

Kudos to Bangladeshi peace-keepers

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WHEN none other than US President Barack Obama says that Bangladeshi peace-keepers, under the blue helmets, not only enhanced the prestige of our country but also the honour of the United Nations, one feels elated and proud. Indeed, our peace-keepers' hard work and efforts during the past twenty-one years in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia and other hot spots have not gone unnoticed. I had the privilege of being involved with the coordination of our peacekeeping missions, first as director general (International Organisations) and then as the foreign secretary, and recall the moments of tension and crises that our peacekeepers had to go through in some missions.

Bangladesh's UN peacekeeping operation started in 1988 on the Iran-Iraq border. Our active and constructive role as a member of the OIC Summit-level

peace committee on the Iran Iraq war, as well as at the UN Security Council and the general assembly, was recognised by both warring parties.

It was indeed most befitting that, after the cessation of hostilities, Bangladesh was one of the first countries to be considered for the blue helmet operation. Since then, about 83,000 of our troops have served in 63 UN peacekeeping operations. It is a triumph of our diplomacy and the professional competence of our armed forces, police and other contingents.

It will be relevant to have a broader look at the overall picture. Currently, 90,000 UN peacekeeping troops are stationed in different conflict zones in the world -- more than at any other time in history. For each mission, detailed proposals relating to its mandate, composition, and financial and logistic aspects are approved by the UN Security Council on the basis of adoption of a

Council resolution.

Since composition of these missions and deployment take quite a bit of time after the adoption of Council resolution, some analysts believe that the UN, like Nato, should create a standing army to improve the response time as well as sharpen their professionalism and coordination. United States, the main contributor to the UN budget, however, opposes the move. It is significant that last week President Obama once again pledged additional support for UN peacekeeping missions.

As per the UN scale of assessment, the funding for the peacekeeping forces comes mostly from the US and other developed countries. However, most of the troops come from developing countries. Last year, the top troop-contributing countries were Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Nepal, Ghana, Jordan and Rwanda.

Why do troops come mainly from developing countries? Well, most of the hot spots are in the Third World and hence, these troops are less likely to produce resentment among the local population. The tragic shooting of American peacekeepers in Somalia is an instance.

The UN also needs the concurrence of receiving countries, and they sometimes specifically ask the UN not to send troops from western countries, as Eritrea did not too long ago. The receiving countries have also been most reluctant to



Brave Blue Berets of Bangladesh.

accept troops from countries whom they consider "unfriendly or partisan."

The permanent members of the Security Council also have a big say in the matter. During the cold war era it was very difficult to send UN peacekeeping missions due to ideological rivalry between the two superpowers. Only after the demise of the former Soviet Union did the peacekeeping operation get a major boost, and a record number of such missions were approved and dispatched.

As regards their composition, the permanent members are still most reluctant to send troops from their rivals in the Council. Here lies the test of our diplomacy, as Bangladesh has to emerge as "acceptable" to both, the receiving countries and the Council members.

Another factor that has encouraged the developing countries is the financial incentive. The UN pays the respective governments, on an average, about \$1,500 per month as salary and different types of allowances for each soldier, and

the governments, in turn, pay their soldiers.

This helps some governments to maintain much larger standing armies than they could otherwise afford. The soldiers also get an opportunity to get professional training from the UN and are also exposed to the use of the latest war machinery.

Currently, about 8,000 Bangladeshi troops and 1,400 policemen are stationed in 12 missions. They are recognised for their professional competence and devotion to their duties. In life threatening situations, when peace-keepers from other countries were withdrawn from Rwanda, Somalia or Bosnia, our troops discharged their mandated tasks under grave risks.

In addition, they have earned respect of the local people through their various nation-building efforts like building of bridges and roads, or setting up of hospitals or schools in those countries, as has been manifested by Sierra Leone's recognition of Bangla as their second language or other countries' naming of their roads after our country.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's effective participation at the just-concluded summit level meeting of the troop-contributing countries at UN, and President Obama's generous praise and pledge of additional support to these missions should give an extra boost to our peacekeeping efforts.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary.

Nepal's elusive peace process

The leaders of political parties in Nepal suspect and distrust each other. There is none within Nepal to help initiate confidence building measures, which is badly needed to take the peace process to a logical conclusion.

MAHMOOD HASAN

THE Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of November 2006, which laid the foundation of a temporary peace in Nepal and created a conducive atmosphere for the elections held in April 2008, has come to a standstill.

Since Pushpa Kumar Dahal (known as Prachanda, 55), the Maoist leader, resigned as prime minister on May 4, the political confrontation in Kathmandu has become worse. Frequent clashes between the police and the Maoists have become a regular feature in Kathmandu. Nepal's polity has become deeply polarised -- between the Maoists, once an outlawed guerrilla outfit, the UML, constitutional leftists supported by the Nepali Congress, and the army, which is at the center of the current turmoil. Though the Maoists and the UML are leftist political parties they, however, do not see eye to eye on any issue.

Prachanda resigned because he lost a constitutional battle with the president and the army chief.

The quarrel with the army chief arose when Prachanda wanted to induct his 20,000 "Maoist fighters" into the regular Nepalese army, as required under the UN-brokered peace agreement.

The Chief of Army Staff General Rookmangud Katawal refused to integrate the "indoctrinated fighters" in the army. Enraged, Prachanda sacked the general on May 3 and appointed Lt. General Kul Bahadur Khadka, the second-in-command as the chief of army

staff. This triggered a series of crises.

When Prachanda announced the dismissal to his cabinet colleagues, they questioned his unilateral decision and the source of his authority. Legal procedures for removing the army chief were unclear under the interim constitution. Angered by this authoritarian decision the largest coalition partner, CPN (UML), withdrew from the Prachanda-led coalition government.

Dr. Ram Baran Yadav (former health minister and general secretary of Nepali Congress Party), president of the Republic and commander-in-chief of the army, overrode Prachanda's decision and ordered General Katawal to continue. This further infuriated Prachanda, who then resigned in disgust, terming the president's move as "unconstitutional and undemocratic." Prachanda was succeeded by Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, former general secretary of CPN (UML), on May 25.

Pushpa Kumar Dahal became prime minister following the massive victory of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in the Nepalese Constituent Assembly Elections on April 10, 2008. In the Constituent Assembly of 601 seats the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) emerged as the single largest party, securing 229 as against 115 of the Nepali Congress.

Though the Maoists did not get an overwhelming majority, the CPN (United Marxist-Leninist) (108 seats) and 20 other parties of the Constituent Assembly elected Prachanda as its leader. He was sworn in as prime minister



"I'll be back!"

on August 1, 2008. Thus, the nine-month old Maoist coalition government, led by the once outlawed school teacher-turned-guerrilla leader, came to an end.

Prachanda's resignation came as a relief to the centre-left UML, the monarchist parties, the Nepali Congress and India. India had a major role in installing

Prachanda as prime minister, who then abolished (on May 28, 2008) the monarchy. Nepal was declared a Republic the same day. India's apathy towards the fiercely nationalist monarchy in Nepal is well known. Now that the king is gone, it seems Prachanda's utility to India is over.

The recent warming of relations between Delhi and Washington, and the rise of the Indian Maoists insurgency, has made India wary of the Nepali Maoists.

The professional Nepalese army is proud of its tradition and has been absolutely loyal to the family of the deposed monarch, who was the supreme commander. Prachanda sees the army as a monarchical legacy, and was determined to dilute its formation and command structure by inducting the Maoist fighters.

Prachanda says he wanted to establish civilian supremacy over the army. Analysts say that Prachanda should have waited till the new constitution was adopted and then moved to restructure the army. His impatience has put the constitutional process into jeopardy.

Since resigning from the post of prime minister, Prachanda has been at odds with almost all the other parties. He is frustrated and unable to resolve the deadlock. He finds it unacceptable that, despite being the largest party in the Constituent Assembly, the members sit on the opposition benches. Prachanda wants to return as prime minister and lead the government once again.

To pressurise the president, the Maoists have been threatening to relaunch jana joodha (guerrilla war). Incumbent Prime Minister Madav Kumar Nepal (56) has called Prachanda's bluff and has not given any maneuvering space to his erstwhile colleague. Prachanda's predicament is that he can neither go off to his mountain hideout nor lead the government of the new republic.

With waning Indian support it is extremely unlikely that the marginalised Maoists will take up arms once again. Prachanda has no alternative but to remain within the constitutional process. His only way out is to join the coalition

under Prime Minister Madav Kumar Nepal, whom he loathes.

The interim constitution came into effect in January 2007. The Constituent Assembly has a mandate to complete the drafting of the new constitution by May 2010. The political deadlock has held up the work of the Constituent Assembly and the final version of the constitution. Prachanda wants to redefine the powers of the president of the Republic in the interim constitution before re-engaging in the drafting of the new statute.

To add to Prachanda's woes, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights-Nepal, (OHCHR-N) recently wrote a stinging letter to Prachanda, asking him to cooperate fully with the ongoing investigation into the alleged human rights abuses that his party cadres perpetrated during the decade-long insurgency.

The leaders of political parties in Nepal suspect and distrust each other. There is none within Nepal to help initiate confidence building measures, which is badly needed to take the peace process to a logical conclusion. This onerous task can only be undertaken by India, under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which defines political and economic relations between the two countries. India has the clout to push the parties to complete drafting the new constitution.

General Rookmangud Katawal retired from service last September. Nepal's professional army has conspicuously remained away from the squabbles of political parties. The danger is that if Prachanda tries to push the army into a corner, it will take a political stance, which will complicate further the already complex peace process.

Mahmood Hasan is a former Ambassador and Secretary, and Policy Advisor, Center for Foreign Affairs Studies.

The battle against the bottle



IT is not easy to run when you are carrying the top half of a water cooler. Especially since it was brimming with liquid. But I had no choice. My victims would be returning within minutes. I staggered across the room and managed to replace the water container on top of the cooler seconds before they returned.

The weather outside was the precise temperature of the core of the sun, so they were soon glugging down the doctor-dosed liquid I had put in the cooler. "Ahh," they said. "That tastes so good."

Before the police get their poisons and narcotics department to arrest me, I should point out that the victims were my immediate family, so I am fully entitled to poison them (and do so regularly, whenever it's my turn to cook).

But on this occasion I wasn't trying to kill them. I had filled the tank of the water cooler with what they thought was a dangerous, noxious substance: tap water. I am not a completely irresponsible father and husband (only about 60%) so, before doing this experiment, I spent a brief 20 years drinking the stuff to make sure it was safe.

Unlike me, my family insists on drinking water shipped to Asia from some spring in Australia because they say it's a better-tasting, safer drink. Well, now the truth can be told. My family members drank the tap water for a month, and no one noticed the difference.

The campaign against using bottled water is growing at high speed. It will only

be a matter of months before youngsters recoil from drinkers of Bonaqua as they do today from people who smoke or wear socks with sandals. They have a good point.

Every bottle of Evian you drink generates up to 600 times as much CO2 as tap water. Most climate scientists agree that CO2 causes killer weather, earthquakes and flooding.

How has the world's biggest producer of bottled distilled water responded to this finding?

Watsons of Hong Kong has upped its output, coloured its website green and added this headline: "Gifting you a greener home for your future, gifting a better breath to your future." I was shown this by reader Karen Fu, who asked: "How is creating more plastic bottles for the dump 'gifting' us a greener home for our future?"

But the prize for inanity goes to Ng E-Jay who wrote on sgpolitics.net that

"access to clean, healthy bottled water is to me a basic right" and if anyone insists on "encroaching on my right to enjoy this magnificent product, I will oppose them come hell or high water."

This is brilliantly apt since he lives in Singapore, a city which will be flooded if CO2 continues to increase. Mr Ng, you may one day be facing "hell and high water" in a rather more literal manner than you think.

In the meantime, I broke the news to my family that they had been drinking tap water for a month. They cancelled their standing order with the bottled water company.

Now here comes the real reason for this campaign. Switching to tap water is going to save me a small fortune! What shall I do with the money? Probably spend it on something really unhealthy.

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