

A Boost to US-Bangla Relations

HERE were four elements to the background against which Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's state visit to the United States of America was set. First of all, there was the need to pick up the threads from Bill Clinton's visit to Dhaka as part of his South Asian odyssey earlier on. Secondly, the US expressly valued her ties with Bangladesh whom she considered to be a nation with considerable potential to grow out of its poverty entrapment. Thirdly, on certain issues like gas export, construction of private container terminal near Patenga, labour union rights at the EPZ, extradition of Bangabandhu's killers a forward foothold needed to be reached. Finally, new areas of cooperation had to be identified and worked upon if the existing cordial and friendly ties were to be given greater depth, dimension or spatial diversity.

All in all, deeper down her rather poverty-stricken exterior Bangladesh's avowed pursuit of democracy and her peace-keeping role at the world's troubled spots make her a fitting case, in our modest opinion, for a round of not merely applause but concrete support in shape of investment, technical assistance and trade access.

The joint communique issued at the end of Hasina-Clinton meeting in Washington on Thursday is a portrayal of a certain point of maturation reached in the US-Bangla relationship over time. It is featured by exploratory, definitive and forward-looking elements which need to be followed up through what has been envisaged as 'continuing constructive consultation' between government officials and private sector leaders of both countries.

The formulation on gas sounds positive with importance being attached to estimating Bangladesh's gas resources and treating the latter as a vital input for the country's development and improvement of the lives of people.

It is good to note that both sides have welcomed the progress achieved in negotiations on two different questions: conclusion of an extradition treaty with the USA in connection with return of the convicted fugitive killers in Bangabandhu assassination case and building a new container terminal at the Chittagong seaport.

Significantly also the research assistance being offered to contain arsenic contamination in Bangladesh goes down very well with.

There are basically two areas we would like to lend a special focus around in view of the potential these hold to put us on road to global market integration which we need to achieve for a meaningful entry into the new millennium mould. First and foremost, it is the removal of quota restrictions on 31 categories of garments that we seek along with their duty free access. Beyond that we want preferential treatment to such items as canned food, hosiery, silk products, packed tea, spices, jewellery, leather and leather goods and travel goods as an LDC which is not without precedent.

Cooperation with the US in the IT sphere is the most coveted thing for us. For our linkage with the international IT infrastructure we certainly need the submarine fibre optic cable in the Bay of Bengal coupled with an appropriate telecom infrastructure but in none of these can we make any headway unless we have developed a huge pool of IT personnel. They should work here, they ought to gain entry into the US market as well to fling all doors open to progress.

Welcome End to CAAB Slumber

FINALLY, the Civil Aviation Authority in Bangladesh (CAAB) has decided to launch an orchestrated 'cleansing' operation to rid the Zia International Airport (ZIA) of 'resident' vagrants and people 'loitering with intent'. Regrettably, one reporter of the BBC Bengali Service had to be mugged and roughed up in the early hours of Tuesday, that too just a few paces away from a police patrol van, before the CAAB slumber came to an end. Nevertheless, the positive side of it is that the effort towards redress has so far been decisive and definitive. The authorities have over the years shown a rather routine inclination to such knee-jerk measures as increasing number of police personnel in and around the ZIA, largely unnecessary security checks at a few points leading to and out of the airport and even more unwarranted restriction on vehicular movement. This time around, quite encouragingly, some measure of organised thought seems to have gone behind the whole operation. Engagement of as many as 15 different security agencies to turn the international airport into a crime-free zone bears testimony to this.

However, there are certain things that the people in charge of planning and execution must constantly bear in mind. As one official at the airport has rightly pointed out, the criminal and anti-social elements do "keep a low profile" when such drives are on only to resurface once the initial enthusiasm dies down. In effect, therefore, the perpetrators remain beyond the hand of law. Therefore, such operations should be sustained for much longer duration than we have seen before. There is no reason to doubt that well-organised gangs are controlling the criminal and anti-social activities in and around the airport. It is highly likely that they have their own men on the CAAB itself who are not essentially lower-level employees. Also, there is the distinct possibility of the operation being controlled by people outside the installation with the blessing of socially and politically influential individuals.

We are glad that the authorities have finally undertaken the 'cleansing' operation with a degree of seriousness never seen before and, needless to say, hardly expected of them. The current drive is highly likely to bump into a series of extra-professional impediments. Nevertheless, the job needs to be done and done now. Already the situation has taken embarrassing proportions. Further indifference could push the problem to a point beyond control and immune to any remedial measure. What could be more pathetic than the fact that passengers arriving on late-night flights take no "chances and sleep on the sofas and chairs and go home in the morning"? What could be more shameful than the fact that the victims don't lodge any complaint in fear of getting doubly 'victimised'?

No leader of any state entity with even minimum of commitment to peace could ever agree to authorise military attacks against another state entity, indeed a peace partner, regardless of the nature of violence on the ground by some aggrieved people. Even killing of two undercover Israeli security men, who were in the unauthorised area, by a mob and not by Palestinian police could not warrant such an abominable action from Israel's military. It is military. It is recognised that the killing of the undercover security men was savage and inhuman, but the killing by the Israel's security forces of a 12-year Palestinian boy Mohammad who was trying to hide in the lap of his father was even more savage and inhuman. He was only one of dozens of Palestinian teenagers killed by the Israeli security forces. In two and half weeks' violence about 100 Palestinians and Arab Israelis were killed by the Israelis. The UN Human Rights Group has already accused Israel of 'war crimes' against Palestinian people.

It has been recognised by the UNSC by a resolution that Ariel Sharon's visit to the holy sites was a "provocation" and there was "excessive use of force" by Israel against Palestinians. The US abstained though it was not happy with the resolution but did not veto the resolution apparently to send a signal to Israel that the facts given by the UNSC were not something that could be challenged. The US President did the right thing by allowing the resolution to pass through the UNSC. Indeed, the peace that prevailed for several years in the region and the trust that grew between the leaders of the two peoples the Palestinians and the Israelis were suddenly and deliberately destroyed by Ariel Sharon's visit to the sites holy to the Muslims. This visit was undoubtedly a "provocation" that led to Palestinian protests. The protest indeed involved, as

usual, stone throwing by Palestinian youths which could not warrant the use of live bullets against them. This led to several deaths and indeed there was no earthly reason for the use of live ammunition against stone throwing crowd. Israel knew well that even one death would escalate violence and various reports show that even on the first day there were as many as seven deaths in and around the holy places. Therefore, Israel used excessive force basically against the stone throwing Palestinian crowd. In view of this, Israel is seen as the one responsible for starting the violence in the first place through one of its leaders' visit that led to the protest and also for escalating the violence.

When the situation went out of control, the US, the UN and international community came forward to help stem the violence. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was the first to arrive at the troubled area followed by Russia, Britain, EU and others. Of course, President Mubarak and King Abdullah were already working to help contain the situation. Kofi Annan worked very hard and his shuttle diplomacy for the first week is certainly laudable but could not bring any real reduction in the level of violence on the ground except some lull for a couple of hours. Indeed, worst happened later. Apparently to take revenge for the killing of a 12-year old boy, two of the undercover security men were lynched by an angry Palestinian mob though Palestinian police tried to save

them. Israel's military responded by aerial attack on the Palestinian positions and particularly against police posts something not befitting for a state's armed forces and brought the area to the brink of war.

In the backdrop of this, the emergency summit was convened by President Hosni Mubarak at Red Sea resort of

Sharm-el-Sheikh on October 16, 2000. President Clinton was invited to lead the summit supported by King Abdullah II of Jordan, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, EU Security Chief Javier Solana. The summit was presided over by President Hosni Mubarak. The summit's negotiating atmosphere was obviously very tense. President Arafat and Prime Minister Barak reportedly had a courtesy handshake but later sat across the table and had no further direct communications. The talks were however, through President Clinton and President Mubarak. One can see the amount of damage inflicted even on the leaders' personal relationship which is vital for the resumption of any peace talks.

However, because of President Clinton's personal commitment to Middle East peace, he obviously pressured both Barak and Arafat to agree to the "statement of understanding" which was, however, unsigned. At the end of hastily called and hurriedly finished 28-hour summit, President Clinton read out the statement which said that Prime Minister Barak and President

has his political problems at home, still it's somewhat easy for him to ask his security forces to observe the deal but for Arafat it's an uphill task to convince the agitated Palestinians who lost their men and children in the hands of Israeli forces.

For the sake of peace both leaders must make honest efforts. The violence would quickly come down if Prime Minister Barak asks his forces to leave the troubled areas with their tanks and other equipment without waiting for the Palestinian youths to stop throwing stones. In other words, to help the situation Israeli forces must make moves first and go out of sight of the Palestinians and remain so for sometime till the situation returns to normal.

Tough some redeployment has taken place, still the Israeli security forces are all around. It has been reported that some eight Palestinian suspects for the murder of two Israeli undercover men have been arrested in Ramallah by Shin Beth and Israeli undercover men. This shows that Israeli undercover men to move about in the Palestinian areas without authorisation. All these have been apparently responsible for continuation of stone throwing and other types of violence.

In any case, for a meaningful outcome of the Sharm agreement, Arafat has also to go out of his way to beg his people to show restraint and give him another chance to work for peace. He must tell the stone throwing crowd that they are no match to the Israel's most

Arafat agreed to make public statements "unequivocally calling for an end to the violence" and to take "immediate and concrete measures to end the current confrontation, eliminate points of friction, ensure an end to violence and incitement, maintain calm and prevent recurrence of recent events." President Arafat reportedly agreed to re-arrest the Hamas militants released from Palestinian jails and disarm the militia faction Tanzim of his own Fatah Group.

Agreeing to a "statement" in the Gulf resort of the Red Sea is one thing and implementing the same in the volatile areas where the age-old frustrated people are in charge is another. However, the leaders went back to their respective areas. Though Barak

is reversed quickly, it's not only the Palestinians who will lose, the Israelis will also lose heavily in terms of peace and security and relations with some of the Arab countries.

The Arab summit has already started its work at the Foreign Ministers level and may be some of these Arab countries would be pressured to limit or even sever diplomatic relations with Israel apart from cutting the economic relations. The US may also suffer in the Arab countries due to Israel's folly.

Palestinians have now suffered over 100 deaths and thousands and thousands before but they have again proved to the world that sovereignty of East Jerusalem and particularly that of the sites holy to the Muslims is something that cannot be compromised.

An early recognition of this truth, however unpalatable it might be to some others, would certainly help any future peace negotiations.

OPINION

Gas Export : Boon or Bane?

Dr. Iftikhar-ul-Awwal

IT would not be far wrong to say that the life-blood of Bangladesh is gas. In 1993, natural gas met 68 per cent of the country's primary commercial energy requirements against that of 25 per cent by imported oil, 4 per cent by hydroelectricity and 3 per cent by imported coal. The dependency of the commercial sector on natural gas has all the more increased since then with the setting up of more electricity generating plants, fertilizer factories, other kinds of industries as well as expansion of the domestic requirements for cooking, etc. The average daily requirement of gas has increased from 650 million metric cubic feet per day (mmcf/d) in 1993 to 900 mmcf/d at present. In other words, there has been an average annual increase by about 5.5 per cent. This increase has been a modest one due to sluggish industrial growth over the past couple of years. Moreover, even today 95 per cent of the country's population is still out of the network of gas supply and 80 per cent have no access to electricity. Due to multifarious factors, therefore, our per capita consumption of energy is still the lowest in South Asia, about one-fifth that of India and Pakistan. So there is indeed enough scope for expansion of the gas market within Bangladesh by setting up more gas-based fertilizer plants and increasing supply in power generation sector. Besides, we can also go for other innovative gas based industries and provide citizens with cheap, clean and environment friendly fuel both for home use and use in vehicles in the form of compressed natural gas (CNG).

Presently, each of the quarters concerned the international oil companies (IOCs), powerful foreign governments and donor agencies are speculating on our probable and actual reserve (including recoverable reserve) of gas. Their estimates vary widely from 12/13 trillion cubic feet of proven reserve to anything up to 33/35 trillion cubic feet of undiscovered reserve. Meanwhile, a U.S. geological survey team has been engaged in Bangladesh to assess with some degree of cer-

tainity the actual quantum of gas reserve. Unfortunately, however, such study would hardly be acceptable to the people in general as it is believed that they are interested in export of gas from Bangladesh. The estimates would thus be suspect from the very beginning. The survey work, to be credible, needed to be conducted such party as constituted with approval of the government of Bangladesh. Only after a study of the fact-finding committee's report can the Bangladeshi government decide (parliamentary sanction is also a must) whether to export gas or conserve it for future generations.

In this connection, we should remember that all the major political parties in Bangladesh are in agreement not to export gas if the quantity falls short of national requirements for the next fifty years. If the rate of consumption of natural gas in Bangladesh increases, say at 10 per cent per year over the present consumption of .33 trillion cubic feet, it is almost certain that we cannot export our golden egg. The supply would possibly be exhausted by the year 2020 or so. Therefore, even if the guess estimate of 33/35 TCF of undiscovered gas be taken as correct, the future need which lies principally on the expansion of industrial activities would debar us from exporting natural gas. In this connection, it would be pertinent to remember that the country is not amply blessed with other valuable and easily accessible natural resources either. How can we then export our 'engine of growth'?

Strategic reasons also stand out prominently against gas export. We would indeed be placed in a vulnerable position if we become wholly dependent on imported oil, the price of which is also rising in the international market beyond our capacity to pay. This together with the fact that it needs to be imported from foreign sources by ships over vast distances would make its landing difficult specially during periods of war and hostility. Furthermore, once we start exporting gas through pipelines (the most cost

effective way, according to the international oil companies), Bangladesh would find it extremely difficult to regulate its production and distribution. We would indeed be at the mercy of foreigners.

Yet, sadly enough, international pressure is mounting on Bangladesh for creating a wider outlet for its gas. The international oil companies and senior government officials from foreign countries are busy creating amongst us an awareness about the crucial role that gas export can play in the economic development of Bangladesh. They are pointing to lack of initiative on the part of bureaucrats to bring in necessary reforms in the energy sector and castigating our political leadership for their immature stand on the issue that confront them. The President of the American Chamber of Commerce even suggested linking of our apparel exports to U.S. market with that of gas export.

The prescriptions of the vested

interest groups in favour of gas export must be countered. It is our sacred duty to mobilize public opinion through holding of meetings and symposiums, workshops and seminars and disseminate its deliberations prominently in the media. Professional groups as well as the government should bring in necessary reforms in the energy sector and castigating our political leadership for their immature stand on the issue that confront them. The President of the American Chamber of Commerce even suggested linking of our apparel exports to U.S. market with that of gas export.

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