

On Road to Fruitful Friendship

THIS truly is a historic moment in Indo-Bangladesh relations. A most natural link between Dhaka and Calcutta that had been there for centuries and closed down following the 1965 Indo-Pak war has been resurrected but in another form. We have now established a direct bus service between the two contiguous premier cities of India and Bangladesh. Its symbolic significance notwithstanding, the opportunity for travel by a cheaper mode of transportation is highly valued in the overall context of the SAARC's much-vaunted vision for people-to-people contacts.

The historicity of the occasion is infinitely more enhanced by the presence of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu in the inauguration ceremony. The former paid a significant visit to Dhaka as the Minister for External Affairs in the Janata government led by Morarji Desai in the late seventies. It was Desai's doctrine of 'beneficial bilateralism' that bloomed under Vajpayee's stewardship of the Indian foreign ministry. As for Jyoti Basu he has made signal contributions to the consummation of the Ganges Water Agreement between New Delhi and Dhaka.

Now, the genuine concerns of Bangladesh will have to be allayed and addressed by the Indian leadership. The central concern for Bangladesh has been that the huge economy of India could one day swamp the small economy of Bangladesh through the trade imbalance suffered by the latter. India has eased up certain terms of trade but it is our belief that nothing short of giving Bangladesh products zero tariff access to the Indian market on non-reciprocal basis can help Bangladesh balance its figures with India to a reasonable extent. Zero tariff access on a non-reciprocal basis is a demand of the LDCs which India as the relatively much bigger economy than Bangladesh's can afford. We can quite see though that it is the Indian private sector that has to come forward to invest in joint collaboration projects with the Bangladesh entrepreneurs on a buy-back format. Costs of production can be brought down by recourse to efficient management. In this context, much as we greet the symbiotic relationship between CII and MCCI we also welcome the prospect for cooperative working between the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

Ban Toxic Food Import

HIGH levels detected of poly-chlorinated biphenyl (PCB) and dioxin in Belgian dairy and poultry products, which may have carcinogenic effect on consumers, sparked off a food scare across the globe. Since the frightful finding, nearly 30 countries have withdrawn these products from their markets and put a ban on their import. French and Dutch products have not been spared either. Unfortunately, albeit rather predictably, there has not been any reaction from our government as yet. Let alone a ban on import and withdrawal of the dairy and poultry products from the market ministries concerned are not even sure who should make the first move. The commerce ministry awaits a reply to the faxed message it has sent to the embassies in Belgium, France and the Netherlands; the food ministry appears too happy for the fact that it imports cereals only while the health ministry is yet to initiate testing of items imported from these countries. With plenty of Belgian, French and Dutch products available in the market, the government indifference and inertia exposes a substantial section of the citizenry to the risk of cancer.

Strangely though, the government's lethargic reaction to grave issues essentially emanating from lack of inter-ministerial co-ordination is nothing new. Many a time in the past, it displayed the slow-go syndrome in matters of grave concern. This time around, what sounds disconcerting, too is the WHO's apparent failure to send a warning to the government in this regard. On the whole, the situation certainly speaks of a systemic failure drawing urgent attention of the government. The government should immediately impose a ban on dairy and poultry products from these countries. That done, it should direct its efforts towards establishing a mechanism, with participation from the ministries concerned, which will keep a close vigil on developments in the international market, so that, in similar situation in future, we are not caught napping.

AK-47 in Wrong Hands

THE Inspector General of Police has made a startling revelation about possession of modern arms by terrorists in the country. Weapons like the AK-47 rifles in the possession of criminals sends definite danger signals to the law enforcing agencies like the police which, according to the IGP, don't possess such lethal arms to combat the terrorists. This can cost dearly by way of demoralising the police force.

He told the newsmen at Chittagong on Friday that crimes and terrorist activities have gone up with the availability of sophisticated arms. Come as it does from the IGP himself the crime situation in the country can be easily fathomed. It is deteriorating in spite of various anti-terrorism measures taken by the authorities in the recent past. Giving casualty figures the police chief said that fifty persons were killed during the first six months of this year compared to thirty five during the corresponding period last year. Police have arrested a large number of suspected criminals numbering around forty-seven thousand and recovered a large number of firearms and ammunition. But according to newspaper reports the weapons seized are mostly obsolete small arms, manufactured in clandestine factories of Bangladesh. A considerable number of foreign made small arms have also been impounded. Recent reports indicate that a large-scale smuggling of arms has been going on via sea and land routes and small arms are easily available in certain points of the country close to the borders.

To top it all is the corruption of policemen. As the police are trying to control corruption through motivation and punishment as claimed by the IGP, so should they try to contain arms-trafficking with the help of specialised agencies and flush out criminals from their dens.

Kosovo Situation Uneasy Peace Lies after Peace Agreement

The present stand-off between Russian and NATO troops emanated from a successful blitzkrieg by Russian troops entering Kosovo ahead of NATO troops and occupying the strategic Pristina airport. While the NATO high command was planning a befitting, if not a triumphal entry, into Kosovo and coordinating with US authorities for participation in the vanguard of NATO troops, a small contingent of 200 Russian troops pre-empted NATO and entered Kosovo from adjoining Bosnia.

FOLLOWING successful completion of a tense, protracted and arduous task of a series of multi-channelled negotiations, the long-awaited and much desired Kosovo Peace Agreement was finally concluded on the 3rd July. The UN Security Council resolution constituted the core and provided international support and commitment that was imperative to secure a smooth and effective implementation of the agreement. Yet, its implementation stumbled and stumbled heavily on the way.

It is strange but true that both the opposing sides claimed victory over the agreement and hailed it as vindication of their respective stands. NATO and the allies were happy that they were able to force the Serbian President, Slobodan Milasovic, by continuous bombing over 11 weeks, to agree to the withdrawal of all Serbian security forces from Kosovo and to the induction of an international force there to ensure free and safe return and rehabilitation of a million and a half refugees to their homeland.

The Serbian President derived satisfaction from the fact that the agreement stipulated Yugoslavia's sovereignty over Kosovo, it held no explicit promise for an ethnic political settlement there and the fact that an international force, technically at the behest of the United Nations and not NATO, was to get de jure authority and responsibility to undertake peacekeeping operation there. These provisions were clearly manifest and constituted the core of Milosevic's claim that he had succeeded in obtaining concessions over the original Western demands which as had been envisaged in the aborted Rambouillet plan. However, Serbian insistence on the stoppage of NATO bombing as a precondition for starting political talks was rejected and NATO

halted air attacks only following visible demonstration of the commencement of withdrawal of Serb troops from Kosovo.

The Russian factor played a very crucial but obtrusive role in the episode. No doubt, Russian efforts through its peace-broker, former Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, finally prevailed upon Slobodan Milasovic accept some of the un-

tering Kosovo ahead of NATO troops and occupying the strategic Pristina airport. While the NATO high command was planning a befitting, if not a triumphal entry, into Kosovo and coordinating with US authorities for participation in the vanguard of NATO troops, a small contingent of 200 Russian troops pre-empted NATO and entered Kosovo from adjoining Bosnia. They barricaded

empt NATO troops into Kosovo has been a moot question due to uncertainty about who had really given the order for such action. The Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov had earlier assured USA that Russian troops would not be the first to enter Kosovo, and after he was proven false he explained, "It was a mistake". But the mistake has not yet been rectified. This revealed incongruity of policy and action between the civil and military authorities in Russia and portends a measure of instability in that country. It was surmised that President Yeltsin himself had ordered, but in general terms. This appeared to have been overstretched by the military, making their own interpretation and taking action accordingly.

The decision of a Ministerial meeting between the United States and Russia under the auspices of the Finnish President, the principal peace broker and international troubleshooter, is to clear up the knotty problems which imposed serious obstacles to the implementation of the peace agreement. Defence Ministers of both the countries are now meeting at Helsinki to this end. The scenario has since undergone a substantive change.

The principal actor to play against NATO is no longer Serbia but Russia itself, who has a historic and ethical interest in the Balkans. This gives rise to a sense of greater uncertainty about the future shape of this trouble-torn region. The international community thus gags and waits in a highly charged atmosphere of deep apprehension and concern.

The author, a former ambassador, presently a member of BNP's advisory committee, is a regular columnist of The Daily Star. He has sent this latest update from New York.

palatable conditions of the peace plan. But, also a very difficult aspect of the negotiations was to secure agreement of the principal Serb mentor and veto rattling Russia on various points of negotiations, including and specially its role in the peacekeeping operation — the nature and degree of Russian authority and participation in the international force.

The general understanding reached about Russian participation did not clear up such necessary details. The Western powers made it absolutely clear that there would be no compromise over a unified command of the international peacekeeping force and that no carving of zones of influence or territorial sectors would be acceptable. The uneasy situation as it prevails now following induction of NATO troops in Kosovo and occupation of Pristina airport by Russian troops are no doubt products of the failure of clearing up such and other unsettled points.

The present stand-off between Russian and NATO troops emanated from a successful blitzkrieg by Russian troops en-

Pristina airport and prevented the British commander of NATO troops Lt. General Jackson from the planned setting up of his high command around there. Meanwhile, sniper shots from members of the Kosovo Liberation Army from the adjoining hills made the situation further complex and dangerous.

The Serbian soldiers and police forces have been systematically leaving Kosovo in order to meet the deadline of 19 July. The trail of refugees in hundreds of thousands from Albania and Macedonia returning to what are left of their homes has also started moving. A large section of Serbs remaining in Kosovo have also started their outward journey into Serbia for fear of retaliation by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, who are now triumphantly and merrily roaming about publicly all over Kosovo. Disarming the latter, as part of the agreement, has not started in earnest by the NATO troops in Kosovo, to the consternation and fear of the remaining Serbs in that territory.

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Vajpayee's Shaken Faith

What struck Vajpayee the most — he became pensive when he repeated it — was the remark of one soldier: "Don't you accept the cease-fire. Let us decide it once and for all." If Pakistan withdrew its soldiers, Vajpayee would be willing to resume talks on the matters pending between the two countries

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee does not rule out the postponement of elections. "It will depend upon the situation prevailing at that time," he said. He was worried lest hostilities escalate.

I talked to him for more than half an hour on various facets of the Kargil situation at his residence, 7 Race Course Road, a few days ago. He exuded confidence and left that the armed forces were doing a tremendous job. I touched upon the negligence aspect but we both agreed that this could wait till after the war.

"How long will the hostilities continue?" I asked. He did not indicate any time. He pinned his hopes on President Clinton's efforts. Vajpayee said that he had been assured on the phone that America was exerting all its pressure on Pakistan to call back the infiltrators.

The US President, he said, was also in touch with other powers, including China, to make Islamabad respect the sanctity of the Line of Control (LoC) and restore the status quo ante.

He was firm on that no talks would take place before that was effected.

The Prime Minister said that when Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartal Aziz met him, the latter pointed out that India too had violated the LoC in the past.

He cited instances of certain heights under Pakistan, were not returned by India after the 1971 war. Vajpayee did not deny that there might be some truth in that. But since then, for some 28 years, the LoC had been respected till Clinton specially commended his bus trip to Lahore and congratulated him for having taken the initiative to go to Pakistan.

"Why did Nawaz Sharif do so?" Probably, he did not know all, Vajpayee said. He attributed most of what had happened to certain elements in the armed

and earlier, change so suddenly? Even now on the phone, he sounded warm and friendly. Vajpayee said.

The Prime Minister said that after his visit to Lahore, the anti-India feeling in Pakistan had gone down considerably. The anti-Pakistan lobby in India had collapsed. The Lahore Declaration created the goodwill atmosphere. Vajpayee said that Clinton specially commended his bus trip to Lahore and congratulated him for having taken the initiative to go to Pakistan.

"Why did Nawaz Sharif do so?" Probably, he did not know all, Vajpayee said. He attributed most of what had happened to certain elements in the armed

military operators to seize the heights overlooking Kargil and other towns and to disrupt the road that India uses to reach Ladakh and to transport equipment, artillery and communications support — all suggest the direct involvement of Pakistan — the army and the intelligence agencies.

Vajpayee once again ruled out the reconvening of the Rajyasabha. "Some parties will use the session to say such things as would lower the morale of the forces. They have a different agenda. Were they to decide to pass a resolution to express solidarity, it would be something different. Told that his own image was high in the country but not that of his party, the BJP, he only smiled in reply. Vajpayee seemed reluctant to have a national government. "They tell me that I can head it," Vajpayee said. "But I prefer some advisory council. We are still working at it, the parties which will be part of it, the number of people manning it, etc."

Talking about the army morale, Vajpayee said that in forward areas the hospitals to which he went, he found the soldiers tallying proudly the casualties their side had suffered. They also compared the number of men participating from one area with another. "Your people are still fewer than ours," said one soldier to another. They hailed from all parts of the country and there were from all communities whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian.

What struck Vajpayee the most — he became pensive when he repeated it — was the remark of one soldier: "Don't you accept the cease-fire. Let us decide it once and for all." If Pakistan withdrew its soldiers, Vajpayee would be willing to resume talks on the matters pending between the two countries.

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