LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY NOVEMBER 15, 2008

BIMSTEC initiatives

Progress lies in collective endeavour

T is only for the second time that the newly formed regional economic grouping has met at summit level, and it was worth repeating the essential message that has resonated during the recently concluded BIMSTEC summit in New Delhi recently -- that our progress lies in collective endeavour.

It is well to remember that the meeting has taken place in the backdrop of two very significant developments in the world, the global financial crisis and the global war on terrorism, both of which have directly or indirectly influenced most of the countries of BIMSTEC. The areas that the leaders have agreed to cooperate in reflect the international economic, financial and strategic realities.

While one saw the organisation become more inclusive by welcoming two new members in 1997, the new grouping has become more eclectic in terms of the region it represents as well as the areas of cooperation essential for the economic development of the region. For Bangladesh to suggest inclusion of global warming as an issue which, BIMSTEC should include in its list of areas of collaboration, is timely indeed.

There is an agreement on as many as 13 areas of cooperation, which include poverty alleviation and terrorism, as well as working jointly to tackle, among other things, the current financial meltdown and food and energy crisis. Of note is the decision to have Dhaka host the poverty alleviation centre, as well as setting up of a regional food bank.

We would like to see the decisions put into effect without delay. We take note of the fact that the meeting has decided to put into effect some of the decisions already, like holding of the second ministerial meeting on poverty alleviation in Nepal next year. It is encouraging also to note, according to the Chair of the Summit, that a convention on terrorism is all but prepared and ready to be signed.

What, however, remains is the completion of free trade agreement negotiations. An FTA, with the necessary safeguards for country like Bangladesh, will, hopefully, see a quantum leap in the intraregional trade which now remains around a meagre 5 percent of their international trade.

BIMSTEC has tremendous potential, most of all because it conjoins two regional groups. The experiences of all its members can be synergised for healthy development of the grouping through collective efforts.

Public hearing on DAP

Casual approach to city development -- again!

E cannot help being skeptic about the public hearing launched by Rajuk, some five weeks ago, on the draft final reports of Detailed Area Plan (DAP) offering a participatory outlet to the city dwellers to be associated with the planning process for the capital city's well-rounded development. In theory, the idea is good; but in practice, it looks headed for a debacle unless of course it is reorganised into an effective interface between the development planner and the city dweller.

The public hearing has until December 2 to expire. And already it has become a listless, fragmentary effort yielding very little by way of obtaining useful public inputs to revise the plan to address city dwellers' concerns.

Just how important is the DAP? Very, for it is the operational plan of specifics pertaining to implementation of Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP), popularly known as Dhaka master plan. The DMDP launched as early as in 1992 remains a non-starter to this day -- thanks to lack of a DAP.

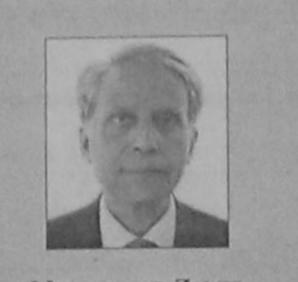
Basically the flawed approach to DAP lay in the consultants' failure to consult the public at the time of field survey thereby ruling out any meaningful public participation subsequently. Involving local public at that stage could have eliminated incongruities in the survey reports and

physical feature maps. Rather than inviting individuals through newspaper advertisement to air their views, civic bodies, community leaders and public representatives should have been involved in the hearing process.

It is alleged that Rajuk has little maneuverability in recognising the flaws and anomalies in the final draft report and amending proposals contained in it 'as it has already paid up most of the fees of the consultants'. How could they have done so? The other allegation is equally serious: according to the experts, the DAP is poised to serve certain coterie interests including that of housing developers.

All these allegations need to be gone into and ways and means devised to attune the DAP to the best practices in town planning to perfect it.

The US polls revolution and Bangladesh



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THAT happened on 4 November shook the world. The people of the USA spoke this time and ushered in change in the most meaningful and effective mode. The manner, in which this was played out, restored to America its standing at the top of the ladder of moral leadership. The electoral process demonstrated once again that given good governance, fairness and a level playing field, a credible election can be held despite difficulties. Like many others, I felt happy to have been alive on this day and to have savoured this magical moment. It around the world a spring of hope. It dream" speech was delivered at Lincoln Memorial, but segregation, discrimination and violent racist abuse has finally come to rest in America. This election, in more ways than one, has been "a huge

step for mankind". complex figure. A child of a white Summit will be like walking through mother and a black father, he in his a minefield, camouflaged with very essence draws together and interregnum pieties. There is every juxtaposes two of the longest and possibility that we might end up most important threads in withastrategic shift in US economic America's national tapestry. He has policy. used his own life and his varied upbringing to reaffirm to the prised if Mr. Obama's first stimulus persuasive measures are taken in time since the first half of the 20th

American people that hope is audacious rather than foolish. By merely winning the White House against major odds he has expanded the scope of a happy promise that sets roads, bridges and ports) that will no boundaries for an American provide much-needed improvecitizen to dream a little wider. Nevertheless, there will still be a lot to be done in the coming months.

The President-elect, as is generally agreed, is going to inherit the 1930s. poisoned chalice of an economy entering a deep and prolonged recession and a soaring budget

package of US Dollar 200 billion is not used to prop up middle class spending. In all likelihood, it will be used in a public works blitz (on ments in infrastructure as well as generate employment. This economic relaunch, in that regard, will be similar to that of Roosevelt in the

expected to focus on as a priority measure will be the extending of

India and many other developing countries (including Bangladesh) that have been profiting from such

BPO engagement expected to pay special attention to two other areas -- labour and environmental standards. Mr. Obama has already made it clear that countariffs. Our BGMEA, the BTMA, the Administration's policies. The BKMEA and the foreign investors in President-elect has made it clear

this regard, this will certainly affect century, we now have a moment of hope and an opportunity to build meaningful bridges. One expects that this will be translated into practice in Iraq, Afghanistan and in The next regime in the USA is the resolving of expectations in Palestine. In the Middle East in particular, one anticipates that there will be a much higher level of US engagement, reversing the tries that repress trade unions or arms-length ambivalence that has Another area that Mr. Obama is breach eco rules will face the risk of characterized much of the Bush

equal measure in post-election speeches by both the victor and Mr

I have always believed in politicians being constructive, positive and bi-partisan in their approach to solving problems. Unfortunately Bangladeshi politicians have failed to demonstrate the necessary wisdom in this regard. Even now, with elections just a few days away, some political parties are resorting to old tactics and are trying to create obstacles towards the holding of a credible election. Veiled threats are again becoming the norm and raising anxiety levels about the post-election scenario. The BNP-Alliance leadership in particular should take lessons from the recently concluded US Presidential election as well as the ones recently held in Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan.

Politicians in our country must understand that people from all walks of life can be inspired to bring about qualitative changes in governance. It is a question of attitudes. We also have to realise that proper functioning of democracy within and outside the parliament is the only way to achieve national solidarity and move the nation forward. Confrontational politics must be avoided for achieving poverty reduction and further development in socio-economic sectors. Time has come for our politicians to turn the leaf and to ensure for the people the fundamental values and rights -- for which millions paid with their lives during our War of Liberation. I am confident that like the Americans, we also can. The time for an ostrich syndrome is over.

We must do this not only for our own welfare but also for the sake of our future generations.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at

POST BREAKFAST

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kindled in the hearts of many deficit that will rapidly reach levels health coverage to the 47 million has taken 45 years since Martin foreigners have continued to fund Luther King's famous "I have a America's debt needs, but a time could come when foreigners could withhold capital. Obama and his team know that this might set-off another round of financial free-fall. Consequently, what is agreed to by the leaders of G 20 in Washington will be carefully monitored by Obama, US President-elect is a Obama. The follow-up of this

In this context I will not be sur-

not seen in a generation. So far Americans without health insurance. It is more than likely that the new President and the strong Democratic Congress will ensure that companies participate in this exercise or face tax penalties. Mr. Obama has not forgotten that his life dying from cancer while struggling to pay for treatment.

Administration, keen on creating jobs in the USA is also expected to give attention to the reduction of Business Process Outsourcing. Many, including Obama, have gone on record on their distaste for 'shipping jobs overseas'. If negative

the EPZ in Bangladesh might like to that his Administration would be pre-emotively take necessary action willing to talk directly with Syria and in this regard.

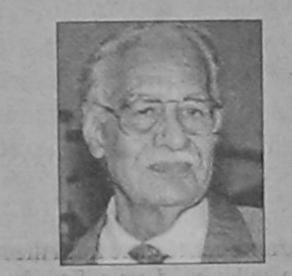
emphasis on renewable sources of The new Democratic green energy (solar, wind power, eventual aim of slashing America's overcome. dependence on imported oil.

divided and dangerous than at any

Iran, both pariahs in the eyes of the Mr. Obama also plans to meet Bush White House. Obama's advisextra expenditure required for a ers feel they can draw Syria out of cleaner environment and a smaller Iran's influence by promising carbon footprint by generating investment and a land-for-peace more revenue from additional taxes exchange (regarding Golan mother spent the last months of her on windfall profit in the oil sector, Heights), thus guaranteeing Israel's stiff rises on fuel duty, and more security. Whatever the premise, one hopes that the Obama team will rely more on multilateralism and abidbio-fuel and nuclear). It is estimated ing by international legal principles that a US Dollar 150 billion fund will than unilateralism. There will be be created for this purpose with the hurdles but they will have to be

One cannot conclude observa-For a world that is certainly more tions on the US election and the Obama victory without also reflecting on the graciousness shown in

Obama factor in South Asia



KULDIP NAYAR writes from New Delhi

OME Pakistani television channels have called me up seeking my comment on the effect of Senator Barrack Hussein Obama's election as the US President on India-Pakistan relations. The Indian media has raised the same question. The first is downcast and the second exudes confidence since it assumes that India and America are "natural allies."

However, Indian reaction to Obama's telephone call to President Asif Ali Zardari is subdued. The general impression is that Pakistan has been singled out, along with five other countries, because it is an ally in the Afghanistan war. Newspapers do, however, carry reports that Obama called Manmohan Singh but communication was not established. The idea is to tell Pakistan that India continues to be close to

What amuses me is the obsession in the two countries or, for that matter, in South Asia about the way America looks towards them. They strain every nerve to catch Washington's eye, to score a point on how close that country is to America than the other, and, to make America feel that its benevo-

lent attention mattered the country in its internal and external affairs.

Such thinking, speaking dispassionately, smacks of colonial slavish mentality, which we have not been able to shake off even after six decades of independence.

If the US elections have proved anything beyond doubt it is that people are their own master. They have no holy cow and they are not afraid to face any challenge. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are sovereign countries and their strength or

trained their guns against Pakistan

India's resolve to have a joint mechanism is the reply to combat terrorism together. M.K. Narayanan and Mahmud Durrani, the National Security Advisers of India and Pakistan, respectively, have held a approach." Even the name of two-day meeting at Delhi to discuss the nuts and bolts of the mechanism. Both have been positive in their observation. This is one example to show that we are our own

press interview, which was given in October but published now, has created a stir. He has said that Kashmir was a place he wanted to "devote serious diplomatic resources to get a special envoy there to figure out a plausible

Clinton figured as envoy. Obama's statement is an unnecessary diversion when New Delhi and Islamabad are engaged in bilateral talks to sort out Kashmir and other problems souring rela-

basis of religion. Obama would only aggravate the situation by focusing his attention on Kashmir or appointing an envoy like Clinton who is pro-India.

The reported nomination of Ahmad Rashid as adviser on Afghanistan to the American forces at Kabul is a welcome development. He is liberal and has many friends in India. His advice would be sober and not smack of high-and-mighty attitude. His knowledge on Afghanistan is intimate. But why has

they have in mind cannot be anything but liberal. Rashid told an Indian newspa-

per recently that while the Taliban were attacking the American and European forces were operating from the Pakistani soil. He suspected the hand of some elements in authority at Islamabad behind the activities of the Taliban. It is an open secret that the ISI, apart of the Pakistani establish-

ment, is at the back of the Taliban and still obsessed with the idea of having Afghanistan as its satellite to get Pakistan its "strategic depth." It is strange that the Pakistani army is trying to eliminate the Taliban. But the ISI is still mixed up with the Taliban. It should know that duplicity which former President Pervez Musharraf encouraged cannot go

Yet the bombing by America on Islamabad's federallyadministered area is a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani is justified in warning Washington to either halt the missile attacks inside Pakistan or face the failure

of efforts to end militancy. Zardari is said to have conveyed the same thing to Obama during their telephonic conversation.

In any case, South Asia expects Bush's cowboy diplomacy to come to an end. If it does not, Obama's victory speech which gave the world a new hope of peace and conciliation may turn out to be yet another false promise held by a US President.

BETWEEN THE LINES

India's resolve to have a joint mechanism is the reply to combat terrorism together. M.K. Narayanan and Mahmud Durrani, the National Security Advisers of India and Pakistan, respectively, have held a two-day meeting at Delhi to discuss the nuts and bolts of the mechanism. Both have been positive in their observation. This is one example to show that we are our own masters.

weakness is from within, not without. They do not have to kowtow before any foreign country, however powerful. Washington cannot impose anything on them if they do not offer their neck. Yet the manner in which they behave gives the impression as if they are banana republics, tiptoeing for favours. Obama has made certain obser-

vations on matters relating to India and Pakistan. Before the polls, Obama was critical of Pakistan for using the US assistance in training and arming terrorists for infiltrating them into India. Indeed, India has been at the receiving end and it still is. But these terrorists have now

I didn't like former Prime tions between the two countries. Minister Nawaz Sharif traveling all the way to Washington and using President Bill Clinton's services for withdrawing the repulsed Pakistani forces from Kargil. Nawaz Sharif knew Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee well. He should have talked to Vajpayee on the hotline and settled the matter then and

Clinton did the same thing indirectly. He had Vajpayee on the phone in the presence of Nawz Sharif, conveying that Pakistan wanted free passage to withdraw its troop from the Kargil heights.

Obama's remark on Kashmir in a

Both had signed an agreement at Shimla as back as in 1972 to iron out differences bilaterally, without resorting to arms. And they have stucktoit. A composite dialogue has been

going on and some progress has been made. The fifth round of meeting is due this month. The two countries would have probably reached a fruitful stage if the valley had not acquired a religious colour after the controversial handing over of land in the valley to the Amarnath Shrine Board. India's pre-condition for any settlement on Kashmir is that it cannot demarcate borders on the

he been given the responsibility of Kashmiras well?

I have not been able to understand the linkage between Kashmir and Afghanistan. The first problem is as old as partition while the second came up after 1980 when America created a force of Taliban to bleed the Soviet Union to death. Even if the time factor is forgotten, combining the two will be like mixing chalk with cheese.

The Taliban aspire to convert Afghanistan into a fundamentalist state. The Kashmiris, whatever their grievance against India, want the Hindu-majority Jammu to be part of their state. If this is so the Kashmir Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Bangladesh agriculture: Challenges ahead

M ANWARUL QUADER SHAIKH

ANGLADESH Academy of Agriculture (BAAG), an organization of senior and eminent agriculturists of the country, organized a round table discussion on "Bangladesh Agriculture: Challenges Ahead" just more than a couple of months ago (23rd August) at BARC Conference Room, Dhaka. A large number of shortcomings as well as challenges were identified during the meeting and ameliorative measures were suggested. However, the most daunting challenges facing our agriculture and urgently necessary measures

are analyzed here. Feeding the ever-increasing population: Twenty five lakh increased population per year has been eating up all the achievements in agricultural production. Consequently people's standard of living is declining and the number of people below the poverty level is increasing. Therefore, population control should be taken up as the most important development agendum alongside improvement

in agricultural production. Constraints and opportunities due to globalization: Relation of Bangladesh with GATT and WTO has put the country in a globalized trade liberalization regime thereby

the world market. But the country is not yet ready to compete with many countries due to quality limitations of its products. Tariff reduction to a much lower level by the WTO has created a condition of unfair comagainst big farmers of the West. Policy support, therefore, is needed through revision of the National Agricultural Policy (NAP) to sustain and nurture the small producers and local traders through development of comparative advantage and providing technological know-how and input.

Loss of agricultural land: About 100,000 ha productive agricultural land is lost per year through nonagricultural use i.e. roads, housing and other "development" projects. This tantamounts to wanton destruction of the most important natural resource base of agriculture and, if not checked now, the country will be left with very little fertile and productive land in the near future. Therefore immediate promulgation of land policy is needed to save prime cultivable land from further

shrinking. Erosion of river banks: River bank erosion affects about 150 upazilas of 50 out of 64 districts of the country. About one million people are affected by this calamity

homestead, land other structures making them virtually beggars. Some of them take shelter in the shanties of towns and others try to make a living out of the occasional shoals ("chars") formed in the river petition for our small farmers beds. Immediate steps to reduce river erosion through river training and partial taming is to be launched as well as all out research & extension programmes be initiated to augment productivity of charlands.

Halting degradation of natural resources: Degradation of natural resources has caused almost irreparable damage to agricultural production. These include soil erosion, soil salinity, sedimentation with sand, waterlogging, deforestation, depletion of soil's organic matter, imbalanced fertilization, reducing fish species etc. Vigorous research and extension programmes should to be initiated immediately with policy support from the government halt/this degradation and ensure appropriate production practices.

Global warming & climate change: Significant changes have occurred in the climatological pattern of the country. The frequency of natural calamities like flood, cyclone, drought etc have increased/become erratic. All these have profound influence on crop

opening the possibility of entry into annually who lose everything -- production in the country. Appropriate research and policy planning is needed to recast our crop calendar and introduce a strategy for managing the risks.

> base: About 400 highly qualified and experienced scientists have emigrated to developed countries due to limitation of career development by way of promotion to next higher grades, lack of higher education and trainings and because of retirement at the age of 57 years. A national HRD programme has to be developed and implemented to ensure (i) ample scope for promotion to next higher grade (including in situ promotion); (ii) retirement age of 62 years (like the Indian Council of Agriculture); (iii) higher salary and service benefits; (iv) higher study and training, facilities and, (v) provision of extra benefits for extraordinary performance. Such measures are expected to slow down the exodus of scientists.

Private sector involvement: The domain of agricultural research and extension in Bangladesh is mainly a public sector function. Absence of business motive has therefore kept it as a slow moving sector. Policy support to encourage the private sector including NGOs followed by appropriate strategic planning to induce private sector funding of

research & extension is a dire need. Many countries have harvested the benefits of private sector investment in agriculture.

Availability of inputs: The inputs Dwindling human resource for agricultural production are always in short supply. Timely availability of adequate quantities pre-requisite to proper production of crops and prior arrangement for ensuring their availability should be a routine function of the relevant authorities.

Marketing and agribusiness: These aspects of agriculture have been very much neglected. As a consequence, the farmers do not get proper price for their produce; the middlemen get the lion's share of benefit. To ensure proper price of products to the farmers, there is a need for: (i) improvement of infrastructure & facilities in the market places; (ii) improvement of marketing system and marketing channels; (iii) alleviation of problems faced by the producers, traders and consumers; (iv) creation of facilities for ushering a smooth field for establishing agribusiness and value addition; (v) arrangement for farmer training to converting subsistence agriculture to commercial

agriculture. Introduction of innovative ideas into practice: Technology innova-

agricultural development in the country. The purpose was to increase production and to become self-sufficient. But not much of innovative practices have been tried by the public and the private secof inputs should be considered as a tors. The only exception has been KATALYST, a project of SWISSCONTACT Bangladesh. The motto of the project is "Growth through business". They conduct market research for various inputs (seeds etc) and the products of farmers with the aim to understand why quality inputs and products are in short supply and to identify opportunities to improve the chain and functioning of the market. The ultimate beneficiary is the total community starting from the input producer to the consumer of the processed food. This kind of activity needs to be taken up by the GOs, NGOs, associations etc involved in research, extension and agribusi-

> Diversification of agricultural products: More than 60% of the land is cultivated by marginal farmers. They along with small and medium farmers have introduced monoculture of rice as a measure of food security for their families. Rice area has been increasing at the cost of all other crops. The trend is reverse in

tion and their dissemination have China. Monoculture destroys the government department) as well as fertility & structural balance of the each has its own Act and Service been the traditional strategy for soil and nutritional balance of the rules. In view of the country's partichuman food. The trend of ipation to the WTO since 2005, a monoculturing of rice has to be new vista for increasing its producslowly reversed through develop- tion possibility and achieving ment of a strategic plan of research, financial support and farmer moti- been opened. The NARS must now

Introduction of information and communication technology (ICT): The existing extension procedures of the DAE do not include ICT. Inclusion of this modern technology has proved to be the quickest, cheapest and most effective means of technology dissemination and market monitoring. India has introduced ICT service to some States where-from the farmers get the latest information about improved technologies as well as market situation of various areas. Introduction of such a system in Bangladesh is expected to augment production as well as ensure competitive price of farm products thereby increasing the farmer's income.

Integration of research programmes of the National Agricultural Research System (NARS): The ten Agricultural Research Institutes belong to four different ministries and have different governance systems (e.g. semiautonomous, autonomous and

greater economic efficiency has address problems related to organizational rigidities of the ARIs and encourage much more integration of their research endeavors under the leadership of BARC.

Introduction of "National Agricultural Scientist System" (NASS): Leaders of highly successful research groups in ARIs are forced to retire at the age of 57 and potential research programmes lose momentum abruptly. This is happening when major breakthroughs are necessary to achieve self autarky in food as a whole. The vision for introducing NASS entails attracting and utilizing the services of extraordinarily competent but retired agricultural scientists to give leadership in conducting frontier research using the most modern technologies for accelerating agricultural production. India, Pakistan and the Philippines have introduced such systems and have been reaping the benefit.

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