

The Daily Star

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For a Border of Peace

BDR says that between January and August of this year alone, 24 border incidents took place with India. Sixteen Bangladeshi citizens died while 38 military and civilian people were injured on our side. We are sure the BSF will have their version of casualty figures. The standard reaction to such incidents has been to not only term them as 'localised happenings' but also to treat them as such. An impromptu flag meeting would be held at a border checkpoint between the BDR and BSF with the effect that the tension will be temporarily defused. But it will flare up again because the root cause of the trouble which lay in the non-implementation of the Indira-Mujib Land Boundary Agreement signed in 1974 has been by-passed as usual.

According to the standard practice, we have had a flag meeting at a border check-point near Sylhet on Tuesday and today another flag meeting is set to take place near Feni on the Muhurirchar dispute. The reported list of agenda for the first flag meeting included recent border incidents, the worst being at Belonia, terrorism, smuggling, child and woman trafficking, arms and drugs trafficking and the like. The very fact that a flag meeting has been held and another is on the cards today augurs well but only in a superficial sense; for these flag meetings cannot by definition take us any nearer to a solution of our border problems than we were before.

To comprehend this one has to only recall the 42 barren flag meetings that have taken place so far between the BDR and the BSF following 19 major shoot-outs that occurred centring around the Muhurirchar dispute in the Feni river. The sandbar rising in the winter becomes a live bone of contention every year. Several JRC meetings had also been held on the question, but to no avail.

Muhurirchar is just a tip of the iceberg if one were to take into account the magnitude of the unresolved border demarcation problems including the transfer of enclaves that jut into each other's territory. If the question of enclaves is settled Bangladesh will get 111 of them from India covering 17,258 acres while India receive 51 enclaves from Bangladesh measuring 10,174 acres. In addition, 3,024 acres of Indian land is said to be under Bangladesh's possession compared with 3,006 acres of Bangladesh's land being under India's possession.

To our understanding, it is the physically undemarcated frontiers at many places that are giving rise not just to problems of incursion, skirmish and tension but also those of terrorism and trafficking of women, children and drugs. When on top of the porous borders we have such gaping holes along them the field-day that recalcitrant people have can be easily imagined.

More importantly, it is a matter of concern for the sanctity of national borders.

The ball has been in the Indian court insofar as the implementation of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement goes. Bangladesh took the earliest opportunity of ratifying it through her Parliament but ironically it is India with her almost an unbroken democratic tradition that has dithered on it for long 24 years.

In terms of an Indian Supreme Court ruling she does not have to take recourse to a Constitutional amendment to put the Land Boundary Agreement into operation. For the sake of durable good neighbourly relations we urge India to expedite delimitation of borders with us in the light of an international agreement she had entered upon a quarter century ago.

Friday Mailbox

Traffic jam in Dhaka

Sir, Allow me to focus on the unbearable traffic problem in Dhaka city.

We have been hearing from time to time about several schemes to improve the traffic system but so far there has been no improvement worth mentioning. We must admit that traffic jam has become a daily occurrence in Dhaka mostly because of the enormous increase in the number of rickshaws, scooters, cars etc. Besides there has been frequent road digging by the utility service-providing agencies i.e. WASA, DESA, T&T, and also unauthorised piling of building materials and encroachment by hawkers. We should pay attention to another important cause of traffic jam — almost everyday long processions are brought out which obstruct the traffic and put the people to much harassment. Such long processions in the city especially in office hours should be banned, while the number of vehicles should be kept under certain control until roads are made worthy as such.

If the authorities really want to make a better and safer transport and traffic system in Dhaka, they should also turn some prominent roads to one-way traffic during office hours, and withdraw the slow-moving vehicles (rickshaw, van etc) from the busiest parts of the city. Moreover, there should be strict enforcement of traffic rules with severe penal measures for the law-breakers in order to contain the perennial problem of traffic jam in Dhaka.

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Remembering General Osmani

Sir, It was a sad day — the 81st birth anniversary of the late General Osmani as nobody seemed to remember him. The only notable national personality who said something notable was our President. It appears that there is a political divide on assessing Osmani; but there should be no qualms in appreciating a notable character and personality who believed in the principle of country's interest first, and then the views of other leaders, irrespective of political affiliation.

Why politics comes inbetween the living and the dead? There can always be difference of opinion (mainly in the approach to an issue) between any two strong personalities; but it does not mean that one of them is unacceptable as a person (unless his professional beliefs are unethical). Politicians fight on principle, and also cross floors on principle; hence they are always under severe public scrutiny. General Osmani's track record appears to be transparent.

Why a good person cannot be on the other side of the fence? This is a question directed at our arrogant and egoistic political leaders, who have no appreciation for the good points in opposing camps. It is time the unintentional and official black-out on Osmani is formally removed through awareness campaign in the formation of public opinion. Sometimes some leaders are economical with the truth, but sometimes it is necessary to call a spade a

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Indonesia in Transition: Troubled Times Ahead?

Coming days leading to the presidential elections will see a lot of horse trading among the Indonesian politicians. The Supreme Advisory Council will also have to ratify the results of the East Timor referendum and grant it independence. In the meantime the situation there has to be kept under control.

ing agencies? The frightening answer is that the latter may indeed be the case. We have seen from our own experience in this country that military rule leaves behind more problems than it ever solves; because, negotiation, accommodation and reconciliation are unknown to it. During the Suharto era, whenever socio-political problems erupted in a segment of the society, or troubles brewed in any region of the country, oppression followed by more oppression used to be the pet answer. As a result, with Suharto's fall, problems, both ethnic and regional, are erupting all over the country, with a government, provisional in nature, not knowing what to do.

To make matters worse, Indonesian law enforcing authorities have often acted against minority interests. The anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta and the ever worsening conflict between Muslims and Christians in Ambon, are cases in point. In some of the troubled areas of the country, ethnic or religious minorities happen to constitute the majority, making situations very difficult.

West Irian, bordering Papua New Guinea, situated in the eastern fringe of the Indonesian islands, is four times the size of Bangladesh with a population of only two million, many of whom are still leading primitive lives. But a large number of people of that mineral rich province, which Indonesia annexed, as late as in 1963, are against remaining a part of the country. After Suharto's fall, the rebels there, presuming that the Indonesian army had lost its position of pre-eminence,



Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

dared raise the flag of Independent West Irian, on the parliament building in Wasema, the capital of the province. They soon found out that they were wrong. Calling the rising of the flag 'an act of treachery', the Indonesian forces came down heavily on the people. The independence movement of West Irian also lacks strength because both the neighbouring Papua New Guinea and nearby Australia, in deference to Indonesia's sensitivity, keep out of trouble's way, by not encouraging the rebels. But for any reason, should their attitude change and should they see themselves siding with the rebels, Indonesia might find it tough going there.

The situation in the province of Aceh, forming the eastern tip of Sumatra is different. Islam came to Indonesia through that area and the four million people of that province, having an area of about 55,000 square kilometres, are almost entirely Muslim. A large section of them find Islam as practiced in Indonesia unacceptable and wish to belong to what they perceive as a true Islamic state. Their demand is for independence. They have, over the past

decade or so, remained in a permanent state of revolt that waxes and wanes from time to time. A few years ago the condition there got so bad that the Indonesian authorities declared it as a special combat zone, thereby further alienating the people there. At the time of Suharto's resignation last year, the Indonesian authorities in Aceh, being in a 'no-win' situation there, decided to recall the army from the province in a desperate attempt to placate the rebels. This did not quite work, for the rebels continued with their activities in support of their demand for secession. Army action there is now continuing in one form or the other and the situation is now back to square one. Aceh is in a different category from West Irian, which was annexed by Indonesia in 1963 — an annexation recognized by the UN in 1969, and from that of East Timor, whose annexation by Indonesia in 1975 was never internationally recognised. Unlike these two territories Aceh has always been a part of Indonesia and its exit from it will encourage discontent brewing elsewhere, threatening the integrity of the country.

The Indonesian authorities have so far fared very poorly in dealing with the ugly post referendum situation in East Timor, thereby losing their credibility. Even the recent imposition of martial law does not create much hope. This is not likely to help them at all in dealing with discontent elsewhere. Hope is now pinned on the election of the next President and the emergence of a democracy there.

In that context the question that first comes to mind is the likely position of the armed forces in the future setup. Even after Suharto's departure, the armed forces have constitutionally retained a political role for themselves. They used to have 75 reserved seats in a 500-member parliament during Suharto's days. They now retain 38 seats in the new parliament and in the coalition situation that exists in Indonesia, this could turn out to be vital. In Indonesia, the President is elected by the Supreme Advisory Council of 700 members that includes the 500 members of the parliament. The parliamentary election is over in which Megawati Sukarnoputri's PDI has emerged as the largest party with 153 seats, with President Habibie's Golkar coming second with 120. Two Islamic parties, PKB and PPP have secured 58 and 51 seats respectively. The armed forces with their 38 seats in fact form the fifth largest party in the parliament. The formation of this Supreme Advisory Council or MPR, however, not yet complete as the 200 additional members comprising 130 repre-

sents the 26 Provincial Assemblies (5 from each province) and 70 representing recognized professional groups, are yet to be elected. In these elections, Golkar, with its money and muscle power and with the influence of the incumbent President Habibie, is expected to do well. President Habibie may still call the shots in the presidential election by aligning himself with the major and minor Islamic parties and the military. In that event he may even offer General Wiranto, the armed forces chief, the vice-presidential slot to ensure the military support. This is not a far-fetched situation, and in that event the military, powerful as it is, will more or less retain its old position in the overall set up of the state machinery. This is likely to be regarded by the rebels in Aceh and West Irian as old wine in a new bottle.

There are of course other permutations and combinations that may lead to the magic number of 351 (out of a total of 700), the most likely one being with Megawati as the presidential candidate. A combination headed by Megawati may wear a more secular look than the one headed by Habibie and may be better placed to deal with the ethnic situations. But that may not help in dealing with the situation in Aceh.

Coming days leading to the presidential elections will see a lot of horse trading among the Indonesian politicians. The Supreme Advisory Council will also have to ratify the results of the East Timor referendum and grant it independence. In the meantime the situation there has to be kept under control.

Then there is the challenge of managing the country's fragile economy. Indeed Indonesia's problems have come in droves — problems that may well shake the country's foundation. 'Unity in diversity' has been the country's motto, inscribed on its crest. Whether the country can live up to it will be tested in the coming months.

Is this Nation Happy?

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

According to a survey conducted by the London School of Economics, Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries on earth, is the happiest nation in the world! And hearken what is even more interesting! Affluent nations such as USA ranked way below in the 46th position, with UK, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Japan trailing closely ahead or behind. Neighbouring India ranked 5th in terms of happiness in dead heat competition with countries like Ghana, Latvia, Armenia and the Dominican Republic.

Resolve not to be poor: whatever you have, spend less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult.

Samuel Johnson (1709-84)
English poet, critic and lexicographer

THOMAS Jefferson enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence that the preservation of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness are amongst the inherent and inalienable rights of men. If that is true then poverty must be the antithesis of happiness, because nothing diminishes life like the absence of means to sustain it.

But hard facts are often stranger than hypothesis. According to a survey conducted by the London School of Economics, Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries on earth, is the happiest nation in the world! And hearken what is even more interesting! Affluent nations such as USA ranked way below in the 46th position, with UK, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Japan trailing closely ahead or behind. Neighbouring India ranked 5th in terms of happiness in dead heat competition with countries like Ghana, Latvia, Armenia and the Dominican Republic.

Why did we not celebrate our world championship in happiness at least with the same

hubris that characterized our victory against Pakistan in the World Cup cricket? Aristotle cautioned that a brief period of happiness didn't make a man supremely blessed and happy. Then why did we ignore the blessings of 'supreme' happiness of being the happiest nation and indulge in its ephemeral collection of winning one game in a tournament?

The most lifting thing about the LSE survey is to know that material dearth doesn't spoil spiritual worth. More than two centuries ago, Samuel Johnson had contended that no two persons could be equally happy, because happiness consisted in the multiplicity of agreeable consciousness. A philosopher and a peasant could be equally satisfied, but not equally happy. Again, one could not be happy without being satisfied first. After all happiness is the expression of a content soul as much as the fragrance of flower enunciates its blossom. That is where we must have scored higher than other nations in the happiness survey. We could be happy with our one victory against Pakistan, while others wouldn't settle for anything less than the Cup!

Richard Cohen, a columnist of *The Washington Post*, encapsulated this view when he said that happiness was 'wanting what you have, not having what you want'. The members of the Roman aristocracy used to cram and then disgorge so

that they could 'cram again, their big nose conduct driven by a Sisyphean search for satiation. One account has it that Keith Richards, a member of the Rolling Stones, wanted to desperately visit USA for concert tours. Fearing that he could fail the blood test, he had a physician drain his own heroin-tainted blood from his body and replace it with transfusions from more sedate citizens. A malcontent soul would go to any length to seek satisfaction but happiness is when he knows where to find it.

An extravagant person would embark on that search without knowing where to find it. Imelda Marcos's shoe collection is but an extreme example that unrestrained satisfaction could lead to ludicrous excesses. Roman emperor Elagabalus had once sent his slaves to bring him 1,000 lbs of cowbuds. When the slaves returned with 10,000 lbs, he gloated, 'From this one can understand how great is Rome.'

The deadliest mix is when conceit and contentment come together in the convulsion of a compulsive mind. It turns happiness into a desperate showdown between identity and ego, its pursuit aggravated into an elusive hunt.

Plato explained in the *Republic* that there are three parts to a human soul: desire, reason and *thymos*. Desire induces men to seek things outside themselves, while reason shows

the best way to get them. But *thymos* is self-esteem, the sense of men's own worth which they want to be recognised by other men. If that recognition falls short of their expectation, they experience emotion of anger. They feel shame when they do not live up to their own sense of worth, and pride when others recognise that worth in them.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra talks about the last man or victorious slave whose desire and reason emphasise upon his self-interest; his happiness unfazed if others do not recognise his self-esteem because he has no sense of shame. This is a man who is spiritually happy with his material satisfaction. More than two hundred years ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had cautioned in *The Social Contract* that a democratic society, which didn't beware luxury, would encourage moral compromise for material comfort. When that happens, the pursuit of happiness is a deplorable trade-off between well-being and human being, when selfish souls, content within the rigors of their complacency, compromise considerations of collective good.

Thus happiness is often the ecstatic state of estranged minds. The loan defaulters are happy so long as they don't have to refund bank loans and the corrupt officials would like their vices to be overlooked. For the same reason, addicts would be thankful if government in-

duced welfare on drugs and the muggers would want their victims to give valuables on demand. Needless to say, a rapist will not mind getting a little co-operation from his prey.

Is that how we are the happiest nation on earth where mischievous minds revel in the condoning climate of connections and cash? Did the LSE survey actually reflect the conniving culture of our condescending times where convenience dictates the contents of character? It is convenient to hire a killer to eliminate a rival instead of a face-off. It is convenient to throw acid on a young girl than to live with the pain of her rejection. It is convenient to borrow money from the banks and then not to repay until there is an exemption of interest payment.

Happiness is meant to be something else, the beatitude of exalted souls. The Pareto optimality of human relations requires that one's exaltation wouldn't infringe upon the exaltation of another. If that happens, it is cruelty, happiness gone on hypocrisy. Perhaps we are the happiest nation because we most enjoy our cruelties both in commitment and connivance, or at least don't feel guilty about them. After all there are two ways one can be happy: getting what one wants or wanting what one gets. While some of us enjoy happiness in cruelty, others don't mind cruelty in happiness.

New Bridges over the Meghna and the Kushyara: A Perspective View

by Imamuiddin Ahmad Chowdhury

WITH the completion of Bangladesh Bridge over Jamuna, the Railway has at long last brought BG line up east side of the Jamuna. A dual gauge BG-cum-MG line being constructed from Parbatipur (in Dinajpur) to Joydevpur (in Dhaka). Another project to convert the existing MG line from Joydevpur to Dhaka into BG-cum-MG dual line is also under active consideration. The extension of existing MG double line from Tongi to Bhairab with provision of dual gauge under German assistance is also being considered. Thus the process of extending BG railway line to Dhaka and then to port city of Chittagong seems to have opened a new era in our railway communication.

A railway system can only be viable with long distance traffic. In a small country like Bangladesh, its railway system can only be viable with extension of traffic to our neighbouring countries like India, Nepal, Burma etc. At present Bangladesh Railway has through traffic to India and also Nepal through Indian Railway MG system. Indian Railway is presently converting its MG lines to BG in a large scale and very soon we will have no long distance traffic with India and Nepal. This decision of Indian Railway is mainly due to the

fact that their BG system, although forming 67 per cent of total route, generated 96.7 per cent of their total freight output and 91 per cent of their total passenger output. On the other hand, their MG system, covering 27 per cent of total route, generated 3.2 per cent of total freight output and 9 per cent of total passenger output.

Now if Bangladesh Railway transforms its main system into BG standard, we can, in future, see traffic on Trans-Asian Railway system like that of Trans-European Railway network. Against this background, the then Pakistan Eastern Railway initiated various projects to gradually convert its vital routes to BG. While executing Chittagong-Dhaka double line project, the embankment, bridges and other structures in the new second Chittagong-Dhaka line have already been constructed on BG standard. Side-by-side Ishurdi-Nagarbari, Shaka-Aracha BG projects were initiated. The construction work was also started on these two projects in 1973 but later on suspended.

The Jamuna Bridge project was initiated by the Railway and first feasibility study for this bridge was conducted under Railway in 1969. The writer

was sent to UK in 1970 for training on this subject. The Railway was advocating for provision of BG-MG dual line on Jamuna Bridge. But World Bank was deliberately opposing railway line on this bridge. A brain storming discussion took place on Jamuna Bridge under auspices of Centre for Policy Dialogue presided over by Prof. Rahman Subhan in 1995. The then Communication Minister, few former Secretaries (including the writer) of Railway, representatives of all donors participated. During the discussion, the writer strongly advocated for provision of BG-MG line on the Bridge. The World Bank representative did not answer our arguments. But Jamuna Bridge was finalised with foundation and profile of an MG railway line only.

However, the present government succeeded in having a BG-MG dual railway line on the bridge. But the damage was already done by completing the foundation of the bridge as a result, majority of the rolling stock in wagons and coaches cannot pass through this bridge. The trains also cannot pass at normal speed over this bridge. In other words, it is a crippled bridge for the Railway.

But even then, Railway can maintain link with BG lines throughout the country and beyond.

Against the above background, I would strongly suggest that government should keep provision of BG-cum-MG dual gauge Railway line on the proposed road bridge over Meghna at Bhairab Bazar and Kushyara bridge at Fenchuganj in consideration of the following reasons:

i) A project for doubling railway line from Akkhaura to Tongi (Tongi to Dhaka is already a double line with second line built on BG standard) is under active consideration;

ii) The present Railway bridge at Bhairab has no scope for double line;

iii) The proposed road bridge at Bhairab will be on Railway land. If rail track is included the cost of land will be reduced;

iv) Indian Railway is converting their side of MG track on Shahbazpur-Badarpur section and therefore Trans-Asian Railway may be introduced via Bhairab-Kulaura-Badarpur Junction in India.

Similarly, the longest and most important Railway bridge on Akkhaura-Kulaura-Sylhet section is over the Kushyara at Fenchuganj. The bridge was

contracted during First World War in 1916 with the main steel span of 250 ft, brought from the redundant bridge over the Barak near Badarpur which was manufactured in 1895. The contemporary span from the same Barak bridge, used in our Sitalakha bridge in 1917, was replaced by Railway in February 1981.

Moreover, the biggest stone quarry of Bangladesh is owned by Railway at Bholaganj, connected with railroad through aerial ropeway with provision of automatic loading of wagons from aerial ropeway tip wagons. The provision of BG-MG will enable the Railway to haul huge quantity of stone required for national projects.

The writer sincerely believes that the government will give proper attention to the above two projects; otherwise posterity will curse the present decision of constructing only road bridge at those two spots. My suggestions are made not only on the basis of my experience on Railway but also my experience in planning while working as Secretary Planning for the longest period in Bangladesh. I am told that the Railway authorities have already brought this proposal to the communication ministry.

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