

Rays of hope

Feathers in foreign affairs cap

by M Anwarul Haq

AT THE TURN of the century, Bangladesh could be reasonably satisfied with her presence and role in regional and international affairs.

Dhaka secured a much-coveted seat of a non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council. This was the second time since her independence that she got a berthing at the UNSC. What, however, could be seen was the unanimous approval secured for Bangladesh's candidature. Dhaka having earlier managed to ease out Cambodia from the contest.

It added to Bangladesh's stature when she managed to successfully host the second conference of the D-8 countries. The new grouping representing over 800 million people in eight countries has tremendous resources and hold the potential of being a significant bloc of Muslim nations. The presence of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad gave a bigger dimension to the Dhaka meeting.

Dhaka earlier also played host to the second ministerial meeting of the BIMSTEC. The meet of the group provided a much needed thrust to the new regional organisation comprising Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The new bloc is working towards improving road, air and



Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee in conversation during the latter's visit to Bangladesh.

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The Dhaka-Calcutta bus service opened up a new avenue of bilateral ties.

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sea links between the member countries which could boost intra regional trading and also increase people to people contact. The bloc is still groping for a more definitive direction and the next meeting due to be held in Delhi is expected to give it more momentum.

Dhaka, however, like most other members felt that a chance to push the economic agenda in South Asia faced a setback following the postponement of the SAARC conference in Kathmandu. The next SAARC meet was due to set a specific timeframe for implementation of a South Asian Free Trading Area (SAFTA) agreed at a level of high officials of the member countries. Dhaka, as one of the architects of the seven-nation regional organisation, will have to take initiative to hold the next SAARC Summit as early as possible in the interest of fostering regional co-operation.

An important bilateral visit during last year was that of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who came to inaugurate the Dhaka-Calcutta bus service and took the opportunity for some important discussions with his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina. The matter of opening multi-modal communication links between the two countries was discussed in some detail. Other major bilateral concerns including that of trade, transit, combating cross-border terrorism and security concerns were discussed, according to insiders.

The bus service between the Bangladesh capital and neighbouring Indian city of Calcutta has opened up a new dimension of people-to people communication with more to follow in

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terms of better understanding of each other.

Despite efforts to lower tariff barriers and increase commercial trading between the two countries, goods through counter-trade or smuggling seem to invade the borders and rule the domestic market, a matter which should be addressed seriously by the government to save Bangladesh's industry.

The official visit of China's number two leader Li Peng, to Dhaka brought to the surface the 'entente cordiale' relations existing for nearly two decades between Dhaka and Beijing.

The Bangladesh President, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed took his first trip overseas to Turkey to a state invitation. The visit that was kept on hold for sometime added to the trappings of the President's office on materialisation since it helped raise the profile of the country in the host nation. More Presidential visits would prove useful as inputs towards strengthening ties with friendly nations.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina travelled less last year compared to the previous years. However, her lesser but more focused itineraries brought dividends in foreign ties. Her lateral trip to the United Kingdom in conjunction with the Bangladesh festival was quite fruitful. Similarly her official visit to far away Australia was a good investment in time and in widening diplomatic relations. Attending the CHOGM meet in Durban also gave her the opportunity to have bilateral discussions with some foreign leaders.

Bangladesh diplomacy showed its glaring weakness in multilateral fora when it failed to put up a respectable fight for the position of Secretary General of the Commonwealth. By all standards, no homework of any kind was done by the Foreign Ministry or the Prime Minister's office to pull through a candidate for such an important position. Dhaka failed to even to make any attempt to get the endorsement of any group or even from any of its neighbours. Dhaka needs to take multilateral diplomacy much more seriously and should not expect that opportunities would come by naturally without putting concerted efforts.

In the field of UN peacekeeping, Dhaka has carved a niche but it faces a challenging task of living up to its reputation as a major provider of peacekeepers to UN missions. The return of over 50 police officers from Kosovo who failed to pass such elementary examinations as gun tests and English language proficiency tests proves that presence in the international arena is not only a matter of recognition but of concerted training and internal monitoring where the government standards for selection should be followed rigidly.

In the matter of conducting diplomacy by the foreign ministry, there were some perceptible changes although much more needs to be done. Officers from other services, particularly those appointed from the defence were mostly called back or retired. While nearly one-third Bangladeshi diplomats heading missions abroad comprised political or contract appointees at the beginning of last year, their number was scaled down drastically by year-end. Nearly a dozen new envoys named by the government who are now awaiting their agreements for foreign postings are career diplomats. The appointment of cadre service officials in larger number would help in restoring the morale of the service. However, more accountability and more efforts are required for our diplomats in pushing the country and selling its image abroad. The promised thrust on economic diplomacy has still not happened and a performance yardstick should be passed around to diplomats along with their foreign postings.

The foreign ministry still lacks the appointment of an official spokesman. Though at different times, it was announced that it has a spokesman, in reality no comments could be or would be available when a crisis occurs concerning Bangladeshis abroad, not any reaction is readily available to the media when an event of concern happens.

Bangladesh needs to prepare itself for the upcoming NAM

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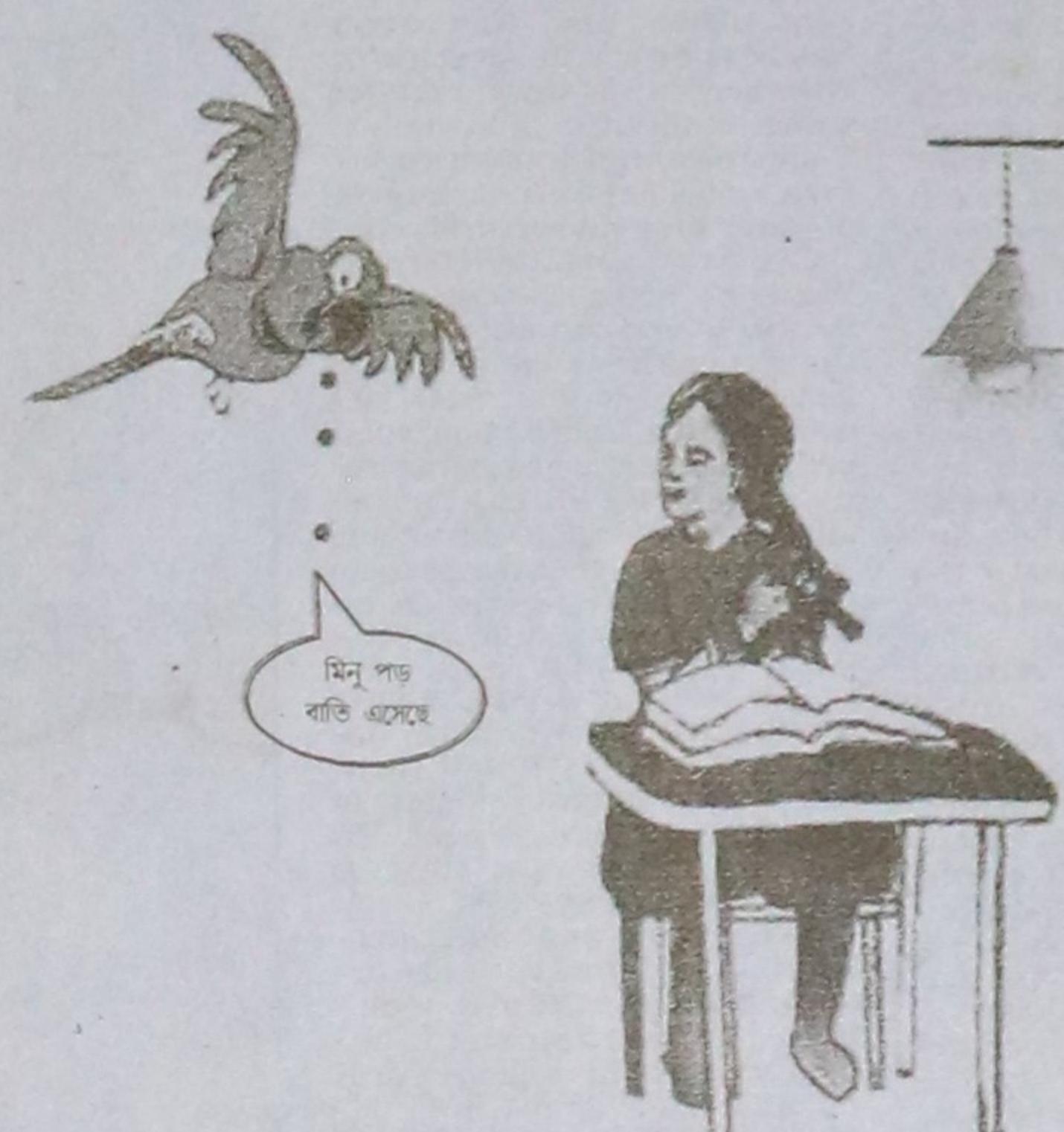
Summit which is only one and a half year away now. According to Convention the Summit is held in early September. There are still no indications that the matter relating to infrastructure building for the

summit has made any substantial progress. These have to be addressed immediately if it is to be held in Dhaka on time.

An immediate agenda in the diplomatic and political calendar is the proposed visit of US

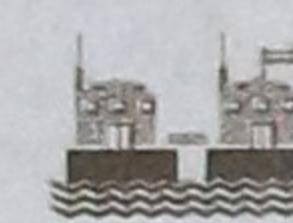
President Bill Clinton. If the political wind in the subcontinent blows correctly, the US President's South Asian odyssey will take place, putting Bangladesh in a sort of lime-light.

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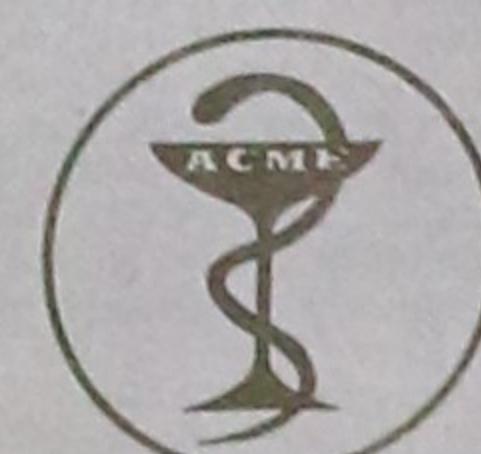
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