

# FM's New Delhi trip: Substance left for PM's visit

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

A major diplomatic event has just been completed. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni has just returned from her official visit to New Delhi (September 8-10). A Joint Statement (JS) issued after the talks indicated that these were held in a cordial and friendly atmosphere where both sides reiterated their desire to move the relations ahead. The FM held official talks with her counterpart, Indian External Affairs Minister Mr. SM Krishna. She paid a courtesy call upon the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who mentioned that India attached the highest importance to its relations with Bangladesh. He hoped that a new chapter of Bangladesh-India relations would be written with the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India soon. Dipu Moni also called on Indian Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the Parliamentary Affairs and Water Resources Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal. Conspicuously left out was her proposed meeting with Sonia Gandhi according to information made available before her visit.

In the joint statements (JS), the two sides reviewed the entire gamut of bilateral relations. On specifics, the sharing of the Teesta waters was discussed. The Foreign Ministries of the two countries have been mandated to move negotiations forward on this issue. Bangladesh agreed to discuss making Ashuganj a port of call under Article 23 of the Inland Water Trade and Transit Agreement and agreed to let India use this port for a power plant in Tripura. India agreed to facilitate Bangladesh - Nepal and Bangladesh - Bhutan connectivity. Both sides agreed on containerized movement of cargo by train and trail. On other trade related matters, the two sides reviewed the existing situation and agreed to strengthen the existing institutional mechanisms to enhance trade. Bangladesh agreed to discuss use of Chittagong port by India. On power issues, India agreed to provide immediately 100 MW of electricity and to discuss the feasibility of power grid inter connectivity from India to Bangladesh.

On border demarcation, both sides expressed intent to resolve unresolved issues. A couple of important decisions were made on border trade. On security, the two sides reiterated their earlier stand not to allow each other's territory to be used by terrorists and to strengthen cooperation on terrorism. The two sides agreed to conclude three agreements on mutual assistance on criminal matters; transfer of sentenced persons; and combating international terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking.

Bangladesh-India relations have been stagnating over the last seven years despite very compelling geopolitical historical relations for both the countries to be close friends. The victory of the Awami League with a massive mandate and the return of the Congress in India to power raised expectations that Bangladesh-India relations would move forward. Unfortunately, in the last eight months that the AL has been in office, relations have not moved anywhere. Instead, the Tipaimukh controversy has injected into the relations a new element of possible discord.

Many expected that traditional close relations between the Awami League and the Congress would be reflected during the Foreign Minister's visit. However, the JS does not reflect that optimism. On Tipaimukh, which is now hovering in the background as a dark cloud, the JS has simply mentioned that Bangladesh side welcomed the reassurance given by India that no steps will be taken to harm Bangladesh. It is true that the Indian Prime Minister had earlier assured Sheikh Hasina on Tipaimukh. That, however, has not set fears in Bangladesh at rest. The parliamentary delegation that visited India on the issue has also not fully rested Bangladesh's apprehensions. The JS will also not lessen people's fears and apprehensions for it does not suggest that Bangladesh's fears were fully conveyed to the Indian side.

On the water issues also the JS has given no cause for optimism. The concession given by Bangladesh to India for use of Ashuganj port to facilitate building the Palatana power project in Tripura and



assurance to allow India to use the same port as a port of call under the IWTTA is substantive concession/assurance. On trade issues where Bangladesh has very good reasons for feeling aggrieved, there is simply an expression of intent with no concrete concessions given. The JS' one positive aspect is India's agreement to facilitate Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan connectivity that Bangladesh has more than reciprocated on the Chittagong port. India's offer for credit line in the railways sector is another positive inclusion in the Joint Declaration. The demarcation of the maritime boundary that is a major unresolved issue of tremendous importance to Bangladesh has been left out. India's requests on connectivity (transit) have also not been reflected in the JS.

There have been many visits in the

past by Bangladesh Foreign Ministers to New Delhi. Those visits have failed to move relations forward. This time however, there could be a reason why the JS has not gone in depth on most substantive issues. Our Prime Minister would soon go to New Delhi for discussing our bilateral relations with her counterpart. Hence, the Indians must have left the substantive matters and in depth discussions for the summit level talks between the two countries.

The above notwithstanding, the Foreign Minister must have brought with her information and experience that could be immensely important for the forthcoming Summit talks between the two countries that have not been reflected in the JS. These could now go to the preparation of the Summit talks. Going by past experience, Bangladesh-India relations

cannot achieve a paradigm shift so long as it is left to bureaucrats and once in a while to the Foreign Ministers and only on very rare occasions to the highest level. It is time to reverse the pyramid to send a political signal from the top to the bureaucrats and ministers to improve relations. Neither side so far has shown this political will. The stakes are too high and too important to allow bureaucrats to spin a web around these relations and keep it stagnant. It is time to break that web for the future of hundreds of millions of people in the two countries.

India is the bigger neighbour. It has the more compelling reasons to hold out the hand of friendship. It needs to show the world that it is a responsible power by treating its neighbours fairly so that it in return wins the respect of the major powers to be in their company. It has great

security concerns arising from internal terrorist threats. India's civil nuclear deal with US under which India will have many nuclear power installations in the future should add significantly to its security concerns. Bangladesh can be the soft underbelly in these security concerns for which it is in India's interest that it should see a stable Bangladesh. That will depend to a large extent on how India shares the waters of the common rivers and resolves the other outstanding bilateral issues.

For India, showing the political will can be easy and it is a matter of surprise that it has not done so thus far. Instead it has conducted relations with Bangladesh on the strictest principle of reciprocity where sometimes India has demanded more of Bangladesh than it has been willing to give. On trade, for example, India gave Bangladesh duty free access for 8 million garments but later imposed countervailing duty to protect domestic producers. Such examples are galore.

It may not be easy for Bangladesh to demonstrate political will because of the dynamics of domestic politics. Unlike India, where the political parties are united on foreign affairs, in Bangladesh the party in power and the opposition are not so and when it comes to relations with India, they oppose each other as fiercely as they do on domestic issues. Nevertheless, without unity on relations with India between the ruling party and the opposition, we will not be able to show the political will to motivate India to resolve the outstanding problems. As Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina must make great efforts to bring the people behind her so that she can negotiate with India on behalf of the nation and just not her party when she undertakes her New Delhi trip. Her massive majority should encourage her to unite the nation just as her father had done in 1971. Dipu Moni could have started the process by talking with the opposition before going to New Delhi. That would have enhanced her position much more than she could have imagined.

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

## US Senator's Burma trip may lead to Aung San Suu Kyi's release

LARRY JAGAN

SENATOR Jim Webb's visit to Burma may yet prove to be extremely significant as he seeks to swap western sanctions for engagement with the military regime. "It is vitally important that the United States re-engage with Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, at all levels," the American politician told journalists during a press conference in Bangkok immediately after he left Rangoon.

One of the key reasons he sees for the need for the US to strengthen its role in the region is China's growing influence, which he believes is a major obstacle to economic and political development in the area, especially Burma. If the senator gets his way, and US policy begins to change, it will also have important consequences for the countries of ASEAN, India and Bangladesh. More importantly the senator's trip reflects the junta's new approach to the international community and especially its neighbours. The trip may also lead to the early release of the detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Senator Webb's main mission on this visit was to meet the reclusive Burmese military rulers in their hideaway in the mountains north of the former capital Rangoon and try to coax them out of their isolation. He had talks with the junta's top general, Than Shwe who rarely meets foreign visitors and the detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

But at this stage everything to do with his visit is still shrouded in mystery. Despite meeting journalists on two occasions while in Bangkok, the usually talkative politician was overtly coy, extremely evasive and continually non-committal. "He is hiding something," said a senior western diplomat who closely follows Burmese affairs. "He knows more than he's telling, something is surely afoot."

This was certainly no ordinary or even private visit, despite senior state department officials insisting that the senator visited Burma in a personal capacity. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, rang him on Sunday night to talk about the trip, Webb let slip during his press conference last week. This only adds to the increasing suspicion that something significant may be happening beneath the public gaze. After all that is how serious diplomacy takes place.

Senator Webb, it must be remembered, is a rising political star in Washington, close to the Clintons and President Barack Obama, according to sources on the Hill. He is also tipped to become the next secretary of defence, when the Bush-appointed Bill Gates stands down in around two years' time. He is currently the chairman of the Senate foreign affairs East Asia and the Pacific sub-committee. It is this guise he is using to justify his visit. Add to that the fact that he is a former marine and Vietnam veteran, making him some the senior general respect. So the US could not have had a better envoy even if unofficially -- than this conservative Democrat from Virginia.

While Webb as was expected told Than Shwe that Aung San Suu Kyi should be released before the 2010 election, and allowed a political role. "We will just have to wait and see how the Myanmar government responds," he told journalists at the end of his visit. "I am hopeful that they will give my recommendation [that she be freed] serious consideration," he headed.

"Than Shwe can be in no doubt, that without Aung San Suu Kyi being released and her party the NLD [National League for Democracy] allowed to participate in the elections, the US and the international community would find it impossible to accept the process as free and fair," he said.

For the generals, their apparent attitude to the senator during his visit also significantly suggests that they are shifting in their usual position on

non-engagement with the international community. Senator Webb was given a ceremonial reception with all the top generals that is usually reserved only for visiting heads of state. Shown prominently on the state-run television, it clearly shows Burma's military rulers now crave international, especially American, recognition, said a long-time foreign resident in Rangoon.

General Than Shwe is the master of dissection and psychological warfare. Divide and rule -- an approach to power gleaned from their colonial masters, Britain -- has long dominated the Burmese generals' strategic options. Their chauvinism and xenophobia makes them extremely cautious about being over-reliant on anyone else.

At present there are growing concerns at the top of the military about China's position, and the top general is looking at how to balance their growing influence in the country. Relations with ASEAN, India and to some extent Russia, was meant to do that but over the last twelve months China's economic and military role has grown out of all proportions dwarfing the position of the other Asian allies. "More critically, China has not backed the regime strongly enough in its efforts to disarm the ethnic cease-fire groups," Win Min a Burmese academic at Chiang Mai University told the Daily Star. "This has angered the Than Shwe, who may now be looking for alternative ways to reign in the rebel groups."

"The warm reception given to the US delegation by Senator Webb, including the diplomat staff based in Rangoon who are normally shunned or called in to get a dressing down was a clear signal to the Chinese," said an Asia diplomat based in Rangoon. "See if you don't help us we can turn to other powerful friends."

So the Burmese military regime seems to be trying to make some international realignments. But if they are serious about engaging the international community, especially the US, it may even heed some of its concerns, and then they will have no alternative but to deal with Aung San Suu Kyi. Than Shwe, at the behest of some of its Asian allies, especially Singapore and China, is keen to improve relations with the US, according to military sources in the Burmese capital Naypyitaw. The senator's visit makes this extremely evident.

"You cannot fail to see in this that the junta is keen to tell the world that sanctions do not work and we are open to dialogue at least with other governments, if not Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement inside the country," said a western diplomat based in Rangoon. But the hints from the Americans, is that this was more than an exploratory trip by the Senator concrete matters were discussed and some kind of deal may be in the pipeline.

"I believe that if the right obstacles are removed and if the United States has a very clear position on some of these obstacles the notion of sanctions economically in this country is negative... it is not good," he told Burmese journalists at the airport before he left on Sunday.

One of the key obstacles is certainly the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi. The season Burma-watcher, and former British ambassador to Thailand and Vietnam Derek Tonkin is another who believes there is more to Webb's than meets the eye as yet. "I sense there is more to this visits than we know," he told the Daily Star. "It is probably all about a deal on Suu Kyi," he headed.

Aung San Suu Kyi will be released before the elections next year, a senior military source told the Daily Star. These are expected to be held late next year. But now it seems likely that the Lady, as she is frequently referred to in Burma, may be freed before the end of the year.

The author writes for The Daily Star from Bangkok.

## Dialogue with the Taliban for stability in Afghanistan!

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

NATO forces in Afghanistan are expected to provide personal security to people from the Talebans but mistakes after mistakes by Nato forces may have killed many thousand innocent civilians.

The September 4th strike on two hijacked petrol tankers in the Kunduz province by Nato plane killed 90 including civilians and the Afghanistan government reacted angrily to such flawed attacks. The German commander was in charge of the unit which struck the petrol tanks.

It was reported that 250 villagers had been near the tankers to get free petrol. And "helping yourself to the spoils" from the hijacked military convoys was nothing new and Nato forces should have known it. Some have asked for a trial of the German commander for killing civilians.

It is reported that Nato has been investigating the incident because the top military commander ordered the Nato forces not to hit the civilians.

Almost every day some Talebans are being killed on the border areas by the CIA Predator drone aircraft. Although such attacks have killed many Taleban stalwarts including its former leader Baitullah Mehsud, they may prove to be counterproductive in the long run as the aerial attacks have made it much more difficult for Pakistan government leaders to isolate the extremists and militants from the tribal population.

Meanwhile, on 31 August, the top US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, who heads more than 100,000 Nato soldiers, called for a complete revamp of military strategy in the country in a sweeping review of operations that acknowledges the disastrous approach of the last eight years and may pave the way for a demand for more troops.

The revised strategy, in the face of the Taliban's expanding influence and waning support for the Kabul government, changes the emphasis from engaging directly with militants to winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan population, officials in Washington and Nato headquarters said.

The US has 63,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, with another 5,000 on the way. It is also reported that US may send additional 15,000 soldiers. Anthony Cordesman, a Washington-based strategist who has been an adviser to McChrystal, said recently in the Washington Post that the US deployment would need about three to eight more brigades, which would mean anything from 7,000 to 40,000 more troops.

President Obama has made Afghanistan the cornerstone of his foreign policy at a time when polls in the US suggest out of 10 Americans, 6 are opposed to war in Afghanistan. In light of the background, sending more troops would be politically difficult for President Obama.

Along with the performance of Nato forces in Afghanistan, continuing involvement by Nato forces has been very unpopular in many Nato countries and some have suggested

Western diplomats said. "It is part of a political effort that needs to be made inside and outside the country to ensure that the military effort is complemented in the right ways."

Important parts of the strategy would be to exploit what diplomats here say are fissures in the Taliban, to separate what amounts to day-wage fighters from the movement's hardcore elements, whom many officials consider to be "irreconcilable," and to separate the Taliban from Al Qaeda.

neighbouring Pakistan.

Furthermore, Pakistan government leaders have found that they cannot pursue vigorously against the Taleban in the tribal areas because people think that it is a war imposed on Pakistan by the Americans.

Analysts say that two main issues stand between the sides: the presence of foreign forces and the system of government in the country.

Afghans from all sides, all ethnicities, including all the Mujahedeen



that Nato should have an exit strategy after two years.

Furthermore, US officials and advisers involved with Afghanistan see little salvation in the recent presidential election, especially with questions raised about its legitimacy. It was thought that the August 20 presidential election would provide security by shoring up an elected government in the ethnically divided nation but evidence of vote rigging has overshadowed the ballot and divided the country.

Security has deteriorated to the point that a growing chorus of Western diplomats, Nato commanders and Afghans has begun to argue that the insurgency cannot be defeated solely by military means. Some officials in Kabul contend that the war against the insurgents cannot be won and are calling for negotiations with moderate Talebans.

If moderate Talebans can be persuaded to lay down their arms against a position in the administration, violence is likely to decrease.

Behind the scenes, it is reported that there has also been quiet work of influential Muslim clerics and international leaders in an attempt to draw the Taliban away from Al Qaeda and to bring peace to Afghanistan, according to an Afghan military attaché working on the plan.

Observers believe neither Nato nor the insurgents could win the war outright, and predict that fighting could continue for 10 more years at the cost of some 100,000 casualties.

For the Obama administration the strategy to open dialogue with the moderate Talebans is not a bad idea. Senior White House officials and military leaders believe that engagement with some levels of the Taleban - while excluding top leaders - could help reverse a pronounced downward spiral in Afghanistan and

groups, should come together to work it out. Furthermore, if the moderate Talebans make the withdrawal of Nato forces as a condition for a peace dialogue, it could be a dead end because the Obama administration is not likely to agree to it.

It has been often argued that war cannot fight an ideology. It rather acts as fuel to the militants as petrol does to fire. If the soldiers interact with the Afghans in a way which gives confidence to the Afghans that security forces are their partners, then success may be achieved.

Education and socio-economic development must go hand-in-hand. When ordinary people have employment and economic prosperity, they move away from extremism because it does not interest them anymore.

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