

## A Good Visit

The summit meeting between Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda and his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka has indeed extended the good work and fruitful cooperation that took a practical shape through their signing of the Ganges water treaty in New Delhi last month. For all intents and purposes, the Indo-Bangla relations are not only going through a damage-repairing phase but also acquiring new facets in their bilateral ties. Therefore, it is only natural that the whole range of issues — contentious and specially those whose solution can prove to be an icing on the cake — are coming up for discussion. Can we suggest that all the common rivers be now brought under discussion for the sake of a broad spectrum deal in water sharing?

We note with satisfaction that neither of the sides suffers from any political hang-overs and is, therefore, well-placed to address both problems and matters of mutual opportunities and interests with an open mind. It is significant that no string of conditionality was attached to the water accord by way of any reference to the transit question. Nor was the transit issue taken up at the summit level, it has been placed on the agenda of the Joint Economic Commission (JEC) meeting scheduled for March next. Let the issue be discussed threadbare. The aim ought to be to place it in a proper perspective through enlightened and substantive discussions, so that there remains little scope for using it for a narrow political purpose by any quarter.

At this point we want Indo-Bangla relations to focus mainly on economic cooperation. Admittedly, it is a co-operation effort between two unequal economies, both in terms of size and the level of advancement. Bangladeshi interests will be better served if the bigger Indian economy makes room for more and more of our commodities. Against the background of our huge trade deficit with India, we can surely expect that our big neighbour adopt some special measures for removing the imbalance, on a short-term basis, and broadening our economic base on a long-term basis. Bangladesh must realise its potential to become a partner in the economic boom predicted for the region in the next millennium.

## Why this Mindset?

In her first major public meeting since elections, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday saw an undoing of SAARC and Indian expansionism in the just-proposed four-nation sub-regional grouping while dressing down the ruling Awami League. Even in the context of her and her party's almost pathological India hatred, the latest piece of criticism seems to be a knee-jerk reaction. For a proposal still at such a rudimentary stage such categorical comments seem a bit too sweeping and premature.

However, we feel, the government should leave no room for misgivings regarding the mooted regional group. Whether this will be within SAARC or an altogether new body should be immediately made clear. The government owes the public a detailed explanation on the subject. Perhaps, the necessity is all the more felt in view of the bearing the grouping could have on SAPTA and SAFTA. We believe forming of a sub-regional group does not necessarily mean a threat to SAARC. On the contrary, a better understanding in a sub-regional context can perhaps bolster the cause of regional cooperation. Besides, well-meaning expanding circles can register some value-added contributions to SAARC.

Anyway, all this will have to be expounded and provided for with finesse and vision. The main opposition leader's speech on Tuesday did not only smack familiarly of the vitriolic but was also suggestive of a mental fixation. It appears that Begum Zia is yet to accept the verdict of the June 12 elections. From the invective-dominated address one can very easily be under the impression that her party's staying away from the parliament falls in line with her rejection of people's verdict. After the '91 election, the present Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina refused to accept the election result saying that "subtle rigging" has occurred. After '96 election Begum Zia is doing exactly the same, claiming that "national, international intrigue and media coup" (whatever that means) snatched away her victory. Both leaders, in turn, are showing how respectful they are of peoples' verdict when it goes against them.

## Art Congress

The Second International Congress on Bengal Art has begun in the city. In the familiar flow of exhibitions focusing on particular branches of art, the four-day assembly under the auspices of the International Centre for Study of Bengal Art (ICSBA) comes as a very welcome and important exception. This is a congregation of scholars from the world of aesthetic sensibility.

The condition of art often tends to give rise to the misconception that creative impulse is the only vital ingredient needed for the cause of aesthetic advancement undermining, in the process, the equally important culture of its academic aspect. Without unabated scholastic back-up, art as a purely, arbitrary and impulsive process cannot continue to be source of aesthetic inspiration. If the ancient masters had only created great works of art and there were no system or necessity felt by the subsequent generations to conduct scholastic research into them; about their creative process vis-a-vis contemporaneity and past, civilisation would have not come this far.

The present congress comes to underscore this theoretical necessity enveloped in the conception of the word art itself. Besides, it also reawakens us to the wonderful phenomenon of the esemplastic nature of man's aesthetic imagination irrespective of time and place. We hope the Second International Congress on Bengal Art will leave a healthy legacy of consciousness regarding the study of art history.

**A**n interesting and comprehensive seminar was held in the city on the 4th and the 5th of this month on what can be described in simplified terms by the headline. The official title was, however, Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development or ALTID. It goes to the credit of the ESCAP in Bangkok and the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) of Dhaka that a host of useful information, facts and ideas about these portentous topics were made available to the public for the first time. The participants, besides the sponsors, represented a wide spectrum of the society and comprised a good number of elite in the fields of politics, economics, education, journalism, industry, commerce and other vocations, besides a sizable number of high and officials concerned of the government of Bangladesh.

The principal objective of the seminar was to trace the evolution of the concept of Asian Highway and Railway Links through the countries concerned, the interaction and attitude of the participating countries, the enormous benefits that are due to accrue to them, the need for speedy implementation of the projects and the facilitatory role that the ESCAP is able and willing to play in operationalising the projects.

The origin of the idea of an Asian Highway can be traced as far back as 1950 and even before. That time the concept was limited only to encompass the countries from Turkey in the west up to Singapore in the East. The route was originally envisaged to traverse through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand and Malaysia. The vision was perhaps a dormant expectation of the natural extension of the old and traditional route of the Orient Express joining the West to the East.

With the growing liberalisa-

# Asian Highway, Asian Railway Link and Transit Facilities

*It is widely known that the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has been vehemently opposing this route which pierces Bangladesh territory from one side to the other. The causes of their apprehension to allow transit to Indian goods and people through Bangladesh from the western to the eastern flank appears primarily due to an evolving sense of security perception.*



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

tion of global outlook and policy in favour of deriving maximum advantage and sought after benefits through increased global and regional interactions, more countries have since joined the bandwagon. The notables among the new aspirants are China, Mongolia and the countries of Indo-China in the East and with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the newly-independent states on its southern flanks or the Central Asian Republics on the West.

Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka found themselves included in the belly of the Asian route. Even Indonesia and the Philippines were not left out.

The current status of the Asian Highway comprises 5 international and 37 regional routes with a total estimated length of 90,000 kilometers. The number of participating countries now stands at 25. The route appears to have an illusory vision of a long unwinding hydra-headed python, having multiple heads sprouting also out of its body and the tail.

I recall the idea had been floated even in mid-fifties when I had some personal experience in this regard. It was probably in 1957 when I had the opportunity of travelling along all three of the conceivable routes in the then West Pakistan — one through the almost impassable boulder-strewn rudimentary road from Karachi through Lasbela and Quetta and the other one through the mostly paved mini-highway via the desert region of Sukkur and the hottest point on earth, Jacobabad. The third one was the original and ancient route

from Peshawar to Lahore highway connecting the original grand trunk road built by Sher Shah Suri in the 16th century. The last two have since been retained.

It shows that the old interest of the people has been compounded by their awareness of the possibility of vast and multifaceted benefits that are likely to accrue out of this project. Besides, the dream of many of travelling by road and rail from London through the Middle East and South Asia to the remote points in South East Asia and the Far East may also come to realisation not in the too distant future.

The economic and social benefits out of this project would vary in participating countries, but what will not vary is the enormity of the magnitude of benefits to be enjoyed by all of them. The ESCAP has attempted to fathom these gains in quantitative terms. Though it is an estimation, it is highly impressive. The broad economic and social sectors that will derive advantage out of this undertaking include international trade, investment, employment, culture, tourism and, above all, promotion of understanding, goodwill and brotherhood

among nations. The desirability of this project is, therefore, beyond dispute.

Now, let us analyse how this route has been envisaged to go through Bangladesh. The report prepared by the ESCAP traces the principal route from India through Benapole-Jessore traversing through Dhaka to Sylhet-Tamabil border points back to India again. Another route was shown via Dhaka to Chittagong-Cox's Bazar-Teknaf with possibility to enter Myanmar. ESCAP stated that the government of Bangladesh in August, 1995 had informed them of their acceptance of both these two routes. It is understood that the Sylhet-Tamabil route came into picture at the behest of the Myanmar government, which then found Chittagong-Cox Bazar-Teknaf route unsuitable for a number of reasons.

There are a number of other entry points from India into Bangladesh on the West and the north-west, but it is the exit point for the same route from Sylhet-Tamabil in Bangladesh back again into India on its eastern flank that evokes a hot debate. This route traverses from India into Bangladesh and back into India again before entering Myanmar.

## China's Security Concerns: Emerging Patterns—II

by Dr Abul Kalam

*Whether China will be able to attain the objective is fundamentally determined by its ability to avoid military conflicts; for any recrudescence of violence, within or outside China, will seriously damage its modernization process.*

(Continued from yesterday)

### Sanguine Leadership

However, China has so far acted with responsibility as a sanguine regional leader and stabilizer, whether it involves the volatility of the Korean contention or the sensitivities involved in its Indochinese relations. Relations with neighbouring non-communist Russia has been steadily improving and has been much better than what was with communist USSR to the extent that Moscow now seems willing to provide an alternative or "emergency backup system" until the West feel inclined to swing back to the linkage that bound China to the international system during the decade and a half of modernization. Relations with major interest in Asian regional security, India, provokes suspicion in Beijing, and as both Japan and Russia are also greatly distrusted. Therefore, China is likely to maintain its past tactical approach of using "barbarians against barbarians" i.e. playing balance-of-power diplomacy in the pursuit of its national interests at both regional and international levels, thus avoiding a countervailing coalition directed against it.

### Peaceful Reunification

Despite occasional diplomatic outburst, political rumbling or even military gaming, Beijing is most likely to look for peaceful means for reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. Indeed, "peaceful reunification of the Motherland" remains a major strategic objective, for China is quite acutely aware that "the cost of reunification by peaceful means will be lower than that by unpeaceful means."

In such an interplay of diplomatic scenario, as "the world's largest emerging market", China may, for instance, hope to lure the major European powers such as France or Germany, or create a sense of solidarity with Japan, since both countries have experienced bitter trade dispute with the US.

So long as economic construction remains the Beijing's central task, the fundamental objective of its security strategy will continue to be safeguarding a peaceful security environment for its economic con-

struction. Whether China will be able to attain the objective is fundamentally determined by its ability to avoid military conflicts; for any recrudescence of violence, within or outside China, will seriously damage its modernization process.

### Balance-of-power Diplomacy

However, Beijing candidly views that since the ending of the Cold War, international relations has become somewhat complicated, and the distinctions between friends and foes have become somewhat blurred. While the strategic links that bound China with the West vis-a-vis Moscow have currently lost their relevance, yet Beijing is most likely to "continue to attempt to divide potential adversaries" — such as the US, no longer seen as a global leader with major interest in Asian regional security. India, provokes suspicion in Beijing, and as both Japan and Russia are also greatly distrusted. Therefore, China is likely to maintain its past tactical approach of using "barbarians against barbarians" i.e. playing balance-of-power diplomacy in the pursuit of its national interests at both regional and international levels, thus avoiding a countervailing coalition directed against it.

### New International Hierarchy

At any rate, the sheer size of the country would assign her very powerful roles in regional and international affairs. Regionally, the economic partnership between Japan and China, which proved to be beneficial to both, is likely to continue, but both must come to terms if a stable regional order is to be ensured. Globally, when its current growth rate and the future potential, its vast territorial base, a huge population, the unsettled question of its reunification, updating its 3 million-strong army and a developing nuclear arsenal are taken into consideration. China can hardly be projected as a status quo power which would automatically sanction the legitimacy of the present international order. It is in this context one may agree with the view that China, with its starkly realistic approach and evidently being a state in transition, may indeed herald the emergence of a new international hierarchy, with a remarkable shift in the international distribution of

power.

As for idealistic concerns any kind of ideological rigidity in China's international outlook seems a matter of the past. China has not only extricated herself from her obsession with ideological purity, her very emergence as a forceful international player coincides with the very pragmatic and flexible shift in her foreign policy, which, again, is closely bound up with an irreversible course of modernization and an open door policy. Hence one may suggest that as China continues to embrace both economic reform and open-door, with the passing away of the old-guard revolutionaries, the upcoming political generation of China may before long decide to introduce systematic changes which may penetrate all the way, touching upon both the domestic socialist system and the country's external outlook.

Whatever may be the changes in leadership in Beijing, the traditional policy drive of China, seeking its national unification as well as a great power status — with a commensurate position in the international security hierarchy — is likely to continue to serve as basis in Beijing's foreign policy initiatives and security outlook. But Beijing is unlikely to introduce any element of volatility which would upset the stability of the international order, despite its firm commitment to national unification and its continuing interest in power-projection forces, including an improvement of its strategic nuclear arsenal.

(Concluded)

## To the Editor...

### Death of Subinoy Chakma

Sir, It is sad that last month we lost a leader like Subinoy Chakma. He was a committed worker of CHT peace process.

How cowardly it was for the assailants who shot him from back! Such an act is always condemnable.

Whenever any initiative is taken to solve the problem of CHT issue, we see that someone has to lay down his life under the vile, abominable grip of some self-seeking people. No matter who they are, they are obviously against the peace and prosperity of the country. They are the cancer of our society.

I earnestly request the government to take necessary steps to punish the killers.

Samuel Rema

Mirpur, Dhaka

### So-called humanity

Sir, In a capitalistic country the democratic institutions are greatly influenced by the business communities which play a vital role in all sectors of the government establishments.

The wide scale of disparity between the privileged and the unprivileged tends to create the element of corruption in respect of the individual's right to property and wealth.

It is a pity that in our country such a trend of corruption is now in evidence everywhere.

The dishonest lot remains busy in organising so-called humanitarian activities under the banner of the international clubs and societies for exploiting the human development resources to get the full benefits of the privileged.

It is a long story about the ultimate results of foreign assistance. One wonders how only 17 paise per take in our currency is spent for development works in the name of foreign assistance and aid programme from the international agencies and donor countries. It is simply a hoax in the context of global corruption and cheating. God knows what will happen to us in the 21st century!

Our economists and political scientists should take immediate steps to save the poor people like ours from being crippled in world economy.

Mostafa Sohel

Banani, Dhaka-1213

### Pressure of population

Sir, Pressure of population is the main problem of any underdeveloped country. Actually, as we have seen, this problem has been so gigantic that comparatively a few of the population have been able to live long enough to live the ripe old age of 45 or 50 years.

The consequences of this, from the standpoint of alleviat-

ing the population pressure are now building up rapidly in many of the underdeveloped countries. It is probably even more threatening to the maintenance of peace than those arising from the policies followed by the European and Japanese colonialism of the past.

Similarly, some underdeveloped countries, for this reason, feel that they must depend more on their own natural, capital and human resources for their economic development. And they don't want to increase their population anymore.

Undoubtedly, our country are facing the same problem as well. This is ridiculous. We should think about it very seriously. We should take proper steps in this regard.

Mostafa Sohel

Banani, Dhaka-1213

### Stock market

Sir, It is very difficult to get any primary shares these days. We hear/read that it is often oversubscribed by more than twenty-twenty five times. So I take it for granted that we have more than enough investors in the country.

I read in your newspaper of 5th instant an article titled "\$100m taken away by foreign portfolio investors". When foreign investors are not keeping their money in Bangladesh, I don't understand why a certain

portion of the primary shares is kept reserved for them.

Can also anyone explain why the "Lock-in" period of one year for foreign investors was withdrawn? What logic is behind this withdrawal, and is this beneficial for the country?

K Anwar

Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### Card phones

Sir, Due to problems in overseas telephone calls, the card phone system was welcomed by the people. But there are many problems in these telephone booths and defects in phone sets. There are business going on regarding phone cards.

In many post offices, even at the GPO in Dhaka, price of cards is costly. For one has to pay extra money. In most cases, these cards are sold to some persons to sell at higher prices.

This should be detected by special squad formed by the postal authority.

Moreover, there are defects in cards which show no units. I purchased a 200-unit card and in my sheer surprise, I found no units at all. In this respect, the postal authority do not pay the money back. This was also disclosed by some business people who told me for they making loss in business.

I read in your newspaper of 5th instant an article titled "\$100m taken away by foreign portfolio investors". When foreign investors are not keeping their money in Bangladesh, I don't understand why a certain

loss in business.

So, we request the T&T authority to take necessary steps.

M Ali

Rajshahi

### Permanent cricket stadium

Sir, Both football and cricket are favourite games in our country, especially to the students who are young and enthusiastic.