

Sheikh Hasina's New Delhi visit

A trip full of curiosity and hope

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

PRIME minister Sheikh Hasina is embarking on a much-talked about and much-awaited visit to India from January. Undeniably, the visit has generated enormous interest and curiosity in all circles in both the countries. The significance and importance of Sheikh Hasina's talks with her Indian counterpart Dr. Manmohan Singh need to be seen against the backdrop of the past and current political conditions in both Bangladesh and India; regional and larger international situations are also relevant in many ways influencing the summit-level parleys.

Indo-Bangladesh ties have a particular character dating from 1971, but they also vary depending on which governments are in the seat of power in New Delhi and in Dhaka. The Awami League had taken over in Bangladesh at the beginning of 2009 after a massive mandate. Only after a few months, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government returned to power this time with a bigger majority and influence.

It is no exaggeration to say that an Awami league government in Dhaka feels comfortable with a Congress authority in India and vice-versa. This is mainly because of the relations and rapport developed during the Liberation War when the Congress led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was in power in India. As such, the governments of Dr. Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, with Indira's daughter-in-law Sonia and her son Rahul being at the helm provides the best chance of bilateral ties both at government and party levels. Against this background, Indo-Bangladesh ties assume special significance with outstanding bilateral matters receiving importance for the sake of better ambience that both the government are likely to relish, notwithstanding their limitations on many issues. But there is hardly any denying that political will in such matters plays vital role, and it remains to be seen how the Bangladesh prime minister's trip to India goes off in bettering the ties.

Rather coincidentally, the overall political climate in South Asia at the moment is different from the past as all the governments here are democratic and believe in secular politics. This somewhat unique situation also provides an encouragement to authorities in Dhaka and New Delhi to remove misunderstandings. Even Bhutan is moving towards democracy as the King himself is voluntarily slackening his grip and showing increasing willingness in involving people in the governance of the country.

Without going into detail of the host of issues including those contentious in nature one can safely say that the summit discussions in New



Delhi will definitely cover all the major subjects that are often raised in the bilateral arena. From Bangladesh side, sharing of the waters of the common rivers, removal of the trade imbalance that is hugely against Dhaka, security along the common borders, transit to Nepal through India, the "Tipaimukh" issue, demarcation of the land and maritime boundaries, and import of power are some of the issues that are expected to be taken up with all seriousness during the talks.

On the water issue, it was during the last tenure of the Awami league government in 1996

that a water treaty was concluded with the United Front government in India under the premiership of H.D. Deve Gowda when the sharing of the Ganges waters was addressed. Dhaka wants specific accord on sharing the waters of river Teesta - a bone of contention - and also protection of Bangladesh's interest on the "Tipaimukh" issue.

The two sides have held talks in Dhaka on the Teesta issue ahead of the summit at the secretary level and both sides appeared upbeat about the progress in the complex issue. Now we know that there will be no deal on the Teesta during

the PM's trip but the matter will be on the agenda and one would hope that something will come about soon at ministerial level JRC meeting. Some other issues may also witness progress and of course several agreements, a variety of security related matter, are expected to be signed.

From India's point of view, transit in various forms and curbing of anti-Indian activities from Bangladeshi soil would certainly figure prominently. There are some other matters as well, but New Delhi is already satisfied that Hasina's government is not willing to allow ULFA or other

such outfits that have found Bangladesh as a sanctuary for their "independence" or secessionist activities.

But what is important here is that Hasina has to take into account the electorate and not just the ruling Awami League supporters while giving concessions to India lest her government is branded "Pro-Indian". Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is prepared to fire the salvo against the government should it find the ground rife on the outcome of the visit. Her party has already cautioned that any "sell-out" to India will not be acceptable. And not all the partners of the ruling coalition may see eye to eye on matters relating to India.

New Delhi will not relish a situation that creates undue pressure on a government in Bangladesh which is seen as friendly towards it. It has to be remembered that Dhaka finds it somewhat difficult to convince people that transit facilities will bring enormous economic benefits to Bangladesh since some quarters are against the idea even though many see the issue as an economic gain for the country. No country these days can afford to remain isolated. Doors cannot remain closed for the sake of connectivity even though it is also imperative that national interest is protected.

Apart from the major issues, some areas can be improved for the sake of the interest of the common people of both countries. For instance, the introduction of the "Maitree train" between Dhaka and Kolkata has been a leap forward in the bilateral ties. However, the hassles and the time being taken for immigration on both sides can be simplified more.

In Dhaka, everyday a large number of citizens seek Indian visa, and most of them are common people. The recently introduced system through internet is definitely good and probably also needed for security and technical reasons. But in a way this has increased trouble as only a small number of common people have internet access. The new procedure also requires several days causing problems for those who need urgent visa for medical and other purposes; this needs to be seen as a priority.

Not unexpectedly, discussions continue to revolve around the coming Hasina-Manmohan talks and this has become a kind of cynosure of all eyes, particularly in Bangladesh. It is being discussed whether the outcome will be a "win-win" situation for the two nations as both have major stakes. India, being a big country and an emerging economic power, should demonstrate what she can do for a smaller friendly neighbour. After all, proximity and historic friendship are expected to be judged by approach and deeds.

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Will India reciprocate Bangladesh moves?

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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's extremely important visit to India is now just days away. The visit will take place in the backdrop of a couple of important developments in very recent times that could encourage India to relent on its stand on three important bilateral issues, namely, sharing of the waters of the common rivers, a fair deal in bilateral trade and accepting Bangladesh's stand on delimitation of maritime boundary.

One of the developments is the arrest of the ULFA Chief Aravinda Rajkhowa and his associates by Bangladesh authorities and handing them over to India that has been widely and enthusiastically welcomed in the Indian media. Rajkhowa has been leading the ULFA insurgency in Assam for the last three decades. Till his arrest, he has been the most wanted insurgent by the Indian security. Former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh in the 1990s, Dev Mukharji has described the arrest of Rajkhowa as a major event. He added: "It is a very positive move that demonstrates Dhaka's intent." The High Commissioner who knows Bangladesh-India relations like the back of his palm was obviously referring to the commitment that Sheikh Hasina made on her second day in office, that her government will not allow Bangladesh soil to be used for terrorist attacks against India.

The other act of Bangladesh that has made the Indians happy is Sheikh Hasina's role in the UN Conference on Climate where she backed the document tabled at the Conference by the five biggest polluters, the United States, China and India together with Brazil and South Africa that passed as the non-binding Copenhagen Accord and saved the Conference from falling apart. Majority of the developing countries either opposed the Copenhagen Accord or rejected it outright.

Indian newspapers have urged their government strongly to generously reciprocate Bangladesh's action to handover the ULFA insurgents keeping in view that the arrests are serious enough to sound the death knell of the ULFA movement. This notwithstanding, Bangladesh has

denied any role in the matter with no official reaction from India either. Bangladesh a few months ago had handed to India two Lasker-e-Toiba extremists.

The developments have created a positive impact on the build up to the visit by removing the negative vibes that had emerged in the past before such an important visit. India has refrained from raising issues of land transit or the presence of "20 million illegal Bangladesh migrants"

Sheikh Hasina would thus be arriving in New Delhi on her State Visit for which Bangladesh has made important behind the scene moves to meet India's security needs, at a moment when internal political risks, with the arrests and handing over to Indian security the ULFA insurgents.

The three security related agreements that have been finalized at the level of Home Secretary of the two countries for signature during the visit will give India

the Congress with a renewed one.

A favorable wind is blowing in South Asia where for the first time all countries in the region have democratically elected governments. Most important of all, in Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, the Congress leadership is in the hands of leaders with sincerity to resolve outstanding problems. Sheikh Hasina herself has shown significant qualities of leadership in international affairs.

Unfortunately, it is Bangladesh's partisan politics that could stand in the way of effecting a paradigm shift in Bangladesh-India relations. In fact, because of such partisanship, the AL led government has not sought publicly so far from India anything in return for meeting Indian security needs because of concerns about domestic repercussions. Sheikh Hasina has also made no overtures to discuss her visit with the opposition either. The opposition, on its part, has already stated it would not accept any deal that endangers the country's interests, a veiled threat that underscores the opposition's mood not to accept any deal made in New Delhi.

In the face of such threat, India would be more than happy to sign the three security related agreements and treat Sheikh Hasina with pomp and grandeur, give her the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace and Development and go through the motion of discussion on "the entire gamut of bilateral relations" and leave the unresolved bilateral issues where they have remained over the last few decades.

Without India making reciprocal gestures, the visit could cause political tension in Bangladesh instead of being a watershed in the development of Bangladesh-India bilateral relations, a fact that India should keep in mind if it really wants to help the AL led government. Such repercussion could also jeopardise the security related deals. Is it possible that India is preparing a new year's surprise for Bangladesh? That would be wonderful because geopolitical realities make it imperative for Bangladesh to have friendly relations with India.

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on Indian soil that it had customarily raised in the past, to set negotiations before a visit of the nature that Sheikh Hasina would be undertaking, on the wrong track.

Bangladesh on its part has also refrained from making public statements on issues that are likely to have a negative impact on the outcome of this important visit except speaking publicly in general terms where the Prime Minister has stated in the media of her intention of discussing sharing of waters of the common rivers, a rather vague intent going by the fact that the Indians did not respond favourably to Bangladesh's proposal for a Ministerial level meeting of the Water Resources Ministers before the visit. She has also not said anything about Tipaimukh that has been a burning issue since the AL Government assumed office.

the handle it needs on the security issues without a formal extradition treaty with Bangladesh. Under the agreements, Bangladesh will be obliged to hand-over insurgents/extremists/terrorists running from the law to India once apprehended in Bangladesh. India, under the agreements, will be obliged to hand over to Bangladesh criminals running from the law and apprehended in India where they usually hide following change of government in Bangladesh.

There are a number of other issues/developments in the context of Bangladesh-India relations apart from those examined that should have assured a paradigm shift in Bangladesh-India relations as a consequence of the visit of Sheikh Hasina. In both Dhaka and New Delhi, the parties in power have a historical affinity, with the Awami League having come to office with a major mandate and

NEWS BRIEFS

S. Korea seeks 'turning point' in ties with N. Korea

South Korea said January 4 it was seeking "a turning point" in relations with North Korea and again urged its communist nuclear-armed northern neighbour to disarm.

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak said January 4 that he wants to see improved relations with nuclear-armed North Korea. President Lee Myung-Bak's remarks followed a call by North Korea on New Year's Day for an end to hostile relations with South Korea's key ally, the United States, and a nuclear-free peninsula.

"This year, South Korea and North Korea should create a turning point in their relations," Lee said in a nationally television New Year's address, suggesting the establishment of an inter-Korean dialogue body.

Inter-Korean ties have been strained since the conservative Lee took office in 2008 and linked the South's massive aid and economic cooperation to progress in the North's nuclear disarmament.

Lee also repeated his call for North Korea to return "as soon as possible" to the six-party nuclear disarmament talks that Pyongyang quit nine months ago, so that the two neighbors can improve their relationship.

"For this, there needs to be a standing dialogue organization between the South and the North," Lee said, without elaborating. "I wish North Korea can sincerely open its heart and walk on the path of dialogue and cooperation."

A presidential official told AFP that Lee had proposed in an interview with The Washington Post in April 2008 that both Koreas establish "permanent high-level liaison offices" in each other's capital.

But the official did not confirm whether Lee was referring to the liaison offices in his proposal for an inter-Korean dialogue body.

In a policy-setting editorial in the state media on New Year's Day, North Korea called for an end to hostile relations with the U.S. and vowed to work towards a nuclear-free peninsula.

"The fundamental task for ensuring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the rest of Asia is to put an end to the hostile relationship between the DPRK [North Korea] and the USA," the editorial said.

"It is the consistent stand of the DPRK to establish a lasting peace system on the Korean Peninsula and make it nuclear-free through dialogue and negotiation."

North Korea left six-party nuclear disarmament talks in April last year in protest at international censure over its launch of a long-range rocket. In May, it staged its second nuclear test since 2006.

U.S. envoy Stephen Bosworth visited the communist nation last month and reached a "common understanding" on the need to resume the talks, which group the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia and the United States. However, no date has been fixed.

South Korean Unification Minister Hyun In-Taek, in charge of handling cross-border relations, said he would bring in "a new paradigm" of relationship between the two Koreas this year.

"We should try our best to achieve improvement of the South-North relationship with principles and productive humanitarianism, strengthening the potential for preparing for unification," Hyun said in a New Year message.

"Most of all, a turning point of denuclearization must be made through productive communication between South Korea and North Korea."

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