

Dialogue in limbo!

Why play hide and seek with the nation?

THE dialogue seems to be going somewhere we don't know. That is a matter of consternation. Both the party heads are away; therefore no decision can be taken before they arrive, on or before the 23rd of the month. It seems rather intriguing that in the age of information technology, when physical presence is not an absolute necessity for exchanging information, data, or proffering advice or opinion, that the dialogue process will be allowed to hang fire because the two leaders are out of the country! Decisions can be given even from the moon.

Furthermore, we would like to ask, why the two leaders had to leave the country almost simultaneously, in the midst of the dialogue process, leaving the nation in a state of anxiety, guessing about which way the dialogue was heading. What is even more vexing is why were decisions not taken by the leaders to resolve the impasse and spare the countrymen the unease, after the talks were adjourned on 10th October and before their foreign sojourn, while they were still in the country? The next date fixed for talk is October 23, possibly the day before Eid. Is that not cutting it too fine? We feel that the two parties are playing hide and seek with the nation, that we are being taken for a ride. It is appropriate to suggest that it would be unwise for the BNP and the AL to take the people for granted or their patience to be unlimited.

The opposition and even some of the senior ruling party members have expressed, quite rightly too, their apprehensions at the way the talks were progressing, fixing a new date after every meeting, quite like how a judge fixes the next date of hearing. The consequence of failure to reach an agreement will be disastrous.

We cannot but express our concern as well as exasperation and indignation at the prospect of the nation being left in a limbo with grave uncertainty staring in its face. The nation cannot suffer just because the two leaders are away from the country. We call upon the parties to take decision urgently. It should be done for the sheer love for the country and the need to avoid confrontation and violence. We are still hoping for a positive outcome of the talks.

FDI growth ranking

Let's build up on it

A T a launching programme of the World Investment Report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development jointly organised the Bangladesh Board of Investment (Bol) and the UN Information Centre, it was revealed that Bangladesh registered a significant growth of 50 percent in FDI in 2005, the second highest in South Asia. This has in turn advanced the ranking of Bangladesh to 5th over its previous 9th position amongst the Least Developing Countries (LDCs). Furthermore, the Executive Director of Bol has pointed out that the growth was 84 percent in terms of actual FDI inflow compared to the previous year's performance.

This is indeed a commendable achievement for the country and all those involved deserve our appreciation.

Surely, we could have done even better, but for our negative image created by corruption, political unrest coupled with labour trouble and a number of lesser factors. Also, there cannot be any second opinion on the observation made by the UNDP's Resident Representative in Dhaka about the state of our governance being a factor that is hindering the growth of our FDI.

In an environment of free market economy FDI is bound to play an important role in the growth of a country's economy.

With the various factors impeding the growth of investment having been identified, let us deal with them in real earnest from here onwards. First priority is to simplify the bureaucratic red tape in approving investment proposals; secondly, we must ensure smooth energy and power supplies; and thirdly, the port facilities must be vastly improved. These are the things we must go about addressing immediately while politics takes its time to settle down and the execution of financial reform is some way off.

Let's not forget, in garnering FDI we face the stiffest kind of competition from other countries in Asia.

Celebrating Yunus, celebrating all of Bengal



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

Muhammad Yunus's triumph may not reform the agenda of the nation's political warriors. But it can, and perhaps will, serve notice to them that the times, as well as the country, are passing them by. As they quibble about power and pelf and play petulant about political dialogue, Yunus points ahead and shows us a beautiful, hugely more purposeful world beyond the narrow parameters of our debilitating parochialism. The gods have thus promised a renewal of spring for Bengalis, in this land and elsewhere.

THE Nobel Prize for Peace has come to Muhammad Yunus at a time when we as a nation were sorely in need of a silver lining in the clouds. No, the Nobel is no guarantee that the darkness we happen to be muddling through will lift any time soon. The inadequacy of politics, the absence of leadership on a national scale, our collective failure to shape dreams any more, et al, remain stumbling blocks in our passage to the future. The corruption that has eaten away at our vitals refuses to go away; and the men who have, in the name of governance, not governed and have indeed humiliated the art of government itself in these past many years, are yet to be sent packing into the woods whence they will not return.

The individuals who have defaulted on repayment of loans borrowed from the nationalised banks move around with not a bit of shame about their criminality; and hoodlums who have entered parliament as lawmakers even as they have systematically broken every bit of the law, and sometimes the bones of the good and the innocent, hover even now in and around the neighbourhoods of those that wait for good and firm leadership to pull these satanic men up in the interest of justice.

Such is the macabre light of medievalism in which the Nobel for Peace has come to Professor

Yunus. No, the Nobel is not a magic wand that will alter the course of life for us. But, then again, life is much more than the simplistic affair we often make it out to be. It is in the depths of gloom that life takes on fresh new meaning, a meaning which Muhammad Yunus has now given us through leading us by the hand, as it were, to a new respectability in the global community.

Just as we were beginning to think we had actually hit rock bottom, his Nobel comes to us as a reminder that the Bengali, much like the phoenix, has it in him to rise from the ashes. All of a sudden, Yunus's achievement has pushed bad politics into the corner where it should forever belong, and has rekindled in us thoughts of the way we once were, and could be again.

It is a purely Bengali achievement, this Nobel Prize for Peace. At the same time, it is a reflection of the Bengali's inextricable links with modernity. The Bengali does not remain a Bengali if he cannot relate to, and interact with, the world outside his frontiers. The nationalism that has driven the Bengali people in their political and cultural movements in the past has, from such a perspective, been an all-embracing affair rather than the narrowness modern nationalisms are generally characteristic of.

Bengali nationalism -- and it is much broader than what you and I

can conceive of -- is fundamentally a taking into account of the varied roles Bengali men and women of substance have played throughout the course of modern history on both sides of Bengal as we once knew it.

Muhammad Yunus is, thus, a re-energising of the essential, indivisible Bengali soul. He inherits the mantle that was once Rabindranath Tagore's, that has been in the hands of the urbane Amartya Sen. All three men -- Tagore, Sen, and Yunus -- have revitalized the Bengali spirit through bringing the Nobel home, in such diverse fields as literature, economics and peace, and have collectively provided a roundness to the political and social character of the race they have sprung from.

It is then right and proper that in celebrating Muhammad Yunus, we observe the evolution of our cultural history as it has shaped itself, or been shaped, over the decades. In this age of decadence, Yunus's Nobel informs us that it is yet possible to dream of things that are to be. That dream has flowed down to us through the clear stream of reason that Tagore once spoke of, a basis of belief in which we have our ancestors communing with us from across the divide of the years.

Count among those ancestors such illustrious men as Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These are men who have defined, and then redefined, our modern sensibilities through times of the deepest despair. It is out of the dark that luminous men arise to offer chinks of hope to forlorn nations. The darkness in Bengal has from the point of view of history been thick, almost cadaverous, needing to be sliced through with a knife. We have had these Big Men in our lives cut a swathe through the dark; and once they passed on, we have slid back into the dark, into newer forms of it.

Professor Yunus knows all about this darkness, as do the rest of us. Where he has made a difference is in instilling the belief in us that hope truly springs eternal, that aspirations must begin with the basics. It is always a little village called Jobra that can reach out to the world beyond its fields of paddy, beyond paths strewn with dust in the manner of old.

Expand your thoughts somewhat, and what you then have is the clear understanding that all politics begins and ends with whether or not you can help change the life of the one who has nothing. You can give a man fish to eat. That is charity. But charity is not progress. When you teach a man how to fish, you realize you have taken the first step towards progress. And then? You take the man to a pond, tell him he has a stake in it, watch the way he smiles in disbelief. You know then

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you have helped a dream sprout somewhere in his soul.

It was just such a dream that Muhammad Yunus planted through Grameen. Poverty, he reasoned and we believed him, might be alleviated through an adoption of master plans and conventional strategy. The bigger thought was that poverty, because it was local, because bureaucracy was simply not equipped to deal with it, could be struck a blow at the micro level. The Nobel this year vindicates Yunus, and so rejuvenates us as a community. That the Bengali is yet capable of doing the good and of climbing the peaks, despite the overweening presence of mediocre and often malignant political leadership, is a truism that has been proved once again.

The Nobel that has come to Yunus humbles all Bengalis. It reinforces the old belief in them about the values they have, across the ages, held dear in all the myriad fields their great men and women have lived and worked in. Satyajit Ray will be, for as long as we hold on to history, a defining point of reference for us. Zahir Raihan made our films empower our politics with a new voice.

In Buddhadev Bose and Nazrul and Shamsur Rahman, we once spotted the sparks of poetry that took us into the far reaches of intellectual space. Jamini Roy and Zainul Abedin spoke to us of the magic of colours and the majesty of imagination. These are men who have stayed home, have kept coming back to their roots, to prove to us over and over again that patriotism is a whole lot more than a frothy screaming of chauvinistic slogans. Patriotism is, in the end, a silent dedication to an attainment of objectives that resonate with nobility.

The grit and determination which the men of Mujibnagar demonstrated in their twilight

struggle for a free Bangladesh, the efficiency with which Jyoti Basu and Buddha Bhattacharya have for three decades presided over the fortunes of West Bengal are for Bengalis on both sides of the frontier, and through its lengthening diaspora a heritage deep-rooted and so immutable.

That, briefly, is the tradition along which you can place the individual talent which is Muhammad Yunus's today. His courage was in engaging in the struggle to lift the poor out of their misery in a moment of uncertainty not many would share with him. But courage must come with conviction, which element has lain aplenty in Muhammad Yunus. The two elements have most wondrously combined to produce the sense of fulfilment, both Yunus's and ours, that now is the Nobel for Peace.

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Japan-China relations on the mend with Abe?



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

Abe did not follow the traditional path of his predecessors. He broke the tradition by not visiting Washington first upon his appointment as the new premier. He paid a visit to China and South Korea instead of Washington. This shows palpably that he is determined to mend Japan's relations with China and South Korea. After a gap of five years a Japanese prime minister has visited China and this is quite a remarkable achievement for Abe.

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Although he attempted to explain his visits saying this was his way of honouring the Japanese dead soldiers, but the fact remains that the shrine also buried the war criminals of the Second World War. Koizumi seemed to be somewhat insensitive to the views of his neighbours. His foreign policy was directed solely towards strengthening good relations with the US. The fact that he was close to Washington did not please China. In fact, it alarmed China.

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KOIZUMI Abe, 52, became the prime minister of Japan on September 26 after his unconventional predecessor Junichiro Koizumi left office. He is the youngest prime minister of Japan. He belongs to a generation who were born after the Second World War. Abe belongs to a family that had close connections with the governments in the past. Abe is not a new name in government as his father and grandfather were also prominent politicians. He is known to be a strong nationalist but is tempered with pragmatism.

Koizumi, regrettably, could not have friendly relations either with China or South Korea. Although Koizumi was very popular in Japan, he has been perceived by its neighbours as the person who did not bother to have good relations with his neighbouring countries. His regular visits to the Yasukuni shrine were an affront to

Abe was welcomed in China. Koizumi tried to visit China but was not welcome there. After a gap of five years a Japanese prime minister has visited China and this is quite a remarkable achievement for Abe. After the visit, on October 8, the leaders of China and Japan issued a statement saying they had been able to get over past animosities.

Why did Abe visit China?

First, the announcement by North Korea to conduct a test of nuclear weapons was taken seriously by Japan. Japan is very much concerned about its national security. The majority of the Japanese believe that North Korea may not hesitate to attack Japan, a close ally of Washington, if the North Korean regime is destabilized by Washington. Japan knows well that that the only country that has leverage and influence with North Korea is China. Good relations with China will pay political dividends for Japan.

Second, China is a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council and has a major say in all global issues. It is noted that Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the Security Council last year, supported strongly by the US, was lost because of China's reservation. China wanted to see reforms in the UN in other areas, not necessarily in the composition of the Security Council. Japan was severely disappointed because it cannot play a role in global affairs, despite the fact that Japan is not only one of the largest contributors of funds to the UN but also the second largest economy in the world. Friendly relations with China pay off in the long run, after all.

Third, China and Japan have some disputes over sites in the East China Sea. The sites are

known to be potentially oil-rich areas. Without trust and confidence, no bilateral disputes can be resolved. Prime Minister Abe's visit to China is seen as one of the confidence-building measures in improving relations with China.

Fourth, China's economic growth has continued at an astonishing speed for decades and it has had far-reaching impact on other Asian countries. With the economic growth, it has become a military power and may dominate the region strategically in the coming decades, challenging the supremacy of the US. Now Japan is fully aware of this fact, although a few years back Japan was not convinced of China's rise because its people in the countryside remain poor. Friendly relations with China will provide Japan with a diplomatic edge in addressing regional and global issues.

Finally, China and Russia are getting closer politically and economically via-a-vis the US. China and Russia are members of the Shanghai Cooperation, set up in 2001 with four other countries of Central Asia. This organization is believed to work as a counter-weight to halt the increasing influence of the US in the backyard of Russia. Already the US military base from Uzbekistan has been removed with the support of China and Russia. Japan, a close ally of Washington, does not want to be in the bad books of Russia and China. Russia since the

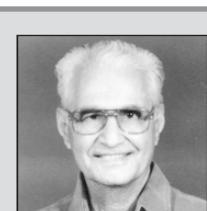
Second World War has occupied some islands, claimed by Japan. Japan needs to have good relations with both China and Russia.

It looks as though it is not only Japan that wants close relations with both China and South Korea. Both China and North Korea also want more constructive relations with Japan. It is a two-way traffic. Therefore Abe should be prudent enough to realize this need of the hour and strengthen ties with Japan's neighbours. For the peace and stability of the region, all the countries need to remove past animosities and move forward to a new environment of political and economic architecture.

Abe, representing a generational change, wants to bring some dynamism to foreign and domestic policies. Abe needs to improve the climate of foreign investment to create jobs and prosperity. If relations with China are good, foreign investment is likely to follow. It seems that his visit to China is good news to all countries, including Bangladesh.

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North Korea does it



MB NAQVI

writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

Proliferation is aided by reason. International relations are not based on sweet reasonableness or morality or international law. What counts is military (and especially nuke) power. The stronger you are, the better the terms are for you. The US has shown, more clearly after the disappearance of the Soviets, that you can dominate the whole world by virtue of possessing overwhelming military power, based on nukes.

until the Second World War and where anti-Japanese sentiment is alive. The threat inherent in this post-explosion situation is likely to be perceived differently by different countries.

For the US, it punctures its vast prestige and influence; it will no longer be able to do as it wishes; the deterrent power it had stands degraded somewhat. China's regret and disapproval, though genuine, is more for the record. Even Pakistan and India have made their disapproval known, though it is a sin that they themselves had committed only 8 years ago.

South Korea's official establishment is formally among those who feel themselves to be in danger from North Korea's nuclear capability, though this alienation from North Korea is far less serious among the people in

the South, who appear to put more stock in pan-Korean Nationalism. No one else in Asia, except anti-nuclear campaigners, will feel threatened by North Korea's bomb. After all, North Korea is a small country that is not averse to most Asian countries. All its militancy is directed at Japan that had mistreated it so badly in the past that its scars are still visible. It has not forgotten the war in 1950s the US led against it for purely cold war reasons. It is friendly to Russia and China for historical reasons; they had also come to its aid in 1950s.

What concerns Asians the most is the Japanese reaction to North Korean bomb. A certain amount of commonsense and a sense of proportion need to be deployed: North Korea is no real threat to Japan. Japan is in fact a great military power as it is; it spends

each year over \$ 40 billion on defence. It is nearly equal to what India and Pakistan spend on defence together. True, it does not have nuclear weapons. But in most other departments, it should be treated as a great military power. And making atomic weapons will require only political decision and a few months. Can North Korea mount an invasion on Japan no matter how many nuclear weapons it can manage to fabricate? The very idea of it is ridiculous. North Koreans' perceived threats to their own security should explain its behaviour; it has reasons to fear the US-Japan military alliance. It is still formally in a state of war with the US.

As the prospect of Japan going nuclear draws closer, there will be real turmoil throughout Asia. Japan's conduct in the 20th century, beginning with defeating Imperial Russia and occupying Korean areas and going on to invade China are a painful memory for most Asians. It occupied nearly all of South East Asia during Second World War and it was knocking at the doors of India. No Asian has forgotten that experience. Japan's going nuclear will be a cat among pigeons. The strongest reaction will come from China, though other South East Asians' fright ought not to be forgotten. Japanese Bomb will