

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 Lalmonohar, police had to retreat and only a big reinforcement from Bhola 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 it 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 privatization 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 I 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 electoral defeat.

- Possible redemption of political debt the current government has incurred during its long struggle 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 witnessed 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 the government has already earmarked for closer and many more than would qualify to be in his 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 pay-back 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 shares 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 losing enterprises and tell them: 'Look, business enterprises losing 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 will 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, then 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 South 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 saw 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 systems 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 people.

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 interest — 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 SAPTA 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 for 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 been 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 armaments. 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

puts direct impact on SAARC's way forward making the bloc a global back-bencher.

On the other hand, almost every member-country has its internal problems and suffers in its own abysmal ways. These intra-country problems are another obstacle to a progressive SAARC. While India and Sri Lanka suffer in their own respective internal maladies, Bangladesh and Pakistan revolve around similar legacies at the political level. Nepal, on the other hand, is in a continuous troubled political errands, for in seven years since the king became a constitutional monarch the country saw the rule of five prime ministers.

However, if the SAARC is to keep up with the worldwide surge of development, the leaders of the seven nations have to create an atmosphere free of ego and legacy both at the national and regional levels.

OPINION

"Demystifying the Myth"

A Ahmed

As far as our relations with India are concerned, I believe the world has moved from a period, say 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, when nationality and sovereignty carried different connotations in the immediate post-colonial era. We are now entering an information/technology age where what will matter is economic development and clean and transparent government. There will be new and emerging roles for less government and more private sector involvement in this changed environment, not to mention the diminishing role of the military in the traditional sense. In this context, we have to adapt to new and novel ways of looking at issues, and not continually churn out the usual theories of conspiracy, domination, loss of sovereignty and so on.

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 democratic in election, namely India, Nepal and Bhutan, and perhaps at a later stage try and bring in Myanmar and possibly China.

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.

To the Editor...

"It is Insulting"

Sir, It is heartening to read Mahfuz Anam's commentary titled 'It is Insulting' on 29 April in *The Daily Star*. It is also no less painful to observe that people at the helm of affairs of this country have almost overlooked the contents of the letter of Mr Philip Tose, Chairman of Peregrine Investments Holdings Limited, Hong Kong.

In fact, it is clear we have almost lost our sense of self-respect and hence our sense of insult is on the wane. Threats of stopping foreign aid/grant/loan/credit are often posed by certain individuals or groups of some quarter. However, experience teaches us that such threats are not devoid of content. The institutions like World Bank, IFC, ADB and the like are run by human beings and their "excellent relationship" with some people matters a lot to get their favour.

Outsiders look down on us because of the bad things we do and hence nobody else other than ourselves are to be blamed for this. We have miserably failed to hold ourselves up and when we let down our compatriots we find pleasure. The outsiders know our inside better we do and in the present-day world, we suffer from the image problem which is our own creation. It is a pity, but since we have buried that sense, there is no point trying to dig it out.

One action cannot restore the dignity unless the totality of our economic and political drawbacks are eliminated. I sincerely share Mahfuz Anam's views and express that I feel depressed about it, why can't I (we) feel angry about it?

Islam, Rafiq Adabar, Dhaka.

Deadlock at Rajshahi University

Sir, Rajshahi University is the second largest University in

Bangladesh where about 26,000 students study. But now an impasse is prevailing on the campus.

The present crisis began when the university authority announced the new admission system. In this new system, admission tests will be held under authority of each department. A student organisation of RU is protesting this new system. Whether the new admission system is good or bad is unknown to me but we, the general students, are in anxiety. Our educational life is endangered. There is no security on the campus. The examinations could not be held due to continuous strike. In a word, the sufferings of general students are beyond description.

Our parents sent us here to study, not to get involved in do violence and dirty politics. So, my polite appeal both to the Prime Minister and the Home Minister to take necessary steps so that peaceful environment may prevail on RU campus. Please save our educational life from uncertainty because students of today will lead the country tomorrow.

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Rajshahi University, Rajshahi

"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

market. Their results should come in an appropriate scientific journal.

This Omega fatty acid (not Omega oil) was isolated from sea fish oil in Europe well over a decade back. There some scientists also claim that when the OFA becomes a component part of the High Density Lipoprotein it can act as a scavenger to remove the excess cholesterol from the human blood system. Here is its main function in relation to heart disease, or in other words, it can be said that its activity is similar to polyunsaturated fatty acids. Omega fatty acid is an unsaturated acid having this unusual name due to an unique position of its double bond in the carbon chain structure.

In the mid-'80s, I failed to isolate this fatty acid with all facilities available at my disposal at that time. Things have changed now as regards to instrumentation and logistic support as well. To confirm results of important work of other scientists by itself is an achievement to make further progress in newer field of scientific investigations. All the workers of the BCSIR involved in the Hilsa project deserve our congratulations.

Sudhir Adhikari
Murpur-10, Dhaka.

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 orders those "Who believe 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),

he says, "When the prayer is finished, then may ye disperse through the land and seek the bounty of Allah and celebrate the praise of Allah often that ye may prosper". Can we afford to disobey His order?

Isn't it time that we seek His forgiveness for having defied His orders? May Allah give us correct guidance.

A M F Quadir
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Asians, unite!

Sir, Russia is unhappy with the NATO expansion eastwards from Europe; and is trying for Chinese cooperation. India and China may try to come closer together for the sake of preserving the Asian identity and initiative at global level (cf. Mahathir). Culturally — isolated Japan has a problem, in that its major market is the USA. Now the Australians say they are a part of the great Asian continent (better late than never!). No problem with one God, but on human super-power lack of self-containment, and cannot depend on internal reference point; and seeks support outside, disturbing others in more ways than one.

South Asia has also no unity in diversity. The geometrical doodling has started. But it is 3-dimensional solid geometry, therefore empathy at three or more planes is not easy. That is the regional picture.

Inside Bangladesh also there is no consensus with the elusive and slippery western toy called 'democracy'. It is a form of imported culture — one cannot partake of it with bare hands; use of fork and spoon is called for. The day we can use democracy as salt with *panta bhat* (soaked rice), then we will really be free and enjoy life, bottom up.

A Husraini
Dhaka