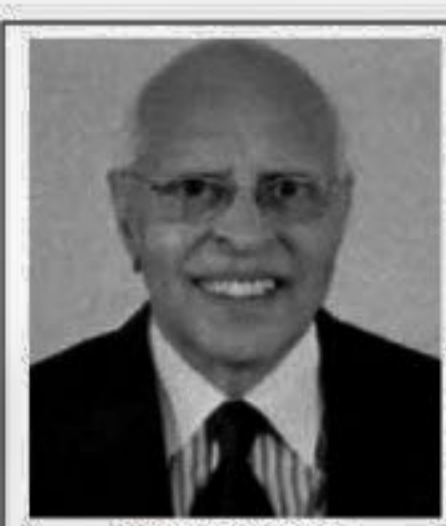


BOTTOM LINE

The trip to Tripura



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's two-day visit to Tripura on January 11-12 was the first by any prime minister of Bangladesh. The visit assumes significance in many respects.

It underscores not only the broadening and deepening of relations with Tripura state but also the desirability of a closer integration of Bangladesh's economy with that of the northeastern states of India.

During the Indian prime minister's visit to Dhaka last September, the chief ministers of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram accompanied Dr. Singh and supported close engagement with Bangladesh.

Chief Minister of Tripura Manik Sarkar said: "The people of Tripura and the people of Bangladesh have always had close relations at socio-cultural level and these relations are being further strengthened."

We tend to forget that Bengali is also spoken in Tripura. Tripura's Finance Minister Badal Chowdhury (who had his primary education in erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh), drove home this point by saying: "Though 60% of people of Tripura have direct or indirect roots in Bangladesh, the entire population of the state become emotional when they talk about Bangladesh."

Tripura shares an 874-km border with Bangladesh and support and cooperation from Tripura state is required in sharing of waters or fixing boundary on trans-boundary rivers -- Feni, Muhuri, Gumti, Khowai and Manu -- which flow from that state to Bangladesh.

The people of Tripura extended their helping hand during the Liberation War of 1971. According to historian and writer Bikash Chowdhury, Tripura had six to seven camps in four different sectors from where the 'muktijoddhas' (freedom fighters) fought the Pakistani forces in the liberation war.

Sheikh Hasina said: "I was further amazed when I came to know that before this university was set up, this place was a training camp of the Bangladesh liberation soldiers. How can we not remember with gratitude our friends in need in Tripura and India?"

The prime minister was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the Central University in Tripura. India's Vice-President Hamid Ansari said: "We admire your courage, prime minister, in facing the threats of terrorism and extremism afflicting humanity, your advocacy of pluralism, moderation and tolerance, and the ambitious agenda of economic growth, welfare and social justice that you have planned for and implemented in Bangladesh."

Ansari further added that Bangladesh provided critical links to the economy, ecology and environment of the north-east region. He said India was committed to fashioning economic and trade arrangements, not only for ensuring closer integration of the region with the national economy, but also with the neighbouring economies.

During the visit, Sheikh Hasina urged India to be more generous and liberal in helping to resolve pending bilateral issues such as water management. She also appealed to India to import more from Bangladesh to remove the gap in trade. Indian investors too should make more investments.

She emphasised that connectivity between India and Bangladesh, particularly with the north-eastern states, including Tripura, would generate tremendous economic vibrancy, leading to people's empowerment and region's development.

She urged India, Nepal and Bhutan to make the best use of Chittagong and Mongla ports, which Bangladesh has already opened for these neighbouring countries, to access the sea route for their trade and commercial activities.

Later, at the civic reception accorded to her by the Agartala Municipal Corporation, Sheikh

Hasina said Bangladesh was keen to undertake a joint venture project for power generation through utilisation of the vast natural gas reserve in Tripura, and that once the project was realised her country would also buy power from them. She also said that four new border 'haats' (markets) would be set up by India and Bangladesh to facilitate trade.

It is noted that the growth of the economy of the region is half of the economic growth of mainland India. It seems that the purpose of such massive plan

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Iran's dangerous brinkmanship

ZIAUS SHAMS SHOWDDHURY

LOOKING objectively at the unfolding crisis in the Gulf, it is crystal clear that Iran's on-going nuclear programme, now widely believed to be in pursuit of weapons, is an extremely dangerous move. Both, according to the report of International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA and Iran's own assertion, Iran is now enriching uranium to 20% level, way above 3.5% needed for power stations, and closer to weapons grade.

In a politically combustible region where wars have been fought in recent decades and where there is a toxic atmosphere of distrust, cataclysmic consequences could flow from Iran's action, which will dwarf anything we have seen before. Iran must be living in a delusional world if it thinks that the US, EU nations, its Gulf Arab neighbours, not speak of Israel, will remain passive in face of this provocative intent.

On November 27, 35-member IEAE passed a resolution by an overwhelming 25-3 margin that prevents Iran from developing an enrichment facility in secrecy. IAEA demanded an immediate freeze on the enrichment activity. Significantly, China, Russia and India -- the countries with which Iran is supposed to have good relations -- also voted in favour. Iran's isolation on the issue was starkly clear.

The US and Israel in particular, and the European Union in no lesser degree, are deeply alarmed that Iran's acquisition of nuclear bomb will radically alter the strategic balance and dangerously destabilise the region. Iran's erratic behaviour and its incendiary rhetoric have worked as a driver behind such an assessment.

The Gulf Arab nations which have deep historical distrust towards Iran are also nervous about Iran's intent. With its revolutionary ethos, Iran is thought to be a sinister source of their insecurity. Never was this anxiety given a more acerbic utterance than the exhortation of Saudi King Abdullah in a conversation with General Petraeus, the US commander in the region, for a preemptive strike to take out Iran's nuclear installations.

According to a WikiLeaks disclosure, the King urged the US to "cut off the head of the snake." Recently, Iran was accused of a plot -- which failed to materialise -- to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Against this backdrop, if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will never feel secure without taking to the nuclear road.

Other GCC countries will fully and zealously support the Saudis in pursuit of deterrence. Israel has made it clear that it will do everything in its power to thwart Iran's acquisition of nuclear capability and is believed to be behind

the clandestine killings of a number of Iranian atomic scientists.

Right now we are watching a deeply troubling turn of events as the American orchestrated sanctions start to stifle Iran like a vise. Historically, sanctions have proved a blunt weapon, but in the case of Iran in the present situation, for the first time, we are seeing a difference.

Let us enumerate a few facts to underline Iran's mounting woes. The Iranian currency depreciated 60% ((9,700 to a dollar to 15,600) since Obama became president. Prices of commodities and raw materials have seen a sharp rise, causing a 50% decline in business in Iran and unspeakable hardship for the people. All these things have been recently reported by *Washington Post*.

Far greater trouble for Iran looms on the horizon as prospect of its oil export, from which 60% of its foreign exchange comes, begins to darken. This time Obama has done a savvy

It is hard to understand why Iran is so hell-bent on having nuclear weapons. It does not face any existential threat nor any compulsion of the kind that Pakistan felt after India went nuclear. By its inane pursuit of nuclear weapon it has put itself in a dire plight.

diplomatic job in garnering international backing for a sanction regime whose impact is so different from anything seen before. A *New York Times* report on January 6 says that under US pressure, Japan and South Korea, two of Iran's major oil importers, have been reluctantly exploring alternative import markets.

The Chinese premier will be visiting three Gulf Arab countries shortly, which may be an indication that China may be looking for alternative suppliers of its oil which it mostly imports from Iran. China, Japan, Korea and India together import more than 60% of Iran's oil. The combined effect of these sales losses on an economy already reeling could be devastating. Iran has become a kind of a pariah state with few friends.

When a nation is gripped by a siege mentality, its leaders are apt to behave irrationally and unpredictably. This irrationality syndrome has been evident in some of Iran's

actions. On November 29, two British diplomatic compounds in Tehran were overrun in the fashion of the 1979 assault on US embassy. It was soon evident that this was a reckless action which could not be sustained. After a swift retaliation by Britain, which expelled the entire Iranian mission in London, a damage management effort was undertaken. A senior ayatollah described the seizures of the British embassy as "illegal."

Iran's media were also trying to shift the public attention from initial triumphalism over the British embassy episode to the mourning of Muharram. The Iranian public, according to the *Economist* magazine, are very nervous after the departure of the British diplomats in Tehran. They fear that this has removed whatever inhibitions there might have been on the part of US and EU for toughening the sanction regime and for an Israeli or American attack.

Iran's recent tendency to punch above its weight is also manifested in the warning given to the US aircraft carrier John C. Stennis and its escort ships not to return to the Strait of Hormuz, and a threat that it will block the shipping in the gulf. Iran has also announced that it is going to stage a second naval exercise in the gulf. In a demonstration of intent that Iran's brinkmanship will be confronted, the US and Israel have made it known that they will hold a joint maneuver, Austere Challenge 12, which will test multiple air defence systems against incoming missiles.

Some experts believe that Iran cannot attack the shipping in the Gulf because of two reasons, namely, Iran stands to suffer more from such an action, and, it could invite US attack on its nuclear sites. Gary Sick, a former White House expert on Iran and a professor of Columbia University, thinks Iran could fire missiles and mine the Strait out of desperation.

On any rational view it is hard to understand why Iran is so hell-bent on having nuclear weapons. It does not face any existential threat nor any compulsion of the kind that Pakistan felt after India went nuclear. By its inane pursuit of nuclear weapon it has put itself in a dire plight.

Iran has badly miscalculated international sentiment as manifested by its isolation. Those who care for world peace cannot but feel dismayed that any conflagration in the Gulf will send the oil price exploding, thereby grievously compounding the already fragile global economy and the chances of its recovery. If ever there was a brewing crisis that needed an international initiative to defuse it, the present situation in the Gulf is one. The question is will some nations that may have some leverage can embark on such an initiative.

The writer is a former Ambassador.

What lies ahead for Pakistan?

NEWSDESK, Dawn

EVERY week is seemingly "make or break" week in Pakistan. But last week and the one ahead could be crucial for the democratic process. Looking back, the last week ended on a relatively peaceable note with the civilian and military leadership gathering in the same room in front of the cameras for a meeting of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet and the prime minister expressing his support for the armed forces while calling on all institutions to respect the domains of one another.

Come Sunday, the prime minister didn't take the bait thrown his way by reporters' questions and simply stated that as PM he was only answerable to Parliament, side-stepping queries about a report, already denied by the presidency, that the army chief wanted the prime minister to either retract or clarify his remarks against the army leadership. This does not mean the crisis in civil-military relations is set to subside.

It will take many more confidence-building measures for the mistrust to be removed, if it, in fact, can be eliminated at such an advanced stage into the relationship between the present civilian and army leadership. The memo affair hangs heavy over the skewed relationship between the political government and the army. In the week ahead,

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much of the focus will be on how the judicial commission's inquiry into the Mansoor Ijaz memo progresses and what happens in the Supreme Court with respect to the implementation of the NRO judgment. A re-escalation in tensions between the government and the judiciary is not inevitable.

From the PPP camp there have been noises that the party may agree to write the letter to Swiss authorities that the SC has adamantly demanded in a case pertaining to money stashed in Swiss accounts that allegedly belong to President Zardari. If the court also shows some flexibility, something it has graciously done on numerous occasions despite warning of dire consequences, the country may begin to limp away from the present state of elevated tensions.

So far, what the country has seen amounts to one step forward, two back and then two steps forward, one back. The net result: the country is near paralysed politically. Having seemingly moved little in any direction, be it forwards towards a permanent resolution of the crisis or backwards towards a tragic mistake by one or more sides, perhaps now is the time for the government to step up and provide an authoritative road map to get democracy back on track.

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