

Bimstec potential unfolding

Dhaka ministerial makes it felt

THE Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, acronymed Bimstec, may be a new comer to the sub-regional grouping lexicon, but it is already jelling. The outcome of the Dhaka ministerial has been indicative of the signs of coagulation in Bimstec. This is quite noteworthy, because membership of the forum spanning India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan on the one hand, and Myanmar and Thailand, on the other, girdles two flanks of Asia -- South Asia and South East Asia.

Evidently, the bonding factors are commonality of interests and potential complementarities between the economies of member countries.

Of the decisions made at the Dhaka ministerial, the most important one relates to introduction of free trade in the region from July 1, 2006. In the first phase, it will be trading in goods, then would come services and investment, in that order under the FTA to be signed at the trade and economic ministers' meeting in Dhaka early next year. Basically, trade will lead to incremental investment, sharing of the benefits of economies of scale and external competitiveness.

The second area of cooperation has to do with combating terrorism and transnational crimes. The sub-groups working to prepare reports on intelligence sharing and stopping terror financing have their jobs cut out. How speedily they deliver is of the essence; for we are in a race with time as far as overpowering the terrorist technology and countering their ideological propaganda goes.

Illicit trafficking of humans, drugs and explosive substances in an area which has the infamy of being a vicious triangle need to be checked on top priority basis as well.

Significantly, in addition to the six areas of cooperation originally identified, seven new areas have been added to the list. The new agenda include: poverty alleviation, agriculture, cultural cooperation, disaster management, public health and people to people contact.

The member countries have a huge potential to grow collectively. What they need to do in the Bimstec area is to unlock all possibilities of better transportation and communication by setting up the key, connective infrastructures within the region and beyond. Secondly, the grouping has economies of varying strengths and weaknesses requiring that these are shared so that the principle of equity reigns supreme.

Killers yet to be brought to justice

A deadweight on journalistic freedom

AS many as 14 journalists have been killed during the tenure of the present government. No culprits have yet been arrested. We believe that this is mainly due to the prosecution process being faulty. It appears that there is no urgency on the part of the government in resolving these cases anytime soon. On the contrary, families of slain journalists are being threatened with their lives by individuals having links with the murderers and are pressing for withdrawal of the cases.

Clearly the murders were born out of a vendetta against the victims orchestrated by vested known individuals and hence arrests of the culprits should be comparatively easier unless the process of investigation is opaque or interfered with. This is reflective of the government's overall lack of sincerity in resolving these cases.

The media is one of the most important organs for both society and any administration for a healthy growth of democratic environment. While every effort should be made for its smooth and unhindered functioning we find that many senior members of the authority are continually engaged in a bashing campaign against journalists and the media as a whole. This is having a negative impact not only on the overall state of information dissemination but is also sending wrong signals to the people at large and clearly having a negative impact on the spirit of free and fair enquiry.

The government, therefore, ought to take all steps necessary to resolve these murder cases not only for the sake of justice but also for a sustained healthy growth of journalism. It is also important for the present administration to realise that alongside people's interest keeping the environment free from intimidation and coercion is to its interest whether in or out of office.

We in the media are ready to help and assist the process of the investigation in all possible ways, if need be. We once again urge the government to complete the processes of investigation and bring the culprits of these heinous crimes to book without further delay.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

LIKE many other aberrations in our body-politic, the phenomenon of the 'Crossfire' and the resultant deaths are not giving rise to appropriate corrective reaction and sadly enough such abnormality is threatening to become a part of our way of life, at least in so far as the law enforcement mind-set and work ethic of the general population and the youngsters including those in public service in particular. It is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate a patent wrongdoing from the lawful action as per the book. Faith in the efficacy of the lawful process is being gradually eroded. Slowly but steadily, the members of public are being forced to acquire the traits of the audience of the gladiatorial fight of ancient Rome. Mobocracy is gaining ground and the guardians do not tell us to follow the correct and saner course of action. There is not much talk about the desired alternative which is obvious but needs to be retold before the country reaches the precipice.

It is in the background of the above observation that there is an urgent necessity of looking at the threat that is allegedly neutralised by the 'Crossfire' actions and if there is an acceptable alternative to the highly questionable modus-operandi of a vital state organ in manifest violation of internationally accepted operational standards.

The malady and rationale for action

The unadmitted explanation or justification of the 'Crossfire' deaths is that hard boiled criminals commit-

ting murder and extortion and several other aggravated crimes are beyond the reach of law. In the same vein it is also given to understand that some parts of the country are affected by the dangerous depredations of extremist elements of different hues who cannot be brought within the clutches of criminal justice system. Public fear coupled with apathy and indifference caused by the threat and intimidation of the criminals and extremists are often cited as insurmountable hindrances to the appre-

The need for creating an overall environment in which the policemen can perform their legal duties with a sense of pride and fulfilment without feeling hamstrung on account of legal, administrative, financial or political problems can hardly be overemphasised. We all have to remember that anti-insurgency or crime operations require sustained and patient approach and a lawfully constituted government cannot rush into legally untenable spectacular action as that saps the credentials of a democratic polity.

hension of such desperados by the enforcement apparatus.

Under circumstances as above, the regulatory authority, it is presumed, is left with no other choice but to resort to extra-judicial killing to wriggle out of an unbearable situation. There is a feeling that the right thing has been done although in a wrong way and that the successes achieved justify the means pursued.

Police regulation and the reality

Regulation 33 (a) of the Police Regulation of Bengal says "No Police force can work successfully unless it wins the respect and goodwill of the public and secures its cooperation. All ranks, therefore, while being firm in the execution of their duty, must show forbearance, civility and courtesy towards all classes". The reality, unfortunately, on ground is different despite the

best efforts. Before we venture to find out the causes of those behavioural aberrations that have a substantial bearing on the crime and order situation, we may list the deviations that are us under: **Misbehaviour with complainants:** There is a virtual absence of service orientation and many policemen fail to realise that the complainant at the police station is often an aggrieved person much like a patient who goes to the doctor, and any misbehaviour with him would be construed as nothing

short of demonic brutality. **Other misbehaviour:** Verbal abuse and ill-treatment while on patrolling duty, harassment of innocent relatives during arrest, roughing up inmates during house search, ill-treatment of traffic violators, unnecessary pushing around during VIP protection and security arrangements cause a great deal of public discontent.

Illegal detention: Several persons are rounded up supposedly as suspects and detained for longer period in the lock-up. There are instances of innocent persons falling into the clutches of erratic policemen.

Custodial violence: Perpetration of third degree torture on suspects in police custody is taken as a matter of routine by many policemen. Excessive custodial violence has resulted into deaths. Other police indiscretions would

include non-registration or minimisation of a graver crime, false implication of innocents, fabrication of false evidence, excesses during crowd control etc.

Crime and corruption by policemen: The significance

There have been cases in which the protectors of law have themselves turned into its prime violators. Instances of policemen associating themselves in crimes like rape, robbery, extortion are on the rise.

Although corruption is a malaise that has afflicted our society as a whole, corruption in police has an extremely deleterious implication for their over-all image for two important reasons: one, being in uniform the corrupt policeman immediately catches public attention and two, since the complainant the police deal with is often a person with a grievance any corrupt demand imposed on him pains him beyond measure.

Pleasing political masters

If political interference has wreaked a near havoc in our police now, it is largely due to the fact that police officers themselves, including some at the helm of affairs, have evinced an undiluted proclivity to please the political bosses for their personal and professional aggrandisement. These officers have set a bad example for the

entire force and that is where the police-politician nexus, much to the detriment of the norms of law and justice, comes into operation.

The alternatives

In view of the preceding paragraphs, it would appear sensible to any discerning observer of our socio-political scene that preparing and properly equipping our police force -- the principal crime preventing and investigating agency under the law -- should receive the highest priority in tackling crimes of desper-

ate nature as against the extra-legal vigilante action now being indulged. There is nothing like a tall order. Requirements are simple. Those are as follows: a) The local police should be allowed to work unhindered. Postings and transfer of all ranks should be on professional consideration. The local MP should not dictate as to the suitability of the officer-in-charge of his constituency. His advice may be taken into consideration.

b) Primary importance has to be accorded to the collection of intelligence as the information network is vital to the fight against criminals and extremists. Financial allocation on this head should be noticeably substantial along with posting of appropriate personnel to the intelligence outfit. Proper information will reduce the necessity of the so-called big operations.

c) There should be sufficient financial and administrative arrangements to inculcate a scientific mind in the investigation of crime as distinct from the present emphasis on interrogation and confession. The CID forensic laboratory should be modernised for encouraging scientific investigation.

d) There should be sufficient funds for witness protection and victim support in this regard to offset intimidation of state witnesses. This would be needed in connection with successful prosecution of veteran criminal and extremist related cases.

e) There should be separate legislation for long-term detention in specially appropriate cases.

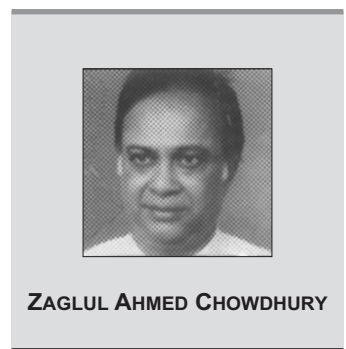
f) The earmarked tribunals should be given all support in conducting expeditious trials. Adjudgments should be minimum.

If the above can be ensured then there would be no reason to indulge in the alleged less-than-legal action. The need for creating an overall environment in which the policemen can perform their legal duties with a sense of pride and fulfilment without feeling hamstrung on account of legal, administrative, financial or political problems can hardly be overemphasised. At the same time the supervisory police leaders have to make a conscious endeavour towards bringing about the much needed attitudinal changes in the police forces.

Finally, we all have to remember that anti-insurgency or crime operations require sustained and patient approach and a lawfully constituted government cannot rush into legally untenable spectacular action as that saps the credentials of a democratic polity.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.

Lankan peace process hits snags



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE prospects of resumption of the peace dialogue between the government and the Tamil rebels in the island state of Sri Lanka following the election of a new president in the country seems somewhat bleak even though efforts are continuing to bring the two sides on negotiating table on the vexed civil war issue. Fresh talks on the matter has been on the cards since Mahinda Rajapakse has become the new president last month, but the process is proving difficult because of the differences in choosing the venue for the dialogue. Earlier several rounds of talks between two sides took place in foreign land and this time the rebels want it in Oslo, capital of Norway, which is brokering the negotiation, but the government wants it in an Asian country. The stalemate continues.

Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidency of the south Asian island state in a closely fought election battle against former premier Ranil Wickramasinghe last month and the development has increased anxiety and concern about the shape of things in the country in the future, particularly

about the conflict with the Tamil militants. He is known as a hard liner on the civil war issue compared to relatively much lenient Wickramasinghe, during whose premiership the government-rebels reconciliatory efforts had gained momentum and the chances of a negotiated settlement of the complex problem also brightened. Rajapakse maintains that he is not against dialogue, but made it clear before the polls that

decades old civil war through discussions have since been hanging in the balance. The immediate past president Chandrika is relatively tough on the peace process, but of late supported it, saying it is for the larger interest of the nation. But Mahinda Rajapakse is known hawkish on the issue and had developed differences with Chandrika on the approach to the rebels during the last days of her presidency. Now

three years ago, which facilitated a dialogue that went for several rounds in different venues abroad making some progress in the vexed problem.

While it will be a height of folly to expect easy resolution of the Sri Lankan civil war given the complexities involved in the issue, the dialogue gave hopes since both sides made significant concessions. The government conceded to some demands of Tigers while

Before the election, prime minister Rajapakse took a pro-Sinhalese line to placate the majority Sinhalese in disputes with the Tamil rebels and depended on the Sinhala community many of whom favour hard line against the Tamils. On the other hand, Wickramasinghe relied on the pragmatic Sinhalese, who want an end to bloodshed, and on the Tamils for his pro-peace policies. But the Tamil militants enforced a

government to give an acceptable guideline for the settlement of the civil war or risk resumption of the hostilities. Expectedly, the government rejected the deadline but insisted that talks can take place. In the meantime, signs of deteriorating conditions are evident as stray incidents of violence took lives of 18 soldiers along with the lives of some rebel supporters. These are clearly disturbing, raising fears of resumption of the bloodshed. However, peace efforts have not been abandoned, but choice of venue for the dialogue has become a major problem. The rebels are for Oslo as planned before but government wants it in any Asian country, preferably in Tokyo as offered by Japanese peace envoy Y Akashi. The rebels remain stuck to their earlier position on venue and consequently there is no headway and both sides brace for further worsening situation although none so far said so.

Sri Lanka needs prudent policies under the circumstance, and obviously the onus largely lies with the government while the militants are expected to demonstrate flexibility and rational attitude should both want the peace process to continue with the ultimate objective of settlement through talks. Resumption of the bloodshed will entail heavy cost for both sides and will take this otherwise very prospective country to further slide.

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MATTERS AROUND US

Sri Lanka needs prudent policies, and obviously the onus largely lies with the government while the militants are expected to demonstrate flexibility and rational attitude should both want the peace process to continue with the ultimate objective of settlement through talks. Resumption of the bloodshed will entail heavy cost for both sides and will take this otherwise very prospective country to further slide.

he would maintain the unitary character of Sri Lanka as a country and is against a federal character, which means he is not favourably disposed to granting autonomy or sharing much of power with the rebels. However, as president he says peace process needs to be pursued.

The peace talks are stalemated for long and took a beating following exit from power of former prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, whose government had initiated the dialogue with the rebels but was dismissed by President Chandrika evidently for being "soft" to the Tamil militants. The elections that followed brought Chandrika's supporters in power under new Prime Minister Rajapakse and chances of a settlement of more than two

he is the president and, as expected, sounding tough.

Six rounds of talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers during Ranil's time raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the contentious civil war in the country which was virtually bleeding to white because of the long drawn conflict centering minority Tamil's armed struggle for a separate homeland in the north. There was no decisive outcome of the civil war as the success in the battlefield swung from one side to the other and occasional ceasefire produced no tangible results and hostilities resumed in quick time. However, situation marked a qualitative change when the government of prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe took an active pro-peace policy with the rebels over

the later abandoned their main position an independent state for the Tamils and agreed for autonomy. The road to peace through negotiations is undoubtedly bumpy but what was remarkably encouraging was the marked willingness to find common ground towards a permanent settlement of the problem. Notwithstanding differences on some key areas, both sides demonstrated commendable attitude in carrying forward the parleys. Admittedly, talks occasionally went into rough weather and even at one stage been suspended indefinitely but both sides never spoke of chances of resuming hostilities. The deal on "Tsunami" relief operations brought them little closer despite differences. But that understanding later fizzled out.

boycott of the voting that clearly heavily contributed to Ranil's defeat. The difference of the votes polled was just two percent, the winner bagging 50 per cent and the main rival 48 per cent. Wickramasinghe lost as he did not secure the anticipated Tamil votes because of the boycott. Tamils constitute 16 per cent of the total population. But despite his hard line policies, new president seemingly does not want to give an impression that he is anti-peace. He appointed Ratnisi Wickramayake, known for his hawkish approach to the Tamil rebels, as new prime minister and this further eroded the government-rebel understanding.

Rebel Supremo Villupai Prabhakaran sometime ago set December 31 as a deadline for the

OPINION

What SAARC offers to the region?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

AGAINST the backdrop of a series of bomb blasts and political squabble between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, the two-day 13th Summit of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which ended in Dhaka under heavy security arrangement, has not succeeded in producing such tangible results as expected. The summit produced an 8-page 53-point Dhaka Declaration, which appears not as serious as no organisation could focus attention on so many areas region wise. However, the pledge by the leaders to resolve unsettled issues leading to the implementation of SAFTA from

January, 2006 marks the positive indication toward evolving regional economic forum, which if implemented in the long run, will benefit India -- the largest economy in the region. But disagreement on the issue of identifying products reflects lack of progress toward SAARC's stated objective of increasing regional cooperation in economic fields. Apart from this, no significant progress has been achieved in alleviation of poverty by SAARC countries where 40 percent of the 1.5 billion people live in abject poverty.

The document on alleviation of poverty prepared by an independent SAARC Poverty Alleviation Commission, which was constituted at the sixth sum-

Whatever might be the outcome of the summit, one must praise the government for holding the summit successfully without any disturbance at a time when the country has been passing through violence and killings. It was also success for BNP led government to secure posthumous honour for Ziaur Rahman who floated the idea of SAARC and successfully negotiated with other countries for the establishment of the regional cooperation group.

mit in Colombo in 1991, provided a radical conceptual framework for poverty alleviation through social mobilisation and empowerment. The summit in Dhaka in 1993 accepted the report and stressed that within the conceptual approach of *daal-bhat*, the right to work and primary education should be given priority.

Since the floating of SAARC in 1985 in Dhaka, it has crossed long twenty years but has hardly begun to walk. That however does not mean to write off the regional cooperation as irrelevant.

Meetings, exchange of views on bilateral, regional and international issues and meetings on the sidelines could help better understand the problems the countries in the region are confronted with. It also offers interface to occur between India and Pakistan, two new nuclear powers.

Political instability, violence, a sense of mistrust and fear and exploitation have contributed toward stagnation of this regional bloc. Among the SAARC countries, Nepal is facing Maoist insurgents who are clamouring to

abolish Kingship. Sri Lanka is not yet free from a long civil war with Tamil Tigers while India and Pakistan, major players in regional politics, are at loggerheads over the disputed Kashmir. Earthquake in Pakistan was "compounded by a plummeting equation with India after terrorists' bombings in New Delhi". Both Bangladesh and India are making allegation and counter allegation about harbouring insurgents while some points of water sharing disputes between the two countries

remain unresolved.

This being the scenario in the region, there was little willingness or appetite to focus on economic cooperation to alleviate poverty.

However, there is redeeming feature of the 13th summit that concerns the elimination of terrorism as most of the countries, by and large, become the victims of terrorism. The leaders have expressed satisfaction at the ratification of an additional protocol to SAARC convention on suppression of terrorism. Another area of positive development is the cre-

ation of a regional disaster management centre. There is hardly any need to put emphasis on the establishment of such centre in view of frequent natural disasters being experienced by the countries in the region. However, it is not understood what was the importance for inclusion of Afghanistan within the fold of SAARC. The inclusion of Afghanistan signals its legitimacy while it is still a satellite of the United States. President Hamid Karzai is the head of a puppet government. At the same time extending periphery to Far East by inclusion of China and Japan as observer does not make much sense.

SAARC has a long way to go before it can catch up with other regional groups, such as Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its trading

arm, the Asian Free Trade Association (AFTA), let alone the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group.

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