

## Haemorrhage on roads

### Action plan needed to stop it

It is a matter of great concern that road accidents account for loss of Tk 4,000 crore a year which is equal to two percent of the GDP. The social cost is also very high with over 10,000 people dying every year, let alone numerous others being crippled, leaving their families in dire straits. The situation has indeed become critical.

The accidents are usually caused by serious lapses at different levels. Faulty and worn out vehicles which should have been ordered off the streets a long ago are operating on dubiously procured fitness certificates. To top it off, a very large number of drivers are using fake licence with a vast majority of them being conductors-turned-drivers. Little more than novices, they are temperamentally unfit as well to take charge of public safety on the road. Traffic rules of every kind are being violated by the drivers. This is particularly true about the menace called mini-bus operating in the city. The situation is even worse on the highways in the absence of police patrol.

Now, all these violations of traffic rules which greatly endanger lives of citizens have to be dealt with according to the law. But, incredible though it may sound, no killer driver has been punished in the last 12 years. The cases were closed even after the accused had been charge-sheeted. The cases are usually resolved through compromise between the parties which many people suspect are tainted by underhand deals, with the police often playing the role of highly interested intermediary.

Punitive action against the killer would have had a deterring effect on accident. One more wholesome effect of punishment would have been to curb mob violence in the aftermath of an accident, which is actually contributing to lawlessness on the roads.

Another area where matters must improve is the way pedestrians use roads. Many of them seem to be unaware of their own safety needs lunging forward dangerously on to the roads. They must make it a point to use zebra crossings and over-bridges wherever they are.

All concerned must put their heads together and devise a comprehensive action plan to reduce incidence of road accidents substantially.

## Journalists under threat again

### It's the same old story

The latest threat to be issued against journalists for merely doing their job comes as no surprise. In fact these kinds of threats have become so commonplace that they rarely even raise eyebrows now. It is only when we pause to consider the enormity of what is going on and the implications for the country that we realise just how serious these incidents are.

The story from Bogra has a familiar ring to it. Three local journalists quoted an upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) as saying that the word of the local MP was law to him, and that the former UNO had been transferred for not abiding by the MP's wishes.

On publication of this quote, the UNO has reportedly become incensed, and at a programme attended by ruling party leaders he termed the reporters as "enemies" and threatened to "beat them up publicly within a month."

It is possible that the officer came under pressure from the local ruling party leader, and that his strong statement in their presence was intended to protect himself. However, these possibilities do not excuse the action. Even if the officer has been misquoted there was no need to resort to intimidation. He could deny the statement and seek a retraction from the publications involved.

Nor is the fact that the statement might have got him in hot water any excuse. Sometimes officers such as him face pressure from local politicians, but it is never acceptable to threaten violence in order to protect oneself.

In any case, the threatening words of the UNO put fetters on the professional discharge of journalistic responsibilities, apart from presaging physical assault on them. The incident, therefore, calls for a probe followed by corrective action.

On the whole the incident underscores the travails of journalists in Bangladesh today.

FAROOQ SOBHAN

RECENTLY, relations between India and Bangladesh have hit a low patch. This stagnation in relations is due to a variety of reasons -- border problems, the postponement of the Saarc summit, as well as a general feeling on both sides that several important issues are not being given the importance they deserve. Among these issues, the most important for India are some security-related issues, which includes arms trafficking, movement of people, transit, and the tripartite gas pipeline, whereas the most important issues on the Bangladeshi side are sharing of the waters of the joint rivers and the river linking project, trade, and a variety of border-related concerns, including smuggling.

Now that the dates for the delayed Saarc summit have been finalized for November, and the meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of India and Bangladesh has been set for the second half of June, it is expected that efforts will be made on both sides to try and improve bilateral relations.

There have been other positive developments as well, most notably the progress in the Tata Group's discussions with the government of Bangladesh on their \$2.5 billion investment in Bangladesh in three different plants: steel, fertilizer and power, respectively. Exploratory talks are also underway with the group regarding a coal mining concession. In any event, the \$2.5 billion investment is the largest by a foreign investor. If the Tata investment materializes, this will undoubtedly influence more Indian firms to invest in our country. There has already been a flurry of interest on the part of other large groups in India, such as Essar, Reliance, Mittal, Birla, and others.

In the meantime, other Indian investments in Bangladesh are already underway. Recently, a state-of-the-art modern hospital was opened in Dhaka, in collaboration with India's Apollo Group. Earlier, an Indian pharmaceutical company, Sun Pharmaceuticals,

began its operations in Bangladesh. Many Indian companies are already involved in the IT and RMG sectors, among others, in Bangladesh; a number of major buying houses in Bangladesh are owned and operated by Indians, as are some leading RMG manufacturers and exporters.

It is perhaps an opportune time to consider the way forward. It is very important that both sides understand and appreciate the fact that they can both benefit enormously from improved relations, as well as by taking advantage of the many

opportunities that will arise out of India's economic expansion and the surge in Indian investment in the region as a whole. It is thus very much in Bangladesh's interest to take a hard look at concluding a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India. The Indians have already proposed such an FTA, and have indicated that they are willing to be both generous and flexible regarding the terms of the FTA. The FTA between Bangladesh and India could be based on the Indo-Sri Lanka FTA, but given Bangladesh's LDC status, India could very well extend more concessions to Bangladesh, similar to those given to Nepal. There exists empirical data to show that the Indo-Lanka FTA has had a major impact in expanding Sri Lanka's exports into India, and has also resulted in a very sizeable increase in Indian investments in Sri Lanka. There is no reason why we should not see similar results here in Bangladesh.

What is important, however, for Bangladesh to appreciate and understand at both the government and private sector levels, is that a bilateral FTA with India would mean that Bangladeshi firms would be given immediate duty-free access to

the Indian market for all goods, including RMG. On the other hand, Indian goods would be given duty-free access to the Bangladeshi market over a period of time, possibly eight or more years. Already, nearly 2 billion dollars worth of Indian goods are smuggled into Bangladesh annually, in addition to the 1.5 billion dollars worth of goods that enter the country legally. The Bangladesh market is already flooded with Indian goods, many of which enter the country on a duty-free basis, since they are smuggled across the border. The bilateral FTA

of their transport and communication networks. This constitutes a fundamental prerequisite of regional integration, and it would be almost suicidal for Bangladesh to exclude itself from the process of transport integration that is already taking place in the region. Bangladesh's biggest strength has always been its geographical location, since we connect South Asia to South-East Asia. For this reason, it is also crucial to develop Chittagong port, which, studies have shown, has the potential to serve as a regional port for not only Bangla-

time to time, can be assisted by the secretaries of the concerned ministries, such as Home, Commerce, Water, Energy, Communications, etc.

In addition to meetings of the special envoys, it is important that regular meetings take place between the prime ministers of the two countries. These meetings should be short functional meetings free of any ceremonial trappings and with a minimum of protocol. In order to achieve tangible progress, the two prime ministers should try and meet every six months. Such

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would give Bangladesh the opportunity to gain something in return. The bilateral FTA would also encourage Indian investments in Bangladesh, on a much larger scale than has taken place so far.

It is also vital for Bangladesh to take advantage of the enormous growth and expansion that has been occurring in the Asean region and in China, by linking up our transport and communication system to East and South-East Asia. The easiest and most practical way of doing so will be to link up with the old Asian highway route through Tamabil. Since the roads are already in place, the route can become operational in months. This may be a wiser alternative than waiting for an indefinite period of time for the completion of the Chittagong-Yangon direct route. It is envisaged that, in the near future, once transport links are well established, there will be both road and rail links between Europe and Asia, as well as between all the countries of Asia. Bangladesh cannot afford to exclude itself from this network.

The key to the integration of Europe, as well as of the growth of economies in both Europe and South America has been the inte-

meetings can be half-day meeting.

In the meanwhile, the two sides should engage in some confidence-building measures. Central to these efforts will be to avoid provocative statements being made by senior politicians on each side. The media on both sides should also be encouraged to engage in more objective reporting and to check their facts. In order to encourage such reporting, both sides should relax the existing restrictions on the movement of journalists, so that journalists from both sides can visit each other's countries and do some interviews and on-the-spot reporting.

The recent suggestion made by the chairman of the Bangladesh Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee for an exchange of visits of parliamentarians on both sides is an excellent idea, and hopefully such an exchange of visits can materialize in the near future.

It is also important to encourage people-to-people contacts at all levels; as we all know, this was a critical factor in the improvement of Indo-Pak relations. Ironically, precisely at a time when the Indo-Pak honeymoon is in progress, Indo-Bangladesh relations have hit rock

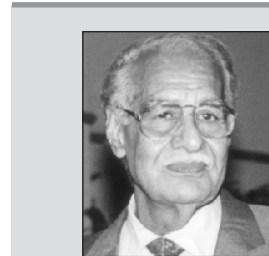
bottom. There seems to be no rational explanation for this.

One important issue that needs to be addressed is the need to insulate Indo-Bangladesh relations from domestic politics. After more than three decades as an independent country, all Bangladeshis should take pride in being pro-Bangladesh. We do not need to be labeled as pro or anti-any country; this pigeon-holding does not take place anywhere else in the subcontinent, so why should only Bangladeshis be expected to take sides? Essentially what this means is Bangladesh's foreign relations with all countries should be based on mutual respect and mutual benefit. It is also important to try and forge a consensus on foreign policy issues so as to ensure continuity of policies. It is worth mentioning that, notwithstanding the wide ranging differences between the BJP and the Congress on domestic issues, their differences such as they are on foreign policy, are quite insignificant.

In conclusion, therefore, while relations between us and our closest neighbour have been at odds in recent months, it is undeniable that, if both sides made a concerted effort, relations can be improved in a relatively short period of time. In other words, the damage is repairable. Indian investment in Bangladesh is just beginning, but there is no reason why it should not be much larger in scale than it has been till date.

However, to promote more Indian investment in Bangladesh, and a much more mutually beneficial relationship between the two neighbours, it is necessary for the two sides to engage in some creative thinking, starting with the signing of a bilateral FTA. India today enjoys a growth rate of close to 7 percent whilst in the case of Bangladesh, we have been averaging 5 to 5.5 percent. If Indo-Bangladesh cooperation can make serious headway, the growth rate for both countries could exceed 8 percent.

## Too many roadblocks



**KULDEEP NAYAR**  
writes from New Delhi

I was in Lahore at a dinner when a late-arriving guest broke the news that New Delhi had told the Hurriyat leaders not to travel beyond Azad Kashmir territory because, in doing so, they would violate an understanding between India and Pakistan. The understanding on the resumption of bus travel between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad was that the passengers from the state of Jammu and Kashmir would visit only Azad Kashmir and the ones coming from Azad Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir alone.

Notwithstanding the understanding, the reaction of the guests at the dinner was that of disappointment. One harsh remark was that the "Hindu over-cleverness," resented before partition, had come to the surface again. It was apparent that the guests, leaders in their own profession, anxiously awaited a rapprochement between the two countries. They felt cheated when the normalcy was delayed. One asked me rather ruefully: How long would it take for something concrete to emerge?

This sort of remark is typical of the exasperated majority in Pakistan. They want to break the web of

different compulsions woven around them for decades. Not having any relationship with India is one of them. There is denunciation of hostility and hatred fomented in the past. It appears that even the limited people-to-people contact has dispersed tension. Relations with India are considered a way out of the maze of shackles that the Pakistanis have got lost in. It would be, however, wrong to infer that the lobby which is firmly

General Pervez Musharraf's statement, which represents his government's stand, is that there exists a "fleeting moment" which India should seize. That is the reason why he is talking about timeframe.

Not that anyone in Pakistan has worked out how to connect the three points New Delhi, Islamabad, and Srinagar but most jump at India if they see "a reverse in the peace process." New Delhi's warning to the Hurriyat leaders not to travel

Pakistan was not on the cards. Their visit was important for him. Hence, his government came down like a ton of bricks, when New Delhi was seen to be restricting the Hurriyat leaders to Azad Kashmir.

New Delhi's stand was nonetheless churlish. It might be technically right. But it looked an impediment in the way of peace process. The heavens would not have fallen if India had kept quiet. Should it

what the organisation has been doing for many years. What they really stand for and have the consensus behind is yet to emerge.

The attitude of Syed Ali Shah Geelani has already shown how deep is the cleavage among the Hurriyat leaders. He has refused to go to Pakistan because he has realised that his stand of Kashmiri integration with that country is not what even Islamabad supports.

pursue Pakistan's new line vigorously. But he may not be able to defeat the hardliners, led by Foreign Minister Natwar Singh. After the offer of soft borders in Kashmir, New Delhi should have responded positively. India should have at least opened new avenues in the field of people-to-people contact. The Pakistanis have hordes of complaints on the visa facilities.

Intelligence agencies reign here supreme. A hotel attendant asked me how could a Pakistani visit India if he had no relative there or no organisation to invite him. New Delhi's explanation is that it follows Islamabad's example. The anti-Pakistan bureaucrats at New Delhi have yielded to the hands of Islamabad. A free democratic polity like India should have allowed the Pakistanis easy access because its selling point is its openness. Islamabad has seen to it that New Delhi remains as rigidly in its approach as Pakistan is.

To give at least one example that we are different, Jinnah's house in Mumbai could be handed over to Pakistan to open a visa office. Strange, Natwar Singh as deputy foreign minister communicates to Islamabad in writing that India would give Jinnah's house to Pakistan for the residence of its deputy high commissioner. The same Natwar Singh says 'no' to a similar proposition when he is foreign minister.

Postures move nations as much as individuals. Too bad such things have come to be sacrificed at the altar of false prestige.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

**Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has assured that he would pursue Pakistan's new line vigorously. But he may not be able to defeat the hardliners, led by Foreign Minister Natwar Singh. After the offer of soft borders in Kashmir, New Delhi should have responded positively. India should have at least opened new avenues in the field of people-to-people contact.**

opposed to India has been demolished. Still some quarters believe that in a neighbour they have a country ridden by Hindu chauvinism. But the desire to make up with India is wide. People are keen to concretise the confidence building measures (CBMs) quickly so that they can travel to India freely and trade with it.

Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri's threat that Pakistan could revive the UN resolutions on Kashmir showed how a collected person like him could lose his cool and point a finger at India's "obduracy." He, like the majority in Pakistan, feels that progress towards normalcy is slow and that the present is the best time to find a solution. President

outside Azad Kashmir was seen from that point of view. People in Pakistan, however belatedly, are beginning to face the reality that Kashmir would not be part of their country. The ruling establishment that has sold the idea since independence does not want to touch the same chord again. It may well use the Hurriyat leaders' visit to serve the purpose.

I recall Musharraf telling me at Islamabad a few months ago that he wanted the Hurriyat leaders to travel in the first bus from Srinagar so that "we can give them a rousing reception." What he probably had in mind been to utilise the Hurriyat leaders visit to let his people know from them that Kashmir's integration with

always be seen under pressure of the BJP which raised the question of passports and visas? These days when a teleconference can take place anywhere with any personality, how does it matter if he or she is actually present?

In fact, it was in India's interest to let the Hurriyat leaders travel throughout Pakistan and face peoples' questions. A leader like Yasin Malik may raise the demand for Kashmir's independence. But this is one thing to which the Pakistan establishment is vehemently opposed. What the Hurriyat leaders stand for will come out to the fore. The opposition to the status quo in Kashmir is easy to pursue. This is

The major part of Hurriyat has become more distant from Geelani. The division in the Hurriyat may damage the purpose for which Islamabad has undertaken the exercise. Religious parties in Pakistan are on the side of Geelani. Musharraf cannot ride the roughshod because they are also his best bet in Pakistan.

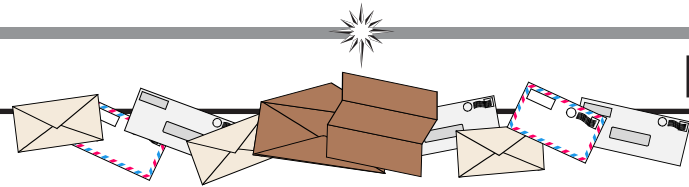
New Delhi remains clueless. It has no roadmap except to sustain the status quo. It might have followed Musharraf's changed stand of "self governance" in Kashmir in place of autonomy, but it does not know whether it is a trap to entangle India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has assured that he would

past examples in Dhaka. There are modular solutions for a healthy integrated picture: reduce the systems losses inside the prevailing political culture. Some random, but healthy exercises are missing. The spirit of sacrifice (and self-suffering) has evaporated (spirits do evaporate!). Parliamentary practice is not popular. There is a hankering for fast politics, like fast food, creating fast problems and fast tempers!

The virtues of patience and tolerance are under-nourished; as suitable gardeners are not available. Vegetarian politics, or meaty morsels? Take your choice, before outsiders take over (once again)! The latter culture is still in vogue in many parts of the globe.

**AAbad,**  
Dhaka

## TO THE EDITOR 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.

### "The Apprentice"

Reality TV is the new genre of programmes that features "real" people in "real" circumstances. Those offended by reality TV claim that such programmes rely on invasions of privacy by placing ordinary people in increasingly extreme situations for the sake of ratings. They argue that such programmes manipulate contestants, expose impressionable young audiences to distorted values and too often rely on a formula in which humiliation and voyeurism are the key ingredients.

One popular show is The Apprentice. Thursday nights are quite interesting as we see a well-known real-estate tycoon: Donald Trump put 15 contestants through a 15-week ordeal of different competitions. And also to find out who has the most pizzazz, intelligence,

street smarts and most important, the cut throat mentality to survive to the end as each contestant aims to have the other fired at the end of each show. The prize after the gruelling 15 weeks of being separated from family, friends and even their jobs is the opportunity to become an executive in one of Mr. Trump's many enterprises.

Now, this idea would have an even greater impact in Bangladesh. In a country where unemployment is high and finding that highly coveted executive position is very hard and requires not only hard work, and stellar education but also very good contacts. Many a time a much-deserved person is ignored for the best-connected person. So why don't we have a reality TV show in Bangladesh where the top executive of a corporation offers a position. The contestants on the show will be chosen from a pool of appli-

cants who put in their resumes. Once they are chosen the rest of the country will see them compete.

**Zeenat Z. Syed**  
UPS eDeployment

### A lesson for BNP

The loss to the AL-backed candidate in the mayoral election in Chittagong should be a good lesson for the ruling party. This election demonstrates that people are unlikely to vote for them in the upcoming national election to be held in 2006. They should be more aware of the need and demand of the people. They should address their own down sides, people of the land just want to survive with two square meals a day. The price hike has been a major problem since they came to power. The business sector is facing a critical problem both at home and abroad.

They have failed to fulfil the commitment they made before the last elections. Thousands of educated people remain unemployed and the law and order situation is bad.

**Md. Kabir Hossain**  
Shabujug, Basabo, Dhaka

### Political approach

The two major political parties are not on the right track in their approaches to political problems facing the vast society. The approach to solving political problems and finding solutions is being dictated on party lines (leadership visions are narrow and ad hoc).

How the party should decide on a new policy? Not on its own survival, right or wrong, but what is good for the vast majority of citizens, who are not actively and directly involved in politics.

Why the politicians disturb oth-

ers? This is not the norm in any profession. Some say politics is an avocation, while others cynically remark that now it has become a nasty and profitable business, without public interest. Non-politicians with money are encouraged to join politics, for quick investment returns. Why political shares are not sold in the stock exchange?

The other quirk is the hankering for virtual leadership-not to serve people (there are too many examples to jot down here). The factories in the public sector have failed due to political patronisation of the trade/labour unions: and the higher educational institutions have been poisoned with political arsenic. Why not ban political poly-bags?

One of the problems is party ego. Then why political leaders change floors? In the under-developed countries, the approach is too traditional and conservative, based

on self-security. Watch how power and positions are misused; and the lust for office-leadership. Note how decentralisation of power (to the districts and rural areas) is being sabotaged, year after year. The Savar RMG factory collapse is an example of weak foundation and weak structures-it reflects the inside story of our politics. More structural collapses are coming, including tsunami in politics!

The other parties' manifestos are never good enough! Any hate campaign is bound to return to the originator, as per timeless mystic laws. The official party goal is not to live untidily. That is why we see the society divided today into different camps; and almost ALL sectors are victims of political pressures. The professionals and the middle class have receded into the background, and money, riches, and acts of terrorism have

invaded politics. Now religion has entered into the mess, dominated by the heart (faith), in contrast to rationality in politics, ruled by the head. The head and the heart have to be separated for the politics (and policies) to survive in black and white (in writing), in contrast to colourful panoramas depicted by the passionate (misplaced) activists of particular clans (tribalism rituals).

Which comes first: the survival of the country (society), or that of the particular party? The majority of the voters is ignored, or has no say, as most of the political field works and activation are conducted by the student and labour unions, and confined to the urban areas. Hence a vast communication gap is created, which is widening day by day, for the last three decades. Even today, the very survival of politics is at stake, as we have witnessed in