

A new beginning in Bangladesh-India ties

The momentum must be used to address the core issues

THE agreement reached in Delhi by Bangladesh and India through bilateral talks between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries is clearly a breakthrough. We welcome the many positive signs coming out of the talks. From an economic and political perspective, the results are pivotal for both the countries. The broad agreement reached on some key issues sets the ground for more positive development in the near future. The agreement on transit to Nepal and Bhutan, and the commitment of 100 MW of power are two immediate steps that are likely to benefit Bangladesh in the very near future. There are several other areas, where detailed planning and quick follow-up are necessary.

Despite the positive outcome of the talks, we note that trade imbalance, a key issue affecting Indo-Bangladesh ties, has not been tackled at the talks. Given that Bangladesh has for a very long time been asking for an entry of its goods into the Indian market, this persistent reluctance on India's part to open its doors to Bangladesh's goods serves as a damper to mutually beneficial relations. Over the years, much discussion has gone on at the government-to-government and trade delegation levels. We have also heard of a track-2 approach. Against this background, the issue should have been resolved at the talks in Delhi.

We thank the Indian side for agreeing to facilitate Bangladesh's transit to Nepal and Bhutan. However it has to be recalled that such an agreement was reached earlier but could not be implemented.

Another significant issue we feel has not been dealt with is Tipaimukh. To be sure, there have been all the blanket assurances from the Indian side about keeping Bangladesh's interests in mind. But the real need is for Delhi to share information with Dhaka on the issue fully and comprehensively and let such information be disseminated to the general public in both countries. This is important as even in such Indian states as Meghalaya the issue has been exercising people's minds. It is critically important that on Tipaimukh nothing be done that can undermine the new opening the Delhi talks have made for the two countries. While on the subject, we fail to understand why such long-standing issues as Angorpota and Dahagram are still in the discussion stage. The problem, which should have been resolved long ago, now must be approached in earnest.

Everything said, however, we welcome the results of the Delhi talks and look upon the agreement as an important first step towards a fresh new beginning in Indo-Bangladesh ties. It is essential that from here on the two nations do not go back to the old standoffish positions on issues of mutual concern. Additionally, the deal should lead to a relaxation in other areas. Increasing people to people contact, especially through an exchange of visits by journalists, is of the essence. Here we urge relaxation of visa restrictions on journalists. Bangladesh is known to be very restrictive, with India being so in many cases. We must also point out that a change in mindset, especially among the Indian media vis-à-vis Bangladesh, is a must. The continuous coverage of Bangladesh as a hub of terrorism has patently harmed relations between the two countries. For our part, we have noted how a number of criminal elements have come from India and engaged in terrorist activities here. That Bangladeshis are by and large a secular people and that religious extremism has no place in this country have conclusively been demonstrated by successive elections, including the one in 2008. The results were a severe blow to extremism and were clearly a rejection of religion-based politics.

We look forward to a greater and more positive understanding of Bangladesh and its people from India. In the days ahead, we expect that the visit by the Bangladesh prime minister to Delhi in the near future will result in a reciprocal trip to Dhaka by India's prime minister. Such reciprocity will, we hope, lead to more positive and concrete developments in Dhaka-Delhi ties.

The power of a simple idea

Ultra-poor women's life gets a Midas touch

IN the business world just how many weighty, pompous, complex and impractical ideas of running an enterprise have vanished as quickly as they popped out -- there is simply no count of it. At the other pole, there would be a lost list of anti-poverty initiatives wilting before the surge of newer ideas, those too failing to take root, far less branch out.

But here is a breath of fresh air from one of the simplest of ideas that has clicked ingeniously with multiple dividends pouring out of it. Like all auspicious and big tidings, this one too had a small beginning. Who is at the centre of the story is difficult to pinpoint. There are many agents and players that got enmeshed in a whole range of a catalytic process yielding handsome benefits all round.

Jahora Bewa, a woman in sixties of Ganga Narayan village in Rangpur was abandoned by their sons and pushed into begging saw little else than darkness enveloping her whole being. At her age, she only looked to be sentenced to destitution until death. It was then that she came in contact with a woman supervising manual tupi-making by a few villagers. She joined the vocation and never looked back since.

She was to soon run a factory of her own. Then the catalysis set in; today 3500 poor women of ten villages including school and college girls are earning money by knitting tupis for a factory run by Abdul Awal, an expatriate Bangladeshi businessman in Oman. Basically, he is the chief catalyser because he saw a great potential for tupi manufacture given the active demand for the light, slightly longish and ornately embroidered headgear in the Oman market. Now, he brings orders, places them with local knitters, who supply with a great flourish.

Sometime ago, we learned of a roaring export success notched up by locally made ties by an enterprising group in Sathkira. With little imagination, research and drive we could go beyond all these. The multiple dividends derivable from such ventures should inspire all concerned into replicating them on a wide scale.

Tackling the swine flu pandemic

The government will have to enforce strict observance of health rules at points of entry into the country -- airports, sea ports and land ports. Similarly, we must also through individual initiative, take necessary action to create a safety zone for ourselves.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

SWINE flu, technically known as H1N1, started earlier this year in Mexico, migrated northwards into the USA and Canada and then crossed both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. It has since touched the shores of Australia, Africa and China and wrought havoc among their respective populations. WHO has reported that at least 2,185 persons have already died. Hundreds of thousands of others are still suffering from this virus.

As anticipated, H1N1 has also found its way into South Asia. It first appeared in India and has then surfaced over the past few weeks in densely populated Bangladesh. By last count, the number of Bangladeshis identified as having this form of deadly viral flu has crossed 270 and two of those infected have died.

As expected, public anxiety has slowly surfaced. The print and electronic media have not resorted to sensationalism but have been responsible in their reporting of the exacerbating situation. Till now, fortunately, there has not been any politicization of this issue.

Nevertheless, there have also been factual stories of mothers running around with young ailing children from clinic to hospital, looking for doctors, medical attention and suitable medicines -- all to no avail. Such reported incidents have not inspired confidence in what government authorities, responsible for controlling and managing this pandemic, have been claiming.

One thing is clear. The pandemic is spreading in Bangladesh -- slowly but definitely. It is also true that our govern-

ment and those responsible in the Ministry of Health are trying to instill some degree of order in the arrangement for tackling this emerging crisis. The point is whether the plans and the strategy being put in place are suffering due to lack of coordination. There also appears to be some degree of confusion among the physicians with regard to the diagnostic procedure and the application of prescribed drugs. This has to stop.

Various institutions including the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), the ICCDDR, B and the local chapter of WHO have extended their assistance to our effort. At the same time we have the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical College Hospital, Dhaka Medical University Hospital, Suhrawardy Hospital, Dhaka Shishu (Children) Hospital and the National Chest Diseases Hospital preparing themselves and making all necessary arrangements to handle a full-blown epidemic. Such pre-emptive planning for the urban areas in and around Dhaka is laudable. However what about the smaller towns and other divisional headquarters? One hopes that similar pre-emptive planning is also being put together in our vast rural hinterland. I am mentioning this because some of the Bangla newspapers have reported insufficient medical logistical support in the border areas with land entry points from India.

In Dhaka and also in other major cities, quite naturally, a lot of pressure has been generated on public hospitals and on their emergency facilities. The electronic media has telecast reports of overcrowded chambers and frustrated relatives of patients

complaining about lack of attention and prescribed medicines. Some, suffering from other ailments (like dengue) and requiring urgent assistance have also questioned the wisdom of not having separate waiting areas for patients who have swine flu symptoms. The hospitals administrations have to streamline the application of necessary measures. Otherwise, even the best efforts will fail.

The other option will be for patients to seek medical care in the unregulated private medical clinics which are expensive and not always reliable. This should not happen.

The existing scenario has been made further complex because of questions related to sufficient availability of swine flu vaccine and also post-infection medicines. Bangladesh, according to experts, is understood to have already crossed danger level 2 on this pandemic scale. Some have suggested that though it has not turned into an epidemic, the situation is not very different.

I agree with the view that the situation could turn serious. However, there is no reason to panic. Our Ministry of Health will have to play an important role in this regard. In this context, it was good of the authorities to announce that the government has a stock of 2.9 million doses of the anti-viral drug 'Oseltamivir' - in both capsule and syrup forms. It is expected that this stock can meet escalating requirement till November of this year. It is also significant that the government has asked local pharmaceutical producers to manufacture another 10 million dosages of this medicine. One hopes that one will eventually not need to use this medicine in such large quantities. However, it is better to be prepared than to be sorry.

The Health Ministry has said that this anti-viral drug will be available on prescription in all public medical colleges, hospitals, civil surgeon's offices in districts and upazila hospitals for free. This is a laudable decision by the government and should also include in its purview those

patients who have for any reason also sought medical care from private clinics. It may be noted here that different drug stores are seeking to profit from this unusual condition and are overcharging for this drug. Some are even asking the exorbitant price of Taka 1,800 for a strip/file of 10 pieces. This might partially be due to panic buying, but the price needs to be strictly controlled and monitored.

It is true that Bangladesh is now facing a new respiratory disease. It would also be correct to say that we have faced the outbreak of dengue hemorrhagic with some success. We can similarly contain the spread of this aberrant viral flu through preventive measures.

As expected, the government will have to enforce strict observance of health rules at points of entry into the country -- airports, sea ports and land ports. Similarly, we must also through individual initiative, take necessary action to create a safety zone for ourselves. Doctors have underlined the need to limit body contact with people as much as possible, to wear masks (facemasks, surgical masks or N95 masks) to avoid the spread of the virus through coughing or sneezing and to avoid crowded places. Following these measures might be difficult within our tradition bound society but they need to be undertaken. Such steps should not be interpreted by others as signs of being rude within our socio-cultural mores.

A bit more of personal care and observance of hygienic standards will greatly reduce the risk. It would also be prudent not to readily resort to drugs without any clinical judgment or without prescription of a physician particularly in the case of persons suffering other serious/chronic medical conditions.

Throughout the world, people, because of globalization, are learning to adapt. We have to do the same.

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Education policy: Improvement envisaged

We wish to make our nation strong and prosperous. Days of depending on remittance of earnings of the unskilled may be over soon. We have to increase the number and upgrade the quality of our skilled personnel. This needs rapid improvement of our education system.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE education minister has formally submitted the draft report of national education policy 2009 to the PM on 7 September. It is expected that implementation of the report will start from the next academic year.

The major recommendations of the report are: free, universal and compulsory primary education up to class VIII; inclusion of information technology and science in the curriculum; mandatory vocational education and scholarships to all students from class VI to class VIII on the basis of examination; uniform syllabus in secondary education (class X XII); three-year degree course to be extended to four-year honors course; establishing technical institutions in every upazila; modernization of madrasa education through inclusion of information technology; and arrangement of text books and teachers for

the indigenous children to enable them to learn in their own language.

After the liberation of Bangladesh we have seen seven commission and committee reports. All these reports contained some valuable suggestions for improving education system. Due to resource constraint and lack of political will only a few of these suggestions could be implemented.

The Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission Report (1974) recommended extension of universal schooling up to 8th grade in line with UNESCO requirement of 14 years universal school. It is indeed regrettable that even after elapse of 35 years (1974-2009) we have not been able to even implement partly the recommendations.

As there is no public examination on completion of primary education the accountability of primary school teachers for the quality of education imparted during the stage cannot be ensured. As such

teaching standards in primary schools are immeasurably bad. The onus of developing a solid foundation is, therefore, sifted to secondary school teachers who often have to start from scratch. In regard to secondary education the present standard is much better than that of the primary stage. However, much scope remains for improvement in case of secondary education system as well.

The new government is committed to introduce a new education policy to modernize the education system. An 18-member committee under the chairmanship of national professor Kabir Chowdhury was set up to prepare a draft education policy in line with the Kudrat-e-Khuda commission report. The report is awaiting final approval.

Before the final approval of the draft pace of work should be quickened because already we have lost 35 valuable years in presenting education policy and it brooks no further delay. The whole nation is eagerly waiting for a good education policy from this government.

Our experience about implementation of recommendations of the past reports has not been happy. We expect that the government will make an all out effort to implement the final recommendations because the government is supposed to be pro-people and by improving the education system it will perform a great service to the

nation to which it is pledge bound. However completion of implementation within its tenure is a tough job. Before starting the process of implementation capacity of our concerned personnel, availability of fund and strength of our educational infrastructure should be carefully assessed.

We have to determine time span for implementation. Needless to say that at initial stage implementation will be difficult and therefore progress may be slow. There is no scope for becoming too optimistic. We should be guided by the fact that a least developed country like Bangladesh has great limitation in undertaking and completing a huge development plan such as education policy. Mobilization of fund may also take time.

Education is the backbone of a nation. We wish to make our nation strong and prosperous. Days of depending on remittance of earnings of the unskilled may be over soon. We have to increase the number and upgrade the quality of our skilled personnel. This needs rapid improvement of our education system. We shall never attain digital Bangladesh without an appreciable improvement in our educational system. We must wish success of the government in its effort to introduce a good education policy.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

Optimism is a moral duty

The only plus point is that Islamabad has a parliament which has come through a democratic struggle that the lawyers waged. It should be more independent than the earlier democratic governments which owed their installation to the army that decided to bring them to the fore at a particular time.

KULDIP NAYAR

THERE is every reason to be pessimistic about relations between India and Pakistan. One is determined not to resume talks until it sees the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack on November 26 last year brought to book. The other is stuck on the stand that New Delhi has not sent it "enough evidence" to pursue a viable case in the court of law, particularly against Hafiz Saeed, the chief of Jamaat-ud-Dawah, which was earlier known as Lashkar-e-Toiba. Saeed has been the bone of contention for a long time, in fact, after he was set free at Kandahar in exchange of Indian passengers hijacked by his men. Home Minister P. Chidambaram has said that Pakistan is "playing with our emotions" in not detaining Saeed. Chidambaram has given more details to Islamabad, how Saeed masterminded the 26/11 and was accompanied by one 'Major General Sahib' (probably a retired Pakistani officer) during a meeting with Kasab and other terrorists at a training camp.

Islamabad has said that the dossier sent by New Delhi is a rehash of earlier information. Had this been only a diplomatic exercise, it would have mattered little. But the outcome of the 26/11 case has got inextricably linked to the composite dialogue or, for that matter, to the normalcy between the two countries. By stating that Saeed was not involved, Pakistan's former National Security Adviser Mahmud Durrani has

convinced none in India. The problem with the bureaucrats and the top brass, retired or in service, is that they support their respective government's stand which they have themselves mapped out.

True, mistrust is at the back of estrangement which is deepening day by day. But this is something with which the people have lived for 62 years when the two countries were born. There is no serious attempt, except at the people's level and that too in a limited way, to change the frozen attitudes. The fact is that so long as the intelligence agencies in the two countries are the ultimate arbiters, no progress is possible.

India's hardened attitude on the 26/11 may be partly because of the Maharashtra assembly election, scheduled to be held on October 13. The Congress-ruled Centre and state may have smelt an electoral advantage in keeping the dialogue hanging. The BJP and the Shiv Sena comprising the opposition in Maharashtra have made the 26/11 their election plank to show New Delhi's "incompetence" in not prevailing upon Islamabad to keep Saeed behind bars.

Yet to say that no talks can take place till the guilty are punished may be like waiting till the cows come home. The courts in third world countries are painfully slow in their disposal of cases. Some compromise formula has to be hammered out and let this not take place by bringing America into the picture -- waiting in the wings all the time.

Pakistan Foreign Secretary Salman

Bashir is right that the two countries will have to come to the negotiating table sooner or later. But this type of confidence does not allow Pakistan to mollify India's fears. In any case, the talks are the means, not the end by itself. The two countries cannot ride a high horse if they want to live like neighbours.

Strange, the debate on who was responsible for partition did not evoke even limited demand, either in India or Pakistan, for the steps to minimize the harm that one is doing to the other. Apparently, there is some regret on partition. Otherwise, the book by Jaswant Singh would not have created the positive feelings as it did. Logically, there should have been some visible effort to make at least travel between the two countries easier. But the whole thing has proved to be a mere digression.

If Islamabad feels it has done enough on the 26/11 case and still has not impressed New Delhi, Pakistan can at least lessen the points of friction. Violations of ceasefire on the Jammu and Kashmir border, although fewer than before, have irritated the public in India. Its Chief of Army Staff General Deepak Kapoor is exasperated to such an extent that he has said at a press conference that his army would be "forced to retaliate." One thing can lead to another. Why doesn't Islamabad see that violations do not take place? After all, the LoC is a de facto border till there is some accord. It does not mean that Pakistan has watered down its claim on Kashmir.

Another point of concern in India is the story in American media that Pakistan had illegally modified the US-supplied Harpoon missiles to target India. Washington has promised to examine the missiles and Islamabad has extended its cooperation. But there is no word of explanation to India where the mistrust has got heightened. When it comes to Pakistan, it is no less hyper. It has expressed its apprehension that India may hold nuclear tests again.

Even if the 1998 thermonuclear test has shown "drawbacks," as pointed out by some Indian scientists, it does not mean that India will resume tests. It has given a commitment to the world not to do so. In the face of nuclear deal with the US, it is nearly impossible that New Delhi would do anything which may put the whole deal in jeopardy. In fact, it is an opportune time for both India and Pakistan to reiterate their earlier undertaking not to be the first user. And the moratorium on tests is a must.

Islamabad should be attending to New Delhi fears that Pakistan is still training, arming and encouraging militants to indulge in terrorism in India. Shah Abdul Aziz, a former parliamentarian, has told a Pakistan TV channel that senior officials of the Interior Ministry sent him to meet Baitullah Mehsud, the Taliban chief who was killed subsequently, to show "unity against India" in the wake of the Mumbai attacks. If this is true -- and there is no contradiction by Islamabad -- then India's charge that the 26/11 has had the involvement of state actors gains credence.

Where is the silver lining in this somber atmosphere? The only plus point is that Islamabad has a parliament which has come through a democratic struggle that the lawyers waged. It should be more independent than the earlier democratic governments which owed their installation to the army that decided to bring them to the fore at a particular time. New Delhi should put more faith in the Zardari regime which is grappling with the problem of terrorism from within.

Many decades ago, there was a wise professor who said: "Optimism is a moral duty." After watching relations between India and Pakistan since independence, I can appreciate the professor's advice, because only optimism can sustain faith in normalcy.

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