

Dhaka SAARC meet

Decade of implementation envisioned

THE Indo-Pak trade dispute that cast a shadow over implementation of SAFTA, the two-year old agenda before the regional body, has been defused, if not resolved. The discordant bilateral note between New Delhi and Islamabad has dissolved into the air, for the time being at least -- thanks to a unanimous decision to refer it to the regular meeting of the SAFTA council of commerce ministers before the 14th SAARC summit scheduled for April 3-4 in New Delhi.

Pakistan's limited tariff concessions to India to only one item of the positive list comprising 773 items led the two countries to accuse each other of violating the SAFTA framework agreement. But one major step towards implementation of SAFTA has come by way of the SAARC member states agreeing to remove para-tariff and non-tariff barriers.

This set the scene for taking other positive measures to further the frequency and volume of regional cooperation. One of the major steps taken is the green light given by the council of ministers towards formation of a common SAARC development fund. The Indian proposals for setting up South Asian University, SAARC museum of textiles and handicrafts and tele-medicine centre have been welcomed for adoption through a programming committee.

On the broader issue of economic and financial integration in SAARC, the governors of the central banks of the member states are to put their heads together for devising suitable mechanisms across South Asia. It's good augury that the council of foreign ministers has decided to observe 2008 as the SAARC Media Year with the objective of implementing SAARC Media Action Plan in consultation with SAFMA. It is highly imperative that the visa regime be relaxed to enhance interaction in various spheres.

It is a testament to the growing prestige and magnetism of SAARC that the USA, South Korea and the EU have sought and received the observer status in SAARC. Earlier, China and Japan had been granted the same status. Besides, importantly, Afghanistan has already been embraced as the 8th member of SAARC.

Price of imported commodities

Too high for anyone's comfort

TODAY the lives of the people belonging to the fixed and limited income groups are extremely burdened by an unprecedented rise in the prices of essentials. While the majority of the country's population reel in hardship, the administration continues to indulge in excuses for its inability to bring down and put a brake on the spiraling prices. As in politics here too the government tries to justify its inaction by merely pointing fingers to certain factors like higher international prices for the price hike. How very convenient!

So far government has attributed the spiralling prices to be the work of the syndicate of importers and wholesalers. Of late, however, the traders are also blaming "the unrest in the Middle East" as yet another reason for the recent unprecedented hike in prices of certain commodities. While some increase in prices may be unavoidable due to a rise of prices globally against the backdrop of a rise in crude oil (gasolene) prices and related costs in imports, the current price index is undoubtedly out of all logical proportions and unrealistic.

To us it appears as though the inaction is deliberate. This spiralling of prices is certainly a vital issue of public interest facing the country today. Yet we fail to understand as to why no action is being taken against the known syndicate of importers who already stand identified as the main cause for the continual rise in prices? On the other hand, no action is also being taken against the wholesalers who jack up the prices at random at the retailers' level driven by sheer motive of profiteering.

It is our experience that once there is an increase in prices in the markets it never comes down, no matter what. The dishonest amongst the traders have long been manipulating the consumer markets in this country causing unprecedented suffering to the common man. A reversal of this debilitating state of affairs is long overdue.

The government should act swiftly, boldly and decisively to bring down this unbridled spiral of prices for the good of the common man and its own interest.

Lebanese crisis and the fiasco of Rice diplomacy

No lasting peace without Hezbollah

TAJ HASHMI

WHILE Prime Minister Ehud Olmert insists there will be no ceasefire in Lebanon until international peacekeepers are deployed in the south of the country, Hezbollah has remained defiant against all odds, logic and common sense, firing more than 200 rockets into Israel, the biggest single day barrage so far on August 2. Meanwhile Israel has mobilized more than 25,000 troops in the border, sending several thousands deep inside Lebanon. Israeli troops raided Baalbek, destroying a hospital, killing and seizing several people, presumed to be Hezbollah fighters.

The fresh round of Israeli attacks on Lebanon began in the wake of the abrupt return of Secretary Rice to Washington on Monday, July 31, albeit empty-handed and humiliated for not being able to visit Lebanon as Prime Minister Siniora refused to meet her this time. Let us see if Rice's failure in negotiating a "lasting peace" in the Middle East is self-inflicted, a by-product of the State Department's intransigence and ostrich policy of denying the reality.

Secretary Rice's first trip to Israel and Lebanon more than a week after the beginning of the latest

Lebanese problem is actually a by-product of the Palestinian refugee problem. So, as it is wrong to single out the "Lebanese problem" so is it wrong to ignore the Palestinian problem, the most important catalyst to a "lasting peace" in the Middle East. We may agree with Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies that a peace without Hezbollah might look impressive, but it would remain hollow and meaningless in the long run.

Israel-Hezbollah showdown did not flicker much hope for a cease-fire. But Rice had to go back empty-handed. Why so? Can the US really negotiate a cease-fire and a "lasting peace" in "days, not weeks"? Is it fair to assume that Israel can achieve the goals in "weeks, not days"? Are Israeli military lobby and American "Jewish lobby" calling the shots while the world is witnessing deaths and destruction in the Middle East?

As Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defence Minister Amir Peretz do not have command experience in the IDF, unlike most of the previous leaders, the IDF seems to have a dominant role in the war and peace making process. Interestingly, after the telecast of the latest al-Zawahiri video the government agreed to accept slightly more than a mile as the "buffer" between Lebanon and Israel, but the IDF succeeded in

convincing the government that Israel needs a much wider buffer zone under NATO troops, preferably up to the Litani River. And the military lobby so far has successfully thwarted all attempts to make peace with Hezbollah.

Peretz tends to agree with the hawks in the IDF as possibly generals direct him instead of him directing the generals. And the upshot is Secretary Rice's abrupt return to Washington within two days after her latest trip to Israel, without making any changes in the previous US stand on not ending the war before Israel "achieves its objectives". Rice's failure in making any headway towards a cease-fire may be imputed to the overwhelming popular support (more than 80 per cent) for the Israeli war effort among Americans.

However, what is missing in both the Israeli and American policies towards a durable peace between Israel and Lebanon is their taking

no notice of the wider popular support for Hezbollah among Lebanese across the board. While 96 per cent of Shiites are behind Hezbollah, 87 per cent of Sunnis, 80 per cent of Christians and 80 per cent of Druze Lebanese consider Hezbollah as the defender of their country.

In view of this, no temporary truce, let alone a durable peace, is possible without active participation by the Hezbollah in the peace process. It is heartening that while Secretary Rice favours 20, 000 international peacekeeping forces in southern Lebanon as a pre-requisite to "a lasting peace", she is against house to house search for Hezbollah militants. Tony Blair is also realistic that there cannot be any peace in the region without Hezbollah.

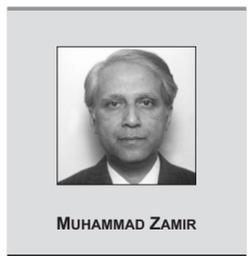
Sooner the Israeli military lobby and the Americans with a soft corner for Israel realize the fact is better. J.F.O. McAllister has rightly

observed: "If peace in the Middle East is a Rubik's Cube whose every piece has to align properly to arrive at a solution, the puzzle posed by Hezbollah seems to have more than six colours for six sides" ["Why Hezbollah Can't be Disarmed?" Time, July 31, 2006]. Peacemakers should remember that Hezbollah has skilful fighters with powerful patrons and overwhelming mass support in Lebanon and the rest of the Muslim world. And that neither Iran nor Syria is willing to disarm the militia. So, a lasting peace in Lebanon does not depend on the implementation of UN Resolution 1559 but other resolutions, especially 242 (1967), taken in favour of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the West Bank.

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Complications Continue in Cyprus



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

POST BREAKFAST

We are aware that the situation has been further complicated by the fact that Cyprus is now a member of the European Union and Turkey is seeking to join this Union. We also know that this has made the settlement process more difficult. Nevertheless, I believe that both the United Nations and the European Union should work together in finding a compromise. They can, and should, exert necessary pressure on all parties to actively engage in finding a common ground that could lead to a settlement under the UN framework and facilitate reunification.

community, who were Muslims, spoke Turkish and had ties with Turkey for the last three hundred years.

This step stopped the possibility of widespread inter communal violence and bloodshed in Cyprus. It also created a political impasse that still continues.

Talks held under UN auspices between 1975 and 1979, tried to find a common ground so that both communities could establish a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation based on the political equality of the two parties. This discourse and negotiating process however collapsed when the Greek Cypriot side brought up the issue in the UN General Assembly in 1983. Turkish Cypriot community not having any accreditation within the UN was denied any formal presence. This led the frustrated Turkish Cypriots to declare the same year the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

The formation of this Turkish Republic has however not meant the absence of any further negotiation over the past two decades. At different times, the UN Secretary General has sent his Special Representatives to Cyprus to find a compromise solution despite latent mistrust between the two sides. Many confidence building measures have been proposed, undertaken and then discarded. This has included the unsuccessful meeting in New York, in 1990, between the leaders of the two sides with the UN Secretary General. We have also seen the failure of Security Council Resolution No. 649 of 12 March,

1990 which called for a mutually acceptable solution on an equal footing.

The unwillingness on the part of the Greek Cypriot authorities to make any compromise appears to have been largely due to indirect encouragement received from Greece and some other states of the European Union. All efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement received a body blow when the southern Greek Cypriot side applied on behalf of Cyprus as a whole to become a member of the European Community and subsequently gained entry into the European Union. This was done without the explicit consent and inclusion of the Northern Turkish side. This has only exacerbated the situation.

This last step has also affected UN efforts to establish a Federation on that island. It has also reduced the prospect of an overall agreement that might safeguard the identity, integrity and security of each community as well as their political, economic, social, cultural, linguistic and religious rights as politically equal members of a Federation.

Nevertheless, there has been since the beginning of this year, another attempt to find least common denominators whereby the political negotiating process can be jump-started. This effort has coincided with the spurt of economic growth in Northern Cyprus which has seen its per capita income rise from US dollar 4500 in 2003 to 11,300 in 2006.

Renewing the mandate of the

United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) for a further period of six months through Security Council Resolution 1687 on 15 June, 2006, has brought the unresolved Cyprus problem again on the international table.

Northern Cypriot authorities have taken exception to the fact that such an extension has been undertaken with the consent of the 'so-called Government of Cyprus'. They have pointed out that internationally recognised principles required that UN peacekeeping operations be carried with the consent 'of all parties' and this has not been done. They have also referred to other issues regarding the ceasefire line and the buffer zone. In this context they have specified developments in the Dherinia region which are associated with the construction of a new observation post by the Greek Cypriot National Guard. It has also been claimed that constructions by Greek Cypriots in the buffer zone 'are a threat to security and create fait accompli which are unacceptable.'

Two weeks ago I was in Northern Cyprus and had the pleasure of meeting several senior officials of the Northern Cyprus Government, including its President Mehmet Ali Talat. In addition to attending the 32nd anniversary of its Peace and Freedom Day, I also had the opportunity to meet and discuss the Cypriot problem with members of its professional community that included doctors, lawyers, teachers and

as possible, a high level meeting this year, with the participation of Turkey, Greece, the Turkish Cypriot side and the Greek Cypriot side for not only finalising the Turkish Action Plan but also an agreed time frame for its implementation. The Northern Cypriot authorities believe that the outcome of such a meeting could then be forwarded to the UN Secretary General for eventual submission to the UN Security Council. It is also being suggested that the UN Secretary General, if so authorised by the Security Council, could not only establish a mechanism to keep the implementation of the Plan under review but also report developments to the Security Council. They are also being encouraged in this regard by recent comments made by Matthew Bryce, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs during his visit to the UN buffer zone near Lefkosa.

I must admit that these are ambitious ideas. The Plan denotes a constructive engagement on the part of both Turkey as well as the Northern Turkish community. It also provides a framework for facilitating a comprehensive settlement to the existing Cyprus problem. We are aware that the situation has been further complicated by the fact that Cyprus is now a member of the European Union and Turkey is seeking to join this Union. We also know that this has made the settlement process more difficult. Nevertheless, I believe that both the United Nations and the European Union should work together in finding a compromise. They can, and should, exert necessary pressure on all parties to actively engage in finding a common ground that could lead to a settlement under the UN framework and facilitate reunification.

This Action Plan has generated interest because it calls for, under an established time-table, an integrated package of proposals for simultaneous lifting of all obstacles on free movement of goods, persons and services, including restrictions on means of transport by all relevant parties in the context of the Cyprus issue. The general opinion on the street was that the proposals contained in the Action Plan were balanced and equitable. It is believed that this will provide substantial benefits to all concerned parties and lead to an improved environment of mutual confidence and economic development that will bring greater prosperity to both communities.

It is clear that the Turkish authorities would like to convene, as soon

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OPINION

Ailing democracy and a few good men

MANOJ MISRA

CIVIL society' is probably the most debated term nowadays in Bangladesh, after the CEC issue. So much has been said about proactive engagement of civil society that at times it becomes less attractive to discuss about the issue. Nevertheless, the debate goes unabated, though, of late, one has found interest in this already hyped up issue. The other day Development Studies Group of the Independent University, Bangladesh, organised a seminar (dialogue) on Proactive Civic Engagement and the lonely speaker was none other than Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya. It is always a privilege to attend lectures by Dr. Bhattacharya because of his convincing way of delivering whatever he has in his mind and his dialectic way of trapping opposing view-makers.

It was however pretty clear from Dr. Bhattacharya's lecture that the task of defining the term, 'civil society,' itself is a troublesome one, let alone finding pathways for effective democratic reform. Even mere translation of the word into Bengali is quite problematic since all the corresponding Bengali terms tend to convey a misleading picture of what civil society should

mean in the context of Bangladesh. However, Dr. Bhattacharya, anticipating this problem opted for an operational definition of civil society.

To paraphrase Dr. Bhattacharya's basic premise it may be said that the Bangladesh polity is now undergoing severe problems in its democratic front sprouting from the corrupt nature of politicians. Therefore, the Nagorik Committee, the public front of Dr. Bhattacharya's endeavour to clean the political process decided to make politics free of corrupt and incompetent politicians. Hence, the solution is to force the political parties to post "competent" and "honest" personalities to run for national elections. This will eventually lead to the removal of all sorts of anomalies and corruption from politics.

Let me try to address some of the inconsistencies. Firstly, is it the corrupt politicians who are to be blamed for the dismal state of our beloved motherland? This practice of blaming politicians is quite similar to that of the military juntas who always discard politicians at the outset from the job of handling state affairs, consequently paving their way to capturing power. Even a few days back the notorious King of Nepal used this very pretext to

appropriate absolute power. Fortunately, he has backed out in the face of immense public pressure, unlike the Pakistan junta. The point I want to make here is that these wrong conclusions emanate from erroneous analysis of social and political problems. Politics is a collective process having its root in the very nature of the social, cultural and economic systems. Therefore, any deviation in it must be seen from a systemic point of view. Individuals hardly matter in deciding the course of politics unless they are talismanic, or charismatic, figures.

The degeneration in Bangladesh's political field implies the organic inconsistency that is now prevailing in the country, which could roughly be attributed to the exotic elements introduced into it without correspondence with the capacity of the societal coping mechanism. It is almost impossible for some 'honest' and 'competent' persons to take up the uphill task and make politics clean. Professor B M Chowdhury, the Vice Chancellor of IUB, raised an important point that the problem is, to some extent, of the breaking down of institutions. It is our failure in establishing institutions that has resulted in the poor performance of

democracy in Bangladesh. For example, the education sector is now in total disarray owing to the tendency of some of the influential teachers to get involved with power politics, holding their respective institutions hostage to their political and worldly ambitions. In the past, there were examples when our respected teachers strongly resisted any move from the government to interfere with the internal affairs of their respective educational institutions. Nowadays, this almost sounds like a fairy tale.

In a democracy politicians are supposed to be the representatives of the citizens of the country. Politicians come from within our society. They are not alien forces brought onto the stage by some divine, or satanic, power. One of my senior colleagues once made a very good point that the problem of Bangladesh is not the density of the population, rather it is the density of the evil doers that has plagued the country. When the society at large is fraught with ethical problems how could we expect some politicians to rise above that? The corrupt nature of our politicians only reflects the decayed nature of our society. As such there is no more a class called politicians. Politicians comprise people from all walks of society,

ranging from businessmen to bureaucrats. I, therefore, feel that we should stop talking about corruption of political parties, instead we must turn our eyes on ourselves and see whether we are doing enough in our respective fields to make the country better for ourselves. When the whole lot gets derailed we can't expect a certain section to be on track. We must engage ourselves in building institutions which will ultimately safeguard against any unlawful intervention by politicians into the system.

What has been said so far about the problem is concerned with internal factors. But in the contemporary world any analysis, or explanation, without taking globalisation into consideration is bound to yield misleading result. Ironically, more often than not, the international factors are so much important in determining the course of national politics that it almost becomes the fate of the country, especially when it is a weak one. The present debate on malfunctioning of democracy essentially presumes the supremacy of democracy over other forms of political system. Democracy is being suggested as a panacea in itself without looking at the cost-benefit analysis, or suitability, of that

system in the context of the particular country. And that democracy, too, is of proto-Western type. Recently, there has been a surge in debates over the curtailment of the role of state plausibly to make democracy functional. Even Dr Bhattacharya, that day, clearly stated that he wanted curtailment of state control and attributed the present problem, to some extent, to the tendency of the state to intervene excessively in matters which they view should be kept out of the purview of the state. They clearly feel pessimistic about the malfunctioning of the state, hence their decision of limiting state control comes forth.

Democracy has been equally malfunctioning in Bangladesh, but there is an optimistic tone among Nagorik Committee members about possible healing of the ailing system. This discrepancy is in line with the prescriptions of the WB-IMF and other donor agencies. I often ask myself whether the problems being faced by Bangladesh are exclusive in nature. But I am consoled since most of the developing countries that have followed the WB-IMF model of development are now on an equal footing in terms of malfunctioning of democracy, or other developmental indicators. This is the White Man's Burden

that is taking toll on our political process.

In that perspective I think we must now rethink whether we should put all our weight behind democracy or search for any other suitable alternative. Across the world the validity of indigenous knowledge has been reaffirmed as a reliable source of knowledge. But depressingly enough the political scientists, for unknown reasons, shy away from this task. As we know there prevailed various forms of indigenous systems of governance across civilisations. Political scientists should engage themselves in developing these systems which will fit into the demands of the modern age. I am not suggesting any reverting back rather my point is that every system develops out of the particular geographical, social and cultural needs. Any political system must therefore correspond to the peculiarities of the society. It is no good to try to mindlessly emulate a model borrowed from other societies because there remains the risk of inconsistency between the inherent structures of the model and the nuances of the object society. At least, what we can do now is to incorporate, or modify, some indigenous elements into the Western model of democracy to

make it consistent with our values and ways of life. I admire Dr. Bhattacharya for his outstanding achievements. I believe people like him have a truly patriotic mind and passion for doing well for the country. I request him to stretch out a bit more. He will then realise how weird it sounds when someone speaks only about cleansing power politics, from a comfortable distance, without focusing on other economic and global factors. We think that the country needs people like him to join politics and try to reform the politics from inside. May be it could be done by forming a mainstream political party and thereby capturing the imagination of people. With a truly patriotic force it is possible to manoeuvre things even within the strict control of global economic and political order. Once politics is back to normalcy then only the Nagorik Committee could work as the balancing factor between the rival interest groups. But unless these issues are carefully looked into I do not see any glimmer of hope.

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