

Indo-Bangla ties

Vibes good for a fresh approach

THE initial statements made by the recently-elected government in New Delhi have been very encouraging for Bangladesh. The final version of the Congress-led government's Common Minimum Programme, released last week, specified that "outstanding issues with Bangladesh will be resolved" and statements made by PM Manmohan Singh and senior members of his cabinet indicate that the Congress government intends to take a more co-operative approach to bilateral concerns than that which was adopted by the previous administration.

The Indian Water Resources Minister has made his skepticism about the BJP's much-touted river-linking project suggesting that controversies over the plan within India and its international ramifications will receive due consideration.

Similarly, Indian Home Minister's comments with respect to illegal immigration that it requires a human approach, come as a welcome change from the accusatory position held on the subject by the previous administration.

The final piece of the puzzle from the Bangladeshi point of view would be to gain greater access to India's markets through the relaxation of tariff and non-tariff barriers. It is noteworthy in this regard that greater market access was pledged by the Congress government 12 years ago, and there is good reason to be hopeful that the current Congress government will also look on the matter favourably.

The Bangladeshi government must also be congratulated for its initiative in taking up this opportunity to improve bilateral relations. The PM was quick to extend her best wishes to the incoming government, and Foreign Minister Morshed Khan's upcoming trip to New Delhi is a salutary demonstration of the government's keenness to move Indo-Bangla relations on to a more co-operative footing.

Ultimately what we hope for is a fresh approach to the relationship from both sides. It is time that the confrontational approach of the recent past was abandoned. Both Bangladesh and India can only benefit from more cordial relations, and there is little to be gained from dealing with one another from a position of distrust and hostility. Greater co-operation is a win-win outcome for both countries. As such, we applaud what appear to be the movements made by both governments in this direction.

Nizami's media bashing

Can it obscure the ground reality?

IN his meeting with the OCAB on Sunday Matiur Rahman Nizami, the Minister for Industries and Amir of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh, has expressed his apprehensions that the 'exaggerated' media reports could lead up to an Afghan or Iraq type external intervention in Bangladesh.

In alluding to the sinister potential for intervention in la Afghanistan or Iraq, Nizami in effect has cast doubts on the patriotic credentials of the media while trying to take a *holier-than-thou* attitude.

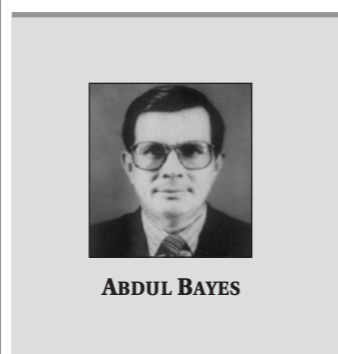
We reject such insinuations out of hand. This is a deliberate and motivated attack on free media, designed to denigrate it. Such remarks are but a veiled threat to curb the free press from its bounden duty of keeping the public informed. It is a dubious attempt to put a sop on failure of governance by depicting the press in bad light.

One could attribute the warped view of the role of the media to two reasons. One, that the media's exposure of the dubious nature of politics that some are indulging in, stands in their way of carrying out such nefarious and harmful politics. The second reason could be that such reports see a link between the Jamaat and the religious extremists, much to their ire.

We also discern hypocrisy in Nizami's remarks. While he distances himself and his party from obscurantist elements, a prominent leader of his party is seen attending meetings of some of these groups.

We suggest that the high government functionaries like him see the reality obtaining on the ground at present. Instead of putting the blame for our image problem on 'exaggerated media reports', they should apply themselves to ensuring that such disreputable acts against the country do not occur in the first place.

Plight of an NGO



ABDUL BAYES

THE role of NGOs in addressing rural poverty and human development issues have long been debated. The general consensus that emerged so far from various empirical evidences seem to point to a positive role of NGOs. Over the decades NGOs, to a great extent, relieved the poor off the shackles of village mohajans for credit. They have also reduced the role of the government in reaching the very poor with little collateral. Not only in credit terms, but also in the light of social development, the role of some NGOs e.g. Grameen Bank, BRAC and Proshika have already earned fames across the world. My frequent visits to villages across the country reveal stories of admiration for some of the NGOs. Grameen Bank model has been replicated in some of the countries to confer credits to out nationhood. But, unfortunately, after sailing smoothly for two decades or so, NGOs have now to forsee a dark cloud cast on their horizon.

Disgraceful and devastating

The arrest of Proshika Chief Dr

Kazi Faruque is indeed a disgraceful and devastating news to us. Mr Faruque is not an individual himself but he heads one of the largest NGOs in the country. Of course, since the present regime came to power, Faruque and his Proshika have been a target of the confrontational politics that the country is wrought with. As an individual Dr Faruque might have committed the alleged 'crimes'

from civil society of home and abroad. However, the fact that Dr Faruque was to be under remand on corruption charges - a rare incident -- simply suspects the whole soul of the argument against him. The HC verdict on this is a pointer.

Uprooted grassroots!

It is well known that Proshika is an NGO with a large network at grassroots level to help the poor.

Some of the local offices became target of the mastans for tolls. Police took the chance and began to pile up cases to earn their pies from Proshika.

Who suffer from this blow? It is the poor to suffer. Some of them got or need loans to rear livestock or do petty business, some to grow green vegetables or sell seeds. They eke out their living from the credit they get from NGOs like Proshika. As I

that forcefully oppose NGOs that stand for women's emancipation, education, health of the poor and overall development of the society.

To this effect, with trust on my memory, I recollect one TV presentation in a private channel that showed some heads of NGO (like ASA, Gono Shasthya) alleging against Proshika and its chief on the plea that they worked for a particular party during the last

particular political party. They might have their allegiance but not exposed to an extent that could harm their own organisation. I never heard Proshika raising any slogan for Awami League but admittedly, Proshika's stand during the last general election was against fundamentalists and anti-liberation forces. It might have requested voters not to vote for these forces but to vote for honest and pro-liberation forces. If NGOs mean that the menace of these evil forces should be wiped out from the society, then they all should join the movement against those forces. But if NGOs tend to think that they have come to earn the interest rates by lending money and thus build their fort of fortunes, then it matters little to fight against any evil.

Let Proshika progress

I think there is still time to heal the wounds. Proshika should be allowed to work as it used to. Its funds should be released immediately. Any allegation against Proshika personnel should be as per the rules of the country. Of course, the government can (and had been doing) cripple Proshika as it holds on to massive power of police, but the precedence could be costly especially for the poor. We want that NGOs should work for the poor, compliment government's efforts to alleviate poverty and emerge as a powerful weapon for women's emancipation in rural areas.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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to invite an axe upon him, but as an institution for the rural poor, Proshika activities need to continue. Besides this point, the allegations need to be established unequivocally before arrests of any citizen of this country. In the past, we observed with sadness and shame, eminent personalities and politicians like Shahriar Kabir, Muntasir Mamun, Saber Hossain Chowdhury and Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir were humiliatingly arrested and inhumanly tortured under police custody. We firmly believe that this trend is good neither for the party in power nor for the nation as a whole. The degree of violation of human rights under the present regime already bagged wraths

It has been working for decades to help lift people's power. It undeniably displayed its efficiency in reaching the poor -- an observation even shared by the donors. Its grassroots level movements against dowry, environmental hazards, lawlessness and for enhancing women's empowerment, rearing green agriculture and realising the spirit of the liberation are all on record and in the minds of the people.

Such an NGO of repute had to remain inactive for past several months (in fact for last two years with fund blockage). Its central office as well as regional offices had been put under the orgy of ransacking. The dedicated young activists -- thousands I suppose -- who opted to serve the poor had been hiding for fear of tortures.

traveled in recent days to seven sites, I observed a sign of sadness among not only the Proshika workers but also their clients. Another party that stands to lose in the long run is the NGOs themselves. The 'tit for tat' kind of politics that is in evidence especially with respect to NGOs could invite a havoc in the horizon. Their operations are likely to suffer due to actual or articulated political alignments. The NGOs would then have to wind up business and their heads hide in homes.

Tit for tat!

If Proshika or for that matter any other NGO is forced to close down, the ramifications could be large. Who would gain? The fundamentalists and the forces

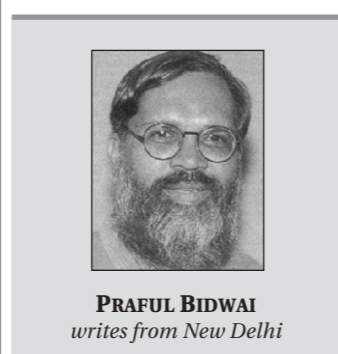
general election. That was a time when every one wanted to be in the good book of the new government. Any way, that some NGOs should sail on such an allegation, true or false, is very frustrating. Who is neutral in this country? The alleged way ADAB was split could establish the point that many NGOs also belong to this or that political camp. If Proshika could be punished by BNP for the alleged support to Awami League during the last general election, should then some other NGOs await a similar fate for supporting BNP while in power?

Against fundamentalists

I think and it is my purely personal observation, that, neither Faruque, nor others express their allegiance directly to any

Celebrating the BJP's departure

Only two cheers for UPA



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

AFTER a historic election, Mr Manmohan Singh has put together a Council of Ministers which reflects India's immense regional diversity and social plurality. The composition of the United Progressive Alliance government is particularly reassuring, indeed empowering, for India's religious-ethnic minorities, comprising over 250 million people, who experienced insecurity under the National Democratic Alliance government.

But it's no less satisfying for the religious majority, most of whose members have never had any sympathy for retrograde Hindutva politics.

The new coalition's name, referring to progress (people's empowerment) and social cohesion, is a pleasant departure from the NDA's divisive politics. It's also a reminder that the UPA's mandate is based on the self-assertion of India's poor.

The Indian voter put distributive justice firmly on the agenda. She pronounced an unambiguous verdict against managerial-style politics based upon eco-

nom ic elitism and pitiless disregard for the underprivileged. And she rebuffed the inciters of hatred.

The UPA's mandate is for equitable growth and people-centred development. It is equally for "detoxification" or cleansing of Hindutva-corrupted institutions, and for healing India's severely damaged secular fabric. It is for reintegrating the values of humanity and decency

the point that India almost sent troops to Iraq. Under Mr Singh, slow but steady progress can be expected in improved relations with Pakistan, China and other neighbours.

Mr Reddy will hopefully make a sincere, purposive effort to establish Prasar Bharati as a genuinely autonomous corporation. Mr Arjun Singh will doubtless try to purge the education system, communalised text-

Family Welfare.

Mr Kamal Nath has been rewarded with Commerce and Industry. Mr Nath certainly didn't distinguish himself as a Minister in the 1990s. He diverted a whole river to raise the value of a hotel he owns in Himachal!

The Commerce Minister will be called upon to play a crucial role in the coming round of WTO negotiations, in which India's

Manmohan Singh's "reforms". Mr Singh triggered India's neoliberal turn in 1991. He believed that in the post-Soviet era, there was no alternative. But he is not a "free-market" zealot. He opposes dismantling the public sector "for ideological reasons"; he says it should be "allowed to grow if [it] can compete with [the] private sector". Mr Singh would be far more responsive to people's needs.

to manipulative business houses. In the past, he was hawkish on the nuclear issue and Pakistan.

The present moment offers Mr Singh a unique opportunity for historic reconciliation with Pakistan. The two countries' peoples have invested great energies -- and hope -- in the peace process. Mr Singh must personally take the initiative here. An India-Pakistan peace will improve both countries' security, and free resources for investment in public services. It will remove a major plank from the communalists' demomology.

Mr Singh has a big challenge on his hands. His government's actions will largely determine the direction of India's own evolution in the coming years: Will India become a subordinate, passive component of an unequal, unjust global order and further enlarge domestic cesspools of grievances while keeping its poor insecure and wretched? Or will India move towards liberating its people from poverty, ill-health and multiple injustices so that it can contribute to making the world a better place?

Mr Singh can turn the challenge into opportunity -- if he resolutely favours high principle and the public good over parochial considerations. But as of now, we must greet his team with two cheers only.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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into the very core of Indian politics and for reasserting popular sovereignty.

Regrettably, Mr Singh's allocation of portfolios does not adequately reflect the UPA's progressive nature. The ministers are a mixed bag.

First, however, look at the upside. Mr Natwar Singh's appointment as Foreign Minister and the allocation of Human Resource Development to Mr Arjun Singh, Information and Broadcasting to Mr S. Jaipal Reddy, and Petroleum and Panchayati Raj to Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar are all very welcome.

Mr Natwar Singh will hopefully bring his non-aligned perspective to bear upon India's foreign policy. Under the NDA, this policy became slavishly pro-US to

books, etc., of toxic Hindutva influences. This is a subject close to his heart. Mr Aiyar will undoubtedly end pernicious attempts to sell off India's cash-rich public oil companies.

Equally significant are second-rung appointments such as those of Mr Dayanidhi Maran (IT & Communications), the Northeast's P.R. Kyndiah (Tribal Affairs), Mr Shibu Soren (Coal), Dalit leaders Ms Meira Kumar and Selja (Social Justice & Empowerment, and Urban Employment & Poverty Alleviation) and Mr Prithviraj Chavan (PMO).

However, Messrs Lalo Prasad Yadav and Kapil Sibal have been given lighter portfolios than they deserve. By contrast, a poorly known leader like Mr A Ramdoss has been given Health and

stand, like that of the least developed countries', will determine if there's unrestricted trade in services, which will irreparably harm Third World peoples. Successful negotiations will need high integrity and acute comprehension.

Consider the appointment of Messrs P. Chidambaram (Finance), Pranab Mukherjee (Defence), and Shivraj Patil (Home). Mr Chidambaram is an ideologically-driven neoliberal, who like many other Harvard Business School graduates, especially in Latin America, remains dedicated to "free-market" dogma.

These policies increased poverty and disparities in India. They were resoundingly rejected by the electorate.

There is a difference in Mr Chidambaram's and Mr

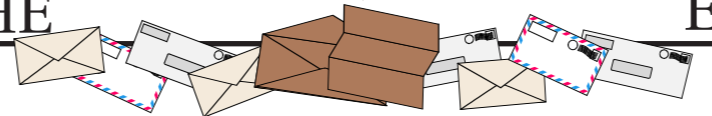
Mr Chidambaram's appointment seems to be a panic response to the recent stockmarket crisis, which was deliberately rigged to promote pro-business policies.

Neither Mr Mukherjee nor Mr Patil can be accused of being imaginative and firm on principles. That is badly needed today in Defence, which cries out for streamlining, deep cuts in wasteful budgets and action against corruption.

Similarly, Home holds the key to punishing the culprits of the Babri demolition, resolving the Ayodhya dispute through a temple-plus-mosque formula, abolishing the draconian POTA, and outlawing Togadia-style hate-speech and Bajrang Dal-style hate-acts.

Mr Mukherjee has been close

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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.

Good cricket!

There is hardly any doubt that Bangladesh cricket is improving, albeit slowly. A few days ago the Tigers completed their ODI series against the mighty West Indies. They have been white-washed in this series but at the same time they gathered valuable experience. The Tigers gave a good fight. Their bowling has improved tremendously and Tapash is now our leading bowler.

Besides, a few weeks ago the Tigers beat Zimbabwe by 8 runs which was their fourth win in one-day cricket. It clearly indicates that Bangladesh are becoming better. Coach Dave Whatmore deserves the credit for the performance of the team.

Zahid Mollik
Karatia, Tangail

Bomb blast at the shrine

I very strongly condemn the bomb blast at the holy shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) on 21-5-04, in which two people were killed and many more injured, including the British High Commissioner, Mr. Anwar Chowdhury, and the DC of Sylhet, Mr. Abul Hossain. It is not an isolated event. In the past also, bombs were blasted at the shrines and tortoise and fish of various shrines were poisoned to death.

The criminals are implementing their agenda, in the name of religion, in a systematic way at the shrines in order to make Bangladesh a fundamentalist country. My humble request to the government, "Please do not sit idle and watch it helplessly. Take stern action against the criminals."

Iqbal Ahmed
New Eskaton, Dhaka

Constitution amendment

The Jatiya Sangsad has passed the Constitution Amendment Bill 2004 amid public censure. The main opposition party, Awami League, boycotted the parliament to show disagreement. The BNP led coalition faced no hurdle to pass the bill as it has an overwhelming majority in the House.

The main provision of the amendment bill is to incorporate 45 reserved seats for the womenfolk. The provision is otiose as women want direct election but the bill does not meet their demand. To empower women, direct election and active participation of the womenfolk in

politics are very essential. Another provision in the bill is hanging of the portraits of president and prime minister in the public offices. That is also redundant. To ensure this, a constitutional amendment is not needed.

The most controversial provision in the bill is enhancement of the retirement age of judges from 65 to 67. There is a hearsay that the government is working according to a plan. The government should clarify its position on the issue. The 14th amendment is nothing but a show of strength by the ruling coalition. The BNP should keep in mind that this attitude wrecks havoc in the long run. It should learn from the NDA coalition's defeat in India.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, DU

Bush's poppycock

People love their own country. For example, we love Bangladesh, Iraqis love Iraq, Afghans love Afghanistan, Palestinians love Palestine, but President Bush seems to love other countries much more than his own!

It has been claimed that Mr. Bush did not take any preemptive measure to protect the US before the 9/11 attack. So his present role on behalf of his country is questionable. Every freedom-loving citizen has the right to fight against foreign occupation forces in his own country. Iraqis, Afghans and the Palestinians are doing just that, but Bush and his allies have identified them as so-called "insurgents," "terrorists," "fanatics," "extremists" etc.

But Mr. Bush's poppycock won't stand the test of time.

Md. Zillur Rahman

Gandaria, Dhaka Investigation into arms haul

The government has apparently ignored its US counterpart's offer to investigate into origin, destination, carriers and owners of the huge quantity of arms hauled recently in Chittagong. Even the US customs official failed to extract the desired information from our port and customs officials. The administration has not realised the importance of placing the whole thing in full public view. That is a lapse which may cost it dearly. Are the high-ups trying to shield the real culprits?

Similar was the fate of the huge ammo haul at Bogra a year ago. Clearly, the issues having a direct bearing on national security are not getting the treatment that they deserve.

Our leaders should learn from Indian election results that voters do want delivery of services through mass oriented policies ensuring good governance without plundering national wealth.

Rezaul Huq
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Pragmatic step

The government's decision to realize the domestic television set licence fee only once during purchase of the set is pragmatic, as also is the decision to waive the renewal of existing TV licence if paid for three years or more.

The step saves thousand of man-hours and paper work, and does away with the various chores of maintaining this licence fee realization and handling of defaulters; spe-

cially applicable in cases where the amount realized is small.

Tax evasion has become institutionalized, hence non-recurring taxes and levies should be encouraged where possible. It reduces the work load on the inefficient bureaucracy, and reduces systems losses.

Another negative attitude is observed in the business circles; the peculiar tendency to pass on the buck to the government, and constantly demanding reduction of taxes and levies, without disclosing internal steps taken for reduction of systems losses. There is always a partiality to shirk civic responsibilities. The regulatory services have to be paid for-- nothing is free in life.

A Mawaz
Dhaka