

Garment sector boiling again

Find a sustainable solution

It appears that the RMG sector is heating up once again. It is distressing to learn of the destruction of a large number of garment factories in Ashulia by agitating workers demanding payment of their arrears. What is regrettable is the routine regularity with which the management of some garment factories default on payment to their workers, and for the workers to almost predictably resort to violence resulting in loss of property.

Interestingly this time, most of the owners have denied having defaulted on payment, asserting at the same time that their factories were ransacked by outsiders. That and the corroborative statement of the BGMEA president that the factories which were attacked were not defaulters, and were in good corporate culture, cause us anxiety. The question that arises is why then are those factories that have not erred in the payment of wages to their workers being targeted? Or is the statement of the BGMEA president entirely accurate?

One thing must be made amply clear. It is utterly unacceptable that the workers go without their wages, which is meagre as it is. It is equally unacceptable that the workers should resort to destruction of valuable property impulsively without giving talks a chance. Even worse is the proclivity of some workers to lay siege to highways disrupting inter district traffic and damaging private and public vehicles.

All relevant quarters must address the tremor in the garment sector in all earnest. It being one of the two major foreign exchange earners for the country, any disruption would affect our earnings, which in turn is likely to compound the foreign exchange inflow, with remittance from the expatriate workers being also under threat.

It devolves on all concerned to go to the bottom of the problem. One could well ask as to why this sector is so violence-prone when there have been accords at different times including a tripartite agreement on wages. It is heartening to see that the knitwear association has decided to supplement the wages of their workers to meet the rising prices. While that is one aspect of the wage issue it is for the garment manufacturers' association to oversee that whatever has been committed is paid in time. It is also for the relevant agencies to ascertain why and how agitation in one factory spills over all the others in the area, something that we have witnessed in the past also, and how, as claimed by many factory owners, hooligans posing as workers manage to resort to vandalism and destruction of property.

It is time that all concerned put their heads together to find out a sustainable solution to these problems.

Government decision on National Mourning Day

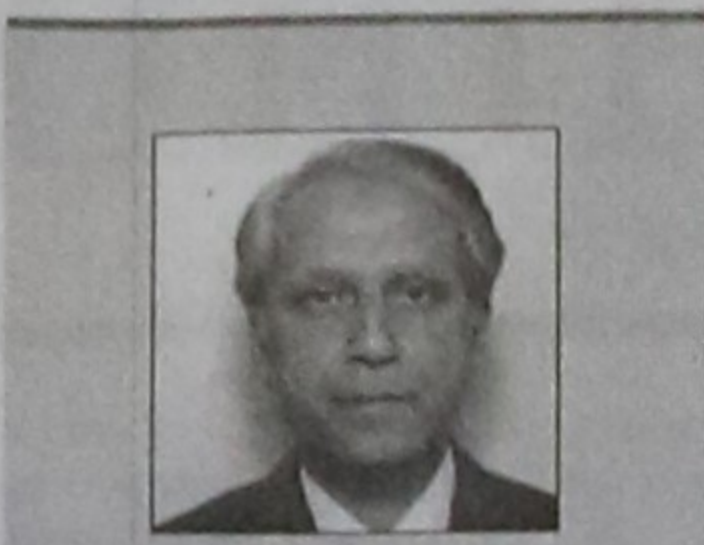
Bangabandhu's pre-eminence should be above politics

THE Council of Advisers has made a judicious move by deciding to reinstate August 15 as National Mourning Day. It is a step that will surely resonate with the sentiments of a nation which was clearly traumatised by the tragic incidents of August 15, 1975. Indeed, the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with most of his family members, on the day remains a blot on our collective national conscience. It is ironic that on such a vital issue as a proper observance of August 15, it remained for the higher judiciary to step in to resolve the matter. By the same measure, we can certainly say that when the last political government decided to do away with the observance of National Mourning Day in 2002, it proved itself unable to rise above party politics.

By opting to show respect to the recent High Court ruling on the matter of August 15, the government has in broad measure informed the country that a non-partisan approach needs to be adopted on the issue. We at this newspaper, having consistently argued in defence of the rule of law and the paramountcy of morality in national life, would like to state here that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by his very role in the growth of nationalism and our onward march to freedom, historically enjoys a pre-eminent position that no one can or should begrudge him. Unfortunately, though, that is precisely what has been done through the years. Now that we go back to recalling his contributions to our national history through remembering him on August 15, it remains our hope that everyone in this country, irrespective of political belief or inclination, will observe the day with the solemnity and serious reflection it deserves. It is absolutely necessary that Bangabandhu, as the symbol of our struggle for freedom, be kept above party politics and beyond party propaganda in the interest of national unity. Any attempt to trivialise him and his place in history or confer upon him a partisan label can only keep divisive politics, which we have so long been victim to, alive to our own detriment.

The decision to observe August 15 as National Mourning Day is, in our view, aimed at putting an end to all political controversies arising out of the gruesome incidents of August 15, 1975. Let the day, from here on, be an opportunity for self-analysis and introspection on the part of the nation. At the same time, let it be from now on the responsibility of all future governments to observe the day in the larger national interest and in the interest of history.

Measuring up to Asean



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I have returned recently from Colombo after attending a plenary meeting of the South Asian Free Media Association and the South Asia Media Commission Conference. They were held on a parallel track with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit Conference. This permitted me to have a deeper insight into the way Saarc is functioning as an institution.

The Saarc has now been in existence for more than two decades. It has in the recent past, in addition to expanding its membership, also taken the positive step of trying to widen its engagement by taking on board several dialogue partners as observers. This was undertaken as a constructive measure.

In this context, I thought that it would be meaningful to reflect on Saarc and compare it with the steps undertaken by the foreign ministers of Asean in their 41st Asean ministerial meeting held in Singapore towards the end of July.

I did so not only to evaluate the Saarc process but also to highlight the comparative seriousness with which Asean is engaging itself in regional cooperation as opposed to the efforts being undertaken by Saarc. I believe that this was necessary, given the modest areas of agreement reached by Saarc during its recently convened summit held

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in Colombo and its past history in being unable to implement its decisions expeditiously.

Both Saarc and Asean have reaffirmed their common desire to ensure peace, stability, prosperity and social progress in the region, but Asean has gone one step further. The have recognised the need for creating a sense of belonging so critical for integration efforts.

In this context, Asean has noted that while Asean members may be pre-occupied with pressing domestic issues, it is vital that they continue to move forward on Asean integration, even if the pace may sometimes vary. Very correctly, Asean understands that their thriving region will then be courted by the major powers for its economic potential and valued as a partner for dealing with larger regional and global issues.

I do not know if the existing internal rivalry within Saarc will ever allow such an equation to emerge in South Asia. The recent terrorist attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India and the subsequent recriminations have definitely not helped.

Secondly, Asean has now taken the bold and pragmatic step of agreeing that each Asean member state will appoint a permanent representative to Asean at the level of ambassador in Jakarta, with effect from January 1, 2009. This decision has been taken to strengthen the Asean secretariat and to provide it with adequate

resources. It will also explore the idea of an Asean laissez-passer for Asean secretariat staff as a valid travel document among Asean member states.

Such decisions connote seriousness in terms of engagement. Can we not replicate this within Saarc? Such a step on our part will then indicate that Saarc believes in being a practical and an action and result-oriented, rules-based organisation.

Thirdly, Asean, unlike Saarc, appears to have garnered sufficient political will to develop concrete programs and activities to implement measures and enhance international and regional cooperation to combat trans-boundary environmental pollution.

This they aim to achieve through capacity building, enhancing public awareness, strengthening law enforcement, promoting environmentally sustainable practices, as well as combating illegal logging and its associated illegal trade.

They have also reaffirmed their commitment to intensify their cooperation with other international organisations in the areas of disaster relief and management. Comparably, very little appears to be taking place within the matrix of Saarc. There are bilateral efforts but nothing of collective substance has emerged.

Fourthly, in accordance with its development agenda, Asean is attaching special importance to the integration of its education

priorities. This is being done to hone the skills and talents of their citizens and to boost that region's overall competitiveness, in order to reap the fruits of globalisation. We are talking of this within Saarc but nothing much has happened in concrete terms. The concept of the South Asian University with its different country based campuses is moving forward at a snail's pace.

Fifthly, I shall touch on the question of strengthening Saarc's relations with its external partners. Unlike Saarc, which is still plagued by the suspicious mindsets of its members, Asean has moved forward remarkably.

They have been able to do so because they are a more integrated community. They have reached a point where they can now look forward to the appointment of ambassadors to the Asean secretariat from their dialogue partners. This will enable them to deepen and broaden their cooperation in various fields with their partners.

This will permit Asean to focus more seriously and meaningfully in key areas like energy and food security, terrorism and transnational crimes, poverty reduction, sustainable forest management and climate change, communicable diseases and disaster relief and response.

This functional approach has enabled Asean not only to push ahead with the FTA negotiations with Australian and New Zealand, the EU and India but also finalise

measures towards the creation of strategic linkages that will bind different regions even closer together.

In this context, steps are being taken through the Asean-Australia Development Cooperation Program (AADCP II) to strengthen the Asean secretariat's institutional capacity to effectively implement its mandate as well as supporting regional mechanisms and capacity for implementation of Asean Economic Community Blueprint activities.

Similarly, efforts are also underway within Asean to establish the Asean-China Centre and the Asean-Korea Centre to further deepen cooperation in all areas. Is Saarc thinking of such visionary agreements with its dialogue partners?

Sixthly, Asean appears to have taken a more pragmatic and realistic approach towards the crucial problems of food and energy security and achieving poverty reduction on the issue of food security, Asean has affirmed that access to adequate and reliable supply of staples, and stable prices are fundamental to the region's economic and social well-being.

To address rising food prices, they have also stressed the importance of regional and international efforts to ensure the efficient functioning of market forces, as well as to coming up with longer term agricultural solutions.

In this regard they have emphasised that all Asean countries should do away with price-distorting export subsidies and other protectionist policies and provide market access to competitive food exports. With reference to the recent volatility and rise of oil prices that has adversely affected Asean economies, it has been reiterated that there was need for

regional and international efforts to ensure the efficient functioning of market forces.

Some of the rhetoric here is addressed towards the WTO. Nevertheless, there is a more target oriented response compared to Saarc. It might be useful for Saarc to also try to solve the region's food and energy security issues in a sustainable manner through greater cooperation measures such as improving energy efficiency and conservation. The idea of a Saarc development fund to combat poverty might also help if implemented sooner than later.

Seventhly, Saarc, like Asean, could also consider expanding its strategic partnerships to include a relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council and the African Union. This will enhance the importance of the South Asian body. Such contacts could initially start with meetings on the sidelines, during the United Nations General Assembly sessions held in New York, and then intensify through initiatives by the Saarc secretariat.

Saarc, despite all the speech making in Colombo, appears to have continued as a toddler in the context of international relations. There is only one reason behind this -- absence of serious political will and the continuing sense of mutual suspicion.

This is affecting Saarc's performance. To rise over this hurdle, the Saarc leadership has to understand that Saarc is relevant to their wellbeing. They have to feel that the deeper their sense of belonging as a community, the more they will be able to achieve in terms of objectives.

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Crunch time across the border



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

AFTER three days of uncertainty and dramatic flip-flops, Pakistan's ruling coalition has decided to impeach President Pervez Musharraf. This begins what could be a decisive battle for the assertion of will of the people's elected representatives against unaccountable centres of power -- or precipitate a disastrous chain of events.

The tortuous manner in which the decision was reached -- after vacillation and many off-now, on-now moments amidst charges of perfidy -- raises questions about its solidity and the coalition's ability to accomplish what's an extremely difficult task even in favourable circumstances in mature democracies.

It's not excluded that General Musharraf will strike to pre-empt or neutralise the impeachment move. Among the reasons that provoked the move was the fear that he might dissolve the national and provincial governments.

A confrontation will be averted if General Musharraf quits, knowing

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN
Indian aid is far better focused than Western assistance and addresses felt needs in healthcare, education, urban transportation, and in the training of civil servants, diplomats, police and the judiciary. This has earned India a great deal of goodwill in Afghanistan. It would be in India's and Pakistan's own interest to negotiate confidence-building measures, including joint projects, in Afghanistan as a means of defusing a new sub-continental Cold War and rescuing the peace process.

that he may not be able to secure the backing of the United States or the Pakistan army for a confrontationist course.

He's no longer in a critical day-to-day policy-making position, not indispensable to the US-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Besides, Washington doesn't want a massive new Pakistan crisis during an election year.

Whatever happens in Pakistan, the situation there is marked by greater instability and potential for retrogression than two months ago, when I visited the country.

As the divided, rudderless civilian political leadership flounders, the business of governance is in the deep freezer. Pakistan's economy is in poor shape. Pessimism and gloom rule.

The military is under enormous pressure from the US to escalate its operations against the Taliban along the Afghanistan border, or to allow the US-led International Security Assistance Force to undertake raids. The army's authority stands greatly eroded and its popular acceptance is low.

Extremist jihadi forces are growing everywhere in Pakistan. On the first anniversary of the Lal Masjid's storming, thousands of women pledged to raise their children for martyrdom in "holy war." Militants are torching girls' schools in the tribal areas.

There is a growing danger now that the gains from the recent trends towards democratisation could be undermined. These trends run against authoritarianism, Allah and America), and favour moderation and accountability.

Pakistan is regressing into a state of being a hostage to three fundamental tensions from which it uncertainly struggled to free itself recently: opposition between the imperatives of a modern, moderate state and a religion-based self-identity; imbalance between military and civilian authority; and skewed distribution of power between different regions.

Two recent developments have further complicated the situation. The first was the July 26 notification placing the Inter-Services

Intelligence agency under the control of the Interior Ministry, and its withdrawal within 7 hours.

The second is growing evidence that the ISI was involved in the July 7 suicide attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul, in which 60 people were killed. This has adversely affected the already tense peace process with India. Mercifully, the process hasn't been suspended.

The ISI notification coincided with Prime Minister Gilani's visit to the United States to assure President Bush that the ISI under civilian control would cooperate earnestly with the US's GWOT. Its withdrawal had the opposite effect.

More important, it highlighted the weakness of the civilian government vis-a-vis the military. This is a significant setback to Pakistan's democratisation.

The second development is even more important. On July 12, the CIA despatched its deputy director, Stephen R. Kappes, to Pakistan with evidence of the ISI's links with pro-al-Qaeda militants. This is the first time the CIA has confronted

Islamabad with such intelligence

The CIA's reported assessment confirms what Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai has publicly alleged about the attack on India's embassy in Kabul, and his identification of the ISI as the source of violent activities calculated to destabilise his country.

According to The New York Times, "the CIA assessment specifically points to links between members [of the ISI] and the militant network led by Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani, which American officials believe maintains close ties to senior figures of al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas." Haqqani is the face of the resurgent Taliban. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took up the issue with Mr Gilani, who promised to order an independent investigation. However, Gen. Musharraf has since accused India of fomenting trouble in Balochistan.

The Pakistani foreign ministry has also charged India and Afghanistan with instigating violence in its tribal areas, and held Afghanistan responsible for its failure to protect its consulate in Herat from an attack on July 31.

Whatever the validity of these charges and counter-charges, there's little doubt that Afghanistan, a ravaged, unstable country, has emerged as a major battleground between India and Pakistan. Pakistan is keen to preserve its influence in that country, which it has long regarded as its strategic backyard. It also seeks to deny India's influence in

Afghanistan.

India, on the other hand, is not only keen to deepen its historic relationship with Afghanistan, which is a legitimate agenda. It also seems to be looking for a vantage point from which to launch low-intensity operations across the border into Pakistan. That purpose is less than legitimate, and risks sucking India into an ugly open-ended confrontation.

India has run one of the largest and most successful aid programs in Afghanistan. It has just expanded it from \$750 million to \$1.2 billion. Unlike Western aid projects, India routes its assistance without outsourcing it via numerous middlemen.

Indian aid is far better focused than Western assistance and addresses felt needs in healthcare, education, urban transportation, and in the training of civil servants, diplomats, police and the judiciary. This has earned India a great deal of goodwill in Afghanistan.

It would be in India's and Pakistan's own interest to negotiate confidence-building measures, including joint projects, in Afghanistan as a means of defusing a new sub-continental Cold War and rescuing the peace process.

The alternative is competitive rivalry, which will harm both India and Pakistan -- and above all, the Afghan people.

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Russian moves in the Americas

Sending a delegation to Cuba and talking up the possibility of nuclear bombers landing or being stationed on the island appears to be a quite classical countermove, reminding Washington that two can tango, and that one of the outcomes of the Cuban missile crisis, at least according to the Russians, was the removal of US missiles from Turkey -- in other words, from close to Soviet territory.

JORGE CASTAÑEDA

RUSSIAN Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's surprising announcement in early August that his country would seek to "re-establish" ties with the Soviet Union's old allies in Havana stirred up excitement in many foreign newsrooms, and raised eyebrows in a few foreign ministries around the world.

Coming in the wake of a three-day visit to Cuba by a high-level Russian delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, and of reports about the possibility of the Russian military's using the Caribbean island as a fuelling station for its Bear bombers, which are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, the flurry of news evoked mem-

ories of the 1962 missile crisis and a new "threat" to the United States from across the Florida Straits.

In fact, there is probably much less here than meets the eye. Putin and Russia in general seem quite upset, and have said so, about the Bush administration's decision to establish a "missile shield" in the Czech Republic (and perhaps Poland) that would theoretically be a protection from all parties, but is seen from Moscow as a threat to Russia.

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of US missiles from Turkey -- in other words, from close to Soviet territory.

Moreover, there are reasons for believing that the Cubans were neither a party to the threat nor particularly enthralled by it. They were quite displeased in 2001 when Moscow, without notice and in response to US pressure, shut down the Lourdes eavesdropping and surveillance station, for which the Soviet Union and Russia had paid big bucks.

Without a clear explanation about what these "new ties" would mean, and a guarantee that the Lourdes precedent would not be repeated, it would seem unlikely that Havana would go along.

The fact that no Cuban official, except Fidel Castro in his weekly editorial in Granma, and in a very

convoluted way, mentioned the entire issue casts doubt as to how much Raúl Castro is truly committed to this new proposal.

Raúl is probably quite reluctant, because the kind of high-stakes grandstanding that the young Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev indulged in 1962 is exactly the opposite of what he apparently desires in foreign policy. If anything, Raúl would prefer to avoid the limelight or any unnecessary conflict, and concentrate on resolving what is clearly, by his own admission, a disastrous internal economic and social situation.

He would go along with this sort of shenanigans only if either Washington turns it into a matter of pride or if the Russian request were accompanied by a substantive economic payoff that would allow Cuba to reduce its life-or-death dependence on Venezuela and its friendly, complicit but increasingly erratic and precarious leader, Hugo Chávez.

Indeed, at base, this is perhaps what all the fuss is really about. Raúl Castro was around in 1962; he headed the Cuban armed forces

then, as he does now. He and his older brother (at least today) know just how dangerous these kinds of games can become.

Unfortunately, Chávez does not, and Raúl Castro does not have the type of intellectual or emotional influence over the Venezuelan that Fidel does, or did. Chávez could buy into a scheme such as the one the Russians are insinuating, and in fact, he is already participating in a small part of it.

He was in Moscow on July 22, and signed more arms deals beyond the immense ones he had already sealed last year. He is calculated to have already bought between \$2 billion and \$3 billion in arms from Moscow, and he and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced that Venezuela would purchase up to \$30 billion in military goods from Russia over the next six years, including planes, submarines, tanks and Kalashnikovs.

This is a staggering sum but, of course, knowing Chávez, it may or may not ever occur. The price of oil may continue to drop; Moscow may

back off if it cuts a deal with Washington on the antimissile system in Europe, and Chávez himself may not be in office forever.

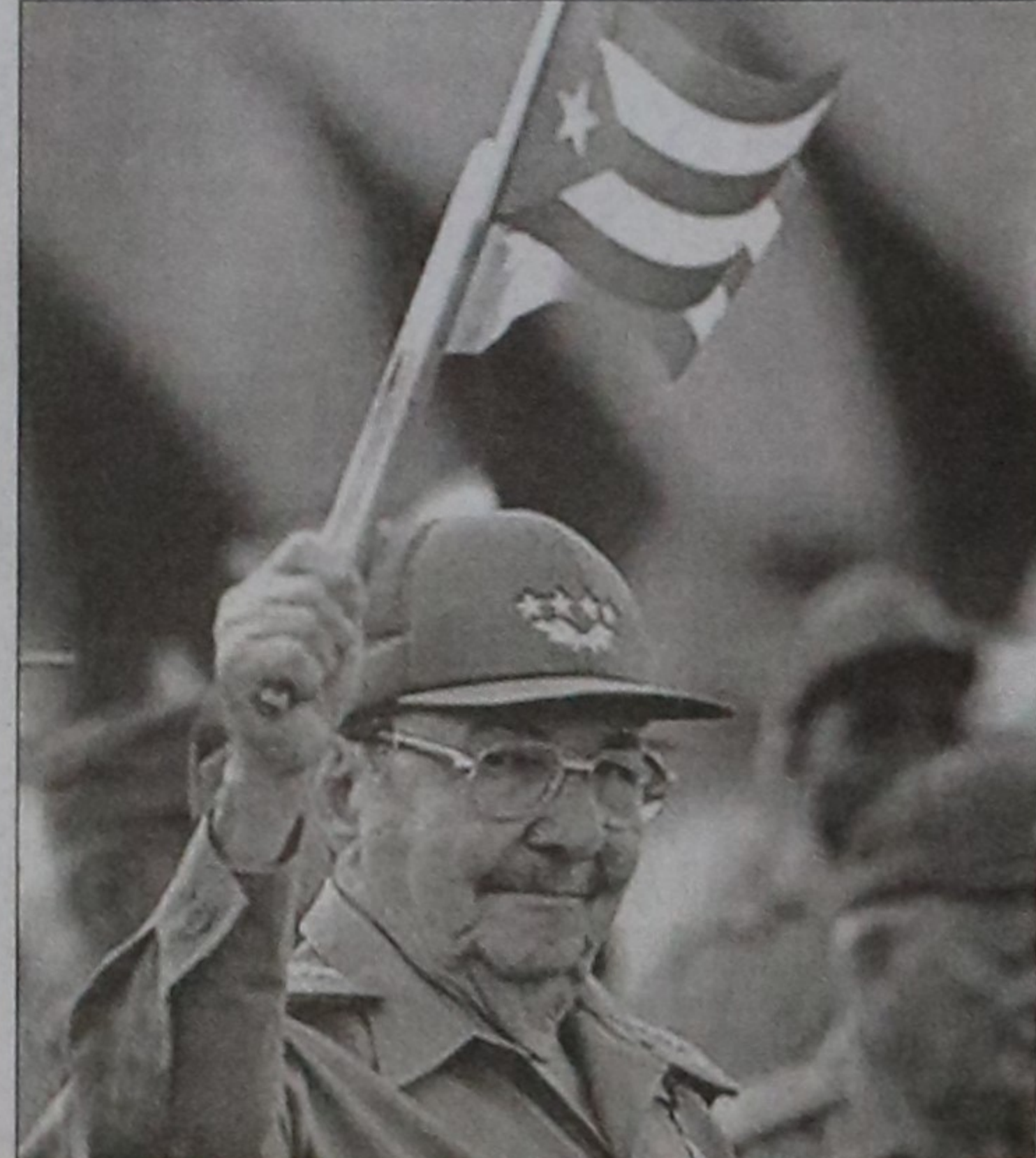
Still, Caracas is where the Russian push into Latin America could work, and the consequences for the military equilibrium in South America (Venezuela borders on Colombia, Guyana and Brazil) and in the Caribbean would be severe, forcing others into an arms race no one wants or can afford.

It would not be a bad idea for either this US administration, or, more likely, the next one, to take up the Venezuelan matter with Putin and Medvedev.

Similarly, it would be wise for Washington to refrain from any tough talk or humiliating language directed at Havana. That only riles the Cubans, and has on occasion led them, foolishly but predictably, to do things they probably would have preferred to avoid.

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Raúl Castro not ready to toe the line.