

The Hindukush: Asia's Strategic Crossroads

Thanks for Standing by Us

Bangladesh's fervent call for global support made on August 26 to cope with a colossal human tragedy rapidly unfolding with an alarming aggravation of the flooding has evoked a 'flash' appeal from the UN...

The first UN appeal more or less covers Bangladesh's indicative need for immediate relief aid, hopefully, the US \$400 million sought by her for stretched out rehabilitation in the wake of floods would also be squared up...

We take heart from the thrust being given by the UN to the most vulnerable sections of the people — children and women — who are homeless and landless risking starvation and disease over the next three to four months.

Members of the Commonwealth, another huge constellation, principally of Afro-Asian countries, have been urged by its Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku to stand by Bangladesh in rebuilding the wrecked lives of flood victims.

These are systems we are talking about — the UN, Commonwealth and ADB — which have well-developed reflexes and quick-response-time sensitivities all rolled into time-tested mechanisms from frequent touch-downs on contingencies in disaster-prone developing countries.

Needs Proper Study

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina tapped a rich seam of potential when she proposed establishment of an Asian Energy Grid in her address at the seminar on investment in South Asia organised by FBCCI (Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry) in the city yesterday.

Sheikh Hasina did no disservice to the existing notion and scientific truth that the region is a vast storehouse of natural resources and it only requires proper handling and the optimal use of them for Asia to close its gap if not exactly catch up with the developed world.

Under the circumstances the PM has struck a most relevant and optimistic note with her proposal for setting up the Asian Energy Grid. We look forward to a proper study of her proposal by the experts at the appropriate forum.

Crime's Reach!

A huge quantity of arms and ammunition was found stolen from the malkhana of the Khulna Metropolitan Police on Saturday morning. Among the missing firearms were eight guns and 11 revolvers, all foreign-made.

The Khulna court malkhana robbery can be very aptly expressed by the Bengali aphorism relating to the fences eating up what they were supposed to guard.

Once the malkhana has proved vulnerable, there may be many wanting to take a cue from it. With the rise of terrorism there is a ready and demanding market for small arms and ammunition.

It was like a flowing river. The waves of conquerors, invaders and adventurers went over it leaving behind hardly anything except some sediments from which grew myriad tribes and clans bearing the distinctive marks of their ancestors.

Whether it was the period of British installed pliable Emirs during the late nineteenth century, or the Afghan Kings of post-British era, Afghanistan's chronic problem was that of the lack of a central authority in a country riddled with irreconcilable ethnic and tribal divisions.

THE government of Mian Nawaz Sharif recently moved a Bill in the National Assembly (NA) for the 15th Amendment to the Constitution (popularly known as CA15).

Now the national structure — at the political, administrative, municipal and rural self-government levels — screams for a matching activation to be able to utilise the support efficiently and optimally.

Suddenly we were under immeasurable domestic pressure to counter the Indian blasts and under severe external pressure not to go ahead with a response. As we stood between the devil and the deep sea, the Indians launched a most vicious propaganda campaign, designed to rub our noses in the dirt.

It seemed we had no contingency plans in place despite the wealth of advice available on courses to follow and consequences thereof. The freezing of Foreign Currency Accounts (FCAs) was necessary in the circumstances but the methodol-

ogy/terminology used was a major mistake. This instituted a panic, exposing our foreign exchange cupboard as being bare and without recourse to regular inward remittances that were the backbone of our economy.

As was to be expected, as a part of the US-led sanctions, the IMF held back promised tranches, deepening our economic miseries. Most of the blame was left at the doorstep of the prime scapegoat, the Federal Finance Minister Senator Sartaj Aziz, a loyal soldier of PML(N) who chose to give his views (and objections) in private rather than public grandstanding.

In contrast Mr. Hafiz Pasha is a rubber-stamp who will hasten to do his master's bidding. One doubts also that the Governor State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) Dr. Muhammad Yaqub will last much longer, as a self-respecting human being of some consequence he has done a remarkable job of keeping us afloat.

Under the circumstances without arranging a broad consensus was mind-boggling. Mind you, the Dam has to be built but the political fallout should have been calculated and avoided. The net result has been that in spite of the necessity for building the Dam, elements opposed to the unity of the country have joined together with saner factions in a joint opposition to the Dam.

Conversely, it is common knowledge that the Northern Alliance has survived with massive supplies of arms from abroad. It was Islamabad which had proposed imposition of complete embargo on arms supplies to the fighting factions in Afghanistan.

The attempt to build the Afghan state through the centralisation inherent in relentless military force has evidently failed in the past. It will not work even now. As a result, as in the past, Afghanistan will continue to remain a chessboard for international power play with no immediate prospect of a reprieve from the brutalisation perpetrated by its rulers for their own survival.

gious seminaries of Pakistan, scoring a decisive victory in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. The Taliban are now virtually in control of whole of Afghanistan and apparently without any challenge to their authority. In fact, the Taliban forces have now reached the international borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

International recognition to the Taliban is unlikely to come overnight in spite of their sweeping military victory. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has appealed to the Taliban to stop fighting and negotiate a peaceful settlement with its opponents.

in Afghan affairs in 1994 has repeatedly proved that it was a united force held together by fanatical religious zeal. The fact that an overwhelming majority of Taliban leaders are Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, is also an important factor contributing towards its ascendancy.

the mid-August (1998) defeat of the anti-Taliban alliance in the North to the alliance's internal schism. It is alleged that the Taliban offensive gained momentum after many Uzbek and Tajik commanders owing allegiance to Northern alliance shifted their loyalties after accepting bribes from the Taliban.

ibans among the bulk of the population, the people are, however, grateful to them for improvement in the security situation. Apart from the historical records of inter-ethnic shifts of power and a great difficulty in the imposition of a central authority in a notoriously multi-ethnic milieu, the international reaction to recent Afghan developments will be disincentive for the Taliban.

pressed their fears about recent developments in Afghanistan. The country that has been most affected by recent Afghan development is Iran after the Taliban has, through its recent actions, made it clear that it wanted to settle scores with Tehran. Iran views the Taliban as a creation of Pakistan, the US and Saudi Arabia to counter Iranian influence in the region.

rot because if Karachi goes up in flames, can Pakistan be far behind? The Taliban now effectively control 95 per cent of Afghanistan, with both emerging opportunities and deep rooted problems.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

clusion the government to the exclusion of all the other ethnic communities. Karachi is Pakistan's economic and industrial capital as well as its only really functioning port city. After Gen Babar cleaned out terrorists in late 1995, the city enjoyed a modicum of relative peace in 1996-97. However in 1998, we are back to square one, with da-ccities, car snatchings, kidnappings and assassinations going hand in hand with an unofficial urban civil war raging between the two factions of MQM, everyone and his uncle in the crossfire.

courses with the world's remaining Superpower. She used the fact of her female gender representing an Islamic country to extremely good effect, making it an asset of some consequence. Her advice has to be taken with value, not rejected as unnecessary criticism.

Which brings us back to CA15? To start with let us not have any controversy over the fact that it is in fact the Quran and Sunnah that rules over all the laws of the land, Pakistan was created on the basis of Islam. However recent political, economic and religious happenings both within and beyond the country have made the issue far more complicated and potentially explosive.

Let us face the issue openly. The western affluent and industrialised world had reached the peak quite some time ago, and is now planning strategies for survival during the 21st century by consolidating the potential markets, starting with Asia, including the rich and untapped CIS (Muslim-majority), in the Second and Third Worlds.

Many of the energy-rich regions are under the control of Muslim nations (ME, Iran, CIS, N. Africa, Indonesia, Bangladesh, etc.). The Muslims are not yet united and strong. This is the time to strike before they band together and can put up a stronger united front. President Clinton is in a hurry. He has to lighten his belt, as the stock is stagnating (poor English, beg pardon).

Terrorism, as unilaterally defined by the US, must have a theory or hypothesis, whether condeoled or condemned. The world's only super power cannot be confronted openly with arms and military might — the mismatch would be contemptuous. Therefore guerrilla movement or hit-and-run terrorism would be the easiest and cheapest tactic employed by the poor and disorganised opponents.

The vigorous US immoral action of pumping 'Monica' missiles into Afghanistan and Sudan is a diplomatic perversion as power becomes a licence for misuse and abuse. But its far-reaching repercussion, short-term and long-term, cannot be ignored, and needs to be analysed now, and constantly thereafter. It is alleged that the terrorist acts against the US are being carried out primarily by Muslim groups, some famous, and some obscure. The open US stand in the Palestine conflict (for decades) is anti-Muslim and pro-Jew. Iran, Iraq and Arab countries would not have drawn US interest without oil, gas, and energy reserves.

Why the US is so much infatuated with Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, now over-flooded with misery (the weather and the rain-bearing clouds were not bribed with dollars and hi-tech, it is fervently hoped!), and moth-eaten with political intrigues and internal and bipolar quarrels? She is a big recur-

OPINION

The Beginning of the End?

Alif Zahr

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Born-again Muslims

How can we as Muslims militate against anything derived from the Quran and Sunnah? There may be parts of the Amendment that can be debated (and even amended) so that no part of the community feels that the Bill can be used for discrimination against them in any manner, whether they be minorities or women.

Provinces of NWFP, Balochistan and Sindh having a field day sowing enmity against the larger Province, Punjab. On the plus side, the PML(N) is far better off without ANP because that alliance was muddying their ideological content.

PML(N) never really had a government in Sindh. What they have is a puppet on a string in the form of Liaquat Jatoi, who dances to the dictations of the PML(N) coalition partner, MQM. For it's part MQM was content to let the CM have the pomp and glory (and his two close aides "Brothers Nazir") their cut in everything under the sun) while in fact the MQM

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Under the circumstances without arranging a broad consensus was mind-boggling. Mind you, the Dam has to be built but the political fallout should have been calculated and avoided. The net result has been that in spite of the necessity for building the Dam, elements opposed to the unity of the country have joined together with saner factions in a joint opposition to the Dam.

Conversely, it is common knowledge that the Northern Alliance has survived with massive supplies of arms from abroad. It was Islamabad which had proposed imposition of complete embargo on arms supplies to the fighting factions in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has consistently advocated strict non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Pakistan maintained credibility with all factions of Afghanistan and has endeavoured to promote reconciliation between them with a view to forming a broad based government representing all important groups.

Pakistan had also been extending its full cooperation to the UN and OIC efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan.

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Pakistan. Even the official western policy lapsed into a phase of indifference after the Soviet collapse. Interests were awakened only when commercial motives began obtruding rather blatantly.

After the recent Taliban military exploits which is almost decisive in character it is now frequently asked: how far the Taliban's success reflects the popular appeal of its ideology and how far the clouts of its powerful backers? The questions have implications for assessing the durability and stability of a ruling arrangement under the Taliban. The answers to the questions can be summed up through what is the common impression of the analysts across the region. The 'Islamic state' as a political prospect in Afghanistan was indeed extinguished in the brutal confrontation between the Hezb-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Islami after the fall of Najibullah. The Taliban embodies, at the best, a variety of fundamentalism that could lead to localised displays of zealotry, but its ability to consolidate and administer a national state is negligible — let alone the question of more delicate and complex Islamic state.

The attempt to build the Afghan state through the centralisation inherent in relentless military force has evidently failed in the past. It will not work even now. As a result, as in the past, Afghanistan will continue to remain a chessboard for international power play with no immediate prospect of a reprieve from the brutalisation perpetrated by its rulers for their own survival. The net casualty is an Afghan state which would remain an elusive goal.

may be parts of the Amendment that can be debated (and even amended) so that no part of the community feels that the Bill can be used for discrimination against them in any manner, whether they be minorities or women. Again this fault is not so much in the content, which may need some adjustment, but in the timing and the method.

As for the detractors, they believe that the government is filibustering to get out of a tight political and economic situation, that the government's risking of a social explosion does not justify putting the whole concept of Pakistan in danger and that by doing so Mian Nawaz Sharif is displaying dangerous irresponsibility. The PM cannot be accused of straying from his vision, what he can be faulted is for the force-feeding of his vision onto the nation without giving the intelligentsia and the masses time to absorb the full ramifications. Some leaders are very impatient, Mian Nawaz Sharif more so than others. As the elected leader, he has a right to try and change the status quo in Pakistan. Let us debate CA15 with logic and maturity, honing the clauses to our satisfaction. Let us not be blinded by opposition for opposition's sake.

To the Editor...

Pakistan's stance

Good work, T&T

Demons in the society

Extend your hands

My hopes in 1998

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