

## Bangla-Myanmar tension defusing?

Resolve differences through discussion

**W**E note with some sense of relief that Myanmar government has acceded to Bangladesh government protest and withdrawn its naval vessels from Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). We also read a positive sign in that the exploration rigs from the area have also been withdrawn.

That said, the situation, we are constrained to say, is not yet normal since our border security forces are on 'red alert' having to face an unprovoked build up of Myanmar forces along Bangla-Myanmar border.

The situation was originally compounded by Myanmar's precipitate plans to conduct oil and gas exploration in an area in the Bay of Bengal which is within Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

It is a matter of regret that the maritime issue, in a manner of speaking, had spilled on to the land border between the two countries when Myanmar government decided to reinforce its border forces facing Bangladesh. This posture of Myanmar was very much unexpected and the tension this move created should have been avoided.

We would like to reiterate that Bangladesh has made its position very clear regarding the Myanmar move to conduct exploration into our territorial waters. We want to resolve the dispute in a spirit of mutual understanding and consultation. The fact that a high level delegation led by the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh paid a visit to Myanmar to discuss the situation only goes to demonstrate our trust in diplomatic efforts for trouble shooting.

There are well-tested ways of resolving bilateral differences through diplomatic channels, but trying to force into territorial waters belonging to a neighbour is certainly not the way to go about it. It also seems quite extraordinary that the government of Myanmar would resort to such a means when technical teams from the two countries were due to meet in the latter part of this month, to address the issue of delimitation.

We suggest that the only way to address disputes between neighbours is through discussion. Any other mechanism that deviates from the peaceful means of resolving differences is antithetical to standard norms of behaviour.

## The need for good town planning

Citizens' opinions should be taken into account

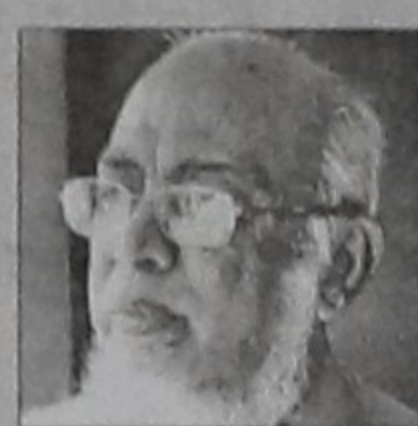
**A**roundtable on urban planning in connection with the observance of World Town Planning Day in the capital the other day certainly made the right noises. And those noises were all related to the impediments that have increasingly hampered town planning in this country. Even without formal seminars and discussions being organised to highlight the issue, one surely understands the gravity of the situation. An observation of conditions in Bangladesh, especially Dhaka, is enough to make us realise everything that has been going wrong with town planning. Over the years, owing to a queer sense of commercialisation, residential areas in the city have been falling prey to depredations of various kinds.

A glaring instance of such conditions comes through looking at conditions in such areas as Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Banani. These were quiet residential areas, until the city corporation began to allow people to set up shops and other business establishments there. The extent to which citizens have remained uninvolved with town planning can be easily gauged from the rampant way in which parks and other open spaces in localities have disappeared; lakes have either been filled in or occupied by individuals of dubious character. Wholesale construction of high-rise buildings has only worsened conditions, owing specifically to the large-scale absence of such necessary additions as parking spaces. In yet another twist to the situation, pavements in large parts of the city as also other towns in the country have been commandeered by traders and hawkers, with the result that pedestrians are often forced to find other ways of negotiating the road.

Another significant aspect of poor urban planning relates to the loss of arable land to the extent of 2.1 per cent in Bangladesh annually. Obviously, such a situation is untenable because we cannot afford to give up, for all our zeal for urbanisation, land that is required for agriculture. With the population expected to go up in the coming years, pressure on land will without doubt increase. It is these aspects of the issue that need addressing. But solutions can only be credible and lasting if the opinions of citizens are taken into account. A top-down approach never works. We see proof of that in the mess we are today wallowing through.

## What if Khaleda Zia opts out of election

### PERSPECTIVES



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

The nation is at a dangerous crossroads, from where it ought to immediately adopt its chosen path of a democratic transition impatiently awaited by the millions both at home and abroad. Much more that, it is hinged to immediately addressing our piled up problems inherited both from BNP-Jamaat misrule and an un-elected dispensation that has gone well past its mandated time.

**A**s her last stint of prime ministership ended after a burlesque of governance, pervading corruption and myriad sleazy activities with regard to public affairs, speculations were rife that Madam Zia would like to call it a day. This was in spite of the fact that our politicians have no tradition of voluntarily quitting the turf unless shown the door and hounded out of office by people's power. Few thought that she would again show her face, smeared with so many slurs, to an alienated people deluded by her perfidious rule. The notion was reinforced gradually with stories made public of pillaging, misfeasance and moral turpitude perpetrated by her sons, relatives and favourites, as well as the nefarious role of the so-called Hawa Bhaban mafia.

Belying those speculations, the madam's continuity in power politics with undiminished stamina and tenacity raised many eyebrows, although the party minions and masochists still remain beholden to her misplaced bravado. The government also has gone the extra

mile to give her political space as a major stakeholder even though she has lost significantly in stature with her dismal performance. Yet, the madam, while blowing hot and cold, seems to be out to extract as much as possible as the price for cooperating with the authority in giving democracy another chance.

As she talked genially to the newsmen a few days back she displayed confidence about upcoming election, saying that she had no misgiving about it and was going to put up her own candidature. But, only days later, she, in a bizarre turn-around, made a volte face by demanding the resignation of the Election Commission and asking the caretaker government to behave impartially, although the dispensation sent her arch rival Hasina to jail prior to her own incarceration.

After the BNP's standing committee deliberations, and following the meeting with ten obscure parties aspiring to be in an expanded BNP-led four party alliance, Madam Zia parroted the

patent cliché usually uttered by any politician in trouble. She found the country "in deep crisis" and "sovereignty in danger," while her redoubtable secretary-general reiterated the BNP's demand for rescheduling the election after fulfilling the party's seven points. Only then will the BNP-Jamaat alliance consider whether or not to participate in the election.

A rather composed Hossain Zillur called the development the result of frustration, without elaborating what that frustration was due to. At the same time, he went on a late night mission to the Mainul Road residence of the madam, presumably for further bargaining and a possible patch up to rescue the election from deadlock. Although, in his characteristic optimism, Zillur put up a brave face expressing his confidence in the planned conduct of election, the caravan of which is well on the highway and steadily moving past its important milestones after the election schedule was declared by the Election

Commission.

It may be the BNP's well-guarded secret but, according to informed quarters and BNP insiders, the party is simply not election-worthy at this moment. As the party's survey reports from the electoral fields across the country poured in, it presented a desperate picture about the party's electoral prospects. It's not surprising that amid desperation and gloom only the party supreme and her secretary-general have suddenly begun talking deliriously while others are keeping a studied silence. It's only an attempt to take refuge in sophistry as to various issues involving the poll.

BNP's predicaments are not difficult to understand. In the first place is the image problem the party created for itself. It's incompetence, misrule, corruption and repressive measures are now indelibly sketched in public perception as the party's hallmark. To change that perception overnight is a daunting task, even with angels participating in a chorus to drum

up BNP's clean image. Even if the BNP minions cry their hearts out to make others believe that the hustlers have turned saints, it will fail. Therefore, the BNP obviously wants to buy time to repair its dented image matter what the impact will be of that long haul on the nation already mired in deep crisis.

Secondly, the BNP's power brokers, Hawa Bhaban mafia and partners in plunder, the mainstay of BNP's strength, are either in custody or on the run. The BNP received a mortal blow to its organisation from an intra-party schism denuding the mainstream from the so-called reformists breeding doubts, apprehension and disbelief which go down the rank and file of the party all over the country. To bring it back to its original shape will be a difficult task, even if at all possible. As a result, the party is apparently not ready for election as per the election schedule.

Moreover, the election date on December 18, only two days after victory day and four days after the martyred intellectuals day, is certainly a damper for the BNP-led alliance infested with collaborators and war criminals. The national psyche has been gripped by a sense of trauma during these sensitive times. The madam would, therefore, need some more time to avoid this date, which is unfavourable for her. So, as a strategy, the party is leveling blanket accusations at the electoral issues already adequately taken care of and taking shelter in ambivalence so that it cannot be

blamed for not participating in the poll just now.

While it may be prudent to continue with the policy of persuasion and appeasement, the election cannot perhaps be prolonged indefinitely. More so when the madam's intention now is to delay the election or put it in fresh uncertainty.

The nation is at a dangerous crossroads, from where it ought to immediately adopt its chosen path of a democratic transition impatiently awaited by the millions both at home and abroad. Much more that, it is hinged to immediately addressing our piled up problems inherited both from BNP-Jamaat misrule and an un-elected dispensation that has gone well past its mandated time. Madam Zia already did great harm to the nation by obstinately sticking to her guns and dismissing others' counselings, and is still resorting to sophistry to keep alive a state of uncertainty. She must be excoriated of the demons overpowering her sense of judgment.

Given her past record and the enviable following she is a phenomenon in our politics. Under the circumstances, her best bet would be to avail a win-win situation which the present arrangement provides, or else she may be condemned forever for making our election questionable with her non-participation. In doing so she will gain nothing, but will be left out in the cold.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## No alternative to state intervention



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

**S**UCH is the grip of neo-liberal or free-market dogma on the minds of its Indian adherents that they deny there's a grim global financial crisis and economic recession. Indeed, some say the collapse of banks and the general economic slowdown in the West represents the birth of a new, vibrant, free-market capitalism. One commentator concedes this is a crisis of neo-liberal globalisation, but asserts this could be globalisation's "finest hour."

Neo-liberals want to raise foreign investment caps in many sectors, dismantle labour protections, free the entry of foreign banks, and go for capital account convertibility (CAC). Such exuberance is surreal when stock-market indices have fallen by one-half, banks are extremely nervous, and industrial growth has plummeted to 1.3%.

Such mindlessness stands in sharp contrast to the frank admission by US policymakers of neo-liberalism's failure and the need for extensive state intervention. Even Alan Greenspan, former US Federal Reserve chairman, admits that his faith in self-correcting markets was misplaced.

Mercifully, many Indian policymakers acknowledge that the cause of the stock-market crash is the withdrawal of \$12 billion by foreign institutional investors

## THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Such a massive loss of livelihoods is unacceptable and morally indefensible. Given the near-total absence of social security in India, it'd mean mass destitution and great human suffering for no fault of the workers. Clearly, what India urgently needs is state intervention addressing substantive issues of production, income and employment. The government must take four different initiatives.

factor related to the global crisis. Had India gone in for CAC, the economy would have totally collapsed.

The Reserve Bank has infused liquidity into banks by repeatedly cutting their cash reserve and statutory liquidity ratios, and reducing the interest rate at which it lends money to them (repo rate) by 1.5% to 3.5% points.

This has funnelled a substantial Rs. 260,000 crores into the financial system. The Finance Ministry hopes this would entice banks to lend to cash-strapped businesses, and prevent a slowdown. But this hasn't happened.

Banks are wary of lending even to well-established companies, or to one another. Last week, the overnight inter-bank borrowing rate was 21%! This is not because banks are short of funds. They have sucked in long-term fixed deposits. Some are so flush with funds that they're lending hundreds of crores to the RBI at the 6% "reverse repo" rate.

The reason for banks' lending aversion is that they can't evaluate risks and default probability as industrial growth slumps and major projects are abandoned.

This has happened in the core sector and in real estate, pharmaceuticals, civil aviation, metallurgical production and

information technology. The realty market is so depressed that some developers are offering a car free with every flat.

Meanwhile, profit margins continue to shrink by as much as 35% over a year for 1,348 large companies surveyed. Reports are pouring in of depleting order-book positions, an export slowdown, and corporations' layoff plans.

A survey of small enterprises reports a 20% to 90% decrease in orders for leather goods, a 10% fall in textile exports, a 20% decrease in orders for auto components. Hosiery exporters are offering discounts of 35%. Exports of polished diamonds, which fetch Rs. 70,000 crores, are in the dumps.

Even worse affected are craftsmen. About 20% of Meerut's 30,000-odd goldsmiths have left. Moradabad's highly skilled brassworkers have taken to plying cycle-rickshaws to survive.

A chamber of commerce estimates likely industrial job losses at a stunning 25% to 30% over the coming year. This report was considered alarmist. But other surveys paint an equally grim picture. A CNN-IBN poll says 79% of respondents believe there's an economic slowdown, and 47% are worried about job losses.

Polls apart, economists using

Planning Commission numbers have forecast that GDP growth will fall this year by 2 percentage points to 7%, and some 2 million jobs will be lost.

Especially vulnerable will be unorganised sector workers, who account for 93% of India's workforce and neither enjoy employment security nor earn a living wage.

Such a massive loss of livelihoods is unacceptable and morally indefensible. Given the near-total absence of social security in India, it'd mean mass destitution and great human suffering for no fault of the workers.

Clearly, what India urgently needs is state intervention addressing substantive issues of production, income and employment. The government must take four different initiatives.

First, directed lending. It should ask banks to lend on a priority basis to the core sector and to employment-intensive small industries, with guarantees of making up losses. This will help revive production and prevent unemployment.

Second, there must humane labour law reform to prevent hire-and-fire practices. Where redundancies become absolutely unavoidable, approaches that



Save their jobs.

avert layoffs must be adopted, including shorter working hours, pay reduction with guaranteed sustenance income, liberal leave, and flexibility for contractual assignments.

Factories employing 50 or more workers must seek government permission before laying-off anyone.

Third, the government must launch a massive social security scheme, including an unemployment allowance, subsidised healthcare, education, and retraining in skills, and pensions for old people, widows and the disabled.

This must include large-scale public works programs, and a strengthening and extension of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to urban areas.

Finally, we need an incomes policy to reduce the astronomical earnings disparities between the poor and the very rich. This means raising minimum wages across-the-board, especially for menial jobs. It also means having a ceiling on incomes, and higher taxes for

the rich. India committed a blunder in 1994 by abolishing ceilings on managerial salaries. This has further fattened corporate Fat Cats, some of whom take hundreds of crores in salaries, commissions and bonuses even as their companies' profit margins shrink. This must be reversed.

It's unlikely that Dr. Manmohan Singh will do this willingly. His instinct is to seek solutions from those very Fat Cats who are part of the problem. He has also appointed ex-IMF neoliberal economist Raghuram Rajan, a CAC votary, as an "honourary" economic adviser.

Dr. Singh will have to be pressed to change course through advocacy, political lobbying and mass agitation. But there's no alternative if we want to cope with the crisis and turn it into an opportunity to build a minimally decent, humane and inclusive society through prudent state intervention.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in

## Islam and Obama

Many Muslims kept their presidential preference a secret in the months leading up to Super Tuesday, fearing that an endorsement from them might in fact work against Obama. After all, this was an election year in which the word "Muslim" was used as shorthand to connote anti-American leanings and a hidden love of terrorism.

LORRAINE ALI

**F**OR the past few months, not a day went by without the words "Muslim" and "Obama" being mentioned in the same sentence. From the divisive shouts and jeers at McCain rallies to the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times to an interview with Colin Powell on NBC's "Meet the Press," Muslims or at least the mention of them have been more prevalent this campaign year than "Joe the

Plumber."

But beyond the use of the term Muslim as a pejorative, and accusations by the far right that Obama was himself a secret follower of the Quran, what did real Muslim-Americans think of the Chicago senator? And how did they vote?

The American Muslim Task Force on Civil Rights and Elections released a poll today of over 600 Muslims from more than 10 states, including Florida and Pennsylvania, and it revealed that

89% of respondents voted for Obama, while only 2% voted for McCain. It also indicated that 95% of Muslims polled cast a ballot in this year's presidential election, the highest turnout in a US election ever and 14% of those were first-time voters.

The Gallup Center for Muslim studies estimates that US Muslims favoured Obama in greater numbers than did Hispanics (67% of whom voted for Obama) and nearly matched that of African-

Americans, 93% of whom voted for Obama.

More than two thirds who were polled said the economy was the most important issue affecting their decision on November 4, while 16% said the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan informed their votenumbers that put Muslims roughly on a par with the general population.

Many Muslim Americans also changed their party affiliations for this election. The country's Muslim population, estimated at between 7 to 8 million, has traditionally voted along conservative, Republican lines. Today, more than two thirds of American Muslims polled say they consider themselves to be Democrats, while only 4% see themselves as Republicans (29% identified themselves as Independents.)

The shift began in 2004 -- in part

because of the GOP's mishandling of civil liberties, from wiretapping American citizens to detaining Muslims in the United States and Guantanamo without trial, and because of the war in Iraq. This year, many more were drawn into the Democratic party by Obama himself.

Muslims across the country were captivated by the senator's promise of unity and hope. On the Muslim-Americans for Obama Web site (Mafo2008.com), their mission statement includes the following: "That we support Barack Obama because, among other reasons, he rejects the politics of fear, challenging our nation to embrace its collective identity, where each American has a stake in the success and well-being of every American."

"All the Muslim Americans I know were excited and electrified

by him," says Salman Ahmed, the New York-based guitarist and singer of the Pakistani-American rock band Junoon. He's dedicated several recent concerts to getting the vote out for Obama. "It was not like 'Good, Obama gets the Muslim world.' It was 'Oh my God! Here's a guy who understands the world, us, America.' Voting for him was a no brainer."

But many Muslims kept their presidential preference a secret in the months leading up to Super Tuesday, fearing that an endorsement from them might in fact work against Obama. After all, this was an election year in which the word "Muslim" was used as shorthand to connote anti-American leanings and a hidden love of terrorism.

A recent study by Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a media watchdog group, found that the mainstream press didn't

do enough to challenge the election-year smears of Islam by such conservative talk show hosts as Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, or counter accusations that Obama was "one of them" by detractors such as "Obama Nation" author Jerome Corsi. "We are the bogeyman now," joked a secular Muslim woman last month during a conversation regarding Obama (she preferred to remain anonymous). "Yes, I want to shout my endorsement of him from the rooftops, but I do not want to mess up any chance of Obama becoming the next president. How crazy is this position we've been put in?"

But the ploy to connect Obama to a demonised Islam may have backfired. Weeks before the election, a nonprofit group which calls itself the Clarion Fund sent out an anti-Muslim DVD titled "Obses-

sion" in Sunday papers across America; copies were also mailed to various voters in swing states.

The DVD paired images of Nazis with images of Muslims, over and over and over again. Its arrival on the eve of the election was clearly intended to scare voters into supporting McCain, turning them against the candidate whose middle name happens to be "Hussein."

"It was intended to be a way of linking Obama to Islam, but it backfired when a lot of people began saying wait, what's going on?" says Jen'nan Read, a professor of sociology at Duke University. "It not only mobilised many Muslim-American voters, but brought out other undecided voters in support of Obama rather than McCain."

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.