

EU envoys' observations

Points to ponder

AS the national polls draw nearer, countries preparing to send election monitoring teams to Bangladesh are keeping track of political developments here, albeit, with more than an academic interest. They are presumably doing it as a matter of weather-taking so as to figure out how congenial or otherwise, the objective conditions in the country are shaping out to be for the polls slated only a few months away. All these are bound up in a cause-and-effect relationship that should be regarded as an ingredient for strengthening democracy through free and fair polls and bolstering the national development objectives as well.

The EU envoys who attended Meet-the-Reporters Programme organised by the Dhaka Reporters' Unity on Tuesday shared their thoughts on politics and economics of the country candidly with their audience.

It has become common knowledge by now that development assistance is being increasingly linked to the recipient country's image in terms of the levels of political stability and good governance it maintains. As a matter of fact, this linkage finds a structured expression in the partnership agreements. The German Ambassador Uwe Schramm put this in perspective, saying, " ... The partnership agreements also had a political aspect, and its (EU's) development assistance was largely linked to politics and governance in the recipient countries".

Inevitably, there were pointers made to political confrontation and violence breeding unstable conditions that boded ill for the democratic way of life and pursuit of economic development goals.

To our understanding, while the continuing political stand-off at the national level is an abominable distortion of democratic culture, what seems even worse, is the blurring of the line between political and criminal acts of violence. It is perhaps too late in the day to expect that the two key players in national politics, viz. Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, caught up as they have been in a confrontational whirlpool would suddenly see for peace through compromise. But what they can certainly do is to put their present-day confrontation behind as they enter the electioneering phase where debates would be more appreciated than any reinforced slugging matches. Basically, what we are looking forward to is a code of conduct accepted by both sides and lived up to at the operational levels by their party cadres under strict advice circulated to them in good time.

That said, we turn to the focus lent by the chief of EU Mission Anders Johnson around the recent assaults made on journalists, the like of which impinge on press freedom. Free press is an insurance for better governance and vibrant democracy. The points made by some envoys about protecting press freedom and the media's role in ensuring good governance are well-taken.

As for the diagnosis of our political ailments, the civil society leaders and the media in the country have been saying more or less the same things that the EU diplomats have said. Still the maladies continued, so that what is being said needs not be blamed; for, we may have courted it. Instead, why it is being said is something that ought to be addressed in the first place. We must remember that in a global environment everything reads like an open-book. Where we draw a line is, of course, important; but in the ultimate analysis, it is the performance that counts.

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.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH HAS BEEN CONTRIBUTED BY TAREQ HADI, A FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

Women's labour lost

These two women are carrying tree branches to sell as firewood and also to use as fuel for themselves. Women in our country have stepped out of their houses to support themselves and their families. The immense burden these two women are carrying very much symbolises their burden of life and the long way women have to travel to find economic prosperity.

Burden of gratitude



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

INDIA proved to be a friend indeed when it became a friend in need. That was thirty years ago, in 1971, when hundreds of thousands of Bengalis living in former East Pakistan took refuge in the Indian state of West Bengal. It was with India's help that our home-grown struggle for autonomy and later the resistance to Pakistani military junta's bloody crackdown passed into the guerrilla phase of Muktiyuddha. In the final stage of the war of liberation, which became a full-scale conventional one, Muktiyoddhas fought side by side with the Indian army. Throughout all these stages India made tremendous sacrifices which will always be remembered by Bangladeshis. The question is how this sense of gratitude should be reflected at official and private levels. An equally important question is, can India take our grateful conduct for granted irrespective of its behaviour towards us? The answer to the two questions are somewhat related.

Being grateful assumes an attitude and conduct that promotes the interest of the benefactor or at least desisting from doing anything that may be detrimental to such interests. The first involves an active role while the latter role is a passive one. The opportunity and occasion to be of positive help may arise by fits and starts. In contrast the scope for maintaining status quo in bilateral relations through a passive role

of the indebted party prevails all the time. Bangladesh may not have promoted the interests of India actively so far but nor has it deliberately taken steps or policies that are inimical to India's interests. By this evidence Bangladesh's record of gratitude is impeccable and faultless. But India cannot and should not take our grateful behaviour for granted irrespective of what it does, wittingly or unwittingly, that affects our national interests.

Gratitude can be eternal so far as

altogether but merely keeping it in suspended animation in view of the emergent adverse situation.

In 1975 the Bangladesh government under Bangabandhu signed a memorandum of agreement that allowed India to divert water from the Ganges for the trial run of Farakka barrage for a period of forty-five days. On expiry of this time limit India continued with the diversion of water from Ganges without any agreement with Bangladesh. This was not only against interna-

placed, to say the least.

The latest incident of border clashes that left casualties on both sides seems to have brought the issue of gratitude back into the limelight in both countries, though in varying degrees. Behind the angry fulmination by Indian leaders and the media against Bangladesh there was the overtone of outrage caused by the perceived ungrateful behaviour of Bangladeshis. The extremist parties in India made no bones about this feeling of righteous

tarian gesture, the reference to the war of liberation was a reassurance that gratitude for help received has not been forgotten. There is an undertone of dilemma of the obligations of friendship in this gesture. But India should not take these expressions literally and see the spirit behind them. By justifying the self-defence action of BDR the Bangladesh government has reminded India of its obligation to maintain friendly relation by taking into account Bangladesh's genuine

not be seen as an expression of a guilty conscience. Even if the burden of gratitude was brought to bear on the nuanced reaction, it should not be made much of. The Bangladesh government was within its rights to be more forthright and assertive over the flagrant violation of international laws by India in respect of the border. Its feeling of gratitude for the past even in a context where its invocation was not very necessary should not give the impression of admission of guilt. The Bangladesh government bent over backward to normalise a tense situation that was not its own making but which it felt should not be aggravated in any way. It had nothing to do with obligation for benefits received in the past. So far the border clashes were concerned the Bangladesh government pointed out politely but firmly that the responsibility lay with Indian elements. It expressed regret as a humanitarian gesture. Condoling the deaths would have sufficed.

It is not the responsibility of the government only to convey the above message to the Indian government. All segments of our society should make it clear that we are a grateful nation but when our interests are threatened we will be prepared to lay down the burden of gratitude temporarily and act in a befitting manner even if that particular act may appear as "unfriendly". There is no crass opportunism in this. Gratitude cannot be taken for granted in the event of wrongdoing by the benefactor. To have the moral courage to say this, the civil society must not allow itself to be weighed down by gratitude, old and new. The bottom line is, Bangladesh did not become independent to become dependent on any country in any way. The border clash should make us pause to examine to what extent such dependency may have crept in at individual and collective level.

IN MY VIEW

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actions based on own initiative is concerned. A party (an individual, a country) may not choose to indulge in arbitrary actions that harm the interests of the benefactor. But when the benefactor takes steps that threaten the interests of the indebted party the latter is not morally bound to remain supine and silent. It has the right to react in a manner that is deemed fit and necessary. The gratitude factor cannot be applied in such cases to evaluate their merit or assess the justification. Reaction rules out own volition and scope of choice. In reacting one is compelled by actions taken by another party and it is irrelevant that the former may have a legacy of gratitude from the past. In other words, when the party indebted by gratitude faces an adverse situation created by the benefactor it is temporarily absolved from the burden of gratitude. It does not amount to renouncing gratitude

tional law but a blow to the relation of mutual friendship and co-operation with Bangladesh. Later, being aggrieved, when Bangladesh took the issue to the UN, India declared this as an unfriendly move. Behind India's wounded feeling was the consideration of the gratitude factor which was expected to deter Bangladesh from internationalising the issue. Even if it is assumed that it was a case of overreaction, Bangladesh could not be faulted for the primal reaction of self-defence while facing an adverse situation created by India. The cause of action lay in India's decision to withdraw water unilaterally without caring to enter into a permanent agreement for water sharing. Having hurt Bangladesh's sentiments as well as its interests India could not take her grateful behaviour for granted, at least not over the dispute at issue. India's feeling of righteous indignation was mis-

indignation at the "perfidy" of a country which was helped in winning its independence with Indian help. Even when the facts from the ground made it abundantly clear that provocation came from Indian side and BDR opened fire in self-defence India's blistering attack focused on the guilt ("adventurism") of BDR and called upon the Bangladesh government again and again to punish the offenders. The Indian government has even gone to the absurd length of filing a case of war crimes against BDR. In the face of BSF's proven trespass into Bangladesh territory and other illegal activities the Bangladesh government maintained great calm and showed extraordinary restraint. Though being the aggrieved party it could be equally vituperative and engage in acrimonious statement, Bangladesh felt discretion was the better part of diplomacy. If the expression of regret was a humani-

interests. It has also been made clear that while forever grateful, Bangladesh will not feel constrained by its legacy of gratitude to refrain from protecting herself in adverse situations created by India. This was not said in so many words but the implicit message should not be difficult to discern. The dilemma of being firm while appearing as conciliatory was palpable but should not fail to deliver the message. The Government of Bangladesh may appear to be weighed down by the burden of gratitude but its sovereign compulsion to be independent at times of national crisis should not be lost on the Indian government. A sovereign independent country, however small, cannot be cowed down by power or forced into compromising position on the basis of past debt of gratitude. The low-key and restrained response of the Government of Bangladesh in the aftermath of the border clash should

The child of a lesser god



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NAMELESS, speechless and without a trace of who she is, the little girl is already missing in the actions of life at the age of seven. One-seventh of her life has been spent in police custody, yet she has not committed any crime. She is no guiltier than an elusive horizon, which meanders without beginning or end. We don't know where she comes from and where she will go, because nobody wants her and she belongs to none.

She exists like an absurd wedge between forgotten past and unknown future, her fate having the futility of a script, which is erased as fast as it is written. In tender age, life looks bleak in the complex architecture of her misfortunes. She doesn't have a family to love, she doesn't have the power of speech and her mind is messy like a gutted house.

This is how the world feels about the little girl, but how does she feel about the world? Does she feel lonely and luckless? Can she tell the

difference between police custody and parental care? Does she have any recollection of her mother whose breasts she suckled? Did she ever sit in the lap of a man who must have been her father? How does she feel being a prisoner of memories, which are sealed inside her like hidden treasure?

She was a drifter when police picked her up last year from a street in Narayanganj. She couldn't tell who she was because of her speech impediment. Later the police found out that she was also mentally ill,

pass the quality inspection of life. These girls are rejected because they are defective; unable to meet the specifications laid down by society for survival and acceptance. Some of them are victims or witnesses of court cases that are still being tried. The case of this particular girl is, however, different. She landed in jail because the law didn't know where else to keep her.

Hence, the biggest question that looms ahead of us is where would she go? Perhaps in her mental state, she neither is capable of asking that

like lightening in the night sky? Does it roam inside her with the rage of a blind cat locked inside a dark room? At the age of seven, when her eyes ought to be anointed with the golden light of luminescent dreams, how does she cope with the bleak burden of her confiscated existence?

To think of it, this little girl is a rude awakening to the futility of life, to all the garnishes we bring to embellish what amount to such a terrible void. Just imagine that name, family, memory and speech suddenly recede from our lives! How should

CROSS TALK

I once read in a western fairytale that each time a child is sad, a fairy drops dead. It means fairies cannot live where children are unhappy. It doesn't matter whose child is unhappy because all children are equal in God's eyes.

which made her an enigma inside a riddle. In a city like Rio de Janeiro of Brazil, policemen come out at night to target practice on homeless children. Our police did the best they could do for her. They took her into their custody, tried to determine her identity through the court, arranged treatment for her mental condition, and then sent her to Dhaka Central Jail for safe custody.

According to the Daily Star report, there are 31 other girls in Dhaka Central Jail and around 220 throughout the country. They are human stock lots who have failed to

question nor working out its answer. Perhaps in her mind she doesn't even bother that she has to go anywhere. Maybe she is happy in her mute innocence, least concerned over the calculus of life, which keeps us awake.

But does this little girl know who she is? A character in Jean Luc Goddard's Nouvelle Vogue says, "Memory is the only paradise we cannot be expelled from. Memory is the only hell we can be condemned to in all innocence." Does she have the memory of anything? Does it flash in her mind from time to time

we feel? The patina of pride and arrogance would be gone! The thick layer of civilisation, which insulates us against the stark reality of bipedal primates, would crumble. To belong and possess are human; to wander and lose are animal, the basic elements of rationality being embedded in the capacity for procurement and acquisition.

All of that has happened to the little girl in police custody; her life stripped of essentials in the midst of its dreary seclusion. Does she cry in that seclusion, and when does she cry if she cries at all? Does she cry

being, who ended up on earth because her spacecraft ran out of fuel? Is she an ill-fated little fairy, lured out of fairyland by a mischievous spirit? Or, is she just a phenomenon of life that reveals the secrets of god's creation? Luckless, loveless and lonely, has she descended amongst us to remind that things we take for granted are the greatest treasures when out of reach?

Maybe she is a goddess, who suffers to bring a sobering effect on us. Maybe god intended her to be flawed amongst his creations to demonstrate special effects of what

happens when his mercy is withdrawn. Maybe she is lost under god's protection and there is nothing to fear for her future. The police, the court, the jail and whatever authorities it may concern, all are perhaps worried for nothings because the child is in god's care.

In the meantime, let us put our own children in her place, and think for a minute that they are growing up in a jailhouse because they cannot tell who they are. There will be tension in our hearts, and our heads will turn in sorrow. We shall ask god in many words why such misfortune had to befall them, while there were so many other children all over the world. Because our children are precious to us, and we wish the best things to them.

Now let us turn the game on the head and think for a minute that this little girl is our own child. Do we feel anything more than a tinge of sympathy? Perhaps, not. Why? Simply because she is not our own flesh and blood. I once read in a western fairytale that each time a child is sad, a fairy drops dead. It means fairies cannot live where children are unhappy. It doesn't matter whose child is unhappy because all children are equal in God's eyes.

Unless we believe, this particular one is the child of a lesser god.

OPINION

Creating a special relationship with USA

ESAM SOHAIL

HE is a soft-spoken American of Arab decent. But when in those mellow tones he talks, people listen. People pay attention to Spencer Abraham not only because he is the Energy Secretary of the United States but also because his mild manner and soft tones only accentuate his credibility.

In the midst of the California power crisis when cities from San Francisco to Los Angeles are reeling from daily electricity cuts, Secretary Abraham said what was quite unpalatable to his constituents: any relief was going to be only temporary because America's hunger for energy simply cannot be satisfied with the currently known and feasible sources of power. Now with the advent of the summer driving season, the recent OPEC production cuts, and the unwillingness of Congress to open up Alaska to oil exploration, it is likely, as Secretary Abraham opined, that the power shortages will extend to other heavy use areas like the Northeast and the Midwest. If the daily inching up regular petrol prices is any indication, the Secretary may not be wrong. The bottomline is that America needs more fossil fuel energy to keep it going at the pace it is accus-

tomed to and it simply does not have it at this moment.

Here is where arises a golden opportunity for a historic solidification of the ties between the United States and Bangladesh. The United States needs something that we have. We need some help from the United States ourselves. But we need to act post haste before America's need for energy is overshadowed by some other crisis or temporarily met by others who get a head start on us. This is the time to 'think out of the box' and bring our two countries together in a mutually beneficial, comprehensive, and long lasting relationship that covers the entire gamut of issues between us: energy, trade, investment and taxation, defence, aid, immigration and the environment. A comprehensive and far-reaching bilateral treaty, akin to the twentyfive-year treaty Bangladesh had with India, is the way to go before it is too late.

One of the principal attractions of a treaty is its constitutional status in the United States. Most areas of American foreign policy, trade, investment, immigration, etc. are covered by national legislation that tends to apply to everybody similarly. Hence, getting separate consideration for special needs of certain countries is a painstaking

and near-impossible process unless there is a powerful lobby operating on that country's behalf in Washington DC. A bilateral treaty, if comprehensive in nature, automatically overrides any provisions of national laws that conflict with treaty provisions. But philosophically a comprehensive treaty between Bangladesh and the United States will go a long way in cementing the mutual friendship between the world's oldest and the eighth biggest democracies. A Treaty of this nature should incorporate several areas of cooperation to the benefit of both sides:

Trade, Investment, and Taxation: This part of the treaty should address the major economic issues in a full-fledged manner. In exchange for a duty- and quota-free access to Bangladeshi goods and services, American investments in Bangladesh would be freed of any regulations on restricted sectors, profit repatriation, hiring of foreign management and minimum export requirements. In other words, any American investment anywhere in Bangladesh will be given the status enjoyed by a firm in an Export Processing Zone. Ideally, this portion of the treaty should include a provision of avoiding double taxation by individuals and firms who earn income in the US and Bangladesh. The real

beneficiaries of these provisions will be the economies of both countries and the thousands of people in Bangladesh who will find an additional source of well-paid employment in American firms and factories.

Energy: In exchange for supplying the US with gas and other related products at negotiable prices, Bangladesh will receive technical assistance for developing its fossil fuel sector. Our gas reserves are conservatively estimated at 1.1 tcf by the local and foreign experts. How much more there is underneath the sea-shelf and elsewhere is anyone's guess. We cannot utilize all of it directly. What we can do, however, is leverage it in such a manner that a limited amount of export can yield the maximum benefit overall. With the United States thirsty for both gas and other petroleum products, this is our opportunity. The actual amount of annual export can be determined by a joint bilateral committee of experts.

Immigration: This part of the treaty will probably be the humanitarian side effect of the idea. Just as it has done for certain specific Latin American countries, the United States will undertake to regularise the status of the tens of thousands of

Bangladeshis living in a legal limbo in various parts of America. These are hard working and mild-mannered people who, for some reason or another, ended up in North America and are stuck. This very act of amnesty for them will yield rich dividends in itself for the US by bringing in the work ethic, strong family values, and tax revenue into the mainstream.

Foreign Policy: Bangladesh and the United States have common views on some global matters and divergent opinions on others. The divergences are pronounced on certain issues in front of the United Nations specially on matters related to the Middle East. While keeping true to their national principles, the two democracies can create a mechanism for regular consultation on foreign policy which will allow both the political and the technical experts of policy-making to exchange ideas and coordinate policies insofar as possible. This will have at least two benefits: first, regular consultations will pre-empt any embarrassments which come with 'surprises' and, secondly, the meetings may genuinely bridge the gap between the two respective policies by seeking a genuine understanding of principles and issues involved.

The United States is just not another country in the world. It is the pre-eminent political power, economic giant, and military leader. No country can deal with the United States as it would with any other country. Whether we like it or not, handling our American policy with special care is in the national interest. It is a boon for us that today there are several areas where the United States and Bangladesh can benefit each other tremendously if only the initiative was taken. Rhetoric aside, it is in the best interest of Bangladesh to move seriously and quickly into creating a 'special relationship' with America. The benefits will be immense not only to the two countries and their peoples but also to regional and global peace. But we have to move right now before it is too late and the ground realities disappear or are overshadowed by other events or other global actors. The time to act is now. At the very least, we have nothing to lose by trying to create a special and beneficial bond between two democracies.