

Saran's bombshell

Some introspection called for

WE have to confess to having been taken by surprise by the recent address delivered by the Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran. It was a forthright statement of the Indian point of view though, and has brought out into the open many of the tensions and resentments that had been simmering below the surface since India withdrew from the scheduled 13th Saarc summit.

The speech on the whole seemed to indicate a frustration with the regional body and some of the member countries that had never before been expressed, albeit not openly.

The message delivered was clear enough. In the first place, India pointed to the hostility towards it as the main impediment keeping Saarc from being effective. In the second, it made it quite clear that India would henceforth demand that the member countries address its concerns if Saarc were not to wither on the vine.

Frankly, we feel that these issues would have been better ventilated at the aborted summit, where they could have been discussed and debated at some length and concrete grievances addressed. If this is how India felt, then it was all the more necessary to have held the summit as scheduled. Another point of concern is that Mr. Saran's statement seems to represent quite a break from the advances made at the Islamabad summit in 2004 which had seemed to mark a turning-point in the history of regional cooperation.

The question is, what has happened between then and now to occasion such statements.

The failures of Saarc as pointed out by the Indian foreign secretary has to be seen in the context of India-Pakistan relations, which before the present thaw, literally held regional cooperation hostage to the Kashmir issue. It is quite unfair to suddenly blame Saarc's smaller neighbours for all its failures. India could do well to examine its own role in it.

Further than that, if there are fissures, they are caused precisely by the mind-set suggested by Mr. Saran that if Saarc is to transform into an effective regional body then the rest of the countries need to fall in line with India's preeminent position in South Asia. There might have been some reason for the frustration articulated by Mr. Saran, but India also needs to think about addressing the grievances of the other member countries.

It was good to see the call for greater responsibility on India's part in the speech but the speech didn't acknowledge any level of failing on India's part for the state of affairs. Interestingly, the subtext of references to issues such as cross-border terrorism and using Saarc to try to contain India and 'narrow nationalism based on hostility to India' seemed to be quite clearly aimed at some countries, who we suspect were the intended audience for the speech.

There is no doubt that India has raised some points about the future of Saarc that must be addressed together with the concerns of the smaller nations in order to strike a balance in their approaches to Saarc so that it can emerge as an economic powerhouse in its own right. It is a pity that the summit in which these issues could have been debated, at the very least in the traditional retreat, was called off by India.

Police hamhandedness can't be condoned

What has the opposition gained from hartal, anyway?

THE 36-hour hartal passed off rather peacefully, with no major incidents reported from anywhere in the country. But brutal police action on the pickets was at it worst as in some cases women were clubbed ruthlessly or dragged along the roads in what may be termed an extremely uncivil manner of dealing with protestors. AL lawmaker Hazi Selim was assaulted physically and so were dozens of pickets. Police excesses during hartals have really become a spectacle of cruelty.

The situation is indeed deplorable. The ruling alliance appears to be hell-bent on obstructing all opposition activities and not allowing them any space anywhere. It seems absolute domination of the political scene is their only goal.

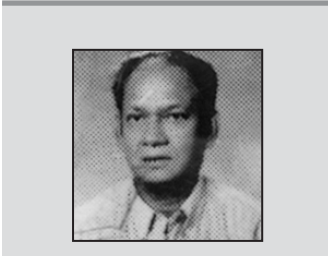
Hartal is a disruptive phenomenon which can bring no good -- that's a known fact. But people are likely to suffer even more if the element of violence is added to it. Police brutality does little to keep the situation under control as tension goes high when they pounce on the pickets.

The opposition has failed to justify its strategy of relying on hartal as a political weapon. What have the AL and its allies gained by calling hartal for no fewer than six days in about three weeks? Their popularity rating is unlikely to go up since hartal means hardship to people and colossal damage to the economy. It is an anachronism which has long outlived its utility. It is highly counter productive and is becoming more and more unpopular.

No nation can afford to remain paralysed day after day in this competitive world. Politics of hartal and confrontation must come to an end. And the government of course has a role to play here. It is the interaction between the government and the opposition which helps the democratic culture flourish in any society. The government must overcome the psychological barrier that prevents it from giving the opposition its due and the latter has to realise that hartal is a self-destructive device which cannot be used any more in a modern setting.

Shias in the driver's seat

Shall US pull out soon from Iraq?



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE just announced election results in Iraq have put the Shias firmly in the driver's seat. The entire situation, though expected, is fraught with complications.

According to the results released, the most remarkable aspect of the election is that 58 per cent of the voters participated in the polls. The opponents of the elections, who were die-hard opponents of the occupation of Iraq by the US-led coalition, did everything possible to derail the elections. They carried on a merciless campaign of death against the occupation forces and indeed the Iraqi administration, whom they saw as collaborators of the occupying powers. On this point the entire Iraqi population appears united -- the occupation forces must quit Iraq as soon as possible.

The Shias have won 48 percent of the votes, the Kurds in the north nearly 25 percent and the Sunnis about 13 per cent. The Sunni vote is worth noting because there was strenuous campaigning within the Sunni ranks and the area surrounding Baghdad, which was mainly Sunni, for them not to take part in the elections. That so many Sunnis voted, defying death threats, is a measure of the pull of the elections. The Iraqis by and

the Americans to hold the elections and thus find a possible honourable exit out of Iraq. The leader of the Shias, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, has played a major role in the holding of the elections. He tamed his firebrand disciple in Karbala when the situation threatened to go out of hand. No wonder that Al-Sistani would expect a big prize from the principal occupying power -- the US. The very difficult choice before the US is that by

ersharp will have to face the fate of Saddam.

Iraq is an ancient civilization and the division along ethnic and sectarian lines is real. Yet over centuries the three ethnic groups, namely Shias in the south, the Kurds in the north, and the Sunnis in the middle, did not live in water-tight compartments but have been liberally intermingled. The post-election scenario brings out the majority Shias on top and puts the

stay in Iraq to work out the leadership contest among the Iraqis.

Along with the Shias in the south has forcefully emerged the Kurds in the north. They have been the most forceful supporter of the US, whom they literally invited into Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein. The voice in favour of continued stay of the US that is heard in Iraq, is mostly Kurdish voice. It is well known that it is a long standing imperialist plan to establish a

hand in fanning the Kurdish flame.

With their emergence within Iraq, through the electoral process, the dream of a separate Kurdish state is likely to get some support. Yet the states surrounding the Kurds, namely Turkey, Iran and Syria are strongly opposed to any such development. More importantly the Kurdish population in those countries (in Turkey there are many more Kurds than in northern Iraq) are fully integrated within the boundaries of those states.

The US and her loyal ally Great Britain have done away with Saddam Hussein, the foe of Ariel Sharon. In the process the US has planted a democracy in place of a dictator! Does the US have the ambition of transplanting democracy throughout the world in her own image? This looks like an impossible task given the vastness of the globe and the considerable number of states being totally unfamiliar with the parliamentary democracy. It seems more likely that the US targets the Middle East, an area that needs to be made safe for Israel and the area is very rich in oil.

The US adventure in Iraq- which it opened the door for the breeze of democracy to blow or has it opened the Pandora's box? Time alone can tell.

Arshad-Uz-Zaman is a former Ambassador.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

The US is at present running the show, but the contestants for power would want it to remain out of the arena, a near impossible feat so long as it is there with more than 150,000 troops facing the onslaught of the Iraqi fighters. The Americans are an impatient people and it is very doubtful if they plan to have a long stay in Iraq to work out the leadership contest among the Iraqis.

large have come to believe that elections will bring a better future for Iraq. It is evident that the Iraqis by their vote have decided to close the chapter on Saddam Hussein, the longtime dictator, ousted by the guns of the coalition led by the US. The chapter of supremacy of the Sunnis, thanks to the regime of Saddam Hussein has been left behind.

The Shias made it possible for

putting Al-Sistani in the driver's seat, they have created a second Shia state after Iran, with her nuclear ambitions and nearly 70 million population.

It is well known that Saddam Hussein had to be removed mainly to placate Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon, for whom Saddam had become an implacable adversary. The question that is on everyone's minds is whether the Iranian lead-

ruling Sunnis at the bottom of the pile. Thus horse-trading is a mild expression. The US is at present running the show, but the contestants for power would want it to remain out of the arena, a near impossible feat so long as it is there with more than 150,000 troops facing the onslaught of the Iraqi fighters. The Americans are an impatient people and it is very doubtful if they plan to have a long

Kurdish state in the northern part of Iraq with long borders with Turkey and Iran and Syria. Turkey has fought a nearly twenty year bloody war with her Kurds in the south east led by PKK guerillas. The Turkish armed forces defeated the PKK and their leader Abdallah Ocalan is currently serving a life sentence in Turkish jail. Both Britain in her heyday of the Empire and the US lately have tried their

SAARC close to use-by date

FARID BAKHT

THE 13th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation - or SAARC - was due to meet February 6-7 in Dhaka. The meeting was "postponed" for the second time. The first meeting, set for January, was pushed back in the wake of the tsunami. This time, India unilaterally decided it would not participate, citing the royal coup in Nepal and the "deteriorating security situation in Bangladesh" following the assassination of a former finance minister and opposition leader.

The reasons cited are not credible, given the extensive security preparations that were made in Dhaka and the Nepalese king's intention to attend the summit personally. Major progress on a free-trade agreement was expected.

SAARC and its seven members - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka - is now in the midst of a crisis. It was a grand idea for the 1970s. Made in Bangladesh. But it may already be out of date. We all know SAARC has been a dead duck because India and Pakistan persist in their pointless rivalry. Everyone supports the latest rapprochement between India and Pakistan, even if it is 30 years too late.

The emergence of Bangladesh was an opportunity to discard Britannia's poisoned gift of communalism. The absurdity of the two provinces East and West Pakistan was exposed and put to an end. Bangladesh won its independence. The Pakistani military was humiliated and went back to its barracks. Unfortunately, it was not punished for its actions and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reneged on his promises for a progressive and modern society. If both had happened, we would have seen a different South Asia emerge. Pakistan would have diverted resources from an unnecessarily bloated military machine into a modern industrializing economy. They might have negotiated with India over Kashmir, leading to

independence or autonomy (whatever the Kashmiris voted for) and moved on.

Instead, the Pakistani military decided to play its version of the "Great Game". The Indian administration decided to ignore the aspirations of Kashmiris. Not surprisingly, the "Switzerland of Asia" went up in flames. The Taliban would not have been possible without Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence and the need for the Pakistani military to prove useful to Washington.

The gas factor

The giant US company Unocal wants to supply India with gas and oil from Central Asia. To do so it needs a pipeline to go through Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Iranians are also eyeing the Indian market. So how big is the gas factor

not last that long.

SAARC can never take off until the issue of 1947 and partition is solved once and for all. A solution means acceptance of the other to survive and genuine moves to cooperate. Moreover, diplomats and the two militaries have to grow up and graduate from playing imperial games. These petty jealousies have given us the most stupid of wars over a glacier in Kashmir -- the Siachen.

China-India rivalries

The world has moved on. China is the manufacturing workshop of the global economy, just as Manchester was in 19th-century Britain. China's economy is fragile and will go bust in the next few years, but the Chinese are following the upward trajectory of the Wild West American economy of the late 19th

century. So why engage in this pointless competition? For more glaciers?

It would be far more sensible for India and China to get closer. They are making some tentative steps but the effort lacks true willpower. India needs to look northeast toward China. India should invest in China. China should invest in India. In the 1940s, a US general called "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell dreamt of building an all-weather road from Calcutta to southern China. For the wrong purpose maybe, but still breathtaking in its vision. A Sino-Indian partnership would inevitably lead to the construction of such transport links to move billions of euros' worth of annual trade.

The Seven Sister states of northeastern India would no

ports are nearer to Kunming than Shanghai is. It is only a matter of time. Five years? Ten years? Again, Bangladesh gains because of geography.

For the past few years, another grouping has emerged. BIMSTEC, an economic cooperation which includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal but excludes China and Pakistan. Then, there is the grouping of Bay of Bengal nations.

Unknown to many, there is yet another entity called BICM. This stands for Bangladesh, India, China and Myanmar. For anyone thinking it through, BICM should be the real aim, not SAARC. In the emerging geopolitical realities of this generation, it would be far more beneficial to concentrate on BICM. If it ever becomes a real

model. We cannot wait for them to grow up.

In Bangladesh there are still influential people who cannot forget that they lost in 1971. Growing up in a flat rice-growing delta, they still look to the west to the hilly, mountainous regions beyond Punjab, as if they have any cultural similarities. They do not. That is a dead-end.

Bangladesh President Zia had the vision for SAARC in the 1970s. It could have worked then if India and Pakistan had buried the hatchet.

Now, we need a new vision for a new century. Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry says it has a policy that is "looking east". If it is looking, one wonders what it is seeing. How else can one explain why it incredibly risked relations with this century's superpower, China, in allegedly allowing the Taiwanese to ditch out visas in Dhaka?

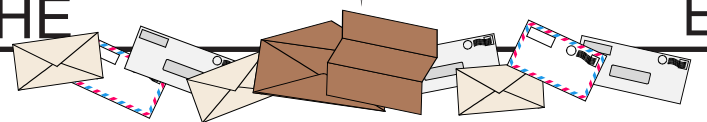
The Bangladeshi establishment is not alone in being myopic. Ignoring internal opposition, a part of the Indian establishment thinks it can cavalierly destroy Bangladesh, as a by-product of the monstrous River-Linking Project. They want to divert the Ganges and Brahmaputra waters to the southern and western states. What is the point of a South Asian union or economic association if one of its members loses the basis of having a functioning nation?

Water is key to Bangladesh's survival. If the project goes ahead, the "C" in SAARC will not stand for cooperation. It will mean confrontation, as millions migrate to India in search of a livelihood. There is a disconnect between fine words in SAARC summits and the real issues of water (and even gas).

There is an absolute necessity to work together. All players need to have a better handle on their geopolitical position and understand who their true friends are. The strange thing is that many ordinary people seem to be aware of these realities. So why do intellectuals and the establishments miss the big picture?

Farid Bakht is associated with Futurebanga Network.

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



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.

Things going wrong

We are hearing a lot about the moral degradation in the judiciary, which is in charge of establishing the rule of law.

There are frequent news items about known terrorists absconding after being allowed bail resulting from uncontested or feebly contested bail petition. Is there a connection? It seems things are going wrong in many areas.

Ahmed Khaled
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'Kyoto Protocol'

The controversial Kyoto Protocol is going to be an international law this week. Are we really aware of the possible disastrous consequences if we don't take adequate measures to stop global warming?

Kyoto Protocol is an agreement to cut six gases amongst which carbon dioxide from fossil fuel is the largest contributor in the climate changes. The protocol is a breakthrough in the fight against climate change and a success for global diplomacy, despite the fact that the US, being the world's greatest greenhouse gas emitter, is yet to take part in the deal. It was signed by 128 nations in 1997 and 34 nations agreed to cut emissions of greenhouse gas. There were serious hurdles on the way to bringing the agreement into effect as it needed ratification by 55 percent of emissions from developed countries. Developed nations took refuge to economic issues while the US played the stand off role. With Russia's ratification last year, the figure rose to 61 percent making it easier for a possible solution.

Why the protocol is necessary? Scientists found that polar bears are

becoming thinner due to regression of sea ice from which the bears hunt. Sixty-four percent of Chinese glaciers may soon become history if the present trend continues. Evidence of green grass in Antarctica is yet another worry. The polar icecap of the Arctic Ocean is melting in such a speed that commercial vessels can obtain this route in near future. Long running drought in Afghanistan may be an outcome of the climate change. These are only few examples while scientists predict that many places will be under water due to global warming and few places will face consistent drought. Due to emission of huge carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the earth was warmed by 0.6 degree in the past century and the consequences are evident everywhere - glaciers are melting, animals on the move and drought spreading. Well, Kyoto cannot stop climate

change rather it is the first step that would remain in effect up to 2012. Hypothetically, if all nations agree to cut emission, the result would probably be 1 percent of emission below the 1990 level by 2012. Scientists contemplate that in order to avert any possible climatic disaster; developed countries need to cut emissions by 60 percent by 2050. A challenging task indeed. Without the US, Kyoto's nations account for only 32 percent of global emission. The most recent international climate change summit in Argentina ended in frustration when the US declined to discuss the post-Kyoto consequences and eventually created a stalemate situation. Poorer nations do not have any significant role to play as it is the rich developed nations who emit gases through industrialisation.

What will happen now? It depends on political will of the rich

developed nations. Post Kyoto rules must be decided by 2007 while the US still remains in its stand-off position.

We all feel that the global climate is gradually changing but we are hardly doing anything to stop these changes - Kyoto is only the beginning of a protracted struggle.

Mahbub A. Bhuiyan

Melbourne, Australia on e-mail

Queen Victoria's idea?

In the Monday, February 11 edition of your newspaper, there are various articles referring to Rab, crossfire, traffic jams due to school openings and rickshaws. I would like to assist your readers to understand the roots of these issues, and perhaps clear up any misconceptions.

You see, they are all related, and as usual, the source of all these ills rest with your former colonial masters, the British. First, RAB, or as it was originally known when first formed by the good old Queen, Victoria, the Royal Artillery Brigade.

It was instituted to keep control of the school kids when on their way to and from classes. You see, only the offspring of the imperial masters went to school in those days, and they were taunted by the local kids, who used to call them nasty names. Queen Victoria was very angry with this, and so RAB was formed to provide an escort. Every time they heard something foul, they were cross, and fired at them, giving rise to the expression "crossfire". I should explain here that the guns used by RAB were low quality imitations made in Wales, which was not then the

superpower it is today. In fact the barrels were bent, and always hit some innocent bystander, rather than the intended target. Perhaps this sounds familiar.

On page 5 of the above mentioned issue, there is an article by Syed Shamim Faruk, "Rickshaws in Dhaka". In his second paragraph, he mentions that "Rickshaws were probably introduced in the early part of the previous century..." This is almost correct. Actually they were another innovation by our dear old queen. You see, RAB did such a good job in protecting the school kids that the children became spoilt and lazy, and just caused a lot of confusion in the streets, especially at opening and closing times. Add this to the fact that RAB soldiers weren't exactly the brightest soldiers on the block, and frequently lost their

way en route to school, and the answer was obvious to Victoria.

She passed a decree that the school children should pull their RAB protectors to school on rickshaws. Also, and this was important, for purposes of identification, she made the children wear white, and RAB wore black. RAB soldiers weren't paid enough to be able to buy combs, so she ordered them to cover their untidy locks with dirty handkerchiefs. Masterstroke! The kids got exercise, RAB got a free ride. Nowadays of course, they have big 4-wheel drive rickshaws, but the principle is still the same. I hope this clears any confusion.

Dr R J Murphy
Gulshan-1