

Indian High Commissioner provokes opposition on Tipaimukh

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

THE Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Mr. Pinak Ranjan Chakravarti has taken the centre stage in our volatile politics, albeit for the wrong reasons. He has incurred the wrath of the BNP who has demanded his withdrawal immediately. According to media reports, the High Commissioner made disparaging remarks about the BNP without naming it for opposition to the proposed Tipaimukh dam at a seminar on regional connectivity sponsored by the India-Bangladesh Friendship Society. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni was present as the chief guest.

The Indian High Commissioner has also been in the news before his controversial speech while making rounds in the Secretariat, explaining to the Ministers that the Tipaimukh dam will not be harmful for Bangladesh and that it would not be constructed in violation of international law. His efforts have been reasonably successful as some of the Ministers have supported him in the media; although, outside this small circle, significant opposition has been building up against the dam across a wide section of the people.

In fact, environmental groups and the civil society in Bangladesh were already at work articulating public opinion against Tipaimukh dam before the High Commissioner's speech. In Manipur where the dam will provide electricity and control floods, indigenous people have described it as a "death trap." Environmental groups there also have fiercely objected to this dam. There is a whole literature available on the internet on vicious opposition inside India to Tipaimukh. Quite expectedly, the BNP, sensing the political potentials, has been leading the opposition to the dam.

The issue has all it takes to arouse passion in Bangladesh. If constructed, it will affect Bangladesh's northeast the same way the Farakka Barrage has started environmental degradation in the north-western part of the country. This dam, like the Farakka, is on an international river that India has planned without proper

consultation with Bangladesh as the lower riparian. The site of the dam is on an earthquake prone zone that raises the possibility of devastating the north-eastern part of Bangladesh with water if the dam is destroyed by an earthquake in future.

The High Commissioner has not cared to take note of the passion building in Bangladesh or opposition in his own country over the dam. He said instead that Bangladesh has no position under international law to object to the project. The High Commissioner has dismissed the opposition to the dam as "India phobia" implying that the BNP is responsible for it, although to a vast majority of the people of Bangladesh, this is patriotism. In fact, thanks to the High Commissioner's efforts, he has brought "India phobia" and patriotism to mean the same in the context of the Tipaimukh issue.

The high commissioner's explanation that the proposed dam would not violate international law and, therefore, Bangladesh has no right of objection is very simplistic. There are serious legal issues that could be subject of a separate article. Additionally, Bangladesh Water Development Board officials in 2003 had informed through the media that the Tipaimukh dam is part of a grand plan to connect thirty international rivers that flow from India to Bangladesh by building man-made canals and dams to divert water from India's flood prone northeastern region to the relatively arid central provinces. The high commissioner has not mentioned about these serious matters concerning the dam that the public of Bangladesh are learning nevertheless as they become more and more concerned with the potential dangers.

In Bangladesh, we are more tolerant than any other capital in giving leeway to foreign ambassadors and high commissioners over their activities as guests in our country. We tolerate them even when they address press conferences to openly accuse us of being corrupt, ungovernable, etc. in contravention of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. In this case, the Indian high commissioner has trashed public sentiment over a very

volatile issue and provoked the BNP, a major party in Bangladesh that has twice formed the government, leaving it with little choice than to react in the manner in which they did. He disparagingly made statements that questioned the expertise of Bangladeshi experts and accused opponents of the dam for "lies" in projecting the dangers of the dam.

The high commissioner should have been summoned to the Foreign Ministry for an explanation for these remarks, particularly those hinted at the BNP. Unfortunately that was not possible because the foreign minister was present when the high commissioner made his remarks. However, she chose to remain silent and gave the BNP an opportunity to shoot at two targets with one bullet. They have been looking for an opportunity to confront the high commissioner for his views on Tipaimukh in recent times. He has given them this opportunity in a silver platter by his speech. Dipu Moni's silence has come as a "political bonus" to the BNP as they called for her resignation together with the withdrawal of the Indian high commissioner.

The foreign minister seems to be finding herself increasingly on sticky wickets while facing the media. In this instance, the Indian high commissioner spoke before she did. She thus had the opportunity to react to the remarks. If she had an antenna attuned to diplomatic norms and deviations, she would have instantly realized that she has been put on a spot, just like she was when an Indian journalist caught her on the wrong foot with the question on "buffer state" during the visit of the Indian foreign minister in February.

Indian diplomats are well known for their professionalism and their calm under testing circumstances. They never reacted in the manner the present Indian high commissioner has even when provoked. In fact, Indian environmentalists oppose this dam more forcefully than ours do and that makes the tone of the high commissioner's remarks difficult to comprehend. During the last BNP government, the present high commissioner's predecessor was made to listen to an anti-Indian diatribe from then



Bangladesh foreign minister in a seminar. She retained her calm during the seminar, which was then considered by everyone as a professional reaction to an unprofessional conduct.

In February this year, the Indian foreign minister visited Bangladesh as special envoy and met the army chief without meeting the leader of the opposition. In April, the Indian foreign secretary also met the army chief. These meetings have raised questions and concerns in Bangladesh about Indian intentions. The high commissioner's speech enhances these concerns because it suggests that India's diplomacy vis-à-vis Bangladesh is becoming more assertive and arrogant and less helpful for development of better Bangladesh-India relations.

Bangladesh is a deltaic plane where the rivers that flow from India, through her into the Bay of Bengal give her the

fertility to sustain one of the most densely populated parts of the world. The grand Indian Plan will turn this fertile deltaic plane into part desert and part land unfit for agriculture due to rising salinity. The proposed Tipaimukh dam will carry on this dangerous process started by the Farakka barrage by destroying the fertile Sylhet division that receives water from the Barak River into its Surma and Kushiara rivers. The high commissioner has suggested generation of electricity as a main reason for construction of the Tipaimukh dam. In fact, it will generate only 400 MW of electricity. If India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan cooperate for building dams in Nepal where the terrain is natural for such projects, then there would be ten times more electricity with the added advantage of controlling dangerous floods in these parts. The argument of electricity generation from Tipaimukh

dam is therefore a very weak one indeed compared to environmental threats and damages to Bangladesh-India relations that it would surely cause.

The prime minister correctly sensed that the Indian high commissioner has raised a politically harmful controversy for her party and Bangladesh. She has therefore asked the BNP to send its own experts to study Tipaimukh, whose opinion would be considered in adopting Bangladesh's response. The ministers have also stopped talking about the dam. The high commissioner's speech may in fact become a conduit in bridging the AL-BNP divide against Tipaimukh for its dangers to Bangladesh. It should now move the foreign ministry to enforce norms in the way ambassadors act in Bangladesh.

(The writer is a former Ambassador to Japan and Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies)

Is Iran at the crossroads?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IRAN's image and role have been politically and diplomatically much weakened globally and in the region over the imbroglio of the result of the June 12 Presidential election. The regime's use of violence on the protesters as shown in TV footage across the world has further eroded the positive image of the government in the international community.

On 23rd June, US President Barack Obama has strongly condemned the "unjust actions" of Iran in clamping down on election protests. He said he

him of "meddling".

Moral Voice Weakened

Iran has been a moral voice in the region seeking fairness and justice for oppressed people, including for the Palestinians, but its role has been seriously jeopardized by its own conduct over its people after the election.

Who has been the ultimate winner? It is Israel which can now say, "we told you so about Iran." The question is was it necessary for the Iranian government to go through all the drama of violence and protests when it boasts it is the most democratic country in the Middle East?

million. The Council justified that such irregularities did not constitute "major fraud" and refused to nullify the election results. What constitutes "major" is a debatable issue and a contested term. Fraud is fraud and whether it is major or minor does not matter.

The decision of the Council has been no surprise after the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on 19th June pronounced the vote fair in a major sermon on Friday prayers. Some say it was too early for the Supreme Leader to approve definitively the outcome of the presidential election.

Mousavi's response to the Supreme Leader was just as blunt as possible. He has challenged the Supreme Leader's authority, like the demonstrators who support him. He said that the Islamic Republic needed comprehensive reform and the people needed freedom of expression.

This is possibly the first time that the decision of the Supreme Leader has been challenged by some political leaders and their supporters. Accordingly the authority of the Supreme Leader has been weakened.

Free and fair elections include many elements. And there's a strong suspicion among critics that the government machine was behind the current President Ahmadinejad. There's much discussion among people over whether the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij militia, and government employees like teachers, has been "encouraged" to vote for Ahmadinejad.

There are two distinct groups that have emerged in Iran: one that contests the election result and the other that wants to justify the election as fair. Behind the two groups are powerful people of Iranian politics. On one hand is the President Ahmadinejad, supported by the Supreme leader and his allies, and on the other Mir Hussein Mousavi, the defeated candidate who was Prime Minister of Iran for eight years during Iran-Iraq war and his supporters.

The split between the two sides is widening day by day. A statement of the Association of Combatant Clergy calling for the result to be annulled has been a surprise move.

The third group is reportedly headed by former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the right-hand man to the father of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

His absence from public view, coupled with temporary detention of his daughter and other family members, is intriguing because he has been an outspoken critic of President Ahmadinejad and supporter of Mousavi.

Rafsanjani who leads two powerful state institutions - head of the

Expediency Council - is supposed to arbitrate disputes between the elected parliament and unelected Guardian Council. He is also elected to lead the Assembly of Experts and this body has the power to oversee the supreme leader and replace another when he dies.

Some political observers say that it is very interesting that Rafsanjani, the ultimate insider, finds himself aligned with the reformist movement. Although he was a diehard conservative, steadily and with the passage of time he has evolved to have more pragmatic views. He supports greater opening to the West, privatizing parts of the economy and granting more powers to the elected institutions. It is not clear what leverage or role Rafsanjani has to broker a compromise between the two groups.

Clash of ideas erupted

It is a clash of ideas that underlies the problem in Iran. It is not new and has been going on for twenty years. Most of the Iranian population is literate and young people do not remember Shah or his oppressive rule. The people of Iran have access to the internet and they know how poorly their country has performed compared with its neighbour, Turkey. Some critics to the Iranian regime say that the country has wasted a huge opportunity to bridge the gap between the regime and an increasingly sophisticated population seeking greater freedom of action and dress code.

Whatever happens next in Iran, observers say there will be no return to status quo. There are already signs that the opposition has entered a new phase. Instead of mass rallies they have focused on civil disobedience, including strikes among merchants (bazaris), labourers, and key arteries of the Iranian economy (like the petroleum industry and oil ministry).

It is likely that there will also be more trouble on the streets on the third, seventh and the 40th day after the deaths of the demonstrators according to the Muslim Shi'ite tradition of remembering the dead.

What makes this crisis unprecedented is the scale of the dissent on the streets and the fact that it is in parallel with a fracture in the ruling elite. For the last thirty years, Iran's top leaders have disagreed with each other many times, but they have never taken their quarrels openly to the people like this. Political observers believe the conflict is certainly far from being resolved.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Iraqis take control as U.S. troops leave cities

IRAQI forces prepared to take control of towns and cities nationwide on June 30 as American troops withdrew in a milestone for the country's recovery six years after the U.S.-led invasion.

Baghdad's streets were quiet and traffic much lighter than usual as people stayed at home for a national holiday to mark the June 30 pullback, ahead of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said the nation's joy at the handover was mixed with sorrow for "beloved friends and relatives" who had been "targeted by terror."

But he also took aim at critics of the Iraqi security forces, saying the nation's army and police were up to the task of defending the country in the wake of the U.S. pullout.

"It is a big mistake for people to think that the Iraqis will not handle the security issue," Maliki said. "It is an offence to the Iraqis. The people who said that the foreign troops would never withdraw and would keep permanent bases in our country were giving a green light to the terrorists to kill civilians."

Iraqis had celebrated into the night on June 29, but soldiers and police were out in force to prevent insurgent groups spoiling the party as American troops left their posts in urban centers.

President Jalal Talabani, meanwhile, thanked U.S. forces for the sacrifices they made in overthrowing now executed dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, and in the years of violence that followed.

"They bore the burden and dangers against the most cruel regime and against the mutual enemy - the terror," Talabani said on state television.

The handover coincided with a U.S. Army announcement that four of its soldiers died from combat-related injuries on June 29, taking to 4,321 the number of American troops killed since the invasion.

The pullout is part of a landmark security agreement signed in November between Baghdad and Washington covering the fate of the 133,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq.

In the wake of bombings that have already killed more than 200 people this month, all leave for Iraqi security personnel has been cancelled.

Motorcycles, a favoured form of transport for several recent bombers, have also

been banned from the streets.

Across Baghdad, tanks and armoured vehicles manned by soldiers and police were decorated with artificial flowers, flags and banners, as nationalistic songs and popular music played.

"We are happy to receive the security responsibilities and we are able to totally protect our citizens," said policeman Ibrahim al-Mashhadani.

Abu Mustapha, a carpenter, added: "I believe that the security of the nation will improve when the U.S. forces leave."

On Monday, the former defence ministry building in the capital, taken over in the wake of the invasion, was handed back to the Iraqi government.

"This marks the end of the rule of the multinational force," said Gen. Abboud Qambar, the head of Baghdad Operation Command.

The security shake-up was celebrated by huge crowds in Baghdad's largest park on the evening of June 29.

Revellers had to undergo three security checks to enter but no one seemed to complain amid a jubilant atmosphere, where an onstage banner declared that Baghdad's sovereignty and independence had been recovered. Even policemen joined in the fun, dancing with the partygoers.

Maliki warned earlier this month that insurgent groups and militias were likely to step up attacks in the run-up to June 30 in a bid to undermine confidence in Iraq's own security forces.

There have been several huge bombings since, the deadliest near the northern oil hub of Kirkuk on June 20 when a truck loaded with explosives was detonated, leaving 72 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

Only a small number of U.S. forces in training and advisory roles will remain in urban areas, with the bulk of American troops in Iraq quartered elsewhere.

The Status of Forces Agreement, which set the pullback deadline, says U.S. commanders must seek permission from Iraqi authorities to conduct operations, but American troops retain a unilateral right to "legitimate self-defence."

Source: www.defensenews.com



respected Iran's sovereignty and it was "patently false" of Iran to say the West was fomenting the unrest.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon had called on Iran to respect the "will of its people" after the disputed presidential poll but Tehran accused

Split among top leaders

The Guardian Council declared on 23rd June that no new election would take place, although it was reported one day earlier that the number of votes recorded in fifty cities exceeded the number of eligible voters by three