

Middle East talks

Dawning of a new era?

WE sincerely hope that the meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt, held under the auspices of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah, signals a turning point in the long-standing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Both sides have pledged to end all violence against the other, and the path seems to have been cleared for the revival of the US-led "road-map" towards an independent Palestinian state and a safe and secure Israel.

We can only consider the latest developments to be positive. Any initiative that helps the Palestinians towards self-determination and nationhood and relieves them of the burden of foreign military occupation must be considered a good thing. Similarly, we would welcome a situation where Israelis could live in peace and security and maintain friendly relations with its neighbour to the east.

The violence on both sides which has been the tragic hallmark of the long-standing dispute has accomplished nothing. Since 2000, some 3,350 Palestinians and 970 Israelis have been killed in the fighting -- in itself a tragedy -- but all the more so when one considers how little the killing has advanced the interests of either side.

Obviously, negotiation is the way forward. Israel -- and the US -- have long held that the principal stumbling block to peace was the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and argued that there could be no negotiation as long as he remained in power. Well, now they have their wish. Let us hope that the Israelis will now agree to negotiate in good faith with Mahmoud Abbas rather than to dismiss him out of hand and use unrealistic expectations as to the extent of his control over militants as an excuse to drag their feet.

The development at Sharm el-Sheikh appear to be good news for all concerned. The two sides are talking to one another at this level for the first time since 2000. From the Israelis perspective, what they have claimed as the major hindrance to peace has been removed. Both sides have pledged to rein in violence.

Things look more promising than they have for many years. We only hope that this is not another false dawn as we have seen many times in the past, and that this time the expectations and promise are turned into concrete action for the benefit of the long suffering peoples of the region.

Food poisoning in Ctg

Blatant disregard for human lives

THE report from Chittagong that at least 72 people fell sick, after taking foods at a village restaurant is indeed cause for serious concern. Doctors diagnosed it as a case of acute food poisoning, which could have been fatal if the patients were not given emergency medical treatment. It seems a disaster has somehow been averted.

We cannot allow this event to pass off as an accident. Adulteration of food and marketing of substandard stuff, unfit for human consumption, have been taking place at an alarming rate. The report from Chittagong says that insecticides might have got mixed with the flour used to prepare the food. A doctor who attended the patients, however, believes that it might have been bacterial food poisoning which can occur if foods are prepared with stale and rotten things. Whatever might be the reason, the truth of the matter is that quality of foods is something that figures nowhere in our scheme of public health. Regrettably, the decision-makers and law enforcers are showing an inexplicable indifference to the issue. Adulteration of foods and application of carcinogenic materials for keeping things fresh have reached such a stage that it is hardly possible for the buyers to get pure and safe foodstuff. The prices are spiralling while the quality is falling drastically. Doctors and experts have told us time and again that many of the gastrointestinal diseases that people are suffering from these days have a lot to do with regular intake of adulterated foods. But who is there to listen to them?

We focussed on this issue many times in the past, but the situation has not really changed over the years. It seems the authorities respond only when something goes awfully wrong. But there is nobody to do anything about the slow poisoning that is pushing millions of people towards death. The health authorities owe an explanation for this criminal neglect of an important area of public concern. It is not known why they can stop the unscrupulous elements responsible for adulteration and use of non-food grade colours and preservatives that can cause great harm to the consumers. The law enforcers must actfirmly to put a brake on all such activities.

Stalled summit, dashed hopes



BANGLADESH cannot be blamed for feeling upset about the postponement of the much-looked-forward-to annual summit of Saarc; twice postponed, this time it was not because of any act of God, but of man. Having felt that the developments in the neighbourhood was not conducive to holding the annual summit, the Indian Prime Minister preferred to stay away from the planned head of state and government meeting of the regional body. This is not the first time that a Saarc summit has been postponed, if that is any comfort. Interestingly, the previous postponements have had to do, in most cases, with India's reluctance or inability to attend. The last time a Saarc summit in Dhaka was postponed was in 1992, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Apart from the preparations that went into the arrangements, including security, going to waste, the hopes of the people have also been frustrated. Bangladesh's association with Saarc is more than just a symbiotic link. Our affiliation is deep, not least because of the

stellar role that Bangladesh had played in its gestation and birth as well as its commitment, expressed and implied, to see that Saarc becomes an effective and viable instrument of collective self-reliance. The very last moment postponement was an unexpected and exasperating development for Bangladesh.

It was the nation that was the host of the 13th Saarc summit, not any particular party or a

the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, is also a matter that Bangladesh could rightly feel proud of. But that was not to be, at least not just yet.

What needs to be stressed upon is the fact that the 13th summit in some ways would have stood apart from the previous ones. Its focus was to be more on the follow-up to the decisions of the recent summits as well as implementation and progress of

well as tackling of terrorism. The most import issue of poverty alleviation was also high on the agenda while the issue of water resources was slated for serious discussion. The Saarc members -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka -- were also to sign four different conventions on customs, double taxation, investment, and arbitration during the 13th summit to

The perception of threats, of the destabilising events and of propitious times, are matters guided much on subjective considerations and one cannot, therefore, question the compulsions that predicate the diplomatic decisions of a country. But one can certainly analyse the ground realities that are supposed to have influenced the decision.

Surely, the recent political

No doubt the recent developments could be construed as disturbing, but these are in no way worse than what some previous Saarc summits were held under. The assurances of the host should have been enough to assuage any misapprehension of the Indian policy makers. It is regrettable that that was not the case.

government. Turning it down is a slight to the nation and we have the right to feel let down.

Regrettably, Saarc's progress has been everything but consistent. The motivations behind a regional set-up were initially seen as less than pious by some of its members, and the tremendous centrifugal force that acted on it, because of the Indo-Pak animus, reflected on the institution and manifested itself through the utter lack of progress on the substantive issues on which there was woeful lack of action.

Bangladesh had attached special significance to the 13th Saarc summit, which was going to be held on the cusp of the third decade of its existence. Not only did the aborted summit coincide with the 20th anniversary of Saarc, the fact that Bangladesh would have been the first country to host three summits "and thus start a new cycle" according to

various programmes and decisions that were conceptualised and taken in hand by various committees of the regional body, rather than on new issues. One has no reason to doubt the Bangladesh Foreign Minister's comments that, "The 13th summit would be a summit of working out ways for implementations of the Saarc decisions, instead of making mere declarations. It would really be a businesslike summit."

We have no idea what the draft agenda looked like since the summit was called off when the Standing Committee was into its final stages of deliberation and before it could be formally presented to the Council of Ministers. But going by various reports one can visualise that issues with topicality were to be brought under the ambit of the summit discussions. Of particular mention are tsunami and disaster management as

facilitate the implementation of Safta.

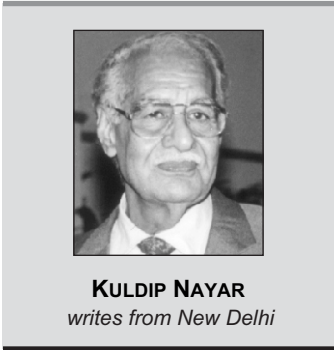
Thus, the postponement of the summit means a setback to many of the programmes that are in their initial stages of operation and many that are waiting to be taken in hand.

One is thus compelled to delve into India's pretext for deciding to stay away from what might have been a landmark summit. While many commentators have bared India's underlying motivations to stay away from the summit we shall comment only on what was said by its officials. According to the Indian Foreign Secretary, "The summit has to take place in a conducive political and security environment. If you have the kind of environment...which prevails today, we genuinely believe desired outcomes are not possible. So we should wait until the time is propitious to have such an important and significant summit."

change in Nepal does not bode well for democracy in the kingdom. But that is a matter for the Nepalese and the Nepalese alone to address and sort out. While one may take umbrage at what has happened there, one fails to see the security slant that India has attempted, unconvincingly, it must be said, to attach to the developments in the Himalayan Kingdom. The Indian assertion that the summit would have been adversely affected by the developments in Nepal is hard to comprehend. Given the political complexity of the region and the constant state of ferment that it is in, it is more likely that summits in the region cannot be held at all, if the Indian condition of "conducive political and security environment" remains the deciding criterion.

The dastardly killing of Mr. Kibria and the situation that followed in Bangladesh had also much to do with India's decision,

Small minds, big chairs



LALOO Prasad Yadav's body language is different this time. He does not have the touch of certainty which he exuded in the last three elections in Bihar from 1990. What worries him is that he does not know whether the Muslim vote bank, commanding nearly 16.5 per cent of the electorate, would honour the cheque his Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) has liberally drawn on it in the past.

The impression is that the Muslims have begun moving towards the Congress which is not opposing Laloo, a minister at the centre, but which is not supporting him either. The Congress is also posturing as if it is on the side of his rival, Ram Vilas Paswan of Lok Janshakti Party, again a minister at the centre. This is bad enough. The worse is that the Congress while flirting with the two is trying to retrieve its old Muslim-Dalit base. It looks like winning more than 27 seats, its last tally in the 243-member assembly. To the embarrassment of Laloo, Congress president Sonia Gandhi has said during her election campaign

that law and order in Bihar required "great improvement." (There are some 20,000 non-bailable warrants pending execution in the state and the number of recorded kidnappings in the state since Laloo's reign is 32,600.)

Still Laloo believes he has played a trump card by releasing the interim report of the Bannerjee commission which has said that the

making very little effect except saffronising the atmosphere in certain urban areas. The upper caste, the Bhumihars, is still sticking to the Congress as it has done in the past. The BJP's support is from the Kurmis, the flock of Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United), who was the Railway Minister in the Atal Behari Vajpayee government. The Bihar assembly may turn out to be a hung one,

Christian community is also solidly against the BJP.

Haryana's problem is different. The Congress is appropriating the anti-incumbency vote against Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala. The BJP is nowhere in the picture although Chautala tried his best to woo the party. The Congress may suffer a bit because of its internal wrangling, but should otherwise make it

But the new phenomenon that is emerging is that regional parties also cannot do without the support of all-India players. It is a strange mishmash, making politics dependent on convenience, caste or combination, not on principles, values or ideological considerations. Take the Congress, the all-India party, in Bihar. It has having an understanding with the RJD on the one hand and the Lok Janshakti

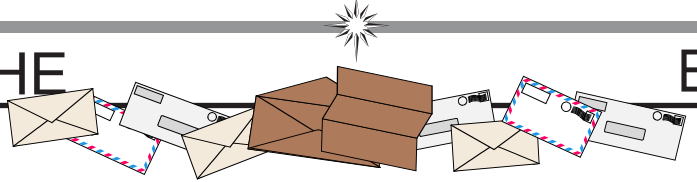
the numbers.

In fact, local problems come to the fore whenever there is any electionstate or general. The first few elections after independence had issues which transcended the state borders. The glow of freedom was still there and people were keen to see India on the international firmament. Those considerations have got dimmed over the years. It was P.N. Haksar, a Leftist secretary to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who separated the Lok Sabha and assembly polls. He believed that local issues would dominate the assembly polls and the national ones in the Lok Sabha election.

"I have certain dreams and I want them to come here," he told me. What he had in mind was a country which should discuss its national issues as dispassionately as the states should their own problems. They should not mix the two. Haksar's dream was shattered during his lifetime. He found the voice of national issues was lost in the cacophony of local or regional noises. Local leaders, flaunting their castes and the mafia they commanded, spoil the atmosphere. Criminals and musclemen came in when they saw that the contest had got reduced to power-money-caste combinations. Some of them have attained positions in assembly and parliament. Maybe, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had them in mind when he said the other day that small minds have come to occupy big chairs.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Attack on AL meet-ing

The January 27 news of the deadly attack on Awami League meeting at Habiganj and death of Shah Kibria and others were most unfortunate. The trend which has set in over the last few years in Bangladesh was an indication of this and other similar types of criminal activities. Bangladesh has a great history of social harmony. But a lot of things have been going wrong in this country as fanatic elements are pushing their own agenda ahead.

However, I believe Bangladesh will overcome this crisis. **Zinda Mahmood Bajwa**
New York, US

Nipah alert!

Now it is confirmed that Nipah a viral disease causing encephalitis has once again attacked Bangladesh. Although the

disease is still under control, there is, however, every possibility of outbreak of Nipah in epidemic form!

The symptoms of the disease include fever accompanied by headache, respiratory problem, sleeping-sickness or sleepy-sickness. This dreaded disease has already claimed 17 lives in Bangladesh this year. It is understood that the bat performs as a potential vector for spreading this disease. Nipah is also spread by the infected person.

The government has taken some effective measures to counter the Nipah virus. Meanwhile, I do strongly feel that information pertaining to symptoms, controls and precautions against the Nipah viral disease should be transmitted to the common people through the print and electronic media immediately.

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Murky politics

There was an attack on an AL rally last year, and then the terrorists have eliminated SAMS Kibria, one of the most respected and honest politicians of the country. His death was a profound shock to us. It was not only an attack on the opposition, but also our democracy. The attackers are an enemy of the people. After such incidents, we did not observe any progress in investigation and the criminals have not been brought to book. Previously, we noticed political parties trying to gain mileage from these events. We condemn such activities which are a clear violation of the democratic spirit. The politicians must place morality and integrity above petty interests. Otherwise, the country would never have a stable political system based on truth and justice.

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Land grabbing

If wealth and property are kept unguarded, the thieves will steal those. Blame, then, is not to be put on the thieves, but on the negligence, indifference or failure to keep those under constant watch. The water bodies are public property. The government is the custodian and trustee of those properties. The administration should look after and utilise public properties appropriately. Trespassers are liable to be immediately prosecuted under the law of the land. Land grabbers do not construct a building or a shed over night. They do it as we know without any resistance.

They use it for profit making for months or years. During this long period, the custodians, trustees and the watchdogs are found to be in a state of hibernation. They wake up in certain cases (not in all cases)

and demolish the constructions. Again after some days the greedy land grabbers occupy the land and start construction. This hide and seek game we are noticing for a pretty long time.

We suggest the following to set things right.

i) Demolish all illegal structures.

ii) File cases against the unauthorised occupants immediately after demolition.

iii) Claim profit money from the occupants.

iv) File cases against the greedy persons are arrested and brought before a fair trial, they will be disciplined to a great extent. Only demolition is not the "answer" to this "cancer." They occupy public land, construct buildings on it and they get back their capital with huge profit during the period from construction to demolition.

Meanwhile, some innocent persons who offer "salami" and rent incur losses. The environ-

ment also incurs loss. Public interest is hurt in a palpable manner. Therefore not only demolition but some other measures and remedies require to be considered.

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Kibria's death and hartal

We are really watching something very unfortunate in the political arena. While the killing of SAMS Kibria was a monstrous crime, it is really shocking that both the government and the opposition have taken a rather one-sided view of the crime. The government reaction to the killing, which has greatly undermined its image, is disappointing, to say the least. The ruling party is even blaming the Awami League for the grenade attack! Do the politicians think that people like us, on the sidelines, don't really

understand anything or have no option other than accepting the government version of the ghastly attack? Perhaps they do, otherwise they would have come with something more credible than blaming the AL for the death of one of its front-ranking leaders.

The government leaders have rightly pointed out that hartal is not the answer, but they seem to be overlooking that the opposition has been pushed to a corner from where it can think only of desperate measures. It seems the opposition's response to the killing is more important to the government, than bringing the culprits to justice! One might conclude that the government does not want the opposition to refrain from calling hartals; rather it is more interested in seeing the opposition losing popularity through embarking on that suicidal path!

Now let's turn our attention to the opposition. The opposition parties have every right to agitate

after the AL lost three of its top leaders in recent times. But opposition strategists are perhaps not asking themselves how far the hartals would carry them. Are BNP leaders affected by the hartals? Or is it the poor people who have to bear the brunt of it? And what about the economy? Well, we have nothing to say if it is less important than opposition interests!

It seems the two sides are testing each other's patriotismsomething that does not really exist anywhere across the political spectrum!

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Dhaka

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