

An Excellent Start

This is no conventional thanks-giving at the end of an international conference to tick off the final ritual of the organisers' check-list.

Our special gratitude goes to Euromoney, the prestigious financial world journal which gave Bangladesh the dignified label of 'an emerging tiger' and did us proud thereby.

The Prime Minister made out a strong case for foreign direct investments saying Bangladesh stands ready for them with a hard working population, a favourable policy framework, good strategic location between East and South Asia, sizeable labour and market potentials in its 120 million people and above all a working democracy.

The representative character of the conference as far as the participation of the opposition politicians and their pledges of cooperation went, must have been partially redeeming despite a halt.

The ball is now in our court. The interest evinced by the foreign investors needs to be sustained. Occasional political oscillations must give way to stable conditions for reasonable economic workability.

They came down for scouting and went away pledging investments but only as an initial gambit. For this to turn into a flow, we cannot hang our gloves after the conference. The conference gave us an excellent start. But let us not forget, it is just the start. There is lot that needs to be done, now.

Can't be Taken Lightly

The two were separate incidents and each calls for outright condemnation, the outrage felt being not of degrees but of the essence. These relate to the explosion of a crude bomb before the passing motorcade of the Prime Minister and the police manhandling of opposition political figures Matia Chowdhury and Sahara Khatun.

Concerning the Prime Minister it was a blatant act of irresponsibility beyond words. First, it was a sensitive haral day on which precaution against such bomb-throwing ought to have been at its best on the side of strike-callers. Secondly, it was after inaugurating a high-exposure international investment meet that she was returning to her office. Thirdly, all conference-related activities were kept outside the purview of the strike.

Top-most political leaders of the country coming under attempted acts of violence that apparently sneaked up through a crack or two in unguarded political activism is evidently not the stuff that politics, even unwittingly, should be made up of.

Highly reprehensible, too, was the mistreatment meted out to Awami League leaders Matia Chowdhury and Sahara Khatun. A reported altercation was followed by chasing and beating by the police, well before the incident about the Prime Minister occurred. While Sahara Khatun landed in a hospital, Matia was picked up and had to go to the police station. Treatment of political leaders is an integral part of building democracy. Gone are the days when police would not dare touch a political leader. But, we can still expect a semblance of that code of police conduct, now that democracy has returned in our country. What has happened is atrocious and oppressive in a democracy, and can't be taken lightly at all.

No Trade Curb, Please!

The five-day meet of labour ministers and officials from 80 developing countries held in Delhi has expectedly reiterated their positions on trade relations between them and with the developed West. Their position is that the rich nations remove trade quotas and tariff restrictions on exports from the developing countries. This the Western world should do, they argue, to give benefits of the negotiated arrangements of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The rich nation's increasing stress on labour and environmental standards in the poorer nations, according to them, is a ploy to deny them a reasonable access to the markets of the West. No wonder that the final resolution known as the Delhi Declaration has decided to oppose any unilateral economic measures to decide terms of trade relations with poorer countries.

Under the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations the poor world had their comparative advantages or competitive edge in certain areas. The insistence on elimination of child labour and newer standards of labour and environment now threatens to blunt that competitive edge. So their concern is quite understandable. Instead of bringing about a uniform order in the labour pattern in the Third World countries, such restrictions have already caused a high degree of unemployment there.

There is however no dispute that quite a sizeable proportion of the Third World workers are forced to spend their working hours in unbearable conditions. Employing children as labourers in factories and industries too is not very desirable. Both conditions need to be improved. But this cannot be done overnight. As for the working environment in factories the sooner measures for its improvement are taken the better. However, child labour cannot be wished away. Unless the under-aged children can be given a better choice, withdrawing them all at a time will further exacerbate their ability to survive. Post-haste enforcement of labour standards too will leave a huge army of workers retrenched. The people who have given their best part of life to the service of their respective industries cannot be so ditched. They surely deserve a better deal.

The plea for environmental standards is however very intriguing: The West have systematically damaged the world environment and still now resort to the harmful practice of dumping or transporting toxic or radio-active materials to third world countries or their territorial waters.

It should now be merely a matter of waiting. The long run of the Indian National Congress as India's acknowledged ruling party since independence is about to come to an end. Whether this event takes place before the next round of State Assembly elections in February or immediately after these elections, or whether the waiting time is stretched till early next year, would hardly make much of a difference.

The Media

Much like nearly everything else in the country's affairs over the past half a century, the media too have been heavily centralised and subject to inordinate manipulation by the establishment in the nation's capital. While reporting and commenting over the turbulent events unfolding during the past few weeks, the newspapers have carefully skipped over the fact that the Prime Minister could not quite gather the courage to convene a meeting of the general body of the Congress Parliamentary party. Obviously, he is no longer sure of support from a majority of the party MPs. A fair number amongst the latter are convinced that he has already led them to rack and ruin; at least the prime minister suspects that they are so convinced.

In the circumstances, while...

Congress: People Have the Final Say

Dr Ashok Mitra writes from New Delhi

From all indications, this new administration, is going to be a coalition of different political parties. Such a coalition, it is conceivable, would emerge even before the nation goes to the polls for the new Lok Sabha.

The other alternative of making a bonfire of the Constitution and taking the authoritarian route has to be ruled out. Indira Gandhi, at the pinnacle of her strength, had experimented with that alternative. Even she met with disaster. Those currently at the helm of the ruling party have read that much of history. Men like PV Narasimha Rao may be guilty of many misjudgments, but in regard to this particular matter, they too know very well their limitations.

Resurgence

With an Indira Gandhi around, it is possible to assert again with almost equal confidence, a resurgence of a Congress party, either immediately or after a reasonable number of years, is improbable. What however would be a more relevant speculation is the complexion of the government which is to take over at the Centre once the Congress party fades away.

Spirit of Independence

The Indian mind takes pride in its individuality and spirit of independence. So a coalition arrangement may hardly be a bed of roses either for the coalition partners or the person chosen to preside over the coalition as prime minister. Clashes of personalities as well as of programmes are likely to be the order of the day in the beginning.

Internal Contradictions

Some of these coalition arrangements are to collapse, sooner or later, because of internal contradictions. It is entirely possible that, for a number of years, there would be a succession of governments one after another in New Delhi, often as many as two or three in the course of a single year. Tension and acrimony are, as a consequence, to fill the air.

The polity and the administration should still be able to survive such turbulence if the various political groups remained in board agreement that the great democratic exercise, based on the consent of hundreds of millions of the Indian citizenry, was worth persevering with.

A number of European countries including France and Italy, have gone through the trauma of unstable governments following one another in rapid succession, ever since the end of the Second World War. These countries have nonetheless survived.

Indian outcome need not be any different. In the post-1996 political landscape, it is possible to envisage offhand the presence of about a half-a-dozen dominant groups in Parliament: A far-to-the-right party like the Bharatiya Janata Party, a couple of Congress factions, one leaning to the right, the other veering towards the centre, a Janata Dal, or a surrogate of it, occupying the middle space, a formidable left bloc and, finally, a cross-section of regional parties.

For the present, permutations and combinations with the objective of forming a government would be confined to these groupings. Through a process of trial and error, they would perhaps succeed in evolving a working arrangement which lasts at least for some while.

Hallmark

Again, there should be no illusion. The government such coalitions would present to the nation could not be expected to be pristine examples of competence and efficiency.

Compromises and patchwork decisions would be the hallmark, at least initially, of the administrations they run. But such coalition governments would have one great virtue: they would necessarily have to have their ears to the ground. It would be a transitional phase, and what is likely to restrain the coalition partners from behaving in an irrationally irresponsible manner is the

fear of retribution from the people.

Without People's Sanction

The reason is obvious. The memory would be still fresh of what sounded the deathknell of the Congress party and its nearly uninterrupted rule spanning over half a century. This party and the government it had assembled took the people for granted. One fact in particular needs to be placed over and over again, on record: the economic reforms the Narasimha Rao government rammed through during the past three and a half years was without the people's sanction. The Congress election manifesto in 1991 contained not a hint of it. A coterie of politicians and civil servants presumed to take decisions on behalf of the nation, these decisions were actually taken for the edification of the foreigners and the country's rich, while the poor were fobbed off with homilies. The rate of economic growth plummeted, employment opportunities shrank, income distribution became more uneven and prices rose by leaps and bounds.

The nation's majority have refused to accept this destiny for themselves, which is why the Congress party is now in its death pangs. Those who succeed the Indian National Congress in power would also not be forgiven in case they betray the trust of the people.

Mandira

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Challenges to Global Security: Some Reflections

by Md Rafiqul Islam

These essence of political crisis facing the world today is that no international order has yet emerged to replace the old one that has disappeared

THE abrupt end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe present the world with new challenges and new responsibilities. After the fall of Berlin Wall and the sudden fragmentation of the Soviet Union, everyone believed that the entire world was turning towards democracy, peace and security. But this elephantine expectation proved extraordinarily naive. Instead of bringing democracy, peace and security, the collapse of communism led to the unleashing of rather venomous nationalism and/or religious passion. Now we see that the world is not progressing toward the 'global village' but is going to turn into a turbulent world which [has] represented many virulent problems to the world. The new director of CIA, James Woolsey has vividly described the present world situation during his confirmation hearing in the US senate. 'We have slain a large dragon but we live now in a jungle field with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.' The Soviet Union, of course, was the large dragon and what was tracked were the familiar structure of conflict associated with long period of the Cold War. In the new global setting nothing seems altogether familiar or simple. But even the smaller ones — ethnic strife in former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, religious fundamentalism in the Arab world, and possible nuclear proliferation in North Korea, Iran, Pakistan are poisonous in character, threatening the global security and of an ambiguous nature. The purpose of this article is to focus on those forces that are shaking the global security.

The Pull of Economic Forces

There was a time, not so long ago, when the 'rate of nations' was determined largely by political and military factors — most significantly the ability of the state to marshal a country's resources for war, conquest or defence. But in fact, most national-security policies in today's world are designed to ensure economic welfare. Economics has become the language of world politics. Free trade is considered to be the best means of growth and development for all economies. But in practice no actor in the world can claim to follow free trade policy in the true sense. While the developing countries are vigorously pursuing free trade policy for their economies, at the same time the

drive by the advanced industrial nations to maintain and even improve their economic status related to the developing world is crystallizing in the formation of regional economic blocs exemplified by moves in the EU by the NAFTA, AFTA, APEC and Japan's evolving ties with the ASEAN countries. But regionalism was seen as both bad politics and bad economics. It implied political domination by an ambitious hegemony as well as by an economic bloc that would destroy the free trade system. The impact of such regional blocs on the developing countries are mixed. African, Middle Eastern and South Asian countries will have a more difficult time insinuating themselves into the schemes.

The Global Dispersion of Power

As world politics becomes more complex, the power of all major actors in international system to achieve their purposes seems to diminish. The rise of supernational capitalism has been accompanied by a diffusion of political, military and economic power away from the US and the Soviet Union to other actors in the international arena. If we focus too heavily on power transition among the leading states, we see the present situation is very different from its beginning: the real problem is power-diffusion rather than hegemonic transition.

Instead of developing power relationship, a number of regional power centers — Japan, China and India in Asia, Germany in Europe, Russia in Central Eurasia, the United States in North America — have emerged. The dispersion of political and military power relations have multiple implications for global security. It also tends the new regional power to pursue their hegemonic ambitions. Furthermore, the collapse of Soviet control over its former Eastern allies has resulted in a series of ethnic and territorial clashes between former components of the empire.

Ethnic and Religious Claims

Unexpectedly the decline of communism, the end of the Cold War and the ideological triumph of the advocates of

market economies and democratisation have been accompanied by a new ethnic assertiveness in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East, and in the republics that make up the Soviet Union. Ethnic and religious demands is taking an extraordinary variety of forms: the demands secession and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union and the creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States; the disintegration of Yugoslavia; the quest for autonomy by the Kurds; secessionist movements among the Kashmiris, Sheikh, Timorese and many other peoples; and debate over the new migrants from North Africa and the Middle East in western Europe; and debates over migration and refugee policies in all advanced industrial countries and in much of the Third World.

Peoples — however they identify themselves by race, language, tribe or history — want new political institutions or new relationships within existing institutions. When the arrangements are not satisfactory or their demands are met with force, they may resist or flee across regional and national boundary. Throughout, the leaders of the world governments, now watch with concern the ethnic and religious conflicts within neighboring states, recognising how quickly these conflicts can threaten national, regional and global security.

Demographic Explosion

World population problem is now the most divisive issue. In the recent International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, this problem has received enormous attention and generated considerable heat. Population growth is not by itself a cause of instability — historically, it has often contributed to the health and vigour of societies but when population growth exceeds the rate of economic growth, and when they contribute to the depletion of valuable resources, the ability of state to engage in long-term economic and social development is impaired.

The world's population now stands at 5.5 billion, and this figure is expected to double by the middle of the twenty first

century. These increasing population is creating pressure on the earth. Population pressure is already having its mark on the environmental balance. Rising subsistence needs are placing even larger demands of water, agricultural lands, forests and coastal habitats. And as these natural resources deteriorate they set in motion a continuous stream of 'environmental refugees', to the urban centers or to the remote areas of hill or forest or even beyond the national borders. These people create extra pressure not only on the resources of the migrated land, causing the environment to degrade, but also causing social disorder as well as transboundary political tension.

Environmental Decline

Even if demographic explosion is stabilised, the world will still be faced with the problems arising from human-induced degradation of the environment. The environmental scientists and the world leaders have given more attention on the long-term effects of global warming and the depletion of the atmosphere's ozone layer, and animal population.

Preliminary research suggests that environmental decline, especially when it occurs in environmentally stressed areas of the Third World will exacerbate inter-group competition and conflict. All were united in recognition of the fact that what happens in one part of the world has a definite and dramatic impact on the rest of the planet. In the Rio Summit, held in Brazil in June 13, 1992, it is undeniable that the global environmental situation is critical and it will soon cause social disruptions that may threaten our common future.

Nuclear Proliferation

Throughout the Cold War era, the spectre of nuclear holocaust terrified people all over the world. Now the Cold War has ended, yet the threat of nuclear weapon remains. Tools of mass destruction are in the hands of many Third World countries as well as the feuding nationalities of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In the nuclear realm, the five declared nuclear power (the US, Russia, the UK, France and China)

have been joined by three undeclared nuclear powers (Israel, India and Pakistan). While Iran, Iraq and North Korea continue their efforts to develop such weapons — Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea and Taiwan retain a capacity to do so in the future. Instead of fearing a nuclear war between two super-powers the world now watches smaller conflicts warily concerned that frustration or bitterness may lead to measures of last resort.

The real threat today is not proliferation, but the acquisition of such weapons in the hands of international terrorist organizations. The terrorist groups may use the weapons against some prestige target as was done in the case of the New York Trade Centre or the Bombay Stock Exchange.

Peace-keeping

In recent years, with the Cold War over and the super-powers no longer assuming responsibility to maintain peace and stability within their respective sphere of influence, a greater burden has naturally fallen on the United Nation, which it has responded to by greatly expanding its peace-

making and peace-keeping operations. Between 1991-1994, the United Nations has established 15 new peace-keeping operations. Whatever the outcome of the UN on the use of force, humanitarian and peace-keeping operation, it is apparent that the problem of preventing and controlling local, ethnic and regional conflicts has become the main security task for the world. Because such conflicts are likely to proliferate in the years ahead and can threaten both regional and global security.

These essence of political crisis facing the world today is that no international order has yet emerged to replace the old one that has disappeared. It may be emerging, but it is far from being securely established and its vulnerabilities are dangerously apparent. The world, we now inhabit in, is a world of inconceivable poverty, exploding population, disparate inequalities, mass migrations, fanatic ethnic and religious animosities, continuing arms flow and instantaneous communications of hopes and grievances. The problem of preventing and controlling these venomous issues have become a pre-requisite to establishing peace in the world. How peaceful the world we shall inhabit in the pre-21st century will be, shall depend to a great extent on these endeavours.

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OPINION Yeltsin and Chechnya

Prof M T Haq

The president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, has started a barbaric and brutal attack against Chechnya, and its capital Grozny, in an already restless world which at the present time so badly suffers from lack of peace, law and order. The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) which was a super-power not long ago, is now a dream of the past. The so-called CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) headed by Russia has yet to have its firm base in the changed economic and political circumstances. The CIS cannot certainly be compared to the British Commonwealth of Nations (a voluntary association of independent nations) which is based on a firm historical and political foundation. The way the former USSR broke down in the chaotic decline of socialism, often misunderstood, is an entirely different matter and the Russian leaders who could not foresee the future are themselves responsible for the break-up. It seems there was hardly any statesman or politician of repute who could understand the political games of the so-called western democratic states which were probably themselves surprised at the chaotic but quick break-up of the east European socialist countries. I feel, maybe, 'ace-statesmen' and politicians in Russia and elsewhere are in the making in this present day complicated world and would come out before long to put things right politically, economically and socially.

The past president of the USSR, M Gorbachev, is a very educated statesman and politician and he could probably have succeeded in dealing with the problems of the USSR which the ex-President of the USA, Ronald Reagan, wrongly called an 'evil empire'. Lady Thatcher, after her visit to the USSR, remarked that Gorbachev was the man whom the

'West could probably do business with. Gorbachev is a well-read man and before he decided to go in for 'Perestroika' (restructuring) and 'Glasnost' (openness), he must have been convinced that the socialist and/or communist societies of Europe needed to go in for change; in this process he wanted to go slow, but then the pressures from outside (Western) and those from his dissenters at home did not allow him to do so.

Let us assume, then the intrigues against Mr Gorbachev both at home and abroad were too strong and somehow the treachery succeeded in removing him from power and thus, Gorbachev's intentions to bring about political, economic and social reforms or changes in the rigid Soviet Society through a process of gradualism came to an end. I believe that it was tragic sight for him and many others both at home and abroad to see the White House in Moscow burning. I am sure that Mr Gorbachev and numerous others both in Russia and abroad are having the same feeling now as Chechnya burns.

Previously, in an earlier write-up, I characterised Boris Yeltsin as 'a very incompetent President of Russia', unduly subservient to the western leaders and perhaps pleasing himself with the loss of the prestige and glory of his own country. To me he appeared to have a sick mind.

To substantiate my point, I would like to quote from the prestigious London weekly, The Economist, 7th-13th January, 1995. On the cover page with a big photo of Yeltsin, the paper says, 'The Wrong Man for Russia'. Inside, while commenting on the man on pages 15, 41 and 62 the weekly Economist, has referred to his 'monumental incompetence' and given other examples of his indiscreet, rather foolish acts.

To the Editor...

Opposition's struggle!

Sir: For the past few months, there have been innumerable number of request, to the opposition parties to find alternatives to hartals, barricades and sieges (the last two have the same effect as hartal). The opposition goes on undeterred, saying it is 'struggling for the people'(?), yet when those very people protest against their policies of agitation, they turn a deaf ear!

of foreign investment in the country! Their activities have not even spared the 'O' and 'A' level students!

Since all pleas and appeals have been ignored, it is high time, instead of holding futile discussions, we should try to organise a protest march, where even if 80,000 of Dhaka's 80 lakh participate, then, perhaps the message will get into their heads!

Earthquake aftermath

Sir, In the consequence of earthquake in Mexico, Los Angeles and now in Kobe many people have lost their all worldly belongings, not to speak of the enormous loss of lives.

Many geologist, scientist and engineer boast of their inventing, theory, technology etc. but in the wake of natural calamity these prove to be a total failure. In fact we always

live at the mercy of the nature.

Giants like the USA and Japan have failed to face the immediate aftermath of their earthquakes and provide succour to their respective distressed peoples in time.

We wonder what would happen if, a God forbid, a Los Angeles' or Kobe type tremor hits this region! Is our disaster management always prepared to meet such eventuality? Would our Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation kindly check up?

O H Kabir, Dhaka

Blackout, no more!

Sir, The aids suspension produced by the 'unsatisfactory' performance of Bangladesh power department worked well ever since.

After all the cautious steps trying to lessen her system loss in order to have her

power generation refueled with aids, she has finally been able to manage fine to change her donors' mind.

Among the possible initiative, again, can be the tapping more hydropower out of falls, rivers, floods, and sea, exploiting wind and solar energy, and manufacturing gas and rechargeable cells.

The overuse of indigenous power sources should also be supplemented with nuclear energy for the next millennium.

Retarding malpractices coupled with proper maintenance indoor and outdoor will be shedding load of loss in her system.

Just to meet the public shortfall in the immediate future, private subsidies can be facilitated toward cost-efficient self-sufficiency of her aids-dependent power needs.

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