

Sinha visit proves useful Understanding forged to move ahead

GIVEN the fact that Bangladesh-India relations have been at a stand still for quite some time, the visit could not have gone any better. Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha's trip to Dhaka followed his swapping of finance ministry with Jaswant Singh and his Bangladeshi counterpart Morshed Khan's visit in June to New Delhi. So it's knowing the nextdoor neighbouring government from his new position and reciprocating a Morshed visit earlier on to the Indian capital that formed the backdrop to Sinha's goodwill trip to Dhaka. Fact that there could not be any fixed agenda on a goodwill visit has actually worked to the advantage of both sides. They could freely discuss all issues of bilateral concern, and in the process, reach an understanding on the urgency to come to grips with them. In some respects, a clear resolve has been expressed and concrete steps visualised to take their relationship forward. First of all, by way of mending fences, New Delhi and Dhaka have agreed to seriously examine our proposal to immediately ensure a zero killing incidence along the border for a three-to-six-month period that 'can be extended gradually'. If India agrees, this would inherently be a good decision in light of Bangladeshis and Indians losing lives to occasional BSF-BDR firing in assorted incidents.

Ice seems to be melting in the trade sphere. And, just. Sinha has conveyed Indian government's decision to his Bangladeshi counterpart that duty-free access to 40 items under 16 categories agreed upon by India the last time around, will take immediate effect. In practical terms, Bangladesh will not have a sizable number of exportables under the categories to avail herself of the full range of free access being offered but this move will encourage investment in export industries in those areas. What's more to the point, so long as the non-tariff barriers remain in place, duty-free access by itself won't do much by way of reducing India's huge trade surplus with Bangladesh.

Compared with Indian goods worth around 2.5-2.6 billion US dollar annually entering Bangladesh market through official and unofficial channels those that go to India from our side are worth only a fraction of it. The gap which is also yawning can not be bridged by anything short of extraordinary measures. So, India is urged to broaden the range and quality of concessions by providing duty-free access to all categories of items from Bangladesh on a non-reciprocal basis in tandem with a removal of the non-tariff walls.

As the much bigger economy, India, we believe, is inherently capable of taking this step as a gesture towards Bangladesh. Aside from the principle of equity, from a purely pragmatic standpoint, a stronger Bangladesh economy will be a better trade partner with India than a weaker one.

The decision to reactivate institutional mechanisms for resolving outstanding problems augurs well. Also welcome is the express resolve to address issues at the highest political level if and when official bilateral avenues will have been exhausted. Let such understanding see some concrete realisation on the ground as a stimulus to more rewarding Indo-Bangla relations.

Chhabi Rani case

Party unit inquiry committee raises eye-brow

THE abduction, torture, stripping, photographing and practically driving insane of Chhabi Rani of Bagerhat are like sequences of a horror movie. Unfortunately they seem to be having a jubilee run in this country. The arrest of three persons, Tayeb Noor, Abdul Aziz Shaikh and Humayun Kabir Himu on the basis of a case filed by Rani is of course positive and more so because the police have done this in spite of their being BNP men.

Rani is still recovering from the attack and is reported to be mentally unstable. Such are the prices of vulnerability. Cruelty obviously unlike charity doesn't bind the limits of human indignity.

The district BNP unit has set up an inquiry committee which sounds novel. For, the setting up of such 'committee' without any legal *locus standi* cannot arouse public confidence, would even be looked with suspicion to the effect that it were up to a cover-up or shielding job. They must not be allowed to mislead the party high command. We demand a thorough-going police investigation into the incident with all the culprits arrested and brought to book expeditiously.

These are not easy times because we are dealing with turmoil of great consequences and many of them are negative. The right to decide guilt or innocence must remain within the domain of prescribed institutions and any alterations should be seriously criticized. It's now the responsibility of the party in power to do so and set an example.

FAROOQ SOBHAN

THE primary purpose of this article is to extend a warm welcome to the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon, who is on his second visit to Bangladesh after taking over this post in April 2000. When the two of us were campaigning for the post of Secretary General we criss-crossed each other on several occasions. I would arrive at a particular capital to be told that Don had just left. We did bump into each other on more than one occasion at Durban during the NAM summit in 1998 and again at the Commonwealth summit in Durban in November 1999, where Don was elected Secretary General. I remember when I was congratulating him on his election I expressed the hope that he would visit Bangladesh, where he would find at least in some quarters a great deal of interest in the Commonwealth. The efforts of Sir Ninian Stephen of course being a strong contributing factor, with the role of the Commonwealth observers in 1991 and 1996 certainly contributing to the profile of the Commonwealth in Bangladesh.

The Secretary General has certainly had his hands full since taking over. Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Fiji, Sierra Leone, problems in the Caribbean and the Pacific have been major preoccupation. But the Commonwealth is not confined to dealing with one crisis after another, although at times it certainly looks that way. Bangladesh as a member of C-Mag, the Ministerial Action Group, which has been mandated to deal with violations of the Harare principles, has been a very active participant and has tried on more than one occasion to forge a consensus on some very contentious issues.

But I would like to focus attention on the potential of the Commonwealth in certain other areas.

The path breaking Edinburgh Summit, clearly recognised that one of the major challenges facing the international community at the turn of the century will be the efficient and equitable management of globalization. Since ODA has been

very much on the decline, the progressive integration of markets has now made it essential for all countries to be able to compete in the global market. It has become essential for the developing countries to be able to export, and to attract foreign direct investment. The experience of the past decade has indicated that while most developed and some developing countries have benefited from globalization, it has been less easy for others. Most developing countries, and this

wealth in recent years has been to address the special problems faced by Small States. This matter was first discussed at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' meeting in 1977 and has been part of the CHOGM agenda since 1979 when it was first discussed at Lusaka. The problems arising out of their small size, limited resources, isolation and vulnerability to natural disasters prompted the Commonwealth to adopt a programme in support of the Small States. Today 60 per cent of

close contacts with various multilateral organizations and institutions in order to advance the case of the Small States.

The projection of a more positive and dynamic image will be one of the major challenges facing the Commonwealth in the 21st century. We must expand the support base of the Commonwealth. Clearly one of the best ways of doing this is with the help of what is widely known as the unofficial Commonwealth. There are some 300 organizations

tions, the UN, multilateral bodies and NGOs in advancing the principles, programmes and objectives of the Commonwealth. The Secretary General's good offices role has become an essential part of his responsibilities. The delicate task of helping member states resolve internal political problems presupposes an enormous degree of trust and confidence in the Secretary General. Upholding the Harare principles implementing the Millbrook Plan of Action, working

variety. It derives from the fact that this family facility is a commingling of the world's diversity. What the Commonwealth tries to do is to harmonize difference over a wider range and to a further degree than any other grouping."

The Harare principles constitute the core values of the Commonwealth today. Democracy and democratic values are relevant not only within individual member states but within the Commonwealth as a whole and the way it discharges its responsibilities. The world has shrunk. We speak of the world as a global village, a village where some people are made conscious of the fact that the power and influence of a few countries is overwhelming. The Commonwealth true to its values and principles must consciously work towards ensuring that each and every member state is encouraged to be fully involved in the work of the Commonwealth. Transparency, accountability and good governance are values that must be adopted by our global village but these must be applied first and foremost within the Commonwealth itself.

I believe the Commonwealth can provide this new vision in the 21st century. The Commonwealth can and must play a dynamic role in creating a just society free from hunger and disease; a just society which is inclusive and which actively encourages and promotes the participation of all its members in the decision-making process. It must bridge the gap between rich and poor, between North and South, between the developed and the developing world; it must do so with compassion, with determination and a sense of urgency. It must continue to strive to heal the wounds within our countries and within the international community. The Commonwealth family must join hands to transform our aspiration and hopes into reality. I am confident that Don McKinnon the Secretary General of the Commonwealth is committed to revitalizing the Commonwealth and realizing this vision.

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includes many of those in the Commonwealth, have experienced serious pain and difficulties.

A number of very concrete proposals were adopted by the heads of government at Edinburgh, including support for duty free market access for the exports of LDCs and as well as support for the interests of the ACP countries. The Commonwealth Secretariat should give the highest priority to implementing these decisions and taking the necessary follow-up action.

The establishment of the Commonwealth Business Council and the holding of periodic meetings of the Commonwealth Business Forum, has been, to my mind, not only a major initiative but an extremely timely one. It recognises both the important role of the private sector today and the excellent business opportunities available within the Commonwealth. It is important that the private sector be made aware of these opportunities and is encouraged to make full use of the networks available within the Commonwealth. The need for a strong partnership between government and private sector today is a matter of fundamental importance to all our countries.

One of the most important initiatives taken up by the Common-

CFTC's funds are spent in the small states. Thirty two countries in the Commonwealth have been categorised as small states. Any country with a population of less than 1.5 million qualifies as a small state. However, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea and Lesotho, although having populations in excess of 1.5 million have been included in the Small States group on the grounds that they share many of the economic characteristics of small states. Twenty of the small states have populations of less than half a million; 25 of them are small island states; most are highly dependent on tourism or one or two export products.

Thanks to the Commonwealth, the international community has become increasingly aware of the special problems faced by the small states arising out of their isolation and smallness. It must remain central to the work of the Commonwealth that problems of the Small States are given special consideration by the international community. Perhaps the time has come for the Commonwealth Secretary General to appoint a high-level Special Representative both to help in overseeing the implementation of the various programmes in support of the Small States and to maintain

which directly or indirectly have an interest in the Commonwealth. This unofficial network is what makes the Commonwealth both special and different. The official and the unofficial Commonwealth should join hands in infusing new life into the Commonwealth.

Today, we all speak of Civil Society, its role and responsibilities. Well Civil Society has been very much an active player in the Commonwealth from the very beginning, thanks to these numerous organizations and associations within the Commonwealth. The dialogue between the official and the unofficial Commonwealth has contributed significantly to the work of the Commonwealth. This has been one of the great strengths of the Commonwealth and it is important that during the next fifty years this dialogue and interaction is further intensified. I believe this could be of immense benefit to the Commonwealth, to its image, and in making it both more widely known, supported and appreciated throughout the Commonwealth.

Today there are no limits to the Secretary General's versatility. He has to be active in not simply mobilising resources but in developing new partnerships, both with the private sector, the financial institu-



Don McKinnon

alongside C-Mag, making democracy work and promoting good governance, have today become an integral part of the Secretary General's responsibilities.

The Commonwealth today is a finely woven tapestry with different hues and colours, elaborate and intricate. Each one of us has contributed to this tapestry. As Sir Sridath Ramphal or Sonny so eloquently put it in a speech to the Commonwealth Countries League five years ago: "the true value of the Commonwealth derives not from likeness or even like-mindedness, but from

The US quest for a pliant Palestinian leadership



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVER SINCE Yasser Arafat defiantly walked out of Camp David II two years ago and earned the US President Bill Clinton's ire as a result, the die was cast as far as his fate was concerned. Not surprisingly an enraged United States not only castigated Arafat, the repentant revolutionary, it also openly sided with Israel. Under Bush presidency it threw all its weights behind a headline Ariel Sharon as he won the election in Israel early last year. The Bush Administration is now even more firmly on the side of Israeli Prime Minister than before in the matter of his offensive against Palestine and the Palestinian Authority and resolve to oust a naggingly uncompromising Arafat. Obviously both are on a look out for a more pliant Palestinian leadership which would accept even a flawed statehood for the Palestinians in conformity with an American game plan.

Although Arafat was no less compliant to start with the US

brokered peace process in 1993 when the Palestinians, thick in their uprising (first Intifada), were in no mood to step into the 'trap', Arafat's occasional revolutionary flush irked the Americans who now in collaboration with Sharon want some one to simply sign the dotted lines. Washington is learnt to have shortlisted the desirous candidates to replace Arafat who, it hopes, will be more amenable and will do just that --

in jeopardy the infrastructure of Palestinian authority (PA). However, with the rest of the world not willing to abandon Arafat altogether and the Palestinians unwilling to countenance an alternative candidate propped up either by Tel Aviv or Washington, now the efforts are intensified to make Arafat at least a lame-duck President by stripping him of his powers. However the surge in public support for Arafat and continu-

their satisfaction with US' position. They draw consolation from the only act that the US is, after all, committed to the establishment of a Palestinian state and have been able to strike the only bargain that Israel would have to withdraw to positions it occupied on September 28, 2000 after a new constitution is ratified by the Palestinian people. Although the US has suggested a three years time frame for this withdrawal to material-

While the preparations are afoot to create congenial conditions for the new dispensation to function the working of the PA has been rendered impossible. Arafat and the Palestinian people are aware of the machinations going on around them but little can they do under a draconian curfew regime they now live in. The Israeli forces had wrought tremendous damage on the infrastructure built up by the PA. These included

provides the right-wing settlers with cheap land, discounted loans and tax breaks. This is in spite of Oslo agreements which specifically prohibited the Israeli government from changing the 'status' of the occupied territories by means of tactics like resettlement. In addition, the new immigrants to Israel are encouraged by the government to settle in the occupied territories.

Today the Israeli government, with the Bush Administration in tandem, dictate term to a beleaguered PA leadership. Sharon now has the open and unstinted support of president Bush. Yet the Palestinians, for their part, have rejected the Bush formulation. And the Palestinian people are not about to give up on Yasser Arafat. Even Arafat's avowed rivals within the Palestinian political spectrum have decried the Bush proposals. The West Asia 'Quartet' comprising of the US, the EU, Russia and the UN, while discussing the situation in the region, rejected Washington's unilateralism with, of course, the exception of the US. They also opposed the political isolation of Arafat and one-sided demands of the US on the Palestinians. It is however still to be seen how things develop the next couple of months to decide the fate of Arafat and whether the American search for a pliant Palestinian leadership would really materialise.

Big (left) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Under the barrel of the gun Jewish settlers are expanding their settlements in the occupied territories at an accelerated pace. The Israeli government provides the right-wing settlers with cheap land, discounted loans and tax breaks. This is in spite of Oslo agreements which specifically prohibited the Israeli government from changing the 'status' of the occupied territories by means of tactics like resettlement.

accepting a statehood for the Palestinians minus Jerusalem as capital, minus the right of return and with territory pockmarked with Jewish settlements. Arafat annoyed Clinton in the second Camp David organised during the last month of the latter's presidency, precisely on those issues.

In late June President George Bush called for not-so-veiled removal of Yasser Arafat as the Palestinian President. In his June 24 speech Bush had said that political progress was not possible unless the Palestinian government is reconstituted and Arafat sidelined. Now the efforts are on to further undermine the authority of Arafat and put

ing international recognition for his leadership made the Bush Administration change their tack recently. The US officials now say that they are willing to accept Arafat as a titular head so long as effective power is transferred to the office of a prime minister.

The machinations go deeper as there are indications that the US Arab allies in the region -- notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan -- will extend their support to US' game plan. Arafat or no Arafat, the US Arab allies no more want to see the region embroiled in turmoil. The foreign ministers of these countries, in fact, met president Bush in the third week of last month to express

ise the Arab friends of the US want the timetable to be expedited. Given the backdrop of Arab expectations and thrust of diplomacy for years for an Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 war boundary this bargain hardly carries any weight. Yet the Arab diplomats take it to be substantial even though they themselves privately say that they expect Bush to continue with his pro-Israeli line, pro-Sharon tilt until the congressional elections are over in the US by the end of the year.

In the meantime, Israeli military intelligence has been spreading stories that a new and younger leadership will replace Arafat in six months time. Israel expects that leadership to compromise with it.

schools, hospitals and government buildings. The Palestinian economy, never in good health, is now in free fall. Palestinians are no longer allowed to cross into Israel for work. The unemployment in the refugee camps is now estimated at around 85 per cent. The huge amount of money that the Israeli government owes the Palestinians have not been reimbursed for more than a year now.

In the past ten years the settler population in the occupied territory has more than doubled. Under the barrel of the gun Jewish settlers are expanding their settlements in the occupied territories at an accelerated pace. The Israeli government

New benefit for refugees

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

READERS may recall the item I wrote in these columns a couple of weeks ago about why Britain is looked upon as such an attractive 'haven' by thousands of asylum seekers and immigrants. That is hardly surprising in view of the many amenities provided for even those who have their applications for asylum rejected and are eventually deported from this country. As a matter of fact, the benefits enjoyed by them while their applications are being processed are not matched anywhere else in the European Union. Countries like France, Germany or Italy, for example, take a much tougher stand with would-be immigrants who receive little or no Government assistance, except the chance to be put up at detention centres for refugees, until their applications are either successful or otherwise. Britain is much more generous in this respect, making sure that all the basic requirements of decent living are met by the Government. The latest benefit now being considered for asylum seekers in this country is free English language lessons, in order to make it easier for them to carry on with their lives during the interim period and to enable them to blend smoothly into the mainstream once they have been given formal leave to remain. A number of planned asylum centres -- or accommodation units -- are going to be built in certain rural areas of Worcestershire, Oxfordshire and Nottinghamshire and teachers will

be recruited and trained for giving lessons in practical English to the inmates. These places will be *de facto* processing centres for refugees and the Home Secretary David Blunket also wants these centres to have their own doctors and nurses so that local GP surgeries do not have to struggle to cope with the additional pressure of asylum seeking patients on top of their regular list of patients.

The Government's plan has, expectedly, met with furious protests from local communities who view this as "one more example of the Government spending the taxpayers' money on asylum seekers and giving them preferential treatment." They claim that all these areas have severe teacher shortages and finding teachers for educating asylum seekers will not be possible "without detriment to local youngsters." A Department of Education spokesperson, however, insisted that local children would not suffer because of this scheme. "Teachers will not be taken out of mainstream schools and put into these centres," he said. "But there is nothing to stop a Local Education Authority employing a retired teacher."

Some teachers of English language, on the other hand, have sounded a different, more worrisome, note. They accept that if refugees are to be given the chance to build a new life in Britain, it makes sense for them to be able to speak and write English. The growing status of English as a 'global language' is one major reason why so many of them flock to this country,

Nevertheless, the concern at the news that at least some of these refugees are to receive tuition in English at public expense is also understandable, because British children too need to be taught their own language properly if they are to compete successfully in the global arena. But despite the Government's pledge of improving standards of literacy among all school going children within five years, the standard of English among the

sity without mastering the basic skills of spelling and essay writing, and employers are frequently heard complaining that many applicants for jobs are even unable to write passably correct letters of application.

Compared to other European languages like French or German, English is a simpler language with few rules and basic skills that can be mastered without too much difficulty. The best way to learn good English,

have already started operating in Essex, the West Midlands and Croydon in South London, and a fourth will be launched in North Wales in September. Police officers on duty rounds will carry penalty tickets which will be given out at the scene of the offence, although most will be issued by custody officers at police stations. Offenders can be arrested if they refuse to take the ticket. The scheme is designed to reduce the number of people who

Offenders receiving tickets will have 21 days to pay by post, but if they deny the charge they can choose to go to a magistrate's court for a full trial where they will face the prospect of a much tougher penalty or even imprisonment if found guilty.

There have been mixed reactions to the pilot scheme. A leading civil rights lawyer feels that the pilot "puts policemen in the position of having to be judge and jury" at the same time and thinks that it could

the payment of fines. And a Home Office spokesperson was confident that the scheme "will reduce the amount of police time spent on paperwork and courts' time in dealing with prosecutions."

Jis deshme Ganga behti hai

THE land where flows the Ganga -- India, obviously. Now, that holy river may soon be able to extend its holiness to British shores. Every year, thousands of devout Hindus, as well as Sikhs, residing in Britain travel to India to perform *pooja* and other rites which include scattering the ashes of their loved ones after cremating their earthly remains in the sacred waters of the river. But it is not always easy, because travelling to India and back in the peak periods of the year can be prohibitively expensive and not everybody can comfortably afford it. So for many years the expatriate Indian communities in the UK have been trying to find a solution to this dilemma, and now they believe they have found it. A scheme is afoot whereby a fast-flowing stretch of the river Aire at Apperley Bridge on the outskirts of Bradford in Yorkshire could be designated as a site where both Hindu and Sikh religious ceremonies would be allowed to be performed. The scheme is still in the planning stage and will require the consent of both Bradford Metropolitan District Council and the Environment Agency. Local Authority officials are examining a petition filed on behalf of the Indian communities and Bradford Council's Director of

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youngsters -- as well as young adults -- is in rapid decline. Personally speaking, I must say that I could not agree more with the English teachers worried about the poor command of the language among its native speakers. Earlier this year -- probably late January or early February -- I remember reading in *The Times* Educational Supplement an article highlighting the results of a survey conducted by the newspaper on the standard of English among 11 to 14-year olds across Britain. More than half of these secondary school students, the survey revealed, could not correctly spell a large number of everyday basic words such as "serious", "surprise", "injured", "individual", "naïstiest", "attempts" and so on. And this poor standard is reflected at college level as well, among undergraduate students. Too many young adults arrive at univer-

as my own generation can testify, is to read good books and newspapers. But another recent research has revealed that forty per cent of native Britons today hardly ever read a book and never bother to read anything but the gossip columns of tabloids. And most teenagers -- apart from struggling through the scheme is something like this: £80 fixed on-the-spot fines for: Causing harassment, alarm or distress (a breach of Section 5 of the Public Order Act); Wasting police time or giving a false report to police; Making hoax telephone calls; Knowingly giving a false alarm to emergency services.

Instant justice

POLICE forces in Britain are being given fresh powers to crack down on hooligans and troublemakers by imposing hefty on-the-spot fines on them. Four one-year pilot schemes for dealing with a number of offences have been finalised -- three of them

are taken to court for committing 'not-so-serious' offences. If it is successful, the initiative will be introduced nationwide. The pilot is adults-only at the moment, but could be extended to cover the under-18s in future.

The Penalty List as set out by the scheme is something like this: £80 fixed on-the-spot fines for: Causing harassment, alarm or distress (a breach of Section 5 of the Public Order Act); Wasting police time or giving a false report to police; Making hoax telephone calls; Knowingly giving a false alarm to emergency services.

£40 fixed on-the-spot fines for: Being drunk and disorderly; Railway trespass; Throwing stones at a train; Being drunk on the highway; Buying alcohol for anyone under 18; Throwing fireworks in public; Drinking alcohol in public where it is banned.

make the workload of the courts even greater if, as expected, many people appealed against the fines. A Tory MP is of the opinion that the policy is unlikely to make any real impact on the levels of street crimes, while a Liberal Democrats' Home Affairs spokesperson said that there was a big difference between giving someone a Parking Charge Notice for leaving his or her car in a No Parking zone and issuing a Penalty Ticket for causing nuisance in public: "That's very subjective and hardly likely to produce a compliant response." On the other hand, the Chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation gave a cautious welcome to the pilot scheme. "It's a step in the right direction to take people away from the environment where they are causing alarm and distress," he said, but warned that there needed to be better enforcement of