

Towards Stronger Ties with Malaysia

One visit, by itself, does not change things much. But it sows the seeds for change. That is what Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's three day visit to Bangladesh did.

Bangladesh's bilateral relations with Malaysia is important from many different aspects. There is of course the affinity that grows out of being the part of the exploited South. That affinity is strengthened by the similarity of culture and religion.

This warning, which may at the outset, appear to be a bit out of tune with the spirit of the visit, is perhaps the most significant comment of the whole dialogue.

However, given all that, the visit has created new avenues about the possible areas where relations can grow. As we had stated earlier, given the industrial, financial and managerial advancement attained by Malaysia, there is indeed a lot for Bangladesh to learn.

Dr Mahathir makes a very important point when he attributes poor trade between our two countries on "poor communication." In the age of information, instant, reliable and detailed information about availability of commodities, their prices and how quickly they can be made to reach a desired destination are the very soul of modern day trade.

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Dr and Mrs Mahathir and to the Malaysian delegation for their kind visit and express the ardent hope that we can build on the initiatives that this visit has set in motion.

Added Responsibility for Rich Nations

Restoring the environmental health of the earth, not the avoidance of a large-scale nuclear war which loomed large until the disintegration of the Soviet Union, is the greatest challenge facing mankind.

All this is no doubt a very positive sign, but rough assessments have given staggering amounts of cost necessary for lessening or bringing a halt to environmental degradation. It is precisely at this point that the shared responsibility of dealing with global environmental pollution has to be analysed.

This same issue was the major issue of discussion at a seminar on Global Environment Facility (GEF) in Dhaka on Sunday. Almost all the speakers pointed their accusing fingers at the rich industrial nations who have been responsible for so much of the earth's physical changes and exploitation of its resources.

The US reluctance to be a party to the Rio charter has certainly hindered the progress of the environmental restoration programme but works in the area have not come to a standstill anyway. This seminar in Dhaka witnessed a strong advocacy for Bangladesh for receiving assistance from the GEF fund from which no less than an amount of 700 million dollar has been sanctioned for 100 projects since 1991.

I have met Prime Minister Narasimha Rao twice since the demolition of disputed Babri Masjid. The first time he called some senior journalists; the second time we imposed ourselves on him because the supreme administration during the rioting in Bombay was too blatant to take.

The words, 'the government is struggling,' he used at the first meeting, are so right. The administration has become effete and communal and anti-social forces dominant. Talking to some secretaries to the Government of India I find that there is no direction, no clear decision.

What he told us in the two meetings is nowhere near implementation. He said that the make-shift temple which had come up on the site in the midst of turmoil, where the disputed masjid stood, would be removed.

I believe he blames Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar, the two senior cabinet ministers, for the faux pas. The original text of broadcast did not contain the undertaking. Both ministers reportedly included

Meetings with the Indian PM

The administration has become effete and communal and anti-social forces dominant. Talking to some secretaries to the Government of India I find that there is no direction, no clear decision. Hundreds of files are pending in the Prime Minister's Office and he has little time to clear them.

When the speech was sent to them for comments, Rao's explanation of sorts is that he saw the suggestion only a few minutes before the broadcast and it was too late to make any change.

When asked why the central government failed to act in time at Ayodhya, the prime minister said they were bringing out 'in two days' time' a white paper which would 'give blow by blow account' to prove how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the state played false.

In reply to our query why the BJP governments in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were dismissed when they did not seem to have disobeyed the centre, the prime minister said that the white paper would give all the information. Now that it is nowhere in sight to prove the BJP's culpability, if that was the cause, the government has unwittingly helped the BJP to be off the hook.

Rao's dramatics were not even impressive when we drew his attention to the

Bombay carnage. He got Pawar, then in Bombay, on the phone and talked to him in haste. He asked Pawar to persuade the organisers of Maha Artis (big prayers) not to stage them on the streets. There was no direction, no firmness. His concern was not a whit better than a far-removed person from the scene. When told his clear orders would have sent

that he could not disclose the steps the government had in view. He gave a long lecture why he was against imposing a ban on political parties when told that the Shiv Sena should have been banned.

Rao was still fuming over the observation of C. Subramaniam, former governor of Maharashtra, that the prime minister had too many portfolios and too many engagements to find time for some concerted work. Rao merely

intelligence Bureau sent him long ago a report to say, 'Besides traditional issues, the communal scene was vitiated due to several other factors, including the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue, passions aroused due to the 'rah yatra' of LK Advani and the 'kar sewa' programme of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Developments in the Gulf have also had an adverse impact due to strong pro-Saddam Hussein sentiments being expressed in some quarters.'

The IB's warning was: 'The communal ambience still remains surcharged and would come under further strain with Hindu mobilisation by the VHP on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue. There is also cause for serious concern due to the changing patterns of communal violence with serious disturbances tending to lead to pro-longed violence as also affecting rural areas.'

Thousands of Hindus and Muslims have died in violent deaths in India in communal riots. But the killings, mostly of Muslims, after the demolition of the disputed Babri masjid, although comparatively fewer, have greater repercussions than the larger number had. It has aroused primitive emotions. It has emboldened Hindu chauvinists and demoralised the Muslim community. The ruling Congress

party is too discredited and too divided to face the challenge.

The drama of Union cabinet's reformation is no substitute for action. It looks as if Rao has tried to divert attention from his non-performance. He seems to be good only at playing politics — indeed, he has marginalised the two contenders, Arjun Singh and Pawar. When it comes to taking decisions, he is found wanting.

Not many tears will be shed for the ministers dropped. In any case, most of them were mere passengers. But the new entrants are no better. All the four donning the cabinet cap, have been tried earlier and so have been those who have been elevated. How will they retrieve the situation?

One does see the hand of Queen Mother, Sonia Gandhi, behind some appointments. That the prime minister should go to meet her on the eve of cabinet's reconstitution tells the story. True, nearly 35 Congress (I) MPs pay court to her and still look towards the dynasty for the win at the next polls. But it does not speak well of the party, which is facing a crisis of confidence.

Rao's biggest failure is that he has failed to energise it, much less give it a vision. And it is strange that he has seldom criticised the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its political wing, the BJP, for the harm they have caused to the country. One may not buy the argument that he shares their political thinking. But he is publicly soft towards them. If this is merely an impression, he should do something to remove it. If there is something more to it, at least the Congress (I), to fit the nation, is in for trouble.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the message all along the line. Rao said that he had left every thing to Pawar as if he was already looking for scapegoat.

The prime minister kept wondering why the Bombay police had not measured up to its reputation of being tough. He did not talk about its contamination or the lack of ethos. Incidentally, the police control room records show that the force was short of ammunition while coping with the riots.

It was suggested to the prime minister that the government should have arrested Ball Thackeray, the Shiv Sena chief, at least after he had gloated over what happened in Bombay and owned the responsibility. Rao merely said

scuffed at Subramaniam's allegation that 'foreign elements' were involved in the Bombay riots. When pressed further to identify them, he said: 'You should ask him.' Of course, he was already full of praises for Subramaniam's successor, PC Alexander, who issued a statement even before assuming office; to commend Chief Minister Sudhakar Naik for handling the situation in Bombay.

Rao's loud thinking that there should be an indepth study to find out why the BJP had strengthened its position in Karnataka and even West Bengal exposed his naivety in such matters. It showed how he employed different pretexts to cover his failures. The

Mobutu Clings to Power as Confusion Grows

by Alan Rake

Unrest has again broken out in Zaire. A stray bullet from rampaging troops killed the French ambassador in the capital, Kinshasa. A state of confusion has reigned in the country for months as President Mobutu and the democratic opposition battle for constitutional supremacy. Mobutu knows his survival is at stake. Accused of assassinations, embezzlement and high-treason by the national assembly, he is threatened with impeachment and even prison. Gemini News Service examines the crisis in Zaire.

A desperate struggle for power and survival is being fought to the bitter end in Zaire. On one side is President Mobutu Sese Seko, who has clung to power since he seized control in a military coup in 1965. Against him are the democratic forces forming a majority in Zaire's legislative assembly, the High Council of the Republic (HCR).

The democrats are led by Etienne Tshisekedi, the Prime Minister. In his chequered career he has been arrested, harassed, detained even tortured by Mobutu, but the tough, obstinate politician has proved Mobutu's match in the long fight for democracy.

Mobutu's, constitutional term of office, should have ended more than a year ago on December 4, 1991. He has stubbornly refused to give up office, using the constitutional chaos as an excuse to retain power. So far no one has been able to remove him because he still controls the army and security forces.

Over the last year a new constitution has been thrashed out by a National Conference. It finally would up last December, having set up a constitution re-

stricting the powers of the head of state and setting up the assembly. It said the constitution would be endorsed by national referendum in April, with democratic elections in August.

Meantime, a political vacuum has been created in which the struggle for power continues with increasing ferocity. Mobutu has shown that he has no intention to hand over power willingly.

The struggle now centres over who will form the government. Early in January Mobutu tried to dismiss the transitional government set up by Tshisekedi. The assembly reacted angrily telling him to stop interfering in government, 'within 72 hours, face dismissal'.

A furious Mobutu refused to be reduced to the status of a monarch who reigns but does not govern. He said a transfer of power to the assembly required a revision of the constitution.

On January 15 the assembly found Mobutu guilty of high-treason for 'having blocked the functioning of the country's institutions at all levels, mainly the investiture of the Prime Minister (Tshisekedi) elected by the sovereign national conference.'

As passions mounted, a majority of assembly members who had united under the opposition banner of the Sacred Union decided to take direct action to topple Mobutu. They launched general strikes and boycotts in all the major towns, to create what are lo-

caly described as 'ghost towns.'

On January 16-19 huge demonstrations were held in Kinshasa with the Sacred Union calling for Mobutu's resignation and trying specifically to 'liberate' the television and radio stations from Mobutu's control. Five people were killed and many more injured in the riots that followed, but the security forces, led by the pro-Mobutu Mayor of Zaire managed to restore calm. A few days later even worse trouble broke out, with poorly-paid troops rampaging through the streets.

Meanwhile, the assembly has conducted a long investigation into Mobutu's 26-year rule and tabled reports accusing him of political assassinations and embezzlement. Among

many charges, they say he was responsible for the detention and torture of Patrice Lumumba, the revered father of Zaire nationalism and other nationalist leaders.

He is accused of massacring defenceless civilians and students and of stealing money from diamond companies and other state-owned firms. Calls have been made to bring Mobutu to trial and to impeach him. A two-thirds majority of the assembly could take the charge to the Supreme Court.

But all these threats make Mobutu more determined than ever to cling to power. In this fantasy world, long on threats and accusations and short on decisive action, the political vacuum continues. Both sides claim legitimacy and refuse to give ground. Yet Mobutu still

controls the army and security forces, and state radio and television and refuses to allow the assembly access to the Central Bank of Zaire, which controls the finance for the ailing economy.

Gradually Mobutu's position is weakening. He is now fighting a rearguard action. He has already surrendered much ground and he cannot put the clock back. Constitutional change is slow but relentless and he has lost the support of all except his immediate coterie who depend on him directly.

He has also lost international support. France, Belgium and the United States will only resume aid, cut off in January 1992, if Mobutu ceases to block constitutional change. On December 17 the European parliament went further and passed a resolution calling on member states to confiscate his assets until such time as he is prepared to answer the assembly's accusations in court. Mobutu's time is remorselessly running out.

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Diary of turmoil

- 1960 Independence from Belgium. Patrice Lumumba forms government. Mobutu coup.
1960-3 Katanga tries to secede. Civil war.
1965 Mobutu back in full power.
1970 and 1977 Elected unopposed for 7-year terms.
1978-9 French, Belgian parachutists, with US support, help rebuff rebels.
1984 Mobutu again elected unopposed.
1990 He quits as party chairman, sets multiparty timetable, appoints transitional government.
1991 Riots in Kinshasa. French, Belgian troops evacuate nationals.
1992 Disorder follows calls for Mobutu to go. Power struggle with PM.



OPINION

Dr F R Khan : The Bangalee Prodigy Unsung in Bangladesh

While going through the letter captioned 'Neutrality: Contribution' by Mr Andrew D'Costa (The Daily Star, February 4) I have been appalled to learn of his ignorance about Dr F R Khan, the world-renowned architect-engineer who in one way or other had sung the name of the Bangalee nation in the world community. It is unthinkable that the people of Bangladesh should view with nonchalance and indifference the remarkable contribution made by this illustrious son of the soil. Does this celebrated gentleman need any perfunctory introduction to his own people? Or, is it a deliberate attempt on the part of some people to pretend to be ignorant about this super-achiever?

Bangalees would be immensely happy to know that this Bangalee prodigy worked tirelessly to build a strong lobby in America in favour of Bangalees during the 1971 War of Independence against the Pakistan rule and had engaged himself in the glorious task of fund-raising for the Bangalee freedom-fighters and refugees. I believe, nobody would raise a shred of doubt that all those valiant souls who directly and indirectly involved themselves for the heroic victory over the killers from Pakistan and their notorious collaborators, can justifiably lay an undeniable claim to immortality along with the immortal soul of the Bangalee nationhood. Most justifiably, Dr F R Khan can claim a place with them. In no way one can undermine the value of the spirited participation of this giant personality in the birth of Bangladesh and in establishing a prominent place for the Bangalee nationhood.

Mentionably, a section of people are yet to cultivate a sense of honour towards these heroes, these super-achievers. Hero-worshipping, needless to say, is also a quintessential part of the process that ushers us into far wider horizons of enlightenment. Logically, wouldn't it be rewarding for us to honour Dr F R Khan and thereby enlighten ourselves? It is worth noting that Americans very fondly remember this man from Bangladesh and they have dedicated a statue in Chicago in honour of this prodigy. Why can't the people of Bangladesh, his own people on their own accord take initiatives to pay homage to him? Perhaps an engineering institution, a residential hall of a University, a main road can be named after him.

Mr Fazlur Rahman Khan, a former student and then a teacher of the only engineering college of the then East Pakistan that later on transformed into the BUET, had gone through a great metamorphosis to become Dr F R Khan, a personality acclaimed world-wide for his mammoth contributions to the science of buildings, especially the tall buildings. As an authoritative figure in structural engineering, he had the honour of designing a number of great constructions of the modern times including the tallest building in the United States of America. In crowning himself with such achievements, this Bangalee architect-engineer, inter alia, earned a rare honour for us world-wide. Doubtlessly, it is unaffordable for Bangalees not to remember him and to honour him. If, by mistake, we start a self-denigrating exercise of exhibiting indifference to prodigies like Dr F R Khan, we would henceforth show indifference to our own national identity and would do so most harmfully.

The most celebrated patriot of all ages, Sir Walter Scott who once had wrote — 'Breathe there the man with soul so dead./ Who never to himself hath said./ 'This is my own, my native land' — would have been overjoyed and greatly awed at the spontaneity in stretching the helping hands by a world-famous Bangalee to the embattled fellow Bangalees from a foreign land thousands of miles away. Patriotism mystically is so undefinable!

When the newly-emerging generations express ignorance about giant personalities like Dr F R Khan, it behooves on the enlightened people to make them knowledgeable. Also, it is their obligation to make people in general knowledgeable. Mr Andrew D'Costa's letter is convincing enough that our people do know a very little about Dr F R Khan. The media must play a vital role in this field, now that we are convinced that the politicians and the political activists can hardly contribute anything noble other than high-sounding rhetorics. Distinguished personalities like Prof J R Choudhury who had occasions to share with Dr F R Khan may be requested to write and to give talks more and more on him.

I strongly feel that patriotic

pride and strength.

Like this prodigy, other Bangalee heroes need have to be honoured by the people of Bangladesh. All those who hold Bangalee nationhood in high esteem must come forward to contribute their mite in this regard. Vox populi

To the Editor...

Circuit house for Dhaka. Sir, Frequent high level conferences are convened in Dhaka by the government wherein senior officers from districts are asked to attend. Besides as a matter of routine, some officers have to visit Dhaka on government duty. But there is no suitable government accommodation here to take care of a big number of officers temporarily. At the moment they have to put up with hotels or their relatives, if any. The old Circuit House at Kakrail has practically been turned into a permanent residence except two/three rooms and the new Circuit House at Airport Road has also been turned into the officers' permanent accommodation. Hence there is an urgent need to construct a circuit house with at least fifty/sixty rooms to cater to the need of temporary stay of officers. It should be carefully planned so that the proposed one may not again turn into family accommodation. With that end in

view size of the rooms should be small and instead of attached baths three or four rooms may have a common bath and toilet.

Government is spending its resources on so many things. Spending a crore or two more for this purpose is quite worthwhile. Will the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Works look into it? Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment

Pakistan : 'A terrorist state'

Sir, Attempts to disdain Pakistan as a 'terrorist state' without taking into consideration its arch-rival India's 'total failure' to deal 'Nationalist Kashmiris' politically manifest, in my view, America's 'radical Islam' phobia related symptoms. If the US policy makers are sincere about human rights rhetoric, they should verify 'credible report' suggestive of atrocities, 'killing and also 'raping by Indian security force in the

Kashmir valley, otherwise such 'double standard' vilification process corroborates former president Bush's observation, 'US's world policing role is not popular abroad.'

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Evil beyond death

Sir, There was an evil man whose member had come. So, he called the village chieftains to his bedside and confessed, 'All my life I sinned and caused you many agonies. As a punishment,' he pleaded, 'stick my dead body at the crossroad in the centre of the village.'

In deference to the last wishes of the dying, his will was done. And before long the police came bounding for an unexplained murder. The whole village rattled.

Please read George Bush for the dying, the unsuspecting Americans for the villagers, and the crossroad as Iraq. Wg Cdr (Retd) Weloyet D Ahmed Kakrail, Dhaka