

## Valentine's Day blast

*Illiberal propensities must be stemmed at all costs*

**W**E note with utter dismay the unfortunate exploding of bombs on Valentine's Day at the DU campus, which injured several persons. The incident raises far deeper questions than merely the inefficiency of the security arrangements made at the campus and the Book Fair area.

We note with serious consternation the unholy grip that is being attempted to be applied by forces of illiberality, extremism, intolerance and bigotry on our society that is known for its rich cultural heritage made even richer by the infusion of new but healthy influences over the years. We cannot but be seriously apprehensive of the onset of a deep-seated malaise in the fabric of our society.

Very recently a caveat was put on the performance of 'Jatra' ostensibly for reasons of security, to us quite unbelievably so. In the past obscurantist elements had targeted cinema halls. Now it is the turn of a Valentine's Day function and the object of the bomb-attack was actually an event organised by the Dhaka University Debating Society.

It is not difficult to fathom the intention of these elements. It's time we registered in our minds the grave implications of these acts and the harm that the monstrosity of intolerance can bring to our image of a moderate Islamic country.

Unfortunately, it appears that we are faced with the forces of anti-modernism bent upon resisting by force our liberal and tolerant outlook. What is being seen as 'alien' is merely a recreational and light-hearted occasion that has added a colourful dimension to our cultural milieu.

We urge upon the government not to take this incident as an isolated event but to take a holistic view of what we regard as part of a more sinister and bigger phenomenon that has the potential to strike at the very core of our time-honoured ethos and traditional respect for cultural diversities.

As Bengalis we must take pride in the multiple facets of our society. The cultural diversity that enriches it is but its mirror-image. Failure to defend it will imperil our existence.

## RMG leadership unity

### before poll

*A prudent move to protect interest*

**W**ITH the clouds of an inclement weather hovering, leaders of three BGMEA groups have fielded a common panel to contest the election scheduled for tomorrow in a pragmatic display of solidarity in their ranks. The new incumbents will rule the roost in three rotational slots which, on top of the unity they have forged, is a sprightly reflection of a spirit of accommodation as well. And what a compelling time to forge all these when the post-quota free garments export world is tasking our RMG sector to show its resilience and competitive mettle, let alone the domestic political restiveness casting its own shadow across.

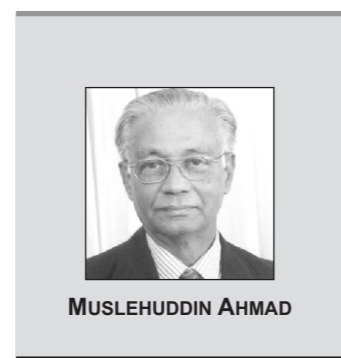
We are greatly heartened, therefore, by these developments that go to address three major concerns dogging the future of the RMG sector on the back of the challenges faced in the post-MFA quota-free regime. First of all, internal unity needed to be ensured to ward off any extraneous divisive interference. Secondly, dissent within a dynamic, export-oriented business community may not be bad in itself, but when stretched to a point of exploitable divisiveness it can be patently self-injurious. Thirdly, a pre-poll unity translated into a common panel participation in the election is a potential insurance for continuity of unified leadership for the advancement of the RMG sector after the polls.

The leaders of the garment sector deserve felicitations on attaining a consensual position to work together going beyond the eight-month presidencies. This is good augury, especially when they have decided to accord priority to rehabilitating the sick units.

Now, the election will have to be a resounding success by virtue of an impressive voter turn-out, without which, to be honest, the consensus reached by the leaders will not be truly vindicated at the electorate level.

While the compromise reached within the RMG sector leadership is an affirmation of their sagacity, we cannot be oblivious of the blatant governmental interference that preceded it in different shapes and forms, something that must be scrupulously avoided in the best professional interest of the garments association.

# An unwritten truce to end Palestinian-Israeli violence?



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

**I**N Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, a historic handshake -- short but a long distance one is as if Abbas in Ramallah and Sharon in Jerusalem (West). The conference table was too wide to bring them closer at least physically -- they stood far apart as indeed their views are on different issues. However, it was quite apparent that both the leaders -- President Mahmud Abbas and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon -- made positive efforts to reach each other across the table. And hence some progress, though no formal joint declaration could be signed at the summit at Red Sea resort of Sharm-el-Sheikh on February 8, 2005.

This was the first meeting of the Israeli and Palestinian sides at the highest level since Intefada began in September, 2000. During this period of over four years, 3350 Palestinians and 970 Israelis got killed -- a sad episode indeed in the history of Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Intefada began because of Sharon's visit to the Masjid-Al Aqsa compound and his objectionable remark about Israel's sovereignty over the Noble Sanctuary.

No real initiative could be taken to end the violence as Sharon and Bush decided not to talk to the legendary Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. This is the first initiative after the death of Arafat and it succeeded as both the US and Israel agreed to

meet Mahmud Abbas who was elected by the Palestinians as the successor of Arafat. The initiative for the summit was taken by Egyptian President Hosne Mubarak with support of King Abdullah II of Jordan -- both happen to be the good friends of the United States. Both Egypt and Jordan have also diplomatic relations with Israel.

In the meantime, Bush got his second term and having faced terrible disaster in Iraq, Bush decided to concentrate on Israeli Palestinian issue with a view to

problems with regard to his action plan for unilateral disengagement from Gaza. He faced large demonstrations before he came to the summit. But he said he remained committed to his disengagement plan as this had the support of the US and EU.

In the backdrop of such a scenario the summit took place. It had full support of King Abdullah II of Jordan and he was present to lend weight to the outcome. President Hosne Mubarak made his opening comments in the summit. He said

and other groups. He saw it as a new opportunity for achieving peace though he conceded that this summit could not solve all problems that exist between Palestinians and the Israelis. He talked about the implementation of the Road Map, withdrawal of settlements, final status of Jerusalem, release of Palestinian prisoners, withdrawal of Israeli security forces from occupied towns and villages etc. He also brought up the issue of Syrian demand for Israeli withdrawal from Golan. He was confident that Palestinian state

Hamas has already said it was not bound by the summit decisions on ceasefire. It, however, added that everything would depend on how Israeli side takes measures on the ground to prove its seriousness. Ariel Sharon also said Israel would release some 500 prisoners out of about 8000 Palestinians and allow Palestinian families to visit their members in Israeli jail. Sharon did not say a word about final status of Jerusalem nor anything about the borders and security wall.

On return home both sides

Hamas sent a couple of rockets into the nearby settlements in Gaza. This led to the postponement of one security meeting between Israel and Palestinians. Abbas took a very strong step and dismissed three of his senior security officials. Later he visited Gaza and had a meeting with the leaders of Hamas and other radical groups. Luckily, Hamas and others agreed to consult Abbas and Palestinian Authority before resorting to rocket attacks for any valid reason they consider. This brought back the confidence in the minds of the Israeli side and the security meeting is now being resumed. Israel also already got the cabinet approval to release 500 Palestinian prisoners. The permits are also being issued to Palestinians who want to go to Israel for work.

All these show that both sides are determined to pursue peace. How much control Mahmud Abbas has over Hamas and others is a different matter. Ariel Sharon also has serious problems at home because of Gaza disengagement plan. His Foreign Minister is openly asking for referendum before any withdrawal from Gaza, which Sharon rejected. There appears to be one good solution to Gaza problem: If some Jewish families voluntarily stay back in Gaza, they will have to accept Palestinian citizenship while they can have Israeli citizenship too. This could be the general formula for some other Jewish families who also might decide to stay back in the West Bank part of the Palestinian State. The Palestinians must accept them as good neighbours as many Palestinians are in Israel as good Israeli citizens. Such an approach should lead to a contiguous Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

## SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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reducing somewhat the burden of his Muslim bashing. The situation was ripe as Arafat left the scene and a soft-spoken mild mannered Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas -- who appears to be liked by both Bush and Sharon -- got elected by a huge majority. Though Hamas boycotted the election, it did not resist the holding of the election. This was a good sign which was reflected in the later discussions that Abbas had with Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups before going to the summit in Sharm-el-Sheikh. Abbas did not have any written commitment from them but it was apparent that they allowed him to talk to Prime Minister Sharon and see whether such a talk could bring any acceptable result.

Ariel Sharon also had domestic

this was a good step forward and urged both sides to work together so that unnecessary bloodshed could be stopped. He insisted that only two state solution on agreed basis could ensure secure life to both Palestinians and Israelis.

Mahmud Abbas in his address spoke of his determination to achieve peace for which he said both sides must work together and avoid any unilateral actions that can cause problems for the other side. There he said, "We have agreed with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to cease all acts of violence against Israelis and Palestinians wherever they are." This meant the Palestinians should not attack even the settlements. This is a major commitment he made though he had no written undertaking from Hamas

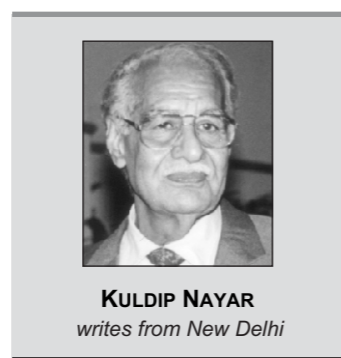
could live side by side with Israel in peace and security. He saw the beginning of a "new era" and hoped if all these were implemented fully, peace could be reached in the region.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon talked of "new relationship" and hoped that this would initiate "real change in the direction to the path of democracy and turn our back on the blood path". He also said, "For the first time in a long time there is hope in our region for better future for us and our grand children." He added, "violence must not murder hope and we must not allow this opportunity to slip by". He insisted that all terrorist infrastructure and network must be dismantled. This was a tall order and it was beyond Abbas to enforce it on Hamas and other radical groups.

started working on the summit understandings. Erez border in Gaza was eased allowing Palestinians to go to Israel for jobs. The 500 prisoners would also to be released soon. There was talk about further release of Palestinian prisoners. On all these there appeared to be some sense of satisfaction among ordinary Palestinians, but Hamas stood by its own decision that it was not bound by summit understandings.

There was also an understanding that one Security Coordinator from the USA General Ward would start working with the Palestinian Authority (PA) for training and monitoring the security situation. But before the work could start, there was a breach of security as one Palestinian youth was killed by a settler and in reply

# Diplomatic breakdown



KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

**W**HEN it comes to the feelings of neighbouring countries, our government is apt to be insensitive. It behaves like any big power which believes that equality in diplomatic jargon is all right as far as it goes. But when the chips are down, small countries must know their place.

New Delhi was at its crudest when it conveyed to Dhaka India's inability to attend the Saarc meeting. Natwar Singh, who presides over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the last person who should be asked to handle jobs demanding finesse. He is too arrogant, too hawkish to care about refinement and delicacy. When the government decided to abstain from the meeting, he reportedly entrusted his foreign secretary with the task of communicating 'no' to India's High Commissioner at Dhaka.

But before the High Commissioner could convey the message to the Bangladesh government, the news was on the TV channels at

Dhaka. Even without ensuring that India's decision reached the right quarters, New Delhi disseminated the information to the media.

Naturally, Bangladesh -- the host of the Saarc meeting -- felt cut up. A country, which is always on the edge when it comes to dealing with India, felt humiliated. I can't make out why Natwar Singh could not pick up the phone and inform the Bangladesh Foreign Minister. Would it have

break of sorts for Bangladesh. It gave the country a sense of importance. Anyone could have figured out that the cancellation would disappoint the people of that country. And since India's inability to participate led to the calling off of the meeting, the anger was bound to be directed at New Delhi.

India's fault was in confusing the Saarc objectives with its own reactions. It made sense when it was

over the developments in Bangladesh for the time being. No doubt, Dhaka was a security risk in the wake of disturbances due to the murder of the Awami League leader and ex-finance minister Shah AMS Kibria. It is equally true that the horrifying incident came at a time when India was feeling peeved over the murderous attack on the Awami League rally in the presence of its president Sheikh Hasina. Yet, New

Maybe, we are barking at the wrong tree. Our main problem is that we have not been able to get along with the Khaleda Zia government which, to say the least, has not been friendly. The comparison becomes obvious when her predecessor Sheikh Hasina was equally irritating, but not unfriendly. The fact is that elements unaccommodative towards New Delhi have crowded out the pro-liberation elements,

in Bangladesh on the sidelines of the meeting.

We have been paying very little attention to Bangladesh since the advent of Khaleda Zia. It may sound harsh but there is no denying that there is hardly any mention of Bangladesh in India and its media in positive terms. Illegal immigrants from Bangladesh are all over the press. The BJP-led government killed the work permit scheme for the Bangladeshis. The Congress, even after being in power for nine months, has not thought of reviving it.

People-to-people contact may be the answer. It is, however, strange that there is very little enthusiasm among the Bengalis on both sides for interaction as is seen among the peoples in East Punjab and West Punjab. This should have been more in West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Supercilious as the Bengalis are -- they do not mix with those whom they consider less important than themselves -- Dhaka would not lose its stature or status if it were to shake hands with Kolkata, even though it is not India's capital. Culturally, linguistically and even otherwise, people in West Bengal are closer to those in Bangladesh. But the equation between the two is lacking. Both have to forget the past. Even if they do not now, they will do so one day. At least, New Delhi should be sensible enough not to spoil things till that time arrives.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

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ruffled diplomatic feathers or violated some protocol rules? The royal coup at Nepal was good enough a reason for India to abstain. But the whole thing turned out to be different.

Look from the Bangladesh point of view. The Saarc meeting has been cancelled twice when Dhaka was all set to have the spotlight. Without having many opportunities to play a worthwhile role in the region, the Saarc meeting was a

Delhi had many other avenues to communicate its concern. In fact, it issued a statement when Kibria's murder took place. Manmohan Singh's security could not have been taken lightly. Surely, Dhaka could have been asked to put more force. We could have flown our own commandos to which, I am sure, Bangladesh government could not have objected to, beleaguered as it was at that time.

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# Text of Indian Foreign Secretary's Policy Address

It is said that the logic of geography is unrelenting and proximity is the most difficult and testing among diplomatic challenges a country faces. Frontiers with neighbours are where domestic concerns intersect with external relationships. This is where domestic and foreign policies become inextricable and demand sensitive handling. It should come as no surprise therefore, that in defining one's vital national and security interests, a country's neighbourhood enjoys a place of unquestioned primacy.

2. The intertwining of domestic and external interests has acquired a new intensity in this new millennium. Technological change is bringing in its wake a more globalized world where nation states and national boundaries can no longer provide the untrammelled autonomy that is associated with national sovereignty. While globalization has brought many benefits and opportunities for development and for the enrichment of our lives, there are also fears of losing one's identity and of being overwhelmed by powerful and technologically advanced societies. We are faced with the emergence of sub-nationalism and ethnic exclusivity even while a more interconnected world requires mutual understanding and tolerance. South Asia is not immune

to these global trends and this forms the backdrop to the challenge we face in formulating our policies with regard to our neighbours.

3. On what basis does India define its neighbourhood policy? Most recently, did our reaction to events in our neighbourhood, or our decision to seek postponement of the SAARC Summit, conform to an intelligent and well-considered neighbourhood policy? Let me begin by stating the obvious. South Asia is a compact unit, of sub-continental proportions, but occupying an easily identifiable geographical space, enjoying a broad cultural unity and a wide range of intra-regional economic complementarities. There were mighty empires in our history that straddled this sub-continent and the experience of colonialism more recently, reinforced the legacy of interconnectedness and affinity. Then came the trauma of partition, the growth of assertive nationalism, the drift away from democratic freedoms in some countries of our neighbourhood and the impact of global strategic and ideological rivalries, turning our sub-continent into a region of division and conflict, engendering a sense of siege both among States in our periphery and in India itself. The sub-continent is now home to several independent and sovereign states and this is a

compelling political reality.

4. As a flourishing democracy, India would certainly welcome more democracy in our neighbourhood, but that too is something that we may encourage and promote; it is not something that we can impose upon others. We must also recognize, regrettable though this may be, that the countries of South Asia, while occupying the same geographical space, do not have a shared security perception and, hence, a common security doctrine. This is different from EU or ASEAN. In South Asia, at least some of the States perceive security threats as arising from within the region.

5. Keeping in mind this reality, our approach to SAARC was the only one logically sustainable - we set aside our differing political and security perceptions for the time being, and focus attention on economic cooperation. Our expectation was that the very dynamic of establishing cross-border economic linkages, drawing upon the complementarities that existed among different parts of our region would eventually help us overcome the mutual distrust and suspicion which prevents us from evolving a shared security perception. This remains our hope today, even though the record of SAARC in this respect, has been hardly inspiring. The fact is that

SAARC is still largely a consultative body, which has shied away from undertaking even a single collaborative project in its 20 years of existence. In fact, there is deep resistance to doing anything that could be collaborative. On the other hand, some members of SAARC actively seek association with countries outside the region or with regional or international organizations, in a barely disguised effort to "counterbalance" India within the Association or to project SAARC as some kind of a regional dispute settlement mechanism.

6. It should be clear to any observer that India would not like to see a SAARC in which some of its members perceive it as a vehicle primarily to countervail India or to seek to limit its room for manoeuvre. There has to be a minimal consensual basis on which to pursue cooperation under SAARC, and that is the willingness to promote cross-border linkages, building upon intra-regional economic complementarities and acknowledging and encouraging the obvious cultural affinities that bind our people together. If there continues to be a resistance to such linkages within the region, even while seeking to promote linkages outside the region, if the thrust of initiatives of some of the members is seen to be patently hostile to India or

motivated by a desire to contain India in some way, SAARC would continue to lack substance and energy.

7. India already has a set of bilateral relationships with its neighbours, which vary in both political and economic intensity. What can SAARC offer as an additionality to this set of relationships? Clearly, the creation of a free market of 1.3 billion people, with rising purchasing power, can be a significant additionality for all SAARC members. Currently, intra-regional trade accounts for only 5% of SAARC's total foreign trade and this needs to be addressed. But the mere lowering of tariffs and pruning of negative lists do not add up to a true free market. The political lines dividing South Asia have also severed the transport and communication linkages among member countries. The road, rail and waterway links that bound the different sub-regions of the sub-continent into a vast interconnected web of economic and commercial links, still remain severed. Transit routes, which would have created mutual dependencies and mutual benefit, have fallen prey to narrow political calculations. Unless we are ready to restore these cross-border linkages and transportation arteries throughout our region, SAFTA would remain a limping

shadow of its true potential.

8. India is today one of the most dynamic and fastest growing economies of the world. It constitutes not only a vast and growing market, but also a competitive source of technologies and knowledge-based services. Countries across the globe are beginning to see India as an indispensable economic partner and seeking mutually rewarding economic and commercial links with our emerging economy. Should not our neighbours also seek to share in the prospects for mutual prosperity India offers to them? Do countries in our neighbourhood envisage their own security and development in cooperation with India or in hostility to India or by seeking to isolate themselves from India against the logic of our geography? Some neighbours have taken advantage of India's strengths and are reaping both economic and political benefits as a result. Others are not. If globalization implies that no country can develop in an autarchic environment, is this not true even more for countries within a region? If SAARC is to evolve into an organization relevant to the aspirations of the peoples of South Asia, then these questions will need deep reflection and honest answers.

9. The challenge for our

diplomacy lies in convincing our neighbours that India is an opportunity not a threat, that far from being besieged by India, they have a vast, productive hinterland that would give their economies far greater opportunities for growth than if they were to rely on their domestic markets alone.

10. It is true that as the largest country in the region and its strongest economy, India has a greater responsibility to encourage the SAARC process. In the free markets that India has already established with Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, it has already accepted the principle of non-reciprocity. We are prepared to do more to throw open our markets to all our neighbours. We are prepared to invest our capital in rebuilding and upgrading cross-border infrastructure with each one of them. In a word, we are prepared to make our neighbours full stakeholders in India's economic destiny and, through such cooperation, in creating a truly vibrant and globally competitive South Asian Economic Community.

11. However, while we are ready and willing to accept this regional economic partnership and open up our markets to all our neighbours, we do expect that they demonstrate sensitivity to our vital concerns. These vital concerns relate to

allowing the use of their territories for cross-border terrorism and hostile activity against India, for example, by insurgent and secessionist groups. As countries engaged in the task of economic cooperation, we need to create a positive and constructive environment by avoiding hostile propaganda and intemperate statements. India cannot and will not ignore such conduct and will take whatever steps are necessary to safeguard its interests.

12. India would like the whole of South Asia to emerge as a community of flourishing democracies. We believe that democracy would provide a more enduring and broad-based foundation for an edifice of peace and cooperation in our sub-continent. Half a century of political experience in South Asia has provided a clear lesson that while expediency may yield short term advantage, it also leads to a harmful corrosion of our core values of respect for pluralism and human rights. The interests of the people of South Asia sharing a common history and destiny, requires that we remain alert to the possible dangers we face when attempts are made to extinguish a democratic order or yield space to extremist and communal forces.

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