

Winds of change over Kashmir

Don't let go of the chance for peace

THE palpable change in their Kashmir policy and the prospect of the oldest running cause of conflict between India and Pakistan at last ceasing to be so, fill us with optimism.

Our optimism stems from the fact that there has been a distinct attitudinal change and a turnaround in long-held positions of both the countries on the matter. It is more evident in the case of Pakistan, where President Musharraf's recent statements might suggest a 'reversal' on the Kashmir policy.

Both the countries feel that the peace process, that has manifested through the bus service and been further reinforced by cricket diplomacy and the mid-April Joint Statement in New Delhi, is 'irreversible'. While India might feel that Pakistan is moving too fast it would do well to seize the opportunity, since the essence of the changed Pakistan's Kashmir policy cannot have missed the notice of the perspicacious Indian strategic planners. Gone is the rhetoric in Pakistani statements and war as an option has been totally eschewed. That, it no longer sees the LoC as sacrosanct and is even prepared to see it become irrelevant for the sake of a lasting solution, according to Musharraf, demonstrates a sense of urgency to solve the problem which India must now reciprocate.

We take hope, as all South Asians must at the prospect of a new era in Indo-Pak relations. For much too long the peoples of these two countries have suffered because of the Kashmir issue. But the biggest sufferers have been the people on either side of the Kashmir divide, more so since 1989 when the insurgency took a very virulent form.

South Asia has suffered too. Much of regional development has remained hostage to the Indo-Pak relations with the negative impact of their adversarial relationship falling upon the other countries of the region.

History has thrown up a chance of a lifetime for India and Pakistan to sue for durable peace. It would be tragic if the leaders failed to grasp it.

Bridge on the river Rupsha

Let's make full use of it

THE more we think of it, the opening of Khan Jahan Ali Bridge since Saturday increasingly dawns on us as providing a vital communication link with a high potential for unlocking a whole range of possibilities for growth hitherto lying dormant in a vast swathe of neglected land-area. This 1.36 kilometre bridge now helping to obviate time-taking ferry across the river Rupsha was a missing link on the Khulna-Mongla highway with the result that the northwestern and southwestern regions of the country were not connected. From this point of view alone, the new bridge constitutes a milestone in infrastructure-building. There is more to it, something we dilate down the line.

The Japanese government and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation have made this possible for us and we are appreciative of their role in helping us develop our infrastructure with the Padma bridge seemingly on the cards to mark another milestone in Japan-Bangladesh cooperation. The government's tenacious pursuit of the project deserves kudos.

The vital bridge-head towards the Mongla port will be a shot in the arm of the second entrepot which suffered a sort of relegation in the face of the primacy of Chittagong port. At one time, people felt that some vested quarters were lukewarm in their attitude towards the growth of Mongla port but now Chittagong port received diminished attention, but now things ought to change for the better with the Khan Jahan Ali Bridge in place.

Let's not forget, Mongla has the potential to be the only deep seaport of the country. Inside the country, it has a big hinterland to serve while Nepal and Bhutan could get transit through it. Overall, there can be an inter-connection between Chittagong and Mongla ports. So, the benefits to accrue from such an infrastructure linkage can be enormous.

Uzbekistan's turmoil and the US response



HARUN UR RASHID

THE Bush administration, by all accounts, has made advancing democracy and human rights in the world the centre-piece of its foreign policy. When popular revolution took place in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, they hailed and strongly supported it. President Bush visited Georgia recently to show his solidarity to its US-aligned president, much to the irritation of Russia.

However, when on May 13, hundreds of unarmed civilians were killed by security forces in Andijan, the fourth biggest city in Uzbekistan, the Bush administration kept quiet for three days before it expressed its concern.

It was Britain's Foreign Secretary who was one of the first leaders of the Western countries to criticise the massacre of women and children in Andijan. The Uzbek Foreign Ministry did not like it and on May 16 stated: "The British government's statement that government troops were involved in shooting people is absolutely groundless and rash."

After considerable pressure on the Bush administration, a spokesperson of the State Department finally came out on May 17 with a statement that the Uzbekistan government "should exercise restraint." The Secretary of State after four days urged the Uzbek government to carry out political changes to head off future unrest. The statement was mild compared to that directed to other countries.

Delayed US response

Why did the same US that invariably jumps to criticise human rights violations in other countries keep

mum in the case of Uzbekistan? Some of the reasons deserve mention.

Many political observers believe that the US policy of democratisation in the world seems nothing but a ploy to hide their blunder in waging an unprovoked war on Iraq and the current on-going debilitating impact on Iraq. They argue that the Bush administration picks and chooses a country for human rights violations for its strategic interests. In October

Furthermore, the US presence in the backyard of Russia acts to contain Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

Last year the nature of cooperation of the Uzbek regime was revealed by the British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray. Ambassador Murray dared to expose the practice of delivering terror suspects from Iraq and Afghanistan by the US-led coalition forces to Uzbekistan for interrogation and

table organisations, which serve as the only source of welfare for the population in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan. The arrested persons are neither Islamic militants nor are subversive to the regime, according to the protesters. It is claimed that they are being unfairly put on trial. On that day some of the protesters were arrested and taken to the city's jail.

Next day, several thousand people including women and chil-

children." Another woman reportedly said: "I have got three children. I was trying to cover them up. I was crying: Take my life [but] don't shoot my children."

What the security forces did is unthinkable. The regime opted for a military solution and, according to some reports, massacred at least seven hundred and forty five (745) men, women, and children. An Uzbek opposition group said that the dead bodies were lying in

government. The diplomats were not allowed to speak to ordinary people. BBC cameraman Sanjay Ganguli summed up aptly: ""We saw pretty much what they wanted us to see." The security forces were not letting people get anywhere near diplomats and the city wore a deserted look, only tanks and heavily armed soldiers in Andijan. Currently there is a demand from international community that an independent inquiry should be held as to the cause of the massacre.

Conclusion

What is the lesson we learn from the Uzbekistan's revolt? When people cannot exercise their constitutional rights of free association, freedom of speech and thought, they turn traditionally to other avenues. In a country of 25 million people, when people were in a back-to-the-wall situation, they came out to protest the oppressive nature of their government in peaceful demonstrations on May 13 in Andijan.

Using massive force, President Karimov survived this time. If the regime does not listen to their people, it is likely that the next rebellion will come in the form of a full-blown revolution, as it occurred in Kyrgyzstan.

Both the US and Russia must think over what has occurred in Andijan and coax the Uzbek regime to introduce openness and reforms in the country. Meanwhile, the credibility of the democratisation policy of the Bush administration has come under sharp scrutiny in Uzbekistan, and human rights organisations all over the world are watching to see how the Bush administration responds to the horrible massacre in Andijan.

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

BOTTOM LINE

Both the US and Russia must think over what has occurred in Andijan and coax the Uzbek regime to introduce openness and reforms in the country. Meanwhile, the credibility of the democratisation policy of the Bush administration has come under sharp scrutiny in Uzbekistan, and human rights organisations all over the world are watching to see how the Bush administration responds to the horrible massacre in Andijan.

It has been the most convenient way for the Bush administration to inflict torture on suspected terrorists by a third country on their behalf. The Tony Blair government recalled the ambassador to headquarters because of his criticism against the Uzbek regime.

Political observers believe that it does not matter to the Bush administration whether President Karimov of Uzbekistan commits a massacre of his own people or not, so long as the regime further advances US strategic interests. According to the latest US Department of State report, Washington "values as a stable moderate force in a turbulent region." The expression "moderate" is intriguing and misplaced because Karimov's rule brought not only oppression of democratic rights of people but also abysmal poverty and terrible living conditions.

Cause of popular revolt

From the reports in media, it all started on May 12 in Andijan, where people had been protesting peacefully outside a city court for four months over a trial of 23 businessmen who are leaders of char-

dren gathered in the city's main square. Most demonstrators were ordinary people and the atmosphere was calm. They were holding a meeting to protest the unfair trial. Roads to the city centre were blocked and protesters controlled the area.

What is remarkable is that the protesters did not even try to solicit support from the Bush administration. They knew that it would be a futile exercise given the special relationship between Karimov and Bush. They asked for help from Russia. In the end, Russia decided not to do anything. Political analysts believe that Russia is not prepared to annoy the US at this stage by supporting the popular rebellion.

The security forces received orders in the afternoon of May 13 to "eliminate" the group that meanwhile seized the government building. The security forces began shooting at the crowd. One woman told BBC: "We don't know what happened to us. All of a sudden these heavy armoured vehicles appeared. One helicopter was flying above. Can you imagine they were shooting at us from above, with our

mosques on the day of the massacre. It is reported that the president himself supervised the "pacification" effort and referred to the scores of dead as "criminals" -- although their numbers included women and children.

The regime reportedly concocted a story that the security forces did not shoot, but the Islamic militants fired the bullets. This story has been contradicted by the eye-witnesses.

Only on May 17, under pressure, did the Karimov regime for the first time admit that 169 people died in Andijan because Uzbek refugees in Kyrgyzstan who fled from Andijan spoke to international media, saying that at least 500 innocent people were killed by the regime. Many of the fleeing hundreds of refugees were also shot at and killed. One refugee told BBC: "We are fed up, we do not need such a state. We won't go back to Andijan. Even if Kyrgyzstan shoots us dead here, we'll stay here. But we won't go back to Andijan. We will die for our children, to save them."

A very controlled tour of foreign diplomats was undertaken on May 18 under pressure by the Uzbek

Quest for democracy, governance and social justice

ABDUL QUADER writes from *Carnterra*

CAN we aspire to achieve democracy in a country without ensuring good governance and social justice for all? The answer to this question is perhaps a big "no." It is generally argued that good governance in Bangladesh is hampered by a pervasive patron-client relationship, widespread corruption, centralisation of power in the hands of the executive, inadequate and unsatisfactory parliamentary performance, ineffectual judicial system, violent political activities, lack of accountability for actions by the government and the bureaucracy, and a general lack of respect for human dignity, etc.

Democracy is not an end in itself. It is rather a means to an end. Democracy is seen as a critical tool that empowers people to freely express their views on how a country should be governed and ensure their participation in the political, social, and economic development of the country. The real beauty of democracy lies in the premise that collective wisdom is better than individual judgement. This is why collective views when considered in governing a country can lead to better and more effective outcomes desired by the society as a whole.

Social justice demands that everybody in the society should have equitable (not necessarily equal) access to resources and the benefits that are derived from the exploitation of those resources (natural, physical, financial, and social) through a process of dispensation of fairness, equity, and rule of law. Social justice can also refer to ensuring the respect for the human person and the rights flowing from human dignity without consideration of social and economic status of the citizens constituting the society.

Democracy, governance, and social justice go hand in hand. Bangladesh could not make much progress on some important aspects of democracy, governance, and social justice (e.g. ineffectual parliament and lack of transparency in decision making by the executive arm of the government). The country is still embroiled with divisive and

change in the standard of living of the people. This also hampers the government's ability to make provisions for adequate education and training and health and welfare facilities, as well as job opportunities for all seeking participation in the job market.

The country has no doubt made notable progress in improving the

Creation of jobs and consequent increase in purchasing power, especially for the economically and socially disadvantaged, can enhance social justice in terms of the ability of people to access the basic necessities of life and to get out of poverty. The benefits of economic growth and job creation, if widely distributed, will reduce

local development in their jurisdictions involving participation of local people. Basically local government system has long been used for the political interest of the party in power, to make the local government representatives as their power base. The effect of all these has been undue benefit seeking by party loyalists and activists from local

a non-political and effective local government system in Bangladesh that benefits all, irrespective of party affiliations. We need to understand that the national and local issues are not the same and they should accordingly be addressed by different levels of government -- national and local -- without unnecessary politicisation at local levels. A participatory local government can make significant improvement in people's lives at local level through the provision of local infrastructure and other facilities provided these institutions are allowed to function properly without interference by political stalwarts at local and national levels.

People are naturally creative and intelligent and have the survival instinct against all odds and difficulties. So what needs to be done is the release of people's energy and creativity through an enabling environment by those in power (because they have the political, administrative, and legal means to make real changes) so that members of the society can develop themselves in terms of meeting their basic needs and then having a higher standard of living through equitable access to material means and opportunities. Democratic practices and good governance, including the rule of law, help achieve these desired goals of the people.

All opportunities are not yet lost and we need to explore them with an open and inquiring mind in order to make a change for the better.

Abdul Quader is an economist.

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often violent politics, without any national consensus on major issues of importance to the governance of the country. This does not augur well for a nation which gained its independence 33 years ago. Three decades are not a short time for a nation and within this timeframe at least some framework conditions for good governance should have been made that could have paved the way for the better practice of democratic principles in all walks of national life.

I believe the ad-hoc and piecemeal approach often adopted by the government in Bangladesh, without holistic and fundamental changes in the political and administrative systems (implying radical reforms in the way the country is governed), is of very little use to tackle the monumental task of nation building in the years ahead. While the population growth rates have declined in Bangladesh over the last two decades, the current population is already huge (more than 130 million). This high level of population puts tremendous pressure on the available resources to make any significant

macroeconomic environment which has seen an average annual rate of 5 percent GDP growth for over a decade. It has also recorded some improvement in health, education, and social welfare sectors in recent years, due to the efforts of both the government agencies and the NGOs. We have seen a growing civil society, a vibrant private sector, and a relatively free press.

However, Bangladesh is now facing a tremendous challenge for achieving sustainable economic and social development and bringing about significant reduction of poverty. This was reflected in the 2004 UN Human Development Report. The report ranked Bangladesh as 138th out of 177 countries in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) ranking. According to this report, adult literacy rate is still very low in Bangladesh (41 percent) and population below national poverty line is almost 50 percent, while that in India and Pakistan is 28.6 percent and 32.6 percent respectively. So Bangladesh has a long way to go to lift its HDI to a respectable level.

inequality in the society, which could have a positive impact on the cohesiveness of the society (as opposed to divisiveness and conflict).

Bangladesh needs a number of growth centres across the country (not just Dhaka and Chittagong), with a view to expanding the opportunities for economic and social development and reducing urban sprawling and slums that sometimes become dens of crime in the cities. One way to do this is to devolve developmental authority and administrative powers to the local level, with strengthened and effective local governments. This also requires allocation of more resources, both financial and non-financial, to local areas within local government jurisdictions.

Various levels of local government in Bangladesh (e.g. municipal corporations, pourashavas, upazila parishads, union parishads) have become too politicised, and that has resulted in ineffective and inefficient operation of the local government institutions. Party politics has become more important for local government functionaries than real

government institutions to the detriment of the welfare of the people as a whole. For example, granting of contracts and lease of markets (i.e. haats and bazaars) mostly goes to the members and supporters of the political parties occupying local government elected positions. The incidence of tender corruption and rigging is well known in Bangladesh.

Local government can play a more active and enhanced role in improving the lives of the people in terms of better education, health, sanitation, aged care, community welfare, public security, as well as infrastructure development (i.e. roads). Since the local governments are closer to people than the national government, there is an opportunity for them to be more responsive to people's day to day needs and also be more transparent and accountable for their actions if they really want. This is why local government should be kept out of national politics as far as possible.

The incumbent government and the opposition parties have a role to play in developing and nurturing

OPINION

Closer trade links with Pakistan

ABMS ZAHUR

WHEN we think about closer links with India or Pakistan we do not perhaps feel confident of the outcome because of our lack of mutual trust. In both the cases we cannot be sure of people's acceptance of such steps. In regard to India, our experience over the last 34 years is that India does not much conceal its desire to intervene in the affairs of its small neighbours. Bluntly speaking, India's overbearing attitude is one of the most critical factors for its so-called lack of closer relation with Bangladesh.

India fails to appreciate the difficulties and peculiar problems of small neighbours like Bangladesh. India is occupying the island of Talpatti by sheer force. She is trying time and again (defying all diplomatic norms) to push Indian nationalists (alleging them to be Bangladeshi) into Bangladesh territory. Her arbitrary river-linking plan, if it is ever materialised, will

certainly deprive Bangladesh of a huge quantity of due river water. Such an action will not only desertify a large part of southern Bangladesh, it will also compel Bangladesh to revise its entire planning strategy. How can Bangladesh develop a closer relationship with India if the latter continues to ignore these problems of Bangladesh, though we gratefully remember the contribution of India in our achieving independence.

In fact, Saarc can hardly make progress so long as India refuses to discuss bilateral issues in this regional forum. On different pretexts India does not solve the bilateral issues with Bangladesh because India knows well that Bangladesh can hardly pressure India to agree to solve these matters. On the other hand, she never hesitates to press-time and again (defying all diplomatic norms) to push Indian nationalists (alleging them to be Bangladeshi) into Bangladesh territory. Her arbitrary river-linking plan, if it is ever materialised, will

during the natural calamities. The Indian attitude of keeping Bangladesh in continuous state of dependence will certainly prompt the people of Bangladesh to find new ways

1971. The then leaders of Muslim League (the party in power until 1958) were not true leaders of the people. Thus, the people's interest could never become their prime

trade. Among the major export items from East Pakistan were raw jute, jute goods, writing paper, newsprint, tea, betel leaves, and betel nuts. Main items of export from West

East, apparently because of failure to achieve success at reducing the trade gap with India to an acceptable level. Already some appreciable actions have been taken toward

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and means to prosper without any help or assistance from India, no matter what may be the cost.

In regard to Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, it has been proved beyond any amount of doubt that the basis of a state can never be mere religious sentiment. The most important basis of a state is mutual respect and trust among its people. Such feeling could not be developed among the common men and women in Pakistan from 1947 to

concern. To them, the philosophy of Pakistan was more important. Because of thirteen long years of military rule (1958-1971) democracy could not be developed. In fact, only India-phobia kept Pakistan together until 1971.

Now both Bangladesh and Pakistan are in need of trade expansion for their own benefit. During the Pakistani rule, Pakistani planners concentrated on developing interwing (East and West Pakistan)

Pakistan were raw cotton, cotton manufactures, light engineering goods, salt, and fruits (both fresh and dried).

In recent times it appears that both Bangladeshi and Pakistani traders are showing greater interest in developing closer trade links between their countries. This is because of their growing need for expanding markets. It may be pointed out in this respect about Bangladesh's looking toward the

that direction. Under the circumstances, it may be advisable for exploring closer trade relations also with Pakistan, a member of Saarc because of the following considerations:

(a) It can be done more quickly due to strong need felt by both;

(b) If joint ventures can be developed in the textile sector it may help us upgrade the sector and expand our market;

(c) Apparently there is a good demand for Bangladeshi products such as tea, betel leaves, betel nuts, fertilizer, melamine, and ceramic wares in Pakistan. Through more participation in each other's trade and industrial fairs and desk research the actual demand may further be assessed.

Despite a good prospect for developing close trade link the following points must be carefully considered:

(i) How long Pervez Musharraf can continue to remain anti-Taliban and control the Pakistani Islamic fundamentalists? Closer trade links means increase in interaction between Bangladeshi and Pakistani traders, such interaction may also encourage Bangladeshi fundamentalists to increase their interaction. Such a situation is not acceptable to the people of Bangladesh;

(ii) In developing shipping facilities between the two countries cooperation is needed from other concerned members of Saarc, such as India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka;

and (iii) Whether free trade agreement between these countries should precede any special trade or industrial agreement.

The war of liberation ended 35 years ago. Yet it would not be easy for us to forget the events of 1971. The difference between Bangladesh and Pakistan is that Bangladesh is a democratic country in which people's interests or sentiments cannot be ignored. In Pakistan, on the other hand, people are not supreme. It is the military dictator and the armed forces which are most powerful. However, it may be assumed without much difficulty that limited interaction with Pakistani traders in the interest of trade only will be acceptable to the people of Bangladesh because of the overriding need for trade expansion.

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