

Stalled again

SAARC summit stuck in Indo-Pak bickering

PAKISTAN'S decision to put off next month's South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit for an indefinite period is as unfortunate as it is regrettable. With New Delhi holding back its decision to attend on an open-ended condition that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would only travel to Islamabad if Pakistan stopped sponsoring "cross-border" terrorism in India-administered Kashmir, the seven-nation meet had already been under a cloud of doubt. Still, the smaller countries of SAARC, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Nepal would surely feel hard done by at the postponement. More so given the fact that the upcoming summit was set to take two regional trade pacts, the SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement and the SAARC Free Trade Agreement, forward. These nations are left with only the hope that there would be a change of heart on New Delhi's part and that "the summit will be reconvened at the earliest possible time".

Even if it is for now, the reality has been that the regularity of summity exercise, or for that matter, the continuity of SAARC's progress has been subject to the vicissitudes of bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan. Whenever there was a dip in their relations, it got reflected on the summit in the shape of postponement. The previous summit in Kathmandu had been rescheduled several times, as Mr Vajpayee refused to share the same dais with General Pervez Musharraf, before being finally held in January this year. And when it was decided that Islamabad would hold the 12th SAARC summit, one could easily smell trouble. Then came the May showdown between India and Pakistan over the militant attack on the parliament building in New Delhi. Both countries went to the brink of a full-scale war. Thankfully, international community intervened and hectic western diplomacy averted what might have led to dire consequences.

Therefore, "to get the SAARC back on track as early as possible", the other member-countries must devise means not to let the Indo-Pak relations hamper the progress of the regional bloc. The first step in that direction would be to have summity prospects de-link from any extraneous reference to issues and bilateral mood-plays. That done, the summit takes place and it works on the sidelines to bring India and Pakistan back to the negotiation table. A daunting task; but as the future of SAARC hinges on effective participation from India and Pakistan, this has to be ensured by all means.

Government expenditure pattern

Steps need to be taken to reduce cost

WE endorse the recommendations made by the Expenditure Review Commission in its interim report about downsizing the government, including the cabinet, to put a cap on spendings. In fact we have repeatedly said that reform in the administration was mandatory for efficiency and less wastage. We fully agree with the commission in its observation over the rationale of some projects in the annual development programme. Some of these projects are not even flagged off due to lack of funds. Donors have recently expressed their concern over some projects adding they were not viable or that they just put extra pressure on the government's expenditure capacity. Actually development projects should be taken up on purely socio-economic merit rather than political considerations.

The size of the cabinet has always been a major source of concern for many and the commission headed by former advisor to caretaker government Hafizuddin Khan has echoed it. It is simply impossible to fathom why the government keeps talking about reducing undue expenses when it has been carrying the burden of a gigantic cabinet on its shoulders? The commission has also mentioned that many ministries and departments have excess manpower and some of them basically have no work to do. Could we afford to be so callous in our present economic condition?

But the real question here is -- would the latest recommendations be implemented at all? As we have seen in the past that as many as 18 reform commissions or committees were formed but hardly any suggestion made by them has been implemented. Who should we blame for this? Of course, the successive governments for their lack of initiative. The commission has dubbed them as unwilling governments, both past and present. When would our political leaders realise that they have been elected by the people to serve them and not waste public resource in any way? Unless and until the government wakes up to this fact and gets going on reforms, rationalising government expenditure and improving the quality of service would remain a far cry.

ABMS ZAHUR

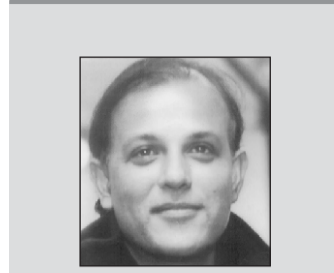
A 10-member independent commission has been set up by President Bush to investigate the September 11 attacks. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger with his broad experience, clear thinking and careful judgement has been asked to lead the panel. The commission is to complete the task of examining issues such as aviation security, border problems and intelligence in 18 months. As indicated by Bush administration it would help the administration to learn the tactics and motives of the enemy.

Most details of the legislation have been kept secret. However, according to US lawmakers there would be biggest-ever increase in intelligence spending to fix some counter terrorism. The bill is believed to authorise more than

\$35 billion in intelligence programmes. It establishes a new centre to help intelligence agencies quickly translate foreign languages; provides millions for the study of languages key to national security and calls for a standard way for all agencies to spell names from other alphabets.

Despite global hunt for Osama bin Laden by a joint team of CIA, FBI and military field operators, US intelligence officials admit that information on bin-Laden's whereabouts has been too sketchy to warrant a major operation to capture or kill him. These officials have not been able to prove that the broadcast from Arab satellite television net work Al-Jazeera a few days back was fake. However this has a visible effect on Bush administration. The statement of Osama bin Laden (as translated by

The secret weapon



K.A.S. MURSHID

ONCE again we are all set to wield our favourite weapon against terrorism -- the Judicial Commission. If I recall correctly, a similar commission was formed on an earlier occasion in response to another bombing. That experiment ended ingloriously because of the failure of the three members entrusted with the task of investigation to arrive at any agreement. We of course have learnt from past mistakes -- this time therefore, there is just one member in the commission, precluding any possibility of disagreement. Now this is progress. In fact, I would argue that this formidable innovation in our war against terror is something we can be proud of. Perhaps we can even export this idea to other countries as well: the USA, Indonesia, Yemen and so on. Bengalis are, after all, great thinkers. We have given the world microcredit and NGOs; we have introduced the concept of a 'caretaker government' -- so it would be quite in character now, at this crucial juncture in world history, to let everyone know about our new

'secret weapon'.

It is not hard to read the government's mind: the arrests of AL leaders and intellectuals provide ample testimony to that. The Prime Minister has publicly stated that there is a connection with 'those who malign our image abroad' and the bombings. More importantly, our Home Minister sees no evidence of a fundamentalist or Al Qaida connection.

the bombings that have taken place in recent years? Are these somehow connected? Let us take a quick look at some of the targets selected by the bombers:
& Udichi cultural event in Jessore (1999)
& Kadiani Mosque, Khulna (1999)
& CPB rally in Paltan Maidan (2001)
& Ramna Batamul, Dhaka (2001)
& Catholic Church, Baniarchar

hasten to add however that in the inverted world of the Bangladeshi politician, I guess just about any conclusion could be derived, depending on what particular prism you happen to favour.
So where do we go from here? Do we continue to keep our eyes tightly closed and hope against hope that the problem will go away on its own (as has been our previous

World Bank if they could give us a grant to cover this). Combined with amnesty, anonymity, impunity and even relocation to a foreign abode, this would serve as a powerful incentive for one (or more) of the perpetrators to break rank and come forth with their eager mouths rattling away. Worth a try, you know, for who knows who the victims will be the next time it happens. And done so far.

In the meantime, perhaps one could request the government to go a bit beyond 'commissions' (no pun intended) and form a suitable anti-terrorist unit instead, with the sole purpose of tracking down the criminals. Oh, and do give them ALL the resources that they need to get this job done. Good luck and God bless. And please check if we can get any medication for that 'knee-jerk' condition that I wrote about last week -- it is time now to use one's head instead.

Postscript: On Tuesday morning the BBC World Service reported: "There's hardly ever any good news from Bangladesh..." The report continued to list the arrests of the foreign and local journalists, the bomb blasts in Mymensingh and the arrests of AL leaders. It also interviewed an important English-speaking minister to find out why the AL leaders were arrested. The minister spoke eloquently, no doubt, but really hadn't much to say except that "the law was taking its own course" -- reason for the arrests remain shrouded in mystery.

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

What we DO need to do is to generate mass awareness; we need to educate our people to watch out for any suspicious object or person; we need every man, woman and child to be vigilant against this threat; and we also need the intelligence services to do a better job, a MUCH better job than they have done so far. In the meantime, perhaps one could request the government to go a bit beyond 'commissions' (no pun intended) and form a suitable anti-terrorist unit instead, with the sole purpose of tracking down the criminals.

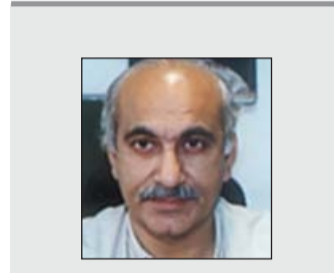
tion. Thus, even before the investigation has begun, the conclusions have been drawn. All that the Commission now needs to do is to work backwards to produce the 'evidence' that will substantiate this conclusion: QED. (Incidentally, you should consider forming these commissions with economists in the Chair -- they may well prove to be better at this type of work!) I now wonder who will be assigned the role of Hassan Imam this time round: Muntassir Mamun or Shariar Kabir? I must remember to catch up with some right-leaning vernacular press on this -- who knows they may even have more original thoughts on the matter.
& Is there a pattern that connects all

(2001)
& Narayanganj AL office (2001)
& Public meeting of AL at Mollarhat (2001)
& Two bomb blasts in Sathkira (Cinema Hall and Circus Party targeted - 2001)
& Powerful bomb recovered from venue of Sheikh Hasina's public meeting (2000)
& Mymensingh cinema hall blasts
& Unexploded bomb recovered from cinema hall in Gaibandha
& So what do we have here? Mainly it would seem, entertainment venues and cultural functions, AL-CPB public meetings -- and at least two occasions when a place of worship, were targeted. Does this fall into any recognizable pattern? I leave that to you to judge. Let me

practice)? Or perhaps we should try and find out why all these cases have remained unsolved for so long? Have we tried hard enough and given up because we had no further clues to go on? Or is there still some scope for forensic foreals combined with thorough investigation? Or perhaps it is simply a question of not having adequately skilled, competent analysts? I have a bright idea: why don't we ask the World Bank to finance a 'bomb investigation consultancy' and contract out the job to the FBI or Scotland Yard? If nothing works we should try the time honoured practice of announcing a reward -- not a piddling amount of Tk.50, 000 or a lac but say, Tk.50-100 lacs (again DO check with the

YES, there will be a NEXT time.
We have had four years since the first blasts in Jessore to gear up against a terrorist threat that perhaps now, finally, we should regard with some seriousness. (I myself had tried in my own way to draw attention to this question a number of times in these columns.) We do not need to speculate out loud who the culprits are, except to note they are no friends of ours. During the last four years, very little attempt was made to make the general public aware of this ever-increasing threat, and the consequence has therefore been grave: 18 innocent lives lost in Mymensingh and scores injured. It is difficult for any normal human being to fathom what moti-

Congress is BJP's B-Team in Gujarat



M.J. AKBAR

DR Murl Manohar Joshi has a great deal of hair for a man of his age; it is long, even luxurious and slickly combed. Within those hirsute waves lies hidden, at the centre of the skull, a special tuft: the classical mark of a believing Brahmin. Many Brahmins have given up this tradition, more out of embarrassment rather than denial. The tuft is not considered modern. But Dr Joshi has an ancient tradition to defend. The Joshis are 'uccha koti' Brahmins, of the first rank (lower ranks of the caste include Brahmins who till the land, or those who preside only over the death ceremonies). The Joshis, Pants and Pandes came originally from the Konkan region of Maharashtra and settled in the Kumaon hills of the Himalayas. The reasons for migration are lost but common practices remain: the manner of the thread ceremony for instance, in which the Vedas are read for three days, and the anointed Brahmin asks for *bhiksha*, gets his hair shaved and ears pierced. These were the Brahmins in charge of a people's knowledge, prayer and ritual.

If the voters of Gujarat want to vote for Hindu qua Hindu, who do you think they will choose between a Kumaon-Allahabad Joshi like Murl Manohar Joshi and an Italian-Indian Roman Catholic like Sonia Gandhi? Or between a svelte Gwalior-Brahmin orator like Atal Behari Vajpayee and a heavily-accented Sonia Gandhi? So why has Sonia Gandhi chosen to chase Narendra Modi's tail in Gujarat? What is this me-too Hindutva all about? The Congress election strategy in this crucial

election is incomprehensible, even if one uses nothing more esoteric than common sense. Who advised Sonia Gandhi to begin her campaign from Ambaji, a pilgrimage centre? What signal was she sending? That she was a devout Hindu? That the Congress was a party of only devout Hindus? I have no problem with candidates visiting temples, mosques, dargahs and churches: that is a sign of respect for the faith of the people, and we

acting on the advice of R.K. Dhawan, decided to open the campaign for the general elections of 1989 from BJP territory, both physically and mentally. He went to Ayodhya for his first speech. With that gesture, the debate entered the BJP's space. The Congress lost just enough seats in 1989 to bring the BJP within striking distance of power. In a very real sense the Congress has not recovered from 1989. Just when the

becoming a saffron Congress.
If the Congress is going to be the B-Team of the BJP why should the voter not stick with the real thing and vote BJP? Why elect the fraud? There is real identity between Narendra Modi and Sonia Gandhi in one critical perspective: both believe that the Hindu voter is communal, and can only be persuaded by a communal dialectic. The implications of this strategy stretch far beyond this election.

Nehru's position on the Hindu-Muslim relationship? If anything, he redoubled his campaign against fundamentalists of all hues, whether Hindu or Muslim. Congress memory need not go as far as 1952. It could have learnt something from 1992. Digvijay Singh, who has kept away from the Gujarat campaign, officially because of his state's differences with Gujarat over the Narmada dam, could have told his party how

similar problem attends the BJP. What would be the consequences of a substantial victory for Narendra Modi? If Modi gets a thin majority, which is all that every sensible senior leader in the BJP is hoping for, then Modi should be worried. If Modi gets a bumper majority then the BJP should be worried.

Modi is an ideologue, with a difference. The difference is hysteria. It is an edgy hysteria, which can mesmerise; and it easily melts into the kind of megalomania that makes a politician believe that he is serving the larger good through a destructive frenzy against a perceived enemy. In Hitler's case, the enemy was the Jew; in Modi's case the enemy is the Muslim. Such a politician is not a fool; in fact, he may have a high degree of intellect. But it is intellect untempered by reason, and untempered by humanism. If Modi wins big, he will immediately seek to make the whole of the BJP a version of his Gujarat experience. He is already visibly contemptuous of the senior leadership of his own party. One reason why Advani got poor crowds was because Modi wanted to prove to his official boss that in Gujarat, it was Modi who ran the show, not anyone from Delhi. Modi will mount a challenge within his party, and get some support too; he will dream of becoming Prime Minister of India after a national victory fashioned through the Gujarat rhetoric. He will depend on terrorists to supply him with Godhras elsewhere in India.

The flaw in the dream is that long before Modi gets anywhere near Delhi, he will have destroyed the BJP.

Will the Congress never learn that there is nothing called "soft" fundamentalism? However, there is something called a soft mind. The Congress ploy in Gujarat is too clever by half. And the voter is not a fool. Gujarat in the last month of 2002 has become a state holding an election that no party deserves to win. That of course makes Gujarat a loser.

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BYLINE

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are a deeply religious people. But to politicise religion is quite another matter. To make Hindutva your central message is to surrender to the BJP even before the battle has begun.

You do not have to be a Clausewitz to realise that you never fight on a battleground of the enemy's choice; you select a field where you have the advantage. That is elementary, dear Congress. Hindutva is the BJP's strength. Governance is the BJP's weakness, and isgovernance includes permitting, if not abetting, the post-Godhra riots. This mistake is reminiscent of the mistake Rajiv Gandhi made in 1989, the first election to witness the emergence of the BJP as a national force that could make a bid for power at the Centre. As party president in that defining phase, L.K. Advani had pounced on Rajiv Gandhi's compromise with Muslim fundamentalism over the Shah Bano case, and turned the discourse to Ayodhya, from where it has not shifted (the pilgrims who were brutally torched in Godhra were returning from Ayodhya). Instead of staying with the Congress ideology, hewn, tested and implemented through a century of trauma, Rajiv Gandhi,

party was showing signs of recovery, Sonia Gandhi has repeated this mistake.

The Congress strategy of "soft-Hindutva" reeks of cynicism and contempt: cynicism about its ideology and contempt for the voter. The cynicism is evident everywhere. Sonia Gandhi, as president of the party, has permitted her candidates to treat Muslims as lepers. Congress candidates and leaders shy away from being seen with Muslims in localities that are predominantly or totally Hindu. In many places Muslims have been told to keep away from Congress offices. Why? Why is the Congress also feeding the hatred that has been created against Muslims? In their campaign speeches, Congress leaders and candidates skirt around the post-Godhra violence and accuse Narendra Modi of not being hard to protect Hindus at the Akshardham temple, which was the victim of vicious terrorist violence. Naroda Patia, the scene of the biggest massacres in the post-Godhra riots, is deliberately not mentioned by Congress leaders. Why? Sonia Gandhi believes that the Muslims have no option except to vote for her, so why bother about them; she must woo the Hindus by

The Congress under Sonia Gandhi has decided to abandon secular politics in ujarat and imitate Modi, albeit without Modi's unique extremism. It is a difference of degree and not content. No wonder Jawaharlal Nehru's face is missing from the lineage of Congress leaders on Congress posters, although Sonia Gandhi's is included: Nehru called dams and steel mills the temples of modern India. Nehru would never have buckled, as his successors have done.

It is not as if Nehru and the Congress did not face such dilemmas. It seems to be forgotten that the first general election was held after the horrible massacres and hatred of the partition riots. In hindsight, and with knowledge of the Congress' huge victory, we tend to forget that the Congress leadership was worried about the Hindu vote in the north in 1952. In Jawaharlal's own constituency, Phulpur, the Opposition had put up what might be called a Hindutva candidate, a rabble-rousing swami whose main objection to Nehru was that he ate beef. Nehru treated this candidate with arrogant contempt, but other Congress leaders were worried. Did this change

he won the elections in Madhya Pradesh in 1993, in the shadow of the post-Babri riots and passions. Did the Congress take Sonia Gandhi's "soft-Hindutva" line then? No. Narasimha Rao was president of the party then, and despite his colossal blunders of December 1992, when he slept while the Babri mosque was demolished, he never succumbed to the temptation of borrowing from the BJP. The Congress stuck to its traditional commitment to secularism. The BJP was stunned when it discovered that the voter did not want to thank the party for helping to demolish the Babri mosque. Digvijay Singh is still in power. I have my doubts about a Congress that cannot stand up to Narendra Modi, and honours him by imitation.

It is chicanery to claim outside Gujarat that you want to destroy the evil of communalism by defeating Narendra Modi; and to indulge in a variation of his communalism inside Gujarat.

In any case, is success the only measure of ideology? Supposing the Congress does well by imitating Modi. Does this mean that the Congress should rewrite its values and convictions?

Strange as it may sound, a

US fight against terrorism: Is Al-Qaida back in full strength?

Whatever connection the Bush administration desires to find out between Saddam Hussein and the Al-Qaida, Bush's fight against terrorism is having some serious effect on US economy. The federal employees have been denied of pay rise of 4.1 per cent. Instead, they have been allowed 3.1 per cent rise. His proposed generous spending for Kissinger Commission appears to be a critical factor for lower rate of benefit to the federal employees.

BBC) in brief, stands as follows:

"The incidents that have taken place were carried out by the zealous sons of Islam in defence of their God and Prophet. What (president) Bush, the pharaoh of this age, was doing in terms of killing our sons in Iraq, and what Israel, the United States' ally, was doing in terms of bombing houses that shelter old people, women and children, with US made aircraft, in Palestine were sufficient to prompt the same among your rulers to distance themselves from this criminal gang.

"White House gangsters are the biggest butchers of this age. It is time that we get even. You will be killed just as you kill and will be bombed just as you bomb ... expect more that will further distress you. The Islamic nation, thanks to God, has started to attack you at the hands of its beloved sons who pledged to God to continue *jihad*, as long as they are alive, through words and weapons to establish right and expose falsehood o o d ... I ask God to let us hold champion His religion and continue *jihad* for

His sake until we meet Him while He is satisfied with us."

The hunt for bin-Laden involves analysts and linguists working in tightly guarded intelligence headquarters buildings in suburban Washington. The best guess so far is that bin-Laden is in closely guarded seclusion in western Pakistan with a few close advisers and a small fanatical team of bodyguards. The CIA has set up an apparatus that can respond quickly to a lead. Everything depends on a break. The challenge of capturing or killing bin-Laden is daunting.

Against this requirement the full weight of US intelligence so far is facing trouble in pinpointing bin-Laden's location.

A large number of people in US appears to be holding different views. To Al Gore, the former US Vice President, Bush's war on terrorism is a serious mistake: "Now the warlords are back in control, the Taliban is back in Afghanistan ... and for a variety of reasons Al-Qaida is back at full strength and Osama is back making his threats against the US." He is critical of the Bush administration

for turning its focus towards Iraqi President Saddam Hussein before it dealt effectively with Al-Qaida. He said, "Saddam Hussein is a bad guy who deserves to be removed from power. But he is not the one who is threatening to kill us right now ... the president succeeded during the election campaign in convincing a majority that Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaida are practically the same thing ... but he convinced the majority of something that is not true and is not backed up by any evidence that I am aware of." However, Bush administration dismissed these comments as "political posturing."

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effect on US economy. The federal employees have been denied of pay rise of 4.1 per cent. Instead, they have been allowed 3.1 per cent rise. His proposed generous spending for Kissinger Commission appears to be a critical factor for lower rate of benefit to the federal employees.

From the background of Mr Kissinger it may be apprehended that the recommendations of the commission may further damage the interest of Muslims in US in particular and Muslim states in general. If this happens the possibility of a third world war or at the least global terrorism will certainly grow. There may be more incidents as happened in Bali or Kenya.

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