

Political party branch offices overseas

Doing the expatriate population more harm than good

It is typical of Bangladeshi expatriates that they often take their home-spun feuding abroad with reckless abandon. They open and operate branches, offices or committees of national political parties in their respective places of residence, thereby dividing expatriate population along party lines.

It is against such background that public opinion has grown in the country for doing away with party branch offices or units abroad. In a reformative ambience that pervaded in the country, the Election Commission (EC) has finalised a proposal for placing a ban on national political parties opening offices overseas. The political parties are opposed to such a move, but we would like to endorse the EC's recommendation for the following reasons:

For all we know, the Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, Thais, Filipinos, Indonesians and others do not indulge in such a luxury and degenerate practice. At best, what they would do is to have community associations serve their collective interest in host countries including practising and propagating their cultural identity and tradition.

Over time the branch offices of political parties have turned out to be the mirror image of the divisive Bangladesh politics abroad. The reactionary politics is taken to such an absurd length that even on the occasion of observing our national day the respective party followers were once seen fighting one another.

The negative impact of this phenomenon are manifold and they far outweigh the plus side, if any. The only advantage one can think of is that they raise funds for the political parties but fund-raising could be done in a plenty of other ways. Putting a ban on operating party offices abroad has been long overdue. For one thing, the divided Bangladeshi community undermines the image of themselves as well as that of the country of origin in the host countries. For another, fragmented in their ranks, they cannot speak cohesively and forcefully for their cultural, educational and other rights.

Let the political parties rise above narrow partisan interest and wake up to the need for modern day politics to accept the EC's proposal in the greater interest of themselves and the nation. If other countries can do without party offices abroad, why can't we?

Keeping the prices down

Monitoring of markets by inspectors imperative

WE have heard for the umpteenth time that the rise in domestic price of essentials is the result of hike in the international markets. But there is more to it.

Market analysts detect unholy manipulation of the internal markets by a network of importers, wholesalers, stockists and retailers, which has resulted in the prices going beyond the purchasing ability of the people. The common motive here is making exorbitant profit by these groups of people. But in their public posturing the wholesalers blame price rise on the retailers and vice versa. The presence of middlemen across the distribution network is a cogent factor that also contributes largely to price hike. This has been going on since the markets across the country began to go berserk in the last one year.

Apparently there is no one around to oversee what kind of prices retailers are charging their customers and whether the prices are abnormally high compared to the prevailing rates in the wholesale outlets.

Many meetings between business leaders and government representatives in last one year have led to no worthwhile solution to the impasse. The only ray of hope now is having the Boro rice coming into the markets in another two weeks. But that is expected to stabilise the price of rice only, leaving other commodities at the mercy of the traders.

We believe the various associations of traders should initiate a mechanism from within themselves to persuade their constituents so that no one can charge abnormal prices to consumers. Display of price charts in shops is a common practice in many parts of the world; therefore this can be introduced in a foolproof way. In this context we wonder why the previous attempts to display such charts failed. We believe regular visits by market inspectors would make a difference at times like this.

Whatever the steps are, traders should be taken into confidence and given the right kind of motivation to keep their profit margin at a tolerable level.

Spectre of global hunger



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

SOARING food prices have emerged as a problem of grave concern not only for Bangladesh alone, but also for many other countries. The World Food Program (WFP), the UN agency in charge of alleviating global hunger, may soon be forced to consider rationing food aid because of rising prices.

Josette Sheeran, the executive director of WFP, while speaking recently to the Financial Times in London said that if WFP donors did not contribute more money, the agency would have to look at "cutting the food rations or even the number of people reached." She told the business daily that the WFP was seeing a new face of hunger affecting a wide range of countries, pointing to Indonesia, Yemen and Mexico in particular.

According to a UN source, 20 African countries are facing severe food crisis. Most of these countries have already spent up to 80% of their national income for importing foodstuff. The WFP launched an extraordinary emer-

BY THE NUMBERS
The spectre of global hunger is affecting a wide range of countries in Asia and Africa. Bangladesh is likely to join the band soon. Global food stocks are at historic lows. China, Japan and South Korea, which are largely self-sufficient, are protecting their rice sectors by imposing steep import tariff or providing heavy subsidies. Countries like India, Myanmar, Brazil, Egypt and Ukraine have chosen to desist from exporting food grains in order to meet their own growing demands.

gency appeal to donor countries recently for at least \$500 million by the end of April to meet global shortfalls of food grains, which includes a \$15 million shortage in emergency food aid to Bangladesh.

Ban Ki-moon, the UNSG, in a recent article titled "The new face of global hunger," says, "The price of basic staples -- wheat, corn, rice -- are at record heights, up 50 percent or more in the last six months. Global food stocks are at historic lows... The effects are widely seen. Food riots have erupted in countries from West Africa to South Asia."

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN has put Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the list of 37 countries facing food crisis and requiring external assistance. In the list released recently, the FAO urged the governments and the international community to take immediate measures to help the poor countries hit hard by food price

increases.

The Global Index of Hunger has given Bangladesh 28.27, India 25.73, Nepal 24.25, Pakistan 21.77 and Sri Lanka 16.63 points. Bangladesh has been placed at 97th position among 119 countries in the index. This reveals that Bangladesh is in the worst position in respect of food security among the Asian countries.

The statistics released by the Bangladesh Bank on March 12 says that rice import has increased by 600% in quantity and 1000% in price in the first eight months of the fiscal year. 1,795 million tons of rice was imported between July and the first week of March, which was 613% more than that of the same period last year. The country had to spend \$ 642 million only for rice import during the time, as against \$55.57 million in the same period in the last fiscal year.

The finance adviser said on March 20 that the present foreign currency reserve that rose to over \$6 billion, was not too big in view

of the increased bills for rice import. Until March 15 of the current fiscal year, total rice import stood at 30 lakh tons, which is six lakh tons higher than the total import of 24 lakh tons in the last fiscal year.

The price spiral of rice has triggered a supply and demand crunch that is hurting some of the Asia's most needy countries including Bangladesh, forcing them to spend more on rice import. The Philippines produced 6.44 million tons of rice in 2007, and is expected to import two million tons in 2008. Production of rice in Indonesia was 57 million tons in 2007, and it imported 1.5 million tons.

Bangladesh imports rice from India, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, but that is becoming increasingly restricted. India finds rich buyers in the Middle East for its Basmati rice and avoids the East Asian countries. India, after vigorous persuasion, earmarked five lakh tons of rice for export to Bangladesh. But it

increased the price to \$505 from \$425 per ton.

Vietnam has set the rice price at \$460 per ton, which is a rise of more than 50% from a year ago. Much of the exportable rice of Vietnam is destined for the Philippines, and President Gloria Arroyo asked Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung last month to guarantee stable supply. Thailand is now selling its rice for more than \$500 a ton, which was only \$325 a year ago.

Bangladesh produced 100.46 lakh tons of both rice and wheat in 1971-72. It attained self-sufficiency in food in 1999-2000, when the country's gross production in rice and wheat reached 249 lakh tons. Rice, the main staple food, provides 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake, while only 7% comes from other cereals.

According to a government calculation, the country needs 255 lakh tons in 2007-08 for the population of 140 million, taking 495.04 grams per capita and per day intake of food grains. The government has set the food production target at 254 lakh tons for this fiscal year. The country will need to import nearly 3.5 million tons food grains in 2008, following a big output shortfall due to floods and cyclone.

Food grain production reached nearly 268 lakh tons in 2000-2001, which was the country's highest food production since independence. But the increasing trend of food production could not be

sustained, and it decreased to 259 lakh tons in 2001-02.

The spectre of global hunger is affecting a wide range of countries in Asia and Africa. Bangladesh is likely to join the band soon. Global food stocks are at historic lows. China, Japan and South Korea, which are largely self-sufficient, are protecting their rice sectors by imposing steep import tariff or providing heavy subsidies.

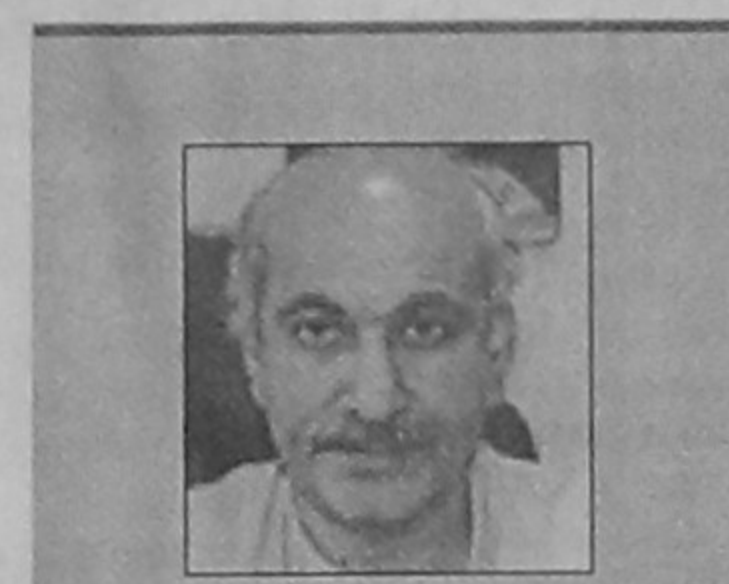
Countries like India, Myanmar, Brazil, Egypt and Ukraine have chosen to desist from exporting food grains in order to meet their own growing demands. The Indian agriculture minister has said that his country would become one of the largest importers of food grains by 2011.

Bangladesh has no other way but to go all-out for increasing food production at optimum level to evade the threat of global hunger. The farmers must be motivated enough to keep themselves fully engaged in food production, and the government agencies must be sincere in supporting them with stable supplies of seeds, credit, fertiliser, and power for irrigation.

The recently formed core committee, headed by the chief adviser, should also ensure timely availability of all basic inputs to farmers at a fair price to reduce the high cost of production.

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A real chance in Kashmir



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT do Pervaz Musharraf, Asif Zardari, Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan, Altaf Hussain (chief of the MQM), Asfandyar Wali Khan (leader of the Awami National Party of the North West Frontier Province, soon to be renamed Pakhtunkhwa) and influential opinion-makers in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad have in common?

They have all come to a calculated conclusion: that the Indo-Pak impasse over Kashmir is now seriously detrimental to the economic and strategic health of Pakistan; that Pakistan has been held hostage to the Kashmir dispute and it is time to shake off the fetters of history and move on.

These fetters have imprisoned travel and trade between neighbours and placed an expensive and unnecessary, if not quite unbearable, tension on the Pakistani defence forces. They understand what common sense tells us: that free travel and mutually beneficial trade between India and Pakistan could transform the subcontinent, if not into a mod-

BYLINE
I have long held the slightly heretical view that India and Pakistan will have to work as allies in troubled Afghanistan, but for that to happen we have to find an alignment of self-interest and identify a common enemy. A resolution of the Kashmir dispute is the first, and urgent, requirement to meet a much larger challenge.

ern Europe then at least into the Europe of circa 1955.

They may not admit it publicly, but it is likely that the leaders of the Hurriyat in the Kashmir valley accept this privately. President Musharraf is on record as saying that borders do not have to change in any future accord. Zardari has told Karan Thapar in a television interview that Pakistan can no longer be held hostage on Kashmir to the detriment of its economy and defence.

Columnists in influential newspapers like Dawn have written that Pakistan needs to break out of this suffocating straitjacket and get on with life. India and Pakistan have invested too much and too long in death.

This is not the view merely of an enlightened elite. The street is also tired of a hostility that promises nothing. War may have some meaning, however expensive and disastrous it might be, if there is a possibility of victory. But you do not have to be a strategic egghead to realise that Pakistan cannot capture territory in Kashmir from India.

Since India is content with the status quo, it has no desire for a single square inch of "Azad Kashmir." What then is the point of

confrontation?

The change on the street is reflected in an interesting shift of perceptions. 2007 was a traumatic year for Pakistan; the Afghan war had spilled over into the west of the country; the people were livid with Musharraf; and the turmoil peaked with the terrible assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

But not once in the whole chain of lurching, searing events was India blamed for instigating any trouble. India and Kashmir were totally absent from the rhetoric of the Pakistan elections, for the first time in the nation's electoral history.

That old idiom has worn so thin that it can't be seen anymore. The people know their problems begin at home and must be addressed there. A self-declared Arab friend of Pakistan was telling me, with despondent acerbity, that the national slogan of Pakistan has changed: "They used to say 'Pakistan Zindabad!' Now they say, 'Pakistan se zinda bha!'"

Terrorism is an internal threat, and far worse than any external threat could ever be, for the enemy within is always much more dangerous than the enemy

without. The solution is not with us yet, but it would be fair to suggest that the Kashmir dispute is over.

The mutually-acceptable future border will be the present border: the line where the two armies ceased fire on the first of January 1949, and which they have guarded with such zealous ferocity for six decades. Six decades add up to two generations of lost sisters, forgotten cousins, and a relentless hostility that has aborted the potential of two nations.

Everyone has heard the question: why do Indians and Pakistanis get on so well in a third country, and how come they do so well in a foreign habitat? The answer was always simple: because they were not living in India and Pakistan.

Over the last decade India has begun to make such jokes irrelevant, but that is nothing compared to what it could achieve in harmony with a natural economic partner like Pakistan. It would vitalise Saar, and set the subcontinent, which still has the poorest parts of the world on its landscape, on the long route towards self-respect.

Is this column too optimistic?

Perhaps. After six decades of pessimism perhaps we should be permitted an hour of optimism. The dynamic of power has changed in Islamabad. While the military-civilian partnership could be fraught with tension in domestic affairs, it is a good fit for India policy.

Zardari and Nawaz Sharif are talking the language initiated by Musharraf. (Now that Pakistan has also got a Dr. Manmohan Singh as prime minister, it is more important to find out Zardari says.)

But, of course, the moment has to be propitious on both sides. One of the minor tragedies of the Indo-Pak equation is that when one side is ready the other is busy, or seems to be busy; it is easy to manufacture an excuse when you do not want to do anything. However, India is heading into its election season just after Pakistan has cleared its calendar. No one readily fools around with either war or peace on the eve of an election, unless you have become either careless or desperate.

Delhi lost a great opportunity when Musharraf was riding high; but even if high drama is not possible, there can be forward movement on trade and travel. But whoever forms the government in Delhi after the next election cannot afford to waste time, because by then time might be running out in Islamabad.

Should those Kashmiris who challenged India on the strength of support from Pakistan feel betrayed or relieved by this swivel? Practical sense suggests relief, because they were caught in a deathly squeeze between

quarrelling elephants. The idea of an independent Kashmir was always a lemon; neither India nor Pakistan would have permitted such a state on such a sensitive geopolitical flank.

Punjab and Bengal were divided in 1947; Kashmir was divided in 1949. Those facts are unlikely to alter. The fate of Kashmir may be settled, but not the fate of Kashmiris. Peace between India and Pakistan will give them *de facto* if not *de jure* unity, because it will restore free movement of people and goods across the ceasefire line. That is not a small gain in a life that is finite.

The danger of ignoring this moment should be obvious. If peace cannot be found when it is waiting patiently in the drawing room, then we are creating an opportunity for some future warmonger. The continued American presence in Afghanistan, the repeated American incursions into Pak territory, and the resurrection of Taliban are creating tensions that are making Pakistan's army vulnerable to internal pressures. Instability breeds unpredictable events.

I have long held the slightly heretical view that India and Pakistan will have to work as allies in troubled Afghanistan, but for that to happen we have to find an alignment of self-interest and identify a common enemy. A resolution of the Kashmir dispute is the first, and urgent, requirement to meet a much larger challenge.

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A moment of truth for Serbia

In this defining moment the West must somehow convey to the Serbian people how much is at stake, and the danger of making the wrong choice. The West must circumvent Belgrade's nationalist politicians and make clear to the Serbian people that there is another path, another future for them as a real democracy.

MORTON ABRAMOWITZ

IT is rare for a small country to take on the European Union and the United States. But that is precisely what Serbia is doing. With the support of extreme nationalist politicians, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has made Kosovo the defining issue of today's Serbia, and is trying to reverse the independence of Kosovo and reassert Serbian control.

Over the last month the Kostunica-led government has carried on an enormous diplomatic effort to prevent other states from recognising Kosovo's independence, and they are leaning on other nations to revoke their recognition.

Kostunica has also told Kosovo Serbs to cease cooperation with the new government and the EU mission. Worse still: he is trying to cement Serbian control over the

northern portion of Kosovo -- in effect partitioning Kosovo, without recognising the independence of the remainder. In so doing, the nationalist Serbian leadership has committed its country to confrontation with both Kosovo and the EU mission that guides and oversees it.

In rejecting Kosovo's independence, Serbia's leaders are railing against the tide of history. Kosovo's independence ended a long, rocky history of Serbian rule, which exploded in 1999 when Serbian forces expelled 800,000 members of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority. Serbian forces were driven out of Kosovo by a sustained Nato bombardment.

Many Serbs, perhaps most, reluctantly and painfully, recognised that Kosovo was no longer part of their country. After the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, the new Serbian leader, Zoran Djindjic, recognised that Kosovo was a thorny domestic

political problem, but that the province's status had to be resolved once and for all if Serbia were to be transformed. Unfortunately, Djindjic was assassinated in 2003 by virulent Serbian nationalists before he could make a move on the Kosovo issue.

Taking his place was Kostunica, who had also participated in efforts to overthrow Milosevic. He was greeted by American and European leaders as a saviour, a democrat dedicated to the law who would guide Serbia along a European trajectory.

But Kostunica turned out to be a fierce 19th-century nationalist, far more an ideological adherent to the cause than the opportunistic Milosevic, and he was committed to doing whatever was necessary to maintain Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. Specifically, he wanted the territory of Kosovo but not its people, and he created a political environment in which opposition

voices fear for their safety.

All the while, Moscow stood at his side, preventing the Security Council from adopting the U.N. plan for Kosovo's independence. And in recent days, he has been remarkably successful at convincing a number of countries that the UN resolution that ended the Nato war provides for Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo indefinitely. It does not, nor does it preclude Kosovo's independence. Yet the West has failed to marshal its own forces to refute Kostunica's claim and persuade many fence-sitters to recognise Kosovo's independence.

Other countries have withheld recognition, fearing it would encourage independence movements within their borders.

Now it is decision time for the Serbian people. This month Serbia's bitterly divided coalition government broke down over differences over Kosovo and the country's ties to the EU. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for May. Kostunica is prepared to forsake the EU for Kosovo, but Serbian President Boris Tadic, whose party was Kostunica's principal partner in the defunct coal-

ition, professes to believe that somehow Serbia will keep Kosovo and still pursue EU membership.

The EU is encouraging this posture, hoping his party can form a coalition government, sign agreements with the EU and, over time, abandon its dedication to keeping Kosovo. But initial polling indicates Tadic will have difficulty putting together a new coalition, and the elections may well produce a backward-looking nationalist coalition, a very weak coalition, or both.

Serbs will have to decide whether they will continue to follow their fiercely nationalist leadership into greater international isolation, forsaking growth and integration into Europe, or side with the more Westward-looking opposition.

In this defining moment the West must somehow convey to the Serbian people how much is at stake, and the danger of making the wrong choice. The West must circumvent Belgrade's nationalist politicians and make clear to the Serbian people that there is another path, another future for them as a real democracy. Our message must be: "We feel your loss; there was no practical alterna-



tive. Your nationalist leaders are leading you into oblivion, and you belong in Europe."

At the same time, the EU and the United States must work together to preserve Kosovo's stability, prevent violence and partition, secure greater international recog-

nition of Kosovo and help it become a working state.

Doing otherwise would severely damage Western credibility and threaten wider Balkan instability and the European order. While always holding out an olive branch, the West must not permit Serbia

and Russia to undermine an independent Kosovo, or use Kosovo as an excuse to forestall Serbia's -- and Kosovo's -- development into healthy European states.

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