

Venezuelan President's visit to Bangladesh: An evaluation

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VENEZUELA'S President Hugo Chavez visited Bangladesh on 23 May as a part of his tour in Asia (Iran, China and Indonesia). Although the visit was very brief (20 hours), it is significant that a President from a Latin American country stopped in Dhaka to have bilateral talks with the Bangladesh leaders.

The visit naturally has given rise to curiosity among Bangladeshis as to the country and its policies.

Venezuela is located in the north coast of South America, fronting the Caribbean Sea between Colombia and Guyana. Its size is almost seven times bigger than that of Bangladesh. Total population is only about 23 million. Spanish is the official language. Petroleum dominates the economy and accounts

almost 80 per cent of export earnings (more than US\$10 billion). The Gross Domestic Product in 2000 was 3.5 per cent in comparison to-6 per cent in 1999.

The late 90s saw rise of unemployment and corruption in the country. In recent years the finance minister, five military court magistrates and numerous other officials lost office over allegations of corruption. . The people have become tired of traditional parties and the electorate voted Hugo Chavez, a former military officer, into power with a mandate to "clean" the administration.

The President is a hugely populist leader with charisma and charm. Since the President came to power in July last year, he had taken initiatives to reform the country in every possible way. A new constitution has been in place, social reforms are

underway. Some argue that the President has become a bit dictatorial in his manner because of his popularity with the poor people.

Its foreign policy is moving to an independent stance away from the US. Venezuela became friendly to Cuba despite US sanctions on Cuba. It had expressed reservation to the proposed free trade zone for 34 American countries at a recent conference in Quebec (Canada).

Venezuela and Bangladesh work together in the UN under the umbrella of "Group of 77" to coordinate policies among the developing countries. Both countries live under the shadow of a big neighbour (Venezuela's neighbour is Brazil, the largest country in South America).

The President's visit to Bangladesh demonstrates that Bangladesh's standing in the international community is respectable. In my view there are many factors that led the Venezuelan President to visit Bangladesh.

First is the fact that Bangladesh is a member of the Security Council (Cabinet of the UN). As a Security Council member Bangladesh has attained a high profile in the international community. Bangladesh has been able to discharge its onerous functions without fear or favour within the ambit of the UN Charter. Bangladesh has been a valued member in the UN and the Secretary General Kofi Annan's visit to Bangladesh is a testimony to this fact.

Second, Bangladesh will host the 13th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement next year and 114 members of the Movement will be represented at the summit. The summit is

crucially important for its direction of the Movement at the 21st century. At the end of the summit, Bangladesh will hold the office of Chairperson of the Movement until the next Summit is held.

Third, Bangladesh has been known for the innovative poverty alleviation programmes of government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as BRAC and Grameen Bank. Many of the programmes of Bangladesh NGOs have been replicated in other developing countries. Non-formal education and micro-credit among the poor have been success stories in Bangladesh. People around the world no longer seem ready to tolerate inequality and poverty and the leaders are aware of it. Bangladesh's programmes could be of immense benefit to Venezuela.

On the other hand Bangladesh will derive benefits from the visit. It is reported that the President promised to assist Bangladesh in oil and gas technology and provide technical assistance to Petro Bangla, besides promoting trade and commercial interests between the two countries. He also assured that he would set up a commercial office in Dhaka and send a delegation to identify areas of mutual co-operation between the two countries.

The visit of Venezuelan President is to be lauded because Bangladesh's image and profile will enhance in South America. It will have an impact politically and economically in the long term. Both countries are to gain from the visit.

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Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission

MILITARY ASPECT-X

Events in East Pakistan

ON 25th March, 1971 negotiations in Dacca, although not formally called off, for all practical purposes, broke down or at least came to a deadlock. The Awami League had presented their draft Proclamation and their General Secretary Mr Tajuddin, had stated to the press that they had made the final proposals, it being now for Gen Yahya to accept or reject them. Most of the leaders, with the notable exception of the Pakistan Peoples Party, had left and the General himself left Dacca stealthily on the evening of the 25th.

At 1am on the night between the 25th and 26th military action was taken in order to restore law and order and to regain control of the administration which during the period 1st to 25th March, 1971, had been completely lost to the Awami League. The propriety of taking this action, or rather the wisdom of abstaining so long as to make this kind of action necessary has been considered elsewhere and our present purpose is merely to review the events that preceded the Indian invasion on the 20th November 1971. It does seem that the Awami League was planning some action on its own part at 3. A.m. and it may well be that in determining the time selected by the army this information was a factor. On the other hand, the Awami League also appears to have had a good intelligence system. The very first step taken namely to attempt the arrest of the Awami League leaders was an almost total failure; none of the leaders could be found with the exception of Shaikh Mujibur Rahman himself who seems more to have courted arrest than to have failed in an attempt to escape in that he was found at his own residence and made no attempt to elude arrest. All the others went underground and managed to cross over to India with the single exception of Dr. Kamal Hussain who was apprehended a few days later.

Considerable progress was made during that night in controlling the situation in Dacca. Almost the first step taken was to switch off all the civil telephone exchanges at about 2 a.m. At that time also action was taken to comb the Dacca University Campus, a centre of political activity, where a considerable quantity of arms and ammunition had been collected. The Army was answered by rifles and shot gun fire and stiff resistance was offered but after a struggle of about three hours, the area was finally secured by about 5 am.

At 2.30 a.m. the East Pakistan Rifles at Pheelkhana were disarmed. Here again there was, as was to be expected a fair degree of resistance, in the course of which Major Rab, an officer on secondment to the East Pakistan Rifles, and five other East Pakistan Rifles personnel were killed. Some personnel, however, made good their escape with a quantity of weapons.

The Reserve Police at Dacca was also disarmed at 3 a.m.; this force also suffered some casualties in the course of resistance offered by them.

Curfew, of course, was imposed in Dacca and other towns and house searches, presumably for weapons and in pursuit of leaders sought to be arrested, were carried out. During one of them Ex-Lt. Commander Moazzam, one of the persons accused in the Agartala Conspiracy case, was killed.

The situation in Dacca swiftly returned to normal and government was once again in full control of the civil administration.

For Chittagong 20 Baluch was directed to secure such places of vital importance as the radio station, the telephone exchange and the Central Armoury, which had a stock of over 18,000 rifles. On its way to Chittagong this battalion was intercepted by some posts established by 8 East Bengal and East Bengal Regimental centre and there was, consequently, some fighting in which both sides suffered casualties, which included Lt-Col. M.R. Choudhry of the East Bengal Regimental Centre. However, by 12 noon on the 26th March the Centre was disarmed. In the meantime, Brigadier M.H. Ansari, Commander Logistic Area, who had come to Chittagong to unload ammunition from a stranded ship, heard of firing rushed up with a platoon strength and some naval ratings and managed to secure the Chittagong airfield.

The "Shafi Force" had been ordered to move from Comilla and the Navy alerted to support it. It was met by rebels, 13 miles short of Chittagong on the 28th. Ansari force moved to link up with 20 Baluch and also met with resistance from 8 East Bengal. Fighting continued, in the course of which both the Navy and the Airforce played a part and eventually, by the 4th April, Chittagong was under effective control. However, there was still rebel pockets and positions had also been taken by some of the rebels in the outskirts of the town.

By the end of the first week in April the situation could be thus summarised: (1) in Dacca Sector, Mymenshingh and Narsingdi were under rebel influence, (2) in Jessore sector, only the urban areas of Jessore and Khulna were under control, (3) In Rangpur Sector only the towns of Rangpur, Saidpur and Rajshahi were under control, (4) Tangail, under rebel control till 3rd April, was brought under control some time after.

By this time, of course, the bulk of the East Pakistan elements had defected. We have specifically mentioned some above but by and large it may be stated that out of the approximately 17,000 personnel about 4,000 were disarmed while the rest had joined the rebels together with their weapons. Most of the police also followed the same course.

Gradually thus the army regained control over increasing areas which had been under rebel control or influence. A series of operations had to be carried out in each sector, and of course, in the course of this casualties of necessity were inflicted. The entire operation was not, however, merely a matter of mopping up by armed military troops against unarmed people.

There was more or less organized resistance throughout. As we have already seen defections of East Pakistan personnel had resulted in the loss also of quantities of arms and ammunition which were used against the army. There is no doubt also that ammunition had been built up during the earlier period when the government was exercising virtually no control and it is equally clear that throughout this period India was at least secretly helping to supply arms. However, by about the beginning of May it could be claimed that all district headquarters, sub- divisional headquarters and major towns at least had been cleared. The main supply routes within the province, including roads, railways and water ways were again in operation. In some measure also infiltration had been checked,

though not stopped. The emphasis till then had been on sealing the main border approach from India with the consequence that infiltrations had been minimised, but nevertheless continued to occur. No until the end of May could it really be said that the province was largely under control. Even this, however, is not to say that ordinary peace time conditions had been restored in which the government was in full control. It is more correct to say that having, by stringent measures, got the upper hand the army was largely able to enforce its will throughout the province.

NEXT: MILITARY ASPECT -XI

"HAVE A NICE DAY" and cartoon strips are held over for Monday