

Grounds for serious trade negotiations exist

A vibrant Bangladesh economy is to the long term interest of the whole region, especially India

THE foreign minister-level Indo-Bangla Joint Economic Commission (JEC) meeting held in Dhaka on July 14-16 after a time-lag of six years took an important decision: both countries agreed to initiate free trade negotiations in mid-October in New Delhi. Closely on the heels, Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury at a press briefing with members of the Overseas Correspondents Association of Bangladesh (OCAB) has made some relevant points about the upcoming FTA talks.

The commerce minister has used some expressive phrases like resolving 'trade disputes' with India, reaping 'early harvests', striking 'square deal with New Delhi in bilateral trade' as the set of 'right conditions' that needed to be fulfilled before the FTA negotiations can begin along meaningful lines. All these expressions indicate our eagerness as well as the issues that we need to address before FTA actually comes into being. The other way of putting it would be: are we going through a teething time before something solid happened in the bilateral trade paradigm between India and Bangladesh?

Minister Khosru has laid down four pre-requisites to the FTA talks: obtaining special and differential treatment to Bangladesh as per the WTO charter; consideration for comparative development stages of the two countries; resolution of problems pertaining to tariff, non-tariff and para-tariff barriers under one package; and assurance for equitable share of trade by reducing the huge trade gap of one billion dollar. The minister lays emphasis on the WTO charter because it has called upon stronger economies to offer special trade terms to weaker economies for the next five to ten years. India has yet to live up to that expectation.

Basically, there have been a carry-over of expectations as far as Bangladesh is concerned. The Indian pledge to accord duty- and quota-free access to 25 categories of Bangladesh products has drawn a blank. On the back of such a debacle, Bangladesh has given her a fresh list of 118 items for free access to Indian markets. The commerce minister has made a test-case of 1,00,000 tonnes of Bangladesh cement which is yet to be given entry.

We think Minister Khosru Mahmud has made some pertinent points, the validity of which has only been reinforced by an unabated trade imbalance that is heavily tilted towards India.

India's perception appears to be that rather than dealing with the items in a piece-meal fashion, let there be comprehensive lists of goods exchanged between the two sides so as to determine the relative weightage to be given to the various items. And there should be a package deal in the shape of free trade agreement (FTA).

So, the moot points are all on the table and the ground is well-prepared for serious negotiations to ensue between Bangladesh and India. The FTA with Sri Lanka could be replicated with special advantages accorded to Bangladesh.

A new generation of Bangladeshi businessmen has grown alive to the need for dealing with their Indian counterparts for a better slice of market access to India. They can't be blind-folded to the huge potential business that the vast and diverse Indian market holds out to them in their immediate vicinity. The fabric shipment from India upon which our RMG sector is so critically dependent takes only 10 days while that from other suppliers would have taken a month or so. The prospect of receiving three consignments in one month is quite an advantage. The younger generation of Bangladeshi businessmen could veer away from the distant trade centres if the markets nearer home provided them with the right openings and incentives.

The volume of trade transacted between India and Bangladesh is huge and the potential is even greater; only that it is one-sided. A vibrant Bangladesh economy with a strong and sustainable growth trend will only be in India's self-interest. This India does not seem to understand in all its economic, social and political ramifications.

So, the upcoming FTA talks should address the concerns of both countries with special efforts made by India to accord differential treatment to Bangladesh.

The best of results can only accrue from trade negotiations if these are carried out without the encumbrances of non-trade issues.

The war on terrorism and the western media

RON CEPESIUK

IT wasn't too long after the end of the Cold War that a new force we in the media call "terrorism" began to assert itself in the international arena. The battle against terrorism didn't look like it would compare in scope and impact to the Cold War. Then the momentous events of September 11, 2001 happened and our world has not been the same since. The media images of those events are still vivid. Hijackers seized four passenger aircraft in the air and guided two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. The horrible sight of the Towers crashing to the ground and then the shocking news that more than 3,000 people died traumatised the country. People of other countries shared America's shock and outrage and there was a tremendous surge of sympathy for Uncle Sam.

U.S. President George Bush, Jr., took aggressive charge of what he said will be a 'War on Terrorism'. The media in the U.S. and other countries accepted without question the U.S. government's lead and jumped on what will certainly be the story of the 21st century. Soon the newspapers, airwaves and cyberspace were filled with stories about 'America's new war.'

The parameters of the big story were set at once when George Bush labeled America's attempt to deal with the September 11 attackers and their allies as "war." In the anger, worry and doubts that follow in the wake of September 11, no one wanted to raise any complex questions that might interfere with the country's focus, and the media accepted without question that America is at war with terrorism.

The situation after September 11 is much like what happened in 1982 when Uncle Sam began fighting the other war launched by President Ronald Reagan: the War on Drugs. What had essentially been a criminal and social issue became a military priority and Reagan sent out an impressive array of military hardware, intelligence and other resources to South Florida and the front lines of the drug war. Reagan and subsequent presidents began to pressure other countries through offers of aide, threats and sanctions to be on its side in its war on drugs. The presidents didn't exactly put it like George Bush, Jr., did later in the War on Terrorism but it had the same intent: You are either with us or against us in our fight against international drug trafficking.

As the U.S. pursued its war on drugs, the mainstream Western media never questioned whether America was really involved in a war or dealing with a criminal issue. The same thing happened after 9-11. In a war, a country fights other countries and armies are

involved. Nineteen men who had no allegiance to any country carried out the actual attack on America. Planes had been hijacked before, terrorist style attacks committed and innocents killed, but no war on terrorism was declared. In 1993 the World Trade Centre was bombed and almost brought down, but no war was declared. The bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 caused much death and havoc, but no war was declared. In the wake of 9-11, we have nearly forgotten about white right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh who blew up the FBI building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing scores of innocent people. But the U.S. government didn't declare war on the Patriot movement. One wonders then if America's response to the horrors of the events on September 11 would have been so dramatic if the images had been less graphic and the loss of life had been less, say, on the order of the attacks in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, or the hijack-

"war," moreover, has had grave consequences for the western media. The media is now under tremendous pressure as the U.S. and its allies relentlessly pursue its enemies. Indeed, in the name of state security, their governments have been working over time to manipulate and intimidate the media.

This has been well documented by media watchdog groups such as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). In its recently released report, 'Journalism, Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism,' the IFJ described a variety of the heavy-handed tactics being employed and noted that "journalists must be free to work without being pressured into service by the government."

Journalists working a democracy must also have a reasonable access to information to keep the public informed. That's why many American journalists like myself are disturbed by the federal government's bold move to drastically

report warned that the Donahue show could be "a home for the liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity."

During the Iraq War, MSNBC and its chief competitor the Fox network, which is owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, adopted an obvious in-your-face-patriotic approach to reporting the War. Both used the government's name for conflict, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," as their title for their coverage, eschewing the more neutral language their competitors adopted. They used the flag as backdrop and the two stations anchors and commentators openly expressed their views pro-war about many aspects of the conflict. One anchor reporting on the search for Saddam Hussein asked "Did we get him?" Some commentators made disparaging remarks about guests who raised questions about the conflict. But the coverage

Taliban prisoners from the Afghanistan War being transferred to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. The impact of the Iraq War on media coverage caused much controversy and will certainly have an impact on how future events in the War on Terrorism are covered.

If you recall, reporters in the 1991 Gulf War had little access to the Kuwait's battlegrounds, where the allied troops were routing Saddam Hussein's army. Being miles from the action, there was little way that journalists could check the facts, and they had to depend on military briefings for their reports. The practice allowed the news media to report the news, put the necessary spin on it, and make propaganda via the media to support its military purpose. The journalist's job is supposed to cut through the fog that the military spreads and deflect the spin and report what is really happening. What the world ended up seeing instead was a war presented

CBS News, told the *American Journalism Review*. "The images that television news crews, transmitted to viewers showing the U.S. invasion of Iraq were unprecedented. The networks were able to bring this war into the living rooms of Americans. It's the first time you can actually see what's happening." But many journalists and most of the world were unimpressed. Embedding, said the critics, leads to bonding, which makes it difficult for journalists to think objectively. If your safety is in the hands of soldiers you are embedded with, you're not likely to criticize them. And besides, what did the public really see? Embedding may have made for exciting reports, but the embedded journalists constantly made mistakes about what was happening. In watching CNN and BBC World news reports of the Iraq war, viewers were often more confused than informed about events.

But despite the criticism surrounding embedding, the military viewed it a success. The American public loved the coverage and Bush's popularity ratings went through the roof. If the U.S. pushes on to Syria, Iran or Yemen, you can bet the military will allow embedding once again. So where does that leave the Western media in a year and half after 9-11? As the U.S. pursues what could be a potentially long and uncertain battle against terrorism, the Western media finds itself in an extraordinary position wedged between western governments that would prefer to wage war in secret and a public that loathes the press. Recent opinion polls show that journalists in the U.S. are about as popular as criminal trial lawyers.

Yet, it is vital that the people of these western countries learn as much as they can about conflict, which is being waged in the name of the people and their way of life. The public may shoot at the messenger, but, more than ever, the media will have to try and do its job well. The people need as much information as the media can provide. This will help foster a robust debate about the war so that the right decisions can be made. We don't want a situation where the lack of media access will be used to cover up mistakes rather than protect lives and operations. After all, an open society is what the War on Terrorism is supposed to be about, isn't it? Unfortunately, so far after September 11 what we have got is a Western press manipulated by the military, hampered by official secrecy and intimidated by fear of offending the public and the government. That I'm afraid has been the impact of the War on Terrorism on the media in the U.S. and other Western countries.

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ers had botched their malevolent plan.

But that's all idle speculation now because with the collective anger of the American people and the understandable desire for action, the media accepted the Bush administration's framing of the September 11 attacks as an "attack on America" and the administration's response that "we are fighting a 'war on terrorism.'"

That was a momentous development for the U.S. and the western countries that are Uncle Sam's allies in its battle against terrorism. If we are at war, then we aren't dealing with criminals, so we don't have to bring our suspected enemies before a court of justice, especially the civilian variety. In fact, to protect state security we can detain suspects indefinitely or eaves drop on conversations between them and their lawyers. If we are at war, then the public doesn't have a right to know how we are pursuing it. Indeed, operating in secrecy is the best way for a government at war to identify, disrupt and expose the enemy. If we are at war, then civil liberties, the bedrock of a democracy, can be restricted - and further restricted - in the name of state security. If we are at war, then the information that was readily made available to the public can become dangerous to state security, in the wrong hands and must also be restricted. All these developments have happened since 9-11. In a war, a country fights other countries and armies are

paid off. The ratings for the two cable news networks soared. To stay competitive, all the other major networks, to some degree, allied themselves with U.S. forces. ## But the patriotic fervour just didn't impact on U.S. national media. For instance, Kurt Haugle, a reporter and columnist for Michigan's *Huron Daily Tribune*, quit the paper after allegedly being told that an anti-war column he had written would not be run because it might upset readers.

The Internet was not immune to the attack of the censors. For instance, the web site *Yellowteam.org*, which featured original anti-war reporting and commentary, was shut down by its Web hosting company on March 24 after it posted images of U.S. POWs and Iraqi civilian victims of the war.

Even Wall Street got on the censorship band wagon after the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera news network's attempts to set up an English-language website were foiled by unidentified hackers who launched a denial of service attack. Then Al-Jazeera was unable to obtain alternative credentials at the NASDAQ exchange. A NASDAQ spokesman told the *Los Angeles Times* "In light of Al-Jazeera's recent conduct during the war, in which they broadcast footage of U.S. POWs in alleged violation of the Geneva Convention, they are not welcome to broadcast at our facility." This is the same media that showed images of shackled

restrict the American's public right to access government information in the wake of September 11. In a disturbing trend several other Western countries, not coincidentally some of U.S.'s closest allies in the Iraq war, are following Uncle Sam's lead and slamming tight their doors to freedom of information.

And while journalists in the Western media like myself are having a more difficult time trying to get access to government information, Western governments are putting pressure on the media to report the War on Terrorism the way they want it reported.

We got a strong dose of the tremendous and growing pressure that the U.S. media is under as the result of the War on Terrorism. During the recent Iraq War, which was fought under the guise of the War on Terrorism and bore the name of "Operation Iraqi freedom," several national and local media figures in the U.S. had their work censored, either explicitly or implicitly, because of the critical views they expressed on the war. Here are a few examples:

The television network MSNBC canceled Phil Donahue's talk show after an internal memo which was leaked to the press, argued that Donahue would be a "difficult public face for NBC in a time of war. He seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush and skeptical of administration motives." The

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closed. For the next few days he walked around like a zombie, his mind afloat in the sea of sorrow. He went to work, visited friends and met with relatives, but his conversation mostly centered on morbid subjects like death, separation, desolation and betrayal. She called him at work and home and he hung up at the

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A lover's spat



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

A perfect day would have ended for him if it weren't for what she said before the sun went down. The evening was warm and rainless, and the glowing red sun glimmered through the coconut tree like a blazing pita bread slashed in the air. He didn't know she had followed him to the roof until the embers of her uneasy breath burned on his shoulders. When he turned around to face her, she said to him the most devastating thing of his life.

She left as soon as she finished saying what she had come to say. He leaned against the railing of the roof and lit up a cigarette, wondering how life had been unpredictable to him, bringing its surprises like a harsh sea dumping its garbage on the shores. In the gathering darkness of a miserable night, he assessed that his life was reduced to ash.

She insisted that he stayed for dinner, but he had already made up his mind that he wasn't going to listen to her again. He refused to stay and she kept asking, her face

showing no sign of the cruelty with which she had ruined his day. He couldn't close his eyes that night as he recounted in his mind how the same woman who had done him a murderous mischief asked him to stay for dinner.