

Ties with Islamabad

Sharif-Hasina meet in the sequel to the Three-Nation Business Summit has certainly helped Bangla-Pak relations to be buoyed up from the somewhat routine pattern these had gone into. This freshening up of the bilateral mood has seemingly been made possible partly by the liberalised atmosphere fostered in the wake of the tri-nation summit and partly because of a perception shared by Sheikh Hasina and Nawaz Sharif that they must let their two countries' relationship come of age.

No highest-level contact between Pakistan and Bangladesh has ever passed off without a reference drawn to the asset-sharing and Behari repatriation issues dating back to our country's birth. For a full flowering of the bilateral relationship these questions will have to be resolved in an amicable manner at the earliest. The ball has remained in Islamabad's court. Who else than Nawaz Sharif can play it adroitly?

Geographical distance does not admit any direct inter-penetration of the economies of Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is by means of policy tools that they must be networking for a spurt in trade and investment activism. The trade balance is favourable to Pakistan and there is a plethora of goods that it can import from Bangladesh to help bridge the gap provided, of course, it lowers its tariff walls. Both India and Pakistan are yet to liberalise their tariffs to the extent Bangladesh, a smaller country, has already done. Pakistan Finance Minister Sartaz Aziz has promised at a colloquium of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on Friday that Islamabad is ready to extend preferential treatment to Bangladesh's goods. He would be only going an extra mile for Bangladesh should Pakistan start according that preferential treatment before the free trade area is fully established.

The business communities of the two countries need to interact through exchange of trade and investment delegations under the auspices of their respective chamber bodies, let alone those organised by their governments. This is now mostly happening at the individual level rather than group-wise and programmatically. We are waiting for the Joint Economic Commission to give a definite direction to bilateral cooperation not only in matters of trade but also joint venture projects.

The agreement on promotion of cultural programmes is another indication of a positive outlook shared between Dhaka and Islamabad in their relationship.

Where are We Going?

Are we on a libidinal trip? Women are being molested right and left. A month has gone since Ferdousi of Chandpur was allegedly raped and killed by students of a madrassah. The other day, Suchitra at Serajganj was gangraped in front of her husband before the group led by her rejected proposer chose the most violent method one can think of to kill the couple. And all this is happening because of the unrequited male advances towards these unfortunate women. No man in love would engineer a gangrape or murder of the lady he is or ever was in love with.

We are alarmed at this wave of terror unleashed upon women in general across the country. Apparently there is only one way left to counter it. We have to instill fear in the minds of all would-be rapists. We believe time has come to declare death sentence as the punishment for physical assault on women. And mere announcement would not do. The government has to make special effort to implement it.

Ours being such an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, it is likely that the formal and newspaper consciousness about repression against women will never quite percolate the administration. Man has to see through a woman's eyes to be able to do any kind of justice to all sorts of protest against repression against woman — he has to emotionally accommodate the trauma a woman goes through if she at all survives it. Admittedly, this will not happen in a day. But the process has to begin here and now. We had suggested earlier and we reiterate it here again that resistance to these criminal inclinations has to evolve from smaller orbits. Parents have to develop a watchdog attitude over the behaviour over their male children. Also a system of effective community consciousness has to be evolved presently in tandem with governmental awareness over the issue.

Postal Service in Ruins

The complain has been there in the air for a long time. Perhaps it has not been backed by the same resonance and frequency. That is eminently explainable. Accountability is a meaningless notion in the public sector of this country. Besides, we have become so used to the culture of being robbed of our privileges that we don't care any more.

Country's Postal Department is not the only government office that will never get a certificate from a client on his or her own volition. Its service has been a source of perennial annoyance for anyone in need of it. Although there has never been the dearth of dedicated postmen like *Dinu daak harkara*, the operative system of this office has been subject to degeneracy and corruption of unthinkable proportions over time. Recently, a Bangla daily has given insight into the new level of corruption inside the post office that is affecting the clientele and the society in general.

Inordinate delay in the distribution of letters has long gone out of fashion! Neither letters opened all too obviously is a source of bother any more. Not long ago Gordon Greenidge, country's cricket coach and a bona fide citizen of Bangladesh now, went to the press with his exasperation in this regard. The leading Bangla daily now cites cases where bank drafts are getting lost frequently. How they are being encashed in the market is an altogether different story of corruption in and around the banks, but the allegation aired is a terrible one. The utterly evasive reaction of the newly appointed Post Master General is shocking. We counsel him to view the matter not only as a source of public grievance but also as one of national loss. It may not be in his reach to fix things on his own but there is a lot he can do by his initiative to get the government review the reality.

Nineteen Ninety-eight: Reason to Hope?

While there may certainly be practical difficulties in implementing reforms through the broad spectrum, pragmatic changes are needed to change the destiny of the country.

HAVING lived through a traumatic 1997, do we have reason to hope for a better 1998? If we continue to repeat the mistakes of the past year then 1998 will certainly be far worse. If our political leadership learns from their own mistakes as well as those committed by the predecessor PPP coalition and the Caretakers who followed them (albeit for a short period), we certainly have reason to hope. One can live on the fountain of hope, one cannot survive on hope alone. There has to be positive activism with a constant check kept both on the style and content of governance that will feed our hopes and aspirations.

Given parliamentary brute majority, PML candidate Justice (Retd) Rafiq Tarar was duly elected and sworn in as President. The Courts have still got to pass judgment on his alleged contempt of court. One does not see him evading disqualification, condoning his remarks may set an unhealthy precedent for the judiciary future. The PM will be far better off if the President survives only shortly otherwise he will remain a focus of controversial attention that will distract the functioning of the government to alleviate the economic sufferings of the people of Pakistan. If Justice Tarar survives as President, Pakistan will be hardput to survive Tararism.

The country desperately needs macro and micro reforms across the broad spectrum of the whole structure in Pakistan. The macro reforms must follow a comprehensive national census, the most important being, viz (1) local bodies elections (2) majority vote, run-off elections (3) proportional representation and women participation (4) direct elections (5) dovetailing education with population planning (6) smaller

government (7) reducing and decentralisation taxation (8) direct linkage between taxation and spending and (9) accountability/justice at grassroots level. With respect to micro reforms, the most important are viz (1) re-structuring the police station and the police (2) bringing private sector participation in all the service sectors and (3) private sector monitoring of all government functions. A myriad other reforms are needed but these must take precedence.

Higher taxes are counter productive because (1) they do not fill the government coffers but the pockets of bureaucrats since those being taxed at such a high scale tend to pay the revenue collectors instead and (2) whether such high taxes are paid or not, business and industry computation adds to prices down the line. Let us reduce customs duties to a flat slab of 15 per cent for everything except those exempted from duty altogether. For parts and spares there should be no duty at all, this will encourage foreign investors to use Pakistan as a manufacturing base with the cheap labour available. At the moment Pakistan's official import bill is about \$ 10 billion while unofficially almost another \$ 20 billion worth of commodities goes through Karachi and other "unofficial ports" of Pakistan to Afghanistan, India and the CIS countries.

Almost all these goods come through Dubai and the computed cost from the time the goods leave Dubai for various destinations is an average of about \$ 45 for every \$ 100 for TV sets, VCRs, Air-conditioners, refrigerators, washing machines, etc. Of the \$ 45, \$ 15

stays in Dubai for handling services of various kind, \$ 15 is spent on the sea trip to Pakistan's/India's coast including under-the-table payment to various official agencies and \$ 15 approximately for transit from the coast to its destination. By keeping an official import duty slab of 15 per cent and adding \$ 15 for every \$ 100 for onward transit to destination, Karachi would have a competitive edge of \$ 15 in every \$ 100 over Dubai.

Now all these are approximate calculations but even a cursory estimate will show that

the people at the grassroots level by holding Local Bodies elections. In order to make the Local Bodies truly representative these must be held on slate basis i.e. the first ten candidates in order of voting priority must be elected with the one commanding the most votes to be the Chairperson. This would ensure that almost everybody in a constituency has a voice on the Body, very necessary to encourage community participation in governance. All candidates for higher bodies must be a member of the Local Bodies at the lowest tier so that one can

have a strong foundation for the candidate's credibility at the grassroots level. All posts must be directly elected as indirect vote is open to manipulation. For the Provincial Assemblies (PA) and the National Assembly (NA), there must be a run-off election if any candidate fails to get a majority of the votes cast, ensuring that candidates pay attention to the whole electorate instead of a favourite significant minority. To ensure that all parties which have participated and have got at least 1 per cent of the vote have on seat in Parliament, a 100 seats must be added at the NA level and commensurately at the PAs level.

This Proportional Representation (PR) must cater for 80 per cent women and 20 per cent minority, obligatory for all parties

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Pakistan will be able to earn more revenues than it does today, more important the official exchequer will earn a lot more by providing services in Pakistan instead of smuggling. This will have a force-multiplier effect on the economy that will in turn snowball revenues. There may be an initial dampening effect on our industry but we cannot continue to protect inefficient and uneconomical units at the cost of the nation. Enough revenues will be generated to revamp the entire socio-economic infrastructure including the utilities and related services. Guess who will oppose it? Only those who are making the most money out of this impossible situation and stand to lose their windfall illegal gains!

Power must be given back to

Prime Ministers Have Right of Way

The stillness of the multitude around me is ominous. It is almost surreal. Like animals sensing an oncoming storm, they appear to have a sixth sense which has told them that this gridlock will not unlock. They are remarkably silent. No one blows their horn; no one gesticulates or waves their fists in anger. Rickshaw-wallas slump forward and wait. Lorry drivers doze off. Private car drivers look bored with life. Even pedestrians stop weaving in and out of traffic.

young child holding his hand knocks hard on the car window. I wake up from my stupor, as it were, and it begins to dawn on me that we aren't moving. We haven't been moving for some time. I look at my watch. We must have been standing still for about 10 minutes. We are in a traffic jam.

You know what terrifies me at this point? It is a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me that things are highly unlikely to change in the near future. This here is the mother of traffic jams.

Our car is wedged between carts, rickshaws, lorries, other cars and people — which is not unusual in rush-hour Dhaka traffic. But this morning, the stillness of the multitude around me is ominous. It is almost surreal. Like animals sensing an oncoming storm, they appear to have a sixth sense which has told them that this gridlock will not unlock. They are remarkably silent. No one blows their horn; no one gesticulates or waves their fists in anger. Rickshaw-wallas slump forward and wait. Lorry drivers doze off. Private car drivers look bored with life. Even pedestrians stop weaving in and out of traffic.

I am very, very late. The man I am supposed to meet has a

plane to catch in a couple of hours. Nothing happens. I start sweating.

I roll down the car window and ask the lorry driver next to us what's up. Does he know why we're not moving. The lorry driver stares at me, saying nothing.

It's those prime ministers, they've snarled up traffic, what do they care what happens to us?

They're big people," says a rickshaw-walla. He shrugs. He does not say any more, but I can guess what he is thinking. Big people can do anything they want. Stop traffic, make ordinary people miss important appointments, keep entire cities waiting patiently until they have completed their business.

"It's going to be like this all day," my driver says, flatly. I roll up my car window. I am terrified as the thought occurs to me. Good grief. How long will

this traffic mess last? Don't tell me I won't make my appointment? I can feel the sweat glands expand inside my forehead, the adrenaline begin to slither into my stomach, the heart muscles tense up. Anxiety attack, here it comes.

If you were anywhere in downtown Dhaka on Thursday, you know how bad it was. You also know that when conference

communication — for us, the ordinary people of the region. For which we are all extremely grateful.

The problem is, I don't think it has occurred to them that the ordinary people of Dhaka have been subjected to grave inconvenience because of their high-powered gathering. Indeed, what bothers me is that I don't think it has ever occurred to anyone in a position of power that perhaps, just perhaps, it is not their right to always have right of way. That even though they are prime ministers, they might wait for their turn like the ordinary citizens of the land.

It could happen, you know. They might even learn something from the experience. Imagine driving along in your car and who should come alongside you but Mr Nawaz Sharif, and in the next car, Mr I. K. Gujral, and in the next car, Ms Sheikh Hasina and yes, each is all hot and bothered under the collar, quite distressed because the ride is taking far too much time.

I can actually see it happen. "Why aren't we moving?" Mr Gujral might ask, rolling down his car window.

"It's something called a Business Summit," Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina might re-

benefit in the lives of citizens being reduced.

A strong linkage between the elected representatives and the police station is a must rather than the traditional line-up with the bureaucracy. For providing services in local communities, the government organization must be limited to a skeleton controlling section and contracts awarded to the private sector e.g. water and sewerage, medical services, education, road maintenance, electricity, etc. This will bring in competitive efficiency. Similarly for accountability, we must induct the private sector to target illegal wealth on a systematic basis, giving them a fair percentage as adequate reward for the amounts they recover.

There is constant talk of changing the system, what one really needs are simple changes within the system. While there may certainly be practical difficulties in implementing reforms through the broad spectrum, pragmatic changes are needed to change the destiny of the country. With a compliant Judiciary, a supportive Presidency and a supportive judiciary, Mian Nawaz Sharif has an overwhelming majority in Parliament and complete command of the executive (except maybe in Sindh where the two bureaucratic brothers are holding Liaquat Jatoi hostage in the CM's House). With the country thus in his grasp, Mian Sahib has to perform, he has no excuses left to the contrary. If he is really sincere then he will use all his tremendous powers for the good of the country. If he is really sincere and the motivation is credible then there is certainly reason for hope but if it is not, a hundred Tarars will not be able to stop the induction of a national government. In 1998 there is thus reason for hope either way.

ply, rolling down her car window.

"Surely, they ought to be more considerate, I mean, why disrupt ordinary people's lives, for a meeting?" Mr Sharif might exclaim, rolling down his car window.

(Okay, so one's mind sometimes plays tricks).

But seriously, just suppose that for some unexpected reason, our three leaders did decide they wanted to experience first-hand what it was like to be an ordinary person, and they did get stuck in a traffic jam and they did show up an hour late for the Business Summit, what would happen as a result?

First possibility: The Summit could start an hour late. (Fine by me). Second possibility: The prime ministers could decide to sack all the traffic cops in Dhaka city. (Fine by me too). Third and most challenging possibility: After having been stuck in traffic for the first time in recent memory, the three prime ministers could decide that before they dreamt of grand schemes like linking up with central Asia and the Trans-Asian Transport Network, they would first try to resolve the traffic problems of an ordinary city like Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Followed, hopefully, by every other city in the region.

Is it possible. Is it too much to expect that prime ministers might find out what it's like to be an ordinary person. Or do prime ministers always have right of way.

in existence on similar terms. Since the government is that of the people, there should be housing offered to all who cannot afford the luxury flats sold by commercial flat sellers.

Shamsul Islam
Bk. 6, House 29
Mirpur-12, Dhaka

Road safety

Sir, Kalabagan is a densely populated residential area in the heart of the city. Lake Circus Road (formerly Bashiruddin Road) passes through the area connecting the Mirpur Road with the Green Road. At the entry to the Mirpur Road there are a number of shops. Most cars and vehicles going to these shops travel by the wrong side creating traffic jams and endanger public safety. Moreover, rickshaws travelling to Dhanrikhanda from Kalabagan routinely take the wrong side. These traffic violations occur in front of traffic police stationed at this point. I would draw attention of the relevant police authority to ensure implementation of traffic regulations here more vigorously.

Anisur Rahman
Associate Professor of Surgery
Bangladesh Medical College

Mini World Cup

Sir, My joys knew no bound hearing the news that Bangladesh is going to host the Mini World Cup from October 24 to November 4 this year. In that tournament, 9 Test-playing nations will play on knock-out basis. It is another good news for cricket lovers. I am — to be honest — thrilled to think that Bangladesh, my love, will come under attention of the world.

I would like to thank both ICC president and BCB president for this.

Zhinuk
311, Kamatuddin Hall
Jahangirnagar University

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

New Year condemnation

Sir, I like the way Dr Kamal Hossain looks at life, vide DS interview published on 1st January. I can understand his every sentence, and am inclined to agree with him in principle on most of the topics.

But, strangely enough, I find it extremely difficult to follow the statements and stands of political leaders when they talk politically, or even otherwise. Their mindset is just out of this world! It seems they are not sincere, and there is the lurking feeling that they have some axe to grind. They are always polarized, especially in this country. In running the running, so far they have not yet proved they are better than the non-politicians. It is not enough to be just marginally better. We can see the branch. But where is the root? There is a marked difference between a sapling and an oak tree.

Their message goes something like this: There is no other way of doing it except this way, our way. They are always polarized in others. Any other approach is not correct. Just plain intolerance by super men and super women.

What will they say as plain citizens when they return to the drawing room in private life? Perhaps a politician can never give up thinking politically, and look at life in a normal and neutral way. The greatest punishment of a political career is the loss of neutrality. Money cannot replace this fundamental faculty of the human mind.

The local breed of politicians are ruining their image, and a

time will come when people will lose confidence in them and reject them. The political style has to change, and change immediately for the sake of the country.

I guess 1998 may bring about great changes in political style and culture. Politics must be freed from money, mastaans, and dishonesty.

An elder citizen
Dhaka

A check-list for action

Sir, Developing Bangladesh has not the economic and infrastructural clout of the ASEAN, FE and NE Asian countries to protect itself from the after-effects of the financial earthquake which may bring down the growth rates in some of these Asian tiger countries from 8 per cent to estimated zero or negative during the next two years of this departing century; hence some environmental exercises could be initiated immediately to minimise the hardship of the first-aid anticipated in the near future.

The base and structures of the banking and the financial institutions have to be strengthened. The exercise has already been taken in hand, and the tough measures to be enforced have been well rehearsed. The implementation has to be unkindly, in the national interest, regardless of the noise level of the vested interests. The bug is the political will.

The administrative reforms can no longer be delayed. Now it has become a life line. The old must yield to the new set-up.

Change has to be accepted mentally and physically. Here again, the politicians hold the magic wand. The Parliament has to be more active than ever. There is no time for platonic exercises.

In all the sectors, our efficiency is poor, and quality control is abysmal. To gain the competitive edge, these two figures have to be improved. We have sacrificed on many occasions, but these invisibles do not motivate us. The politicians have to initiate a greater awareness programme, and believe in what they say.

The list is short, but the details are many; once the principle is accepted. Can we face the reality?

A Zabr
Dhaka

"Service age in Bangladesh"

Sir, I have read Neville Hasan's letter under the caption 'Service age in Bangladesh' published in your esteemed daily on 6-1-98. I support his viewpoint on service age in Bangladesh. I have taken the M Sc exam and my result is likely to be published soon. I'll need a job and I'll prefer a government job. If I get a government service at the age of 30 which I would like to serve for 30 years like those who entered government jobs at the age of 27.

So, in the interest of the new entrants 60-year as government service age should be introduced in Bangladesh without any further delay. What on earth impels those persons who are acting against the introduction of 60-year age-limit for government service in Bangladesh? If the government increases the service age, it will be a 'state policy' by which everybody will benefit.

Those who oppose the idea saying that their promotion will be delayed or that the rate of unemployment will multiply are

looking at only one side of the problem. I think extension of service age will not demand any extra effort in the management of manpower. Because in our country there is still no master plan so far made. Lots of posts in different cadres are lying vacant. Vacancies in Education Dept are innumerable, for example. My point is, we are to start from somewhere.

If the present benevolent government lays a milestone by raising the service age from 57 to 60, the decision will receive a wide welcome — and the whole nation will be enjoying its benefit. We hope our honest and fair-thinking Prime Minister should be considerate enough to introduce 60-year service age in Bangladesh without yielding to any pressure from any quarter.

Sahinina Tasnim
33, New Buling
Rokea Hall, DU

Two popular ladies

Sir, Two news items, "PM distributes warm clothes in city areas" and "Khaleda distributes warm clothes" (DS 9th Jan '98) in the back page, on the winter clothing distribution by two leading ladies of our country, one belonging to AL and the other to BNP have attracted my attention. I feel DS was not impartial in presenting both the news items. Firstly, news related to PM, was not supported by any photo, although a picture tells a thousand words.

On the other hand, in the news coverage of BNP chairperson, photo coverage was there. Even there was mention of PM's distributing of warm clothes. "Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also distributed warm clothes among distressed people in the city on the day", appeared superficially. As both news items appeared in the same page, side by side and separately, on the one hand, it reduced PM's position, and on the other I feel, it would become befitting if in the news item of PM, reference of BNP chairperson reflected.