The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI
DHAKA WENESDAY JANUARY 31, 2001

Chittagong Port is a national asset

Declare services under it Essential

CHITTAGONG Port is the world's second most expensive one after the port of Yokohama in terms of cargo-handling and other costs. It is also probably the most badly managed port. Mired in a regulatory maze of customs and ministerial procedures and controls, the CPA is also critically assailed by a combination of rent-seeking and uncontrolled activism by workers' unions. Rent-seeking extracts nearly twice the amount that the CPA earns annually, and labour unrest and strikes have caused it to be closed for an average of nearly 96 hours per month for well over three years now. All this has led to the erosion of efficiency and predictability of port operations, loss of control by management authorities, and a rapid escalation in cost for both exporter and importer. The end result is that business competitiveness has been seriously impaired by the exorbitant cost of cargo, not only in monetary terms, but also in time lost due to delays, strikes and stoppages.

Various proposals, such as greater involvement of the private sector and reform of the CPA, are valuable but they can only bring about piecemeal results. The only way out of the crisis-ridden situation is to declare the services under the CPA 'essential' in terms of the relevant act and to centralise management under a fully empowered authority.

Chittagong Port is a national asset and ought to be protected for all business, labour and other concerned parties. Workers' rights should be safeguarded by specific guarantees in the new mandate but a complete weeding out of the rent-seeking tradition and labour union tyranny must be undertaken. The time has come for strong and bold measures that will make Chittagong Port business-worthy again.

Violence against garment workers

Home Ministry should step in

A disturbing dimension has been added to the grim conditions under which women work in the garment sector. A study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has found that violence against women working in the garment sector has been endemic.

One of the most disturbing findings of this report is that nearly 75 per cent of abusive incidents occur on the streets as garment workers commute to and from work. They are attacked by mastaans, sometimes kidnapped, often mugged and frequently sexually harassed by young hooligans and even the police. Many incidents are never reported because the victims fear reprisals from their tormentors, aided by the police.

It is the duty of the police to protect all citizens, especially those more vulnerable, and not to abuse and exploit them nor let others do the same. The Home Ministry has now to take a serious view of the incidents and see to it that police abuse against women is stopped in the first place. Then only will they be in a position to exercise their authority over the mastaans who perpetrate violence against garment workers in their dwelling places, which are slums, or hostels or mess houses.

Frequent beatings and verbal abuse of garment workers by their supervisors inside the factories have also been alleged. We have already advised owners of garment factories to put an end to all forms of exploitation and ensure workplace safety and security, and we do so again. Particularly in the light of the gender-biased abuses that the ILO report has identified, the matter deserves immediate attention of the government. To ignore this would be to invite social turmoil and economic losses. Although Bangladesh is making economic gains because of globalization, the hard work is being done by workers, many of whom are women, in the export-oriented sectors. We must ensure that our economic gains are not won by exacting an immeasurable social and human toll on society.

Religiously unreligious

KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

Pakistan's reaction to India's unilateral ceasefire is churlish. Once again there is an undue haste for a tripartite conference. This is an exercise which Islamabad has gone over before. It still has not understood its futility.

India cannot solve the Kashmir problem without Pakistan. If it could, it would have. This is the reason why Jawaharlal Nehru sent Sheikh Abdullah to meet General Ayub in 1964. And this is the reason why both the Shimla Agreement (1972) and the Lahore Declaration (1999) said that the two countries will find "a joint settlement of Jammu and Kashmir." Pakistan's reiteration of its demand for a tripartite conference is nothing sort of putting the cart before the horse. There has to be the cessation of violence. Only a peaceful atmosphere can prepare the ground. How is a meaningful dialogue possible after the Laskar-e-Toiba's threat to the life of India's Prime Minister? The outfit is operating from Pakistan. Jihad, presently less mentioned by General Pervez Musharraf, is the Laskar's war cry. Such a frenzy by fundamentalists can destroy any effort at peace. By extending the ceasefire third in a row Atal Behari Vajpayee has once again indicated his resolve to solve the problems between the two countries through peace, not war. I wish Musharraf had also reciprocated the gesture by stopping the supply of arms and giving refuge to militants. He should realise that patience in India is wearing thin. The ceasefire does not mean that one country has accepted the viewpoint of the other. It only means that both want to give peace a chance. There is no other option. Pakistan has to rein in the jihadis on its soil. If Musharraf can declare a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC), what stops him from having it all over? He had agreed to such a proposition six months ago during a conversation with me. If that were to happen, I can visualise a meeting between India and Pakistan at the highest level. What I cannot visualise is how the two will sort out the Kashmir problem unless one of them or both change their outlook. True, Jammu and Kashmir is a Muslim majority state. But that does not give Pakistan the legitimacy to demand it. Had the state gone to Pakistan when India was partitioned on the basis of the two-nation theory, the latter would have taken it in its stride. Now, after 53 years of independence, how can it negate the ethos of freedom struggle a secular polity? What does it do to the Hindutva forces which will be emboldened in its efforts to convert India into a Hindu Rashtriya?

Leave aside Hari Singh, the Hindu ruler, who signed the state's instrument of accession to India. Sheikh Abdullah, the state's most popular leader at that time, too, chose to align himself with New Delhi. A staunch follower of Islam as the Sheikh was, he saw the reflection of Kashmiryat in India's pluralism. The ties between New Delhi and Srinagar are that of secularism.

I am amazed to read an interview by Syed Ali Shah Gillani, a prominent leader of the All Party Hurriyat Conference that there is "no place for secular parties in Kashmir." He says that "the present struggle (in the Valley) is part of Islam and cannot be separated from religion." Gillani has, in fact, maligned the 12-year-old movement, which is meant to register Kashmir's entity and its demand for autonomy. He is also a wrong person to represent the Kashmiris. But if the Hurriyat has selected him to go to Pakistan, New Delhi should not come in the way. The purpose of the Hurriyat delegation is to persuade the militants to stop firing, not to negotiate any settlement between India and Pakistan.

Since Islamabad likes Gillani, one wonders whether it shares his views as well. If so, it is living in a make-belief world. India will never accept the two-nation theory. Most Indians did not even contribute to it when the subcontinent was divided on that basis. The 130 million Muslims in India are part and parcel of the same nation. In any case, New Delhi cannot afford to settle the Kashmir issue on such a theory because its own unity and integrity will become a question mark. There has to be another formula. The demand by Hindu fundamentalists is precisely the reverse of what Gillani and the like-minded in Pakistan cherish. They are far more powerful today than they were a decade ago. If religion were to determine the future of Kashmir, it would be disastrous for us. How do we stop Hindu fanatics from going to town with the argument that, even after 53 years of independence, the Muslim majority areas in Jammu and Kashmir want to join Pakistan because it is an Islamic country?

BETWEEN THE LINES

I can visualise the horrors of partition repeating themselves. Once again the wounds would be reopened. Whatever India has been able to do, probably not much, to inculcate the spirit of secularism among people will come to a nought. We are already weak and exposed. We cannot jeopardise our composite culture by accepting the principle of separateness...Religion strengthens faith in the principle of accommodation, not separation.

I can visualise the horrors of partition repeating themselves. Once again the wounds would be reopened. Whatever India has been able to do, probably not much, to inculcate the spirit of secularism among people will come to a nought. We are already weak and exposed. We cannot jeopardise our composite culture by accepting the principle of separateness. Gillani's interview has made it clear to me why he was opposed to the return of Kashmiri pandits to their homes until there was an overall settlement of Kashmir. Gillani believes in a theocratic state, Kashmir without the Kashmiriyat. He is no different from the RSS which too believes in a state based on religion.

In fact, when the RSS talks about trifurcation of the state into the Muslim majority valley, the Hindu majority Jammu and the Buddhist majority Ladakh, it translates the sentiments of Gillani. Why have the two not made a joint front remains a mystery to me because there is hardly any difference in their thinking. Many in Pakistan have reminded me of Jawaharlal Nehru's promise to hold a plebiscite in the state after things had settled down. So many new factors have come into play since. For example, the induction of the US arms in Pakistan in 1954 when it became America's ally during the cold war, changed the balance in the subcontinent. In any case, a plebiscite is bound to take a religious turn. It would be the Quran versus the Gita, as happened during the referendum held in the North West Frontier Province to decide after partition whether it should go to India or Pakistan. New Delhi cannot risk a proposition which has religious overtones.

It is a pity that Pakistan has gone away from the principles which its founder had enunciated after its creation. I was still in my home town, Sialkot, when Mohammad Ali Jinnah said on August 13, 1947: 'You cease to be Muslims and Hindus, not in the religious sense but otherwise. You are now either Pakistanis or Indians.' This was indeed a secular thinking. Had he lived, he would have established in Pakistan a secular, democratic society. Maybe, the migrants would have returned to their homes as they had imagined they would do after the disturbances had subsided. Maybe, fundamentalists on both sides would have had no opportunity to exploit the religious sentiments. Still the fact is that neither Jinnah in Pakistan, nor Gandhi in India could stop parts of the subcontinent from going up in flames. Killing and looting in the name of religion went on for days without any check. Nearly one million were killed and 20 million were uprooted from their homes in the two countries.

Whatever the solution to Jammu and Kashmir and however long it might take, India, for one, can never agree to divide the state on the basis of religion. The sooner the likes of Gillani in Kashmir and in Pakistan realise this, the better it will be for them.

Religion strengthens faith in the principle of accommodation, not separation. In the moment of prayer, every man is at his best.

Peace process essential for resolving Kashmir problem

M.J. ZAHEDI

INDIA has extended the so-called ceasefire in Kashmir by another month. This has of course not done much to ease the pain of the Kashmiris who continue to live in fear. But it has raised the diplomatic stakes for Pakistan. Even newspapers here have admitted it. The News said that Pakistan would have to do a little better than continue to reject such moves as claptrap. All credit for this sudden change in India's stance must go to Mr Jaswant Singh, that country's external affairs minister. He has taken the initiative for his country to come out of the foot dragging. At the present moment it is stuck with the self-created problem of granting travel documents to the leader of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference. The process that started with the Hurriyat's move to send a team to Pakistan has become known as the peace process. It actually means a well-formulated strategy pursued by the two antagonistic parties for the gradual resolution of their conflicts. The term was actually coined by Harold Saunders of America, an expert on conflict resolution in the context of Arab-Israeli relations. It was later on applied on different troubled spots of the world, including South Africa, Namibia, Cambodia and Northern Ireland.

As far as India and Pakistan are concerned, the term seems to have been misunderstood by some circles. In the instant case it has to be viewed in the context of three important factors. First, it must be realised and accepted that no peace process can succeed unless it meets one of the important requirements: the concerned parties should hold and express the political will to be true to the fair and just principles in the agreement; they should also take public opinion into confidence. If one looks at peace process in different regions of the world, one cannot but be reminded of the fact that a peace process is not likely to be successful if it is not carefully designed and if it does not enjoy popular support. An example that comes to mind is the Egyptian-Israeli peace process beginning from President Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977. The most important element in it was the understanding that was present among the two leaders: both knew well that the chance that they had got could be missed only at the peril of properly dealing with the critical issues they were faced with. And that is exactly what happened.

But in the present case, what is wrong with the leaders of India and Pakistan is that both do not seem to comprehend the costs of confrontation. Of course of late there has grown an understanding, belated though, that there should be an end to the various acts of confrontation. Kashmir undoubtedly is a major cause of confrontation between Islamabad and Delhi, the lunching of a peace process will certainly contribute to bringing positive changes in relations between the two neighbours in particular and for establishing peace in South Asia in general.

Both countries realize that the road to peace is not easy and only as a result of a continuing process the two sides can terminate (or at least begin to do so) the conflict situation. The leaderships in the two countries will have to face the reality and come to terms for normalisation. The initiatives taken by Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris signify a change in the attitude that has been prevailing till now. The change in the role of the leaderships too is noticeable and indeed welcome.

But a peace process, whether 'home grown' or imposed cannot take off unless some suitable tangible steps are taken by the parties concerned for bettering the environment. New Delhi and Islamabad will have to show by appropriate actions that they mean business, that they will not be victims to paranoia and retrogression. The ceasefire announced by New Delhi against its actions against the militants in Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan's response by withdrawing extra troops it had deployed along the line of control are positive indications for the success of a home grown peace process. The initiative taken by the All Parties Hurriyat Conference to send a delegation to Pakistan for talks is another such welcome gesture. There are of course elements in all the three sides that can neutralise people who want to sustain the war process at the expense of peace, progress and prosperity of one billion people of south Asia.

LETTER FROM KARACHI

A peace process, whether 'home grown' or imposed cannot take off unless some suitable tangible steps are taken by the parties concerned for bettering the environment. New Delhi and Islamabad will have to show by appropriate actions that they mean business, that they will not be victims to paranoia and retrogression. The ceasefire announced by New Delhi against its actions against the militants in Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan's response by withdrawing extra troops it had deployed along the line of control are positive indications for the success of a home grown peace process.

Of course, outside 'help' will be welcomed, (even if not as a must thing), by all the three sides. But what sort of help exactly is needed to sustain the peace process? While the initiative must be carried forward themselves by the parties directly concerned, the outside world can surely facilitate and provide moral support and, of course, encouragement. Bt it will make a lot of sense, if the world, especially the developed countries, take a serious interest in the ongoing efforts for peace by taking two measures. One, offering support in providing technical assistance, particularly in terms of monitoring and verifying the progress of the agreements that the three parties will arrive at if the process ends successfully.

Secondly, the developed countries in particular must render great help by launching a financial package like the Marshall Plan, for the economic development of the beleaguered Kashmiris. Peace process between India and Pakistan is essential for avoiding a possible nuclear showdown in South Asia.

For the progress and prosperity of the region, the outside world needs to actively support and engage in indigenous efforts for peace.

APHC leaders: taking initiative to send a delegation to Pakistan for talks.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Beginning of the end for Chittagong Port?

As a Bangladesh I am happy as well as concerned at the news of the re-opening of the train service between Benapole and Petropole. The new era in Indo-Bangla rail communication not only brings opportunities but also new challenges. In addition to making the cost of transportation of goods between the two neighbors cheaper, this will also make travelling between the two countries easier. There is tremendous potential to increase our bilateral trade with India, though it must be noted that unless the present trend of one-way trade is altered it would bring further benefits mostly to India only and therefore, it is highly unlikely to change Bangladesh's trading position. I believe in the not too distant future we will be able to board a train at Dhaka for New Delhi or Mumbai or, for that matter, Karachi or Islamabad.

My most serious concern is that this may be the beginning of the end for Chittagong port. It would be an understatement to describe the present situation at Chittagong port as catastrophic. Many small vested interest groups are now holding the port hostage. The whole nation is at the mercy of some local mastans. Since the mid 80's, no new significant investment in the port's infrastructure has been made. The proposal to build new berths is bogged down. Shipping lines are suffering tremendous losses due to delays caused by hartal/inefficiency/congestion. The ship-owners are charging a surcharge to recover their losses and this poor nation is paying through its nose.

The idea once floated that Chittagong port could be used for transshipment of goods for India and Nepal seems to be far-fetched. A transit agreement with India is politically sensitive. If the present situation at Chittagong port is allowed to continue, Bangladesh may soon be forced to use Indian ports for transshipment of its own cargo. With integration of the rail system not only can we bring cargo to and from India. India may for its own benefit allow us to use its new modern ports for transshipment of goods destined to and from Bangladesh. If my information is correct, to this end they are investing in a large port development at South Haldia in Calcutta and at Paradeep in Orissa.

In the current trend of globalization and an increasingly border-less world, a sea-port has to compete and be efficient to survive. Like any other business, an inefficient port will slowly lose out and die to a more efficient one. It has happened in other countries. The vast port of London had a slow death in the mid 70's due to similar reasons as now exist in Chittagong. Today the Port of London has been converted to a marina and leisure center as all trades/shipping have moved out to Antwerp/Rotterdam.

Once India allows transshipment (which India will) all shipping will move out of Chittagong to Indian ports and we will be able to do nothing about it. We will become even more dependent on India. We do not have the money or the time so we must act now.

Capt. Towfiq Elahi (Master Marine)
Dhaka

"President must ignore this provocation"

Reference your editorial "President must ignore this provocation" (The Daily Star, January 28, 2000) I fully share your distress over the remark of the Prime Minister about the President of the country. We are appalled. The Prime Minister has diminished herself as a leader. Again. The fact that other leaders routinely do the same is poor consolation indeed. When will our leaders find a decent middle ground between cringing servility and over-bearing megalomania? Ironically, while that little remark, while constitutionally "correct", is also another brick thrown into the nation's all too fragile constitutional development itself.

Mahfuzur Rahman
New York, N.Y. USA

Preparing for elections

In Bangladesh, particularly in election year, a number of politicians waffle and grizzle about India. They never debate over the political economy and strategy for our development, or comparative and competitive commercial advantage over India. They always have debated over India's 'hidden' intentions that makes 'Big India' always pivotal to our politics. The result is that a picture has been sketched on people's minds that India is the only hurdle to our development and a threat to our sovereignty.

Usually the anti-India weapon has been used against the Awami League (AL). The post-liberation AL government's mismanagement did make room for such xenophobia. The post-1975 government utilised this weapon successfully. Khaleda Zia and her colleagues tried to feed an anti-Indian elixir during the last general election, but not in an effective way. Very childish comments were made by BNP regarding mosques and temples. During 1998 floods, I was holidaying in Dhaka during the flood and had experienced the whole spectrum of that environment. At that time, Khaleda Zia made some funny comments being an ex-Prime Minister. She tried to convince the people that the 30-years Water Pact had caused the floods. This is paranoia. There may be pros and cons in the Pact. However, while in the chair, once Khaleda said that she had forgotten to raise the water issue during her visit to Delhi (how funny!). The BNP never felt it could congratulate AL for its obvious successes. The AL also never congratulated the BNP. There is no reciprocity. We have never developed the culture of appreciation.

This year is our election year. This is an election year in Australia too. After the summer vacation, the Australian Labour Party (ALP) and Australian Liberal Party (Lib) have started putting forward their billion-dollar plan and strategy for education, science, research, innovation and development. Kim Beazley (ALP) and Prime Minister John Howard (Lib) are busy selling their policy and plans to the nation.

With elections ahead, let's ask the BNP and AL to come forward with their strategic plans on: strong local government, corruption and unnecessarily growing administration, environment, education, science and technology, student politics, health care, road and traffic system, honesty in the police forces, foreign policy and trade, India, and so on. Hasina and Khaleda Zia should not speak about their parents, husbands or India unless it is relevant.

Tarik Zaman
University of Sydney, (Orange) Australia

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Abusing the road

STAR PHOTO : **SK. ENAMUL HAQ**

How can they even conceive of manoeuvring on any thoroughfare leave alone, in the middle of one of Dhaka's busiest main roads? But these two men are blundering an ungainly passage through, uncaring about the inconvenience it causes to others. We have enough traffic problems to cope with congestion, rickshaws, lorries, cars. The traffic police must stop these monstrosities that create more chaos on the roads.