

## Consensus for Jamuna Bridge

The external co-financiers of the US dollar 700 million (approximately) Jamuna Multi-purpose Bridge, namely the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Japanese government — each footing approximately US dollar 200 million, with Bangladesh putting up about US dollar 100 million in local currency — are supposed to give final seal of approval for the project sometimes during the course of the next few days. According to the finance minister, Saifur Rahman, a Japanese expert team arrived in town yesterday to make some final enquiries and settle the issue.

There has been substantial debate on the necessity, viability, usefulness and cost-benefit of this bridge. There have been a lot of studies and numerous feasibility missions by the hard-nosed financiers. All of them have come up with positive conclusions about the need and the economic viability of this vital link between the north and western districts with the rest of Bangladesh. The 4.8 km long and 18.5m wide bridge will carry a 4 lane road and have foundation for a metre gauge railway bridge (all we will need to do is put the tracks) support an electric interconnector, a gas pipeline and telecommunication facilities. In other words this one bridge will provide vital links with the other half of the country not only in road and rail (future) communication, but also in vital energy resource transmission in such areas as electricity and gas. The importance of energy transmission aspect of the bridge is almost as crucial as the road link, because it has been a long standing demand of those districts that they were being deprived of adequate supply of electricity and gas which were hindering their economic progress. Separately it has been estimated that constructing an electric interconnector across the vast expanse of the Jamuna would itself cost anywhere between US dollar 150 to 200 million. Then, consider the cost of setting up a gas pipeline, either under water or, far less practical, overhead across the mighty Jamuna. What about the cost of separately setting up telecommunication links? Taken together, these three facilities — which the government will have to build in the near future —, plus of course the road and rail links, the real cost of the now proposed multi-purpose bridge appears to be much more cost-effective.

The bottomline of the usefulness of the bridge is, of course, the economic return. And it is here, that the case for the bridge is strongest. First of all it has to be understood that there are tangible and intangible gains from the bridge, making the latter benefits difficult to quantify. Given what can be calculated, like saving the waiting time of goods carrying trucks, increased road traffic and the consequent rise in economic activities, it is estimated to have a rate of return of 15 per cent — an extremely favourable return, compared to other projects of comparable size, complexity and cost. The main argument against the bridge comes from those who talk about improving the existing ferry system. The weakness of the ferry alternative is that it can never match the time saving element, dependability and efficiency of a 24 hour, all weather road link. Ferry will be affected by vagaries of weather and its modernisation will itself cost quite a package. And it can never carry a rail bridge, gas pipe and electric interconnector.

In addition, the construction of bridge will generate huge demand for locally produced goods which the bridge will use, not to mention business for local contractors, and employment for local labour in river training, road construction and other related works. On the intangible side, the feeling that the whole country is connected, and that one part is not being developed while the other is left behind — exactly how many people on the other side of Jamuna feel at the moment — is not something to underestimate.

Having considered all aspects, the nation must now extend full support behind this critical project, and that a visible national consensus — regardless of whether one is in power or is in the opposition — should now be demonstrated in its favour.

## Uppish Mental Health

With the observance of the World Mental Health Day yesterday, Bangladesh joins the international community in yet another common endeavour to make the human society a little better. Certainly, somewhere there are some committed people whose unflagging efforts account for the celebration of the numerous world 'this day or that day' throughout the globe. But sometimes they come so crowding together that common people just wonder what they mean. Even more puzzling is their short-lived but ostentatious fanfares and merriment. Some people of the specific field and a few distinguished personalities, including government functionaries, give the occasion some grace but then the rest is a silence.

Barring a few exceptions, this is the symptom of marking the world days, international years and the international decades. About one thing then there is no doubt that we do not qualify to be any exception in this regard, least of all when it comes to a subject like mental health. Of the world's 500,000,000 mentally ill, Bangladesh is home to 5,000,000 such patients (let us hope the figure is reliable and not fraught with controversy like the statistics of population and literacy) — which means the ratio is half that of the world. Much as this may look healthy, there is however little cause for euphoria; still less for neglecting it. In a land of integrated family, close-knit society with its traditional moral and spiritual strength, mental derangement should have been almost a totally foreign thing — which once indeed was the case, but not any more.

This is enough indication that not everything is going well on our mental health front. Social scientists perhaps will be the most competent people to adequately explain what really has gone wrong. To our mind, however, there is little doubt that a large part of the problem owes to unbearable poverty and unemployment. In the affluent society, this problem has assumed the forms of western society which has been paying a heavy price for its indiscipline life, lax morals, uncontrolled consumerism, comfort and luxury. All those vices are just making an inroad into our system. A balanced development complemented by our traditional values can perhaps be an answer to this personal trauma and social problem.

# Foreign Policy: Are We Drifting in Uncharted Seas?

THE kindest thing that one can say about the Bangladesh foreign policy these days is that it is being conducted at a very low key. There is nothing inherently wrong in a low-key foreign policy if we have no particular goals to achieve or problems to solve. But we do, have problems which brook no delay.

Even from a careful scanning of the newspapers one can hardly discern the elements or the modalities of our foreign policy. Of course, one does hear, from time to time, about the Farakka problem, the Rohingya refugees and the Chakmas of Chittagong Hill Tracts or the troubling push-in policy of India. But one does not know if the handling of these questions is based on a coherent policy or merely reflects desperate efforts at short-term crisis management.

More than two and half years have passed since the present government assumed power but regrettably all these critical problems remain unresolved.

What is the background against which the current policies of the country are to be considered and evaluated? During the Liberation War the government headed by the Awami League leaders veered to the Soviet bloc out of the sheer need for survival. The other superpower, the United States was opposed to our aspirations for independence. In fact, the arrival of the 7th fleet in the Bay of Bengal at a crucial moment of the war was a clear demonstration that the United States under Nixon and Kissinger did not harbour exactly friendly feelings towards Bangladesh.

The other superpower, the Soviet Union and its ally India, stood by us during those critical days. Soon after independence Bangladesh, under the leader-

ship of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted to shed this image and worked actively to bring about a better balance in our external relations. Feelers were sent out to China and a campaign was launched to secure the recognition of the Western Powers and the Arab countries.

Simultaneously, Bangladesh joined the Non-aligned movement and the British Commonwealth to broaden its international contacts. Eventually Bangladesh also successfully pushed to joint the Organization of Islamic States to further cement relations with the Islamic world. All these efforts did correct the tilt in our foreign policy but it took the United States, China and Pakistan quite sometime to become reconciled to the reality of a Bangladesh which refused to become identified with any one camp. The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and transfer of state power to Mustaq and his forces brought about a sudden shift in foreign policy. Bangladesh, under him and then under Zia and Ershad firmly joined the anti-Soviet and anti-India constellation of powers. Begum Khaleda Zia has not done any thing so far to change the status quo.

The question that naturally comes to mind is: Have we examined our position in the context of the current global political situation? We all know about the change in international politics as a result of the exit of the Soviet Union as an effective player on the world scene. But we do not seem to grasp its significance in altering the geo-political equation in Asia.

China and the US are moving apart over differences on trade and human rights policies. China does not need, as it did in the past, the US umbrella

against Soviet power. Moreover China has its own regional ambitions. So China is seeking out new allies and behold, they have discovered in India a potential new friend. Having lost its Soviet ally, India is perhaps in a more difficult situation.

Buffeted by internal problems such as the separatist movements in Kashmir and the Punjab and the rise of communal forces India is no longer assured of the steady and reliable support of the Soviet Union which has been a corner-stone of her foreign policy over the

last thirty years. Today, Yeltsin's Russia is closer to the US than to India. In these altered circumstances India has found the idea of friendship with China to be not too unpalatable. The fervour of the old Hindi-Chini bhai era is perhaps gone but geo-political exigencies are pushing them closer with every passing day as reflected in the recent visit by Narasimha Rao to China.

It should be noted that other Asian countries including Japan, the two Koreas and the ASEAN countries are all trying to reposition themselves to meet the new challenges posed by the shift in the configuration of regional powers. But have policy makers here made any discernible move to adjust to the changed situation? Our professional diplomats surely perceive the implications of these basic and far-reaching changes but why do we not see some reflection of this understanding in the way in which our foreign relations are being conducted?

Pakistan, for example, is no longer in the same happy position that it enjoyed during the cold war and particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In fact the US is now getting impatient with Pakistan's drug exports and is alleged support for terrorists. Its nuclear policy is now under sharp attack whereas during the Reagan era the US turned its eyes the other way. Friendship with China is still proclaimed loudly but the cold reality of Chinese friendship with India will inevitably erode the Sino-Pakistan alliance. How long, one wonders, can an en-

emy's friend remain a friend? Pakistani policy makers are, obviously quite conscious about these profound changes in the power equations and they are making adjustments in their foreign policy.

But Bangladesh seems to be stuck in the policy framework that was forged in the aftermath of the bloody political change of 1975. The world has not standing still. Must we not re-assess the currents and cross currents of global and regional power politics in order to protect and promote our national interests?

The Prime Minister's statement in the UN General Assembly made some references to some of the common international questions but it touched on two very fundamental and sensitive issues, namely, the security of small states and the question of sharing of the waters of the Ganges. The Prime Minister was right in highlighting the problem of the security of small states but how do we achieve this goal? She should have looked at Bosnia, Leba-

non, Iraq, Kuwait and even Israel in order to appreciate the realities of life today.

The UN is a useful forum but it is still an instrument in the hands of the great powers. Great speeches in the UN did not save the poor Bosnian Muslims from getting systematically butchered by the Serbs. The underlying reality of international life today is that it is not the UN which is providing security to its member states. It is either their own military power or the political-military alliances which binds them with their neighbouring countries in their respective regions.

The UN is yet very far from having any significant impact on the question of security of small states. The organization is nearly bankrupt and it can move only when the great powers (and also those who have the means to foot the bills) want it to act. Policy makers in Bangladesh have to realize that national security must be sought against the background of our regional situation.

Some people in Bangladesh who love to play the role of David against Goliath and want to appear heroic, must have enjoyed the Prime Minister's remarks about the Farakka issue. It reads well, it excites patriotic fervour. However it smacks suspiciously of a statement made primarily for domestic consumption. India has indeed been most unfair in denying our legitimate share of the waters. But a Prime Minister does not and must not make a statement simply because we will all enjoy it. It must have a purpose. Presumably the purpose was to get an increased flow of water for us. Has she improved our chances of getting our fair share of the water? On her return she reportedly said that many countries' representatives privately expressed concern for

ish.

Among 17 emissaries sent to Malaysia in connection with the abortive MIG deal was the popular singer and millionaire businessman, Yussif Kobson. Another intermediary, touting sales of planes and tanks in Australia, turned out to be a veterinarian of a scientific visit.

The strangest story of all concerned General Dmitri Volkogonov, Yeltsin's defence adviser. In a post-mortem on the Malaysia deal, it transpired that for a deal which would put Russia into direct competition with the US, Volkogonov had recommended as a middleman a friend of the US military attaché.

There has never been any special training for Russian arms sellers something which recently caused the administration head of the arms-producing Vladimir region to complain that amateurish salesmanship was losing local factories half their market.

Today there is pressure from the industry to return to the use of experienced brokers, to prevent established markets being taken over by newcomers such as Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Brazil.

In response to the foreign invasion of its old markets, Russia, with a client list of 47 states, is now seeking new ones: in South-East Asia, Latin America and the Gulf.

There is even talk of what a few years ago would have seemed impossible partnerships. South Africa has inquired into the possibility of using SS-25 rockets to launch satellites; Taiwan has asked about the MIG-29; and Pakistan has shown interest in the US-27.

But so long as Moscow dare not risk offending existing customers, such things will still be theoretical; and experts see its main clients in 1994 as India, China, Syria and Iran.

ANDREI MARTOV is a Russian defence analyst.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

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## DEALING IN DEATH

# Where are Russia's Arms Going?

Andrei Martov writes from Moscow

The ending of the Cold War was a blow for the Russian military industrial complex. Billions of dollars worth of weapons are going begging in Russia and other republics as a result of the deterioration and break-up of the Soviet armed forces. More than 200 fighter planes and 1,000 tanks are waiting for buyers. Gemini News Service reports on the woes of the ex-Soviet defence industry and the cut-throat quest for export orders.

## Soviet arms sales to the South



their chances of getting the sales? Or, to see the problem from the other side, which Third World countries are in line for the sales push?

American experts say that Russia has no hope of competing with the United States in the production of high technology weapons. But it does have a potentially large market for less sophisticated arms, such as the MIG-29 fighter, the T-72 tank, a variety of ground-to-air missiles, and small arms like the Kalashnikov AK47 assault rifle.

The MIG-29, though no longer in production for the air force, is in such demand abroad that between 1991 and 1993 its price tag went up from \$14 mil-

lion to \$24 million. Another item in international demand is the Zenith S-300 rocket installation, Russia's counterpart of the US Patriot, for which Russian dealers ask \$3 million.

But competition is taking a toll of both sales and profits, as Russia's salesmen discovered earlier this year, when a contract to sell MiG-29s to Malaysia was derailed at the last minute by an American offer by General Dynamics to sell F-19s at \$3 million less.

Another chastening experience has been with the T-72, which Russians call the best tank in the world, fire-power for money. The Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations is currently

trying to raise the price to \$2 million, compared with \$5.2 million for the American Abrahams and \$4.5 million for the British Challenger. But sales of the same tank built under licence in Slovakia and Poland have cut the world price to \$500,000.

The standard model Kalashnikov AK47 still costs \$150, and SVD supersniper \$1,000, according to the official price list. But in the course of three years the price of another popular Russian-made small arm, the 9mm Makarov pistol has tumbled from \$100 to \$60-70, due to competition from a Chinese copy but also sales (or thefts) from ex-Soviet stocks in Germany and Eastern Europe.

One of the biggest problems for the Soviet arms industry has been the shifting of government policy regarding sales methods. Under the strict rules imposed by Soviet governments up to the mid-1980s, all foreign arms orders had to go directly to the Ministry of Defence and be finally approved by the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

The procedure was cumbersome and orders could take years to be complete, with KGB and GRU (military intelligence) officials involving themselves in every stage of the bureaucratic process. Nevertheless, in the lush conditions of the Cold War, it could be highly profitable.

With the confusion caused by the precipitate Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the rush of its successors into a 'market' economy stupendous irregularities blossomed.

Ships of the Baltic fleet were 'privately' sold by senior commanders to Italy and Spain; an illegal consignment of T-72s was intercepted by customs as it was waiting to be shipped from the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, to a still unnamed customer. Later, defence officials swooped on a plan by Black Sea navy officers to sell seven warships to Greece.

But the heart of Russia's problem has been its salesmen's inexperience in a highly competitive market, where Cold War rules no longer apply.

Except for sales to India and China (Moscow's biggest customers, with whom dealing continues to be direct) the Yeltsin government decided to put arms sales in the hands of *posredniki* — middle men or brokers.

At first these were state-owned firms working under the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations; but then, last year, in a market-inspired move to dilute the government monopoly, private firms, and even individuals, were allowed to set up as *posredniki*, in quest of the customary commission. Results were often amateur-

## 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.

### Banking anomalies

Sir, During my three years experience as an exporter to Bangladesh from Hongkong, our company has suffered immensely and we do not foresee an end to our problems in the near future.

The main handicap to our smooth operations is the gross indifference and also inefficiency of some of the banks we deal with. At time things are so bad that our banks in Hongkong get frustrated and tell us that our claim will be ignored unless they receive a response from the importing bank in Bangladesh within a specified time.

Anyone with a bit of banking knowledge knows that an export document requiring a certain maturity date (Usance Bill) will automatically be paid by the importing bank on the date of the maturity of the bill. Since it is a commitment by the importer's bank that payment will be on maturity if everything else is in order, the fund position of

the importer is irrelevant. But does it always work like this with many of the banks here? No sir. Some bankers have the cheek to tell me that they can only pay when they receive funds from their clients. In other words the importer can withhold payment at his will depending on the clout he might have with his banker!

As a result of, I am sure, only a few fouts-ups, our export bills are discounted by banks in Hongkong only if a Hongkong bank has added its confirmation on the bills at a cost of 1/2 to 2% of the bill amount. This adds to the cost and hundreds of thousands of dollars are drained out of Bangladesh which can be avoided once our Bangladeshi banks learn to honour their commitments. Business is only done through banks because they are thought to be honest arbitrators in a playground when business is done between strangers in most of the cases.

A crusader.

### Taslima, fundamentalists and economy

Sir, The feminist novelist Taslima Nasreen now stands at par with Salman Rushdie by having a small group of Islamic fundamentalists put a price on her head. Council of Islam in Sylhet has offered \$ 1,250 to anyone who kills her, according to TIME International (Oct. 4, 1993). I have never read what Taslima writes but from comments made by those who do read her books I have no desire to read her. But that does not mean I have any right to gag her or make her life miserable. Freedom of speech, expression and views are basic rights that we all must learn to practice and respect. Let us not try to go back to dark ages when we have made such a tremendous leap towards a democratic society and we have elected a democratic government which is working towards establishing that system.

In our country, because of inherent backwardness of economy, we continue to exist in a poverty level from which we are unable to get out. As a result, we harbour many radical groups that attract a lot of disgruntled and frustrated youths who find in such groups and their extreme means of solution. In the recent times the funda-

mentalists have found a fertile area to exploit the economic depression that has come the world over especially the underdeveloped countries. Bangladesh has not been left behind in their sphere of influence and they have done an extremely good job at that. This has happened because of corruption, autocracy and misuse practiced by previous governments. At the same time the progressive elements in our society have failed to come up with any constructive programme or even to understand the people's sentiment.

It is critical situation that we face now and the best way to tackle this would be a whole hearted commitment of all the patriotic people to try to bring about an economic revolution that will eliminate the poverty that the people of this country has been thrown into. We must create the atmosphere for business to flourish, industries to open and the economy to boom. This will give opportunity for employment and the overall standard of living should improve.

Akku Chowdhury  
Nakhalpara, Dhaka

### II

Sir, Tasleema Nasreen is a modern and emancipating

young lady. She has gained popularity for her books which reflect the actual picture of the society we live in. She has boldly pointed out social problems and also has indicated the various reasons which are behind these problems. Her books give us a vivid picture of the evil elements of society.

Not only has she written about how the women are treated in this community but also has pointed out that women are considered as robots devoid of feelings and emotion. Social problems including extra-marital relations, divorce and physical and mental torture on women have found place in her books. But the most amazing and shocking thing is that she for writing the truth has been castigated severely.

Weeks ago, while reading a newspaper I found out that certain political groups consider Tasleema Nasreen's books as trash and obscene. Why should Tasleema Nasreen's books be considered as trash? Because she writes the truth? Because she has unmasked the society? Or, because she is a woman? Tasleema Nasreen has the guts to write what is fact and by writing these she is informing us of the social problems and also showing us how to change our attitude to avoid overcome these problems.

Her books are analytical where each character plays a major part in pointing out the evils of this society. She should be thanked. I hope that she will continue writing in her distinctive style.

Touheed Feroze  
New DOHS

### Worth of award

Sir, I was amazed at the advertisement on receiving a Spanish award by a packaging industry or Dhaka Published on page 12 of The Daily Star on 7.10.93.

Some years back a friend of mine who is in unconditional business for quite a long time, received an award from a Spanish organisation. He was invited to receive his prize in Sapin at his own cost and also on payment of an entry fee which was about US \$500 (to be paid in Spain). He did not accept it.

Is it a packet? Then there may be so many like this, particularly in developing country, including Bangladesh!

Bottom line: You pay for an 'award' you did not as for.

Asif Ali  
Elephant Road, Dhaka.