

South Asian Business Forum

India's role pivotal to bridging trade gaps

IT'S a ray of hope seemingly flickering through an otherwise murky regional situation. This has to do with the tiding that India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have decided to form South Asian Business Forum to alleviate their balance of trade problems. With the commerce secretaries and the presidents of apex trade bodies of the four countries agreeing to set up the forum operationally it is being obviously flagged off from a vantage point. But there has to be more to it. One has to wait and see as to how much of the political will of the partnering countries, especially that of India as the leading economy in the region, is brought to bear on the newly visualised process.

Our experience in the economic dimension of regional cooperation within the SAARC framework has not been all that satisfactory to kindle any fresh hope just like that. After years of drudgery, even SAPTA remains fractionally attained, let alone the far cry of a dream called the free trade association. In fact, if it were a success story we would have had perhaps very little need for a newer contrivance to shore up cooperation. This is not to trivialise, in any way, the new forum that will be hopefully up and running soon but to simply say how important it will be to make a success of it. A compact forum will have the advantage of addressing the balance of trade issues in a focused manner; that's where lies its significance.

India, as the leading economy having overwhelming trade surpluses with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, evidently holds the key to the forum's success as a promoter of equitable trade within the region. In her bilateral trade with the small neighbouring economies India has not been quite as generous as would befit her gigantic economic status. With Bangladesh, for instance, she has for years dithered on grant of free and non-dutiable access to a minimal basket of 25 items despite commitments to the contrary. Now, it seems she is attaching a conditionality to it. As for Bangladeshi batteries, an anti-dumping clause is being applied - rather inexplicably.

As we look at the whole scenario, it should be in India's long-term interest to help strengthen the markets of neighbouring countries. That India stands to benefit from stronger economies in the region needs no elaboration whatsoever. In the ultimate analysis, South Asian Business Forum will have a positive impact on regional trade only if India agrees to be radically accommodative to the requirements of smaller neighbouring countries.

Welcome to the interim Afghan government

National reconciliation its prime task

AFTER an interlude of more than twenty-two winters of pain and blood, the people of Afghanistan have been given another chance. The interim government of Hamid Karzai has taken over with all the best wishes from most people of the world. He represents the face of legitimacy and moderation is expected of him. Where guns alone have stood and spoken, he must make the voice of law and order heard the loudest.

The present government in Afghanistan has come about as a result of one of the most intensive wars of recent times. The US-led coalition literally bombed away the Taliban from power and the Bonn meeting where the interim government arrangement was finalized had also been brokered by them. The present construct has in a way been ushered in by super-power guarantees and will be well supported by those who matter. Given this background, the task of the new head of the interim government is even more significant.

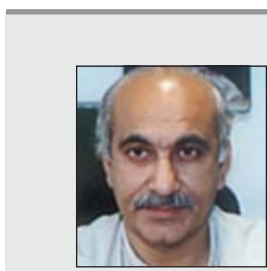
In fact, Afghan history has been intertwined with the annals of power-play in the region. The former USSR, USA or neighbour Pakistan took their turns. And in each case the Afghan people alone have paid the price. One hopes the present regime will be able to function without too much external pressure. They must be allowed to decide for themselves. This is essential for mending the Afghan nation.

It should also be a reminder and warning that when the Taliban came to power dislodging the Northern Alliance, the people cheered them. They must be able to control the ethnic fighting that erupted the last time so murderously and which is both unresolved and never far away even today.

The Northern Alliance now in power is basically composed of all the ethnic groups' bar the Pashtuns but they are together in the minority. The majority Pashtuns are not in this governing make-up and their representative in effect had been the Taliban. While the discredited Taliban are gone, the residue of ethnic resentment remains. If the new leadership fails to treat all the ethnic constructs fairly or indulges in revenge-taking activities, the ghost of another ethno-based militancy may arise, especially in the border areas.

Modern and common sense governance can help resolve most problems but that is not always in ready supply anywhere. Given the history of the suffering endured by the Afghans, one hopes that the new leadership will ensure that such an episode never recurs again.

Sound bites can bite back



M.J. AKBAR

ATAL Behari Vajpayee becomes Prime Minister about twice or thrice a year; anything more is for those with larger appetites. One reason why his leadership has not staled despite three years in office is because he does not spread himself wide, and thin. He is not an interventionist in his own government, a temptation that Prime Ministers and Presidents are very prone to. He does not come in the way of his ministers, and start doing their job for them, although, God knows, there are times when India would be happier if he did.

Being aloof makes sense, for him. You cannot be a minister and not become unpopular in India. That is impossible. The ruling principle of the motherland is that if anything can go wrong, it will go wrong in spades; and if anything goes right, no one will notice. That is the cost-benefit equation of power. If you don't like the mathematics you can choose another profession. Hence, the less the Prime Minister is associated with his own government, the less vulnerable he is, personally. If the economy is in a mess, go blame the finance minister. If bombs blast holes all over the country, check with the home minister. When Atal Behari Vajpayee, therefore, allows a free hand to his ministers, we should not confuse it with goodwill or generosity. Just put that in the category of good politics.

However, the obverse is that if you do not understand when those two or three moments of crisis, or national need, come every year, or appreciate what needs to be done when you are standing alone on high ground, then you are irretrievably sunk. Such space opened up after the terrorist attack on our Parliament on 13 December, and nearly inflicted damage than the worst nightmare could not have

mature democracy in full flow. Parliament was attacked; it was obvious in 48 hours that the objective was to hold as many of its members hostage, spread death and havoc if necessary, and defeat the government on the bargaining table just as it had been defeated during the hijack of the Indian Airlines plane. India's Parliament responded with the strength of confidence and the grace of a democracy. Clearly

Chandra Shekhar's questions were worthy of Arjuna on war during Mahabharat. Mrs Sonia Gandhi was the one disappointment of an outstanding debate. She should not really speak in Parliament until she has learnt the value of conviction over compromise as well as the art of discourse. She is not in the league around her.

You could be forgiven for believing that the Prime Minister, sitting in

short of opening hostilities to indicate its rage, and its conviction that December 13 was yet another battle in an undeclared war by Pakistan against India. There are enough Indians who believe that the only meaningful response to an undeclared war is to declare one.

There used to be a time when a clash between India and Pakistan had all the cozens of neighbourhood acrimony. The two countries are

You cannot launch something as serious as war without thinking through the questions, answers and options. Colin Powell made a wise comment to Ariel Sharon when he reminded the Israeli Prime Minister that there was a tomorrow, and then a day after. Today's anger must always be matched against tomorrow's possibilities.

India has the sympathy of the world today; the challenge is to convert that sympathy into active and meaningful support. I do not think the terrorists realise how much they have hurt their own cause, if their cause is Kashmir, by this sustained, suicidal adventurism. However, there could be a method in this madness. Terrorists, living on the fringe of reality, may want to provoke a larger conflagration.

General Pervez Musharraf is doing what he can to provoke Delhi. To describe India's reaction as arrogant is stupid; there is no other word for it. President Musharraf is generous with his tongue because generals, not being familiar with the demands of democracy, are not used to accountability. They think they can get away with anything as long as it sounds faintly patriotic. Perhaps the General has been spoiled into believing that his interaction with the media is consistently brilliant. Sound bites can bite back General.

If his genuine assessment of Indian feeling after 13 December is that Delhi is being "arrogant" then the General has no appreciation of what is happening in a democracy next to his dictatorship. Such ignorance can do more damage than intelligent hostility.

Mr Vajpayee will have to steer through difficult minefields in the coming days, and try to keep his balance when all around him are losing theirs. However, this might require becoming Prime Minister more than twice or thrice a year.

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BYLINE

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The response had to be multi-tiered. At one level was the immediate need for security forces to eliminate the terrorists. This was done with commendable speed after the embarrassing initial failure when the security ring was punched open. The political response and the overall management of the incident is a more complex business. The first duty of the government was to prevent any ugly internal fallout; there is no shortage of elements, some in the ruling phalanx, eager to fan communal fires out of every spark that comes their way. All political parties, very consciously and very carefully, refused to identify terrorism with Indian Muslims. There were times, during the debate in Parliament, when one could see rhetoric beginning to wander in dangerous directions but at least one important politician pulled himself back from the brink.

The highlight of the national response to terrorism was surely the debate in the Lok Sabha. The context might seem slightly inappropriate, but what a pleasure it is to see a

tone of the debate had to be set by the Opposition: what can a ruling party MP do except be obedient to the powers that be or, if his IQ is on the lower side, find a surrogate to hit? The leaders of the Opposition shaped national policy with their views. Mulayam Singh Yadav, who has no reason to be kind to the BJP with the elections in Uttar Pradesh only weeks away, defined the difference between the national interest and the national government, identified himself with the first and left no doubt that the second needed a wake-up call. The real impact, however, came from former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar. He spoke at a moment when war hype was dominant, and when any opinion poll would have found a majority of Indians urging a war that they wanted to start without knowing how it would end. If ever a speech can claim to have helped alter a mood, then that must be one. That speech did not change the mood, but it interfered with a rising spirit. Prime Minister Vajpayee acknowledged this contribution when he intervened during the debate, noting that

the House, was resting while the others had their say. His eyes were half-closed. The good news is that his mind was open. He could have turned the wind in whichever direction he wanted. Mercifully he chose to be a Prime Minister of India rather than a leader of a political party. By the time he had finished, he had become quite the master of ceremonies. He achieved many things simultaneously, at least one of them good for his own political health. One presumes he realises that the national anger against terrorism, and against Pakistan, will not translate into a vote for his party in the UP elections. If the war in Kargil could not change the UP mind in the last general elections, when Mr Vajpayee was asking for a vote for himself, then December 13 is unlikely to bring Mr Rajnath Singh back to power. The goodwill Mr Vajpayee is accumulating now will serve him in good stead when the backlash of a Lucknow defeat begins creeping towards Delhi.

The big question between now and those elections is relations with Pakistan. Delhi has done everything

now simply too powerful for the world to sit back and let them get on with it. Between them they could bring the most sensitive and unstable bit of unreal estate tumbling down.

However Indians must decide their own course of action, on the basis of the Indian interest. Every war has to have an objective. Our objective is the elimination of terrorist camps and arsenals located in Pakistan. By definition such camps are unconventional, disguised and mobile. Can they be hit in a conventional war? Terrorists do not operate from cantonments. Will it help to defeat the Pakistan army, assuming that the Pakistan army can be defeated in a war that it will fight to protect its country's borders? Can you defeat only those elements in the Pak armed forces who are encouraging this Jihad against India? Is the objective of such a war to seize territory? It cannot be, for what do you do with that territory? Are there any guarantees that a conventional war will not escalate under the pressure of circumstances?

Another 'My Lai' in Afghanistan



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AS the endgame in Afghanistan's war is drawing to close it has given rise to several disturbing questions as to the fate of religious-ideological warriors whether belonging to Taliban's Islamic militia or Al-Qaeda "terrorist" outfit in the wake of their surrender. Before being baptised as Taliban or Al-Qaeda many of them were sponsored by CIA through Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence to fight a proxy war on the US' behalf against Soviet invaders and included a large number of foreign volunteers willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. The Afghan Taliban are believed to have taken cover of prevailing confusion and melted into mountains or mixed up with the local populace thus making their identity indistinguishable from them. Some Taliban might have already trekked across porous Durand Line to seek protection of their ethnic brothers in Pushtun tribal areas or Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. The

problem has however arisen with regards to non-Afghan fighters who have virtually nowhere to hide or fall back on. While a few of them could have escaped to neighbouring Pakistan or Iran, most of them have ended up in captivity. How will they be treated once taken as prisoner of war (POW) and what can be their final disposal?

While it is true that the Geneva Conventions do not apply to the foreign volunteers, they nevertheless

would safeguard the lives at least of those in their custody. After all, none could be more empathic than the west in harping on such basic human right!

But what happened to Taliban prisoners in Qala-i-Jangi fort near Mazar-i-Sharif late last month came as a chilling shock to international community. The massacre of nearly 600 POWs who 'revolted' in the fort and role of the allies in the mayhem seriously stirred the conscience of

best, with Kalashnikovs. The entire drama of the Taliban's 'revolving' and the allies quelling it down to ensure an overkill gives the impression that the aim of the high command was the wholesale slaughter of the POWs.

Referring to the massacre, the celebrated British war correspondent Robert Frisk said that the western soldiers bore moral responsibility for it. According to him the 'British troops are now stained with

warlords of their culpability. What has however been extremely shocking is the attitude of the soldiers of highly professional British and American forces which are equally responsible for the violation of the code of conduct in war. Is it because the Taliban captives particularly its foreign volunteers, who could neither be set free nor brought to trial so easily became a liability!

The available information on the event already sparked serious

there shall be no survivors. The legal debate forces another complex question: Did the Northern Alliance, the US and Britain not have an interest in the death of these pro-Taliban fighters?

Apart from the concerns for many more foreign comrades of Taliban now trapped in Afghanistan the most disappointing aspect of the horrific crime committed in Qala-i-Jangi is the response of its perpetrators. All that has so far been received from the Pentagon is a "we will look into it" kind of reaction. No word has come from the State Department nor has the White House reacted. This is bizarre, because governments usually rush up to defend themselves. In this case either they do not feel that they are to blame or they think that they are above international law or laws of the war. Even Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General showed no zeal to uncover the mystery behind the killing apparently because of American indifference. Even France and Germany preferred to keep mum over what is blatant violation of law of war.

Yet, all sane minds of the world agree with Amnesty International (AI) that there is need for an enquiry into the massacre. It is hoped that the UN will start an inquiry into what AI calls 'proportionality of the response' by the US-led forces so as to determine who, in the allies' military or civilian set up, ordered the prisoners' massacre.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

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less retain the privilege of being human beings and, thus, are entitled to life and humane treatment. The non-Afghan Taliban are, by all means, protected by this universal code of conduct. Then the war itself is not always without its own virtue the victors instinctively showing compassion for the fallen heroes on the other side. Those finer aspects of human conduct were hardly expected from the US-led allies in Afghanistan who showed little regard even for the lives of the civilians including innocent children and ailing old man in the hospital or the sanctity of the mosques. But it was certainly expected that they

the concerned people the world over. To them, what happened in Qala-i-Jangi seemed like the replay of the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the Second World War. There are ambivalence as to whether the prisoners actually revolted or a 'revolt' was engineered as a prelude to the allies' actions in quelling it down. The real issue, while crushing the 'revolt' is the use of excessive force that seemed redundant in putting down a revolt in a mud fort surrounded on all sides by Northern Alliance soldiers and British commandos. In addition, the US gunships were called in to fire at the inmates of the fort armed, at the

war crimes'. Amnesty International has called for an international inquiry an appeal supported by several British politicians. The Amnesty International talked also of legal responsibility while emphasising that "the governments (British and American) cannot hide simply saying 'that's war'". Although the purported revolt was jointly put down by US-led allies including the Northern Alliance, the latter's role in the crime tends to be overlooked because it is hardly a professional Army only which teaches lands of war to its soldiers. Nevertheless this does not under any circumstance exonerate the Northern soldiers and

human rights issues. The most urgent issue is that of the proportionality of actions stipulated by the 1949 Geneva conventions on the right in war time. The Amnesty International demanded an urgent inquiry to look into what triggered the violent incident in Qala-i-Jangi including any shortcomings in the holding and processing of the prisoners and into the proportionality of the response by the Northern Force as well as the British and the US forces. The article 51 of protocol A of the Geneva Conventions bans explicitly all indiscriminate attacks. A 1977 protocol to Geneva conventions makes it illegal to order that

OPINION

A victory for the fourth estate

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

HEINOUS crimes were committed immediately after the election of October 1, which gave the four-party alliance more than two-third majority. These offences were against life, property and honour, committed allegedly by the activists of Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami party on the Hindus. Reports still continue to appear in newspapers.

Recently Saifur Rahman, the Finance Minister of Bangladesh went to India to address a meeting of the Chamber of Indian Industries (CII) held in Delhi and stated there, according to reports published in local dailies, that the economic condition of Bangladesh was very bad and that India should import more goods from Bangladesh to remove disparity in the balance of payments. He called on the Prime Minister of India Atal Behari Vajpayee, who said that the faith of the Hindus in Bangladesh was badly shaken due to atrocities on them and their faith had to be restored. Saifur Rahman said that the Awami League was responsible for whatever happened to the Hindus and that an inquiry committee had already been formed to investigate into the matter. If the matter is pending, how a senior Minister like Saifur Rahman could say that the Awami League was involved in it? During his meeting Saifur Rahman was told that the Indian Prime Minister would meet the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, in January 2002 during the SAARC summit. The statement of Saifur Rahman not only proved to be lame excuse but it also exposed his political acumen in dealing with the Prime Minister of India.

Earlier the Home Minister, Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, a retired Air Vice Marshal, against whom cases of corruption are pending before the court for trial, said through the print and the electronic media that sporadic incidents, which might have taken place, were exaggeratedly publicised by the newspapers and by the private television channels. Morshed Khan, became a member of the cabinet after AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury became the President of Bangladesh. He got the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his first interview with one of the private TV channels he categorically said that there was no mentionable

oppression on the minority community as reported by the national newspapers. Moma Banarjee of Trinamul Congress of India started protesting through the electronic media, seen in Bangladesh by many, against the oppression, torture on the Hindus and gang raping of the Hindu women. The chief minister of West Bengal stated that Hindus from Bangladesh were coming to West Bengal because of these incidents. Some local newspaper had sent their own teams to places of occurrences to verify the facts and published elaborate and illustrated stories after the fact-finding trips.

It is said that despite Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's haranguing in meetings, iftar parties and conferences to round up the culprits and bring them to book, the law and order situation is not showing signs of improvement. Government claims reduction in the incidents of hijacking, pick pocketing and extortion in the city particularly, but these are minor incidences compared to oppression, torture, rape on the minorities and land grabbing, murder and hacking to death in broad day light. The magnitude of the offences on the minority community particularly has an international repercussion. The Amnesty International has invited the government to appoint an impartial and independent commission to hold inquiry into the incidents of atrocities. The dimension of this state of affairs has deepened as a section of the press has recently reported that torture took place in a village in Natore where nearly 50 Christian families live. The hoodlums came at night on motorbikes in large number and asked either for toll money or for the girls.

The police have charged Shaharier Kabir of sedition. The case will be decided on its merit by the court of law. But till he is held in the prison, his wife, sons, daughters are entitled to see him as per government law. Why such permission is being denied?

Some newspapers, however, smell propaganda play in Bangladesh supported by what they call yellow journalism, to whip up the minority issue. Only the report of the said inquiry committee when published will reveal the truth if allowed to be free from interferences. But sooner it is done the better for the country and the governments of two friendly countries. A couple of BNP MPs, on condition of not being named, confided to this scribe that

much talks have gone out in the matter which was totally unnecessary. The government, they said, should have appointed a judicial inquiry committee in the first instance. However, Saifur Rahman has confirmed that an inquiry report can be expected. Reaz Rahman, State Minister for Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some days back gave an interview to the Bengali-language programme of ETV, mostly in English, and said that the matter is under active correspondence with the government of India.

Franklin D Roosevelt, an ex-President of USA, defined four freedoms in 1941 and these freedoms are freedom from want, freedom of worship, freedom of speech and freedom from fear. Along side there is another freedom, which is called the 'Fourth Estate', which means the Press and not the Lords, the Commons, and the Clergy. These are some of the freedoms of a 'Civil Society'. In Bangladesh during the last one-decade we have often heard the expression 'Civil Society' but unfortunately our leaders particularly the political leaders who talk about the high ideals of civil society and human rights do not conform to them. But many media workers have shown conviction and faith in these principles and published reports of atrocities of various kinds and degree at the risk of their lives and living.

The objective reporting about the atrocities committed on the Hindu community has been possible due to the courage and conviction of the undaunted reporters and correspondents. This is why the matter came to a head and government attended to it, slowly though, by appointing an inquiry committee as reported by the Finance Minister. Otherwise perhaps the incidents of atrocities would have been swept under the carpet. This is the victory for the press the Fourth Estate. Three cheers for those who reported objectively to nail the misdeeds perpetrated.

Changing pattern of robbing

A MAWAZ

THE pattern of robbery is changing. The newspapers report that now armed gangs of 60 persons surround a market and loot it. In the residential areas of Dhaka metropolis, a team of half a dozen miscreants ring the bell in a flat, and commit robbery in broad daylight. About a thousand persons are arrested by the police, but the situation is not improving.

The furious crowds have now started lynching the muggers and toll collectors caught around the shopping areas, killing many of them. The police is not relied upon. Toll collection is rampant these days, and have increased manifold compared to five years ago. How far is the debased political culture responsible for the law and order situation of late? What are the responsibilities of the politicians (the MPs in particular)?

Where is the presence of good governance? The government cannot create a deterrent effect on the bad guys in the society (from the mighty bank-loan defaulters to the semi-literate mastans). The new regime, voted to power with overwhelming majority, is apparently helpless, as a babe in the lap of the mother! Bad images do not last long, as the last general elections proved. It is time for another round.

The politicians have failed since independence. The non-political leaders who seized power in between, could not do much, except for some cosmetic effect. The succeeding political regimes, voted to power since the 1990s, have made the situation worse. Now what is the alternative left, when politicians fight amongst themselves, and the country is going to the dogs?

Is the other cure a huge national calamity in some form (and the politicians cannot be blamed for it)? What is the sustainability of this evil phase in the society? Change has to come. Plan it, or

leave it to chance and the opportunists? Now we have to find a solution to the 10-year itch. The 'eczema politics' has to go.

The established institutions have been ruined or eroded. The moral indifference has been colossal. Politicisation has spread like cancer in the society. From top to bottom the moral values have practically disappeared. Evil has triumphed over good. The former need not be in a majority to disrupt the national system, but it can cause enough harm to leave the nation limping for decades. We do not have the energy and leadership to recover - at least, not yet. Today's politics is like water-hyacinth, flowing with the tide, never against it. The luxury of this floating life will be felt in the near future.

The old order has failed. Sycophants are clinging to seats of power. The new faith is deployment to short-cuts in life, the more the merrier. The queuing order has changed. Now the bold are evil, not beautiful.

Where the nice people have disappeared? The new regime has to tighten the belt right now, before the situation goes out of control of the government. Emergency rule is a palliative. The 'powerful' opposition may exploit the situation, regardless of what happens to the society. Now the leadership in power has to take calculable risks, to stem the fast deteriorating situation. In thirty years we have not seen any turning point, thanks to what the society patronises, right or wrong. We are now passing through alternate phases of politicisation and de-politicisation. The game is no longer funny or exciting.

Don't blame the 'calamity' if it comes without notice or 'permission'.