

We Need a New Agenda to Tackle Dhaka-Delhi Bilateral Relations

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

Major Change in Agri Technology

The myth of an agriculture revolution attributed to high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice seems to be over. Scientists at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Philippines, world's largest of the kind; indirectly and somewhat reluctantly admitted the limitations of the until recently much-vaunted farming technology developed in the 1960s and further readjusted over the succeeding two decades. An article with some references to this was carried in an English daily here on Sunday. True, there are defenders who argue in favour of the HYV citing the doubling of rice output in the past three decades. The fallibility of the method has been dismissed rather as a natural outcome. That this has been so lightly considered is unacceptable.

Such concern, on the other hand, on the part of the advocates of HYV technologies, is in sharp contrast with the scientists' opinion for a complete shift from the practices developed during the three decades to a technology dubbed as 'green technology'. The fact is that the HYV technology has outpaced its utility in such a short time. No other compulsion could have been enough for scientists to opt for a sudden U-turn unless the technology's efficacy to deliver the goods had been suspect. No proof is stronger than this necessity for a different farming technology from one that, besides its utility, has also caused enough damage to our environment.

Why the HYV technologies are at fault has been coming to light since the latter part of the 80s. But the information on the damages has been shoved under the carpet by big international companies and vested interest groups. Even then the amount of information that has been leaked is enough to alarm farmers and environmentalists. The strongest charge against the HYV technology is that it has reduced the varieties of rice to a select few. This is proved by the fact that the HYV varieties have to discard seed varieties after a certain period during which time the yield may be quite spectacular but then outrun their potential for ever. It is precisely this inadequacy of HYV seeds that have compelled scientists to go on developing ever new varieties.

The second complaint against the farm technology is the increasing inputs required without corresponding rise in output. More serious are the impacts of the chemical fertilizers and pesticides on bio-diversity and environment. Add to this the lopsided favour the big farmers receive due to more inputs needed for such farming leaving the small farmers out of farming practices. The result is widening social disparities among the rural people. Nowhere has this been so prominently brought to focus than in the Punjab, India that has witnessed a so-called farming revolution.

What has happened as a result is that rice, the most versatile crop, is no longer the same. The HYV seeds have pronounced the death sentence on most of the one and a half lakh of local rice varieties in the sub-continent. Majority of the varieties have been lost for ever. Some reasonably invent in it the working of seed imperialism. Reduction of germ plasma to a minimum number exposes different forms of life to a danger unprecedented in history of biology. Rice types in India have been brought down to just about 150 varieties.

Scientists, therefore, are concerned how to offset the loss. Part of their remedial measures consists of returning to nature for its internal sustainable mechanism. Already the results have been encouraging. In Indonesia a large number of pesticides have been banned. Chemical fertilizers have been replaced by organic manures elsewhere. Azolla and other nitrogen-fixing plants are being tried to get nitrogen supplements. This new-found virtue in the environment-friendly sustainable agriculture surely points to some positive developments to come. What, however, will decide the fate of the new technology known as ecological farming is the absence of a bias for heavy inputs.

Stealing the Sailor's Eyes

Muggings and dacoities are increasing without let-up. It could, as such, be taken as quite natural that river piracy should also go up in a consistent manner. Nothing much to complain if some 13 dacoities were committed on the Padma and Jamuna over the last six months, killing three and injuring 70. This attitude is wrong. If the situation in the national road network is worse still that cannot justify making the waterways insecure by even a minuscule rise. The government willing if, the road risks of all kind can be taken care of very effectively indeed. But securing the rivers against violent crimes is a far more difficult job. If things get bad there, government would not be able to stop the rot all by itself. The rivers can be secured, as they have been for thousands of years, by the people using them and inhabiting the shores of these through social mechanisms that include various beliefs and injunctions. If these are lost, the rivers would be gone as the main arteries of national movement and communication.

Worse things than plain dacoity have been happening to our river navigation. Lights and beacons set up by the IWTA are being subjected to plain thieving — and even daylight loot, in the presence of police too. Light signals and beacons, 3000 of the first and 200 of the second line up the riverways that connect Nagarbari, Aricha, Baghabari and Daulatdia. These act as eyes for the sailors. According to a report published by The Daily Star on Monday, the large-scale pilferage of these have resulted in vessels hitting shoals and the ground more than 200 times over only the last three months. The report says each light signal cost more than a lakh taka when these were bought two decades back.

If this stealing of the river lights be a criminal activity what shall we term the government's complete neglect of the running of these signals? There are 25 posts of lightmen to oversee the performance of these lights — much too insufficient compared to the load of the job — and there are only eleven on the job at the present moment. How do they move from one site to another? They have no riverine transport. And the lights and beacons do not have any shelter where the lightmen can save themselves from rain and sun and fatigue. Aren't these signs of neglect by the government also criminal in nature?

Why cannot government make the village and union where the stealing is done be responsible for resisting it? Why should not those unions be treated as recalcitrant and made to pay for the loss?

Now that the dates — April 10 and 11 — have been set for the twice-postponed Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), we should be breathing a little comfortably. Unfortunately, it cannot be too comfortably. After all, the tension that casts its shadow over New Delhi's relations with Dhaka and a few other SAARC capitals may have lessened, but it has not disappeared yet.

Whether the behind-the-scenes one to one talk between Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India will lead to a rapport between the two leaders, against the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and its aftermath in this country, remains to be seen. The differences in their age, political experiences and their national compulsions would not, we fear, contribute to an easy conversation.

This scepticism may, we hope, prove groundless. Instead, the two leaders should be utterly frank with each other, even admitting where their two governments might have failed in handling the unprecedented recent chain of events and as to what they should have done as part of their alternative options.

This means that if P V Narasimha Rao at least concedes that his policy towards the mosque issue was based partly on his political miscalculation and partly on the betrayal of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Begum Khaleda Zia should go more than half way in responding to Rao's candour.

In my view, it would not hurt the government of Bangladesh to admit that several temples and homes of the Hindu community had been damaged during the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque and that her earlier statement that nothing like this had happened was based on "inadequate information." Again, would Khaleda Zia go along with what one of her senior ministers recently said to me at a dinner, within the hearing of six other guests, that it was a "mistake" for the Jatiya Sangsad to hold a four-day debate on the Babri Masjid and then to pass what seemed like a somewhat partisan motion?

Sadly enough, such candid statements by Rao and Zia would be immediately dubbed by the media in both India and Bangladesh as "concessions" or "signs of weakness", with necessary slants given to suit the respective national constituencies. We may then see the headline in a section of our local press: "Khaleda bows to Rao's pressure", while part of the Delhi media, with bias for BJP, would proclaim, "Rao makes concessions to Begum Zia."

To make this kind of frank one-to-one ex-

changes look constructive and positive to the media, we must turn to how spokespersons of the two countries, usually attached to their foreign ministries, brief the media at the end of the high-level meetings. Such briefings may be highly informative or hopelessly negative, depending on the guidelines provided by the ministries or the expertise of spokespersons.

One good example of positive briefing that I recall after some 20 years was given by Syed Anwarul Karim, the then Acting Foreign Secretary of the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry at the end of the Sheikh Mujib-Indira Gandhi talks in Dhaka in 1972, at the end of the Indian leader's first visit to Bangladesh.

A degree of openness, not necessarily cross-

dropped after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman," he says. "The efforts made afterwards looked half-hearted."

We cannot recall Prof Sobhan making this statement in the past, in any of his articles or at any seminar.

Apart from developing as much openness — or what we call, transparency — as possible in our bilateral relations, there is much else to be done — or at least tried — if we are to put our cooperation on a new stable forward-looking footing.

In the first place, we must recognise that the highly personalised Mujib-Indira relationship that marked the Dhaka-Delhi ties, between 1972 to 1975, making Bangladesh essentially a

beneficiary of India's assistance is gone for ever. Also gone is what Nayar last week called the "golden period" of the relationship between India and Bangladesh, highlighted by a personal rapport between President Ziaur Rahman and Prime Minister Morarji Desai.

An example as to how these two leaders worked together, often without attracting much publicity, was related to me by the then Bangladesh High Commissioner in New Delhi, Khan Shamsur Rahman, more popularly known as "Dr Johnson". Somewhere in Bangladesh, a Hindu temple had been damaged by some hoodlums. Before the press in India could pick up the story, Desai wrote a personal letter to President Zia, not with a complaint but with a request to do something about the shrine. The Bangladesh leader took up the matter, got all the repairs done promptly and ordered the construction of a new access road and a small garden attached to the temple. Desai was delighted.

The fall of the Desai government in 1979 caused a genuine regret to President Zia, as I found out during my last interview with him, oddly enough, at a FAO conference in Rome.

Instead of going back to the past, we should be moving forward and develop a new businesslike approach, based largely on a measure of political trust and a shared concern for economic cooperation. In the process, we should let new players enter the stage.

It is all a question of Bangladesh and other countries in South Asia making the best of the new realities — and new opportunities — in the world of trade, commerce and investments, using the SAARC framework wherever possible.

In developing such a new scenario, "we must do something to reduce the level of political distrust between Bangladesh and India", as Nayar put it to me during one of our meetings here last month. He talked about setting up a new mechanism. However, we did not discuss it further.

What may be more important is to use the existing media, develop more exchanges and work out a set of guidelines for promoting better perception of one country in another.

As I said once at a meeting in New Delhi, and I repeated it to Nayar, as individuals, we from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in the best of terms. "Unfortunately, our problem lies with our institutions, sometimes including the media, with our ministries and quite often with our diplomatic missions."

Then, we talked about our so-called friendship societies in New Delhi and Dhaka which are more like "lobbies" than fora with forward-looking programmes offering new ideas for cultural and educational exchanges.

Once we identify these problems in our existing scenario and recognise the need for remedies, we will surely appreciate the urgency for formulating a new agenda for the bilateral relations between New Delhi and Dhaka, one that also provides a new impetus to regional cooperation, with Bangladesh playing a major role.

Ten Years after Sabra-Shatila — Remembering Palestinian Courage

OVER the past 10 years, I have been under pressure to say who I thought was to blame for the Sabra-Shatila massacre. Does it matter that much? On this anniversary I am as convinced as ever that undue debate over who pulled the trigger and on whose orders is a diversion from the fundamental question. Not just how and why did they die? More importantly, why do Palestinians have to die refugees? I discovered that question the hard way.

Until 1982, I was a supporter of Israel. I never knew Palestinians existed until my arrival in war-devastated Beirut that year. Television coverage of Israel's aerial bombardment of the city prompted me to respond to an international appeal for Britain to send medical volunteers to tend to the injured and traumatised Lebanese and Palestinian people. Beirut was then under a food, water and medicine blockade. Israel's declared aim in invading its northern neighbour was to flush out the Palestine Liberation Organisation. In the process, it killed and injured tens of thousands of ordinary people and destroyed homes, hospitals, schools and factories.

I was working in Gaza Hospital — located in the twin refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila which were home to more than 100,000 Palestinians and Lebanese — following the PLO evacuation of Beirut. A multinational Western peace-keeping force was deployed to protect the unarmed Palestinians remaining in the

camp. When that force suddenly withdrew in mid-September, an estimated 2,400 defenceless women, children and old people were slaughtered.

Like millions of Palestinians all over the Middle East, the people of Sabra and Shatila first lost their homes in 1948. They were part of the 750,000 Muslims and Christians who fled when their native Palestine became Israel. The UN gave them tents while the international community pledged to find them a permanent solution. Four decades later they are still waiting.

The refugees gave birth to children — children who were born refugees, who grew up refugees, and many of whom died refugees. Sabra and Shatila became crowded towns; the canvas tents gave way to houses. Amid the squalor and deprivation, the Palestinians rebuilt their dignity and national coherence. Schools and hospitals were named after places in Palestine: Gaza Hospital, Akaa Hospital, Ramallah Maternity Home. From the children I learned Palestinian songs, and from the old people a wealth of oral history, and also how to 'cook' Arabic coffee.

My first three weeks in the camps, from late August 1982 until 15 September, was a peaceful and precious time because I fell in love with these people. The PLO had evacuated and the cease-fire was holding. The camp families were busy rebuilding their homes and lives, the surgeons were busy cleaning up infected wounds. Each morning I would

look out from the hospital window and watch the newly returned families patch up and decorate their bombed-out homes. I enjoyed the generosity of the camp people, who shared everything with me.

Then suddenly, on 15 September, that all changed. War planes flew in, tanks rumbled, shells started. Gunmen broke into the homes of the refugees and shot up entire families, in the middle of meals, repairing their homes, tucking their young ones into bed.

For 72 hours, until the morning of 18 September, our little surgical team had been working without food and sleep to save the lives of those brought into Gaza Hospital's basement operating theatre. Finally, at gunpoint, we were forced out of our hospital, leaving behind our wounded patients. As I stepped out into full daylight, the truth was painful to eyes accustomed to a dimly-lit basement.

People had been killed in their hundreds — tortured, raped and mutilated, and their bodies left in alleys in twisted heaps, or partially buried in rubble. For days afterwards, more bodies were found and mass graves uncovered. The stench of decaying flesh was inescapable.

Certain images remain vivid. "You are a Christian? And you

came to help Palestinians? You are filthy!" My militia captors yelled at me. One pushed me so hard with her rifle that I tripped and fell over the body of an old man. He was cold, dead, and his eyes were dug out.

The homes on both sides of Rue Sabra, the camp's main street, were no longer standing. I had seen those same buildings being painted by their proud owners three days before. Now they were heaps of rubble, churned by bulldozers that mixed stones with clothes, furniture and human remains.

Hundreds of the camp people were rounded up at gunpoint and lined up on both sides of Rue Sabra. One woman pushed towards me and held out her baby. I took the child from her and understood she wanted me to raise him because she knew she was going to be killed. I held him briefly, but his terrified mother was made to take him back. For days afterwards I roamed the camps, but never saw mother or child again.

The bodies on Rue Sabra forced me to confront my many prejudices. Like many Christians raised on the Old Testament and the Western media, I had held a simplistic view that Palestinians and their PLO were terrorist mon-

sters and never victims of terror. I only believed their story of injustice after they had died. The massacre transformed Western perceptions of the Palestinian people. For the first time, they became human, because humans die.

Nothing will now bring back the dead, so why talk about them? The mood in the Middle East today is one of reconciliation. At the many meetings I have addressed, and at the Israeli Kahan Commission of Inquiry to which I gave evidence, I still find great difficulty talking about bitterness. Yet without bitterness, I know why I must continue to speak up.

Somewhere, deep within, I will always weep for the Palestinians in Lebanon, for the Sabra which no longer exists, and the Shatila which is quietly bleeding to death. While everyone should look forward to the day when the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza can live free, Lebanon's Palestinians must always be remembered.

Like the road to Calvary, the Palestinian journey is long and painful. As a Christian, I see the Sabra-Shatila massacre as a crucifixion. Where then is the resurrection which follows?

My Palestinian friends tell me without that massacre there could not have been the Palestinian intifada. The intifada and the hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries and imprisonments paved the way for the peace process.

But for me, the first stirring of the resurrection came a lot earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. A

few mornings after 18 September, while mass graves were still being uncovered, I went in search of friends and survivors. I was broken and tired. Suddenly, someone small ran up to me and threw his arms around me. A little boy whose broken wrist I treated three weeks ago had spotted me and cried with relief; he thought the gunmen had killed me when he saw me being taken away from the hospital. The child had lost his parents.

Other kids soon joined him and surrounded me. A little girl spotted my pocket camera, and asked me to take a picture of all of them against the background of the remains of the camp. "Doctor, take us, because tomorrow there may be another massacre and we will also die, and the camp will be flattened. But you can show our picture to all the world, and they can see the children of Sabra and Shatila."

As I focused my camera, they raised their hands in the victory V and said: "We are not afraid." Since that day I have been back to Lebanon on half a dozen medical missions. Each time I have looked for those kids but I never found any one of them. I fear the worst for them. But I have honoured their request. That picture of courage in the face of death I have been able to show the world. It was those children's spirit of victory over death which heralded the resurrection of the Palestinian people.

— Third World Network Features

DR ANG SWE CHAI is an orthopaedic surgeon.

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.

Electricity/Telephone/Gas bills

Sir, There has been reports that the Electricity, Telephone, Gas authorities are disconnecting their subscribers (customers) for alleged non-payment of bills, without notice, thus causing inconvenience to those who take all the pains to regularly pay their bills. Non-entry of payment details in the books have been cited as the cause of this fiasco. This is incredible in this age of computers and it is known that all these organisations named above have already computerized their accounting and billing at a considerable expense.

If the accounting and billing are properly programmed and relevant payment details put in the computer regularly under proper supervision, there should be not only no reason for such lapses but payment system also so simplified that the subscribers will not need waste time and money unne-

cessarily as at present. To save the customers from the hassle of paying bills under the present system, I would like to put forward the following suggestions to the Electricity, Telephone and Gas authorities (for easy reference hereunder referred to as ETG authorities) hopefully, that it will receive their attention and some positive steps will be taken to help the subscribers.

1) The ETG authorities should nominate the banks and their branches and it should be the option of the subscribers (customers) to pay the bills to any of those nominated branches convenient to the subscriber.

2) The respective branches should daily prepare a scroll standardised by the ETG authorities and send the same daily to the accounts office of the authorities without fail. A person at the accounts office should monitor the receipt of the daily scroll from the nominated branches who should send 'nil' return if there has

been no payment on a particular day. The scrolls should have serial number to keep a control that there is no missing scroll. At the accounts office the person monitoring should ensure that payment details are put in daily so that the chances of non-entry is removed.

3) To save the customers from hassle of preserving the receipts year after year there should be a system of issuing 'no demand certificates' annually at the end of a financial year on request even, if required, on payment of a nominal cost.

I shall be most grateful if, in the interest of all, you publish this letter in your daily to bring about some improvement. Presently it is an horrendous experience for any one who sincerely wants to clear his bills regularly.

Najm El Husayn
2/504 Eastern Tower
New Eskaton Road, Dhaka-1000

Muslim countries

Sir, This is to convey, as a member of the Muslim Ummah, my deepest disappointment and regret on the failure of the governments of Muslim countries to rise above petty political and mundane interest even when the

Muslims all over the world are groaning under the brutality of the enemies of Islam. While possessing half of the world's vital energy sources side by side having the staunchest and bravest part of the world's population I, as many others, fail to understand why should the Muslim world fail to put up a united stand to settle things once for all. Why should they not join hands to acquire effective technological knowhow to combat the common and sworn enemies of Islam instead of bleeding each other with the very weapons manufactured and bought with their own money?

Shoukat Ali
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Comparative development indicators

Sir, Prof Rehman Sobhan and his economist friends made significant contributions in discovering disparities existed between East and West Pakistan during pre-liberation days. Recently a good number of economic indicators of several SAARC countries were published in newspaper supplements. Against the backdrop I am tempted to know through them the comparative

economic indicators of Bangladesh and Pakistan like GNP per capita; average annual growth rate in GDP, agriculture, manufacturing industry and services; distribution of GDP in agriculture, industry etc; per capita consumption of food, electricity etc; export trade quantum; balance of payment; debt service ratio; flow of external capital, external public debt; health and education related indicators etc, etc. Let us get educated through those comparative facts and figures!

Sadiq Ali
120/1 Maghbari, Dhaka-1217

Communication — the first priority

Sir, I would like to refer to the article, "Is Communication New World Order's Greatest Problem?" by Syed Munir Khasru, published in your daily on February 15, and underscore the need for the realization that, in order to keep pace with the new world order, communication, out of other inter-disciplinary approaches, should be given utmost priority.

I fully comply with the writer's view that, education, which is based on selected and focused topics cannot lead the world for developing and effectively dealing with the constant changes at levels of inter-

personal, inter-group and inter-nation situations.

It is, as one can logically perceive, the economy, the trade, and the finance, which remain the only major alternatives to lead the nations to prosperity would be the essential factor in determining the relative importance of a nation in the changed world. But trade and commerce can only prosper, when effective communication system will be able to play an active role in such field.

Experiencing the unprecedented and the dramatic changes in the world order, it is necessary that every nation, to respond efficiently, must realize the importance of communication. It is, as the writer pointed out, "one of the critical elements for generating a process of fruitful interaction within as well as outside the organization."

If communication is not given its required priority, the change which has already hindered the progress of evolution will further enfeeble her, from which, I am quite sure, it will be decades to make up. Therefore, the significance of the development of communication for the viability of the nations in the new world order must not be undermined.

Tasneem Zaman
Dhanmordi, Dhaka