

Strife in Karachi

Karachi is a deeply divided and troubled city; almost in the classical fashion of some strife-torn cities which make hair-raising headlines in the global media from time to time.

The troubles have much wider ramifications for the political life in Pakistan than what have so far been perceived as merely a concern for law and order. Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto went pretty close to the heart of the matter when she urged her countrymen to realise that a mini-insurgency or a guerrilla warfare is on in the city.

The latest spate in the sectarian violence can be ascribed to both ethnic and religious factionalisation. The Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), spearheading the fight for the rights of the city's Urdu-speaking Mohajir majority and representing the ethnic dimension, has a rival in its Haqiqi faction. Then there is the Sunni Muslim group called the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) which is pitted against the Shi'ite Muslim group named Tehrik Jafria Pakistan.

In violent clashes between the groups, 115 people died since November 30 when the 29-month-long army deployment was ended. Altogether 600 people died in sniper fire this nearly full year, meaning that even during the iron-grip of the army the toll in human lives remained at a high notch.

Benazir Bhutto does not want the army back in the law enforcement business; not at least for the present because it could compromise their image. They had been a subject of controversy in their earlier stint anyway. The MQM alleged that the Haqiqi faction was created by and being patronised from the seat of power. Haqiqi's electoral performance was no match for the original MQM's.

The distancing of the army from the law and order duty implies that the Pakistan Prime Minister is keeping the option open for talks with the MQM. Congenitally for a negotiation too, the MQM is said to be allergic to any aspersion on its allegiance to the country.

Most people in Pakistan favour negotiations between the PPP and the MQM, being two large political parties with clout in the country. The MQM's feeling of persecution is a stumbling-block for talks with the government. This needs to be allayed together with the shunning of any overly tactical approach to defusing tension. Benazir Bhutto has the political sagacity to realise the importance of offering the right package of political and economic deals to the Mohajirs.

Expectation Surpassed

Expectations have been surpassed. This is a rare thing to happen in Bangladesh. The Meghna-Guni Bridge commissioned just the other day had been projected to carry a daily traffic of 4.5 thousand motor vehicles. Soon after its opening 5 thousand vehicles were counted as crossing the bridge every day.

The 1410-metre or nearly a mile-long bridge is constructed to be in service for 90 years with very little maintenance work. The pavements on the bridge will, however, need to be relaid in 20 years time. Although constructed by a Japanese contractor most of the technical manpower who delivered the job on time were local. So far one of the biggest engineering undertakings in independent Bangladesh. The bridge happens also to be the biggest built by the Japanese firm which is one of the leaders of Japanese bridge building.

There is all the reason to expect that the Dhaka-Chittagong motor vehicle traffic will keep on increasing at an impressive rate. Chittagong is the sole entrepot and Dhaka is what centrally holds all Bangladesh economically and administratively together. Besides, the road connects such surplus producing areas as Comilla, Brahmanbaria and Noakhali, with the last of the time-consuming ferries out, there will be a spurt in the land-based communication between the two cities and to and from all points on the wayside. We do not know how this increased volume of traffic is going to affect the bridges. But it will. How much traffic will this bridge bear, say in 2050?

And how this increased use of the road is going to affect the railway communication which is a much cheaper and truly environment-friendly mode of communication? The effect on water-borne movement of goods to and from Chittagong has also to be kept under observation. Motorised road transport while economising on time may in the end prove to be costlier than now appears on the surface — and in very important terms.

Ninety years is not a long time for a people. But for governments, it is. The world is changing fast climatically as well as environmentally. Ninety years is too long a time for one to be sure about the rivers under the three Obayashi bridges to keep on flowing without a change. An ebullient Prime Minister, on the opening of this big and spectacular thing, said she would throw bridges all over Bangladesh so that people could travel everywhere on the road and in a day. A noble dream, but can prove to be a careless idea if they are not well planned.

Search for Roots

Mutalib Weyters, a 23-year-old Dutch national and a restaurant manager in Holland, was not fully happy with his secured and successful life. Something tugged at his heart. The Bengalee people, perhaps all the sub-continentals indeed, believe in the power of the umbilical cord. Didn't Mutalib feel in his guts that something was pulling at him? Perhaps even since he, a child lost on his way in Patuakhali, was adopted by a Dutchman in Dhaka and taken to Holland 17 years back, has always been having that feeling of being cut off from something very important, something he could not do without.

Mutalib, taken abroad at six, had a number of very clear and fond memories. These did not allow him to live as if life in Holland was all there was to life for him. Something told him a very crucial part of his life was elsewhere. So he came back to Barisal and after much searching and repeating bouts of frustration, he tracked his mother, a brother and a sister to a Bauphal, Patuakhali village. What a reunion it was!

The story needs to be told again and again in a society where thousands are migrating abroad, almost all for good and not coming back ever even on a trip — cases every year of tearing oneself away from the pull of the native soil and the thousand human bonds that enmesh all to a human and natural setting.

Mutalib is a real-life Kintaki.

Mekong to Ganges: Let there be Will

by Amjad Hossain Khan

Every year colossal losses occur due to floods in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. While the situation in Nepal and India is different as they are in the upper reaches, the situation in Bangladesh is critical as she has to give passage to the 93 per cent of flood water of the three rivers.

THE Mekong river agreement was signed in Hanoi by four countries: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand on Monday, 28 November, 1994. The three-point agreement will cover the important aspect of river water sharing and the environmental improvement of the region. The agreement was hailed by all as a big step in developing regional cooperation among the member countries. The other two riparian countries, China and Myanmar, however, did not sign the agreement as yet.

The Mekong river development was initiated in 1960 under the auspices of the United Nations. It took more than 30 years to come to this stage when all the riparian countries agreed for development of the river basin for the mutual benefit of all.

There is a lot of similarity between the Mekong river and the Ganges. The Mekong river traverses a length of 2550 km through China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. The three major tributaries of the Ganges, the Karnali, the Gandaki and the Kosi, rise in China and flow through Nepal to join the Ganges in India. During its long course it covers the highest mountain range in China and Nepal and gets into plains of India and Bangladesh before falling into the Bay of Bengal.

The Mekong agreement on water resources development including sharing of water among the riparian countries is a recognition of practical consideration of regional co-operation for the benefit of the people. The agreement also recognises that a river basin has to be developed — from its source to the outfall.

The Ganges basin is one of the most densely populated river basins in the world with a population of 340 million.

The requirement of food and fibre for the teeming millions is enormous. The land available is limited; maximising crop production needs water for agriculture. The water available for crop production in the dry months is not enough to meet the requirement of all the riparian countries.

The devastating effect of unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges water by India has caused damage to the northern and western regions of Bangladesh affecting 40 million people. The adverse impacts have caused widespread salinity affecting industries.

desertification of much of the land, suspension of navigation, destruction of fish resources and ecosystem of the Sunderbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world.

River basin development is a tool for social development. It supports economic growth and improves living condition and the quality of life. The Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna are international rivers with their basins spread over China, Nepal, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh. But no coordinated attempt has been made so far to rationally utilise the vast water resources available in the countries concerned.

The total drainage area of the three basins is 1.76 million sq km of which 62.9 per cent is in India. 8.02 per cent in Nepal, 7.69 per cent in Bangladesh, 2.5 per cent in Bhutan and the rest in China (Tibet).

The three river basins have fertile alluvial soil, good climate, plenty of rainfall and a network of large number of rivers. The countries in these basins are prone to natural disasters like flood, drought, cyclone, tidal surge and earthquake.

Every year colossal losses occur due to floods in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. While the situation in Nepal and India is different as they are in the upper reaches, the situation in Bangladesh is critical as she has to give passage to the 93 per cent of flood water of the three rivers.

Bangladesh is an agrarian country: 80 per cent of the population depend on agriculture. The net cropped area is 8.6 million hectares producing about 20 in tons of foodgrains to feed 120 million people. The population of Bangladesh is likely to be 140 million by

2000 AD requiring an additional six million tons of foodgrains.

The Mekong agreement is a good development for regional cooperation among the riparian countries. Similar instances of river basin development have taken place in case of many of the river basins — that of the Rhine, Reagrade, Danube, Congo, Nile, Amazon, Alba, Jambesi and Chad. The countries in the South Asian region must rise to the occasion and try to come closer for development of the water resources for the benefit of the people. Many of the problems facing the world today are the results of the development plans that are taken up by individual countries ignoring the adverse impacts on the other countries. These conflicts must be resolved soon if the countries have to survive as nations.

It is high time that Nepal, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh should join hands to develop the vast water resources of the three river basins for the benefit of 540 million people. Let Mekong Agreement show us the way.

democratically elected government. We believe in full transparency and there is freedom of the press. We have nothing to hide. In the past there have been complaints of violation of human rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Now we have a situation where there are three tribal MPs from the tracts who sit in Parliament on the Opposition benches. So they now have people to voice their grievances. There is a clear and calculated effort on the part of some organisations to deliberately misrepresent the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We have 450,000 tribals who live there. If there were human rights violations we would have heard from them.

Q: What is Bangladesh's stand on the South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement? Can it ever become a reality?

A: Yes, of course, it can. But at least in the case of Indo-Bangladesh trade relations, we are moving much faster than SAFTA. The concessions that Bangladesh provides India have enabled it to become one of the most important export markets for India in the world today. Whether we have SAFTA or not, India is already reaping full benefits of liberalisation programmes in Bangladesh. But we remain confident that SAFTA will set the light of the day.

Q: Which are the areas where Bangladesh would prefer cooperation with China more than with India?

A:

We have very clearly said that the refugees have nothing to fear. We stand by our 16 point rehabilitation package. A majority of the refugees who have returned have been rehabilitated. It is true that a handful of them have not been able to build their homes yet. But there are reasons. In some cases, they opted not to and in others, the land claimed by them is disputed by other tribals and not by settlers.

Q: Why did Bangladesh react the way it did when plague broke out in India? How can you justify the cancellation of flights when Western countries did not contemplate such a move?

A: Bangladesh has a 4,000-kilometre border with India. Unlike Western nations which are thousands of miles away, we have India all around us. We had every reason to be extremely cautious. You can say we erred on the side of caution. But why single out Bangladesh? Look at how the Gulf countries, Russia and many East Asian nations reacted. Moreover, the Bangladesh government was greatly influenced by the Indian media. But we hope that things will come back to normal as quickly as possible.

Courtesy: The Asian Age

'40 Million People are More Important than a Few Cusecs of Water'

Since the liberation in 1971, India's relations with Bangladesh have come a long way. The initial bonhomie that followed the installation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as first Prime Minister of the newly- liberated state was replaced by increasing bitterness under successive regimes in the two countries; though attempts have been made to put relations on a better footing in the recent past.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Dr Farooq Sobhan spoke to Nandita Roy of The Asian Age on a wide range of issues which include the sharing of the Ganga waters, the problem of the Chakma refugees and bilateral trade.

Q: Relations between India and Bangladesh, at an all-time high following the liberation in 1971, took a downturn later. What contributed to such an overwhelming change?

A: The Ganges water problem is certainly central to the problems that have emerged between India and Bangladesh over the years. Bangladesh had serious reservations about the Farakka barrage when commissioned. Bangladesh, which was getting 14,000 cusecs of water, has been getting less and less water since year. Another important problem has been the very large trade deficit between the two countries. Bangladesh has been buying much more from India than India from Bangladesh. In the early years there were talks of setting up joint ventures between the two countries partly by way of compensating the big trade gap. For various reasons these ventures never saw the light of the day.

There were also differences in perception after the death of Sheikh Mujib. The then Indian government had reservations about the leadership in Bangladesh. Then we had problems with the Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Bangladesh government felt that the main support for the Shanti Bahini was being provided by the Research and Analysis Wing in India. That was the main bone of contention. Later, some tribals crossed over to India. They subsequently wanted to return to Bangladesh but were prevented. India also had misgivings about Bangladesh's relations with China and the United States, though India herself was close to the then Soviet Union. So it was a kind of Cold War-like situation in the subcontinent.

Q: How would you define present relations between the two countries?

A: There is serious attempt on the part of the present government in Bangladesh to place its relationship with India on a better footing, starting with the visit of our Honourable Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to India in May 1992. An important milestone in our relations was the accord on Tin Bigha. With the end of the Cold War

we are pursuing similar economic policies geared towards economic reform, globalisation and liberalisation. In the coming months a few Indian cement plants will be set up in Bangladesh. Indeed, India is reaping the benefits of Bangladesh's liberalisation programme and its exports in the last three years have risen at the rate of 40 to 50 per cent. The largest number of tourists to India are from Bangladesh. We would like to see Indian tourists visiting Bangladesh.

Q: As far as the Ganga waters are concerned, Bangladesh has two big rivers, the Brahmaputra and Ganga, whereas the survival of Calcutta port and the economic well-being of the state of West Bengal depends on availability of water in the Hooghly channel. Is it not quite natural on the part of India to demand a greater share of Ganga water from Bangladesh?

A: The Ganges basin in Bangladesh has a population of 40 million. This population is heavily dependent on the Ganges in the dry season. They need this water for irrigation, for consumption and industrial purposes and above all it is used to prevent salination and desertification. Since the Farakka barrage was commissioned to divert the flow of water, there has been a very rapid ingress of salinity up the Ganges, travelling almost upto Khulna and beyond. Khulna is an important industrial city. But during the dry season we have to bring water in trucks to feed the industries there, since saline Ganga water cannot be used. Earlier, the pressure of the Ganges used to keep the saline water at a safe distance. We have also lost a substantial part of Sundari trees in the Sundarbans forest. The entire ecology is changing because of this diversion. We lose a substantial quantity of foodgrains in the dry seasons because pumps in the Ganges cannot be used because of the tremendous fall in the level of the water. India is effectively destroying the lives of 40 million people by this unilateral action. Is saving Calcutta port more important than the lives of 40 million people? There

is a: We have been advocating this idea of storage dams right from 1972. This way we not only control floods during the monsoon, but have an opportunity to release more water during dry months. This augmentation of the waters of the Ganges can help in meeting navigational requirements of

both India and Bangladesh. Now there appears to be an agreement between India and Nepal for the storage dams, but Bangladesh has not been included in this process, though it was Bangladesh which had been propagating this idea all along. There is also a tremendous potential for generating hydroelectric power if we harness these waters, which could change the entire face of the eastern part of India and Bangladesh. Nepal and Bhutan.

Q: Over the years Bangladesh has complained that India imports very little from that country. What does Bangladesh have to offer India to achieve the trade balance?

A: Bangladesh wants a level playing field as far as opportunities to sell to each other are concerned. Under the liberal trade regime we have substantially lowered duties and tariffs. There are no restrictions on consumer goods from entering the market. So Indian goods have flooded our Bangladeshi markets. On the other hand, our industrialists are unable to sell consumer goods to Indian markets because either they fall under the category of restricted items or they have very high duty. We have given a list of 34 items to the Indian government on which we would like to see a substantial reduction of duty.

Our problem is market access. If the 900 million market of India is available to Bangladesh, then many of our industries will gear themselves to try and supply to India. Bangladesh can sell items like urea, jute carpets, garments

and textiles, ceramics and high quality pharmaceutical products to India. If we had the option, for example, to sell duty free to the northeastern states in India from a factory in Chittagong, I am sure many importers in the Northeast would prefer that to bringing the goods all the way from Punjab of Tamil Nadu. Since India has full access to the Bangladeshi market, Bangladesh should also be given full access to the Indian market. Then the market will determine who buys what.

Q: What is Bangladesh's stand on Kashmire?

A: We have very clearly said that the refugees have nothing to fear. We stand by our 16 point rehabilitation package. A majority of the refugees who have returned have been rehabilitated. It is true that a handful of them have not been able to build their homes yet. But there are reasons. In some cases, they opted not to and in others, the land claimed by them is disputed by other tribals and not by settlers.

Q: Why did Bangladesh react the way it did when plague broke out in India? How can you justify the cancellation of flights when Western countries did not contemplate such a move?

A: Today Bangladesh has a

OPINION

Irresponsible Statements

Ansaruddin Ahmed

Encomium for the spirit of your commentary (Daily Star Dec 1) headlined "Competition of Irresponsible Statements".

Your argument that her utterance could lead to street violence amounts to inviting someone to do something which may not be up to his sleeves. You need two groups of people for violence. Currently the opposition is having a free rein on the streets with hooligans and all kinds of measures to punish people for not allowing them to run the government.

BNP has reined in its own activists. They have offered no resistance, chiefly because they wanted no trouble. There is no chance of a large-scale violence as long as this status is maintained. Dubbin Khaleda's speech provocative is itself a provocation.

Irresponsible statements?

Let me give you some examples: a) Hasina said the British parliamentary delegation which came here couple of months ago was brought in by the government to give it a "good character certificate".

(b) She, at a public rally last September, asked the police to disobey the government. (c) She has implicated the prime minister's children in extracting political shenanigans. (d) She has threatened to cripple the country in December.

Now, please do cite matching rejoinders from the prime minister to such irresponsible and provocative comments. She can't, then Hasina is decisively the first prize winner.

However, let me repeat that your spirit is the testament of honest journalism your paper has all along endeavoured to pursue.

To the Editor...

Telephone and gas at Hemayetpur

Sir, The lack of better and adequate infrastructure is the main hindrance to the steady growth of industries in the country rather than political crisis and law and order situation. This has been amply proved at Hemayetpur Industrial Area where the normal functioning of some industries has virtually come to a standstill due to the absence of such utility services as telephone and gas.

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