The Baily Star

Conversation

The Foreign Ministry is Undergoing Reorganisation

In his first-ever in-depth interview — an exclusive to The Daily Star — since he took office some ten months ago, Foreign

Minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman discusses the whole range of issues and problems facing the country's relations with the

sonnel?

N any country, it is hard for a journalist to get to meet the foreign minister, not certainly for a long conversation. He is off from one conference to another, and, in his absence, his pending tray becomes full, with a few requests for interviews, which do not unfortunately get much priority. Last but not the least, most foreign ministers are not particularly communicative individuals. If diplomacy has acquired a few connotations. secrecy seems to be one of tored the overall situation. We

During his ten months in office. Mr A.S.M. Mustafizur Rahman has given indications that he is different from other foreign ministers we have known in various countries. including our own. He is open, forthright and eager to listen as much as to talk, maintaining a balance that is often lacking in conversations with other prominent personalities.

It was characteristic of the Foreign Minister to agree to meet The daily Star team for what we insisted would be a free-wheeling conversations. without any question submitted to his office in advance. There was some problem in deciding on the time of the interview. We had to catch him between one foreign mission and other. However, when we finally met him, he had all the time for us. He was affable, relaxed and communicative on issues which might have been taboos with any other minister in the government.

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. With the Foreign Minister were the Foreign Secretary, Riaz Rahman and the Additional Foreign Secretary, Farooq Sobhan.

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

The Dally Star (DS): We have had a 20 years of foreign policy in Bangladesh, under different Presidents and now under a Prime Minister. What would be the distinguishing marks in the foreign policy that you, as the Foreign Minister, have pursued during the last 10 months and in what way is it different from any thing that had been done in the past ?

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. But in our foreign policy, we offer no preferential treatment for any country. However, certain emphasts has been given to two areas. One is, those countries who are our neighbours who will get little or more preference and assistance from us and another is, because we are 82-83 per cent Muslims, so we have associated ourselves with the Muslim block. These are the salient features. But in that process, we have not ignored any country, nor have gone oblique to any country. I can say that past government was hesitant to go on with Iran. hesitant with Russia. These two are the things. I think we have observed, which we think in our case are not there. We have talked with both the countries. We have had relevant talks. And now we are in a very happy position with all the countries.

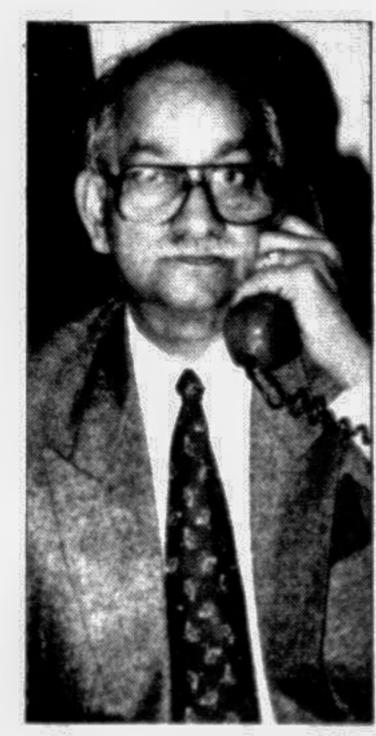
DS: You referred to gov ernments in the past, which included the BNP-led administration by the late president Ziaur Rahman. Do you see anything that was done in President Ziaur Rahman's time which are influencing your policies now, but which did not influence the policies of

president Ershad? FM: Actually after a gap of nine and a half years, I would say, that policy had come back With the exception, that would say, there might have been some situations in those days, and not present now There will be a variables in this two. But that variation will be limited. But basic things would not vary very much from president Ziaur Rahman's time to

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, and which does not

influence our policies to the same extent. How is Bangladesh responding to the new realities produced by the Cold War? FM: We have closely moni-

had taken some time for the recognition of the new republics in the Soviet Union because we felt that this needed close monitoring and assessment. But certainly we would like to go along with the rest of the world and see that this world enjoys peace which has been eluding us for a long



DS: Coming to the question SAARC. Recently in the Colombo summit, we saw a major trauma. Impact of the first collapse. A rather cursory summit, a one-day, twelvehour summit. How do you assess the strength of SAARC

at the moment?

FM: The meeting of December 21, according to me has been something which is unique. In this respect, that after the November postpone ment many people predicted that SAARC's last nail on the coffin has been put in. Our Prime Minister and myself were both quite optimistic that it will come back to its original place. So on December 21, I was very im pressed in a way, that the leaders talked and the cordiality that was prevalent in the atmosphere. It had given me all the hope in December, that SAARC was certainly going to move a little faster than we expected in November.

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

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

When SAARC was set up, it was mentioned that issues like bilateral issues would not be discussed in SAARC.

Secondly, the principle of unanimity became a basic rule of SAARC, the idea being that we should concentrate on those issues that unite us. rather than those that divide us. Then SAARC began at a nu cleus stage. The forums of regional integration are many such as very sophisticated ones like you can have common market, you can have customs union, you can have single currency unit. In our case, we started a process of the pool ing together of our knowledge, of starting the process by various institutional mechanism, a structural growth, and moving towards a greater socio-economic relationships. What I mean by that is, in the socioeconomic field, until now, in the first six years of SAARC, the concentration has on the clearing house effect. There were seminars, workshops and activities of that nature. But the hard correlations of trade manufacturers, services, industrial cooperations, joint ventures, which would show a greater cooperation amongst the SAARC countries, have not taken shape. One of the ideas was, a sum-up of bilateral rela

tionships, and another is, to

come up with an aggregation of

policies that had a regional fo-

cus - a regional plan of action.

Now, for the first time the last

SAARC moved with a concen-

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. There is a regional study also on the causes and consequences of natural disasters. protection and preservation of the environment. There is harmonisation of plans regarding poverty alleviation, concept of basic need perspective 2000. So. SAARC is moving towards a more practical long time orientation. At the same time, the expectations of the people are much greater than the pace in which you can move. On bilateral matters, we have kept the hard core issues away. And we said other areas are plenty, where we can slowly come in together.

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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 i would have to be programmed There you get a much better atmosphere. After coming out of SAARC meeting, when you are talking, the atmosphere is much better to talk on. That's a benefit.

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? If you knew then what efforts were made by Bangladesh to save 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. But having the experience in the past, some meetings were held without the head of the ' state being present. Officially it was not supposed to be held with a proxy, but then it was. Having that experience we thought we would be able to

bу 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. At that time he had also asked the members, the SAARC representatives, that he would be sending a representative nominated by him. This was the first letter, and then he sent a second, third and fourth letter, but there was no objection to this. It was only on the night that the Indian Foreign Minister arrived. And the morning after there was a meeting amongst the foreign ministers. Here India took a stand — that the unanimity rule has to prevail and India was opposed to any proxy representatives. At that time, foreign ministers made a very strong appeal that all seven should make an appeal to the King of Bhutan that he should

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. On the Indian side, the position was that unanimity should be maintained by a high level representation, otherwise SAARC would gradually be eroded. And therefore they held to that position. SAARC operates by unanimity. And ultimately that rule is the binding fact.

total candour, Mr Rahman outlines his plan for reorganisation of the foreign office.

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 new to involve themselves more on economic work. But now I am treating my ambassadors as trade representatives. They have to sell and buy. This is a process which Bangladesh should promote. Secondly, I have said that this foreign office is going to be a monitoring headquarter, to see how much they sold, of how much they have been able to achieve. Because I intend to get worth for my

DS: People say that, like many other ministries, the foreign office lacks professionalism and the morale is low. It is not assertive in many different countries. Again, the problem you mentioned, it does not pay enough attention to trade and economic matters. I would also say as a journalist, I feel it does not pay enough attention to the role of the country in media — in the countries where your missions are situated. Within one mission you have a labour attache, who is answerable to labour ministry you have a press attache who is answerable to information.

FM: Number one, I have said that different ministries are also sending people to work in our missions. But let me tell you that, we have decided, they would come under the purview of the foreign ministry. They will remain under their ministries, but, for work, they will be answerable to Foreign Ministry. About professionalism, I must say. that due to nine and half years with different policies pursued by this Ministry — we are subjected to many things which are guite different than what they were meant to be. This has not taken place with this government. Unprofessional people were recruited, appointed and sent out. And actually, in some cases, I would say that missions served as dumping stations.

This sort of things do happen. But when a political government came which is inter-

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 per-

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, thought if I don't have a willing man working in this Ministry I am not worth calling a leader and I believe that I should be able to put in him the confidence he needs. I am not an unfair man. I do not believe in going after some people unnecessarily, but at the same time I am a strong believer in discipline.If I am a disciplined man. I also want a disciplined surrounding. We are slowly trying to, now you can say I am cajoling somebody, and coaxing somebody. But in the process I am getting to the process whereby I see my officers with more smiling faces than in the past. I am also going through some important changes, changes which have been in my mind for a long time. And that too we are doing through a process. Unfortunately, we are a democratic country now. Every action of ours can be questioned.

How 'unfortunately' fit in?

FM: In this aspect, if we were a real demogratic country it would be all right. I like the opposition should be constructive, not destructive. There is a tendency of destructive attitude which I do not like, personally, I am a great believer of democracy: am a great believer in being criticised. But I would like criticism to be in the right place and right forum. I do not believe in bargaining. I do not believe in going out to the street hitting the cars and breaking their glasses. We have a parliament. Let us talk there.

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.

l am a little safer. Foreign policy is really a product of our domestic strength. At a time, when the situation of the country is uneven, foreign policy shows the country's position, strengths and weaknesses. We cannot divorce the two.

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

ested in seeing that its coun try'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. Nor can bring about changes because everything will entail money But what we are trying to do is we will organise this. We will go through a process and we will bring it up to the professtonal level.

talk about aid and that less than 10 or 20 per cent of for eign aid is actually utilised. But there is a lot of money in the pipeline. What is your comment on this?

FM: I think, the conditions attached to the aid are some times tough. Some conditionalities make it difficult to decide - where to utilise. Secondly. we have our preferences. It is not a one-sided story. There are also our weaknesses which

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. A second main conditionality that has been imposed upon us is with regard to structural adjustments. More and more, the World Bank and others are making this government accountable. They say aid will be governed by the fact of how you deal with efficiency, utilisation of aid, and so on and so on. Now on this aspect, this government has been taking a number of steps that is moving towards structural adjustments. One of the factors that we have argued also is that the imposition of structural adjustment without sufficient lead time. leads to an imposition on the poorest of the poor, which is extremely burdensome and the lower income group elements. those who are outside the mainstream of development are affected much more direly. while we are moving towards privatisation, and towards a new industrial policy, and to-

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icy to denationalisation and so

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. With regard to the growth factor, today we talk about equitable growth, socio-economic and distributional growth. And we have added a new element this is what we call a sustainable development.

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 represen tatives went around with a begging bowl to every country and we were projecting how much aid we got from this country or that country. This government's policy is to move away from such aidcentricity. 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. This is in the process of the whole democratic system. If there is any change in terms of foreign policy aspects these are some concentrations in this field in our present policy.

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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, those who were involved in the events of August 15. What is your current position on this matter?

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

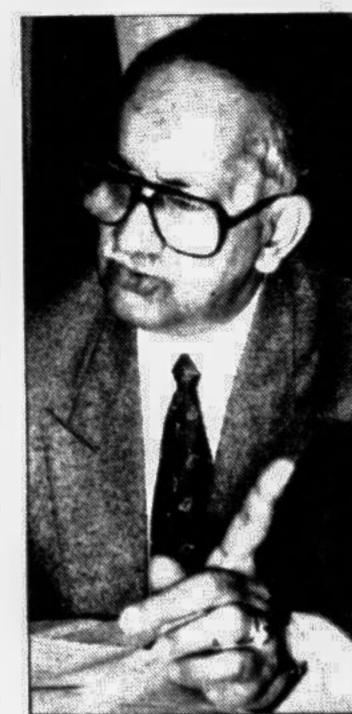
outside world. No major subject is left out of the conversation, whether it relates to the promise of increased regional cooperation under the umbrella of SAARC or prospects of bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India. Above all, speaking with these years to repeal this ordinance or even to file 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, 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

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. I am just giving an example - Kampuchea is asking for us. Yugoslavia is asking for us. That indicates that we are now getting a sort of mark of being a very neutral peace keeping nation. This posture we would like to keep for our own good and for the good of the maintained of peace.

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. And two, as it were change their orientation, to be more productive in these areas. I think one very important exercise which we have already started doing, which has been largely absent in the past, is a monitoring and evaluation exercise of performance. wrote to every ambassador and him asked to explain what exactly he was doing and what exactly he felt he could do in the future. We would monitor that exercise on a monthly basis. The second exercise which we have already embarked upon is to do an indepth review of the economic performance of each embassy. and what they should be doing during the next twelve month

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, from our workers sent through official channels. Here, there is a role our embassies can play. The government agencies in Bangladesh can support this exercise. And this is symptomatic, one of the key weaknesses that existed in the past, simply there was no dialogue. Ambassadors were left without instructions, without guidance. There was no monitoring and no evaluation. When ambassadors sent pro-

posals 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 tmportant, 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

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. He was telling me that there has not been proper study of the prospects of our trade with India. Now, is it true?

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 And I do not know what follow-up it has done about it. Single country entry means our goods will go to India to sell. You see that this will eliminate smuggling to a great extent and other things will improve. And this would also give us a better chance for our garments. It is of a standard. it can go to India and sell. Our trousers, our shoes, can go to India and sell. Now this needs a coordination and a follow-up. India is agreed on that subject They have said very clearly, that in order to correct the balance of payments position. it can be improved in this

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. But I would expect that economically, we need to go along with our neighbours and sell our goods. Otherwise tomorrow they can very well say that you owe us so much, so we come and collect it. What can we say ? So it is always good to remove the imbalance, and that we can do by tactfully. playing on to various other fears.

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. What is that trade? We export worth of \$ 1.7 billion mostly jute and jute products, about \$400 million or little less than that, garments \$ 700 million, where garment and hosiery is little more than \$1 billion, tea \$57 million, leather. we are selling something in the region of \$183 million. fish and food products something in the region of \$160 million, added up together this is our \$1.7 billion export. Now, any of those items that you take, jute - India produces jute. India produces tea.

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 -

napther, pulp, things of that (Continued on Page 10)