

## If There was Smoke

We are all reasonably relieved that the air has been cleared of the utterly unnecessary and undesirable controversy over the name of Zia International Airport. Few questions about the genesis of the controversy, however, remain to be answered. It is not for nothing that the storm of controversy raged in the first place. After all, as the proverb goes there must be some sort of fire if there is any smoke.

In fact, a vernacular daily which tracked the origin of this 'change talk' in a supposedly departmental directive referred to civil aviation minister's argument that the move was aimed at restoring the original name of the airport which came to be replaced as Zia International Airport since 1981. The civil aviation state minister is quoted to have remarked that proper governmental norm was not observed in naming ZIA.

Assuming that the minister is right, we feel he approached the subject bureaucratically. The approach should have been political. Specially when it dealt with a person like former president Ziaur Rahman whose party secured 34% votes compare to ruling party's 37% in the last general elections.

It is the self-defeating nature of the initiative bordering on unhealthy and holier-than-the-Pope sort of zeal that we find so objectionable. It was naïveté at its height. Never in the whole course of the matter, any thought seemed to have been given to the political consequences of pursuing such a plan.

We believe the government should not create distraction for itself by initiatives such as this. At the same time we commend the government for showing maturity and clearing the air in a manner that may appear as a strategic retreat.

This is not for the first time that the government of Sheikh Hasina has run into such an embarrassing situation. We would like to warn the government that there seem to be elements at work within it who are periodically involving it in acts that are enormously damaging for its efficiency and popularity from the motive of ingratiating themselves through excessive devotion and zeal.

## Dutch Support

The Dutch Development Cooperation Minister Jan Pronk came, saw, and left conquering our hearts. Seldom has a dignitary visiting us spoken our developmental idiom with such a convincing effect on an audience wider than our domestic one as did Pronk during his brief sojourn in Bangladesh. He took the words right out of our heart, partaking of our innermost feelings largely kept to ourselves lest we sound self-advertising. This is what he said for us: the international community should 'honour' the achievement of the Ganges water treaty and come forward to assist Bangladesh in implementing the Ganges Barrage Project.

Underscoring the need for organising an international consortium to finance the barrage project, the Dutch minister led the way by committing full support of his government to such an effort with a decent monetary contribution to the undertaking. The minister was emphatic also in assuring financial assistance to projects for Meghna delta development and dredging of the river Gora.

While their help in building cyclone shelters and the promise held out for bolstering rural electrification are appreciated, NGOs like BRAC and Proshika must have words of special thanks for the Netherlands government's standing them in good stead.

The Dutch-Bangla relationship, let's place it on records, has been characterised by starry-eyed dreaming of a solid partnership as the tangibles lagged way behind aspirations in terms of utilising the Dutch experience with dyking against floods and reclamation of lands. Their evincing an interest in some of our water management projects where their technical inputs ought to be as prized as their funding is viewed by us as an appetiser to the main course of sharing their land-use know-how.

## Gujral's Trinket

On Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral's attempted bravado of an overture for unconditional peace talks with the Kashmiri militants is proving to be a non-starter. For, it has been deflated by the proviso he added *post-haste* that the Muslim rebels would have to first surrender their weapons before being entitled to the dialogue at all.

This is literally going one step forward and two steps back. Because while an outside chance for a conciliatory spirit to be instilled in the separatist groups sneaked on to the horizon by the offer of talks, the prospect has been botched up by attaching a precondition to these.

Moreover, speaking of fundamentals, the negotiations are going to be about their shunning the path of violence by disarming themselves of their own volition. But the revised proposal for talks seems insistent on achieving the ultimate goal ahead of the dialogue itself which must first be held for any peaceful settlement of the problem. As it is, the Indian Prime Minister has made it clear that the framework of talks would be the territorial integrity of India.

Gujral could not have deliberately hollowed out his original overture for unconditional negotiations within a matter of hours since it gives his penchant for having announced political rather than a military solution of the Kashmir question. Only time can say whether he will revert to what he began with, but for the present he looks like a man under pressure ill put to apply some of his bold theories for innovative peace.

**D**HAKA and Calcutta are two huge metropolises located very close to each other. Yet, there are no regular surface transportation — either by road or rail. In fact no where else in the world there exist such large cities with so little distance between them but very little connection in terms of movement of people, goods and services or voice and mail communication. The inter-city traffic of all sort is a record low.

Strangely enough, the two cities are remote neighbours. It is an incredibly unique situation in the world today of rapid communication and no apparent reason to remain so distant in spite of geographical proximity to each other. Similarities of language, culture, food, environment are all so obvious. It is also understandable that political compulsions prior to 1971 insulated the two neighbours since the partition of 1947. But what happened after 1971?

There was a brief interlude of opening to the neighbour which was hampered by the devastated transport network. Even up to 1975, the desirable of interactions were lacking. The remoteness continued to prevail. Visa restrictions were quickly imposed and cross border exchanges were mostly illegal. There were proposals to revive cultivation of fruits and vegetables and promote intensive rural aquaculture in the districts of Jessor, Khulna and Kushtia for supplies to the Calcutta market following the rural-urban trade links of pre-partition days. But those proposals never saw the light of the day.

No doubt, there was a profound reluctance on the part of both the parties to come close to each other. Those were the days of closed economies. The outward looking strategies of economic growth through trade and development were yet to mature into a global dogma as it

is today. The economic liberalisation is now in full swing all over South

**A**sia. Trade opportunities within the subcontinent have remained dormant for the last 50 years. The time has now come for a fundamental change in outlook. We cannot remain so distant any more.

Just recall that 50 years back, all the raw jute consumed by over 100 jute mills around Calcutta used to be grown in Bangladesh. Pakistan Government killed the entire export trade in jute through foolish policies. Cost of production of raw jute in India is much higher than in Bangladesh. However, we failed to revive the old trade and thereby save the industry even 25 years after our independence. It is never too late.

If an alternative crop can bring a higher return to farmers of India and our farmers can get a better price of jute, then there still is an excellent complimentary situation which should be exploited without any further delay. And, it is only through trade that our nearest neighbour can no longer remain so remote.

I am, however, of the view that a new dimension of our relationship with West Bengal in particular have emerged after 20 years of successful development experience of the Left government led by the most eminent politician of India today, Mr. Jyoti Basu. According to reports published in the *Daily Janakantha* of Dhaka dated 20 June 1997, percentage of poor has gone down from 58.3 to 27.7 per cent, agricultural production has increased enormously — surpassing even the record levels of Panjab and Haryana — and all these were possible due to successful land reform pro-

gramme implemented by the Left Front government.

We have many things to learn from West Bengal — our most immediate neighbour — who should no longer remain that remote. Free flow of information, exchange of experience on a continuing basis, training and study tours and above all, ease of people wishing to visit West Bengal should be ensured. This can be done by regular bus service from Dhaka as well as other districts towns of the country. After opening of the Jamuna bridge next year, travel to Calcutta from Dhaka should not take more than 4 hours — may be less. At the same time, visa restrictions can

be promoted regardless of the fact that the existing balance of trade with India is grossly unfavorable to us at present. This is because in the long run, we should gain in terms significantly new inputs and knowledge and skill which are likely to be imported along with other goods and services.

It was amazing to find that West Bengal suffered from considerable excess demand for fish as well as food grains. But today, the state is the third largest producer of fish in India and is surplus in cereals. We find imported fish from India in Dhaka market every day. Little do we realise that if it is possible to produce so much

there is not single member of the Communist party or any offshoot thereof.

As a result, neither land reform nor corruption-free policies — the two most dominant features of West Bengal scenario can be replicated in Bangladesh today. On the other hand, people can do wonders. No body thought that people will get united the way they did at the time of crisis in 1971. People are the king pin of development and at the moment, I would put my faith on people to people exchange as the basis for promoting new development ideas and initiatives. It should eventually bear the fruits of development and welfare.

The present government has taken certain bold initiatives contributing towards the shaping of a new development paradigm. First and foremost among these is the new local government institutions which should become a reality as soon as possible. However, the new local government structure should be complete, right up to the district level.

If it is left incomplete and only the village and Union Council elections are held, then we go back to square one. Secondly, not only local councils should be fully established, it should be seen that an increasing proportion of the development budget is channeled through local governments. By the national election year in 2001, at least 50 per cent of the development budget should be earmarked to the local bodies (same as in West Bengal today) which in their turn should share an increasing development responsibility.

Another significant initiative is the proposed sub-regional cooperation through the South Asian Growth Quadrangle. If it comes through then

trade and development will flourish — bringing in considerable inducement to economic growth of the sub-region in general and Bangladesh in particular.

Unlike West Bengal, NGOs share a big load of development at the grassroot level in Bangladesh. This institutional feature can obviate the party's role which is so dominant in West Bengal. What the party cadres do at the village level, can be taken over by the NGOs. The alternative solution may not be perfect; but this in our situation is the next best solution.

My suggestions and ideas are untested. Much more thoughtful analyses are called for. I will deeply appreciate the views of readers of this column.

## CORRECTIONS

I regret to say that there have been some misplacements of data in the table presented in my article "How High Should Public Expenditure Be?" published on July 27, 1997, which will create a lot of confusions in the minds of the readers. First of all, the numbers relating to the 5th (TE as % of GDP), 6th (GDP) and 7th (RE as % of GDP) rows 37.44, 2442.13, and 16.23 respectively placed under the column, 1997-98, should have been under the column, 2006-07, since these numbers are calculated for the year 2006-07. Secondly, the data relating to the last four rows (AARG of TE, AARG of RE, AARG of DE, and AARG of RR) placed under the column, 1985-86, should have been in the empty space between 1990-91 and 1996-97 since these data represent the annual average rates of growth of the stated variables between 1990-91 and 1996-97. I am indeed sorry for these errors.

Kabir U Ahmed

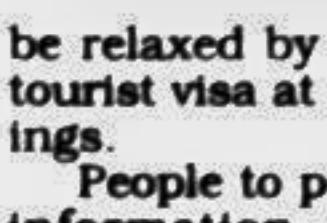
# The Remote Neighbour

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## Window on Asia

Shahid Latif



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be relaxed by granting 15 days tourist visa at the border crossings.

People to people exchange of information and knowledge can bring in changes as well as reforms in directions not even known to us today. It is on record that the rapid expansion of wheat cultivation for the first time in Bangladesh in, after 1975, was possible not because of strong government programme but similar success in West Bengal with Sonalika variety of wheat seeds which were subsequently smuggled in through private initiatives. The illegal nature of such exchange or trade must stop forthwith. Therefore, people in general should not only be allowed to travel across the border, but trade in general ought

fish in West Bengal. Bangladesh can do even better because of the vast lowlands as the potential habitat for an enormous quantity of fish.

The biggest handicap in following the West Bengal example is the conspicuous absence of strong political party organisation in our country. The central leadership of parties in power have so far failed to create a vigorous local government system through which political cadres are trained and leadership flourish — eventually rising up to the national level. It was not only the Chief Minister of West Bengal, the entire party back-up was remarkable. Another unfortunate development has been the demise of the left political parties in Bangladesh. In the present parliament,

## Indo-Bangladesh Water Talks, and their Ramifications

by Jagul A Chowdhury

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proved incorrect. This, consequently, sent wrong signals in the capitals of the two countries and not surprisingly, a stalled situation developed as far as the water issue is concerned.

The recently concluded meeting here was 32nd of the JRC which held numerous dialogues across the table dealing with such terminologies as 'augmentation' of the dry season flows of the Ganges, construction of storages in the high-ups like the Himalayas to

them in the dry season to obviate the flows, tying of the embankments of the Teesta, level of water flows at Farakka and the Hardinge Bridge, availability of water in the GMB (Ganges, Meghna, Brahmaputra) basin, flow of water in different seasons at various points, etc. These have been the hallmarks of parleys regarding the water issue between the two countries over the years.

At one stage more high-sounding technical works like "dams" in the upstream or the

"link canal" were very much on the lips of the experts of both sides as a way out to the ever increasing problem of scarcity of water in both the countries. Whether such ideas which also often came as conflicting to the either side did any good to the solution of the water problem between two countries remain highly debatable because it is unlikely that those involved in these exercises on both sides for years would agree that they burnt the midnight oil unnecessarily.

May be these schemes were not acceptable because either they were not pragmatic or failed to bridge the yawning gaps and, at times remove contradictions in the approaches.

Behind the semblance of normality, the water talks between Bangladesh and India often raised tensions even during negotiations when two sides traded charges and scheduled duration of discussions was curtailed as there was no point to carry on the negotiations. During the talks both sides were locked in many issues and when they concluded the dialogue — at times a terse and incoherent statement followed.

In one of the JRC meetings in New Delhi in the early eighties when the newsmen anxious to cover the outcome of the talks rushed to the venue sufficiently ahead of the scheduled closing of the meeting, they found that the discussions were already over as all the problems were sorted out much before than expected. The actual condition was on the contrary since trading of the charges resulted in the breaking down of the crucial dialogue although none would officially agree that it was the case and would rather remain tight-lipped.

The most talked-about high level meeting that raised a lot of dust even in the view of those not associated with the talks was here between the late Indian irrigation minister Babu Jagjivan Ram who later rose to become deputy prime minister, and our deputy chief martial law administrator in charge of the water resources portfolio in late 1976, Rear Admiral M H Khan. We, the newsmen covering the event were kept in suspense over the results of the ongoing discussions but the talks would continue in all seriousness for longer time. On the last session of the crucial dialogue when the covering journalists

got into close proximity of the leaders of the two delegations, to our utter surprise we found that Mr Ram was in a kind of aggressive mood and was giving vent to his anger while Admiral Khan was trying to pacify him. Mr Ram was an elderly politician of India who seldom lost an election from his famous Saraswati constituency in Bihar and was an experienced senior minister. His mood sparked off speculations of possible total breaking-down of the talks and sent wrong signals. But it took a moment's time for Mr Ram to control himself and he appeared calm. Paradoxically, to the pleasant surprise of many, that talk produced good results and if I remember correctly, later led to the signing of the agreement on sharing of the Ganges waters, in 1977. Mr Surjit Singh Barnala of the then water resources minister of India signed the accord.

These references are made to drive home the point that any discussion is good no matter even if it begins or ends on an acrimonious note. Contacts always leave involved parties a scope to meet again. Certainly, the 32nd meeting of the JRC that has just completed its two-day deliberations in the Bangladesh capital augurs well when judged from that point of view. The talks covered such issues as the implementation of the accord reached earlier at the summit level to share the Ganges waters with a desire to identify the bottlenecks, sharing of the Teesta waters in the coming days etc. But what is most important as outcome is the date for the next meeting which will be in New Delhi this year. Political climate governs the talks and hence the ambience is important. The treaty was signed in December last year but the JRC took several months to meet. It should have been earlier. Since the JRC has a lot of work to do in the long run involving many rivers and issues, its periodic meetings are necessary and the convergence of policy decisions in this regard is welcome.

On the other hand, the BNP has worked here. They have good reasons to be apprehensive of a massive reprisal from the pro-independence forces represented by Ghafur Dalal Nirmul Committee. Siding with the BNP in such an uncertain hour has been to shield themselves against any possible onslaught.

Jerry Dhaka

## Restricted VAT application

Sir, VAT on Internet providers and users may be restricted to installation only, and not on operation.

Similarly on computers-import of spaces, parts and accessories. High-end users can pay VAT on import of fully-assembled units.

In the electronics sector, multiple application of taxes, levies, VAT may be restricted.

Test equipment are expensive but essential; while sub-equipment for R&D have to be encouraged. Local assemble must be provided with incentives, direct and indirect. 'No tax' is bad philosophy. Tax on recurring items and serving may be reviewed carefully.

A User Dhaka



Indo-Bangladesh water talks in 1976: Indian Water Resources Minister Mr. Jagjivan Ram (with stick) and DCMLA in charge of the Water Resources and Irrigation Ministry Rear Admiral MH Khan (in all white) are seen with newsmen and others.

## To the Editor...

### Bus stops

Sir, Now that a road parallel to the existing one in the children's park on the east of Gulistan square has recently been opened for public thoroughfare, will the authorities concerned kindly direct removal of the bus stops on Toyenbee Circular Road and Jalkali Mandir Road on the south of Bangabhaban to enable free movement of traffic to and from the south-eastern part of the city?

One single trip during the working hours of any office day by the Commissioner of Police will convince him the necessity to issue orders to clear the area of all sorts of stationary vehicles. These are rightly dubbed as 'killer trucks'. Even small vehicles like baby taxis, tempos and rickshaws behave in the same aggressive manner. They don't care a fig, whether they are breaking any traffic rules or not. Everybody seems to be in such a rush to be first and go ahead of the nearby vehicles. What the race is for, it is difficult to comprehend because we, people by nature, are slow and waste a lot of our valuable time just sitting and lazing around. But once on the road everybody's time seems to be so precious that he pushes and corners others on the road just to go ahead of them and reach his destination in the shortest possible time. Then just sit there and gossip! Cars driven by drivers are the same getting suddenly in front of you from side lanes without looking right or left, trying to overtake you even when there is an obstacle ahead. They don't care the slightest if the car gets a dent or not. The owners sitting at the back should see that their drivers follow the traffic rules.

The drivers of all these vehicles can't be blamed too, for they are illiterate and come from a lower class, where they never were taught good behaviour and manners. So how can they be expected to behave well on roads too! Then most of them are not properly trained, they just learn by taking the

wheels of a baby or tempo in their hands and practice driving. That the rules