

## The foreign minister's fury *Amateurish outburst or policy shift?*

**T**HE state of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship has suddenly taken centre-stage in the media. What has captured our attention is the extremely strong comments of the Bangladesh foreign minister on certain aspects of the Bangladesh-India relationship in the presence of the Indian and Pakistani heads of missions. We are taken by surprise at his outburst.

The timing of the remarks makes us wonder as to what has changed of late in respect of our bilateral relationship that has provoked the country's top diplomat to react in the way he did.

We recall that the BNP government considered the coming to power of the Congress-led coalition government in New Delhi as a window of opportunity. The visit of our foreign minister to India and his comments thereafter had all the indications of a new beginning in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

What could have occurred in the recent past that could instigate such an outburst by the foreign minister? One, he has perhaps taken umbrage at the fact that, while the Indian prime minister called up Sheikh Hasina to express his sympathy following the August 21 incident, he did not call the Bangladesh prime minister, as was done by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

This could have been construed as India's bypassing of the government in Dhaka and siding with the Awami League. The protocol given to Sheikh Hasina, and the level of meetings arranged for her during her visit to India, before any meeting with PM Khaleda Zia, was also not lost on the BNP coalition government.

Certain comments in a section of the Indian press that were published following the attack on Sheikh Hasina, which were critical of the BNP government, also could have added to the foreign minister's chagrin.

Even if, for the sake of argument, the Indian prime minister's not telephoning our prime minister immediately following August 21 was a breach of protocol, then could it not have been better and more effectively communicated through the normal diplomatic channels? Did it call for such a public outburst?

It is common knowledge that diplomacy is conducted away from the public glare. Even at the worst of times, the harshest of sentiments and strongest of objections are conveyed secretly. In fact, the harder the line the more secretly it is done, unless of course Bangladesh has concluded that our bilateral relations have degraded to such a level that no-holds barred public denunciation is called for.

So the question is, is that the case? Has our relationship with India come to such a pass? If so, why? We think the people have a right to know, and the government has a responsibility to tell us, simply because the government needs to carry the people with it, if such a drastic change of policy towards India is to be pursued.

If, on the contrary, the foreign minister's outburst does not reflect the policy of the government, as indicated by other senior ruling party policy-makers, then an immediate damage control move should be set in motion.

Given the importance and sensitivity of Bangladesh-India relations we should avoid such amateurish outbursts in the future.

Diplomacy must be conducted in a more temperate manner.

## Camera at Rokeya Hall

### *The news is disturbing*

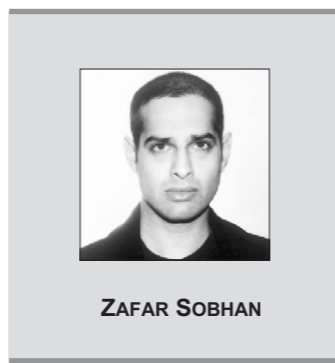
**S**TRANGE things are happening in society these days. A report carried by the press says that the students of Rokeya Hall of Dhaka University have been greatly embarrassed by the discovery of a video camera from a bathroom of their dormitory. The purpose of placing the device in a bathroom needs little elaboration. The news is disturbing not only to the students and their guardians but to all sane elements having a modicum of respect for our social values.

The report also indicates that the hall authorities did not pay sufficient attention to the matter, though a similar camera was found at the annex of the dormitory nearly two weeks back. But the students were not cautioned and no attempt was made to find out the culprits. But the question is, was it right for the hall authorities to ignore the issue? Such activities are a clear intrusion into the privacy of students. And the authorities are supposed to ensure that students are not harassed or disgraced in any manner by unscrupulous elements who might be engaged in the business of selling nude pictures.

It is indeed a matter of concern that young women are exploited in many ways in our society. The Rokeya Hall incident, however, shows that they might get trapped in an immoral business even without being aware of their involvement in it.

The hall authorities should take the matter seriously since modesty and privacy of a female student is not something that can be allowed to degenerate into a source of money making. A thorough investigation into the incident must be conducted to find out how the device could make its way to the dormitory and who were behind it. The students stay at the dormitory to pursue higher education and not to expose themselves to the devious scheme of any pervers. It is the responsibility of the hall authorities to ensure that they are not disturbed in any manner.

## Cooperation not confrontation



ZAFAR SOBHAN

**I** spent the past two days at a dialogue between young journalists from India and Bangladesh organised by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute.

The idea behind the dialogue was to get journalists from both countries together to discuss issues of bilateral concern, and to see if anything could be done about the gap in perception that exists between the two countries, and especially the gap in perception between the media of the two countries.

It was hoped that this kind of person to person contact would help the Indian media see things from the Bangladeshi perspective, and vice versa, and that this would go some way towards closing the perception gap that exists between the media of the two countries.

The dialogue was, to my mind, quite a success. We spent two days discussing and debating the main issues of concern between the two countries: trade and economic relations, water, security, perception of each other's policies, and so on.

The debate occasionally became pointed, but people listened respectfully to opposing viewpoints, and engaged with them in a meaningful way, and speaking with the other participants both during and after the

conference, there seemed to be a general consensus that hearing the other side's perspective on issues had been an invaluable experience.

The discussions were very fruitful and there was more agreement than disagreement, perhaps because the journalists who would come to such a dialogue, almost by definition, are the type who would be more responsive to the opposing point of view in the first place, and believe that cooperation rather than confrontation is the way to solve our problems.

I really think we opened the eyes

relationship is dialogue within each country on the bilateral relationship.

Neither the Bangladeshi nor the Indian delegation was fully representative of either media or popular opinion in each country. In both countries there exist significant constituencies that prefer confrontation over cooperation as a means to advance their nation's agendas, and it is these constituencies that are the impediments to a more mutually beneficial relationship.

The fact that there exist constituencies within the media and the general public in India that are

at the border who believe that confrontation rather than cooperation is the more effective way in which to advance their country's national interests.

The confrontational approach appears to have an eloquent advocate in the person of our honourable Foreign Minister Morshed Khan who, apparently unmindful of the occasion, took the opportunity to launch a broadside against India (not just the Indian media as has been reported by some), in the speech with which he opened the dialogue on Tuesday.

approach is unlikely to bear dividends is not the same thing as saying that we do not have legitimate grievances, nor is it the same thing as saying that India is right and we are wrong.

It is simply a question of diplomacy. From a simple practical point of view, the idea that we could wage a trade war with India is laughable.

The \$3 billion dollars of Indian exports to Bangladesh that the foreign minister threatened he could bring to a halt "like that" is a small piece of India's total economy of \$650 billion. One half of one per-

cent, in fact. But as our export and domestic economy is heavily reliant on Indian inputs, halting Indian exports would have a catastrophic impact here. To say nothing of the fact that most Indian goods would simply find their way here through unofficial channels, thus denying us much needed customs revenue.

I actually don't know why I am even responding to the minister's words as though they were an actual policy proposal.

The foreign minister is a smart man and he knows as well as anyone that the Bangladesh economy cannot do without Indian inputs, and that threats to issue a statutory regulatory order on Indian goods are nothing more than chest-thumping rhetoric.

Now, as I have mentioned, we certainly do have legitimate grievances when it comes to the bilateral

relationship, and the minister did an effective job of enumerating them -- trade, water-sharing, unsubstantiated allegations of insurgent training camps, etc.

But the question is whether taking a bellicose posture towards India and threatening a trade war is the best way to advance the Bangladesh agenda.

This is an internal debate we need to have within the country. Now, one could argue that the approach we take depends on the approach that the Indians take, and if they are uncooperative and confrontational, then we gain nothing by being conciliatory and accommodating in return.

But this would only be true if India were monolithically anti-Bangladeshi, and it isn't, any more than Bangladesh is monolithically anti-Indian.

The simple fact of the matter is that the more bellicose and confrontational our attitude towards India, the more we empower those elements in India that are implacably opposed to us.

If the hard-liners on both sides get to dictate policy then we stand to lose far more than India does.

Confrontation would cost both countries, but there can be no doubt that it would cost Bangladesh more.

There are many things that we want from India -- indeed that we believe we should get as a matter of right -- such as trade concessions and a more equitable water-sharing deal -- but something tells me that we are unlikely to get them if we continue to take a confrontational "bring it on" approach to the bilateral relationship.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

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of the Indian delegation, who will return home armed with a more sophisticated understanding of our concerns and the awareness that, popular perception to the contrary notwithstanding, Bangladesh has emerged as a nation seething with Indian interests and that India should stand prepared to counter such hostility by any means necessary. There clearly exist hard-liners in India who are not our friends.

The question for Bangladeshis -- and the debate that I believe needs to take place within the country -- is what should be our attitude and posture towards India given that there are elements within India that are both friendly and unfriendly towards us.

The debate we need to have is whether a cooperational or a confrontational approach is more likely to be in our national interest.

There are many on both sides of

What was noteworthy about Morshed's rather undiplomatic outburst (apart from the fact that the Indian High Commissioner was sitting on his right when he delivered it) was the confrontational tone and posture that he took.

I doubt that too many people in Bangladesh would argue with the minister's complaint that India has not done nearly enough to open up its markets to Bangladeshi goods, but his threat that Bangladesh might take retaliatory action to bring India's \$3 billion trade with Bangladesh grinding to an immediate halt certainly raised eyebrows.

I don't think that there is any other word to describe the minister's speech than confrontational.

The question is whether such an approach is likely to be effective. Somehow, I doubt it.

Now, to say that a confrontational

cent, in fact.

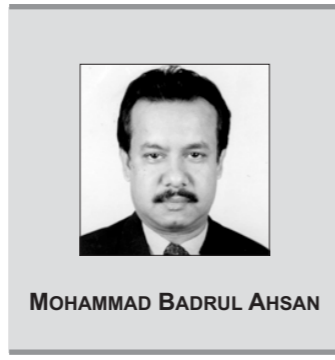
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## A nation of courage



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**A** nation of Courage was the slogan for the Republican National Convention held at the Madison Square Garden in New York last week. New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the First Lady of the United States Laura Bush and a host of other firebrand speakers proclaimed that George Bush was a courageous man, who was their choice for the next president of the United States. They all asked for four more years for President Bush and supported his war on terrorism. They all said it again and again that Bush was fighting this war not for anybody else but for America.

In so much as these were election time rhetoric and political hot air, the speakers at the Republican Convention had the uncanny resonance of something that happened more than 70 years ago. On 01 February 1933, Adolf Hitler said in his Proclamation to the German Nation in Berlin: " Now, people of Germany, give us four years and then pass judgment upon us... May God Almighty give our work His blessing, strengthen our purpose, and endow us with wisdom and the trust of our people, for we are fighting not for ourselves but for Germany".

Wait a minute before you jump to any conclusion. Nobody is trying to compare the Republicans to the Nazis and George Bush to Adolf Hitler. We are talking about different people in different countries at different times. But the children of Hungary might beg to differ. A survey of 34000 high school students showed that 25 per cent of them disliked Adolf Hitler closely followed by George Bush with 23 per cent. By golly be jolly! Bush is even more unpopular than former Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, the survey says!

vicemen were reported dead in Iraq. The hostage horror in Beslan, Russia came much later and by then Richard Cohen was no longer counting. This tragedy claimed the lives of several hundred hostages, half of them children. Nobody is blaming these deaths on George Bush. These are insane brutalities committed by madmen who deserve our strongest condemnations. But these are also the signal failure of the Bush Doctrine that terrorism can be terrorized, that violence can be met with violence.

to love the terrorists. But how much can he hate them? Not much I guess, because hatred cannot root out hatred just like a wet tissue cannot wipe much water. Jackson Diehl, deputy editorial editor of The Washington Post wrote last week that the report submitted by a panel led by James R. Schlesinger gave clear and meticulous account of how decisions made by President Bush, his top political aides and senior military commanders led directly to the prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib prison and other detention

commander in Iraq as migration of best practice.

Terrorism is commonly the covert operation of confused minds, people who swing between truth and falsehood, hope and despondency, promise and prevarication until they explode one day to take things in their hands. But terrorism is never a political process like a revolution, which is smoldering fire that flares up. Terrorism is too many sparks, which fail to start the fire. To go one notch up, terrorism is a kind of sickness, a delusion that holds

searching, no apology. The real courage of conviction was drowned in the commotion of the claque.

It pained me to watch the dog-and-pony show of the Republican Convention, which reminded me of the same demagoguery that characterizes our politics. It reminds us of a joke about Laloo Prasad Yadav, the central Minister for Railway in India and former maverick Chief Minister of Bihar. Once he visited Japan and was asked what he thought of it. A wisecracking Laloo said in his usual drawl that, if given to them, the Japanese had promised to turn Bihar into Japan in ten years. What was his reaction to that? Laloo said he had made a counter offer instead. He promised to turn Japan into Bihar if given only five years' time.

Starting from the disputed election of George Bush to his disturbing selection for another term, it seems a lot of bad influence has rubbed off on the US politics from the Third World. The alleged election fraud, the chicanery, the cover-ups, fire-brand speeches, and use of violence for political gains (not on the home ground unlike the Third World countries) are now the grist for mill in the politics of the most advanced democracy in the world.

The Republican Convention ended on that sad note last week irrespective of what happens to George Bush in November. It seemed odd that a nation of courage should have raised such cowardly politicians who tell lies to stay in power and push their evil designs. Bad news for our politicians. Others are catching up with them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

Terrorism is commonly the covert operation of confused minds, people who swing between truth and falsehood, hope and despondency, promise and prevarication until they explode one day to take things in their hands. But terrorism is never a political process like a revolution, which is smoldering fire that flares up. Terrorism is too many sparks, which fail to start the fire. To go one notch up, terrorism is a kind of sickness, a delusion that holds people hostage on the brink of their minds.

But one man's courage can be another man's fear and that is what the hawkish speakers in the Republican Convention failed to realize. Every time they belloyed their war cry against terrorism, they sent fear into the hearts of people across the world. When George Bush said in the Republican Convention that the war on terrorism was in fact winnable, Richard Cohen, a columnist of The Washington Post, was counting. On that very day suicide bombers killed 16 people in Israel; 12 Nepalese were massacred in Iraq; five Afghans were accidentally killed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan; nine people were killed by a suicide bomber at a Moscow subway station, and five more American ser-

Because, terrorism is evil in case George Bush has not realized. It is as evil as crime and drugs. What happened to the war on drugs, declared by the United States more than 30 years ago? What has happened to the war on crime? Unfortunately, certain things in the world cannot be eradicated like smallpox, and evil is one such thing, which has to be managed. That is why God has created opposites. That is why we need to affirm our virtues in order to deny our vices. That is why we pour water to put out the fire, and look for a shade in the sun instead of vowing to destroy its heat. That is why love is the most effective antidote to hatred.

No, George Bush does not have

facilities. In December 2002, Schlesinger report says, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld authorized a number of harsh methods to interrogate the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. When challenged by the military lawyers, the policy was revised in April 2003. But only the policy was revised, not its practice which was already circulating from prison to prison. Thus what started in Guantanamo Bay immediately traveled to Afghanistan, but did not reach Iraq until August 2003 when Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, then the commander at Guantanamo Bay, arrived in Iraq. He gave the policy on use of harsh methods to Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the top

people hostage on the brink of their minds.

But then those who believe terrorism can be fought back, are on the brink of their own minds as well. It turns them into pathological liars, subjecting them to perverse delusion of the reverse kind when they want others to believe in their own illusions. What came out loud and clear from the Republican Convention is an echo of that delusion when speaker after speaker roiled in their political exuberance and upheld the proverbial windmill and their American Don Quixote. There was no mention of their mistakes in the invasion of Iraq, false WMDs and brutality in Abu Ghraib and other prisons. There was no soul-

## OPINION

## Attack on AL rally: Threat to national security

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**I** READ with keen interest the article written by Brig Gen Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc, (Retd) entitled "Attack on Awami League Rally: Threat to National Security," published September 3. I always find the Brig Gen's writings stimulating and thought-provoking. I would like to make some comments on his article and add some of my observations.

Brig Gen Sakhawat wrote, "Our law enforcing agencies remained hollow, when billions of taka were spent during the last three decades on so called modernisation." He then went on to describe how money was squandered on trivial issues like changing uniforms and ceremonial parades and not enough was done to modernise the forces. I differ on this issue with the writer.

The fact is that the police and other law enforcing agencies, including crime detection, criminal investigation, and the judicial prosecution departments, did not get the right priority in the national budget. The meager budget that was allocated was barely enough to pay the personnel, leaving very little for training, equipment, and logistics.

Where were we spending billions of taka then? It went to build an oversized but ill-equipped military

that was to defend Bangladesh against external aggression. Compared to the giant defence budget, the police budget was a midget. While preparing against a hypothetical enemy, we neglected to address the mushrooming danger of internal threat. Even in the question of internal threat, our focus since 1972 had been the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT); a sizeable portion of our army had been stationed there. But CHT insurgency never threatened the mainstream Bangladesh political leadership or challenged our democratic polity, as is being done now.

In 1996, at a seminar organized by BISS, I argued that the threat of external aggression against Bangladesh was minimal to nonexistent then or later, whereas there was clear and present danger from within -- both from the extreme right and the extreme left. I argued that our security forces, including the armed forces, should be trained and equipped so that they would be capable of meeting the danger posed by these extremist forces. Now we can clearly see that our army's tanks, navy's frigates, and the air force's fighters are of little use against the threat that has emerged. The military force structure, training, and equipment are designed to thwart a conventional attack on our frontier. Our armed forces, though

quite huge in size, are not adequately trained or equipped to deal with the internal security situation. That is why, when deployed, such as in Operation "Clean Heart," despite all good intent, they end up creating an unwarranted mess.

Brig Gen Sakhawat rightly pointed out the danger posed by arms smugglers to Bangladesh's national security. For too long we have been denying the fact that the insurgents across the border, in connivance with local collaborators, are using Bangladesh as a transit route for arms. Huge arms caches, seized or accidentally discovered from time to time, were hushed up. We were told to shut up, lest we tarnish the national image abroad.

I recall the incident of a truckload of small arms and ammunition that was accidentally discovered by villagers in Bogra. The truck that started its journey from near Tripura border was heading North-East. A look at the map will reveal the probable destination, i.e. Nepal. Who would be the probable customers for this huge supply? The answer is Maoist guerillas in Nepal, of course.

Then take the case of the biggest arms haul in Chittagong. An ocean-going ship must have brought those sophisticated weapons to the outer anchorage, unloaded them on to a barge, which brought the weapons to a government jetty to be loaded on

trucks. Somehow the plan misfired and the weapons with the trucks were seized by the police. It was apparent from the type and quantity of weapons seized that those were destined for very advanced and organised guerrilla outfits outside the border. However, within hours, our politicians were pointing fingers at their opponents as possible culprits. Months later, the only people in custody are some labourers, truck drivers, and small time smugglers. Which ship brought the arms, from where, where were they destined, who are the local collaborators and beneficiaries -- all these questions remain unanswered. Such huge arms smuggling needs meticulous planning and coordination at very high level. The question is, how high is that level?

I cannot but comment on some of the strategic issues brought out by the Brig Gen. He wrote, "It would not be out of place to mention that one of the strategic considerations that drove India to support Bangladesh liberation was the prospect of unlimited access to the East." I am yet to see any document, memoir, or history book, where it was mentioned that back in 1971 "the prospect of unlimited access to the East" was a consideration for India to go to war against Pakistan.

In fact, the then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, was reluctant to go to war. After March 1971, she and her government,

along with the Soviet Union and many others, tried in every way to convince Pakistani President Yahya Khan to come to a just and honourable solution of the Bangladesh issue. While preparing for war, she kept the windows of negotiation open till the very end. That Mrs. Gandhi was not for war was evident from the fact that she was addressing a public meeting in Calcutta in the afternoon of December 3, 1971, while the Pakistan Air Force launched attacks on Indian air bases. On being informed of the air attack, she rushed back to Delhi, conferred with the military commanders, and then ordered a counter attack. The first Indian air attack did not come till well past the mid-night of December 3-4. Downsizing Pakistan would be in the strategic interest of India, but to say that that was the prime motive for India's support to our Liberation War would be to deny Indian leadership and the people the moral high ground of standing beside a populace that was fighting for independence and was subjected to genocide by a military regime.

Brig Gen Sakhawat wrote that India was interested in using Chittagong port in order to keep a watch on Chinese naval activities in the Bay of Bengal. Now that is stretching imagination a little too far. First of all, for China, Bay of Bengal

is a far lower priority than South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Japan Sea, or the Pacific. Secondly, the Chinese Navy is still essentially a coastal navy, years away from attaining capabilities of sustained operation in distant waters. Thirdly, the Chinese are making frenzied economic progress. Their leadership is presently focused on gaining international respectability; they want to be accepted as a responsible member of the international community. I do not foresee that the Chinese leadership would venture into any form of adventurism in the future.

It is in this context that India and China are going to forge greater friendship and cooperation as two major powers of Asia. Even if in some distant future, Chinese navy does operate in the Bay of Bengal, the Indians have their bases in the Andamans -- guarding the entry and exit, beside strings of bases and facilities all along the western coast of the Bay. Why would they bottle up their navy in an already bottled up port called Chittagong? Indian proposal (if there was any) of use of Chittagong for transporting goods to and from North-Eastern India should be examined by Bangladesh from a commercial viewpoint. If it makes economic sense, we may accept it, otherwise reject it. Just look at Pakistan! They are negotiating with

their arch rival India for the pipeline that would carry gas from Iran to India passing through their territory. It is all simple economics. If additional customers for our port bring us increased revenue, we should go for it. Just because the customer is an Indian should be no bar.

Brig Gen Sakhawat rightly pointed out the threat posed by the "Islamists" to the security of Bangladesh. Prior to August 21, even mentioning the existence of "Islamists" or religious extremists was taboo. Now I see these terms being used frequently. Was August 21 our 9/11?

In Bangladesh today, moderate Islam is on the wane, extremism is on the rise. Our situation is somewhat similar to that of Indonesia. Islam in Indonesia was, for centuries, a synthesis of local and Islamic culture and traditions. There was never any conflict, until the new breed of Islamist under Jamia Islamia (JI) started preaching the Wahabi brand of Islam.

The Indonesian government had long denied the existence of any militant groups in the country until the Bali bombing -- a catastrophe that came as a shattering blow to the government's claims. Interestingly, in Bangladesh both the AL and BNP government tried to cover up the issues. Not a single bombing incident was properly investigated and

people were denied the right to know the fate of the investigations -- irrespective of whether AL or BNP was in power.

It was like nurturing a cancer hoping that it would cure itself. Such self-denial never pays. I hope the attack on AL rally on August 21 will help us all to wake up to the danger that is lurking within. I hope both AL and BNP will come together on this issue and confront it squarely before the Frankenstein destroys them both.

Bangladesh today faces the twin danger of extremists from the far right in the form of Bangla Bhai and his likes, and from the extreme left, in the form of Sharbahars. The socio-political situation is ripe for the proliferation of both. Widening rich-poor divide, increasing landlessness, poverty and unemployment are the breeding ground for the leftist extremists. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of madrassas of all kinds that are producing thousands of obscurantist mullahs, totally alienated from the rest of the world and are likely Jehadi recruits.

To conclude, I once again thank Brig Gen Sakhawat for a very well-written piece that sounded a timely warning.

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