

Phnom Penh Stalling Cambodia Peace Plan

Stranded Pakistanis

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has given the right signal to a visiting special envoy from Pakistan when she emphasised this country's keenness to see the resolution of two outstanding issues in the Dhaka-Islamabad relations, namely, the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis and division of assets between the two countries. According to press reports, Begum Zia told the envoy, Mr. Hazar Khan Bijrani that these two issues have remained unresolved far too long "despite a warm and cordial relationship existing between Bangladesh and Pakistan", a statement that also underscored the fact that notwithstanding these two issues, our ties remain positive and sound. In other words, we have the right climate in our relationship for approaching the two issues with renewed earnestness and vigour.

There is no denying the fact that on the two issues, the respective positions of our countries remain well-defined. It was during the rule of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that Dhaka took up both the matters with Islamabad, an approach that evoked positive responses from the then government of Pakistan of the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. While a joint committee started preliminary discussion on the question of division of assets between Dhaka and Islamabad, the Bhutto regime made a firm commitment to facilitate the repatriation of nearly quarter of a million non-Bengalis here who had chosen to return to their home in Pakistan. Unfortunately, since then, no further progress was made on the question of the division of assets, but a small number of what is officially described as "stranded Pakistanis" were lucky enough to be repatriated to their chosen home. The successive administrations in Islamabad adopted divergent attitudes on what Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has rightly termed as a "humanitarian issue". During the regime of the late President Ziaul Huq, Islamabad did take back a few more batches of these stranded Pakistanis and, what's more, it made a lot of noise about a Jeddah-based international effort, backed by large committed funds, aimed at taking back all the stranded Pakistanis within a fixed time frame. Great expectations were raised among these unfortunate victims of history, expectations which were dashed when Benazir Bhutto came to power. During her visit to Dhaka in late 1989, she gave many indications that her administration was in no mood to meet the commitment made first by her father and then by her adversary. However, the offer to help in the repatriation of these Pakistanis quickly came from an unlikely — or perhaps not so unlikely — quarter, from Nawaz Sharif, then the Chief Minister of Punjab, who seemed all willing to rehabilitate what is now estimated at over two lac returnees in his province.

It is important to go over this sad story of broken promises and half-hearted efforts which, we regret to say, put successive administrations in Islamabad in a very unfavourable light. The stranded Pakistanis who have spent two decades here, in bitterness and despair, may well wonder if Mr Sharif, now the Prime Minister of his country, will carry out the commitment he had made less than two years ago, as the Chief Minister of Punjab, and thus facilitate the return of his people from the refugee camps in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the new elected government of Begum Zia would hope that the immense burden that this country has carried for some 20 years looking after these stranded people would now be lifted and that the interest of Islamabad in strengthening its ties with Dhaka would find tangible expressions on both the issues brought up by the Prime Minister with Mr. Bijrani.

Bravo, Old Dhaka

In a span of 24 hours two businessmen were killed by muggers— better known as hijackers—in two incidents in the Lalbagh area of the metropolis alone. And a third victim, a lady rickshaw passenger, was robbed of her diamond ring and gold ornaments and goodly cash at dagger point the same Sunday morning at Mohammadpur.

The incidence on Dhaka roads of 'hijacking' has by their high and nagging frequency has injured the public mind to taking it all without a feeling of revulsion. Consequently news-interest has also suffered and, specially after the Soghra murder passing off with impunity, even fatal cases of muggery have ceased to elicit appropriate reaction and occasion build-up of popular resistance.

But two killings by muggers in 24 hours is too much even by Dhakaite crime standards. It will be stating the obvious to say that police hasn't been ideally alert and any breach in the safe use of the roads is very squarely their fault. The DMP must justify its special and perhaps a little privileged existence by making the capital city's roads crime-free. They must be able to prevent such — and, as a deterrent, must be instrumental in making the culprits pay dearly for their crimes.

There is an interesting — and saddening — point of departure in this news of muggery death. Old Dhaka, in spite of its suffocating overcrowding, has for the last so many decades been a cozy and safe place to live in — what with an unending supply of good and cheap food, good neighbourliness on which one could eternally depend. Mugging was as such almost wholly unknown in old Dhaka. The incidents of Sunday mark an end to one of old Dhaka's best charms. Mugging that started on a big scale in the seventies was confined to New Dhaka and it was believed not without reason that the crime was the handiwork of young people coming from not particularly impetuous families. In the Mohammadpur incident there is a confirmation that the trend continues — the muggers came in a car. In the old Dhaka incidents, the social profile of the criminals was evidently different.

Old is gold. Mr Abdur Rahim, a businessman, was one among the crowd that gave the muggers a chase. He was a resister dangerously close to the culprits — and they stabbed him fatally. The social resistance is still there. Bravo, Old Dhaka!

RELUCTANT to accept a peace plan that it agreed to in principle months ago, Cambodia's Phnom Penh government is being charged by guerrilla factions with stalling the United Nations effort to end a war that has lasted well over a decade.

During recent meetings in Phnom Penh, government officials agreed that the military and political machine of the Khmer Rouge must be destroyed.

The Khmer Rouge is held responsible for killing up to two million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979. Its military remains the most dangerous obstacle to lasting peace in Cambodia.

But Western officials claim that the proposed UN Peace Plan which would dismantle much of the current government and force warring factions to hand in their weapons is the only viable solution to the Cambodian quagmire.

Factions led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Son Sann say that the Phnom Penh government has been encouraged to raise objections to the UN plan after receiving assistance and unofficial recognition from Western countries that once gave the resistance more support.

The resistance, including the Khmer Rouge, has said it is willing to accept the UN plan without reservation.

"Our policy is defensive in line with the United Nations appeal for restraint," said Keat Sukun, a spokesman for Son Sann faction in Bangkok. He admitted that military supplies for his faction have been so low that an offensive posture would be impossible.

The Phnom Penh government has objected to stipulation in the UN plan that factions drop their arms. Officials contend that the Khmer Rouge have vast caches of weapons stored underground that they would take up at a later date.

Phnom Penh has further objected to the UN's planned dismantling of its major governing bodies, including defence and information. It prefers to leave the basic government intact while disarming soldiers and preparing for elections.

Officials also insist that the Khmer Rouge be labeled a "genocidal regime."

Noncommunist factions agree in private about the charge of "genocide," but say that for the sake of a settlement, the Khmer Rouge must be brought into the peace process without being alienated.

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Philip Gorton writes from Bangkok

They point out that many of the officials in the Phnom Penh regime were former Khmer Rouge leaders who defected to save their own lives during the purges of the late 70s.

"The major obstacle to peace involves the Khmer Rouge in the city and the Khmer Rouge in the countryside who don't agree," said Keat Sukun.

A spokesman for the guerrilla faction of Prince Sihanouk agreed that discussing the question of "genocide" in advance of a settlement was detrimental to the peace process.

Leaders of the two non-communist factions fighting the central government, charge that Phnom Penh has held up the UN initiative since it was approved by the permanent five representatives of the United Nations Security Council.

They say an ill-timed move by the United States to drop its recognition of the allied

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guerrilla faction's UN seat last year has encouraged the reluctance.

"The US had always worked behind the scenes, leading ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to support our struggle against foreign occupation," said Lapress Sieng, a Son Sann official in Bangkok.

The US and China back allied guerrilla factions, while Vietnam and the Soviet Union back the Phnom Penh government's forces in the battlefield.

"They want to be recognised and have been wooing the West," said EK Sereywhath, a spokesman for the Cambodian faction led by Prince Sihanouk. "The additional aid they have been given by Western countries has encouraged them to say no the UN plan."

The Soviet Union, which has been the major arms supplier to the Phnom Penh government, has also agreed to

the UN plan. Arms supplies for the government side have come increasingly from Vietnam, not the Soviet Union, according to sources in Bangkok.

"If the Western countries want to shorten the length of the war, they will have to put more pressure on Vietnam," said Mr Ek.

Meanwhile reports of starvation and bloodshed near the Thai-Cambodian border continue. A poor rice harvest in Cambodia this year has left displaced villagers on both sides of the fighting with little food.

"What we can do for these people now is nothing to be proud of," said Keat Sukun, who said that humanitarian assistance from the United States has done little to alleviate the plight of peasants. "People are asking for medical help, especially water and sanitation. Children are inflicted with malaria and infections."

The Khmer Rouge army, still led by a shadowy band of generals that includes Pol Pot, is in a better position to provide for peasants. Taxes on gem mines near the town of

Patlin and support from China have allowed them to extend their control in Western Cambodia over the past two years, according to guerrilla sources and Western diplomats in Bangkok.

Civilian casualties from shelling are a permanent fixture of the war.

Jane's Defense Weekly reported that, despite China's claims to the contrary, weapons from Beijing continue to flow the Khmer Rouge.

It quoted guerrilla and intelligence sources as saying China was "frontloading tons of ammunition" to the Khmer Rouge to guard against shortages that might occur with an expected UN moratorium on supplies.

Other sources say that the Khmer Rouge are stronger today than at any time since they were ousted from power by invading Vietnamese troops in 1979.

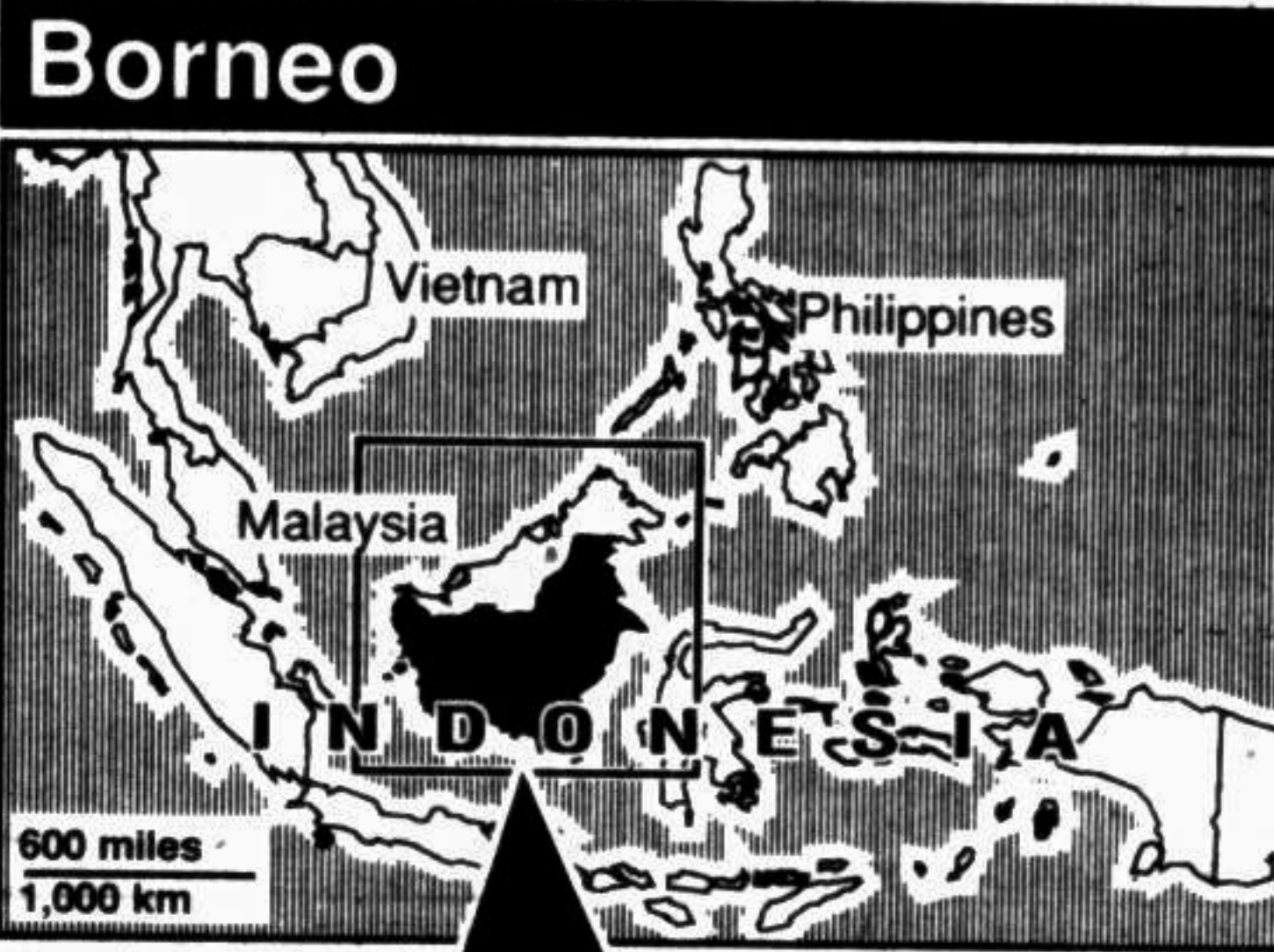
But since a government of offensive almost a year ago, none of the armies, including the Khmer Rouge, has set a substantial portion of the country. The Phnom Penh government maintains control over more than 95 per cent of the country.

—Depthnews Asia

Deep in the Forest where the Medicines Grow

Stephen Carr writes from Balikpapan, Indonesia

One of the great fears about deforestation is that all manner of plant and tree life that can be used medicinally to treat illness may be lost to humankind. Many local remedies that could be of value in treating patients around the world have yet to be tested. An expedition has just been in Borneo to collect samples. This fascinating account by a member of the expedition tells of their discoveries.



seemed to be the equivalent of toys, taken out at intervals and fed on seeds.

A tall tree, yago, with large leaves and no flowers, could be ground up whole and the oil extracted was good for massage. The bark could also be burnt to keep away insects. It was more effective than commercially produced mosquito coils, said our guides.

Some plants had purposes specific to the hazards of the forest. One creeper, camlung, with three-foot leaves, would be burnt and the ash used to treat the intense irritation and pain caused by skin contact with a yellow and black hairy caterpillar.

Another unnamed bark could be rubbed on the skin as relief from bee stings. Our hosts had no access to medicaments of any kind apart from these natural cures they were showing us. But they had a plant remedy for any sickness or accident likely to befall them.

There was a thick-rooted creeper, bul, whose infused leaves could be drunk after childbirth to ease pain in the hips and back. If dried over a fire, but not so much as it became crisp, it could also be used externally, rubbed on the affected area.

A six-foot plant, jilieng, with red grape-like clusters of fruit, had a root which could be boiled as a cure for tuberculosis. It was a potent medicine, the Punans said, and needed only one or two doses.

Another plant, cunwajo, with geranium green leaves, could be made into a bitter brew for anal infections and bleeding. A thin skin inside the bark was the active ingredient, which could be scraped off and boiled.

A red-fruited plant which our Indonesian guides called terong pipit, had a root which could be infused to relieve beri-beri and hepatitis. It was a slow-acting treatment, they said, and needed frequent doses.

A tree bark the Indonesians called benuang could be pounded until soft and taken as a pick-me-up by the old and tired. A final, curious treatment for stomach ache was siksok, a small plant whose pinkish roots could be ground to a paste, made into a plug and inserted into the navel.

At a settlement for Dayaks at Rantau Panjang, we stayed with the chief. He told us half the population had malaria.

On an island grew a three-foot bush with purple flowers called lamotin. Its leaves could be burnt and the ash used to plug holes in the teeth. Further upriver, across squelchy mud flats, we entered a dark tangle of trees, secondary forest which has grown over land once used for agriculture.

The next plant, which was nameless, had red and green leaves. They were boiled and drunk to stop bleeding after childbirth. Another infusion was made from the kalak tree, a rare species, our Punan guide said. The whole plant, including the bark, could be ground, boiled and drunk as a cure for stomach ache and an aid to digestion.

We tramped through the forest single file, babies slung on the backs of the Punan women and a small daughter tagging along. Two chirruping young birds in their nest, put into one women's rattan pack,

2.1 per cent died from it. From July to August, when the forest was full of fruit, there was also a high incidence of cholera.

There was no natural remedy for the disease, but for malaria the young leaves of sarakung, a small bushy plant smelling of mint, were infused. A treatment for tuberculosis was also known—klemak root, chopped and boiled and mixed with ila lang, the grass we had already come across.

Incongruously, the chief's house, decorated with his ceremonial hornbill cap, also had pasted on its walls magazine photos of the Duran Duran pop group, Jesus and the Virgin Mary. At the front of a Pentecostal mission church was a painted red cross flanked by portraits of the Muslim Pres-

dent and Vice-President of Indonesia.

Other plants were identified which could be used for cuts, skin irritations, fevers, bee stings, monkey bites and tooth bacteria.

A light green fern, pahusulu, could be made into a soup and given to mothers for increased milk production after giving birth. A cure for rheumatism was tubadauntinga, a small spreading plant cooked on a fire, packed with salt and put over painful joints.

The lung plant, with a reddish stem and smelling strongly of rhubarb, had three uses. Its root was dried and blown into all the body orifices to stop fits and rigid spasms. It was also effective for fever—and, we were told, to protect babies from ghosts.

All the samples were labelled, dried and some preserved in alcohol to prevent mould. They have been shipped to Britain and the United States. Analysing them for useful compounds will take months and drugs from the samples may be years away yet.

— GEMINI NEWS

OPINION

Three Cheers for End of Gulf War

As an observer of international affairs, I find the article, titled, "A View from India: Resist Bush's New World Order" by the noted Indian journalist, Chanchal Sarkar, published in your esteemed daily on April 4, laced with inaccuracies, contradictions and revealing a blatant, grossly anti-American bias—at a time when the United States has emerged as a dependable ally for the allied powers, which acted promptly and decisively to preserve law and order in a potentially explosive region. Thanks to the combined allied strength the world is no longer subjected to the wild swings of oil prices (dictated by the latest threats of Saddam Hussein) as well as the spectre of Third World economies being crushed by the burden of super-costly fuel! For that, three cheers for a mercifully short and successful end to the Gulf War — from the rest of the world's point of view.

President Bush rushed into the Gulf crisis and worked overtime to mobilise one of history's largest armies, air and naval forces to confront an avaricious dictator of megalomaniac proportions who had pounded and looted his tiny, defenceless neighbour. Mr. Sarkar has conveniently forgotten that before the Allied Powers stayed the Air war against aggressor, Iraq, numerous attempts at a negotiated settlement by a wide range of international politicians and statesmen had been attempted. However, Saddam Hussein's position had been adamant and crystal clear — he won't give up an inch of Kuwait soil which his army had grabbed by force! "The world wants peace, not super-power bullying" — says Mr. Sarkar. I would also like to add that the world does not want bullying of any kind — and Saddam Hussein is the epitome of the village bully.

In any case, there was just no time for anyone to act like a Mother Teresa — a Rambo style action was called for and as events turned out, proved highly justifiable.

Undoubtedly, the world cannot deny that the US with its allies "has pulverised one of the oldest region's of the world and the cradle of civi-

lizations to rubble". The statement is exaggerated but still regrettable. But then who had built armament factories right beside ancient monuments in the first place? Even "smart bombs" cannot be expected to have pin-point accuracy. Besides, if you attack another country, you cannot (if you possess any grain of sanity) possibly expect to get off lightly.

Bush and his Secretary of State have expressed their hope of the possibility of Saddam Hussein being overthrown — at the height of the Gulf Crisis. Many peace-loving people would have hailed such a development. Just take a look at the crude and massive environmental destruction, the burning of Kuwaiti oil wells he has unleashed, to name only a fraction of the disaster caused by Saddam Hussein. The fact that Bush is doing nothing to help Hussein's internal enemies (who have risen by the millions in open rebellion) just shows remarkable restraint. And true to his word, Bush has no intentions of breaking up Iraq. Having shown Saddam Hussein to be an adversary "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing", Bush has merely dropped him like a hot potato.

It is totally inaccurate of Mr. Sarkar to claim that "the US President has conducted an illegal... war". We well know that Bush had full Congressional approval for American and allied intervention in the Gulf crisis. As for it being "an unequal war", never in the history of nations has the cause been so just — ask the Kuwaitis how they felt about being invaded and plundered by an "unequal", huge and battle-hardened army!

To say that "we are at a nodal point of our planet's affairs" is unnecessarily melodramatic. And to speak of the Middle East feeling the "Texan jackboots on its neck for the foreseeable future" is a complete misreading of the allied ambitions in the region. The US has affirmed time and again that it does not wish for its troops to be there for a day longer than necessary.

Nancy Wong
Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Happy spenders

Sir, A recent news item said that young unmarried Japanese women, or maidens whatever we may choose to call them, are the best spenders and happiest persons!

Well, women have always been well known as spenders. In old days they preferred that men would earn and either spend for them or let them spend on themselves. Anyway, that spending has been a matter of delight to women throughout the ages, is no

Anti-miscreant drive

Sir, A news item says that the police are following an anti-criminal drive in the city. They have up to date rounded about some hundred of miscreants in this connection.

Well, so far so good, but the point I would like to stress is that in the process of cleansing the city of

miscreants, they do not harass the public in general.

For it so happens that in an effort to perform their duties they often overdo it.

Well, whatever, we do appreciate this attempt taken by the law enforcing agents, as indeed the law and order situation seems to be in a pitiable state. And if we really want to do something about it, we will all have to make serious effort.

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Motijheel, Dhaka.

Rajiv Talukdar
Chittagong.