

Indo-Pak Relations

Sour Again

BARELY a month has passed since the defusion of Kargil-centred tensions between India and Pakistan, their usually distrustful relations have touched a new low raking up fresh fears of a wider military conflict. The sharp deterioration in the bilateral ambience has been caused after India shot down a Pakistani marine patrol aircraft on Tuesday alleging that it had violated Indian airspace over the state of Gujarat. Pakistan, infuriated over the loss of sixteen naval personnel who were on board, says that the patrol aircraft was attacked during a training mission and that its wreckage has been found two kilometres within its borders. India counters this argument in terms of basics saying that it was a Pakistani 'maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft' intruding into Indian airspace and purportedly provoking missile attack from Indian MiG fighters.

On the basis of details furnished by both sides — Pakistan saying that it was a non-combatant aircraft and India maintaining that it was not so and, was, besides, on a hostile mission — the onus logically lies on India to prove her contention. More so, it would seem, because India contends that the plane was shot down well within its territory, which should enable her to find out if the aircraft was indeed carrying any objectionable cargo pointing the finger at its being on a hostile mission. India's downing of the aircraft seemed avoidable; because it defies normal understanding as to how a single Pakistani aircraft, if located within the Indian airspace, could dare to be hostile against the challenging Indian MiG fighters. Furthermore, if the aircraft had 'previously violated Indian airspace on eight separate occasions' what steps, one would like to know, had India taken during those incidents to stave off any further occurrence of the same?

India to our mind, emerges trigger-happy from this latest incident; and it cannot be exaggerated that if India caught Pakistan on the wrong foot in Kargil, Pakistan has reasons now to catch India on the wrong foot about the downing of her plane. Is the BJP-led minority government in India trying to flaunt a tough image to the Indian public before the elections which otherwise have put off the process of bilateral talks anyway? Pakistan, on the other hand, needs to take guard on the hawks in the army who might have been instrumental in enacting a Kargil in May. We are concerned. We want peace in South Asia.

Slums are People

THE ongoing eviction drive, according to the home ministry, is based on the assumption that demolition of slums would arrest the alarming rise of criminal activities and facilitate the city development projects. However, the government seems to have ignored the very fact that it is dealing with slums that mean people, not piles of garbage. The way it has gone about the task of eviction amounts to gross violation of the fundamental rights of a large body of people. Indeed, the prime minister's promise for a massive rehabilitation programme for the slum-dwellers speaks of noble intention on the part of her administration. But is her government not putting the cart before the horse? Should there not have been a comprehensive rehabilitation plan in place to avert the ruthless demolition work that has got underway now? Besides, does her government really believe the solution to a demographic challenge of such a magnitude lies in building a few thousand low-cost houses in the rural areas? That rural-urban migration is essentially sparked off by economic, not housing, considerations appears to have evaded their attention. Unless and until there is sustained economic activities in the rural areas, influx of rural immigrants would continue, and that requires a broad-based national policy, not a quick-fix solution.

The administration does not seem to have taken into cognisance the possible after-effects of such an ad-hoc action. True, slum-based criminal activities have been on the up and the killing of a constable inside the Gopibagh police camp has been a poignant indicator to that effect. But, does that make the entire slum population an anti-social lot? Had law and order been the primary consideration, would the government have not done better job by rounding up miscreants instead of condemning the slum-dwellers en masse to a life of uncertainty? Moreover, by dispersing them, is it not exposing the residents of the capital to criminal activities? Besides, it must realise that relocation, not eviction, of the hapless lot should be part of any city development project.

When the city does not have adequate low-cost housing facilities for even the small-income service providers like the menials, rickshaw-pullers, vendors and others, the eviction drive could at best be called a precipitous action on the government's part. We can only expect it to do a better job in rehabilitating the thrown-out thousands to make amends for poor planning and execution in the first place.

Postal Unrest

POSTAL services have stopped in the rural areas as 20,000 Extra Department employees and those of sub and branch post offices struck work from Sunday last. The strike has been called by the Postal Employees' Council to realise their demands which include national pay scales for them and reinstatement of their leader who has been allegedly implicated in a 'false case'. Only the other day this paper wrote about the importance of postal services in a country like Bangladesh where the bulk of the population live in villages out of reach of the modern IT technology. We also wrote about improving conditions of the employees of the postal services. For quite some time we have had no problems from this important but low-profile public service sector. This news of strike by Extra Department employees is a clear sign of disturbance. On the face of it, their demands seem to be reasonable because these employees have been suffering from discrimination since the British rule. It is rather strange that even after half-a-century of self-rule the problems keep staring in the face of the authority. The Extra Department employees may not possess the educational background of the rest nor the sub-post office staff are as experienced or educated as the regular employees, but the discrepancy in the pay scales between them is there and it calls for immediate rationalisation.

We would, therefore, urge the authorities to solve the problem without delay and also request the PEC to withdraw their work stoppage in the greater interest of the suffering public.

Alif Zabr Dhaka

Transhipment of Indian Goods Through Bangladesh

The rebellious movements in East India have been gaining ground fast, calling for urgent and massive action by the government of India. Since Asian Highway and Asian Railway, on which national debate has been going on over the past years, would take long to materialise, agreement on transhipment will serve Indian purpose ideally and promptly.

TRY as we do not extend any cooperation and support to the rebels in India, we must not also be blamed for extending cooperation and allowing facilities through our territory which may be designed to quell their movements in any possible way.

Furthermore, any difficulty, dislocation or sabotage by any quarters involving transhipped Indian goods en route in Bangladesh may cause concern and even anger of India, who may take any action, under this pretext, that will be deemed necessary by her. Bangladesh being the weaker partner will not be able to effectively oppose it and will have to endure it. Not only world history is replete with such instances, India's own internal actions, including so-called police actions against some constituent states, immediately after independence and her relations with neighbouring countries since then are pointers in this direction. Once the transhipment agreement is formally concluded, can Bangladesh, for any reason whatsoever, annul it, or effectively alter it or even refuse to renew it after it expires? The answer is an emphatic 'no'.

Can Bangladesh do the same in respect of the water transit treaty, which is assiduously renewed at the behest of India every two years? It may be recalled that Bangladesh is continuing to renew this treaty concluded in Pakistan time and practised since the British period to transport goods through Bangladesh waterways from West Bengal to Assam. Bangladesh does not enjoy any special benefit in return for this highly beneficial concession granted to India. Will Bangladesh be allowed to re-negotiate this treaty with a view to obtaining some reciprocal benefits? The answer needs no elaboration.

These are serious issues of supreme national importance involving security, independence and sovereignty of Bangladesh. The present government cannot unilaterally take decision on this matter. The decision should have been taken following discussion with other political parties in the parliament, eliciting public opinion and evolving a general consensus of all concerned.

The next question arises about our economic security. The decision of transhipment of Indian goods from the western part of India to her eastern region will foster only India's internal trade and will not enhance even an ounce of Bangladesh trade. Secondly, this measure will destroy the prospect of Bangladeshi exports to India's eastern region by providing further competitive advantage to Indian goods by transhipment to that region through much cheaper and quicker route over the territory of Bangladesh. In the event no transhipment was allowed, Indian goods will have to be transported through the long, expensive, dangerous and circuitous route in the extreme north of West Bengal, thereby rendering their goods much less competitive than Bangladeshi goods in the eastern states of India. It was estimated by Indian authorities that a staggering sum of Indian Rupees 7,000 crores is spent by India annually to transport her goods from the west to the east over the north of Bangladesh. Thirdly, there have been talks about setting up of joint venture projects in Bangladesh by Indian entrepreneurs and multinationals part of whose products would have gone to eastern India. Under the changing circumstances, this possibility would wither away. Finally, one may also argue that some of the goods under transhipment would be unloaded or pilfered, by connivance or not, en route and add to the mountains of smuggled goods in Bangladesh from India.

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