

New Delhi's welcome policy shift

Islamabad should reciprocate with earnestness

THE Indian government's invitation to Pakistan's self-styled chief executive, General Pervez Musharraf, was certainly the last thing the region's political analysts had expected against the bleak backdrop of prolonged acrimony between the two South Asian neighbours. The bold move, viewed as a major shift in diplomatic gear, surely entitles Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to unalloyed talks and not reprobation as, we are sure, some hawks within his own country would come up with. New Delhi's invitation to the military ruler, if accepted by Islamabad without its signature cynicism and followed up with reciprocatory measures, looks poised to change the diplomatic equation between the two bitter neighbours in particular and for the region in general. And, needless to say, the change would be for the better.

Islamabad's response to New Delhi's unexpected offer was quick and, encouragingly, positive, reiterating Musharraf's readiness "to meet and hold talks with the Indian leadership anytime, anywhere." Hopefully, the military regime would refrain from attaching any string to its readiness for bilateral talks at the summit level. The pothole is there all right: along with the invitation also came the announcement—the unilateral cease-fire that the Vajpayee government had effected from November last year was over. However, we believe that Islamabad would focus more on rational negotiations rather than any unreasonable pre-emptive demands. As we see it, there is no military solution to the Kashmir problem and, therefore, now that the channel for talks has been opened, interaction between the two governments should continue until an amicable settlement is reached.

The shift in Indian policy on Pakistan eliminates a major hurdle from the path of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). India's reluctance to share the same dais with a military ruler resulted in the postponement of the last SAARC Summit. Till now, the summity cycle has remained stalled, although there has been some moves at the sidelines to revive it. We earnestly hope that New Delhi's move would soon, very soon, result in rejuvenation of SAARC. Engrossed in their hatred and mistrust for each other, both India and Pakistan tend to forget the greater responsibility they have to their other neighbours in the region. As the major powers of South Asia, it is more their responsibility to maintain peace and harmony, and ensure smooth economic development in the region than their small neighbours. We are sure both have started realising that.

Non-registered drugs in market

Policy lagging behind real demand

THE Drug Administration (DA) has deemed certain drugs to be 'luxury' items as an excuse for leaving these out of the registration process. According to a *Daily Star* probe, over 200 potentially life-saving drugs manufactured outside Bangladesh are being brought into the country illegally. They form the substance of a Tk 150 crore annual turnover black market in medicine. Routinely prescribed by doctors for cancer, heart, liver and kidney problems and a wide range of other serious illnesses, the drugs are being openly sold in drug stores everywhere.

It is highly provocative of the DA to be so nonchalant about this illicit trade in drugs. Even if the volume of demand is low compared to that for other medicine, this does not justify keeping critical drugs outside the public registration umbrella. Not only are prices for these illegally sold drugs generally high, but also supply is erratic, with sudden shortages causing untold hardships to patients. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that expiry dates and quality safeguards are being adhered to by local retailers of these contraband drugs.

The Ministry of Health has offered the flimsy excuse that since no formal application has been made to the relevant authority, these drugs have not been registered. This is highly irresponsible. The onus lies on the Ministry to monitor demand, maintain surveillance and encourage stability in the drug marketplace. It is also about time that the Ministry looked into the reasons why local manufacture of specialised drugs is still in its infancy. Pharmaceutical companies need incentives to encourage production of drugs that do not have an assured high volume of sales. In the meantime, the DA's list of legal drugs must be updated to reflect market and health needs. The case for any life-saving drug must not be so summarily ignored.

Undeclared war: Israel uses F16 against Palestinians!



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

Palestinian security posts within Palestinian territories. Israel also killed five Palestinian police men while asleep reportedly in a pre-planned ambush. Under US and international condemnation Israel has said it would apologise if it was a mistake. Though a military source reportedly already acknowledged that it was a mistake, Israel has not yet apologised. However, it appears from some reports that Israel did this under a secret terror tactic that PM

equipment puts any restriction on the buyer in terms of its use. The restrictions are particularly important in such sale deals for the reason that there could always be person like Sharon in the helm of affairs of a country and he can merrily use such destructive war equipment any time against civilians. If, however, the Palestinian Authority had anti-aircraft guns a defensive equipment in its possession, Israel would have

for "Palestine... We will not give in. We will go on, God willing, until we pray together..." in Al-Aqsa Mosque. This means that Arafat has practically given up the strategic option of peace through the peace process apparently for the reason that the other side led by Sharon does not believe in peace. This clearly leads to a dangerous situation i.e. Hamas and other extremist groups are gradually taking over the control. This is obvious as the control on the

clear that "terrorism is reprehensible and unacceptable" and take "immediate steps" in the matter. UN SG Kofi Annan asked for "blanket halt to expansion of all settlements... including the 'natural growth' of existing Jewish communities".

Israel also reportedly welcomed the report but refused to implement the most important recommendation freeze on all settlement activities. Sharon asked Palestinians to end all violence immediately to pave the

essential to push the parties to the negotiating table. It's not absolutely necessary to have the end of violence first and then talk. Earlier too the parties talked while some violence was on. Indeed, the violence in this particular area is endemic and historical. In fact, if some talks start and there is some progress in the implementation of Mitchell report and particularly on the freeze of settlement, the violence would taper down paving the way for further talks.

But most important is to control volatile Sharon who is the main cause for violence that erupted eight months ago. This appears to be the view of former US President Clinton too who spoke at a gathering in Vienna a couple of days ago. While everybody is trying to see an end to violence, Sharon has said he would create a buffer zone along Egyptian border and as *The Jerusalem Post* reported he "warned Arafat not to oppose this, or else he will order the army to destroy every house and uproot every tree along the border."

How can any one try to stop the violence if the Prime Minister of a country talks and behaves in that fashion? One fears that Sharon would lead the area to a major crisis. For obvious reasons, the only country that Sharon cares about is the US but unfortunately Israeli-Palestinian issue does not seem to be the high priority item in the new Administration's present agenda.

However, it's good to see that the US has started to act and asked its Ambassador in Jordan, William Burns and its envoy in Israel to undertake the "task of moving the ball forward." This is encouraging though the action was taken after a lot of damage has already been done in terms of the peace process through use of American F16. Talks at the officials level may help but New Administration's "hands off" policy should end and serious talks at high political level should start before it is too late.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

As the US has been slow in reacting to Israeli-Palestinian situation, active role of the EU and UN is essential to push the parties to the negotiating table... Indeed, the violence in this particular area is endemic and historical. In fact, if some talks start and there is some progress... particularly on the freeze of settlement, the violence would taper down paving the way for further talks.

Sharon approved.

The revenge is going on in both sides. A suicide bomber killed himself and five Israelis and wounded another 70 or so at Hasharon Mall, Netanya. Hamas claimed the responsibility and said it carried out the attack for Israel's killing of 5 Palestinian police men. President Bush said he was "deeply concerned" by the suicide bombings. He added, "It is essential that the leaders in the Middle East speak out clearly against violence. We must break the cycle of violence in order to begin meaningful discussions." It's not clear whether President Bush made his remarks after Israel's use of F16 fighter bombers as his statements did not mention anything about the use of American F16.

Suicide bombing, of course, deserves strong condemnation as usually such is against civilians but the use of a highly sophisticated warplane F16 without declaring a war should be doubly condemned. F16 strikes killed 12 Palestinians and injured scores. The damage was colossal. The world expected the US to condemn both suicide bombings and the use of American F16 in an undeclared war. One does not know whether the sale of such destructive war

thought twice before using F16. This indeed, raises the important issue of future Palestinian State having appropriate defensive equipment.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan termed Israeli response as "excessive and misdirected" and called on both sides for restraint. He also termed the suicide bombing as an "appalling terrorist attack" and expressed his utter condemnation. Europeans, particularly Britain and France expressed anguish over the suicide bombing and also bombing by F16.

Meanwhile in the Arab League Foreign Ministers' conference in Cairo Abu Musa, the Secretary General, condemned the use of F16 fighter bomber and called on the international community for "urgent international protection" of the Palestinians. He said a "rapid international intervention" was necessary to put an end to organised slaughter..." of the Palestinians. President Mubarak himself was furious over Israel's use of F16 and asked for immediate halt of Israeli aggression.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that President Arafat told the Arab League conference that the fight between Palestinians and Israelis has escalated into a "decisive battle"

other side too slid into the hands of the rightists and extremist parties through conscious choice made by the Israelis in the last election. The situation became worse as Shimon Peres could not exert the necessary influence on Sharon and his cabinet to change course. Peres is in the cabinet and he has not said a word about the use of F16.

The *Jerusalem Post* also reported that the US has given "general endorsement" to the Mitchell report. According to the report Secretary Colin Powell has said, "We note the report's observations on the negative impact of continued settlement activity on the prospect for peace. We believe that this issue is an essential confidence-building measure that must be addressed by the parties." Mitchell said, "Every American Administration for the last 25 years has opposed the actions and policies of the government of Israel with respect to settlements." If one recalls correctly senior Bush, former President of the US, stopped aid to Israel at some stage at least for a temporary period on the issue of settlement as US aid enabled Israel to divert a good part of its own revenue for the settlements. Mitchell report also recommended that the Palestinian Authority make it

way for talks. This was welcomed by the US but it did not ask Sharon to stop settlement activities which has already been the basic position of the US. If the new administration does not want to prevail on Sharon on such an important issue on which international opinion is unanimous, then one does not see any chance of cessation of violence in the area.

Even Meretz Party leader Yossi Sardid clearly stated that Mitchell report is the only basis to end violence provided it is implemented in full. According to Sardid most of the Israelis would support freeze on settlements and he said there would be majority support even in the Knesset (parliament) on it. Palestinians have accepted the Mitchell report and asked for implementation in its entirety. Arafat also called for an international conference on implementation of the Mitchell report.

International pressure has started building up against Israel's excessive use of force against Palestinians. EU's Chief Foreign Relations Coordinator Javier Solana has been in the region for some days and talking to all concerned. As the US has been slow in reacting to Israeli-Palestinian situation, active role of the EU and UN is

OPINION

The Padua incident: How did it happen?

KHANDAKAR QUDRAT-I ELAHI

WE could be under no illusion about the seriousness of the Padua incident, because it concerns a national prestige and a sense of persecution. We have already been humiliated by the fact that we had to retreat from Padua, the village we repossessed after three decades. And our people living in the border areas are sustaining damages both in person and property as the BSF continues to harass them in different ways. Unless the incident is resolved in a way that satisfies both the countries, we will remain under constant assault. Thus, the Padua incident is a matter of serious national concern and it demands a very sincere and objective assessment.

In making this assessment, it is important to make a clear distinction between the perceptions of prestige and persecution: Prestige is a moral (sentimental) matter, while persecution is a physical phenomenon. The whole debate on the Padua incident is overwhelmingly loaded by the perception of national prestige, which means that the persecution of our people, living in the border areas, receives little attention. Since the national prestige issue concerns mainly those of us who have little or no risk of suffering persecution, it

would be fair to give adequate reasons to the people in the border areas who are suffering personal injuries on our behalf. An objective assessment of the situation would require the clarification of the facts about how this incident had happened. If we knew how it happened, we would then know why it happened and who is responsible for it. This knowledge will pave the way for a satisfactory solution of the issue. And this clarification of these facts might begin with understanding the nature of this incident.

The incident is normally described just as a 'skirmish' in our media and popular discussion. The word, skirmish, in this context, means a minor gun battle between the border forces of two neighbouring countries. This sort of exchange of gun fires is understood to be both unintentional and unplanned, and ordinarily take place between border forces of countries which are not in good friendly relations.

Describing the Padua incident as a skirmish, however, seems quite difficult. Referring to the BDR Director General Major General Fazlur Rahman, the DS (18th April) reports the incident as establishing 'full control' over our territory that has been under Indian occupation for about three decades. "We have just completed a mission", said, the General, "to restore our territory and

sovereignty. We did not have to fire a single shot during the operation and there was no casualty or injury on either side." The operation to reclaim the occupied land began on the night of April 15 and ran through the next morning.

It is, thus, clear that this BDR operation was pre-planned. This is public knowledge, which gives very different meanings to the incident. India could interpret the incident as an act of 'aggression'. The fact that Indian occupation of the village was illegal, would hardly change this interpretation. The dispute is supposed to be resolved through bilateral negotiations, not through military operations.

From our perspective, we could consider the incident as an act of war, because it could have instigated Indian retaliation. In other words, a war could have broken out between the two countries over the incident. This brings out a critical question of authority: Who in our system of government has the right to authorise such a serious action that could put the whole nation in danger?

Clearly this right belongs to the PM and the President respectively as the head of the government and the head of the state. This means that this action must have been authorised by both the PM and the President.

In that case, the PM needs to explain to the nation two points. First, she should clarify about the constitutional questions, which might be involved with the action. Second, she should explain why she sought a military solution to this problem, which we know we cannot achieve. On the other hand, if the incident took place without proper authorisation, it infers a dangerous breach in the chain of command. This matter should be taken seriously. The PM has a responsibility to tell the nation and the nation has a right to know how this incident had happened.

To clarify the facts about how this incident happened, the opposition's role also needs to be taken into account. For this purpose, M. M. Rezaul Karim's column in the *Daily Star*, published on the 28th April, may be consulted. Mr. Karim analyses the facts concerning the incident from BNP's partisan perspective. He argues that the AL government pursues "a foreign policy subservient to that of the Indian government", which is starkly demonstrated in handling this incident. BNP cannot blame the government, because the responsibility for the incident lies with it. The point is that if we expect the government to deal with such situation, then we must also believe that only the government has the rightful authority to order such operation. Third, the AL is said to be 'in love' with India, which implies that BNP is 'in hate'

with India.

In other words, if AL is pro-Indian, then BNP is anti-Indian. If this is the case, then how does the BNP propose to solve all the difficult problems, like the Padua village, that we have with India?

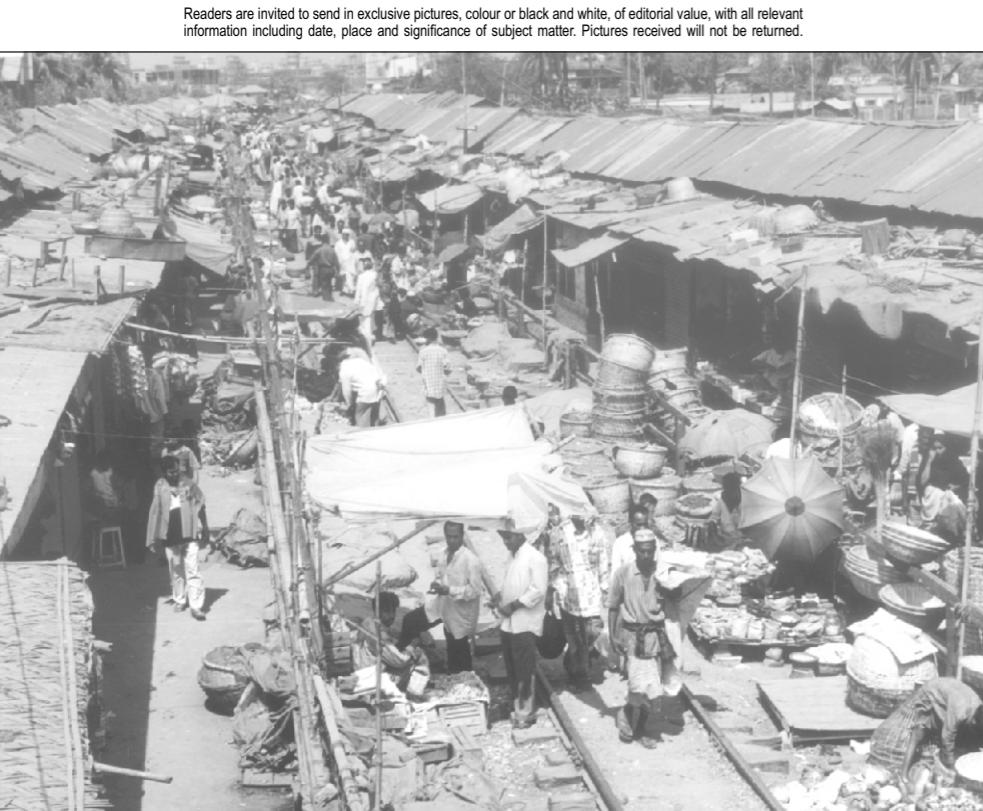
Finally, the Padua incident is a serious matter which has already cost a number of lives of border security forces of both countries and caused sufferings to our people living in the border areas. Yet, BNP, the party which had been in power for more than a decade and now performs the role of main opposition, sees the situation just as an ordinary political game. This is both unfortunate and regrettable.

The government's failure to clarify the facts about the Padua incident is only benefitting those who want to use it for their partisan advantages and those who ignorantly seek to satisfy their sense of national pride. This also means that the government is utterly failing to perform its duty to the nation.

Khandakar Qudrat-I Elahi, a former Associate Professor of the Bangladesh Agricultural University, now lives in Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

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.



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSAIN

Encroachment

The area adjacent to the railway at Jurain is occupied by numerous encroachers who have turned the place into a bazaar. A serious accident may occur at any time, but nobody seems to care. Even though these unauthorised shops and bazaar have been demolished once, it didn't take too long for them to mushroom again. How long will the authorities continue to overlook this problem?

True spokesman?

In his regular column "Letter from America" (May 12), Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed wrote: "I admire any Indian who puts the interest of India first, just as I command Bangladeshis who do the same for their country. Where I have a problem is when a 'Bangladeshi' starts putting the interest of India ahead of Bangladesh."

After reading Mustafa Farooq's letter ("The truth is out there" May 18), I realise that there exist such 'Bangladeshi' right here in Bangladesh.

Ashfaque Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka, on e-mail

Unsafe airport road

Thanks to the indifference of the government and utter professional inefficiency of the police, the Dhaka airport road has become unsafe for travellers for the last few years.

A large percentage of the voters would not vote for the party in power just on this count, because administrative failure of this type is reflected in many other public sectors: gang violence, corrupt practices, armed hold-ups, robbery, toll collection, politicisation, and so on. Why is the regime so callous even during this

sensitive period?

A citizen
Dhaka

Election wish list

We are approaching election fever in our country and politicians are busy giving their usual rhetoric and making impossible promises. We, the citizens want very basic commitments and a clear plan of how they plan to achieve them during their tenure.

We don't want the politicians to make a manifesto with all our wish lists as that would need a magic wand. What we need are a few basic human demands to be fulfilled so that we could live as decent human beings.

We want security of life and that means getting the law and order situation in order. We don't want to hear who did what but how the elected representatives will reorganise the law enforcement force so that they are better equipped, better paid, and would have the authority to bring to book the criminals, no matter who they are.

We want clean air and stern environmental control so that stern action can be taken against the polluters. We want our children to get the best education in line with the rest of the world so that in the world of 'globalisation' they are not left out of the job market. We want business to be competitive and not state sponsored. We want patriotism not as a speech but in action. We want public servants and politi-

cians to be working for us and with us but not us becoming hostage to their power play. Last but not the least, the basic 'human rights' recognised by the UN Charter should be applicable to all citizens of this nation.

Am I asking for too much?
Akku Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka, on e-mail

On Palestine

I have gone through the article by M. Shaifulullah on Palestinians, Biharis and Kashmiris (April 19). I would like to state that this article contains a lot of inaccuracies.

For the readers let me reproduce the exact words of the Lahore Resolution adopted on 23 March 1940. This resolution is commonly known as the Pakistan Resolution although the word 'Pakistan' did not appear in the text of the resolution.

"Resolved that it is the considered view of this session of the All India Muslim League that no constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to Muslims unless it is designed on the following basic principle viz.; that geographically continuous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted, with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute independent states in which constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign."

Here I underline the significance of the world's independent states and constituent units. This resolution was moved