Seventh SAARC Summit

Every summit is a composite of symbols and substance. So also is the 7th SAARC summit whose final count down began yesterday with the first official level discussion. After being postponed twice, if ever a summit really, really needed to be held, just for its own sake, then ours is the one. The factors that forced the summit to be postponed are the very ones that make it to be of such crucial importance. The divisive forces in the subcontinent are perhaps at their height. While the need for cooperation may be obvious from even a cursory glance at the economic and social data, yet the political wave seems to drift us apart. There is no denying the fact that after six years of SAARC, and as many summits, the core agenda of the 7th summit is nothing more than keeping the regional body afloat. What Foreign Secretary Reaz Ahmed calls "confidence building," is really the key issue. Starting under a heavy cloud of scepticism, SAARC over the last several years, hardly went much beyond the rhetoric and the symbolic. The annual handshaking and the photo-sessions could not hide the fact of the wide gap - which in some instances was widening — among the leaders.

However, it is our view that, the event — destruction of the Babri mosque — that dealt such a severe blow to SAARC is, ironically, the very event that brought out, into the open, that there is absolutely no alternative for us but to opt for the path of cooperation as opposed to that of confrontation. We, the SAARC members, are much too inter-woven in history, culture, religion, and intellectual legacy, not to mention geography, not to seek the path of helping each other for our own individual benefit.

As we see it, the 7th summit has two very distinct sets of agenda — one which is official and is spelt out in the various documents that have been written and rewritten throughout the preparatory period. The other, nobody speaks about, but is in every leader's mind.

Let us take the most important of the official agenda — poverty alleviation. If our regional body is ever to acquire a place in the hearts and minds of our people, it will have to translate itself in some meaningful way in reducing the poverty that is destroying us all in so many ways. The progress in SAPTA is a tangible achievement. But it must be pursued with energy and a real will to help the disadvantaged members. The market economy which all the SAARC countries are now opting for has given us another converging point. However, market mechanism in our case will have to be implemented with an eye on the strengths and weaknesses of each of our economies. And herein comes the question of the genuineness of our desire for cooperation.

The other agenda, the unwritten one, is where the future of SAARC will really be determined. The leaders coming together after two aborted attempts, must realise that the task before them is for more than mere exchanges of pleasantries or signing over some dotted lines. Theirs is one to reach out and convince each other that regional cooperation is uppermost in their minds. The issue of protecting the rights of Muslims in India and, in a broader way, of minorities in SAARC, is one in handling which the leaders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh must go beyond the surface. In this particular instance domestic politics for each one of the leaders acquire greater importance than the issue itself. This can be overcome through building trust among them. which is far from what is the reality now. About our share of the Ganges water, a deeper appreciation of our plight by the Indian leader is necessary to change the course of events. The problem of Kashmir again posses a major stumbling block in improving Indo-Pak relations. The cooperation between Sri Lanka and India is a must if LTTE terrorists are to be defeated

All this will figure in the bilateral and informal talks that are likely to be held. We do not expect any of these problems to be solved, even marginally, during the summit. But we do hope that important personal contacts will be made which will set a new tone to negotiations on the above issues. The key word — and one that keeps coming back, is - 'confidence building.'

Wanted Action to Regenerate Soil

That soil is degenerating and losing in fertility all over Bangladesh is nothing new to be told. A Kishoreganj report in a Daily Star page on Wednesday "chemical fertilizer use rampant, soil fertility declining" struck us into believing what has been known to us as a casual piece of information. Coming to think of it, it is strange that in view of the accepted fact of countrywide soil degeneration, no nationsized first-priority programme has been taken up for regeneration of land — the linchpin of our physical existence here.

The Kishoreganj report holds rampant use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides in the cropfields to be exclusively responsible for the general fall in soil fertility. There is a hint to another factor - want of cowdung - which when added to the other two make up the most formidable foes of the soil's life-giving and sustaining magicpower. What our Kishoreganj correspondent has failed to identify as another great contributor to the dwindling per-acre yield of crops is the HYV connection.

Chemical fertilizer, pesticide and the High Yielding Varieties (HYV) have joined hands to bring back to us the tragedy of killing the goose that laid golden eggs — so tellingly. In fact, the HYV has been instrumental to inviting in the positively dangerous chemical fertiliser and the pesticides. The traditional low to middle yielding varieties of cereals do not need either the costly input of constant water or chemical fertilizer and pesticide in order to ensure a good but moderate harvest. Their continued use, with a helping of cowdung and the support of off-season sprouting of the nitrogen-fixing Kalai sustains the land.

The short-stalked HYV doesn't allow cattle to have a square meal. The galloping demand for beef in the towns, together with the HYV's ungenerous feed supply, pushes the dwindling livestock situation to a point of no recovery.

We have in these columns tried to counsel the nation to desist from sloughtering lakhs of cows for reasons of ostentatious contest of status - far removed from the teachings of what has been and continues to be a religion of the poor, for the poor. Please don't kill the goose, otherwise the golden gifts of nature — this land and this water, these trees and this moisture - will all go as surely as the muslin has gone out of our life.

NON-PARTISAN EXPERTS LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

Reaching a Dead-end

Decline in Interaction with Politicians

HE much-expected interaction between the media and politicians and, indeed, between intellectuals and parliamentarians remains a distant dream, with all sides picking up the losses and none any gains.

This has become a commonly accepted scenario in this country. As a senior journalist puts it, "I cannot remember when last time I had a substantive talk with a politician. Only two years ago, political leaders would chase me to get all the gossips. Now, when we meet, usually at my request, I get long lectures, full of answers to the questions we may not even ask."

Even it sounds a somewhat harsh oversimplification, there is obviously much truth in it. The fact is, among other things, there is a rapid decline, if not a total breakdown, in communication among segments of the educated elite who have much to contribute to the development of the country and, more specifically, to the protection of democracy in Bangladesh.

In this scenario, the worst victims are those who had once showed considerable potential of being non-partisan experts capable of contributing to the debate on contemporary issues in political and economic fields.

It has not taken much time for them to suffer from unspoken disenchantment and, in the end, to be left out in the cold.

There are many and varied reasons which have contributed to this situation. Even during the anti-Ershad agitation in the late eighties, a handful of intellectuals who occasionally called on Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina generally failed to establish much of a rapport with these political leaders, especially with their mid-level followers.

"Whenever we were in the company of a national leader", a former university teacher once said, "we felt, rather uneasily, that we were in someone else's domain."

If these independent experts were treated as something like intruders, they were also perhaps seen as potential candidates for senior posts in the new administration, no matter which party headed it.

During the past two years, this alienation of non-partisan intellectuals from political groupings has grown stronger. One would not know if they feel bitter and angry. However, some have returned to their shells, pursuing some

traditional Istar party

earlier month - celeb-

rating the end of the

day's Ramadan fast - became a

game of political pointscoring.

The winner was Khaleda Zia

the Prime Minister. Against all

expectations, Mrs Zia attended

the party hosted by her arch

rival Sheikh Hasina, Leader of

the Opposition Awami League.

Mrs Zia's move as a victory of

statesmanship over petty-

mindedness, an act it hoped

would help to reconcile the

two. For 18 months they had

spurned each other's invita-

tions, issued more out of polit-

ical nicety than affection.

"From my side I have no rivalry

[with her]. I do not know about

her," says the Prime Minister.

iation may be a long way off.

However, genuine reconcil-

The two leaders dominate

their parties and domestic pol-

itics. The tendency, according

to a western diplomat, is for

the opposition to be preoccu-

pied with Mrs Hasina's per-

sonal battles and for the gov-

ernment to be constantly on

the defensive and unable to

define a clear strategy for the

entered politics as standard

bearers respectively for their

murdered husband (President

Ziaur Rahman) and father

(Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who

led the struggle for an inde-

to the events surrounding the

creation of the state 22 years

ago," says a foreign diplomat.

Mrs Hasina, for instance, is de-

termined to repeal the indem-

nity given to her father's

which divide the ruling

Bangladesh National Party and

the Awami League. Their ag-

It is these historical issues

"Both the women hark back

pendent of Bangladesh).

Mrs Zia and Mrs Hasina

future.

The local press described

literary and cultural activities, but generally cut off from broad-based national affairs.

On the other hand, a number of them have found a way-out. They have discarded their non-partisan positions and associated themselves with political parties, usually with the opposition Awami League (AL). If, by their actions, they have weakened the base of independent thinking, they have probably convinced themselves that there is hardly any room for a non-partisan approach to the highly polarised volatile politics of Bangladesh. In this respect, their losses are much greater than their marginal gains. No matter what positions

the establishment of a third political party have apparently confirmed the worst suspicion of the AL Chief, Sheikh Hasina that the setting up of Forum was only a cover, paving the way for a new party that would rival the main opposition

Whatever the future of the proposed third party and of its impact on the overall political scene in the country, AL is paying a price for its inability - or unwillingness - to promote interaction with a cross section of the educated elite.

In this respect, the opposition may take some consolation from the fact that in the useful figures of investments generated from outside. As this paper has editorially suggested, these statistics would be more meaningful if we got the comparative ones for the same period last year, which are not available just now. Again, from the point of view of interaction, experts need full comprehensive information on all issues, economic, political, foreign affairs, education and so on and so forth. This is what transparency is all about.

We are, therefore, in a situation in which independent experts are being left out in the cold. If they are denied a continuing communication by the opposition AL, say, through its socalled Advisory Council (whatever it is called), they are cut off from government sources when it comes to vital information, not perhaps deliberately but due to an absence of a mecha-

It is not surprising that people, including diplomats from other countries, look for all kinds of reasons why the situation, never particularly satisfactory, has been turning from

One theory, rather a charitable one, is that the major parties need orientation in interaction with independent experts. In short, it is a question of training.

A less charitable theory is that both the national leaders, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have been increasingly thinking along party lines, unable to seek out the views of non-partisan individuals through a sustained

Up to a point, fault surely lies with the closest associates of the two leaders, and, in the case of Begum Zia, partially with the Prime Minister's Secretariat. Whether these people are unable to think carefully or are too shy - or scared - to give the right advice to their respective leaders is really beyond me. In a way, the answer would not make much difference.

What would make a lot of difference is a reversal of the process, turning what I had described as a "distant dream" at the start of the column into a reality. Once the two parties reach out for national constituencies, instead of merely promoting party lines, some new thinking on our contemporary issues may emerge, for the benefit of the country as a

ALI

they have been assigned by the leader, they are yet to find a role for themselves in sharpening the programme of what many of us describe as the alternative government of Bangladesh.

It is in this context that the establishment of the Democratic Forum (DF) raised such expectations, as a loosely-structured body of independent experts, regardless of their party affiliations, and, what is more important, as a think tank. Many of us still have a lingering hope that in its latter capacity, it would promote and sustain not merely a political agenda, such as a broad-based national consensus, but also research-oriented activities in such fields as privatisation, the use of foreign capital, educational reforms, agriculture and protection of environment. In all these fields, Kamal Hossain, the architect of the DF, has been in a position to ask for assistance and guidance from noted experts, ranging from former vice chancellors to agricultural experts with international background, distinguished economists to retired civil servants.

Dr Hossain has been slow in using this chance. Whatever might have been his original perception of the role of DF and its future, same field, the ruling party's performance merits no appreciation. If anything, it is getting worse.

There is less and less sustained conversa tion between government leaders and the media or between politicians and members of the business community. True, some ministers make themselves readily available for senior journalists and editors. Such meetings are useful, even when some briefings turn out to be rhetorical monologues.

The problem is, there is no established mechanism, in any part of the present administration, that sustains interaction with the intellectual community and offers it a chance to come up with new ideas.

This lack of interaction, especially with the media, often puts a ministry at a serious disad-

This writer recently asked the head of a ministry which had been criticised in the media if he had a couple of dependable writers on his staff to produce a documented defence of the government policies. The answer was vague, the impression being such writers did not exist.

Another ministry has just provided some

ters. Students, who played a critical role in forcing Ershad's

downfall, have been largely has been to sustain the momentum behind the transition radical Islamic party, enjoyed to democracy. The press speaks its mind and the Jatiya Sangsad, the parliament, though lacking some of the sharper skills of democratic

army's door. The army is content. Its refusal to bail out General Ershad was an important turning point for the military. Today, the army believes its interests are broadly served by Mrs Zia's brand of Bangladeshi nationalism and commitment to Islam.

politics, functions well. Both

main parties are committed to

parliamentary democracy

Nobody is knocking at the

Mrs Zia's other accomplishment has been to strengthen her position within the BNP. Among cabinet colleagues, she alone enjoys national support. Though some ministers, such as Mr Saifur Rahman at Finance, are acknowledged to be doing a good job, they scarcely represent a challenge to Mrs Zia.

Nor is she under threat

The Jamaat-e-Islami, the

brief influence after the election by supporting the BNP and giving it an overall majority. But with the appointment of 30 nominated women members to parliament - most allied to the BNP - the parliamentary wing of the Islamic party has been sidelined. The Jamaat-e-Islami's influence is mostly confined to local politics where its powerful cadre and organisational strength ensures it a strong voice in byelections.

The Awami League is seen by political observers as enfeepersonalities and rarely on issues of substance. The party lacks a coherent strategy and is internally divided. Sheikh Hasina needs to think afresh. She might have started by revising the guest list for Eid party marking the end of

Courtesy: Financial Times,

Ramadan.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

some mixed signals from other sources about

Pointscoring in a Democratic Consensus

gressive partisanship hinders consensus on pressing problems, such as the economy on which the two parties claim common ground.

Though Mrs Zia continues to invoke the spirit of her husband, recalling for instance his "19-point economic plan" — a vague strategy which lacked substance - she insists she is her own person. "I am a different personality [than my husbandl and developed my policies during nine years of the autocratic Ershad regime.

General Ershad, who seized power in 1982, resigned in December 1990 in the face of pposition protests and student demonstrations. Ershad. was arrested and tried on charges of illegal possession of arms and abuse of power. He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. Mrs Zia came to power after winning the country's first free elections in February 1991.

The Prime Minister is trying to escape the past. In recent months she has toured rural areas, addressing crowds of up to 500,000. "She is trying to shift the political ground. She is raising very important issues such as poverty, education and illiteracy at a critical time," says Talukder Maniruzzaman, a political scientist at Dhaka University.

With the government under intense pressure to implement a tough World Bank programme, Mrs Zia needs to sell it to the people. Her speeches in the countryside are also enabling her to widen her political support. Urban critics have always accused her of being out Khozem Merchant traces the rivalry between the two ladies who dominate the Bangladesh political arena



Prime Minister Begum

of touch with the people because of her "cantonment culture", a reference to her life in the barracks as the wife of a

Khaleda Zia

soldier. However, as Professor Maniruzzaman says: "The government is drifting. She has not been spectacularly successful but she sets the tone of government. There is a logic in her approach. Her intentions are good. She

emphasises development." The sense of drift is partly explained by inexperience. Only five of her 40-member cabinet had ministerial experience when appointed. Few capable candidates are waiting in the wings. The majority of the 1991 parliamentary intake were political novices, newly-

OPINION

Leader of the Opposition

Sheikh Hasina

Her real accomplishment

rich businessmen. In any case, the Prime Minister is loval to

from other traditional quar-

President Clinton's Dream of Change and Regeneration

The inauguration speech by the US President Bill Clinton Boomers' hold the conviction that not everything is right with America, and that change is vital for it's continued wellbeing and strength.

Compared to other inauguration speeches - some of which, like President Kennedy's, have become classics — Bill Clinton's was short of memorable quotes. It suffered from repetitions and generalizations, although it did have specific references to current issues that are bound to keep him preoccupied throughout his four-year term. But the repetitions and generalizations highlight the main themes of, his speech, they are textual props to put forward his ideas which, in the atmosphere of great expectations created by his victory, need to

be heard loud and clear. The inauguration speech again and again harped on dynamism and change that Clinton feels are prerequisites to complete programmes that he feels are required by his country. Perhaps the most memorable assertion of the address - "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America" — is most suggestive of the direction the new administration will take. Change is the new President's basic concern and regeneration will be his modus operandi. It is surprising to see how many times he uses the term regeneration and it's synonyms - reinvent, readtalise, reform. Clearly the central emphasis of the speech is on the capacity of America to

M M A Matin regenerate itself in the face of

stagnation or crisis. Like his fellow Americans, Clinton does not force radical change. He did not mention anything like America taking drastic new steps to solve its problems. All he said was that America has, at least had until the recent past, the greatness that has to be rediscovered and reshaped. It is essentially a looking back on itself and then looking forward that can reinvigorate America.

Clinton obviously has been

trying to capitalise on the euphoria caused by the changing of guards. George Bush's administration and pre-World War II generation have given way to the post-war generation. The change that he visualizes is something that he symbolically represents. Old ideas from a generation raised in the days of colonialism and the primacy of white Europeans have given way to the 'flower children' of the sixties. His youth is a great factor; it is reassuring, heartening. If change has to come, it will come as a matter of course, in keeping with the religion of youth. Regeneration on the other hand is going back to the past — not to its blind alleys and for its closed off areas, but to the ever changing flow of events that connect all time to the present. Thus, Clinton's speech straddled past and present and provides a pointer to the future actions of his administration.

As was expected, Clinton restated America's faith in democracy. But the one significant difference is that he, like President Kennedy, includes the struggle for democracy in other countries as the struggle of Americans themselves. This should be heartening, especially to the democracy-loving people of the third world whose efforts to achieve the goal of democracy received only lip-service from previous US administrations. He also mentioned Somalia and implied Bosnia where hope for US involvement is seen as an answer to chaos. But there was one ominous note in his speech - he did remark that the US would 'use force when necessary.' Let us hope that this will not give the Pentagon a license to become involved everywhere, but that care would be taken to distinguish between true need and madeup need.

A new generation of Americans has taken control of the world's first democracy and only superpower, a generation raised in the shadow of the cold war and the threat of nuclear holocaust. A generation that espouses love, peace and social justice. Bill Clinton's inaugural address speaks for this generation, a young man with a vision for America and the world.

America, at this point in its history has to face change and looks upon it positively, as a friend. He is trying to draw on the American people's proven ability to address and resolve problems so that a process of regeneration and renewal can be established. If the American people can rediscover this ability, then the current problems can be solved and a brighter future can be created.

Essential to such a process is, of course, America's pursuance of democracy and democratic principles. The theme of democracy will also be the basis for America's relations with other countries, including those of the developing world and this is to be welcomed, provided that genuine concern for the welfare of the people of other countries does not develop into unnecessary interference in the running of those countries.

Hajj policy

Sir, We are all aware of the proverb: Man proposes - God disposes. This year's Hajj policy however shows that what Allah proposes, man disposes. Islam enjoins us to perform Hajj — the current Hajj policy seemingly dissuades us to do

We have no quarrel with the Government's ballot system of Hajj. However, there are many people who would rather avail the non ballot system because of personal reasons.

One of the biggest advantage for non-ballotee pilgrim is the flexibility the person has he can arrange his own departure and arrival. Not only it saves time, it also saves money for the pilgrim as he has to stay less number of days.

The Saudi Embassy unilaterally declared that there they will not entertain non-ballotee pilgrims this year. This is a contradiction of their earlier announcement wherein they requested non-ballotee pilgrims to produce a sponsorship certificate or advance house rent agreement in Makkah and Madinah.

As custodians to Islam's holiest sanctuaries, Saudis should allow flexibility to their Muslim brethren so that they can perform their Hajj comfortably and uncomplicatedly. However, their attitude this year is controversial and does not show such intentions.

As Muslims, we have to ask Allah to solve our problems. pray fervently to Allah that He brings sense to our Saudi brothers so that we can perform Hajj under the non-ballotee system. May Allah grant our prayers!

S. Ahmed 193 Elephant Road, Dhaka

"Roundtable with the Government: Is the

Bangladesh Govt. Sleeping?" Sir, One should hardly miss

such an important theme as discussed by SM Ali in his feature column captioned "MY World" in The Daily Star, dated April 2. It is as much a thought-provoking as it is also an eye-opener to the Gulivers the country who are still sleeping. The keystone of success of the country's overall development lies in the planned economy which may be found out through open discussion participated by the Govt. leaders, economist, entrepreneurs, industrialists, bankers etc. by holding seminars, workshops and roundtable conferences paving the way for development and new investment opportunity.

It is surprising to know that roundtables of the kind have been organised in Pakistan. Shri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia to sort out their economic problems and to devise its panacea. But alas the name of Bangladesh is missing from the list.

S M Ali has evoked further interest by attaching an inset

photo on the cover page of an economic brochure published on the eve of such roundtable in Pakistan. It at once captures our mind and instil ideas in the mind of readers by publishing such a cover-page photo with an extra added charm of inscription: "Is the Bangladesh Government Sleeping? Who will wake them

We endorse with the views for holding a pre-aid club meetings in Dhaka. But "it is too late of such meeting this year as the aid to Bangladesh meeting in Paris is just round the corner.

We understand, economic seminars and roundtable as such, are being organised by various newspapers and banks. Our national dailies and private banks like Grameen Bank can take the initiative and play as counterpart of Thai Farmers Bank emulating the precedent. We are also happy to learn that a dialogue was organised by The Daily Star two years back in which two experts like Rehman Sobhan and Syeduzzaman encountered each other highlighting their views from their respective angle. Certainly, general readers will be tempted to be acquainted with their views. From the academic standpoint, would you kindly reproduce the dialogue in the form of question answer by Rehman Sobhan and Syeduzzaman to get us enlightened who, like me, might have missed?

Syed Saleh Uddin Mahmood 150/1 Azimpur Road, Dhaka

had one dominant message change. We must make change a friend' he stated and one felt that behind this wish of the new President are the hopes of his generation of Americans, born since the end of World War II. He and his fellow 'Baby