

South Asia

Clinton Discovers Bangladesh

What could indeed be the attractions of Bangladesh for the United States? asks C. Raja Mohan

WHETHER the US President, Mr. Bill Clinton, stops in Pakistan or not, he is certainly going to Bangladesh. But why Bangladesh? What in the world is taking Mr. Clinton to a country that has long been a symbol of human despair?

Although much of the world does not pay serious attention to Bangladesh, the Clinton Administration has turned a keen eye towards this nation in recent years. The Clinton visit is not a passing fancy but the product of an assiduous American cultivation of Dhaka over the last few years.

Bangladesh. But American interest goes beyond natural gas. The US sees Bangladesh as an important example of the proposition that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible.

There is a growing conviction in Washington that for all its other troubles, as a nation Bangladesh may be on the rise. The US believes Bangladesh could move itself in the next two decades from the ranks of the poorest nations to the status of a middle income country. Some among the Bangladesh elite have begun to see their nation as the possible "Kuwait" of the sub-continent.

and development, it could easily rise to 50 to 60 tcf. American companies such as Unocal and Enron, as well as other Western such as Royal Dutch Shell are actively developing the natural gas resources of Bangladesh.

The US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Mr. Karl Inderfurth, said recently that Bangladesh - through the development of its vast energy resources - could not only transform itself but also become an engine of regional economic cooperation in the sub-continent. "With the right policies in place," Mr. Inderfurth said, Bangladesh "could make a quantum leap forward by developing vast energy resources, particularly in natural gas. Regional cooperation in this area would provide Bangladesh with a huge market... just across the border in India."

with its neighbours". Mr. Inderfurth adds. But returning to Bangladesh, its larger political significance was summed up by Mr. Bill Richardson when he visited Dhaka in April 1998. "Bangladesh is dramatic evidence that Islamic countries can be strong democracies." If the US is in search of "modernising and moderate" Islamic nations, few could match Bangladesh. And this in turn could alter, over the long term, the American pecking order in the sub-continent. For years, the US has seen Pakistan as a moderate Islamic state that needs its support. But as Pakistan becomes a breeding ground for extreme forms of Islamic militancy, Bangladesh represents a progressive counter tendency in the sub-continent.

While the American agenda is now a negative one in Pakistan, of preventing it from becoming a failed state, the US policy towards Bangladesh is a positive one of building prosperity and modernity. While the US agenda of engaging Pakistani military generates deep anxieties in India, Washington's approach to Bangladesh might well open the doors for a new trilateral cooperative effort at building political moderation and economic cooperation within the region.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.

For a New Orientation

Former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral feels that it is time a white paper was brought out on the ongoing "strategic discussions" between India and the United States in order to evolve a consensus on and provide clarity to diplomatic and strategic initiatives.

He said that the context of President Bill Clinton's visit to India should be used to evolve this clarity and to develop a new orientation for Indo-U.S. relations. Excerpts from an interview he gave Venkitesh Ramakrishnan of the Frontline of India



not be addressed now? On the CTBT, there are many questions to be looked into, such as whether it would come out of the U.S. Senate in its original form or in an amended form. A proper response can be made only after looking at all these aspects.

On India's request to the U.S. to declare Pakistan a terrorist state, there is one opinion that this is a departure from the principle of bilateralism that we have adopted with Pakistan in the past. What is your view? In the contemporary era it is difficult to be one-line-oriented on a particular formation. After all, terrorism is something that is bothering the world. And if we have enough evidence to prove Pakistan's complicity in terrorist activities, there is nothing wrong in making this demand. At the same time we should also strive to evolve an international consensus in combating terrorism, especially in the subcontinent. India and Sri Lanka have for long been disturbed by terrorism and now Nepal is getting in to the same league.

But during your prime ministerial tenure you advocated the Gujral Doctrine, which emphasised good neighbourly relations. The Gujral Doctrine emphasised on good neighbourly relations with all our neighbours. Even the Lahore Declaration was a logical conclusion of the process initiated by the Gujral Doctrine. But Pakistan's polity is a complex one. In that complexity one element thought of

Kargil and the same element thought of a coup. This shows that there are elements within Pakistan's polity that do not want to move in a direction that is in the larger interests of that country too.

The U.S. has certain interests in securing access to the Central Asian republics, which are rich in mineral resources. This is one of the reasons why it backed the Taliban militia in its early days. Do you think that this factor has ceased to operate in American geopolitical calculations so that the U.S. may swing to India's side in neighbourhood confrontations? At one stage the U.S. needed the Taliban to pursue its economic and other operations in Central Asia. But the information available now is that it is evolving other options in the region in order to protect and advance its interests. Whether this would be sufficient to make it swing to India's side is a question that would have no definite answer at the moment.

How do you respond to the doctrine of a limited war, propounded by Defence Minister George Fernandes? A war is a plague whose size cannot be specified. I hope that the Defence Minister's viewpoint is not the viewpoint of the Government as a whole. India has always stood for peace and I am of the opinion that this Government is also generally pursuing that time-tested line.

By arrangement with Frontline of India.

Clinton and Confusion

Irfan Husain explains how Pakistan should feel about US President's visit to South Asia

THE news that Bill Clinton will visit India and Bangladesh while skipping Pakistan has come like a stinging slap in the face.

To be excluded from an American president's first visit to the region in a quarter century is a decision that will certainly be greeted with disguised disappointment in many quarters, while others will pretend insouciance, and say, "So what? So plenty. Like it or not, Washington is more pivotal than ever before in the global shape of things. Anyone who thinks differently is living in a fool's paradise. Unless we want to be relegated to the Afghanistan and Rwanda category of failed states, we will engage the United States constructively. The alternative is to sulk on the sidelines and watch the rest of the world move on." With the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the US calls most of the shots, ideological considerations no longer sway decision-makers in Washington. Where earlier the Americans were happy to do business with dictators like Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan and Pinochet in Chile, now they are no longer concerned about a communist threat and therefore use different criteria to decide which countries to support.

seek to establish stability and secure smooth and friction-free global trade. This is aimed at ensuring a continuous expansion of the American economy and the well-being of the American people as well as shareholders in USA, Inc. As multinationals - mostly American - merge and expand, they seek new markets as well as cheap raw materials and labour. Anybody threatening the health of the American economy does so at his own peril. Had Saddam Hussein invaded an empty desert instead of oil-rich Kuwait - thus also threatening an even oil-rich Saudi Arabia - there would have been no desert Storm and the subsequent (and continuing) pounding of the Iraqi people.

Kashmiri hijackers have all contributed to building a composite picture of hirsute fanatics killing innocent bystanders for distant, incomprehensible causes. I am not suggesting that these images are necessarily accurate; nevertheless, they have been etched on the retinas of the American public by a mass media that is more concerned about instant sound-bites, newspaper sales and television ratings than about accuracy and fairness. Also, we are so consumed by Kashmir that we assume that the issue looms just as large on everybody else's horizon. The reality is that most Americans would be hard-pressed to point to Kashmir on a map of the world.

taken to killing innocent civilians as well as kidnapping and killing western tourists; and we have been bullying western businessmen who had invested in Pakistan. While Clinton's visit would be largely symbolic, it would signal to the world that we are not (yet) a pariah nation. Presidential visits are usually accompanied by a flurry of agreements, and our ravaged economy could do with any boost it can get. On the other hand, if Clinton skips Pakistan, our diplomatic isolation would be virtually complete.

India would not like the US to give respectability to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, says K.K. Katyal

INDIA RUNS the risk of converting an American predicament into an embarrassment for itself. The U.S. faces an acute dilemma over whether or not its President, Mr. Bill Clinton, should include Pakistan in his South Asian itinerary next month. On the one hand, it would like to refrain from rewarding a military dictator; on the other, it would not want to shun the people, considered important. This choice is not easy and Washington is trying hard to sort out the intractable matter. India would not like the U.S. to give respectability to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's Chief Executive, because of his action overthrowing a democratic government. Washington does not dispute this and says the situation has to improve to enable Mr. Clinton to go to Pakistan. But what will happen if Gen. Musharraf announces cosmetic measures to meet the American demands and the U.S. finds the new environment acceptable? Mr. Clinton would be visiting Pakistan even if there is no material change in the situation. In the process, New Delhi would land itself in an awkward situation, while the U.S. may seek to sell the Pakistan visit on the basis of assurances (which could not but be phoney), apart from justifying it in the light of its national interest. It will not be hard to imagine Islamabad gloating over New Delhi's failure to influence the U.S. decision. India has placed itself in a position where the success of its diplomacy hangs by a thread - a U.S. 'no' to Pakistan.

able, therefore, that Mr. Clinton's visits to India and Pakistan will not become an occasion for a major discussion on what Washington has often described as a nuclear flashpoint in South Asia. In his oft-quoted interview to The Hindu last month, Gen. Musharraf made out a case for Mr. Clinton's visit: "If the President is coming for bringing a rapprochement between India and Pakistan or bringing peace to the region... if he is coming to contribute towards lessening of tensions, then I really don't see how this objective can be achieved without going to both India and Pakistan. He is just coming for some economic cooperation, then that is a different issue altogether." Reversing the formulation, it means any decision to go to Pakistan would be a sure indication of intent of "bringing rapprochement between India and Pakistan." On the substance of this issue, Mr. Clinton made himself explicit the other day, replying to the presentation of credentials by the new Pakistani ambassador, Ms. Maleeha Lodhi: "The U.S. is prepared to work intensively to see the dialogue between Pakistan and India on all issues resume and intensify. To make progress in this area, the cycle of mistrust and violence must be broken. I am personally committed to do what I can towards this objective."

like any linkage established between the Clinton visit and its decision on adherence to the CTBT. Why the Presidential visit to India now? This is Mr. Clinton's last year in White House and, as such, is it good diplomacy to invest in a summit with a lame-duck President? Those making such points obviously put greater weight on personalities and personal factors than on national interest. There were instances - in the reverse direction - when foreign dignitaries came here in the midst of political instability or situations of uncertainty. Germany went ahead with the visit of its President in early 1991 when the fall of the Ayodhya government headed by Mr. Chandra Shekhar was widely predicted. What was Bonn's rationale? That "we are dealing with the eternal India." In January 1993, the then British Prime Minister, Mr. John Major, stuck to his India trip (he was the special guest on the Republic Day) even though the country had not recovered from the aftermath of the Ayodhya demolition. The decisions taken during both the visits were of long-term significance, which was not affected by subsequent political changes. In the case of Germany, the appointment of an eminent persons group then added a major dimension to the bilateral relations and in the second case, it became the occasion for the Indo-British Partnership Initiative, a mutually beneficial framework for strengthening economic cooperation.

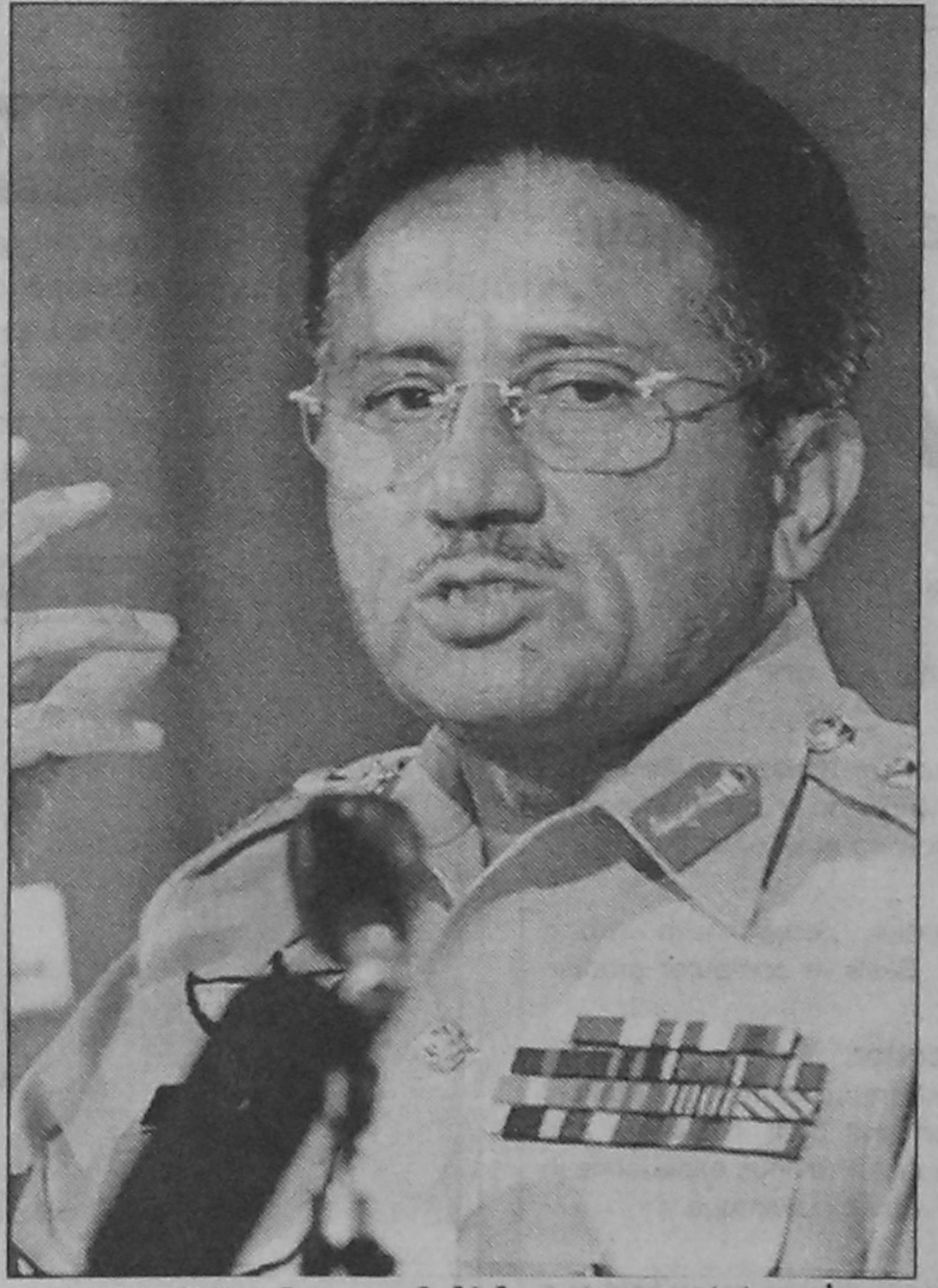
like any linkage established between the Clinton visit and its decision on adherence to the CTBT. Why the Presidential visit to India now? This is Mr. Clinton's last year in White House and, as such, is it good diplomacy to invest in a summit with a lame-duck President? Those making such points obviously put greater weight on personalities and personal factors than on national interest. There were instances - in the reverse direction - when foreign dignitaries came here in the midst of political instability or situations of uncertainty. Germany went ahead with the visit of its President in early 1991 when the fall of the Ayodhya government headed by Mr. Chandra Shekhar was widely predicted. What was Bonn's rationale? That "we are dealing with the eternal India." In January 1993, the then British Prime Minister, Mr. John Major, stuck to his India trip (he was the special guest on the Republic Day) even though the country had not recovered from the aftermath of the Ayodhya demolition. The decisions taken during both the visits were of long-term significance, which was not affected by subsequent political changes. In the case of Germany, the appointment of an eminent persons group then added a major dimension to the bilateral relations and in the second case, it became the occasion for the Indo-British Partnership Initiative, a mutually beneficial framework for strengthening economic cooperation.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.

The General in the Labyrinth

Pakistan Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf is faced with riddles that he finds unsolvable, writes M Abdul Hafiz

WHEN General Pervez Musharraf stepped in to rule Pakistan as its chief executive in October last year he did it with the righteousness of a saviour and in consonance with the tradition established in the country over last 32 years. The impression carefully crafted that the reluctant general was compelled to take the extreme steps to save the country from utter ruin earned him instant support and sympathy. There had been no action or announcement that could scare the people unduly - no martial law, no press censor and not even an immediate state of emergency. Instead he could project for himself a man of compassion within his rugged commando exterior - a devoted family man fond of pet Pekingese, rose garden and ghazal.



ical pressures, growing neo-fundamentalist groups in the Army and his own opaque approach to the country's dozen plus Islamist militant organisations. His predecessors once propped up Taliban militia to fight in Afghanistan. The same Taliban monster now threatens to devour Pakistan. The Taliban connection, which Musharraf is believed to have nurtured for his operations both during and after Kargil war is increasingly becoming his liability. Not only it dents his liberal credential before the West, but also at stake are the resumption of International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans which remain critical for Pakistan's economic revival and the possibility of visit from US President Bill Clinton who is due in South Asia at the end of March. There are speculations that he could step in Islamabad if Musharraf's government takes strong measures against 'terrorist' groups including recently released Maulana Masud Azher, now in Pakistan. Clinton might also be able to persuade India to resume talks with Pakistan if Pakistan clamps down on Harkat.

Nawaz Sharif's abysmal misrule before the military take-over gave him happy excuses to seize and cling on to power. Those who raised unhappy noises at the change took barely a fortnight to lead the queue to do 'business as usual' with him. Most importantly the US who mattered most emitted signals which, when placed together and deciphered, meant almost an endorsement of the takeover.

So far Musharraf did not want to give even a face-saving timeframe for a democratic restoration to make possible a visit to Pakistan by Bill Clinton.

But the general's choice will be still more difficult on the question of Osama bin Laden whose apprehension the US hopes to secure through the good offices of Pakistan - the most crucial of the three countries having diplomatic relation with Taliban held Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Pakistan there is no Red Army now waiting to march into Afghanistan and turn General Musharraf a friend of America in need.

Indeed the West and Pakistan's regional allies adopted a wait-and-see attitude till the general unravelled his full hand. They wanted to give Musharraf's military government time to implement reforms and the benefit of doubt over its commitment to return to civilian rule. Even if the pace of progress towards those goals was painstakingly slow the people both at home and outside tried to bear with the ground reality. But since Indo-Pakistan tensions reached a boiling point over Kashmir after the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane in December by Kashmiri militants the international community got panicked and impatient with Pakistan government's lack of movement both on domestic and foreign policy front.

ing and there is no sign of restructuring collapsed State institutions. The local and foreign investments are still shy and the recovery of defaulted money slow - only five per cent so far. After almost four months in office what Musharraf could deliver is mere platitude which is no more satisfying Pakistani public primed with high expectations from the military. It is not surprising that his charm offensive is gradually losing its cutting edge. And the patience of Pakistani public is also cracking.

Therefore a trade-off - whether by swapping over bin Laden or clamping down on militants operating in Kashmir from Pakistan - is inevitable. So far Musharraf did not want to give even a face-saving timeframe for a democratic restoration to make possible a visit to Pakistan by Bill Clinton. But can he withhold decisions on the issues like that of Bin Laden or terrorism at the cost of vital support - even if symbolic - from the world's sole superpower? Just now the general seems paralysed by indecision. The author is a retired Brigadier of Bangladesh Army.