DHAKA THURSDAY JANUARY 3, 2002

## SAARC process back on course

Comprehensive agenda for Kathmandu Summit

E are delighted at the prospect of a rejuvenation of SAARC process that all but ground to a halt after the 1998 Colombo Summit. The next summit which was due in 2000 is now being held as late as on January 4-6, 2002 in Kathmandu. The standing committee of secretaries from the member-countries has made a number of recommendations for the consideration of ministerial level meeting leading up to the summit on January 4. The secretaries endorsed the proposal of the Group of Eminent Persons for a South Asian Economic Union, somewhat echoing the concept of Europeans Union. Need for regular summits has been emphasised on the cogent ground that since decisions have to be made by consensus any break in the summitry cycle of SAARC tended to create a glut in the forum. The regularity of summitry can be ensured through a built-in mechanism where the ministers from across the region meet in quick succession and make sure their leaders stay focused on the need for their attendance at the summit.

One very important recommendation of the secretaries' committee relates to acceleration of South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) process with a view to finalising a draft treaty by the end of 2002. We don't know of any official statement putting us in the perspective about the oft-repeated goals for interacting with the European Union or the ASEAN; but we suspect not much of a headway has been made in that area. However, it augurs well that the positions of regional countries will be harmonised on a number of international issues comprising the World Trade Organisation related matters, including that of the recently-held Doha round of WTO talks. This is one area on which we definitely need to bring our collective negotiating skill

As for the validity of development or growth quadrangles within the region we believe this is in full consonance with the SAARC spirit. It should not whip up any controversy on the sub-

The most topical subject where we shall need a comprehensive agreement has to do with combating drug and terrorism. Let the SAARC process move from strength to strength from this

## Revamping traffic is on in city

Initiative must focus on efficient transportation not just jams

OADS are seeing fewer traffic jams in the last few days as the government has come down on old and run down vehicles ordering them off the roads. This has made the thoroughfares look more sane. However, the suddenness of the decision has raised a few questions, which is worth pondering as one congratulates the authorities for being tough on a problem, which has grown over the years due to official tardiness.

It's worth asking if the plan could be gradually implemented or not giving some of the vehicles time to become road worthy through repairs and a touch of redoing. It's possible that if the vehicles had got more time, some of them could have led a postsurgery life. This point is made because shortage of public vehicles is a fact of life and greater shortage will put ordinary people in difficulties. The hastiness could perhaps be a result of the government's need to present a fresh image of itself as soon as possible.

But the government needs to make sure that the roads are free and that there are enough vehicles to meet public need. For the time being there will probably be a period when there one may not see a sufficient number of transports for ferrying of people to various destinations in the city and this will cause some distress which the media has already noted.

The government is also responsible not just for traffic jam free roads but the people getting value for money when they travel. Most of the public transports are in a horrendous state and just because people don't complain loudly enough doesn't mean that things are fine. The idea is not only to make them road worthy but passenger worthy as well.

Ensuring the provision of essential services is a critical responsibility and a right that is claimed by the people. The key point is that the people need to travel, quickly, smoothly and in comfort after paying reasonable fare out of their pocket. The authorities need to recognize the multiple reality of these issues and decide that not just roads but the transport system need overhauling.

It's a good beginning but one that needs to be rationalized, sustained and ultimately expanded to include public account-

# The poor SAARC to save the day now



► AARC is coming to the rescue of a troubled region, for the first time since its inception in Dhaka 16 years ago. This is amazing. At a time when the regional organisation itself needs to be rescued from a moribund state. it is appearing in the role of a saviour!

Dogged by lack of continuity in the summitry cycle and sent down on a low priority roll by membercountries preoccupied with political tensions, SAARC had been pushed to a point of near-atrophy. But South Asia being in a dire strait with its two core countries India and Pakistan beating war-drums, the fall-back potential of SAARC has acquired a new relevance, something worthy perhaps of being instantly utilised to come out of the woods

So, we find that in spite of their war cries -- or shall we say, because of them -- India and Pakistan remain steadfast in their commitment to the

SAARC process. They let the preparations for the SAARC summit in Kathmandu go ahead, extended full cooperation to these and settled the dates for the summit (4 to 6 January) by consensus with four other member-states of SAARC. Interestingly, India even declared that the overflight restrictions to PIA would be waived for Pakistan President Musharraf to make his trip to and from Kathmandu on the occasion of

Islamabad's crackdown on Islamic extremist groups in Kashmir by offering her a bilateral dialogue on the sidelines of the January 4-6 SAARC summit in Kathmandu.

So, a negotiated defusion of tension in the region is on the cards.

It will be naïve to think, however, that the presence of the forum as a potential trouble-shooter is solely tipping scale towards relaxation of tension in the present context. The

But why was such a massive show of might and weaponry along Indo-Pak border this time? The demonstrations of military pageantry and hardware were taken to an extremely intimidating length, unseen after any previous sabrerattling exercises we had observed between the two countries. After all both the countries have their chauvinist constituencies to placate. Plus BJP has the state elections in the

haps going to be like in the future posturings between any two inimical countries in the world

Pakistan's crackdown on the Islamic militant groups has gone down well not merely with the USA and India but also presumably with China as she faces the spectre of crescent in its Shanqiu province. It is significant that Pakistan President Parvez Musharraf is leaving for Beijing again hot on the heels of his four-day trip there ending

capitals at the initiative of president Ziaur Rahman in late seventies it was received with mixed reactions Some pundits in India said it could be a Trojan Horse of smaller nations of South Asia ganging up behind the scene against big neighbour India and 'coming out in their true colours' in time with an element of surprise. The view at the other pole was that India being the largest country or economy of the region will swamp the smaller countries so that the ends of cooperation might not be served. The architects of SAARC responded to both the apprehensions through an intelligent formulation of the SAARC charter. It envisaged that: (a) SAARC will be purely an economic cooperation association keeping contentious bilateral issues completely out of its ambit; and (b) all decisions of the regional organisation will be made by consensus which gave equal status to the member-countries of SAARC.

The way we have been latching on to SAARC in times of regional stresses and strains, it is now imperative that we start using the regional body as a vehicle for conflict resolution in South Asia. This will require rewriting the charter. Without this happening, economic cooperation cannot go far enough

S H Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

# JUST ANOTHER VIEW

When SAARC was first mooted in the regional capitals at the initiative of president Ziaur Rahman in late seventies it was received with mixed reactions... The way we have been latching on to SAARC in times of regional stresses and strains, it is now imperative that we start using the regional body as a vehicle for conflict resolution in South Asia.

The careful nurturing of the SAARC outlet by India and Pakistan parallel to their snarling war posturing along the LOC in Kashmir and the international borders is standing them in good stead now. It has kept the option for constructive engagement between the two countries open. Despite the exchange of ballistic words, India and Pakistan seem to have all but pulled back from the precipice of a war as their latest expression of mutual intent

suggests. In a dramatic develop-

SAARC summit.

US pressure on Pakistan and India to eschew war at any cost and the nuclear deterrence factor have definitely played a powerful preemptive role in all this. The forthcoming SAARC summit provided the exit route.

Given the size of the two countries' armed forces, their conventional arsenals and the state of the art missile technologies, even a conventional or calibrated war could wreak havoc on them. let alone cutting loose by accident in dreadful

about to snow the landscape, an outbreak of open war could not have been contemplated and yet there has been this oversized deployment of troops and armouries along the

UP to weather. And with the winter

It seems that the US-led display of the state of the art war technology during its fight in Afghanistan and the Israeli show of might in the Palestine-occupied territories have had a contagion effect on India and Pakistan. And that's what it is perChinese leaders. The consultation is taking place before Musharraf flies off to Kathmandu for his muchawaited meeting with Vajpayee on the sidelines of the SAARC summit, or the limelight of the international press corps rendezvous in the retreat, if you will.

December 24 last. Obviously, the

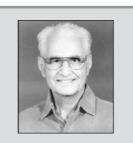
emerging prospect of a troops pull-

back along Indo-Pak borders will be

on the agenda of Pakistani and

A touch of history. When SAARC was first mooted in the regional

# Cold war's many costs



M B NAQVI

T is clear that while a war is still possible through miscalculation, escalation or accident, neither New Delhi nor Islamabad wants it. For one thing, it may force nuclear strikes on both. For, it will be odd for any general or government to risk heavy losses or defeat and not use the weapon that can reduce or avoid them; even a winning side may wish to shorten the war or reduce the costs by nuking the enemy. However, the rest of the world is horrified by the prospect and appears to be putting effective pressure on both sides not to let the cold war become a hot one. Hence this stultifying stand off may continue in some form --- until the two see its futility and make peace.

Meanwhile both peoples should re-asses the policies of their spective government that have resulted in this endless deadlock. Apart from the initial specific disputes over territory, states, stores and cash, both India and Pakistan inherited attitudes rooted in culture, circumstances and interests that made them rivals. Thus they had peculiar but similar illusions. India, drawing upon six thousand years-long heritage, staked a claim to leadership: 'light

comes from the east'. Pakistan, almost as second best, wished to be the leader of Islamic world to the annoyance of and even derision by most Muslims. Later, the dynamics of Kashmir dispute made the two states cold warriors and before too long they became nuclear powers.

One cost of this disputation that became unending military confrontation from around 1986-87. clearly had a nuclear dimension. Indians thought that given their nuclear status, Pakistan would desist and stop challenging it militarily over Kashmir. That did not happen and Pakistan acquired its

high birth rates. Future will not be bright for both until they do not extend the meaning of national security to achieve high levels of human development; indeed human development has to be seen as most of national security.

Politics in both countries has been distorted by a jingoistic nationalism that benefits the elite classes and chauvinistic approach. But first consequence is the unsustainability of peace and stability in South Asia so long as the two rival nuclear deterrents exist eyeball to eyeball. Nuclear weapons in Pakistan are designated for India. make a nuclear response. Or else it

any whit more respected than before? The world is excoriating both for it and an attempt is on to push them away from the confronta-

One particular illusion was, and is, particularly pernicious: it is the bomb's deterrence. Was Pakistan deterred from supporting the Jihadis in Kashmir because of Indian nuclear capability? India is threatening to take offensive military action despite the Pakistani bomb; that is the heart of the current crisis. Should India invade, Pakistan has now proclaimed that it would not

costs? The BJP government's wisdom in scrapping agreements and established trading practices regarding normal visas, rail, road and air links or MFN status is open to question. Who will suffer most? Not the ruling elite in either country but the common Indian or Pakistani --- mostly members of divided families or small traders shall suffer. Denial of air space to Pakistani aircraft will do what? How will it change the policies that India dislikes? It is claimed that common Indian sentiment is being responded to? It bears examination from which Indian quarter is this

elections and true reform are relegated to the background and what becomes ostensible is to 'stand united behind the Army because the enemy stands menacing at the door'. The generals cannot ask for a better gift from India than this cross-border tension. May be the two ruling groups are helping each other's political longevity.

What Messrs Vajpayee, Fernandes and Jaswant are doing is to politically strengthen the anti-Hindu religious parties and groups and other anti-India Rightwing groups in Pakistan. This preempts the politics of dealing with the concrete problems of common people. In fact all social and economic reforms --- except those suggested by IMF, WB and WTO --are being preempted by the politics of jingoism on both sides. Economic progress is being downgraded as a

The politics being pursued has an international dimension:

Automatically, the Americans are being invited to come and separate the two --- who want to get at each other's throat but dare not do so. The US leadership role in Asia is being immeasurably strengthened and helped. Pari passu, others' role is being diminished. Even the Indians and Pakistanis are showing themselves to be unable to keep peace --- so necessary for maintaining stability sought by all major powers --- without outside

Nagyi is a noted columnist in Pakistan

# PLAIN WORDS

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own nuclear capability; it has gone on challenging it. Pakistanis considered their new capability to be an invincible shield which they can go on needling India through a Jehad without it being able to use its superior military strength to bear on itself. The denouement, sort of, is this paralysis of will on either side. This stand off has brought quite a few things into relief: their common militaristic approach to disputed problems has resulted in both states becoming national security states par excellence. A large proportion of their people has stayed poor, unlettered in indifferent health, with

Indian bomb, too, can only be oriented for use in Pakistan; there is no other conceivable use for it. riposte. The bomb has thus proved trust the intentions of the other so long as this weapon of offence is sitting there? The bomb's actual utility between India and Pakistan is either nil or, in exceptional circumstances, lies in a surprise attack of a massive kind. It has no defensive role.

Earlier illusions about these weapons being status symbols or currency of power have to be discarded. Look whether nuclear bombs have made India or Pakistan damage from the expected Indian any practical use. Let Indians make their own assessment of their bomb's cost effectiveness. India's wish to make war, or its noises, is predicated on Pakistan's Kashmir policy and apparently the presence of the Pakistani bomb has made no difference.

stands to suffer totally unacceptable

The conclusion emerges: both countries. all things considered. cannot go to war. So why are their forces deployed on forward positions? Why incur the extra

seen by the spin doctors of the ruling Defenders of which country can to have no deterrent power nor is it Parivar? The true human and economic costs need to be seen The immediate political costs are

pressure coming? Could it be that

borne by secular democratic parties and forces in India, while Hindu chauvinist parties stand to profit from the aroused anti-Pakistan sentiment in the February polls. Ideas of equity and fairplay are forgotten in the jingoistic propaganda of 'let us punish Pakistan'. In Pakistan war psychoses work wonders for the ruling junta of generals. All talk of immediate

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

# response

I am writing in response to Mr.Ashraful Alam's letter (January 1), who wants that I should shed some light on my position, vis-à-vis, our war of independence.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned back home on the 10th of January 1972 and I was served with a notice of detention (protective custody as revealed later) on the 20th of December 1971. The then Prime Minister had therefore nothing to do with my detention, since the new government of Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed had already sealed my fate.

However, I simply became a victim of circumstances according to a definite plan. One of my own colleagues had worked out a master-plan to humiliate me on some pretext or the other, since he seriously considered me to be a potential rival and thought it essential to keep me behind the bars for as many months as possible without

But as Almighty had ordained, I came out almost unscathed (because nothing could be proved against me) and he went behind the bar for 32 months in the mid-'70s. And then the impossible and the most surprising thing happened. All praise to Almighty God, the Lord of the Universe. The gentleman who had planned the rigours of hell for me had to share a Cabinet berth with me in the Awami League government of 1996-2001. Today

F a e z u I H u q 's however he is convinced that I was never his rival or power contender at any point of time. But the damage was and has been done and it is exactly for that, that I have to send rejoinders and replies to many inquisitive people like Mr. Husain or Mr. Alam almost regularly

> The two British MPs of whom I mentioned in my last letter came as members of a delegation from the House of Commons to find out the real situation in the occupied area and report back to the British government in June 1971. They met me privately and I had explained everything to them in detail keeping the interest of Bangladesh intact and they obviously remembered me in June 1972 again when they heard that I was not a free man. Along with Amnesty International, they wrote to the then Prime Minister expressing their dismay and requesting him to do the needful in my favour. And it did work. I was once again a free

> I was not the member of any Peace Committee or Pakistani delegation, nor did I say anything against the then government at Mujibnagar or our freedom fighters, or praised the then Pakistan government or met Tikka Khan or General Yahya Khan at any time. Rather I tried to contact everyone at Mujibnagar through Mr. Zaman, who was with the French Consulate at that time (and is now working with

the French Embassy in Dhaka). Finally Mr. Alam's idea of threat to any one is misconceived and preposterous to say the least.

Suppose if I call Mr. Alam a Razakar (which probably he is not), how would he react? Won't he protest? If he says he won't, then I shall certainly withdraw my earlier demand for an apology from Mr. Husain. Similarly I can't call Mr. Shawkat Husain a rogue or swindler on just hearsay. Will he spare me? No never. There are so many other things, which cannot be narrated in such a short space and time that we have at our disposal. Maybe I shall

In the meantime, is my demand for an apology uncalled for then? Advocate A.K. Faezul Huq 27 K.M. Das Lane. Dhaka

have that opportunity someday.

### The Khatib's brand of Islam

The Khatib has at best expressed his opinion or the opinions of those following his particular brand of Islam unless we are saying that the Khatib represents the official Islam in Bangladesh. Even if he does, I'd like to know which type of Islam is that? Does Bangladesh subscribe to the Khatib's version which fits that of the Hamas and Osama bin-

BNP should also remember that according to Islam, a woman couldn't lead a nation. So Khaleda Zia's premiership (and Sk. Hasina's too) is invalid according to Sharia law which the Khatib follows. Why doesn't he deliver his next sermon on this topic? Naser Husain

## India-Pakistan ten-

India is using America's War against Terrorism as an excuse to escalate tensions with Pakistan due to ulte-

India like America is a democracy but in name not in substance. The ruling party in India has xenophobic communal extremists personified in Mr Advani the Home Minister.

India does not have the moral legitimacy to declare a country terrorist state nor to hijack America's legitimate war to continue their vendetta against Pakistan.

## Hijab controversy

This is in reply to a letter published from Sajjad Haque, New York, USA. It is very knowledgeable of Mr Hague to point out that Bangladesh is a democracy and that 'no mullah' can 'forcibly don the purdah' on

However may I point out that the sticking point of this long running argument has been the fact whether it is compulsory or not according to the religion of Islam; to which, of course it is compulsory to hijab the hijab. Bangladesh is a democracy and therefore it is up to the individual to decide on how one wants to be with their religion.

On another point Mr Haque airs

his views on the Taliban and his apparent knowledge of Afghan women's views on wearing the hijab. Journalists in the UK are rather surprised with the 'fact' that most women are still wearing their hijab. After speaking to the Afghan people they have found them to be rather religious and therefore adhere to Islam more than others

I do not dispute Mr Haque's belief that women should not be forced to wear the hijab against their wishes. After all I live in a democracy too. This is different to declaring whether it is compulsory or not according to religion.

around the world.

Lastly reading the letter I cannot but be struck by the way Mr Haque mentions the 'hospitality of 15,000pound American bombs'. Innocent people died on 11 September and that was terrible. Innocent people are dying today because of the bombing and that is just as terrible. It seems he is a true US citizen and believes in the 'just' (in US eyes) bombing by his government. The citizens of the USA seem to set themselves above every other nation, always. Could this be part and parcel of why Americans are so disliked in many parts of the world? Oh by the way I think Mr Haque, with his western and democratic views, will disagree with his government's policy of propping up repressive Middle Eastern governments such

Tipu Sattar Surrey, UK

as the Saudis

## Who's responsible?

Soft-spoken speaker of USA Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair should remember that Britain is solely responsible for 90 per cent problem of the present world.

Klanto Jhalakati

## The year that was

Many important, sensational and shocking events took place in the year 2001 both at national and international level. To me the three most important events of Bangladesh were:

i) The sensational result of the 1 October 2001 election in which the BNP led four 4-party alliance won two hundred and fourteen out of three hundred seats in the JS.

ii) Bomb blast at the cultural function at the Ramna Batamul on Pahela Baishakh.

iii) India's BSF men tried to invade our country, which was repulsed by our valiant BDR men. The three most important events of the world were

i) The terrorist attack on America on 11 September and the destruction of the Twin Towers and the partial destruction of the Pentagon. ii) Bombing of Afghanistan.

iii) Laden-phobia. Personalities of the year were:

i) Former President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and former Chief Adviser Justice Latifur

ii) Osama bin-Laden.

### Iqbal Ahmed Dhaka

### Ban on polybags

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

use of polythene bags is the right step. In order to eliminate the use of this harmful element, the awareness among the members of the public is most important. Besides the electronic and print media, the innumerable numbers of NGOs in the country can help in educating people particularly those in the rural

Although belated, the ban on the

Sobhan Abdus Atlanta, GA, USA

### The hassle with utility bills

As a consumer of utility services, I am besieged with problems of dealing with my electricity and gas bills. The service offices in the public sectors have little efficiency because the ministers seem to have little interest in routine service as it never catch the headlines.

The computerised electric bills have teething troubles, and onestop service or complaint centres have not been opened in the zonal offices in the city. It is a waste of time visiting the utility office time and again, going from table to table and room to room, in the absence of a coordinator, who will accompany the complainant to other sectors to sort out the data checking?

In the computerised electric bills that I have been receiving for a couple of months, I find that the

monthly average (in round figures, say 500 units) is added each month: and the actual meter readings do

The meter reader should take the reading in presence of the consumer, should not come alone. and silently sneak away. His meter reading must tally with the reading in the bill. As I was self-billing for a decade, I got all the data and figures, which now do not tally with the computer figures. And there is no response from the authorities verbally or in writing on the discrepancies pointed out.

The electronic media may carry out a campaign publicising the payment of utility bills. Nontransparency should be removed. Meter-readings can be fake. I am supposed to pay for the periods I have already paid, because the manual entries have not been adjusted in the computer. Payment of arrears should be made optional within a grace period of four weeks, and not one week as printed on the bill, as the office cannot handle so many complaints daily.

The ministry and the controlling offices should take more interest on the consumers' problems. Inspectors should pay goodwill visit to each home and ask and answer questions. There is no PR at all in the government offices. How bureaucracy has become more efficient in 30 years?

Dhaka