

Sensible Pak Move

THE recalling by Pakistan of its irresponsible and unworthy deputy high commissioner brings to a close the latest drama in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations. We are happy that Pakistan spared us the task of expelling its diplomat, for, expel him we would have, given the nature of his arrogant remarks. We are glad that Islamabad had the good sense to understand the depth of damage caused by its errant official and how seriously it had affected our bilateral relations. By this move at least some sort of damage-control mechanism can be set to work and the spirit of SAARC, already under strain from the deteriorating Indo-Pak relations, can be saved to the extent possible. We would like to commend our foreign office for the manner in which it handled the whole episode - firm without being offensive, determined without being destructive and unrelenting without being undiplomatic. The message got through clear and loud to Islamabad and, to its credit, it responded with sensitivity rather than with stubbornness.

However, mystery still shrouds as to why the Pakistani deputy high commissioner said what he said, and chose this particular time - beginning of December, our month of victory - for doing so. He could have easily said many things, couched in diplomatic parlance, which could have easily conveyed his views without hurting the feelings of our people. Yet he deliberately chose words and expressions that he knew very well - having been here for more than two years - would raise a storm among us. His words echoed what we heard during the 1971 genocide by Pakistan army that "...it were Awami League miscreants who were killing the people and not the Pakistani army". For every freedom fighter and for all those who remembered those nightmarish days of killing, looting and genocide of '71, the similarity of these words made us think that Irfan Raja was some one from the Pak military of '71, and who has been frozen in time - and of course mindset - and suddenly was resurrected after three decades to insult us.

We express our tremendous satisfaction in the way our people - as one - reacted against this insult to our Liberation War. Pakistan and the world came to know once again, - if there was any need to reiterate this fundamental message - as to how dearly we hold the memory and the values of the war of independence. Though this latest drama has ended somewhat satisfactorily for us, the fundamental question about Pakistan apologising to our people for its genocide in '71 still remains. Recently we happily noted that several groups inside Pakistan were expressing support for Pakistan's apology. We should engage ourselves with them and also with global human rights groups who can spread the words on what happened in '71. We must also try to incorporate the genocide of '71 as one of the "crimes against humanity" events that are being chronicled by the United Nations. We should not rest now that this episode comes to a close. We must inform the world as to how the Pakistan government and its army behaved with us during our Liberation War. This should be done not to seek revenge against Pakistan but to inform the world and put this tragedy into history so that no other people need to suffer and be humiliated as we were.

Hopes in Sri Lanka

THE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his annual Heroes' Day speech on Monday offered unconditional talks to the Sri Lankan government in an apparent softening of his position on the question of a separate Tamil state. This was, however, accompanied with the LTTE reiterating its earlier demands that the government declare a cease-fire and withdraw its troops from Tamil occupied areas, conditions that Kumaratunga had rejected in the past.

This is certainly a significant development, not just because implacable Prabhakaran sounds pragmatic and conciliatory but also because of his overturc coinciding with Kumaratunga's victory in the parliamentary elections. Also, this comes at a time when Colombo has been the focal point of diplomatic initiative undertaken earlier by Norwegian peace mediator Erik Solheim and British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Peter Hain; and lately, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth has appeared in a peace-making role.

It does not seem likely that prior to the talks Kumaratunga would agree to a ceasefire, let alone any partial pull-out of troops from the Northeast. In fact, she is certain to insist on talking her devolution package first to see how prepared the LTTE is for a break with its traditions of insurgency and call for a separate state. As a friend of Sri Lanka and a fellow member of SAARC, we in Bangladesh hope that the much-awaited dialogue between LTTE and the government will commence at an early date paving the way for a peaceful settlement of the long-running ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka.

To the Editor ...

Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner's atrocity

Sir, I was shocked when I read in the newspaper that Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan Irfan Raja had made some derogatory remarks regarding our War of Independence. I would like to remind Mr Irfan Raja and General Parvez Musharraf that in 1971 it was the Pakistani who committed the worst and most heinous crimes and genocide on innocent Bangladeshi in the name of religion. The whole world knows very well what the Pakistani army did during those days.

Once again I would like to remind Irfan Raja and General Musharraf that one day the new generation of Pakistan will apologise to Bangladesh for the crimes and genocide committed by their ancestors.

Here I would like to say something about our government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well. The government should have declared Irfan Raja as persona-non-grata and expelled him

within 24 hours. Everyone should realise that we are not the puppet of any country.

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka 1000

Fires in the garment factories: Revamp BGMEA

Sir, It looks like that the BGMEA may be held to be morally guilty for the lapses in factory safety measures which has resulted in the deaths of about 200 garment workers due to fire and other hazards in the recent past. The latest fire in Narasingdi is a shocker. Consolatory statements are not enough. A media campaign needs to be mounted to wake up the sleepy policy making authorities.

The problems are known to the government and the BGMEA, but both are lax in public interest and the authorities are unable to exert enough pressure on practical enforcement of the regulations in the books. This foreign-exchange earning industry is being coddled and criminal negli-

gence is being overlooked. Rules and regulations are to be obeyed and implemented and there should be no nepotism.

The monetary expenditure on phased safety programmes is not a problem, as thousands of BGMEA members can contribute to create a fund for the safety and well-being of the million workers. This booming industry has created an HR problem for international intervention, as the local authorities look helpless.

The integrated approach is missing, and the political will is absent.

The safety of workers is a human issue, not a political issue. The NGOs and the CBAs have to create the necessary administrative pressure for the government and the owners to initiate and enforce practical steps for daily application. The official administration will be held responsible for any harm to the garment industry.

The politicians, the political leaders and the political parties, who represent the people, owe a moral obligation to the nation to deliver the right measures at the

Asian Free Trade Zone: A Learning Experience

Given that multilateralism is a slow and inefficient way of getting to multilateral free trade, RTAs (regional trade agreements) offer a faster and more predictable way of getting there. The experience of the ASEAN economies with the extended free trade agreement would, therefore, be of immense importance to the other countries in the region.

PREFERENTIAL trade agreements have multiplied dramatically over the last three decades. They have proliferated to the point where virtually all members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) belong to some form of regional trade agreements (RTAs). These RTAs, sanctioned by Article XXIV of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff (GATT) are mostly in the form of a customs union, a free trade agreement, or an interim agreement leading to one or the other. Currently, more than half of the world trade is estimated to take place within RTAs. Last week, ministers from the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed to consider an East Asian free trade zone that could rival the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). They have commissioned a one-year feasibility study of a proposal to link their economies with those of China, Japan and South Korea.

It would mark a further step in efforts by Asian countries to promote faster regional integration through trade agreements. This follows a similar announcement earlier last month by the leaders of nine African countries including Egypt, Kenya, Sudan, and Zambia. These countries launched a free trade area, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) to guarantee the free movement of goods and services within the region and remove all tariff and non-tariff barriers. While the free trade agreement among the African countries took effect immediately, the ASEAN is taking a more cautious approach. The plan for a free trade area will be put into effect gradually only if approved by the leaders at their next summit in a year. However, there are two immediate prob-

lems that these countries face regarding this plan. First, the members are divided over how quickly to liberalise trade. They are facing problems keeping on schedule plans for their own free trade pact, the ASEAN Free Trade Area, due to be launched in 2002. In fact, they are struggling to implement existing plans to lower import barriers in the face of Malaysia's refusal to cut its high tariffs on vehicle imports.

Second, their efforts to include three big economies - China, Japan, and South Korea would make their task even harder. China is now more concerned with the demands of WTO membership. Japan and South Korea are against opening up their protected agricultural markets to outside competition. Despite these concerns, the decision to explore the possibility of free trade arrangements among these countries indicate that they realise the risk of falling behind economically unless they can create an arrangement to match EU and NAFTA.

It also exemplifies the worries among the ASEAN countries about increasing competition from China for trade and investment. There has already been a big shift in foreign direct investment flows away from the ASEAN members and towards China and other north-east Asian economies. Given the current development, a question that should concern the policy makers in this region is whether these RTAs are beneficial institutions that complement WTO objectives, or do they act as serious imped-

ments to globalism? Are there incentives for RTAs to keep expanding with more members so as to move towards multilateral free trade eventually, or will there be incentives instead to keep new members out? These trading arrangements are posing both an important challenge as well as a unique opportunity for the policy

makers around the world. It is a challenge because RTAs can lead to high welfare costs for both the participating as well as non-participating countries by diverting trade and investment. It can also generate important welfare gains for the participants as well as the rest of the world by creating regional dynamic forces in favour of free trade. RTAs have been an integral part of the world trading system throughout the period under the GATT. They were originally accepted as exception to the GATT's most favoured nation (MFN) principle. Today, they are customary arrangements that have grown in significance. Most RTA formation has occurred in two bursts of activity: first, during the 1960s and 1970s when the growth was concentrated exclusively in Europe, and then again since 1990 when the growth has been

more widespread. The recent spurt in regional trade agreements can be attributed to the need of many smaller countries to complement internal efficiency gains from trade with external market access.

Trade creation occurs when a lowered trade barrier between member countries leads one

an incentive to shift their imports from outside countries to member countries once preferential access is granted. However, if a country has high tariffs and other trade barriers, then the preference given to member countries may impact the extent and speed of unilateral trade liberalisation by members of an RTA. If, for example, members of an RTA become more willing to conduct unilateral trade reforms or grant concession in the context of a multilateral negotiation, then RTAs can be seen as contributing toward a more liberal trading system. On the other hand, if countries that join an RTA develop a 'fortress mentality', they may see a strengthened regional market as an excuse for erecting barriers to external competition. This would be a further cause for global concern. Thus the regional trading agreements have both trade-creating as well as trade-diverting effects. From a static perspective, RTAs are more likely to increase world efficiency if their primary effect is to create new investment and trade rather than to divert existing investment and trade. The probability of this happening depend upon existing trading pattern among the RTA members and the way in which the agreement is structured. Given that multilateralism is a slow and inefficient way of getting to multilateral free trade, RTAs regional trade agreements offer a faster and more predictable way of getting there. The experience of the ASEAN economies with the extended free trade agreement would, therefore, be of immense importance to the other countries in the region.

would have invested at home, or not at all. Investment diversion occurs if investment in a member country displaces investment in the rest of the world.

This can happen when a member country maintains restrictive barriers to investment from non-member countries while granting preferential treatment to investment from partners in the RTA. Recent economic analyses have shown that RTAs may impact the extent and speed of unilateral trade liberalisation by members of an RTA. If, for example, members of an RTA become more willing to conduct unilateral trade reforms or grant concession in the context of a multilateral negotiation, then RTAs can be seen as contributing toward a more liberal trading system. On the other hand, if countries that join an RTA develop a 'fortress mentality', they may see a strengthened regional market as an excuse for erecting barriers to external competition. This would be a further cause for global concern. Thus the regional trading agreements have both trade-creating as well as trade-diverting effects. From a static perspective, RTAs are more likely to increase world efficiency if their primary effect is to create new investment and trade rather than to divert existing investment and trade. The probability of this happening depend upon existing trading pattern among the RTA members and the way in which the agreement is structured. Given that multilateralism is a slow and inefficient way of getting to multilateral free trade, RTAs regional trade agreements offer a faster and more predictable way of getting there. The experience of the ASEAN economies with the extended free trade agreement would, therefore, be of immense importance to the other countries in the region.

Third Front - Yet a Distant Possibility

Sakyasen Mittra writes from Calcutta

WHEN the former West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu had resigned, he had an ambition in mind. That is to once more set up the Third Front: A group of parties that were politically opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party and its other allies.

However, at the moment, it seems, that the job Jyoti Basu has in hand is a very tough one. As three of the smaller Left minded parties have already made it clear that they will not have anything to do with the Third Front, if the Congress is involved. Basu and few other leaders, including the two former Prime Ministers, H.D. Devegowda and Inder Kumar Gujral, however, feel that the Congress is necessary for the success of the Third Front. The opposition to the inclusion of the Congress has come from the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the CPI. All the three have quite categorically stated that they would rather fight the elections alone than join a front which has the Congress in it.

The main amongst them was the Samajwadi party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav. The enmity between the two is a well known fact in the political circle of the country. So Basu will have to deal not only with problems within the Left Front itself, but also from other parties scattered over the country regarding the formation of the Third Front. He had hoped that at least he would not have to face any opposition from the allies within the Left Front. But now it seems that more than anything else he will have to tackle the other Left minded parties of the country regarding the association (direct or indirect) of the Congress with the Third Front. The problem is really big, simply because the Left parties in India are probably the most non-flexible parties in the country.

There are other problems also. The CPI and the RSP feel that the moment the Congress is included in the fight against the BJP, the

power struggle in the Third Front would begin. "A front survives on sacrifice," said Manju Kumar Majumdar, the state secretary of the CPI on Monday. "We can only survive if we do not fight amongst ourselves for power. However, once the Congress comes into the picture there will be a mad scramble for power." Majumdar is also against Basu's theory. "You cannot ever shake hands and become a friend of a party that has been our main enemy for the last 50 years. That will give rise to serious political complications," said Majumdar. Basu's troubles, however, does not end here. A few days ago, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader and the defunct Chief Minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav was in Calcutta. During a telephonic conversation with Basu, he made it clear that he was against some of the other leaders that Basu had been talking to.

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right time, or they should be replaced without sympathy.

The time is now, before the next general elections. The attitude of the owners of the factories is detestable, as it appears to public opinion. BGMEA has to create a fund for the safety and well-being of the million workers. This booming industry has created an HR problem for international intervention, as the local authorities look helpless.

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OPINION

You Forgive Those Who Want to be Forgiven

Tashfeen Hussain

Few weeks ago, President Clinton became the first US President to visit Vietnam since it became a communist nation after American forces left the country more than 25 years ago. About 3 million Vietnamese died during one of the bloodiest and longest of civil wars of this century, so as more than 50,000 American lives were sacrificed. As Clinton stepped into the soil of Vietnam, he profoundly acknowledged the wrong that was brought to this beautiful land because of the war. No, he didn't apologise; however, his mood reflected that US realises that it was a wrong war to be involved with, and wants to help Vietnam to heal. The US President did not reflect the simple question: "Keeping our ego aside, did we behave like humans with them?" They need to look at the mothers, wives, brothers, sisters, and friends, and think: "How would I feel, if my father, brother, or wife would be brutally killed?" It has been 29 years, since they have not been asking themselves these questions. It is because of the absence of that soul searching for which they are still going through a denial stage. It is because of a lack of willingness to accept the history and acknowledge the facts for which their Deputy High Commissioner could unleash such lies and impudence. It is because as a nation they have miserably failed to feel sorry, to sense that our wounds need to be healed, to perceive that for us to forget they need to be forgiven first. They tell us to forget, when they are not willing to forget and to be forgiven; when they are still full of revenge for their defeat, when their animal instincts urge them to vent their hatred towards our independence and national identity. It is time for them to think like humans again.

Irfan Raza is not alone in Pakistan; rather, there are millions like him who nurture hatred rather than sympathy for those who sacrificed themselves for our cause of independence. Thus, how can we forget or forgive for

themselves to be ready to forgive and forget. We can be there for them to heal their wounds. And, more than us, it is the Pakistanis who can do it. But, before they can start helping in healing, they need to search their own souls, they need to ask themselves the simple question: "Keeping our ego aside, did we behave like humans with them?" They need to look at the mothers, wives, brothers, sisters, and friends, and think: "How would I feel, if my father, brother, or wife would be brutally killed?" It has been 29 years, since they have not been asking themselves these questions. It is because of the absence of that soul searching for which they are still going through a denial stage. It is because of a lack of willingness to accept the history and acknowledge the facts for which their Deputy High Commissioner could unleash such lies and impudence. It is because as a nation they have miserably failed to feel sorry, to sense that our wounds need to be healed, to perceive that for us to forget they need to be forgiven first. They tell us to forget, when they are not willing to forget and to be forgiven; when they are still full of revenge for their defeat, when their animal instincts urge them to vent their hatred towards our independence and national identity. It is time for us to remember what happened in 1971 more than ever rather than forgetting it. Today, it is time for us to realise that we should not forget or forgive, because you only forgive those who want to be forgiven. And it is time for us to act. It's good that Pakistan has called back its diplomat Irfan Raza, but we want to tell them that we will never forget unless they feel like to be forgiven first, and ask for it.

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Getting Rusty: Whither Maintenance?

Alif Zabr

MOST of the Postal letter boxes on the roadside are old and rusty, and beyond economic repair; as the regular replacement programmes cannot be implemented due to shortage of funds (most likely), inadequate inspection, indifference, and absence of disciplinary action in the modern civil service.

I inserted a letter (addressed to the Editor) into a roadside post box, and got my hand scratched and bleeding. The letter would not go in and drop inside. The inside was rusted and some other user (a member of the public) had twisted the rusted iron sheet inside, desperately trying to insert the letter. I have also seen (earlier) a couple of letter boxes without lock.

During the British period, the Postal vans carried the logo "Service Before Self". Now few citizens would deny that the slogan has been reversed: "Self before service". We see so many examples everyday, everywhere. The same slogan applies to the other public service providers, such as the elected representatives of the people. If politics is rusty, nothing can shine, or be in a normal operating condition. This is the state of the cultivation of democracy on one side of the Buriganga. The latter is shrinking and disappearing, slowly but surely, thanks to the popular entrepreneurship of misuse of power and influence. But ultimately however much land does man require?

Rust is a part of civilization, and its antidote, namely, oil, is not in short supply. In fact oiling is a booming business today, although misspelled on the VIPs, and not applied on the machinery. Paint is a protection against rust; and it comes in many colours. Now plastic synthetic paints are available to hide any defect, or weakness. Physical or moral? But plastic politics or administration will not do.

The rust inside the letter box escaped attention as it was inside. The problem with public administration is internal rusting. Political cosmetics cannot remove the latter. Life may depend on the liver, but internal rusting comes first. The electric power supply breakdowns and load-shedding have become so regular that it reflects a true image of the state administration. But political power-shedding is rare, and this culture is fairly stable, regardless

to be developed, to last and shine for a long time. The job of the national leaders is to reveal the rot inside. Black money is a corrosion, leading to corruption. The nation is suffering from political rust