

No impending food crisis

But deeds must match words

MONSOON floods have long been among the most devastating of crises that successive Bangladesh governments have had to contend with. Now, with floodwaters wreaking havoc in the northeast and on our door-step here in Dhaka, there is no question that the current situation is shaping up as a serious test of the present administration's capabilities. It is thus that we are heartened to see the government stepping up and categorically stating that it is giving the situation due importance, and reassuring the population that the floods will not bring about a food crisis.

It is times such as these which are the test of a government: how a government responds to a crisis which is not of its making and cannot be avoided. It is reassuring to note that the administration has made no efforts to shirk its responsibility to the people in their hour of need, and that it is not attempting to suggest that there is little it can do, or that its power to meet the exigency head-on is limited.

Already over one crore people in 33 districts have been affected by the floods, with the numbers growing by the day, and nothing is more important than that the officials at the Food and Disaster Management and Relief Ministry be fully prepared to tackle the flood and post-flood situation. This we have been assured of, and the measures that the ministry have outlined seem to us to be sensible and practical.

However, while official resolve is gratifying to note, alone, it is not enough. The words must be followed up with the commitment and the competence to ensure that the planned measures are brought to fruition. We cannot emphasize enough how crucial it is for the government to perform in this instance.

Nor is this solely a test for the government. In times such as these, it behooves all of us to band together to do what we can for our fellow countrymen and women whose lives have been devastated by the flooding. This includes the opposition, and we expect that it would put the need for unity above that of partisanship. It is thus that we would urge the opposition to call off its planned hartal on Saturday. However, real the opposition's grievances, hartals are never an appropriate response in a democracy, and even less so in the midst of such a critical time for the country.

AP report

We condemn this shoddy work

THE Gauhati datedelined AP report on the "killing of Indian insurgents" in Dhaka, though retracted later, has drawn our attention for obvious reasons.

The dispatch from Gauhati gave a detailed account of a 'gunfight' and 'casualties' that could not have occurred without a heavy engagement between two armed groups. Our first question is why an international news agency of AP's stature failed to check it up with its Dhaka bureau. What did they do to ensure the authenticity of the highly sensitive news that would surely have an impact on bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh? Even a lay person would instantly realise that it was not the kind of news that could be released without due verification.

Our government termed it a trash and AP also acknowledged the mistake. However, the whole exercise gives us the impression that the matter has not been addressed with due seriousness. It has not been a mistake that could be corrected by sending a routine corrigendum only. The government should ask for a detailed explanation of how the mistake occurred. A process, we are told, has been initiated by our High Commission in Delhi to get a clear picture of what really happened. We believe that the matter should be resolved for removing any misgivings that might have been created between the two countries by the absolutely baseless report.

Tainting the image of a country is not a difficult task. The Indian journalist who reported the imaginary shoot-out may have been oblivious of its damaging impact on bilateral ties, if he had no other motive of course. It is extremely amateurish to make stories on intelligence feed only. The bilateral implications of the issue are far too manifest to be ignored by any sensible, professionally sound journalist. For some inexplicable reasons, a section of the Indian press appears to be over-enthusiastic about blowing up sensitive stories concerning bilateral ties. In this instance, however, it was not a case of exaggeration, but malicious reporting that could have served only one purpose: embittering the relations between the two neighbours. We need to be on guard against journalism of this particular brand. However, AP must bear full responsibility of circulating this false story and should not only retract as it did but apologise to all its subscribers whom it so callously misled.

SAARC leaders must come out of mental straightjacket



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

HAVING been in a state of torpor over the past several years, SAARC appears to have arisen from slumber and is about to make a move forward. This optimism stems from the fact that we are going to have a second SAARC Summit on the trot, in Jan 2005 in Dhaka. This is indeed heartening.

Admittedly, there is not much that the regional organisation, whose birth was viewed with wary eyes, has to show for its achievements over the last twenty years. That, it has endured the pitfalls of a seminal growth, is an acknowledgement of SAARC's continued relevance to the countries of South Asia.

While it is futile to apportion blame on any one for SAARC's failure to achieve less than it might have, it will be worthwhile for our policy makers to delve into the

reasons for our inability to exploit the full potentials of the regional organisation in the last twenty years. Skeptics were prepared to write SAARC off as only a talking shop, having nothing more to do than hold meetings, some of which did not always eventuate. In the nearly twenty years of existence of SAARC, the Jan 2005 Summit will be only the thirteenth. Some of the summit meetings had to be postponed because of the unwillingness of

must be borne in mind that ASEAN's birth was motivated by extra regional compulsions, wherein there was a definite perception of threat. There was a degree of external input in the security perceptions of the ASEAN states. The threat came to be defined both in terms of ideology as well as in substantive physical terms. There was, unlike in SAARC, a modicum of symmetry in ASEAN, with no one country exercising or perceived to be exercising its pre-

political entity not so long ago, with shared history and values, and, unfortunately some sad experiences, have perhaps had much to do with the wariness in their relationship that in turn affected performance of the Association.

While some of the less confident wondered at the efficacy of an organisation composed of the poorest of the global indigents, SAARC's founding fathers put their confidence in the Association on

conceptualised, to have a caveat on addressing bilateral matters. However, one finds it difficult to understand the logic of some countries for desisting from attending summits because of matters arising out of purely bilateral issues, yet calling for such matters to be kept out of the purview of the Association.

The matter regarding lack of dynamism of SAARC came out starkly during a two-day regional conference on SAARC organised by

More than actual poverty, we suffer from, what one erudite scholar of South Asian scenario calls, 'poverty of thoughts'.

One has to glance around us to see how, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, formed in 2001 with the Central Asian Republics, Russia and China, having primarily a security bias, have expanded its scope, to include economic cooperation, poverty eradication and trade.

That is why one was dismayed at the reluctance of the SAARC Standing Council of Ministers to even consider Pakistan's proposal, to have a fresh look at the Charter in order to enhance its scope, in its recent meeting in Islamabad.

Our predilection of holding on slavishly to a charter formed almost a quarter century ago gives one the impression of being hostage to our own mental privations.

The moot point is whether we can continue to fulfil SAARC agenda, which is growing by the day, without bringing in changes to the SAARC charter, particularly insofar as it relates to bilateral issues.

This is a matter that our leaders must address, and to do that objectively they need to free themselves of the mental straightjacket they have been in for so long.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, 'The Daily Star'

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either of the two prima donnas to attend.

There is no plausible answers to the question whether, as one analysts asks, "SAARC must remain satisfied with the fact that the leaders get to see each other once in a while and sign on some trivia that their officials manage to cook up?" Some cynics were quick to juxtapose SAARC with various other regional organisations like the ASEAN, while lamenting its poor performance.

SAARC does not in any way bear comparison with ASEAN because of certain fundamental differences between these two organisations. It

dominance over others.

Fortunately for SAARC, need for physical security of the South Asian states had very little, if at all, to do with the conceptualisation of the regional body. In fact, rhapsodic though it sounds, 'collective self-reliance' was the motive force behind the concept of SAARC. The motivations were internally generated which makes the need for its success all the more imperative. But its momentum was regrettably stunted by the state of Indo Pakistan relations.

Also, the fact that three of the countries of SAARC were a single

their belief that even poverty, when shared, becomes more endurable.

Thus, there is a need for introspection, but more importantly there is an even more pressing need to move ahead with the agenda that we have set ourselves to achieve in SAARC.

But, while one wants SAARC to move on, one cannot but wonder whether or not SAARC might do well to have more dynamism infused in its workings. One criticism that is leveled against it is its inherent inability to address bilateral issues.

It was perhaps a need of the time, when the association was being

the BIIS in Dhaka last week. The overwhelming view was that realpolitik predicated all our actions.

Unfortunately, it is politics that drives economics and all other agenda, when ideally the reverse ought to be the case. Issues that are regional in nature, have bilateral nuances, making it well nigh impossible to come out of the political sphere.

The important thing to remember is that when other regional organisations have adapted to the changing global scenario, SAARC seems to be constrained by the mental straightjacket of its leaders.

Let's think coolly and talk



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE schedule of the long-stalled Composite Dialogue between India and Pakistan has been agreed. Beginning July 28, it will reach the Foreign Ministers level meeting on August 25 next. This preliminary process is to start the substantive political-level negotiations from August 25 onward where actual give and take can take place. Definitive results will start coming later.

It is notable that officials' talks are being held amidst almost a euphoria. There is, for no solid reason, hope and expectation in the air, more in Pakistan but also some in India. Not too long ago, the relations between the two countries were at an all time low and a war seemed imminent during the long military confrontation of 2002. There was intense propaganda of hate in both countries. And yet the red hot tensions quickly gave way after India's PM was mysteriously persuaded to switch from a jingoistic stance to extending a hand of friendship to Pakistan last year. Clouds of war soon began to lift and people's latent desire for peace and friendship in both countries asserted itself. What helped was, of course, the US 'facilitation', Track II diplomacy by establishment's trusted emissaries and work of innumerable Track III groups: like Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, many similar bodies and Intiaz Alam's SAFMA. People's true desires were articulated by this third track of non-officials.

The common people on both sides are aware of what they have lost in the huge extravagance of vital resources in futile confronta-

tions and mutual boycott by Pakistan and India. This is the true bedrock on which a real people-to-people reconciliation from grass-roots up can be built if properly led -- such as has happened between the German and French peoples in postwar period. On this foundation imposing edifices of not only Pak-India friendship, free trade, economic cooperation and politically harmonious policies of peace can be raised but also real regional integration can be anchored in.

Let no one forget that Pakistan-

the same real estate on which so many and so diverse people live. That it is a complicated problem is well known. It is bound to be a long haul and no quick fix seems possible or will be realistic. Both sides need patience and goodwill.

(b) Two competing nationalisms have arisen and are based on the growth of communalisms during the Raj. These contradict and violate the legacy of over seven or eight centuries of intimate Hindu-Muslim coexistence: the Indo-Pak Civilisation. The political dynamic

they will never be used (i) as a result of deliberate intent, (ii) accident, (iii) miscalculation or (iv) a non-state revolutionary group getting access to the red button. The same applies to Indian nukes: none in Pakistan can ignore the possibility of the use of Indian nukes in many of the same eventualities.

This mistrust is fundamental; it is an inescapable product of two rival nuclear deterrents. In the presence of these WMDs, long-term prospects of Pakistan-India friendship will retain a roller-

India and Pakistan should strengthen their Command and Control Systems so that the possibility of accidents, unintended, miscalculated or unauthorised launch should be prevented by timely mutual consultation.

The US diplomacy has evolved voluminous literature on how two military enemies can arrive at détente to prevent accidents, unauthorised launch and how to keep the WMDs safe from terrorists. They acquired this wisdom from a generation-long negotiations with

VHP in India? What if any elected government in New Delhi, driven by militant nationalism and manipulated by vested interests, threatens a nuclear strike on Pakistan territory? Which CBM will prevent that? The same applies to Pakistan where another general or a jihadi group can seize power. What if he threatens to nuke India unless it relents on Kashmir quickly? Pakistani rulers are known to have taken many imprudent decisions.

Is it wise for Pakistan and India to preserve NVMDS and remain on high alert for all times to come? One will go so far as to say that Pakistan cannot go on living on edge, constantly worrying about the balance of power, balance of terror and the constant effort to upgrade its deterrents. That involves huge opportunity losses and a financial burden that will snuff out real development and can lead to the Soviets'-like implosion. Such a possibility needs to be obviated. Pakistanis need higher living standards and more freedoms. That requires working for a Nuclear Free South Asia as a first step. We should aim at that.

CBMs, while being unexceptionable, are no solution. The only solution is to do away with the WMDs altogether. But one encounter with any informed Indian will show that the constituency for doing away with the nukes and reverting to a non-nuclear South Asia is tiny. India is likely to go on becoming ever more powerful, with more of all kinds of weapons. Pakistan is claimed to be irrelevant to it. That, realistically speaking, is a given. Policy makers in Islamabad however know no better than to go on scrapping the bottom of the barrel to keep up with the Indian Joneses. Would that do the job? Unfortunately, it will neither enable Pakistan to keep up a given power ratio with India nor will it ever be able to attend to the problems facing the common Pakistanis, with all the attendant political, economic and social risks.

The situation poses a big challenge.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Can CBMs prevent the election of a party like Shiv Sena or VHP in India? What if any elected government in New Delhi, driven by militant nationalism and manipulated by vested interests, threatens a nuclear strike on Pakistan territory? Which CBM will prevent that? The same applies to Pakistan where another general or a jihadi group can seize power. What if he threatens to nuke India unless it relents on Kashmir quickly? Pakistani rulers are known to have taken many imprudent decisions.

India relationship can shift from love to hatred quickly. This is what enabled BJP government to stir up much hatred, at least among the upper and middle classes, against Pakistan during and after Kargil affair. Pakistan could also reply in kind. Mark the swiftness with which dominant sentiment changed and all classes, at least in Pakistan, quickly awakened to the need for peace and friendship. After all South Asia used to be Historical India where Hindus and Muslims lived cheek by jowl in harmony for centuries. Thanks to the rise of acrimonious communalisms under the British it is now necessary to remind that Hindus and Muslims of India jointly created the magnificent Indo-Persian civilization; its sources, bases and imperatives are still alive -- hence a basis of close friendship exists.

Let no one forget that huge stumbling blocks to a friendship policy have been erected since 1940s. They flourish on the latent negative legacies that are also there. These are many: (a) There is the complex and difficult problem of Kashmir; two rival nation-states of unequal potential are vying for

of these nationalisms requires contempt and hatred for the "other". This fomented feeling is generated and strengthened by packaging it in patriotism. Allied to it is -- and which has become the outstanding feature of these rival nationalisms -- militarism and jingoism. Moreover, all large militaries create powerful vested interests. In America, they call it Industrial Military Complex. Both Pakistan and India have their own bureaucratic versions of this complex. Its leading lights can only enrich themselves and acquire importance when relations between the rival powers are worsening. They are also able to spend on propaganda handsomely and many media persons are always obliging.

(c) Another result of these nationalisms is two fully-fledged and rival nuclear deterrents in the subcontinent. One thing that nuclear weapons do with absolute certainty is to destroy basic trust among nuclear rivals. The unfortunate fact is that so long as Pakistani nukes -- the bomb, delivery vehicles and accessories -- are poised, who in India will sleep easy that

coaster quality. These can prevent the bright possibilities from being realised. There is no solution to the problem they pose. South Asia can never settle down to peaceful pursuits so long as WMDs are not consigned to the dustbin of history through more enlightened and more focused agreements of far reaching mutual dependence.

True, the two Foreign Secretaries are discussing the nuclear subject. The official publicists on both sides have given a great build up to the proposals that the Foreign Secretaries have exchanged in their last meeting in New Delhi. India has proposed several nuclear Confidence Building Measures. Pakistan has also proposed an elaborate set of the same genre, called Nuclear Restraint Regime. One suspects the origin of both sets of CBMs is common. In fact it may be a notional and 'in-principle' agreement between Pakistan and India that the US has helped shape through the Track II diplomacy -- that itself came into being as a result of US initiative. The agreement is that both should remain nuclear powers and seeking recognition as nuclear powers. The US only desires that

the Soviets. They have shared it with both India and Pakistan and both seem to have lapped it up because both love to have the tacit American approval of their nuclear status. Thus, by seeming to be a selfless do gooder, the US has the gratitude of both countries' establishments. Cost of it all is that the US is now the arbiter of Indo-Pakistan affairs and the two new nuclear powers are eating out of American hands. But the biggest negative point is that the two countries are now more likely to negotiate CBMs and ignore the real problems posed by WMDs from a long-term viewpoint.

Are CBMs, no matter how perfect, a solution to the problems posed by NVMDS? One should not be misunderstood: one is not against CBMs as such; one supports all real CBMs. But when we have eliminated the chances of accidents in storage, transportation, servicing and have a perfect C3 for the WMDs, including preventing their unauthorised use and present rulers' finger staying firmly over the final button, what then?

Can such CBMs prevent the election of a party like Shiv Sena or

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Ban on faulty vehicles

A year or two back the government made much hue and cry and said that there would be no noise pollution and no emission of polluted smoke from the old vehicles. People obeyed it, more or less, by colouring and denting their old vehicles and went smoothly in front of the law enforcers.

Two years after, the streets are full of polluted smoke and dilapidated cars, which make mockery of the authority by roaming on the street with all cylinders on.

This is the present situation on the street and yet it is happening in front of the law enforcers. I believe something will be done to save the citizens from this unavoidable harassment. Let us breathe freely and live in the city!

Bhasib
Dhaka

Channelling the private way...

Private channels and package programmes are common jargons

to our media people. From mancho (theatre stage) we have developed performers of high calibre.

We should always appreciate the fact that the theatre movement has contributed towards our cultural splendour. The movement was initiated after the independence but possibly the flow was there since long. We have seen the transformation ourselves.

I am not a connoisseur of theatre but can understand we have walked a long way on our very own to achieve a unique status. What a rewarding act it is! Very recently, a private TV channel was celebrating her anniversary and fortunately I was able to watch a programme which showed review of the programmes aired by them over the year.

I was overwhelmed by the quality of some of the programmes. Given the right ingredients, we can produce original and better subject matters.

We can live and enjoy life with national and private channels! Right now we need spirited lead-

ers.
Ashfaq Ahmed
Dhaka

Syllabus -- English medium schools

As a guardian I am familiar with the syllabus of English medium schools (EMS) at home and abroad. In Dhaka, my son and children of relatives have read or are reading in such schools. During occasional coaching sessions at home, I get the opportunity to browse through the textbooks prescribed for different subjects in several classes.

What concerns me is the heavy accent on Western history, culture, literature, and geography, and paucity of local writers on local and foreign topics. There should be more chapters on Asia and writers from Asia, especially South East Asia.

We are producing Western-oriented children, who later become very keen for further studies in the West. The spirit of nationalism and culture is eroded, or the base is not strong enough. Later many of these

youth do not wish to return to their homeland, as the anchoring is missing or weak.

Our education policy planners have to go deeper into reviewing the guidelines for syllabi followed in the local EMSs, and revise it accordingly. The ministry may encourage a series of seminars on different aspects of English-medium education in Bangladesh, to draw up a modular national education Code for the EMS.

Md. Abd
Dhaka

By-election

The recently held by-election of Dhaka-10 constituency broke all the past records of rigging and false casting of votes. The government has failed completely to hold the election in a free, fair, and neutral atmosphere. And perhaps the present government has to pay the price for the massive irregularities which really symbolise the death of democracy. While most of the organisations and observers believe that there were rigging and false votes, the

government is alone in singing its own rhymes that the election was held in a free and fair manner. How can people disbelieve what they have watched or read in TV channels and newspapers after the election? Though the candidate of the four party alliance won the election, the alliance has lost the credibility which the people of Bangladesh had in it during the general elections of 2001. Now the government's path has become full of thorns.

There is no doubt that Mr. Fala won the by-election, but at the cost of his party's image. It was a bad bargain, of course, on the part of the government.

Wajahat Anwar
Mirpur, Dhaka

Listen, politicians

While talking to a reporter, the former president, HM Ershad said, "Without Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman there would have been no Bangladesh".

For this statement, the nation would always remember him (Ershad).

I personally never supported him (Ershad), but now for this statement I will say he is a big hearted politician.

I would urge other politicians to speak the truth and reach a consensus on the history of our liberation war. They must rise above the level of petty party politics in the greater interest of the nation.

S Zaman Khan
Pennsylvania, USA

A strange country!

Kazi Faruque's organization Proshika worked well on poverty alleviation and social developments through decades. Proshika had been active against fundamentalist powers that oppose the spread of liberal modernization and consciousness that the NGOs advocate. NGOs create awareness against dowry and early marriages among people in the rural areas and they are against all kinds of discriminations in the name of religion. I guess good things and good people do not last long in this country. That's why Kazi Faruque lay behind the bars today. And the peo-

ple, who once used to praise the man, are now accusing him of being a corrupt seditious. Is it really a crime to support a political party in a liberal country like Bangladesh? And why wasn't he accused when the Awami League government was in power? Is it because he supported that party, and the present government is harassing him not because he has done something wrong, but because of the fact that he supported their rival? It's really a strange country.

Kh. Asef Safa Kabir Upal
Lalmatia
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Dhaka

The vilest form of brutality

Of late, human brutality has, perhaps, for the first time reached its height around the Iraqi captives in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. A picture recently published in one of the dailies of the country shows that ferocious dogs were allowed to bite a wretched, helpless captive who lay almost dead and naked on the

ground. Blood was oozing from different parts of his body bitten by the dogs. An American soldier with a dog beside him was looking at the dying captive with a smiling face. At this, a question may certainly arise. Where is humanity and where is Geneva Convention, though we very often talk of these things? A man who is a captive is really a helpless human being. Anything may be imposed on him. This is true about the American soldiers as well.

In fact, those who are posted to kill in the war field, are no more than ordinary men. They are appointed and used in war by the ruling class or that section of people who are in power. To exercise power, the rulers very often impose their selfish whims on common people. Most wars or misanthropic acts, so far we know, are directly or indirectly linked with those whims of a few.

Perhaps, the time has come to reassess the definition of humanity. Nobody actually knows why the war started in Iraq in the first place.

Md. Nurul Amin
Uttara, Dhaka