

Tension on the border

Hostilities must cease

It is a supreme and unfortunate irony that just as the peace process between India and Pakistan has been termed by both sides as 'irreversible,' India has entered into rapprochement with its old rival China, that relations between India and Bangladesh should continue to falter.

Unlike Pakistan and China, we do not even have a history of hostility with India—indeed our two countries have considered one another friends and allies since independence, and this is what makes the present situation specially distressing.

No less distressing is the fact that the current tension appears to centre on apparently petty matters that one would have thought could easily have been resolved in an amicable manner.

Instead, the tension, which began with the skirmish on Saturday that left an assistant commander of the BSF and a ten year old Bangladeshi girl dead, seems only to have increased in the past few days.

The Indian external affairs ministry has registered a strongly worded protest with the acting Bangladesh High Commissioner, and noted that 'repercussions' cannot be ruled out. This not-so-veiled threat indicates the seriousness the Indians are attaching to this incident which should not be lost on us.

Nor has the response been only verbal. There has also been a massive build up of troops on both sides of the border, which is in itself worrisome. Subsequently, there has been a panicked exodus from the border region to safer areas, and border trade has reportedly ground to a virtual halt, damaging the economy of both countries.

This resumption of hostilities comes shortly after a DG level meeting of the BDR and BSF on the subject of border fencing. Assurances were reached to maintain peace and quiet, but the talks eventually fizzled out over the issue of India building structures within 150 yards of the border, in contravention of the 1974 agreement between the two countries.

In the past few days there have apparently been telephone talks at the ministerial level, which is a good sign. However, the tension does not seem to have been defused, and this indicates that the mechanisms we have in place are insufficient or not working properly.

Perhaps the time has come for intercession from authorities higher than those in communication so far in both countries. The relationship between India and Bangladesh is too important to permit the continuance of this level of hostility.

Misadventurers arrested

Swindlers nowhere to be seen

NINETY young people, purportedly on their way to Greece, were picked up in Chittagong by a navy patrol team on April 17. They are the latest among the victims of swindlers operating under the guise of travel and recruiting agents. To add horror to the story, eighty-six had been sent off to some unknown destination via Kutubdia earlier on.

The incident is a fresh reminder of how desperate job seekers in the country are being exploited by organised cheats. The recent deaths of 13 Bangladeshi youths in the Mediterranean brought into focus how such unemployed gullible youngsters are lured into taking high risk for a plunge in the darkness abroad. The men arrested in Chittagong had also embarked on a highly perilous journey -- a point made clear by the fact that most of them did not even have passports, let alone any clue as to where they were going. Yet, they had paid between Tk 200,000 to a staggering Tk 700,000 to the racket leaders.

Clearly, such things can happen only when the business of travel and recruiting agents is taken over by professional double-dealers. The association of the travel agents has come up with the startling revelation that the number of the fake travel agents far outstrip that of bona fide ones. This is something the law enforcers should work on.

Another very worrying aspect of it is that the racketeers have an international network. Bangladesh seems to be a happy hunting ground for them where hundreds of thousands of jobless young men are ready to walk into their traps -- thanks to the poor employment situation in the country.

The problem has to be tackled forthwith. First, there must be strict surveillance over the activities of travel and recruiting agents and those that are working without registration must be held accountable for their illegal business. Second, receptivity must be created among the people so that they become aware of the hazards associated with travelling abroad without authorisation. The hypnotic spell that these young men come under must be broken with hard facts dinned into the ears about the rules and regulations of the countries they intend to travel.

The navy patrol team has done a good job. However, coastal surveillance has to be strengthened to make sure that such trafficking of human cargo through the sea routes is checked effectively.

Pacific Commander's exposé



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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It seems that everybody except the relevant persons in Bangladesh has indubitable intelligence on the doings of the militants in this country, that have turned, or are in the process of turning, Bangladesh into a hotbed of terrorism and a safe haven for terrorists. And, all that is happening in our neighbouring country, or that is going to happen in the future years, related particularly to its security in its North-East, is being planned and fomented by extremists housed in Bangladesh.

Over the past several years, the Indian media and think tanks, have been crying hoarse about the presence of Islamic terrorists in Bangladesh, some of whom, they aver, have relocated in our territory, having been divested of a base or sanctuary in Afghanistan following the US invasion of the country in October 2001.

The "cocoon of terror" that was supposed to have been spun by this "dangerous cargo" was linked to the global Islamic terrorist movements. All the terrorist acts

since 1999 including the grenade attacks at the AL rally on August 21 last year have been attributed by most observers in Bangladesh to outfits with an Islamic hue.

Now we have the Chief of the Pacific theatre of the US Military Command reveal in no uncertain manner that international terrorist organisations are active in Bangladesh. There is no reason to question the veracity of his statement, since, one would like to believe, it

desch has become a convenient route of transit of both illegal weapons and drugs, that complement each other, is a well-established fact. It does not need a Mahan or Mackinder to determine the likely destination of these weapons. And, even the most uninformed would not suggest that these were smuggled in to be used as agricultural inputs. However, merely being a conduit does not necessarily make a

mode of expression, unless we wake up and take notice of the developments in and around us. Apparently, acts of terrorism in Bangladesh have been limited to bomb attacks that have taken more than 150 lives. No one has claimed responsibility for these acts. This is not quite the way of the hard core terrorists, whose first objective is to announce their presence and their political and religious agenda by taking credit

for acts of damage and destruction perpetrated primarily on innocent civilians, such as those we have seen committed in Bangladesh, particularly in the last two or three years.

None of the government investigations into these incidents has been made public, and we are not to know whether the government has any definitive information on the presence of terrorist groups in Bangladesh. However, if one were to take the Foreign Minister's remarks to be factual, there are no such groups in Bangladesh with trans-border linkages. In this context, I can hardly resist quoting a portion of yesterday's DS editorial, which the government should do well to consider while addressing the issue. It

It may be that the Admiral has left more things unsaid than what he has said. What we would like of the US government is to share with the GOB information regarding the presence and operation of terrorist groups on our soil. We should not be satisfied with statements that merely restate what is already known. Tangible evidence must come forth so that concrete action can be implemented.

stems from very sound intelligence. And, if what the Admiral has said is based on reports and specific information, then perhaps all the speculations regarding the presence of terrorist groups in Bangladesh will have been proven correct. Although the US admiral was very careful not to attribute religious label to the terrorist group or groups, it is a safe guess that it is Islamic terrorists he was referring to. It is quite natural for the Americans to be concerned at this development. And so must we in Bangladesh also be, if what the US admiral said is an accurate representation of the facts on ground.

But is there anything new in the Admiral's remarks? Absolutely nothing, to be frank. That Bangla-

country a suitable operational area for international terrorists with an agenda to implement or a message to convey, for that is what terrorism has come to be now, a way of expression, vile that may be. Of course there is hardly any doubt that many of the illegal weapons meant for other destinations have found their way into the hands of local criminal.

Nobody will take issue with the admiral's general formulation regarding the whys and wherefores of terrorism; i.e. why does the phenomenon emerge after all. Given the current divisiveness in our society and the flux that we are encountering, one can say, even at the risk of being labeled a heretic, that terrorism may well become a

desch does not mean that there are no latent groups waiting for an opportune moment to spring into action. And there are perhaps tell-tale signs that are clear enough to compel action on the part of the government.

Thus, the US offer of cooperation to address the issue must be viewed objectively. It would however not be wrong to suggest that the remarks of our Foreign Minister, whose first reaction, according to press reports, was that the issue of terrorism did not come up for discussion at all, yet in the same breath said that Bangladesh would not countenance the growth of terrorism in its territory, is demonstrative of the denial syndrome of our government insofar as it relates to this sensi-

President Musharraf's two victories -- on points



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

APRIL 16 saw two victories of President Pervez Musharraf -- partial and questionable from the common man's viewpoint. His cricket diplomacy has succeeded and the Indians decided to make the most of the occasion -- pushing forward their own agenda, especially over what Pakistan calls the core issue: Kashmir. By laying down the outer parameters of negotiations on Kashmir -- India will never accept a change in political boundaries in Kashmir while being ready to discuss the subject -- the Congress government negotiators have ensured that what will be discussed is more Confidence Building Measures in Kashmir, making the Line of Actual Control into a soft border. But Pakistan is going to call the further negotiations on Kashmir as its own -- and its patron the US -- victory. But more on that presently.

The second was the substantial success in negotiations with Pakistan Peoples Party, which also became apparent that day when Asif Ali Zardari landed safely in Lahore but was not allowed to meet PPP workers and sympathizers. The latter were prevented by force from giving him a rousing reception and taking him to his Lahore Bilawal house in a rally. The Musharraf-created Authority drew a line at public reception and the rally. That was that. The Gen-

eral was laying down the outer limits of how far can the Army-PPP rapprochement go. Asif remains undismayed and will carry on with talks with the General's men. That is a 3/4 victory, the remaining 25 per cent marks will have to go to PPP and its top leader Benazir Bhutto who has remained persistent in relying on American good offices and abhorring the idea of taking to the streets. PPP seems set to provide the fourth PM to the General-President, maybe BB

years since the Shimla Accord of July 1972. Why was not the opportunity seized that could have come Pakistan's way anytime it showed its readiness to accept all the implications of Shimla agreement? Feeling inferior in armaments, Islamabad stayed quiet for 18 years. It can now be seen that it was creating a deterrence to India in the interval during which conditions in Indian Administered Kashmir ripened for Pakistan to play a

brought on an undeclared change in India's nuclear doctrine. It threatened to invade Pakistan in January 2002, its much vaunted nukes notwithstanding. It was a threat that was credible to friend and foe alike. Superficially, the Indians showed a readiness to let Pakistan use its nukes first. It would then wipe out the seven or eight urban-industrial centres of Pakistan from the face of the Earth. It is not hard to see what was the mean-

Kashmiris are not an inch closer to their Azadi after having buried up to 70-80,000 young men and a horrendous loss of limbs and property. If their peaceful political movement till 1989 had been left alone, the Kashmiris would certainly have gained something more than what is on offer today -- and not more than a few thousand would have gone to jail.

One hates to quote oneself. It is bad form. But the Pakistani generals could have read any of

Army-created system of governance -- that is acceptable to the US at least for now -- has also been accepted by Benazir; the terms are likely to include her own Prime Ministership while President Musharraf not only stays with his powers but PPP is impliedly promising to uphold them, including being ready to suppress those who oppose them. Her situation after the agreement is implemented will be similar to that of Mr. Shaukat Hussain today.

Benazir and PPP, in the light of the experience of their two terms in office in 1990s, is that they accept the supremacy of IMF-WB advice in economic policy-making without question then and will do so again; in politics she has allowed the Army to run foreign policy and security matters to her own exclusion; she accepted Army's supremacy -- what with Eighth Amendment infested constitution and meekly accepting the summary sacking of herself as PM twice. She accepted the military's supremacy then and seems to be willing to accept that now. So what is the difference between Messrs Shujaat Hussain and Shaukat Aziz, on one hand, and Benazir and Asif, on the other? She has to show the reason to 150 million Pakistanis why should she be preferred over Shaukat Aziz, Shujaat Hussain, and Mir Zafullah Jamali, and indeed over the general who matters. As for the enlightened moderation, PPP's record in office gives no indication of these fine qualities.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Although, the Kashmir Jihad has continued after a fashion in its own momentum, Pakistan had washed its hands off it in September 2002 to end the 10-month long eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Heavens be praised that some one blinked first to ward off the implied nuclear threat to Pakistan. One is simply not directly concerned with what might have happened. But what is relevant here is the denouement of Jihad: Kashmiris are not an inch closer to their Azadi after having buried up to 70-80,000 young men. If their peaceful political movement till 1989 had been left alone, the Kashmiris would certainly have gained something more than what is on offer today.

herself.

The net result of Musharraf's three day Delhi visit is that the two powers will continue to discuss Kashmir virtually ad nauseam, irrespective of any results, though Kashmir-related CBMs will continue to be proposed and implemented. For practical purposes that is a solution of sorts for the problem. For the rest, more communication links between the two countries, including Munabao-Khokrapar rail link, will be opened, especially in J and K State. Consulate Generals in Karachi and Mumbai will probably be reopened. Relaxation of the visa regime does not seem to be on the cards. It will thus be a controlled relaxation.

Taking up the first success first, a few quick points can be made. This deal on LOC was available to Pakistan all these

part; by 1989-90 conditions in IAK became conducive for a Pak role. The latter's putative nuclear deterrent had, in Gen. Aslam Beg's words, come in operation by roughly 1987; Kashmiris had launched a protest movement against India's misrule and rigging of elections. This gave Pakistan an opening. It manoeuvred and helped convert that peaceful and secular movement for self determination (basically for independence) into an Islamic Jihad by infiltrating armed Jihadists, the veterans of Afghan Jihad, into IAK.

Aslam Beg was right up to a point. India did stay deterred for over a decade; by stretching, Vajpayee's Lahore visit by bus could be taken as consciously being deterred. Kargil and Islamic militants' alleged Delhi attack on December 13, 2001

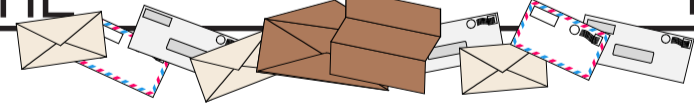
ing of the threat: it actually involved using nukes first. For, no power in its senses would let another nation nuke its territory first and only later will it move. That strains credibility of the "no first use" idea. It seems nonsense.

Although, the Kashmir Jihad has continued after a fashion in its own momentum, Pakistan had washed its hands off it in September 2002 to end the 10-month long eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Heavens be praised that some one blinked first to ward off the implied nuclear threat to Pakistan. One is simply not directly concerned with what might have happened in, or to, India, through one hates the idea of nuclear destruction of even Indian cities where many decent people live. But what is relevant here is the denouement of Jihad:

one's columns dealing with problems created by Indo-Pakistan nukes after May 1998. In each of them, one concluded that the competitive explosions of that year have frozen the Kashmir issue dead. Neither side can threaten the use of force on Kashmir. A war between the two is now impossible until one is willing to countenance a totally unacceptable form of destruction on both sides. No cause is worth that kind of destruction. Happily the two major governments in South Asia have now begun proceeding on a more realistic bases over contentious issues, no matter how they have arrived at this commonsense view.

As for PPP-Musharraf talks, the outside parameters have been agreed. Should the agreement finally go through, the

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



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Trapped in intrigue?

Bangladesh is truly trapped in international intrigue, according to a seminar in Dhaka (DS 4/4). It is neo-colonialism; the United States is initiating the British ghost of the Empire era. Actually it is the Western exploitation of the third world; mainly for natural energy resources, followed by new markets of a couple of billion consumers. Islamic terrorism is just a diversion tactic. Mahathir has proposed gold as the international standard for international transactions. The ME monarchs should not let the Muslims down. Free survival is more than religion.

Religion is a message or a medium? Let this issue be debated for mass awareness.

The US dollar is going to bust as the sole international currency. Its effect would be far greater than that caused by the tsunami (under-sea quake), as the developed nations would feel the pinch, and fume in their helplessness.

The US intentions in S Asia have to be seriously analysed by the two

main wearing political parties in Dhaka. Diversion movements just won't do. Our bad politics is letting Bangladesh down, and there are no dissenting voices on this issue. It is a pity that politics might go on hibernation for a while. Look at the plight of some Saarc members.

Our politicians should not let the country go into the hands of foreign powers. See how India changed camps, and the plight of Pakistan. The situation in Nepal is not a quiz. The mighty US is fighting for its own survival! As a citizen I have a simple message, unite or become a slave.

A Husnain,
Dhaka

Pakistani visa

Previously, the Pakistan High Commission used to issue 25 to 40 Visitor and Business Visas per day. However, nowadays they do not want to accept any Tourist or Visit Visa application for the reason best known to themselves and verbally ask the applicants to contact the interior ministry in Islamabad. It is troublesome. It seems that the High

Commission of Pakistan does not want to keep good relationship with Bangladesh and its nationals. This behaviour will create a bad impression about Pakistan in Bangladesh.

We, the general public of Saarc member countries, would like to see Visa Free access to all the countries so that we can enter each other's territory without any hassle. This way trade and commerce, cultural ties and economic cooperation will increase many-fold.

It may be mentioned here that EU member countries and ASEAN member countries have abolished visa.

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Ekushey and Islam

It is about a report "Ekushey tradition broken" published in The Daily Star of 22 February. I do not personally find anything wrong with recitation from the Holy Koran at the Shaheed Minar since that is part of our religious faith. The reporter provided the excuse that it offended the people of other

Faiths who had come to Shaheed Minar to pay their respects. But we cannot see why should it be construed as an offence against other religions. In this connection we may recall when King Hossain of Jordan and Chairman Arafat died many dignitaries of other Faiths from all over the world came to pay homage to them; but that did not impel the burial organisers to ban recitation from the Holy Book, nor did it offend anybody.

Meanwhile, we have also read a letter in a journal dealing with the same subject. The writer angrily asserted that it was an attempt to Islamise the Bengali culture. Culture is not a static phenomenon. To us, Bengali culture is an admixture of the rites, rituals, customs, festivities etc of our past with that of Islamic ones. Islam appeared in this part of the world about a thousand years ago and it accepted those traits of the culture of our past that did not contradict the fundamental beliefs of Islam with the spirit that "Learn... from all the world, and take whatsoever we can make into our own."

The way we pay our respect today to the martyrs of Ekushey by placing wreaths at the altar of the Shaheed Minar is not indigenous either, it is borrowed from Christianity, and has now become a part of our current hybrid culture, and nobody has any objection to it. Nobody to our knowledge ever objected to Tagore songs or Nazrul songs or Jibanananda's poems and Bengali folk songs which are particularly popular among the masses. Culture is not to be taken in a narrow sense.

MD Hossaini
Dhaka

Reflections on "Baishakh"

The Cadet Colleges Club arranged various programmes on the 1st day of "Baishakh", 1412. Everything was well programmed, well organised, disciplined, well attended and thoroughly enjoyable. People kept on coming in and young girls and ladies came in colourful attires. We devoured glasses of traditional 'Ghol'- butter milk with a butter

topping, cakes 'chitloi', 'Bhapa', etc, followed by 'Phuchka' and 'chatpatti'. The main menu was obviously watered rice, 'bharta', omelette, Hilsa fry, mashed potato, three kinds of 'shutki' dishes, mashed mustard, mashed red chilli and what not.

Coffee and cold water were there too. 'Baishakhi' festival was arranged in Ramna, Gulshan playground, Banani Club and other places also.

Music, dances and poems kept on entertaining the audience and added to the glamour of the occasion. Some people were party hopping- going to other clubs. All said and done it was a happy and joyful day. The significance of celebration of 'Baishakh' lies in the fact that it is a no-bar, secular occasion. Anybody and everybody can participate, interact, intermingle and rejoice on this day.

We need more celebrations like 'Baishakhi' to foster and build up fraternity and love.

As the late Pope Paul said in his last message - "Love more and

more, love brings peace". More love and sharing should flourish in this troubled world. We and our children want to live in a peaceful, prosperous and happy world.

S N Mamoon
Dhaka

Need for effective local government

Local government is a hotly debated issue in Bangladesh. Union Parishad elections have been held on a regular basis but still UPs are regarded as an ineffective institution. There is little initiative for developing a comprehensive monitoring system to oversee its entire performance by the government. It is not very effective and vigorous. Some of the NGOs are trying to introduce this system in a limited way. So far as we know they achieved some results like participatory budget, women's involvement in the decision making process and community mobilisation. In this process, people will assume the role of monitors to assess the performance

of UPs and, on the other hand, they will assist them on a voluntary basis to run the UP related activities efficiently.

I think the government and other NGOs should launch this type of programmes jointly so that a pro-people, accountable and responsible governance will be ensured at the grassroots level.

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Rab

I do not like to add one more comment on Rab. However, I want to express my opinion regarding the response so far given by the government. One can reasonably believe that the government prefers to remain silent on the issue, despite concerns expressed by many quarters including newspapers.

The only course left to the people, I believe, is to wait and see. Silence can be more audible than noise!

A Bangladeshi abroad
On e-mail