

Premature electioneering

Irresponsible political behaviour yet again

ARTICLE 44B (3) of the Representation of People's Order, 1972, prohibits any form of electioneering before three weeks of the polling date and provides for two to seven years' imprisonment should any candidate violate the law. Unfortunately, the ruling as well as opposition party leaders, at least some of them, feel they are above the law, any law for that matter. Let alone announcement of a polls schedule, the incumbent government has more than two months of its tenure left. However, a good number of aspiring candidates, of both ruling and opposition parties, have already begun canvassing for votes through graffiti and posters on the walls. The Election Commission having a host of problems related to legal and infrastructural reforms to attend to within the limited time at its disposal, could certainly have done without the latest irritant prior to elections. As it usually does under such circumstances, the EC has decided to urge the political parties to refrain from the devious practice. In all likelihood, the commission's assertion of authority might end right there; for hardly does it seem that the political parties would pay heed to whatever it has to say. The reason, as we have said so many times through our reports and editorial comments, is quite simple: law for these people are texts that apply for all but them.

In the first place, there is no scope for any request to be made to those people to refrain from the malpractice; because they have violated and are still violating a particular law of the land, one that has to do with a fundamental pre-election norm. It is a cognisable offence and must be dealt with accordingly. Ideally, the process should have been this simple. Unfortunately, in our context, it seldom happens the way the law of the land prescribes. Admit it or not, people in politics do consider themselves being well and truly above the law. The pity is, they do not even mind playing football with a basic law of elections!

Let the Election Commission go ahead with its plan to urge all political parties not to embark on election campaign before the announcement of polls schedule. At the same time, we expect the government and its law enforcement agencies to track down the people who are violating the Representation of People's Order, 1972, and, if necessary, file cases against them, so that law takes its course. Strict enforcement of law would work as a deterrent there.

Crisis in children's drugs

Resume sale of bottles

A SERIOUS threat to children's health has been allowed to hit this country. Medicine for children, particularly in liquid form, are disappearing from the market. Adults are also threatened by this crisis, as many life saving products, antibiotics and even the simple pain killer, paracetamol, are in short supply. The cause of this crisis is a shutdown at the country's only bottle factory, Bengal Glass. For the last two months, Bengal Glass has been forced to halt sale of bottles because of a dispute over payment of Value Added Tax to the National Board of Revenue.

While not in any way supporting the evasion of VAT, we must ask why the NBR forced the company to stop sales of such a critical product? As we understand it, the NBR and Bengal Glass are in dispute over the applicability of a VAT credit claimed by the company against renovation expenses. The disagreement should be resolved according to procedure, but this does not justify placing citizens' health at risk.

The halt in bottle production is forcing many pharmaceutical companies to stop manufacture of many, including children's drugs, while others are being tempted to use recycled bottles, thus exposing both young and adult consumers to unknown and even fatal hazards. The crisis will become worse as demand is bound to outpace stocks, if any. Are we to accept the onset of a critical shortage of medicine for the sole reason that the NBR and the local bottle manufacturer are disputing a VAT concession?

Steps need to be taken at the appropriate inter-ministerial level to resolve the conflict in view of the serious repercussions the bottle crisis is having on critical supply of medicines to the children in particular.

India-Bangladesh relations: A wake-up call

MAHFUZ ANAM

(This article was submitted to the Outlook magazine of India, which published an edited version in its issue of 29 April 2001. Below we publish the full text of the article.)

"EXPLODE a nuclear bomb or invite Bin Laden to Bangladesh" was the reply to my complain to why Bangladesh received so little international media attention. The same could apply to the Indian media which had no time for us except to implicate us with the insurgency in the northeast, imply that we are becoming an ISI base or suggest that religious fundamentalism was taking us over. Well the border incident, however sad and reprehensible, appears to have caused an avalanche of Indian interest in us. Sadly most of it is reflective of the same stereotype as suggested above. YES, something is seriously wrong with India-Bangladesh relations. And NO, we are not anti-Indian. We are just pro-Bangladeshi just as all Indians are pro-Indian.

Barring the extreme right religious fringe and the near-extinct extreme left, there is no substantive anti-Indianism in Bangladesh. What exists is a fierce urge to be independent and a serious concern to safeguard our interest against a big, powerful and myopic neighbour who has no time for the small countries which surround it, and does not have the imagination to think of its self-interest in an inclusive sense but views it to the exclusion of its neighbours. Nothing illustrates the failure of India's tunnel vision than the case of its relations with Bangladesh whose independence it helped

to attain and whose people continue to remain grateful, with an enormous store of goodwill for the Indian people.

India's problems with Bangladesh, including the recent border clash, are the direct result of its callous disinterest and continued neglect of relations with the latter and its incapacity to understand Bangladesh's legitimate concerns and aspirations. The irony is that there exists no fundamental problem between our two countries like there is with Pakistan and China. On the contrary, there are many areas of mutual interest. And yet over the

Bangladesh was repeatedly assured that an equitable and fair water-sharing treaty would be signed before the dam was made operational. The dam became operational in 1974 but the treaty came about in 1996. Meanwhile Ganges water continued to be withdrawn by India as it saw fit.

There were some interim accords which Bangladesh accepted under pressure and in which our share as the lower riparian got smaller and smaller each time it was renewed.

The irony was that the Indian goal of reviving the Kolkata port was never served as the additional water

our deep suspicion about India's attitude towards us. Nothing exemplified more substantively and on a day-to-day basis India's 'big brother' attitude, the callousness, the utter neglect and a fundamental disrespect for the concerns of Bangladesh than the Farakka dam episode.

The second example directly relates to the recent border clash. A good start to resolving border issues was made when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Mujibur Rahman signed an accord back in 1974 clearly setting out the

cent of India's total export trade. We are the biggest single market for India outside the developed world. In education and health along Bangladesh spends \$100 million a year in India.

Nearly eight years ago we lowered our tariff to a weighted average of 17 per cent, which for particular goods coming from India amount to only 12 per cent. Compared to that, India's weighted tariff rate has recently come down to 25 per cent. This much lower Indian rate is twice that of Bangladesh.

The situation is that far from

India is the growth engine of the region. But that growth engine must include the smaller countries of the area region. Weaker regional economies will drag India backwards and negatively impact on its potential for growth. India must learn from Europe and see how stronger economies assist the weaker ones to ensure sustained growth of the region as a whole. India's position in the globalised economy will be far stronger if it enters it as a region rather than as a country. Will India have the wisdom to acquire that vision, or will it continue on its myopic course?

last three decades distance between our two countries has grown wider, suspicions deeper, acrimony louder and the resolve to solve them weaker.

Three examples will prove my point. First the story of the Farakka Dam and second that of the Indira-Mujib Accord of 1974 and finally that of our economic cooperation.

For nearly two decades India wrought havoc on Bangladesh's economy and ecology by unilaterally withdrawing the Ganges water and diverting it into the Hoogly river through a dam it built at a place called Farakka in the state of West Bengal. The rationale was greater flow through Hoogly river to flush accumulated silt to increase draft at Kolkata port.

flowing through Hoogly did not produce the desired result, forcing India to construct the Haldia port further down stream. For more than a decade it was known to the Indian experts that Farakka was not having the desired impact on Kolkata port and yet they refused to change their policy of unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water.

Because by then what may have been conceived as a technical project became a political weapon in the Indian hands.

It is our view that India's Farakka policy, spread over nearly two decades of Bangladesh's 30 year existence, wrought havoc to our bilateral relations, greatly eroded the goodwill built during our Liberation War and laid the foundation of

course to follow. Bangladesh immediately ratified the accord and brought into effect all the necessary constitutional amendments to start implementing it. One of its most important provisions was the return of Berubari enclave to India in return for the Bangladeshi enclave of Angarpota and Dehagram and a corridor to access them. We returned Berubari to India within months of the accord while India took more than 25 years to give us a limited access corridor.

What is perhaps not known to the people of India is that Bangladesh is a nearly \$3 billion market for Indian goods, taking the formal and informal (euphemism for smuggling) trade together. At the moment Bangladesh accounts for 6.5 per

giving us any privileged treatment India is not even giving us the same facilities that we - a far weaker economy - are giving it. In addition we have removed practically all non-tariff barriers. Even after all reforms India imposes six types of non-tariff barriers on Bangladeshi goods.

So what we see is that India does not give Bangladesh the respect that a major trading partner deserves. Instead we are constantly depicted as a problem country sending illegal migrants and an ungrateful people who have forgotten India's help in our Liberation War.

A small and simple thing like Nepal's access to Bangladesh's

Mongla port was denied for all these years. It has now been allowed but with so many restrictions that it makes no economic sense any more. Yet Nepal's access to a second port, after Kolkata, would have made practically no impact on India and would have enormously helped its two friendly neighbours.

I have not discussed the recent border clash because my focus is on the long-term improvement of Bangladesh-India relations. It is our hope that this incident, however sad and shameful, should awaken India to the fact that the smaller neighbours have a lot to say about the present state of their bilateral relations. India must find time to pay more attention to their concerns. The future lies in economic cooperation which will not come about unless India sheds off its narrow vision and learns to define self-interest in a broader and inclusive regional perspective.

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backed economic sanctions against Iraq, and virtually all of them ignore the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba.

As the twenty-first century evolves, relations that different countries have with Europe, are bound to evolve, also. In shaping a policy that takes account of this evolution, different countries around the world should be aware that over time, Europe is likely to become more unified and self-confident, more willing to defend and assert its own identity and to seek its own role in the world.

United States provided the military hardware, backed by a large number of troops stationed in Europe. But the end of the Cold War has weakened that dependence and given new life to the desire by many Europeans to live in an environment less dominated by the United States.

For example, Europe sees itself as the natural leader of the effort to re-democratise Eastern Europe. In the absence of the Soviet threat, more Europeans have reason to doubt the need to develop a U.S.-backed ballistic missile shield that the Russians strongly oppose. Many of them oppose the U.S.-

The new Europe



DR. A. R. CHOWDHURY

If the European Union (EU) were a country, it would be a super-power. It would have a population of 375 million people, cover 1.2 million square miles and boast the second-highest gross domestic product in the world, after the United States. The 15 nations of the EU are not a single nation now, of course. Rather, the EU is sometimes an unwieldy conglomerate of different languages, cultures, currencies, national interests and histories; and the pages of history are littered with examples of conflict between these contending nations and peoples. Just now, the rising tide of nationalism is energizing devolution movements in Britain, France, Spain and elsewhere within the EU. In Yugoslavia, outside the alliance, nationalism combined with bitter memories of past injustices has produced rebellion and war. Another non-EU nation, Russia, is grappling with a dogged insurrection in Chechnya.

But the over-arching force of history, at least in Western Europe, seems to be pushing nations together, not apart. The EU already speaks with a combined voice in the World Trade Organisation and the Group of Eight industrialised nations, and there have been discussions of a European seat in the United Nations Security Council.

With the introduction of the euro

and the establishment of the European Central Bank, monetary union is fast becoming a reality, and Europe is in the early stage of producing a common defense policy and a military force designed to complement NATO, which itself is reaching out to Eastern Europe with a view to bringing nations there into the fold.

The expansion of NATO toward the frontiers of Russia evokes painful memories and strong opposition in Moscow. Even within the NATO alliance, the expansion has raised questions. In its own way, the enlargement of the EU beyond its current 15 members has become difficult and sometimes controversial. No fewer than 13 nations have applied to join the EU. Some of these applicants, such as, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia, are fairly close to meeting the conditions for membership that the EU has written for itself.

But some of the other applicants have very different political and economic interests from the current member-states. Politically, many have weak party systems, unreliable and unprofessional legal systems, unstable governments and inefficient or corrupt bureaucracies. Their ability to function efficiently within the institutional framework of the EU is untested and dubious. Moreover, there are important differences within some of these new applicants, such as, Latvia, Lithuania, and Malta.

The EU's current 15 member-

states are a diverse lot, but they also have a great deal in common. Even so, it is often difficult for the EU to reach unanimity, especially on important and controversial issues, just as it was difficult for NATO to act quickly and collectively to halt the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia. The introduction of 13 new members would vastly increase the EU's size and, at least potentially, its wealth and influence. It would help break down national barriers that have fostered not only discord and ignorance, but hatred and war. If done right, EU enlargement would preserve those cultural features that enrich the lives of its citizens.

But the very diversity of an expanded EU could make it more fractious. The result could be stagnation, paralysis and death of an alliance. Just now, the ability of the EU to cooperate in the face of a common threat is being tested by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, which has already moved from Britain to France and which threatens to spread elsewhere on the continent. The problem is not just containing the disease, which (since it is extraordinarily contagious), is difficult enough; it is also minimising the damage the malady threatens to cause to the agricultural and tourist industries of Europe.

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During the Cold War, Western Europe relied on the United States to bolster its security. Europe, in effect, provided the battlefield for whatever war might have broken out with the Soviet Union, and the

United States provided the military hardware, backed by a large number of troops stationed in Europe. But the end of the Cold War has weakened that dependence and given new life to the desire by many Europeans to live in an environment less dominated by the United States.

For example, Europe sees itself as the natural leader of the effort to re-democratise Eastern Europe. In the absence of the Soviet threat, more Europeans have reason to doubt the need to develop a U.S.-backed ballistic missile shield that the Russians strongly oppose. Many of them oppose the U.S.-

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