

## PM's First SAARC Summit

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina starts her first SAARC summit facing a hoard of questions about the proposed sub-regional grouping and the growth quadrangle. The sudden love for SAARC of the very people who denounced it for its incapacity to do anything useful is opportunistic no doubt. Yet the fear that sub groupings within SAARC may weaken this body cannot be said to be without foundation. There are two fundamental reasons why there are so many questions about the new initiative. First, because so little is known about it; and second, because the way it suddenly appeared to have burst on to the public agenda. If pressed for details the government says the sub-regional concept is at a very preliminary stage, and yet it is known that final draft is ready for consideration by the governments concerned. Why is this reluctance to share with the public which will no doubt affect their lives fundamentally?

These and other questions may not be on the summit agenda as such; even so, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would stand to gain by making the best use of the retreat to explain things to her esteemed colleagues. We sincerely believe that the sub-regional co-operation idea is pregnant with tremendous potential to bring benefit to the people of this region. There is something almost natural about this idea. However, we also sincerely believe that SAARC is a very good idea and in no way should it be allowed to weaken. We must forcefully fight any attempt to counterpose SAARC and the sub-regional idea. But concerns of all must be met. However good the idea may appear from our side, if any SAARC member feels uncomfortable with it, it is our duty to explain to them how we see it. Pakistan is on record to have expressed reservation. It has been reported, but officially not confirmed, that Sri Lanka and Maldives are also not very excited about it. Their reaction is natural and understandable. Something that does not help them, and requires moving in a new direction can naturally give rise to suspicion. This is especially true in the background of years of enmity between India and Pakistan, on the issue of Kashmir. In fact, it is the rivalry between these two that kept the SAARC and all other attempts for increased regional co-operation crippled. The Pakistani objection was a foregone conclusion. But because it was expected we should not neglect it.

We must take the advantage of the Male Summit to explain our ideas clearly, forthrightly and sincerely to all our SAARC partners. Our aim should be to strengthen SAARC and fit the sub-regional initiative within it.

## How Can They be Helped?

What a strange place is this Bangladesh, Selucus! One can hardly refrain from paraphrasing Alexander's expression of amazement to his general, as celebrated among the Bengalees, courtesy DL Ray's Chandragupta, on seeing yesterday's report of rampage in centres of HSC exams throughout the country. Not many newspapers in the world find intermediate level or other examinations at all reportable. In the subcontinent these board examinations find generous space on the kick-off day. And then these fully disappear from the media. In Bangladesh, however, the examinations remain eminently reportable — because of some obnoxious notoriety — until they are finished for the year. The infamous element is the number of expulsions made from the examination halls.

On Saturday some five to six thousand examinees were expelled for cheating and related offences at the exam halls. In several centres magistrates were manhandled along with invigilators and teachers. In more than one place regular thousand strong mobs fell on teachers. In Lalmoni, police had to retreat and only a big reinforcement from Bhaba could rescue the principal and the magistrate and others but not before their vehicles were burnt and the college building damaged.

The tons of paper the examinees fill up with microscopic writing and the fights they mount go to prove how serious it is for them to score a pass. Why don't they read and write then? Because somehow the colleges have come not to indulge in these archaic things and the teachers that privately teach for keeps do not teach and want pupils to scribble the answer scripts in a particular manner — by copying either from memory or from some scraps of paper hidden in the person of the examinee.

How can these boys and girls be helped and saved, rather than punished — without making a further mess of our education system. Let the examination eruptions set us to serious thinking on how to bring back the art and culture of teaching back to our society.

## The Iranian Cataclysm

The death toll in the Iranian cataclysm rose to 2000 by yesterday noon, an increase of a hundred per cent in less than 12 hours since the earthquake occurred. Who knows where will this escalation stop. These death figures are, however, quite deceptive. These tend to make one believe that these were about all of the loss and destruction wrought by such an elemental strike. Death occupies but a small and not too important part of what such a calamity leaves behind. How many are the survivors and how will they live — it is almost inconceivable to have an idea of that.

The Iranian earthquake comes as a very poignant and timely reminder of the fact that this very well could be the lot of any tremor-prone country, we ourselves having had a brush with the other day.

Let us sincerely sympathise with the Iranian survivors and be all observation as to how they cope with the problem of normalisation. And can we not send at least a medical team or two as a token of our sympathy? Can we not prove ourselves a friend in need in the very small way we can? We must do something more than sending down messages of grief and condolence.

# Now is the Time to Act on Privatization Programme

by Dr Mohammad Musa

*The short-run benefits of privatisation are not visible but short-run political costs are high. The long-run benefits of privatisation are plenty. If implemented properly and quickly, then it will have positive impact on both national budget and national economy within 3/4 years of its implementation*

We are unfortunate to have a very big public sector. No proof is necessary to convince any sensible person of problems of having such a big public sector. The results speak of themselves. Most of the public sector enterprises are losing concerns. Thousands of crores of taka have to be accommodated to bear the yearly losses our public sector undertakings are making. The current government appears to realize that the thinner the size of our public sector, the better. Since their assumption to power, starting from the Prime Minister to Industry to Finance Minister, all have been reiterating their commitment to the privatisation and reform programmes. The government is now eight months old. No tangible action has yet been taken in this regard. But now is the time to act. Talks alone do not go very far. If the government fails to act now, then it may be too late to implement the programmes. If the worst happens and the government fails to implement privatisation programmes, then it will become a tremendous liability for the government in the next election and the nation will suffer an irreparable damage.

Before I explain why I think this way, let me draw your attention to a recent news item. Appearing in the print media a couple of months back if quoted the World Bank President James Wolfensohn to have identified three major problems facing reforms programme in Bangladesh:

• Possible political instability as the previous ruling party has yet to reconcile with its election defeat;

• Possible redemption of political debt the current government has incurred during its long struggled of 21 years to power;

• Imbalance in the current account situation in Bangladesh.

I would not be much worried about 'possible political instability' in near future. I will put

three reasons for that. First, the election reflected public mandate as it was held under a caretaker government. It was widely perceived to be free and fair by far. If the BNP fails to realize that, then it is their loss. Second, the public is not in a mood to respond to the agitation call by the opposition this early after the election. The question could be: Is not the party apparatus sufficient to disrupt the normal economic activity? The just concluded struggle for democracy has shown us that as long as it was party apparatus the disruption was not that severe. The real disruption started when the opposition at that time could successfully bring the common people to the street to realize a cause — an election under caretaker government — and it was possible only after February 1996 election which caused people to realise that election could not be free and fair under any party government. However, if, in the meantime, the government takes action perceived to be against the interest of the country, then the opposition may get issues on which they can mobilize public protest. Providing transit facilities to India, import of electricity from India and a subgrouping under SAARC have the potential to become major issues to the common people.

Third, looking back in the past 25 years, we can observe unless the major opposition parties were united in the struggle to resist the government, the struggle was never successful. We saw that in 1991 when, under the leadership of the Awami League (AL) and the BNP, the 15 and 7 party alliances and Jamaat worked together to oust the then President Ershad, the struggle was successful. We wit-

nessed the same thing in 1996 when the Awami League, Jatiya Party and Jamaat worked together, their movement to realize their demand for an election under a caretaker non-political government, was successful. The present political climate is not for such a unity because Jatiya Party is part of the government of consensus, as they like to call it, and Jatiya Party appears to believe that their number one enemy is the BNP, not the Awami League.

My greatest concern is about the second one of the list of problems that Mr Wolfensohn identified. It is because of the pressure from within. A potent force that acted for Awami League to capture power after a long struggle of 21 years was its labour wing, Sramic League. Many of the state-run enterprises have already earmarked for closer and many more than would qualify to be in hit list for closer have labour unions run by Sramic League apparatus. In cases where unions run by rival Sramic Dal, Sramic League supported labour wing has strong following among the ordinary workers. During its bad days, Awami League took help from these unions. Many labour union leaders were killed, put to jail and tortured for their stand against the governments that were in power from 1975 to 1996. This is payback time. We should not be surprised if we see that Sramic League stands on the way of privatisation.

So far as the privatisation and the reform programmes are concerned, AL faces pressures from both inside and outside. They have pressure from their own wing Sramic League when it comes to privatisation of state owned enterprises. There

are signs that they are yielding to such pressure. An example would be the government's decision to sell 25 per cent of Biman's share to the members of the general public. The decision is yet to be implemented. It is alleged that the government is not that keen to go ahead with the implementation of the decision as the decision erupted angry protests from the labour unions of Bangladesh Biman. It is very bad to take a decision and not implement it or retract from it in the face of protest. Because it sends signals as to the government's weaknesses.

Pressure is also coming from the opposition. The opposition is blaming AL government for closing down public enterprises. The pressures will be there. In the face of these pressures government has to make judicious decision and stick to it whatever may be the costs. Political cost is one of these costs. No doubt true, the government's own political wing will be disturbed by its decisions as these decisions would hurt their own interests.

In an interview published last year in a section of the press, I emphasised on need to involve labour unions in the decision making process. There is an inherent distrust between government and workers of state-owned enterprises. It is important that this distrust be removed as far as practicable. Making the workers' representative involve in the decision making process will substantially reduce the level of distrust. In my view, it would be very easy for the government to sit with workers' representatives of loosening enterprises and tell them: "Look, business enterprises loose year after year cannot and should not survive. Because allowing them to con-

tinue amounts to putting good money in bad uses. Simply put, we are wasting and continue to waste our valuable resources.

Twenty-five years is a long period to know that we are incapable of running these enterprises effectively and efficiently. We have to act and act right away. We have problems and have to sort out how to solve these problems. We are always mindful of the consequences of privatisation or closing down of public enterprises. It is the workers who suffer the most. This is why we want to involve you in this process. Advise us how the process can be as painless as possible to you." I am sure once the workers' representatives are brought in, they would not only come up with new ideas to deal with the situation but also help to implement the decision taken because they were part of it. At least, that will reduce the communication gap and thereby reduce the level of distrust between the government and the workers.

For any government the initial period is known as the honeymoon period. This is particularly true for a government which has just replaced the old one by a popular vote. The political capital they enjoy is the public good will. Any political decision involving huge interest groups, such as workers of state-run enterprises, and having major political implications should be undertaken during this honeymoon period. Although such decision will cause many affected groups to grumble, no serious repercussion will result as the government has some political capital to waste away.

There is another important consideration for undertaking such policy decisions early on. In our system, the party in

power is up for public mandate every five years. If policy decisions that have long-run benefits to be achieved but short-run liabilities to be incurred are taken and implemented early on, then by the time the next election is due, the benefits will be realized and the government in power will be the beneficiary of those benefits. Furthermore, the affected parties will also get plenty of time to think through the real benefits of these decisions and would be able to forget the pains those decisions brought on them as 'time heals all wounds'. Privatisation is such a policy decision. The short-run benefits of privatisation are not visible but short-run political costs are high. The long-run benefits of privatisation are plenty. If implemented properly and quickly, then it will have positive impact on both national budget and national economy within 3/4 years of its implementation.

As the days are passing, the government is becoming older. People have already started to take stocks of what they expected of the government and what they are getting. The level of scrutiny of the government will become more intense in coming days. The political pressure from the opposition will also increase as the opposition will become more desperate to find government's fault. Once the government is in its third year, the party in power has to be very mindful of people's concern. Therefore, it would be very difficult on the part of the government to implement politically sensitive but highly beneficial programme like privatisation. It is, therefore, my view that if the government is really sincere about privatisation and other reform programmes, than it is high time that they start acting than only talking.

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## SAARC: Creating an Atmosphere for Development

by Ekram Kabir

*The leaders of India and Pakistan have to understand that their ego-war puts direct impact on SAARC's way forward making the bloc a global back-bencher.*

With high hope for "development" to be watched around, the ninth SAARC summit is being held from today (12-14 May), in the Maldives' capital Male. But Asia may still be the most awkward squad in the global village if it doesn't try to ease tensions among the member-states of the bloc. The 13-year-old organisation needs more than just "cooperation" to be economically as strong as other blocs like ASEAN etc.

This would be self-explanatory if one goes back at the inception. In the backdrop of the world still being divided by the Cold War, regional analysts didn't see a very fruitful future when the SAARC got going. The seven-nation cooperative bloc then seemed quite irrational because there were two military regimes (Bangladesh and Pakistan), two presidential system of governments (the Maldives and Sri Lanka), two monarchies (Nepal and Bhutan) and one parliamentary system (India). In fact, according to a section of researchers, for almost a decade SAARC was made to serve as a forum of leaders who only gave lip-service, showing a cold-shoulder to the need of region's impoverished peoples.

However, driven by necessity the importance of cooperation in the real sense is now urgently felt vis-a-vis the global change.

And this time — with four new leaders from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal — the Male Declaration is expected to come up with manifest prudence in strengthening the ties among the member-countries. Apart from 13 salient areas of interests — trade, economic cooperation, agriculture, tourism, communication, transport, environment, information, education and culture, development of women, welfare of children, prevention of illegal trafficking of any sort and curbing terrorism — the emphasis will be on making concerted efforts for transforming SAFTA into a barrier-free SAFTA.

And according to a report, an exclusive debate waits in Male among the participating heads of state on South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ). Since many have termed the idea of this sub-regional cooperation to be ill-timed due to the lack of confidence and mutual trust among the countries, especially between India and Pakistan. Perhaps, with a feeling of being left-out and fear of losing status to India, Pakistan has clearly explained its position against the subject at the foreign secretaries level meet in Kathmandu early last month.

Press reports reveal the stance of Islamabad quoting its foreign ministry spokesman: "While every state has the sovereign right to cooperate with other states, we believe that any attempt to promote sub-regional cooperation in the SAARC framework would weaken the organisation and could ultimately lead to its disintegration."

This reminds one of the regional tensions and disputes,

most of them involving India and a second country. Some of the regional disputes have already been worked out like Indo-Bangla water treaty etc.

The questions of repatriation of stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh and war-compensation of 1971 are yet to be resolved.

South Asia as a region has long lived in a tangled web of internal and bilateral conflicts and disputes for establishing dominance and building military power, especially by India and Pakistan. Most of these factors of discontent still exist, and these may, as stumbling blocks, spoil the possibility of economic prosperity of the region in the foreseeable future.

The three-day meet starting from today is hoped to serve as a milestone, unlike the past summits, for starting the process of eliminating all the seeds of inter-country discontents.

India somehow or the other has disputes with Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and, of course, with its arch-rival Pakistan.

By every yardstick, India and Pakistan have engaged in ego-conflicts since the two countries became independent, being obsessed with the core issue of Kashmir. Over the last 50 years, they fought three wars, two being associated with Kashmir. Although they could avoid two more, yet the wars made them spend 25 and 20 billion US dollars respectively on ammunitions. Not only that; to maintain the balance of supremacy, India and Pakistan on average spend 9 and 4 billion US dollars respectively on military build-ups every year. Imagine, what could be achieved with these sums if they were spent on human development!

However, many believe that the ice has started melting since Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan in last general election. He is expected

to hold a meeting in Male with his Indian counterpart IK Gujral, who also hails from Punjab, for promoting trade and commerce between the two countries. He also is likely to carry the talks forward for resolution of issues that impede normalisation of relations with India and restoration of peace in South Asia.

Although cordial responses would be there in Male, yet the Kashmir issue may still remain unresolved. After all a 50-year-old highly disputed issue cannot be expected to be resolved at a single summit. But the leaders of these two countries have to understand that their ego-war or whatever such stance they maintain at the regional level

## OPINION

### "Demystifying the Myth"

A Ahmed

The 8th May issue of *The Daily Star* carried an article entitled "Demystifying the Myth," written by a retired army officer, Abdul Hafiz. He opines that present-day poverty in Bangladesh can be traced back to, in his words, the "British plunder of Bengal." There is some truth in this, but had it not been for the active cooperation of local leaders and businessmen, the British could not have made significant inroads.

During the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb in the late 17th century, the East India Company was kept on a tight leash and the British were unable to make much headway. It was during the time of Robert Clive, some 60 years later, and due to the connivance of men like Mir Jafar, Jagat Seth and Omi Chand, that the British at last established a foothold in India. In return for being appointed the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Jafar paid Clive the huge sum, in those days, of Sterling 250,000 and a land grant that earned him Stg 30,000 per year. Clive's subordinates and the Company were also rewarded with an amount totalling nearly a million pounds.

This was the beginning of an era that witnessed a massive transfer of resources from South Asia to the British Isles, largely as a result of which the British were able to enrich and position themselves to carry out the task of establishing and running an Empire. It is worth remembering, however, that upon his return to London, Clive was accused of plunder by his own countrymen and he eventually committed suicide.

Nevertheless, times have changed, and I cannot accept Mr Hafiz's premise that there is some sort of similarity between those early years of British imperialism and what is occurring presently in the state of Bangladesh-India relations. Nor do I subscribe to the theory that the reasons for this country's present condition of under-development are to be found in the actions of what foreigners did or are doing here. The British left 50 years ago, and Bangladesh has been an independent nation for half that period, and to continually point fingers at foreigners for our own shortcomings is a boring and futile exercise.

As far as the proposed new regional grouping is concerned, Bangladesh must examine and view this issue from its own perspective and arrive at a rational judgement regarding its viability and potential. Quite frankly, SAARC has not delivered the goods because of a dispute between two countries which has nothing to do with us. Pakistan has decided to form regional groupings with Iran and Turkey on the one hand, and with the new Central Asian states on the other, because it suits their purpose. They were not bothered whether SAARC liked the idea or not. Similarly, Sri Lanka is building ties with the new Indian Ocean Rim group, because it suits them. From a purely Bangladeshi point of view, I must say that it makes economic, political and environmental sense to develop a grouping with those near us, namely India, Nepal and Bhutan, and perhaps at a later stage try and bring in Myanmar and possibly China.

The government, I believe, has embarked on a sensible course, and institutions such as the World Bank and the ADB also think so. However, having been democratically elected, they must learn to explain and debate issues more openly, notwithstanding the fact that the SAARC idea was implemented some 15-plus years ago without any attempt to cast around for consensus.

## "Hilsa can help reduce cholesterol"

Sir, This refers to the above front page news (Col. 5) in *The Daily Star* (4 May 1997) on Omega fatty acid (OFA) in Hilsa fish oil and its role on coronary heart disease. It gladdens our hearts to know that the OFA has been identified in the Hilsa fish oil by the scientists of the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) laboratories, Dhaka. I am sure they must have found out the approximate amount (per cent) of the acid present in the Hilsa fish oil and in other sea fish available in the local

## Weekly holiday

Sir, "Pakistan is not our model. We cannot follow her without any justification," writes a letter writer in the DS. Can we afford to disobey and disregard the dictates of Quran? In ayat 9 of Surah 62 Allah clearly ordered those "Who believe to hasten earnestly to the remembrance of Allah as and when the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the day of congregation) and leave off (suspend) business for that is the best if ye but knew."

In the following ayat (No 10),