

Zakat stampede

Eliminate the root causes behind such tragedies

THE deaths in a stampede in Gaibandha on Saturday must have come as a rude shock to the nation as a whole. The poor women and children, who were waiting for clothes that were to be distributed by a rich man as part of his religious obligations, have, however, left a message for us -- there are still pockets in this country where people are grappling with grinding poverty.

What is indeed unfortunate about these Zakat stampedes is that such incidents took place quite a few times in the past, and many lives were lost. But the affluent who offer Zakat as mandatory donation have not yet found a safe way of handling the situation. Perhaps we should not blame anybody because stampedes, like accidents, are not always easy to prevent. The man who was willing to help the poor in his area could not anticipate that the conditions for a descent to chaos were very much present among the crowd.

It is really tragic that people in this country still die under such circumstances. There was nobody to notice that the situation was going out of control. Else, they could have sought help from the law enforcers before it was too late.

There are lessons to be learned from the loss of 35 lives in Gaibandha. First, it is important to help the poor, as prescribed by religion, but it is also equally important to ensure their safety. Second, it is imperative that we evolve suitable ways of performing our religious duties. The point will be made clear if we consider the fact that today we have to deal with a much greater number of people in every sphere of life, and that is true about Zakat seekers as well.

The tragedy becomes all the more unbearable if we delve a little deeper into the root causes behind it. A large chunk of the population is still steeped in the kind of poverty that forces them to wait endlessly for a piece of cloth or a morsel of food. It is this poverty that we must strive to eliminate.

There is food for thought for the decision-makers. All our endeavours, aiming at socio-economic progress, will be reduced to an exercise in futility if poverty assumes such an intractable character.

Who the govt is trying to fool?

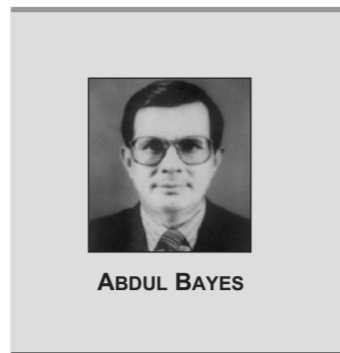
No-foreign-journalist-in-prison stance has no credibility

FIRST the Foreign Secretary, then the Press Information Officer told us that no foreign journalists have been arrested, only two foreigners are being held for, in their words, "suspected involvement in subversive acts." Do they really think that any person with minimum of commonsense would believe this denial? It has been well established that Zaiba Malik and Bruno Sorrentino are freelance professional journalists. Channel 4 and BBC have also given statements that they have worked for them before. The former has gone public that these two journalists were on an assignment of doing a documentary relating to Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Therefore we want to know what is the government trying to prove by calling them mere foreigners, ignoring their professional identities?

The government and the whole world know that both Zaiba and Bruno came to Bangladesh pretending to be somebody other than journalists and we have criticised them for this. But now their identity has been proven beyond doubt. What possible advantage the government can have by saying that it has no foreign journalists in its custody? We think this course of action is not only foolish and self-defeating but also making us a laughing stock in the eyes of the world.

We are simply dumbfounded by the attitude of the government when it comes to face the actual situation. It has to realise that shying away from the reality would not serve any purpose, it would only create more problems. Already these journalists have been interrogated for five days. The government has had ample time to examine all the video cassettes and written materials that have been found in their possession. Therefore it should now make public proofs of their so called seditious activities. We as a nation and journalists of the world have a right to know the basis of the government's charges against them. If, on the contrary, we haven't found enough evidence for what we charged them with, then they should be allowed to return to their respective countries.

Trade with north-east India: A win-win game!



ABDUL BAYES

THE Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) recently organized an important seminar in collaboration with Indian High Commission. Participated by high level government officials and business tycoons from both sides of the fence, the aim of the seminar was to delve deep into the details of Bangladesh's Trade with the northeastern part of India (NEI). Of late, the issue assumed capital importance to both the parties. The presence of the Hon'ble Minister for Commerce and distinguished diplomats of the Indian High Commission in that seminar simply shows the seriousness of the matter. Bangladesh and India -- especially those with disjunct distance from the center of commerce and industry -- have long been vying to get access to each other's market.

The bilateral trade talks between India and Bangladesh have generally been dictated by several key developments. First, there is a call for raising the volume of South Asia regional trade through preferential trading arrangements; secondly, the enormous and persistent trade imbalance -- both formal and informal -- in India's favour has been a contentious issue for Bangladesh defying any simple resolution; thirdly, Bangladesh's call for getting market access into India on a non-reciprocal basis to counter the trade imbalance; and, finally, India's need for obtaining transshipment/transit rights over Bangladesh territory for the movement of goods to and from the NEI. Against this backdrop, there is also the prospect of sub-regional cooperation within the ambit of South Asia 'growth triangle' that envisages multi-faceted cooperation amongst the sub-regional states: Nepal, Bangladesh and the land-locked NEI.

Trade with NEI: Historical

perspective
It is not surprising that both Bangladesh and NEI would gain much from mutual trade. The First Five Year Plan (1973-78) of Bangladesh had envisaged such potentials and called for: (a) setting up of joint-venture projects including cement and fertilizer project, (b) co-operation in the area of infrastructure and movement of inputs and (c) joint development of infrastructures. Various feasibility studies on Indian side are also reported to provide positive comments on Bangladesh's comparative advantage in trade with

Mizoram. They are also called "seven sisters" and are largely land locked. These states have considerable endowments of natural resources including minerals but they are poor. The regions can be termed as rich in resource endowments but poor in economic performance since those resources remain largely untapped due to prohibitive transport costs to and from the centers of Indian trade and commerce. It is, therefore, not surprising that these states tend to suffer from low trade volumes and the consequent adverse effects on growth, employment and poverty

be a pointer to the existing potentials of legal trade. Recent empirical evidence suggests that the total value of illegal imports from Tripura in India (through Comilla) could range between Tk. 900-1500 million (\$ 15-25 million) every year. Likewise, the total value of illegal imports from India through Kamalganj (Moulvibazar district) is estimated to centre around Tk. 500-1000 million (\$ 9-17 million). Thus, from the two points on the eastern front of India alone, allegedly, goods worth Tk. 1500-2000 million (\$ 26-34) enter into Bangladesh through illegal channels. According to some

reported to be enthusiastic about importing poultry and meat products, toiletries, pharmaceuticals and other consumer items from Bangladesh. Bangladeshi exports, which are said to have bright prospects in eastern states include, *inter alia*, dry fish, cosmetics, toiletries, melamine products, pharmaceuticals etc. in exchange for coal, granite and boulders from Assam. Import of Assam tea for blending purposes indicate good prospects for joint ventures.

Size of the NEI market
NEI regions cover over 255 thou-

sand sq. km with about 34 million population. Gross Domestic Product of NEI stands at Rs. 25 thousand crores. The per capita State Domestic Product (SDP) varies from Rs. 5 thousand to Rs. 10 thousand. Average per capita SDP is about Rs. 8000. Colour TV penetration in the higher income group is 66 per cent while refrigerators are owned by two-thirds of households of higher income groups. Bangladesh lies close to NEI than any other part of India and hence should be the most cost effective supplier of commodities to that region. Just think of the disdainful distance between Calcutta and Agartala. Agartala is about 1700 km from Calcutta but only 350 km from Dhaka. The cost of a truck for goods is reported to be Rs. 20 thousand from Calcutta but only Rs. 3000 to 4000 from Dhaka. Assam is reported to have lost Rs. 8000 crores for procuring food from other states during the 8th Five Year Plan period. For NEI, trade with other states -- bypassing Bangladesh -- appears to lead more to trade diversion than to trade creation.

The perennial problems
The perennial problem started with political separation resulting in economic isolation that partition of India accounted for. Tariff and non-tariff barriers bedeviled trade through formal channels. But as economists would argue, formal barriers give way to informal exchanges, and despite restrictions, trade between Bangladesh and NEI has been booming through illegal channels, ipso facto. Problems also relate to the underdevelopment of Land Customs Stations (LCS), infrastructural bottlenecks connecting entry and exit points in border belts, banking facilities and administrative complexities. The problems also lie with Indian attitude to provide Bangladesh with access to its markets. Over the years, Bangladesh pursued liberal economic policies that allowed easy entry of Indian goods to Bangladesh but, allegedly, the reverse did not happen. The Indian tone on trade, unfortunately, trails Bangladesh behind India.

It is in the interest of the relatively underdeveloped resource-rich regions that India should take up the access issue seriously. In fact we expect that the win-win situation should be harvested through conducive economic and political policies. Both India and Bangladesh have to sit together on this issue urgently and chamber bodies in either side of the fence should put pressures on respective governments to carry out the agenda. After all, it is the business community who knows the markets better and the duty of the government is to see that the said market serves well.

Abdul Bayes is professor of economics, Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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NEI. Among the business community in both countries, there is broad consensus on the positive outcome of trade between Bangladesh and NEI.

The potentials of trade links of Bangladesh with the NEI states have also historical roots. Before the end of the British rule in India in 1947, the regional economy of the eastern side of the Indian sub-continent was functioning as reasonably well-integrated economic entities. At that time, economic activities hovered around agriculture and forestry and were organised around the concept of transportation through the regional metropolitan-cum-port Calcutta and the natural harbour of Chittagong in the south-east corner of the sub-continent. In fact, the whole eastern and NEI regions of colonial India were the economic hinterlands of these two seaports through which internal and international trade took place. It was the 1965 Indo-Pak war that led to a complete halt in the movement of goods. As a result, illegal trade continued to replace legal trade along the porous India-Bangladesh border.

Locked land, blocked trade
The seven states of India bordering Bangladesh are: Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and

There is sufficient empirical evidence to show that land locked countries all over the world generally have transport costs 50 per cent higher and trade volumes 60 per cent lower than coastal economies. However, land locked countries are able to overcome a substantial portion of their disadvantages through improvement in their own and in their transit countries' infrastructure.

More informal than formal
At the moment, of course, Bangladesh has some formal trade with these states. For example, in 2000/01, India's export to Bangladesh stood at Rs. 349 crores against import from Bangladesh to the tune of only Rs. 8 crores. For 1999/2000 the figures were 425 and 13 crores, respectively. About 90 per cent of the imports of Bangladesh from NEI consists of coal, limestone and boulder stone. One-tenth of the remaining imports comprise horticultural products, spices, rice, dry chilly etc. Again of the total imports, Meghalaya is the largest supplier with 83 per cent followed by Assam 16 per cent and Tripura 0.16 per cent. From Bangladesh side, exports to NEI mainly consist of Hilsa fish and food products.

However, existing informal trade seems to outweigh the existing formal trade. Admittedly, the presence of illegal trade could possibly

newspaper reports, there are at least five such pockets on eastern side of the border trading almost the same value and volume. In that case, the total illegal imports from NEI could be as high as \$130-170 million. Livestock, fisheries and poultry products and agricultural products mostly come through Kamalganj border while textiles and agricultural products predominate on the Comilla border. Experts opine that huge quantities of fruits and forestry products such as rubber in Tripura and adjacent states fail to find outlets while agro-processing capacities in Bangladesh are growing. Import of limestone to Chhatak cement factory and almost all the boulder for the Jamuna bridge coming from Meghalaya are clear indicators of NEI India's trade potentials.

At present, it is estimated that illegal exports of gold, electronics goods, and dry fish worth Tk. 80 million (\$1.4 million) are passed out of Bangladesh to these two states (Tripura and Meghalaya) of India. However, available research shows that there are potentials of joint venture clinker factories in Meghalaya and cement factories in Bangladesh. Exports of agro-products during summer and rainy seasons from Meghalaya and during winter from Bangladesh are very promising. Meghalaya is

choose from among the greats of the past. There are often enough startling inclusions or omissions. Hammond's team for example does not include Sir Jack Hobbs, generally considered to be the greatest of English batsmen. The element of time lag is particularly difficult to allow for. How would WG Grace have negotiated the googly, modern field placings or fast reverse swing or adjusted to the one day game? I should think he would have been more than equal to such challenges, after, to be sure, an initial period of

The selections of both the legends and the team were perhaps weighted in favour of modern players. Indeed few of the experts could have seen in an informed fashion many of the old time greats at play. The only -- and obvious -- player to break the time barrier was Bradman, who was voted the top among legends and included in the team. Jack Hobbs and W G Grace were also placed near the top of the 50 legends but did not make the team. The team selected by the panel consisted of Gavaskar, Barry Richards, Bradman, Viv Richards,

Seizing upon the size
It seems worthwhile for Bangladesh and NEI to seize the opportunities for increased trade and exchanges. For Bangladesh side, it provides some scope for reducing the galloping trade deficit with India. Some

I suppose a computer could be programmed to play simulated matches between all-time teams. Some years back an attempt was made for computer simulated contests to determine the greatest heavyweight in boxing.

The result was less than conclusive. One programme chose Ali and another Marciano. Even computers I should think cannot be absolutely impersonal or dispassionate, as the human element in programming cannot perhaps be dispensed with.

Cricket was at one time considered by its "blindest worshippers" to be more than a game. It was synonymous with a gentlemanly code of sportsmanship and even helped to hold "Empires together"! Robertson-Glasgow, easily among the best writers on the game, has written of the "air of holy pomp" that started from the "main temple at Lord's." All this may not be taken too literally in these times. Cricket is a game, to be played competitively but above all to be enjoyed and to give pleasure. The commercial aspect cannot, of course, be ignored and hence the innovation of the one-day variety. There are purists, though, who disavow the one-day version as a distortion. Personally I enjoy both Test and one-day cricket. It is testimony to the modern player's skills and versatility that he can adapt so readily to either form of the game, each with its distinct technique and approach.

Only three teams have dominated in cricket at different times and for varying periods, England, Australia and the West Indies. At present Australia is clearly the dominant team, although cricket is still very much a game of uncertainties. The Australian team is remarkable; resilient, mentally tough and able to lift the level of its game when needed. An old slogan from our student days comes to mind, especially as the next World Cup nears, "no cricketers like the Aussies." At the present time this is certainly true.

Competing credibly in cricket

MEGASTHENES

FOR sheer enthusiasm and love for the game, Bangladesh is surely the equal of any other cricket playing country. For performance on the field, however, there is room and an immense need for improvement, if performance is to match enthusiasm.

In any area of human activity, including sport, a beginning has to be made and it is the norm rather than the exception for such beginnings to be modest or humble. In cricket, the obvious example would be New Zealand, which first played at the Test level in January of 1930 against England and waited impatiently for 26 years and 45 matches before its first victory -- against the West Indies. India played its first Test match in June of 1932, also against England and won at that level for the first time in its 25th Test match in 1952 against a virtually second string England team. It took New Zealand, India and also Pakistan quite a while before they could compete seriously with the best. For the babes of Test cricket thus the task will not be easy, but then Test cricket is not supposed to be easy.

Crickets at the Test level is played more regularly and frequently than of old and the above examples are emphatically not for Bangladesh to follow. The purpose for Bangladesh at this time is not to win every time it plays but to be able to compete credibly at the highest level. A contest, whatever the level, that is blatantly one-sided or a mismatch adversely affects spectator interest and the game itself is the loser. If our players have achieved Test status for Bangladesh, they must also believe in their ability to perform credibly and creditably at that level and play to their potential.

Incidentally Bangladesh has a tenuous, almost irrelevant but nevertheless historical, link with Test cricket. The first Test match ever played, was between England and Australia in March 1877 at Melbourne. Australia won by 45 runs. In the Australian team was one

BB Cooper, who scored 15 and 3 runs in the match. According to Wisden he was born in "Dacca, India" on 15 March 1844!

Pakistan's first captain AH Kardar -- an Oxford blue in cricket, who also played at the county level for Warwickshire -- named his book on Pakistan's tour of England in 1954, "Test Status on Trial". Clearly he felt that it was only after a worthy performance in England that Pakistan's Test status was truly vindicated.

Crickets is in some ways unique among games. Of the 190 or so

the paper their ideal post-World War II Ashes XI, comprising players from England and Australia only. In the first week of the contest, a plastic card was given free with each paper bought or sold. The cards contained arbitrarily chosen Ashes teams, different for different cards. If an expert's chosen team coincided with that in a card held by a reader, the lucky winner was treated to an all expenses paid trip to Australia to watch the Test series. At the end of the contest, a certain pattern could be discerned. Enor-

choose from among the greats of the past. There are often enough startling inclusions or omissions. Hammond's team for example does not include Sir Jack Hobbs, generally considered to be the greatest of English batsmen. The element of time lag is particularly difficult to allow for. How would WG Grace have negotiated the googly, modern field placings or fast reverse swing or adjusted to the one day game? I should think he would have been more than equal to such challenges, after, to be sure, an initial period of

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LIGHTEN UP

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nations, it is played in a few and at the Test level, only by 10. No other game lends itself so well to literary description. In the words of the Rt. Hon. RG Menzies CH. PC., the late Prime Minister of Australia, the "greatest charm of cricket is that it gathers into its family circle the clever and the dull, the expert and the incompetent, the famous and the obscure. They are united by family affection". Menzies was not the only Head of Government to have been a cricket enthusiast. Michael Manley, the late Prime Minister of Jamaica, wrote a very readable book, "A History of West Indies Cricket". John Major's love of the game is also well known.

During the Ashes series in Australia in 1900-91, the Sunday Times of London ran an interesting contest, not of skill but more of luck. For several weeks -- at the rate of one a week -- individuals, knowledgeable about and intimately involved with the game, cricket writers and eminent former players, published in

mous differences existed even among foremost experts in such a team selection. Only one player -- and that too essentially a pre World War II player -- figured in every expert's team. The player was, of course, Bradman. None from the likes of Botham, Lindwall, Lillee, Miller, Hutton, Compton, Harvey, Crowdy, May or Dexter made it to every expert's team. Clearly there are difficulties in selecting an all-time team, even on a restricted time basis.

Selection of all-time teams, whether national or on a wider scale, is a stimulating pastime for cricket lovers and affords a pleasure that ranks behind only watching and reading about the game. Experts also indulge in this. Hutton, Hammond, May, Constantine and also Michael Manley, among others, have written about their ideal teams. Most would select from among those they have seen, played with or against. A few, more adventurous ones, go back across time and also

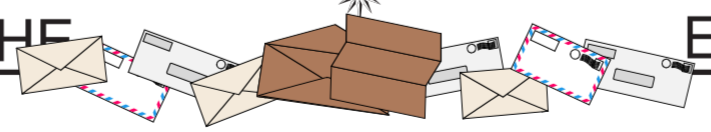
uncertainty or adapting. In Grace's time, pitches were under-prepared and uncovered and shooters were not an aberration. He excelled nevertheless. Grace would have revelled in the one-day game. His basic approach suggests this. He did not like defensive strokes, as, in his words, one "could get only 3 runs from them"! And yet times have changed, as have laws, the environment of the game, tools, technique and even protective gear, which makes comparisons of players belonging to different eras very subjective.

A cable sports channel recently ran a series of programmes on all time great cricket players. Fifty players were chosen by an expert panel as cricket legends -- one programme a day devoted to a player. The programme began with legend No. 50 and moved up gradually to No. 1. After that an all-time team was chosen by the expert panel. Viewers also saw some rare footage of old-time greats in action.

Tendulkar, Sobers, Adam Gilchrist, Wasim Akram, Malcolm Marshall, Lillee and Warne. A very strong team but the most powerful combination possible? That would be moot. My team to play against this would be: Hobbs, Trumper, Hammond, Headley, G Pollock, K Miller, Les Ames, Benaud, Lindwall, EA Macdonald and O'Reilly. It should be easier to select all-time teams, whether national or global, if this was done on the basis of pre-World War II players to play against those who played mostly after the War.

Bradman in one of his books suggests a variation of this pastime: selection of all-time teams comprising players whose names begin with the same letter. For balance and flexibility, I find the "M" team the easiest to select. This could consist of Merchant, Morris, May, Miandad, Macartney, Miller, Mankad, Marsh, Marshall, EA Macdonald and Mailey. One could also select strong "W", "H", and "B" teams.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"2 foreigners, not journalists held"

Principal Information Officer Khondker Manirul Alam has misled the readers that Mr Led Sorrentino and Ms Zaiba Malik are not journalists ("2 foreigners, not journalists held, says PIO", December 2).

They are indeed journalists who have been engaged by Channel 4 Television of the UK. They want to report on the violation of human rights in Bangladesh in the programme entitled "Unreported world" scheduled to be shown in November 2002.

Our Forum took on the issues of violation of human rights in Bangladesh with Channel 4 Television in July 2002. Channel 4 advised that they were considering doing a programme on Bangladesh. Chan-

nel 4 passed on the information sent by us to the producer and reporter of the programme "Unreported world". Our Forum and Hindu Baudha Christian Unity Council UK met Ms Malik before she was leaving for Bangladesh. We briefed her in some details about the violation of human rights highlighting the plights of the minorities.

Ms Malik applied for visa to Bangladesh High Commission London but the Government of Bangladesh was delaying the visa giving one excuse after another. Subsequently Ms Malik and her colleague left for Bangladesh. We advised her to be very careful, as we were aware of the arbitrary dealing of the Bangladesh government. We even advised her not to go to Bangladesh, as there is evidence of rape of foreign woman.

Bangladesh High Commissioner in London Mr Razzak Ali denies any violation of human rights in Bangladesh though your paper is full of such stories. The Principal Information Officer denies that the journalists are not journalists. The present Bangladesh regime and their agents are master of "banoat" i.e. denying the truth. The Bangladeshis must expose this "banoat" culture of Khaleda Zia's government.

Sunil Kumar Pal
General Secretary
Forum for Minority Rights in Bangladesh
London, UK

Arrest of foreign journalists

I am, Delwar Jahid, former Chief Executive of Bangladesh Founda-

tion of Human Rights and former President of Comilla Press Club and Comilla Union of Journalists would like to express my serious concern over the arrest of Salim Samad, Bangladesh representative of Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) and two other foreign journalists.

Under the directives of the BNP-Jamaat coalition government attacks on journalists were being made in various occasions. The present government has broken all the previous records of harassing and torturing journalists. The government started its repressive measures on the progressive newspapers and other media immediately after assumed power.

I am strongly condemning the arrest of the journalists and demanding their unconditional release in

respecting press freedom and also appealing to the journalists community to build up a strong resistance in the country and abroad against undemocratic activities of BNP-Jamaat coalition government.

Delwar Jahid
Manitoba, Canada

Fundamentalist element in Bangladesh?

Now it seems that if Sheikh Hasina fails to portray Bangladesh as a Taliban state, Khaleda Zia will definitely not fail to do that. All the recent actions of present government are going against us, providing lots of question marks internationally about our seriousness to fight against terrorist and religious

extremists.

When all the governments are going tough against religious extremist groups worldwide our BNP government are trying to protect them. They are trying to protect Jammat-Shibir, the so-called Peers, Khatibs and Zehadi groups by putting the blame on AL and Sheikh Hasina. Instead of arresting them and investing their activities they are arresting and harassing people who are opposing these Taliban elements.

There is no doubt the in general we are very open-minded people. But it's a fact that religious extremism have increased in our society for the last couple of years.

The Government must wake up now. They can't get way with it just by putting blame on the AL. It's high

time government investigated the allegations and took serious action against those Taliban elements. Remember, they are not just Taliban, they are THE enemy of our independence too.

Sonia Mirza
Banani, Dhaka

India's attitude towards Bangladesh

My heartfelt gratitude for the timely editorial on November 29. It is appalling that our neighbour India has once again started to behave as irrationally as can be expected from autocratic leaders.

Being a fundamentalist government itself, the BJP leaders like Mr. Advani and Mr. Sinha are singing the song of anti-Talibanism accus-

ing a country that has purer records than India has as far as secularism and harmony between various religious factions are concerned. Mr. Advani is the person who led in demolishing the Babri mosque. So, what is the difference between the Taliban who partially damaged the Buddhist statue in Bamyan and the BJP who destroyed the Babri mosque?

I am outraged by the Indian Foreign Minister's comments that "India is giving time to Bangladesh". It is clearly a violation of any diplomatic norm and seems to be a covert threat of India's muscle. We expect much more matured, cultured and friendly attitude from our neighbour, India.

Ahmed Mohiuddin
Banani, Dhaka