

Expectations from Indo-Bangla summit

Taking the relationship on to a new plane

WITH the visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister to India we are hoping to see a change in bilateral relations between our two countries that were marked by suspicion and acrimony. We hope a new beginning will dawn that will reflect a shared attitude in which each country see to the welfare and good of the other and contribute to their mutual wellbeing. Let the layers of mutual suspicion and distrust created over time give way to positive atmospherics for a dramatic healing of sore points, resolution of longstanding irritants.

What is to be particularly noted is that Bangladesh has already been hugely forthcoming in allaying India's security concerns centring around its Northeast region. The natural expectation in Dhaka will be that India would reciprocate, and the signs are that Delhi is being sensitive to our concerns.

India's short-, medium- and long-term interests are in a way tied with economic progress of Bangladesh. In fact, invigorated two-way street of a bilateral relationship paradigm freed of tension and underpinned by connectivity to Nepal and Bhutan can be the cornerstone of robust regional cooperation within the SAARC umbrella. That is where we see the underlying stakes in the forthcoming Manmohan Singh-Sheikh Hasina summit.

The accords and MoUs that are on the cards make an impressive reading. Judged by past standards, they signify a rapid expansion in the volume and quality of bilateral cooperation. On the specific issues like Teesta water sharing, Tipaimukh dam and border killings signals that India has given sound being right, only that Bangladesh awaits concrete results on her commitments.

There is a surge in the new-found longing in Indian leadership to stabilise relations with Bangladesh and this is when Bangladesh should be able to make the most of the unfolding opportunity for reordering the bilateral relations on the firm foundation of sovereign equality and mutual benefit.

Although it is a bilateral summit we are talking about, yet given the challenging global context in which the regions are looking inward to fend for themselves it is the broader picture that both India and Bangladesh should be looking at shunning any myopia or shortsightedness.

As we look forward to a new era of mutually beneficial bilateral relationship, we must be aware that it would be unrealistic to expect that one visit or summit will be able to address our numerous concerns that now exist. We would therefore caution against burdening this summit with over-expectation.

However, we do expect the summit to make headway in mitigating some of our concerns, and lay a definitive pathway to their resolution and set an irreversible trend of a win-win pattern in solving all our major outstanding issues with due sensitivity and urgency.

Our cheated workers in Libya

Hands-on approach to migrant labour issue needed

IT is quite clear that for all the steps taken or reassurances voiced regarding the safety of Bangladesh's workers abroad, they still remain prey to the whims of their employers as well as their recruiting agencies. The latest that we have on this front is the disconcerting news from Libya that 46 Bangladeshi workers there have been going without wages for the past six months. And how life can turn into a nightmare for men with no wages abroad can only be imagined. The harrowing experience of these men has been compounded by the fact that they have now been deprived of the food and water, scanty though they have been, so long provided to them by the firm which employed them. At this point, it is starvation that these workers face. Back home in Bangladesh, it is their families which struggle with the twin problems of paying the interest taken on the loans (taka two lakh for each worker) needed to send them abroad as well as keeping themselves going in the absence of any remittances from their hapless relatives in Libya.

That Bangladesh has in these past few years regularly come face to face with problems relating to its workers abroad has been an incontrovertible fact. In Malaysia, South Korea and the Middle East, our workers have with regrettable regularity found it hard to keep their jobs or get decent wages for the work they do. In most instances, it has been the recruiting agencies in Bangladesh together with the employing firms in the host countries which have been responsible for their predicament. Countries such as Malaysia and Bahrain even went to the extent of banning manpower from Bangladesh. When that happened, it was for ministers in the Bangladesh government to convince the authorities in these countries to reverse their decisions. Such steps certainly provided relief of some sort. But observing conditions in Libya, where as many as 24,000 Bangladeshi workers are sent in a year, one realises that our migrant worker-related troubles are far from over.

A proper, hands-on approach to the issue of migrant workers is today an absolute necessity. It is obvious that the measures adopted so far about streamlining the activities of recruiting agencies in the country and ensuring fair deals for workers abroad have not quite worked. If they had, these 46 workers would not be in the dilemma they are in today. We suggest that, as a first step, the Bangladesh embassy in Tripoli take up the issue with the Libyan authorities as also the employing firm concerned. At home, let the recruiting agency responsible for sending these workers abroad explain its failure to ensure the workers' wages and indeed their job-related security.

The admirable spirit of facing facts

The nation could get over many of the hurdles that litter its development path, if its leaders become franker and develop the spirit of squaring up to the facts.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

IT is hardly surprising that most of the ruling Awami League (AL) leaders have evaluated their first year in office in a very positive light. As expected, to the opposition and its alliance partners, the AL-led government's one year of performance was nothing to write home about.

Small wonder this is the usual language of appreciation or criticism of the political parties, either in power or in opposition, about each other, especially in Bangladesh context.

In democratic parlance, about everywhere, party or parties in power and those in opposition are critical, often scathingly at that, about one another. Even so, in Bangladesh things habitually go to their extremes. Here the two main political groups belong to, as it were, two enemy camps in a military war. And as in any such war, there are no holds barred when it comes to attacking the opponent. In the end, in this kind of polemical attack, it is the truth that becomes the first casualty.

Obviously, in this overcharged ambience, the political polemics in vogue is highly rhetorical and exaggerated and, more often than not, lacking in substance, or truth at worst.

Notwithstanding this prevailing political culture, one sometimes comes across exceptional political characters who talk in a language that has little similarity with established customs.

The food and disaster management minister of the incumbent government has set such an example. Curiously, while taking stock of his and his government's successes and failures, he spoke in a language that is different from his other cabinet colleagues as he unashamedly admitted to his ministry's failure to address the miseries of the Aila victims.

It may be recalled here that in May 2009, the cyclone Aila swept through southern districts of Bangladesh, accompanied by huge tidal waves that killed some 200 people and dislodged around half a million people from their homesteads along the coastal belt. Sadly though, Aila hit the country only one and a half years after Sidr, the worst hurricane from the Bay in recent memory, had razed the country killing some 3,500 people.

It was like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Hardly could the populace in the south, battered by Sidr, recover when Aila struck with a vengeance. It was a double whammy, and it was not only the victims whose sufferings multiplied. Rescue and rehabilitation work also got

tougher and further complicated. The newly elected government of the grand alliance led by Awami League was yet to have their house in proper order when Aila put them through their paces.

Even then, addressing the woes of the cyclone-hit people should have been on the highest priority of the new government. The media and the people at large, except, of course, the victims themselves, were about to forget the Aila nightmare. Now, thanks to the food and disaster management minister's acknowledgment of the reality, we can at least jog our memory afresh. The frank admission of the minister speaks volumes for what those hapless victims of multiple shock and devastation have been going through until now.

What should an average person make of Dr. Razzak's candid comments on the rehabilitation of the cyclone victims? Was it a faux pas or a deliberate attempt at breaking away with the existing culture of always toeing the official line?

In the prevailing mood of politics, some, who are not used to such openness, may even think that Dr. Razzak has let his government down by such frank admission of a lapse in the performance of his ministry or the government, for that matter.

In point of fact, if anything, he has only told the truth and thereby helped the government and the people to face facts and thereby have a better grasp of the situation in the Aila-affected districts.

But then, by all accounts, the food and

disaster management minister's remark is a clear departure from the current practice of our politicians both in and out of power. That apart, our hope is that Dr. Razzak's style of bringing the burning issues into perspective while making any assessment will not be totally lost on his colleagues or other politicians watching him.

It is in the in the correct spirit of democracy that the truth should not be suppressed under any circumstances. For, in the present case, if any attempt had been made to hide the real picture, then it would be nothing but a prescription for perpetuating the suffering of the Aila victims. Sweeping the truth about the Aila victims under the carpet would have only made their rehabilitation work harder.

Now that people know the fact, the government and the non-government agencies along with the various philanthropic organisations may get into gear and make renewed efforts to reach the victims of that cyclone and start relief, rescue and rehabilitation operations in a coordinated fashion.

In the present case, accepting facts will hopefully go to helping the victims of the last year's cyclone out of their sad predicament.

The nation could get over many of the hurdles that litter its development path, if its leaders become franker and develop the spirit of squaring up to the facts.

Syed Fatahul Alim is a senior journalist.

Banning of religion-based politics

In Bangladesh, too, the events involving terrorist activities perpetrated by Islamic extremists have strengthened the demands of the people to ban religion-based political activities. One hopes this expectation will now be realised.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

POST-COLD War political theorists are now engaged in interrogating the different visions of democracy (Nadia Urbinati of Columbia University, "Two visions of democracy," Dissent magazine). One vision questions the inclusion of Islam among the cultural and religious differences within a democratic community. The other does not exclude Islam within the expression of liberal multiculturalism because this school of thought does not see Islam as "a subspecies of totalitarianism," contradicting Pascal Bruckner's, a well-known French "nouveaux philosophes," description of people being chained to their roots and consequently unable to change and adapt to modernity.

The militant liberals gained ground after 9/11 and shifted their politics of intolerance from communism in a post-Cold War period to Islam. But Italian theorist Norberto Bobbio postulates: "It is worth risking liberty by making its enemy its beneficiary if the only alternative is to limit liberty to the point of suffocating it, or not allowing it to bear fruit. Much better an always endangered but expansive liberty than a liberty well-protected but unable to develop."

The proponents of the second version that include, according to Professor Benjamin Barber, "Samuel Huntington's discredited notion of clash of civilisations in which the West and the rest are locked in

a struggle of survival," are militant liberals, neo-cons and "new sovereigntists" glorified during George Bush's administration, who almost consciously ignored the 200 or more sects of Christianity to zero in on a few wayward Muslims of bin Laden's variety.

The question facing the world today is not about the comparative superiority of different religions. The question is of the engagement between people holding absolute contrapositions in order to establish cohabitation in a multicultural society that guarantees freedom of expression and the practice of one's own belief under the conviction that they will not be vilified by communities who profess other beliefs.

Addressing the Istanbul seminar in June 2008 (Reset Dialogue on Civilisations), Benjamin Barber found the proposition, which has become fairly fashionable in many Western quarters, absurd that Islam cannot accommodate democracy or that democracy cannot accommodate Islam. Barber contends that to the extent Islam is fundamentalist, so is religion in many places "because in our secular age religion is under siege and fundamentalism is above all a reaction to religion under siege."

Perhaps Benjamin Barber could have spoken of religious extremism instead of fundamentalism, as the word "fundamentalism" connotes looking for fundamentals of an idea or a concept, be it divine or mortal, and does not necessarily mean the meaningless terrorist acts conducted by a section of deviants in the name of Islam.

The aggrieved nations, both developed and developing, Muslim and non-Muslim, who have been victims of terrorism, would agree that the process of cultural transformation has to come from within and can only be encouraged from without.

The Bush version of democracy, as an international project to be implemented through coercive measures, if necessary, was a non-starter because many of the developing countries that lacked, in the eyes of the West, the basic tenets of democracy had been subjected to colonial exploitation for hundreds of years and are weary of intervention in the name of "liberation" of the oppressed from the tyrants.

Michael Ignatieff (of Harvard Kennedy School of Government) was at least honest enough in his admission that the invasion of Iraq "was a referendum of American power." But then, a decade after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the people of the world are reluctant to support the regime change argument now proffered because it was already known to the Anglo-US leaders that Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction.

Barack Obama's Cairo speech had, to a large measure, diffused the scepticism in the Muslim world (no supporter of Osama bin Laden) about the sincerity of the US-led West to solve, for example, the festering Palestinian problem, but the strength of the Israeli lobby is proving to be more powerful than Barack Obama had assumed.

The confusion raging around the world today is not about the struggle between atheism and religiosity. Yale Professor Paul Bloom is convinced that religion is bred in the bones. Tocqueville and Durkheim insist that free societies have been constructed on a religious foundation that lends them stability and the opportunity of political disagreement. Rousseau saw the need for religion as solidifying people into

groups laying the foundation of the state. What we have to guard against is that acknowledgement of religious and ethnic differences does not degenerate into giving, in Pascal Bruckner's words, "one's blessing to hostile insular communities that throw ramparts between themselves and the rest of the society."

In the light of the above, the Bangladesh Supreme Court's decision to lift the stay order on the four-year-old High Court judgment, declaring illegal the 5th amendment to our Constitution, provides an opportunity to bring back to life the 1972 Constitution with Islam as the state religion and, at the same time, to ban religion-based political parties.

Undeniably, Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country and most of the people are devout Muslims. But the absence of the separation of religion and the political authority in unambiguous terms, the teaching of giving unto God what is God's and unto Caesar what is Caesar's, opens up the possibility of strengthening the alleged presence of what journalist Christopher Hitchens would call "Islamofascists" and historian Niall Ferguson would label "Islam-Bolsheviks," committed to revolution and reordering the world in a way that would undo modernism and take countries like ours to sixth-century Saudi Arabia.

There is no denying the fact that religion-based politics is contrary to the basic tenets of universal human rights followed by all civilised countries, both in their domestic law and in their international commitment. In Bangladesh, too, the events involving terrorist activities perpetrated by Islamic extremists have strengthened the demands of the people to ban religion-based political activities. One hopes this expectation will now be realised.

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Safe handling of contaminated dredged materials

As it is understood that the Buriganga riverbed sludge is heavily contaminated with industry effluents, including chromium from tanneries, the operation deserves extra care and caution. Recovery of poly bags for recycling and leachate collection and treatment must be stressed as a basic requirement for this operation.

MOHAMMAD REAZUDDIN

HUNDREDS of years ago, the banks of the Buriganga were a prime location when the Mughals made Dhaka their capital in 1610. The house-turned-museum of the Nawab (ruler) overlooks the river, which is the country's main waterway for trading and ferry travel. It was once the main source of drinking water for Dhaka's residents, and an hour downstream from the capital city the river is still crystal clear. But as it flows through the capital, waste from sewers and factories -- especially tanneries -- pour into it.

Now, up to 40,000 tones of tannery waste flows into the river daily along with sewage from Dhaka, a city of more than 10 million. Human waste is responsible for 60 percent

of pollution in the river, followed by industrial waste at 30 percent. The rest is solid waste. Illegal structures have sprung up along its banks, narrowing the river and adding to the dirt, while ferries spill oil into its waters.

A recent survey found that a polythene stratum, measuring about 10 feet in thickness, was embedded under a certain stretch of the Buriganga. The river remains terribly polluted from domestic and industrial wastes and the polythene makes it worse, especially given the shallowness of the river. The huge quantities of garbage dumped into this arterial watercourse have turned it into an environmental nightmare.

Trashed poly bags seem to pose a far

greater danger to human health than ordinary garbage. While the latter is absorbed into the environment, polythene, being non-biodegradable, is permanent garbage. Brisk business goes on with recycled poly bags along the riverbank, and during washing and drying activities a good proportion of them ends up in the river.

Against this backdrop, the recent initiative by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to remove the garbage, including polythene, from the bed of the river is therefore a welcome one. It may be considered as the first step towards cleaning the river, if it is a well planned one. However, it is to be remembered that the safe disposal of the sludge removed from the bed remains a big challenge in this kind of initiative.

BIWTA, therefore, needs to identify appropriate places for dumping the sludge after necessary cleaning operation, including the recovery of poly bags for recycling. It is gathered from reports in the newspapers that Amin Bazar has been chosen as the dumping site. This has not been a right decision as Amin Bazar dumping site falls in the flood flow zone. If the

dredged materials are dumped in this site all leachates, including the contaminants from the tanneries, will find their way to the surrounding environment. It would have been better if BIWTA had chosen Matuail dumping site of DCC, as it is claimed to be a sanitary landfill site. It would be also pertinent to involve the Department of Environment in this operation for giving expert opinion on the safe disposal of the sludge and for monitoring purposes.

As it is understood that the Buriganga riverbed sludge is heavily contaminated with industry effluents, including chromium from tanneries, the operation deserves extra care and caution. Recovery of poly bags for recycling and leachate collection and treatment must be stressed as a basic requirement for this operation. Needless to say, the sludge should be spread in layers and compacted. All these required are to make sure that contaminated dredged materials are kept isolated from the environment, until it is safe.

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