

Alarm bells on the eastern border

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BAKGLADESH and Myanmar are on a collision course with tension in the border that has been heightened by amassing of troops in their respective sides of the border. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, when asked by journalists about the construction of pillars for barbed wire fence along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border at Naikhangchhari in Bandarban, said that the action is in accordance with international law. The Foreign Minister, however, told journalists that she was not aware that the Myanmar military had gathered 10,000 Rohingas in the border on their side with the intention of pushing them into Bangladesh. The Foreign Minister also did not comment on the amassing of troops near the border. She was trying to diffuse the tension diplomatically, which is understandable.

Bangladesh and Myanmar relations have been faltering in recent years. During the emergency, the two sides faced off a confrontation in the Bay of Bengal where they have disagreement over demarcation of maritime boundary with potentials of armed conflict. In fact, the two sides brought their warships into the area during the emergency period in Bangladesh when it protested Myanmar's decision to allow the Korean company Daewoo to move vessels and rigs in a disputed block to drill for hydrocarbons. In fact, Myanmar warships had escorted the Daewoo ships and rigs into the block provoking Bangladesh to move its warships. Although the Daewoo ships and rigs were later removed without any incident, the tension later shifted to the border where Myanmar continued to lay landmines, thus moving the tension from the sea to the land.

Myanmar has a history of securing its border with landmines. Between 1995 and 2000, Myanmar's military junta mined its side of the border with landmines to allegedly stop Arakanese rebels from entering into Myanmar from Bangladesh. It stopped planting more landmines after the alleged threat receded. Myanmar had earlier abstained

from voting on the pro Mine Ban Treaty at the UN in 2002 and hence has no obligations under international law not to plant land mines on its territory. Despite the tensions at sea over the maritime boundary demarcation and planting land mines on its side of the border, the two sides have accepted diplomatic channels to resolve their disputes. In fact, during the Caretaker Government's tenure, Foreign Affairs Adviser of the CG and Myanmar's Foreign Minister had met in New Delhi on the sidelines of BMSTEC in a cordial meeting where both agreed informally to resolve the thorny issues in their bilateral relations through diplomatic channels.

Recent actions of Myanmar's military junta have not been following that informal understanding; in fact, these actions are overtly provocative. The rounding up of 10,000 Rohingas bring back to memory the ruthless action of Myanmar's military rulers in 1977 when they forced into Bangladesh over 2,00,000 Rohingas by scaring the daylight out of them, leaving them with no alternatives but to flee to Bangladesh for their dear lives. Although by 1979, most of them went back to Myanmar, they again flooded back to Bangladesh in greater number in the early 1990s and by March, 1992, 2, 60,000 Rohingas were pushed into Bangladesh. Bangladesh, with its scarce resources, had to look after the refugees with UNHCR assisting for a long time and still over 20,000 of them are living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. A new influx of Rohingas in the numbers seen in 1979 and 1992 could have far reaching disastrous economic, social and political consequences for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's current apprehensions are not restricted to just a new influx of Rohingya refugees. Myanmar is an unpredictable regime ruled by a military junta that has scant respect for international opinion, having chosen isolation on its own volition. It has strengthened itself militarily over the years and today possesses formidable defense and offense capabilities. In recent times, it has added missiles of both the short and the medium range capabilities to its military

arsenals from China, North Korea, Russia, Bulgaria and Ukraine. On a comparative scale, Myanmar's military is thus extremely well equipped to pose a serious threat to Bangladesh.

The contentious issues notwithstanding, the two countries have so far preferred diplomacy in conducting bilateral relations. Thus the recent provocative actions of Myanmar are unexpected. However, they are not surprising. Myanmar has been steadily building its relations with most of the western countries without giving much in return. The demand of USA for the release of the Noble Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has fallen on deaf ears. The military regime's ruthlessness, last witnessed in 2007 when it put down dissent of the country's much revered monks, shows no signs of weakening. Yet all the western nations together with Japan and South Korea, are vying with one another for doing business with the country's military junta. The USA has finally also joined the bandwagon by deciding to engage with the regime having concluded that economic sanctions to bring the military junta to submission have failed. Engagement, without relenting on the economic sanctions, could encourage the junta to accommodate popular participation with the military in sharing power where the possible inclusion of Aung is being seen by the US administration as a possibility. Myanmar today is finding wide acceptance internationally through the back door.

For Bangladesh, none of the above is good news. It has given Myanmar a new importance with powers that could otherwise have come to its assistance to persuade Myanmar to stop its provocative acts against Bangladesh. In fact, the scenario is more depressing when it comes to countries that have in the past come to Bangladesh's assistance in time of need. China is one such country that Bangladesh could have depended upon in the past as a friend in need. China's recent engagements with Myanmar that it values very much for strategic reasons have weakened Bangladesh's bargaining position because it cannot now expect



China to use its influence to back Bangladesh against Myanmar. China may have other reasons to be upset with Bangladesh, for instance, over the granting to Taiwan the permission to open a Trade Office in Dhaka unilaterally in 2004. Even India, that Bangladesh could otherwise expect to support its cause against Myanmar because of the historical closeness between the incumbent ruling parties in Delhi and Dhaka, may only be lukewarm in the event Bangladesh has to seek its assistance to talk to Myanmar. India has gone ahead and developed its own relations with Myanmar, allowing its democratic commitments to take back seat.

At the back of the junta's mind there is also a lingering suspicion about Bangladesh in the context of its not very effective national reconciliation

where there are many groups still fighting the military junta for freedom and right of self-determination. The junta also has a score to settle with Bangladesh for declining the joint request it made with India to Bangladesh during the last BNP Government for a gas pipeline to India at a time when the military junta needed hard cash very badly. Although there may have been then and still may be good reasons to deny the request; the denial had not been handled diplomatically nor communicated to Myanmar (and India) in a satisfactory manner.

Despite the tension in the border, the chances of Bangladesh and Myanmar fighting even a limited war soon is very unlikely. Nevertheless, the current situation on Bangladesh-Myanmar points to

failure of Bangladesh foreign policy vis-à-vis Myanmar for which responsibility should be pinpointed at the doors of the past governments of Bangladesh in the last one decade. Scarce attention has been paid during this period to foreign policy and foreign relations. It is foreign policy nevertheless that can help Bangladesh with not just Myanmar but with its future as well. In this instance, although the Foreign Minister is not saying so, Myanmar's provocation may have been caused by Bangladesh granting lease in the Bay of Bengal to US companies in the part that it disputes, a part that has good prospects of striking oil and gas. The decision of Bangladesh to see UN arbitration to which Bangladesh is legally entitled may have enhanced that provocation.

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Terrorist rehabilitation programme for Bangladesh

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THE newspapers in Bangladesh are once again abuzz with the stories of Islamic militants being arrested from around the country. Only recently, their hideouts, training centres and arms cache have been found deep in the jungles of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Their recruitment, training and motivation programmes, as revealed by captured militants, even if those are partially true, are simply amazing.

It is apparent that our 4-year long campaign against the Islamic militants, while protecting us from violent attacks, has not been able to stop the spread of militant ideology. Although hundreds of militants have been arrested, many hundreds have been inducted anew. While we get to see every now and then pictures of captured militants lined up behind the pile of arms and ammunition, books and CDs, we still do not know their sources. We are not aware of any arrests made of the writers, printers or publishers of the jihadi books and CDs. How these are printed/manufactured and distributed remain a mystery. It clearly shows that while we are arresting the foot-soldiers of the Islamic militancy, those who are fanning the ideology are still beyond our reach.

International linkage that the local militants have been able to develop over the years is also a matter of grave concern. The "Terror Inc." is now able to get their personnel and material across South Asia, from Baluchistan to Teknaf, unhindered by international boundaries. The religiously oriented militants, like the JMB or HUJI, will be a long-term problem for Bangladesh and we need a long-term strategy to combat the menace.

We should remember that Islamic militancy is an ideology, however misguided it might be. Police action against the militants, while essential, is only a part of the solution; the main arena must be on the ideological front, where we are doing nothing. Another important question is the rehabilitation of the militants who are now in jail. As far as my knowledge goes, the authority has not addressed the issue yet, although I shall argue that the matter needs urgent attention.

On the ideological front our aim must be twofold: first, to prevent our citizen from becoming militants, and second, to re-educate and rehabilitate captured militants so that they return home as reformed persons after their release. As a part of the preventive strategy, our education system, especially the madrasa education, needs a thorough overhaul. The latest Education Policy announced by the Government has proposed to modernize the Aliya madrasa system, but it says nothing about Quomi madrasa system. However, even the limited

reform of Aliya stream that the committee has proposed is being attacked by the Islamists as a conspiracy by the Government to destroy Islam in Bangladesh, an age-old calumny by the Islamists against the secular forces.

We need political, social and economic reforms that would create conditions where extremism cannot find a secure foothold. While the modus operandi needs to be debated on the national level and would take time, our immediate attention should be on the extremists who are already in state custody. While some of the terrorist leaders, those who were engaged in



bombing, killing or wanton destruction, are liable to be given capital punishment, a vast majority of the militants will remain in jail - either under trial or undergoing prison sentence. We need to devise a strategy to reform them in prison and ensure that once released they become law-abiding citizens. This paper will highlight some of the options.

First of all, the militants must be isolated in prison from all other prisoners. If necessary, we need to set up separate prison for them. Otherwise, they would soon indoctrinate many other prisoners in jihadi ideology. Most of the prisoners in our jails are uneducated and unemployed youth who feel that the society have not treated them well. They cultivate deep resentment against everything that the society stands for. If the militants are allowed to preach their ideology among the prison population, especially among the young ones, soon we would have to be deal with thousands of ex-prisoners who have turned jihadi while in prison. It is important, therefore, to physically isolate the militants from all other prison inmates.

The re-education of the militants comes next. We need to remember that we are not dealing with ordinary criminals. Here we are dealing with people who are ideologically indoctrinated to wage Jihad against the 'infidels'. There is no remorse in their mind, nor do they feel there is anything to be ashamed of. In

fact, they believe that they are performing a religious duty, an act of piety in the name of Allah. The militants are convinced that they are on the right path, battling against evil forces. The re-education in these cases would be difficult and time consuming; yet it has to be done.

The jail authority will have to employ mainstream religious teachers who need to engage in theological arguments with the militants to convince them that what they thought to be religious cause were actually a deviant interpretation of the scripture. Most Jihadists seek their religious inspiration

life. Along with motivation and counseling, we need to impart general education and skill development training to the prisoners so that they could seek useful employment once they are released. Most of the militants have got little or no formal education. Therefore, they remain not only unemployed, they become unemployable in the modern, technology-driven job market. The re-education programme, therefore, need to be skill-based, that provide employment. The prison record of the militants could be a serious impediment for their future employment. Many prospective employers may shy away from employing these people. Here the Government could liaise with various employers' organizations to provide job for them. Unless they are usefully employed, the ex-militants might revert to militancy once again.

Re-education and rehabilitation of the militants is already working in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Even in Saudi Arabia there is an ongoing re-education programme for the domestic militants and returnees from Guantanamo or other US or European prisons with success. Of course, the Saudis have used, besides re-education, enormous monetary incentives for those who renounced militant path and swore allegiance to the Saudi monarchy. We, in Bangladesh, cannot afford financial incentives of such magnitude, but the Government could help secure loan or financial grant for those militants who want to start a small business, for example.

The militants, once released, need to be monitored by the law enforcing agencies, for there is always the danger that they might return to the old ways. It has happened in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where apparently reformed and repentant militant had returned to militancy soon after release. That the Government's effort to provide the militants with decent means of livelihood is not thwarted by difficulties should be also ensured that they

They need to have a national data base of the militants and keep those updated and for the safety and security of the vast majority of people we need to keep the militants, including the reformed ones on watch. Although, a long-term terrorist rehabilitation programme would be a costly one, not having one would be even costlier. In conclusion it can be said we need to stop the growth of religious extremism, which in the end gives rise to militancy. This would, of course, be a multi-pronged strategy that would have political, social and economic dimensions.

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Afghan Presidential Elections

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THE second Afghan Presidential elections which concluded on 20 August 2009 were marked by a low voter turnout of approximately 40 per cent, allegations of widespread fraud and 400 incidents of violence - making it the most violent day in Afghanistan since 2001. Hamid Karzai's failure to build upon the previous electoral verdict, which gave to him support of 55 per cent of the electorate - based on a high voter turnout of 70 per cent, and the resultant corruption and lack of governance created a sense of despondency amongst an already war weary electorate, many of whom chose to stay away. This coupled with the threat of the use of violence by the Taliban, kept away a large number of women voters. Although these elections have been held under extremely trying circumstances and thus their conduct was not expected to be perfect however, the widespread allegations of corruption and fraud has only served to make matters much worse. The UN backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) is investigating 726 serious allegations of major vote fraud and over 2000 complaints of fraud and intimidation. These developments have ruffled feathers in the west and undermined Karzai's moral standing both in the international community and back home.

With 91.6 per cent of the votes counted thus far the IEC has given the incumbent President Hamid Karzai a lead, securing 54.1 per cent of the total ballots cast compared to his closest rival Dr Abdullah Abdullah who has secured 28.3 per cent of the votes. However this entire exercise may possibly begin to falter with the EEC's decision of 10 September, as it declared that it has found "clear and convincing evidence of fraud" in Paktia, Kandahar and Ghazni provinces. The EEC in its statement said that the "ballots were not legally cast or legally counted". It has ordered an invalidation of ballots cast in 51 polling stations in Kandahar province, 5 in Paktia province and 27 in the Ghazni province. It has also ordered the Independent Election Commission (IEC) to conduct an audit and recount of ballot boxes where more than 95 per cent of the votes have been cast in favor of one candidate or in polling stations where there has been a 100 per cent turnout.

Paktia and Kandahar are two significant provinces in the Pushtun dominated south, out of the 20 provinces in which Karzai happens to be leading - securing 82.2 per cent and 87.7 per cent of the vote respectively - as against Abdullah Abdullah who is leading in 12 provinces, eight of which are in the Tajik dominated north. While in Ghazni Karzai has secured

42.4 per cent of the votes, thus making him a close second to another presidential hopeful Ramazan Bardosht who has secured 46.6 per cent of the votes. Gauging from both the volume as well as the serious nature of complaints, one gets the sense that this only the beginning of the process of unraveling the Afghan elections, touted as a reasonable success only a few weeks back. The EEC's decision is likely to have certain serious ramifications for Afghanistan.

First, if the number of ballots invalidated amounts to a cancellation of a sufficient number of votes that were cast in favor of Hamid Karzai it could reduce his majority to under 50 per cent, thus forcing a run off in the presidential race. If this were to happen the run off would take place with the onset of the winter season in the country, rendering many remote parts inaccessible and thus making the any nationwide poll process nearly impossible. It would also multiply the security challenges involved manifold. On the other hand a decision to honestly implement the EEC's decision of re-run of the polls either in part or in toto and a fair audit would augur well for democracy in Afghanistan. However given the ground realities in Afghanistan a rerun of the entire polls seems highly unlikely.

Second, further investigations by the EEC as well IEC's compliance with the EEC order could at least take up to 3 months, putting the country in a state of limbo. This certainly will not augur well for Afghanistan's stability and could potentially trigger a period of intense political turmoil, which neither Afghanistan nor the international community can afford at this juncture.

Extricating Afghanistan out of this political quagmire, by attempting to cobble together a conciliatory alliance government in Kabul by the international community will be an extremely challenging task, an indication of which can already be seen in Abdullah Abdullah's stance "a government whose record is very low, with corruption, it was called a narco state; rule of law, non existent, and on top of that it has committed ... fraud ... I don't see a place for myself in that sort of a government."

In a country that is rife with corruption, is war fatigued, is fighting one of the most fierce insurgencies and has historically not known peaceful transfer of power, the key players on the political chessboard will have to tread with extreme caution, for even one wrong move could potentially result in them being checkmated in the game thus ensuring what could perhaps be Afghanistan's irreversible descent into chaos.

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