

Implementing CHT peace accord

A consensual approach needed

TWELVE years of Chittagong Hill Tracts accord provided an occasion for not only stocktaking as to where we stand in terms of realisation of its provisions but also for some hard thinking on the part of people who have a stake in accelerating the process of its implementation. The observance of the twelfth anniversary of the signing of the accord has therefore served a useful purpose by providing an in-depth reappraisal of the CHT situation. Practically, it has been as much a matter of commemorating an auspicious turning point in the history of Bangladesh in that it ended 25 years of insurgency, conflict and bloodshed in Chittagong Hill Tracts through political means as one of regrets and soul searching over why some major provisions of the accord remain unimplemented even to this day.

While taking heart from the AL-led Mahajote government's efforts to push the process of implementation forward by means of a national committee and the task force, we would urge the government to try a new approach in materialising some important provisions set out in the accord. There has been talk of a review of the agreement in a bid to remove the weaknesses of the accord. We think, this suggestion should be heeded to respond to contemporary ground realities, strengthened in the fundamental belief that the accord brought peace in the region and upon its full implementations benefits would accrue to all sides.

Let's not forget, land disputes between the indigenous people and the settlers from plain land are at the heart of implementation problems. By all means, the land commission which has done very little since its inception in 2001, should be revitalised and its *modus operandi* determined in consultations with all the stakeholders. Importantly, the question relating to constitutional guarantee may be addressed. The powers of the CHT regional council should be clearly laid down. It is important from the representational and participatory points of view that elections be held to the regional and district councils.

We endorse the suggestion from the civil society that the existing CHT regional council, the land commission and the CHT accord implementation committee should deliberate among themselves as well as with the leaders of the indigenous communities and the Bangalees to resolve the problems of implementation.

AIDS situation

Firming up the resolve to meet it

THE news that 143 AIDS patients were diagnosed in the country in the last one year, while 39 of them died, does indicate that the deadly health hazard is making an inroad, despite the claim by health authorities that it is not a major problem yet.

The injecting drug users have been identified as the most vulnerable, though the general awareness level has gone up. This is largely due to the fact that the users are not going by safety regulations and a huge a number people are exposed to HIV/AIDS, particularly in poor urban areas.

It is rather disquieting to learn, as stated by the health minister, that corruption overshadowed some HIV/AIDS prevention programmes in the past. Obviously, things have to be set right in this critically important sector as HIV/AIDS is treated as a major threat to public health throughout the world today.

The government is reported to have long, short and medium term plans to cope with the AIDS situation. We believe the strategic plan for 2011-15 that will include some key programmes like extending services to the high risk group, arranging the necessary funds and, most importantly, enhancing institutional capacity, is the most important component of the government's plan to combat HIV/AIDS. Identification of the highly vulnerable people is a task that has to be undertaken on a priority basis. Equally important is eliminating the risk factors responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The country's geographical location is also a matter of concern as some of our neighbouring countries are grappling with AIDS epidemic. So, there is the need for regional cooperation in containing the menace. Movement of people across the border and poorly maintained brothels are among the risk factors that have to be attended to keep things under control.

Another aspect that needs great improvement is the social outlook. AIDS patients usually feel ostracized because of the overall social milieu. And this also obstructs treatment or management of AIDS. Many patients are reported to have died abandoned and uncared for.

The drive against HIV/AIDS has to be launched keeping in view the social realities. While the government can provide the logistics to deal with it, it is the people who have to ward it off through giving up the practices known as risk factors.

New Afghan strategy?

One wonders whether there really can be a new strategy for the US other than a face-saving withdrawal, having muddled up the matter over the period of nine years in Afghanistan. In fact the US president's speech to West Point cadets on December 1 seems to be a "get ready to leave" message for his countrymen.

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SO the US president has determined that it is in the US vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. After all, how many countries in the world have the misfortune of finding its security and safety rooted in another country half a world away from its shores.

And by the beginning of July 2001, US troops will commence withdrawal from Afghanistan. The moot point, the state of Afghanistan at that point in time, remains undetermined; it will be certainly in a state of flux, and may perhaps be no better off than at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Although many see in the US president's speech a new US strategy in Afghanistan, President Obama's announcement of an additional 30,000 US troops in Afghanistan within the shortest possible time does not come with a new strategy at all. The aim, defeat of al Qaeda, remains the same.

One wonders whether there really can be a new strategy for the US other than a face-saving withdrawal, having muddled

up the matter over the period of nine years in Afghanistan. In fact the US president's speech to West Point cadets on December 1 seems to be a "get ready to leave" message for his countrymen. President Obama has set a timeframe of eighteen months without, however, making any preconditions for the withdrawal. And that is what the main cause for concern is.

There were never enough troops to start with in Afghanistan, and the ill-motivated occupation of Iraq, the idea for which was mooted well before 9/11, misplaced troop priority from where the focus should have been.

What President Obama has done is what no military strategist would recommend -- reinforce a lost sector -- and for all intents and purposes that is what Afghanistan is for the US although the US president still seems to be suffering from an illusion that Afghanistan is not lost. It is not lost yet, but will the country be in the shape that the Bush administration had hoped the US occupation of the country help achieve -- defeat of Taliban, democratisation of the country etc, by the time the US forces leave Afghanistan?

At best, for a lost theatre, a stop-gap measure is the only option. That is primarily to buy time to regroup to take on the enemy in another area to reduce pressure on the threatened theatre of operations. Unfortunately, no such option is available to Obama. It would seem that 30,000 troops is far too many for a stopgap arrangement. On the other hand it would be highly optimistic to think that the additional troops would help in creating a situation in the next eighteen months, something that has not been possible in the last 144 months, which would allow a peaceful transition of responsibility to the Afghans.

And if the Taliban has gained momentum one is not sure what new tactics the ground commanders would employ to "seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of US forces out of Afghanistan." One wonders whether holding ground for the purpose of controlling the population centres would be of much use either.

The Taliban have now resorted to insurgency, a tactic used against the Russians. Thus, while the US and its allies on ground might know who the enemy is it would be difficult to determine where they are, and that will add to uncertainty and allied casualties. And what will the extra troops help dominate? The large country that Afghanistan is, population control for winning the hearts and minds will be a difficult proposition.

As for the restated aim that president Obama has articulated, it is to disrupt,

dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and its allies in the future. And to meet that goal, the following objectives within Afghanistan will be pursued, like denying al Qaeda a safe haven and reversing the Taliban's momentum.

The aim is ideal, but are the objectives attainable, particularly when that has to do with countries other than Afghanistan. To defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban it is necessary to divest them of their support base. Would it be possible to do so when the support base of the Taliban, both the Afghan and Pakistan variety, exists not only inside Pakistan territorially, but also within its military establishment. It is difficult to disagree with those who suggest that the current Afghan war will have to be fought in Pakistan.

The question is, what after the US leaves? Would it be enough, as the US president says, to train competent Afghan security forces, and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight and help create the conditions for the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans. Should transfer of responsibility remain the sole objective of the US in the next eighteen months?

An Afghanistan and Pakistan where the Taliban and al Qaeda remain intact has dangerous implications for South Asia in particular.

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Food production loss from climate change

Assessing Bangladesh's food production loss due to global warming and climate change will help us ask for financial assistance in the form of ODA. The United Nations Climate Change Conference, scheduled to be held from December 7 to December 18 in Copenhagen, may be the right forum for raising the issue.

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WHILE addressing the executive and retreat sessions of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2009, at the National Academy of Performance Arts in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago on November 27, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sought separate financial assistance in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA), for most vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, for enabling them to cope with the threats stemming from climate change and calamitous weather conditions. She reminded the world leaders that although Bangladesh's contribution to greenhouse-gas emission was negligible, it was the worst sufferer of the global warming.

While explaining to the global leaders the negative impacts of climate change on agriculture and food production, Sheikh Hasina said that universal food security would be difficult to achieve unless the people and economy were safeguarded from the climate risks. She also laid emphasis on a mitigation pro-

cess for safeguarding the existence of the globe from disastrous consequences of excessive carbon emissions.

Global food security has been a matter of great concern, particularly for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO). The Director-General of FAO has stated that, over the next three decades, the world's population will grow by 2.3 billion. Meeting the demand of the world's 9.1 billion inhabitants in 2050 will require 70% more food than the world produces now. If right decisions are not taken today, there is risk of finding the global cupboard dangerously bare tomorrow. More importantly, he has cautioned that in the years ahead the world food system must deal with the growing challenge of climate change, which may reduce potential agricultural output by 30% in Africa and by up to 21% in developing countries as a whole.

According to IUCN, the case of Bangladesh is unique in the climate change context as the country will eventually face multi-dimensional appearance of climate change such as flood, cyclone, sea-level rise, drainage congestion, salinity, drought, etc. UNDP's

Comprehensive Disaster Management program lists climate change as a serious component of Bangladesh's vulnerability to natural hazards.

According to our climate change experts and agricultural scientists, variability of temperature and rainfall pattern in the country exhibit early signs of climate change. The country experienced 32% less rain than normal during the June-July period this year, the peak time for transplanting aman paddy. The rainy season surprisingly started this year in mid-May instead of the first week of June. If the pattern of rain and winter keeps changing due to global warming, there is no doubt that the country's agriculture sector will be hit hardest. Erratic rainfall and deviation in temperature will bring critical changes in rice farming patterns and affect production of food grains (rice, wheat), starchy tubers (potato, cassava), vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, tomato), pulses (lentils, peas), fish, etc.

Against this situation of declining food production, the population of Bangladesh, according to various studies, will double to 280 million at the current rate of growth by 2080 and reach about 180 million as early as 2020. Annual population growth rate outpacing annual food production growth rate poses a challenge for the country.

Bangladesh is yet to properly assess the food production loss that will result from global warming and climate change. On the other hand, India is known to have made significant progress in this regard. Quoting Indian Council for

Agricultural Research (ICAR), The Hindustan Times of November 30 writes that if temperature rises by between one and four degrees Celsius, the production of food items will decline by up to 30%.

The assessment shows that India's annual average wheat production of 75 mn tonne will decrease by 5.2%, 15.6% and 31.3% in 2020, 2050 and 2080 respectively. Annual average rice production of 90 mn will decrease by 6.7%, 15.1% and 28.2% in 2020, 2050 and 2080 respectively. Annual average potato production of 2.2mn tonne will decrease by 3% and 14% in 2020 and 2050 respectively. The assessment also shows negative impacts on fish and coral reefs. Another study by the ICAR has further found that protein content in wheat can fall by 10% and iron content by 8% due to carbon emissions.

Agricultural scientists want Rs.7,000 crore every year for climate change mitigation. But others think that this amount is much lower than the financial loss caused by crop failure.

Assessing Bangladesh's food production loss due to global warming and climate change will help us ask for financial assistance in the form of ODA. The United Nations Climate Change Conference, scheduled to be held from December 7 to December 18 in Copenhagen, may be the right forum for raising the issue. After all, Bangladesh should not suffer for the fault of others who are responsible for global warming and climate change.

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The prize is India

Obama must keep in mind that South Asia is a tar pit filled with failed and dysfunctional states, save for one long-established democracy of 1.2 billion people that is the second-fastest-growing major economy in the world, a check on China's rising ambitions, and a natural ally of US.

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BARACK Obama has been criticised for kowtowing to the Chinese and the Russians over the last few months. But so far, this is all about atmospherics. The administration has not made any unilateral concession of substance to either country. It is taking a strategic view that developing strong relationships with both countries, particularly China, will yield long-term benefits. Strangely, however, that strategic focus has been lost in dealing with Asia's other rising giant, India.

At one level the administration is being extremely friendly. India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington brought a lot of toasts and celebrations and many nice words were said in public about the ties between the two great democracies. But underneath this lies an unease about the state of the relationship.

Indian officials worry that the Obama team does not have the same fundamental orientation as the Bush administra-

tion regarding India's role in the 21st century. Some Obama officials publicly criticised the nuclear deal championed by George W. Bush, a deal that the Indians regard as basic recognition of their status as a major power. They worry that a Democratic administration could succumb to protectionism. They worry that it is too cosy with China.

These concerns will pass as the two sides get to know each other better. The more lasting danger is that the Obama administration, now intensely focused on the war in Afghanistan, will look at South Asia largely through that prism.

Since Washington desperately needs Pakistan's cooperation in that conflict, it is tending to adopt Pakistan's concerns as its own, which is producing a perverse view of the region.

In his leaked report, Gen. Stanley McChrystal warned that "increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures." This is a bizarre criticism. India is the hegemon of South Asia, with enormous

influence throughout the subcontinent. Its GDP is 100 times that of Afghanistan (that is not a typo).

As Afghanistan opened itself up after the fall of the Taliban, the cuisine, movies, and money that flowed into the country were, naturally, Indian. This is like noting that US has had growing influence in Mexico over the last few decades.

The Indian government's aid to Afghanistan has mostly gone to build schools and infrastructure. And while New Delhi is trying to gain influence with the Kabul government, US officials tell me that Indian intelligence has limited operations in Afghanistan. America can't and should not want India to banish itself from its own subcontinent.

In fact, India's objectives are exactly aligned with America's -- to defeat the Taliban and to support the elected Afghan government.

Pakistan's objectives, on the other hand, are not the same as Washington's. Islamabad has long argued that it has a right to see a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan. Asia expert Selig Harrison has noted that in an interview with him in 1988, Pakistan's President Zia ul-Haq demanded "a regime to our liking" in Kabul.

Last year a Pakistani general told the director of national intelligence that Pakistan had to support the Taliban in Afghanistan, "otherwise India will reign." Having created the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has still not taken any steps to

dismantle it. Even now, while attacking the Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan, it has not disturbed the leadership of the Afghan Taliban in Baluchistan.

The Obama administration has also seemed to endorse the idea that if only the dispute over Kashmir were resolved, Pakistan would suddenly attack all the terror groups it has supported over the years. Now, it's fair to say that India is far too prickly about Kashmir, but the only path to any resolution there will lie in building trust between Pakistan and India. That's unlikely to happen while Pakistan refuses to go after the terror group that also planned the Mumbai attacks, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Generals like McChrystal -- no matter how smart or tough -- should not make policy, because they confuse the imperatives of the battlefield with a broader view. Obama must keep in mind that South Asia is a tar pit filled with failed and dysfunctional states, save for one long-established democracy of 1.2 billion people that is the second-fastest-growing major economy in the world, a check on China's rising ambitions, and a natural ally of US. The prize is the relationship with India. The booby prize is governing Afghanistan.

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