

The Failure of Water Talks

India has delivered a severe blow on Dhaka-Delhi bilateral relations by its refusal to make any concessions to meet the position of Bangladesh even part of the way during the official water talks which ended here on Wednesday on a note of failure. If our use of the word 'refusal' is deliberate, it is because the leader of the Indian team, Dr C. D. Thatte declined to talk to the local press — nor was there any joint statement — leaving us completely in the dark about New Delhi's game plan. On the other hand, by adopting an open attitude, the leader of the Bangladesh delegation, M. Asafuddin, outlined all the various proposals made by Dhaka, ranging from a visit to the Padma at the Hardinge Bridge to a joint monitoring evaluation by the two teams. During the talks, the Indian side reportedly turned down these suggestions, without of course giving the media the reasons for taking up such an unpromising position.

The blatantly unreasonable stand taken by the official team from New Delhi becomes all the more untenable in the backdrop of two particularly significant developments. First, in May last year, the Indian Prime Minister had personally assured his Bangladeshi counterpart that "every possible effort would be made to avoid hardship to Bangladesh by sharing the Ganges on an equitable basis." Secondly, there is plenty of evidence, available in newspaper reports and photographs, showing all time low level of water under the Hardinge Bridge, with the threat of failure of crops, if not famine, looming over the horizon. There are all the signs of "hardship" facing this country, the kind of hardship that the Indian Prime Minister had vowed to help Dhaka to deal with. With the Thatte team even declining to visit the site where the water in Padma has reached a dangerously low level, the assurance by Prime Minister has most certainly lost much of its credibility.

As if to soften the blow on Dhaka-Delhi bilateral relations, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, K. Raghunath has reportedly suggested that water sharing talks might resume at the "political level" during the forthcoming SAARC Summit. Is it a hint, a firm proposal from the Indian Government or just a suggestion which still calls for clarification? A bigger question facing the two countries is, where is the need for another round of political talks when the two sides spelt out their agreed position in the joint communiqué published on May 28 last year? What is really needed now is a sustained attempt, among officials, to come to grips with the technical details and prepare the ground for a new water-sharing agreement to avert the drought that faces Bangladesh today.

There are all kinds of theories why the Indian team put itself in an uncompromising position and let the talks fail. Is it possible that Dhaka is being taught a lesson for the stand taken by the Jatiya Sangsad on the demolition of the Babri Masjid? Is it also possible that Indian bureaucrats, serving on New Delhi's team on the water talks, have followed their own rigid devices rather than the political line offered by their Prime Minister to Begum Khaleda Zia during the latter's visit to New Delhi last year? It is a pity that one must take these suspicions into account, when the Indian team to the abortive talks could have been open, straight-forward and transparent in dealing with a problem that means life and death to Bangladesh.

Intellectual Wares for Consumption Abroad

A fair of Bangladesh books and an exhibition of Bangladesh paintings, opened in Calcutta on Tuesday, are currently enjoying a warm sweep of enthusiasm. The fortnight-long double-exhibit, one knows for sure, will be a regular haunt of the intellectuals and connoisseurs and the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission there, the sponsors, may feel tempted to extend both.

We are confident that by the time both the events, embellished by seminars and get-togethers participated by the writers and painters of both the countries, come finally to an end one thing will have been proved beyond doubt that Bangladesh has a goodly market of its intellectual wares in West Bengal. A thousand titles would be on sale there and we reasonably expect a sell-out.

So long it has been a one-way traffic as far as books and journals were concerned, thanks to both ineptitude on the part of our government and traders and the business and governmental blockages put up by the counterparts on the other side of the border. Let the book fair, we are unsure about the paintings exhibit's market impact, be the beginning of a much-delayed intellectual traffic from our end to theirs.

The book fair is a positive way to get out of our book-trade's persistent plague — dictation by political and pseudo-cultural partisan pressure groups aiming at a total ban on import of Bengali print material from across the border. Apart from this smacking of undemocratic ways of putting the national psyche and intellectual ferment into a straitjacket, this is a patently impractical thing bound to flood our markets with contraband print material — as surely as the smuggled Indian cows and sarees are swamping the Bangladesh market.

There was a cry of sub-standard print material coming from across the border having the potential of corrupting our culture and values. But we also have never been wanting in such commercial material, and the glory of being the greatest movie success in decades in West Bengal belongs to a Bangladesh box office film — Beder Mehe Jyosna. We have, however, exported better things than this. Soccer lovers all over India, specially in West Bengal, have an extra flush of love for Bangladesh players.

When we choose to introduce market economy as against command economy in our country, we opt out of preventing the consumer from getting what he wants. At the same time we also completely lose the ground for blaming our failure to export our intellectual and artistic wares — even to the biggest potential market of these — on some imagined cultural, communal and governmental resistance at work across the border. If our production is worth buying and our marketing is efficient enough to reach the buyer wherever he or she is, it is surely a matter of time and perseverance alone that our books and songs, our football and our Satkora would find their way to homes and fields abroad.

We wish the Calcutta fair of Bangladesh books all success.

AFTER observing 48-hour countrywide strike in mid-March, the Sramik Karmachari Oikkyo Parishad (workers-employees unity council), in short, called SKOP, is now planning to go for a greater movement in the coming months to realise its demands. The demands include fixation of national minimum wage and implementation of agreement signed between the government and the SKOP last year.

The SKOP, comprising 17 national trade union federations, claimed complete success of its strike on March 15-16 in industrial areas. The government termed the strike as illegal and said that the production in a good number of jute mills and other industrial enterprises continued despite the work stoppage programme. However, authorities later estimated a loss of industrial production to the tune of Taka 300 crore during those two days. Bangladesh Employers Association (BEA) and some leading chambers hailed government's stance of not bowing down to SKOP's pressure saying that the country's industry and economy would suffer if the demand for fixation of minimum wage was met. The employers suggested linking of wage with productivity for the greater interest of industries and workers.

The SKOP's recent strike was the first of its kind during the two years' rule of the BNP government. Though this government experienced some work stoppage or strikes in particular sectors, this was the first time that a workers' strike was called in all the sectors of industry, which, according to SKOP, involved

more than one million workers.

The SKOP which groups all the major trade union organisations, came into being in April 1983. However, the formation of such a body was initiated in September 1982 through a joint statement by 11 trade union federations in which the killing of a railway worker Kuru Mia in Chittagong by the members of law enforcing agency was condemned. The country was then under Martial Law which prohibited all trade union activities and that prohibition led those trade union bodies to unite against the autocratic regime.

Initially, the SKOP was launched by 13 labour organisations. These were: Jatiya Sramik League, Jatiyatlabadi Sramik Dal, Trade Union Centre, Jatiya Sramik Federation, Sangjukta Sramik Federation, Bangla Sramik Federation, Workers Federation, Federation of Labour, Bangladesh Sramik Federation, Ganotantrik Sramik Andolon, Jatiya Sramik Jote, Bangladesh Sramik League and Samajtantrik Sramik Front. At a later stage five more federations, namely, Trade Union Sangha, Samajtantrik Sramik Federation, Jatiya Sramik League Bangladesh, Workers Federation (another group), and Jatiya Sramik Federation joined the SKOP.

Presently, after merger of some federations and forma-

The Minimum Wage Issue: Only a Consensus can End the Impasse

by Chapal Bashar

Law and restoration of democratic rights. After the strike in March 1984, the SKOP announced the programme for a 48-hour strike on 22-23 May the same year to realise its 5-point demands and carried on a countrywide preparation for that. To avert the strike, Ershad government signed an agreement with SKOP on 21 May. The then labour and manpower minister Air Vice Marshal Aminul Islam signed it

on behalf of the government. In that accord the government agreed to declare wage structure with a minimum of Taka 460 per month for workers and Taka 400 for employees covered by pay commission. The government also agreed, more or less, to meet other demands of the 5-point charter.

The SKOP went on 48-hour strike again on 23-24 December that year demanding implementation of the agreement. Afterwards, government implemented the wage structure and other points of the agreement by 1985. However, SKOP maintains that the agreement was not fully implemented.

During 1989-90, when anti-Ershad movement reached its peak, the SKOP also became involved in the struggle for democracy and actively supported the programmes of three alliances — the 8-party, the 7-party and the 5-party.

The first agitation of workers during the rule of BNP government took place in October 1991 when the jute and textile workers put up barricades on roads and railways to realise their demands. The government signed a memorandum of understanding with SKOP in December that year which was followed by the signing of agreement in July 1992. In this the government agreed to announce wage commission report which would provide for a national

trade union rights, formation of national wage commission and pay commission and implementation of their recommendations, stoppage of denationalisation of industries, and repeal of Industrial Relations (Amendment) Ordinance 1982.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

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Jimmy Carter — the Indefatigable Crusader

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

Of all former US presidents Jimmy Carter remains the most diplomatically active and socially committed. His Carter Centre in Atlanta is today a major operation, mobilising 100,000 volunteers to work in American inner city ghettos, brokering peace talks in places like Eritrea, and monitoring elections in Africa and Latin America. This last activity is sometimes criticised for its style of operation.



JIMMY CARTER
Life after the White House

SOME Washington wag once commented that Jimmy Carter is the only person ever to use the United States presidency as a stepping stone to higher things.

It is certainly true that no other ex-president has been as diplomatically active and as socially committed as the smiling, soft-spoken Democrat who occupied the White House from 1977 to 1981. Now 68 years old, Carter remains a highly energetic crusader against poverty and a peripatetic advocate of human rights.

Unlike Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, who have used corporate sinecures to enrich their retirements, Carter regularly performs acts of charity, such as helping to build homes for poor people through a volunteer programme called Habitat for Humanity.

In contrast to the semi-reclusive Richard Nixon, the former peanut farmer from Georgia often appears on television chat shows, discussing his peacemaking initiatives in Asia and the Middle East or recounting his experiences as an election monitor in Africa and Latin America.

And it is unlikely that George Bush, the newest member of the exclusive club of living former presidents, will match Carter's efforts to improve conditions in the African-American urban slums.

While almost every ex-president establishes a library dedicated primarily to the study of his own historical role, none except Carter has created a multi-faceted institution designed to nurture democracy in the Developing World, eradicate deadly childhood diseases, and promote racial harmony in the US and abroad.

Launched in 1982, the Carter Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, now has a full-time staff of 130 and an annual budget of more than \$16 million. The funding comes entirely from individual and corporate donations. By avoiding reliance on taxpayers' money, the Centre can operate free of the constraints and conditions that

the federal government typically imposes on aid recipients.

Among the Centre's programmes is an international conflict-mediation service. Carter saw the need for an institute aimed at resolving civil wars because the United Nations seldom intervenes in disputes within a country's border. The ex-president acted under the auspices of this unit when he organised peace talks in 1989 between the Ethiopian government and independence fighters in Eritrea.

The Centre also carries out research projects that assist emerging democracies in establishing legal and institutional protection of human rights. Chad, Liberia and Ethiopia are among the countries where the Carter Centre has responded to requests for advice in this area. The former president and his wife,

Rosalynn, have also personally intervened several times with government leaders to secure the release of political prisoners.

Through an initiative known as Global 2000, specialists working in Atlanta and others posted abroad develop agricultural innovations and water-quality projects. For example, the Centre facilitated the transfer of crop production technology that has enabled Ghana to nearly reach its goal of food self-sufficiency.

Similar endeavours are underway in parts of Zambia and Sudan. Global 2000 has helped build a prosthetic manufacturing facility in China, a country with three million amputees.

A Centre-sponsored task force on child survival claims to have boosted immunization rates in the developing world from 20 per cent to 80 per cent in just six years. Advances of the same pace and magnitude are now being sought to prevent diarrhoea deaths and maternal mortality.

Close to home, the Carter Centre has mobilised an army of nearly 100,000 volunteers who work in inner city ghettos to lessen the social problems associated with poverty.

Of all its myriad activities, the Carter Centre is perhaps best known internationally for its election monitoring work. Delegations assembled by the ex-president have observed and reported on voting in several countries in recent years, including Panama, Nicaragua and Zambia. Last year alone, the Centre despatched monitoring teams to Mexico, Guyana and Ghana.

As more and more countries move away from dictatorial rule, election monitoring has emerged as a growth industry among good-governance

groups in the West.

In Africa, for example, the Carter Centre has worked in co-operation with a consortium that includes an African-American research foundation and institutes linked to both the Republican and Democratic parties in the US. The Centre has not been the sole monitoring agent from the US invited to assess the voting process in some Latin American countries.

Delegations organised by the Commonwealth have also been present in a few places where Carter Centre monitors were viewing election procedures. The relationship between these two sets of outside observers has not always been harmonious. Indeed, members of Commonwealth teams sometimes complain that their Carter Centre counterparts behave in an overly aggressive and intrusive manner.

The Commonwealth style of election observing is different.

The teams are made up of judges, election commissioners, lawyers, MPs and other eminent experts from Commonwealth countries. They are smaller than the Carter teams and run on limited budgets.

For its election observing activity the Carter Centre gets funding from USAID. It received \$2.3 million for its work in Guyana, Ghana and Liberia and another grant for Nicaragua in 1990.

The Commonwealth relationship and shared administrative systems means Commonwealth observers are more familiar with the country they are working in. The Carter teams include large numbers of younger people with little experience of developing countries or of local electoral practice.

Officials in Atlanta defend the action of the Centre's monitors. David Carroll, associate director of the Carter Centre's Latin America programme says:

"It's a case of different organisational styles. The Commonwealth is an inter-governmental organisation and, as such, it has to be a little more cautious than us. Also, they probably see us as being typically American — forward and outspoken."

Carroll adds, however, that the delegations from the Centre and the Commonwealth co-operated reasonably well during the Guyana election last October. He says: "There really wasn't much friction, or competition between us. There could have been much more."

By contrast, the simultaneous monitoring operations were clearly in conflict with one another in Ghana. Alesia Brooks, assistant project manager of the Centre's Africa governance programme, says: "We were critical of what the Commonwealth people did there."

She pointed out that they announced that the voting was free and fair, "before even 50 per cent of the results were in," while the Carter Centre did not announce its initial findings until two days later when it declined to certify the election as free and fair.

— GEMINI NEWS
KEVIN J KELLEY is the editor of the international affairs journal *Toward Freedom*

OPINION

More on Economy and Foreign Relations

Mir Abdus Sattar

In his rejoinder to my recent piece, Shah A M S Kibria has again taken considerable space of your Opinion column on Tuesday to lash out at the government — and, indeed, at me in a somewhat sarcastic vein — on two related areas, the financial reforms and external relations.

In the first place, Kibria insists that the economy is in stagnation which he says describes the present situation "accurately". The dictionary meaning of the word is "motionless", an extreme situation that surely does not exist here. However, I will not quibble about it. As one who knows the fiscal situation, I am aware of the importance of macro-economic reforms as a base for micro level changes. We are far from happy with the latter. Experts like former governors of the central bank, S B Chaudhuri and A K N Ahmed have dealt with the issues in a balanced manner in a constructive fashion, without indulging in emotional rhetoric and highly partisan manner like Kibria.

Kibria says, rather sarcastically, "perhaps the certificate of foreigners is more important to him" (meaning this humble self). He might have lifted this point out of context from my last piece. However, I do attach importance to the studies and surveys on our economic situation (not to mention of projects) carried out by donor nations and aid agencies. They are not flawless. However, in committing as much as two billion US dollars to this country every year, they do take a hard look at what is going on. They do not offer us "certificates"; they present us with comprehensive evaluations. I wonder if Kibria has read the recent speech by US Ambassador William Milam on problems facing the country or a balanced presentation by the

tough line against Myanmar, as suggested by Kibria. China was providing arms to Yangon; Thailand was carrying on normal trade with Myanmar and the ASEAN hardly issued a statement — Malaysia criticised Yangon much later — blaming the ruling junta in Yangon. We were advised to follow moderation. Let Kibria quote a single statement where we were told to be tough.

Kibria finds it "amusing" that the stage was set for water talks between Dhaka and Delhi, which I had referred to, and for the setting up of Indo-Bangladesh joint ventures. Amusing? Well, the day the Star published the piece by Kibria, official talks on the sharing of water started in Dhaka, based on certain assurances exchanged between Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh last year that New Delhi would not hurt the interest of Bangladesh where we do face a precarious situation. The credibility of India is on test. It is a serious matter. There is nothing "amusing" about it. The same is true about settling the stage for "joint ventures", on which exchange of visits by members of trade bodies of Bangladesh and West Bengal — not to mention of a major conference held last year in Calcutta — have taken place. Here, I take exception to the remark by Kibria when he asks, "How many more years will it take to begin actual negotiation and then how many more decades will it take to implement the agreement on these subjects?" Then, he says, "Sattar's optimism seems to have no limits."

On Rohingya issue, let the Foreign Ministry defend its policy. One argument is, if Dhaka had waited for the involvement of UNHCR in the whole exercise, it would have taken a long time to get the repatriation started. There was hardly any pressure on Dhaka by major powers to take a

My optimism has limits, and so has my patience. After this, I will not respond to anything that your guest columnist says either to challenge or even to support any of my views

To the Editor...

Garment dollars

Sir, As a layman-reader of newspapers, I am confused about the high export earnings (in dollars) quoted statistically, as it is not indicated whether these are 'gross' or 'net' earnings, as we know that the majority of the raw materials used in the garment industry are first imported, and then exported in finished form (value-added).

It is hoped future news items would clearly identify the figures used in the numbers game.

Alif Zabr
Dhaka

Consensus needed

Sir, There is a good number of political parties in our country. We like to believe that all of them are patriotic and dedicated. Four parties are big. They are the BNP, the Awami League, the Jatio Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. Let us think that all these parties are working for development of the country. But there is always a gulf of difference in their ideologies and concepts.

The BNP, as we observe, thinks that General Ziaur Rahman was the only champion for creation of Bangladesh. They also think that the Jatio Party has 'destroyed' the nation. The Awami League thinks that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has got the full credit for the creation of Bangladesh. They also think that the Jamaat-e-Islami is an alien (impliedly Pakistan) agent. Jatio Party, in its own way, believes that it has done much for the cause of the nation during their nine years. They have no faith in the ruling BNP. On the other hand, the Jamaat-e-Islami is treating the AL as "Indian agent".

These differences among them and attitude against one another are creating confusion in the public mind, admitting terrorism in the society and hampering the development of the country. Practically speaking, the society is drifting towards no direction or destination. And hence we think that a real consensus amongst the parties is absolutely needed to save the nation. I also think that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman be rehabilitated as the founder of the nation and be called

Bangobondhu. A K Fazlul Haque, Moulana Bhashani, General Ziaur Rahman should be given their due honour and seat in the national perspective. The general public have faith in and honour for all the leaders more or less. But unless a real political consensus is made and some sense of honour and tolerance is shown to each other the harmful and destructive restlessness in the society cannot be removed at all.

Md Abdul Latif Khalifa
Belpara, Jessore

An appreciation

Sir, I am very much impressed by the photo with the caption "Hunger — the perennial enemy of mankind..." which appeared in page 8 of your issue of March 9. The photographer, Shehzad Noorani, deserves congratulations for such a wonderful photo. It moves my heart with a desire to extend some gifts to the chubby child with a sweet smile who appears on the photo.

M Zaman
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