

Need for Consensus

Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan has brought good tidings from India after meeting with top leaders in the government and of the opposition in that most important neighbouring country of Bangladesh. While calling on Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda and External Affairs Minister I K Gujral he absorbed positive vibrations of reciprocity and understanding from the United Front government.

In fact, a consensus has emerged in India across the whole political spectrum over the rationale for triggering a radical improvement in relations with Dhaka by an immediate settlement of the Ganges water issue. The BJP leader and former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, former External Affairs Minister in the Congress government Pranab Mukherjee and West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu have pledged their support for an early resolution of the water sharing problem.

That is the strength and texture of the emergent national will in India to see Indo-Bangladesh relations placed on an even keel. But we are yet to forge a national consensus of our own. It is of vital importance to us that what we are now putting across to India as our national concern is translated into a full-fledged consensus, basically a bi-partisan understanding between the ruling party and the opposition. Relations with India are so crucial to us that the thought of improving them on any ad hoc basis must not be entertained any more when the change of government in both countries has created the most opportune moment to set things right.

The Awami League government is expressly willing to seek an understanding with the opposition on the water and other issues affecting Indo-Bangla relations. It is time that separate dialogues with the political parties get underway without ado. That phase over, there would have to be a full length public debate with the participation of experts, media people and other professional groups sooner than later. Ties with India are a matter better not left to the politicians alone.

For the political parties, whose response is sought, they are advised not to regard consensus-building as mileage given to Awami League but a service done to enlightened and permanent national interest.

Investing in the Villages

The Finance Ministry statistics for 1995-96 provide food for thought. Agriculture, an activity exclusive to the villages, at present contributes 32 per cent of our GDP. How much capital support it gets from financing sources? It is 19.71 per cent, down 4.25 per cent from 1990-91. The towns got 80.29 of the loans in 1995-96. Why? Do not villages repay well? They do that better than the towns, says the Finance Ministry figures. And, thirdly, the untenable one-eyedness of financial management has been continuing in spite of the deposits increasing in the villages, with a steeper curve than in the towns. It is a Finance Ministry conclusion that there has been a net siphoning of resources from the rural to the urban areas resulting in a slowdown of economic activities in the rural areas. And this a prize for their good performance!

The towns vs villages dichotomy, always tinged unmistakably with a modicum of antagonism, has for long characterised the socio-economic aspect of our existence in Bangladesh. That the towns would be but concentrations of the better educated ones having better control of society was never contested before but now it is being questioned in forward-looking economic planning methodology. Because, for the towns to prosper, there is the precondition that the hinterland or the villages be economically lively and socially fulfilling and satisfying. In Bangladesh the towns have been killing clean the proverbial golden goose for ages. One had thought that with the achievement of independence the foolish hangovers will be gone and the villages would start living as in olden times.

With our march towards democracy gaining in momentum in the wake of a fair and free election, it should now be in order to reverse all this and stem the rot in the towns and make the villages thrive again. Invest in the villages — this is the best investment ground in the nation and possibly among the best in the world. For a beginning why not credits to villages rise to 32 per cent of total advances — at par with villages' share of our GDP?

Hydrocarbon Exploration

Preparations are afoot to attract foreign private company investments for hydrocarbon exploration, especially in the Bay region. The anxiety is the fast depleting 11 trillion cubic feet gas reserve in the country seems hardly a peg to hang our hats on when contrasted with an ever increasing dependence of our power and fertilizer plants on natural gas as their vital raw material.

The energy ministry is going in a big way for both 'solicited' and 'unsolicited' biddings. In the solicited category fall the preparations geared to organising two international investors' conferences in London and Houston in the first week of October. In the unsolicited one, the achievement level seems on the up, the latest news being that two US companies are about to sign an accord with the energy ministry to start exploring near the St Martins Island and the Sunderbans.

Earlier five similar agreements were signed with British, Dutch and US companies. The Cairn Plc and Holland Sea Search's success — in striking over one trillion cubic feet find in the shallow continental shelf of the Bay — has generated enthusiasm among the potential foreign investors.

Whether we go for solicited or unsolicited investments, at the end of the day, what will matter is a policy framework with a clear-cut statement on terms and conditions offered to foreign investors. And then, of course, we must have a well-developed negotiating skill to fend for our interest.

For Permanent Sharing of Ganges Water

by Amjad Hossain Khan

MR SALMAN HAIDER, Indian Foreign Secretary, came to Dhaka on a good will mission on 5 July carrying a message from Indian Prime Minister Mr Deve Gowda for the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He stayed in Dhaka for two days. In his press conference he said that a ministerial level meeting between Bangladesh and India will be held shortly for a quick solution of the outstanding bilateral disputes. He invited Mr Farooq Sobhan, Bangladesh Foreign Secretary to Delhi in the middle of August.

Mr Abdur Razzaque, Water Resources Minister in his press statement (The Daily Star, 8 July, 1996) expressed his optimism that the Government would be able to reach an agreement with India on sharing of the Ganges water soon. The reasons for his optimism are that the present Government of India had already pronounced its commitment to resolve various problems with the neighbouring countries. Secondly, the Indian External Affairs Minister I K Gujral before taking office had on record showed positive attitude towards resolving the problems. The Minister further said that the ruling Awami League Government wanted to run the govt on the basis of national consensus.

The leader of the opposition in Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia made a statement in Fen (Janakantha, 9 July, 1996) that our legitimate share is 38,000 cusec of Ganges water and this cannot be compromised under any condition.

Mr Dev Mukerjee, Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh in a press statement on 26 July stated that India is now prepared to discuss with Bangladesh a permanent water sharing arrangement covering all 54 rivers including the Ganges. In a major shift in policy, the Indian High Commissioner said that the problem of sharing of the Ganges water will be solved on the basis of the water available in the river without looking into the issue of augmentation of water either link canal proposed by India or by construction of storage dams proposed by Bangladesh. He is confident that given the political will on both sides, this can be achieved. He remarked that the water issue had been politicized to such an extent that often there was an inadequate understanding between the two sides particularly on the water problem.

Mr Mukerjee negated the concept of regional cooperation by including Nepal on the plea that inclusion of a third party is not desirable as it takes longer time to find a so-

lution. He also commented that involvement of any outside agencies or discussion on issues between more than two countries would not lead to a quick solution. According to him, further agreements by India with Nepal will not create any problem with any other countries in future. Mr Mukerjee also said that India had no intention to link water issue with transit facilities.

Mr Mukerjee's statement coming prior to the visits of Indian Foreign Secretary is very significant. While agreeing to a permanent sharing of all the 54 rivers including the Ganges, he has clearly outlined the Indian Government views on water sharing and other bilateral issues. His comment on the Tipakush Dam on Barak river and his clarification of the difference between Dam and Barrage is interesting. His press statement is timely or preemptive, time will talk.

Mr Abdus Samad Azad, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh in a statement in Jatiya Sangsad on 4 August, 1996 said that the new Govt had taken a bold attempt to realize the right share of the Ganges water and would be able to resolve permanently the water sharing problem with India. He further said that the Govt would finalize its position on the issue of water sharing with India only after discussing the issue in Jatiya Sangsad. He assured the

benchmarks to resolve the water sharing issue with India. It further quoted him as saying: 'The solution to this problem is essential — instead of going into a debate on who had brought what quantity of water in the past, let us reach a consensus on this kind of national issue'.

Mr Kuldip Nayar, a noted Indian Journalist in an article (The Daily Star, 26 July, 1996) 'Mutual relations: An opportunity in Bangladesh' said that the sentiment of liberation war has returned and there is an overflowing feeling of friendship that was dyed for more than 21 years. The Indian Foreign Secretary was struck by the friendliness of the Bangladesh Government. The same bureaucrats who were rigid earlier were now forthcoming. He also mentioned that the Government in New Delhi have played in the hands of hawkish bureaucrats. He mentioned the adverse impacts of Farakka Barrage on Bangladesh. He recently talked to Mr Joyti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal who favours a new agreement on the basis of the earlier agreement. He further said that flushing the Hooghly by diverting Ganges water has proved to be a myth. The Calcutta Port is dependent on

Bangladesh including sharing of the Ganges water as noted in recent statements. Bangladesh must capitalise on this opportunity.

Foreign Secretary Mr Farooq Sobhan along with team of officials visited Delhi on 7 August, 1996. The Foreign Secretary called on the Indian Prime Minister Mr H D Deve Gowda and handed over a letter from the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The Prime Minister of India is reported to have said that the GOI was keen to settle all outstanding issues with Bangladesh in the shortest possible time. On sharing of the Ganges water, Mr Deve Gowda proposed that the Foreign Secretary level meeting in New Delhi could create the ground for Foreign Minister and Water Resources Minister level meeting. He also said that there could be a heads of Government meeting to settle the issue permanently.

The last half a century (46 years exact) the water sharing problem has been discussed. Voluminous data and information were exchanged. Before liberation of Bangladesh, the discussion were held without any results. After liberation, the water sharing talks was again resumed.

The Joint declaration of the

and desertification of the northern region, affected irrigation and the navigability of the rivers and brought destruction to fish resources and Sundarban, the largest mangrove forest in the world.

It is very interesting to note the recent developments on Ganges water issue since the new Government came to power in both the countries. The matter which could not be settled in the last 46 years can not be solved overnight unless there is a political will to resolve the issue.

One hundred and twenty million people of Bangladesh have suffered a lot due to acute shortage of water of the Ganges and other rivers. The flood which is a recurring problem could not be solved yet. The recurring floods destroy our economy and infrastructures.

In the backdrop of all these developments, let us analyse the situation. With the change in Government in Bangladesh and India, the political leadership has changed — not the bureaucrats in the either country. Are the bureaucrats in the same wave length of the politicians? Experience has shown that the bureaucrats play a role in deciding the policy. A strong political will in both the countries are needed to arrive at a solution of the water sharing problem.

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Sangsad that not only the water from Ganges, they have taken initiative to realise water from all the other rivers and they will be able to arrive at a permanent solution.

A news item published in Dhaka (The Daily Star, 5 August, 1996) states that the officials of Bangladesh and India will meet tomorrow in New Delhi at Foreign Secretary level to discuss the whole range of bilateral issues including the water sharing, trade imbalance and economic cooperation. Mr Farooq Sobhan, Foreign Secretary will lead the delegation and leave on 6th August. The news item further said that talks this time will open new area of cooperation and likely to break new grounds for understanding and cooperation. The consultative takes are expected to create grounds for political visits between leaders of the two countries.

Another BSS news item published on 6 August, 1996 said that the Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad stated in the Jatiya Sangsad on 5 August to sit in camera session to reach a consensus between treasury and opposition

dredging as was done earlier.

He suggested that water sharing agreement should be done before the next dry season from 1 January, 1997.

Since liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, 25 years has passed without a solution of equitable sharing of the Ganges water. During these long period the Government was run by Awami League (4 years), Bangladesh National Party (10 years) and Jatiya Party (9 years).

The Ganges Water Agreement 1977 came when Janata Government came to power in India. The Congress Government stalled the issue for a long time. When Congress Government came to power again they allowed it to continue till 1982. It refused to sign any fresh agreement. Instead a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 1982 for two years with some minor changes in the share of water. The 80 per cent guarantee clause safe guarding the interest of Bangladesh was deleted. The change of Government in India in 1996 is favourable to improve relation with its neighbours and resolve all outstanding issue with

Prime Ministers in May, 1974, expressed their determination that before Farakka Barrage was commissioned, they would arrive at a mutually acceptable solution of water available during the periods of minimum flow in the Ganges.

The Farakka Barrage was commissioned in April, 1975 for a period of 41 days from 21st April to 31st May for test running. India started unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water at Farakka from June, 1975 and continued to unilateral withdrawal of Ganges in 1975, 1976 and 1977. The Ganges water agreement was signed in November 1977 for five years followed by a MOU for two years in 1982. India refused further extension of MOU in 1984. Another MOU was signed in 1985 for a period of three years. Since 1988 there is no agreement on sharing of the Ganges water at Farakka.

The unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges water at Farakka by India has caused damage to the northern and south western region of Bangladesh affecting 40 million people. The adverse impacts has caused wide spread salinity intrusion

dian High Commissioner Mr Dev Mukerjee is significant in many respect. On Ganges water sharing he suggested permanent sharing of water along with all other river (54 rivers) based on the water available in the rivers. What is the present availability of the Ganges at Farakka is not known to Bangladesh. Our information indicate large scale withdrawal of the Ganges water upstream of Farakka. India refused any joint inspection of the Ganges above Farakka, neither furnished any data of water withdrawals. The Ganges water sharing was based on availability of the Ganges at Farakka between 1948 to 1973. Based on this agreed data 60 per cent was given to Bangladesh and 40 per cent to India. In the absence of any other agreed data on availability, the future sharing of the Ganges water should be on the basis of availability at Farakka from 1948 to 1973.

Begum Khaleda Zia's claim that at least 38,000 cusecs of water should be given to Bangladesh is confusing. Similarly the statement of Foreign Minister that Awami League, got 44,000 and now expect

then opposition in power.

Now, the party in power is talking about a national consensus government and has allowed MPs from other small parties to share power to govern the country. They are also inviting the BNP — the biggest opposition party — to join the AL government.

It is most interesting that yesterday whom we pulled down from the chair, today we are offering them to share power for governance. It is only 2 months ago the BNP government was beaten. That fallen party is again being invited to join the present government. From where did we get the trust and confidence that the BNP is so good?

Besides, we the general people, do not want the BNP instead of being in opposition for the people's interest, share power with present government. If they do so they run the risk of a possible rejection by the people in the near future whose clear verdict was to see BNP as the opposition. Apart from this being an opposition party in the Parliament, if it joins the government led by the rival party, the identity of BNP as an independent party is sure to be lost. We have seen this happening the care of JP, the second largest opposition party in the Parliament.

So let BNP run themselves as an independent opposition party and act as the spokesman of the people in the Parliament.

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children have found their own honest way to earn a living. If such children can understand the significance of an honest living and sacrifice the easy way of begging, then we should help them and be hopeful that one day the rest of this nation would also have confidence and believe in an honest living.

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Food colours

Sir, Colour is a vital constituent of food. It is one of the first characteristics perceived by the senses and is indispensable to the modern-day consumer as a means for the rapid identification and ultimate acceptance of the food. Almost all foods have an associated colour acceptable to the consumer on the basis of social, geographical, ethnic and historical backgrounds. From a modern food manufacturing viewpoint, colour additives are indispensable.

Colour additives for food represent a unique and special category of food additives. They have historically been considered so in legislation and regulation. The certified colour additives are synthetics manufactured to meet strict government specification, while the uncertified colours are usually naturally derived substances. Both groups are strictly controlled in most countries by regulatory statutes the knowledge of which is indispensable to food processors.

Various types of coloured foods are available in our country. Ice-creams, snacks, dairy products, bakery goods, coloured liquid foods and sweets are most common in village markets and also in towns. Thousands of common people are eating all these everyday. Most of the food processors may not be using safe colour additives. Some foods seem to be very unusual in colour and may be dangerous for health. Because there are many colour organic chemicals which are carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic in nature. Very few people are considering the impact of colour chemicals on health. Colour concentration is another important factor for health. In most cases, high concentrations of colours are used.

We believe, various social clubs, schools, and NGOs can play an important role in motivating the common people in this regard. Public Health personnel should give special attention towards controlling these unsafe colours in food.

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buses/trucks, and via RAJUK may enact necessary laws to compel the owners of the multi-storied commercial buildings to convert their ground floors as parking places.

At the corporations, chambers of commerce and industries must take practical measures in this respect. I am optimistic that the above measures will find public approval and the relevant authorities will get an impetus to act with speed and courage. We have wasted 25 years of our national life, and now, it is time for action.

Azharul Islam
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Bangabandhu and Agriculture

Sir, The LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Zillur Rahman while addressing a seminar 'Bangabandhu O Krish' (Agriculture and Bangabandhu) organised on the occasion of the National Mourning Day by the Chhatria League unit of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI) disclosed that the government of Sheikh Hasina had arranged subsidy to the farm sector from Tk 100 crore endowment in the current national budget with a view to achieving self-reliance in food. Rahman who is also the Deputy Leader in the Parliament said that the government is formulating a national programme with the highest priority to agriculture in the line with Bangabandhu's dream of a Sonar Bangla.

Before starting of the functioning, the minister, while talking informally with the teachers and the principal of BAI, enquired about various aspects of the roads and alongside the footpath like Curzon Hall-High Court areas, meters for taxes and baby-taxes for the ease of passenger travel etc.

Now I would like to add a few more suggestions to ease the traffic jams on Dhaka roads: (i) earmark separate bus stops for buses of corporations, commercial banks, insurance companies who occupy half of the roads, (ii) construct multi-storied car parks, (iii) prohibit parking of cars in 2/3 rows in the commercial areas, (iv) one row parking of cars may be allowed in the commercial areas on payment of taxes as done in New Market, (v) city corporation may divide the road zones and lease out those to educated unemployed youths of that area as a source of earning and maintaining traffic discipline, (vi) all future buildings in the commercial/residential areas must make their own parking arrangements — none to be allowed to use roads for parking of cars.

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"Get-a-Word"

Sir, I fully endorse the opinion expressed in your esteemed paper by two gentlemen under the above headline. I think it is a very exciting and intelligent pastime. Apart from gaining knowledge in English, there is a financial

gain also to the winners as well as to the sponsoring newspaper by increasing its sales.

In fact it was with one of the handsome fist prizes won by me from the GET-A-WORD competition of erstwhile Morning News of Dhaka that I was able to purchase a residential plot of land in the city. I hope, you will consider sponsoring a "GET-A-WORD" section in your paper soon.

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The Prime Minister

Sir, I have due respect to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's steps to eliminate crime, stop oppression on women and then inviting opposition political parties to come forward to unitedly build the country. In fact, Hasina's above propagation did work splendid to take Awami League through the 1996 general elections