

Baggage Problem

We are for more non-government initiatives to promote regional cooperation as the time rolls on. When track-II diplomacy came into play and flourished in no time through the active participation of eminent personalities in South Asia we lauded the development as an auspicious trend. Given the historical baggage of mistrust we have been carrying bilaterally, the political leaderships in the region could not quite act beyond certain cobwebs of prejudices in their inter-relationships. That is where came on the role of eminent citizens groups forming into think-tanks to try and build bridges between peoples and governments in South Asia. Former ministers, parliamentarians, present and past, reputed retired bureaucrats, top media and other experts pooled their expertise and visions in a bid to transform the poverty scarred face of the SAARC region. Although the immediate emphasis has been on sub-regionalism for reasons of geographical contiguity and convenience, the member-states of SAARC have endorsed it as being complementary to the entire process of regional cooperation.

Set against this backdrop, the outcome of the tri-nation water conference that concluded in Kathmandu on Sunday by adopting a 5-point declaration merits attention. Organised by the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), Centre of Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi, and Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), Kathmandu, the moot purpose could not remain focused on "harnessing the eastern Himalayan rivers," its agenda on the table; for, certain cogent factors having a bearing on the attainability of the goal had to be taken into account to address it in a meaningful manner. In the process some generalisations had to be resorted to. For instance, the need was recognised for creating congenial climate at political and official levels within the South Asia region towards harnessing the water resources of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. While this is important for cooperation in the common water resources sector, where collective political will is absolutely crucial, we must not gloss over the fact that unless some regional mechanism is evolved for conflict resolution, the desired level of economic cooperation will remain a far cry. There has been a lot of research work on conflict resolution, but none of it, to our knowledge, has been adopted by SAARC in any form or shape. That is where the unfinished agenda lies.

World Health Day

Today the world observes the Health Day focusing on the theme: "Active ageing makes the difference." This is indeed prudent, on part of the World Health Organisation to have adopted this slogan; because global life expectancy has experienced a sharp rise over century and the number of people reaching old age has increased considerably. Five hundred and eighty million people, both male and female, aged 60 years or older, are a reminder of that reality. This figure is expected to stand at 1,000 million by the year 2020, a 75 per cent increase compared with 50 per cent for the population as a whole.

The richer economies to a great extent have demystified old age, proving that the elderly are not frail and weak. Bangladesh is also a habitat for a large, and increasing, number of people, growing old in diverse ways depending on their socio-economic standing. The fact remains though that most of them are not healthy because of a life span linked to poverty, malnutrition and horrible effects of a polluted environment. In our circumstances, caring for the elderly is no easy job, let alone keeping them active. First, the socio-economic contribution of our elderly members demands recognition of their special needs. Then avenues have to be opened up for them to remain as active and useful citizens; but the opportunities created for them should not militate against those for the younger generations. A mechanism, therefore, has to be formulated whereby the experience of the old gets blended with the output of the youth not necessarily from the same station of life. Senior citizens, after retiring from their formal professions, may be drawn into sectors like health-care awareness, literacy programmes etc., where comprehensive social mobilisation is necessary.

IV Bag Hazards

Absence of an effective screening system in such a complicated medical procedure as blood transfusion exposes patients in our country to, more than anything else, the HIV. Blood transfusion often takes place without even a thorough check on transfusion accessories like bags, tubes, needles etc. Blood-screening is still, it seems, an alien concept. There have been allegations that disposable accessories are illegally recycled, exposing patients to certain irreparable, and often fatal, blood-borne diseases. Besides, in cases of infusion, there is absence of proper monitoring as regards quality of fluids used. The Rangpur Medical College Hospital tragedy, in which six patients died after being injected with long-expired saline, is not an event of too distant a past.

On top of that, the recent revelation that the vinyl IV bags and accessory tubes contain a toxic chemical element called phthalates, or DEHP, which can damage heart, kidney, liver and lungs, and cause cancer, makes the whole scenario look far more menacing. As researchers in the United States have found out, DEHP, used as a softening agent in the imported plastic sheets the IV bags are made of, can percolate the solutions and, subsequently, find its way into the human body. Once ingested, it slowly damages vital organs and may even cause cancer. The US Environmental Protection Agency has already labelled DEHP as a probable human carcinogen.

At this stage, what we need is a double-screening mechanism. Initially, it has to be ensured that the intravenous injectables, saline or blood, are hazard-free, which requires introduction of monitoring cells at every medical installation. Then, to deal with the DEHP dread, the Institute of Public Health, which manufactures vinyl IV bags from plastic sheets imported from the Netherlands, must weigh up the research findings in detail and, if needed, switch to safer containers. People who matter should act fast because delay in this regard may mean death to many.

Not Yet Across the Rubicon

by Syed Badrul Haque

Political will is vitally needed for implementing the autonomy-consensus and this is where the big parties in their dreary sameness draw blank. Should the autonomy be kept on hold indefinitely, the honeymooning of our people with the present bipartisan politics could well be on a test, might even be the subtext of the coming general election in 2001.

member commission on September 9 in 1996. After deliberating for nine months which included a trip to England, the commission put forward a ten-point recommendation to the government in July, 1997. This was again followed by an eight-member committee to identify the legal and technical aspects of the autonomy agenda. Till date, the committee is learnt to have met twice and the national commission, 28 times. After all these flurry of activities — not to speak of the tax-payer's money spent — the incumbent government did not nudge the issue any further, and for all practical purposes the autonomy-consensus now remains frozen.

All these years, the BTV and Bangladesh Betar remained a bureaucratic operation per se. In the absence of a reliable feedback and policy flexibility, their approach to news stories remained insensitive, routine, bound and lackadaisical — an antithesis to the very concept of news. For these two organisations, the world barely moves during the gap of two news bulletins — one at 8pm in Bangla and the other at 10am in English which is usually the translated version of the earlier bulletin. And much of the air-time remains under the spell of what is known as speech journalism at the expense of news judgment.

Fundamentals of news these days are so universal that any deviation from it would only expose the media's deficiency in determining what constitutes news and all that defines modern-age journalism.

The bureaucratic identity of

newspapers and journals liberally which far outnumbered the total publications allowed in the preceding decades. Public interest in printed news and views remained vigorous enough to sustain a free press. Mentionably, most of these newspapers and magazines were highly critical of the BNP government. It is not rare that he or she comes out unscratched. It is true our electorates are overwhelmingly illiterate and are generally unversed with the niceties of republican governance or social dynamics, but they are normally endowed with uncanny intelligence to read a lot from the visual images coming on the tele-screen.

It is widely perceived that with autonomy in place, the electronic media as institutions given to creativity, should improve appreciably their ratings across the board. This was amply reflected during the days of the apolitical caretaker government when BTV was on its own. It suddenly sprang to life with journalistic pluralism and became worth watching. The mini-screen came to grips with the realities; it broadcast news of all stripes holding rallies and demonstrations. Much of the ills of our public bodies, particularly in the realm of electronic media, stem either from wrong or over-bureaucratic governance. If autonomy is allowed, BTV should be able to neutralise such a regressive situation and make it democratically effective, transparent and vibrant with greater participation of private citizenry at the management level. But since it is not an event, and essentially a question of growth and improvement over time, we must not be in a poverty of vision.

In many respects, to recall, BNP's tenure in office proved to be the springtime of the BTV and the print media as a whole. Importantly, the debut of the BTV in no uncertain terms for their debacle. Surely, the audience were very much within their rights to be informed of the accidents on priority basis, — not as a privilege graciously bestowed by the authorities.

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The audio-visual media, television is the most powerful

electronic media is not only about showcasing the 'good' work of the ruling party to offset the negative images, but to allow opinions freely on any issue of social relevance. Words alone will not bridge the chasm between concern and credibility. It is time that meaningful efforts are made than mere leaps of faith which ought to be transparent and delivered to earn confidence of the citizenry who now feel crudely sidelined by their own law-makers in their most cavalier fashion.

Traditionally our people felt a strong attachment to their socio-political system. But they always have been wary of those whom they delegate political power. And they are not faulted on this count so often.

It is tragic that the democratic expectations born on the ashes of the autocratic regime have seemingly been receding into the background. The Daily Star in its leader on March 26 last writes, 'Be it the commitment to annul the Special Powers Act or grant autonomy to the audio-visual media or separate the judiciary from the executive, two successive elected governments since the fall of autonomy have failed to deliver on any of those crucial pledges.

On the one hand, the nation has been denied of an institutionalised democracy as a result of renegeing on those commitments, while on the other, a counter productive political culture has come into play. So this a double tragedy we face today.'

As is obvious, political will is vitally needed for implementing the autonomy-consensus and this is where the big parties in their dreary sameness draw blank. Should the autonomy be kept on hold indefinitely, the honeymooning of our people with the present bipartisan politics could well be on a test, might even be the subtext of the coming general election due in 2001.

A Bully's Muscle-flexing: Perils of NATO Expansion

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Most Russians feel cheated by their experience of "mafia capitalism". Their incomes have halved in seven years and their misery has worsened (with average life expectancy falling by seven years). They feel further embittered at NATO enlargement. This will encourage ultra-chauvinist, atavistic forces, as happened in Germany after Versailles.

world, answerable to no one. Its plea that Serbia's right-wing nationalists can only be disciplined by force, is a mere excuse. The NATO powers watched helplessly when the same leadership ethnically cleansed Bosnia. Mr Slobodan Milosevic must of course be brought to heel, but NATO cannot arrogate that role to itself. It is also wrong to claim that it alone is militarily equipped to do so.

That undermines the UN's legitimate functions. NATO enlargement is seen by Russia as a threat and as having "severe consequences" for security in Europe. NATO enlargement has three larger consequences. It re-divides Europe just when there is a historic opportunity to heal old fissures. NATO's enlargement lacks a clear security rationale. Russia has recently done nothing that constitutes a threat to the West or NATO. Second, any extension of NATO's activity into the former Yugoslavia means that the alliance is seeking a role for itself way outside its traditional zone — the North Atlantic. NATO policing in Kosovo, i.e. in Russia's hinterland, will legitimate its "out-of-area" commitments — with dangerous results. Tomorrow, NATO might seek a role, say, in the Indian Ocean, violating its location-specific rationale.

Third, with its three new members, NATO will have roughly 15 per cent more tanks, military aircraft and naval vessels than it is allowed under current East-West arms control treaties. This could impel Russia to delay signing or ratifying major agreements like START-II (strategic arms reduction treaty) which is meant to cut US and Russian nuclear weapons by two-thirds. That would be a setback to the cause of nuclear disarmament.

The US Congress's latest decision to allocate \$10.5 billion to a "National Missile Defence" programme further aggravates matters. This retrograde move is bound to annoy Russia and China, and jeopardise the vital Anti-Ballistic

Missile Treaty of 1972 which bans "Star Wars" type missile defences. Both Russia and China regard ballistic missile defences as means of neutralising their nuclear weapons. They cannot technologically match NMD without bleeding themselves economically. Russia has reacted with outrage to the US move.

Already, Russia is upgrading some missiles and renewing degraded and rusty nuclear weapons. If the US goes ahead with NMD and other aggressive programmes, Moscow would come under enormous pressure from its own hardliners, to resume an arms race. This would be disastrous. It will weaken the post-Cold War momentum favouring nuclear restraint and disarmament, with harmful consequences in other continents, including Asia. The US has little to gain in the long run by threatening and humiliating Russia. Most Russians feel cheated by their experience of "mafia capitalism". Their incomes have halved in seven years and

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Can the West Keep Its Promise to Kosovars?

by Ekram Kabir

For NATO, the stakes are high in the Balkans. The ultimate issue is whether the combined will of the western leaders can triumph over the Serbian obstinacy and they (western leaders) keep their promise made to the Kosovars.

placing of ground troops to alleviate the "repression" against the Kosovars, a large section of whom are seeking independence from the Serbs.

At this state the Contact Group peace plan, developed at the Rambouillet talks, seems to be a dead duck. What is surfacing is tougher than the West earlier thought of. About a quarter of Kosovo Albanian population has been driven out from their homes, some members have been butchered in front of their families, while many others have simply disappeared. As a result of the air strikes, the tyrant Milosevic has become more arrogant and the point where the Kosovo Albanians were willing to accept a status within Serbia seems nowhere in sight.

The choices now facing world leaders lie between accepting Serb control of a Kosovo that is devoid of most of its ethnic people or establishing an independent statehood, under long-term NATO protection, to which the refugees can return. But unfortunately, both these options suffer from complexities:

either accepting a Milosevic victory or driving the Yugoslav forces out of Kosovo, which the NATO is planning on the ground.

The reality that is surfacing now is whether the tired and starved refugees from Kosovo seeking shelter in the neighbouring states of Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro will be able to return to their respective homes.

Western leaders seem to be deceived by the Bosnian case. NATO points to the "success" of air strikes in finishing the Bosnian war, apparently forgetting that Croat forces (and to a lesser extent the Muslims) had turned the tide on the ground. The Serbs, staring defeat in the face, needed an escape clause and the political initiative that accompanied the air strikes provided it.

The Serbs seem to believe that because ethnic cleansing worked in large areas of Bosnia and the survivors have never been able to go home, the same results can be achieved in Kosovo. To a great extent, the Serb hierarchy has calculated it

right, but, again, circumstances are different. In Bosnia, the movement of refugees did not threaten the stability of neighbouring states; the human tide flowing out of Kosovo can — and will — cause chronic instability unless the flow is reversed. The ethnic balance in both Montenegro and Macedonia could be permanently disturbed by the sheer number of refugees, adding to existing problems and creating potential new "Bosnias". Albania, which is trying to rebuild after its feeble economy was destroyed by fraudulent investment schemes, is in no condition to cope with teeming penniless refugees flooding its northeast. Again, Macedonia has declined to entertain any more refugees from Kosovo.

Although British Prime Minister in a televised speech has promised the Kosovars their safe return to Kosovo, yet there is no sign so far that NATO has managed to curb the attempt of purging Kosovo of most of its people. The Serbs are still herding thousands of people on to trains and sending them

south to Macedonia. The western alliance says it may need weeks to force the Yugoslav strength to a standstill — but if they continue to drive people out at the current rate, the clearance could be complete in little less than a month from now. And this is where the next set of problems unfolds.

What will the West do if Belgrade then agrees to withdraw its forces and allow peacekeepers to keep whatever peace was left, subject, of course, to its borders remaining closed to any would-be returnees? British Defence Secretary George Robertson has however declared that "Milosevic will not be allowed to profit from a *fait accompli* — the Kosovars must be allowed to return and their homes must be rebuilt."

But questions loom: "Can NATO justify its activities against an army that may not be doing anything? How long could it keep up the pressure, if Belgrade refused to budge? Is it at all possible to re-open a border with missiles, or even ground troops? Can NATO per-

suade the same people who were driven out from their country at gunpoint that it is safe to return home?"

These may seem as some fleeting questions, but bear long-term implications. A mechanism has to be devised now to guarantee that refugees can return under a credible NATO protection ceiling. At this juncture, Belgrade has to agree both to the presence of a large NATO force and to a wholesale return of the displaced or, as a last resort, NATO must be ready to get more involved despite Serbian objection. The long-term stability of southern Europe demands that the Kosovars are able to live in Kosovo and the refugee burden is removed from Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. At the same time, NATO must act as an effective fort against oppression.

For NATO, the stakes are high in the Balkans. The ultimate issue is whether the combined will of the western leaders can triumph over the Serbian obstinacy and they (western leaders) keep their promise made to the Kosovars. If the West stumbles in courage to discharge the responsibility it has taken on, the effects may reverberate well into the next century which the West can ill afford to carry on with.

ores etc. All we have is this gas. Therefore don't take it away and sell it to others. As selling it to others for earning cash is like throwing it away, for we are not good at using cash to our maximum benefit. We waste it and spend it only on luxuries added to our well-known system loss.

Cash is no good for us, for we don't understand our priorities still. Therefore help us use this only wealth of ours by lending us your skill and technology. Your companies will also get their money once the gas is fully utilised for electricity generation and development.

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid
Dhaka Cantorment, Dhaka

To the Editor...

D-8 summit

Sir, The second D-8 summit was held in Dhaka since its inception in 1997 in Istanbul. The purpose of D-8 is 'Developing Eight Countries' of the world which involves Iran, Turkey, Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. These countries have some common ground such as — all countries are predominantly Muslim, all are OIC members, aside few most are LDCs, all have common field of trade and business, mostly agro-based economy, huge natural resources, vast manpower etc.

These common identified sectors can be cooperated through mutual understanding. The new bloc can start joint

venture, commercial establishments and abolish tariff barriers to ensure maximum mercantile relations. The member-countries through multilateral and bilateral talks can introduce visa-free access of their nationals to develop tourism, help in educational sector, exchange cultural heritage etc.

Md Abdur Rahim
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Help us

Sir, Everybody's main concern is his own beloved country and countrymen. The ambassador of USA is no exception. In fact his concern for his countrymen is praiseworthy. See

how he points it out that we must sell gas to earn money. Money that will go to his own countrymen too. He is doing the right thing for his countrymen; it is his duty to see their interest, first and foremost. But isn't it the duty of our leaders too to see that our country is benefited first before anyone else? Isn't it for them to see that this huge gas reserve that we got as a gift from God Almighty, should be used first to alleviate the suffering of the poor people of this poor country, first? How the people are suffering day in and day out for lack of power supply, not to mention the mills and factories coming to a stand still and production getting hampered, even the day to day lives of these millions have be-

come miserable because of continuous country wide load shedding. They get roasted in excruciating summer heat without fans, the food in fridges get spoilt,