair will give the winners legitimacy. We hope that all parties will be able to work together. The continuation

and successful holding of next election is very important for Bangladesh."

They are quite familiar with the prevailing confrontational politics in the country. The remarks made by Rocca and those of Scherk were carefully formulated as they have merely echoed the concern and attitude of the countries they represent.

The EU delegation in its statement described the next elections as a key milestone for democracy in Bangladesh. The EU delegation concluding its three-day visit said, "Peaceful, free and fair election in 2007 would send an important signal to the international community that a durable democracy is being cultivated in Bangladesh. The EU team emphasized the need for holding of polls on schedule for the country's stability with full participation of all parties. Caretaker government and the constitutional office of an independent and impartial Election Commission are principal guarantors for free and fair elections." The fight against corruption and the

need for improvement of governance were also stressed.

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Meanwhile, the Tuesday Group, an informal caucus of the diplomatic missions of donor countries, which was formed on the eve of general elections in 2001, has reportedly been given the government's green signal to hold its much talked about conference on conditions that reforms of the caretaker government provision or

Election Commission, would not be discussed. The AL led combine has been raising demands for the reforms of the caretaker government provision as well as Election Commission.

The conference could discuss matters relating to technical aspects of holding free and fair polls. A lot of noise was raised between the Tuesday Group and the government over it.

The question which is being asked in different circles whether the reforms of the existing caretaker government provision of the constitution and the issue of Election Commission, would be resolved during the time of the present government or left for the next government, remains to be seen. Under the caretaker provision of the constitution, the country has witnessed three polls, which have been widely lauded at home and abroad as free and fair.

The ruling alliance has been pressing for participation of the AL in the parliament to raise whatever they want including the issues like caretaker government and Elec-

tion Commission inside the House. How these issues are resolved by the ruling alliance and the mainstream opposition, still remains unclear.

Both the ruling BNP and the mainstream opposition AL should sit together and help devise mechanism so that none could raise questions about credibility of the next polls. Both sides need to cultivate the culture of accepting defeat in elections in good grace. In the past those defeated, brought allegations of "rigging" against the winner.

The moves of both parties are keenly watched not only by the people at home but also by the development partners. The inner message of the remarks made by the US senior State Department official and the EU delegation should be kept in mind by both the BNP-led alliance and the AL-led combine who have ruled the country alternatively and intend to do so also in near future.

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