

Terrorism linkages

Just denying is not enough

WHAT Admiral Fallon, the US Pacific Commander said to the journalists regarding possible activities of international terrorists in Bangladesh is a cause for concern. The remarks, it has been claimed, stem from reliable intelligence. If that is so, then all reports, speculations, hypotheses and assumptions that were made in the matter so long, may well have been proved right. It is imperative that the US government share the information with the government and the people of Bangladesh. We deserve to be spared the stifling air of assumptions and speculations that pervade the atmosphere today.

The reaction of our Foreign Minister reconfirms the government's known attitude to the issue. We feel that the government must demand specific information of the US government on their findings of possible activities of international terrorists on our soil, so that concrete actions could be initiated against these elements.

There have been reports regarding presence of terrorist elements trying to get a foothold in Bangladesh. In fact Harkatul Jihad (HUJI) was named specifically as one such group having links in our country. We ought to keep in mind that the threat of international terrorism in our part of the world runs right across the Middle East to South East Asia. One must not, therefore, discard out of hand the possibility of its tentacles existing in Bangladesh, without a serious investigation into the matter. We are not sure whether that has been done with any seriousness.

Our policy towards combating international terrorism is well demonstrated in our signing of the UN Conventions on it. In keeping with that the government should consider very seriously the US offer to help us combat the menace at home by adopting a holistic policy on the issue. Terrorists cannot be combated without a coordinated action at regional and international levels.

We appreciate the attempts of the government to acquire appropriate hardware to reinforce the Coast Guard. It is just as well since that is one area which remains most vulnerable and at the disposal of the smugglers of illicit weapons and drugs, to be used without let or hindrance.

It is just not enough to ban groups suspected of terror links and do nothing about arresting their members. It must be ensured that such elements are divested of all capabilities of working with anti-state and transnational terrorist elements, once and for all.

Row over compensation

A standard needs to be set

THE collapse of a nine-storey garments factory at Savar last week killing at least 77 workers and injuring many has brought to the fore one of the most significant aspects of such tragedies -- the issue of compensation to the dead and physically crippled. Though the legal experts and labour rights groups have been airing their views on it ever since the 'accident' occurred, we feel that there ought to be a policy decision on the question because it has to do with throwing an economic lifeline to the families and dependents of the deceased.

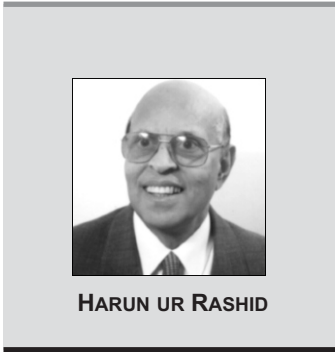
It is learnt that each family of the dead workers will receive a flat compensation payment of Tk one lakh, which to begin with, was only Tk 25,000 back in 1990. But the question is -- is it enough? We certainly do not think so. Tk one lakh is not the kind of value we ought to put on the life of an industrial worker.

In fact, the 'Fatal Accident Act' of 1855 as amended in 1955 says that the compensation to be given to the victims' families should be proportional to the economic loss suffered by the families at the death of their kin. It also gives them right to move to the court to ensure compensation.

Elsewhere in the world a worker's family receives the total amount of salaries as compensation that he or she would have earned during his or her entire working life. The law even provides for financially penalising those found responsible for causing the fatal accident.

Sadly, none of these practices are followed in our country. The victims' families simply have to rest content with whatever amount they get from the employers while the employers have washed their hands of the matter by parting with a small sum. All this has to stop. There must be a realistic compensation package; the victims' families cannot be taken for a ride any longer. We agree with the activists and support their demand for an appropriate increase in the rate of compensation.

Cricket diplomacy ushers in a new hope in the region



IN the 1950s, China employed "ping-pong diplomacy" to ease relations with other countries. Soviet Union and the US, at one stage, employed "chess diplomacy" for people of the two rival countries to understand each other. People of the US and the Soviet Union found that they were like any other normal human beings, although at the governmental level both countries painted the other as "devils" in the world.

India and Pakistan successfully used "cricket diplomacy" to enable President General Musharraf to visit India to witness cricket between the two sides. The idea was that even if the outcome of the mini-summit would fail, it would not harm politically the leaders of the two countries because cricket game provided the edifice of the meeting of two leaders. Accordingly they went to the field and shook hands with the players of both sides with thousands cricket fans cheering the leaders.

Taking this opportunity of witnessing the game, President Musharraf met with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and had a mini-

summit in an extraordinary atmosphere of cordiality. It meeting was choreographed well from diplomatic point of view.

After the meeting, both the leaders have said that peace between the two nuclear rivals is "irreversible." Why is there such optimism between the two sides? President Musharraf summed it up in a breakfast meeting with India media editors on April 18 when he said quite simply: "The world has changed."

coming decades. India's rising economic power, coupled with China's growth will force a restructuring of balance of power in world affairs.

Pakistan has been aware that India's relations with the US and China have changed. Both countries want to lure India to their camp. The US wants India to act as counter-weight to China in the Asia Pacific region, while China wants India to move away from the embrace of the US and a subtle

both India and Pakistan have realized that the territorial dispute of Kashmir has been a key negative factor in not cooperating with each other. As a result, both the countries are lagging behind in economic development, even compared with that of in the countries of South-East Asia. Unless economic power is there, political leverage diminishes in international affairs. Both realize that Kashmir dispute will need to be resolved with imagination and

been "set in stone but drawn on sand" as one Indian journalist put it. It appears that both sides are prepared to accept the reality of the opposing view. Former Indian Foreign Secretary M.K. Rasgotra reportedly said: "Both sides have shown flexibility and displayed pragmatism."

What have they agreed?

In the joint statement, the two sides agreed to:
› set up a joint business council to

peace process. For India this commitment from President Musharraf is very significant.

President Musharraf before his departure paid a courtesy call to former India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. It seems that the President recognized the peace initiative provided by Vajpayee in January 2004 and his contribution to peace efforts between the two countries. The 1999 Vajpayee-Sharif Lahore Declaration is considered as one of the pillars of peace.

Conclusion

Peace rapprochement between the two countries is good news for people of South Asia. It will hopefully generate the momentum in the region for other countries to cooperate in achieving the common goal of alleviation of poverty of millions of people in South Asia. With all the available resources of the region, South Asia should be an engine of economic growth. At present, half of the world's poor live in this region that constitutes only 21 per cent of the world's population living on 3 per cent of the surface area of the world.

It is interesting to note that while President Musharraf was born in India, Prime Minister Singh had his early childhood in Pakistan. Both leaders migrated from their birthplaces. Both know the catastrophic consequences of turmoil after independence in 1947 and both realize the implications of peace and war in the region.

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

BOTTOM LINE

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How has the world changed?

There have been seismic shift in the world environment during the four years. It is not cliché to say that after 9/11, the world has changed. It has changed the focus of American foreign policy and its preoccupation with war on terrorism has changed its relations with many countries. For example, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics were drawn to the embrace of the US after 9/11.

Another fact that has emerged is the rise of China as the potential global power, challenging the US. Both India and China are tipped to cause world power shift in the

power game is being played in the Asia-Pacific region by the US and China. The US Secretary of State visited New Delhi last month and China's Prime Minister visited India. President Bush is scheduled to visit India later this year.

Another factor is the prevailing atmosphere of economic globalisation. During the Cold War, an absence of armed conflicts was considered a success. At the 21st century, there is a different definition of success. It is judged by interactions within regional economic blocs to enhance their economic gains by collective bargaining.

Shifting Indo-Pakistan position

In the light of the above scenario,

innovation because past strategies would not work.

Pakistan seems to have reversed its earlier policy that if Kashmir dispute is not settled, nothing moves in other sectors. The pragmatic President Musharraf ditched the policy and has embraced that confidence-building measures must be adopted first to create an environment in which the Kashmir dispute would be amicably settled to their mutual satisfaction.

India, on the other hand, has also realized that making the Line of Control (LOC) as the permanent international border of two countries is not acceptable to Pakistan and India has prudently shifted its earlier stand that LOC has not

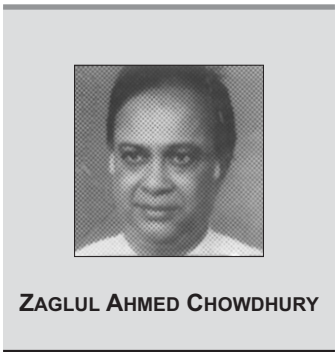
improve trade;

- › launch a rail link between the Indian state of Rajasthan and Pakistani province of Sindh by January 2006;
- › increase the frequency of bus service across divided Kashmir launched on April 7;
- › allow trucks to use this route to promote trade;
- › open a bus link between Poonch in Indian Kashmir and Rawalkot in Pakistani Kashmir;
- › re-open consulates in Mumbai and Karachi by the end of the year; and
- › begin a bus service between Amritsar in India and Lahore in Pakistan.

Both sides also pledged not to let militant attacks impede the

Growing China-South Asia ties

'Kunming Initiative' needs to be pursued seriously



CHINESE prime minister Wen Jiabao has just paid a visit to south Asia that took him to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and at the last leg, to India. All the countries that he has visited have described the talks that the Chinese leader had with his counterparts as "productive" which will contribute to strengthening their bilateral relations with Beijing. The focus of the visit was clearly economic while the political aspect is also not lost among the watchers of Sino-South Asian scenario. The visit is expected to impact positively both on bilateral plane as well as collectively on the region. China is geographically adjacent to this region and cooperation with such a giant nation both by its size and emerging economic prowess should bring multi-faceted benefits for Beijing and the countries that Wen Jiabao visited individually on one hand and collectively for the region on the other.

South's Asia's potentials for forging and enhancing multi-faceted cooperation with this

important neighbour are enormous. But not much concrete ideas and steps were taken before exactly in this direction even though nations of this region felt that such interactions with China could be extremely fruitful. China, the largest country in the world in terms of population, is presently catching global attention as an emerging economic power. The politically socialist country has adopted innovated

ness, communications and other fields. A conference in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, late last year, which was termed as "China-South Asia Business forum" has shed enough light in this area and the ball seems to be now rolling. Yunnan province, seen as China's gateway with South East and South Asia, had launched the "Kunming Initiative" a few years ago, but without much progress. However, the idea has

interactions with and assistance from outside world. Nearly twenty years later, the forum has made modest progress, but many feel that it is time that SAARC swings into more concrete action oriented programmes. The last and 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad felt that the regional grouping now needs to swing more into effective action oriented welfare activities. The signing of agreement on South Asian Free Trade (SAFTA)

SAARC leaders in a far bigger way in their future programmes. Here SAARC can be benefited from greater links with nearby ASEAN and big neighbour China.

Against this background, the "China-South Asia Business Forum" meeting in Kunming was an event in right direction and top business leaders from the region attended it. Bangladesh's strong team was led by FBCCI president. What was noteworthy is the sup-

Dhaka-Kunming direct air route is now a bright possibility and may take shape by the middle of 2005. It finally does, this will help Sino-Bangladesh cooperation in addition to the regional framework. The Chinese ambassador in Bangladesh Chai Xi told a seminar here sometime ago that his country is very enthusiastic to push the "Kunming Initiative", but deplored that same spirit is not exactly noticeable among other countries linked with the enterprise.

The visit of the Chinese premier to four South Asian countries took place at a right time and this is expected to provide the much needed push to Sino-South Asia cooperation and also the "Kunming Initiative", which has several concrete programme on hand, like road and air communications, to pave the way for regional and sub-regional cooperation that will help economic and social advancement for all involved. Interactions with China can serve rightly in that direction and what is required is the follow up actions both at bilateral and multilateral levels. There should be no slackening in this effort since regional cooperation holds the key for progress of developing countries. Bangladesh should pursue follow up actions on areas of agreement reached bilaterally during the Chinese premier's visit and also spare no efforts to carry forward the "Kunming Initiative" as well as on Beijing's collaboration with South Asia collectively.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

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open economic programmes and is establishing itself as a strong economic power in a rather amazing speed by maintaining a commendable steady annual growth over the last several years. The country is also open to economic and other cooperation with neighbours. Being a vast country, some of its provinces are close to South Asia and central Chinese government has encouraged these provinces to forge closer regional cooperation.

China and its neighbours are now coming together with specific measures to promoting cooperation in economic, trade and busi-

ness, communications and other fields. A conference in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, late last year, which was termed as "China-South Asia Business forum" has shed enough light in this area and the ball seems to be now rolling. Yunnan province, seen as China's gateway with South East and South Asia, had launched the "Kunming Initiative" a few years ago, but without much progress. However, the idea has

been praised by all parties concerned and of late concrete steps are being considered and discussed for multi-faceted cooperation under this initiative. The matter was discussed during Chinese prime minister's visit to South Asia and with the countries which have great stakes in the idea. Bangladesh and India among the SAARC family are involved in the "Kunming Initiative". The other country in this venture is Myanmar, which is not exactly in South Asia but in the neighbouring South East Asia.

The welfare oriented programmes of SAARC need

and stronger emphasis on unremitting efforts for poverty alleviation in world's one of the worst poverty-ridden regions on one hand reflected the forum's eagerness to tackle critical issues inextricably linked with economic emancipation and protocol on curbing terrorism, on the other, underlined the willingness to improve overall climate in the area as far as possible. But it is the core economic matters that will help improve the socio-economic conditions of the member countries, particularly the lesser developed ones should now catch the imagination of the

port from China's central government towards Beijing's economic cooperation with South Asia. China's assistant minister for foreign affairs Shen Guofang, traveled to Kunming from the central capital and assured the forum that his government would go all out in encouraging cooperation with South Asia initiated by the Yunnan province, whose vice Governor Shao Qiwei is a driving force behind the regional and sub-regional cooperation. He was also keen for bilateral cooperation with Bangladesh and led a high powered team here last year to discuss concrete issues. A

OPINION

Caretaker government: Reform or no reform?

ATM MURSHID ALAM

A great deal of debate is going on in the country about whether our caretaker government system should remain as it is or should be reformed. AL and some opposition parties want to justify their move for reform by saying that the government, in a bid to win the next election, has extended the age limit of the justices so that a particular person, who once held a party position in BNP, could become the next caretaker chief. They therefore think that the present system of selecting the chief advisor of the caretaker government should be changed. These parties are also proposing some other reform proposals, among which strengthening the election commission and appointment of the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners, on the basis of a consensus, are notable to mention.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and some other ministers are saying that AL want to create anarchy in the country realising that they can

not win the next election. BNP are of the opinion that AL never accept defeat in election but when they win everything is right. They say that the last election was held under a president, a chief election commissioner and three election commissioners who were all appointed by the AL and still AL and ex-PM Sheikh Hasina have accused all of them of conspiracy for AL's defeat in the election. Therefore BNP thinks AL other opposition parties have no genuine demand and they are only moving towards disrupting the next general election.

If the above two opposing views are taken into consideration, it can be seen that both the opposing camps have some arguments in their favour and in the opinion of a neutral observer, possibly the arguments of BNP will receive more points than that of AL. Now what BNP can do under the circumstances? Well, BNP can ignore the demand for reform and go for the coming election as per the constitutional provisions or they can sit with the opposition and work out an

acceptable formula for the election.

Let's see what BNP can gain from the two opposing options. BNP can go for and become successful in holding the election. BNP and allies will get at least 3/4th of the seats in the absence of participation by AL and its allies (which they are saying). BNP and its allies will comfortably form the next government. But what happens then? Can such an election get legitimacy in the eyes of the people and the world? The answer is -- of course not. Can BNP govern with a clear conscience? The answer is also-- no. Unrest and agitation will start from the first day of their governance. BNP can look back to see the fate of a similar election conducted by them and get the answer by themselves.

On the other hand BNP and its allies have everything to gain from an election acceptable to all as they think they are going to win the next election in view of their better electoral alliance and in the absence of a responsible behaviour from AL during the last few

years. This nation will heave a sigh of relief if BNP abandon hard line and work out an acceptable formula with the opposition. There is an opinion prevailing among considerable number of people that AL would not have succeeded in coming to power had BNP embraced caretaker concept in time. There were reports in the press in those turbulent days of 1995 that Khaleda Zia advised Jamaat's Motiur Rahman Nijami to talk anything but 'caretaker', when a delegation led by him met the then PM Khaleda to press for the demand of a government. The rest is history and they should learn from the history.

It is unfortunate that Begum Khaleda Zia is perhaps making it difficult by rejecting the reforms demand outright. She is a political leader, she should know that. She could have easily said that BNP would examine the proposals when AL and other parties place them. Our law minister Moudud Ahmed says, "Caretaker government is a settled issue and one of the basics of the constitution". The

minister should remember that election under an elected government was a settled issue and was one of the basics of the constitution but BNP had to go for 13th amendment to undo that settled issue and that basics in the greater need of the country. Moudud Ahmed will justify his job if he provides genuine advice to his leader and the party.

There is a whispering going on in some circles that BNP will drag its feet on the reform proposals as they are confident that the would be next caretaker chief can be persuaded to withdraw through back channel negotiation. Such type of thinking will do no good to the country as the very system of choosing the caretaker chief from the immediate past chief justice has become an embarrassment to the nation's highest court and also to that person concerned. A few days ago respectable former chief justice Mr. Mustafa Kamal has spoken about this particular aspect of embarrassment, as reported in The Daily Star. Besides, selecting the chief election commissioner

and other election commissioners through consensus and giving more power and authority to make the election commission truly independent and powerful are very important indeed.

The option of selecting the caretaker chief should better be limited to the past chief justices only. Options should not be wider as there is a danger of a deadlock due to our political culture of opposing each other's view. A wider choice could give rise to wider disagreements which can simply be a very disturbing scenario for the President in that interim period, in the absence of an elected government. A crystal clear guideline has to be in place so that if a consensus choice cannot be made, a former chief justice who has the support of the majority parties representing the last parliament will become the caretaker chief.

A proposal of taking away the defence portfolio from the President and entrusting it to the caretaker chief is being circulated by certain quarters. This is most

unfortunate. These people are placing their trust to an unknown person instead of the Presidency. A President holds a unique position in the system of a parliamentary democracy like ours. We should look to India to see how powerful their President becomes when a crisis appears in respect of the formation of a new government. The whole world will laugh if we tend to portray our president as a person who cannot be trusted. Some say, a president is appointed by a certain party. Of course there will always be persons holding offices, selected by a certain party but if every selection is questioned, Bangladesh as a country just cannot function. These people have forgotten that AL had come to power under a caretaker government when Presidency was held by a person named Abdur Rahman Biswas, elected by BNP and who always was by AL disliked. Mr. Biswas did nothing or could do nothing to prevent the victory of AL in the polls even after he crushed a coup bid by the then army chief and

appointed another general in his place before the election.

Coming back to reform, people in general feel that BNP will be smart enough to go for reforms in the greater interest of the country. It is unfortunate that when a party remains in power it thinks everything is alright everywhere. AL thought so while in power and did not change a single thing and BNP now in power is also thinking so and do not want to change a single thing. As these reform proposals in no way would put BNP in a disadvantageous position, it is hoped the government would change their hard line in working out an acceptable formula with the opposition for the holding of a meaningful election.

ATM Murshid Alam, previously served various organisations in various capacities now a businessman.