

## Navigate, revive and thrive

Our hopes of living among greenery should be revived by demonstration of genuine efforts to arrive at a conclusion that assures the lower riparian nation that it would not be deprived of the quantum of water needed.

Z. A. KHAN

THE Bangladesh parliamentary delegation that went to visit Tipaimukh Dam site to obtain first hand information has apparently come back without much success. Our nation is not surprised about the outcome. An opinion poll held by The Daily Star last week about whether India would extend any worthwhile cooperation to the delegation, more than 80% respondents opined that it would not.

Although the delegation claims that it got some valuable information, which substantiates India's position that construction of this dam will not affect Bangladesh in any way, the people are not inclined to believe the delegation's claim of India's positive assurances.

Taking a cue from India's non-adherence to certain aspects of the instrument of understanding between Bangladesh and India pertaining to water sharing from the Farrakka Barrage, this time too they fear a repeat of the attitude shown in the past by India.

The people feel that our leaders, both in the government and in the opposition, should find ways to resolve the vexed issue so that our fragile relation-

ship with India does not slide any further. In the days of "mouse click civilisation" speed is of the essence in any conflict resolution. If Tipaimukh is not dealt with in earnest by the parties involved, it may put the two neighbours on a collision course that is likely to create impediments in our march for development.

There are 55 rivers and rivulets that flow from India to the Bay of Bengal through our country. We have learnt that our neighbour has already constructed dams on the upstream of 54 of them. The Farakka experience has terrified the population living on the Meghna basin about the possible effects of the Tipaimukh dam. Any tampering with the flow of these water sources will affect Bangladesh a great deal.

Bangladesh, being a lower riparian country, bears the brunt of the natural vagaries caused by rains and flooding. The turning of the Ganges into a desert because of Farrakka may have given us football grounds (a recent photograph in The Daily Star is a proof in point), but it has deprived the area of a waterway that helped agriculture and communication aplenty.

The horrendous experience of the Farrakka Barrage has made our nation apprehensive about the extent of damage that Tipaimukh dam may cause. So both India and Bangladesh should demonstrate eagerness to engage in a genuine dialogue to resolve this critical issue to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders.

We wasted a lot of time in deciding on the composition of the delegation, which was rejected by the opposition on the ground that no expert had been included. They suggested a few names, which were unacceptable to the government. Finally, our delegation went to visit Tipaimukh dam site without any member from the opposition.

As ill luck would have it, the delegation made two attempts to visit the site, which were aborted by nature. The delegation, on its return, informed the nation that it had received some documents that show that the Meghna basin is not threatened with desertification and biodegradation. The delegation also informed the nation that India had made a firm commitment that the construction of the dam would not affect water sharing in both the wet and the dry season.

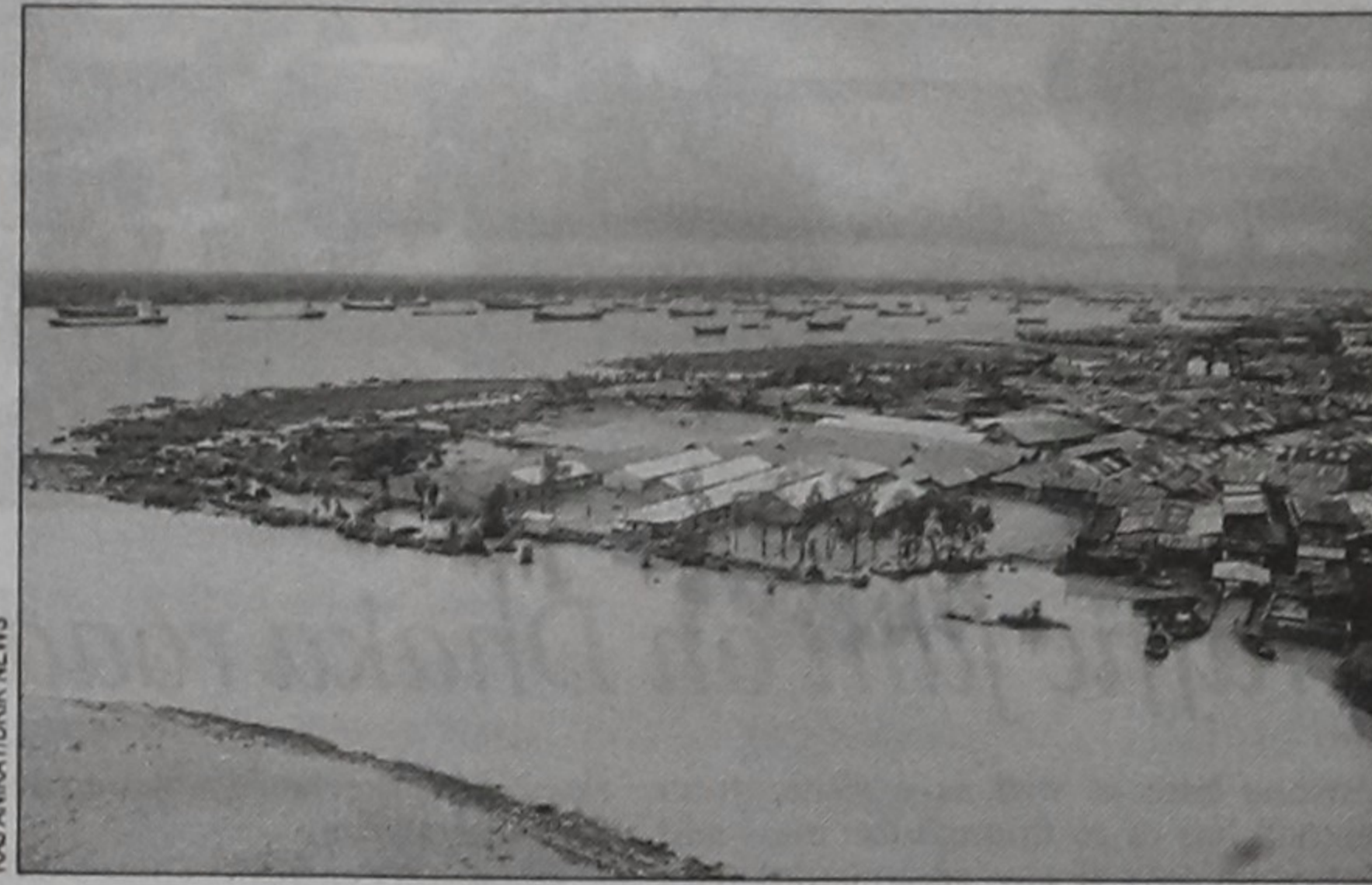
People find it intriguing as to why the relevant details made available by India were not made public initially, and why the delegation did not land at the site when they could see it while hovering over it in a helicopter? They allege that our government is not demonstrating firmness in seeking assurances from

India that the dam will not affect our economy and environment. This has provided people outside the government with an opportunity to blame the government, terming the entire exercise as a failure. Let us not forget that this is a top priority national issue.

To my understanding, both the government and the opposition should work hand-in-gloves to find a common solution, which should strengthen the dialogues of our side to press home our demand. The water resource ministry should immediately arrange a broad-based conference of experts to deliberate on the viability of the suggestions put forward by India, and short list an agenda by according priority for further discussions in the immediate future.

Let us form an international body of experts to determine whether the dam, if constructed at the selected site, will have any adverse affect on our people's lives or retard our development -- or neither. If this is not considered in due haste, it might snowball into a massive movement which may not augur well for the government. Let us choose time to save time.

My intention is not to censure anybody. I only want to remind us about what Lord Buddha said in this perspective, which is: "Right view, right speech, right action, right mindfulness and right contemplation are sinews of a full life (successful life)." To this, I would add that these virtues should be founded on compromise and barter when it comes to dealing with problems



We can't allow our lifelines to be blocked.

involving nations.

Any delay in ensuring a national consensus about the modus operandi to handle this issue with India may subject our nation to gallows humour. If the government remains stubborn about not including experts suggested by the opposition it will drive a wedge between the two, which will imperil development of politics of understanding, which is essential for democracy.

The nation deserves to be correctly navigated by the leadership so that we are led towards peace. Our hopes of living among greenery should be revived by demonstration of genuine efforts to arrive at a conclusion that assures the lower riparian nation that it

would not be deprived of the quantum of water needed. Only thus we can thrive to enjoy the fruits of democracy and development, the prime mover of our motivation to fight for independence.

Let us be reassured that our rights to life and property will remain the chief concern of our political leadership, both in the government and in the opposition. As of now, we feel shaken at the thought that a large chunk of our productive territory will be engulfed by water if we do not face the challenge thrown by India's decision to build the dam on the upstream of the Borak river.

Z.A. Khan is a former Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

## Northern exposure

But while they have drawn international attention southward, the Taliban have been creeping back into the north over the last two years -- to the surprise of the United States, Afghanistan's central government, and the German military, which has 4,000 troops stationed there.

RON MOREAU AND SAMI YOUSAFZAI

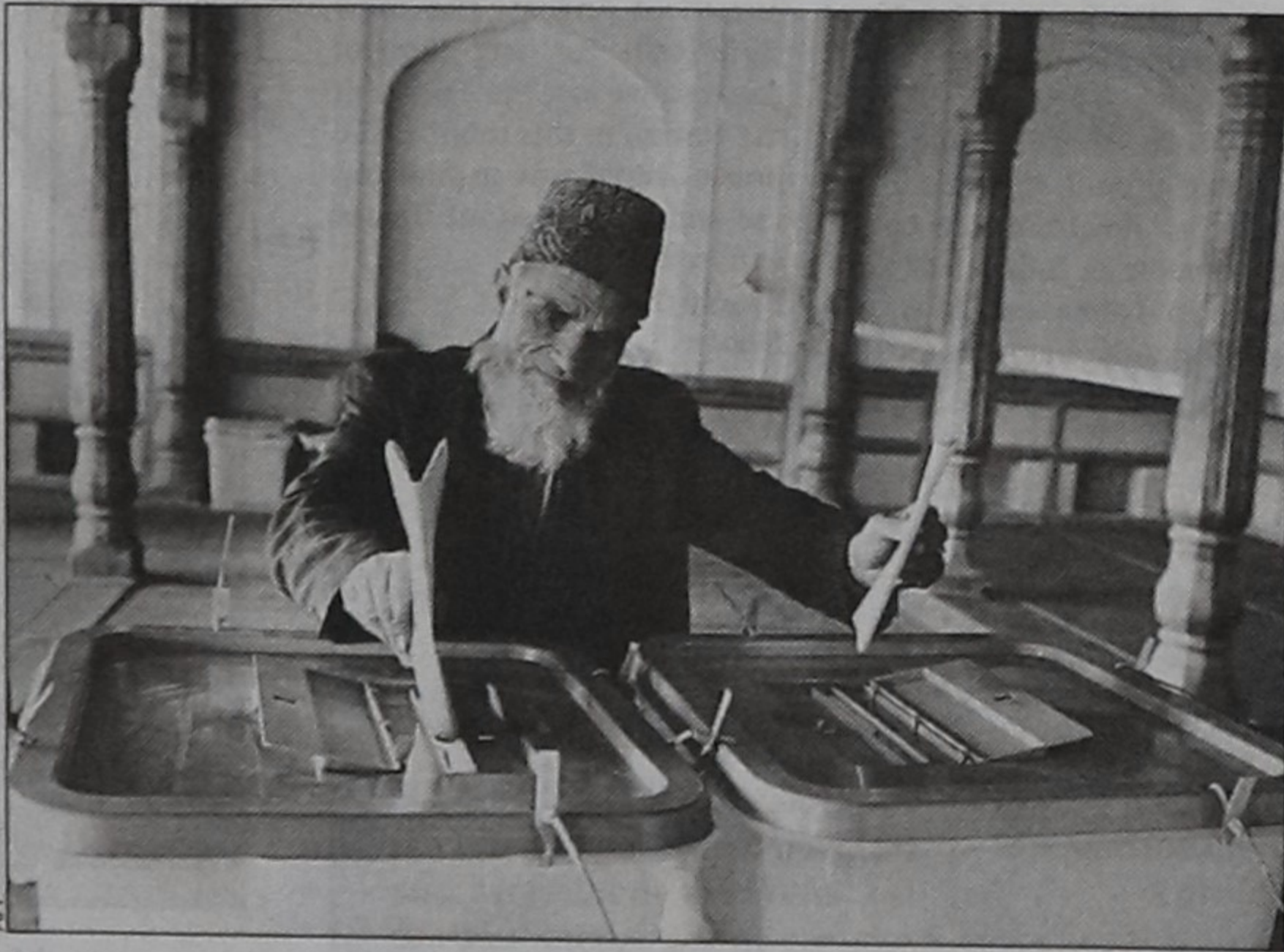
DURING Afghanistan's last presidential election, five years ago, the Taliban was a distant memory for most residents of Kunduz province in the country's north. Routed decisively in 2001, almost all Taliban fighters in the north had been captured or killed. So the election went off peacefully in ethnically and linguistically diverse Kunduz, as it did in most of the country, with President Hamid Karzai winning the majority of the votes. That's not going to be the case this year.

Since that election, the story of the Taliban's resurgence in the south is well known. In majority Pashtun areas like Helmand province, they have harassed civilians, disrupted governance, organised protection rackets, and battled US Marines. The military component of President Obama's "Afghanistan surge" is centered almost entirely on the country's south; most other nations with troops serving in Afghanistan have even refused to let their soldiers see combat in that area.

But while they have drawn international attention southward, the Taliban have been creeping back into the north over the last two years -- to the surprise

of the United States, Afghanistan's central government, and the German military, which has 4,000 troops stationed there. Five years after the last presidential election, Kunduz voters may think twice before they head to the polls Thursday to elect a new president and a provincial council.

In the past two months alone, the Taliban have dramatically ramped up



What is in store for the Afghans?

their roadside ambushes and IED attacks, killing seven German and American soldiers. This month, Karzai's vice presidential running mate, campaigning near Kunduz City, the provincial capital, was nearly assassinated, and one town has been attacked and briefly overrun twice. As in most of the country, the local Taliban have vowed to disrupt the election. "The Taliban's strength is incredible compared to that of previous years," bragged Maulvi Qari Bashir, the commander of insurgent forces in Kunduz, in a telephone interview with Newsweek. "The Germans better send more coffins to collect their dead sons."

Bashir is doubtlessly exaggerating the Taliban's might, but Western officials admit to the gradual resurrection

of the northern revolt. "The north has become the insurgency's new focus of attention during the past six months," says a Western official in Kabul. According to these officials, the guerrillas have more armed men than at any time since their 2001 defeat, using them to launch increasingly sophisticated attacks, mostly on military convoys.

They are using a combination of small arms and rocket-propelled grenades, coupled with roadside IEDs that are hooked up to improved detonation technology. These tactics, according to a Nato military source, are reminiscent of Al Qaeda, who are assumed to be assisting the local Taliban.

The German military, which was initially deployed in Kunduz and Mazar-e Sharif to the west seven years ago, thought at first that it would largely be engaged in economic reconstruction work. In fact, the government in Berlin had expressly barred German troops from offensive combat assignments. But since 2006 the insurgency has mounted and the German troops are under attack; they've lost 35 soldiers since arriving in 2002. In April, they suffered three strikes in one day. (German officials speculate that the Taliban is ramping up there in part to influence the September 27 German parliamentary elections.)

To cope with the new reality, the Germans have adopted new, more aggressive, rules of engagement. They no longer have to wait to be fired upon before firing back; they're allowed to anticipate trouble. As a result, German forces have begun launching preemptive military sweeps, alongside Afghan troops, into Taliban strongholds.

Two thousand joint forces swept through the Chahar Dara district just west of Kunduz City last summer, though the insurgents managed to slip away. (It was Germany's largest military maneuver against an armed enemy since World War II.) "We are still roaming where we were before the operation," says Bashir, the northern insurgent commander.

Western officials say the Taliban's push into Kunduz and neighbouring northern provinces is a calculated strategy to show that, once again, its base is all of Afghanistan -- not just the southern, eastern, or western corners of the country where ethnic Pashtuns are the majority. (The north, except for pockets of Pashtuns, is populated chiefly by Hazara and Tajiks.)

Once upon a time, Kunduz was a Taliban stronghold: in 2001 Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban, made his last stand here, pounded by American bombs and surrounded by the Tajik and Uzbek forces of the Northern Alliance. Afterward, up to 20,000 Taliban and foreign fighters surrendered.

Now the Taliban are back. Bashir insists that most of his fighters are local men and have not arrived from sanctuaries in Pakistan -- and that he commands his fighters from inside the province. "I'm sitting hundreds of kilometers from Peshawar and Quetta," he says, referring to the Pakistani cities where some senior Taliban leaders are based.

But Western officials argue that local fighters have also been reinforced by Taliban fighters from provinces around

Kabul -- where U.S. forces have established a presence this year -- and by some foreigners. Still, the Taliban have a base of support in the north: after their collapse in 2001, Tajik and Uzbek warlords seized power and confiscated Pashtun property, giving the Taliban a popular political cause with the people.

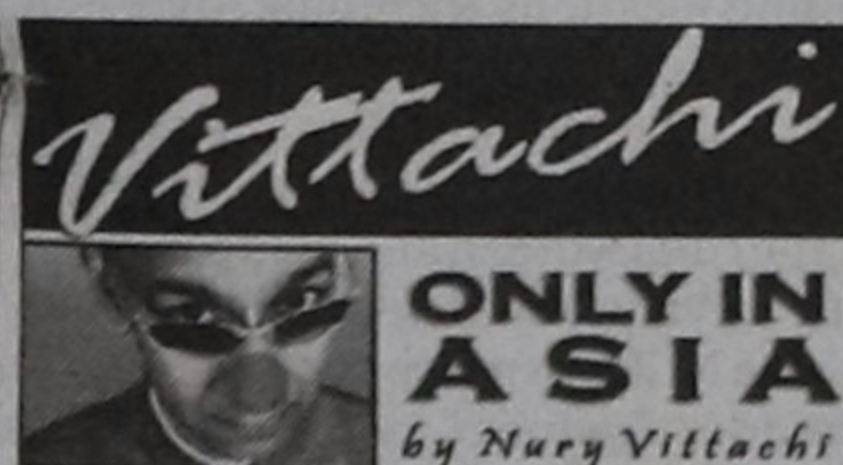
On election day, Bashir claims, he won't have to intimidate voters to get them to stay home because local people despise Karzai and his government for corruption and other alleged sins. "People won't go vote for these corrupt U.S. puppets, smugglers, and warlords," Bashir says. "They will stay home."

Reinvigorated Taliban forces threaten to hurt the countrywide counterinsurgency. Spreading from Kunduz, they are already trying to ignite neighbouring provinces, particularly Baghlan just to the south, the site of a crucial highway linking Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with Kabul. Coalition forces increasingly use this as a re-supply route because the Taliban's main supply artery from Pakistan is a dangerous corridor.

But over the past few weeks, fighting between government and insurgent forces in northern Baghlan has increased. "They are reverting to the old tactics that the mujahedin used so effectively against the Soviets, attacking main highways and supply routes," says the Western official in Kabul. A jarring election day may be just the beginning.

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## What sort of meeter are you?



"B LACKBERRYS have liberated people from boring meetings," Jim Balsillie, boss of the phonemaker, announced recently. He reckons you can remain engaged and active by secretly read email while sitting opposite your boss in boring confabs.

This makes no sense to me. All my urgent emails are from my boss, anyway.

I once got one saying, "Do it over." I didn't know whether he wanted me to repeat today's assignment, the year-long project we'd been working on, or my life. (I hoped it was the latter.)

A friend of mine arranges meetings. It's not as dull a job as it sounds. It's much, much duller. But curiously, I noticed her smiling at the end of a gathering that was so excruciatingly tedious that under "Any Other Business" I proposed "Commit group suicide."

Afterwards I questioned her on her suspicious behavior. She revealed (after only a moderate amount of violence) that she and her assistant kept themselves awake with a little game: they guesstimated how long meetings would last, and nearly always got it bang on target.

How did they do it? Here's the secret (try it yourself).

Warning: This is possibly offensive. Take the maximum allotted time for the meeting, add 15% for every person from India present to a maximum of three, and 20% for each Westerner to a maximum of two.



Deduct 2.5% for each Hong Konger and 5% for every Filipino, Sri Lankan or Indonesian attendee. (For people of other cultural backgrounds, you have to do your own research.)

The meeting I had just been at started with six Hong Kongers, one Sri Lankan, and a Filipino.

So the sum was 60 minutes minus 25%, taking us down to 45 minutes. But

just as we were starting, a European arrived, pushing the estimate back up to 55 minutes.

At first I was skeptical, but the girls' system turned out to be remarkably accurate: it was 55 minutes.

One committee on which I used to sit lost its token Westerner, and meetings did finish 20% earlier than usual. Then a Canadian joined us, and meetings went back to their previous length.

Why does it work? To generalise absurdly, Westerners are critical thinkers who see meetings as democratic events at which they can contribute to more or less every item on the agenda.

Indians also like to talk. They come from a society where debating is a popular pastime, since watching Indian TV has the same fun quotient as being waterboarded at Guantanamo Bay.

Hong Kongers are busy people who don't like meetings, but they are polite, so make the minimal number of comments to show they are present.

Filipinos, Sri Lankans and others stay silent because they loathe meetings so much they are not mentally present, being deep in fantasy worlds.

Meeting organizers list the present writer as a "wild card," since I stay silent except for occasionally making irrelevant comments such as, "You probably don't recognise me without

my cape."

I tracked down one colleague who has, to my knowledge, NEVER spoken in a meeting, and asked him if he was worried that bosses would issue orders to his department based on incorrect assumptions.

He shook his head. "Whatever commands the boss gives, I just nod. Then I ignore them," he said.

I decided that this man is a genius. The boss is happy, because his views are accepted without question. The workers are happy because idiotic commands from the top never reach them.

How ironic: the guy most worth listening to and was the one who was completely silent.

To know more about what to do in the middle of a boring meeting, visit our columnist at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com) (illustrations are quoted from Dilbert, by Scott Adams. © UFS).