

Forthcoming Delhi summit SAARC must acquire newer dimensions

THE forthcoming summit of SAARC nations in Delhi promises to be different from all earlier meetings of the organization. The presence of as many as five observers, together with the entry of Afghanistan as the newest member of the South Asian regional body, is a clear sign of a certain spirit of rejuvenation coming into SAARC. It hardly needs to be pointed out that since its inception twenty two years ago, the organization has struggled to find a foothold and make an impact on the lives of the people in whose interest it took shape. It has not been unusual for people to come by sentiments patently critical of the body, to the extent that it has often been derided as a mere talking shop. Fortunately, given the changing political and strategic realities around the globe, SAARC appears to have been taking a good look at itself and is now poised to redefine its parameters.

The presence of China, Japan, South Korea, the United States and the European Union at the April summit of SAARC nations is a good indication of the increasing appeal of the regional body. In a very important way, the five observers have, through their interest in the summit, acknowledged the potential SAARC holds in promoting economic and political cooperation among the member states of the organization. Of course, such a perspective on their part has much to do with some recent developments in the region itself. On the one hand, the relatively healthy bilateralism which has of late defined contacts between India and Pakistan and between India and China has sent out the message that cooperative endeavours could now be digging deeper roots. On the other, there is somewhat a perception that the member nations of SAARC could from here on develop a unified response to the many issues the wider world happens to be tackling. In other words, the presence of observers at the summit may well be regarded as adding a new dimension to politics and related issues in South Asia.

Beyond the matter of the prospects being held out for SAARC, though, comes the matter of the organization developing a sinewy image of itself. That of course presupposes a certain kind of rethinking in such areas as the charter of the organization, particularly in relation to bilateral issues being dealt with by the wider body. At the same time, progress will need to be made in such vital regions as free trade, or SAFTA. To date, deals on such issues as countering terrorism and the like have strengthened the feeling that SAARC does hold the potential to add substance to itself. With Afghanistan now coming in as a member, it is time for SAARC leaders to consider seriously what must be done to make the body become a full-time participant in the affairs of the wider world.

Open market sale a success But streamlining mainstream market important

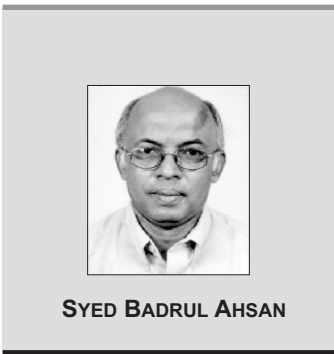
OPEN market sale of essential commodities that was initiated by BDR some weeks back has now become quite popular. People in increasing numbers are crowding the markets where goods are being sold at comparatively lower prices than at regular kitchen markets and grocery shops in the city. This has definitely given some relief to consumers and more such OMS centres are set to open on selected days of the week between 6 in the morning and 12 noon.

We appreciate the role the BDR's market outlet is playing; yet it must also be said that there are a number of special factors that are contributing to its success. Goods are being transported to locations directly without the participation of the wholesalers, middlemen or retailers in the supply chain. So, quick transportation of goods and direct sale are key elements. This is benefiting both the consumers and the growers.

No extortion is involved along the line. But OMS is an extraordinary measure that cannot be replicated in the wider real market situation. One has to take into account the question as to what percentage of the total population of the country is being served and benefited from the present exercise.

The overarching imperative is that the government engage regular players like the wholesalers, importers and retailers in a continuing process of consultation to devise ways and means together to maintain a demand-supply equilibrium so that the prices are stabilised at affordable levels for the middle and low income groups. The government needs to give fiscal support and create an enabling environment for the market forces to operate normally. At the same time, unscrupulous businessmen who resort to hoarding and black marketing by forming syndicates should be identified and neutralised by the concerted efforts of the government and business community leaders.

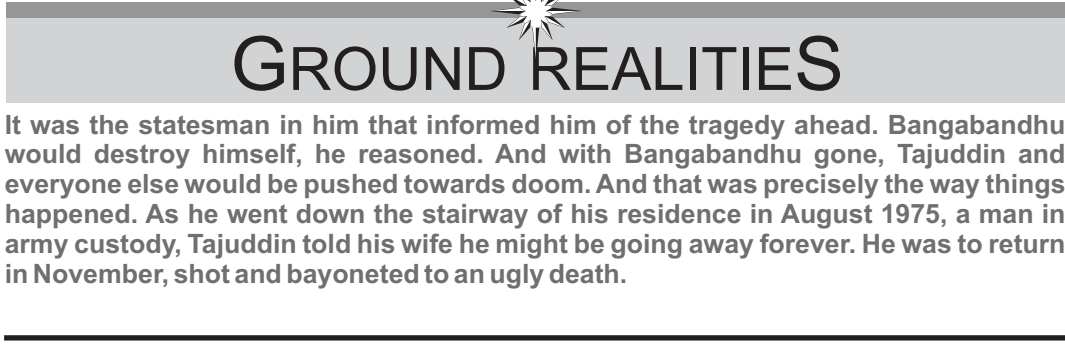
A Tajuddin biopic and our sense of history



TAJUDDIN Ahmad's moment of glory came through the rattle of Pakistani gunfire in March 1971. The saddest part of his brief life was arrived at in the few minutes the men who had only months earlier murdered Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took to pump their bullets into his heart and in the hearts of three of his political fellow travellers in the darkness of incarceration.

He was a mere fifty when he died. Yet in those five brief decades of his life, Tajuddin Ahmad achieved a feat rare in the history of political men. He rose to the peaks of leadership in the brilliance emitted by Bangabandhu and remained there till almost the very end. In between, he managed to pull off what was certainly the most significant success for the Bengali nation, which was the formation of the very first Bengali government in history and the liberation of Bangladesh.

In recent years, a necessary revival of interest in the life and career of Tajuddin Ahmad has served to add the missing links to



Bangladesh's national history. Much of the revival is again a result of the strenuous efforts put into the story of the wartime leader by his daughter Simeen Hussain Rimi. She has been instrumental in having Tajuddin's diaries transcribed in Bangla and published in immaculate form. She has, in effect, been doing work that ought to have been done by historians, indeed by the Awami League of which he remains a paramount historical point of reference.

Beyond Moyeedul Hasan's *Muldhara 71* and Faruk Aziz Khan's *Spring 1971*, not much has emerged to expand on the contributions Tajuddin Ahmad made to history in South Asia, indeed around the globe. Rimi has served as the driving force behind an anthology of essays on Bangladesh's first prime minister and has, additionally, come forth with a moving work of her own on her father. It is a touching tribute to the humble man who has, especially since his assassination in 1975, become an icon for students of history.

Now that Simeen Hussain Rimi has, with the history-driven Tanvir Mokammel, emerged with a biopic

on Tajuddin Ahmad, a certain new intensity has come into the job of retrieving the late leader from the shadows and offering his legacy anew to a nation that might well have been blown off course had he not been around to take charge in the year when we lived dangerously.

Back in March 1971, the risk for Bengalis was double-edged. On the one hand, there was the spectacle of a captive Bangabandhu. On the other, there was no clear sign of anyone else in the Awami League hierarchy, at least up to that point, taking control and reassuring the country that everything was on course, or soon would be.

The call of duty was one that Tajuddin Ahmad heard loud and clear. By the time he found himself on Indian soil, he knew that exile, his and that of everyone else in those times of horror, would need to be purposeful. He lost little time in meeting Indira Gandhi and setting out before her his plans of freeing Bangladesh of its murderous Pakistani presence.

Tajuddin Ahmed: Nishongo Sharothi (Tajuddin Ahmad: An Unsung Hero) is in broad measure

the tale of a man who consciously abjured the limelight. He was clearly not happy at being relegated to the job of finance minister once Bangabandhu took charge as prime minister, but his acute sense of loyalty precluded demonstrating any hint of his displeasure.

Discipline was a lesson he had learned early on in life. He was not inclined to verbosity. He was not an orator. It was his organisational abilities which complemented the inspirational leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These two men, more than all those others in the party, were the reason why Bangladesh needed to be.

On their watch in the mid 1960s were the Six Points formulated. In early March 1971, as Yahya Khan and Z.A. Bhutto resorted to chicanery, it was elemental Mujib-Tajuddin strength that kept them at bay, until they let loose the dogs of war.

And yet, somewhere between cobbling the Mujibnagar government into shape in 1971 and making his way out of government in 1974, Tajuddin became a lonely traveller. Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni and his band of Mujib loyalists took it upon themselves to undermine

Who will replace Chirac?

Royal and Bayrou camps and the French activist groups have already mounted a campaign against Sarkozy on this issue. Sarkozy had earlier earned the wrath of the human rights groups for his tough handling of the rioters in 2005. As a ranking Minister, Sarkozy is also vulnerable to attacks on account of failures of the present government. Furthermore, since he had declared his candidature before others, he has nothing

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

PRESIDENT Jacques Chirac, 74, announced last Sunday over national television that he would not seek a third term at next month's French Presidential elections. He thereby opened up the way for the new generation of leaders to take over France at a crucial time when it is trying to restore its economy, strengthen its social cohesion and enhance its international standing.

The announcement, widely anticipated, meant the end of Chirac's remarkable 45 year political career, which included 12 years of presidency, two terms as prime minister and 18 years as mayor of Paris. His failing health and declining public support finally made Chirac bow out of French politics.

In his television address Chirac did not endorse his party's presidential candidate

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. But in a clear reference to the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, he urged the voters to reject "extremism, racism and anti-Semitism." It may be recalled, Le Pen had stunned the whole world at the last presidential elections in April 2002 when he had decisively defeated the Socialist candidate Prime Minister Lionel Jospin at the first round and had moved to the run off with Chirac.

How will history judge the Chirac presidency? Well, he leaves behind a mixed legacy. Washington will surely remember him for his strong opposition to, and rallying of international support, against the US-led invasion of Iraq. However in view of France's special position in the Middle East, both the countries actively cooperated on Lebanon, Iran and Palestine-Israel issues.

To his countryman, Chirac had personified the image of a regal

French leader, super elegant and debonair, and often temperamental who bluntly criticized his European Union allies. He was fond of good living and a staunch defender of French language and culture. However, his standing gradually dropped, especially during the last two years of his presidency.

Chirac, a strong supporter of new EU constitution, suffered a major political setback last year when the French voters summarily rejected it in a national referendum. His popularity further plummeted when his economic reform package failed to arrest the economic woes, unemployment remained record high, racial discrimination worsened and France's overseas clout diminished.

After riots in the suburbs of Paris in 2005, and labor and student strikes last year, his public support plunged to record lows. Only 2% of French people surveyed expressed their readi-

ness to support him for a third term. In September 2005, he suffered a mini-stroke and in view of strong leadership challenge within his party, maintained a low profile since then.

Major contenders

There are four main candidates in the arena to replace him: the front runner is the Conservative party, Union for a Popular Movement's nominee Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy; the Socialist Party's candidate Segolene Royal-the first lady aspirant for the highest job; the Centrist Party, Union for French Democracy's nominee Francois Bayrou; and the far-right National Front's nominee, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Until recently, Royal had been cruising ahead of Sarkozy and it had appeared that France was going to have the first lady president. But the scenario changed dramatically a couple of months ago when the centrist candidate Bayrou joined the race. In latest polling Sarkozy is leading by 26%, followed by Royal 25%, Bayrou 24% and Le Pen 14%. Of course, all these figures may keep on changing during the coming five weeks.

Since none of the candidates are likely to secure 50% of the votes at the first round on 22 April, the elections will surely go

to the second round on May 8, when the two top candidates will face each other.

The second round will mark the turning point in this race. If its Sarkozy and Royal, then the former is expected to beat the latter in the second round by a comfortable margin as a good chunk of centrist votes could go to him. Furthermore, the leftist camp has been deeply divided between the "mainstream" left which accepts the market economy, represented by the French Socialist party, and some leftist groups which question or reject the market economy.

If Bayrou and Sarkozy move to the second round, then the centrist and the left wing voters might get together to defeat Sarkozy. In 2002 there was a similar situation when the centrist, socialist and conservatives got behind Chirac and defeated ultra-right Le Pen by a landslide at the second round.

Bayrou, who has always been a centrist politician, with a definite lean to the right, has refurbished his image in such a manner that voters find very little difference between his program and Royal's. Given this scenario, it should be in Sarkozy's interest that his hitherto arch rival Royal moves to the second round.

This third option, a Sarkozy-

the Nation. Tajuddin Ahmed was as good as his word. He left quietly. Between that low point in his life and the end of life itself, he would lapse into silence. The assault on pluralist democracy, through the rise of the one-party Baksal system of government in January 1975, was an appalling circumstance for him.

It was the statesman in him that informed him of the tragedy ahead. Bangabandhu would destroy himself, he reasoned. And with Bangabandhu gone, Tajuddin and everyone else would be pushed towards doom. And that was precisely the way things happened. As he went down the stairway of his residence in August 1975, a man in army custody, Tajuddin told his wife he might be going away forever. He was to return in November, shot and bayoneted to an ugly death.

An Unsung Hero recaptures the quiet legend of the man that was Tajuddin Ahmad. It is a warning that airbrushing him, or individuals like him, out of history is inevitably fraught with danger. Tajuddin was the one man who led the nation, through danger, to freedom. But danger lurked once again when he and Bangabandhu fell out in 1974. It assumed a darker, sinister shape in the nocturnal hours of November 3, 1975.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

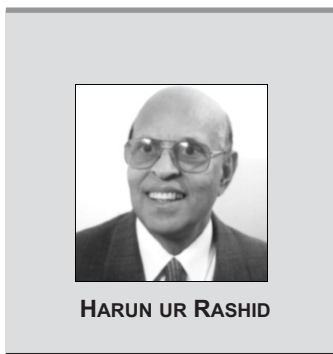
Royal runoff, is the least likely but it is possible only if Sarkozy support base shrinks dramatically. Sarkozy is aware of this possibility, and he has been wooing the far-right supporters, by promising the creation of a separate "immigration and national identity ministry" basically to stop immigration from their African colonies.

Royal and Bayrou camps and the French activist groups have already mounted a campaign against Sarkozy on this issue. Sarkozy had earlier earned the wrath of the human rights groups for his tough handling of the rioters in 2005. As a ranking Minister, Sarkozy is also vulnerable to attacks on account of failures of the present government. Furthermore, since he had declared his candidature before others, he has nothing new to offer.

The race is thus just heating up and no candidate has so far emerged as a clear winner. The French presidential elections have always defied predictions of political pundits and we should "expect the unexpected."

Syed Muazem Ali, a former Foreign Secretary, served as Bangladesh Ambassador to France from 1998-2001.

A few thoughts on the Saarc summit 2007



THE 14th Saarc summit will be in New Delhi on 3-4 April. The first question arises is why 14th and not 22nd summit? The Saarc charter stipulates that every year there would be a summit since the first one took place in 1985 in Dhaka. It is simply because the member-countries could not even agree in holding summit meetings each year in certain countries because of political reasons. What does it demonstrate? It demonstrates that member-nations have different vision and approach to Saarc and do not consider Saarc as a serious regional collaborative forum. Saarc's weakness largely rests on the divergent attitude of member-states.



Why is Saarc limping?

In explaining the weakness of Saarc, it is appropriate to quote the following in part what former India's foreign secretary stated on February 14, 2005 in New Delhi at the India International Centre:

"The fact is that Saarc is still largely a consultative body, which has shied away from undertaking even a single collaborative project in 20 years of existence. In fact, there is deep resistance to doing anything that could be collaborative. On the other hand, some members of Saarc actively seek association with countries outside the region or with regional and international organizations, in a barely disguised effort to counter-balance India with the association or to project Saarc as some kind of

a regional dispute settlement mechanism."

The above statement reveals some of the reasons why Saarc has been limping on its path to achieve its stated goal while Asean in South East Asia, is gaining strength to strength every year. Some of the core reasons for Saarc's inability to do anything collaborative in key areas include lack of trust and confidence among member-nations.

The on-going strained Indo-Pakistan relations have adverse impact on Saarc. Pakistan appears to be determined that unless the Kashmir dispute is resolved, no serious cooperation in economic or social areas is possible with India.

On the other hand, India's size within the Saarc countries is asymmetrical and gives the impression

of India's dominance over other member-countries. There is a sense that India takes other smaller countries for granted and lacks consideration of their difficulties.

As India is an emerging a global power, its policies do not appear to inspire or instill confidence among member-countries because many of its policies are often targeted for its national interest outside the region.

New Delhi Summit -- Let there be a new beginning

Let the legacy of history affecting relations among member countries be put into back burner. Let not the political relations act as a barrier to economic cooperation.

Despite their uneasy political relationship, if India and China, or China and Taiwan, or China and

the US, can expand its economic relations in terms of trade, communication and investment, why are not the leaders of Saarc prepared to embark on a new course of action to revitalize Saarc?

It is good to note that on March 23 India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, ahead of the Saarc's summit, stated that his country desired to see its neighbours feel secure and confident that in New Delhi, "they have a well wisher."

The statement provides a friendly and reassuring environment to hold the summit in New Delhi. In addition, in recent years, the overall relationship among nations in South Asia has remained much more constructive than before.

The key element should be the understanding of the needs of neighbours, strengthening the ties among them, and making much more effort in consolidating a regional identity.

In Saarc countries, the number one issue is poverty alleviation of million of people. The central message for Saarc leaders is that development must be people-oriented. It calls for not only for better economic performance but also for action to spread the bene-

fits of economic growth more widely among people.

Saarc countries must make greater use of collective resources to move forward, keeping pace with Asean countries. At the summit, many political observers suggest the leaders must consider and decide some concrete steps on the following priority matters:

- Regional food bank.
- South Asian energy grid.
- Transit facilities to third countries & enhanced communication facilities.
- Management and utilization of water resources of common rivers.
- Pooling of natural resources of all member-nations for joint or multi-national projects.

The summit must be a decisive one. It is of no use to discuss from A-Z issues concerning South Asia without any decision.

Saarc leaders must realize that cooperation is a goal oriented action wherein not only goal but also certain resources are shared together by member-nations. One needs to look at aggregate gains if concessions are exchanged across sectors, and not limited to one sector only. It is seldom perceived to have equal gains in cooperation in one sector.

The old mind-set of sharing national resources with other is often taken as a loss of sovereignty or against national interest. This perception has to be dismantled when the time demands a new form of cooperation, sacrifice and contribution from each of the member-nations.

New global trend

South Asia can not be immune to the global trend of economic cooperation. The new era is "global" and not "international." The word "international" regards the country as the basic building block of world affairs so that "international cooperation" means governments working together.

The new global era recognizes that the present world is borderless because of the easy mobility of capital, investment, and industries from one country to another. It is an age of internet and competition, speed, mobility and productivity are the hallmark of the 21st century.

The people of South Asia are industrious, creative and imaginative, and if their talents are pooled together, South Asia can inject a new dynamism in regional cooperation that will have meaningful impact across the world.

It is noted that during the days of

economic globalization, it is necessary for Saarc leaders to ensure that Saarc may catch up speedily with the dynamism of Asean and China.

We hope our Saarc leaders may rise to the occasion and make a new endeavor of cooperation among the countries of South Asia so that poverty among more than 515 million people in the region can be put back into "a museum" and a relic of the past. Let us hope the Summit Declaration does not contain only "motherhood statements" but must contain concrete decisions.

Let this 14th summit in New Delhi usher a new era of hope for the 1.3 billion people of South Asia. Active cooperation among the member-nations will make a major contribution to peace, progress and stability in the region. Let the Saarc leaders not fail their people.

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