

Regional Cooperation May Elude South Asia

by Daya Kishan Thussu

South Asia is one of the world's most populous regions and also one of its poorest. Rivalry between India and Pakistan, its two most important countries, have thwarted moves towards greater regional economic cooperation. During the Cold War the two were in opposing camps. Now the change in balance could usher in greater understanding in 1992.

Time to Clarify

Tension along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, despite assurances from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, does not seem to be easing. On the contrary, press reports suggest that the Myanmar military build-up has taken on a more serious turn with the construction of five helipads and re-activation of an old airfield close to the border in recent days. In that context, neither Myanmar's attack on a Bangladesh Rifles post on December 21 nor the violation of Bangladeshi airspace by a Myanmar helicopter escorted by a fighter aircraft last week seem like isolated incidents. The Myanmar Ambassador to Bangladesh would certainly like us to believe that they were isolated cases, but we are under no compulsion to take his words at face value, especially given the type of the regime he represents. At the same time, the foreign ministry in Dhaka has not been frank enough about the events either.

The situation now calls for some urgently needed clarification and a public statement on the policy Bangladesh is pursuing in relation to Myanmar and the Rohingyas. We have a parliament in session at the moment and the foreign minister should clarify his policy and his interpretations of recent events to the House without any delay. The Jatiya Sangsad should, from now on, make a point of devoting ample time, even a whole day's sitting, to issues related to conduct of foreign policy. The continuing crisis with Myanmar has demonstrated — if it ever needed such a demonstration — that no matter how friendly an attitude we may harbour towards a neighbouring state, the possibilities of friction are real and ever-present. We are rightly committed to good neighbourliness, but that commitment must not be seen as a sign of weakness. It was necessary, following Myanmar's violation of Bangladeshi airspace last week, to take a visibly strong line. Whatever strong protest the ministry might have lodged with the Myanmar Ambassador, the public remained largely in the dark, since the information released contained more about what the Myanmar Ambassador had to say.

The foreign minister should find no better source of strength than the Jatiya Sangsad. Once he takes the House into confidence by initiating a full debate on the floor of parliament, he would be in a position to fully articulate his policies to the representatives of the people and obtain backing of parliament for his stance. But he must explain his stance first.

The major issue at stake is the one dealing with the Rohingyas. We have taken them in as refugees, in a humanitarian gesture. That much is well understood. However, that still leaves the question of how a number of Rohingya organisations have managed to sprout and operate inside Bangladesh despite apparent official disapproval. The question of how the government intends to deal with the issue of repatriation under the present circumstances is also one that needs to be clarified to the public through parliament. How long a large group of refugees — numbering anything between 50,000 and 1,50,000, not counting those who remained in Bangladesh illegally after the 1979 repatriation — can be allowed to roam freely inside the country, with all the legal, political, social and economic complications that this may give rise to, is something the government has to consider seriously.

No Easy Way Out

A news report from Netrokona says that there are about 10,000 drug addicts in that district. Some may feel this to be alarming. Netrokona after all had been a far-off nook of a countryside with more hills and dales and beels and haors than populated localities. From where could on such a forsaken land 10,000 young people infected with that western disease more sweeping than either AIDS and Herpes descend? But the realities of the land are quite contrary — informed people might find this figure well on the conservative side. This is perhaps the size of the young crowd that queue up before the 'pharmacies' for their dose of 'medicine' unfailingly after each nightfall. The figure has been credited to a social worker's exertions in The Daily Star despatch published on Sunday who very obviously note into account the ramifications of the evil practice up to the upazila level.

In the metropolitan cities the problem takes on deceptive look, posing as the disease of the wayward progeny of the well-provided people. And, as is so natural, much exhortations have been spent on what a bad thing drug taking is — and some half-hearted had also been taken to set up centres for treating addiction patients — most of which have already run out of steam. And the whole of the nation's drug addiction profile has been totally ignored if only because the government — not to speak of the social institutions — knows well that it has wee little power to do anything about this mighty challenge. An evening in Narayanganj will convince anyone of the hopelessness of the situation — and the far-off Netrokona scene can only underline that sense of despair. Is there a way out, or isn't?

In Malaysia even foreign citizens have been hanged for possessing narcotic material — urgent and express persuasion from governments abroad have failed to stall any of the death sentences. Who doesn't know why and how Diego Maradona fell from the top spot of world esteem and admiration to something next only to a pariah dog. Strangely enough no one has heard of any "narcotics" sentence passed by any judge. How we wish we could also hang people for keeping, dealing in and partaking of the thing that is dangerous not only to individual lives but to social existence as a whole? But our socio-economic realities do not indeed permit us to go for such harsh punitive measures if only because that would neither be implementable and nor would it be any effective deterrent.

The main reason behind large-scale conversion to addiction lies in insecurity, both individual and social. Economic as well as emotional. And very peripherally in any bent for criminality. A true antidote must involve a very long-drawn-out struggle for a secure and stable society tied necessarily with the general need of well-being of the whole people. As a shorter time-frame measure social action is a good bet provided that this is truly social and timely action which is not the case with parading done on Dhaka streets and photos published thereof in the newspapers. In drug addiction we are stuck up in a really nation-sized problem. And no easy way out or bluffing may kindly be resorted to.

MOVES towards regional cooperation in Europe and other parts of the world will leave their impact on South Asian nations in 1992. New international relations in the post-Cold War world could spur greater regional cooperation to cope with internal challenges and external changes.

In Colombo in December, the sixth summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives, recognised the need for strengthening regional cooperation.

However, observers believe any moves towards cooperation in the economic field are unlikely to be successful given the endemic distrust among countries in the region. Smaller countries fear domination by India, the biggest of the seven with a huge industrial and technological edge.

It is unlikely that any significant treaties will be signed in the New Year since neighbouring countries are suspicious of Indian intentions and do not want their markets flooded with Indian goods. The West, which has traditionally had close relations with Pakistan and Sri Lanka, would also discourage any Indian economic domination.

The other factor restricting closer ties among countries of the Indian subcontinent is the continuing tension between India and Pakistan, particularly over Kashmir. India will stress

Pakistan involvement in political violence in the border states of Kashmir and Punjab to hide New Delhi's lack of political initiative in solving these crises.

India's problems with Sri Lanka over the treatment of Tamil ethnic groups will continue in 1992. However, diminishing Indian support to some Tamil groups in the wake of their alleged involvement in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination will please Colombo. The view of small nations like Bangladesh and Nepal of India as the "big bully" is unlikely to change.

Internationally, the most important change in the region will probably be the improvement in Indian relations with the United States. Having lost its traditional ally, the Soviet Union, New Delhi is anxious to find a role in the new world order.

The emphasis will be on its democratic credentials and the liberalisation of its economy. Already Washington has bailed India out of a severe balance-of-payment crisis by facilitating a loan of two billion dollars from the IMF.

The US is keen to invest in a country which, despite its notorious bureaucracy, has a

West-oriented middle class of 200 million, which is becoming increasingly consumerist. With the arrival of the American Cable News Network (CNN) in India, that group will grow. The US sees India as a long-term strategic ally and shares its concern over growing Islamic fundamentalism.

However, differences over refusal by India to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which it says is discriminatory, will hinder relations. The US is also unhappy with India over the issue of Intellectual Property Rights in the current GATT talks.

Besides, given the nature of the Indian government — Nehruvian Socialism and self-reliance coupled with the policy of non-alignment — it is dangerous to assume that New Delhi will sing to the tune of Uncle Sam.

Closer ties with India will inevitably lead to the weakening of the US relationship with Pakistan. During the Cold War Islamabad was keen to play the role of a frontline state against communism as a member of the now defunct defence organisations CENTO and SEATO, spending a disproportionate

high amount on defence.

However, with the thaw in East-West relations and Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan's importance in US strategic thinking has diminished. Moreover, the US is opposed to its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

The other significant diplomatic development is the thaw in relations between India and China, although the border dispute remains unresolved.

If the two Asian giants are to be heard at an international level, they will have to work together to safeguard the interests of the developing world. Premier Li Peng's visit to India in December has already laid a foundation for this rapprochement.

Both have an instinctive suspicion of US policies and would like to strengthen a Third World bloc to check untrammelled US domination in international relations.

All countries of the region now profess democracy at home. With the mature Narasimha Rao at the helm, democracy in India is in safe hands. In Pakistan, too, democracy will increase its foothold under the leadership

of astute Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

In Nepal the government of Prime Minister GP Koirala strives to limit the power of the King and make democracy work to alleviate the oppressive poverty of the hill state. Bangladesh Premier Begum Khaleda Zia, despite her relatively long political experience, is expected to learn to use foreign aid sensibly.

President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka, who survived an impeachment in 1991, will keep on playing one faction of separatist Tamils against another. A serious initiative to resolve the ethnic violence in the north and east of the republic is unlikely in the New Year.

In Bhutan the youthful King Jigme Singye Wangchuk will continue to dominate state affairs, while the Maldives President Maumoon Gayoom may go ahead with multi-party elections in his island nation.

In the field of economics, the region — one of the world's poorest — will continue to move towards a free market. Privatisation of generally over-staffed and inefficient public sectors — already undertaken in a big way in Pakistan — will

extend to other countries, axing a large number of jobs. This may result in labour unrest, affecting production. Ethnic and sectarian violence may increase because of economic difficulties.

With the decline of communism, many will look to indigenous ideas for development. Already in India the need to reassess Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on political decentralisation, small-scale industries and ecology is gaining currency.

Environmental issues will also move up in the region's political agenda as greater foreign investment and industrialisation will mean more ecological degradation.

Religion will be on the ascendance in an area where it has always been dominant. The 1991 electoral success of the Hindu-revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party in India indicates the potential of right-wing parties. This trend could grow with the demise of socialism and may be especially visible in India where the secular nature of the state is under strain.

While intellectuals debate the merits or demerits of privatisation, agonise over self-reliance or capitulation to multinationals, the majority will find refuge in the dream world of India's burgeoning film industry.

In the New Year, as in previous years, they will get on with their lives with colour and gusto.

— GEMINI NEWS

THE basic message that dominates the official Serbian culture is that Eastern Christianity and the Byzantine civilisation have been rejected and are threatened by Western Christianity and European civilisation. The ethnocentrism and xenophobia that underlie this message is prevalent in post-communist Serbia today.

The collapse of communism as an ideology and global political project has brought about two main events in Central and Eastern Europe. One, a crisis in the "ideological empires" (the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia), that is, in multi-ethnic states and societies born of force and the "new religion" and not of free choice and the logics of interest, and two, an ideological, intellectual and emotional vacuum at both the individual and mass levels.

For the ordinary man, communism was not just an ideological system and a totalitarian form of social and state organisation. It was also a form of religious system. For the great majority, communism was a forcefully imposed form of "civil religion" which, in the common mind, was substituted for the original religion — Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, Jewish — that had been taken away by enforced atheism.

When the whirlwind of the events of last few years overthrew communism as a ruling ideology, political system and secular religion, it created a cognitive and emotional vacuum at the individual and mass levels. It shook awareness of identity and belonging, of what was allowed and what was forbidden, and even of good and evil.

Since the new, post-communist elites and the economic of these states did not allow people to look to the future, they turned to the past. The process through which the intellectuals, politicians and peoples of Central and Eastern Europe are passing through today is a form of search for a lost time. Some

Serbia: The Myth of Ethnic Narcissism

The collapse of communism in Europe has left a vacuum that is being filled by a nightmare of ideologies, among them the ethnocentrism and xenophobia that underlie the current conflict between the Yugoslavian republics of Serbia and Croatia, writes Croatian sociologist Slavica Letica from Zagreb.

authors call this a process of rebirth or the discovery of history.

Whatever the case, this "journey into the past," inspired by the need to revive a faded collective memory and tradition and to find cultural roots and identity, does not lead these people towards the European tradition.

Thus the ideological vacuum caused by the collapse of communism, instead of being filled with tolerance, Europlism, pluralism, modernism and post-modernism, is now being filled with a nightmare of ideologies and value systems: populism, nationalism, neo-despotism, monarchism, imperialism, racism and religious mysticism.

This is the chaos in which Serbia finds itself today. This is the background of its prominent intellectuals, and this is why they feel that Europe and the Vatican are threatening Byzantium and Belgrade.

The movements in art and architecture that swept through Western Europe (the renaissance, baroque, art nouveau, modernism, and others) did not take root in Serbia. Six centuries of Turkish rule over the principality of Serbia instilled a deep anti-European complex among Serbian intellectuals.

At the political level, the traditions of individualism, pluralism, respect of human rights and parliamentarism hardly exist there. Serbian art and culture developed mainly within the Serbian Orthodox Church, which alone was able to preserve freedom of action during the time of the Turkish empire.

The glorification of sacral

art and religious culture in general that dominates the thought and work of the Serbian intellectual elite can be understood from this standpoint. But what is not easy to understand is its xenophobia, anti-European and cultural intolerance (towards Islam and Muslims, for example).

An even greater problem is that influential Serbian intellectuals have for years been transmitting this xenophobia, intolerance and cultural aggression to the entire Serbian people.

A whole plexus of religious and secular intellectuals, gathered around the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Serbian Writers Society and the Serbian Orthodox Church, have managed since 1986 to infect Serbian politicians, soldiers and people with their xenophobia.

This manufactured feeling of being under collective ethnic threat gave rise in 1987 to a powerful national-socialist movement headed by Slobodan Milosevic. Since then, this movement has resulted in repression in Kosovo, a short war in Slovenia, and a long and tragic war in Croatia.

The war in Croatia is another example of "history repeating itself." At the end of the 20th century, Serbia is leading a conquering and imperialist war, based on deep religious, ethnic and cultural prejudices. It is a war born of an atavistic territorial instinct and a collective obsession for conquest, destruction and domination.

In the name of protecting its "living space" and defending its "threatened Serbian proportion of 'problem'." And by now it has gained ground down the level of menace even.

Very soon it will not remain — or perhaps it is already not — in the domain of effecting any solution. Then what; how to live up with? By eradicating the menace? Eradication of traffic! "Whether it is nobler in mind..."

A sufferer
Dhaka

Workaholic

Sir, The Dhaka city remains famous for its mosques. The Muslim is undoubtedly a Muslim one. It is a pleasure and a delight to visit all the mosques, not just in the city, but in entire Bangladesh.

With my bad nerves and being accident prone — apart from having very little money in my pocket — how do I hold my composure during the day? Having put my poetry books and novels aside, I am beckoned to perform my duties by the "aazan" in my vicinity.

The 9 am to 6 pm schedule must be followed at my office in Dhanmondi. I wish I knew how to take a "Roman Holiday" when — my other vices apart — I remain a "workaholic." Am I a sinner, anyway?

Nasreen,
Tikatuly, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Mosquito

Sir, I felt delighted to go through your second leader "The Puny Lords of the Nights" of Jan 4, because when the press takes up matters editorially, some among the authorities contemplate to rise to the occasion.

I wish some actions are in the process now, even if it is already much late, to relieve the Dhaka residents of the reigning mosquitoes.

A citizen
Downtown Dhaka

Dhaka roads

Sir, This is to bring to your notice that the roads in Dhaka are being rebuilt. Yet we find that it is extremely difficult to travel in the city.

While the roads are growing higher the drainage of the city is not being adequately maintained. Meanwhile the by-lanes remain broken constantly.

Why cannot we grow more trees to improve the ecology and environment? In that manner the country would not sink into the Bay of Bengal — as was feared during the last floods.

This, incidentally, was discussed on Australian TV. They feared that we, Bangladeshis, would all end up as the Vietnamese "boat people" and would need asylum.

G. H.
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Traffic

Sir, Perhaps even the most optimistic among us is never going to see any solution to our traffic problem. Rather than a "problem" one should call it a menace now. For how long a problem remains in the dimension of "problem" if left unresolved over the years? Virtually little or no attempt has been made to effect any "solution" since the time our traffic situation started taking

OPINION

Denationalization of Jute and Textile Industries

Akber Kabir

On 25th and 26th November last the country went through a trauma when labourers of nationalized Jute and Textile Industries conducted a road and railway blockade on the issue of a demand of Government announcement that no further denationalization of these two industries would occur. The labourers have also warned that if such an announcement was not made by a certain date, then again such action would be undertaken. The Government (I do not mean the present government only) has always failed to tackle this public nuisance.

In the election manifesto of Awami League in 1970 there was mention of nationalisation of some key industries. Achieving independence, Awami League government in fulfilment of its election pledge nationalized these two industries along with several others including banks and insurance companies. Initially, the management of the industries were left, where available, with the original entrepreneurs. Only the profit would come to the exchequer and not go to the proprietors (individuals, groups or shareholders). This arrangement naturally could not last and then management of industries was finally taken over by Government. It is alleged that there was no inventory and either bureaucrats, without any experience of running industries, or others equally inept were placed in charge. High hopes had been given to labour. Euphoria of liberation raised high expectations. Not only in industrial sections but

even in Government or semi Government organisations impractical demands began to power in, gheraos held, pay-hikes were enforced under duress. In this two industries, a way out was found to appease by recruitment of unneeded labour. There was corruption and what was most damaging, unmitigated inefficiency. Government policy of trying to operate an industry through bureaucratic red tape contributed no less to the sorry state of affairs. The industries naturally became unprofitable and were kept floating through subsidy and loans. When under military Government, it was decided to divest and taxpayers spared from meeting continued and ever increasing losses, not always the selection of what industries should be given to private purchasers and at what price was done objectively or on any national basis. Corruption played its role in these transactions also. So the expected benefit from privatisation was not there. On the contrary, labourers suffered not because of necessary retrenchment but many of the industrial units themselves were closed down.

The wisemen in the Government had instituted sector corporations to coordinate, supervise and help the units develop and function efficiently. What I have heard, and these observations were not irresponsibly made, these corporations turned out to be white elephants, adding cost but hardly contributing to any improvement in performance.

For a couple of years Government may allow credit facilities for working capital and for balancing, modernising, rehabilitation and expansion. No subsidy should be given and taxpayers will not bear any cost of operation. If an industry cannot survive, it would automatically go under liquidation. This would mean that the board that is the managing and supervising staff and labourers will ensure no corruption, no surplus labour, no unrealistic demand. In their own vital interest all employees will run the factory efficiently.