

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 Bangladesh 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 'Talibanised' 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 have been articulated on paper must be seen through on the ground and the process should start without delay.

Obama's threat to strike Pakistan

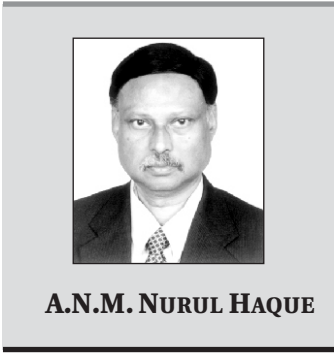
US politicians must have better grasp of issues

PAKISTANI Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood 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 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

SIGNING of an agreement by Dhaka and Yangon on July 27 to construct a 25 km road linking Gundhum in Cox's Bazar and Bolibazar in Rakhine state has marked the beginning of a new era for economic relations between two neighbours, which has been long overdue.

The agreement that followed efforts over the last couple of years opens up the real possibility for Bangladesh to establish road links with Kunming of China on the one side and with Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore on the other. Designated to start at Gundhum in Cox's Bazar, and then run over 23 kms through the Myanmar, the road is envisaged to eventually link up to the Chinese city of Kunming.

Bangladesh was closely linked with Myanmar socially, culturally, religiously, and economically for centuries. Large number of people from greater Chittagong and Noakhali migrated to Myanmar in quest of fortune. But the two countries despite having a common border were distant neighbours since the partition of India. The road link for which the countries

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 Akiyab 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 Bangladesh, is considered most potential for building a 500-600 mw plant.

Bangladesh is at the crossroads in the critical globalised trade game. Bilateral trade with India has only yielded huge deficit for the country with out any chance of being obliterated in near future.

Bangladesh now needs to look more seriously to its "Look East" policy in the context of changing dimensions of regional trade and economic relations. This has in fact been reflected in signing of the road link agreement with Myanmar having possibility of a greater road network between Bangladesh and the South-East Asian countries.

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.

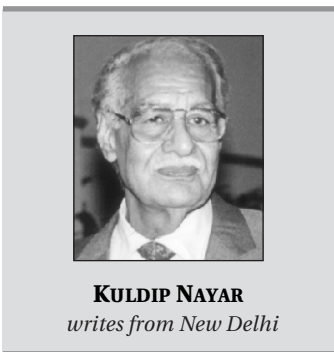
Bangladesh has become a member of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), an agreement originally mooted by five Southeast Asian countries -- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in 1976. Bangladesh's induction to TAC will strengthen its "Look East" policy and will deeper trade 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 government'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 sponsored 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

THE press in India has teased or even irritated 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

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. He criticises the establishment too often to its liking, and carries too many articles which are critical.

The management is under pressure. The BJP-led government of Atal Behari Vajpayee was no better. The residence and the business premises of a weekly's proprietor were raided after it had carried a photograph of "someone" in "certain company." The editor had to meet the high-ups to have the government off his proprietor's back.

The states are worse. They use all methods, including the denial of government advertisements, to force newspapers to fall in line. In some cases, a chief minister makes the paper's defiance a personal issue.

"Eenadu," a leading Telugu daily from Andhra Pradesh, had to suffer in the process. 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.

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 deposits 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 financiers a stay.

When the ruling party slips it knows no bounds. Take the current instance of high-andedness in Kerala. The state CPI (M) is after a Malayalam daily, "Mathrubhumi," and its editor.

The paper published that the party's official organ, "Deshabhimani," had received Rs 2 crore from the two sons of a lottery king facing several criminal charges. At the behest of Prakash Karat, the CPI (M) secretary-general, the state committee decided to return the money.

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 remotely 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 omitted 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 is when the management began to play a bigger role. It had seen through the courage of paper tigers.

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, what they think of love and sex 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 matter -- absolute non-entities. Often, good stories are not followed up properly. Planted stories make the front pages. Even factual information is often incorrect.

Journalists have turned into politicians, and newspapers into projectors of a particular point of view. News columns have come to be editorialised in the name of interpretative reporting. The press, no doubt, has a clout, more than it ever had. It is free as well. But, is it independent?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Bangladesh in post-US hegemonic era



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IN the fall of 2003, President Bill Clinton, in a speech at the Yale University, had put forward a possibility, however distant, of the US no longer remaining the sole superpower in the world, a thesis earlier aired by historian Paul Kennedy in 1987 (The Rise and Fall of Great Powers), in which he argued that the US was suffering from "imperial overstretch," a malady that had afflicted other great powers like Spain, France, and Great Britain in the past.

Bill Clinton pointed out the difference between conservative Republicans who, like Robert Kagan (Power and Weakness), would prefer the US to remain the strongest and the biggest power in the world, or like New

GOING DEEPER

It is, therefore, imperative that, for our own sake and to act as a responsible member of the international community, we adopt democracy responsive to popular will, but firmly based on institutional foundations so that the aberrant has to account for his misdeeds whenever these occur. Bangladesh simply cannot afford to go back to the "business as usual" practiced in the past.

Sovereignists, who look at international law with disdain, and Clintonians who would like to build a world with rules and partnership and habits of behaviour that the people would like to live in and "in which we [the US] are no longer the only military, economic, and political superpower in the world."

President George Bush, surrounded by members of the New American Century with their imperial outlook, never understood this point of view, and was determined that America should continue to have omnipotent power and "bless" the rest of the world with democracy; a mission that Francis Fukuyama (Should Democracy be Promoted or Demoted: Stanley Foundation) thinks should be pursued by placing it "in a broader context of

promoting economic development, reducing poverty, and furthering good governance."

Fukuyama argues that democracy is culturally rooted, and not a universal good; besides, the respect for the principle of sovereignty and the need for sequencing in the introduction of democratic reform do not encourage democracy promotion as desired by the US.

The world is now aware that the Bush administration's drive to put Saddam Hussein to eternal rest has produced an Iraq mired in internecine, sectarian, and suicidal fighting, causing untold death and destruction both to the Iraqis and the coalition forces. The Iraqis' participation in various elec-

tions in 2005 was driven more by the desire to promote Shiite supremacy than to establish liberal democracy.

Now the Bush administration's exit strategy, "to stay the course," is opposed by an increasing number of members of the Congress, and a sizeable number of US nationals who would like their country to be extricated from the Iraqi quagmire.

The result has been a loss of international confidence in the American model of democracy promoted by the Bush administration's uncaring pursuit of war on terror, and has brought about nostalgia for the values propagated by the founding fathers of America, that had protected the free world from the invidious intrusion of

the colonial powers (e.g. Monroe Doctrine) and against the onslaught of communist ideology for most part of the twentieth century. The values encouraged emulation by many countries, albeit with various degrees of imperfection, voluntarily through unfettered expression of the will of the people.

This essay is an attempt to fathom a probable place in a post-unipolar world for a small country like Bangladesh. One school of thought believes that a world without the US hegemonic role would be an old fashioned multi-polar world, stitched together by great powers like post-Napoleonic 19th century Europe, in which Russia and the United Kingdom played the prominent role.

In the 21st century, the binding glue would in all possibility be the US, Russia, China, India and the European Union. "In this kind of world," according to Paul Starobin (National Journal-Beyond Hegemony-Dec 2006) "the principal powers would have their own tacitly accepted spheres of influence. Lesser powers would fall under their sway."

Should that happen, either China, thought as a possible successor to the US as a global hegemony having the

largest GDP (a notion dismissed by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye and President Carter's National Security advisor Zbigniew Brezinski), or India aspiring to be a global power if its growth rate is any indication, would stake their claim for regional leadership.

Professor Bradley Thayer (Missouri State University) holds the view that the emergence of China as a superpower would herald, for the first time in the history of the West, a non-Western power dominating the world far more thoroughly than the Ottomans did. It is believed that a basic principle of the hegemonic system is that the weaker powers tend to go with the strongest power, even if the weaker ones have strong cultural aversion and dislike its value system.

It is possible that Bangladesh, wedded to democratic principles, though corrupted beyond recognition by the immediate past alliance government, would have more similarity with the Indian model than with the Chinese model, not because China is not a friend and does not help Bangladesh (despite the huge trade imbalance between the two countries) but because of the authoritarian political system the

Chinese have goes against our grain.

Additionally, notwithstanding the India-fear factor being dominant in certain quarters in Bangladesh, our shared history and racial commonality would make India more readily acceptable to Bangladesh as a partner in progress. Evidently, such a course in our foreign relations should not be pursued to the exclusion of our relations with others, which, in any case, in this age of globalization is neither possible nor desirable. Besides our trade and economic links with the West is so vast that our survival dictates an open-ended relationship with all countries of the world.

While chalking out our preference we have not yet been able to gauge India's preference to have substantive relations with Bangladesh, notwithstanding friendly remarks made by diplomats, and our total bilateral trade (both formal and informal) with India being a substantial part of our global trade.

The G-8 countries, the Bush administration, and European Union are now courting India, with little qualitative change in her relations with Russia. In that context, a euphoric India may not have sufficient time to attend to relations

with Bangladesh. It is also difficult to understand fully whether India considers us as an extension of the seven sisters infested with insurgency.

Bangladesh is suspected by Delhi of providing shelter and money to the rebels. Since chaos means unpredictability, it is doubtful that India would like to have Bangladesh as an imbalanced country, unable to contain the Islamic extremism that we have experienced in the recent past, and that perhaps is dormant for the time being.

It is, therefore, imperative that, for our own sake and to act as a responsible member of the international community, we adopt democracy responsive to popular will, but firmly based on institutional foundations so that the aberrant has to account for his misdeeds whenever these occur. Bangladesh simply cannot afford to go back to the "business as usual" practiced in the past.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.