

Home secretaries' meet

The focus on ground reality welcome

THE home secretary-level talks between India and Bangladesh, which concluded on Friday, addressed issues of mutual concern that have been in hibernation for a long time. It is a good thing that they talked about the ground realities and ways of dealing with them. They have not resorted to rhetoric, nor have they engaged in usual, almost ritualistic, trading of accusations. What we have witnessed is a pronounced emphasis on solving the outstanding problems, instead of raising contentious issues to score points over each other at the negotiating table.

The two neighbours have shown a better understanding of each other's sensitivities and perceptions. This augurs well as a confidence-building measure.

India has been constantly complaining that militant insurgents from Indian territory are crossing over to Bangladesh. The issue has been raised at almost every high-level meeting between the two countries in the recent past. Obviously, such allegations by a neighbour can only strain bilateral ties. We want this to come to an end through the dispelling of Indian misgivings.

However, the backlog of unresolved problems is quite heavy and it will take some sincere and sustained efforts to set things straight. The issues of border demarcation and handing over of enclaves have to be settled on a priority basis. The demarcation of 6.5 kilometers of border is long overdue.

Dhaka and Delhi have agreed to organise coordinated patrols through information sharing as a way of countering all kinds of illegal movements across the border. This will help curb smuggling, human trafficking, firing by BSF personnel on our civilians etc. The home secretaries' decision to talk over telephone to quickly address any problem, instead of waiting for a meeting, will hopefully add the element of dynamism that has so far been missing. We hope that the Dhaka meet has laid the basis for meaningful cooperation between the two countries in combating threats to each other's security.

Death on the highway

Time to talk road safety

THE head-on collision between a speeding truck and a wedding party-laden bus on the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar highway on Thursday that killed twenty-six and injured scores more was a horrendous tragedy that underlines the urgent priority that must be given to road safety in this country. Bangladesh has the most dangerous roads in Asia, and the government needs to give serious consideration to enacting reforms that might save some of the thousands of lives that are lost annually to traffic accidents.

The dangerous state of the country's highways has been responsible for deaths on a weekly if not a daily basis for many years without adequate steps being taken to make them safer. One hopes that this latest tragedy will jolt the government out of its inaction and bring the subject to the forefront of debate.

The real tragedy is that it would be relatively simple to enact common sense measures that would protect us all. It is not a complicated matter to ensure that the commercial vehicles and their drivers (which are responsible for the bulk of the accidents) are fit for the road and meet elementary safety standards.

The case of Thursday's wedding party accident was especially horrendous because it was caused by a confluence of events that one would have thought could easily have been averted. The truck which caused the accident was laden with illegally felled logs and was reportedly speeding to avoid having to pay further toll to the police. Finally, it was the presence of another truck parked on the road and unloading earth into an adjoining plot, that obstructed visibility and was the final factor causing the crash.

Simple registration and effective policing could have eliminated the prevalence of unsafe vehicles and drivers. Indeed, the truck with its contraband cargo should never have been on the roads in the first place, and the fact that the truck was speeding to avoid paying the police toll hardly needs elaboration. Nor can there be any excuse for vision obstructing vehicles to be parked on a highway.

The real tragedy was that this was entirely avoidable. The time has come for the government to enact measures to improve road safety. Only then will tragedies such as Thursday's, which killed over two dozen unsuspecting celebrants on their way back home from a joyous wedding, be averted. The government owes at least this much to the victims and their grieving survivors.

Eddies of thoughts after the floods

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

A crisis brings out the essence of a people and its leaders. This might sound like a cliché, something I normally avoid, but in the present context I am quite willing to live with it.

The floods of July-August 2004 were indeed a crisis. They have been called a disaster, even a catastrophe, in the national press and by the leadership of the nation. They have been compared with the floods of 1988 and 1998. Some two-thirds of the districts of the country and thirty million people were afflicted by them. Large areas of the capital of the nation were submerged under stinking, sewage-filled flood water. A very large amount of crops was lost, millions were hungry, medicines and drinking water were scarce. This was a crisis.

As usual, most of the flood-hit people bore its brunt with fortitude. Also as usual, there was an outpouring of sympathy from fellow citizens. Private and non-government organizations came forward with succour and there were numerous unsung individual acts of sympathy and help. These were edifying images of the nation. What could be more uplifting to the human spirit than the newspaper photograph of a young girl splashing across swirling flood waters, a packet of oral anti-diarrhoeal solution tightly held between her teeth, determined not to lose it?

Far less edifying have been the many other images that the floods threw up. One can consider the images around the political leadership of the country for one thing.

Though the situation was critical, the nation was quite familiar with it. Floods, even devastating ones, have become a regular event in the Bengali calendar. Yet, in crucial areas, the leaders appeared blinkered, unsure of themselves, and

Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday sought international assistance for post-flood rehabilitation." Not incidentally, such flip-flopping on critical issues was repeated after an atrocity that was committed only weeks later: leaders in power were

the problem. The confidence that the leadership needs to instill in the population on such a critical issue remains singularly absent.

These are generally matters for those placed high in leadership position. Unsurprisingly, the lesser

to underestimate the autonomous power of individual local "leaders" -- if that is the term to apply to them -- to do great evil. In the present context, for example, how on earth do we explain the reported action of a local leader in the district of

But certainly the image of the country's Prime Minister distributing relief goods among the flood affected people would stand out. It is not, however, her formal handout of *traan samagi* that is particularly noteworthy. A top leader of the country, particularly one in power, is naturally expected to perform such duty. What struck me were the saris she wore on her visits to people in distress. They were always the finest chiffon, (were they georgette?), in sky-blue or light purple or peach, the Prime Minister standing diva-like, resplendent against the backdrop of a huge throng of half-clad humanity, some in waist-deep, muddy, brackish waters, their hands outstretched. And in one unforgettable television footage, she was seated in a huge, ornate chair, the colour of gold, on a raised platform, while thousands of dirty, haggard supplicants stood in front of her -- women in tattered saris, emaciated children barely clothed. Probably the throne-like chair was some sycophant's idea of decency, but that is beside the point here.

What is not beside the point is the symbolism of it all. How I wished to see the Prime Minister of this poor country in a coarse, hand-woven, cotton sari (preferably striped), *anchal* gracefully wrapped around her waist, standing knee-deep in water with the people she had come to help! One would like to think she wished it too.

Mahfuzur Rahman is a former United Nations economist and a humanist.

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hypocritical to boot. Take, for example, the question of the need for foreign assistance for relief and rehabilitation. On July 27 the Prime Minister of the country, talking to the press, was giving a firm impression that her government was in no hurry to seek international help. This was loudly echoed by the food and disaster management minister the same day. We should not "extend a beggar's hand" to the world community on every occasion

loudly proclaiming that they would not seek international help in finding the perpetrators of the grenade attack on an Awami League rally on August 2 that killed twenty people and injured hundreds. The Interpol and the FBI arrived on the scene no sooner than these pronouncements had been made.

Except to the simple-minded, floods in Bangladesh are an immensely complex phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the very large body of studies that have been undertaken over the past decades, many of them with international technical and assistance, has provided, if not a clear solution, a great deal of insight into the problem. Yet whenever the floods roar back on their annual visitation, the leadership tends to view the phenomenon as if it was something new. They seem to start from square one, unable to explain to those whom they purport to lead what was being done in the longer term to resolve or mitigate

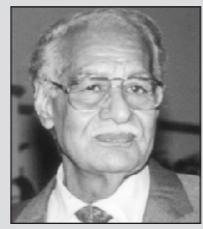
leaders present an equally depressing image. Events following the latest floods once again showed that partisan politics is never far below the surface even as the multitudes of an apolitical population suffer. There were serious allegations of relief operations bypassing flood-hit localities which happened to be strongholds of the political opposition. Some of the opposition parties too used the opportunity of their relief operations to advance their political ends. But they could at least defend their stand on the ground that they were not distributing government relief, which belongs to the people, irrespective of their political affiliation.

The strength and character of national leadership do greatly influence the action and attitudes of the lesser leaders. A strong and broad-minded central political leadership would undoubtedly inspire local leaderships to do great things. But it would be wrong

Serajganj to cut a vital flood protection embankment, out of sheer enmity towards a rival, both allegedly belonging to the political party in power, an action that led to devastation of thousands of acres of agricultural land and misery to tens of thousands of people? That story of wickedness committed by people who profess to be leaders of their community will linger in public memory of the floods of 2004.

We Bengalis love symbolism. And none should underestimate its power. We built, rightly, a makeshift *shahid minar* hours after the first of our young men laid down their lives in the fight for their mother tongue. Thanks mainly to the modern press and the television, the floods of 2004, like earlier floods, were full of symbolism. The young girl in flood waters I mentioned earlier presented an unforgettable image. There were many others, though not all were as lifelike.

Farmers still outside the system



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

PRIIME Minister Manmohan Singh's statement that there has been no investment in the agriculture sector for the past one and a half decades is only part of the answer to the question why the countryside is writhing in poverty and helplessness. The fact is that the exploitation of rural India has continued unabated for years to the benefit of the urbanites. So much so, however proficient an agricultural worker, he remains in the category of "unskilled." This alone has denied the labour in wages a whopping figure of Rs 5 lakh crore a year and they constitute 93 per cent of the total workforce.

The average daily wage of an agricultural worker is Rs 50. In comparison, a peon gets Rs 150, an industrial labourer Rs 350 and a Collector Rs 1,000 a day while professionals may earn Rs 50,000 or more. This disparity remains even when 70 per cent of India's population lives in villages. During the last Lok Sabha elections, the countryside re-registered its protest by voting against those who mistook cities for villages and said: "India shining."

"There is not a single farmer without debt," says former Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal who is also a landlord. He may well be right. For unexplainable rea-

sions, the loan given to agriculturists is charged compound interest, not the simple one as happens in industry or business. No political party has so far brought any bill, much less enacted a law, to lay down that an agriculturalist will pay simple interest even when he fails to clear the credit he has borrowed from a moneylender or a bank.

The British rulers were far better in this field and had two laws: the Land Improvement Loans Act, 1883, and the Agriculturists' Loan

-- when a farmer commits suicide, particularly in Andhra Pradesh or Punjab, the two prosperous states. This is largely because of the burden of compound interest or the daily demand by the baniya. The money taken on loan goes on accumulating because of compound interest and the debt passes from one generation to the other till someone sells his land, the child or himself or resorts to some other step to mollify the moneylenders. Believe it or not, even the British

Although political parties say that there should be remunerative price for crops -- Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party has included this in its election manifesto -- none has worked out what it should be. How much is remunerative?

Maybe, the Congress and the Left which have formulated the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) should define it. True, the support price gives farmers the confidence that the price of their

Policy which the Vajpayee government enunciated in 2000 to usher in the 21st century.

The CPM indicates that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) proposes to reverse the process. But the steps contemplated indicate a halting and half-hearted approach. Land reforms continue to be of the old mould of creating surplus land, share cropping, etc. The main thing is: can we go to the basic and say that the land is not property but a means of livelihood?

BETWEEN THE LINES

The bulk of the poor lives in the rural areas. All of them are loosely integrated with the non-agricultural sectors of the economy. There can be no meaningful indent in poverty unless there are specific programmes towards particular poverty groups in the rural areas. A system that fails to protect farmers from rapacious exploitation can have no justification. No doubt, both the Prime Minister and the Planning Commission Deputy Chairman have enhanced the allocation for agriculture. They have first to identify the root causes and the nature of agrarian crisis. The community continues to be out of the system. This is its biggest grievance.

Act, 1884. The rules said: "Compound interest shall not be charged under any circumstance." In free India when we have been mouthing slogans of socialistic pattern and doing little, the government has been acting otherwise. It brought in 1984 the Amendment Banking Act that "notwithstanding anything contained in the usurious Loans Act or in any other law relating to indebtedness in force in any state, the court should not reopen any transaction between an banking company (including cooperatives) and its debtors on ground of excessive interest." No state or political party ever protested against the draconian law.

The press and public opinion wakes up -- always for a short while rulers had protected their subjects by laying down that the period of recovery "shall ordinarily not exceed 35 years."

Still worse is the detention of the farmer if he does not clear the debt. It is called "civil jail" but the farmer prefers to call it "a visit to friends" to cover up the ignominy of detention. Police use all methods for recovery -- illegal detention is one of them. Moneylenders also employ muggers to recover their debts. A farmer has no protection from the state or from the law.

The different studies have shown that the main reason of uncleared debt is that the farmer has no leeway: the price of the produce does not cover the cost of inputs which goes on rising.

crop has something minimum base below which it will not go. But this does not ensure a remunerative price. Nor is there any permanent guarantee for support price which is considered subsidy, and in economic terms, "a burden on the exchequer." Experts are against it.

In fact, the policy that the Vajpayee government pursued has spurred an agrarian crisis.

His government demolished public distribution system and moved on to free market regime to have "commercial agriculture for profit." It rejected the dictum: "the land should belong to the tiller." The party also facilitated transfer of land to people with money, including the corporate sector. This was what the National Agriculture

We have the examples of communist countries like China and the old Soviet Union where individual holding has come back. But can we rekindle the community spirit in the land of Mahatma Gandhi who wanted villages to be self-sufficient and constitute republics within the Indian republic?

Another problem facing the countryside is unemployment. Old trades and skills have been crowded out by the one-track economic reforms. The alternatives are not just there. The youth once they get educated want a white-collar job and do not want to return to agriculture. In states like Punjab, there the unemployed youth has taken to drugs in a big way. This has invariably resulted in

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Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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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.

Attention: Sunnydale School

Thank you Mrs. Asmat Ara Jahan for your letter. My daughter was in that particular school. I must admit she learned a lot from the school but as parents I must say we suffered a lot too. The gatekeepers used to treat us as third class citizens and I found many a day that the school was closed without any notice.

Badal Hasib

Abad Avenue, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Wipe them out

I very strongly condemn the heinous grenade attack on an AL rally on 21/8/04 that killed 19 people including AL leader Ivy Rahman and injured over 200 others. The motive of this attack was to assassinate Sheikh Hasina. Those who do not recognise Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign country, want to make Bangladesh a vassal

of either Pakistan or India and want to project Bangladesh internationally as a failed country are behind this ghastly attack. They are the enemies of the country. So not only democracy but also the existence of Bangladesh is at stake.

Time is fast running out. Therefore, I humbly request both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to work together and unite the 140 million people of Bangladesh, irrespective of party affiliation as a one nation like that of 1971 and wipe out the enemies from the soil of Bangladesh.

Iqbal Ahmed

Dhaka

Why UN?

I went through the letter by Mr. Abu Abdullah from Portland published on 15 August titled 'Why UN'. I would like to say something regarding this issue. To Mr. Abdullah Bangladesh is an independent country and hence UN investigation appears to be

face a situation in which one of our students died in a road accident on September 6 in front of our university. There was some protest by the students, but will that put an end to accidents? Our demand wasn't illogical. Is it impossible to build speed breakers?

Pavel
Dept. of Economics, JU

A neglected city

Khulna, an old divisional city, has been totally neglected for the two centuries and very limited developmental activities have been carried out.

The importance of Khulna city is gone and it is now a dead city due to various criminal activities as well as threat to life, property and business establishments.

But why things have degenerated to that extent?

Does Khulna suffer from political instability, lack of commitment and the government's apathy? Yes, there are many elements, one is

political commitment, and therefore, though Khulna is blessed with one of the major ports and industrial establishments, it does not have a full cabinet Minister. Fortunately, the Mayor of Khulna has got the responsibility to look after its affairs, which is a big task for him. If you consider the trend of development of other divisional towns/cities, you will see that the support of the government to these cities as well as political commitment have played a vital role.

Now Khulna is called a city of terrorists. I was born in Khulna and grew up in the city. If you go 30 years back, Khulna was a very peaceful town where people could live a decent life.

Industrialisation, establishment of the port and many economic activities made the city a busy place and, as a result, many rural people converged to the city for