

Taking the Bangla-Nepal transit a step further

The whole idea should be regional connectivity

HOPES have been generated for a new vista opening on Indo-Bangla relations in the sequel to the meet between Indian foreign secretary Nirupoma Rao and her Bangladesh counterpart Mijarol Quayes in Dhaka centring around the forthcoming visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister to India.

While a substantive improvement is expected both in terms of approach to and the content of bilateral ties with three deals said to be in the offing, a breakthrough has already been made in untying a knot relating to India allowing her territory to be used for trade between Kathmandu and Dhaka.

It is precisely for want of right to passage through India that the Bangladesh-Nepal transit agreement which the two countries had signed to boost bilateral trade in 1976 has remained unimplemented. This is now about to change. Actually, treaties existed with India whereby Bangladesh is allowed to conduct bilateral trade with Nepal and Bhutan on road. Now is the turn for the railway transit between countries involved to be made possible through an inter-connective infrastructure.

But there is a much greater potential associated with this positive development by way of optimising the benefits from a wider approach. Mere road and rail transit between the countries involved can bring limited dividends to them, but if Nepal and Bhutan are allowed to do third party trade through Bangladesh sea ports there would be enormous benefits to accrue to all the countries. The land-locked partners will get access to the sea and Bangladesh will earn in terms of tariff. So, we need to expand our thought process into the realm of greater regional connectivity and multi-modal transport infrastructure for the benefit of the least developed countries in the region.

Ever since Indian foreign secretary's visit to Bangladesh and her positive signals about breaking the impasse over right of trade passage to Nepal and Bangladesh, it has become a subject of discourse among experts here on whether the transit facility would logically mean Nepal being allowed to do external trade through Bangladesh sea ports.

When the two prime ministers meet we believe this point will be discussed with a positive decision taken on it, giving an impetus to the economies of the countries concerned.

India being the big neighbour in South Asia and an emerging economic power house can only be expected to play its due role in helping economic rejuvenation of smaller countries which would also benefit India in various ways.

Sending migrant labour to Iraq again

The safety of our workers must be ensured

THE resumption of Bangladeshi labour migration to Iraq after a break of six years should be seen as a positive development. The disruption that occurred in the presence and working of migrant labour in Iraq when it was invaded by US and British forces in 2003 was in turn to lead to misery for foreign workers, some of the worst affected among whom were those from Bangladesh. When the move is seen against the backdrop of the large numbers of Bangladeshi workers sent back home by some countries in the Middle East as well as Malaysia, we cannot but feel a little cheered by the news that job opportunities have opened for 2000 Bangladeshis in Iraq.

That said, there is the other side of the picture, especially where it is a question of our workers being employed in Iraq. For all the impression the Iraqi authorities as well as western nations with troops there have given of conditions becoming normal there, there are yet the security-related worries that we may have about sending our workers to that country. Let the fact be taken note of: the security situation in Iraq is still in a tenuous state and one cannot say with certainty that the fractured nature of its politics has healed enough to allow foreign workers to go back to it. The expatriates' welfare ministry should, therefore, ensure that there is a definitive change in the situation before our workers can go there. The state must have a responsibility to those it agrees have a right to go abroad for employment.

It goes without saying that of late the export of Bangladeshi manpower has been in decline. In such a situation, the news from Iraq looks good. If the plan really works out, it will mean a good leap for Bangladesh where remittances from abroad are concerned. Of late, despite the decline in manpower export, there has been an increase in the volume of remittances owing to changes in monetary exchange rates as also an increasing propensity on the part of migrant workers to go for formal, more organized channels, as distinct from and opposed to *hundi* methods, for sending money back home. It is an encouraging sign of things to be. Indeed, if we can break new ground here, through exploring manpower opportunities not just in Iraq but in other countries as well (apart from the traditional ones), it will mean a whole lot to the country.

The mission to inform

The freshly constituted office of the Information Commission (IC), the first of its kind in the country, is facing an enormous challenge. It will also come up against still bigger hurdles while fulfilling its mission.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

IT has been about four and a half months since the Information Commission started its work from a temporary office in Dhaka.

At a view exchange meeting with the press last week, the Chief Information Commissioner, flanked by two other Commissioners, briefed journalists on the activities his office had undertaken, especially to meet its goal of reaching information to the doorstep of the people, as charted in the Right To Information Act (RTIA) 2009.

So far as the RTIA is concerned, the members of the press present expressed mixed opinions about it. Some were not very convinced of the document's usefulness in practice, while others were positive, but cautious in their optimism. A few, the present writer included, on the other hand, were rather upbeat about the RTIA. The argument in favour of their view was that something is always better than nothing. And since there is still room for improvement in the document, it is hoped that in the future it would be possible to enrich it further through the process of trial and error. During the meeting with the press, the Chief Information Commissioner and his colleagues dwelt briefly on some important provisions enshrined in the RTIA, the activities they had been doing since the office of the Commission started work, the cooperation

they are getting from the government and the constraints they are facing.

Highlights from the RTIA:

Under Chapter II of the RTIA, one would find the Sections and their subsections that deal with one's right to information (Section 4), its preservation (Section 5) and disclosure (Section 6).

Excepting Section 7, which deals with the cases where disclosure of information to its seekers is not obligatory. The RTIA, otherwise, is very unambiguous about ensuring that the information providing authorities and the units under them in the government, autonomous or statutory bodies, or organisations financed and/or managed by the government or foreign donor agencies may come out with the sought after information through a given set of procedures. There are, however, instances, such as Section 7 and Section 32, which restrict the applicability of the sections of the RTIA that guarantee access to information.

Notwithstanding those embargoes, one can still have access to information from the restricted sources. For example, subsections 9 and 10 of Section 9 of the RTIA provides the scope for disclosure of the sought after 'part of the information', if it, though linked to the inadmissible Section 7 of the RTIA, is itself very much a 'part of the provisions of disclosure' outlined before.

In a similar vein, subsection 1 of Section 32 precludes some 'authorities' mentioned

in the 'Schedule' of RTIA from disclosing information. But at the same time, the subsections 2 and 3 of the Section 32 provide for disclosure of that exclusive information, if that has to do with any case of corruption or human rights violation by those 'authorities' concerned.

The Sections 24, 25, 26 and 27, on the other hand, provide for the procedures of filing appeals and complaints to the Information Commission by any aggrieved individual who did not succeed in getting the asked for information from the 'responsible officer' concerned or did feel hard done by at the decision to this effect of the latter.

These are but a few instances out of a total of 37 Sections incorporated in the RTIA that aim to safeguard people's right and access to information.

It cannot, however, be said that the provisions as given under the RTIA guarantee everything under the sun so far as it concerns people's right to information. Undoubtedly, the document (RTIA) in question has its limitations, shortcomings and lacunae. But that does not imply that the entire exercise has been a futile one.

The most important question here is how the bureaucracy, entrenched as it is in the age-old culture of secrecy, is willing to see that the RTIA might deliver as expected to fulfil its desired mission. To overcome this barrier to the RTIA's effective delivery of the goods, the government will be required to exert its political will. The bureaucracy will be obliged to come out of its self-spun cocoon, if and only if, the Executive organ of the government brings the political pressure necessary to bear on it.

Information Commission's office
Of the three-member Information Commission, one is woman. The inclusion

of a female member has been done in the spirit of the subsection 1 of Section 12 of RTIA.

The Commission, in spite of all the limitations that are natural for a new office, appears to be rather confident of discharging the responsibilities the nation has entrusted in it.

For such an important statutory body like the Information Commission, the location of its present temporary office appears to be a bit out of the way. The good news is that the Commission has found a large space for its accommodation in the building that houses the Archaeological department. The Chief Information Commissioner has further informed that they have requested the Works Ministry to provide 32, 00 sq yards or two big has of land for its office.

These are certainly positive developments so far as the working place for the Commission is concerned. Anyway, the government would do well to arrange a place for the Commission's office, which is located in the heart of the city, so that media people, appellants, members of the public and others concerned might reach there easily.

Challenges

The freshly constituted office of the Information Commission (IC), the first of its kind in the country, is facing an enormous challenge. It will also come up against still bigger hurdles while fulfilling its mission, which is about ensuring free flow of information, especially to the common people at the grassroots. But the tasks are easier narrated than accomplished. And the enemies it will have to fight on its way to its goal are a legion.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a senior journalist.

Time to wake up from stupor

Militancy will not decrease in Bangladesh unless the primary education system is urgently addressed.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, before the 1/11 change in its Transnational Threat Update, stated: "The current security climate in Bangladesh may allow terrorist groups to organise attacks using a radiological dispersal device. Concerns over this possibility are plausible given that radio substance have proven accessible to terror groups within the country." The recent arrests of militants from Pakistan and India, activists of banned Lashkar-e-Toiba, some of whom were educated in engineering in Bangladesh while recruiting prospective terrorists, confirm anew Eliza Griswold's report in the *New York Times* (January 2005), raising the possibility of Bangladesh giving birth to the next Islamist revolution. Travelling through Bangladesh, she concluded "The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of regimes like that of the Taliban impossible, in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way." In Griswold's footsteps, Bertil Linter's article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 2002) warned of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Time magazine and the *Asian Wall Street Journal* alleged of sanctuaries being given to transnational Islamist elements.

In the eyes of Robert Kaplan, many in Bangladesh view it as a weakly governed state (*The Atlantic*-September 2009), surprisingly ignore David Held's (of London School of Economics) assertion that we no longer live in a world of discrete national communities but in a world of "overlapping communities of fate." So the Muslims in Bangladesh do not constitute the majority community as they are surrounded by Hindu majority India and Buddhist majority Myanmar, and in the vicinity of non-Muslim South East and Far East Asian countries.

Militancy will not decrease in Bangladesh unless the primary education system is urgently addressed. Mainly due to poverty, coupled with Islamic fervour, people in general send their children to get educated at village madrasas. Since madrasa education is free, but does not carry much financial reward in a labour market demanding non-ecclesiastical skills, students graduating from madrasas are forced to become madrasa teachers or priests in mosques. Coming from impoverished families, they are forced back into poverty in a world racing for material advancement. This vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation find expression in anti-Western feelings, particularly in the aftermath of the decimation of Afghanistan and the illegal invasion of Iraq. Many madrasa students may find Osama bin

Laden as a hero. Understandably, the US Congress keeps itself informed of the madrasa education in South Asia. A report by the Congressional Research Service -- "International Terrorism in South Asia" -- states that among the approximately ten thousand madrasas in Pakistan, some have been implicated in teaching militant anti-western and anti-universal values.

The emergence of religious intolerance in Bangladesh, particularly during the BNP-Jamaat regime, should be seen in a global context. If Muslims are to prove historian Bernard Lewis wrong, that "Islam was never prepared, either in theory or in practice, to accord full equality to those who held other forms of worship, and that the centuries old rivalry between Christianity and Islam is no less than a clash of civilisations -- the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the world wide expansion of both," then the Islamic world would have to abjure stoning and imprisoning of rape victims, public flogging, stoning and decapitation of criminal offenders. Globalisation is no longer a choice; it is a reality that all countries have to deal with.

In this game, the West has a decided advantage over the Muslim world, particularly the least developed among them. Countries like Bangladesh, suggests Dr. Biru Prakash Paul (*The Daily Star*, 15.11.09), should address modern trends and future needs in higher education to ensure quality in education. According to Cybermatics Lab, Dhaka University has been ranked 4922

among 6000 universities in the world. Indian and Pakistani universities attend American job markets to select the best possible candidates, as do universities in France, Egypt, Singapore and China.

Nobel laureate Paul Krugman (*The Uneducated American*, October 2009) wrote that if one had to explain US economic success in one word, it would be "education." In the 19th century, America led the way in universal basic education and as other nations followed suit, the "high school revolution" of the 20th century took the Western world to its height of prosperity, and the US continued to lead the world in higher education. Krugman is disappointed that due to the current economic meltdown, described by Josef Stiglitz as a tsunami shock to capitalism and free market as the collapse of the Berlin Wall had been to communism (stoutly refuted by his Columbia University colleague Jagadish Bhagwati), education, mainly the responsibility of state and local governments, has become a victim of austerity as in many other sectors of the economy.

It is possible that emerging economies -- China and India -- will lead in producing more engineers, doctors and scientists than the US and the West, and bring into question the technological superiority, claimed by some academics as one of the pillars, as to why the 21st century would continue to be the next American, and not Chinese, century.

Unless we wake up, our society will be irreversibly pulled down towards the labyrinth of underdevelopment and darkness

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and ambassador.

Promises are easy, but hard to keep

Faced with the worst global financial crisis since the 1930s, G-20 nations, accounting for about 85% of the global gross domestic product, have sought to re-boost growth through stimulus spending and low interest rates, without undertaking any drastic reform.

THANONG KHANTHONG, *The Nation (Thailand)*

THE Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit in Singapore last week succeeded in becoming an extension of the G-20. It embraced a new economic paradigm based on re-balancing global growth, inclusive of prosperity and sustainable growth.

Yet, this is but a parroting of the G-20 Summit's agenda, fostered in Pittsburgh in September. Faced with the worst global financial crisis since the 1930s, G-20 nations, accounting for about 85% of the global gross domestic product, have sought to re-boost growth through stimulus spending and low interest rates, without undertaking any drastic reform.

We shall see how this lip service from global leaders helps pull the world out of the recession. Despite signs of resumed growth, many still doubt whether it is sustainable, given the structural imbalances, huge indebtedness and financial crisis wreaking

havoc on the major economies.

A group of Asian journalists and I had a dinner meeting with Kazuo Kodama, press secretary and press and public relations director-general of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo the other day. We had a nice conversation. Kodama was quite bullish over the Apec meeting's outcome, where the grouping took over the task of tackling the global financial crisis and trying to put the world economy back on a growth path. Japan hopes Apec will continue to work on this new paradigm of growth, which Kodama calls an "irreversible trend," as it will host the next Apec Summit in Yokohama in 2010.

Let's examine Apec's new paradigm of growth, if not the G-20's. Re-balancing global growth is designed to address the macro-economic imbalance, going on for years. "The US has been consuming too much and creating too much debt, while Japan, China and the Asean countries have been exporting to the US and saving too much. And we [Asia] use the savings to buy

US treasuries to finance the US deficit. This is not sustainable," said Kodama.

On this front, Kodama is right. President Barack Obama's Asian visit to Japan, China and Singapore, in a way, marked a US retreat from its over-consumption mode. Obama put his cards on the table in his Tokyo speech last Saturday. The US would make a comeback to Asia through cross-Pacific partnerships. Moreover, the US would like to export more to this region, which still registers relatively strong growth compared to other regions. This took place against a falling US dollar, while gold prices are surging.

In China, Obama's meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao was far less successful, with agreements elusive as they discussed cooperation on the economy, climate change and security.

How does Asia react to Obama's gesture, as many countries still bank on their cheap currencies to boost exports? Asian nations are not yet ready to save less and spend more. They still want to export more. This complicates efforts to re-balance global growth because both the US and the Asian countries want to increase exports.

Apec leaders vowed they would strive for shared growth and prosperity for all. But I would argue this is more lip service, because there hasn't been any major effort to meaningfully restructure the financial system to prevent a future crisis.

With the financial crisis, bankers and money managers -- who benefit from government bailouts -- become richer, while

working people on Main Street face hardship and unemployment. (Bankers and money managers still make money the old way: if they lose money, taxpayers will bail them out; if they make money, they pocket the profit for themselves.)

Lastly, global growth is not sustainable without addressing climate change and taking into account environmental preservation. Industries continue to plunder the world's natural resources. Again, action plans are easier talked about than implemented. Japan's new leadership under Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has pledged to reduce CO2 emissions by 25% in 2020 as compared to the 1990 level. This pledge is almost unilateral, as many countries are unwilling to make commitments ahead of the UN conference on climate change in Copenhagen next month. Planet Earth is on a disastrous path to environmental destruction, yet mankind is still too concerned about economic well-being.

As I have travelled around Japan over the past 10 days, I have noticed the clear message that Japan will be working seriously on emissions control and improving the environment. Yet the effort might be too little in the face of global industrialisation. We need a serious rethink and a commitment to save this planet by sacrificing ourselves to slower growth -- via Apec or non-Apec means. Or by any means.