

'This is just the first step'

Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a deal on July 27 to construct a 25 km road from Gundum in Cox's Bazar (2 kms inside the border) to Bawlibazar in Myanmar, the estimated Tk 141 crore cost of which will be borne by the Bangladesh government. What benefits will accrue to Bangladesh from financing this project and what is our long-term goal in building this road? There is no one better to answer these questions than Dr. M. Rahmatullah, one-time UN-ESCAP director and now a program director at CPD as well as transport policy advisor in the Transport Sector Management Reform program at the Planning Commission. Dr. Rahmatullah took the time to speak with The Daily Star's Zafar Sobhan earlier this week.

The Daily Star: Let us start at the start. Is there any connection between this road that will be built and the Asian Highway network?

Dr. M. Rahmatullah: At present this link is not a part of the Asian Highway network, but this is just the first step. For the moment it is merely a bilateral route, but it is a route with tremendous potential for Bangladesh. In the first instance it will boost trade and people-to-people interaction between the two countries. More importantly, it will help open up our eastern neighbour to us and help to create stronger ties. This can only be a good thing for Bangladesh.

Why would we want better relations with a country that is an international pariah?

The main thing is that Myanmar is very keen to have better relations with Bangladesh. In fact, they have made offers for Bangladeshis to invest and buy land in Myanmar on very easy terms. They have the opposite problem from us. Lots of land but very few people. So this could be a very advantageous possibility for Bangladesh. Of course, they have internal problems, but this does not mean that we can ignore them.

Is part of the attraction that Myanmar lies on the route to Kunming in China?

Exactly. If we wish to open up a direct road link to China -- and also Thailand -- then we must do it through Myanmar.

Is there interest in Myanmar and in China to develop this road link further, all the way to China?

Very much so. Under the Kunming Initiative in 1999, the BCIM countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) have been promoting the idea of greater sub-regional cooperation in trade, transport, and tourism. At the 7th BCIM Forum (as the Kunming Initiative is now known), held in Dhaka four months ago, the representatives from Kunming expressed great interest in developing a road link between Kunming and Chittagong through Myanmar.

How far away are we from the development of such a road link?

The distance between Kunming and Chittagong is 2,380 km. Roughly 1,700 km of good quality road between the two points already exists. Basically, it is only about 680 km of road -- in Myanmar -- that needs to be upgraded to a two-lane road of international quality for the

entire route to be of international standard.

How long would this take to build?

Realistically, it would not be less than three to four years, minimum. Myanmar would require a great deal of help and financial assistance from China to build the road. Nevertheless, as of now Myanmar is also on board with the project, when earlier there was not much interest from them.

Why is China so interested in this road link?

Kunming is in south-western China, far away from China's ports on the east coast. This direct road, when developed, could provide easy access for Kunming -- and Myanmar for that matter -- to Chittagong port as well as the deep sea port that is being developed at Sonadia Island near Cox's Bazar. And it would, of course, also provide a direct road link the other way, from Bangladesh to China, as well.

How important is this road link for the development of a deep sea

port at Sonadia?

It is vitally important. Bangladesh traffic alone is not enough to justify the expense of building a deep sea port. To make it viable, we must service the hinterland, this means not only China and Myanmar, but also Nepal, Bhutan, and the north-eastern states of India. This will be a win-win situation for all countries concerned. All of these countries desperately need access to a deep sea port, and we need their business to make the project viable.

But seeing as a deep sea port will take decades to develop, what is the immediate benefit?

Actually, all these countries can benefit from greater access to Chittagong port as well. Chittagong port's carrying capacity can also be increased to accommodate the expanded trade. What we need is a sub-regional approach, encompassing the neighbouring hinterland all the way to Kunming and Nepal and Bhutan. Chittagong can then emerge as the transport hub for the entire sub-region. The benefits to the Bangladesh economy

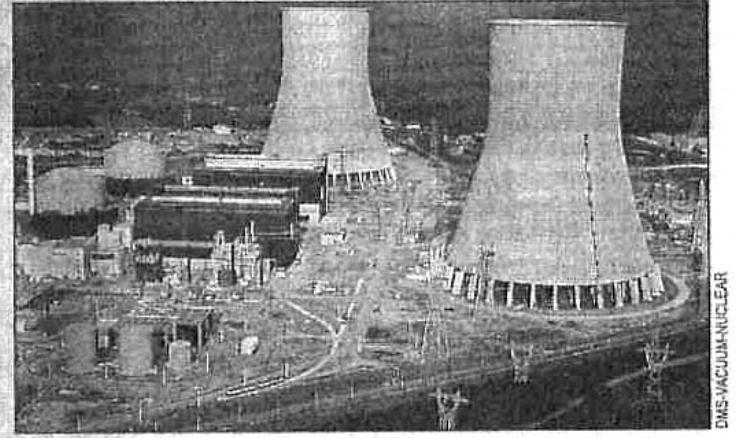


would be incalculable.

This would require that we enter into some kind of arrangement with India as well, to allow transit through India from Nepal and Bhutan?

India also wants transit or transhipment rights through Bangladesh. The solution is a sub-regional solution. Indian transit/transhipment rights in return for Nepali and Bhutanese transit/transhipment rights through India. It would be win-win for all the countries. India has never accepted a sub-regional solution in the past, but may now be willing to do so, as this would facilitate passage from Kunming to Kolkata.

International Atomic Energy Agency turns 50



DINESH CHOWDHURY/IEA

MAINUDDIN AHMED

AFTER the catastrophic display of the might of atom bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945, the people of the world were horrified. Intense diplomatic activities were undertaken by the international community to find out ways to prevent recurrence of such a human tragedy.

The might of atomic power was proved; its beneficial use should be explored for the benefit of mankind. The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) genesis was US president Eisenhower's "Atom for Peace" address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on October 8, 1953. His ideas for the beneficial applications of atomic power for human development helped to shape the IAEA statute and accelerated its birth.

The IAEA statute was approved by the Conference on the Statute of the IAEA, held at the United Nations Headquarters, New York, in October 1957; it entered into force on July 29, 1957. Thus, the International Atomic Energy Agency, popularly known as the

nuclear watch-dog of the UN, headquartered in Vienna, Austria, was established as the world's centre of nuclear cooperation in the inter-governmental "atom for peace" organisation within the UN system.

The IAEA contributes to global peace, development, and security, in essential ways -- helping to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and fostering safe, secure, and peaceful uses of beneficial nuclear technologies for human development.

As per the statute, IAEA, in short, has the following functions with respect to the benefit of the developing countries, including Bangladesh:

- To encourage and assist research on, and development and practical application of, atomic energy for peaceful use throughout the world; and to perform any operation or service useful in research on, or development or practical application of, atomic energy for peaceful purposes.
- To make provision, in accordance with the statute, for materials, services, equipment, and facilities, to meet

the needs of research on, and development and practical application of, atomic energy for peaceful purposes, including the production of electric power, with due consideration for the needs of the under-developed areas of the world.

- To foster the exchange of scientific and technical information on peaceful uses of atomic energy.

• To encourage the exchange of training of scientists and experts in the field of peaceful uses of atomic energy.

• To establish and administer safeguards designed to ensure that special fissionable and other materials, services, equipment, facilities, and information made available by the Agency, or at its request or under its supervision or control, are not used in such a way as to further any military purpose; and to apply safeguards, at the request of the parties, to any bilateral or multilateral arrangement, or at the request of a state, to any of that state's activities in the field of atomic energy.

• To establish or adopt, in consultation and, where appropriate, in collaboration with the competent organs of the United Nations and the specialised agencies concerned, standards of safety for protection of health and property.

• To acquire or establish any facilities, plant, and equipment useful in carrying out its authorised functions, whenever the facilities, plant, and equipment otherwise available to it in the area concerned are inadequate or available only

on terms it deems unsatisfactory.

Capacity building in basic science and technology is a pre-

requisite for helping developing countries address many basic needs -- improving access to food, water, energy, healthcare, housing and education. The IAEA is providing assistance to member states in manpower development in all these fields, including Bangladesh.

Poverty is a curse for humanity, that brings a deep sense of injustice, anger, and humiliation. Forty percent of humanity lives on less than two dollars a day; 850 million go to bed hungry each night. World governments spend roughly \$100 million on foreign aid, whereas more than \$1 trillion is spent in weapons of war.

Food security is the most important factor in poverty elimination, but has been ignored by most of the rich countries. The IAEA is assisting its member states in controlling post-harvest food losses, developing enhanced crop varieties, effective pest control measures, increasing soil fertility, and better soil and water management.

The Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) and Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture (BINA) in Mymensingh receive support in the form of equipment, training, and expert services through the regional, international, and country programmes under the technical assistance of the IAEA.

In addition, IAEA supports research in the institutions in developing member states directly, and through its laboratories in Vienna and Seibersdorf, Austria, the Marine Environment Laboratory in Monaco, and Abdus Salam Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, Italy.

Non-destructive testing

many occasions for the support of the agency.

IAEA has always reacted positively to the propositions of Bangladesh. It did so recently when Bangladesh was planning to establish a 600 MW in Rooppur. In brief, these are not all but some of the projects assisted by the Agency.

Bangladesh has developed trained manpower and infrastructure through the assistance of the IAEA in nuclear chemistry, nuclear physics, radiation biology, computer science, electronics, nuclear engineering and technology, survey of nuclear minerals and exploitation of heavy minerals, and nuclear medicine and nuclear agriculture, through the technical and financial support of the agency.

Nuclear science and technology was introduced in the then East Pakistan after the commissioning of the Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka (AECD) in 1964. Since then, the country has been receiving unhindered support from the Agency. After independence, Bangladesh became a member of the Agency in 1972.

The research and development of BAEC increased after the establishment of the Atomic Energy Research Establishment in Savar. Support in training, equipment and experts, the maintenance and operation of major facilities such as the 3 MeV Triga research reactor and gamma irradiation facilities, were also provided by the Agency.

Although the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant was approved by the then Pakistan government in 1964, it never saw the light of day. Renewed interest has been shown, and powerful delegations have been sent to Vienna on

proper action had been taken soon after the independence from Pakistan, as many of our nuclear scientists had to move other places considering the lack of opportunity in the country. With the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission in India, nuclear science flourished along with other higher science and technology like electronics and space science.

Everyone knows the position of India in science and technology. In the same way, science in Pakistan developed significantly. Timely intervention would have developed our science as well. Many of our nuclear scientists and technologists would not have left the motherland in the mid 1970s.

As the world's demand for energy is increasing day by day, and fossil fuel is not only degrading the environment but depleting fast, nuclear energy appears to be a competitive and commercial source of alternative energy. As a necessity, and also because the Chernobyl accident is no more haunting the developed countries, there is a renewed interest in nuclear power in European countries and the US, which had declared a moratorium in nuclear power in the past.

It is anticipated that IAEA's role as nuclear watchdog will be enhanced in course of time. We have to rethink our position in nuclear science and take appropriate planning in building infrastructures, including trained manpower, so that we do not lag far behind in practical application of nuclear energy.

There was a recent dialogue (CPD and UNCTAD) on the Bangladesh position in science and technology that contradicts my above statement. Even among the least developing nations our position is at the lower order as reported in the dialogue. It might be true in technology transfer.

It would not have happened if

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Still BFFs



a joint press conference on Monday.

"We had a good, relaxed, meaningful discussion," Bush said, turning to Blair. "I'm pleased you're here and I'm pleased to report that this relationship will be a constructive strategic relationship for the good of our peoples." Blair echoed the US president's warm words: "I think we're both agreed that all challenges can best be met when, together, the United Kingdom and the United States work in a partnership that I believe will strengthen in the years to come."

Brown's task at his first summit with Bush was particularly tricky. (They had met once before, in passing at the White House, earlier this year.) He succeeded a prime minister whose too-close-familiar relationship with Bush damaged him politically at home, as postwar Iraq deteriorated.

In Brown's first weeks in office, as his stock soared at home, Brown benefited enormously from the "I'm not Tony" factor -- escaping being accused of being Bush's poodle simply by not being Blair. Indeed, by comparison, he seemed, well, a British bulldog.

This worked wonders at home, where so many people deplored Blair's seeming servility to Bush's

interests. In Washington, however, questions remained about Brown: would he stay the course in the Roosevelt-Churchill, Reagan-Thatcher, Bush-Blair tradition? Or would he jump ship? The answer was never really in doubt among those who knew Brown well. But that wasn't enough to stop the questions.

It didn't help that mixed signals emanated from Brown's government. A protégé of Brown's, his brand-new Secretary of State for International Development, Douglas Alexander, gave a speech in Washington in which he praised the effectiveness of "multilateral, not unilateral" action in solving global problems.

Another member of Brown's new government, Mark Malloch Brown, the former No. 2 at the United Nations, whom Brown named as a Foreign Office minister, gave an interview in which he pointedly said that the US and the UK were not "joined at the hip."

Perhaps because the Bush-Blair bond had proven so incendiary, the British press was quick to jump on these signs -- however slight or even misinterpreted -- as an indication of a chill in relations between Downing Street and the White House. Thus, much

past, so we will continue to work closely together as friends to tackle the great global challenges of the future."

Brown reiterated his belief in the strength of the special relationship again in the hours ahead of his meeting with Bush. What was interesting about Brown's solidarity exercise was that it highlighted differences in the way Brown saw the US-UK relationship, as opposed to the way Blair did. If only as an accident of terrible timing, Blair saw the US and the UK fused together in Downing Street as well. At one point, Brown ordered his chief of staff, Tom Scholar, to write a letter to all cabinet ministers emphasizing the importance of the transatlantic relationship.

But Brown didn't leave it there. In the run-up to his summit with Bush, Brown made doubly sure to set the record straight. The day before the meeting he issued a statement: "It is in the British national interest that the relationship with the United States is our single most important bilateral relationship."

He went on to say: "We know that we cannot solve any of the world's problems without the active engagement of the US. And just as Britain and America have always stood side by side in tackling great global challenges of the

message, is this: it has fallen to Britain to be at America's side."

Brown is enjoying a political honeymoon right now, but he's bound to face tougher choices and challenges down the road. British troop numbers in Iraq have been reduced to about 5,500, from a high of 10,000 at the time of the 2003 invasion.

Most Britons assume that the numbers will continue to come down over the next year, but Brown may face US opposition if the Iraq Army is not fully able to maintain security in southern Iraq, where British troops are concentrated. Brown has been placing a special emphasis on Afghanistan in recent days -- perhaps indicating that as Britain reduces its role in Iraq, it will increase its presence in Afghanistan.

Iran could prove to be another test. British diplomats remain fairly confident at this stage that the United States will not take military action against Iran's nuclear buildup in the waning months of the Bush administration. But they do not rule it out, and close observers of Brown wonder just how he would act if Washington used force against Iran.

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STRYKER MC GUIRE

WHEN the biggest question about a summit is sartorial -- how will the new British prime minister dress? -- you can bet the meeting will be a success. And so it was when Gordon Brown had his first encounter with President George W. Bush on Sunday in the "business casual" confines of Camp David.

Anyone expecting an explosion of disagreement between the two leaders on matters of sub-

stance would have been disappointed. True, it was not a hot date à la Bush and Tony Blair, Brown's predecessor. But equally true, it accomplished what both parties in the new US-UK marriage wanted: a fresh start marked by mutual respect and admiration.

The dress issue was easily resolved. Brown has seldom been spotted in anything but a dark suit and tie, and his visit to Camp David was no exception. Bush has been known to greet guests in casual slacks and an Air Force

bomber jacket.