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PRIME MINISTER'S WASHINGTON VISIT : ANOTHER VIEW

Rohingya Crisis and Foreign Policy Implications

by Enayet Rasul

Bangladesh-US Trade Ties

The volume of trade is a most strong — if not the only — reflection of the bilateral relations between two nations. On this count, the growing trade volumes — specially the exports from Bangladesh to the US — between the world's richest country and the most poor one certainly augur well for both of them. A review of the past five years' exports from Bangladesh to America shows a sharp increase. In the area of garments particularly, apart from fish, jute goods, leather and leather products, Bangladesh has indeed achieved an enviable record in a very short time. Its capacity to compete with other nations is no more in doubt. That recognition has come not only from, the US but also from the European Community countries.

Recognition of such order is, however, not enough for rewarding the deserving candidate. That has exactly happened in the case of Bangladesh. Credit has not been complemented with cash simply because of the complicated international trade relations. The exponents of free trade do not always find it convenient to practise it at home. There is a concern for keeping the flow from their end unhindered. In such a one-way-traffic, it is the poor developing nations that lose in the bargain. Notwithstanding the virtues of free trade, this has happened in the past and will continue to happen in the future.

It is precisely for this that quota restrictions are in direct contradiction with the free trade or for that matter free market theory. Poor nations, moreover, have not many areas where they enjoy a definite edge over their richer counterparts or partners in international trade and commerce. Imposition of any restrictions on imports of goods and commodities with high demands in rich countries, simply runs counter to good international relations and perhaps the much-awaited new international economic order. But not many are seen to be respectful to this simple rule in this competitive world. What happens as a result of this is best evidenced by the stalemate in the Uruguay Round of General Agreements on Trade and Tariff (GATT) talks. So, when the trade interests clash between rich nations, either of the party is supposed to suffer at one time or other. A parity is what has to be struck for moving the wheel of global economy. That is somehow or other happening so far — albeit disavouring the more disadvantaged.

The point that is lost sight of in the process is that those disadvantaged nations surely need a few concessions instead of the hostile reception — as is the case now — for bringing about a more reasonable trade order between and among the nations. In this context, the rising volume of exports to the United States from Bangladesh — instead of the other way round — is a very positive indication for the smaller nation. This is despite the fact of trade irritants — some of them bordering on really contentious issues. Presently, the share of Bangladesh's export to the US is in between 25 and 30 per cent of its total exports. The special trade preference as enjoyed by Bangladesh for sometime has indeed gone a long way in giving a tremendous boost to the country's garments industry. The same principle stands to be successfully implemented in other areas as well.

As for the Bangladesh-US trade relationship, there are surely enough reasons to be optimistic about its future prospects. Much has been done, no doubt, about that. But, then, there remains more to be done so far as the exploration of markets in the US for goods — specially the non-traditional ones — is concerned.

A Good Job in a Worthy Cause

On Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla Academy quite fittingly launched a week-long 'folk festival' and a two-week 'Boi Aarong' as part of its celebrating the arrival of the new year. Going by past records there is nothing in the country that can beat a folk-festival in popularity. And it is guaranteed that the Bangla Academy premises will be thronged by tens of thousands of avid listeners. It gives rise to an inevitable question: Then why is there not many of these festivals around? And round the year, specially in the festive winter season? The radio authorities used to organise such festivals from time to time on a very unpredictable irregular basis. And the result is known to all. There were never enough of place anywhere to take in the crowd that turned up. Still, folk-festivals are not among the 'in' things and these must be sponsored and produced by government or semi-government agencies. We are persuaded to believe rather strongly that a properly organised Lalon or Hason Raja festival or such others cannot but be a very lucrative proposition for commercial investors, not to speak of friends and lovers of our traditional songs and the numerous cultural organisations in the country who have a duty to discharge in this matter. Folk festivals, however, have their own problems starting from the very meaning and understanding of the word 'folk'. Songs are being written and fashioned in the villages as a very natural continuous cultivation, creative and saleable proposition. Shall we call the tons of commercial gibberish being turned in the name of folk as being truly both 'folk' and 'music'? Certainly not? The made-to-order sub-standard fare is far from either 'music' or 'folk'. These are but very poor caricatures of the real stuff. How do you sift this 'dut-nombori' chaff from the golden right thing?

While creativity will go along even in what is at present our dying villages, and many a gem is bound to pop up there every now and then, the sponsored festivals must make a rule of 'old is gold' and not let themselves be supporting with public money anything less than at least fifty years old. In fact, organisations like Bangla Academy, the Shilpakala Academy and cultural giants like Chhayana or even the puny but mightily powerful and creative Anandadhwani can hold festivals of purely traditional village songs in order to preserve them and bring them back to life and society. Their attempts to find out the old tunes and lyrics and composers are certain to augur the opening of a new chapter in our cultural endeavour. In the mean time let the newly-made 'folk' songs also enjoy market and competition — as the so-called 'bands' do depending on Bengal folk tunes as their business mainstay. And why should our recommended festivals of traditional songs be centred on the capital alone? To start with let each greater district town have such festivals. We congratulate Bangla Academy for doing a good job of a worthy cause.

THE Prime Minister's recent trip to Washington and her brief meeting with President Bush was portrayed in the media, loyal to the BNP, as a gargantuan diplomatic achievement. The trip was described as the key to unlocking the American door. Bangladesh can now supposedly count on the moral and material support of the world's only superpower to deliver her immediately from the awesome predicament of the Rohingya refugees and the chronic problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

The above views should indeed appear like overstatements if put under the microscope. The premise is too simple that the United States at present is the only superpower or seemingly unassailable power. So, if we can befriend the United States, we can muster enough counterforce to make the country or countries which are presently giving us trouble, more amenable to our suggestions.

Some analysts see in the Rohingya problem a parallel to Kuwait. The Kuwait problem and the Rohingya problem are not the same. The United States will most likely not respond to the Rohingya problem as dedicatedly and consistently as it did in the case of Kuwait.

The occupation of Kuwait by Iraq posed an extremely serious geo-political and economic threat to the national interest and security of not only the United States, but the West as a whole perceived it as a similar threat. The Rohingya issue, aside from its moral and humanitarian aspects, has no vital bearing on the national interest or direct security interests of the United States. Our policy planners should do very well indeed to bear this in mind.

Even during the Kuwait crisis, when so much was at stake

for the United States. Washington's response did not come instantly. Washington did not feel strong enough to take unilateral action against Iraq despite being the world's mightiest power. It was only after Iraq's complete or near complete isolation in the Arab world and the world at large was achieved and after the unique consensus of the great powers in the United Nations Security Council freed US hands for military actions that the US felt inspired to take such actions on a second grade power like Iraq. Even then, the United States engaged in military operations against Iraq not singly but she more or less compelled all her Western allies to participate wholeheartedly in the process.

A similar evolution of events in the Rohingya crisis is inconceivable. Not only the Rohingya issue does not constitute a grave direct threat to US interests, but even the chances of an Iraq type UN Security Council understanding over the issue appears almost non-existent. Iraq's isolation in the world was almost total. The junta in Rangoon, contrarily, enjoys a high degree of manoeuvrability, both regionally and internationally. The junta is not so much a pariah as some would like to believe. The authorities in Myanmar have the tacit backing of the region's strongest military power, the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese authorities, who still adhere substantially to orthodox communism, are in no mood to accept US dictates round the world, specially US activities close to China's periphery. Beijing may

go on mildly censuring the regime in Myanmar in diplomatic verbiage for atrocities against ethnic minorities for consumption in the world stage. But Beijing will most likely, at least not yet, push Myanmar hard to yield to international pressures vis-a-vis the Rohingya refugees. Even during the Kuwait crisis, the Chinese showed streaks of independent mindedness in UN Security Council deliberations. They could agree to most of the Security Council measures against Iraq because those involved actions far away from their own borders. But Beijing considers Myanmar as falling within its sphere of influence and will almost pathologically resist any international intervention in that sphere. The Chinese are committed to their traditional policy of expelling any foreign presence in their backyard, specially a US presence in the face of Chinese opposition, the US will have therefore slim temptation to intervene too directly in Myanmar since China has a substantial nuclear capacity and is almost a superpower whereas Iraq by contrast was a small adversary and thus an easy prey to US and Western military might.

Apart from China, the other big player in the vicinity able to play a notable role in the Rohingya imbroglio, is India. Diplomatically and militarily, India can be a tower of strength behind Bangladesh in the Rohingya issue. But the authorities in New Delhi have made it clear that any Indian help will not be innocent and like Shylock India will cooperate with Bangladesh on the Rohingyas after it has exacted

the price for such cooperation. This price can be unacceptable high for Bangladesh. The Indians have reportedly indicated that Bangladesh ought to invite Indian forces into Bangladesh as per the twenty-five years Indo-Bangladesh friendship treaty in order to face up to Burma. Needless to say, Dhaka will see in the proposition an attempt by India to create a Sri Lanka type of situation in Bangladesh, if for no other reason, then only for the sake of exhibiting Indian overlordship over Bangladesh.

Indira Doctrine

India since the seventies had been developing its equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine of the United States which came to be known as the Indira Doctrine. The essence of the doctrine is that India and India alone in the guardian power of the Indian Ocean area and the intrusion of presence of any alien power or powers in the Indian Ocean will be construed as threats to Indian security.

How sensitive India can be as regards adherence to this doctrine could be glimpsed when a contingent of the US Navy came to Bangladesh after the Gulf war to aid Bangladesh cyclone victims. The Indians viewed this humanitarian US exercise with dark suspicion and reportedly asked Bangladesh through diplomatic channels to seek withdrawal of the US naval task-force and to accept similar Indian help instead. The coming of the US task-force to Bangladesh created an uproar in the Indian parliament and pro-Indian elements in Bangladesh par-

liament too raised a hue and cry against the coming of the task-force. Rajiv Gandhi, then campaigning in the Indian general election and sure to win, also charged the Bangladesh government for inviting the US Navy.

Analysing the current events, it appears that a new structure of power politics has emerged on the debris of the former Soviet Union. The old Soviet-American competition has been replaced by a more but still of great significance was the significant relaxation of tension between two Asian giants, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India at around the same time. The Chinese Premier visited India last year, the first ever top level visit between the two countries since their show-down, in 1962. India and China still have their differences. But these two countries are also clearly showing signs that they want to fill the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Further, and more important perhaps, both seem to have a unity of views in resisting moves which aim at a stronger US physical presence in Asia.

The purpose of this article is not to admonish but to caution and warn. The international environment has changed too dramatically during the last couple of years which puts the onus on a very poor and very vulnerable country like Bangladesh to tailor a very dynamic and very flexible foreign policy immutably in order to match the demands of the times. If security is the basic concern of foreign policy, then we are to deduce, in light of present and

past realities that Bangladesh's security needs (especially at this very critical juncture of the Rohingya problem) will not be served by stereotype thinking. Warm relations with the world's strongest military and economic power may be a good factor, but that goodness depends on circumstances. Such warm relations with an extra-regional super-power, perceived as at the cost of regional powers, may prove to be counter-productive than productive. Pakistan is a classic example of this lesson. Pakistan was the most allied country to the United States, both bilaterally and multilaterally. But the alliance was no guarantee of Pakistan's security and could not prevent the ultimate dismemberment of Pakistan.

Specially in the backdrop of the Rohingya crisis, we ought to assess as efficiently as possible and at no loss of time the intentions and limitations of each of the powers, the United States, India and China, vis-a-vis the Rohingya issue. We should then formulate an overall policy on the Rohingyas and independent policies towards each of these powers, accordingly.

Meanwhile, we should spare no attempt in addition to our military strengths from what ever sources we can acquire armaments. The whole nation should be mobilized to deal with the long and short term aspects of the Rohingya exigency. In the last analysis, our internal strength alone will be the determining factor in securing our interests in relation to Burma. Every country has a right to survival and that means the right to arm itself to face direct or indirect aggression. It is high time that our leaders asserted this sovereignty unabashedly regardless of all kinds of pre-conditions for trimming defence expenditures.

ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN BANGLADESH—III

The Political Economy : Land Reform and Other Measures

THE issue of land and housing for the rural destitute is of course related to the entire issue of land reform and land policy. It is not intended to address this politically sensitive issue in this paper. But a just society committed to alleviate poverty cannot ignore this problem for much longer. The issue is not to seek equity by redistributing land in unviable decimals of land to the poor. The issue is to take land from those who neither farm it, invest in it or work to improve its productivity but merely use it as a source of unearned income and social and political power. An efficient as much as a just society would seek to locate land title in the hands of those who work it, invest their sweat and money in improving its yield and can be directly serviced by the state in this task without the intermediation of a non-cultivating rural elite. This was the central logic of land reforms in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea as well as in Peoples Republic of China, where the reforms substantially eliminated a non-cultivating landowning elite and gave a new incentive to the cultivating peasant to improve the yield on their land. It is arguable that it was these land reforms which set the stage for the dynamic growth of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and China by democratising rural society, stimulating productive surplus for sustaining industrialisation and widening the rural market to sustain industrial output. There are innumerable studies not to mention enormous field evidence which articulates the non-productive as much as the exploitative role of the landowning elite in rural Bangladesh.

There are obviously many questions associated with a meaningful agrarian reform. Most political parties including the more radical ones, are populated by the scions of this land owning class and draw upon its support in local politics. The tendency of the earning segments of that society drawn from bureaucrats, the armed forces, the urban working class to buy land as an investment and lease it on *barga* to the land poor is endemic and provides a wider social constituency in support of the existing tenurial arrangements. To sustain a land reform will thus require a possible social transformation which may be beyond the capacity of our prevailing political parties and system. Nor do we have any well conceived programme to determine who will get redistributed land and what we will do with the larger number of the rural poor who will not get land. The issue is thus left unaddressed here. But it is suggested that a serious political debate within and outside parliament be initiated to decide how we can make our land ownership system more congruent with our wider social goal of both promoting a more efficiency oriented and a more just society. The prevailing land system is manifestly counterproductive to both these goals. However until this debate resolves itself the state can do a great deal to improve the inefficient and corrupt system of land administration inherited from colonial days. Here the recommendations of the Task Force on Land Administration merit serious attention.

Institutional Issues

The above programme for poverty alleviation is largely derived from the BIDS poverty study and the Task Force report on poverty alleviation. It is indicative rather than substantive. Any move to initiate a credible national programme for poverty alleviation would need to address these reports within the framework of a National Commission on Poverty Alleviation set up on a bipartisan basis by the government to develop a national agenda around which the nation can unite to overcome the

This is the third and concluding part of a three-part series on Alleviating Poverty in Bangladesh. The first and second parts were published day before yesterday and yesterday, respectively.

disease of mass poverty in this day and age.

The National Commission will define the problem, quantify it, define a time-bound national agenda with concrete programmes, will meticulously cost it and will then fit this programme into the ADP over the next 5 years. The fiscal premise of the Poverty Alleviation programme will have to recognise that resources will need to be diverted from many on-going items of public expenditure on current and development

have been endorsed by Parliament, an inter-ministerial Executive Task Force should be established under the authority of the chief executive. This Task Force may be made responsible for the planning, execution and supervision of all the GOBs poverty alleviation programmes as well as keep track of similar programmes under the NGOs. This Task Force should from the beginning be kept cost-effective, run by people with both political motivation and the highest managerial skills

POLICY ISSUES

Rehman Sobhan

account. This will involve putting all aspects of public expenditure under reappraisal leading on to severe pruning of many heads of budgeted expenditure of lower priority than the poverty programme. Such an exercise must also seek to eliminate the built-in superfluities of the poverty alleviation and many other aided programmes. There is no excuse for upto 50% of aid funded poverty alleviation programmes being appropriated for foreign consultants, project overheads and other inefficient components of expenditure. In a resource starved society it is bad enough to allocate inadequate resources for poverty alleviation but unforgivable if much of what is allocated ends up with the non-poor.

To ensure both focus, economy and greater coherence of the poverty alleviation programmes of the government and to give effect to the recommendations of the proposed National Commission on Poverty Alleviation after they

who should function outside not just the jurisdiction of the existing bureaucracy but also its prevailing value system. The task of monitoring trends in poverty could be assumed by this Task Force and such organisations as BIDS could be used on a regular basis for making updated evaluation of various facets of the programme. The Prime Minister should place before the Parliament along with the budget a progress report prepared by the proposed Inter-Ministerial Task Force on realising the agenda for poverty alleviation which should be discussed in detail in a special Parliamentary Committee and on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad.

Mobilisation of the Poor

Moving beyond budgetary commitments and administrative arrangements any serious commitment to attack poverty must seek to empower the poor to both take command over programmes designed to

improve their own condition and to constitute their own political constituency so as to put pressure on the government to improve the conditions of the poor. This must aim to involve the deprived segments of society at the local level in the design and management of poverty alleviation programmes. Such a commitment will involve devolution of power and executive action from the national to the local level through the strengthening of institutions of local self-government. However it will serve the poor little if these local institutions continue to be dominated by the local elite who use their symbiotic links with the local administration to enhance their relations of domination and dependency with the poor through intermediation of all public resources directed to the poor. The poor must be encouraged to organise themselves to fight for and capture power at the various tiers of the local self-governing institutions.

The task of mobilising the poor is however primarily a political task. The major political parties should thus seek to not only organise the poor within the framework of their own parties but should interact with attempts at self-mobilisation of the poor. If the social base of these political parties for the moment precludes their reaching out to the poor at the very least they should not obstruct attempts at self-mobilisation by the poor. Here the incumbent government must be persuaded to give unambiguous direction to the local administration, particularly the police, not to frustrate such democratic attempts at mobilisation by the poor. A democratic process which continues to deny political participation to the democratic majority of the poor will find it difficult to sustain itself.

A Political Commitment

Whilst the above discussion has spelt out an agenda for al-

leviating poverty in Bangladesh the substantive goal in the foreseeable future must be the elimination of poverty from our society on grounds of both efficiency and morality. Poverty is not a curse of nature or divine providence but a man made affliction founded in the inhumanity of humans to their fellow human beings. It is morally repugnant to every religion or value system for some people to enjoy the good things of life in abundance whilst many of their fellow humans go to bed hungry, living wretched lives of deprivation and insecurity. It is politically untenable and economically unsustainable for any society when many of those who enjoy this affluence do so neither from merit or the fruits of their enterprise but out of the patronage of the state and even from crimes against civil society. This proposition applies particularly for societies where the deprived poor constitute the more hardworking, efficient, creative element and account for democratic majority in society.

The persistence of mass poverty for even a short period of time when we not only have the programmes but also the means to eliminate poverty in the foreseeable future should render any regime politically unacceptable and any such society morally intolerable both to its own people and the global community. A donor community which continues to underwrite the viability of such a morally delinquent society has much to answer for not only to its own electorate but to its conscience. Both the government and the opposition should thus place a programme for the elimination of poverty on the top of their political agenda and their political future as well as access to aid should be made to depend on how seriously they commit themselves to this programme.

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.

The driver has escaped!

Sir, During the past 10 years or so I must have read about several thousand cases of buses and trucks having caused numerous deaths and grievous injuries to persons, but except in one or two rare instances, in all other cases the cryptic police handouts merely notified the public that the drivers had escaped and nothing more

was ever heard of any absconding drivers having been apprehended and sentenced.

While the police can often unearth highly complicated crimes and for which they deserve praise, it seems a mystery why they habitually fail to apprehend absconding drivers. It would make the task of the police easier if the owners of all vehicles were required by law to be in possession of the

full bio-data of their drivers including their recent photographs and their permanent addresses duly authenticated by the local Union Council Chairmen or local Ward Commissioners. The punishments for serious traffic offences as provided for in our existing laws are too inadequate to prove as deterrents. With traffic offences on an increase, these laws need drastic changes. The laws should also provide for the owners of offending vehicles being liable to pay compensation to traffic offence victims at the rate of at least Tk 1 lac per person for deaths or grievous injuries.

A Goyamul Gulshan, Dhaka

Marketing of new local books

Sir, I went twice to the New Market to buy a copy of a book on the late Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, published locally (and reviewed in the Press); but I could not find it. No bookseller offered to get a copy for me, except one, who wanted the name of the publisher, which I could not recall at that time. Today I am still without the book, and do not know how to get it, or where to buy it.

The bookseller told me that the book publication sector (excluding text books) was not well organised. Several questions arise. How the publishers inform the retailers (bookshops)? Do they leave a

copy or two of the latest publication at selected bookshops in the prominent areas of the city? Is there any monthly or quarterly magazine published by some agency such as the Publishers' Association; or any internal Newsletter for the retailers? How the bookshops keep themselves informed about new releases of 'out-books' (non-text books)?

Pointing out to local reviews and publication ceremonies have no practical effect, as it is not possible for a shop to read all the newspapers and magazines. It is surprising that a bookshop has to ask from the customer the name of the local publisher of a new release, considering the fact that only a small number of out-books are published annually in a country

such as Bangladesh. It does not take a lot of organisations to publish a 2-sheet Newsletter once or twice a month. It is easy to create a data-bank. The point to note is that the same bookseller readily noted down the list of some foreign books I ordered through him for procurement from abroad, but could not get me a local publication! The Daily Star would be rendering a useful service if it could allocate a quarter of a column twice a month to list the new releases, in English/Bengali (for non-text books). Meanwhile we readers owe some clarification from the publishers' association. A Masuz Dhaka