

# Why the two leaders are not talking?

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ANY well-meaning citizens of Bangladesh and a good many of our friends from abroad have often very seriously emphasised upon the apparently overriding necessity of a one-to-one dialogue between the two supreme leaders of the two major political parties of the country. Their appreciable concern assumes special significance in the present political scenario when quite clearly the two leaders are not in any meaningful communication. While the paramount necessity of such a dialogue will not be disputed by any democrat, the factors or the perspective suspected to be stalling such talks are perhaps not being adequately focused for pragmatic understanding of the situation. As a former public servant who had the occasion to witness the Bangladeshi politicking, I would like to share my thoughts with fellow readers and citizens in the following paragraphs.

### The origin and mindset

Many well-intentioned citizens believe that there should not be much difficulty to begin a dialogue without perhaps seriously studying the post 1975 political scenario and the mindset of the politicians across the divide. The older political party, the Awami League, consider the BNP as the beneficiary of the tragic and cruel changes of 1975 that killed the Father of Nation in the most gruesome manner. Information provided recently by a responsible journalist speak of a conspiracy involving a foreign power in connection with the above assassination. Accusing finger is pointed to the founding father of the BNP. One may or may not be able to know the truth in

the not-too-distant future but undoubtedly, the facts and circumstances surrounding the great tragedy and its aftermath do not facilitate the creation of a favourable climate for dialogue.

To this one might add the horrendous acts of 21st August 2004 that saw deaths in double figures and hundreds of injuries. To make matters worse, the nation had to suffer the costly tragedy of the murder of AL stalwart Mr. SAMS Kibria, an internationally reputed illustrious personality. The compounding grief is that the investigation of the above two incidents thus far does not raise much hope about the sincerity of the government run by the other major party. To top it all, the verdict of the Bangladesh murder case remains mired in procedural wrangles with the Awami League accusing the government of a lack of earnestness in pursuing the matter to its judicial end.

The BNP on the other hand accuses the AL of introducing one-party rule and gagging press freedom in 1975 and sees itself as the great deliverer that brought back multi-party democracy and rejuvenated the nation by heralding a new breed of nationalism. Quite often its leaders denigrate the AL for their (AL) so-called fascist proclivities. Some BNP leaders of lesser stature question the very bonafide of AL as a democratic party and are found encouraged in lambasting their opponents in the most impetuous manner.

Some less-than-responsible personalities from both sides of the political divide display a nearly comical 'more catholic than the Pope' posture, by indulging in virulent criticism of the recognised national figures of the political scene.

Their compulsions, some historical and some personal, may be

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The two leaders are talking! (a photo from the past)

understood by the discerning observer but cannot be appreciated by any democrat. Their political diatribe, without doubt is fuelling the already pernicious polarisation of our polity.

### Divergence and the deadlock

From a study of the very brief account

placed herein before, one would perhaps be right to presume that our politicians, unfortunately, hold diametrically opposite views on many aspects of our national life including the basics. Therefore, one may very reasonably wonder how in such a situation there would be a political reconciliation of nationally important issues with the ultimate objective of

building a cohesive society? For cohesion is supremely important for socio-economic emancipation of a modern state. One may, however, be right in concluding that such paternalistic or altruistic views betray a pathetic lack of appreciation of the ground realities rooted in our contemporary history.

Coming to specifics, one may

hypothetically suggest that all criticisms, however well-founded, of the father of the nation and late President Ziaur Rahman should henceforth be stopped for creating political goodwill. While expression of such a hope may not be difficult, it would be politically and intellectually a near-impossible proposition. On a point of illustration, it has to be said that any dispassionate analysis of the two figures stated above will contain some unfavourable reference for obvious reasons even if our politicians unexpectedly succeed in restraining their tongue. And since Bengali is admittedly a language of over-statement and with Bangladeshis being a very sensitive and sentimental lot, it may not be long before our political masters lose their composure at the slightest innuendoes and revert to their favourite slanging bouts with renewed gusto. The bad wave moves upward.

On many other matters relating to the body-politic there are dangerously opposing views which are forestalling the much-desired convergence. There are suspicions to believe that some political elements aligned with the BNP have not reconciled to the emergence of Bangladesh on the basis of Bengali nationalism and nurse a desire towards the establishment of a theocratic state. Such elements are obstacles in the way of fruitful political dialogue.

### Doubtful criminal cases

Harassing political opponents by the

institution of palpably false cases is a sad reality of Bangladesh's political culture. The AL continues to allege that 70,000 criminals have been let off by the BNP government as a matter of political expediency while the latter says that a large number of their party workers were falsely implicated in criminal cases due to political vengeance and that the authority has taken remedial action after proper examination and scrutiny.

Under the above circumstances, one can see that the peculiar dynamics of our politics is giving rise to heightened social tension with the attendant ill-effects. The credibility of state regulatory institutions is eroded. In such an environment meaningful dialogue cannot take place.

There are a host of other factors which also pose as barrier to the initiation of political dialogue but since it is hoped that the identification and resolution of the major irritants may usher in a healthy climate for better understanding, those have not been listed here. Mention also must be made that there are perhaps a few non-political factors which debar the two leaders from communicating to each other but as those are not considered very significant, no discussion has been deemed necessary here.

### The way ahead

The politics of summitry whether in the international parlance or on the domestic plane require painstaking homework to sort out the thorny issues, may be not all in one go, to enable the supreme leaders to arrive at a desirable outcome. As far as the dialogue of our two principal leaders is concerned, the first task may be to thrash out some common agreements through the wisdom of our political leaders who should be able

to arrive at a bare reducible minimum. Thereafter, the leaders may engage in meaningful discussion, aided and supported by the civil society with tacit backup from friendly quarters.

There may be a need to at least agree on the following:

i. Assassination or murder for political or any objective cannot be condoned and the guilty must be brought under the law.

ii. Completed and unconditional commitment to Bangladesh's political identity as a sovereign democratic republic has to be unequivocally ensured.

iii. While criminal activities in support of political objective has to be punished, the emerging political change has to be recognised in the light of the reality warranted by irreversible circumstances.

iv. Contribution to war of liberation by all concerned has to be recognised in true measures and political history of the country has to be recorded in proper perspective.

v. Both parties must have the magnanimity to acknowledge the aberrations caused to the polity by their respective policy and action.

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Secretary and IGP.

# Will the UN summit be able to achieve its objectives?

ABDUL HANNAN

PRIME minister Khaleda Zia is leaving for New York on Sunday to attend a 2-day UN special summit -- a razzmatazz of the largest ever gathering of 175 world leaders on the 60th anniversary of the organization, to address issues of aid and development, with particular emphasis on the implementation of UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to eradicate poverty by 2015 and to focus on strengthening and reforming the UN. Civil society activists around the world are also supposed to participate in the initiative in New York for a viable campaign against poverty and for internationalism. Indeed, the goals are pious and lofty, wide and far reaching. But will the summit be able to achieve its objectives? By all indications, the summit, described by the UN as 'once in a generation opportunity to take bold decisions', may be condemned to reduce the MDG as a footnote and end as an expensive failure.

The delegations of Third World developing countries may return home empty handed poorer than ever before after spending huge amounts on air travel, hotel tariff, limousine fare and satellite charges to send images of razzle dazzle photo opportunities of rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful for spin back home.

The potential threat to the success of the summit has come from

intervention of the new US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton who was appointed unilaterally by President Bush after his nomination for Senate approval was stalemated and mired in serious controversy over his questionable background for the UN position. An arch enemy of UN, the hardliner and abrasive John Bolton earlier remarked, 'There is no such thing as the UN, there is only the international community which can be led by the only superpower which is the United States'. He also observed, 'The UN Headquarters building in New York has 38 stories and if it lost 10 stories it would not make a bit of difference'. He has written in the Wall Street Journal that the US has no obligation to abide by international treaties even when they were signed and ratified. He opposed the International Criminal Court and treaties restricting land mines and biological weapons.

According to foreign press reports, Bolton has proposed 450 wide ranging changes to the 36-page draft plan, embodying UN reforms and poverty eradication target, arrived at by painstaking negotiation and debates over last nine months by the UN General Assembly. The US objection to the plan deletes the pledge to devote 0.7 percent of GDP of developed countries as aid to developing countries; it deletes increasing aid for agriculture and trade opportunities for poor countries; it deletes

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measures to deal with important climate change; it deletes the document language 'force should be last resort' while dealing with security threat; it deletes NPT's three pillars including disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear energy; it deletes reference to right of self-determination for those 'who remain under colonial domination and foreign occupation'. The US proposal stresses the right of a state to formulate and enforce national immigration policies and rejects linking migrant worker's issue with human rights. It deletes any mention of human rights altogether; deletes all mention of enhancing the authority of the UN and calls for its efficiency and absolute national sovereignty. It undermines the centrality of the General Assembly to legislate international laws and codify international treaties and offers importance to the Security Council and the US in matters of security and UN internal management oversight.

The summit is also in danger of being overshadowed by the publication of an internal UN report, by the American investigator Paul Volcker,



UN HQ, New York

into the running of UN's oil for food programme in Iraq from 1996 to

2003, beset by scandal and corruption. The issue can severely damage

Kofi Annan's reputation and raise question whether he could

continue as Secretary General. The US is not 'terribly' pleased with Annan's comments on occupation of Iraq.

The so called reform of the existing 15-member Security Council by expansion to 25 members including additional 6 permanent members without veto powers and 4 non-permanent members, it seems, is on hold for now, over American opposition and conflicting claims of the contending countries -- Germany, Japan, India and Brazil and the African countries -- for permanent seats. Reform of the Security Council by expansion of any number of seats without abolishing the veto power of existing 5 countries is a misnomer, an exercise in futility.

Bolton's proposed changes, if adopted, will leave the draft plan in tatters shredding the 30-page document into a three page statement. The changes are horrendous and are a recipe for abandoning impoverished nations, rejecting international law, glorifying ruthless market forces over any attempted regulation and weakening the UN itself. This is unabashed, ascendant and rank US unilateralism. The proposals are a threat to 190 other member states, social movements of entire world and the UN itself.

It is not known how the draft plan will be salvaged. The EU, particularly Britain which holds the current presidency of the EU, notwithstanding its 'sympathy' for the draft plan in all probability, will go along and

acquiesce to the changes. G-8 countries recently at Gleneagles, Edinburgh meeting pledged to increase aid to heavily indebted African countries by 48 billion a year and cancel 100 per cent of their multilateral debt. But later it transpired by leaked documents that it was essentially a book keeping exercise without much difference in as much as the increase in aid would come from the fund put aside for debt relief.

The UN, governments, civil societies and peoples around the world must mobilise their concerted efforts to reclaim the UN charter to ensure international cooperation for promoting international peace and security, development and human rights and must not allow Washington's apparently sinister design to turn the UN an adjunct of US foreign policy.

The people of the United States, proud of the pantheon of Thomas Jefferson, F.D Roosevelt and Harry Truman who espoused the values of freedom, human dignity and honour, fairness and justice, must arise to put up a united campaign to re-assess internationalism derided and despised by the Bush White House and its neo-con cohorts seemingly in pursuit of empire. Remaining silent at this hour would be disservice to humanity, to America itself.

Abdul Hannan is a former Press Counselor, Bangladesh UN Mission in New York.

# Upstream diversion threat to river management

MD. SAEEDUR RAHMAN

INTERVENTIONS into river for day-to-day need are as old as history. Rivers, apart from commonly known purposes, have also been used as the source of political and military gains. Different studies have documented that among many others, the impacts of interventions on river include (i) increased water deficit, (ii) habitat destruction, (iii) unsustainable agriculture, (iv) over exploitation, (v) water quality degradation, (vi) deterioration of the river ecosystem and (vii) increased social inequality. The international communities have given due cognisance to this growing concern over the threatened environment. Indian gigantic river linking project if and when kicked-off shall be threatening afresh the very existence of Bangladesh.

The total length of the intricate river network is said to have decreased over the last few decades from 35,000 Km. to 24,000 Km. or even less leaving behind a string or seasonal flow. River based labour employment opportunities have narrowed down impacting national economy. Aquatic plants, water-fowls and fishes are disappearing. Erosions rendering thousands homeless every year. Access to water is becoming far reaching. The degradation of water quality is ubiquitously beyond the tolerance limit. Traditional sports and cultures surrounding water have been sinking into oblivion. Human emotions responsive to tidal, tranquil and twinkling waters are rapidly evaporating. Healthy streams, indeed, are now rare and dwindling resources.

Social landscapes of both rural and urban livelihood are formed and

supported by rivers and canals and, therefore can never be separated from human or as such, human from rivers. These rivers and canals are seasonally flushed by abundance of water fed principally by the Ganges and Brahmaputra from the Himalayan glaciers ensuring year-round supply to hundreds of millions of the Indian sub-continent. The Meghna from north-east adjoining the world's wettest place joining the Ganges-Brahmaputra system tributaries by 50 trans-boundary rivers constitutes 93 percent of Bangladesh's total inflow and, the rest 7 percent is generated within the country chiefly from annual average rainfall of 2300 mm. And again, 96 percent of the total flow is conveyed out to the ocean by the Meghna estuary alone and the remaining 4 percent by other 28 smaller outfalls, mostly on the south-west coast. The daily average conveyance is estimated at 3000 million cubic meters with high range of fluctuation between dry and wet seasons.

A comparative analysis recently published by the Asian Development Bank on tracking water resources management in 17 countries of Asia and the Pacific revealed that Bangladesh as the most downstream riparian state, has particular interest in promoting regional cooperation in water management, but progress generally has been weak. The 1996 Treaty on Sharing of the Ganges River is not comprehensive and there are no agreements with regard to other shared rivers; projects generally are carried out unilaterally, in some cases to the clear disadvantage of Bangladesh. Further, the World Bank in one of the Bangladesh's Project Performance Assess-

The government may initiate reviewing the institutional setting of the existing organisations including their capacity and possibly restructuring them for the purpose of right-stewarding nation's waters keeping relevance with the objectives of the National Water Management Plan. The time for pulling up socks is not much left with the sufferers brewing in the environmental collapse.



Upstream diversion may retard natural navigability of river

ment Report (No.31565 February11, 2005) observed that the management culture of the country's water sector... has not changed over the last decades. These two broad aspects, one within and the other outside the country, combined together has led to appalling management of the rivers and canals. Reclamation is not bringing back

the geometric configuration of the rivers or canals disrupted and knocked out of hydraulic equilibrium. So merely recreating the form without the function or functions in an artificial configuration bearing little resemblance shall not constitute restoration as defined by the river experts. The variables that shape and maintain rivers or canals are its discharge,

width, depth, velocity, slope, channel roughness, bed load size, and bed load volume. These variables responsible for offsetting the rivers or canals are largely influenced by the watersheds, the land that contributes water to a common network of rivers or canals. Large watersheds are composed of many smaller watersheds upstream of the primary river

or canal in the network. Each river or canal in the watershed is a tributary of the larger river or canal downstream. Every stream downstream is thus dependant on the conditions of equilibrium of that at the upstream. A living stream is in a continuous state of adjustment for attaining a condition of dynamic equilibrium by balancing these variables within a wide range of natural variability. It is thus impractical to reclaim or restore a reach or a corridor completely to its virgin state with reference to time.

Water management is generally hinged to conservancy of a river or a canal or any such source. The conservation is thus the scientific trafficking of the water of a river or a canal by drainage, detention and diversion for a particular sequence of its flow in a given situation circumventing floods, erosion and accretion, back water affects, water scarcity, thinning navigability, water logging, degrading water quality, increasing soil salinity, ground water contamination and depletion and, impacts on ecology. Unfortunately, so long so forth much less consideration has been given by the water professionals to the sustainability of rivers or canals and their water quality in designing a project for consumptive or non-consumptive use of water culminating in fatal disruption of stream's hydraulic equilibrium.

The National Water Policy attached

priority to the river basin management aspects for catering the core problems of country's water resources. Twelve such programmes for development of major rivers have rightly been incorporated in the National Water Management Plan (NWMP). The main aims of these programmes are to ensure that the rivers are comprehensively developed and managed for multipurpose use focussing on inter-regional potential developments, long-term risk management and erosion control. Water Resource Planning Organization (WARPO), Bangladesh Water

Development Board (BWDB), Haor and Wetlands Development Board (HWDB), River Research Institute (RRI), Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), Centre for Environment and Geographic Information System (CEGIS), Mechanical Equipment Organization (MEO), Dredger Organization (DO) under the Ministry of Water Resources along with those including Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), Inland Water Transport Authority (IWTA), Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) etc. dealing with cross-cutting issues are the public bodies directly or indirectly assigned with the roles and responsibilities of water resource management.

Cataclysms, stemming from poor management of rivers or canals, triggered in the past have always been implored by high sounding commitments and assurances. The professionals claiming their competence adequate for handling these problems often cite resource as a constraint, albeit not untrue. True shortcomings elsewhere are inappropriate setting of the institution and dim understanding about rivers or

canals along with lack of regional cooperation for basin-wide management. In many countries, however, separate River Basin Organisation has been formed to deal with river issues. NWMP in its drafting stage skipped off creating one such special body for dealing with river basin management in the face of the organisations' conflicting interests.

The International Conference on Sustainable Development of Water Resources held in New Delhi in November, 2000 emphasised upon the need for creation of River Basin Organisations in South-Asian countries recommending actions comprising of legal and regulatory framework, national and multinational level organisations and, implementation and monitoring plan. The principles of basin management in general and in South Asian context in particular included suggestion for identifying pilot river basins, for development of a core group of professionals in South Asia, for exchanging professionals/experts and experience between member countries. The government may therefore initiate reviewing the institutional setting of the existing organisations including their capacity and possibly restructuring them for the purpose of right-stewarding nation's waters keeping relevance with the objectives of the National Water Management Plan. The time for pulling up socks is not much left with the sufferers brewing in the environmental collapse.

Md. Saeedur Rahman is a retired chief engineer of BWDB