

Another sunk vessel buries sector's reputation

Act now or pay later

ANOTHER vessel has gone down in the coastal zone of Bangladesh proving that river travel is not just unsafe but death-friendly. It comes only a week or so after the worst maritime disaster that killed over 400 people. Life is certainly cheap but efficiency, regulation and safety management is certainly so expensive that we can't afford them at all it seems. This pudding of death now provides the proof that very little had been done to ensure some degree of safety for the passengers. It's feared that most of the 120 passengers have perished.

The spot on river Baleshawer where MV Subha sunk is a deep point in the river where the current is also very strong. Till last reports came in, the rescue vessels had not been able to do much beyond recovering the dead bodies. Most, including the Navy, have given up the idea of salvaging the vessel.

What is most disconcerting is the fact that the authorities seem to be clueless about the situation as a whole and there is no response mechanism visible. It means that the rivers are unsafe, the vessels even more unsafe and the authorities unable to take any action except try to lift vessels after they sink, if possible.

Media have expressed fear that this sector may well have gone beyond measures of normal control and its about time some emergency measures were taken for immediate revamping. And the PM should do something inspiring. The standard procedure of setting up a committee followed by recommendations that are never implemented will not do anymore. This neglectful attitude kills too many people.

The Daily Star had called for wholesale examination and review of the plying vessels and declaring how many are actually travel worthy and how many should be grounded. But this hasn't been done because accountability is not an issue in this sector in general and failure has never met with punishment. The public perception that there is opportunity for the "intelligent" to make money by "overlooking" flaws may well be correct.

The Government has two options. It can continue to do business as usual and further reduce its credibility and make helpless people more angry since nobody travels in this route to seek fun. Or it can react and take actions to make riverine travel safer. Both have a price tag and will have to be paid. It's up to the government to decide what it wants.

Indo-Pak war cry

When guns rule the heart, the head must speak

WITH every passing day, fear intensifies and people desert the Indo-Pak borders as shells land to declare that war is near. Yet people are hoping that somehow India and Pakistan will be able to avoid the next war whether out of concern for life or some other incentive whatever that may be.

The on again, off again hostility between India and Pakistan has been going on since birth so it should qualify as a congenital problem. There have been three major wars and endless number of skirmishes including the latest deadly Kargil conflict. They have no way of speaking in the language of reconciliation because it takes enormous courage today to speak of peace on either side.

The flaring point is once again Kashmir, South Asia's worst diplomatic curse. If anything it has become an itch that is scratched into a sore to cause a crisis. People seem to be more keen to score military and propaganda points and the loss of life and livelihood hardly seems to matter.

This present war to be has become more worrying because both have nuclear capability. Now most would think that although they have the bomb they won't use it but then why have it in the first place? There certainly is a point for both which if crossed will lead to nuclear weapon exchange no matter how placid are the respective warring minds. And a nuclear exchange in Kashmir may well mean that such echoes will be heard elsewhere. It will be a terrible first strike that will encourage other nuclear weapon holders to try it out.

Given that scenario, the US, the superpower must play its role. Bashing Mullah Umar is good but ending potential military apocalypse in Kashmir is more important and necessary.

Sadly enough, when India and Pakistan have failed to end hostilities it's time other able nations did it for them. The US stayed away from action in the Middle East because it was too biased towards Israel but it has a stake in the health of both India and Pakistan. Let the US act now. At least till Pakistan and India can start thinking peace.

South Asia on my desk

Whose war is being fought anyway?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

was on the impending war and what that could mean to many.

ONE of Mitu's and also my close friends is Beena. Beena Sarwar used to be the Editor of News of Friday published from Lahore. She recently went to London for a year, was trained in TV and is now in the TV wing of the Jang group. She has recently moved to Karachi and we had in fact recently been part of a joint South Asia study on media

Whose war is it anyway?

IT'S not my war but it's a war on my friends. I wonder if V&P themselves are in charge or is the national ego dictating it all. I have never understood how countries could be proud of their bomb when they can't feed their own people properly. Yet millions of Indians and Pakistanis will give their life for another bomb to kill each other.

What isn't stated is that many

a life from being a super technocrat in Bhutan to being a refugee and everything else in Nepal. Now he is just trying to survive in a hostile history. An enormously educated and intelligent person, he has learnt almost never to lose his cool. He can't go back to the place where he grew up. Now his identity is a travel document, not even a passport. In the last mail he wrote:

"The Maoists are reaching into the valley. Remember the police

have met works for Himal magazine while Bela edits manuscripts for British publishers.

YET in many ways, the man who has brought and networked with more South Asians than any others is Kanak Dixit who has a Volkswagen which he wants to drive to Dhaka to raise money for setting up a spinal injury centre. He himself is a wonder, a man who literally fell off the mountain and his incredible story was covered by the Reader's Digest.

HE is also a dreamer whose agony was incredible when the nuclear explosions shattered India and Pakistan. He spoke of a deep sense of corporate failure and shame as two neighbours, claimant of peaceful heritages exploded bombs and yet felt that peace was possible. It was his sense of outrage that has touched many and his magazine Himal South Asian is probably the only product of its kind where peace is actively promoted by secular, sincere and serious writers. And Kanak continues to nurse them. Even last week he organised a meeting of Indian and Pakistan top-notch journalists pushing the peace agenda. I don't know if he knows how deeply the deck is stacked against him but he keeps rowing against the tide.

"Banglabandhu, I am driving down to Dhaka with Himali and then we can attend the Film Festival. Why is no one interested in hosting the South Asian Film Festival when the top award went to Bangladeshi?"

Don't ask me Kanak. I don't understand us.

THESE are my friends, my South Asians, my motley bunch of friends who probably don't represent a mainstream but who continue to bat for peace and fight against war. The best argument is the concern we feel for each other which eludes all political combinations. But we all know that our world has been brought together by the PCs. At least the PC people have a stake in peace because their friends are real flesh and blood individuals not unseen, unheard enemies without faces and names but only national political identities.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

These are my friends, my South Asians, my motley bunch of friends who probably don't represent a mainstream but who continue to bat for peace and fight against war. The best argument is the concern we feel for each other which eludes all political combinations. But we all know that our world has been brought together by the PCs. At least the PC people have a stake in peace because their friends are real flesh and blood individuals not unseen, unheard enemies without faces and names but only national political identities.

responses to cross border conflicts.

DEAR Beena,

All this war noise is very scary. Mitu is quite depressed about a nuke possibility though I think the US can't afford it. V seems to have backed down a bit after the "war cry".

How is the scene? Is it as bad as it sounds?

Take care.

Afsan

Late that night Beena responds:

Hi Afsan, I just wrote you a longish reply, which got wiped out by server timeout or some such thing. I am in the middle of my assessments in the third (2nd for me) week of training.

Yes, it's very scary and quite tense... Today the situation seems a little better. Vaj has withdrawn somewhat. But I wish he wouldn't keep the tensions up so much. The whole situation is frightening.

Take care. I still haven't seen your film...

Love, B

DO politicians know about these people on both sides of the border, scared and worried and with no sense of control over the situation?

Are these people less in love with the flag and land and ideology than V&P?

How do you separate Mitu's voice from that of Beena's?

would give their lives too to stop another bomb.

I was in Delhi for the showing of the film which Beena mentions -- on women and war of 1971 and how Bangladeshi historians have undermined their role -- when the US attack on Afghanistan began. There was an inevitable pall of gloom over the closing ceremony but Meenakshi Devnath of WISCOMP counselled courage and spoke with wisdom.

"I know everyone feels sad and depressed and our Pakistani and Afghan colleagues feel insecure even about their journey home. People feel helpless and wish things were not like this. We all know the facts but don't feel so down. I feel this crisis will be overcome and in the end we will have a more fair and just world."

These words meant something to many of us. I still carry that feeling in my heart, that image of many shades of South Asians standing in a single room hoping for peace.

BUT our problems are not just cross border driven. In fact few are. Even our cross border conflicts are part of our attempt to manage our internal dissension. One of the newly emerging conflicts is that of the Maoists in Nepal.

My friend Bhim has gone through

check-post near your home. Somebody attacked that, two were killed. K says that it could be people trying to get even with them for something they did and not really Maoists. The streets are deserted. From the office you can see that the fogs are not lifting from the hills. Don't worry. There is someone up there who ultimately takes care of everything."

BUT many are also crossing the borders camping in different lands. Aruni is from Sri Lanka and lived/lives in Kathmandu. Once in Colombo -- for her a chance to see home while on work -- we sat on the porch of a fine old hotel and had dinner and chatted as the sea washed the shore and until the rains came and sent us packing inside.

"When we were children we used to come down and play in this hotel. And if we were late, Mom would send a nanny to call us home. Now if people are late nobody knows if they will ever come home again. The war has changed everything."

When I would read Aruni's mail -- now studying at Oxford for a year -- I am always reminded of rain washed lazy afternoons in a time which was assassinated by war.

THOMAS and Bela, one Keralite and other Punjabi-Assamese and married to each other, live in the Patan part of Kathmandu valley. Thomas, one of the best editors I

books and conversation and a glow of friendship, which lights my life. Such people are denying borders through the very acts of their intelligence and work. Thomas knows as a history student what the processing of time means. In Kathmandu we had a daily e-discussion on comparative theology. Sadly, most of my friends here don't read anything except their professional work assignments or the broad sheet wisdom.

"MAN Afsan,
Where is that piece you promised on the defamation case of the tabloid Editor in Bangladesh. Indians and Pakistani briefs have arrived."

Bro Thomas,
As soon as I finish this column.

ONCE, when they contemplated adopting a child, I was one fourth part of the proposed name. Pablo Irfan Karan Afsan Mathews. At least three faiths in one small child.

His mail today is about beating the system and leading a life fashioned almost entirely according to one's will. They aren't exactly embarrassed that they don't own a car. It's people like them who let me breathe in this status symbol choked provincial Dhaka. My PC is

Cabinet (despite unresolved charges), the Balco sell-off, rewriting of history textbooks, the Ram temple campaign revival ...

Till May 14, the bulk of Indian public opinion and all of the Opposition was united against the government, which it saw as untrustworthy, and prone to undemocratic, sectarian and irresponsible behaviour.

Are we now suddenly to trust the same government on life-and-death issues?

Are we to let BJP leaders pretend that India is the US, and therefore should emulate it? Are we to suspend all our critical faculties and allow jingoistic nationalism to overwhelm us?

It was bad enough that the government has expelled Pakistan's high commissioner. This is no more than an expression of anger. But terminating diplomatic contacts with Pakistan, while begging the US to side with India, resolves nothing.

One sincerely hopes that this is not followed by other thoughtless measures such as abrogating the Indus Water Treaty of 1960. This will be illegal.

The logical course would be to take the terrorism issue to the United Nations, and propose joint India-Pakistan patrolling of the LoC.

"Limited war" is no option. It represents insanity.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Pull back from the brink

War is no solution

PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

THE roll of war drums gets louder each day in India and Pakistan. After the May 14 terrorist carnage at Kaluchak near Jammu, there has been clamour for "action" especially, "limited strikes" across the Line of Control. This has become louder with Kashmiri leader Abdul Gani Lone's assassination on May 21.

The Vajpayee government would be totally ill-advised to attack Pakistan. Kaluchak does not constitute a *casus belli* (reason for war). Although the government claims to have established the Pakistani identity of the militants involved, it has produced no credible evidence that they were sponsored by Islamabad.

It is hard to believe that Pakistan would engineer such an act today. This is not because military-ruled Islamabad has suddenly become a noble, benign, well-intentioned power. It is because of the military-diplomatic pressure under which Gen Pervez Musharraf operates.

It is hard to believe that Pakistan would be irrational and irresponsible for India to start a war with Pakistan unless there is convincing proof of Islamabad's hand in specific terrorist acts. It won't do to hold Islamabad *generally*, vaguely guilty.

New Delhi has been sloppy in

members, Gen Musharraf would have to shoot himself in the foot to ask the ISI to embark on an adventure in Jammu, just when a senior US diplomat was visiting South Asia.

The Kaluchak terrorists were probably anti-Musharraf *jihadis*. Recent violent incidents in Pakistan targeted at the government and its

Western collaborators suggest just that. The Islamabad church bombing, and the Karachi attack killing French technicians were calculated to show that *jehadi* militants are capable of wreaking vengeance.

These incidents were probably the work of terrorist groups bent on provoking war in order to weaken the Pakistani state, get the Americans out, and spread communal terror in battle-scarred India.

It would be irrational and irresponsible for India to start a war with Pakistan unless there is convincing proof of Islamabad's hand in specific terrorist acts. It won't do to hold Islamabad *generally*, vaguely guilty.

New Delhi has been sloppy in

about the international community of the need for a military attack, without clinching evidence. Today, unlike during the 1999 Kargil war, Pakistan is not globally isolated. It hasn't crossed the LoC.

Today, it's India that's upping the ante under a government which in the world's eyes has lost direction and popularity, and which, after Gujarat, is desperate for rescue.

The Vajpayee government is far too dependent on the US to want to easily defend its call for restraint. Its own role-model remains Israel, with its unspeakable atrocities against the Palestinians.

But Pakistan is not the Palestinian Authority, a weak regime with

east.

New Delhi wants to "settle scores" with Pakistan. If it doesn't act after ratcheting up the build-up, it will lower its "tough-guy" image. But it cannot unleash war without risking US displeasure.

It is seeking an angry way out by threatening "limited war". The most talked-about plan is either to launch "covert operations" inside Pakistan, or destroy camps and communication routes in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

This would send the message to anti-India terrorists that they must pay a heavy price for their operations.

This plan is dangerously

what the provocation.

The US remains the cornerstone of India's strategy. The Vajpayee government won't find it easy to annoy Washington without paying a high price for crossing the LoC--just as Pakistan did in 1999.