

Dreadful Dip in Indo-Pak Relations

INDIA and Pakistan have gone ballistic again. There has been a high-voltage trading of charges lately between the two over not merely crossing the Line of Control in Kashmir but also killing people through alleged armed incursions into each other's territory. Officials in Islamabad accused India of launching, on February 25, a blistering artillery assault on Lanjod, a village inside Pak Kashmir, and killing 14 civilians most of them, women and children. India has denied any involvement of its troops. Some mutilated bodies were shown over PTV. Thereafter, no sooner had two days passed than we heard the news on February 27 of an apparently retaliatory intrusion by Pak soldiers into Lum, 480 kilometers south from Srinagar which led to the killing of six Indian soldiers. Some of the decapitated bodies were shown on Indian television.

Pakistan blasted the incident on 24-25 February night as state sponsored terrorism by India in the Naxal sector. On the other hand, India regarded the February 27 mayhem on her soldiers in Kashmir as another proof of Pakistan sponsoring cross-border terrorism.

Evidently, the situation along the Line of Control has hotbed up with a premonition that an open conflict might break out, if not consciously held off by both sides, against the backdrop of their nuclearisation. It is difficult to view these developments in any stereo-typical fashion linking them to 'seasonal forays' into those higher altitude zones with the tapering of the winter season. It seems seasonal all right, but in a very special sense in that US President Bill Clinton's forthcoming visit to South Asia has generated 'a new tension' in the ambience of relations between India and Pakistan. New Delhi has been pressuring Washington to treat Pakistan as a 'terrorist state' and keep Islamabad out of Clinton's South Asian itinerary. Washington's emphasis though is on a commitment from Pak Chief Executive Gen. Musharraf towards a time-frame for the restoration of democracy in his country before Clinton hops over to Pakistan, an old-time ally of the US.

So, both New Delhi and Islamabad seem worked up to carry their points with the US President who is about to embark on his South Asian odyssey. Although this is Bill Clinton's last year in office, his visit is valued from the US establishment's policy perspective as far as South Asia goes. It would be of immense benefit to our region if the US President's visit can help bring the two historically inimical South Asian neighbours — India and Pakistan — any closer to an understanding on ways to resolve the Kashmir question.

Piracy at the Port

FOREIGN ships at the outer anchorage of Chittagong port or at its wharves have become targets of pirates, a new menace threatening the image and reputation of the principal port of the country. The trouble is nothing new; only that it comes in an aggravated form now — thanks to the lack of action from authorities despite ample news-coverage on the subject. The target of the pirates varies between the costly ropes used for anchoring ships to valuable equipment kept on the cargo ships.

Once in a while the Coast Guards foil an attempted robbery but they cannot effectively stop or control regular onslaughts by the pirates inadequately manned and ill-equipped as they are. With only two patrol boats in hand it is next to impossible for them to patrol the mouth of the Karnaphuli river, the outer anchorage and a portion of the territorial waters into the Bay of Bengal. The port itself has only one patrol boat which is used to curb piracy along the jetty. The port thana police have also very little to do except recovering looted articles when an FIR is lodged and that too happens very rarely as the captains of foreign ships hardly lodge any complaints with the police. They are just eager to leave the port on completion of loading and unloading operations. We have heard stories of Portuguese pirates on high seas, have heard stories of the Vikings of Norway in the north sea, now we have our homegrown variety bringing slur on Chittagong Port.

These are small time hit-and-run crooks who can be dealt with according to the law of the land if the Coast Guards so wish and the authorities concerned support them with requisite logistics. Let the problem be nipped in the bud with the right kind of coordination forged between the ministries of ports and shipping, home and perhaps the naval authorities.

Vexing Tanneries

ONCE again the tanneries of city's Hazaribagh area have come into focus. A survey on six manufacturing units has revealed some frightening facts. Almost ninety per cent of tannery workers die before they reach the age of fifty due to various afflictions like ulcer, skin disease, high blood pressure and rheumatic fever. The causes of these deadly ailments among the workers have been identified as 'industrial pollution', 'liquid waste' and 'leather dust'. Reportedly, all the labourers in this area's tanneries — unofficially numbering around 800 small and large units — work without proper safeguards like 'footwear', 'gloves' and 'masks'. And the chemicals spewed in the processing of leather are hazardous to human health and have a fatalistic impact on the environment. What the government has done so far is to set up an effluent treatment plant, which only prevents 'chromium' from dissolving into the Nature. The other lethal elements remain intact.

However, a proposal to move all these units to a designated site in Gazipur was placed before the government a few years back by the environmentalists. But unfortunately, nothing has come of it. On the contrary, these hazardous enterprises have been allowed to contaminate the surroundings on a continual basis. Why? The issue has to be addressed immediately with pragmatic policy decisions. The huge number of people cannot remain hostage at the hands of a few moneymakers. At the same time we cannot abandon the entrepreneurs. So, we strongly suggest that the authorities start the process of moving these tanneries out of the city. Alongside, the initiative to modernise the non-mechanised and semi-mechanised industries must be carried forward.

A comedian's punch-line always carries a sharp sting when it says, 'Early to bed and early to rise and you will make your neighbours suspicious.' Bitter it may be in taste, but perfect in truth, if applied on a wider scale in our political scenario. So whatever you do, may be with best of intentions, it may raise suspicions in your neighbour's mind across the already disturbed fence.

So when India strongly insisted for the postponement of the regular annual summit of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), which was scheduled to be held in Kathmandu in November last year, and carried it off successfully with its 'negative' vote, the plea that it won't attend the summit with the new army ruler of Pakistan, Gen. Musharraf, strong suspicion was looming large in the minds of other SAARC members who were taken aback. Kathmandu was all set to hold the summit till the last 'bang' came from India. Whatever might have been the good intention of India to express its resentment against army rule, imposed in Pakistan by replacing an elected government, to many minds India's BJP government's attitude came as a sort of rather 'overreaction' in boycotting the summit. It was rather surprising that one 'negative' vote or a so-called 'veto' was enough to send the SAARC summit into limbo. It was, no doubt, a great success on the part of India by keeping Pakistan 'out of bound', using the 'army-ruler as a road-block.'

'Baby' Thrown Down the Drain?

If India thinks that its demand for postponement of the summit was a 'message' not only for the new military rulers of Pakistan, but also for any ambitions and adventurous Army General in the South Asian region, then it can be safely said that it had been done at too high a price-tag. Because

by doing so, India has literally thrown the proverbial 'baby' down the drain, retaining in its hand the 'bath-tub' with murky water. Following the bad precedent that India had set in this respect, if other SAARC members follow suit, one by one, then what will happen to the organisation? Nothing but doom to death!

SAARC has its own charter where clear provisions have been included for the conduct of its affairs, whether it is the officials' meeting, or the ministers' meeting, or the Summit Conference. It is true that as a major policy matter, it has decided to keep 'bilateral issues' out of its orbit with a view to maintaining its mentality and integrity. But nowhere it has provided any member state with a 'veto' power or 'negative' vote to make it immobile. Rather it has clearly stated that 'No one state' or 'a combination of members' would be allowed to impose its decision on the organisation.

As Prof Shamsul Huq, who was the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, when Bangladesh initiated the SAARC proposal which was finally launched in Dhaka Summit in 1985, in an article some time back, said: 'No one state alone, or in combination with others, can impose its decision because unanimity and not consensus is the basis of all decisions.'

If that's what the SAARC charter dictates, then where does the Indian demand for postponing the Kathmandu summit stand? Was not then the postponement of the November summit a gross violation of the SAARC charter and hence totally unacceptable?

Gujral's Advice to Indian Government
Former Indian Prime Minister

ter I K Gujral, in a recent media interview, expressing his resentment against Vajpayee government's stance against the summit, said that calling for postponement of the SAARC summit over 'bilateral differences' was 'not proper', adding, 'SAARC, under no circumstance, should be linked to bilateral issues, and the summit should be held as early as possible'. Calling on the Indian government to agree to an early date for the next summit, Mr Gujral said that 'a meeting between Vajpayee and Gen. Musharraf would help de-escalate tensions'. He, however, admitted that SAARC forum 'is not meant for bilateral decisions', but 'a meeting would always help', he hoped.

Echoing similar feelings, the Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, one of the founders of SAARC, in a message to the recently held SAARC Economic Cooperation Conference in Male, attended by representatives of Chambers of Commerce and Industries from SAARC member-countries, urged the business leaders to help SAARC 'out of the present political crisis in the region'. With an oblique reference to the 'hung-up' Kathmandu summit due to India's initiative, President Gayoom said, 'the most important thing for the SAARC is (its) regular summit'.

These are undoubtedly words of wisdom for those who understand, as they say, 'a word to the wise is enough.'

Unfortunately it was the so-called unofficial 'veto' power, used by India in postponing the scheduled Kathmandu summit, created a bigger crisis for the organisation, than perhaps it was intended to defuse. Perhaps India was inspired by the quick action taken by the Common-

wealth Heads of Government Conference being held then in South Africa, suspending Pakistan forthwith from the Commonwealth in view of the military take-over. And it became known that it was the 'veto' power that brought an abrupt end of the League of Nations and the same is again playing a ruinous role in the United Nations. So the SAARC should not be allowed to become a helpless victim of this policy.

Army Coup: An Internal Affair?

It is true that no democracy-loving and sensible person will ever support an army coup or army rule in a country. But once it comes, it should be left with the people there, as an internal affair without any outside interference, to decide their future course of action. Particularly, when the army coup is 'bloodless' and has been widely acclaimed by the people in general and there has been no hostile demonstration against the army regime, it would be more appropriate to allow it more time to find the extent and depth of popular reaction. During last three months or so since the summit has been postponed, the army rule in Pakistan has been strengthened instead of losing its grip on the administration. In spite of repeated requests by India to declare Pakistan as a 'terrorist state', America has refused to do that. And there shows a growing possibility of President Clinton's visit to Pakistan. So who gains, or who loses by postponing the summit?

It will, therefore, be the responsibility of the SAARC leadership at the highest level to find ways and means to save the much-cherished organisation from the 'curse' of 'veto' or 'negative' vote by 'state alone' or 'a combination with others', instead of following an ostrich-like policy. In this context,

Bangladesh has a special responsibility, as the initial promoter of the SAARC proposal, to save it from an untimely death. Everybody should remember that it was the 'veto' power that brought an abrupt end of the League of Nations and the same is again playing a ruinous role in the United Nations. So the SAARC should not be allowed to become a helpless victim of this policy.

Put SAARC on Right Track

It can't be denied that 'suspicion' and 'fear syndrome' or 'big-small-neighbour syndrome' among the SAARC member-states have been continuing despite the establishment of this organisation some 15 years ago, the main propose of which was to bring the seven member-states — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — more closer for greater economic cooperation among them for the benefit of some one billion people of the region. But it has not come true. Why? Much progress has been made in the field of economic cooperation among the member-states, but it has not been as big a deal as was expected.

In the language of Abdul Gayoom, '... Progress has been hampered by various obstacles' and that's why he had urged the business leaders, in his message to the Male meeting, 'to help it out of the present political crisis' to put the SAARC on right track.

Whether you call it politics of revenge, or political hatred, or any other complex, the suspicion of each other's intention persists there and will continue to haunt it; until the root cause of such 'complex' is not surgically removed. The question of

'what is cooking in the neighbour's backyard?' will be hanging there to haunt the organisation, hampering the real purpose for which it was established. The member states will have to accept the ground reality that economic progress and political security go hand in hand. And it would be sheer foolishness to ignore one at the cost of the other. Better call a spade a spade.

Let's Not Play with Matches

It has become a tradition of one country showing the other country's 'card'. Thus India shows the 'Pakistan card' in Kashmir militancy, Pakistan shows 'India card' over forcible occupation of Kashmir. Sri Lanka once also showed 'India card' for its Tamil insurgency. So on and so forth. Even with the best of terms now existing between India and Bangladesh, India alleges that political troubles in the eastern provinces of India being fomented by militants, having training camps in Bangladesh. Nepal had its 'worst times' with India after it tried to purchase arms from China without consulting India. But the most dangerous of all is the Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir and the current political atmosphere has become more tense and volatile since India and Pakistan have emerged as new nuclear powers of the South Asian region. It is time that BJP government, led by Vajpayee, would take a realistic approach, leaving aside its ambivalent policy against Pakistan or any other SAARC member-country, and agree to call the postponed SAARC summit at an early date as, to quote Mr Gujral, '.... The summit should be held as early as possible.'

Let us not play with matches. The author is a retired UN official.

For an Early SAARC Summit

by A M M Shahabuddin

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responsibility of sanctions for 'the destruction of an entire nation — it is as simple and terrifying as that.'

They also reflect concern over the weakness of the 'oil for food' programme which allows Baghdad to buy specified essential imports, under UN supervision, with money earned from limited oil sales.

Their views and their resignations do not come out of the blue. When Ireland's Denis Halliday, a former UN Assistant Under Secretary-General, resigned as Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq in September 1998, he did so in protest at the

responsibility of sanctions for 'the destruction of an entire nation — it is as simple and terrifying as that.'

He did not join the United Nations to oversee genocide, he said.

Von Sponeck has worked for the UN since 1968, serving in Ghana, Turkey, Botswana and, as Resident Coordinator, in Pakistan and then India until 1997.

Before taking up his post in Iraq in October 1998, he was Regional Representative and Director of European Affairs at the UN Development Programme in Geneva.

By last June, his frustration

became clear when he told a delegation from the international group, Physicians for Social Responsibility, that the oil-for-food programme provided just \$180 a year per person 'out of which everything has to be financed, from electrical services to water, sewerage, to food, health, ... the lot.'

'Do you consider that adequate for survival?' he went on. 'I can say at the very best the nose is just above the water. But over the years the nose is increasingly touching the water and many people are drowning. So it is not a figure we can re-

ally take lightly or accept as

The way this country has deteriorated in terms of social fabric is a way that any one of us who has any kind of moral fabric in him or her can certainly not accept... we are setting the stage for depriving another generation of the opportunity to become responsible national and international citizens of tomorrow, and that might be the most serious aspect of all, apart from the nutritional deficiency.'

In October, when he returned to UN headquarters in New York for consultations, it was

reported that he had been re-called for his position to be terminated. But when I met him in Baghdad the evening before he departed, I had the unmistakable impression that he intended to resign in protest at the situation and was subsequently persuaded to stay.

While both von Sponeck and his spokesman George Somerwill are saying little, I am reliably informed that the last straw was what they considered the 'hopelessness' of the oil-for-food deal and worsening relations with Benon Sevan, Executive Director of the UN's New York-based Office of the Iraq Programme.

'They have not spoken since October,' the source claimed.

The ceiling on the amount of oil Iraq is allowed to pump has been raised, but the state of the country's oil industry — particularly its shortage of spare parts — renders the gesture largely meaningless.

Von Sponeck said that the programme had failed to meet even the 'minimum require-

ments' of Iraq's 22 million people. Burghardt later commented: 'I fully support what Mr von Sponeck was saying.'

'It is a true humanitarian tragedy.... and I believe any human being who looks at the facts and the impact of sanctions on the population will not deny that he is right.'

US State Department spokesman James Rubin dismissed von Sponeck's action, implying that he had 'gone native' and become too close to the Iraqi regime.

Further criticisms of the US-led sanctions policy were made at a meeting in London at Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office in early February. A widely-held perception among the participants, who included US embassy representatives, Iraqi opposition figures and academics, was that sanctions had failed and their human toll had been incalculable, but that lack of political will and potential loss of face in Britain and the US would ensure that the issue remained a low priority.

Halliday is more outspoken.

'This policy constitutes genocide, and London and Washington are responsible. It has to change,' he urges.

— Gemini News

The author is a freelance journalist who has visited Iraq more than 20 times.

UN Resignations Blame 'Humanitarian Tragedy'

Felicity Arbuthnot writes from London

Dialogue? Don't hold your breath, Iraqi spokesman Tariq Aziz commented last year on relations with the West. Since then, there has been little change in the situation, with sanctions still in force. Now two high-level resignations within the UN, reports Gemini News Service, have revealed seething tensions below the surface.

Shadow over the Presidential Election in Taiwan
by Harun ur Rashid

The last poll indicated that Soong had leapfrogged Chen in popularity. The likely victory of Soong as the President of Taiwan will bring comfort to all parties — the Taiwanese, the US and China and by extension to the rest of the world.

THE Presidential election will be held next 18 March in Taiwan. Taiwan went to polls last in 1996. Whenever the Presidential election is held in Taiwan, China cannot remain indifferent. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province and has threatened to invade the island if it ever declares its independence. China has three 'No' policy regarding Taiwan — No independence, No two Chinas and No representation for Taiwan in international organisations. Any departure from this policy is galling to China.

China demonstrates by action or words that any candidate who supports Taiwan's independence would do damage to the stability of Taiwan because China would not be a silent spectator to such event. China makes it very clear to the Taiwanese voters that they should not vote for any Presidential hopeful who dares to declare its independence.

In 1996, China began lobbing 'test' missiles into the Taiwan Strait, the narrow body of water

which separates Taiwan from China. The political commentators maintained that it was an intimidation tactic meant to steer voters away from the Strait but issued a firm statement that China would not hesitate to use force if Taiwan declared independence. This statement has again led the US to send on 23