

Progress not break-through

A significant boost in bilateral relations but major issues remain unresolved

THE fact that the Indo-Bangla Joint Economic Commission meet was held after a time-lag of eight years is itself a positive development. It has helped clear the air of confusion emanating from political apathy and policy indecision marking their relationship so far. The next JEC talks are scheduled for mid-October. The secretary-level standing committee stands activated. In other words, one of the major components of the bilateral relationship, namely, the economic cooperation agenda, is poised to be addressed now through the JEC, a mechanism originally devised for continuing consultation between New Delhi and Dhaka.

Hopefully, the other major segment of the relationship having to do with concerns centring on common rivers would receive early attention by staging the long overdue Joint Rivers Commission meeting.

When such an important institutional meet like the JEC one took place in Dhaka after a long lapse of time, the aspiration level was naturally high. On the other hand, the load of issues was very heavy, too. Under the circumstances, no magical results could be expected from the just-concluded JEC meet. Even so, what has been achieved is a breakthrough in that a genuine bilateral effort has got underway to take the relationship forward from a stagnating state it seemed mired in.

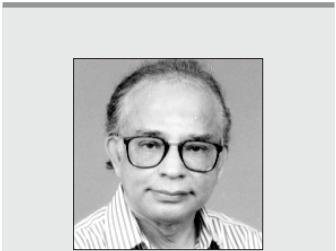
The joint agreed minutes signed by Indian External Minister Yashwant Sinha and Bangladesh Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan envisages discussion on free trade agreement (FTA) in the mid-October JEC meeting to be held in New Delhi. Dhaka's demand for free access to its 180 products will be reviewed at that time. Bangladesh's concern over non-tariff and para-tariff barriers put by India will be taken up in mid-August supposedly as a prelude to the FTA consideration in October. As a precursor to the signing of the FTA, a bilateral investment protection agreement will be signed soon. Towards invigoration of trade, both sides have agreed to develop land customs centres at the border together with revamping of the banking links. The commitments towards forging and modernising telecommunication and information technology links between Delhi and Dhaka are welcomed.

There is a perception that Bangladesh's demand for zero-tariff market access to India was linked to India gaining transit and transshipment rights to its north-eastern states. The latter is a politically sensitive issue for Bangladesh and yet in the words of Morshed Khan, "The point was raised and we are discussing it; we have not shied away from it." Sinha said ... "We would discuss it further". The gas export issue remained unspoken. No agreement could be reached on India's proposal for commissioning passenger train service between Sealdah of Kolkata and Jamuna bridge in Sirajganj. But a bus service between Dhaka and Agartala will start in the first week of August, being the second route on the offing after the Dhaka-Kolkata service operating since April, 1999.

There is manifestly a new bilateral thrust towards facing up to facts, demands and challenges in the relationship without being ostrich-like or polemical about them. This is a sign of maturity the two countries should try to build up on, albeit within the framework of their enlightened national interests. Sometimes perception is as important as reality and we get a feel of it from what Morshed Khan and Yashwant Sinha had to say to pressmen emerging from the JEC meeting. Khan said, "We achieved unanimity of approach by viewing the issues from the same lens." Said Sinha, "We made very substantial progress and will continue to remain engaged in resolving other issues between us."

True, the JEC meeting in Dhaka has created an ambience for speeding things up from the glacial pace at which the primary issue of trade deficit against Bangladesh was being addressed by India. But one would have expected New Delhi to put in place some confidence-building measures for Bangladesh by way of removing non-tariff barriers against her exports and living up to her earlier commitment to accord duty-free access to 25 categories of goods from Bangladesh. October is some way off; India could still do something about it.

Requiem for the dead



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

FACTS are stranger than fiction and here is such a case. Standing before a tea-stall, he saw the tragedy of the capsized launch unfold on TV. He was overwhelmed with shock and horror by what he saw and heard. Moved by the scenes on river Maghna he trudged all the way from his home in Chandina to Chandpur to see the salvage work for the survivors and retrieval of deadbodies. At one point he could bear the agony no more and jumped into the river to commit suicide. He was rescued by a boatman whose boat was passing by. Jamaluddin, a 35 year agricultural labourer, had no relation travelling in the ill-fated launch that went down in the confluence of rivers near Chandpur. To judge by the interview he gave to news reporters, he does not appear to be a mentally deranged person. But being sensitive he became one, at least temporarily, when he saw the human dimension of the tragedy. Thereby hangs an object lesson for others, many.

Several hundreds of people, who were healthy and very much active in life, suddenly went to their watery grave. One more scene in the endless saga of tragic deaths in launch disasters was enacted in Meghna. Like the accident, the hapless victims became mere statistics overnight. But even as statistics, determination of the number of dead has bred confusion and uncertainty. According to a survivor, the ill-fated launch was carrying about 750 passengers as against the permissible number of 295 for night journeys. Besides, it was loaded with tons of cargoes, though carrying of cargoes in passenger launch is prohibited.

The launch capsized, according to preliminary enquiry, is both due to overloading of passengers and cargoes and the careless navigation into the treacherous spot where rivers converge with ferocious currents. From the ill-fated launch, that was devoured by a strong whirlpool, only 220 passengers could swim to safety. That leaves more than 500 dead or missing. Casualties in any accident that number in hundreds evoke shock, horror and grief. It was, therefore, natural for print media to give prominence to the news of

mourn. When human lives are lost on such a large scale there is usually coverage in foreign media and condolences from foreign countries. The BBC gave coverage to the launch disaster in Chandpur prominently. Condolences were received from abroad. But it will be difficult to say that the dead has been mourned in a befitting way by the nation itself.

Accidents like the recent launch disaster near Chandpur have taken place before, at various times. The reactions made were more or less

dear ones of those drowned. There has never been a national mourning in a formal sense to remember the dead and pray for their soul's eternal rest. What purpose would such a national mourning serve? One may ask. For one, it would convey to the relations of the dead and missing that they are not alone in their grief and loss. Collective mourning can provide sympathy and solace to lessen the burden of sorrow. A national mourning can declare unequivocally that the nation is united and cares for every member, whatever his or her posi-

tion, becomes a collective expiation.

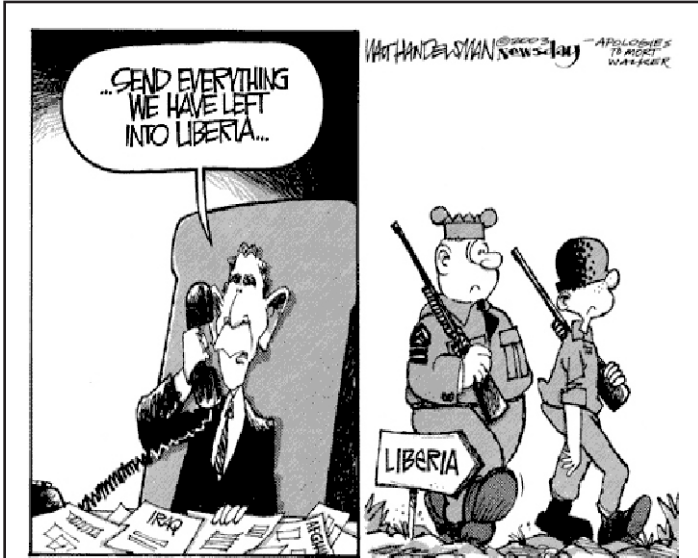
Even when casualties in disasters are in hundreds we as a nation do not seem to be moved sufficiently to mourn the dead with due solemnity and shock. There are hardly any condolence meeting or processions of civil society wearing black badges and carrying black banners. It is a great puzzle that these normal public posturing resorted to every so often for sundry causes are not availed of to express grief and to mourn the dead collectively. How can this

the latest gourmet restaurant in Gulshan. In private universities children of the rich display their designer dress to impress class fellows. People who use Lexus Suvs may not even know the name of Chandpur. A few sensitive souls huddling in staff meeting in newspaper offices is not the microcosm of the macrocosm. Not to speak of being the majority, they do not even constitute the significant minority.

National mourning is required to express grief and pay respect to the dead. This has to be dictated by conscience and based on a shared sense of loss over the death of the victims. A nation should be united in times of shock, horror and grief. This is necessary not only to pay respect to the dead and share the sorrow of their near and dear ones. It is also required to strengthen the resolve to prevent similar accident from taking place in future. Out of such national mourning will come demand for changes in law, regulatory system, enforcement of rules, compensation to the relation of the dead. Left to bureaucracy, enquiry will be held in the routine manner and the report, as usual, will be sent to cold storage. The civil society has to ensure that this is substituted by really meaningful implementation of decisions, both to punish offenders and for taking preventive measures. So far, civil society has failed to rise to the occasion. It must not fail in future or even now.

After the tragic deaths of hundreds in the launch disaster in Chandpur only one man, who is not related to any of the dead or missing passengers, gave public expression to his mourning. Jalaluddin, the day labourer from Chandina, saved the nation from embarrassment and shame. Contrary to speculation, he is very much a sane man. He became mentally deranged, temporarily, by the impact of the tragedy. Perhaps his reaction was melodramatic and foolhardy, too. But he alone tried to redeem the role of the nation in such a tragic moment. He should make the rest of us rethink.

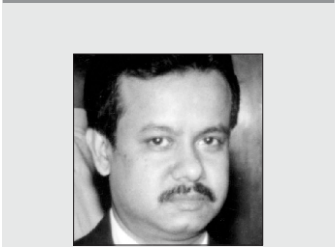
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lapse be explained? Can it be that the regularity with which these accidents occur has blunted the impact of shock and made them appear banal? Or is the blase attitude due to the fact that their deaths are not seen as price paid for any great cause? Most probably the apathy is due to fact that the people who die in such accidents are ordinary people, anonymous and unknown. But if it is accepted that they are part of the nation, that admission alone calls for national mourning. If they died without any cause, that meaninglessness also is a matter of grief.

A young journalist, obviously with a very sensitive mind, wrote in a weekly after the disaster: "to some (and they number many among us some would go so far as to call them majority) those were the first questions that came to mind (*about the accident*) as news of M V Nasrin-1 sinking at Chandpur broke. In our living rooms, our office meetings, our private university canteen and sitting cushy in our Lexus Suvs, some of us thought of all these whys." Fine sentiment, but very fanciful. "In our living rooms" discussion don't centre around a launch capsized in Chandpur but perhaps about holidaying abroad. In "our" parties, guests talk about

The twins



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LALEH and Ladan Bijani, daughters of Dodollah Bijani of Lohrasb in Firouzabad, Iran, died in Singapore after doctors pried apart tightly packed brain tissues and blood vessels to separate their fused skulls. A team of 28 specialists and 100 assistants conducted the surgery for two days at Singapore's Raffle Hospital, when the twins died 90 minutes apart from a severe loss of blood. They died as if a cluster was ruined after careless people tried to break it apart.

The Bijani sisters were 29 at the time of their death, and, for so long as they lived, they may have lived one life in two bodies or two lives in each of them. Their last wish was to come apart and see each other face to face, not in the mirror. It was a simple wish, something we do naturally. We sit face to face, back to back and side by side. We have the flexibility, our pliable bodies giving us the freedom to take any position we want. Laleh and Ladan were different from us because they didn't have that flexibility. They grew up like the two halves of a book, which couldn't be closed because it was jammed in the spine.

The conjoined twins often show a common sense of destiny, their separated souls trapped in the psychosomatic confluence of joined bodies. They are like two pipes connected to the same sink-hole; when life drains out of one, it drains out of the other as well. Mary and Eliza Chulhurst, also known as the Biddenden Maids were born in 1100, and lived for 34 years in Biddenden, County of Kent, England. The sisters were joined at the buttocks and lower backs. After the death of one sister, doctors hoped to save the life of the other by sepa-

But the Siamese brothers had lived to be sixty-three, and they were married to two sisters, fathering twenty-one children.

We know of Millie-Christine, the two-headed nightgale in the 19th century USA. They retired from show business and moved into a house with their parents and their fourteen brothers and sisters. On October 12, 1912, just a week after their sixty-first birthday, Millie died of tuberculosis. Christine died within next seventeen hours.

Laleh and Ladan Bijani came

convinced that conjoined twins resulted from the blending of two initially independent twin embryos or from the fertilization of one egg by two sperms.

But beyond science and superstition, the Persian twins have set their own record. They didn't end up in circus or freak shows, but studied to become lawyers. They sustained normal and healthy aspirations of life, and only wished to be separated to signify their union. They joined heads in true sense of the words, and agreed to undergo the surgery, which clearly

CROSS TALK

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rating them surgically. The surviving twin refused, declaring, "As we came together, we will go together." She died several hours later.

Similar thing happened to the celebrated Siamese twins Chang and Eng. Eng woke up one night with a strange sensation to find that his brother Chang, who clung to his body, had died, and within hours Eng also passed away. Initially it was determined that Chang had died of a cerebral clot, but it was unclear why Eng had died. Some physicians suggested that he died of fright. Today, it is thought that Eng bled to death, as the blood pooled in his dead brother's body.

together and went together. They were like two branches of the same tree, two streams of the same river, two drafts of a single breeze, two fruits from a single stem and one soul with two thoughts. They were born a double deal; one offered in the bargain for another. They were freaks, one of the many wonders of God, perhaps His anger, or a devil's influence.

In the sixteenth century, the French surgeon Ambroise Pare attributed conjoined twins to several types of constriction, including too tight a womb, tight clothes, and the manner in which a woman sat while pregnant. Two centuries later the scientists were

risked their lives.

If you put aside predestination for a while, Laleh and Ladan would have been alive today if they hadn't gone through that surgery in Singapore. They would have still walked around on four legs with four arms and two faces. They would have still gone on as a double entendre in human flesh. They would have still struggled to take shower, change clothes and look around.

Violet and Daisy Hilton were conjoined twins from North Carolina, who died of complication of influenza. These twin sisters had acted in a movie called *Chained for Life*, a lurid tale in which one sister

forged their bodies into a stronghold of afflictions. They had no privacy from each other. They could not lie down on their sides without being stacked upon each other. One couldn't take a nap, if the other wanted to read. One couldn't be sad, if the other wanted to smile. One couldn't lie down, if the other wanted to stand.

It comes only as a rude contradiction that they are now separated in death as they were joined in life. Throughout history, conjoined twins have appeared in myths and legends. The Greek and Roman god Janus had two faces, one young, one old, and Centaur was a combination of horse and man. A com-

mon heraldic symbol, the Double-Headed Eagle, is common throughout the Central Europe.

We don't know if the Persian sisters symbolized anything. What we saw is their sufferings, the agonies of two separate souls chained to their fused bodies. They were born and then they grew up, cherishing all through their wretched existence the hope to be severed someday by the stroke of a surgeon's knife. They must have talked about it between them, whenever the Persian night dropped like a mysterious shroud and left just two of them side by side.

We never knew Laleh and Ladan Bijani, but we have seen them on television and heard their voice. For the few weeks that they came to the limelight, we have watched them during the run up to the surgery. They talked, smiled, posed for the camera and looked confident. One time they themselves set up the camera on a raised spot and then rushed under a tree just on time before the shutter went down. They must have had a sense of destiny and were in a hurry to etch their memories onto the world before it erased them.

Perhaps that is what they symbolized, if anything. Every life is a conjoined twin: one is permanent and one is transitory. We talk, smile and pose for the camera, denying all the time that the permanent is fused with the transitory. Laleh and Ladan symbolized in flesh, what we must adopt in faith.

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OPINION

Ammo haul and politics of stunt?

AH DEWAN

IT is anybody's taking-aback to read the lead news (DS Jun 29) of a massive amount of ammunition hauled at Bogra that made a long safe journey reportedly from Chittagong. There were two more caches followed by, one in a pond and another in a drain in Jagarpara also of Bogra. BNP, like it did following the bomb-blast in Mymensingh cinema halls that killed scores of people in a point-blank accusation minced no matters to raise its fingers towards the AL. It is unfortunate that before a near-conclusive clue was reached, the Prime Minister in her speech in the parliament tagged AL, the only secular political plank in Bangladesh as al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist, and the Home Minister sensed AL plot for anarchy. Whereas Jamaat and JP men were also held in Bogra in connection

with the haul (DS Jun 30). The police are all out to unveil who are the big wigs involved behind smuggling in of these big ever ammos consignment. The nation expects them to do their duty without biding of the government though it is beyond their guts. BNP is patently trying to cash in on this haul to prove the remarks the Prime Minister made before the gathering in Islampur (Dhaka) that AL is out to create anarchy in the country and that her government would give no more concessions.

We were flabbergasted to learn of BNP having given any concession to its opponent Awami League. Who knew not that since the Alliance government is in power it has been ferociously after the AL. The police like hounds have been on actions even on the peaceful procession of AL either in the streets or around the precincts of its central office or at the Russel

Square. Leaders like Matia Chowdhury and Mohd. Nasim, let alone hundred others, were mercilessly clubbed. And even the women activists in one of the recent protests were swooped upon and the police actions were most unseemly and condemnable though peaceful protest against the misdeeds and misrules of the government is the democratic right of the people. Government seems to want us go to slumber and rule us according to its whims. So was there gush of arrests and persecution inflicted on the columnist, journalists and writers who made common cause with AL.

A democratically elected government has already tarnished its image by putting up a dictatorial posture under the garb of democracy. So the PM could launch Operation Clean Heart (OCH) with armed forces men without even consulting her cabinet and with-

drew them just before the Union Parishad elections despite Chief Election Commissioner's appeal for their stay until elections were over. This was just to let BNP activists and cadres to have a freehand in the election fields and the nation witnessed their open interference. The OCH that was acclaimed by people at the outset also earned bad name for custodial death of at least 45 people allegedly due to torture. They died before they could be proved guilty in the court of justice. Hundreds others were tortured and crippled for life. But the alleged killers were indemnified in deliberate violation of the constitution and convention of human rights.

After the OCH we are beholding terrorism of ghastly sorts rebounding in full force and fury. Killing followed and still follows in spate. The recent killings of AL leader Mumtaz of Natore and BCL Dhaka

North leader Soheli allegedly at the hands of BNP cadres/activists have sent shiver down the spine of many leaders of the opposition camp and scaregripped them. Two Dhaka City JCD and Jubo Dal leaders also fell to the terrorist's bullets. The gory tales of decimation and liquidation of people on the front and back page of the national dailies continue unabated to the consternation of readers.

When some 50 thousand charge-sheeted offenders, many of whom are believed to be hardcore criminals, could get scot free allegedly by reason of their being affiliated with the BNP and its Alliances how could one expect of a situation better than the above? How rule of law is to follow under such warped politically motivated decision of the government and its Home Ministry? Few recent newspaper scoops are worth repeating. The case of Rajshahi Jamaat leader

Dr. Mozammel Huq, accused of bomb-blast in his house when the bomb was being made which killed two persons was withdrawn when the police investigation was in process. During BNP's Council meeting in Rangpur one BNP activist opened fire from his revolver (DS Jun 29) in presence of leader Gayeshar Roy. In Rajshahi BNP cadres ransacked one of their leader's house with showdown of arms (DS Jun 29). This is perhaps tip of the iceberg. Illegal arms in the hands of BNP activists abound and their use in bullying the opponents, or extorting or threatening to wrest tenders and even in eliminating the opponents attribute to a great deal to creating the present deteriorating law and order situation. Sony's (of BUET) meeting an untimely end was the sequel to a firing between the activists of two factions of JCD vying for exacting a tender bid. During the police attack on the students of

Shamsunnahar Hall at dead of night the JCD leaders were reportedly in possession of illegal arms. Where all these arms come from? Why these illegal arm-holders remain unscathed and undogged?

When this is the picture, only accusing of AL for the present haul and harping the same string of blame on it for creating unrest while giving leverages to its (BNP's) own men will cut no ice as the people now are a little more conscious and all eyes are focused to what the national dailies tell us daily about the government's lapses, about sweeping the problems under the carpet, and about its unctuous claim of good governance. When government polices main organs of services namely the police and even allegedly the judiciary, it fosters hidden purpose to serve, and fairplay and for that matter good governance become a far cry. The AL too was

not above that blame. But BNP alliance government is doing that rather with a vengeance. Making politics vicious by political vilification has become the order of the day. Democracy upholds the right to criticism and government must have guts to bear with that for that would help it rectify its follies and frailties. Opposition also holds support of the great bulk of the people who are to be equally treated. Hence the need for the opposition to be reckoned with. Opposition bugbear and prejudice is to be shaken off. For without opposition you cannot hold democracy functioning and the country's image saved. And we should expect both the people in position and opposition to shun vilification and counter vilification. However the onus rests with the government, first.

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