

Agriculture in double jeopardy?

Crying need for a plan of action

RECORD low rainfall deficit and patchy supply of electricity all over the country have pushed farming into the throes of uncertainty and brought it face-to-face with a self-compounding crisis threatening to compromise food self-sufficiency, our hard-earned strong point, a niche of pride. There has been a 98-100 percent shortfall of rain water over last four months, reminding one of the prelude to the 1997 drought marked by a similar rain scarcity.

Yes, things might start changing in April and May if the easterly and westerly low pressures are in a conjunction to bring the rains beating down on the land. Much as we would hope for the best, fruit cultivation may have already been affected.

There is something more serious. The land moisture is decreasing, but while the hope lies in irrigation-based agriculture for which we have had a fairly strong and well laid out infrastructure as a fallback option, we have a bad omen there as well. That is exactly where we stumble into our second large hurdle which is the severe power supply shortage. The IRRI-Boro croplands, particularly in the northern districts are getting between one-fourth and one-third of the electricity needed in the peak hours. We get such an appraisal from no less an authority than the Rural Electrification Board (REB) adding that such power deficit is seriously impeding irrigation. Little wonder, therefore, that the farmers have laid siege to a local MP's house and district and lesser headquarters while road blockades and other forms of demonstration have been usual sights.

Faced with such a situation, frenzied explanations are being offered by the power ministry and power development board officials under questioning by the relevant parliamentary standing committee. There is the sub-culture of recriminatory swipes taken of each other with reckless abandon as each agency flaunted a holier-than-thou defence, as though secure in the knowledge that, there is none to hold anybody to account. Here is a sample of a hilarious argument put forward by PDB officials to the parliamentary body: since we are supplying more electricity to rural areas to keep irrigation going, the urban centres are having to take the brunt of load-shedding. This is falsehood at its worst; otherwise why should the farmers be getting one-fourth to one-third of their electricity requirement met and the urbanites roast in load-shedding for up to seven to eight hours a day?

Let all heads be put together to draw up a doable plan of action for an early mitigation of the problems.

Terror financing trails

Rather long on exposé but short on action

THE issue of alleged involvement of some foreign NGOs in funding terrorist acts is nothing new. Quite sometime back our intelligence agencies identified a few foreign-based NGOs with suspected funding support from some Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. There has also been considerable hue and cry about taking action against such NGOs, both in the media and various public fora. Despite an embargo on release of funds on one such Kuwait-based NGO, defiance of the ban is said to be continuing. One of the leading Bengali dailies has reported the active existence of yet another NGO, called Tawhid Trust. Most of the operating accounts of both NGOs continue to be maintained and operated through two banks, namely, Islami Bank and the Al-Arafa Bank. The report published in the Bengali daily has even quoted the actual account numbers held in Al-Arafa Bank, through which large sums of money were transacted including the names of the branches involved.

All these call for further scooping investigations. It is also to be noted that as early as 28 January, 2004 Bangladesh Bank had issued a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make queries on possible flow of funds for terror acts in the country by one Saudi-based funding organisation called Harmain Islamic Foundation and suggested its possible banning. Based on the ministry's response Bangladesh Bank subsequently in March of the same year sent a letter to all commercial banks all over the country asking for existence and details of suspected dubious accounts. Apparently only one bank responded. Later, however, Bangladesh Bank through its exclusive enquiry found a wider existence of such accounts.

We are concerned at these developments and their likely impact on the administration's anti terror campaign. Unless and until any recalcitrant financing operation is effectively checkmated there can be no sustainable success in combating and uprooting the curse of terrorism.

PM'S VISIT TO NEW DELHI

A new beginning in bilateral relations?



HARUN UR RASHID

FROM media reports, it appears Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's three-day visit to India has gone well. The mistrust and misunderstanding between the two neighbours that were built since October 2001 after BNP-led coalition government coming to power seems to have cleared up and the ice in relations has melted for the benefit of both countries.

It was not expected that one high-level visit would remove all the bilateral issues from the table but the important fact is that the leaders appeared to have understood each other's position against the background of current geo-political scenario and took some steps to eliminate the cloud hovering over their bilateral relations.

The statements of Finance Ministers of both countries are indicative of "wind of change" in their future relations. Bangladesh Finance Minister's words have been pragmatic and forward-looking. Bangladesh Finance Minister reportedly said that "if European countries could come together for economic integration after fighting among

themselves for centuries, why can't we? After all we have not fought for centuries" and it went to the heart of the matter.

What he meant was that in the days of globalisation, when Bangladesh is at the throes of integrating with global and regional economy, she needs to come up with a sensible framework of economic relations with India.

supply and was only keen to advance its own interests without considering its impact on its neighbours.

The visit seems to have underlined the realization that Bangladesh and India should live in stable relations and be friendly to each other. A stable and prosperous Bangladesh is an asset to India. Not only its market expands in Bangladesh but also

between the two countries. Once transportation facility is agreed upon including transit rights, commercial relations will immediately get a huge boost.

Both the Prime Ministers agreed to operate the Sealdah-Joydepur train link and decided to hold high-level meetings over disputes on security and water more regularly.

On Tata's investment in

to hurt Bangladesh.

On the construction of Tipaimukh dam, India stated that the project was for storing water to generate electricity and not to divert water from the Barak river which feeds Bangladesh rivers, such as Kushiara, Surma and Meghna. However more details need to be provided to Bangladesh to ally its concern on the storage of water at the

activities and the issue of regional grid needs to be raised, if not at a bilateral meeting, at the SAARC level.

Conclusion

It appears that a new beginning has dawned on bilateral relations. We all hope that the goodwill generated through the visit will provide a momentum in which negotiators will not be imprisoned in their old mind-set in advancing their relations. An open mind is imperative to bring about a change in their attitude towards each other.

Another fact is that the Prime Ministers or Presidents or Monarchs of neighbouring countries in South Asia ought to meet more frequently as European leaders do. Russia's President Putin met Chinese President Hu at an interval of several months.

Finally, although the Prime Minister was received ceremoniously with full protocol at the Rastrapati Bhavan, it would have been a nice gesture if India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh would have received the Prime Minister at the airport, breaking the normal protocol which he did for President Bush. In 1977, Prime Minister Morarji Desai received President Ziaur Rahman at the airport. For a Prime Minister of a neighbouring country, breaking protocol would have been appropriate and desirable.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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India's Finance Minister touched the moot point when he reportedly said that if India as a regional power could not be sensitive to the needs of its small neighbours, then what was the point of claiming to be a regional power?

What he meant was that power brings certain responsibilities and one of the responsibilities lies in maintaining good and friendly relations with its neighbours. He also talked about the core message of "Gujral doctrine" in which India may give concessions to its small neighbours as much as possible without asking reciprocity.

In the past, the bureaucrats in New Delhi always asked for "tooth for a tooth and eye for an eye". That was why no small neighbour was happy with India. India's generosity was in short

with economic prosperity allegation of unauthorised migration of labour to India will disappear. It is a win-win situation for both.

India has realised that trade deficit needs to be addressed and the revised trade agreement aims at expanding bilateral trade and economic relations on the basis of equality and mutual benefits by facilitation, expansion and diversification of trade.

What is significant in the trade agreement is the inclusion of agreeing of both parties to make mutually-beneficial arrangements for the use of their waterways, roads and railways for commerce between the two countries and more importantly provision for passage of goods between places in one country through the territory of the other. Transportation bottlenecks have hampered growth of commerce

Bangladesh, the latter assured that the matter had been under serious examination by all the agencies of Bangladesh and twenty-three agreements are required to be signed. One tricky issue is that while fixing price of gas to Tata, the domestic investors should not feel let down.

Other concerns

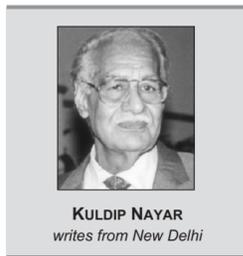
Bangladesh's other concerns seem to have been addressed. Bangladesh has been concerned with the river-linking project of India. The project aims at inter-linking trans-boundary Himalayan rivers to create "a new water grid", comprising 19 diversions, 16 reservoirs and 19 water transfer links. India assured Bangladesh that there was no proposal to bring in rivers originating in the Himalayas under it and nothing will be done

upstream. Bangladesh, being a lower riparian, is naturally anxious to know the layout of the project that has not reportedly been furnished to Bangladesh.

India has raised the sensitive issue of existence of northeast insurgent camps within Bangladesh and it appears that since Bangladesh itself has been a victim of terrorism, if India provides a list of location of camps, Bangladesh will certainly look into it. At the same time Bangladesh has raised the issue of some alleged anti-Bangladesh groups operating from India's territory and India assured to crack down against them.

It seems from the media report that regional cooperation in energy has not been addressed. Both Bangladesh and India are hungry for energy for economic

Who betrayed Bhagat Singh?



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

A comrade-turned-journalist, whose testimony sent Bhagat Singh, a revolutionary, to the gallows in March, 75 years ago, wrote a letter before his death to tell why he became an approver. He, Hans Raj Vohra, worked with The Statesman, Times of India, and the Deccan Herald, and died in Washington 11 years ago. The letter was addressed to Sukhdev's brother, Mathra Das Thapar, who too has died since.

The British tried Bhagat Singh and his two comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, for having shot Saunders, a British police officer, dead. All the three were found "guilty" and hanged on March 23, 1931. Vohra, who was recruited by Sukhdev, has alleged in his letter that it was Sukhdev who disclosed to the police all about the revolutionary movement from the beginning to the end.

Vohra probably fell prey to the usual tactics of the police. Even today the ruse employed by them is: "Your comrade has already spilled the beans. You may as well tell your side and we would try to get you pardon." Something like that might have happened. In any

case, Vohra's defence was not convincing. How could a person with even a grain of commitment to revolution turn into a stool-pigeon?

In his three-page letter, Vohra says: "I was arrested on the eve of Saunders' murder. This did not surprise me. I was the most important and the most well-known student leader in town. At the age of 17 or so, I became the first secretary of the Punjab Students movement which I tried to convert

should construe that I am asking for mercy or that I am flattering myself.

"However, when I was arrested a second time, soon after the rounding up of Sukhdev and some other party members, I was presented with a statement by Sukhdev which ran, I believe, into probably 50 or 100 pages, typewritten and foolscap. Secondly, I found that about eight or ten members of the party and every senior member, at that, had

cause. He was a ceaseless worker. He was a convincing talker which is apparent as I joined the party at his behest.

"To this day, I do not know what precisely went through his mind that he burst like a Diwali balloon within hours of being arrested. I am absolutely sure that the police did not use any high-handed methods. If anything, the investigators were very respectful and kind. Sukhdev voluntarily divulged every secret

knowledge about the party, which he freely cast away, created problems for others. Mine has remained my companion throughout my life. My life is stunted and stained and there is nothing I can do to wash away the horrible marks so deeply etched in history.

"I gave up the resistance to the investigating police for the following reasons: My guru, I felt, had let me down, together with the rest of the party. My portion of

organized and which I had seen being readied for a few minutes before the execution. I said nothing about it. So I was neither a witness to the conspiracy of the murder, nor of the murderer. I also take such credit as I can for abstaining to mention anything about Durga Das whom I had recruited. I was able to do both because I found that Sukhdev's statement had omitted them.

"You must also remember that I was the youngest member of the party. But I did understand the legal consequences of action. Even while giving evidence, I tried to do the least harm and possibly some good, as Durga Das has often acknowledged to me. I have written this letter about my experience of the case much against my wishes."

Vohra's letter does not absolve him of his act of betrayal. The difference between Sukhdev and Vohra is underlined by the people's response. The ashes of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru were consigned to a shrine near Ferozpur where thousands of people flock to pay their homage even today. The crematorium at Washington where Vohra's body was put to fire is not even known. Sukhdev is a hero.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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into a public forum for our revolutionary movement. I called a Punjab students conference which was astonishingly well attended. I proposed a resolution for complete independence for India when the Indian National Congress was contemplating Dominion status. So, I put the students ahead of the elders.

"After my arrest, the burden of concealing the murder conspiracy, about which I knew everything, fell on my shoulders. When I was released on bail several weeks after the arrest, I had carried out my responsibility to the party successfully. The secret remained locked in my chest. I do not want to write about the ordeal in the police lockup lest you

become the king's witnesses or approvers as they call themselves.

"So I had to think things anew in the light of the following facts: Sukhdev at whose command I had given up my family and whom I had accepted as my guru, had wrecked the party which he had done so much to create. It was an inexplicable situation, totally disappointing and terribly shattering of morale or the common purpose we had set out to serve.

"I cannot accept the explanation that he became nervous (ghabra gaya). This is so inadequate for a would-be hero of a story that it mocks his better side. He was a great organizer. He was selflessly devoted to the

of the party. There was nothing important to keep although I did find a few things which he had forgotten to mention and which, therefore, I also withheld in my statement.

"Sukhdev's performance presents two problems, none of which has been solved: (a) If he had no axe to grind, why did he make the statement? and (b) Having made the statement why did he not take some advantage from it? As I have said, there is no rational reason for (a) except that his mind was like a tumbler of water. The tumbler cracked and the water overflowed.

"Having thus mentally evacuated himself, I guess, he was at peace. But his overflowing

the story was relatively small and inconsequential as compared with what had been given away.

"I was consumed by helplessness and although it is easy to say that I would have received a light punishment, I could not risk going down with people I no longer respected.

"Secondly, it would have meant a total disruption of my life as I was in my final year of education. So I tried very deftly, doing the least possible additional harm to the party, to extricate myself so that I could pick up the remaining pieces as best as I could.

"I was able to abstain from giving any personal evidence of the murder, which I had seen

Eden College: Healing the wound

NURUL HUDA

THE government, as it appears, has finally taken a step for 'healing the wound' of Eden Girls' College, which is the country's largest educational institution for female students by removing its principal.

The agitating students of the College backed by student front of Awami League, has however, made it clear that the change of principal would not solve the problem. Some of the demands of the general students include removal of the outsiders from the college and ending the "seat business."

By seat business they mean collection of money from students seeking accommodation in the dormitories. It has, however, been in practice for long. It is an open secret that a section of leaders of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) and Bangladesh Chhatra League have long been involved in this illegal trade. Such 'business' is

being run very much within the knowledge of the management of the respective educational institutions.

In case of public sector educational institutions, including universities, the influence of the student front of the ruling party is strong compared to the private institutions. Some JCD leaders try to ensure accommodation in dormitories in public sector educational institutions including the universities for those who are identified as their loyalists. The leaders of the student front of Awami League also might have their share in seat allotment. Money plays an important role in the allotment of accommodations and those coming from rural areas are left with no choice but to grease the palms of some student leaders, preferably those belonging to JCD presently.

The incident which took place in Eden Girls' College on March 14 is unfortunate and cannot be easily passed over. It is also

The JCD has probably celebrated its apparent victory in driving away the agitating students. But saner section of society would describe it as a defeat for JCD. The number of students who suffered emotionally has outnumbered those who suffered physical injuries. The incident is a matter of very sad experience for all of us and a shame for the country. The government should remain on guard also about other educational institutions so that similar incidents do not occur elsewhere.

difficult to condone the actions of those who conducted the attacks. Had the authorities wanted, the brutalities which the college students suffered could have been avoided.

It is being asked in different circles why the college administration allowed the situation to aggravate instead of finding a peaceful solution. There is need for a thorough investigation into the matter for fixing responsibilities so that actions could be taken against persons responsible for this shameful incident. The action against the college principal may be treated as just one step towards restoration of

normalcy in the college.

The gravity of the situation demands formation of a high level committee to probe the incident and recommend actions as per its findings. It is hoped that steps towards establishment of congenial academic atmosphere in Eden College would begin soon. Authorities should give due attention also to other educational institutions so that similar incidents do not occur anywhere else.

The policemen on duty were seen playing dubious role as instead of trying to restrain the attackers, some of them acted as aids of the attackers against

the agitating students. The electronic media have screened some shots of the incident, which were watched not only by the countrymen but also the viewers outside.

Is it not shameful that female students were subjected to physical attacks by activists of JCD for raising some logical and reasonable demands -- stoppage of seat business and expulsion of outsiders from the dormitories?

Earlier, on March 13 an announcement was made declaring sine die closure of the Eden College asking the inmates of the dormitories to

vacate their seats by March 14 morning.

The ruling party leaders would probably cite the example of the attack on students including those belonging to JCD inside the hostels of Eden College during the time of Sheikh Hasina government. But they should be reminded the high price that the party (AL) had to pay for its mistakes and excesses.

This example however, would not be acceptable to any one as an argument in defence of the March 14 Eden College incident. It is being asked in different circles whether the ruling

party parliament member representing the area, Nasiruddin Pintu, had any role behind it. It is the job of the authorities to clear their position to the nation.

The incident of March 14 has left at least 20 students injured including one teacher. How the teacher became a target still remains unclear. There can be some charges against the agitating students for coming out on the streets defying the authority's decision to close the college. For such an offence they should not have been made the target of such brutal attacks. The cries of the general students, most of whom are from outside the city, had fallen on deaf ear.

The JCD has probably celebrated its apparent victory in driving away the agitating students. But saner section of society would describe it as a defeat for JCD.

The action against the principal, however, indicates the

government's intention to restore normalcy in the college. It is hoped that the government would move in the right direction and more steps should follow so that congenial academic atmosphere is established in the institution and the students are back to their classes.

The number of students who suffered emotionally has outnumbered those who suffered physical injuries. The incident is a matter of very sad experience for all of us and a shame for the country. The government should remain on guard also about other educational institutions so that similar incidents do not occur elsewhere.

Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS.