

Dhaka-Delhi meeting

An opportunity for making real progress in water sharing

THE two-day long meeting of the Bangladesh-India Joint Commission of Experts of the Joint River Commission, beginning in Dhaka today, is significant for a number of reasons. The secretary-level meeting will address some core issues pertaining to water sharing. Another meeting between the home secretaries of the two countries is scheduled to be held on Thursday.

We look forward to the JCE meeting with the expectation that it will be able to make good progress towards settling the outstanding problem of water sharing. The issue of water sharing has long been straining bilateral ties between the two countries. It is particularly sensitive for the lower riparian Bangladesh. For a deltaic plain, the natural flow of the rivers is vital for its agro-based economy. We have already had our fingers burnt by the Farakka barrage which has had terrible effects on the north and north-western region of the country, as the major rivers are deprived of the natural flow of water. The barrage is also responsible for flooding during the monsoon.

Reports indicate that the two sides have done the groundwork for hammering out a deal to share water of some common rivers. We expect that the meeting, long overdue, will be able to overcome the technical difficulties and other differences to reach a durable accord in this respect. Obviously, a breakthrough in this crucially important area will be a big booster to bilateral relations.

Settling the issue of water sharing is important for some other reasons as well. The immediate past Indian government was contemplating a river-linking project that would leave it with absolute control over the flow of some common rivers. But New Delhi assured Dhaka recently that no such plan would be implemented without consulting the latter, which means that Bangladesh's interests won't be harmed.

Since the two neighbours have always expressed their willingness to settle the disputes through dialogue, the secretary-level meeting has created an opportunity to make a solid step forward and build confidence for effective interaction in future.

Capital deluged

Dhaka must be safeguarded from floods

RAIN has been falling in Dhaka for the last 48 hours, threatening to flood many parts of the city and render movement impossible. This recent deluge comes hard on the heels of the devastating floods of July that wracked the entire country and that we are just now beginning to recover from.

What the recent downpour in Dhaka has taught us is that even when the surrounding countryside is not victim to massive flooding, the capital can be severely affected, and that it is time that the government took serious steps to safeguard the capital from this kind of havoc.

Dhaka is the nerve-centre of the country. Not only is it the seat of government, it is also the commercial capital of the country, and, for better or for worse, many things in the country revolves around it. In fact, as we saw in July, keeping Dhaka functioning is actually key to being able to provide effective flood relief elsewhere. It is thus imperative that measures be put in place immediately to ensure that the city is not debilitated by inclement weather conditions which result in much of the business of the entire country coming grinding to a halt.

The reasons for the increased flooding of Dhaka are readily apparent. The main problem is poor management of the catchment areas and insufficiently developed drainage facilities, which in turn are a result of unplanned and often unlawful construction, and encroachment on and filling in of the water bodies that served as the city's natural drainage system. This should never have been permitted to happen and none of our governments is blameless.

Nevertheless, the issue before us is how to address the crisis that exists now in the city. There is supposedly a master plan in place, but as far as we can tell, nothing is being done in a masterful way. The government must take cognisance of the potential reach of the problem, and begin to implement measures to keep Dhaka running smoothly during deluges such as the one of the past few days or even worse ones that could occur in future.

Massacre and scare



ABDUL BAYES

A reign of panic seems to be prevailing in the country over threats of bomb blasts. The other day, little children of a school were forced to run hastily for cover following a bomb threat. Dhaka university authorities had to be on their toes following a similar kind of threat. Panic seems to have reached a peak when the Country Director of the World Bank has to leave the country for the same reason. However, most of the rumors were not found to be real. Nevertheless, such threats are really keeping people reeling under tension all the time.

The secretariat has been put under severest security system. Even the ministers of the cabinet seem to be no less scared than the common people. The monsters might attack the ministers also appears to be the sentiment. The other day, ruling party BNP arranged a public meeting at Muktagon in protest against the grisly grenade attack of August 21.

Cabinet ministers addressed the meeting. The interesting part of the episode is that tight security checks were ensured with each and every participant going through a physical check up. Dog squads were let loose to sniff around the spots for security.

The security checks so enforced upon a government-backed rally unleashed two aspects. First, Awami League should have had in action such a security system on the eve of the public meeting organised on August 21. A government that

rare event in future. In a democratic society, holding such meetings is the dominant means of pulling public support. Thus indirectly, democratic parleys have turned out to be costly and cumbersome.

To arrest such unwanted massacre and scare in future, the government should have taken the August 21 attack very seriously from the beginning. Towing the traditional path of setting up a one-man commission, the government has grievously demonstrated the lack of a sense of sincerity in identifying the

surprisingly, it would take time. But decades after decades might be lost if we do not follow the correct sequence in the aftermath of August 21. In other words, have we started from a correct corner to look for the clues? For example, could we identify how and why the police force deployed to ensure security fled from the field of occurrence? Were shells of teargas thrown when panic propelled people to seek for a safer place or take the wounded ones to the hospitals, and, if so, why? Could we collect the finger-

very short while. The long run solution in minimising the malaise lies in the total attitude of the government in dealing with the devils.

Allow us to raise a few questions in testing the attitude of the government in dealing with the devils. Late Dr Humayun Azad clearly expressed his suspicions and named the people he suspected. Allegedly, some of them are parliament members. Has there been any attempt to take them into custody and address the question of the attempted killing? How is it that a

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We want a secular society with complete freedom of expression, economic freedom, and good governance. The "blame game" offers very little to help us come out of the conundrum that the country is faced with. We would like to strongly assume that, by this time, the government had received a wake-up call regarding the malafide intentions of the culprits. Cooking stories about August 21 might turn out to be costly in the long run.

ensures security only for its supporters leaving the opposition in woes, cannot be called a good government. Second, and admirably perhaps, the government belatedly arranged more or less similar security checks for subsequent meetings organised by the opposition parties.

That means to us that holding public meeting in open spaces either by government or opposition parties has become riskier these days. The mammoth public meetings that we are accustomed to watch, attended by a huge number of people, would possibly become a

culprits associated with the conundrum. The lack of seriousness could also be in evidence from the statements of some of the policy makers who apparently pointed the finger at Awami League for the attack of August 21. After all, a party cannot gain by killing its party chief, leaders, and workers through grenade attacks. The unbelievable hypothesis on board after a few days of the occurrence tends to raise question as to the sincerity of the government in catching the culprits.

The clues to the August 21 massacre are yet to be found. Not sur-

prints of the grenades lying here and there, even in toilets or in central jail?

As I mentioned before, the spectre of the scare of bomb blasts has also been haunting the government high ups. The bomb scare or threats are jeopardising the normal lives and activities of the common people. The whole society seems to be scared from threats, artificial or actual. Quite obviously, creation of public awareness, alerting the police force and upgrading the communication network might help stem the rot. But that would be for a

series of crossfire-killings are taking place in a regime where even law enforcing agencies are not supposed to be above the law? The last Awami League government attempted to identify the killers of Udichi and other bomb blasts. Allegedly, the charge-sheeted culprits were let free by the present government. There is all sorts of evidence that one can come up with to show that there is a grave lack of sincerity on the part of the government in facing the evil forces. And therefore, unless this changes, the massacres and scares are likely to

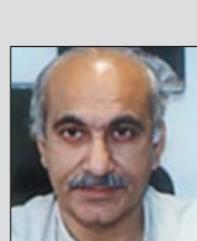
prevail upon us in the times to come. The government has to punish the culprits of the August 21 massacre for the sake of establishing a civilised society for which millions sacrificed lives.

The impact of such a situation on the economy of Bangladesh is not difficult to imagine. Investments are likely to be down and evidence to that end has already been surfacing. The image of the country to the outside world as a harbour of heavenly investments is likely to be adversely affected. Blaming the opposition for tarnishing the image of the government would turn out to be too old a tool try with. Going like this, the society is likely to be torn apart into politicised segments seeking for a sword to fight each other. The economic fundamentals are likely to go wrong when fundamentalists are allowed to go right.

We want none of them. We want a secular society with complete freedom of expression, economic freedom, and good governance. The "blame game" offers very little to help us come out of the conundrum that the country is faced with. We would like to strongly assume that, by this time, the government had received a wake-up call regarding the malafide intentions of the culprits. Cooking stories about August 21 might turn out to be costly in the long run.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

The ostrich of Delhi



M.J. AKBAR

THE chief attraction at the Gupta Shudhi Vaishnav Bhojanalaya, one of the honourable pitstops for heavy traffic on the highway between Pathankot and Jammu, was a large kiosk selling Lay's potato chips. I asked Guptaji Junior, who was minding the shop, how multinationals were faring in the struggle against domestic, cottage-industry pakoras, bhujia and samosas. How many packets of Lay's did he sell in a day? "About ten ... sometimes as many as 20. The truck drivers now want Lay's and water."

And the price? Twenty rupees. If you break up the price in one way, it comes to 50 paise for a fried, salted flake of potato: I imagine there can't be more than 40 of them in a large packet. Dissect the price in another way and it adds up to ten samosas. Guptaji Junior had a third take. He made only two rupees from every packet sold: 18 rupees went to the company. All it needed was for one friend, or, worse, relative, to drop in and pick up a packet. The earnings out of ten packets disappeared. What could one do? You can't be rude to a relative.

Life was much better in the pre-Lay's era, when all a relative wanted was a cooked savoury. The per-unit cost of hospitality

had jumped sharply with the arrival of Lay's. And then there were the rats, who were even worse than relatives. Once they nibbled off all the packets on display. "I tried to return those packets to the company but they refused, saying that they were into selling potato chips, not rat insurance." I could feel his pain.

But Guptaji Junior ended on an optimistic note. "From October the samosa will be king. In winter no one will buy these packets.

loop was security. As a policy this must rank among the higher grades of stupidity. The last thing any terrorist wants is to talk on a mobile phone, where records are maintained of every call made and to which number, and then locked into a computer until the policeman comes along. On the other hand, anyone who does want a conversation across the border can simply use a pre-paid chip on a satellite phone. Apparently, on one occasion when the supreme com-

on Pakistan's sporting calendar. On the other hand, the age of surprises is upon us. This week I saw an American cricket team on television, playing against New Zealand. The shock became slightly more explicable when one noted that it was a black-brown American XI. Clearly there is no tariff on the import of cricketers from West Indies. No wonder Brian Lara has to make do with a scratch side. All the potential Sobers, Kanhaias, Huntes, Worrells,

expected anything much. Shabbir Shah and Yasin Malik left an unusual marker in Delhi when they publicly suggested that some movement forward between India and Pakistan might be possible if Atal Behari Vajpayee were asked to head a Kashmir Committee, but since that is not going to happen, they can keep waiting.

I was in the city for the launch of the fourth volume of the collected speeches and writings of S.A. Shamim, organised by his ebullient

"Violence does not erupt for nothing. It is not that people are seized of a mad instinct to destroy property. What happened in Andhra? Andhra was peaceful. Six months ago an objective situation existed there. The Prime Minister and her colleagues with their pride and prejudices did not want to recognise the realities ... That is what has given rise to such vast destruction of life and property in Andhra. It was a French student who said a few years after the disturbances (in 1969 in France): we had to burn a few buses and buildings so that they should take notice of us."

Then came his sharp message about Kashmir, leavened with wit:

"There is a conspiracy of silence in every corner as far as the state of Kashmir is concerned ... the reason being in Kashmir there is no violence ... There is no response because there is no violence in Kashmir. If tomorrow there is violence, the way we have in Andhra, Mrs Gandhi and her colleagues would sit up ... Unfortunately for us who are in Kashmir, there is no railway property to destroy ... I do not think the situation will remain as it is."

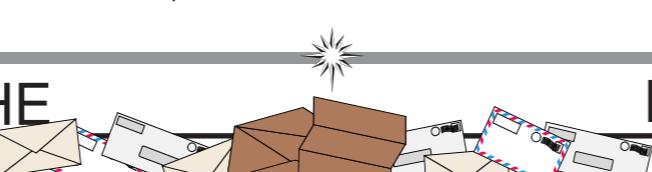
And then there was a memorable comment on Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who had unilaterally accepted the reality of Kashmir's accession to India but was still kept out in the cold: "You can today ignore Sheikh Abdullah but once he is no more on the scene, the new generation will not understand the language of secularism and the language of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi."

Is there need to say more? Once again the ostrich has descended on Delhi.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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 and social space

Politics and the politicians occupy too much social space in Dhaka, creating unnatural peaks in human interface. The trend has not changed since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In fact, today politics dominate the social scene. The point struck me as I was browsing through Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism (1993), wherein he elaborated on the social space dominated by the imperial empire-builders in the preceding centuries. Locally, critics have referred to the zamindari effect—a moral weakness of the regimes in power.

Under the cloak of democracy, this autocratic tendency cripples two-way communication at several levels: amongst the political parties; in the parliament; between the politicians and the voters, and the delicate interface between politics and bureaucracy (the civil service in charge of administering the public services). The cumulative effect of one-way communication (from the

politicians, who all consider themselves as leaders) encourages impatience, intolerance, and hate campaigns. In between, during the last three decades, we have had bouts of autocratic governance. Now, after the 21/8 bomb attack, the very future of political governance has become a perturbing issue. With larger political footprints crowding the front stage, the other players in the society feel the strain of performing with less elbowroom, distorting the balanced output of a fast developing society. The books of wisdom point out that power lies not in using it. The consequences of overuse and misuse of power and influence are now apparent in almost all levels of the society. The situation is not changing decade after decade. There is the cynical feeling that politics is too important to be left to the politicians alone.

There is another serious parting of the way in the political pilgrimage towards the final goals of the budding nation. It erodes the sense of nationalism. Motivation erodes when the masses are confused and divided politically. This loss is differ-

ent from the role of the opposition. Irreparable damage is caused to the young generation in this tug of war of conflicting goals. Politics has become "popular" for the wrong reasons: it is believed to be a shortcut to success! There are no shortcuts in life, although there might be illusion in some cases. The majority have to take up the chores of working quietly in the background. Instant and fast food fall into different category. The inputs need raw materials and energy, and processing needs knowledge and experience, before the output (10 per cent of the 100pc input) becomes visible and could be enjoyed. Even with mechanization of agriculture, the farmers have to work hard to feed the nation. Systems losses go into the garbage bins. Why do we patronize garbage politics?

We are interested in the politicians, not in political culture (base, structure, and super-structure). What has gone wrong with the prime movers?

A Mahasen
Dhaka

Not interested in

politics!

As a veteran citizen (double-retired professionally) I have once again lost interest in politics. Initially, as a new voter, I was passively interested in healthy politics, as a healthy voter, as a newspaper reader. After middle-age, I started criticizing bad politics, in an amateurish way (every voter's right). Now I cannot keep pace with it.

The politicians are above criticism (a rare distinction), and the political leaders have armour-plated shields to ward off deadly radiation from the millions of voters (but not from the millions of votes)! Isolated and insulated, with supreme insularity of elegant vulgarity. Unapproachable and irreproachable. The shinghason is acquired through devious devices as custodians of public confidence. The armed brigades surrounding these celestial entities enjoy limitless power of immunity.

Now there is no point in trying to beat up a dead horse. Self-immolation was never a political virtue in this part of the world, now

they have risen to the occasion, for forced retirement (for a whole). 'Jolap' (flushing, purgative) is good for a sick system. But what is the prescription for millions suffering from political epidemic (name it as you like)? When the governors cannot be governed, who will govern the governors?

Perhaps we need a new PCS: Political Civil Service, which will keep track of the Political and Civic sides. Both these management techniques are in short supply, due to erosion and "Jinjira" (imitation) versions. Officially the movement has started: Beautifying Dhaka: It is a physical, visible, cosmetic programme, to impress visitors and foreigners (the locals are too sadistic to appreciate it). Long dead politics!

A citizen
Dhaka

E-politics?

With about 18 leaders of the main opposition party away abroad on treatment (suffering from the "21/8" aftereffects), how the party man-

ing committee will run and take decisions, vital to national interest? Through e-mail? That's electronic politics, something new in LDC Bangladesh.

Remote-control of a political party brings in unforeseen practical problems, specially when the opposition is trying to gear up to oust the regime. "Physician, heal thyself first." Why some of us are reminded of this maxim?

There are two sides to this current spate of political healing: one, the healing of the physical wounds and damages; and two, the mental political healing at the higher levels of national politics.

Politics in Dhaka hardly rises above the party level, if the past decades are an indication. Some national projects are injected into the confidential master plans as cosmetic palliatives. The hidden priorities are distorted: first comes the subjective security anchoring for continuity of the party's hold on the national assets... then comes sporadic but visible development projects with proper paper work, but

the tendering ritual is still a hazy area.

Look at the paradox: how electronic politics can succeed when the parliament politics is in limbo? Mystery, thy name is woman!

AZ, Dhaka

Tea industry

"Tea research hampered" is the headline in The Daily Star of Aug 28. Right: there is lack of official patronisation of the tea industry in Bangladesh. It is left at the routine level (how to politicize tea?!).

The monitoring is indifferent, and the development projects are not being adequately publicised.

According to media reports, the local consumption of tea is rising rapidly, and in the near future the volume of exports would be going down (less foreign exchange earning). Tea plantation has been started in the Northern districts, but the integrated effect on the market is not visible.

Bengalees are fond of 'ek cup cha' at regular intervals throughout the day, at home or in the office. At

home, our kettle is beside the gas stove from morning