

Save the newspaper industry

Cutback on newsprint import tax highly imperative

OUR newspaper industry is getting a raw deal in terms of severe newsprint availability distortions, asymmetry in the quality between local and imported newsprint, and above all, the high import cost of newsprint made all the more exorbitant by local taxes that are markedly higher than anything that relatively more advanced newspaper markets in India and Pakistan have known. The economics of newspaper production in Bangladesh has, therefore, turned, we are sorry to say, industry unfriendly.

Newsprint is where the crisis lies. The local production capacity is nothing to write home about, comprising as it does, only 25 percent of the total requirement. Even the supply of this minimum quantity is irregular and poor in quality, its rolls often containing shredded newsprint which chokes printing, apart from the time-waste. The remainder 75 percent of the total demand has to be met by importing from the international market where the price of newsprint per tonne in the last two years has soared by \$150 which in taka terms is a lot of money because of devaluation against dollar.

On top of the purchase price, a whole array of costs are to be borne: 25 percent import tax, vat, surcharge, advance income tax, PSI, DF vat, port charges, shipping agency charge, insurance and transport costs. All these work out to a good 60 percent increase in price of newsprint over its C&F cost. The cost per tonne stands at Tk 59,500.

That is not all the trouble. An NRB rule insists, apparently ignoring structural deficiencies in the newsprint supply as elaborated above, that a newspaper publisher has to purchase 50 percent of the ABC quota from the local newsprint market to qualify for the exemption of 25 percent tariff on the other 50 percent allowed to be imported from international market. Realistically, this is not a workable formula; in fact, what is given by one hand is taken away by another.

The viability of newspaper industry is further jeopardised by the low rate of government advertisement and the flawed ad distribution policy of the DFP which favours less known newspapers having government leanings. Furthermore, the delayed, staggered payments for DFP ads complicate any financial planning exercise.

Under the circumstances, we strongly plead for withdrawal of import tariff on newsprint for newspaper industry; short of which, the government may fix the minimum rate at 5 percent. Secondly, given the manufacturing capacity and product quality of the local newsprint industry, the insistence on 50 percent purchase from them must be done away with. Thirdly, the DFP advertisement rate be raised to Tk 500 per column inch.

The government should be positively responsive to these demands in deference to the newspapers' recognised role worldwide as the upholder of democracy, good governance, transparency and accountability, the sum-total of what a democratic polity is all about.

BSF claims

Investigation proves them wrong

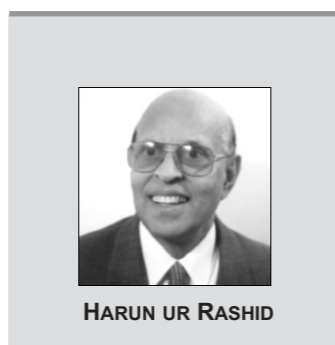
IF there is anything worse than spreading falsehood, it is believing in it. Repeated claims with 'specifics' supposedly furnished, which have now turned out to be incorrect, by the BSF chief on alleged ULFA activity in Bangladesh would leave any detached South Asian watcher wondering why such sweeping observations were made in the first place. We, however, know better, now that our paper's investigation into the matter has revealed that the Indian BSF claims are without an iota of truth. It is hard to accept that the BSF believed in such unsubstantiated report and even more, attempted to make all others believe in it. It defies our comprehension that a government functionary was even allowed to go public on a matter that has the potential of unnecessarily souring good neighbourly relations between the two countries.

One would have expected the BSF to doubly verify its claim of ULFA running commercial ventures in Dhaka topped off with maintenance of bank accounts, before making such claims *ad nauseum* in public.

The fact that every year we are handed down a list of Indian insurgent camps in Bangladesh has obviously become a source of big embarrassment. And, we wonder what benefits could accrue in terms of bilateral goodwill from such unsubstantiated claims by Indian politicians and government functionaries. It would have been much better had proper channels been used to address the 'concerns' rather than going public with claims that can only detract from good bilateral relations which top Indian leaders have been stressing the need for from time to time.

Good neighbourly relations must be rooted in the understanding and appreciation of genuine concerns of neighbours and be based in a climate of mutual trust and confidence.

Dr. Singh goes to Washington



HARUN UR RASHID

INDIAN Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh is scheduled to visit Washington in July. The Bush administration reportedly said that the visit would be treated as a "grand event" and at this year's end President Bush will visit India.

The world order of 20th century has been changing dramatically and a new alliance of countries is being formed at the 21st century. In that context, the visit of India's Prime Minister to Washington has many ramifications on world affairs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, India has realised that there is no option but to embrace the US. During the Cold War, India's relationship with the US was uneasy and mired in distrust as the US was a close ally with Pakistan.

Emerging new alignment

The fragility of post-war Iraq confirms that it is easier to wage war than it is to win peace. Every state has watching how the US has been bogged down in Iraq for an indefinite period, and the messy situation has undermined the credibility of the US in reshaping the world order.

Europe is increasingly distancing itself from the foreign policy directions of the US. France and Germany want a multi-polar world

replacing the current uni-polar world, the US being the lone superpower, calling all the shots. Before the Iraqi war in 2003, French President Chirac said: "We want this world to be multi-polar and to make sure that each pole of it makes well-balanced decisions."

Russia under President Putin maintains an uneasy relationship with the US, and differs with the US in helping out Iran in building a nuclear reactor and agreed to supply short missiles to Syria

appear to converge in many areas. Both are democracies and both have stakes in the future world order. Both can shape the contours of the world to their advantage. India knows that it is being wooed by the US and it can determine how far and to what depth it can have relations with the US. Being a large country in a geo-strategic location, India thinks that it can manage the US embrace on its own terms.

The major shift of US-India relations took place when President

George W. Bush visited India in March, he said: "This is my first stop as Secretary of State in Asia. The President has personally put a lot of time and energy into the relationship. The US has determined that this is going to be a very important relationship going forward and we are going to put whatever time we need into it." It is reported that when Rice met with Singh she presented an outline of

with the US are moving quite fast. The US is reportedly offering India the most advanced of its F-16s, high-tech defence and space cooperation including Patriot and Arrow missiles, and access to once taboo nuclear technology. The US is reportedly prepared to discuss more fundamental issues of defence transformation with India, including such areas as command and control and early warning system.

During the Cold War, America's strategy was to contain the Soviet

of China. India has already been moving in this direction to calm China and hosted the visit of the Chinese Prime Minister last April. The statements of both Chinese and Indian Prime Ministers have given indications of broader relationship. Dr. Singh said: "India and China can together reshape the world order," and during the visit eleven agreements were concluded. The agreements demonstrate the maturity of their new relationship in areas, among others, in trade, joint petroleum, gas, and space exploration. Furthermore, the recent meeting at Foreign Minister level of China, Russia, and India provides testimony to the balancing act (the three countries constitute 40 percent of the world's population).

Conclusion

India has sought recognition in the international community of its position as a large and long-standing democracy. India's nuclearisation in 1998 reflected the belief that nuclear weapons constituted a short-cut to establishing the country's stature as a major actor -- in former Prime Minister Vajpayee's words, the nuclear tests "show our strength and silence our enemies."

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, in his book *The Discovery of India* (1946), firmly believed that India would be one of the four powers (the other three being America, China, and Russia) on which the future of the world would depend. It seems that India at last is on the path to realise the vision of Nehru.

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

BOTTOM LINE

During the Cold War, America's strategy was to contain the Soviet Union. US President Nixon's rapprochement with China in the 70s gave the Soviet Union a feeling of encirclement. No analogy is perfect but at present India is being cast by the US in the role of China of the 70s to provide a feeling of China's encirclement.

against the wishes of the US. If Chechnya was not a problem for Russia, it would be more open against some of the policy directions of the US in world affairs. Political analysts believe that Russia will gradually assert itself in many trouble-spots in the world.

Furthermore, China is rising and is demonstrating both its economic and military power in Asia. On America's doorstep, Brazil under the left-wing President Lula is rearranging its relations with the Middle East countries. Oil-rich Venezuela is defying the wishes of the US on many issues and looking for an oil market in China so that its income does not depend on oil exports to the US.

New dynamics in relations

The interests of the US and India

Bill Clinton visited India in 2000. In plain words, he acknowledged India's regional role. The conceptual change has come under the Bush administration in the context of rising China as a global power.

The National Security Strategy of 2002 said that the US sought a "transformation in its bilateral relationship with India."

Currently the Bush administration has gone further. When the two leaders met briefly in Moscow in May at celebrations to honour the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe, it is reported that President Bush introduced his wife Laura to Dr. Singh: "This is the Prime Minister of India and I am going to take you to his country this Christmas-New Year so you can see the most fascinating democracy in the world." The mes-

sage is clear that both Bush and Singh can "do business."

It is quite unusual in diplomatic terms that a US President has sent a signal of this dimension to India. It simply means that the US will help India realise the global aspiration that its size and geography merits, and that its post-1991 economic liberalisation has caught the attention of the US administration.

It is noted that India has already planned to acquire Theatre Missile Defence System from Israel and Russia as part of its efforts to neutralise missile capabilities of Pakistan. Furthermore India's nuclear protocol states that nuclear weapons are to deter armed aggression by "any state or entity against India and its forces."

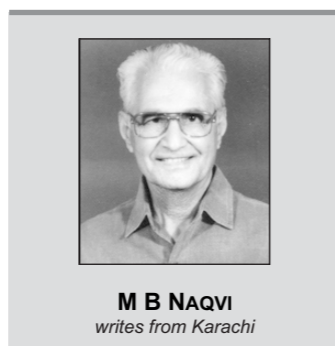
It seems that defence matters

Union. US President Nixon's rapprochement with China in the 70s gave the Soviet Union a feeling of encirclement. No analogy is perfect but at present India is being cast by the US in the role of China of the 70s to provide a feeling of China's encirclement.

India's balancing act

India has been delicately balancing its relations with both the US and China. Too much close cooperation with the US may adversely affect its standing among Asian and African nations as it seeks permanent membership on the Security Council. Furthermore, the strategic cooperation with the US should not be perceived as anti-China. India has to assure China that its cooperation with the US is not a part and parcel of US "containment strategy"

The shape of things to come



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

TWO new and several old developments and trends demand immediate attention because they will shape international politics in years to come. Chief among the new developments is the loud European "no" to confirming EU expansion, agreed through a new constitution. First, the people of France convincingly rejected the proposed constitution, and later the people of the Netherlands rejected it by a decisive margin. This has shaken the EU to its very foundations. Causes and consequences of this "no" will continue to be discussed for long. The crisis is about the EU's very being and the direction in which it has been moving in recent years. The orientation it was adopting has been rejected.

There is another development in the UN. There was the five-yearly Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The conference sat for a month in New York. It failed to produce a declaration or even an enumeration of what it has been discussing. The whole conference broke up, underlining a serious deadlock. The impasse is between the five recognised powers by NPT -- together with three other nuclear powers that remain un-recognised,

viz. Israel, Pakistan, and India -- and the rest of non-nuclear powers. The latter wanted the original five recognised powers to act on their pledged word on which the whole treaty is based.

This promise requires the five recognised nuclear powers to take credible steps toward nuclear disarmament. That none of the nuclear haves is prepared to do. Instead, they simply insist that the rest of the world should not fabricate

Republics. In many of them -- Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, maybe Kazakhstan and in the Caucasus, America has or will soon have military bases -- Russian influence is rapidly being replaced by American.

The Russians are actually frightened; they do not trust the American intentions vis-a-vis the Russian Federation itself. It is thought that the Americans are interested in Ukraine-like revolutions in all the

Islamic extremism, the denominated enemy, is actually becoming a force, though it poses a much greater danger to the Muslims countries themselves than to the major western powers that are now fighting it.

To revert to the European "no," it is also linked to recent American initiatives. One of which was to insist on the continued survival of Nato, a military pact that was intended to serve a specific purpose of defence

25. More await. Most of the new members are especially close to the US and listen to its advice. The whole flavour of the EU is now being heavily diluted.

This is one reason why the French and the Dutch have decisively rejected the new constitution. They think that this is a measure through which the EU would be subverted and made to serve the purposes of Anglo-American capital by forcing down European throats

not be easy. In Central Asia, the opposition from Russia and China is becoming organised, and at least one of the Central Republics that had earlier been won over by the Americans may have slipped out, viz. Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan poses other problems and has not yet fully cast its lot with the Americans.

Insofar as the nuclear issue is concerned, the US policy is clear. It is going to police the world through the PSI (Proliferation Strategic Initiative). Despite these setbacks, America, after having rejected the Salt II and the ABM treaties, is building new kinds of nuclear weapons. It is otherwise also determined to vertically proliferate. As against that, the rest of the world is at a loss what to do. Ultimately, the rest of the world will have to think of promoting non-violent protests and ways of persuading American public opinion to press for nuclear disarmament. That underlines the need for a big global anti-nuclear movement with special emphasis on taking the Americans with us.

Another possible line of attack by the rest of the world is to think more constructively and to suggest an alternative paradigm to what the WTO, World Bank, and IMF, etc. are insisting on, mainly at the behest of the Anglo-Americans. The existing paradigm is sounding the death-knell for the welfare state in Europe and other developed countries. This red-in-the-tooth-and-claw capitalism needs to be metamorphosed into a more civilised one by insisting on social goals, such as exists in Europe. The concept of a more evenly-spread economic development is the need of the hour.

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PLAIN WORDS

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nuclear weapons, even though the treaty was predicated on the promises of the five nuclear powers. The basic idea was that nuclear weapons are bad for everyone and no one should have them. Now, the position is that the nuclear-haves want to keep their nuclear arsenals intact while they want the rest of the world to remain non-nuclear. The non-nuclear world thinks that the major powers are cheating them, though no one is planning to have nukes except two suspected cases of Iran and North Korea.

A third major development is the Russo-Chinese response to American moves in Asia. They have bestirred themselves and are trying to dam up the spreading American influence in Central Asia. Already the US has made big inroads in all the former Soviet Central Asian

former Soviet territories. The Chinese are siding with them and the two together have reactivated the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement known as Shanghai Six. Recently the Russian FM invited Chinese and Indian FM's for a conference.

Insofar as Russia and China are going to coordinate their efforts and take measures to stop the expanding American influence, it would be a significant development that may before long start or restart the East-West cold war. In passing, it should be possible to take note of some older factors in the situation. Among them is the unending War on Terror the US initiated four years ago. What were seen to be short, sharp surgical operations -- the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan -- have evolved into quagmires for American military and diplomacy.

against the specific threat from Soviet Union in the 1940s. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the pact should have been scrapped. But the Americans made sure that it should not only exist but it should increase its membership, expand the area of operation, chiefly to lighten the burden on American manpower. Nearly all the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe were made its members.

American influence in the former pro-Soviet republics of Eastern Europe amounts to a sphere of influence. They have not only been made members of NATO, which is commanded by the US, but were also forced into the EU. With the help of the UK, the EU has been bamboozled into accepting a very large number of new members. The membership of EU now stands at

the new capitalist paradigm first championed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Through the WTO, the whole world is being reorganised, mainly for the benefit of the Anglo-American MNCs. This would make EU itself a cog in the big machine over which would preside the US. What the French and the Dutch people have rejected is this paradigm. In a manner of speaking, the WTO- and US-imposed world order, political and economic, has been rejected.

It is strange that in the short span of three or four years the US has been meeting setbacks on three major fronts. The going is getting rougher with the passage of time in Iraq and Afghanistan; the rest of the reshaping of the Middle East may have to wait. True, the neo-cons may wish to press on, but that will

OPINION

The road to reform

ABMS ZAHUR

THOUGH tireless effort to downgrade Bangabandhu appears to be going on, conscious common citizens shall always pay him respect and remember him as one of the greatest leaders in the world. If fact without Sheikh Mujibur Rahman there could not have been an independent state called Bangladesh. There may be difference of opinions about his style of leadership, there may be controversy about his method of political campaigns, there may be people who failed to realise his political foresight, yet attempt to belittle him is bad politics. Our problem is that we are impatient, too much sentimental and too much emotional.

In 1946 the overwhelming majority of Muslim population of the then Bengal voted for Pakistan and accepted Mohammad Ali Jinnah as the sole leader because of lack of leadership at the national level. Then it was the Muslim Students' League who realised that the Muslim leaders of the then West Pakistan never cared for the welfare of the then East Pakistan. Instead, they aimed at controlling the Bengalees politically, economically and even culturally. They had rather

a stupid notion that poor and simple East Pakistani peasants would not have the capability to govern.

It was only Sheikh Mujib who could stand against the then powerful Muslim League. After struggling for long 24 years he could throw away the Pakistani rule. It is indeed unfortunate that he was not remembered even on 26 March this year. Sheikh Mujib can never be compared with any political leader of Bangladesh. If we fail to recognise his greatness we disown ourselves as a nation. We might have human weaknesses. This does not mean that we should belittle him because his party is not in power. Why should we not try to free ourselves from narrow political thinking for a moment?

Awami League has passed through various phases during the last 56 years. Its first phase ended with its split with Moulana Bhasani group. It was mainly the realistic political consideration which prompted Sheikh Mujib to choose the leadership of Husein Shaheed Suhrawardy in 1957. Though with military coup of 1958 political activities virtually stopped for a while (1958-62) Mujib continued to remain firm on achieving legitimate rights for the then East Pakistan though he was offered various

temptations by the West Pakistani leadership time to time.

After the national election of 1970 Sheikh Mujib spared no pains to bring political understanding between the leaders of West and East Pakistan. Because of Bhutto's ambition to remain the most powerful leader in West Pakistan Sheikh's honest effort was nullified. Sheikh was fully aware of the risk involved in seeking assistance from any foreign country to liberate his own. This has amply been proved by his step taken for withdrawal of Indian army from Bangladesh. Many of us may have sacrificed a great deal in achieving the independence, yet our gain was huge. Bangladeshis became free from awesome economic, political and social domination of the Pakistanis.

Because of poorly organised bureaucracy immediately after independence different treaties and agreements between India and Bangladesh at that time apparently went more in favour of India. India-Mujib accord of 1974 could not be implemented in full because of indifference of India. In the Ganges water treaty the interest of Bangladesh was not safeguarded well. At present India appears to be set to divert river water upstream further ignoring the right of the country

downstream, the Indian BSF is rather brutally killing innocent Bangladeshis living in border areas on different pretexts. Such show of force appears to pressurise Bangladesh for allowing India certain concessions without conceding any reasonable demands of Bangladesh. Lots of bilateral meetings at different official levels proved futile.

Awami league is popularly believed as friend of India because it led the war of independence with Indian help. Because of rather unfriendly attitude shown by India the common people of Bangladesh look to India with suspicion. Thus favourable attitude of India, if any, toward AL is no plus point for it. At the same time AL must refrain from claiming all the credit for achieving independence of Bangladesh.

In politics or in war it is well known that the opponents would never be underestimated. Perhaps this adage was repeatedly ignored by AL leadership both in 1991 and 1996.

To a great extent it is true that religion is the sign of the oppressed. As the most organised religion-based party Jamaat can draw sympathy and respect from the poor and illiterate Muslims of Bangladesh. AL must not forget that in a democracy freedom of thought

cannot be taken away from any one. If Jamaat followers have softer corner for the Muslim Ummah why they should be treated as fundamentalists or destroyers of secular attitude in others?

It is a happy sign that all the liberal and moderate political parties could gang up on a common agenda of bringing reform in the constitutional provision of caretaker government. It may be pointed out that we have seen the strength of such an alliance in the recent municipal election of Chittagong city.

Awami League needs reform in its party structure before the national election. By reminding liberation movement, name of Sheikh Mujib or secularism or pro-socialist philosophy, as it appears, they cannot win majority votes. Even the slogans against corruption, inefficiency or deteriorating law and order are not that effective. Hartal is losing its appeal and effectiveness because it is common people who suffer the most. These people not only form the majority of voters they can also influence the voters in general.

Awami League should not ignore the unpalatable fact that because of low rate of literacy (43%) common people do not understand the

deeper meaning of freedom, democracy, human dignity. Because of their abject misery they bother about their own survival needs like food, shelter and clothing. Thus it may be dispassionately analysed as to how many of them really appreciate the contribution of Sheikh Mujib or Awami League or how many really understand the implication of raising the level of their language. To our illiterate and poor mass influence of religion is still profound.

Whatever may have been gained by AL during the past 15 years are all from the slips, errors and incapacities of BNP. It was a big blunder for BNP to take a retaliatory attitude toward AL. Instead of benefitting BNP this has benefitted the Jamaat which has been able to influence part of BNP. Needless to say that this part of BNP is dominating in present politics. In the last national election AL's mistake was misreading the opinion of the educated middle class living in cities as the opinion of the people. To regain their pristine glory AL may consider taking the following measures:

(a) To approach Dr Kamal Hossain to return to AL. He may be offered a suitable position in the party.

(b) Despite some controversial records effort may be made vigorously to convince Ershad to join the alliance.

(c) The young AL activists from Jubo League, Student League and Labour League with good and clean background be considered for senior positions in the party.

(d) The front ranking leaders of AL must stop making provocative or disrespectful statements against the front ranking leaders of the government.

(e) AL must try to appreciate the good works of the opponent. There is no harm in giving some credit to opponents some times.

(f) AL must refrain from announcing frequent hartals.

(g) AL should be more vigorous about purging bad elements from the party.

The four party alliance has proved that moderate and pro-Muslim parties can work together without much problem despite incumbency factor. They may face strongly the AL-led alliance without resorting to unethical practice in the election if they can convince the people about their capability to take the following measures:

(a) Improved governance.
(b) Real improvement in law and

order (extra-judicial killing does not assure improvement in law and order situation).

(c) Destroying houses and shops of poor people in the name of democracy and allowing the wealthy to grab government land is no democracy. It is oligarchy in the garb of democracy. So refrain from such practices.

(d) Establishment of anti-corruption commission (making it inoperative makes the real intention of government questionable).

The recent municipal election of Chittagong city indicate that more or less fair election is possible if right candidates can be placed. At the same time it is a unique development that people can dictate counting of votes fairly and announcement of correct result.

New suggestions from the former CEC have been received. May be the government can consider strengthening of the election commission a necessity under the present circumstances. We also hope about reform in the provision of caretaker government. We wish for a truly free and fair election for further progress toward strengthening of democracy in Bangladesh.

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