

Law and order situation threatens international aid

Blaming Opposition will not be enough to convince Paris donors

THE ruling party may not have liked but the law and order decline in Bangladesh has emerged as a major issue at the Paris donors meeting as well. The Paris Forum has stated in no uncertain terms that the escalating levels of disorder in Bangladesh are hampering economic development. Unless the situation is harnessed, trade and aid flows will be seriously affected.

Bangladesh in its official document has as much agreed to this analysis. It has however commented that the failure to manage the situation largely lies with the failure of the police and the inflection is on the political givens. It may not have struck the Bangladesh government that the police are part of the official machinery.

But the statement made by the Finance Minister M. Saifur Rahman that the Opposition is causing the law and order crisis in order to justify their boycott of the parliament will not go down well either with the home or the international audience. It does sound like a Government that isn't ready to confront that it's performing below par at least in this sector.

The media reports are facts, which simply can't be washed or wished away. The daily list of mayhem is making media a narrator of social uncertainty bordering on anarchy. Whoever is in power will have to recognize that the law and order situation is rapidly going out of control and needs harnessing if Bangladesh is to survive as a country eligible for development aid.

What the Government will have to recognize is that in these days of instant information, the spokesperson can only endorse what is already universally known as in the case of our law and order crisis. Blaming it on the Opposition will neither cut any ice in Dhaka or Paris.

Perhaps one may ignore Dhaka but as long as the economy is dependent on international development aid and the donors have a voice in what we do with their money, the government will have to take issues more seriously than they have been doing till date. With the shrinking aid world, the crisis of credibility will expand to threaten the crisis of ruling. Today is a good day to start facing facts and acting accordingly.

Another footbridge collapses

Twice within four months means nobody really cares

WITHIN a matter of four months a second footbridge in Dhaka has collapsed and killed. This time it was located at the Science Laboratory inter-section and the concrete slab crushed a car and under its weight both passengers died. It was gruesome not only in how it killed but that this was the second such bridge to give way and it was being constructed by the same company. It's not in too many countries that such accidents happen.

Two factors are obviously involved. First, the design for such constructions is certainly flawed. There are such bridges all over the world albeit built without so much dependence on concrete slabs and weak supporting pillars. But the second collapse must lead to expert examination of the designing of such constructions altogether.

The other of course is shoddy work inclusive of criminal neglect. It's frightening that the same company was allowed to go on doing this work even after its first handiwork killed. One remembers that an enquiry committee was set up but we haven't heard anything about the report. While that is common, what is dangerous is that the same company was allowed to do the same deadly work and this happened because someone took advantage of public apathy.

The Mayor of Dhaka has said that the said company was blacklisted but it gained a court injunction and went on working. One must thus ask, if through this process, the system itself has contributed to the disaster. Moreover, whether, the authorities had other means to stop the said company, Surma Construction, from going on working. The Government has authorized a new committee yesterday but in this land of committees, which never deliver, this will hardly raise confidence. No matter what excuses are offered at the moment, a criminal act has been repeated twice and lives have been taken. We don't expect justice but at least a few answers are needed. People have a right to that.

We demand that the authorities announce an investigation and declare the date of the report submission. And the laws, rules and practices should be amended so that such tragedies are avoided. That's the least the Government can do.

Should Myanmar remain our distant neighbour?



M ANWARUL HAQ

go further but look at the record of the United States dealing with countries with minimal human rights record. They know that internal democracy is one thing while bilateral diplomacy is a different ball game altogether.

For Bangladesh, there are only two neighbours. But the fact remains that our people led by the policy planners have been thinking only of India as THE NEIGHBOUR. In the process we are unwittingly pushing our only other neighbour Myanmar away. By following such a

Myanmar while Bangladesh keeps sitting with its BDR trained across the Naaf river? India could understand that a policy of isolation would drive Myanmar into the Chinese fold completely. China has already connected Myanmar with good surface links and is working on a deep sea port, a likely naval base deep south known as Coco's island. India, perhaps in response, has focussed recently on its Andaman and Nicobar Islands defence establishments and upgraded them into another command. The naval

"Presently we have foreign investments of over seven billion US dollars, most of those in the oil and gas sector and the rest in hotel and tourism industry. Earlier we had one hotel; now we have 700 hotel rooms.

"Myanmar," the foreign minister said, "never received one cent of international assistance. (Now) we would like to get international assistance but without any strings attached."

What is even more significant is that the western countries as well as

long back had the visit of Senior General Than Shwe, who is the prime minister, materialised, more than a year back. Not only the problem of refugees would have been solved but also the entire trade regime of Bangladesh and Myanmar opened up on a grand scale.

Although, Than Shwe's illness was attributed to a last minute cancellation of the visit, it is time now to send a fresh invitation for the visit to Bangladesh of a neighbourly Prime Minister. This could be

school of thought is no longer living in isolation. Thousands of western visitors flock to the country. It has succeeded in becoming a part of the South East Asian economy by successfully joining the ASEAN bandwagon. Even it decided to join what started as BISTEC - comprising of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand -- the four-nation forum for economic cooperation. Mooted primarily by Dhaka, Yangon through its insistence became the fifth member to join the grouping now called BIMSTEC with the M for Myanmar added.

Bangladesh has a potential for tapping into the consumer market of Myanmar by exporting pharmaceuticals, toiletries, newsprint, fertilizer, ceramic products, bottled juice, leather goods and tobacco. Myanmar too could benefit from the export of timber, rice, maize, pulses, gems and precious stones. Besides there are ample opportunities of expanding border trade, reviving old sea links and opening up road communications.

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Bangladesh has worked out a weeklong marketing extravaganza in Yangon beginning March 26 where it will promote its culture and cuisine and also parade its traditional and non-traditional wares. During the promotional blitz, visiting members from Bangladesh delegation will play golf with locals while a team from the defence services will play hockey.

A new beginning in Bangladesh-Myanmar relationship is being attempted. But the two countries will have to engage themselves in more constructive diplomacy, golf wise and business wise for their mutual benefit. Otherwise they would continue to remain distant and remote neighbours.

Let Bangladesh Tee off by putting the ball in Myanmar's court.

M Anwarul Haq is Diplomatic and Defence Correspondent of The Daily Star

ACCORD AND DISCORD

Bangladesh has a potential for tapping into the consumer market of Myanmar by exporting pharmaceuticals, toiletries, newsprint, fertilizer, ceramic products, bottled juice, leather goods and tobacco. Myanmar too could benefit from export of timber, rice, maize, pulses, gems and precious stones. Besides there are ample opportunities of expanding border trade, reviving old sea links and opening up road communications.

policy we are depriving ourselves the many advantages that we could reap by building a bridge of friendship with neighbouring Myanmar with whom we have a 317 kilometre land boundary.

Even our THE NEIGHBOUR-India has long abandoned its policy of speaking openly in support of pro-democracy movement led by the SLORC in Myanmar. At one time Delhi even used to run a regular propaganda service by the All-India Radio lambasting the Burmese military regime, but that too has been disbanded.

The fact is that in the realm of foreign affairs, India has been pragmatic enough to follow a policy of better neighbourliness with Myanmar. Today it has many agreements in place with Yangon and is constructing highway networks to connect its north-eastern states. There is definite indication that not only in roads but the two countries are willing to enter into the sector of energy cooperation by building gas pipeline.

Why did India decide to woo

developments pose a peril for neighbours like Bangladesh, as it could become a potential flashpoint.

It is the turn of Bangladesh to be bypassed by Myanmar if we fail to act and now. While we have a per capita income of less than 200 dollars, Myanmar's is 1200 dollars. Even in military strength, although exact figures are not available, Myanmar has a large if not larger land force and a much bigger air force than ours.

Should we look at the European Union for our Burma policy?

Investment of several European Union countries, besides China, Japan, Thailand and Singapore's in Myanmar, despite its lack of democracy, is simply phenomenal.

I do not have the latest figures of foreign investment in Myanmar, nor does our Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But what I learnt from Aung San Suu Kyi during an exclusive interview two years back in Dhaka, I am stating:

"We tried to build the economy without foreign participation. This policy has now been abandoned.

China and India since some time now are re-inventing the strategic importance of Myanmar.

Myanmar's geographic location is most strategic. Whoever controls Myanmar, controls the gateway to Asia. It has long borders with China, Thailand, India and of course Bangladesh. Due to its geo-strategic location it is essential that Myanmar is kept non-aligned with any single power. This perhaps the western countries are now realizing quickly.

Bangladesh, as anyone knows, has a major irritant with Myanmar. We had been swamped by the influx of Rohingya refugees. However, protracted negotiations have almost solved this problem. Myanmar has taken back 2,30,000 Rohingyas out of some 2,51,000 since the refugees began crossing the border way back in December, 1991. According to last week's figure there are some 21,627 Myanmar refugees, taking into account new born babies and split families. The trickle back is slow for these residual numbers but Myanmar watchers feel that this problem would have been solved

preceded by trips of our Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister besides having the stalled BDR-Nasaka talks completed at the earliest.

Cross border problems with neighbours are not uncommon.

What is uncommon is not to have any irritants among neighbours.

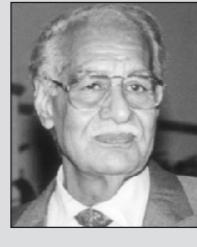
Problems of border demarcation and refugees no longer stand in the way of developing bilateral ties, particularly on an economic plane. China and India despite their long dispute over border demarcation are going ahead in building economic relations. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji recently went on a lengthy trip of India after touring Bangladesh.

What is interesting to note is that another neighbour of Yangon - Thailand - has more than one hundred thousand illegal

Myanmar refugees living in camps in its country. Despite the problem, the two neighbours maintain harmonious economic relationship.

Myanmar, contrary to the old

Religion and politics



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

Nearer home, take Kashmir. You find Muslims of different countries participating in what is going on in the valley, but there is no Muslim from the rest of India. Even the support to the autonomy demand is lacking. Silence of Indian Muslims on such issues is often misunderstood. Yet, they have seldom said or done anything, which they think does not represent the sense of the country.

Happenings in Gujarat have indeed jolted the community. On the

mated in no time. Every time the dishonesty, if not the animus of the majority, is more visible than before. The community's fears have heightened because it finds the authorities purposefully inactive, the police contaminated and the government more interested in covering its tracks than in punishing the guilty. This was their experience in the last big killing at Ahmedabad in 1969, nearly 33 years ago, and now again in Gujarat. In fact, the community increasingly feels that a Hindu-

clout the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a fundamentalist organisation, has in the corridors of power. The Prime Minister had to bring the Kanchi Sankaracharya (high priest) from down south, to make the VHP issue an equivocal statement that it would abide by the court's verdict on the disputed Ram Janambhoomi-Babri masjid site. Otherwise, also, the community's faith in Vajipayee's liberality has been lessening for some time. This is clear from the way the Muslims voted in UP, bring-

This might well be what Hindu fundamentalists and even the BJP are wishing. Their efforts to polarise the country have not succeeded so far but it is very clear that they are hell-bent on doing so. In fact, this has been their objective all along since partition. The community will play into their hands if it decides to go it alone. The Muslim Personal Law Board has not, however, done well by combining the Ayodhya dispute with its normal work. The demolition of the Babri masjid hurt the conscience of all not Muslims

Hindus and Muslims. This is a matter between those who believe in secular ethos of the country and those who are out to establish Hindu Rashtra. This is a matter which goes to the roots of our beliefs, our faith in the constitution. The Supreme Court's verdict was floated when the masjid was demolished and the VHP is traversing a similar path in a zigzag manner.

In a way, the Prime Minister is right when he says that a settlement between the two communities can decide the dispute. But it will be a limited settlement if it is ever reached. Many Hindus do not want the temple to come up where the masjid once stood. Many Muslims also do not want to rebuild the mosque at the same site.

Most people in the country would like the place to be left vacant so as to serve as a reminder to the nation that a structure that represented our pluralistic society was pulled down by religious zealots on December 6, 1992. Japan has done a similar thing to keep the horrors of war before its people. Hiroshima has left the ground, where the bomb was dropped during the last World War, vacant. It serves as a catharsis. The vacant site at Ayodhya may have a similar effect.

It is a pity that those who were once the supporters of a secular India are now apologists for a policy which is communal in content and ruinous in objective. Their rationalisation of what happened in Gujarat is as disgusting as is their craze to stick to ministership. This is not a political issue. It is sheer communalism. How many Gujaratis should happen before the different parties, particularly the ruling BJP, realise that religion and politics cannot be mixed if India is to stay united?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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one hand, it is surprised over the reaction of some who became so desperate that they went to the extent of burning the coaches of the Sabarmati Express at Godhra. On the other hand, the community has suffered beyond proportion when it comes to retaliation. It has also found most of the Hindu intelligentsia coming to be part of anti-Muslim sentiment in one way or the other.

True, the Gujarat fire did not spread to the rest of the country, except stray incidents in three or four cities.

But it is of little satisfaction to the community when once in a while there is such a communal conflagration that whatever confidence it may have built over the period is deci-

Muslim riot generally turns into a Muslim-police clash. The proposal to have a mixed force in every state has remained only on paper.

The biggest challenge facing the community and the country is how to change the biased mindset of the police. And an almost equally big challenge is how to stop the injection of communal poison by the RSS parivar in the states under the BJP and in the central ministries headed by the BJP men. The Ayodhya issue has risen at a wrong time. It has re-ignited the fears in the community, which is still feeling

under the loss of the Babri masjid, demolished more than nine years ago. The community has also become nervously conscious of the

ing down the party strength in the assembly by 68 seats. Still the message has not gone home. Vajipayee, to the chagrin of the community, is as dependent on the RSS as before. It was the third party at the meetings between the Kanchi seer and the VHP. The fallout from the events, as they have unfolded, is the closing of ranks by the community. The Muslim Personal Law Board is emerging as a rallying point. If this development had remained confined to religious problems, it would not have mattered. But it looks like becoming an instrument of political pressure.

Many Muslims have begun talking in terms of one platform and even a Muslim party. The Ayodhya matter is not alone. The entire nation felt horrified because the masjid represented India's composite culture. So many Hindus joined hands with the Muslims to condemn the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, another member of the RSS parivar, over the masjid's demolition. The mood of the nation can be judged from the dismal defeat of the BJP in UP and Rajasthan in the state elections held soon after what happened at Ayodhya.

Muslims will be well advised in constituting a separate body in dealing with the Babri masjid problem. That body should have members of all communities. The Muslim Personal Law Board can join the body, but not appropriate it. The Ayodhya matter is not between

alone. The entire nation felt horrified because the masjid represented India's composite culture. So many Hindus joined hands with the Muslims to condemn the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, another member of the RSS parivar, over the masjid's demolition. The mood of the nation can be judged from the dismal defeat of the BJP in UP and Rajasthan in the state elections held soon after what happened at Ayodhya.

Unless we clear up our legal code and annul unnecessary laws, we will all remain criminals. Speaking of useless and trivial laws, do we still have the one, which made it illegal to take photographs of airports, bridges and railways? Silly Indians still have that.

Yasser Rahim
Dharmundi, Dhaka

"Laws aplenty"

I fully agree with Mr ES' letter regarding the habit of passing laws.

I would also like to add that a

government that passes too many laws encourages crime by trivialising crime.

Take for example the limits placed on political campaigning. Here you have a perfect example of a law, probably vetted by lawyers, but honoured only in the breach.

Each and every MP in Bangladesh has broken the campaign finance limits because the limits were never made realistically.

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Speaking of useless and trivial laws,

do we still have the one, which made it illegal to take photographs of airports, bridges and railways? Silly Indians still have that.

Bastiat
Dhaka

"Victimizing the victims"

The opinion "Victimizing the victims:

Is the media responsible?" (March 13) is a timely write-up. We no

longer want