

DMP special drive against lawlessness

It is time for serious rethink on police issues

THE Dhaka Metropolitan Police launched a three-day special drive on Wednesday to tackle criminality in the nation's capital. There are a couple of ways in which the drive can be looked at. In the first place, it is a welcome move for the important reason that when citizens are face to face with lawlessness, it is the social order which threatens to get frayed. In the second, the launch of the drive is an acknowledgement by the police that all is not well where security of life is concerned in this metropolis. It is now to be seen whether the drive yields any perceptible success or is merely one of those exercises that begin with a bang and end in a whimper. Besides, one is not quite sure that a three-day special drive will do what normal police activities have not done in the past. Again, it is a sign of how bad things have become that the police now must go for special drives against criminal elements, over and above their normal work.

That said, one hopes that the drive will achieve its goals and that citizens will end up heaving a sigh of relief. More importantly, one must bear in mind the limitations that the police have persistently suffered from over the years, which fact again has left them vulnerable where handling crime is concerned. It is against this background that one will expect the authorities to take certain meaningful measures to ensure that the police are able to do their job to their own as well as public expectations. For the immediate future, it is necessary that the police force be beefed up, enough to allow it to handle crime without having to stretch its resources. For years there have been complaints about police manpower not being adequate in dealing with law and order. It is a situation which calls for a rethink, the ultimate objective being pumping more investment into the force. Part of the investment must include provisions of training in order to turn the force into an organization ever ready to spring into action.

In the longer term, there is a whole lot that must be done to add substance and quality to the services rendered by the police. In this context, the issue of police reforms assumes huge significance. During the period of the caretaker government, a good number of reform measures in various areas were talked about and indeed undertaken. Unfortunately, the matter of police reforms was not taken up comprehensively. Now that an elected government is in office, the issue must be taken up in earnest. Unless reforms are brought about in the police service (and those reforms must also ensure that the police remain free of partisan political influence or control), there is not much to be gained from on-again, off-again police drives against lawless elements.

Sensitising people about militancy

An educational drive would be a big help

SOME government ministries, departments and agencies have an inherent potential to be useful in the task of creating awareness among the people against militancy. They need to be self-activated given their contact with the people to be playing their due role here. For, in the ultimate analysis, it is at the community level that extremist agenda feeding on exploitation of religion are best countered, fought off. People's awareness of ways and threats of militancy, their vigilance over these and cooperation with law-enforcement agencies provide the most effective safeguards against attempted extremist inroads into a society.

That is why, quite appropriately, we think, the high-powered government committee on militancy resistance and prevention turned to the Department of Films and Publications (DFP) and the Education Ministry for activating their constituents in building an awareness campaign against militancy. Evidently, the DFP has a huge potential outreach to people waiting to be utilised through booklets, audio-visual presentations, documentaries, short films and advertisements to get the right messages across. If they have any constraints in fulfilling the task they ought to let the home ministry committee know about them in a bid to remedy the situation. Indeed, in the area of mass communication, a lot more can and should be done to develop this. To be sure, the role of the media, both print and electronic, needs to be complemented.

It is equally important that teachers and students of schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions come forward in strengthening the awareness building processes in whatever way they can. Some out-of-classroom efforts, organised on a voluntary basis, can contribute immensely to social mobilisation and resultant public sensitisation against extremism and violence.

Simultaneously, it would be highly useful if the imams of mosques use their considerable influence over society in combating extremism.

Foreign policy conundrum: India factor

It is a happy augury, that our Foreign Minister's recent meeting with her counterpart in New Delhi has broken the ice after a long period of mutual misgivings and fear. It is reported that India has now agreed to 'facilitate' Bangladesh transit to Nepal and Bhutan. The use of Chittagong port by India for its eastern states was 'also discussed', though no final announcement was made on either side.

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THE Tipaimukh controversy spurred a wave of protests that highlighted a kind of ineptness and indecision of the government for too long a period on a vital matter for our survival. It also focused the confusion that existed in our foreign policy objectives from the beginning, particularly after the SAARC was set up with a set of lofty ambitions much of which remained unfulfilled over the last decade and a half.

The confusion became so compounded as to be best defined now as ambivalent. The policy conundrum now needs to be discussed threadbare, assessed critically, and a consensus worked out unambiguously. It is important that it is achieved in a bi-partisan way that may help us survive as a nation.

A revisit to our foreign policy objectives was necessary as the second largest member-state of the SAARC, Pakistan, was in a disarray with internal strife and the Taliban terror which, in all probability, was to be a long-drawn affair. The delicate balance that the regional small states including Bangladesh had strived to maintain so far between India and Pakistan had now become obsolete and would appear misdirected in the current geo-political and geo-strategic realities. It is imperative that this crucial question be discussed and debated, and an acceptable consensus evolved without any ambiguity.

The foremost of the aching questions of hitherto unresolved disputes with India is the Tipaimukh dam and the diversion of trans-border river waters upstream.

This is an extremely sensitive issue because India helped us gain our independence from a vicious colonial rule -- aimed at wiping out our national identity, resources and subjugating us in a worse way than the British. India suffered a colos-

sal loss of men, material and money.

India might have thought a secular and sovereign Bangladesh could curb terrorism in India and at the same time lessen, if not remove, the constraint of a physical barrier of the then East Pakistan between India's mainland and the far-flung eastern part in former Assam province and Tripura. When it was found that even after liberation, this constraint continued to remain, it caused dismay in India, and it resorted to 'pressure tactics' -- widely practiced in international diplomacy.

Lately, in order to circumvent these constraints with a transit route, a rail-link between Akhaura and Agartala and use of Chittagong port for the eastern states became vital for them in the wake of a growing wide-spread insurgency in most of the seven eastern states, euphemistically called 'seven sisters.'

We seem to be in a dilemma in our dealings with India. The most immediate issue that worries us now is the Tipaimukh Dam across the Barak river just a kilometer upstream from Jakigunj border in Sylhet for hydro-electricity. The river, on this side of the border divides into two -- the Surma (350 km long) and the Kushiara (110km long) providing the life-line for the vast population in entire Sylhet Division.

In addition to this dam, another barrage is proposed to be built further upstream about 100km from the border on the same river at a place called Fulertal. These two -- the dam and the barrage -- are feared to stymie the Surma and Kushiara water flow in Bangladesh leading to virtual desertification of the Brahmaputra basin in the country's eastern part just as the Farakka in 1976 did to the drought-prone Ganges-Brahmaputra river basin on the west.

Consequently, there was an outcry all over the country.

The government, however, was a little tardy in its response. When it did, it was a frail attempt to play to the gallery. A hastily

constituted parliamentary delegation drawn mostly from the Treasury Bench lacking the credibility of parliamentary team and its co-committing weight was sent to the barrage site, but they could not land due to inclement weather. No wonder, Khaleda Zia ridiculed it as a 'sight-seeing tour'. For the India-bashing Opposition, this was an opportunity to muster wider support for them.

True, we are a sovereign nation having the freedom of action, but the fact remains that we have the disadvantage of being a small state with a very large population beside giant-size India. A weaker economy and widespread unemployment and poverty make us further vulnerable. We are encircled on three sides by India. India is a very large and strong country in South Asia with a nuclear storehouse. Economically, it is developing at a very high rate.

It may, therefore be wise to maintain a balance of good relations with India but with equal advantage. This, at times may be tight-rope walking, but 'give and take' relations may be the best option.

Reverting to Tipaimukh, ours is a riverine country with 57 trans-boundary rivers, 54 of them with India and three with Myanmar. A significant quantity of the water flow from these rivers is withdrawn and diverted upstream by both countries for irrigation and other purposes reducing their normal flow in Bangladesh. The Farakka Barrage is a notable example.

It has been seen in the past, in the dry season, the quantity pledged to be given to Bangladesh is not given. According to the Farakka agreement, a joint Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) was to oversee the just and timely implementation of the agreement every three months. There had been no meetings of the JRC at all for the last four years. Repeated reminders from the meetings and reportedly SOS from Bangladesh side had gone in vain. Another agreement was requested for River Teesta by the Bangladesh government to which India remained indifferent. On the other hand, India had built another barrage on the north side of the river rendering the Bangladesh barrage to be of little use.

For the sake of good relations, it is imperative for both sides to follow the principle of "give and take" to resolve the disputed issues. Now is the right time to do this when new governments have come to power in both the countries winning a huge mandate from the people. This is a chal-

lenge and an opportunity for both Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina. In doing this, both the governments should try to take along Opposition with them by 'feel good' pleasantries and charm.

It is a happy augury, that our Foreign Minister's recent meeting with her counterpart in New Delhi has broken the ice after a long period of mutual misgivings and fear. It is reported that India has now agreed to 'facilitate' Bangladesh transit to Nepal and Bhutan. The use of Chittagong port by India for its eastern states was 'also discussed', though no final announcement was made on either side. A formal agreement is likely to be signed when the Prime Minister visits India sometime this year.

Though there is no mention of the Tipaimukh dam in the joint communiqué, but the need for a 'separate agreement on Teesta is recognized', and an immediate joint 'hydrological survey' has been agreed to. If this happens, this will be the second water management treaty with India. This will also help restore mutual trust and confidence.

Each side agreed to allow container cargo to be carried through its territory by rail and water routes as it used to be before Indo-Pak War in 1965. It is noteworthy to recall that in those Pakistan days, Railway and Inland Water Transport Authority used to earn a good deal of revenue from this India cross-traffic.

India has unilaterally offered in principle a credit line for Bangladesh Railway for its projects of procuring locomotives and coaches. It also offered to construct the Akhaura-Agartala rail link. This is a kind of a 'package deal' which the government claims will be beneficial for our country, whereas the Opposition has rejected it as a 'sell-out'. One wonders if the two opposite views could be reconciled and inter-woven keeping adequate safeguards for our national pride and sovereignty and thus save the country from another turmoil.

The discerning eye may, however, see a silver lining in the exchange of smiles and niceties between the two national leaders at an Iftar party during the month of Ramadan at the Sena Kunjo. A day later, the Prime Minister appealed to the Opposition leader to return to Parliament, implicitly meaning perhaps that smaller issues of disputes could be sorted out by discussion. If this is responded to, it could turn the tide.

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Strategic interests shifting in the US backyard

The relative absence of United States influence and the growth of self-confidence among several Latin American countries (bent on asserting their diplomatic independence) have led to a quest for diversification of economic ties. This quite obviously raised questions regarding whether this evolution foreshadows geo-political changes or any strategic threat for the USA.

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THE late nineties reaffirmed to the world that China had arrived in a big way on the international economic horizon. This development was seen as a success story in many countries in Africa and Asia. They discerned in this a potential for their own growth.

It was, however, not so in Latin America. Countries from this region monitored the emerging situation with concern. Some of them, in particular, felt threatened. This was because average wages in China were one-fifth to two-fifths of those in Latin America. Consequently, it was anticipated that much of this region's labour intensive manufacturing industry would suffer serious harm. It was this anxiety that persuaded several Latin American countries to table many anti-dumping actions against China at the WTO, even more than the United States.

Such fears have, however, reduced over the past decade and inter-linkages between China and this region have grown. This has been mostly due to China's thirst for commodities. It is also this factor that has led China to make inroads into Africa.

A classical example of such pro-active engagement has been the recent agreement between China and Peru (rich in copper) whereby China will invest US\$2.2 billion in developing the copper mine located at Toromochi in the Peruvian Andes. China will also build a new US\$70 million wharf in the port of Callao to facilitate shipping of the copper ore across the Pacific to China for Chinese industrial units. Such infrastructural involvement will be another symbol in the canvas of burgeoning trade and investment making China an economic partner with Latin American countries. It is also breaking down suspicion.

Analysts have been monitoring this steady Chinese involvement with great interest. They are particularly highlighting Brazil in this context. Statistics indicate that China has become Brazil's biggest single export destination for the first time. This has been partially made possible by Brazil's sharp fall in manufacturing exports

because of recession. Brazil's President Luiz de Silva and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao have both taken personal interest in improving bilateral links. This has recently led to Brazil signing in May this year, an agreement whereby China Development Bank and Sinopec, a Chinese oil company will lend US\$10 billion to Brazil's state controlled oil company Petrobras. In return, China will receive an assured supply of 200,000 barrels of crude oil a day for ten years from Brazil's new deep-sea fields.

It may also be recalled that earlier this year, China offered Argentina a currency-swap arrangement involving use of Chinese currency, the Yuan, worth US\$10 billion. This was the Chinese way of not only underlining the importance of the Yuan as an international currency unit but also pointing out to United States the need to manage its finance with greater probity.

The use of soft power to gain entry into the Latin American and Caribbean landscape has also been demonstrated in its constructive engagements with cash-strapped Jamaica (lending US\$138 million to avoid a debt default), with Ecuador and Venezuela (buying stakes in its oilfields) and with Costa Rica (discussing the possibility of building a refinery).

The Chinese have been specially focusing on ensuring their access to energy, in both short and medium terms. This has persuaded them to identify international companies involved in production of oil both in Africa as well as in Latin America. China's approach has not been random but a very pre-meditated measure. This focus on ensuring access to energy has now persuaded China National Petroleum Corporation and Cnooc, another oil firm, to make a bid of about US\$17 billion for an 84 percent stake in YPF, Argentina's biggest oil company, held by Spain's Repsol.

The emergence of external actors within the strategic backyard of the US has encouraged some political economists to question the continuing validity of the Monroe Doctrine-enunciated by US President James Monroe in 1823. The entry of such actors into Latin America includes not only China but also India, Russia and



Brazil's President Luiz de Silva with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao during the former's visit to China.

Iran. It is true that until now, their total investment and trade statistics do not match that of the United States and Europe. However, it is clear that new and potential stakeholders are wading ashore in this region. It is also a reflection of the gradual transfer of centres of power. Some analysts have also noted that this shift has also been facilitated by the US administration's neglect of its backyard in its pursuit of the so-called 'war on terror' during the past Bush presidency.

The relative absence of United States influence and the growth of self-confidence among several Latin American countries (bent on asserting their diplomatic independence) have led to a quest for diversification of economic ties. This quite obviously raised questions regarding whether this evolution foreshadows geo-political changes or any strategic threat for the USA.

The US State Department, for obvious reasons, has been monitoring very carefully the expanding areas of Chinese influence all over the world. They are however more worried about Iran's 'encroachment' into the scene. They consider Iran, Russia and China's growing relationship with Venezuela (which provides 10 percent of US oil imports) as a challenging 'axis of anxiety.' The United States does not appear, however, to be too averse to a growing

relationship with industrializing India.

Economists have been focusing special attention on this changing international paradigm. Chinese and Indian demand for raw materials has driven world prices for commodities to unprecedented levels and accelerated the rate of economic growth for countries like Brazil, Chile and Peru. It has also helped them to ride out the world recession somewhat unscathed. It is true that Brazil's shoemaking and toy-making industries have moved to China (because of cheaper wages) but jobs lost have been re-born in other sectors through indirect investment coming in through the demand for its commodities. This has been an example of a multi-polar world at work.

Whatever be the equation, two aspects appear to be abundantly clear -- the USA might have lost ground in terms of trade and investment in the Latin American region, but it doesn't mean that such a thesis is likely to lead to rise in radicalism or emergence of political instability. Those investing, particularly China, will keep a careful watch that their efforts are not overturned due to political turmoil. From this point of view, it may be seen as an indirect axiomatic form of re-insurance towards regional stability.

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