

Police and Journalists

THE Bangladesh Photojournalists Association's roundtable on Saturday at the Jatiya Press Club, billed to be a confidence-builder between the police and the photojournalists, went only a part of the way in fulfilling that expectation. The discussion-meet on "Photojournalism in Bangladesh: Obstruction and Challenge for the Next Millennium" was obviously induced by a recent spat in the incidence of police highhandedness against photojournalists covering agitation programmes of opposition political parties. The Inspector General of Police AYBI Siddiqui who was on hand apparently saved the day for his force by holding out an assurance for a remedy. He said he would issue written orders to field level police officers asking them not to go for action against newsmen.

Photojournalists carry only a camera when they go to cover any event. There is no weapon nor any ammunition on their person. For that matter, all journalists, by definition, are non-belligerent people having no need for use of force in the discharge of their professional duties. Photojournalists just take a snap of what's happening or reporters draw a pen-picture of it. If the policemen had read their manual well enough they would have known that only when somebody had used force that he would deserve to be paid back in his own coin for the sake of maintaining public order. Journalists do neither have the gears nor any professional necessity to use physical force so they must be immune to it! Besides, a higher principle is involved here which has to fundamentally do with press freedom as part and parcel of a living democracy.

The basic difficulty with a professional police role is the advantage that the ruling party takes of them as an instrument of self-aggrandisement. The police for their part tend to think that by listening to the buzz words circulating from the political top-brass they have met the accountability criterion in a convenient, risk-free way. The policemen must be freed from partisan influences of any kind when it comes to performing their professional duties. Furthermore by training they ought to know where to use force and where not.

As it is, journalists sometimes have had the misfortune of being confronted with political activists and mastaans; and, if on top of that, they have to face police highhandedness, where do they go, how do they serve the people?

Bay of Bengal under Threat

ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS is definitely not our forte. To the innumerable instances of environmental degradation, including slow-killing of the Buriganga, is now added massive pollution of the Bay of Bengal. In the absence of any monitoring mechanism, the sea has virtually turned into a waste dump for nearly 150 industrial units located close to it on the bank of the Karnaphuli. Adverse impacts of the industrial effluent have already started showing. In the last few years, there has been a sharply reduced catch of sea fish. More threateningly, the Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) level in the marine water has gone up in different parts of the Chittagong coast, ranging from 0.7 to 38 parts per million (PPM) whereas the WHO-accepted level is five PPM. Deoxygenation induced by the toxic waste is taking place in the sea. In plain and simple terms, as some experts fear, the marine eco-system is under threat to the extent that, unless addressed immediately, fin-fish and shell-fish will be on the verge of extinction. Besides, there is also the bleak possibility of a huge migration of marine fish to Indian and Myanmar waters. Either way, the country will suffer, for it relies on marine fisheries in the Bay, especially shrimp, to earn foreign currency through exports. Moreover, some 1.5 million people in the area actually live on the spoils of the sea.

Dumping of toxic industrial effluent into the sea has already assumed dreadful proportions. According to a government report, 2528 metric tonnes of waste were dumped from shrimp processing units into the Bay through the Karnaphuli only in one fiscal year — 1994-95 that is. In August this year, some 200 metric tonnes of oil and 1400 tonnes of rotten rice were dumped when the carrier ran aground near Anwara. These are only two instances of deliberate pollution. There are more.

The fact of the matter is, we, particularly the government, are not appreciative of the need to keep the Bay clean for geo-morphological reasons. Alarming as the situation may be; there is time to avert disaster.

Not Again!

THE onion price is too high for comfort. Reports in the local dailies suggest that this essential edible has registered a price rise of more than Tk 10 over the past week to stand at Tk 36-38 per kilogram. This price-hike is nothing new to the consumers. During this time around last year the price went as high as Tk 65 per kilogram. There have been all sorts of explanations by the business community as well as the commerce ministry for this annual phenomenon. With the new arrivals of onion the prices are likely to fall, but the machinations of unscrupulous traders have started early in the day to make a windfall before the supplies are replenished. Suddenly the wholesale prices have shot up by about 50 per cent for no obvious reasons. But the wholesalers don't need any explanation for raising the prices. "Reduced flow" from India is cited as the main reason for the price-hike.

It is too well-known that bulk of the onion and pulse normally come to Dhaka from the northern region of Bangladesh and since the opening of the Jamuna Bridge flow of the merchandise from the northern region was supposed to be steadier. It always beats the imagination what market forces operate to cause such sharp fluctuations in the prices of essentials. Hopefully, the commerce ministry and the business community will put their heads together to normalise the onion price.

THE issue of transit has become very contentious indeed. The debate surrounding transit was on the table for quite some time with participants seen clearly polarized in two distinct lobbies, one group has been opposing transit and the other supporting it. The debates have been mostly forays into the theoretical realm of political economics and have been fought with the clear intention of justifying any of the opposing views. The political polarization in Bangladesh makes an objective treatment of any issue almost impossible as most arguments are made not on sound economic rationale but rather on petty personal or partisan interests. It is a sad fact of life that politicians and intellectuals treat matters in this way. It is therefore necessary to address the question of Transit in a more objective manner with a clear perspective of the stakes involved; for this indeed is a very vital issue which could affect the economic and political future of the nation.

The recent heating up of the issue is obviously due to the general perception that the government is soon giving away transit facility to India. While it is true that the government and the party which forms it are not denying the suggestion, there appears to be quite a bit of nervousness surrounding this issue. This is seen in the government's attempt to legitimize it by asserting that the founder of the party now in opposition was in fact the architect of this concept. This is ironic indeed since the government, the party and their intellectual cronies are vociferously supporting the political reality of an integrated global economy and the economic rationale of earning a huge direct or indirect revenue through this process. The nervousness of the government officials are made more obvious by the recent emphasis of various government officials on calling the process of transporting Indian goods through Bangladesh territory "transshipment" not "transit". This game of juggling with words in order to make the matter palatable is a very sorry attempt indeed because in neither address the key issues nor does it indicate an iota of knowledge of common trade and transport jargon.

While the government party and their cronies are trying to support the move to offer Indian goods, the opposition party in Bangladesh political party in opposition, is denouncing this attempt. Their arguments are mainly centered around the concept of national sovereignty, a subject matter of extreme sensitivity to a people who had to make enormous sacrifices for it. The opposition politicians and the lobby behind them are trying to bring out the spectre of Indian domination through the "Trojan horse" of transit but their arguments till date have been mostly aimed at inciting the people's reaction rather than to challenge the issue in a way which is more intellectually gratifying.

The present approach of the government suggests a gradual and phased introduction of transit facility to India. The first phase of this is the so called "transshipment", a term

vociferously promoted to mean something which it does not mean. The present proposal is in fact to "tranship" intra-Indian freight into Bangladesh vehicles at the border and to carry this on Bangladesh vehicles over the Bangladesh territory to the border at the other side where it will be again transhipped into Indian vehicle. One needs a magician's slyness to say that it is not Transit but transshipment. It is in fact transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh in Bangladesh vehicles after transshipment at the border. This is a relatively costly move as it will necessitate unnecessary and spurious handling of the goods at the border which obviously will erode some of the benefits of transit. This is perhaps only an attempt to make it palatable and is only the first phase of the eventual arrangement in which the process will be streamlined. Given the failure or the unwillingness of the government to discuss the vital economic issues related with transit, the fostering of the deep rooted suspicion in the mind of people is not too surprising.

Ideally the concept of transit is exhilarating both from Bangladesh and Indian perspectives for obvious economic reasons. In an ideal situation one can envisage a scenario in which both Indian and Bangladesh road/rail vehicles and inland watercraft participate in cross border trading activities as well as in the transportation of intra-Indian goods over the Bangladesh territory. In this ideal situation, the port of Chittagong is linked by well made roads and railway network with strategic population centers deep inside the Indian territory and perhaps inside Bhutan and Nepal as well. These make the transportation of export and import containers and other goods possible at the minimum cost level. It is envisaged that in this scenario there are no stoppages for trans-border crossing of goods and vehicles and these pass without much hindrance at the border. This is a concept which is conceptually possible to visualize as this kind of flow of freight transport is quite commonplace in many regions of the world.

The geographical location of Bangladesh is strategic in logistic terms because of the peculiar geographical extension of India to the north and east of the country. The territory of Bangladesh provides the natural and most attractive transport corridor not only because it provides the shortest route between the Indian northeastern states and the rest of the country, it also provides the easiest terrain on which a transport infrastructure can be laid. And it does not need a genius to point out that the port of Chittagong, situated strategically at the north of the Bay of Bengal, is the natural port for the entire landmass north and east of Bangladesh. It is possible to see why transit is of such a great appeal to India. In the ideal situation depicted above the economic benefit to the Indian northeastern state would

be tremendous with a big boost to their international and inter-state trades. This boost will come in the way of reduced freight costs and in the savings in transit times. The resource rich states of Indian north-east would find a breather to bolster their economies which are constrained by the costly, difficult and time consuming circuitous transport links with the rest of the country and the very costly maritime access. Hopefully this will help in the greater cohesion of the Indian federation, a goal which remains elusive with active insurgency and militancy apparently on the rise in the Northeast and Northwest.

For Bangladesh, the above scenario could definitely be a great source of revenue. In economic terms we can perhaps calculate the revenue which may accrue to the national exchequer in the way of tariff for goods and vehicles for using our port, highways, railways and river ways. Additionally we can see generation of employment opportunities and increased business participation by members of our business community in new areas. The total benefit in financial terms are said to be quite astounding and supporters are coming out with various figures with a sort of prophetic certainty which is definitely exhilarating to a cash starved nation. It is necessary to take a

fully aware and respectful of a country's international obligations. The above conditions are not mere fantasies but are the reality as such is the state of affairs in regions where one sees the concept of transit finding success. The EC and the NAFTA regions are the prime examples. There is no need to dwell too long on the situation here. The paucity of our transport infrastructure does not need much elaboration. Our main north-south axis road from Chittagong to Dhaka is of gross under-capacity and of poor orientation. Whereas the north of the country is linked with Dhaka by a bridge over the Jamuna the southwest is only accessible by ferry crossing over numerous rivers. Moreover, the road system is centrally oriented with all axis touching Dhaka without bypassing the city in any effective way. The resulting congestion, delay and occasional accidents are common knowledge to all. The rail system similarly remains fragmented by the different gauges in the eastern and western half of the country. Moreover, the capacity of the system is hampered by the ponderance of single track segments over major sections. The waterway, which provides a very efficient system for the internal transportation of bulk cargo of low value is not really an option for time sensitive high value cargo. What is clear

The decision to offer transit facility to India is not a sound one at this stage of our development. The country is neither ready in terms of the adequacy of our infra-structure nor there prevails the congenial economic and political environment which would make it an all out success. Moreover, there appears to be no attempt on the part of our politicians to do a proper cost-benefit analysis encompassing all issues. It would not be prudent to push this agenda further at this stage.

is that our present transport infrastructure is poorly equipped even for our own requirements. It is also not necessary to question the adequacy of Chittagong port to handle additional cargo destined for India as the port is itself capacity constrained and linked with the hinterland with an antiquated and poor road and rail network.

The assessment of the merit of granting transit facility on the basis of an overall free trade environment on the regional basis also falls short of the requirement. The general environment is of suspicion where cross border illicit trades in commodities and alleged dumping grossly distort the internal markets and affect domestic industries in Bangladesh. There is a big disparity in the economic prowess between India and other nations in the region and smaller economies are burdened with huge trade deficits which greatly favour India. In general, there prevails a sense of distrust among the business professionals in Bangladesh regarding Indian trade policy.

- 1) there exists in Bangladesh an extensive network of high quality roads and/or railway or waterway with surplus capacity;
- 2) there exists a customs agreement on regional basis which allows freedom of freight movement with a minimum of hindrance from governmental bureaucracies;
- 3) there exists a generally accepted trade agreement on a regional basis which allows a balanced and fair trade among nations and which dispels suspicion of unfair trading practice or dumping by dominant economies;
- 4) there are competent bodies in all countries in the region capable of assessing costs and benefits associated with transit and to set a tariff which reflects the inclusion of all these factors;
- 5) there exists a congenial political environment where peace prevails in the region as a whole and where countries are endowed with a politically matured and reasonably educated population

breather at this stage and consider other aspects of the issue. While the benefits to both India and Bangladesh are quite obvious, one must not forget the other side of the coin, the costs involved. It is necessary further to deviate from the very rosy ideal picture which we have drawn so far. Because the ideal scenario presupposes certain conditions which must be met before one can realistically accept it. These, conditions are that—

national trade, in the reduced spending for the maintenance of vital transport infrastructure over a difficult terrain. Even if we leave the more subtle but high value factor of national cohesion, the benefits are bound to far outweigh the costs. This is a scenario which is enormously appealing to India in economic terms. For Bangladesh, the scenario is very different. The benefits to accrue can be translated into financial terms but what about the costs? Some of the costs can be translated into financial terms and these include spending for infrastructure, regular spending on maintenance of infrastructure, loss of potential market by Bangladesh goods in the competition with goods of competitive advantage and maintenance Indian companies located in other parts of India due to the easier and cheaper transport costs. But many of the costs are not so easy to convert into money terms, these include the costs associated with the increased congestion on our meager road, rail or water infrastructure, the economic cost of relocating a huge population for new infra structure projects, and the economic costs of pollution due to the increased freight activity which would serve a market of over 25 million people in the Indian north and northeast. The question of pollution is a very important one and this is directly related with the concept of sustainable development. It is important to note that in the EU road haulage of freight transport has been identified as most threatening to the environment and most governments are trying to impose various fiscal and financial measures to divert as much freight as possible to a more environment friendly mode of transportation, preferably waterway or rail transportation.

Ignoring the political arguments against sovereignty for the time being, it is possible to see that even on purely economic and ecological terms, the costs associated with transit are quite considerable and needs very careful evaluation. Unfortunately we have not seen any attempt till date which would give us the confront that there remain competent authorities amidst our policymakers who understand and appreciate the stakes involved. The opposition's slogan of the "endangered sovereignty" is generally related with condition (5) above. This is a very vital and perhaps the most important pre-condition. This is because the privilege of transit under the ideal situation described above is only workable where there is a harmonious relationship among nations and when this harmony does not depend on the identity of the party in government but rather on the relationship which is much deeply rooted. The deep rooted relationship must exist between the enlightened and educated population with mutual respect for each other's cultural heritage and territorial integrity. There must prevail in

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Dangerous Games: Cross Border Terrorism

Pakistan should wake up to the fact that "cross border terrorism" is the attempt to label us as originators of the latest weapon of war against our integrity and sovereignty and that we need to gear up our defences thereof as we are presently ill equipped to counter the enemy's assault.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

or two in Azerbaijan? Add that to the concerns of Iran about the Shia community in Afghanistan as represented by the Shia Wahdat and you come back to the wider question of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan as opposed by the "Northern Alliance" led by Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Masood. That Osama Bin Laden has sanctuary in Afghanistan, courtesy of the Taliban, is being used as a "smoking gun" to paint Pakistan as somehow being "collaborationist", as the chief provider of training and logistics to Islamic terrorism anywhere in the world. With JUI's Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Sipah-e-Sahaba's Maulana Azam Tariq using the Aabpara Market in Islamabad as a convenient Hyde Park to threaten to "kill all Americans on sight" if anybody touches Osama Bin Laden, our enemies do not need to spend any money on "black" propaganda, it is being provided for them gratis. For once the Foreign Office is on the ball, having refused to condemn the terrorist acts in Moscow and Dagestan where bombs have destroyed large apartment buildings housing families of Russian army men, among other civilians. This is as it should be, we cannot condone (or for that matter seem to be condoning) such terror anywhere. There is no doubt that the vast majority of Pakistanis support Chechens and they are sympathetic to their struggle to liberate Dagestan; there is a difference between genuine guerilla warfare and terrorism as a struggle for independence that targets civilians and we cannot seem to be in any manner supporting terrorism. The armed struggle on the Chechnya-Dagestan border is a regular conflict. As much as Osama Bin Laden has caught the imagination of the Pakistani public, it must be remembered

of capability compounded by inefficiency and a lack of both commitment and intent. When any functionality's personal agenda transcends that of the nation and its leaders, both are in deep trouble. In Pakistan there are too many PM hopefuls and many look to come in through the back-door by building bridges with Pindi, putting priority on their own ambitions and the careers of their own close relations to the exclusion of all other motivation and interests.

If Mian Sahib remains blind to such blatant personal agenda, he will not remain in power much longer. Add to that the fact that the Zee TV has led the assault against Pakistan in the electronic media, you have to ask the question, how is one expected to react to a hard-core Zee TV person in a senior management position in our media? Whatever his antecedents, can we take the risk of his being at the nerve centre of our media strategy with complete access to planning and implementation? The taking up of cross border terrorism is a major threat to the fact that the Zee TV has led the assault against Pakistan in the electronic media, you have to ask the question, how is one expected to react to a hard-core Zee TV person in a senior management position in our media? Whatever his antecedents, can we take the risk of his being at the nerve centre of our media strategy with complete access to planning and implementation? 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