

Capturing 'Bangla Bhai'

Long on rhetoric, short on action

THE 'Bangla Bhai' spectre has arisen again. If the home ministry's reaction is anything to go by, as we ought to, there is no official acknowledgement of any group called 'Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh' (JMJB); and thus of its self-styled leader Bangla Bhai. In other words, he is supposed to be living in the figment of media imagination. But when there was a surge of reports and commentaries last year, on his illegal and criminal activities, which amounted to taking the law into his own hands, no less a person than prime minister Khaleda Zia herself directed that he be arrested at once. But as we all know, directive fell on deaf ears down the line.

Now, the seesaw being played out regarding his arrest is putting the country's image on the line, something which ought to have been avoided. We really do not see why the authorities are hesitant in recognising his existence despite mounting evidence of the evil clout he exercises on his followers. Failing to do so would only fuel all kinds of undesirable speculative theories about religious extremism in Bangladesh. The quicker the authorities realise this, the better for all of us.

It's not that we lack the capacity to catch him. Our law enforcers are definitely capable of capturing such a criminal any day. But if ambiguous statements about so-called Bangla Bhai are made by people in authority, then it might well be construed as lack of intention on their part to put him behind the bar. The government can rest assured that when there is a serious bid to arrest him, there would be no dearth of support from the common men; for, we are in no doubt about a growing public sentiment against the monstrosity of Bangla Bhai and his party.

Pilgrims' plight

The same old story!

EVERY year before the Hajj season the Ministry of Religious Affairs tells us of the many good things that it would incorporate to make the life of our Hajjis in Saudi Arabia more comfortable than the previous year. And invariably, every year after the Hajj, we hear from the returning pilgrims how poor the arrangements for them had been.

The shortcomings in the arrangements of the previous year is well known and the performance of our Hajj mission in Jeddah last year have been looked into and some of the officials have been called to account. Good! But why is it that lapses continue to occur and the same flaws of the past and some new ones appear and reappear?

Every year a large Hajj mission is dispatched to Jeddah well in advance to make necessary arrangements for our Pilgrims so that they can perform Hajj in some degree of comfort. Those who have been through the process would be aware that it takes a lot out of a person in the three or four weeks that he or she spends at Hajj in Saudi Arabia. And if necessary logistics are not in place many of the rituals of Hajj that need to be performed may well remain unperformed altogether.

Many procedures are entailed from the time of departure to the time the pilgrims return, that are lengthy and cumbersome at times. And those that are entrusted with the job of helping out the Hajjis in this regard on arrival are, more often than not, nowhere to be found. They are perhaps busy looking after the VIPs and IPs that descend upon Jeddah to perform Hajj.

Admittedly, slip-ups may occur in any arrangement that involves a detailed logistic planning and even more, efficient execution. Looking after several thousand pilgrims cannot be an easy task, but not to be served with one's meal on time is totally unacceptable.

No one that goes for Hajj seeks luxury and comfort while they are there, but what they expect is the bare minimum that would allow them to endure the test that Hajj entails.

The least the government can do is to provide this bare minimum.

'India and Bangladesh have much to share and give each other'



VEENA SIKRI

Rs. 100 crore in flood relief assistance to Bangladesh to help mitigate the damage. This assistance is a reflection of the goodwill that the people of India have always had for the friendly people of Bangladesh.

During 2004, India witnessed yet another smooth transition of power after our 14th General Elections held in the month of May, when the new UPA government was sworn-in. This demonstrated once again India's strength as a mature, pluralistic and secular democracy and as a factor for stability in the region. The continuity in our national policies has been reaffirmed by our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, when he said, while addressing the CII Partnership Summit in Kolkata earlier this month "Despite many changes in Government at the Centre, the economic and foreign policies that were initiated in the early 1990s have stood the test of time and there is today a broad national consensus around them".

The Government of India has reiterated our foreign policy focus and the high priority we attach to India's relations with our neighbours. Speaking at the inaugural BIMST-EC Summit in Bangkok in July 2004, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said "We in India view our quest for closer and mutually beneficial ties with all our neighbours as a logical response to the challenges with which we contend". Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh further underlined that "we have to work for peace and for security, and to create a new climate in which we can concentrate on our primary responsibility a better life for all our peoples. The solutions to some of these problems lie with Governments. Equally, we have to reach out beyond, to find imaginative answers to intractable issues. This is the way we have chosen in India".

These principles equally mark our approach to India's relations with Bangladesh. We remain committed to working towards deepening and further strengthening the ongoing multi-faceted friendship and cooperation between the Governments and the peoples Bangladesh and India. The meeting of our two Prime Ministers, on the sidelines of the BIMST-EC inaugural summit in Bangkok on July 31, 2004, has reaffirmed that this is indeed a shared commitment. This meeting has given an important impetus to Bangladesh India bilateral relations.

During the preceding 12 months I have had the opportunity to travel in Bangladesh and to meet a wide cross section of the people, from Bandarban to Rajshahi and from Kushtia to Sylhet. These interactions have reinforced my conviction that our two countries have much to share and give each other. Our common history and civilizational heritage remains the cornerstone of our relations. Nothing illustrates this more effectively than the fact that we are perhaps the only two countries in the world, whose respective National Anthems are composed by the same poet, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. My interactions have equally convinced me that peoples of Bangladesh and India desire and keenly expect that Bangladesh - India relations can and should be taken to a new higher

Our common history and civilizational heritage remains the cornerstone of our relations. peoples of Bangladesh and India desire and keenly expect that Bangladesh - India relations can and should be taken to a new higher level.

I believe it is important for us to acknowledge and build upon this trend for the mutual benefit and prosperity of both our peoples.

It is only through regular dialogue, based on mutual trust and understanding that relations can be strengthened and new areas for cooperation can be identified. It is only through dialogue held in a spirit of friendship that differences can be addressed so as to arrive at constructive, practical and mutually acceptable solutions. The very process of dialogue generates the positive momentum so necessary for achieving a breakthrough. It is with this belief that the preceding year has witnessed a series of high level exchanges and visits on the bilateral front between Bangladesh and India, each of which have helped pave the way for increased cooperation between our two countries.

At the ministerial level, successful visits to India include those undertaken by Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman, Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, Science & ICT Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan and State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism, Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin. Foreign Minister Morshed Khan was among the first senior foreign dignitaries to be received in New Delhi by the new

President Bush did not name the leaders of "outlaw regimes" but Dr. Condoleezza Rice (Secretary of State in waiting) referred to a few regimes that include Iran, North Korea and Zimbabwe. Cuba must also be there as one of the "outposts of tyranny".

Empirical evidence suggests that America always wanted a "Strong Person" in developing countries rather than a democratically elected head of state/government. This is because a democratically elected



HARUN UR RASHID

UNDER the tightest security seen at a US Presidential inauguration for his second term, George W. Bush promised to "spread liberty and freedom" across the world but did not make it clear how he would achieve it.

The question is: Is it by force or persuasion? Some analysts say that force is currently out of the question as the US forces are bogged down heavily in Iraq for a considerable period, although his Vice President Dick Cheney made some noises that Israel might attack Iran first to destroy its nuclear facilities.

At a 21-minute speech, reportedly a text written and edited more than a dozen times, President Bush used the word "freedom" 27 times and the word "liberty" 15 times. The first American President in almost 30 years to be sworn in during a time of war. America's 43rd President entered his second term with one of the lowest approval ratings. The major European allies were not enthused in his inauguration, given his track record in Iraq.

BOTTOM LINE

Existence of poverty negates freedom and democracy. The prevailing endemic poverty in many of the developing countries is the breeding ground of frustration and desperation of young people. Frustrated unemployed youths are lured away by extremist elements. Last April, at a meeting with the leaders, World Bank President Wolfensohn said that US\$900 billion were being spent on defence per year while only US\$60 billion were disbursed as aid. None of the G-8 rich countries including the US has spent targeted 0.7 per cent of their gross national income on foreign aid. Is this the way to fight poverty and spread freedom and liberty?

executive of a country cannot dance easily to the tune of America. Dictators without accountability can.

In 1973, the democratically elected President Salvador Allende of Chile was overthrown with the active support of America to install a dictator General Augusto Pinochet who ruled the country with an "iron fist" until 1990 and allowed US multinational corporations to use fully its resources and market. In South Asia, America had always supported dictators in Pakistan and embraced the country into a mutual defence

treaty in the mid-50s. There is a saying that the hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist -- McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the first designer of F-15 aircraft. Many say that America adheres to this doctrine to spread its business to survive.

The idea of spreading freedom and democracy is a noble idea but is the President seriously interested in doing so? Let us examine how the

Musharraf, as earlier promised, did not relinquish his "second hat" as Chief of Army on grounds of security of the country. Is not the action of the President Musharraf contrary to democratic principle? Why is the Bush administration silent on this issue? It is the Bush administration that has pumped billion of dollars to the military regime in Pakistan in return for its fight against Al-Qaeda militants in Afghanistan. The Parliament and the Prime Minister of the country can be

been rejected recently by them in Morocco. Many cynical political analysts believe that to introduce democracy in the Arab world is like trying to unravel a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Did Dr. Rice include any oil-rich country as one of the "outposts of tyranny"? If not, why not?

Fourth, why a democratically elected President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez is not supported by the Bush administration? Is it because his links

liberty" to others. A country known for its fight for freedom and democratic values is now perceived as the "bully" to advance its own interests. With the negative image around the world, is the Bush administration capable of spreading the message of "freedom and liberty" to others?

Finally, existence of poverty negates freedom and democracy. The prevailing endemic poverty in many of the developing countries is the breeding ground of frustration and desperation of young people. Frustrated unemployed youths are lured away by extremist elements. Last April, at a meeting with the leaders, World Bank President Wolfensohn said that US\$900 billion were being spent on defence per year while only US\$60 billion were disbursed as aid. None of the G-8 rich countries including the US has spent targeted 0.7 per cent of their gross national income on foreign aid. Is this the way to fight poverty and spread freedom and liberty?

President Bush's inauguration speech reminds me of what Lord Ponsoby wrote in 1928: "Between nations, where the consequences are vital, the most upright men honestly believe there is no depth of duplicity to which they may not legitimately stoop. They have got to do it. The thing cannot go on without the help of lies.... In war time, failure to lie is negligence, the doubling of a lie a misdemeanour, the declaration of truth a crime." People can judge whether Lord Ponsoby is right or wrong.

Banister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Long walk to freedom



ANWAR IBRAHIM

IF you were walking out of prison after serving a lengthy term, you would more than likely experience the curious, eerie feeling of stepping into a different time zone, as if you had an internal clock that ran at a slower pace than real time.

As a prisoner, I felt as if the world rolled to a dull, lethargic rhythm. It was a world in which death was more real and more certain. Prisons are built to isolate criminals from the rest of us. And society often forgets its prisoners and their existential situation. Among the forgotten are innocents who, because of a lapse or corruption in the system, are thrown in to share the life of the condemned.

Lapses in the administration of justice can happen anywhere, even in societies claiming the best system humanly possible. But in some societies the miscarriage of justice has become endemic and is some-

times used as a convenient political tool. My court trials and six-year incarceration, for example, had all the facade of legality and procedural justice, but only for the naive. In essence, the whole saga was just a more sophisticated version of the Moscow show trial.

Aside from political persecution masked by legal procedure, we also have variations of gulags (Soviet forced labour camps) and political prisons, especially in Asia and Africa. It is amazing how stubbornly these

better place so that others will not suffer as they have.

I too have such hopes, which I carried with me out of prison, along with my toothbrush and bundle of clothes. When the Supreme Court announced my freedom, I felt a shot of euphoria surging through my veins. But it was a temporary high. As it began to wear off, I realised that although I was free from the cold stares of four grey walls, there were other walls, more insidious, surrounding me and my compatriots. I

crisis of the late 1990s was not without its dividends: there is now some consensus, at least in words if not yet in deeds, that opacity is bad for business, be it the business of governing or the business of making money.

Yet the forces resistant to reform and unfriendly to democracy have not simply surrendered. On the contrary, they have tried to strengthen their positions. The recent decision by the Myanmar junta to extend the house arrest on

development and cling stubbornly to their outmoded doctrine of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of member-states.

ASEAN is replete with internal contradictions. Some of its members Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand had made giant leaps into mature democracy. But they have not made a serious effort to influence their less democratic partners, or to put democracy on the ASEAN agenda. The region's leaders are proud of their tradition of consensual deci-

democracy is capable of meeting their demand for greater choice. And as the economies of the region become more interlinked, so do the fates of the ASEAN peoples.

ASEAN is diverse, but there are fundamental cultural, economic and political meeting points. The desire for wealth is a common motivation, and it has resulted in high economic growth in the region, albeit uneven. But economic well-being nourishes the desire for greater freedom. Current ASEAN leaders want to set limits to their cooperation. They should know that they are daydreaming. Deepening economic integration will bring with it many unintended consequences. It is not only the ASEAN's desire for democracy, openness and freedom that they will have to grapple with. It may not be too long before the peoples of the region begin to see themselves as members of a single community. When that happens, the seed of ASEAN greatness will have been sown.

Anwar Ibrahim is former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia. This article also appears in Global Agenda, the magazine of the World Economic Forum, whose Annual Meeting is being held in Davos.

NOTICE "Cross Talk" will be published tomorrow.

Freedom has a demonstrative effect. ASEAN leaders must wake up to the reality that democracy is increasingly asserting its presence in the region. The democratic mind is nurtured by social and political activism and by unlimited access to information. We are seeing the birth of an informed ASEANese community.

camps of shame survive. They certainly serve well the sinister political purposes of those in power.

How many have suffered when justice is miscarried? Celebrated victims the Mandelas and the Suu Kyis may be remembered and given their place in history, but what happens to the rest? Must they remain faceless and simply disappear?

Hope may be the most irrational of human instincts, but it is what makes us human. To the many who are unjustly incarcerated, it is hope that preserves their humanity. Some hope for justice beyond the grave, and some hope the world will become a

may be free to socialise with family and friends, but in my mind's ear, I hear the rattle of chains that seek to shackle our thoughts and imagination.

The Asian currency crisis and economic meltdown, the backdrop to my incarceration, are now a distant memory. Thailand and South Korea, among the worst hit by the crisis, are again economic powerhouses. For Indonesia, the crisis was cataclysmic, but it terminated Suharto's military rule, forced open the gate to genuine democracy the biggest in the Muslim world and unleashed a free press and a vibrant civil society. The economic

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a case in point. Other countries pay lip service to democracy while their policies ensure that the playing field becomes increasingly uneven. The press remains submissive to the ruling clique and fundamental liberties are severely curtailed.

One of the dividends of the crisis is that the struggle for freedom has taken on a regional character. The civil society sector is forging regional solidarity for democracy and human rights. The governments of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the 10-nation regional grouping, are fearful of this new

tion-making, but this is the very thing that keeps the group inert, that makes it unwilling to set a standard of democratic governance that it could impose on member-states.

But freedom has a demonstrative effect. ASEAN leaders must wake up to the reality that democracy is increasingly asserting its presence in the region. The democratic mind is nurtured by social and political activism and by unlimited access to information. We are seeing the birth of an informed ASEANese community. It will be increasingly evident to the region's citizens that authoritarianism limits their choices and only

UPA Government, as the Special Envoy of Hon'ble Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. He was received with the traditional warmth that characterizes Bangladesh-India relations and his message to the new government in India was seen as reflecting Bangladesh's commitment to work towards strengthening our friendly bilateral relations. The visit of Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has been significant and of key importance in identifying mechanisms for enhancing our bilateral trade and investment relations, including through cooperation in energy matters and expansion of transportation infrastructure and linkages, such as through our railway network. Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury was our Guest of Honour at

negotiations with the concerned authorities in Bangladesh will commence. Here, indeed, a specific example of a win-win solution, this time through partnership between the public and private sectors.

Indeed all of us in India remain committed to Bangladesh's economic development and its continued prosperity. India sees Bangladesh as not only a close neighbour but as a valued partner. At the governmental level, discussions have taken place on a range of issues, signifying the ongoing and steadily successful dialogue process. In the area of water resources, two Secretary level meetings were held, one in New Delhi in January 2004 and the other in Dhaka in September 2004. These were followed up by technical level

neighbours. India and Bangladesh are not only close neighbours but are also natural trade partners. India has made considerable strides in recent years. Ours is now one of the leading economies in the world, the world's fourth largest in terms of Purchasing Power Parity. The size of the Indian economy enhances both our capacity to provide a ready market for Bangladeshi products, as well as our ability to supply Bangladesh with cost effective capital inputs for your rapidly growing economy, thereby making this a mutually beneficial relationship.

We are deeply aware of Bangladesh's concerns regarding the imbalance in our bilateral trade, regarding so called para-tariff and non-tariff barriers and regarding Bangladesh's

speed up the process of certification for cement and other Bangladeshi products entering the Indian market, including fruit juices and other agro-products. On yet another issue, export of lead acid batteries from Bangladesh to India, after completion of the due process of review, the Government of India has recently withdrawn the anti-dumping duties levied on this product. India remains willing to address these issues sincerely and we look forward to the next meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Working Group in Dhaka.

Investments and associated economic linkages between Bangladesh and India have in recent years emerged as important drivers in our bilateral relations. India is the 10th largest investor in Bangladesh with a total investment of US\$ 330 million registered with the Board of Investment. There are 29 Indian joint ventures in Bangladesh and seven wholly-owned subsidiaries in such diverse areas as textiles, construction industry, chemicals, paints, pharmaceuticals, travel goods, information technology, coconut oil, ayurvedic products, white cement and automobiles. Indian companies are also involved in projects in key infrastructure areas in Bangladesh such as power generation and transmission, telecommunications, roads and railways.

India also remains deeply committed to the promotion of human resource development in Bangladesh. Each year, more than 200 Bangladeshi students receive scholarships or join training programmes in India which enable them to pursue professional studies in India's leading institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology, medical colleges, NIIT, CMC and APTECH. Additionally, thousands of Bangladeshi students join courses of study in Indian schools and colleges every year. In the domain of Information Technology, India has offered to share our experience and has already implemented a 'Train the Trainers' programme, imparting specialized training to 250 Bangladeshi teachers in India, carried out by the prestigious Tata Infotech Company. Steps are presently being taken to gift 650 computers to various schools in Bangladesh.

Given our common civilizational heritage, cultural exchanges between Bangladesh and India are marked by enthusiasm and vibrancy. The preceding year witnessed the holding of a film festival, numerous art and

photo exhibitions, workshops, seminars and visits by performing artists as well as eminent cultural personalities from different parts of India. These include performances by eminent Indian cultural troupes and artists such as "Ritushamaram" by Ratan Thiyam's Ghoru Repertory Theatre, Ghazals by Penaz Masani, and folk dances from Rajasthan and Tripura. We recently inaugurated our Cultural Centre in Dhanmondi with a very successful and well-attended Exhibition of Rare Photographs of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. We hope to continue our efforts to further intensify our interaction in the cultural domain.

I would like to express my appreciation of the very significant contribution that the Indian community is making in this country, by dint of their hard work and entrepreneurship. I would like to particularly mention the large number of Indians working in Bangladesh's readymade garments industry in developing its infrastructure and service industries, particularly in areas such as financial and ICT services, railways, roads, telecommunications and power transmission.

There are immense prospects for regional cooperation in the energy sector as can be seen from the Joint Press Statement pertaining to the gas pipeline proposal that was issued in Yangon on 13th January 2005. We are indeed looking forward to the speedy implementation of the proposal for the common benefit of the three countries.

In conclusion, may I emphasize how much the government and people of India are looking forward to the successful outcome of the forthcoming 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka. The Government of India remains deeply committed to the collective future of peace and prosperity for the entire South Asian region. Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, has said "With our South Asian neighbours, it will be our sincere effort to jointly realize the vast potential for cooperation, and to ensure mutual security, stability and development". We will work hard with complete dedication to achieve this objective.

Mrs Veena Sikri is High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh. The above is her message on the occasion of the 56th Republic Day of India.