

Confluence of Volga-Yamuna at Delhi

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

President Vladimir Putin's visit to India on 3-5 December took place within the established practice of holding annual meetings at the summit level. The two countries signed several documents during the visit. These were (a) Delhi Declaration on further consolidation of Strategic Partnership; (b) Joint Declaration on strengthening and enhancing economic, scientific and technological cooperation; (c) MOU on combating terrorism; (d) Protocol on use and protection of intellectual property rights; (e) MOU on cooperation in the field of telecommunication; and, (f) Protocol between Karnataka and the Russian Samara Region Administration on trade, economic and cultural cooperation.

Delhi Declaration elevated the existing strategic partnership to a qualitatively higher level in bilateral and multilateral fields. As large multi-ethnic and pluralistic states, Russia and India "are convinced of our special responsibility to combat and bring to an end challenges posed to our unique attributes, including our territorial integrity by forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism". Both countries agreed upon the need to strengthen the centrality of the UN in promoting international security in a multipolar world. India and Russia reaffirmed the necessity of UNSC reforms "reflective of contemporary geopolitical and economic realities and rendering them more representative of the interests of the vast majority of the UN members". In this context, Russia reaffirmed its support to the Indian candidature for Permanent Membership of the UNSC. Delhi Declaration made no mention of UNSC resolution 1441 on Iraq and called for continued political and diplomatic efforts to resolve the problem. Apparently this is indicative of the two countries' opposition to military intervention in Iraq without first exhausting all avenues. Understandably terrorism

received primary attention in the Delhi Declaration as both countries "have been victims of terrorism, and as democratic and open societies have been vulnerable to the threats posed by globalization of terror". They strongly condemned "those who support terrorism or finance, train, harbour or support terrorists. States that abet or shelter terrorists are as guilty of acts of terrorism as their perpetrators". This was an obvious reference to cross-border terrorism from Pakistan into Kashmir and Pakistan Intelligence Agency's assistance to

UN ambassador speaking on the renewed Al-Qaida and Taleban efforts to destabilize the Hamid Karzai government made an oblique reference to Pakistan and informed the UN that "these elements (al-Qaida/Talebans) continue to receive moral and material support from their erstwhile mentors across the border". That Pakistan would turn a deaf ear to these words is stating the obvious. What the international community has universally condemned as terrorism is regarded by Pakistan as "freedom struggle". The league

difficult proposition. In December 1971 Pakistan declared war on India and India immediately recognised Bangladesh as an independent country. UNSC proved powerless. China and US gave strong support to Pakistani demands for an immediate ceasefire, an approach vetoed five separate times by the Soviet Union. Albeit President Vaclav Havel described the communist regime as a "contaminated moral environment...armed with arrogant and intolerant ideology" (Prague 01.01.1990). But the present dis-

Russian diplomats on charge of spying, tension over NATO expansion, and withdrawal from ABM Treaty were few examples. Putin, however, was among the first to denounce the tragic terrorist attacks of Nine-Eleven. He also did not object to temporary US presence in Central Asian Republics - a region that had been a part of long standing Russian sphere of influence. Without the use of these former Soviet air bases the expulsion of the Taliban from Afghanistan would have been a difficult proposition for the US administration.

Japanese and about one hundred thousands US soldiers serving in this region. Diabolism of such total disregard of human lives, if one were to try to comprehend the incomprehensible, could be an Indian assessment of the personality of President Musharraf as a "risk taker" regardless of the consequences, and through the "confession" of a North Korean official to an US emissary that the North must have the nuclear weapon at any cost. Since President Bush (and the majority of the Americans) is unwilling to wait "for the final proof - the smoking gun -- that will come in the form of a mushroom cloud", the question remains as to how to deal with such truant states. Should they be declared as "rogue/terrorist" states with attendant follow-up actions? Or should their delinquency be overlooked because one or more of them are momentarily serving the interests of the rich and the mighty? Diana Allin of London International Institute for Strategic Studies (NATO Review-Debating Intervention-current issue winter 2002) feels "If there is a problem with US unilateralism, it is not so much that US policy is over-militaristic as that it is insufficiently ambitious". She adds that since marriage between US forcefulness and European humanitarianism consummated in Kosovo intervention is unlikely to meet the challenges of Al-Qaida and failed states; the wealthy and democratic states should fight on two fronts militarily and "moral equivalent of war" e.g. Marshall Plan. Given the multi-polarity of the world and global allegiance to the United Nations it is doubtful how many converts such an approach would attract. But there is no doubt that the international community faced with this agenda having the complexity of Rubik's Cube will have to come to grips and find an equitable solution.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a retired Secretary of Bangladesh government and former ambassador.

Thai-Bangla relations A new era heralded

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's just-concluded three-day visit to Thailand had a dramatic start, indeed. In came Thai Prime Minister Dr Thaksin Shinawatra on a special Thai Airways flight to inaugurate the airliner's Chittagong-Chiang Mai service and then, the ceremonial over, took his Bangladesh counterpart on board on the way back. The gesture was unprecedented and, as it has turned out, marked the beginning of "a new era of economic cooperation" between Bangladesh and Thailand. Friday's talks in Chiang Mai between Dhaka and Bangkok could not only have far-reaching implications for the bilateral relations of the two countries but might well have also signalled the start of bridging South and Southeast Asia by way of opening a new vista for economic cooperation. Prime Minister Khaleda's three-day visit to Thailand has certainly pushed forward what began with Dr Thaksin's visit to Bangladesh earlier this year. Whether it will culminate in a greater regional cooperation between South and Southeast Asia remains to be seen. At this point, what needs a closer look is the benefit the talks have yielded to Bangladesh.

Dr Thaksin's declaration of tariff reduction for 128 items under six categories, including duty-free access to jute and jute products, leather and leather products, ceramics and pharmaceutical products, and five per cent duty on frozen food and agro-based goods, should rejuvenate the industrial sector. Put together with the prospect of a surge in annual trade, which currently stands at 2.6 billion US dollars, Bangladesh can expect a positive change in the foreign direct investment scenario. What we need to do at this juncture is make sure our industries, especially in the jute, leather, ceramic and pharmaceutical sectors, are equipped, in terms of infrastructure and logistics, so as to cope with the increase in demand the tariff reduction will trigger off. There should immediately be an inter-ministerial follow-up meeting to devise ways and means to reap maximum benefit of the change in bilateral tariff regime.

The foreign secretary has claimed Prime Minister Khaleda's visit to be "a great diplomatic achievement" in the making of which her Thai counterpart Dr Thaksin played a highly laudable role. However, such a great diplomatic achievement would count for very little, if it were not followed up with objective analysis of our industrial capacity and chalking out of a course of action to increase it. Greater trade access calls for higher productivity.

We can benefit immensely from Thai expertise in agro-based industries; their scientific method of fruit cultivation in particular is what we can learn a lot from.

Reuters' questionable story

Was it a distortion or a fabrication?

BANGLADESH was stunned by a Reuters story in which the home minister was quoted as having said that the Mymensingh blasts could have been the work of Osama-bin-Laden's Al-Qaida network... This ran counter to Bangladesh's position that no terrorist networks exist on its soil.

For obvious reasons, the story was picked up by the newspapers all over the world, leading some of them to conclude that the blasts were a sequel to the Bali incident and the like. Bangladesh's image was the sad casualty of the wide coverage of the report.

Later, the home minister cried himself hoarse to make others, including his cabinet colleagues, understand that he had never uttered anything like that, but still could not avoid being criticised by his colleagues. Such was the credibility of Reuters. Now it has transpired that so far the news agency has been unable to produce any evidence to back the story.

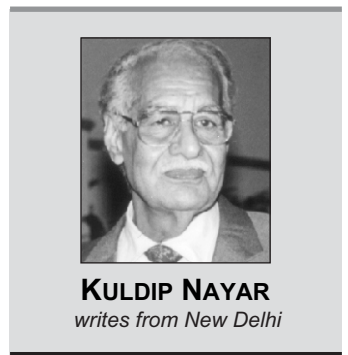
The plot thickens when we consider that the telephone number given by Reuters, as the one over which its stringer talked to the home minister, has been found to be the number of a local journalist. So how did the Reuters story originate? And whom did the Reuters stringer speak to? Finally, what steps did the Reuters take to check and crosscheck the authenticity of the comments, which any journalist worth the name would have found to be a potential bombshell?

So we are forced to ask whether it was a case of sloppy journalism or fiction writing. More pertinently, what is Reuters going to do about it now? We believe a mere withdrawal is hardly enough to make amends for the damage done to our country.

Bangladesh may not matter to Reuters, but professionalism and journalistic ethics, we believe, do. Over more than a century, Reuters has built an enviable and laudable reputation about the credibility and authenticity of its reports. Reuters has earned this reputation through a relentless pursuit of the highest standard of journalism. It is that pursuit that has given the Reuters the credibility that it enjoys today. But the unsubstantiated (as yet) story on Bangladesh has hit at that credibility. The only way for Reuters to limit the damage that it has done to itself is to give a clear picture of what had happened and apologise to its subscribers if it was on the wrong. We expect such a statement at the earliest from the Reuters regional chief who is now in Dhaka probing the incident. This is what professionalism and journalistic ethics demand. As advocates of free press and as a proud independent newspaper we also demand this of Reuters.

We also protest the arrest of the Reuters stringer. We believe Reuters may have been on the wrong, but the treatment meted out to the journalist is equally wrong. And we find the forcible confinement of his family members highly condemnable.

Tolerance dips in South Asia



KULDEEP NAYAR writes from New Delhi

Benazir Bhutto was in the wilderness and living at Karachi when she convened a meeting of opposition leaders from South East Asian countries, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Her purpose was not so much to enhance her own stock as to get recognition for the opposition's role and its point of view. She also wanted the opposition leaders to exert pressure on their governments so that the latter would not adopt the posture of confrontation against their neighbours.

This did not work. The parties in power had their own agenda. In fact, the scenario has deteriorated since. Ruling combinations have come to believe that they must stay in power by hook or by crook. They are oblivious to the point of view of different parties in their own country, much less that of neighbours.

Take Bangladesh first. Its opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the country's founder, is being accused of every sin, even sedition, for her speeches at Brussels and Delhi. She said that the government at Dhaka was doing little to suppress fundamen-

talists or terrorists. This had made the minorities feel still more insecure.

The demand for Hasina's trial for 'defaming' Bangladesh is not surprising. She has also been pilloried by people who were opposed to the liberation struggle, 31 years old this month. The muddied waters of Bangladesh are getting muddier day by day.

The position in Sri Lanka is different. The President and the Prime Minister are two parallel authorities. They do not hit it off. What was once the opposition point

of view has provided the breakthrough in the 19-year-old Colombo-LTTE war. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who won on the plank of bringing peace to his country, is happy over a federal structure emerging. But President Chandrika Kumaratunga is not, although she once led the peace lobby. There have been reports that she, after getting new powers under the constitution, may dismiss the Prime Minister.

That LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has renounced the demand for independence and accepted self-rule under Colombo

is a welcome development. But I am intrigued by New Delhi's attitude. First, it refused to be present at Oslo despite requests by all the parties, including Norway which brokered the settlement. Now Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal has said that Colombo must be certain that the LTTE has given up its demand for a separate homeland. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has hailed the settlement. He must have satisfied himself.

We seem to be throwing a spanner in the works. Do we hate the king cannot be two opinions on the kingship that has to conform to the demands of democracy. The King must set an early date for elections. It is none of his business to forge a consensus among political parties to resolve problems before the country. This is the job of the elected members. The sooner Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur, the King's nominee, is replaced by parliament, the better it would be for the country. New Delhi should not influence events one way or the other. Nowhere has the opposition

Pakistan, is always in the way. It has never gone back to the barracks since the take over by General Ayub in October 1958. Even Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's interregnum was not a democratic stint. Perhaps the National Security Council, the apex ruling body that Musharraf has constituted, is an appropriate arrangement for the time being. It looks as if Pakistan, like Turkey, has to live with the military for a long time.

Whether India wants to have any relationship with Pakistan as long as the military is the real ruler is no

military revels in such a situation. People to people contact is the only silver lining in the dark clouds of Indo-Pak relations.

NGOs and people outside the government may some day help the two sides to exchange ideas, commodities and cricket and hockey teams. This may generate goodwill that can break the logjam. Official level talks have led us nowhere.

When one top Hurriyat leader commends regional autonomy within Sri Lanka, it is clear that the Kashmir solution on those lines is a possibility. But the most important thing is a dialogue between the people of India and Pakistan. The governments should be kept into the picture but not take over the talks till the ground has been prepared. In the process there may be a fillip in Pakistan to the democratic forces.

At present, India is acting the Big Brother to its neighbours. Its size overawes them. It has to introspect its policies. Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha did well to start his stint with visits to countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. But then there was no follow-up. There have been such spurts in the past with no long-term strategy. Something is lacking somewhere because "we are ugly Indians" practically throughout South East Asia.

Maybe, the opposition leaders of the region should meet once again, this time to consider how to live in all accommodative spirit. India's opposition leader Sonia Gandhi should take the initiative.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

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.

Notice
The readers are requested to send their comments on the series of bomb blasts in Bangladesh starting from the Udichi meet at Jessore, Ramna Batamul to the recent Mymensingh Cinema Hall incident and other similar incidents.

The readers may focus on the efforts of the authorities to bring the culprits to justice, the accusation and counter accusation from amongst the political parties regarding the incidents and the consequent effect on the general people about the carnage.
--Editor

its citizens, rich or poor. To that end, cooperation with all Asian countries to further trade and commerce, particularly China and the ASEAN bloc is highly desirable. Gone are the days of political invasion when nations would invade to grab each other's land. Economic cooperation is the name of the game now. In present day global scenario, alliances are formed and unity forged amongst nations through economic cooperation. Bangladesh should secure a strong foothold on this economic bandwagon and strive for its fair share of global might and power. Let's not forget Belgium and Japan - both countries about the size of Bangladesh, but with muscle power comparable to a mini superpower. Why should Bangladesh be any different?
AA, California, USA

"DV or no DV"

This is in response to Mr. Sani's letter "DV or no DV" (December 9). DV visa is usually the only way for poor Bangladeshis to gain legal entry in the United States, but there

are requirements that must be met.

- 1) He/she must be a native of Bangladesh.
- 2) He/she must have a minimum 12 years of primary and secondary education. For Bangladeshis, they have to pass at least 12th class. If he/she does not have the education, he/she must have at least two years work experience in an occupation that requires minimum of two years training, as mandated by the U.S. Department of Labor.
- 3) He/she must also pass a security check.

If one of these criteria is not met, a DV visa will not be issued. Does Mr. Sani know if his relatives failed to meet any of these criteria?

Karim Abdullah
New York, USA

Detained local journalists

I would like to draw your attention to the growing concern about the fate of the local journalists Saleem Samad and Pricilla Raj. They were arrested and charged of assisting

the Channel 4 journalists Zaiba Naz Malik and Leopoldo Bruno Sorrentino. It is disheartening to learn that following the release of the foreign journalists, Saleem Samad and Pricilla Raj still remain behind the bars.

As it has turned out, the result of Zaiba Naz Malik and Leopoldo Bruno Sorrentino's mission refutes every suspicion of al-Qaeda links in Bangladesh. The question is what role did the local journalists play in this? The answer is obvious. They did a good job by helping and guiding them. The result was the foreign journalists found "no evidence" of al-Qaeda and Taliban activities and saw "evidence of communal harmony". Since there is no 'sedition' charge against the main offenders, how can those who helped them be guilty of sedition?

It will be a positive move on the part of the Bangladeshi authorities to release Mr Samad and Ms Raj immediately. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.
Foday Kangbai
Washington DC, USA



Encroachment goes on unabated

Only a few months ago the lakeside of road no 14, Dhanmondi R/A was cleared from all illegal occupation. Now PDB who illegally grabbed the lake side earlier are back again to reoccupy the same land and also to

double their aggression, they are even filling earth to reclaim land from the lake. An illegal multi-storied construction work is going on in this illegally occupied land. It was mentioned PWD, WASA, PDB etc have already occupied large tracts of lake side land and are increasing their occupation by taking land from

the lake side.

These departments have their maintenance office on these illegally occupied lands. They needed on katha each for their offices, but they have occupied more than a bigha each. Officers and staff and even some outsiders who have no connection with the maintenance work of the area live here in the illegally built quarters, barracks and slums. None got proper allotment, building plans are approved from Rajuk. There is even a big shop in their compound which is creating all sorts of nuisance. These corrupt and inefficient departments are expected to be abolished or privatised in course of time, but the damage they have already inflicted may never be repaired.

It is unfortunate that there is no body to see these things and do something to stop these damaging blows to the environment of the area. We hope something is done soon to protect Dhanmondi Lake and the lakeside.

MAR, Dhanmondi, Dhaka