

Clipping the wings

IMRAN ASIF

FOR four consecutive years since 2001, we topped the charts. Well, as Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) puts it, corruption in Bangladesh has been "perceived" to be the highest in the world during this period."

Our very own national airline, Biman, is a testament to this perception.

Since it was formed just after liberation in 1972, the magnitude of corruption never reached anywhere near what it had during the last 5 years.

It was during the Ershad regime that Biman was taken for a ride for the first time. The then operational Fokker F-27s were overhauled and refurbished at hefty cost, and were soon sold off at rates far lower than average for the type at the time. And then the poet-president went shopping to UK in 1989, and bought 2 British Aerospace ATPs for the airline at \$ 14 million each – a price which no other airline ever paid for

the aircraft type.

Seemingly "haunted" by the corruption behind the purchase, the ATPs went on to have a horrendous service record with Biman, and were finally sold to the UK-based Emerald Airways in 2004. In their 14 years with Biman, the ATPs barely took to the skies, and yet spares for the aircraft were purchased by both AL and BNP governments, allegedly amounting to about 75 crore taka.

In its regime between 1991-1996, the BNP government bought 2 Airbus A310-300 aircraft from Airbus Industries. While I do believe that the choice of the aircraft type was right (compared to the similar B767 aircraft from Boeing), the price paid was again the highest by any airline.

These two aircraft were shown bought at list prices of the manufacturer, and in the world of commercial aviation almost zero-percent aircraft sales are conducted at list prices. The discounts offered by manufacturers range between 5 and 25 percent, depending on the customer, order value, and delivery



schedule.

As an early customer for the type, Biman ought to have had at least 15% off the list prices - an amount never accounted for in the books, because it made its way into the deep pockets of those who were involved in the deal from within the government and Biman's management.

Awami League picked up the baton of corruption from BNP when it came to power in 1996. Two

then minister for civil aviation and tourism, was flying high.

I would not be contradicted by many, if at all, for saying that the worst thing(s) that has ever happened to Biman are Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin and Shamim Eskander. The former is an uncouth character, with the aura of corruption beaming from every inch of his being. The latter is the younger brother of Begum Khaleda Zia, infamous for single-handedly leading the looting in Biman over the last 5 years.

The lease of 2 Boeing 737-300s from Singapore-based Regionair involved corruption of about \$ 3 million, based on the prevailing global wet-lease rates for the aircraft at the time. One A310 was leased from US-based Crane Aviation at outrageously high rates, at the persistence of Eskander. Two Fokker F-28 aircraft, actually meant for scrapping in Indonesia, were bought for \$ 2.9 million. If they were not taken up by Biman, they would have been turned into beer cans. Hmm!

From his professional designa-

tion of Flight Engineer at Biman, Shamim Eskander actually "engineered" more than just flights. Apart from the occasional aircraft lease deals, he unleashed his shameless greed day-in and day-out at Biman throughout the last 5 years. For example, spares worth about \$ 200 were brought at \$ 7,000, or ones worth \$ 12,000 at \$ 55,000.

Thousands of such purchases were made, often deliberately forcing an Aircraft-on-Ground (AOG) situation, to take advantage of the liberal purchase regulations, which were meant for true emergencies. He used his brother-in-law Shahedul Huq's company as the tool, while Nasiruddin used his close aide Farhad (an automobile spares supplier in the grey market), to plunder millions of dollars from Biman's spares purchases and maintenance, repair, and overhaul deals.

Years of unending corruption in Biman reached its peak between 2001-2006. Its losses in 2006 neared \$ 42 million – while the minister, many senior and middle

management officials, and even some cabin crew, were rolling in wealth at the expense of Biman and, thus, the nation.

A recent newspaper report stated that Biman owes about 1,500 crore taka to Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), and another 1,000 crore taka as outstanding bills and payables to international organizations.

I have spoken to a number of Biman's current officials, like Captain SM Nasimul Huq (ex-president of Bangladesh Airline Pilots' Association), and read articles on Biman by Captain A Muquet, Bir Pratik (ex- president of BAPA and Regional Vice-President of International Federation of Airline Pilots' Association) which has led me to believe that, if it was not for corruption, Biman could have well been a strong and sustainable airline.

Most of the information I mentioned in this article has been reported in different media over the years. And the point that I am trying to make is that, if all the corrupt who

"raped" Biman through the years are taken to task, and even half of the taxpayers' money these people have plundered could be recovered from their possession, Biman would be a pretty wealthy organization in no time at all!

I would like to, hereby, urge the combined body of Biman's trade unions -- the Biman Sammilito Sangram Parishad (BSSP) -- to file a graft allegation at the Anti-Corruption Commission, and demand trials of all those who have mercilessly clipped the wings of our pride.

The author, currently an aviation industry consultant, has previously worked on projects with The Boeing Company, Honeywell Aerospace, and FAA's Operational Evolution Plan (OEP) in 2004-2005.

India's new pragmatism

The Indian intervention in favour of the people's revolution last April in Nepal, and against the monarchy, is a case in point. In Myanmar, New Delhi swings in favour of the military junta -- and against Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru's close friend Aung San -- because Naypitaw promises help with insurgency and terrorism.

JYOTI MALHOTRA

NEW Delhi's newly pragmatic turn has been confirmed with off-the-record praise for the Army-backed political dispensation currently sweeping Bangladesh. For the record, Dhaka now follows Yangon (or Naypitaw, as Myanmar's new capital in the back of the Burmese beyond is called) in India's list of military calling cards.

Indeed, concern for whether General Pervez Musharraf will don his uniform or campaign in civvies when elections are held in Pakistan sometime later this year, is already wearing thin.

The old morality mantra in South Block -- where the Prime Minister's Office as well as the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence are located -- has been replaced with a spanking, new realism. It asks not whether high-sounding principles are good for your country, but what this country can do in the promotion of your national interest.

Presiding over this shift in both policy and national temperament is Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, even when he defers to Sonia Gandhi's political instinct for the poor. Since the prime minister's

instinct is much more right-wing, he seems much more comfortable with the George Bush Republican model that declares, let's do business tonight.

Bangladesh is a classic case in point. When the Army in Dhaka took control of the rapidly deteriorating political situation in January, New Delhi reacted predictably by hoping that the people would be allowed to exercise their democratic right in a free and fair election as soon as possible.

Barely a month later, as Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee prepared to go to Dhaka, New Delhi signalled to Fakhruddin Ahmed's army-backed new caretaker government that it was prepared to invite Ahmed to the Saarc summit in Delhi in April, even if he wasn't an elected leader.

Mukherjee's flying visit in February was notable for one other thing. He may not have formally met Bangladesh army chief Lt. Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed, but a couple of generals in uniform made it a point to attend every official meeting.

Indeed, it was the Indian authorities' meeting with the army chief, one day before the foreign minister's visit, that set the stage for the expression of the new pragmatism.

It was at this meeting that the train service from Kolkata to Dhaka was finalised -- a train that will now make its first journey on April 14, Bengali new year.

Diplomats on both sides recalled that the train service has been on the cards only for 15 years, since 1992, and that even the so-called, pro-India Awami League party of Sheikh Hasina, in power from 1996-2001, had not been able to swing this popular, cross-border measure.

Over the weeks, as contact between the Indian government and Dhaka's military headquarters grew and grew -- on the sidelines of the public cleansing of Bangladesh's public life, that has touched a new high last week with the arrest of none other than Tarique Rahman, son of former PM Khaleda Zia and considered to be the most powerful man in Bangladesh until the army took over two months ago -- the generals began to speak a language that New Delhi had been waiting and waiting to hear.

For a start, they said, terrorism and insurgency was a bad thing, and insurgent groups -- whether or not they were anti-India and had taken refuge in Bangladesh's northern areas -- could not be good for the country.

Secondly, since the character of any country was judged by the treatment of its minorities, Bangladesh had a duty and responsibility to protect its rapidly diminishing Hindu population, who had stayed loyal despite two partitions of the mother country. All Bangladesh's minorities, they said, had a right to live securely.

The army-backed caretaker government also sought to push the relationship with New Delhi to a totally new trajectory, pointing out that a political filip was needed. The Kolkata-Dhaka railway line could lead the way, while trade, Manmohan Singh's chosen diplomatic manifesto, could make way for other things.

In fact, India has already promised it will look at selling power to Bangladesh from its eastern grid -- a matter as simple as reconnecting electricity stations and grid exchanges, for e.g. between Murshidabad and Pabna, a few kms afar, but a world apart.

We are a unique army, the Bangladesh generals said to New Delhi again and again, we are not like Myanmar or Thailand. We are not here to ape the politicians. We will clean up the system, however long it takes.

It's a message New Delhi seems to have clearly bought. In the wake of the decision to run the cross-border train service, the Indian government has even invited the Bangladesh army chief to visit India.

Clearly, too, India's pragmatism takes strength from the army-

backed political changes currently sweeping Bangladesh. If the army can sweep such a strong broom at home, goes the argument, it can surely help weed out criminal and terrorist elements that have made Bangladesh their home.

Still, the pragmatism has been in the making for a while, and cuts across ideological belief. It was the previous BJP government that knocked the bottom out of India's non-aligned urge, a concept now as flat as yesterday's coffee and as out of date as the Cold War. Former PM A.B. Vajpayee's man-of-all-seasons Brajesh Mishra believed it was in India's national interest to move on and make peace, whether with Pakistan or China.

Bangladesh was a prize that eluded the BJP, but the time may now have come for the Congress to establish a new deal with Dhaka. Mukherjee's visit was intended to break the ice, to signal that bridges can be built -- not only over the Rangachannar -- that New Delhi would go the extra mile to do business with anyone who wanted to do business with it.

What is more, this new thinking also throws up brand new opportunities for political friendships. For one, it cuts the long accumulated slack between India and Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. Those who remember the tumult of 1971 point out that Indira Gandhi also supported Mujibur Rahman in the hope that India would have a permanent friend in Dhaka.

And while this may have been

generally true, New Delhi feels it is also time to get rid of the unnecessary antagonism this perception has evoked in Khaleda's BNP. Significantly, it also seems as if the BNP itself may be turning, with an influential section now believing that the party hostility with India should transform itself into some sort of partnership with Delhi.

Perhaps the Indian pragmatism takes heart from India's newfound partnership with America. But even as the world's strongest power is increasingly bloodied in the Middle East, New Delhi feels that it ought to take responsibility at least for its own neighbourhood.

The Indian intervention in favour of the people's revolution last April in Nepal, and against the monarchy, is a case in point. In Myanmar, New Delhi swings in favour of the military junta -- and against Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru's close friend Aung San -- because Naypitaw promises help with insurgency and terrorism.

In Bangladesh, India believes, if the army can now broker a domestic, political peace as well as usher in a new bilateral partnership, then so be it.

Jyoti Malhotra is Diplomatic Editor, The Telegraph, Kolkata.

Minnows no longer



PAUL MASON

MARCH 16: The Cricket World Cup has finally started. We've endured the "razzle-dazzle" of the opening ceremony and seen the back of endless speculation. The group matches have begun, and if the West Indies winning the opening game against much favoured Pakistan is anything to go by, we could be in for some surprises.

Like the players, I've been in mental training -- getting ready for a month ahead with little sleep, and the likelihood of suffering outrageous fortunes. I expect extreme emotional torment as I swing regularly from elation to despair and back. And to top it off, I occupy the rare position of being an Englishman, living in New Zealand, who also finds himself backing Bangladesh in the cup. Now there's a prospect few others have to face.

My support for Bangladesh can be traced back to the 1980s when I was lucky enough to call Dhaka home. Looking back now I think fondly of a city of lakes, slow rickshaw rides, and a soft light at dusk unlike anywhere else.

My time in Dhaka left me with an enduring (and since unfulfilled) love for roadside puchka, and a group of friends who remain close despite the distance. And, born out of a sense of nostalgic duty and an instinctive need to back an underdog, it has also left me following the Tigers -- and what a ride that has been: World Cup 1999 -- against the odds the Tigers beat Pakistan by 62 runs. (Who could forget that sweet euphoria?)

I quickly email Zaf in New York to share in the glory -- he's throwing a party and every Bangladeshi he knows is invited. As he put it: "We're all brothers today." I find myself getting annoyed at the ill-judged gossip of match fixing that follows in the papers.

Even this moment can't compare to the ecstasy I feel watching Ashrafu blast a run-a-ball century against the Australians in the Nat-West Series in Cardiff in 2005.

This was the match that Symonds tried to turn up to drunk; such was Australian arrogance prior to the fixture. The harder they come... Ashrafu's post-match interview in halting English brings a lump to my throat.

From the sublime to the ridiculous: World Cup 2003, losses to everyone including Canada and Kenya. Some years are best forgotten.

So what can we expect to see this time round? Both Bashar and Whatmore feel that Bangladesh have a realistic chance of making the second round -- the super eight - and I would tend to agree.

There is a certain amount of expectation going into this tournament -- the Tigers no longer deserve to be included under the moniker of "minnow," and I feel that this World Cup could well prove the point.

We see a young side (only four of the current squad have prior experience of this high-level tournament) who come into this competition unencumbered by previous baggage. (It was this sense of freedom that Michael Vaughan credited with a big part in England's regaining of the

Ashes in 2005).

Perhaps most importantly, this current Tigers squad also has a belief that, on the day, they can beat anyone -- and they're right. The Whatmore revolution continues.

The omens are good: both the ICC Associates tri-series matches against Canada and Bermuda were won with relative ease. This was followed by wins against Scotland and New Zealand (a New Zealand side, I might point out, which had just come off a convincing 3-0 whitewash of Australia.) There was a palpable feeling of shock down under the day after that two-wicket win.

If the young Tigers play to their abilities, they are clearly capable of mixing it with the best. There are several players who, I feel, are key to the Tigers' chances: the skipper Bashar needs to bring his experience to the fore, and for his troops to play to their best he needs to marshal them well. If there was ever a time for him to add an ODI hundred to his figures, to go with his three test centuries, it is now.

It seems an age since Ashrafu became the youngest player to score a test century, and though he might not have had a consistent run of good form of late, he still remains Bangladesh's most colourful batsman.

Conventional wisdom has it that this World Cup could well be bowler dominated -- with many pundits forecasting modest totals. If this is the case, Ashrafu's explosive batting has the potential to take the game away from the opposition.

With four ODI centuries under his belt, including a recent 104 off 112 balls against Bermuda, the left-handed Nafees also has a big role to fulfil in the batting line up. A flying start is a key element in modern day limited-overs cricket, and Nafees's intuitive ability to play his shots suits that game plan.

Mashrafe's 4-44, and his quick-fire 30 off just 14 deliveries, played a large part in the win against New Zealand. Bangladesh needs their young paceman to maintain his current fitness, and stay clear of the physio, if they want to have the best chance of succeeding.

I'm hopeful. When the Tigers take the field against India tomorrow we might just see an upset.

So, win the toss Bashar, put them in on that moist, early-morning Caribbean pitch and hope that the ball does a bit. Then, after they've collapsed for less than two hundred, make hay in the sunshine.

And if you do, not only will there will be dancing in the streets of Dhaka but, on his island many miles away in New Zealand, an Englishman will also be raising his glass to the part of him that is forever Bangladesh, and wishing he had a plate of puchka.

Paul Mason is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Broaden the vision: Meet our people's aspirations

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE next Saarc summit will be held in New Delhi in a matter of weeks. What kind of summit will it be? Will it be ceremonial and high sounding, or functional and effective? If it opts for the latter, then it has to evaluate Saarc's goals and achievements with a broadened vision, strengthen its implementation mechanism, and try to connect the region with the adjoining regions in a resurgent Asia, and the world at large.

It should also appraise the existing format and dispense with all the unnecessary expenses and fanfare, which have so far characterized past Saarc summits. The goal should be to hold a functional summit where all heads of state/government would stay under one roof for two days and have a "meeting of minds," without the glare of a spotlight. After all, the world's richest countries hold highly functional G-8 Summits in remote towns every year.

Saarc is still plagued by mistrust and tensions among its members caused by the "baggage of history," lack of resources within the region, huge asymmetry and geographical anomalies.

Historically, India has been apprehensive of being "ganged up" on by her neighbours and, hence, she has always dealt with them strictly on a bilateral basis. On the other hand, smaller neighbours have viewed India with caution, and have been apprehensive of Indian "domination."

The threat perception of the Saarc members are, thus, from within and not from outside. However, the biggest challenge has been the rivalry and tensions between two arch nuclear rivals, India and Pakistan, which have very often mired the regional integration process.

Despite such major impediments, Saarc has made some progress, and has upgraded itself from discussing non-controversial functional issues in the past to



hardcore economic issues. Given the weakness of its internal dimension, Saarc has slowly strengthened its external dimension.

The doors of the hitherto closed club have been opened. Afghanistan will attend the New Delhi summit as the eighth member, while the US, EU, China, Japan, and South Korea are joining as observers.

The major global players are showing renewed interest in Saarc, because they realize that in this era of globalization they can not ignore South Asia for its enormous size, prospects, potential and strategic location. There is no alternative to regional cooperation in this era of globalization, and the summit should try to hasten the regional integration process.

Bilateral problems exist not only in South Asia but also in other regions, but that has not precluded them from intensifying their regional cooperation and integration process. For example, the Asean countries have not been able to resolve all their bilateral problems, but their leadership has shown political acumen by containing

those disputes so that they do not hinder the integration process. The Saarc leadership should demonstrate such broadened and enlightened vision, and collectively face the major challenges ahead.

South Asia is home to nearly 47% of the world's absolute poor, living on \$1.00 per day. Naturally, Saarc recognized poverty alleviation as its top priority issue about three years ago. While the South East and East Asian countries have substantially reduced their poverty levels, the Saarc countries have made only marginal progress.

What is particularly alarming is the further widening of the gap between the privileged few in the metropolises and the vast majority living in the countryside. Despite recent high GDP growth, South Asia still lags behind other adjoining regions in income and human development index.

The Dhaka summit had declared the years from 2006-15 as the Saarc Decade of Poverty Alleviation. But a mere declaration did not help. At the Islamabad summit, a decision was taken to create a "South Asian

Poverty Alleviation Fund" with an initial capital of \$ 300 million.

This was the seed money, and the whole idea was to generate a much larger amount from the international community. Unfortunately, very little progress has been made so far. The New Delhi summit should make the fund operational, so that our finance ministers could jointly approach the World Bank and other global financial institutions for financing various poverty alleviation projects, including the setting up of a Development Bank.

The creation of a free trade area is the sine qua non of any regional organization. The Dhaka summit had somewhat hurriedly launched the Safta; but it took another six months to resolve various contentious issues.

The Safta has so far had very little impact in promoting intra-regional trade, as most of the member countries have placed the principal exports of their neighbours on their negative lists to protect their markets.

Furthermore, Pakistan has maintained that, despite the Safta

agreement, its trade with India will be on "the positive list" basis rather than on the "negative list." This means that Indo-Pakistan trade would be outside the purview of the Safta.

Intra-regional trade among the Saarc countries is only about 4% of the overall trade of the member countries, compared to 37% among the North American Free Trade Agreement members (Nafta), 67% among European Union (EU) members and 38% among Asean members. Intra-regional trade can only be enhanced by creating greater trade complementarities.

India, as the predominant market player, has a special responsibility. The regional countries import 5% of India's total exports, but only 1% of India's imports come from these countries. India has to help her smaller neighbours to develop their export potentials so that they can effectively take part in the regional integration process.

India, as the host, has proposed "connectivity through trade, transport and energy corridors" as the theme of the upcoming Delhi summit. Surely, South Asians need more energy, better road networks and modern port facilities, and total transformation of their communication infrastructure. But in order to achieve those, there is a clear need for a broadened vision to break the existing logjam.

Given the existing geographical anomalies in the region, any proposal for regional cross-border connectivity is invariably viewed by smaller neighbours as a part of their bilateral negotiations with India.

In the past, India had tried to keep the smaller countries separated from each other, and she had refused transit facilities through her territories. Consequently, smaller countries had refused similar land transit rights to India through their territories. Here, India has to take some bold and unilateral actions to earn the trust and confidence of her neighbours.

South Asians also need a common regional approach in the areas

of disaster management and utilization of our common resources. Every year the South Asian countries suffer from floods and droughts.

Our rivers need taming and training. The countries' efforts to control floods, or to augment their irrigation facilities, or to generate power through small-scale national level projects have not produced the desired results.

On the contrary, they have aggravated regional tensions and ecological imbalance. We have mega-problems and we need mega-projects with international cooperation for the common benefit of the members.

The Saarc members should also promote the concept of "gateway strategies," which would go beyond physical connectivity and include their human dimensions in areas such as education, health, research and innovation and understanding of the region and its cultures. Such strategies should be pursued both nationally and regionally.

The Delhi summit should, therefore, consider forming a vision and strategy group of eminent persons from the Saarc countries for formulating recommendations for comprehensive internal as well as external regional cooperation in the context of globalization and Asian resurgence.

As the Japanese proverb says, "Vision without action is a day-dream, but action without vision is a nightmare." The need of the hour is to closely coordinate our vision and our action.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a Former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.