

Male Declaration for a Better South Asia

Given the history of mercurial mood-plays in the region, the bon homie displayed by SAARC member-states in Male, especially the ice-breaking diplomacy between I K Gujral and Nawaz Sharif, has vastly contributed to confidence-building and, consequently, to the creation of a congenial environment for the rapid advancement of a SAARC process

Cooperation with India

Thursday last, we saw a full two-hour debate by our MPs on how far we could or could not go in cooperating with India. We think the subject is extremely important and more such debates, not only among our MPs but also among our intellectuals, business leaders, politicians and other members of the civic society should be held. As a neighbour girdling us on three sides; as an economy on whose reach, ability and expansion we must keep a close watch; as a political power of considerable global standing and as a military power capable of impacting significantly on the peace of the whole region, India makes it imperative for Bangladesh to forge a national consensus on her relations with that big neighbour. It is far too important to be left to any one party, who happens to be in power at any one moment in our history.

However, the type of consensus we are talking about cannot emerge from the level of debate we saw on Thursday. The debate, if we can call it that at all (may we recommend to our honourable MPs the inter-school and inter-college debate programme that BTV runs), was fundamentally flawed simply because it was not based on facts but more so on assumptions and prejudices.

The treasury bench kept harping on the virtues of regional cooperation, which as we understood the discussion, was never in question. It was the content of it that the opposition was sceptical about. So far, the main problem, we think, has been the failure of the government to explain to the people what it is talking about and planning to do. The main contention of the opposition is that India is getting a corridor through Bangladesh in the name of transit, which it will use to transport military goods and personnel to its northeastern states. If that is not the case, as the government claims, then why doesn't it make a strong policy statement on the floor of the House as to what will and will not be contained, if and when, transit facility is granted to India. All other issues raised by the opposition must, and should be similarly addressed publicly, clearly and forcefully. Just saying regional cooperation is the need of the time, and that all countries have done it, and are doing it, will not suffice.

Opposition BNP's position that India cannot be trusted is totally opportunistic. Let us recall that out of the 25 plus years of our existence BNP (including Zia's tenure as MLA) ruled for nearly 12 years. JP for 9 and AL for four and a half years. Didn't Zia, Satter and Khaleda governments have dealings with, and sign SAARC, SAFTA, SAPTA and other agreements with India? Didn't they talk and sign MOUs on the Chakma issue which began the repatriation process? So, why this totally negative stance now that it is out of power?

We repeat relations with India must be based on consensus and for which we need open, factual and sensible debates based on a vision which will put the national interest above that of the parties.

Calls for Treatment

An agency report carried in Friday's press went a long way in explaining the appalling condition of our state medicare. According to it, one third of the government supply of medicine for hospitals is pilfered and sold in the open market. With Taka 40 crore in a total allocation of Taka 110 which consists of 51 per cent of the national health budget, not reaching their destination, small wonder it is that state hospitals have served better as a source of enhancing the sufferings of the patients than alleviating them.

The report dug it out that mostly through the manipulation of stock registers and transportation loopholes that this reign of pilferage continues. Apparently a section of corrupt employees, especially those involved with distribution keeps the wheels of this grossly inhuman business moving. This process of bedevilling the government hospitals through rampant corruption by the fourth class employees has now become a pretty old tale of corrupt culture. Protected by the shield of various unions and vested interest groups they have been piling on the suffering of the mass for a long time.

Some doctors who, heaven knows why take the trouble of taking the oath of this great profession only to soil it through their corrupt inclinations, work as the facilitating forces in this cycle of corruption. The unholy nexus between the doctors and these employees was very poignantly brought out by the reference that 90 percent of the outdoor patients are given only two thirds of the medicine written on the slip prescribed by the doctor and that in many cases attendants of the under-treatment patients are asked to purchase from outside the very medicines that are shown to have been supplied by the hospital.

Corruption has a way of breeding in every system man has come to think of until now. But the point is it cannot be tolerated when it continues so rampantly and consistently in a field as important as that of a nation's medicare.

We urge the government to strike these bastions of corruption immediately and stop the drainage of taxpayers' money and improve the standard of medicare at the government hospitals, something which they so fundamentally deserve.

Poor of JCD

We are disturbed by Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal's tantrum regarding its participation in the Paribesh Parishad or the campus environment meeting of Dhaka University. BNP's student front reportedly boycotted it protesting the presence of the university's proctor in the meeting called with a view to consider the law and order situation on the campus and the preparation for the DUCSU elections.

We find the attitude of BNP's student front deplorable because either ethically or practically it simply has no foundation. As a student body it just cannot demand the resignation of a teacher like that. Besides, it is a very bad and dangerous trend. Today it is the proctor, next day it will be the pro VC or the VC. If JCD can come up with such crazy notion in the name of pressing demand then what guarantee is there that some other party will not pursue the same policy.

Whatever the background may be, JCD, we think showed tremendous irresponsibility in attaching its participation in an important meeting like that of campus environment with that of its equation with a teacher.

As a party with a huge following, we expect the JCD to behave little more responsibly.

If all goes well, the SAARC will have three more annual summits before this regional cooperation organisation for and of the world's one-fifth generally poverty-stricken population is launched into the next millennium.

The off-repeated concern over the challenging prospect of our embarkation on the 21st century sounding almost like a cliché now, an incurable skeptic may hazard putting an out-of-fashion question like this: what is so great about our entry into the next century when after all years are years and we have but only a few to pass and hardly any time to change the objective conditions remarkably enough to be dolled up for the occasion?

The question holds the answer: member-states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are under a back-breaking fast-track pressure to get on to a preparedness foothold for the next millennium so as not to be left by the wayside in a race with the rest of Asia. The continent of Asia is on a march to become the centre of global economic gravity with the ASEAN in a close reckoning with Japan and China and the SAARC region by a stark contrast still on the sidelines of the unfolding drama of the auspicious shifting of the sands. South Asia has the potential to emerge as an epicentre of the emerging Asian economic powerhouse provided that cooperation in the region is complemented and supplemented by the benefits of extended collaboration being

visualised through the eye-holes of ECO, subregional growth quadrangle, or triangle, and that of the likely grouping of the Indian Ocean Rim States.

The outcome of Male SAARC summit, the 9th in the 12-year chequered history of the regional body needs to be critically analysed in the light of slow-moving cooperation in South Asia and the remedial agenda adopted to quicken the pace of our preparations for the next century.

In order of merit and novelty, the salient features of Male Declaration can be catalogued as under with my observations following the trail:

— With the objective of enhancing regional solidarity and promoting overall development within SAARC, the heads of state or government encouraged, under the provision of Articles VII and X of the Charter, the development of specific projects relevant to the special individual needs of three or more member-states.

The encouragement from the heads of state or government was not easy to come by, meaning that they have agreed to wish the initiative for a sub-regional grouping well after a thorough deliberation on the implications of the same on SAARC, so that it carries conviction now. In fact, when the idea was first mooted by India,

Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to have special trade relations among them it was received with criticism in Pakistan and Sri Lanka which might have initially balked at the prospect of an India-dominated axis against them. It was a major achievement at the foreign ministers' meet in Male that the misgivings could be removed in good time for the summiters to give it a seal of their approval as a desirable goal, worth even



Time and Tide
Shah Husain Imam

replicating where possible. An issue that could split the organisation has been settled most satisfactorily strengthening thereby the SAARC with a burst of open-minded liberalism to new concepts.

Since India has a developed economy compared with that of others in the sub-group she has to be particularly accommodative to the individual needs of the rest.

— A group of eminent persons representing all SAARC

countries will be appointed to review SAARC achievements and to examine ways to provide further impetus to the regional cooperation. The work of the group will be of immense value in identifying ways to integrate activities and targets in a SAARC agenda for 2000 and beyond.

The association of the non-governmental actors with the SAARC process dates back to the previous Male SAARC

summit in 1990. It was decided then that scholars, professionals, NGO leaders and media should be harnessed to reinforce the official SAARC process. An Independent Group of South Asian Scholars and Professionals, IGSAC, for short, was accordingly formed and they submitted a synthesis report at the Colombo summit in 1991.

The Colombo summit went a step forward in employing the non-governmental resource when it established the Independent South Asian Commission on poverty alleviation. The commission laid stress on a major political approach in which social mobilisation and empowerment of the poor, who themselves hold the key to poverty eradication, would replace the failed 'trickle-down' distribution of growth benefits to the poor.

The dependence on the non-government repository of knowledge and expertise, though highly welcome on its own merit, reflected on the inadequacy of inter-governmental efforts which the SAARC process has been all about for the first six years since its inception in 1985. The desultory and segmented sectoral pattern of emphases may have been straightened and reshaped into an Integrated Programme of Action, and we have had down the road SAPTA, as a precursor of SAFTA, on the premise that a very large South Asian market is up for the grabs; but what we are overlooking is that mass poverty does not make for an effective market. So, poverty has to be alleviated first to a degree for success in free trade.

The answer is a long list of items: micro-credit, participatory local government, women's empowerment, mobilisation of external and internal resources, eco-friendly develop-

ment efforts and, above all, a distributive policy with a human face. The Male Declaration covered some of these aspects.

It is the spirit of Male that bore a stamp of collective statesmanship in a measure that perhaps surpasses any we have known to emerge from the previous SAARC summits except for the pioneering one in Dhaka which is historically in a category of its own. Given the history of mercurial mood-plays in the region, the bon homie displayed by SAARC member-states in Male, especially the ice-breaking diplomacy between I K Gujral and Nawaz Sharif, has vastly contributed to confidence-building and, consequently, to the creation of a congenial environment for the rapid advancement of a SAARC process.

The emergence of new leadership in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal has provided a marked impetus to the liberalisation of the atmosphere in this region.

Nawaz Sharif's democratic stature going high with the popular mandate he brings to bear on his office and the constitutional amendment he has effected to streamline the power equation with the president and the army, he has emerged as a potentially prestigious regional player. The hotline that has opened between the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers should buzz with an exchange of words for peace and stability in the region, the key to which is undoubtedly held by New Delhi and Islamabad.

Shaping Sino-South Asian Relations in the 21st Century

by Dr Abul Kalam

Prudence demands that South Asia features more importantly in Chinese foreign policy initiatives and undertakings than ever before. Both environment and water are critical areas where China may have a role to play, as the Himalayas provides linkages in both

LIU Shuqing, President of the Chinese Institute of Foreign Affairs, who concurrently holds the rank of a Vice-Foreign Minister, has just left Dhaka after leading a team of Chinese experts to Bangladesh. Only a few weeks ago Liu Gan, Secretary General of the State Council of China and a Vice-Premier, led a team of high-ranking Chinese officials to the South Asian countries. These visits, dawning on so soon after the death of Deng Xiaoping, China's 'paramount leader', are also taking place in the backdrop of a recent meeting of the Chinese National People's Congress. The visits seem quite significant for a number of reasons. The purpose seems to be three-fold:

(i) brief the South Asian leadership on the continuity of Chinese foreign and domestic policies in the post-Deng era; (ii) explore and identify areas of further trade and economic cooperation; and (iii) more importantly, signal Beijing's continuing and persistent interest in developing relationships between and among the countries across the south of its Himalayan borders.

It is proper to begin with a resume of the pattern of policies that China had experienced in the foregoing decades. That should then enable one to project the type of relations South Asia may be forging with its giant neighbour on the north in the coming millennium.

China's New 'Peace Image'

Even before the demise of its 'paramount leader', China emerged as a major power player and as 'the central pre-occupation' of the Asia-Pacific region. In contrast to the revolutionary image of the Mao era, Deng projected a 'peace paradigm' in shaping China's strategic posture. In terms of operational management, domestically, the new peace image entailed a blend of central planning and market forces, and in international relations it emphasized a 'new era' based on growing interdependence and the system of 'one world market.' China's domestic and external policies were thus intertwined, marked by the principle of 'co-existence' between socialism and capitalism, both at home and abroad. The post-Deng regime seems committed to the course.

Beijing's Future-oriented Security Strategy

China's post-Cold War security

strategy pays much attention to establishing friendly and good-neighbourly relations with surrounding countries, as China sees itself as an Asia-Pacific country and hence is especially concerned with the security, stability, peace and development in this region. Consistent with its new peace image, it has underlined three basic objectives for the region's security: maintenance of stability and prosperity in China, safeguarding long-term peace and stability in the surrounding environment, and initiating dialogues and co-operation on the basis of mutual respect and equality.

In realistic terms, the new peace image was intended to bring about rich dividends, reducing the need for heavy defence expenditure, modernizing the various sectors of the economy through foreign investment and technology. The new foreign policy posture thus not only was intended to ensure China's modernization at a rapid pace and attain progress in negotiations over national renunciation, but also help create a non-threatening environment around China.

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, China has respectively reached boundary-related agreements of various types with a number of countries, including India. It has also placed a priority on developing bilateral security cooperation with its neighboring countries, at the same time pursuing a more active and energetic policy of multilateral security cooperation, with mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Economic co-operation at the multilateral level has taken concrete shape in the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC).

Over the long-term economic construction remains China's central task, the fundamental objective of its security strategy will continue to be safeguarding a peaceful security environment for its economic construction. With the ultimate aim of maintaining a favourable security environment for its economic construction, China will naturally place prevention of military conflicts in its neighbourhood at the top of its security objectives.

In pursuing its foreign relations China thus seems to be currently forward-looking, future-oriented, representing no lament or moaning over the past; rather, the way it articulates the underlying principles of its foreign policy are very much consistent with governing the future frame of relations between China and South Asia.

Need for New Understanding

In the context of current global change, however, one may outline the principles of friendship and cooperation between China and South Asia, emphasizing the need for mutual understanding, mutual accommodation and developing co-operative relationships.

Since China itself is committed to a course of reform and modernization, it seems natural that China currently would look for a mutually beneficial relations with the South Asian countries. To bring forward this aspect of relationship, there is already enough supportive data and information to substantiate China's emerging dyadic links with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Basing on these one may also project the future potentials of their relations, suggesting a 'bright future for mutually beneficial cooperation' between China and South Asia, with the implementation of confidence-building measures in Sino-Indian border areas, and with an enhanced economic and trade co-operation.

Beijing expressly looks towards a substantial Sino-Indian co-operative relations, an all-round co-operative partnership with Pakistan — already having a solid foundation of friendly contacts — and finally, on the great potentials that exists in Sino-Bangladesh relations. But such an optimistic projection of relations between China and its South Asian neighbours runs into immediate difficulty when it is placed in the 'delicate' plane of South Asian diplomacy. The 'zero-sum game perception' that traditionally had taken root in the subcontinent and vitiated relationships, may indeed be attributed to 'the despicable acts of drawing in one country and hitting out at another' by the major powers.

It is, however, known that

Beijing itself was also a major participant in the subregional power game. But, then, international diplomacy operated during the entire Cold War period in a feedback process and notionally 'balance of power' was seen as an essential ingredient of preserving and strengthening the security of states. One can, then, well imagine why China emerged as a major weapon supplier to Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian border clash or why Bangladesh also became a little beneficiary in the same category since the opening of diplomatic relations in 1975.

Cold War Power Game

True all this is but the legacy of Cold War period continues to linger on and tends to complicate the diplomatic initiatives. Thus the very suggestion of a 'fight against hegemonies and power politics', presumably being 'the common foreign policy goal of China and Pakistan', coupled with a continued flow of sophisticated system of weaponry to Pakistan, may not necessarily contribute to either world peace or regional stability; for such a policy perspective may well be misperceived in India, which has issues as well as over regional dominance. Similarly, China's plea for a Nuclear-free Zone and that of an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace have also provoked different thoughts, especially in New Delhi, and perhaps also in Tokyo, as China itself continues to develop and admonishing others in the region to think only in pace terms.

Post-Cold War Prudence

Yet, China has been 'very prudent' in pursuing its relations with its wide-ranging neighbours in the post-Cold War period. With its 'fastest economy' China is indeed an envy to many a nation and truly serves as an example to the developing world, as Mao had envisioned. While China emerges as a system player in the international polarity, with the onset of a new millennium there may be expectations of different role playing, sometimes even of conflictual order, from Beijing. This indeed means that China in pursuance of its regional objectives has to go beyond its

traditional role of a power balancer and should advance positive initiatives signaling its interest as a true harmonizer in the wider fields of security, reassuring a potential rival that it has no expansive design and at the same time intensifying support so that the South Asian protagonists do not feel motivated to settle their disputes peacefully in the spirit of seeking common ground.

That may not be an easy task, given the complex nature of regional politics. However, with a common bond, bound by the huge Himalayas, which regulates both environment and water, and hence life itself of over two billion people on its either side, China has a tremendous role to play in shaping the destiny of its South Asian neighbours.

Prudence demands that South Asia features more importantly in Chinese foreign policy initiatives and undertakings than ever before. Both environment and water are critical areas where China may have a role to play, as the Himalayas provides linkages in both. Economic and trade relations may perhaps be institutionalized on the APEC pattern. A China-SAARC Forum (CSF), patterned on the ARE (ASEAN Regional Forum) may help alleviate the security concerns, ensuring greater communication and transparency.

Two-way Development Co-operation

It may quickly be pointed out that successful diplomacy involves a two-way process of interest and interdependence. China itself can signal its interest to come half way, but the South

Asia neighbours have to reciprocate to combine in joint efforts so that harmony replaces suspicions. The perceptual paranoid has to change, consistent with the sweeping post-Cold War changes, if we are to catch up with the rest of Asia.

The more recent 'growth-oriented' subregional idea may perhaps be expanded beyond quadrangle notion in terms to nation-state actors and given a basin-wise shape, as is suggested in the World Bank concept paper. By signing an environmental accord with China, India has already recognized how crucial it is to have understanding on either side of the Himalayas. Any subregional water-resources sharing has also to involve China, precisely because it is upper riparian as far as the Brahmaputra is concerned. China can hardly be left out of the Asian communication network passing through the eastern Himalayan subregion, in which it indeed has vital interest.

Initiative to these ends may come from either side. India being the leading regional power, New Delhi has to play a catalytic role to pursue such priorities, so that objective conditions are created for movements in the right direction. A friendly Bangladesh now is known to be at New Delhi's arm's length and Dhaka is known to be also sensitive toward India's security needs. Similarly, the Awami League government in Bangladesh, not unmindful of the regime interest, may also take up these objectives with India, and Dhaka and New Delhi together may pursue common objectives with Beijing which would serve greater interest of the wider community of the South Asian and Chinese people.

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OPINION Cricket is the Game of Life

A Mawaz

The bat and the ball bound the nation on the ninth and thirteenth of April. The cricket boys broke the number 13 voodoo by winning the ICC Trophy final (the mini World Cup champions?) in a nail biting finish, to get the one run needed off the very last ball of the match. The challenge was tough, to score at nearly seven runs per over to win, after losing the first wicket for zero run. Never in the field of national endeavour was so much owed to so many to so few (to paraphrase Churchill).

Bangladesh has come of age. The younger generation has burst with the spirit of the 21st century. We can depend upon them. The future is bright. Listen to the chirping of cricket.

The display in Kuala Lumpur is an object lesson for our national leaders of all shades — to come up to the expectation of the bearers of the burden. Compete, or get lost!

The odds for the team — now in the first phase of becoming a cricketing nation — were tremendous, especially after overcoming the tough challenge in the preceding match. In this match also a stiff target was set for the Bangladesh boys — more than six runs per over.

When iron comes out of the fire, it becomes steel. Our boys twice passed the test in less than a week and came out victorious. This steel has to be turned into stainless steel, to glitter in pages of history and in the minds of the people. Only then the eldorado of Sonar Bangla would be in sight.

The Bangla New Year 1404 on the eve of the 21st century brought intimations of the revival of the legendary Sonar Bangla of Sonargaon fame centuries ago when Bengal was a leading exporter of culture and

fine goods in the then global market.

Our time has come. Looks like we are ready for the final test. The nation has to demonstrate the qualities before the World Cup finals in 1999. It is not that difficult if the non-cricketers also start playing mental cricket. Real cricket is not played on the field. It is the game of life demonstrated on a sticky wicket. The beauty of cricket is its unpredictability. When we as a nation can become predictable?

The team effort in Malaysia has introduced a catalyst in the Bangladesh society, which will help trigger a chain reaction to clean up the stagnant and polluted social environment. We have been passing through a period of flux since independence. This fluxing period is necessary during the cycles of revival and regeneration. We have suffered enough. Now is the time to get together, and rise, purified and re-dedicated, to help, not ourselves, but others. It means service before self.

Today, the self is divided between insecurity and dedication. The society appears to be deeply polarised, lost in local affluences, losing the focus on the single goal ahead. Life is not a cigarette, beginning with fire, and ending in ashes (Oscar Wilde). We are ready to be led. But where are the statesmen in the midst of many leaders? The whole world is passing through a crisis in leadership — Bangladesh and the neighbours are no exceptions.

We are falling down, falling down... reminding us of the old nursery rhyme 'London bridge is falling down, falling down...'. Our boys, back from Kuala Lumpur, have brought a message to Garcia (they have reached Garcia). Anyone listening?

To the Editor...

Bangladesh and Britain

Sir, Variety is the spice of life. And so, Tony Blair has become the youngest British Prime Minister in 185 years. The Great Britain has returned to a Labour Government after 18 years of Conservative rule in a landslide victory on May 1, 1997. Up on the sky is a new horizon. Our heartfelt congratulations to young and energetic Tony Blair.

Great Britain is one of the world's leading industrial nations. It is a permanent member of UNSC and active member of NATO. Great Britain's hereditary monarch plays a largely ceremonial role in the government. Sovereignty rests in the Parliament which consist of a 635-member House of Commons and a House of Lords. Effective power resides in the Commons.

Bangladesh's ties with Britain are traditional and historic. It is a mixture of bitter and sweet memories. It is bitter because British East India Company snatched away our independence in 1757. It is sweet because British people supported us during our War of Independence in 1971. It is said that had there been no Bengal (now Bangladesh) there would not have been any British India and if there had been to no British India there would not

have been any British Empire. Over 1.5 million Muslims including half-a-million Bangladeshis are living in the Great Britain. Bangladesh exported goods valued nearly 418 million dollar and imported items around 130 million dollars in 1995-96. Bangladesh gets nearly 50 million dollars from Britain for various development projects. Queen Elizabeth II and former prime ministers James Callaghan and John Major have visited Bangladesh.

Great Britain's traditional and historic link with Bangladesh is the oldest among all SAARC countries. In the swiftly order of human relations at macro level taking the shape what is often called 'new world order' we are confident that relation between Bangladesh and Britain would be further strengthened for the mutual benefit of our two countries and the new British Prime Minister would make it convenient to visit Bangladesh in the near future.

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Denis Compton

Sir, A Mawaz's letter (29/4/97) evoked reminiscences. In fact, we had together witnessed the football match he had mentioned in his letter. As a member of the Calcutta Mo-

hammadan Sporting Club, I had an opportunity of seeing Denis Compton in 1940, when he visited Calcutta with a Service's Team and displayed his mettle as a footballer. Denis Compton, apart from being a reputed cricketer was a great sportsman, in the true spirit of sportsmanship.

In 1956, England suffered its first defeat in Test cricket against budding national team from this sub-continent. According to convention, the captain of the losing team is invited by the captain of the winning team to cut the cake jointly in the pavilion. The English captain was conspicuously absent. But Denis Compton, a member of team, did the face-saving. At the diplomatic reception hosted by the winning team, none of the cricket players of England XI attended the reception. Once again Denis Compton graced the occasion. So you see, he also played cricket off the field!

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Good, but not good enough

Sir, Abdul Hashem made headlines in the newspapers on March 13 when he handed over his son to the police and asked them to punish him, after the son had thrown acid on a 13-

year-old girl who refused to marry him.

I certainly felt pity for the father, who would bear the shame for his son's behaviour for the rest of his life. It was an act of honour to turn his son to the police, and it could not have been an easy decision to make for this unfortunate father. What finally gave this father the courage to make this decision, we don't know. The suggestion that Tk 30,000 reward money has made a difference was denied by the father who said: 'What more could I take as reward when I am handing over my own son to the police.' And I, certainly, could not agree more.

So Mr Hashem, put your words into action by giving the reward money to someone who might need them for treatment. To the person who is now suffering day and night from the pain of the acid your son threw on her. Instead of receiving 'reward money' for yourself, give it to the girl whose whole life got ruined by the action of your son, because what your son did can never be undone. And I like to believe that the money did not make the difference to you.

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