

FOCUS

"ASEAN 10", Bangladesh and SAARC

by Dr Abul Kalam

In ASEAN's past calculations South Asia, including Bangladesh, did not feature as a priority area; but the situation may now be changing, as ASEAN currently seems to look westward, while South Asia itself looks eastward. The main problem may perhaps have been one of lack of mutuality in perception and identification of the converging area of interests.

THE Foreign Ministers of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) in a special meeting held on 31st May 1997 decided to fulfil the vision of an "ASEAN 10" in the 30th year of its existence. The ASEAN will be expanded in July when the Southeast Asian regional entity will begin three decades of its coming into being. A ministerial meeting of the regional grouping is scheduled to be held in Kuala Lumpur on July 24-25. ASEAN currently groups Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The new ASEAN members proposed are Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. In extending its membership to the three new entrants, the ASEAN has shrugged off pressures from the West to put off the entry of army-ruled Myanmar because of a crackdown on pro-democracy activists, and rising political temperatures in Cambodia. There has been a sort of "super-power rivalry" involving the US and China over the ASEAN's expansion: Washington imposed a ban on American investment in Myanmar and thus signalled a strong message to ASEAN against Yangon's admission to the regional grouping; whereas China, mounting a new drive to build cordial ties with ASEAN, supports the group's plans to welcome Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia into its fold. It looked as if the ASEAN found "itself caught between a rock and a hard place."

The ASEAN grouping no doubt has its concerns about what is happening in Myanmar or in Cambodia, but "the interests of the region" and "the interests of the ASEAN" have been uppermost in the minds of the ASEAN leadership. While Chinese overtures cannot be taken at face value, Washington's actions seem to have offended collective nationalist feelings

of the grouping.

Primacy of Economics

It is largely economics, rather than politics, that placed priority in ASEAN decision making. The rationale behind ASEAN decision to induct the three countries sooner than later was to allow them to adjust faster to the AFTA tariff-cut schedule. ASEAN is, in essence, a free-trade area. "The more free-traders, the merrier." There is a perceived security argument. With the admission of the three to the ASEAN club, it will group together all ten Southeast Asian countries. That may help maintain the balance of power in Asia. Myanmar's admission will keep that country from falling under China's sway. In addition, the current divisive nature of politics and ideology involving the new members, it is felt, are likely to be swept aside once they join the club. The idea is to pursue a policy of "constructive engagement" so that the ASEAN with its own span of a variety of political systems may cajole the new members with trouble-some behaviour into moderating their worst excesses.

As a matter of principle, there is indeed good reasoning for taking the new members. Whatever may be the "intent and purpose" of the ASEAN decision to admit the new members, from July 1997 onward ASEAN will be brought to the door-steps of Bangladesh and SAARC. Bangladesh has a special concern: its immediate ASEAN neighbour (from July onward), Myanmar, is "in the grip of a thuggish military junta."

AFTA and SAFTA

For under-developed Bangladesh and its relatively better-off neighbours, such as India and Pakistan, the ASEAN economic experiment is a lesson they must take into consideration in any South Asian free trade arrangements (SAFTA).

which is supposed to be operational in 2001, two years ahead of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

The new members of the ASEAN will be given 10 years from January 1998 to comply with tariff cuts required under a plan to create AFTA, to be in place by 2003, allowing them extra five years to phase in the changes after the AFTA comes into force, considering their under-developed status. Experts view the integration of the three countries into AFTA, which would create a free trade area of 500 million people, as one of the bigger challenges facing ASEAN. In case of South Asia, with over a billion and a quarter population, the challenges could be still bigger. Especially the poorer economies of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal would find it extremely difficult to cope with the regional giants such as India and Pakistan in economic competitiveness.

Lesson for SAARC

South Asia and the SAARC have a lot to learn from the neighbouring region and its regional entity ASEAN. ASEAN has won respect for successfully quelling tensions between its own members, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. ASEAN has shown its dynamism, innovation and leadership both in development cooperation as well as in security dialogue. It provided a model of market-driven, export-led development that is being widely imitated. The intra-ASEAN growth triangles often referred to for similar attempts else-

where. It has shaped the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia's only regional dialogue for security matters. It has also brought together the countries of three continents for Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), which has committed the countries concerned to free trade arrangements by the year 2010.

ASEAN has thus already developed itself as a truly "merchandise trade oriented society", while SAARC nations remain utterly trapped in poverty. Both ASEAN and SAARC have within each and between them asymmetric features and both have diverse socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

Outline of Inter-regional Co-operation

The SAARC Charter (Article 1) contemplates the possibility of inter-regional cooperation; but a consensus decision and a clear-cut policy directive on the issue is yet to emerge. Hence a SAARC perspective on inter-regional cooperation with the ASEAN is yet to take shape.

However, there already exists an outline for a SAARC-ASEAN co-operative relations in the functional mechanisms such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in the emphasis of south-south cooperation by the Group of 77, in the series of intra-regional trade promotion talks and Ministerial Conferences held under their auspices where countries of both the subregions had participated, in their current

"Western tilt" — with no major contradiction in overall security objective — and in their overall conceptual adherence to cooperative engagement and/or security, interdependent development etc. Evidently, efforts are there, especially at the ASEAN end, to intensify actions and identify areas with a view to working towards an integrated approach to sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation.

More importantly, because of the expanding nature of the market economy that currently influences policies in both the subregions, the mounting debt crisis, especially in South Asia, the need to combine efforts in such areas as investment, finance, and technology geared to attain collective self-reliance, and finally the need to coordinate and apply mutual preferential treatment in shaping mutual economic relations as well as strengthen mutual security — all these provide substantial room for closer ties between ASEAN and SAARC.

There are intangible or less discernible processes which, in fact, may have much impact on the realization of the common objectives. Whether a formal structure of a cooperative approach or a more non-formal approach of a dialogue, both bilateral exchange or summitry and/or multilateral interaction, as experienced by the ASEAN, seem to provide a uniquely interesting model of subregional cooperation in Asia.

Divergence and Commonalities

There are, of course, elements of both inter-regional and intra-regional divergences in terms of confronting problems, vulnerabilities, threats to the economies and economic performances of certain member states as well as mutual threat perceptions. But they also have a broad spectrum of mutuality and commonality of interests. Apart from this general framework of motivations there are variety of reasons connected with the continued distortions in systemic economic order that leave substantial room for closer cooperation and partnership for the two geographically contiguous regions. However, until recently there has not been any impressive movement in this direction between the subregional entities.

There is sufficient scope for co-operation between the two subregional groupings and also for Bangladesh involvement with the member states of these two geographically contiguous regions.

Dhaka has a number of important concerns in fostering closer relations between itself and SAARC and the member states of the ASEAN. As the prime mover of the SAARC idea Bangladesh has a role to play in bringing about co-operative partnership between the two subregions. Its own interests dictate the need for developing such relations. In pure economic matters such as trade, the pattern of trade of Bangladesh indicates that the

country had more trade, and significantly more favourable trading within the ASEAN area, than in the SAARC region.

Bangladesh Looks East

Bangladesh has attached a priority in forging closer links with its East and Southeast Asian neighbours, having been leaned toward a "Look East" policy. Singapore has emerged as a leading trading partner and commercial relations with other ASEAN countries have also shown marked improvement. Bangladesh also may get closer to the ASEAN by replicating their development model with an export-led growth, based on a labour intensive approach and an extensive use of indigenous raw materials. It may endeavour to benefit from possible relocation of some of the labour-intensive industries from some of the ASEAN countries to South Asia. It has already evoked a lot of sympathy over the exodus of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, from some of the ASEAN countries, notably, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, who expressed concern over the treatment of its Muslim minorities by the

perception and identification of the converging area of interests.

ASEAN's external relations continued to intensify and become increasingly complex over the years, and now encompass overall security and economic cooperation, including the areas of trade, investment and market access. In the field of development cooperation the current emphasis is on thematic programming and equal partnership.

The prospect of co-operative partnership between ASEAN and SAARC may be viewed in the context of the foregoing general frame. The ASEAN experience of inter-regional co-operation, particularly its window of "partnership" relations may be judged in this context and would seem to provide useful input for promoting relations between the two Asian subregions. Pakistan has acquired ASEAN's sectoral dialogue partnership, while India's sectoral status is upgraded into one of a dialogue partner. It seems surprising that Bangladesh failed to pursue an institutionalized approach to its relationship with the ASEAN.

Bay of Bengal Bloc: BISTEC

The idea of a new economic grouping, styled the "Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Organization", has been mooted for some time as a bridge between the SAARC and the ASEAN countries. The news of the organization may be seen as a welcome development, as there

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economic arrangement involving the countries of the two Asian subregions. A proposal however well-meaning it may seem, should have been articulated at least for public consumption and debate. A person-alized approach of decision making, at whatever level may be, is always suspect and prevents consensus-building, which is a sine qua non for success of a co-operative entity. The second point relates to national interest. No country should lay claim, or be allowed any unusual claim, to the Bay of Bengal waters without full appraisal of reciprocal rights and privileges. The frequent intrusion of the Thai fish-trawlers off Bangladesh coast is a case in point. That often creates a lot of bad-blood between the two otherwise friendly neighbouring countries. But there may be others, especially involving the exploitation of resources underneath the Bay. Care must be taken to secure Bangladesh's national interest.

The third and final point concerns the motivation of the original sponsors. As Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury stated that the new grouping, as originally mooted by India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, did not contemplate inclusion of Bangladesh in it. It seems surprising, as the very nomenclature of the proposed new grouping concerned the Bay of Bengal, and not the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the idea of exclusion of Bangladesh must have been ill-conceived, to say the least. It may in this context also be mentioned that there is another loose but potentially wider trade bloc of 14 countries being mooted for sometimes, christened as Indian Ocean Rim [IOR]. Bangladesh, being an Indian Ocean rim country, is naturally entitled to be its member. Dhaka has in fact been pursuing its interest to be included in the grouping from the very inception of the concept. It is widely perceived that due to India's opposition Bangladesh's candidature has so far been impeded.

In the current context it seems quite appropriate to pursue, as well, the old IOR interest, given friendlier regimes in both New Delhi and Dhaka, while building a new edifice of co-operative structure linking the coastal shores of the Bay of Bengal. The new proposition would be truly more fitting and logical in terms of geographic proximity and economic reasoning, if both Myanmar and Malaysia are drawn into it as full members. More importantly, the new economic grouping would also link the giant neighbouring India to a symmetrical frame of wider regional interaction, putting a cap on its power asymmetry in the process of bringing the two geographically linked subregions closer together. This, hopefully, would usher in a new era of co-operation and understanding between and among the small state-actors and their bigger colossus of Asia, provided that the new quadrangle does not allow itself to serve as a mere "sideshow" to dilute the end of more pronounced, strategic entity, planned to serve the objective requirements of the much-treasured "India doctrine."

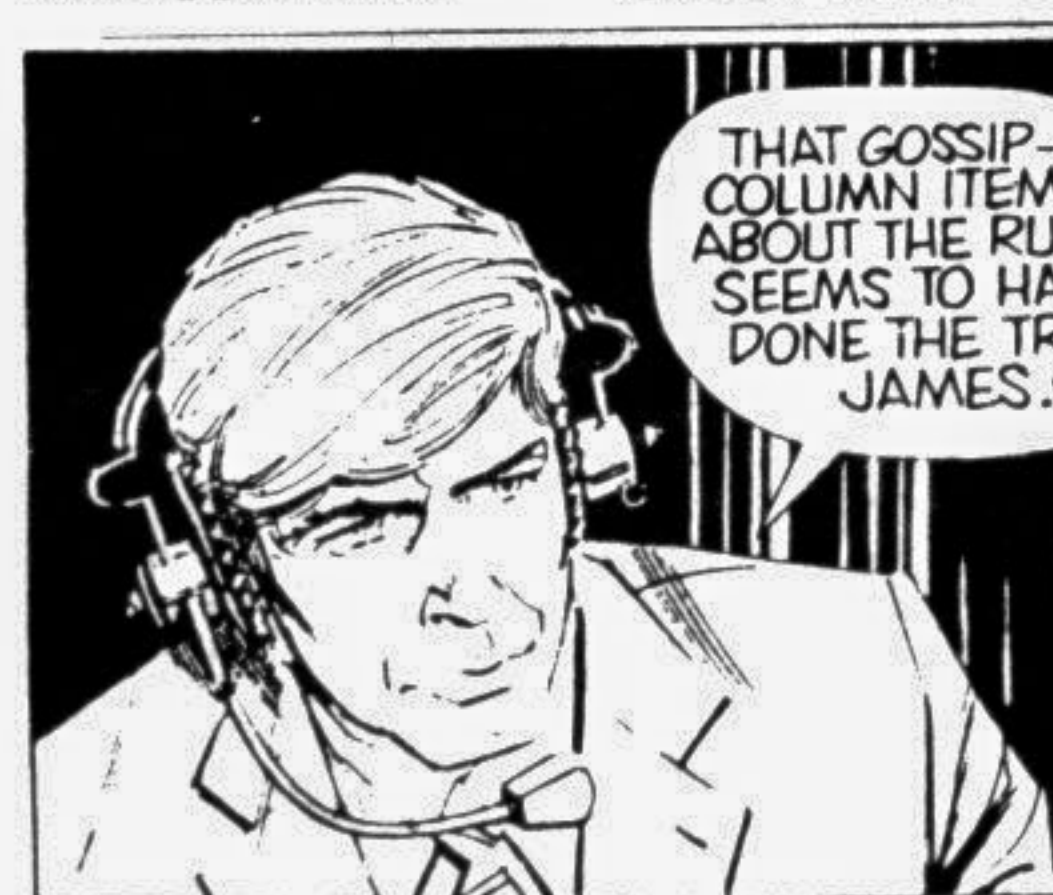
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by Jim Davis

Metropolitan

Body formed to identify, lease khas land

No plan to repeal Vested Property Act: Mosharraf tells JS

By Staff Correspondent

The government has no plan to repeal the Vested Property Act, State Minister for Land Rashed Mosharraf informed the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday.

He said in response to a question of Jamaat-e-Islami lawmaker Delwar Hussain Saidee.

As some other MPs, both from the Treasury and Opposition Benches, wanted to know about the government's plan about the said act, the minister said, a commission has been formed to recommend measures on the vested property and upon submission of the commission report, decisions would be taken accordingly.

Replying to a query of ruling party deputy Advocate Sk Md Nurul Haq, the state minister said, there were vested property of 6,61,000.94 acres farming land and 41,325.89 acres non-farming land. He said, management, administration and leasing of vested property were being directed under policies adopted in 1966 and 1977.

Opposition Whip Abdul Abedin Faruq enquired whether vested property would be handed over to the original owners.

In reply, Mosharraf said that it would be decided upon receiving the commission report.

was announced through a gazette notification last month," he told parliament in reply to a question from Md Shahidul Islam (BNP-Jhenidah).

On a supplementary from A S M Firoze (AL-Pirojpur), the state minister said that the committee would start work for identification and distribution of khas land in a month or two.

"I guarantee that the khas lands will be distributed among the real-landless people only," he said adding that he had talked on this matter with representatives of various peasants' organisations over the last six months.

In reply to another question from Sarwar Jamal Nizam

Rangpur Cadet College reunion begins June 19

By Staff Correspondent

Former cadets of the Rangpur Cadet College will hold a three-day reunion from June 19 in Rangpur.

Major General Mohammad Anwar Kabir Talukdar (NDC, PSC) GOC, Rangpur area is expected to be the chief guest of the inaugural session, said Tarique Haasan, President of the Rangpur Old Cadets Reunion Committee.

Interested cadets are requested to contact Haasan for registration at his office at room no. 51 (first floor), Aziz Cooperative Market, Shahbagh, Dhaka. The contact telephone numbers are 867054, 858283 (office), and 863181, 861773 (residence).

(BNP-Chittagong), the state minister categorically said that the price of the khas lands would be fixed in accordance with government policy. "We will not sell out the interest of the country," he added.

On another question from Shamsur Rahman Sharif (AL-Pabna), Mosharraf said the government had a plan to distribute khas lands among the distressed freedom fighters families under the policy.

AUB offers MBA course from Sept

Asian University of Bangladesh (AUB) will offer MBA course from September this year, a press release of the university said yesterday, reports BSS.

Interested candidates have been advised to contact the admission office of the university at house-9, road-7, sector-7, Uttara model town, Dhaka-1230.

Kamrunnessa School Old students' reunion June 27

A reunion of the old students of the Kamrunnessa Government High School will be held on June 27, reports BSS.

Those willing to take part on the occasion are requested to get them registered from June 18 to 25 between 2 pm and 4 pm at the school premises, according to a press release issued by Prof Selina Bahar Zaman, convener of the reunion committee.



Prof Dr Muzaffar Ahmed addressing the launching ceremony of UNDP Human Development Report 1997 at the CIRDAP auditorium in the city yesterday. Khushi Kabir, Dr Mashiur Rahman and UNDP official Michael Constable were also present.

Indian orthopaedist says

Acid-burned people not burden of society

An Indian orthopaedist yesterday said the acid-burned people are not the burden of our society as their injuries could be cured like other burn injuries, reports UNB.

The acid-burned people may recover from their deformities with our traditional and natural methods of treatment," said Prof N H Antia.

Antia, who is the pioneer in establishing a burn unit in Bombay Hospital, was exchanging views with the newsmen at Naripakkha office in the evening.

He said their (patients) intention to fully recover from their deformities caused by acid throwing is not important. "A lot can be done with our limited facilities available in

this region including Bangladesh," the Indian surgeon told the journalists.

He also examined two acid-burned patients and said there is no difference between acid burn and other burn injuries.

Prof Antia said the initial treatment of such injuries is not much expensive but it's time consuming for those who suffered seriously. In some cases, he said, a series of operations like corneal and skin graftings are needed for full recovery.

Citing his working experience with the burn patients in Mumbai, Prof Antia said the sufferings of the acid burned patients intensify for lack of adequate knowledge and information.

Bhutanese envoy calls on Sajeda

Ambassador of Bhutan to Bangladesh Lyonpo Tashi Tobgal made a courtesy call on Environment and Forest Minister Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury at her office yesterday, reports UNB.

They discussed matters relating to social, economic and environment of both the countries and hoped that the existing relations between the two countries would further be strengthened in the days ahead.

Zohra Tajuddin returns

By Staff Correspondent

Awami League presidium member Sayeda Zohra Tajuddin returned home yesterday after successful operations in her legs at All India Institute of Medical Sciences in India.

Osmani Airport to be made int'l

Ban on foreigners visiting hill dists may go: JS told

Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism yesterday informed the Jatiya Sangsad that the government was planning to lift the present ban on foreigners visiting the three hill districts following restoration of peace there, reports BSS.

"The government has a plan to open the area for tourists, both locals and foreigners, once the present peace process is completed," Dr Alamgir said in reply to a supplementary question from Bipan Kar Talukdar (AL-Rangsat).

The state minister asked the parliament to do the needful to promote tourism when the present restrictions are withdrawn.

Dr Alamgir informed the House that Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation is now running 12 tourist centres throughout the country.

Nasir new council chairman of Lions Multiple Dist 315

Nasir Hossain, District Governor, Lions Clubs International District 315A1, Bangladesh has been elected as Council Chairman Multiple District 315 Bangladesh for 1997-98 in the Multiple District Convention held on June 7 in the city says, a press release.

Nasir is also director of Mir Akhter Hossain and Eastern Bank Ltd. He is a member of Executive Committee of FBCCI and past president of Faridpur Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The minister, however, said that at the moment there was no plan to set up a tourist centre either near Kantoj Mandir in Dinajpur or the Shahi Masjid in Naogaon district.

Meanwhile, Osmani Airport in Sylhet will be upgraded as an international airport under a plan being executed now, Dr Alamgir told the House yesterday.

Replying to a question from A Mukit Khan (JP-Sylhet), he said custom and immigration facilities like international airports have already been introduced at the Osmani Airport.

Dr Alamgir said the runway at the airport is being extended to 9,000 feet for the use of Airbus category aircraft. The work is expected to be completed by June 1998, he added.

He informed the Sangsad that Taka 27 lakh had been spent to make the abandoned Thakurgaon airport useable for STOL (short take off and landing) aircraft. Thakurgaon airport is now ready for use, he said in reply to a question from Md Dabirul Islam (AL-Thakurgaon).

UGC chairman visits CU

CHITTAGONG, June 16: Chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Prof Yajuddin Ahmed yesterday visited Chittagong University to see for himself the extent of damage caused during the recent cyclone, reports BSS.

Prof Yajuddin Ahmed went round different damaged sites of the university and was appraised of the extent of destruction.