

Bangladesh-China friendship

Benefits of improved co-operation could be immense

WE are pleased to note the progress made during the recent trip of the chief adviser to China, and are hopeful that the concrete rewards of a better relationship with the economic superpower will soon be evident.

Bangladesh is fortunate to have China in such close proximity. China's economic growth has been nothing short of phenomenal and there is no doubt that it is well on its way to becoming a new superpower.

The fact that it is so close to Bangladesh is therefore a great opportunity for us that we should not miss out on. Friendly and productive relations between the two countries must be a corner-stone of Bangladesh's foreign policy going forward, and in this regard it is good to see the government taking proactive steps.

Chinese technological and managerial expertise can certainly benefit Bangladesh, as can Chinese investment. All steps on our part to facilitate these should be taken. Thus we applaud the idea of setting up a special economic zone for Chinese investors, and hope that it would be fast-tracked.

Indeed, with China now moving away from garments and footwear into more lucrative manufacturings, we should do everything we can to capitalise on this and move as much of that business to Bangladesh as possible.

Chinese assistance with nuclear technology and building of infra-structure is definitely something that should also be welcomed. Similarly, greater connectivity between Bangladesh and China is imperative, and if we can work together for a road link between Kunming and Chittagong and permit the Chinese to use Chittagong port or help to build another facility further south for regional use, as has been discussed in the past, the benefits to both countries would be incalculable.

Finally, the goal of lifting bilateral trade to \$5 billion by 2010 is a worthy one. Of course, Bangladesh's primary concern here is to ensure that we are able to access and penetrate the Chinese market, and if we are able to boost our exports to China, with over a billion consumers, nothing could be more advantageous for us or have greater long-term benefit.

In short, the better our relations with China, the better for Bangladesh. It is as simple as that.

Players opt for ICL

A blow to our cricket

WITH the BCB officials' last-ditch attempt to prevent the 13 rebel cricketers from joining the Indian Cricket League failing, our cricket is passing through a crisis. And it is the latter who are being held responsible for it.

It seems the BCB officials were genuinely surprised by the development as they did not have an inkling of what was going on even a day before the players submitted their resignations. It is not clear why the cricket managers failed to smell anything even after the team's dismal performance in Australia, where the players were apparently busy formulating their future plans, instead of concentrating on the game. Coach Jamie Siddons has very rightly said that it was a "shame" that they had something else in mind while they were playing in Australia. But what was the BCB doing while the players were getting ready to resign? It is not enough to claim now that the resignations were not acceptable because the players hadn't served any prior notice. That is a legal question that the rebels may have to answer, but it can by no means alter the palpable truth that the officials had distanced themselves from the players and did not bother to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments.

The players, for their part, have failed to behave like mature and responsible members of the national team. To claim that the coach had misbehaved with somebody was but childish. After all, they have not performed well enough in the recent past to quit with honour and grace. Much of the cricket fans' expectation remains unfulfilled, as the cricketers lost almost all the matches that they played in the last couple of years. Now they have decided to quit the team that they failed to serve with a sense of dedication and commitment. Obviously, nobody can stop a player from retiring, but the players should have mentioned clearly in their resignation letters that they are retiring because they failed to deliver. Yes, their professional needs cannot be ignored, but is cricket, or any sport for that matter, all about money only?

The ICL, viewed negatively by the national cricket boards, is a reality that we cannot overlook, nor can we ignore its enormous financial clout. So, what can the BCB do now? They should follow coach Jamie Siddons' suggestion and replace the rebel players. Nobody is indispensable and the game itself is more important than any individual.

1/11 and twenty wasted months!

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

While we wait eagerly for the parliamentary election, without ensuring these preconditions the aspiration of the people would remain unfulfilled, and it will again be business as usual, back to the pre 1/11 days, at least insofar as politics is concerned. That is a horrible thought to entertain.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE common refrain these days on everyone's lips is, what does the CTG have to show for the twenty months that it has been in charge of the affairs of the state? The common feeling is that we are perhaps back to square one -- with the only disturbing reality that we do not even have a square peg to fill the square slot.

If people feel that the last twenty months have been wasted in pointless exercises, with cosmetic touches here and there to give the impression that there was no lack of effort on the part of the government, they can hardly be blamed for feeling let down. The redeeming feature, though, is the completion of the voter list and national identity card.

Regrettably, there has not been anything tangible that the people can feel hopeful about, at least insofar as political reform and fight against corruption is concerned. And that is perhaps because there were too many cooks with not only too many recipes, but too many untried

methods of cooking. And the perfectionists would say effort doesn't transform into work unless there is output.

I feel we have wasted our efforts because of too many ideas but without really a good prescription for how best to put those into effect. Unfortunately too, some of the ideas were ill-conceived, destined to come up short in delivering the desired results.

However, what must be made clear is that, notwithstanding all the acts that have been played out in the political stage in the last year and a half, particularly in the last one month, and the apparent "deals" and "counter-deals" made to get "everyone to participate in the election," the demand of the people for political reform and for good election contested by good candidates, remains as relevant as before.

Notwithstanding the resistance from some parties against the newly promulgated RPO, people will not countenance any dilution of those provisions that can ensure a fair election in which only the clean candidates

should stand a chance of being elected.

The government started with a bang and is very likely to end with less than a whimper. But why did the situation come to such a pass? There were very compelling reasons for the changes of January 11. And the people in one voice, except for some inveterate supporters of the alliance government, wanted changes in our political culture.

The disconcerting aspect, but which we all must accept as a reality, is that our political culture is not about to change soon. One can bring in any number of provisions in the RPO and all the rules and regulations; the truth is that political culture is a matter of attitude, which is shaped by the mind. And like any other aspects of culture, if the political ethos has to change then the mindset will have to change too, beginning with the politicians', which, hopefully, would trickle down to the party workers.

But that is a tall ask -- just imagine the violence that we witnessed after the news of Tarique Rahman's injury.

Helpless passersby and vehicles were set upon, and one unfortunate person was killed. And this has happened when there is Emergency in the country!

Political reform is a two-way traffic. Both the EC and the political parties need to act in their own ways to see this comes about. If the EC's efforts to transform the nature of politics in the country have conveyed the impression to the politicians that the changes are meant to usher in the practice of "command democracy" then the lack of effort on their part has given us the impression that political reform is not in their list of priorities.

Democratisation of political parties received a rude shock when some genuflecting BNP standing committee members decided to make Khaleda Zia lifelong chairperson of the party. The dissenting persons, surely there must have been a few in that group, could not pluck enough courage to say that it was a very bad idea -- that it was out-and-out an anti-democratic step. At least Begum Zia had the

good sense to realise, though belatedly, the stupidity of the suggestion and "declined" to accept the post for life. It seems that nothing has changed for some of the politicians.

The anti-corruption drive did shake up the nation initially. One understands that this is a continuous process, and no one is so naive as to think that we can get rid of something that is embedded in our blood in a matter of months. Though a few big fry have been convicted, it appears that the ACC's effort has stumbled.

One feels that the ACC has been hard done by, by two things. Firstly, the anti-corruption drive should not have been guided by political motive -- it was an ill-advised act. Most of those arrested for alleged corruption are politicians, and very few have had any substantive charges brought against them in all these months.

One would have thought that a year and a half would have been enough to either prove or disprove the prima-facie against the accused. And the legal process varied from case to case -- show me the man and I will show you the law -- was what has been practiced in certain cases. Secondly, the Truth and Accountability Commission is a setback for the drive against corruption. While one cannot quite comprehend its TOR, one wonders whether it will be able to deliver either.

And in all the legal wrangling, particularly those related to the bail of the two leaders and some high profile accused, the image of the judiciary and the character of the legal process have been unnecessarily tainted by very injudicious remarks, among other things, regarding the matter of bail, by one of the advisors to the caretaker government.

The talk of the town currently is the parley between Hasina and Khaleda. One feels that there is no need for the government to spend time on this. Yes, as leaders of the two major parties they must meet and break the ice that exists between them, but it would be wrong to give the impression that the future course of politics is dependent solely on the two leaders sitting down for talks.

In the final analysis, the two major parties should take the lead in removing the obstacles towards political reform, and the process would require a flexible EC too. It is entirely up to the political parties to effect changes in their party constitution. Also the onus is on the parties to select good candidates, let quality and nothing else be the sole criterion.

While we wait eagerly for the parliamentary election, without ensuring these preconditions the aspiration of the people would remain unfulfilled, and it will again be business as usual, back to the pre 1/11 days, at least insofar as politics is concerned. That is a horrible thought to entertain.

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Sri Lanka -- is the government really winning?

MATTERS AROUND US

Despite the claim by President Rajapakse that the government is very close to winning the war, the scenario in the battlefield is not one of easy achievements by the government troops. The determined Tamil militants will spare no efforts to overcome the losses, which, however, is a Herculean task.



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE civil war in Sri Lanka is getting more intense, and the impression is that the government is winning. The military has stepped up attacks against the Tamil rebels and the government has vowed to dismantle the rebels' mini-state by capturing Kilinochchi, their political capital.

The United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has expressed alarm over escalating fighting, and said that both sides were obliged to ensure the safety of displaced civilians. The European Union has also echoed similar sentiments.

Evidently, the militants are suffering more losses than the government, and some quarters feel that the war is moving towards a decisive end -- albeit not immediately.

Fortunes in the battlefield are often marked by ups and downs, with the pendulum swinging in both directions. Nevertheless, it is clear that the government is at

the moment in the driving seat. But does it really mean anything decisive?

The country is embroiled in a full-blown war following a number of developments that clearly indicated the hardening of stances of both -- the government and the Tamil militants. The peace process is in tatters, and the government discouraged mediation by foreign powers as it may be feeling that a decision can be reached in the battlefield.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) had earlier expressed great concern at the worsening conditions. Others feel the same, and are concerned about the shape of things to come -- which obviously is more bloodshed and destruction.

The peace talks took a beating following the exit of Ranil Wickramasinghe, whose government had initiated the dialogue with the rebels but was dismissed by President Chandrika, apparently for being "soft" to the Tamil militants.

Ratnasiri Wickramanayake became the new prime minister, and the chances of a settlement through discussions receded. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who succeeded Chandrika, followed the same hard-line with the rebels, and no progress has been made towards a negotiated settlement of the civil war.

Occasional moves for dialogue have collapsed. The president vowed some time ago that he wanted to end the war, not through talks but in the battlefield.

Several rounds of talks between the government and the Tamil Tigers during Ranil's time raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the contentious civil war in Sri Lanka, which was virtually bleeding white because of the long-drawn conflict.

There was no decisive outcome of the civil war as both sides blamed each other for the situation. However, overall conditions marked a qualitative change when Wickramasinghe's

government took an active peace policy with the rebels, which facilitated a dialogue that went for several rounds and made some progress.

While it was the height of folly to expect easy resolution of the imbroglio, given the complexities involved, the dialogue gave hope since both sides made significant concessions. The government conceded to some demands of the Tigers while the latter abandoned their main position -- an independent state for the Tamils -- and agreed to autonomy.

The road to peace through negotiations was undoubtedly bumpy, but what was encouraging was the marked willingness to find common ground towards a permanent settlement. Notwithstanding differences on some key areas, both sides demonstrated eagerness in carrying forward the parleys. But the scenario has changed as the new government is pushing for a decisive victory in its favour.

The latest developments have

frustrated the mediators, who pinned hopes of resumption of the dialogue despite yawning differences in the positions of the two sides. Norway and several other nations are keen to see that the belligerence is at least minimised. But it appears that nothing is working except the fighting.

Despite the claim by President Rajapakse that the government is very close to winning the war, the scenario in the battlefield is not one of easy achievements by the government troops. The determined Tamil militants will spare no efforts to overcome the losses, which, however, is a Herculean task.

In any case, even with the setbacks, no cakewalk is possible for the government. The militants will evidently fight to the last, and it will be folly to assume that they are on the verge of a total defeat. The rebels are committed cadres, hence they are hell-bent to go to any extent. But they are also losing cadres in bigger numbers.

The government wants to prolong the war, thinking that the militants will be short of fighters in the coming days while the troops will no face a problem, at least not like the rebels. But independent analysts believe that a decisive win for the government in the near future is unlikely, despite favourable conditions. Even a common

citizen is not convinced that the war was going to be over soon. India says that a military solution to the civil war may not be easy and forthcoming.

But the question is -- must the government find a solution through military means? After all, the loss of lives on both sides is colossal. As such, the government needs to demonstrate maturity to resolve the crisis.

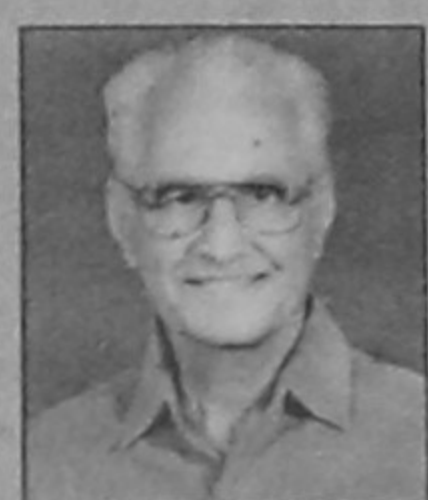
Sri Lanka needs prudent policies even at this stage and, obviously, the onus lies with the government, while the militants are expected to demonstrate a rationale attitude. The claims of big gains by the government may not be baseless, but this in itself is nothing to boast about in resolving a national problem.

A South Asian nation with relatively wider social and economic progress compared to its bigger neighbours must not be allowed to bleed white. It cannot be in the interest of Sri Lanka -- regardless of whether the Sinhalese dominated government wins the conflict or not.

If an amicable settlement of a seemingly intractable problem involving the radical leftist Maoists and the government can be found in another South Asian nation -- Nepal -- why is this out of question in Sri Lanka?

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Adrift in a stormy sea



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

ONE American ground attack inside and frequent aerial attacks from Afghan territory have created a crisis that is worrying Pakistanis. Is it a prelude to a serious American ground action in Federally Administered Tribal Areas or something even bigger?

The consequences of what America is doing vis-à-vis Pakistan need to be considered. It is not just this or that incident. It is the pattern of what the Americans are doing to, and in, Pakistan that is important.

The Americans were worried in 2007 with the rise of political agitations against Musharraf. They had put all their money on

PLAIN WORDS

The situation in the Fata is that Pakistan is receding into itself; it exists only where the Pakistan army is entrenched. The rest of the territory is outside its control. Much of Fata and many settled districts of NWFP are now effectively outside the control of the army and the provincial government.

Musharraf leading Pakistan in the War on Terror the way it satisfied them. Musharraf had given satisfaction to them, but they realised that his non-democratic antecedents were going to create difficulties.

Therefore, they started talking of a deeper view of problems in Fata; US experts discovered the need for more economic development of the area and, on the other hand, they remembered that Musharraf's anti-democratic actions and his non-democratic status would create more difficulties.

America decided to provide a "democratic face" to Musharraf. It needed a compromise between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto,

she being the leader of the party that could be expected to win a reasonably fair election. America asked Musharraf to let her participate. The Saudis pleaded the cause of Nawaz Sharif. So Musharraf allowed both to participate in the election.

While PML (N) could participate in the polls, Nawaz Sharif could not because of legal hitches. The election results have shown that Musharraf did need a radical makeover of his image because he was the most hated person in Pakistan, and that all those who supported him earlier were trounced.

The PPP and PML (N) came respectively first and second in the National Assembly. PPP con-

trolled Sindh and PML dominated Punjab.

Musharraf's utility continued to decrease throughout 2007. What made him progressively less effective, despite his uniform and amplitude of constitutional powers, was the growing popular hatred.

Americans fell back on two alternatives. One was when American media, think-tank community and the administration began grooming General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani after his takeover from Musharraf as the next leader of Pakistan. And the other was to work upon the winners to form a coalition government. The US expected them to do what Musharraf could not: con-

duct the War on Terror more effectively.

The coalition took such a long time coming into being and agreeing to necessary understandings that it required hard labour by America's frequent emissaries from the State Department. The government in Islamabad could be formed in March.

The performance of this PPP-led government has been marked by inertia and lack of will to do anything to tackle the mountainous problems that Pakistan faced. PPP began quarreling with PML (N) from day one over the question of judges' restoration to their jobs, making Pakistan's politics much more volatile than it ever was. Musharraf was still the president with the traditionally powerful establishment in place.

PPP knew its place. It was brought in to provide a democratic face to Musharraf. It, therefore, initially accepted everything Musharraf and bureaucracy said could be done or could not be done. Musharraf, the establishment and powers beyond did not want the strong and assertive judiciary that would result if the

sacked judges were restored. On that issue, the first rupture in the coalition took place within two months.

After that, a looser coalition has resulted after PML (N) walked out of the government while it continues to lead the Punjab provincial government with assertive support by the PPP. Even the Punjab government is under stress and the two major parties are engaged in political warfare -- a repeat of what they had done in the 1990s -- and had discredited "democratic" governments as immature and inefficient.

A big crisis is in the making in the Pak-American relations. The Americans are now disenchanted with their own option of giving politicians a chance. They may revert to their older view; only the Pakistan army can run Pakistan.

The Americans have shown that they have confidence in General Kayani, although his reaction to the US ground attack of September 4 contrasted sharply with the government's weak response. The generals' own praise from the Fata's militants against whom the Pakistan army is fighting.

The Americans are determined to go on doing what they are doing. Pakistani public opinion is furious. All major parties want the Parliament to meet in a joint session to consider what the Americans are doing and what Pakistan's response should be.

So far, the response from General Kayani and the military has been very strong: "Pakistan will not allow America to conduct any ground operation on Pakistan territory." The government has remained almost tongue-tied for about 48 hours, with different ministers saying different things.

Another September 4 like incident was actually frustrated by ordinary residents of South Waziristan, security forces and, in all publicity, some militants also. After the strong statements and actions by the military, the prime minister endorsed the statement of the army chief as the government's own. But the message has gone abroad that while the military is more patriotic and strong, the government is weak and does not know its own mind or cannot muster the courage to confront the Americans.

Secondly, the Americans do not know what they are doing. They might kill a few more al-Qaeda, Taliban and other militant leaders as they claim they are doing, but the one net result of their attacks is to inflame Pakistani opinion further.

Pakistan is known to be the most anti-American country. It will be far more anti-American as result of American actions that are killing civilians.

The situation in the Fata is that Pakistan is receding into itself; it exists only where the Pakistan army is entrenched. The rest of the territory is outside its control. Much of Fata and many settled districts of NWFP are now effectively outside the control of the army and the provincial government.

More civilian casualties will cause faster growth of militant organisations with their ideological differences as well as unity of purpose insofar as resisting the Americans are concerned. The whole situation will go out of the control of Islamabad.

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