

India's lost opportunity

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It is disappointing to read that India has decided to withdraw from the forthcoming Saarc summit that was scheduled for early February in Dhaka. The Saarc meeting was supposed to be a summit gathering of the member states, but when an important member like India decided to withdraw, the meeting unfortunately, as required by its own rules, had to be postponed. This would be its second postponement, the first was due to the unfortunate Indian Ocean tsunami disaster. Hope Dhaka is luckier third time round in hosting this promising regional gathering.

India had cited the recent political developments in Nepal and the security issues plaguing Bangladesh as the reasons for its withdrawal. On the face of it, the reasons stated are indeed factual, but to make a unilateral decision as one of the leading nations within Saarc just didn't seem right. This decision of India is at the very least a debilitating blow, especially when the organisation is still struggling to get its act together. For Saarc to survive and be a viable economic force to reckon with, the bigger nations in the grouping have to start leading from the front and not use other members' domestic issues as an excuse for withdrawal. If anything this was an opportunity for India to demonstrate its leadership and foresight, rather than to hide behind the diplomatic cloak.

The developments in Nepal are indeed a matter of concern; an instance where the democratic government has been summarily dismissed and replaced by an autocratic rule of the king. And it is not only India, the world is also up in arms about the untoward developments. The official communique from Nepal about the circumstances are the usual bland, prosaic statements, revealing very little about the

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real situation and circumstances that lead King Gyanendra to take matter into his own hands.

Which is why the Saarc forum would have been ideal and fortuitous to find out more about what is really happening in Nepal. Under the circumstances, perhaps a more appropriate action should have been, to seize all opportunities to get a better understanding of the situation through direct contact with the king. Nothing can be better than hearing it from the horse's mouth. And what better stage could India have asked for than the imminent Saarc summit. It would have given Prime Minister Manmohan Singh an opportunity to have a face to face dialogue with King Gyanendra of Nepal, assess the situation, and possibly come up with some conciliatory solutions and guarantees which could help ease tension and provide better appraisal of the state of affairs.

With the Saarc conference taking a view and providing an explanation on the matter, the world would have certainly benefited. It is in situations like this that more dialogue is better than less. This is not the time to isolate Nepal but to understand its predicament and if needed apply the moral suasion that a body likes Saarc could only provide. One has to just look across to the Asean groupings to see how Myanmar is accepted within its fold.

As for the excuse of lack of secu-

forthcoming G7 meeting along with China, Brazil, and South Africa is a case in point. If India wants to be readily accepted as a global leader, then it better start demonstrating its leadership and statesmanship first in its own backyard.

Where sovereign nations are involved and especially within one's own ethnic lot and neighbours, it is emotionally and diplomatically unacceptable to explicitly proclaim a fellow nation as an outright leader.

But a true leader can earn a tacit approval if it is willing to conduct itself like one. In this instance India had a golden opportunity to show to the world that as a country it has matured and is willing to take up the mantle of leadership within its own region by helping to voice and resolve local issues.

This is not the age for unilateralism; one has to just look at the US and its almost unilateral action in Iraq and how the world had reacted against it. In a globalised world the essence of it is interdependence for the greater good of all, helping to sustain the fabric of co-operation and mutual respect. It is important that successful economic nations demonstrate their benign leadership and win respect from peers and others. South Africa is a good example in Africa; China offering to tackle for the world the North Korean nuclear threat, and the EU (albeit not a regional issue) taking the initiative to forestall Iran on nuclear proliferation. India as it grows in economic stature has an opportunity within the Saarc region to emulate some of the leadership roles played by other nations in the world, but it has to earn it by examples and honest actions. Unilateral decision to withdraw from your own regional conference shows more diffidence and lack of self-confidence than bold leadership.

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Kibria's killing is a psychic trauma for the nation

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

I write this piece to add another grief stricken voice to the many that have appeared on Mr. SAMS Kibria's death. I write this as a junior Foreign Service colleague of his who had the privilege of enjoying some degree of closeness with him.

In this country we have had the sad experience of seeing many leaders depart in violence. Even for a nation used to this gruesome culture, Mr. Kibria's death has symbolised a new paradigm of evil. Across the social spectrum, there has been a level of shock and horror which, I think, is unprecedented. Those who killed Mr. Kibria did not kill just another leader. He was, a man of rare qualities who is a pride for any country. His service to this nation was enormous. Had he lived longer, it is probable that he would have contributed much more. Few Bangladeshi attained a higher international stature, and this has been reflected in the shock and concerns expressed by other nations over his killing.

I came to know Mr. Kibria in Islamabad in 1969, two years after I joined Pakistan Foreign Service. My first impression of him was that he was very caring to the Bengalee colleagues in the foreign office, specially the junior officers. He was the kind of a senior colleague from whom juniors could get support and guidance, and learn a lot. He contributed much to my own career.

In 1973 when he went to Australia on his first ambassadorial appointment, I worked with him for a short and happy spell as a junior officer. I again worked with him for a short period when he became Foreign Secretary in 1978.

The thing I liked about him was that he was always ready to listen, and accept a view point if it could be presented in a rational light.

An officer who tops the list in a nationwide civil service examination as Mr. Kibria did, has to have a bright mind. I felt an extraordinary respect for his insights into issues. His talent for analysis and his clarity of articulation were of a remarkable order. The procession of his thoughts, when he would make a point, had a persuasive logic. I have a vivid memory of an important meeting that he was attending shortly after he became Foreign Secretary. The foreign Minister Mr. Shamsul Huq was presiding over the meeting which was to decide some important postings to our overseas missions. Every

time Mr. Kibria gave his views on a posting proposal, he was sharp, clear and to the point. His arguments were unassailable and his class so evident.

When Mr. Kibria had his first high level call on a senior official of the Australian foreign office in 1973, after he joined the mission as the High Commissioner, an Australian diplomat who was present during the call later spoke admiringly about him: "Your new High Commissioner is a thorough professional", he told me.

I will relate another episode. This was related to me by a leading tea entrepreneur of Sylhet who, as Chamber President, accompanied Mr. Kibria to Paris during an aid consortium meeting. After the consortium there was a foreign investor's forum with the object of attracting investment to Bangladesh. This Chamber President told me recently that Mr. Kibria made a great impact by a presentation he made. An Indian who was representing an American telecommunication firm observed after listening to Mr. Kibria's Presentation: "Your finance minister is a man of high order. We don't have many like him, in our country".

During his relatively brief stint as Foreign Secretary, a remarkable contribution that he made was with respect to the formation of the SAARC. He played the key role in fleshing out the concept of a regional organisation for South Asia which was conceived by President Ziaur Rahman. Mr. Kibria led the Bangladesh delegation to the first meeting in Colombo in April 1981 when the idea of SAARC was put across to our South Asian neighbours. One should not forget that selling the idea of SAARC was not easy given the complex regional politics and the barriers of Indo-Pak distrust that existed at the time.

Apart from his intellectual and professional excellence Mr. Kibria had a genuine love for his country. I remember that in Australia, where I worked with him in our mission, he used to become emotional while talking about the atmosphere of freedom in Dhaka after Bangladesh came into being. He used to tell me that he relished a feeling of delight in those early days of our independence that he had not known before while serving in Pakistan. I could feel what a true and patriotic son of the soil he was. His role in the liberation war also attests his love for Bangladesh. During his university days he suffered imprisonment for

his involvement in language movement.

Mr. Kibria was not a run of the mill politician. He did not take to politics for any material gains. When he retired after serving in an exalted UN post for 11 years, he could have lived a life of ease and comfort. Despite its hazards and complexities, he chose a political career because he wanted to work for the country. His political career was clean and honourable. No one ever said he was tainted with corruption during his tenure as Finance Minister. His conduct was nothing if not dignified. With his international fame and exposure, he was the kind of person whom this nation needed so much to nurture its international image -- an image that is continually under assault.

With the killing of such a person our society has plumbed a new depth



of degeneration. How far down are we going to go after this? Will Mr. Kibria's death rouse our collective conscience to search for a sane and civilized way of existence? There are certain things that need to stay above politics. Mr. Kibria's killing has thrown a very fundamental moral challenge that our nation needs to confront. If our leaders and social thinkers do not unite to resist this sinister trend, our country will cease to be livable.

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