

Working together against terrorism

Greater understanding of Bangladesh's effort needed

THE just concluded talks between the home secretaries of Bangladesh and India have focused on several bi-lateral issues with the main thrust on terrorism. It is only appropriate that it be so.

The agreement to have necessary arrangements in place that would allow exchange of intelligence between the two sides including facilitating sharing of current and actionable intelligence between the two border forces, one hopes, would be implemented without delay, because there is an urgent need to join hands in tackling the scourge of terrorism to which Bangladesh has been so painfully exposed in the last two years.

The idea of reviving the joint working group (JWG) of the home ministry is a good idea but we would like to see the JWG meet regularly to address the contentious issues, including border management. This has remained a touchy matter between the two countries, particularly with so many unarmed Bangladeshi citizens falling victim to BSF firing in the last one year, although reportedly, the situation has improved in recent months.

The expressed commitment not to allow each other's territory to be used by the miscreants or by the anti-state elements for subversive activities must be followed up with concrete actions. We have no doubt that harbouring Indian miscreants is not and cannot be a policy that the Bangladeshi government pursues, since it has absolutely nothing to gain from such a policy, and that is what our big neighbour must understand. We have expressed our firm commitment to stamp out terrorism and not to allow our territory to be used against our neighbour, but if anything further needs to be done on ground to allay India's apprehensions Bangladesh should have no hesitation in doing whatever is appropriate in that regard. By the same token we would like to see the end of the blitz that Bangladesh is subjected to from time to time by the Indian media painting it as 'hotbed of terrorists' and 'Talibani' country.

There has been a concord of view particularly on the border management issue, which once put in operation will help to make the borders more manageable and certainly more peaceful. Both countries must appreciate the uniqueness of the border and approach its management problems more humanely, something that depends largely on cooperation of the border forces.

What has been articulated on paper must be seen through on the ground and the process should start without delay.

Obama's threat to strike Pakistan

US politicians must have better grasp of issues

PAKISTANI Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri is fully justified in expressing his and his government's sense of outrage at a recent comment by a US politician. Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama stated the other day that if he won the White House he would not hesitate to order unilateral military strikes against terrorist targets inside Pakistan. Mr. Obama's comments are only the latest in a line from Washington, where powerful men have clearly opined that the American military could go into action against Taliban and al-Qaeda elements inside Pakistan in a bid to finish them off or smoke them out. Clearly, the American point of view has been dictated by the fact that Pakistan's own military and intelligence services have to date been unable to rein in the terrorists in. American frustration is therefore pretty much understandable, but not acceptable. Moreover, when Obama is willing to negotiate with leaders of states the US has reservations about, it makes little sense why he must treat Pakistan with such contempt.

The frustration a state feels over the inability of another to do what must be done can never be an excuse to say or do things that can leave international law turned on its head. Of course there have been violations of Pakistani territorial integrity in recent times by the US military, but to suggest that it can or should be accepted as a normal affair would be morally and politically wrong. Senator Obama, waging an uphill battle to prevent the Democratic nomination for the presidency from going into Senator Hillary Clinton's hands, was without doubt trying to score political points with his threat to strike targets in Pakistan. But it was politics that demonstrated an embarrassingly poor understanding of relations between states and, on a broader level, of the ramifications that might follow an assault by a sovereign state on another. The senator appeared not to be worried that he was speaking of striking targets in a country that remains operational as an independent state. In other words, in his own partisan political interest, he was quite willing to undermine the security of a state whose particular problems he may not even be aware of.

Senator Obama and others like him, in America and elsewhere, will need to demonstrate a better grasp of international affairs. The urge for power must be accompanied by a willingness to be responsible in behaviour. Anything less than that is a sign of immaturity as well as a hint of future danger.

Linking up to Southeast Asia



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

China's foreign minister reiterated on August 1 Beijing's support to Dhaka's proposal for a trilateral road link project connecting Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. The BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) have been promoting the idea of greater sub-regional cooperation in the field of trade and commerce since 1999. The proposed Dhaka-Yangon-Kunming road will allow China to ship crude oil through Chittagong port to eastern China.

have signed agreement is actually restoration of the Arakan road, which linked Chittagong with Akyab until early 1960s.

Myanmar is the only other country, apart from India, to share land border with Bangladesh. Bangladesh has no border problem with Myanmar, as it has with India. The pushing of Rohingyas into Bangladesh is the only problem with Myanmar. The talks made considerable progress on the issue of repatriation of around 25,000 Rohingya refugees.

Although around 8,000 of the refugees were cleared by the Myanmar authorities for repatriation, they are still living in Bangladesh in fear of persecution in their home countries. Rohingya issue can be resolved through bilateral talks.

Myanmar, with an area of 676,577 square kms, is almost five times the size of Bangladesh. On the other hand, its population is only 47 million, which is one-third of Bangladesh's population. The density of population in Myanmar is 70 persons per square kilometre, while it is 861 in Bangladesh. As such, per capita share

of land in Myanmar is 12 times bigger than that in Bangladesh.

Myanmar is considering leasing out at least 50,000 acres of land in its Rakhine state to Bangladeshi private entrepreneurs for contract farming. The land would be leased to produce crops like paddy, onion, maize, soybean, tea, and sugarcane.

According to a proposal, up to 5,000 acres of cultivable, fallow or wasteland is available for plantation crops, 3,000 acres for fruit gardens and 1,000 acres for seasonal crops for contract farming.

Land tax exemption for a period from two to eight years and income tax waiver for a minimum period of three years is also offered to Bangladeshi private entrepreneurs. An expansion of Bangladesh-Myanmar trade would also see a quick agreement on avoidance of double taxation, a draft of which has already been finalised.

Only 12 per cent of total land area is under cultivation in Myanmar and its liberal policy on leasing out lands for setting agro-based industry is indeed attractive.

Myanmar is endowed with various

natural resources, which include gas, limestone, timber and varieties of marine product. Besides recent discovery of 16 TCF proven gas reserves, it has million of tons of limestone deposit in Rakhine and Chin states bordering Bangladesh. Myanmar's bamboo forestry producing 2.2 million tons of bamboo per year, can feed up 25 large paper mills with pulp.

Myanmar's geographical proximity has added much potentiality for setting up joint venture industries for import substitution and also to improve trading opportunities.

Dhaka-Yangon bilateral business relations will provide ample economic benefits to the entrepreneurs from both sides and will strengthen the existing potentials in economic and trade sector.

At present Bangladesh-Myanmar trade is limited only to border trade with both way trade volume standing at an annual \$60 million and a massive trade surplus to Myanmar. The direct road link between the two countries opens up new vistas to boost trade.

The horizon of bilateral cooperation in the economic field can be

expanded to trading of

pharmaceuticals, fertiliser, livestock, consumer goods, minerals, fisheries and tourism.

Dhaka and Yangon have also agreed

to sign a memorandum of understanding for a joint techno-economic feasibility study to build a large hydropower plant in Rakhine state to feed Bangladesh's power hungry national grid. The river Lemro in Rakhine state, which is nearly 100 km from

Chittagong port to eastern China.

Bangladesh has become a member

of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), an agreement originally

moored by five Southeast Asian countries -- Indonesia, Malaysia,

Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand

in 1976. Bangladesh's induction to

TAC will strengthen its "Look East"

policy and will deeper trade relations

with the ASEAN countries.

The deal for direct road link

between Bangladesh and Myanmar is

indeed a landmark development,

paving the way towards better

regional connectivity. Bangladesh's

"Look East"

policy has also received

momentum, as the road link is

considered a major component to

strengthen ties with Southeast Asian

countries, including China. The

greater connectivity will lead to

greater trade and commerce between

the countries of this region and

Bangladesh should have a good grip

on this potentiality.

The signing of the road link deal

also underscores the interim govern-

ment's preference to get the country

connected with Asian Highway,

which the last BNP-led four party

government chose not to sign up to.

The proposed road linking Myanmar

is considered as a sub-regional road

to the Asian Highway, a UN spon-

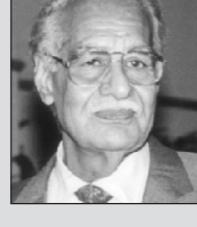
sored road project connecting 32

countries across the Asia-Pacific

region.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Is the press independent?



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

BETWEEN THE LINES

This shallow, unthinking attitude gets reflected even in the news stories and articles that are printed in the papers. Reporters do not always cross-check the information they get. They often write one-sided versions of events, and about people who do not matter -- absolute non-entities. Often, good stories are not followed up properly. Planted stories make the front pages. Even factual information is often incorrect.

know of an influential English daily editor who is in the bad books of the government, but has enjoyed freedom. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, said that the government disliked the liberties taken by the press. Yet, committed to democratic values as he was, he said: "I would have a completely free press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed or regulated press."

Unlike her father, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was easily upset by press criticism. She was the one who clamped censorship, for the first time in free India, when she imposed the emergency from 1975 to 1977.

Today, there is no emergency or censorship. But conformism has taken over the press. It is already too nice, too afraid, and ever ready to leave out. The government, too, sees to it that the press, by and large, does not cross the line, which the establishment has in view.

The modus operandi is generally the pressure exerted on the proprietors. I

Later, the land was de-notified to benefit the chief minister's men. What they bought at Rs 15 lakh to Rs 25 lakh an acre was sold at Rs 10 crore. Sensing that the action against "Eenadu" may boomerang, the chief minister resorted to underhand methods. He had Margadarshi Financers, an outfit connected with "Eenadu," and which accepted deposit from people, raided. The Reserve Bank of India had cleared the company. This did not matter to the chief minister. The Supreme Court stepped in and gave the financers a stay.

When the ruling party slips it knows no bounds. Take the current instance of high-handedness in Kerala. The state CPI (M) is after a Malayalam daily, "Mathrubhumi," and its editor. The paper published a story about the chief minister's men buying at a pittance 376 acres of land belonging to farmers. The government first issued a land acquisition notification for building an outer Ring Road.

This only angered its functionaries, who threatened the editor and the paper from public platforms. The Editors' Guild condemned the harassment meted out to the paper and its editor.

Yet, the party's central politburo did not utter a word of criticism. Of what use is the freedom of expression, which the constitution guarantees, when the establishment exerts pressure on the press? In a free society, the press has a duty to inform the public without fear or favour.

At times, it is an unpleasant job, but it has to perform because a free society is founded on free information. If the press were to publish only government handouts or official statements, there would be no one to pinpoint lapses, deficiencies, mistakes or frauds.

My feeling is that the press, like other institutions, has not regained the vigour and the dedication it reflected before the emergency. Till then, New Delhi would scrupulously avoid any measure, which suggested even remote restrictions on the press.

Rajiv Gandhi's was the last effort to control the press in the name of anti-

defamation bill. There was such a protest throughout India that he had to withdraw the measure.

Yet, the same journalists caved in during the emergency. I recall as many as 103 scribes turning up at the Press Club in New Delhi to condemn censorship, within three days of the imposition of the emergency. But, subsequently, they developed cold feet and literally danced to the tune of V.C. Shukla, the Goebbels of Indira Gandhi. The Pakistani journalists who faced the martial law proved to be of sterner mettle. They bore the punishment of lashes in their struggle to uphold freedom of the press.

After the emergency, the Indian press was at hammer and tongs over the excesses committed by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi, an extra-constitutional authority. This was the catharsis of journalists for their cowardly silence at the time when they should have spoken out.

Yet, nearly every journalist "claimed" to have "sabotaged" the emergency from within as he was a Trojan Horse, not a collaborator. This was when the management began to play a bigger role. It had seen through the courage of papertigers.

The management took direct interest in the editorial side of the paper. What was once a profession changed into business. The Working Journalists' Act, legislated by Nehru to give a permanent tenure to scribes, was substituted by a contract system.

Journalists who had a poor record of standing up to challenges did not have

the courage to oppose the measure.

Today, our print media is suffering a

mad disease, which has played havoc

with newspapers. I will call it the tabloid syndrome. You open any paper in

the morning. The pages are full of

pictures of young models,

supermodels, actors, actresses and

fashion designers -- the names you

have not even heard -- garnished with

"information" on what they love to eat,

what kind of dress they like to wear,

what they do when they relax and such

trivia.

This shallow, unthinking attitude

gets reflected even in the news stories

and articles that are printed in the

papers. Reporters do not always cross-

check the information they get.

They often write one-sided versions

of events, and about people who do not

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good stories are not followed up prop-

erly. Planted stories make the front

pages. Even factual information is often incorrect.

Journalists have turned into politi-

cians, and newspapers into projectors

of a particular point of view. News

columns have come to be editorialised