

## Stop Boxing in the Air

The draft accord for peace in the CHT has become cannon fodder for a strident BNP campaign getting more intense as the day draws near for its signing. Quite apart from the opposition party's legitimate right to articulation of national interests and concerns, and its own favoured approach to the CHT problem, an impression is fast gaining ground that the BNP is out for an overkill smacking of scuttling a fairly concretised chance for peace. The party may have even invited unsolicited flak that it couldn't be gracious to a good tidings of the ruling party origin.

Much of the BNP's outlandish accusations of 'secret talks and a suspicious treaty with the so-called Shantibahini' could have stood their ground if the opposition MPs included in the National Committee on CHT had participated in the negotiations in the first place. They kept out of the process from the very beginning apparently to retain the right to criticism rather than provide opposition input to the committee's work. If one were to say that they have been an accessory to keeping the nation dark on it one might not be very wrong.

Newspaper reports and Prime Minister's own clarifications on the sensitive points of the final draft accord suggest that the armed forces and the Bengali settlers will not be withdrawn from the CHT. With such recorded confirmation of the safeguard for 'the country's integrity', is there any way for the signed and publicly delivered accord to be textually different from this?

While the government may have been extra-cautious in avoiding pitfalls due to the BNP absenteeism, it is nonetheless open to a degree of criticism for maintaining an atmosphere of hush-hush which they are likely to interpret was meant not to queer the pitch.

We want the olive branch spread across the CHT without any ado, specially at a time when the refugee leader in India Upendra Lal Chakma has now lent his unqualified support to the repatriation process.

The government should not lose the opportunity of tabling the full details of the draft accord in the forthcoming session of the Parliament. Let there be an informed deliberation on the subject to clear the air.

## Disorderly

Yesterday's morning press reported frighteningly resonant armed clash between BCL factions on the Jahangirnagar University campus. Only a few days back we were informed of things being at the crisis point in Sylhet where schism in the local unit of Chhatra League appeared to be at its lowest in the recent times.

A very grave picture which tells that the terrorist elements in AL are slowly but surely assuming control is emerging.

It is absolutely immaterial to dwell on who is more responsible when it comes to involvement with terrorism, the point is all this is contributing to a further plummeting of an already badly vitiated atmosphere in the law and order sphere.

AL stalwarts have — more frequently the party chief and Prime Minister — been maintaining that establishing a terrorism and violence-free society is one of its electoral commitments to the nation and that it is focused on the challenge with the same sense of urgency and sincerity as it had been before coming to power. Is this what she or her party meant about their 'seriousness'? With her party and its student front being such monstrous sources of armed conflict and contributive agents to the deterioration of law and order, how come she expects others to listen to her call for severing links with terrorism? There certainly cannot be two different rules for one game. What is imperative for other political parties is equally imperative for the ruling party. In fact the onus is more on them. They have to lead from the front with convincing examples.

It is hard to imagine that the ubiquitous squabbling and bickering would have been there if the AL high command had really meant business and had a rod in the pickle for any violator of the party decision.

Just throw them out and subject these anti-socials to the law of the land. Mere utterances against terrorism or blaming the Home Ministry for being 'soft' won't do. But who does not know that if there is a will there is a way?

## Let the Birds Come

The guest birds have started coming for their yearly winter vacation here from far off Siberia. But why should they? It is no more the welcoming country it had been over eons. There are some, however, who eagerly await their arrival. Some with nets to catch them, some others to hawk and sell them and yet others to eat them. Birds are wise and their wisdom is celebrated by the Bengali fairy tales where they, as *Bengoma* and *Bengomi* are all knowing and benevolent. Why should they then be coming to certain death? Perhaps because it is in their genes to come to a country which has been wholesome for them at least for the crores of years after the rise of the Himalayas from the ocean. Now it may take another eon of time for the unwholesomeness of this clime to get into their genes.

What if the birds don't come? If this place becomes unwholesome for the visiting birds, there is no question of its being wholesome for the primates called *Homo Sapiens* — or the Wise Man. It is against this possibility of a future incongruity to all life forms that we must commit ourselves to fight against. And that fight can have a very good symbolic beginning if we can turn this nation into a country-sized sanctuary for the visiting birds.

Our failure to go up to the man crying *shikar* and swaying a bunch of visiting birds by their legs — a Nazi-style torture — and tell him he was doing a wrong thing and must stop — is at the root of this society being undone, imperceptibly but surely.

# Gas Find has Transformed UK-Bangladesh Relationship

Interviewed by Mahfuz Anam

— Derek Fatchette

THE UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London is as elegant an office as can be imagined. Centuries of tradition, now cleaned, refurbished and redecorated, the FCO, as it is commonly called, is the envy of most of the other ministries. Located next to the 10 Downing Street (the official residence of the British Prime Minister) the FCO bureaucrats are working overtime to implement the new ideas and directions that the Labour government, returning to power after 18 years, is spinning out constantly as it tries to revamp the British foreign policy in the era of globalisation and single superpower.

It was to hear first hand about the new initiative of the Blair government that I went to meet Derek Fatchette, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at his 2nd storey office.

The minister was an extremely cordial man, putting me at ease from the word go. Just after introductions he jumped from his chair and literally pulled me towards a corner of his room where he proudly displayed on his wall a framed memento of famous Nakshi Kantha of Bangladesh. "This was a gift from my constituency members originally from Bangladesh. They are all my voters. They especially made this for me when I became a minister. So you see I am very familiar with Bengali culture and customs. Bangladesh is constantly in my mind."

As we came back to our seats, Mr Fatchette started to explain how fundamentally the new government wanted to change the existing nature of relationship between the rich and the poor countries. We talked about UK's policy towards Bangladesh and South Asia and about UK's vision of the world on the verge of the 21st century. Following is a selected extract from the interview taken two weeks back in London.

Daily Star (DS): To go straight to the point, will your government support increase of trade between Bangladesh and UK, and also between Bangladesh and the European Union (EU)?

Derek Fatchette (DF): Yes, within reasonable limits?

DS: What do you mean by reasonable limits?

DF: We understand that with greater trade Bangladesh's economy will grow. For that we are willing to help to the extent we can. However, our focus is to assist in economic development of your country which will make your country a more powerful trading partner. It is our firm view that Bangladesh has under-performed like the rest of South Asia. This must change, and we will help in every way we can.

The policy of the Labour government is to change our status from that of donor to being a partner. From now on our aid will be people-centred. No more dependency, but partnership. You may have heard that we will soon publish a White Paper on our aid policy, which we

hope will transform our aid relations. Our aid will be more and more focused on democracy, human rights, good governance, and related issues. We will be more and more interested in the poverty alleviation issues.

To be very frank, the gas find in Bangladesh has transformed our relationship. Now we are business partners. There is real potential in your gas reserve. If this resource is properly used, and if downstream activities are properly organised — meaning that if proper infrastructure for the support industry is built — then there is real chance in making significant progress in your country. Your new wealth must be used to create jobs, which will then create new wealth. Effective use of your resources will enable you to make significant strides in your economy. We in the UK hope that you achieve that, and the Labour government is willing to help Bangladesh in this process.

DS: What are the major features of the newly elected Labour Government?

DF: One of the things that



Derek Fatchette  
Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs

distinguish our government from previous governments in UK is the ethical dimension that we have introduced in foreign policy. We will lay far greater emphasis on democracy, human rights, representative government and on all related issues while dealing with other countries. These will also be the main considerations for us in taking positions on international issues.

We have already taken lead in abolishing land mines. Agreement has been reached among a few of us to try to persuade the United States to join our effort.

We are also developing a new code of ethics for selling arms. As one of the largest exporters of arms this will mean quite a restriction on our trade. Even

then we are trying to persuade European Union to join our effort. France, another major arms exporter, has shown interest in our proposal. If UK and France can jointly work out a code for selling arms, especially to the developing world, then the situation will improve a lot. The code will deal with such considerations as to whether or not the purchased arms will be used for internal repression or external aggression. In other words, while selling arms we will probe into why a particular country is buying arms. The security question of the buyer will be examined more seriously.

DS: But how can that be ensured. After all you cannot control the use of arms by a sovereign country, once they

have been sold.

DF: You are right but only to an extent. We are addressing these questions. We will seriously look into whether or not a purchasing country really needs those arms. After all defence needs can very well be assessed from outside. It is really not that difficult a question as it may appear.

DS: Will it not amount to interfering if you start saying how arms once purchased are to be used?

DF: Well that makes this question so very complex. How we can impose this code without appearing to be dictating is the challenge. On the other hand, without such a code, arms sales can continue to impact negatively the economic development of the poor countries, where a large amount of resources get diverted to defence.

DS: Will the Labour government take more interest in South Asia than before?

DF: Interest in South Asia dates from the previous government. We are very keen on overall development of the region. We think South Asia did not progress enough compared to South East Asia only because there has not been sufficient regional co-operation there compared to other regions of the world. Therefore it is the policy of the Labour government to do everything in its power to promote regional co-operation in your area. We strongly support SAARC and will back all efforts to promote greater co-operation between the countries of the region.

DS: What are your government's view on the newly proposed sub-regional co-operation idea?

DF: That is for the countries concerned to decide. However, we support the sub-regional group idea since we think it is based on some common problems and prospects. Generally speaking, anything that promotes regional co-operation we will support.

We have also heard about the

growth quadrangle concept which will include Burma. Here our view is that any move to involve Burma is questionable. When the whole Western world is reducing its involvement with Burma, Bangladesh's increased involvement with it raises question as far as we are concerned.

DS: Is it correct to say that Western world is reducing involvement with Burma while Western investment is rising there, if I am not mistaken?

DF: Western governmental involvement is very limited. We do not encourage working with Burma at all. Frankly, the Burma angle worries me.

DS: Generally the Western view of South Asia is India and Pakistan centred, with the rest of the smaller countries being mere adjunct to that central focus. That, we think, how the US views things. Is it also the view of your government or you will pay more attention to the smaller countries of the region?

DF: We do not view South Asia only from the perspectives of India-Pakistan situation. We have historical ties with all countries of the region especially Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In the latter case we helped, only recently, to negotiate a code of conduct between the ruling and the opposition party. I have already visited India and Pakistan. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has also visited Pakistan and India.

DS: Doesn't these visits only confirm our impression?

DF: Not really. Minister for International Development Clare Short has just been to your country. I hope to come in a few months.

Let me assure you, we have not been obsessed by India and Pakistan in our dealings with the subcontinent.

How can we do that. The Labour Party has a large constituency of voters originally from your country who will not permit us to forget Bangladesh.

DS: Thank you Mr. Minister, for your time.

## INDIAN POLITICAL SCENE

# Congress Attempting a Comeback

The Congress' ranks including Sitaram Kesri, the party supremo hardly hid their craving for power which they tasted for many years. The desire even if veiled one surfaced at least once when Congress withdrew its support from Deve Gowda government without a convincing reason.

INDIAN Congress party with its glorious heritage of spearheading India's freedom movement and leading the country for 45 years during its post-independence period now lies in tatter. Not only the party suffered its worst electoral defeat in 1996 general election, an unexpected spate of jinx fatally struck the outfit both before and after the eleventh Lokshava poll. Tainted by Bofors scandal, among others, Congress was defeated also in 1989 and became internally divided after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. In 1991 PV Narasimha Rao formed a minority government at the Centre but could not maintain the cohesion of the party. In May 1995 the party finally split with a break-away congress led by ND Tiwari, an old party veteran. Only months before 1996 election 'hawal' transaction charges were leveled against three Congress ministers and the net quickly widened to include a number of other former Congress ministers irreparably denting the party's electoral prospects.

No sooner the election was over, it was the turn of outgoing prime minister Rao who, it was widely believed, masterminded the 'hawal' plot to undermine his political opponents both within and outside the Congress. Rao and a host of other prominent Congress leaders were now implicated by CBI (central bureau of investigation) in infamous JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha) case. Within a month Rao faced another charge of having accepted \$100,000 bribe from Lekhu Bhai Pathak, a British Indian to secure the latter government contract. Another Congress minister Sukhram was implicated in yet another scandal. Rao was entangled also in St Kitts bribery case in which he was believed to have forged certain documents. Faced with this cascade of ignominy an exasperated, Rao stepped down last year from the premiership of an already-tainted Congress by handing its rein over to a lackluster octogenarian, Sitaram Kesri.

The ignominious fall from an exalted height of the mono-

lith which charted the course of India's political history for over a century did not, however, evoke much surprise, because the decay and the decline of the party had since begun. Most literatures on the Congress trace the party's decline from late-'60s when it suffered its first split in 1969. However it was the '80s that witnessed the breakdown of Congress system both at the Centre and in the states. The party machinery experienced decay due to twin forces of centralisation and de-institutionalisation which operated during the mid-'70s emergency period. Under Indira Gandhi, there had been gradual erosion of intra-party democracy, increasing use of centralised institutional devices and interference in the working of the state governments leading to the loss of autonomy and even atrophy of party organisations. The party was further weakened during the prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi who failed to reverse the trend with his preference for a managerial work culture.

Notwithstanding, a partial recovery of the party during 1980 and 1984 elections restoring its traditional bastion of Nehruvian era, the six northern states in the Hindi heartland it could never restore its structure of dominance shattered in its 1977 defeat. Strangely, the party again suffered defeat in 1989, the worst in the north. It did poorly also in the east but well in the south. The southern performance remained intact also in 1991 making Congress a party with a base mainly in the south now.

In 1996 election, Congress performed badly both in the north and south. The party became marginalised holding very few seats in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra which earlier formed its bastion. These sets back apart the demoralisation that had set in the party ranks as a result of leadership crisis particularly during Rao's rule was more respon-

sible for sapping the strength of Congress. At least, in the face of its rule Rao showed visible signs of an intellectual fatigue and political naivety which proved infectious and damaging during the election.

Given this dismal state of things for the Congress and its numerous predicaments, what are the chances of the party re-turning to power? The Congress' ranks including Sitaram Kesri, the party supremo hardly hid their craving for power which they tasted for many years. The desire even if veiled one surfaced at least once when Congress withdrew its support from Deve Gowda government without a convincing reason.

spread, a common thread of aspiration running through the country's diverse thoughts and ideas, the organisations at the grassroots and a treasure of experience of how to run a continental polity. In contrast, the BJP is at the best, a sectarian party promoting the interests of India's burgeoning Hindu middle-class which wants to combine its religious prejudices with new found affluence. The front, in spite of ruling India more than once under variety of arrangements, fails however to emerge as a strong national alternative.

Yet the Congress assertion at the 80th, party plenary which was its first attempt to



PERSPECTIVES  
by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

The personal ambition of some in the erstwhile ruling party must have been at work behind the move. Indira Gandhi who reorganised Congress in the late-'60s and gave it its present shape and orientation was an ardent practitioner of realpolitik and had penchant for either wrestling absolute power or courting total defeat in political gambles she often took. The proclivity seems to be persisting among the Congress ranks although they lack the skill of Ms Gandhi who rose like a phoenix from the ashes of 1977 defeat. Can today's Congress repeat her performance? It believes, it can. The notion was reinforced when in recently held Calcutta plenary the party reaffirmed 'its faith in its capacity to ensure and acquire public support for a viable, stable, one party government' of the Congress.

True, the Congress is in many ways unique. Not only it has the craving for power, it is the only party with a national

revive and revamp the organisation after 1996 debacle was preposterous and not in any way substantiated by ground realities. Most political observers find the plenary an exercise in completing Mr Kesri's consolidation and its vindication lies in providing a 'feel good' therapy to the disillusioned lot of congressmen. If nothing else they dispersed from Calcutta believing that their party could again stage a comeback at the Centre. After Calcutta jamboree, the Congress can claim that it has once again discovered a belief in its destiny if not capacity — to preside over the recovery of the party's collective clan. In a small measure there was also an inner party consolidation. Beyond this, the party's standing remained as precarious as it was before.

Even if the party was consolidated during its plenary session there was no immediate indication of the consolidation

of party's hold over the electorate. In spite of fanfare, high drama and self-exhortations in Calcutta plenary, the Congress failed to formulate a coherent response to the deeper, crises of the country its political system and party organisations; neither could it offer any radically new or innovative prescriptions for the problems facing the country. Nothing that Congress said or did in Calcutta was suggestive of the party having any clue to how to make a stable governance of India a working proposition, once again. The party's political resolution did recognise the loss of the confidence of the minorities and deprived classes who formed major vote banks for the Congress, but later drifted away from the party. There was no strategy outlined how would they be won back. An impressive array of 117 speakers took part in debate over the party's political resolutions but none came out with a dazzling perspective or any original idea of statecraft. In political terms, in spite of the eloquence and ornaments, the speeches were reduced to mere platitudes. Although at the outset of the plenary Congress wanted to apologise for 1992 Ayodhya episode to win back the Muslims, finally it fumbled out, only a perfunctory regret. No credible steps were taken to recover the lost ground also with regard to scheduled castes and tribes. It was a disappointment for those who needed more than bracing word to heal their sense of being wronged.

On organisational front the bunglings are still more acute. The party's organisational conditions being what it is today the Congress cannot hope for reaching even the fringes of power unless it is drastically overhauled. In the states it is riven by factions and controlled either by power brokers or regional satraps seeking to use party machinery for personal ambitions. Amidst this disconcerting situation the steps to give the party a cogency

and coherent shape is yet to be undertaken. There is no consensus effort as yet to resolve the schisms that exist in the state units of the party. Not only Manta Banerjee continues to be a thorn in Congress' flesh in West Bengal such mavericks are there also Bihar, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh.

The last but not the least is the Congress' acute identity crisis during a crucial transformation period. The party had been gradually reformulating its ideology on the twin contentions of economic development and secularism. Indira Gandhi made a clear shift towards the right on both social and economic issues when she resumed power in 1980. Rajiv Gandhi representing a new post-nationalist generation in the Congress with little attachment to Nehruvian ideals carried the process further. The Rao regime faced by acute social conflicts and a major economic crisis retreated from the two basic pillars of Nehru model, socialism and secularism and created a crisis of identity and ideology within the party, that contributed to its breakdown. Both the transition and its trauma do not seem to be over.

The Ayodhya problem, the reservation for the OBCs (other backward castes), the need for macro-economic stabilisation versus the need for welfare schemes for the poor and myriad other contradictions led to the poor performance of the party in the state assembly elections after 1993. By the mid-'90s, the Congress party lost its broad social, regional and ideological appeal among its rank and file. By no means, the Congress can take a fresh electoral plunge before these organisational issues and problems are resolved with due earnestness. Then its equation with the people also will have to be re-established. None more than Congress is aware of the daunting tasks ahead and the need involved. This explains why the Congress has been just marking time although it can set in motion a chain of events making inevitable a mid-term poll at any time. The time is not ripe for Congress as yet to call the shot.

## To the Editor...

Dhaka

"Rex Having an Axe but Guile Having Guillotine"

Sir, Some related news items appeared in your esteemed daily, in the last few days, have attracted my attention. This has taken me back to the undistorted history of the past. During Bangabandhu's time, one Group Captain MG Towab (then a Luftwaffe executive in Germany) was tipped to take over Biman. Intention was to tame wild, irregularities for which Biman's revenue and reputation had nose-dived. For the survival of the flag carrier, Biman needed the airlines business-like discipline in the administrative in the competitive market. Mr Towab assured Bangabandhu that he would do to the best of his ability to fulfil the demand of the time. But, he urged Bangabandhu that trade union (a great drag in that business), had to be axed. Somehow, Bangabandhu could not accept

his proposal and Mr Towab returned to his base. Later, he was called again by the government and was made the Air Chief. Is same affairs are going on now again?

The news item, 'Govt Considering Clampdown... Unruly Trade Unions' (DS-11 Oct), where an incidence of Sonali Bank was depicted, and DS's comment was: "In most cases the victims are not all lucky", but that too did not last long. On 14th October in the last page of DS, "Some Changes in the Admin" we find the maverick CEO of Sonali Bank could not survive, as Mr Mahbub had been poised to his place. In the same go the CEO of Shipa Bank also had been removed. The same day, in the front page, appeared "PM urges teachers not to protect terrorists". I wonder, for all those important changes in the administration, whether the respective ministry and the PM were consulted! If so, then were not they being briefed appropri-

ately? On 16th October, in the front page of DS, we find "Powerful loan defaulters get Sonali Bank MD Removed". I don't like to draw any conclusion on what is going on. But based on the reports, I would like to say that if these activities continues in the knowledge of top executive of the country, then God bless us all.

Amen!  
A R Choudhury  
Uttara, Dhaka

## "Mobile Telephone and BTBT"

Sir, I like to draw your attention to the opinion expressed in The Daily Star on 18/10/97 on the subject by Mr MG Pir. Mr Pir seems to have some misconception about BTBT. I had written in this column several days ago suggesting Grameen to introduce incoming call charge. I am not an employee of BTBT.

and my opinion has nothing to do with BTBT. I also know BTBT has no opinion about Grameen incoming calls being free. If anyone is to be blamed for the suggestion, it is myself and not BTBT.

Saying the above I have 3 points to add:  
1) Mr Pir has mentioned "Bengalees are great talkers". There is a well known proverb that "more you talk, the less you talk sense". Then is it not a necessity that when talking over cellular phones costs money, it should be paid off, irrespective of whether the talks are of sense or nonsense.

2) Mr Pir has suggested that BTBT itself should introduce a time limit for local calls. Could this suggestion by itself not be applied to cellularphones for introduction of incoming call charges to discourage people from occupying telephone lines unnecessarily? Anyway I support Mr Pir for this suggestion to BTBT for introduction of time limit to local calls.

3) Mr Pir wishes very much that Grameen by their very advanced technology can overcome the present mess they are in and allow their subscribers to enjoy all incoming calls free and at the same time ready access to the system any time they wish.

Nurul Bashir  
Khilgaon, Dhaka

## Missing 'country' music

Sir, When we were teenagers in the early or mid-'70s, music then was pure and worth a message that kept us alive! Good old Bob Dylan with his poetic country-style was simply relaxing. Groups like, Cream, Doors, Black Sabbath, Uriah Heep, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin were all leading hard rock bands. Their music and lyrics made us blow higher. The mel-

low musicians like, Crosby Still, Nash and Young, America, Bread and Seal and Croft were really cool that kept us looking for peace. Even after the introduction of the fancied VCR in the early-'80s proved that these groups meant music and not exposed scenes. Their background scene portrayed "Mother Nature". Today, be Indian or the western music, it is more the physical exposures than any quality music.

The other day, time allowed me to watch one of the music channel — I was watching Fiona Apple for a while. She was indeed melodious, the music too was pretty good but the overall scene was dirty I mean, it was a bare all-dare all performance. It would be really nice if ever we get to watch some of the great rock concerts of the past like the Hair, Wood Stock, Bangladesh concert and some old bands which kept us going.

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