

The landmark Islamabad Declaration

SAARC set to forge ahead

THE Islamabad Summit of SAARC countries ended on a note of high optimism, just as it had begun on January 4 amid high hopes. SAARC leaders have succeeded in reaching understanding on some issues crucial to the regional grouping's future as a common platform of the seven countries.

SAARC is now committed to tackling terrorism; addressing the security concerns of the smaller nations; eliminating poverty; and ensuring effective cooperation among the nations in the true spirit of cooperation for regional development. The Islamabad Declaration, which incorporates as many as 42 articles, has also laid emphasis on a very important issue -- catering to the needs of the less developed member states by providing them special and preferential treatment. This is an imperative that the planners of regional economic cooperation had to take into account to make sure that all the countries attained competitiveness in the field of trade and commerce in order reach the common goal of balanced economic development. But at the initial stage, they certainly need some kind of a shot in the arm that could be provided only by the stronger economies.

SAARC is now following the principle that was the basis of the great successes that other regional groupings have achieved in recent times.

The attitudinal change and the readiness to leave behind an unwieldy historical baggage, which include many tricky issues, have been the most striking feature of the Summit, and that is particularly true about India and Pakistan. There has also been a marked departure from the approach seen in the past which kept the two neighbours tethered to the Kashmir issue only. But this time around they appeared ready to go beyond that, and the 'negative vibrations' of the past were not allowed to derail the present course of action which is expected to produce more positive results soon.

The bottom line is that the SAARC nations are looking forward. However, a great deal of consistency and commitment to regional issues will be needed in the days ahead to attain the goals set by the SAARC leaders.

Four-year-old accused!

Further evidence of shoddy police work

ACCORDING to the first-information report of a case of looting rice in Khulna district, one of the offenders is a four-year old boy, Mehedi Hasan. Mehedi's father suggests that his son was implicated in the case by the local police on the basis of a complaint lodged and without any independent investigation. On the face of it, it is hard to argue with this analysis. Surely, the local police concede that had they conducted any kind of independent investigation into the complaint, they would not have included a four-year old child as one of the accused in a case of armed robbery.

The accusation lodged against young Mehedi, apart from being almost comical in its absurdity, actually serves to highlight some pervasive problems that continue to plague the police in this country. The first is that this is yet another example of the police simply not performing with even minimal competence and efficiency. Even a cursory investigation into the matter would have revealed that one of the accused was a small child whose name should have been excluded from the first information report.

Yet more worrying is the suggestion made by Mehedi's father that the accusation was not merely due to a failure to investigate but that it was the basis for extortion. In other words, this was no careless mistake, which would be bad enough, but premeditated villainy. Mehedi's father claims that his other son Aktharuzzaman who was also implicated was not even in the district at the time of the alleged looting and that he has had to pay Tk 5,000 in bribes for the release of himself and other family members. The fact that so many of the accused were from one family also suggests that their arrest might have been linked to some kind of personal feud.

The point is that, for whatever reason, too many young children are accused, arrested and imprisoned for crimes they could not possibly have committed. It is only after reports in the media and public outcry that they are released. The police must ensure that this kind of gross injustice is not repeated.

SIRAJUL ISLAM

A couple of one weeks ago, it would have been ludicrous to think that a Saddam Hussein on the loose would serve US interests better. But only days after his capture, that prospect became a dawning reality. Despite the trumpeting at the White House and crowing at the Pentagon, the captive Saddam is a growing burden and unforeseen problem. Some of this relates to the circumstances of his capture underlining his present status: isolated, powerless and irrelevant.

Saddam was cut off from the insurgents and everyone else, so he could not be directing the insurgency. He was clearly dejected and forlorn, confirming that even his huge ego had come to accept his miserable fate. Observers like Gen. (Retd) Wesley Clark put it succinctly: "We got the wrong guy." Saddam Hussein is not Osama bin Laden, and the former Iraqi strongman was no more a threat to the US than he ever had anything to do with Sept 11. Saddam's physical reappearance has prompted a return to the central issues: were there any weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), where is Osama, and how to stop the insurgency? Nobody in the White House or the Pentagon has a clue.

Were Saddam still at large, Washington could continue with the official "line" that all the answers would come together once they had Saddam. Now that they do have him, but not the answers, things are more difficult for US officials -- a problem worsened by the looming US election.

Soon after Saddam's arrest, the top US military commander in Iraq, Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, said that the prisoner "has been cooperative and is talkative". By

the time Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld got into place later that day, only to find that Saddam had denied US claims of his involvement in WMDs, Al-Qaeda or the insurgency, Rumsfeld said he was "not cooperating". Saddam was inconsiderate enough to be found, then to reject Washington's allegations in a live "unplugged" performance. If he were still on the loose he could at most issue haphazard taped messages which Rumsfeld or Bush could dismiss offhand.

Worse things are in store for US bureaucrats from a captive

Osama. Further, he might even show how the US had encouraged him to invade Kuwait in mid-1990. Once in his element, Saddam could likewise reveal all the assistance in money and weapons that the US and UK gave him over the years.

All of that would be highly embarrassing to both countries, and potentially damaging when election season is near. Author and filmmaker Michael Moore quoted a 1994 US Senate Report that US operators supplied Saddam with bacillus anthracis (cause of anthrax), clostridium botulinum (source of botulinum toxin) and other bacteria and poisons he could use in WMDs. Then when Saddam reportedly used poison gas on the Kurds in 1988, President Reagan denied it

and the CIA apparently covered for him. Now all those details and more could be unearthed together with a haggard Saddam.

There was earlier speculation among US officials on whether Saddam should be allowed to be found alive. The decision was then taken to permit it, in hopes that his capture and humiliation would sap the morale of the insurgents. Now that a live Saddam is poised to be a major liability instead, the alternative would be for US officials to work out a private agreement to avoid any political embarrassment and electoral

damage. Since Saddam's first words upon his surrender were that he wanted to "negotiate", US officials already have him at a disadvantage. Yet even that discovery of Saddam in the dirt hole in Tikrit may not be so simple or straightforward. There are those, including some in Israeli intelligence, who believe that Saddam had already been held as a prisoner for up to three weeks before US forces arrived.

Saddam could have been betrayed by some of his bodyguards, or the secretive family from his tribe who owned the farmhouse atop the hole. The reward money was US\$25 million for a country of poor people, and US military sources issued conflicting reports on how exactly Saddam was found. An earlier version said a soldier advancing into the hole wore protective gear as he inched his way inside and downward. Another report at the time, corroborating this, mentioned that gas might have been pumped into the hole to neutralize the HVT within. Those who believe Saddam was already a prisoner readied for the hand over point to several factors as clues: his disorientation, his facial injuries indicating he had been beaten, his lack of communication equipment, his unwashed state despite the house nearby, his long hair and unkempt beard that

would have taken weeks to grow, and a lull in the insurgency in the weeks preceding his capture. US forces would of course want the credit of discovering Saddam themselves, so nothing about a tip-off might be revealed. And those who betrayed Saddam would also avoid being identified for their own safety, just as the family who quietly revealed the whereabouts of his sons and then secretly collected the reward. There is an even more sinister possibility: suppose that Saddam Hussein had not been imprisoned by Iraqi civilians or his bodyguards, but caught and held by Al-Qaeda in the Tikrit countryside. Osama's henchmen would have had the ability and resources to overpower Saddam's bodyguards and anyone else who came near. They would also be highly moti-

vated to receive the US\$25 million, now that their funding has been held up. Getting rid of Saddam, a secularist who never appealed to Osama, by handing him to US forces would further divert Washington's attention from Al-Qaeda. That has already happened, as Washington's critics have lately charged. Then for Al-Qaeda to receive US money to continue with their anti-US campaign would be the ultimate in poetic irony that Osama would relish. The documents found on Saddam would be a further diversion, particularly if they had been forged. But US leaders have other matters to tussle with for the moment. USA's closest ally UK has said no to the death penalty for Saddam, and even former Conservative Party Defence Minister Sir Malcolm Rifkind has argued that the US should now get out of Iraq. Bush nonetheless pursues the death sentence for Saddam, after the former leader is given "a fair trial". Meanwhile, two US courts condemned Bush's treatment of captives from Afghanistan while those opposing the death penalty include Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Should countries like Iran now perhaps place sanctions against the US for human rights violations?

Sirajul Islam is a social sciences researcher and consultant

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Other, underlines the willingness to improve overall climate in the area as far as possible. Without going into the brass tacks of the 43-point Islamabad declaration adopted by the summit, one can conclude without much scope for disagreement that the just-concluded SAARC summit has delivered encouragingly more than many had expected. Consequently, the forum has come out of a sordid situation where many had

viewed it with a large degree of disappointment since the summit of the leaders itself hung in the uncertainty for a long time, let alone SAARC's effective functioning. The 12th SAARC summit -- albeit taking place after a long delay due to political problems between two major member states -- may not necessarily be a great occasion but has definitely been meaningfully productive seen against the background that has afflicted the forum causing dismay and apathy among the well wishers of the grouping. Indeed, the summit has come as shot in the arms of the SAARC even though none should be under illusion that whatever success that marked the conference of the leaders would drastically change the political, economic and social conditions of the region.

SAARC comes out of limbo



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

WHEN the south Asian association for regional cooperation (SAARC) was launched in Dhaka through the first summit in 1985, the most elderly leader -- Sri Lankan president late Junius Jayawardene -- cautioned that the new forum faced manifold problems despite potentials but hoped that it would go ahead weathering many a storm. Nearly nineteen years later, president Chandrika Kumaratunga of the same island state told the inaugural session of the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad that the regional grouping now needs to swing more into effective action-oriented welfare programmes. As the three-day summit was over the other day culminating on hopes for a better political environment in south Asia, there is no denying that SAARC leaders did not lag behind in deciding positively on certain core issues of collective economic and social benefits. The signing of agreement in south Asian free trade zone (SAFTA) and stronger emphasis on unremitting efforts for poverty alleviation in world's most densely populated region on one hand reflects forum's eagerness to tackle critical issues inextricably linked with economic emancipation and protocol on curbing terrorism, and on the

saying that it is he who is the target of certain forces and not the SAARC summit or any leaders. The confusion was further set at rest by Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who traveled to Islamabad and also held talks with the Pakistani president on the sidelines of the summit. One should not forget that there are instances of the summit being called off at the last moment. Once it happened when Bangladesh received with shock that the event was postponed at the dying moments when the country had made all the works to host it. But, finally, the heads of government meeting not only took place but also went off quite satisfactorily. While all the leaders deserve kudos for a fairly successful event, it is necessary to ensure that in the future the summits are held on the schedule and do not fall prey

to political acrimony among the member countries. It is important that the SAARC summit takes place regularly in time as stipulated in the charter of the organisation. The charter provides this clearly for the reason that a summit once in a year should not be difficult since members come from one region and their number is not large. Commonwealth leaders (CHOGM) meet once in two

problems mainly stemming from political differences. After all, it is the summit that effectively helps clear the hindrances that scuttle the expected growth of the forum. Bangladesh has particular reason to be anxious about the SAARC as this country mooted the idea. When late president Ziaur Rahman conceived of the south Asian forum, the proposal was greeted with a large degree of skepticism in certain circles and

with important areas have also performed reasonably well. But the inherent mistrust in the region and particularly between the two main players of the spectrum -- India and Bangladesh is seen to mar the expected development of the forum. The summits always leave a sobering effect on the political climate of the region. This is the Islamabad summit that has produced a breakthrough in the Indo-Pak dialogue as the two nuclear-powered arch rivals have now agreed for talks in February to further improve their often acrimonious relations. Dialogue which was absent between them for a long time will no doubt help clear misunderstanding although settlement of vexed issues is very difficult although not impossible.

Islamabad summit has taken up a series of programmes in the economic, social and other sectors and all these are commendable. It is imperative that the positive spirit is maintained through appropriate and timely follow up actions. SAARC with its resource constraints cannot do much but the achievements cannot be mean either. A major segment of the vast multitude living in south Asia is mired in abject poverty and it is a kind of bounden duty for the regional leaders to spare no efforts for their economic welfare.

major nations in the region even dragged their feet in endorsing the concept. But once it took off following assiduously built painstaking efforts, SAARC did not look back and the nascent forum is now eighteen years old -- the slow progress notwithstanding. The summits should not be subjected to delays as failure to hold the event in time spawns mistrust and doubts about the effectiveness of the forum. Islamabad summit has reviewed the progress of the SAARC made so far and has succeeded in drawing several programmes on the hand. Despite slow achievements, there can hardly be any denial that seven countries have established cooperation in varied fields through the integrated programmes of actions (IPA) and the technical committees dealing

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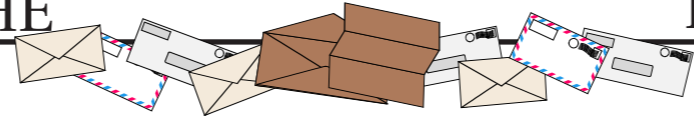
finance minister for the latter's introduction of the so-called saving schemes is hardly acceptable to the people. During his incumbency, Bangladesh has earned the infamous hattrick for achieving the prime position in corruption. Mr. Rahman's tirade against the TI was another indicator of his frustration. We understand the sorrow of many innocent BNP lovers and appreciate their sugarcuated criticism of the party's failure in all the sectors. But I would request them to maintain some relevancy while attacking the other party. The party in power is not leaving any stone unturned to demolish its predecessor in all conceivable ways. Sonia, Uttara, Dhaka-1230

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a Senior Journalist

MATTERS AROUND US

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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.

Politics of hartal

The Awami League, the main opposition in parliament, observed a hartal Saturday -- an unconstitutional practice. The dawn-to-dusk hartal was observed to protest 'infringement on democratic rights'.

By setting BRTC buses on fire during the hartal, they violated our right to have transport, or wasn't it hindering our daily busy lives? How many of our democratic rights have they ruined so far? That is the question to be asked. What if we, the people, really start asserting our democratic rights and raise our voice against the parties which observe hartal? How many times have we heard that a referendum be held to get the people's opinion on hartal? The opposition is clearly not concerned about the rights of

people. Shamim A Salam Dhaka.

Scientists abroad

Dr. Abdul Moyeen Khan, Minister for Science and Information and Communication Technology, has urged the Bangladeshi scientists and engineers working abroad to return to the country for accelerating the pace of its development (DS, Jan 3, 2004).

However, one should think twice before drawing any conclusion. As a former official of the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC), I am shocked to see that this prestigious institution has become ineffectual. Following the retirement of the last chairman some months back, it is being headed temporarily by a joint secretary from his ministry,

who is a doctor by profession. Of the three members of the BAEC, only two posts are occupied. But none of these two can be considered for the appointment as chairman as they are holding "current charge" in spite of being incumbent for years in their position.

The minister thought it fit to change the name of his ministry from "Ministry of Science and Technology" to "Ministry of Science and Information and Communication Technology". Will one be wrong to assume that he is interested in that part of technology? If that is the case, why should the technologists from other fields venture to come back?

I would urge the honourable minister to put his house in order before asking others to return to it.

Engineer ABM Nurul Islam House 23, Road 63, Gulshan-2, Dhaka-1212.

Relocate bus terminals

The city of Dhaka has three major bus terminals. The terminals are now located at Gabtali (for Khulna-Barisal and Rajshahi regions), Mohakhali (for Tangail-Mymensingh region) and Saidabad (for Chittagong, Comilla and Sylhet regions). These were set up by relocating the single jam-packed terminal situated at Gulistan by a self-proclaimed government of General Ershad. The division and relocation were effected for lessening traffic jam in the city centre and to have the terminals on the city-ends towards the destinations.

We are to remember here that autocrat Ershad could materialise more decentralisation than our democratically elected governments!

However, the positions of both Mohakhali and Saidabad are again in the interior of the city and these are causing large-scale traffic jams in the areas concerned. Only Gabtali is very much at an end of the city. The Mohakhali terminal should be relocated on the northern fringe. The location may be at or near Abdullapur--the northern end of Dhaka. There may not be enough space on the western side, but there is such space in between the road and the rail-line just inside the dam built to save Dhaka from flooding by the Turag. This location is very good in the sense that both Tangail-Mymensingh and Khulna-Barisal going buses can use this for

convenience.

The Saidabad terminal may be relocated near Kanchpur Bridge. But there is not enough space and the bridge is a very old one. Besides, the new road connecting the east to the north-west is joined to this road at Madonpur beyond the bridge. Thus the location may better be on the eastern side of Kanchpur Bridge in between the bridge and Madonpur. The same terminal may have access to the buses towards Dhaka and to the north-west from and to the eastern region of the country.

I think relocating of these terminals may be associated with the construction of Dhaka eastern by-pass and may be materialised as soon as possible.

MAS Molla BAAS, Dhaka.

An untenable case

Mr. Sajjad Waheed's letter on the BNP was nothing but the cry of a broken heart, shattered by continued failure of his beloved party, the BNP. Two years of an unbroken story of misrule, corruption and lawlessness has broken many lovers' hearts. He admonished his favourite party and advised it, though tacitly, to deplete the national exchequer with a view to creating problems for the party that will come to power next.

Our ill-advised political leadership always succumbed to the cunning bureaucrats. But Mr. Waheed's comparison of the present state of corruption with Awami League leaders' acquisition of degrees is not only disproportionate but also ill conceived. His laudatory comments on the

introduction of the so-called saving schemes is hardly acceptable to the people. During his incumbency, Bangladesh has earned the infamous hattrick for achieving the prime position in corruption.

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