

From Seattle to Doha

WTO negotiations should be meaningful, yield benefit to poor nations

DEEP differences remain," said Mike Moore, director general of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), at the inaugural session of the five-day ministerial meeting at Doha, the Qatar capital. His words have a strong pessimistic undertone: policy disputes that scuttled the Seattle talks towards agreement on a new trade liberalisation agenda in December 1999 remain acute as ever. The Doha talks may not see more than 40,000 anti-globalisation activists waving placards, chanting slogans and eventually damaging windowpanes and locking in violent clashes with the police just outside the meeting venue as in Seattle; however, these may not arrive at an agreement either. At a time when the world is in turmoil, both politically with the United States and its allies engaged in an apparently open-ended war in Afghanistan and economically with major economies sliding into recession, failure of the Doha talks would be a costly misfortune to be sure.

The United States and its Cairns Group allies want elimination of government subsidies to help farmers export their output, which the European Union vehemently opposes. Again, Washington, on its part, does not want inclusion in a new round of debate its anti-dumping policies, under which punitive duties have been slapped on imports deemed to have entered the US markets at unfairly low prices. Japan and South Korea strongly denounce this US practice and want to see the issue on any future trade liberalisation agenda.

On the other hand, the developing countries are unhappy with a draft ministerial statement that, they say, falls far short of meeting their needs. The poor nations hate being almost forced into making new trade commitments although previous multilateral accords have hardly borne any fruit for them. There is also growing demand from them for greater access to markets in the industrialised world. To top them all off, the poor nations are seeking the right to override WTO-approved patent protections to produce cheap generic drugs to combat health crises.

How would another round of failed WTO talks impact on the developing countries like Bangladesh? Heavily. Washington has already made clear that duty- and quota-free access of Bangladesh readymade garment products to the US markets in foreseeable future is highly unlikely. Global economic downturn has already started taking its toll on our biggest source of foreign exchange earning. The country needs to make its concerns heard at the global forum and we are sure the Bangladesh delegation to the Doha ministerial would try to do that. More crucially, let's hope the industrialised nations listen to what we have to say.

Air pollution, a sign of failed governance

That's how it has to be dealt with

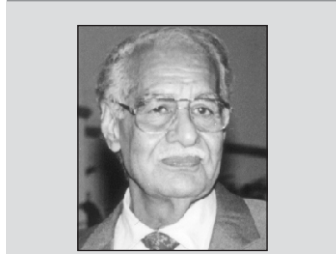
THE state of Dhaka's air has become so bad that it can no longer be described through ordinary language. Only metaphors can portray this murky monster that is swallowing us. Not only are we swallowing some of the most polluted air in the world, we are also doing nothing to eliminate the sources of our misery. The state of air pollution is not as much an environmental problem as it is a governance disaster.

Serious concern was expressed over the state of affairs at a public rally held by a pressure group Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon where eminent intellectuals and civil society leaders spoke as reported in The Daily Star on Friday. What however is scary is that this isn't the first time that a meeting has been held, the situation decried and alarm bell rung. The refusal or inability to act that follows such condemnations and appeals is also familiar. There is something deeply tragic about this process of demand articulation by civil society leaders and denial by the powers that be.

But as the speakers have noted, the state of the pollution may indicate a deeper malaise and the situation as we see today is part of an overall decline. We may not be making the connection because we have lived with decline for so long. Somewhere along the line, the entire process of managing society and governing the people in consonance with the general will of the governed was lost. It's the coterie that subverted public interest for personal gain which ended up getting the upperhand. It will take extra-ordinary and perhaps somewhat unrealistic optimism to think that the trend will change for the better if fundamental structural changes are not made.

We congratulate the voices that have spoken out for reason and against the pillage of the environment. Our hope is the government will pay heed to these and bring about a turn-around drawing on the wealth of expert advice we have had on the issue of air pollution.

Kashmir: to cut the Gordian knot



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

KASHMIR again. Coup leader Pervez Musharraf has to keep it on the front burner. The war in Afghanistan, increasingly unpopular in Pakistan, needs to be balanced by emotions - and outbursts. The anti-India rhetoric is a useful digression even in a highly volatile situation.

What is depressing is that a democratically elected Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is equally keen on playing to the gallery. That his party, the BJP, faces a crucial election in UP is understandable. After having been ousted from 24 out of 28 states to political parties in the opposition, losing the government in the most important state can shake the alliance at the Centre. But the PM's observation of kara in response to Musharraf's bravado that he was not wearing bangles did not enhance his dignity. He sounded as childish as the Pakistan President.

Almost every power on earth has asked for talks between India and Pakistan. Vajpayee has said so many times: how long can you avoid talking to a neighbour? Both he and Musharraf have been told by foreign powers during their recent visits abroad.

It is not that they have not met. The sitting at Agra was a marathon session. Still nothing came out of it. The reason is their diametrically opposed positions. It means that someone should help. But an outsider is ruled out because his role may become that of an arbiter or a mediator. The two countries have to settle the problem of Kashmir bilaterally.

Perhaps the way out is to entrust the job to non-officials. Both countries can choose one person of their confidence. They can meet and do

the spadework. In fact, during the Nawaz Sharif time, the two such non-officials almost found a solution. In the words of Vajpayee, "we were almost there."

Over the years I have seen that when it comes to Islamabad, New Delhi throws restraint to the wind. The bureaucrats on both sides do it all the time. Their hatred or one-upmanship against each other provides grist to the propaganda mills of difference and defiance. When their superiors begin to speak in the same vein, they raise only concern.

It is a familiar scenario - some kind of political déjà vu. Even the sequence has not changed. First there are inflammatory statements from both sides. Then some firing at the border and ultimately there is a build-up which is provocative enough but does not indicate hostility. Every time America calls for restraint and every time the temperature comes down.

The show looks like the threat which a spoilt child gives to his mother that he was going to jump into a river but does not do so because of her imploring. Both countries are probably vying with each other to catch Washington's eye. Once in a while, at America's prodding, there is a summit meet between the two countries. Then the period of animated pause begins. And everything is back to square one. The same exercise starts all over again.

Pakistan understands it. But after the death of its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who favoured a secular nation, the country has been made a theocratic state where the liberals have only little role or say. The war in Afghanistan is strengthening the hold of the jihadis and other fun-



PHOTO: BBC WEBSITE

damentalists. How can they reconcile themselves to the idea of a secular Jammu and Kashmir when they want to grab the Muslim majority valley of the state?

There is no dearth of agreements between India and Pakistan. Starting right from the Jawaharlal Nehru-Liaquat Ali pact after the partition to the Lahore or the nearly-signed Agra Declaration some time ago, the joint communiqué have not been the problem. They

have analysed the situation correctly whenever the two countries have wanted to do so.

Take, for example, the Shimla Agreement text. Both countries declared: "The Government of Pakistan and the Government of India are resolved that the two countries put an end to the conflict and confrontation that have hitherto marred their relations and work for the promotion of friendly and harmonious relationship and establishment of durable peace in

BETWEEN THE LINES

By making Kashmir a religious state - as Osama bin Laden wants to - the extremists are complicating further an already complicated problem. Theocracy is an outdated ideology which could attract people in the Middle Ages, not in the 21st century. And what about the elements in Pakistan who believe that the pressure on Kashmir will make India disintegrate one day?

the subcontinent so that both countries may henceforth devote their resources and energies to the pressing task of advancing the welfare of their people."

Nobody can take exception to the sentiments expressed. The problem is not that New Delhi and Islamabad do not know what ails their relationship. The problem is the absence of desire to implement the understanding they reach, either in letter or in spirit. Pakistan is largely to be blamed because it raises Kashmir even before the ink of signatures on any agreement dries up.

Musharraf is blunt enough to say that Kashmir comes first and other problems later. But this does not mean that he is right in his approach. He knows that the path he has taken cannot end up in a solution of Kashmir. The entire approach is too religious and violent. India can never agree to it because it will hurt its pluralistic policy. Even a party like the BJP has begun to argue that Pakistan is seeking to undo India's secular society. It is significant that Vajpayee brought in partition of India for the first time in his recent speeches and said that the country would not allow the partition to be repeated.

One leader at Srinagar has said: The Afghanistan war has highlighted Kashmir and it will now be pursued by the Muslim world. Again, the approach is communal. No amount of religious colouring will resolve the Kashmir problem. It will only get tangled. The liberal approach of Kashmiriyat may help. But that is where the Kashmiri pandits come in, not the Muslim world.

A letter which I have received from Ghulam Rasool Kar, once the Congress president of Jammu and

Kashmir, rightly points out that "Muslims and pandits are two inseparable components of Kashmir society." The problem is how to bring back the community to the valley after 20 years and how to give them the confidence. Islamabad can never understand, much less appreciate, this aspect. Even New Delhi does not.

Bringing the Kashmiri Muslims and the pandits together is important to normalise the situation in the valley. But attending to the alienation of the Jammu population is equally important if the state is to stay together. Just as the valley has got communalised in the past few years, so has Jammu. The Hurriyat which claims to represent the state should make efforts to retrieve the situation in Jammu. But it faces the pressure of the Islamic lobby from within. Were New Delhi to start negotiations with the Hurriyat and other elements in the state, the focus must be political, not religious, as the case is today.

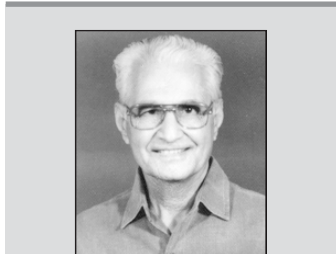
Such a process will also defeat the efforts of fundamentalists from across the border. They should have realised by this time that the Indian state is no pushover. By making Kashmir a religious state - as Osama bin Laden wants to - the extremists are complicating further an already complicated problem. Theocracy is an outdated ideology which could attract people in the Middle Ages, not in the 21st century.

And what about the elements in Pakistan who believe that the pressure on Kashmir will make India disintegrate one day? Even in a recent interview to *The Nation*, published from Lahore, former ISI chief Hamid Gul has said: "I believe India cannot live as a political entity as it is today. It has to be fragmented."

But when one comes to know that Hamid Gul is the person who wove the web of fundamentalism in Afghanistan in which thousands of simple, gullible people were caught, one can only have pity for those who think likewise in Pakistan. They are sick. The Muslim society should be wary of them. Look at what they have done to Afghanistan.

Kuldeep Nayar is a leading Indian columnist

Resolving multiple polarisations



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PAKISTANIS are confused because of multiple and often conflicting calls on their sympathies. Polarisation has resulted. Premier one causing anxiety is over the War on Afghanistan. An apparently growing section under the spell of religious parties and Jehadi groups is all for 'Taliban' -- each American bomb dropped on Afghanistan is enhancing support for Taliban as also anti-American sentiment -- while a much smaller and aware section, believing in secular or semi-secular politics, approves Musharraf's policy switch on the ground that it was unavoidable. But it is unhappy with the way the War has gone; poor hapless Afghans rather than credible terrorists are being hit. Besides, doubts about the western war aims are growing. Aren't Americans engaged in a geopolitical advance into Central Asia -- with its oil, gas, minerals and markets -- after befriending India and commandeering Pakistan's allegiance?

This polarisation has already gone too far and lines have been drawn for a future civil war, or rather civil strife, since one side might be too weak to fight, more as a result of the uncertainty regarding the generals and their troops'

loyalties; there is no knowing how credibly modernist this institution now is. In their hearts and minds, the Pakistanis are already at war. Tribal lashkars are already in Afghanistan to join the war on Taliban side. But the government is committed to the anti-Taliban cause.

The makings of a civil war are there; only the bloodshed has not begun. But the political demonstrations of pro-Taliban elements have been spectacular what with

view of Pakistan is too heavily tainted with both their think tanks' prognostications of Pakistan being a wobbly state that may split or dissolve and the images of streets full of fierce bearded fanatics.

The reaction to pro-Taliban lobby's utterances in Americas, in turn, greatly strengthening anti-American sentiment, particularly on the nuclear issue. For many, Kashmir is the core issue for the state and mainstream parties and of course their propagandists.

and actions. With a key state election pending, harsh anti-Pakistan utterances, including a stance exhibiting national arrogance, seem calculated to boost BJP's chances in UP polls. War of words is no great hardship for the military regime either. Since neither side can wish away its neighbour, they have necessarily to neighbour a lot of business.

They might as well become civilised enough to transact it by making it mutually beneficial

unworthy for both New Delhi and Islamabad. As it is, their confrontation has diminished both India and Pakistan, lowering their normal statures and making both clients of the same superpower.

It is time Pakistanis revised their notion of predicating their national cohesion on anti-Indianism. Since Kashmir dispute has in any case been frozen, it can and should be put in a new democratic framework in which the problem can be resolved in the fullness of time.

them from falling into Indian, American or other undesirable hands. Since Pakistan has already incurred an unacceptable political cost of hopelessly freezing the Kashmir dispute over their account in addition to a lot of continuing expense, it is time to ask the hard question: what is the point of having them?

Pakistan should therefore revert to its traditional stance of keeping South Asia nuclear weapons free and forcing the issue on India by making Pakistan nuclear weapons free first. Whether or not there are Indians - who would make India nuclear weapons free, that is Indians' business. We will then have no reason to be impressed by Indian weapons, even if they survive ours. But all these problems are secondary in nature, dealing with external matters. Primacy should always go to domestic troubles. How can Pakistan stay truly independent and free, with as much sovereignty as is possible in the modern world. What is imperative is keeping the people happy and reconciled with one another -- or united in freedom.

They have to have maximum freedoms. But formal civil liberties are meaningless in the context of mass poverty. Thus, removal of mass poverty and keeping the people reconciled in a truly free political dispensation are the twin tasks that should be defined as our first priority. That is the way to cut through the thick layers of confusion under which problems are falling over one another to trouble poor Pakistanis. A change in national priorities is called for that begins by firmly subordinating external affairs to overriding domestic priorities.

MB Naqvi is a noted columnist in Pakistan

PLAIN WORDS

Formal civil liberties are meaningless in the context of mass poverty. Thus, removal of mass poverty and keeping the people reconciled in a truly free political dispensation are the twin tasks that should be defined as our first priority.

lashkars being formed and Karakoram Highway being blocked, not to mention the daily rallies and meetings, the government's hitherto empty growls notwithstanding. Pakistan's relationship with America and the west is also causing confusion. Are the Americans real friends or are saying things only for PR purposes. Do they mean to help Pakistan stand on its own legs or are only making the drip slightly ampler -- and that is calculated to do just a shade more than merely enough to ward off defaults in payments. A melancholy fact has to be faced that most of this supposedly anti-Taliban activity is moved by the mercenary consideration that, if we are making such a sacrifice as to ditch Taliban, it should be recompensed by massive aid. Its questionable morality apart, America does need to strengthen a key ally.

The perception in this quasi-secular crowd is that American

Kashmir issue is both a symbol and consequence of Hindu-Muslim quarrel in British India which continues to shape Pakistan's domestic as well as foreign policies. Both the relations with India and Kashmir question are now dangerously deadlocked: the next logical step is war because both sides have nothing new to say and remain determined to stick to their guns. Finding Pakistan immersed in troubles, New Delhi continues saying provocative things, stressing the right to move across LoC and treating Pakistan's repeated requests for talks -- a line calculated to score points internationally -- as some kind of a favour that is being withheld. In a game both countries are playing games over Kashmir.

The BJP-dominated government, in ideological terms, is the mirror image of the dominant mind set on this side: BJP political flourishes on anti-Muslim rhetoric

because there is no way that they can remain permanently at war or even distant. With nuclearisation of South Asia, war between India and Pakistan is now out of the question, all the growling and petty theorising about limited conventional war notwithstanding. So why not go beyond civility and be friends. Apart from these general propositions, the by now utterly pointless military confrontation with India has become back-breaking financially. It distorts the economy and impoverishes both the government and the people. It simply cannot be sustained.

The Americans are on the job of resolving the Indo-Pakistan confrontation, wishing to take both India and Pakistan along for serving the ends of their grand geopolitical design in Asia. Should they succeed, they will thus achieve one objective that is good per se (reducing tensions) and another which is demeaning and

Meanwhile both Indian PM and Pakistan President are scheduled to journey to a largely symbolic gathering in Kathmandu and Indian Foreign Office has indicated that their separate meeting would be possible. But a mere meeting is no big deal. The idea is there should be serious negotiations that are necessary in the larger interests of both countries. Neither will be doing a favour to the other by entering into negotiations. Talks for talks' sake are pointless.

The objective should now be total normalisation. That would be in Pakistan's best interests. It should be combined with regional free trade and economic cooperation, not excluding political harmonisation. There is a sore thumb of a problem posed by nuclear weapons. As recent developments have shown, the so-called strategic assets have become a wholly different problem: how to keep

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

People's verdict

I don't disagree with Mr YZ's letter ("People's verdict", October 4) on elections but I have some additional comments to make.

The writer said that he is happy that people didn't vote for candidates like Shamim Osman, Akhtaruzzaman Babu, Joyal Hazari and others. But what is his opinion about the fact that Hazari is replaced by VP Joyal? What about Saber Hossain Choudhury's defeat by Mirza Abbas who is also one of the godfathers in our country? Saber Hossain is one of the cleanest persons as well as the most successful organiser in our country.

And I also don't consider the October 1 election as a silent revolution of people. Awami League lost the election because of the alliance of four parties and intra-party rivalry. If it were a revolution, then AL wouldn't get 40 per cent popular vote.

Z. Hogue
Kansas, USA, on e-mail

Mass assembly of

low-cost PCs

The government may encourage the private sector (including the EPZ), to mass assemble low-cost (minimum-power) personal computers for the students and middle class families. The latest high-power models advertised are costly for penetrating a slow-growth market in a LDC.

Nowadays PCs are being sold on hire purchase system. There is also a need for opening a large number of servicing centres in the district towns. But the quality of training of these service personnel has not been standardised officially (the official certificate may be displayed in the shop).

The official BS Society has to promote the development papers in a coordinated and integrated manner, with offices at the divisional headquarters level for handling the local inquiries. The dealers advertise the latest high-power, expensive computers, which only the affluent users can buy.

The creation of a Computerisation Division may be considered for introduction of computers in the government offices on a large

scale. It will reduce the human system losses, prevent false records, and ease file keeping. Due to the slow pace of computerisation in the NCBS, many clients are switching over to the new private banks that offer on-line and ATM services. The capital cost involved can be easily recovered in a few years.

Grateful Muslims

Dr Fakhrudin Ahmed's gushing ode to American 'generosity' and 'greatness' (October 30) would be merely ludicrous were it not also such a typical mindset of many grateful, alien American citizens.

Mr. Ahmed derives strange comfort from the fact that, what has been, in reality, a bigoted backlash against Muslims in America (post September 11) has not been any worse. Naive teenagers or ignorant adults can be expected to be impressed by Mr. Bush's attempts at slick public relations but others, Mr. Ahmed inexplicably chooses to promote such inconsequential events as

America's generosity and maturity.

Mr. Ahmed's recounting of recent, sweet and satisfying personal experiences with fellow Americans betray his smug, self-congratulatory mood. It's highly fashionable, yet thoroughly inadequate, to demonise the Taliban and try to demonstrate some moral distance from them. Whatever one's views on the Taliban, nothing can justify the current atrocities of the despicable war waged on innocent Afghans and the Taliban. 'September 11' did not (indeed should never) make proud Muslims defensive (as Mr. Ahmed asserts) -- it just made perennially complacent, defensive Muslims more visible and identifiable to the truly proud, assertive Muslims.

It's humiliating to set out to desperately distinguish oneself as a 'good', 'acceptable' Muslim to America and the West as Mr. Ahmed does. Let's not self-righteously lecture each other about 'true' Islam. Mr. Ahmed and his ilk may feel compelled to defend Islam to their friends in the West; millions of other Muslims, even the Taliban, quite rightly, feel no such urge.

"This is a war against terrorism, not Islam" is a vain, con-line that Mr. Ahmed, to his discredit, naively champions. When American media/political/military commentators have been routinely saying that Ramadan is not (or should not) be a factor in America's ongoing military campaign, Mr. Ahmed advances the astonishing fallacy that America "wants to end operations quickly enough to be able to feed and clothe the Afghan civilians" and "they want to do all this before the beginning of Ramadan."

Does Mr. Ahmed have an insider's knowledge of America's true intentions that the rest of the world doesn't?

Mr. Ahmed, to his credit, makes a reference to the untenable U.S. policy in the Middle East. He is wrong, though, to argue that now is not the time to examine the causes of the Sep 11 attacks. That sort of evasive cop-out is most unhelpful. Mr. Ahmed has a right to be enamoured, as he obviously is, with the American way of life and their 'values'. It's understandable, too, that he sympathises with the suffering of his American friends and colleagues.

What is disappointing, and unacceptable, is that Mr. Ahmed, in his zeal for extolling America's supposed virtues, fails to fully acknowledge America's most egregious attitudes and policies that have been so ruinous to a justly enraged Islamic world.

Sajjad Husain, on e-mail

"Clash of confusions"

It was nice to read Mr Akbar's reflective essay on the current Afghan (and for that matter world's) crisis. I however would like to mention that, since this conflict, at least according to Salman Rushdie, is "about Islam", influential Muslim countries and Islamic organisations like, OIC, the Gulf Council and modern Islamic scholars must also be included in a much needed global dialogue. I think the UN is the only organisation that can midwife creation of such a global forum. Question is would that be possible?

Do the big western powers have the will or courage to do that, a courage that comes not from the infamous B52s but from the heart

of hearts? I am suspicious because the other day I saw how disdainfully Tony Blair in London sidelined the relatively poorer European countries like Portugal to discuss the Afghan crisis! This was high snobbery. If Tony Blair can be a snob to a European ally, it is easy to suspect if they are serious about the countries like Bangladesh or Afghanistan or towards any "global" dialogue to resolve and prevent the kind of crisis we are in now. Mr Akbar's idea of "parallelism" is notwithstanding highly praiseworthy. One can only hope that it surfaces as a second front of the current "war".

Samir Sahar, Stockholm, Sweden, on e-mail

Kibria's article

Like a vanquished general, Mr. Kibria (November 5) is looking for scapegoats to explain the Awami League's defeat and his poor generalship as the AL Election Co-ordinator for which he must have come under severe criticism from the party rank and file.

The caretaker government

offers Mr. Kibria a splendid target as it no longer exists and its members in all conscience can no longer respond publicly. Nor does this really matter, now, for the public has spoken in an election that most Bangladeshis and external observers consider free and fair. But what is really irritating about Mr. Kibria's article is the "stab-in-the-back" myth he's trying to float, just like the German Army did following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. He implies even if he doesn't come out explicitly that the AL would have won but for the caretaker government's "partiality" - or stab-in-the-back. This is nonsense and Mr. Kibria knows it. That's why his article is a mass of generalisations, uncorroborated accusations and assertions of impropriety by the Chief Adviser and his advisers that are slanderous if not defamatory.

Mr. Kibria should come off his high horse and use his undoubted talent in reforming the AL and discharging his constitutional duties as an MP instead of wasting his energy on political casualty.

M. Iqbal, on e-mail