

## 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, 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.

# Transshipment 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 transshipment will serve Indian purpose ideally and promptly.*

try. As we do not extend any co-operation and support to the rebels in India, we must not also be blamed for extending co-operation 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 transshipment of Indian goods en route in Bangladesh may cause concern and even anger of India, who may take any action under this pretext that may 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 transshipment 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 transshipment 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 transshipment to that region through much cheaper and quicker route over the territory of Bangladesh. In the event no transshipment 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 transshipment would be unloaded or pilfered, by connivance or not, en route and add to the mountains of smuggled goods in Bangladesh from India.

The government claimed that the decision of granting transit to India had, in fact, been taken by the BNP government in 1980 under Art. 8 of the Trade Agreement with India and later in 1993 under Art. 12 of SAPTA. The trade agreement was a general one which had been initiated by the first Awami League government in 1972 and again in 1973 with the same Article and same provision without any change. Article 5 of the Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement, signed by Bangladesh Commerce Minister M.R. Siddiqui on the 28 March 1972 states, 'the two governments agree to make mutually beneficial arrangements for the use of their waterways, roadways and railways for commerce between the two countries and for passage of goods between two places in one country through the territory of the other'. There was another provision in that agreement envisaging border trade, which was scrapped next year in 1973 at the insistence of Bangladesh, but it is surprising this border trade is now being re-introduced by the present Awami government. Again, the next Trade Agreement signed by

years to do so. Why were these governments reluctant to give effect to what they had agreed upon in principle? It is because India would not give reciprocal benefits and Bangladesh leaders were not certain about consequences of granting that concession. India's record of her dealings with Bangladesh and, for that matter, with her other neighbours were highly unsatisfactory and full of deceptions. Take for example, the question of enclaves. While Bangladesh passed over to India the Barubari enclave immediately after conclusion of the agreement, the land corridor measuring only three high-ways connecting the Bangladesh enclaves of Dahagram and Angarapota to be leased in perpetuity to Bangladesh in return as per agreement, has not been ceded. Again, Indian government refused to extend the interim water sharing agreement of the river Ganges of 1977 after it expired in 1982. The issue of sovereignty of Bangladesh over Talpatti island, where India sent warships, and forcibly raised Indian flag, still remains in doldrums. There are still other unresolved issues which could have been solved, but for

the regional agreement of SAPTA. Under this agreement Bangladesh was already granted zero or preferential tariff on a total of 2,014 items during their first, second and third rounds of negotiations, and more concessions were pledged. The Bangladesh Commerce Minister claimed a trophy on having secured preferential tariff for only 25 items of Bangladeshi exports to India. It was nothing but a superfluous exercise, since these and more other items were due to be granted preferential treatment automatically by India under SAPTA. The Commerce Minister may have been hoodwinked by the Indians and in turn wants to deceive the people of Bangladesh. Our people, though simple, cannot be bluffed easily and know well that the colossal imbalance in legal Bangladesh trade with India to the tune of Taka 4,500 crores cannot be bridged this way.

Again, Article 12 of SAPTA states, 'the contracting states agree to undertake appropriate steps and measures for developing and improving communication system, transport infrastructure and transit facilities for accelerating the growth of trade within the region'. BNP continues to adhere to the policy of SAPTA and would strive for realisation of its objectives as far as possible to extend benefits to all member countries. If India gets transit facilities through Bangladesh to the east, then Bangladesh should also be accorded the same facilities through India for trading with Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to the west and vice versa. By that way, collective benefit under SAPTA will be assured. Then, China may also one day ask for transit facilities to Bangladesh over India's eastern region and vice versa under the framework of the proposed 'growth triangle' or 'growth quadrangle'. Would India accede to that?

The Prime Minister tried to justify the decision by claiming a sum of Taka 2000 crores as 'royalty' earning from this deal. The estimate was attributed to the World Bank whose representatives are unaware of this figure. Anyway, this amount is highly exaggerated and is a propaganda gimmick in a bid to justify the decision. So is the benefit to our truckers and labourers. Transshipment will give way to transit after the Asian Highway takes shape in a few years and all the benefits to be accrued to Bangladeshi truckers and labourers will then disappear. Moreover, our present road infrastructure is not sufficient to withstand even a part of the heavy burden envisaged. In any case, the question of nation's paramount interests and not some revenue earnings must run supreme in our consideration of the issue.

Many have argued why the BNP and other opposition parties call the transshipment fac-

ities as having accorded a corridor. It is true that the corridor signifies a strip of land connecting two parts of one country through the territory of another country. The land corridor granted by the then East Germany to West Germany to connect its land-locked territory of West Berlin may be cited as an example. But, contrary to general assumption, this strip of land was not granted to West Germany for its exclusive use nor was it enclosed by fence. The highway demarcated for this route or corridor was used also by East German traffic, but was heavily guarded even by erecting watch towers, though West German goods and transports were exempt from stoppage and inspection by East German authorities. Similarly, the use of Bangladesh territory for transshipment of Indian goods is tantamount to the granting of corridor. This is in view of the fact that Indian goods will have unhindered passage along a demarcated route, also used by Bangladeshi traffic, from one part of Indian territory to another part over a foreign land and that Bangladesh government would have no right en route to touch or inspect the cargo against illegal, contraband and undesirable goods. It may be recalled that after the creation of Pakistan, she demanded a land 'corridor' through Indian territory to connect the two parts of Pakistan which was summarily rejected by India. This 'corridor' did not imply exclusive right to the use of a strip of Indian land, but, like the present case of transshipment, signified unimpeded transportation of one country's goods to the same country over another country. By that analogy, right of transshipment could legitimately be called granting of a corridor.

Finally, many people keep on wondering why the Awami League government was in such a great haste to conclude the agreement which has been resisted by all successive Bangladesh governments since 1972. Three reasons are advanced. 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 transshipment will serve Indian purpose ideally and promptly. Secondly, parliamentary election in Bangladesh is fast approaching, with no guarantee for continuation of the Awami League government, hence India's insistence on hurrying up to get her part of the unofficial bargain. Finally, this will add another feather to the BJP leader Vajpayee's cap and help him in the coming election. But so far as the BNP and the opposition in Bangladesh are concerned, the transshipment deal will be bitterly resisted by the people, who are determined to protect their sovereign right, independence and all-round national interests at all cost.

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## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Bangladesh Commerce Minister A.H.M. Kamruzzaman on the 5 July 1973 incorporated in exact words the same provision in its Article 8. Similarly, Article 8 of the Trade Agreement signed by BNP Minister Chowdhury Tanveer Ahmed Siddiqui in 1980 contained the same provision. The same provision appeared in subsequent Trade Agreements concluded during President Ershad's rule. It may, however, be noted that the provision for transit in the Article concerned had been incorporated and renewed, without exception, at India's insistence.

These were in effect umbrella agreements manifesting a general intent — a framework under which specific agreements could be concluded later in order to implement its provisions. There were two very important elements in this article. These envisaged mutually beneficial arrangements and the purpose was to promote 'commerce' between the two countries. These two important ingredients are conspicuous by its absence in the transshipment agreement, which was designed solely for enhancing India's internal trade and was devoid of reciprocal and proportional benefits for Bangladesh.

Now, one has to look into the rationale for consistent refusal of Bangladesh to implement an agreement concluded first by the Awami League government as early as in 1972 and renewed or re-introduced from time to time by successive governments. Despite these agreements, why did not a single truck carrying Indian goods ply through Bangladesh in the last 27 years and why the present government is in a great hurry to allow thousands of truckloads of Indian goods to pass through Bangladesh by a sudden cabinet decision? Why did the government take an unprecedented decision without consultation with other political parties, completely bypassing the parliament and refusing to evolve a national consensus on this grave national issue?

BNP governments of both President Ziaur Rahman and Begum Khaleda Zia refused to implement the agreement. The government of President H. M. Ershad also took no action and the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not implement it though Sheikh Mujib had long three and a half

the unreasonable and sometimes intransigent attitude of the government of India. On the regional domain, the tripartite agreement of Bangladesh, Nepal and India in 1979 under the Morarji Desai government was rendered ineffective by the government of Indira Gandhi by various methods, including immobilisation of traffic on Indian side. Consequently, the absence of trust and confidence constituted the main factor responsible for the refusal of all the governments in Bangladesh to implement the transit agreement so long during the past 27 years, but this tradition has been reversed abruptly by the present Awami League government.

As for SAPTA, it is a multilateral agreement concluded by the seven member nations of the South Asian regional organisation of SAARC. It was a product of the vision and efforts of President Ziaur Rahman designed to promote all-round co-operation among member states. BNP remains committed to its ideals and will continue to endeavour to fulfil its objectives. Under this agreement, every member country was to conclude agreements on granting preferential treatment on the entry of others' goods into its own territory by granting zero or low tariff. Bangladesh concluded an agreement with India within the framework of

## OPINION

# A Kinder and Gentler Society?

by Dr. A.H. Jaffar Ullah

IN recent days, a whole bunch of prostitutes located in the brothels of Narayanganj and some other areas were evicted by the government to thwart the rapid growth of prostitution in greater Dhaka. There were some earlier reports of murder of one prostitute in Narayanganj's infamous red-light district that may have triggered a chain reaction and which resulted in the eviction of all the prostitutes from Narayanganj. I am positive some folks living near the red-light district are now heaving a big sigh of relief. However, human nature won't change much. Give them a year or two; a new crop of prostitutes will converge again in the periphery of the red-light district of Narayanganj. Those hungry landlords and the pimps will be desperately looking for new businesses and as long as demand for sex money is there, the 'oldest profession' as they say, will prosper again.

The focus of this write-up is not what lies ahead for uprooted prostitutes or whether it was a cruel act by the police and authorities to forcibly remove these women who were not contributing to any violence or causing any harm to the society. Rather, I will cite some instances to put forth the idea that our urban society is slowly becoming a kinder and gentler one.

Lately, if you glance through any newspapers in Bangladesh you are bound to see heart-rending stories of the plight of sex-workers who were evicted forcibly by the police. The newspaper reports coming from Dhaka are writing overwhelmingly in favour of the rights of the prostitutes. It must be a hot topic in Bangladesh now. I have received e-mails from some organizations who are alarmed at the plight of these ladies of the night. Conversely, there are so many infants dying daily in the slum areas of urban megalopolis, but very seldom do we hear about their predicaments in daily newspapers. We indeed live in a seemingly paradoxical world, don't we? I bet the news of babies dying of malnourishment is not as spicy as the plights of some young women who happened to be sex-workers.

The rapid conversion of the term 'Prostitute' to 'Sex Worker' has done a job for our newspaper reporter. But a

question comes to my mind — why do you call a prostitute a sex-worker? Is it necessary to do so? The word 'sex worker' doesn't only have the prostitute under its category. The pimp, the landlord, and the elderly women who look after the young recruits are all part of the sex industry. Therefore, in essence they all are sex workers. Thus, no one precisely would know the definition of the word 'sex worker'. English lexicon has added a whole slew of words as synonyms to the primary word prostitute. These words simply add nuances to the word. The words are: whore, call girl, hustler, harlot, strumpet, lewd woman, bawd, streetwalker, loose woman, fallen woman, courtesan, abandoned woman, concubine, vice girl, fille de joie (French tramp slut, lady of assignation, tramp, hooker, lady of the evening, bimbo, prostitute, white slave, poule (French), etc. But noticeably absent is the word — sex worker.

Perhaps the modern-day society in South Asian countries does not want to use the harsh word with overt sexism. Therefore, they have coined the word 'sex worker' to mean the prostitute. In western press, though, I hardly see the word 'sex worker' in write-ups where the writers are not resorting to euphemisms to tone down the bad connotation associated with the word prostitute. Then, how is it that our urban society in Bangladesh treading the liberal path? Isn't that little bit strange? You expect the more liberalized western society to euphemistically call the prostitute a sex worker. It is a confusing term, to say the least. It is a gender-neutral term, at its best. I think Dhaka's English newspapers should provide a better service to its readers if they use the proper term. Mind you that in any language a word evolves to mean something specific. Any ambiguous word, on the other hand, will fall on the wayside and the people will be reluctant to use the term if it confuses them. The 'sex worker' is such a term. It is one thing to be kinder and gentler; however, it is entirely a different matter to invent a term to downplay the meaning of the primary term.

Is it appropriate to call a rickshawpuller a 'transport worker'? A truck driver could also qualify for that term. How would you then differentiate the

two workers? It is simple. Do not use the term 'transport worker' to denote a rickshawpuller, a trucker, or a bus driver. Stick to the original word. Similarly, call a prostitute a prostitute. Glorifying her job by calling her a sex worker is not going to work in any society. Demand for her service is not going to quadruple because the newspaper reporters have decided to attribute the new gender neutral name 'sex worker' to designate a prostitute.

Furthermore, should we now call all the domestic aid in our homes — 'household worker' or 'domestic worker'? Similarly, should we call the schoolteacher, college, or university professor, education worker? How about calling all the bank officials, bank clerks, bank accountants, etc. financial workers? In theory, they all sound nice; but in practicality, it will be disastrous. I hope I have made my points clear.

The euphemistic use of the term 'sex worker' to mean prostitute is telling me that our society is becoming more permissive than it used to be. It's not a taboo anymore to talk about the plights of prostitutes in public forum. In addition, whatever happened to the social stigma attached to this old profession. Is it on the wane? Genuinely the society is a good thing; however who is going to define the yardstick of morality? Is sexual promiscuity a good thing for Bangladesh society?

If the street ladies could be retrained to make them productive citizens of the land, nothing could be better than that. The prostitutes lose out in many ways. They are virtually prisoners in the four walls of the brothel. The landlords, pimps, and vice-squads all keep them routinely, and when the ephemeral charm wanes rapidly, they become the object of derision. Won't it be nice to let these women be free?

It is good to see that our urban society is becoming a kinder and gentler one. However, that does not mean that we should promote promiscuity. We should promote gender equality. But first we should stop glamorizing the oldest profession by calling them sex worker. We may revert to calling a prostitute a prostitute.

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## To the Editor...

### Closer conflicts

Sir, Whether it is a coincidence or not, rail and road links are being systematically bombed in NE India by terrorists in Indian territory, soon after the GoB announced to examine in principle the transit of Indian goods across Bangladesh. Currently the links in India had been broken between mainland and the NE Indian states. It was officially confirmed by the Indian authorities that the alleged Pakistani military spies had been arrested in NE India on sabotage activities. It has also been stated that it looks like Pakistan has opened a second front in the eastern region vis-a-vis the Kashmir conflict.

It means that even before a decision could be taken by GoB on the transit issue, some regional conflicts are coming closer to the Bangladesh borders. 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.

Alif Zabr  
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### Media reportage

Sir, A reader (DS, Aug 9), who also attended a meeting session at the Press Club auditorium ('Military Muscle ...'), is not happy at the angular ex-

sentation of the proceedings (staff report). The minnows could not capture a line in the report, and some important viewpoints were skipped over.

The complaint raises an interesting mass media issue. A reporter may use his judgement; but cannot sit over judgement; and, he has few options to pick out selected portions of an incident or news for preparing a news story.

The sad part is that such an enforced (?) negative professional culture finds environmental encouragement in the Third World countries, that has also crept into mass media reports and comments. The situation is improving fast, under the leadership of the media of the press; but there is another problem: some editors are not happy with some of the publishers or investors, when the latter have their own axe to grind. This tendency cannot be suppressed in have-not societies with a rising curve of empowerment (including misuse of power and influence) in different fields. To cite an example.

However, some sections of the political press is still undisciplined, and very unprofessional at times. With the rise in literacy, circulation, and purchasing power of the newspaper readers, competition will bring about its own corrections. The fall-out from the current 'floating' press market has to occur sometime (as it is doing in the real estate market).

The objectives of DS are noble, but the local constraints are quite a few, some of which are controllable to a certain ex-

tent, but the rest is open to upper level patronisation.

### Terrorism and illegal 'toll' collection

Sir, On the occasion of the surrender ceremony of a large number of outlawed and armed terrorists at Circuit House, Khulna our Home Minister Mohammad Nasim referring to the introduction of 'Risk Allowance' for the police said, 'I am ready to give you everything needed, but catch the terrorists and let the people live in peace'.

We however strongly believe that if our government can check and stop some unscrupulous elements working in Customs Department, Taxation Department Land Registration Office, Municipal Corporations, Electricity and Water Supply offices, Port Authorities, Railway Department, BIWTC, BIWTA, Judicial Courts, Police Department, Bangladesh Biman, C&B Department and some other government departments and public sector corporations from demanding, taking and earning some 'extra money' from members of the public for rendering public service we would be able to eliminate and eradicate terrorism and collection of illegal toll from the country for good.

Charity begins at home.

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