

WE WEEKEND M MAGAZINE

Conversation

The Foreign Ministry is Undergoing Reorganisation

IN any country, it is hard for a journalist to get to meet the foreign minister...

During his ten months in office, Mr A.S.M. Mustafizur Rahman has given indications that he is different from other foreign ministers...

It was characteristic of the Foreign Minister to agree to meet The Daily Star team for what we insisted would be a free-wheeling conversation...

During the conversation, the team from The Daily Star was led by the paper's Editor, S M Ali who was assisted by the Executive Editor, Mahfuz Anam and Assistant Editor, Sabir Mustafa...

Below is the text of the conversation between Foreign Minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman and The Daily Star team.

The Daily Star (DS): We have had a 20 years of foreign policy in Bangladesh, under different Presidents and now under a Prime Minister...

Foreign Minister (FM): In the past, there has been a tendency to go a little oblique towards a set of countries and ignore some countries...

DS: To be more specific - what are the areas of disagreement?

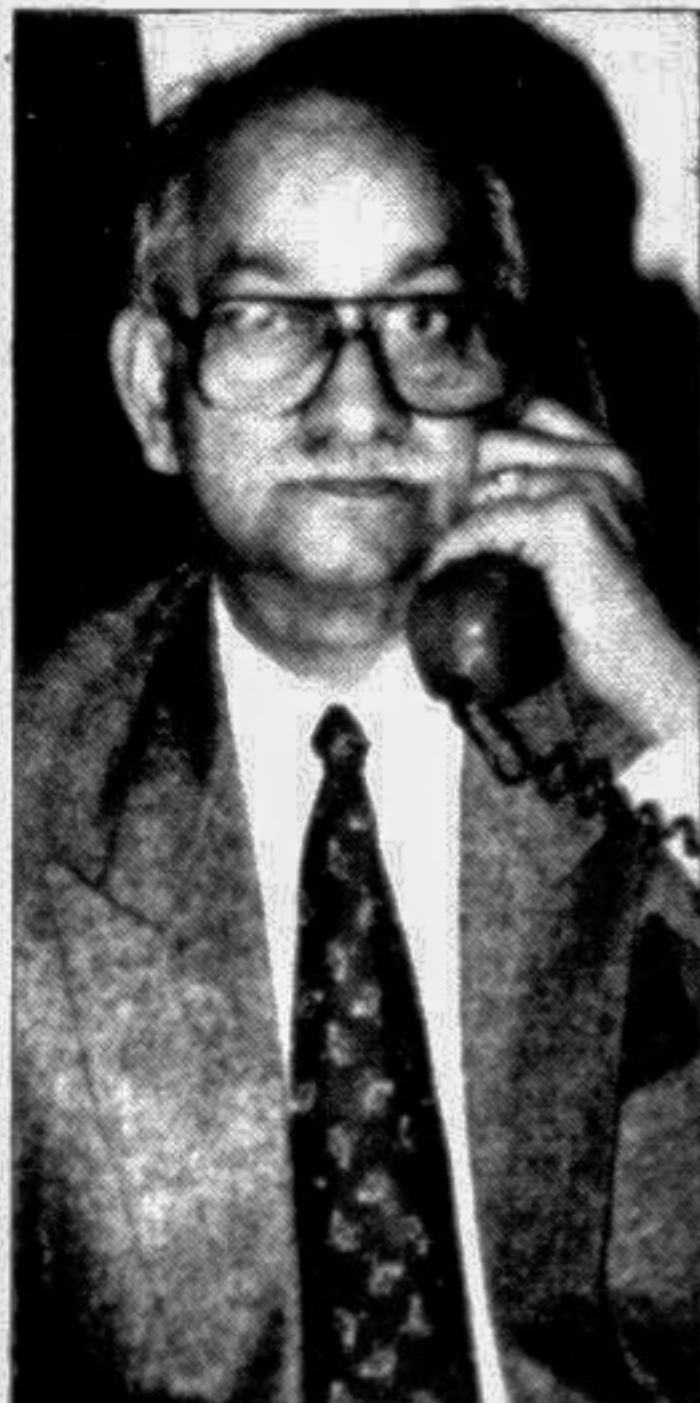
FM: There are certain areas where the people have disagreed in the past.

DS: You referred to governments in the past, which included the BNP-led administration by the late president Ziaur Rahman...

DS: One major difference of course has been the end of the Cold War which had influenced the policies during the time of president Ziaur Rahman...

Influence our policies to the same extent. How is Bangladesh responding to the new realities produced by the Cold War?

FM: We have closely monitored the overall situation. We had taken some time for the recognition of the new republics in the Soviet Union...



tration on regional identity, with a regional focus, on the way that it would approach. There is a regional study on trade manufacturers and services...

"In our case, we started a process of the pooling together of our knowledge, of starting the process by various institutional mechanisms, a structural growth, and moving towards a greater socio-economic relationships."

DS: You still had the opportunity, during bilateral talks, to discuss the bilateral issues. Do you feel that the SAARC was able to make some kind of a contribution in bringing a certain amount of understanding?

FM: Actually I would say, one good point of SAARC is also having an opportunity to go for bilateral issues as well, in which normally otherwise it would have to be programmed...

DS: Coming back to the November summit which was postponed, there are two questions. First, did you know that the King of Bhutan had declined to come, a week ahead of the summit?

FM: Actually, our officers were already in Colombo and they were working when the news broke that the King of Bhutan was unlikely to come...

DS: This is slightly perhaps outside the work of your ministry. But when you talk about help - there is a lot of

"Day by day Bangladesh is getting a name which is quite important from the peace keeping angle. Everybody in the international world, has started believing that Bangladesh believes in peace and Bangladesh policy is based on peace."

finish this meeting without the King of Bhutan. Therefore, we all went accordingly. However, the King of Bhutan was advised by his cabinet not to come...

Secondly, they made a strong appeal to India to accept a proxy, if for some reason, the King of Bhutan was not able to come...

DS: Just a quick question. Where do you stand now? Have you changed the working rule?

FM: No, not at all. To go back to your previous question, about my foreign policies I would like to add a few things. Our ambassadors have been asked now to involve themselves more on economic work...

DS: People say that, like many other ministries, the foreign office lacks professionalism and the morale is low...

FM: In this aspect, if we were a real democratic country it would be all right. I like the opposition should be constructive, not destructive.

DS: Let us talk about this in terms of foreign policy. Have you had non-cooperation or a destructive opposition in terms of foreign policy?

FM: Foreign policy has been a little away from others. I am a little safer.

DS: This is slightly perhaps outside the work of your ministry. But when you talk about help - there is a lot of



Foreign Minister A.S.M. Mustafizur Rahman in his office

est in seeing that its country's image improves, that will go through a process of reorganisation. But having been in this chair for, little over nine months, I cannot give it a complete overhaul...

DS: How did you find the morale of the foreign office when you took over? And what are you doing about establishing a ratio between political appointments and appointments of foreign office personnel?

FM: I have inherited a personnel policy I have not yet touched. But what I have successfully done is to bring up the morale of my foreign office officers. One reason is, I thought if I don't have a willing man working in this Ministry...

DS: How does 'unfortunately' fit in?

FM: In this aspect, if we were a real democratic country it would be all right. I like the opposition should be constructive, not destructive.

DS: Let us talk about this in terms of foreign policy. Have you had non-cooperation or a destructive opposition in terms of foreign policy?

FM: Foreign policy has been a little away from others. I am a little safer.

DS: This is slightly perhaps outside the work of your ministry. But when you talk about help - there is a lot of

"When ambassadors sent proposals to Dhaka, no one responded to that. Our ministry will play a role as a catalyst."

"From now on, we will monitor the work of every ambassador on a montly basis."

DS: You mentioned about the Opposition. Now, one of the issues the Opposition is interested in, where the Foreign Ministry is concerned, relates to the position of 11 or 12 diplomats posted abroad...

FM: Each of these diplomats is carrying a copy of an ordinance, the Indemnity one. What authority do I have or does anybody have to call them killers? Again, why did not the Opposition take any step all

we have to correct. We must get the priorities right. Aid is more and more conditional on what they call good government. On human rights, democratic process and, for once, this government is not on the defensive...

"You talk about development cooperation, not getting aid just for the sake of getting aid. It is to get the aid, to use the aid efficiently, and to move towards what we call development cooperation."

on. The impact of this should be in such a manner that the poorest of the poor are not affected. So this is point two. The third conditionality, is more in terms of economic development which is defined for us as the twin objectives for us of promoting growth on the one hand and of alleviating poverty on the other...

Finally, one of the things about the past regime was, which was more and more concentration in what we call aidcentricity. More and more it was seen that our representatives went around with a begging bowl to every country and we were projecting how much aid we got from this country or that country...

"When ambassadors sent proposals to Dhaka, no one responded to that. Our ministry will play a role as a catalyst."

"From now on, we will monitor the work of every ambassador on a montly basis."

DS: You mentioned about the Opposition. Now, one of the issues the Opposition is interested in, where the Foreign Ministry is concerned, relates to the position of 11 or 12 diplomats posted abroad...

these years to repeal this ordinance or even to file any FIR against any of them? So, you must appreciate my position regarding these diplomats.

DS: But why in the Foreign Office? Since they are posted abroad, the issue does affect the image of the country?

FM: They were put in the Foreign Ministry. In this sense, I inherited them. They can continue to be in the service of this Ministry until such time as the policy of the government is changed or they retire.

DS: We have taken a good deal of your time, Mr Foreign Minister. So, may we ask you to sum up some of your views on the changes you have made in the Ministry or take up issues which we might have left out?

FM: As the Foreign Minister I see that, day by day Bangladesh is getting a name which is quite important from the peace keeping angle.



Everybody in the international world, has started believing that Bangladesh believes in peace and Bangladesh policy is based on peace. So we are likely to play an important role, wherever peace keeping or peace negotiations are likely to take place...

Here I would very briefly mention, four or five other points about what we plan to do to activate our missions more in economic and trade fields.

So, here are a few specific areas where we have been monitoring the performance of our missions. One is trade. The second is in the area of employment. For example, to give you one very specific exercise we are doing is to see how we can get remittances from the Gulf countries...

When ambassadors sent proposals to Dhaka, no one responded to that. Our ministry will play a role as a catalyst. We will interact more closely with the Ministries of Commerce, the Export Promotion Bureau, the Ministry of Industries, as well as with the private sector.

DS: You have said another thing which I think is very important, and I would like to highlight - that all the people working in various missions will now be accountable to your ministry, which was not the case before.

FM: Absolutely and to follow up on that, let me say this, every ambassador without exception - his performance will be monitored, he will have set targets and he must deliver. And if he does not deliver, he is out.

DS: In this regard, I would like to specifically focus on the whole question of our trade with India, and the whole thing about smuggling. Now we know that the Prime Minister said the other day the economy is being destroyed as a result of smuggling - and most of it is Indian smuggled goods. Now I have had talks with some officers of the Commerce Ministry...

FM: I will explain to you. I went to India. I told India about it. In the balance of payment we are badly off, you better do something. They said, we will give you one single country entry. It stopped there and I came back and told the Commerce Ministry...

DS: Is the imbalance in the trade relationship between Bangladesh and India at this stage due to lack of interest on the part of both governments, or is it due to lack of coordination, or is it political?

FM: Let me make this clear. We have taken a stance on India now. In the past, our foreign policy often had an anti-Indian bias. Plus we have a great number of people who are anti-Indian due to a number of reasons...

DS: This provision of single country entry, what does it mean in economic terms?

FM: Single country entry, means they will not allow imports from any other country other than Bangladesh of that particular item. Look at trade with India or for that matter with any other country. There are certain complementarities...

Garments - India is competing with us. What is the quantum of trade we are going to have? Where are the areas that it is going to open up? From one point of view, we import \$ 3.7 billion worth of goods. Basically, it is fuel. It is food, and things like that. Now what do we have with India? Some of our non-traditional goods, we can talk about - naphtha, pulp, things of that

(Continued on Page 10)