

Foreign Office and Policy Imperatives

by MM Rezaul Karim

THE decision of setting up another Committee to review and reform the Bangladesh Foreign Office and Missions abroad as well as evaluation of the process of policy formulation in the light of last changing global scene and priorities of our foreign policy objectives, has been received, as it is expected, with a mixed feeling.

The critics view it as yet another attempt at a futile exercise in formulating a set of lofty recommendations which are destined, as the past experience showed, to be consigned generally to its usual place under the files and remain unimplemented. Most others, on the other hand, contend that the past failures should not inhibit the government from making another effort to institute reforms in an establishment presently assigned to the primary task of promoting economic diplomacy. The appointment of a business magnate in the person of M Morshed Khan to head this Committee simply substantiates this point.

In any case, it would be fallacious and unfair to call it a cover up operation of past failures. It is, in fact, designed to bestow a practical guideline as well as a renewed emphasis, commensurate with the ever changing global situation and national priorities, on the issues which had hitherto received mere lip service.

The terms of reference of the Committee stipulate, inter alia, the task of completion of its deliberation and formulation of its recommendations within 3 months of its first sitting. The principal objective is to put an adequate thrust enabling us to reach our foreign policy goals in terms of securing substantial investments from abroad and of promoting economic and commercial interests with other nations and foreign institutions. Why not? After all, industrially developed nations have also set these priorities themselves and often take a host of prominent business people with their leaders on the latter's tours abroad.

The Foreign Service cadre, which is inadequate and ill-planned, needs much to be done by way of infusing neces-

sary strength and vigour with farsighted planning, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. While some of the malaise of the past needs to be addressed, though belated, and call for rectification, the recruitment and training of the cadre have to be taken in hand in all earnest in a systematic and planned manner in a long term perspective.

In many countries, the Foreign Service officers receive due training in the government and non-government establishments dealing with economic and trade matters and consequently become proficient and discharge their duties efficiently. It would also be realistic to assume that our recruits in the Foreign Service should be able to do so satisfactorily, given due initial and in-service training. After all, they are selected from among the top echelons of successful candidates appearing in competitive examinations and are drawn from among the best of

the autocratic ruler without consultation with the Foreign Minister and the Foreign Secretary who had then been away from the country.

Our Missions abroad also directly call for an over-all review and consequent reform. While the legitimate official and personal needs of the officers and staff are to be met, all-round standardisation and streamlining procedures and functions along with accountability must be devised and put to practice. The office of an Inspector General with a befitting status and experienced person should be set up. It could be entrusted with the responsibility of exercising close vigil on our Missions and securing compliance with the rules, procedure and the standards set for the Mission's personnel, activities and property.

Allegations were recently made against President Zia

to exist in the Foreign Office.

Again, allegations were also made that those who had been involved in the assassination of Sheikh Mujib had been rewarded in Zia's regime by not only relieving them but also by posting them in our foreign Missions. One keeps wondering why and how the Awami League was able to restrain itself from seeking to reverse it through legislation during the Ershad regime.

It is again absurd to vilify President Zia by characterising grant of patronage to his political supporters as the principal motivating factor for the creation of the posts of District Coordinators. One must not forget that it was Bangabandhu who had already set the example by creating similar posts, rather exalted ones, terming them as District governors. Was it merely for bestowing political patronage? No. One might assume Sheikh

Islamabad, but negotiation continues. Our relations with China, Japan, Malaysia and other Asian countries as well as Middle Eastern countries flourished. Bangladesh's relations with the West have also expanded, as manifested by numerous visits at leadership levels.

In the multilateral spheres also, the achievements of Bangladesh are noteworthy. Prime Minister participated and made valuable contributions in major meetings on multilateral fora, be it in the UN, OIC, NAM, CHOGM, and others. Bangladesh has earned praise and distinction in being the third largest supplier of UN peacekeeping forces covering almost a dozen of world's hot spots. Bangladesh continues to play a leading role as the spokesman of the LDC.

Economic achievements in our external relations are also no mean to recount. Our commercial and manpower exports have reached record

effect that irrespective of which party formed the government in future, the existing foreign economic policy would continue unabated to provide stability and reassurance to investors and traders from abroad. The statements stipulate a high degree of consensus on our external economic and trade policy. Similarly, positions of political parties in other domains of external relations are not wide apart and can be harmonised.

Nevertheless, the foreign policy of a nation reflects largely its domestic policy. One is reminded of the widely known illustration to this effect. Foreign Missions' officials are compared with butlers serving whatever food is cooked at home. If the food is delicious, butlers can make it still more attractive by dressing it properly and serving it in style. In our case, the butler not only serves but has also to sell. So, our food has to be not only delicious but economically competitive. That devolves a double responsibility on our personnel in Missions and warrants a high degree of efficiency and clairvoyance.

While dealing with the issue, one is tempted to digress a while. Everyone in the international conference on investment listened with rapt attention to the Jatiyo Party leader who had offered a permanent halt to the strike, siege and such other economically retrogressive measures, if the opposition parties in future would also pledge to do so. If the Awami League also subscribes to the same view, one should assume that the BNP would also follow suit. In that event the scourge which has plagued our economy and somewhat shied away our economic partners from abroad, will be removed once and for all. Would it be too much to expect? Is it a dream? Why not? Even dreams sometimes come true. Let us nudge the concerned people to take the welcome initiative and await the auspicious moment to come.

The author is a former Ambassador. He is currently Member, BNP Advisory Council.

One fully agrees that a consensus on foreign policy objectives among the major political parties would help attract and reassure foreign investors, traders and economic benefactors, inducing them to undertake further activities in Bangladesh.

human resources the society can provide.

Training is a sine qua non for the establishment and growth of an efficient service cadre, no matter whichever cadre may it be. The Foreign Affairs Training Institute, which was abolished by a stroke of pen, without investigation and report on its efficacy, by President Ershad, deserves urgent revival and reorganisation. One must not however be oblivious of the fact that that foreign policy is the first line of defence for an independent nation. Hence, justification exists for organising an elaborate training programme for the benefit of those who would help formulate and implement such policy.

Another basic institution, the External Publicity Wing, which furnishes material to and interacts with our Missions to project the image of our country abroad, was severed from the Foreign Office, as if by a quick and sharp blow of a butcher's knife. It was a split second decision taken by

that he had established a doot pool of prospective emissaries, who could not otherwise be provided with Ministerial posts and other loaves and fishes, to head our Missions. The custom of appointing political figures to such posts is, for uncommon and is being practised in varying degrees, in almost all countries of the world, including our own right from its inception. Even the most advanced nation, the USA, uses it as political booty and bestows such high offices on many of the benefactors of the victorious political party.

As a matter of fact, it was not Zia but Ershad who brought the share of career Heads of Mission to an all time low plummeting it to almost 50% of the total posts of Heads of Mission. It is however interesting to note that the then Foreign Secretary cannot legitimately absolve himself of the responsibility of creating doot pool by his inability to advise the Head of Government appropriately against it. At least, no record of such reservations or moral compunction appear

Mujib considered this institution as an expedient political tool for, what he thought, promoting good governance. It would sound paradoxical and prove a double standard to accuse President Zia for undertaking a similar exercise.

As for the foreign policy achievements during the past four years, plenty can be cited both in bilateral and multilateral domains. Our relations with neighbours have been developed in the SAARC spirit after having received a setback in the 6th Summit. Relations with India improved. The Tin Bigha enclave finally came to our legitimate possession following a protracted negotiation. The Chakma refugees have started returning home from Tripura and the dialogue on the Ganges water dispute continues. More than half of the Burmese refugees have been repatriated. Our relations with Pakistan received an initial boost by repatriating the first batch of stranded Pakistanis over to Karachi. The process halted with the change of government in

high during the present regime. So has our foreign exchange reserves. Foreign investments over the past one year, as registered in Bangladesh, amounting to a staggering \$ 1.2 billion is almost fourfold the amount of investment during the first 22 years of our nationhood. With the active cooperation of all and by reducing the avoidable loss sustained by harkals, siege etc. the progress would have reached further heights to the benefit of the mass people.

One fully agrees that a consensus on foreign policy objectives among the major political parties would help attract and reassure foreign investors, traders and economic benefactors, inducing them to undertake further activities in Bangladesh. It is heartening to note that the gap among the major political parties has gradually been narrowed down. It was also most gratifying to hear the leaders of the Awami League and the Jatiyo Party in the just concluded conference on foreign investment to the

Towards Better Relations

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka formally talked on Wednesday about how could the two countries benefit from developing co-operation and friendship. The leaders of the two nations meeting at a state banquet in honour of the Bangladesh leader the same day exchanged sentiments and hopes that can serve both as true base on which the officials would build the edifice of partnership in progress.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, as becomes the scholar she is, struck the right chord — one close to the facts of history and culture as to the hearts in our two countries — when she noted the wonderful affinities between our two nations. She spoke about our two peoples sharing a common culture as manifested most in our dress traditions and preferences and food habits. She could as well point to our musical affinities.

It is not easily to be explained how and why in spite of these numerous and vast areas of social, cultural and historical unity, we never looked for a natural partner in Sri Lanka. Once the communal delusions, that led to absurd imaginings about our cultural rootings were healed by the emergence of Bangladesh, we should have found in Sri Lanka a historically ordained friend.

Was Bangladesh waiting for a perching paying the debts due to Lafayette — some initiative to come from Sinhala to repay the mission accomplished by Mahendra and Sanghamitra? Not really. The most ancient Pali scriptures had been teaching the Sri Lankans for two thousand years about their descent from a Bengali prince and his cohort. And we knew as much from our own traditions and specially from D L Roy's celebrated poem on Prince Vijaya's colonisation of Sri Lanka. These beliefs, however much corroborated or rejected by modern researches, failed to influence the way we build our political reality. Two kinds of colonial degeneration — mental oozing from the distant past of Central Asian sway on the sub-continent and material arising from the British stranglehold on our lives and oven dreams — made us completely blind to the stark fact and life-giving reality that we were indeed South Asians and our true cultural and material interests lay more to the east than otherwise.

Let a growing co-operation first in the field of trade and commerce and joint industrial undertaking and then in the political, social and cultural arenas between our two nations help remove the blinkers that have kept us so unmindful of our larger and truer identity of being South Asians. We do hope Chandrika Kumaratunga will usher an era of peace, prosperity and humanity in Sri Lanka and will be remembered by us as heralding a very important change in our international outlook.

We Wish India Well

India observed its 46th Republic Day yesterday amid growing political uncertainties. The ruling Congress Party's irreversible decline is what seems to have triggered the political turmoil. With the resignation of Arjun Singh, a part heavyweight, from his ministerial post and his subsequent sacking from the primary party membership by prime minister Narasimha Rao the Congress is virtually heading for an early disintegration.

A party's reversal anywhere normally should not spell disaster for a country. But for India and the Congress it is quite different. So dominant a role this party has played in shaping the largest democracy in the world ever since the country's independence that India for many years used to be almost unimaginable without the Congress. The other reason is that the party, under its liberal and dynamic finance minister Manmohan Singh, embarked on reform programme only a few years back. Although the economy has responded quite positively, the task is far from over.

The recent Congress debacle in the state elections gave rise to the fear that the economic reforms may suffer a setback. We can only hope it does not. Whatever may be India's future political make-up, we want to see a buoyant Indian economy. We also hope that the political crisis facing India will be over for the country to carry on the reform move. At the same time we can only look forward to a closer economic co-operation with our big neighbour. There, however, we find ourselves in an unhelpful situation. The average tariff on Indian goods at our end is 30 per cent but our exportables face on average a 63 per cent tariff at the entry into Indian market. This is unfair. We face also a serious problem with India on water-sharing. Other bilateral issues between the two nations are in a state of standstill, but a serious and forward-looking strategy be devised together to address the outstanding issues for the full realisation of the potential of our neighbourly relations.

Savar Shows the Way

The grip of terrorism on society is so tightened that the latter is gasping for breath. That it can pluck enough courage to turn around and stare terrorism in the face is hard to imagine. But people with their backs against the wall can do the unthinkable at times. Feeble protests have been sounded against this social malaise from different corners but no effective social resistance has so far come from anywhere. Yet some people risk too much to stand up to the anti-social threat. Such a praise-worthy move has been initiated by people in Savar.

We congratulate the campaigners of social sanity. It is good news that common people are expressing their anger against the social goons through the formation of committees. The more people so condemn the social parasites the better. If society as a whole rises against them, there is no reason why these musclemen cannot be mopped up. In case of the Savar rally against the known criminals it is now clear the goons can no longer rely on the local people for their shelter.

This is important. The law enforcers most of the time blame local people for not adequately co-operating with them. Here the thana has a strong case to act in a very determined manner. But there is need to be assured of the law enforcing agency's seriousness in dealing with this social problem. The system of enforcing law here is far from ideal. If it was efficient enough, at least people could take up the case with the law enforcers.

So we want the law men in Savar to make a strong case of the demands made by the common people. This time the law enforcers cannot shirk their part of the job on any flimsy pretext. We like to see a collective drive against the terrorists to culminate on a happy and successful note.

JANUARY 11 brings back to me the memory of Lal Bahadur Shastri end at Tashkent in 1966. India's second prime minister died some eight hours after signing with General Ayub Khan, then the Pakistan president, a declaration to restore peace and normalcy in the subcontinent. Some of us, journalists from India and Pakistan, witnessed first the ceremony and then the cortege.

People had lined up on both sides of the road leading to the airport. The overwhelming silence that enveloped the route was broken only by muffled drums as the funeral procession — with Ayub as one of the pall-bearers — inched through the streets of Tashkent. Friendly hands stretched towards us as we went along the road to catch a special plane.

Shastri's death had consecrated the declaration. It was a bold effort to span the distance that had developed between the two countries in the wake of partition in 1947, the Kashmir war in 1948 and the hostilities in 1965. But the declaration turned out to be at best a spurt, which subsided within weeks, leaving the relationship as cold as before.

The reasons, which nearly wrecked the conference at Tashkent and were subsequently papered, are the same which keep them apart. One was Shastri's emphasis on the renunciation of force to settle issues between the two countries and the other was Ayub's insistence on the solution of Kashmir. (The vacation of territory that either side had gained during the 1965 war was a problem because Shastri wanted to retain the Hajipur and Tithawal posts. But the threat by A Kosygin, the then Soviet prime minister, to op-

pose India at the Security Council made him relent.) Ayub regarded the renunciation of force as a non-war pact. He did not want to consider it until the Kashmir issue had been settled. Shastri was firmly opposed to it. Kosygin brought round both — Shastri was the first to accommodate — to accept the formulation that the reaffirmation of obligations under the UN charter was equivalent to non-use of force for the settlement of disputes and there was no need to spell it out.

Shastri had his way when at the final meeting he made Ayub add in his own hand, the words 'without resort to arms' in the Tashkent Declaration draft that only said that 'all disputes between the two countries should be settled through peaceful methods in accordance with the principles of the UN charter.' It is apparent that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then foreign minister, who accompanied Ayub, prevailed on him because the addition did not figure in the signed declaration. The external affairs ministry archives, however, have the draft declaration carrying Ayub's addition.

It was really Kashmir that dominated the various discussions at Tashkent. When Shastri and Ayub met for the first time, they exchanged the following words in Urdu: Ayub: Kashmir ke mamle men kuchh aisa kar deejye ki main bhil apne mulk men minh

pose India at the Security Council made him relent.)

Ayub regarded the renunciation of force as a non-war pact. He did not want to consider it until the Kashmir issue had been settled. Shastri was firmly opposed to it. Kosygin brought round both — Shastri was the first to accommodate — to accept the formulation that the reaffirmation of obligations under the UN charter was equivalent to non-use of force for the settlement of disputes and there was no need to spell it out.

Shastri had his way when at the final meeting he made Ayub add in his own hand, the words 'without resort to arms' in the Tashkent Declaration draft that only said that 'all disputes between the two countries should be settled through peaceful methods in accordance with the principles of the UN charter.' It is apparent that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then foreign minister, who accompanied Ayub, prevailed on him because the addition did not figure in the signed declaration. The external affairs ministry archives, however, have the draft declaration carrying Ayub's addition.

It was really Kashmir that dominated the various discussions at Tashkent. When Shastri and Ayub met for the first time, they exchanged the following words in Urdu: Ayub: Kashmir ke mamle men kuchh aisa kar deejye ki main bhil apne mulk men minh

dikhane ke qabil rahoon. (Please do agree to some arrangement about the Kashmir question so that I may be able to show my face to my people.)

Shastri: Sadar Saheb, main bahut muafi chaheta hoon ki main is mamle men apki kot khidmat nahin kar sakta. (Mr

have been signatories to the Shimla Agreement in 1972. That too reiterated the earlier resolve to settle differences peacefully. Yet, the two countries today are as far from peace as they were before the Tashkent Declaration and even earlier. In fact, the relationship has deteriorated to such

Prisoners of the Past

Kashmir is a territorial dispute, not a Hindu-Muslim problem. Islamabad scares the west when it tries to give it a religious colouring. Even most of Kashmiris are not happy with the stand. Both Shabir Ahmed and Yasin Malik, popular youthful leaders, have said many a time that their struggle was secular.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

President. I apologise profusely that in this matter I cannot be of any service to you.

As the talks progressed, it was clear that Ayub's demand was to establish a 'self-executing machinery' to settle Kashmir. Shastri was prepared to mention Kashmir in the declaration, nothing beyond. When Kosygin asked him whether he could go farther, Shastri said that he would never agree to any machinery for the discussion of India's sovereignty over Kashmir. 'India's sovereignty over Kashmir is non-negotiable. I am prepared to go back to India without an agreement.' Shastri said, as is clear from the record of the talks. The declaration referred to Kashmir, with the words: 'each of the sides set forth its respective position.'

Since the Tashkent Declaration, the two countries

an extent that even diplomatic niceties have been dropped. There is an open warfare of abuses and allegations. How can there be a talk of conciliation?

Assuming Pakistan does not want to have anything to do with India until Kashmir is settled, how does the posture of intractability help? Islamabad must have realised by now that it cannot forcibly take Kashmir from New Delhi. Pakistan should have learnt from the experience at Geneva and the UN that foreign countries do not want to get caught in the crossfire. Also, they have their own economic and other interests to serve. The OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) countries say something in private and act differently in public.

Kashmir is a territorial dispute, not a Hindu-Muslim problem. Islamabad scares away the west when it tries to

give it a religious colouring. Even most of Kashmiris are not happy with the stand. Both Shabir Ahmed and Yasin Malik, popular youthful leaders, have said many a time that their struggle was secular. The OIC did no service to Kashmir when it invited the Hurriyat, having a limited representation in the valley. There was none from Jammu and Ladakh, the two other regions of Kashmir.

Indian opinion has come a long way from the one that prevailed five, six years ago. Most people now recognise the fact that the Kashmir issue is far from resolved and that a final settlement would need Pakistan's association. By communalising the issue, Islamabad is only strengthening the Bharatiya Janata Party stand, which is parochial and which demands even the abolition of Article 370 that gives Kashmir a special status within India.

Also by initiating efforts to lessen contact with India (which unfortunately is following a tit-for-tat policy) Pakistan is alienating the elements which are talking in a different language. They are the ones who are taking some stand. No government or political party is willing to do so.

Politicians are now busy with elections in five states; later they will be preparing for the parliamentary polls in the first half of 1996. Any solution that departs from the beaten track will have to wait till after

the new government is formed at the centre in the middle of 1996. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao or, for that matter, any other leader will not even say something, much less propose, which may cost votes. The past is too much with both countries. And it is not the recent past. It dates back to the time when the Muslims advanced their claim to national expression on the basis of religion and when the Hindus tried to gloss over their sentiment, however exaggerated, saying that all Indians were the same. And history has been distorted to serve parochial ends.

Wars between kings and overlords have been understood as wars between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims recall the days when they ruled India and Hindus see themselves as the rightful owners of Aryavarta, treating others as intruders or plunderers. Both communities miss the dominating and determining force of economic factors in all history.

Ultimately, New Delhi and Islamabad will have to sit across the table to sort out their problems, including Kashmir. Going off the tangent all the time does not help. They have gone to war thrice in the last 48 years and should understand that there is a limit beyond which the countries, like human beings, cannot stretch the relationship or estrangement. It can spell disaster.

People on both sides should assert themselves and say openly that they had had enough of hostility and that they want peace. Whether the governments listen to them is not the point. They would have at least raised their voice against the dangers that loom large on the horizon.

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.

Where does the telegram go?

Sir, On 18.12.94 I sent an Urgent Telegram from the Azimpura Telegraph Office (Receipt #226) addressed to 'Karuna', C/O Late Munirul Islam Khan, Vill Purandarpur, P.O. Khalishpur, T.O. Kotchandpur, Jhenidah, Jessore to communicate an urgent piece of information. Normally, it should take two days, at the most, to reach the telegram considering the excellent communication and transport system in that area. To my ut-

ter surprise, however, more than a month has passed by now, but the 'Urgent Telegram' has not yet reached, nor has it come back to me! Not only this, it has been observed, with dismay, that the standard of postal and telecommunication service has sharply fallen during the last three years, and most of the ordinary letters are allegedly not delivered to the addressees.

Through these columns I wish to bring this serious matter to the notice of the Ministry of Post and Telegraph

to kindly institute an investigation into the matter and take necessary steps to remove the snags and also kindly inform me as to why this has happened and why this has been happening.

Dr K M Saifur Islam
Prof. Dept of Library and Information Science,
University of Dhaka

"Fatwa in Islam..."

Sir, I am a final year student in a Madrasa, situated in the outskirts of Dhaka. I would like to make it clear here that a few Madrasa students do certainly keep in track with the worldly happenings. And not all of us are merely confined within the four walls, therefore, we are not alien eccentrics, as remarked by the respected Dr. Syed Anwar Hossain. Here, in my humble

response to his article 'Fatwa in Islam...' published in The Daily Star on 18 January, I wish to express some of my points of view. First, the learned Dr Hossain is absolutely correct in pinpointing the twisted and misguided fatwas of some uneducated so called Imams/village Mullas. In fact, we would not call them Imams/Moulanas; they are rather harming Islam as their deeds and activities prove so.

However, astonishingly the learned writer has only one sidedly pinpointed the anti-Islamic behaviour and practices of these Mullas, while at the same time, he should have emphasized and made rooms to elaborate true message of Islam in reciprocation to the anti-Islamic conducts. Otherwise, the non-Muslims, the members of NGOs and those cut off from Islam will seriously misunderstand and look

at Islam in a different angle. And the learned writer has hardly made or has expressed any opinion to solve the problem.

I wonder, if he would agree with my point of view that legal action should be taken against the devil fatwababs and learned Muslim Muftis be appointed wherever necessary. This will save and protect Islam and the true message of Islam can be spread, specially concerning the great honour and respect Islam has for the womenfolks etc.

The other prejudice point is that the so called Fatwababs are alone blamed for all the worldly corruptions, as if the 'progressive-minded ones' are innocent angels. Perhaps, the foreign NGOs are doing some good work but we are also very doubtful of the objectives and intentions of some NGOs. However, what hurt us most

is that how could such a learned personality like Dr Syed Anwar Hossain make such sweeping remarks and brand all Moulanas and Madrasa students as anti-liberation people! Many of us were not even born then and not all of us are offsprings of the anti-liberation forces. I am afraid, Dr Hossain's remarks may only discriminate and even tarnish the practice of religion among believers.

Finally, we hope that Dr Syed Anwar Hossain is well aware of the brutal atrocities, genocide, arson, rape, gruesome torture and killing of Muslims all over at the hands of the so called civilised and progressive Europeans and others, and he would care to write something on this.

A final year Madrasa student
Dhaka