

Bangladesh's proposal for joint initiative to fight terrorism

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THE victory of the Awami League has been hailed worldwide as a victory of secular forces over fundamentalism. While this is a partial explanation of an unbelievable victory, it will nevertheless give the new administration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina international recognition that could be crucial for success of her Government for making Bangladesh a Muslim majority country with liberal traditions. External support, particularly of Bangladesh's development partners would be extremely important for translating to reality the massive electoral promises of the AL. In this context the image that the elections has created would be very helpful.

Closer to home, India has been elated at the AL's resounding victory. Sheikh Hasina has been warmly congratulated by the Indian Prime Minister. Sonia Gandhi has spoken with her on telephone. The enthusiasm in New Delhi will be even more important for Bangladesh than the positive view that the news has caused in other world capitals. The reasons are obvious. First, Bangladesh is situated literally inside the belly of India. Second, almost all her rivers that provide the lifeline for her people whose major occupation is agriculture flow from India. Finally, Bangladesh has been restrained from exploring unhindered for hydrocarbons in the Bay of Bengal because her maritime boundary with India is undemarcated. These factors, among others, make it imperative for Bangladesh's sustained development and well-being to have friendly relations with India. Unfortunately, during 5 years of BNP rule, Bangladesh-India relations have regressed while during the caretaker government, bilateral relations have remained stalled.

While the AL's resounding victory has been welcomed enthusiastically in New Delhi, it is Sheikh Hasina's statement, that she would not allow Bangladesh's soil to be used by any

terror groups and that she would like a joint task force to be established with India to fight terrorism that has been music to the ears of the Indian leaders. Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said this is "positive" news while BJP leader LK Advani better articulated the Indian viewpoint in a letter to Sheikh Hasina in which he wrote: "The people of India are delighted to read...your categorical statement that your government will not allow the territory of Bangladesh to be used by terrorists and extremist organizations."

The AL assumes office at a time when the international situation is vastly different from what it was when the party was in power the last time from 1996 to 2001. In between, 9/11 has dramatically changed world politics. First, fighting terrorism and militancy has become the major focus of governments all over the world including India that has been at the receiving end of the misfortunes from such acts. As President Bush hands power to President-elect Barack Obama, the war on terror that he led and fought militarily is now expected to be dealt more through the non-military channels where the new US administration would be seeking partners worldwide. Second, India has since emerged in a very effective manner upon the world scene where it is now the accepted regional leader. During this term of AL, India will have great influence in world politics and it will thus be in Bangladesh's interest to have friendly relations with her.

These are realities that the foreign affairs team of the new Government must focus upon for the future of Bangladesh. One issue that has emerged from the December 29th elections is that the so-called "India factor" had no impact upon voters' choice of parties. The record number of voters has voted on substance such as economics, good governance, trial of war criminals and democracy. In the past, the "India factor" has restrained Bangladeshi politicians in dealing with India objectively because it has been a factor in elections. India, on her part,

did not render much encouragement either to the people of Bangladesh towards friendly relations with her by disdainfully scorning Bangladesh's legitimate claims on a wide range of bilateral issues.

LK Advani has put Bangladesh-India relations in perspective by stating categorically that it is not an option but an "indispensable necessity" in his letter to Sheikh Hasina. It is now up to the Indian Government to demonstrate how "indispensable" these relations are by the way they reciprocate to the positive move made by Sheikh Hasina. India's prospects of evolving into a major economic powerhouse on a world scale will depend to a large extent on successfully containing terrorism and militancy that has been recently spreading all over the country. In this context, the area that borders Bangladesh, India's northeast, has been particularly vulnerable. Just after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November last year, Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram made specific accusations in Parliament that insurgent groups operating in northeast India, including ULFA, have sanctuaries in Bangladesh. Indian Government has in addition also accused Bangladesh Government for permitting Pakistan's ISI to assist the terrorists in India's northeast from inside Bangladesh. Bangladesh government has always denied these accusations. Militancy and terrorism does not serve anyone's purpose for these militants, their initial motives for terrorists acts notwithstanding, often become Frankensteins and their actions in the end affect everyone adversely. Sheikh Hasina's foreign policy aides must now open discussions with their Indian counterparts to, first, remove Indian doubt that Bangladesh has been aiding Indian separatists, and then, to jointly fight this menace so that militants on either side are exposed and brought under the purview of the law.

For sustainable improvement of relations, India of course has the major role to play. India could now show her



goodwill on a wide range of unresolved bilateral issues while officials on both sides work out the modalities of the joint task force and build upon the positive move of Sheikh Hasina. Take for example the un-demarcated maritime boundary issue. In a recent seminar organized by the Daily Star on this issue, participants were unanimous that Bangladesh's future lay in her territorial waters where India's counter claims have put a spanner. The Seminar established the fact hitherto little known in Bangladesh that the extent of the area that has been causing problems for Bangladesh with India is but a very small percentage of latter's total territorial waters in the Bay of Bengal. However, the nature of India's claims, supported by Myanmar, is such that it would take away from Bangladesh a major part of her legal claims in the Bay of Bengal, an area that

is presumed to be very rich in unexploited hydrocarbons. Although it is difficult yet to assume how India would deal with Bangladesh after her move on the security issue, it may not be very unrealistic to expect that India would demonstrate the political will to resolve the issue of the maritime boundary by taking on board Bangladesh's claims that are both fair and legal.

In fact, it does not have to be the maritime issue upon which India could begin its reciprocal gesture. India could make it on a wide range of other outstanding issues such as water sharing, trade imbalance, etc. where it has denied Bangladesh a fair treatment due to lack of political will on her part. India's reciprocal gesture must nevertheless come quickly because although the "India factor" did not play any role in the elections, there is a perception in

Bangladesh that India is not quite as fair a neighbour to Bangladesh as it should have been. It needs two to tango. Sheikh Hasina's move on fighting militancy jointly has set the stage. It is now India's turn to reciprocate beginning with demonstration of political will for resolution of any one of the major outstanding issues that in turn could create the positive environment for dealing with other outstanding bilateral issues on both sides and in the process revive the 1971 spirit. If India fails to match Bangladesh's move in a major way, then the political will shown by Sheikh Hasina's offer could vanish quickly and AL led Government could be left stranded with the blame for being soft on India and the so-called "India factor" could be re-established again.

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An Israeli trap for Hamas

MKHAIMAR ABUSADA

THE truce between Hamas and Israel ended in the early hours of December 19, but the accusations over why it ended have followed the missiles and rockets across the border.

Hamas accuses Israel of not complying with the terms of the six-month Egyptian-mediated truce under which Israel was expected to end its siege and blockade of the Gaza Strip, re-open the commercial border crossing between Gaza and Israel and halt its military activities against Gazans.

Israel holds Hamas and other Palestinian groups responsible for not respecting their part of the truce. Israel claims that the firing of Qassam missiles and mortar shells did not stop and accuses Hamas of exploiting the truce by conducting more training and building better fortifications along the border between Gaza and Israel. Israel has also said straight out that the border crossings would not be fully re-opened without the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, captured by Hamas in 2006.

In the knowledge that Israel had sent its envoy Amos Gilad to Egypt to renew the truce a week before it expired, Hamas felt it could hold out for better conditions. The Islamist movement seemed convinced that the political leadership in Israel was not interested in war in Gaza. Hamas also felt that Israel wanted to exploit the political

divide between the West Bank and Gaza as long as possible and therefore was not in a hurry to start a war with Hamas.

But, to the contrary, the Israeli security establishment was busy with the long-term preparation of a major military operation and was carefully gathering intelligence, engaged in secret discussions, operational deception and spreading disinformation to mislead the public. Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister, reportedly instructed the Israeli army to prepare for the operation over six months ago, even as Israel was beginning to negotiate the just-expired truce agreement with Hamas.

Hamas fell into the trap. Israel is in the middle of an election campaign and the governing coalition is looking for excuses to justify a military attack on Hamas and its infrastructure in Gaza. Some of the right wing parties in Israel, mainly the Likud headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, were accusing the government of not doing enough to stop the firing of missiles from Gaza and even called on Barak to resign from his position.

According to Israeli public opinion polls, the Labor party headed by Barak will be the main loser in the coming elections while the Likud stands to become the biggest party in parliament. In other words, this was Barak's golden opportunity to launch a military strike against Hamas and improve his standing with the Israeli electorate. As a result, Israel launched the largest Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip since it

captured the territory in 1967, leaving more than 300 people dead and hundreds more wounded at the time of writing.

What comes next is extremely important. Whether Israel halts its air strikes against Gaza or continues the war and launches a ground invasion will depend on Israeli goals and interests. Israel has learned some lessons from the 2006 Lebanon War and has limited its immediate goal to ending the firing of missiles from Gaza. But military operations are like snowballs: the more momentum they gather the bigger they become. Soon Israel might find itself launching a full and comprehensive invasion if it calculates that the cost will be minimal.

But Israeli calculations will also depend on Hamas' behavior. If Hamas launches a large number of long-range missiles at major Israeli cities like Ashkelon and Ashdod, it will provide Israel another golden opportunity to go all the way. But if Hamas restrains itself, Israel might reconsider its position. Israel expects Hamas to retaliate and launch a barrage of missiles on Israeli towns and cities, but Hamas has so far been careful. The movement knows that any irrational behavior will cost it its government and potentially its existence in the Gaza Strip.

Nevertheless, Israel is hedging its bets. The army announced its intention to call up 6,700 reservists and Israeli officials said some reservists had already been mobilized to help protect Israeli towns and villages on the Gaza border from retaliatory Palestinian rocket attacks. Hundreds of Israeli infantry and armored corps troops are headed for the Gaza Strip border in preparation for a possible ground invasion.

Was the war on Gaza inevitable? One can argue that Israel's genuine interest with its air strikes is strikingly similar to Hamas' interest in firing scores of rockets into Israeli population centers: to force a ceasefire on better terms than the one just ended. For Hamas, this largely means securing an easing of Israeli economic sanctions against Gazans. For Israel, this centers on ending the rocket fire. For both sides, it means a prisoner exchange involving Gilad Shalit and hundreds of jailed Hamas members.

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India to build homeland security on US model

Indian Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram will discuss with U.S. officials how to model India's future Homeland Security Agency on the lines of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security during a Jan. 9-10 visit to Washington, sources in the Indian Home Ministry said.

Chidambaram replaced Home Minister Shiv Raj Patel as a fallout of the Nov. 26 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Sources said Chidambaram is scheduled to visit U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and with members of the transition team of President-elect Barack Obama.

India plans to set up an intelligence-gathering agency called the National Technical Facilities Organisation that would be similar to the U.S. National Security Agency.

The agency will act as a central agency for coordinating technical intelligence details from various assets of the Indian defense forces and other intelligence agencies, including the Research and Analytical Wing and the Central Bureau of Investigation.

Sources added that the U.S. and Israel will be major providers of equipment and weapons being acquired on an emergency basis for homeland security needs.

The \$10 billion wish list for homeland security includes a variety of UAVs, combat UAVs, hologram sights, advanced weaponry for urban warfare, and light capabilities in the form of helicopters, aircraft and precision-guided munitions.

Iraq: Security forces ready to defend country

Iraqi officials insisted on Jan. 4 that the fledgling security forces are ready to defend the country even as a suicide bomber killed at least 35 people and injured dozens in northern Baghdad.

The blast at checkpoint near the entrance to a Shiite shrine in the Kadhimiyah district occurred as top government officials gathered in the Green Zone to mark Army Day.

Today we are more optimistic and hopeful because the new democratic Iraq will be an example for the region, in building democracy and the state of law," Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said at ceremony in the Green Zone.

"The army will defend the unity, people, soil and sky of Iraq."

Iraqi Defense Minister Abdel Qader Jassem Mohammed said Iraq was ready for that task.

"This day shows that we are going in the right direction and we have the abilities to take care of our security issues," he told AFP after the ceremony to commemorate the 88th anniversary of the Iraqi army.

"We are ready to take over security completely by the end of 2011."

On January 1, the U.S. military turned over to Iraq security control of the Green Zone in central Baghdad - a heavily fortified government and diplomatic area that came to symbolize the American occupation.

In line with an agreement signed in November, the United States has handed over several security files to Iraq on January 1 and is due to withdraw entirely from the country by the end of 2011.

The Jan. 4 attack killed at least 35 people, including women and children, and wounded 65 others among them Iranian pilgrims who were taking part in a religious procession.

Estonia calls for more Baltic cooperation

The Baltic nations must accelerate their cooperation in land, air and naval forces, Estonia's Defense Minister Jaak Aaviksoo

said Jan. 5.

"There is already a good deal of cooperation between the Baltic nations, and this process needs to deepen. We now need to develop more practical areas for cooperation, including common equipment procurements. Defense cooperation is the only viable way forward for regional security," Aaviksoo said.

The Baltic nations set down a framework for closer security cooperation when the defense ministers of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia convened in Lithuania on Dec. 4 to discuss a new platform for collaboration. The meeting was attended by Aaviksoo and his Baltic counterparts, Vinets Veldre of Latvia and Juozas Olekas of Lithuania.

"Equipment procurement costs are a huge factor that will determine the future capability of our national defense. We need to cooperate, and it is here where the most important advances in defense can be made," Olekas said at the time.

The most recent evidence of interstate Baltic defense cooperation came during the second half of 2008, when the three nations contributed a joint infantry battalion to the NATO Response Forces NRF-14.

"As regards joint Baltic equipment procurement programs, this must also be seen as important against the tight economic conditions that prevail today that require that the resources available to small nations such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are used wisely. Interoperability of equipment is also important," Aaviksoo said.

The Baltic states have already established a joint committee to examine the feasibility of a common air security strategy that could result in a common multirole aircraft procurement program. The committee is due to submit its report in 2010.

India signs \$2.1b aircraft deal with Boeing

India has signed a \$2.1 billion deal with U.S. aerospace giant Boeing to buy maritime surveillance aircraft for the Indian navy, officials told AFP on Jan. 5.

The agreement to buy eight P-81 long-range reconnaissance aircraft marks India's biggest military aircraft deal with the United States, defence ministry officials said. The contract was signed on January 1 in New Delhi.

"The deal is finally through and we will receive the first P-81 in 2013 while the remaining seven will be procured in a phased manner over the next three or four years," a senior official said on condition he not be named.

The contract includes lifetime maintenance support and an option for the acquisition of up to eight additional P-81 aircraft, the official said.

The deal comes less than a year after India and U.S.-based Lockheed Martin signed an agreement worth \$962 million for the purchase of six C-130 Hercules transport planes for the Indian army.

Both Lockheed and Boeing are also in the race for a \$12 billion contract to sell 126 fighter jets to the Indian air force. Four other global companies from France, Russia, and the European Union are in the race for the world's richest fighter jet deal in 16 years.

India last year also signed a 1.5-billion Euro (\$2.2 billion) deal with France's Dassault to upgrade 51 Mirage 2000 fighter jets, which the Indian air force bought in 1985.

India, the largest buyer of armaments among emerging nations, plans to spend 30 billion dollars until 2012 to modernize its 1.23-million-strong military, the world's fourth largest.

Source: www.defensenews.com

