

Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime talks

A good beginning made

IT is a good start that the two countries have made in respect of a very sensitive issue, one that had not been addressed in bilateral forum between the two countries for a long time. The last time perhaps after 1986, that the two countries met to discuss the matter, was when the two were facing a standoff in the Bay of Bengal in 2008.

The recently concluded talks have demonstrated that if one is willing to set aside archaic mindset and think out of the box, without being prejudiced by stated positions, the possibility of resolving so-called intractable issues becomes so much better.

We must appreciate the fact that for the first time Myanmar has moved away from its rigid stance of not considering any other option except the equidistance method in delimiting sea boundary. The meeting has also demonstrated that at the end of the day the matter will have to be resolved through understanding reached across the table. That Bangladesh and Myanmar have decided to delimit the maritime boundary going by the principles of both equidistance and equity is a clear testimony to that.

As it is, much time has been lost in demarcating our maritime boundary. The matter of delimitation in the Bay of Bengal, irrespective of the dateline fixed by the UN to fulfill certain obligations on the part of the parties concerned, must be addressed by the three littoral countries with urgency.

For Bangladesh it is even more so because of the setback caused by the current state of non-demarcation, in the exploration and harnessing of sea resources within our maritime zone. We understand that India has claimed certain blocks on our declared area as theirs. It has also carried out physical survey of the area. These are inside our waters as per declaration of 1974. Myanmar has also carried out survey in 2005 and has given the block to an international oil company in 2003; this is inside our area.

We appreciate the fact that the maritime issue is a complicated matter which needs all the countries concerned to appreciate the position of the parties involved in the matter. Therefore the talks, we hope, will help to establish the basis of taking forward the discussion leading up to a final agreement that would address the needs and establish the rights of the parties concerned in an equitable manner.

So far as the principle of equity is concerned, Bangladesh must finalise the points that need to be factored in our claims, something that has not been done as yet, in spite of the fact that we have been harping on this principle from the very beginning.

Burnt-down shanties and destroyed shops

Real causes behind the fires must be spotted

A fire which destroyed thirty shanties in South Begunbari of Tejgaon and another which left sixteen shops burnt down in Mirpur on Friday raise the old question of how safe city slums as well as tin-shed business establishments are from such frequent disastrous occurrences. In fact, on a bigger scale, incidents of factories and similar establishments catching fire in recent years have consistently been a matter of concern for all of us. There is a certain frequency to these fires which, of course, are not linked to one another. But consider this: every time a fire burns down shanties (and this happens all too frequently), there are all the legitimate questions which come up about why it happens.

In the present instance, reports have spoken of the fire emanating from a leaking pipe and spreading to the slum in Begunbari. It has also been suggested that despite repeated reminders about the leakage, the authorities did nothing to ensure the safety of the people in the area. If that is indeed the truth, it is for the administration to launch a full inquiry into such a laid-back attitude on the part of those whose job should have been to repair that leaking pipe. That said, there are the suspicions related to the fire. Slums in Dhaka and especially in Begunbari have been razed to the ground through inexplicable fires earlier too. Despite the fact that some explanation or the other was offered about the causes of these fires, there has been the feeling that these fires are sometimes, if not often, ignited at the behest of those with an eye to grabbing the area. The logic is simple: a fire will burn down everything, making it easier for unscrupulous elements to move in and for the dwellers of the destroyed shanties to be pushed out. It is a case of poverty being unable to withstand the pressure of powerful elements in the area.

There is thus a huge necessity to inquire into such fire incidents in the slums. With so many reports of influential elements devising ways and means of grabbing land and water bodies in and around the capital, one will not be surprised if some dark hands are spotted behind the blaze in the slums. Much the same could be happening in the case of markets, of the kind in Mirpur. A bigger level of vigilance, in terms of, first, keeping watch on those who might benefit from such fires and, second, making life safe for slum dwellers and shop owners, is called for.

Of austerity measures

Economics aside, there is a human element to the story. The government needs to show that it is alive to the misery of the people and is taking steps to alleviate their condition. One small step towards this goal is to refrain from unnecessary expenditure in these grave times.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

EVERY time there is a political change in the country, meaning a change of guard in the government, there are talks of belt tightening to save available resources to be later invested in nation-state building. The idea is indeed praiseworthy and evocative of a noble prospect. Who knows, it may one day provide a lifeline to the nation during the worst times. So, for any newly established dispensation, austerity has become almost a buzzword, even if it is inconsequential on the ground. So, that is what we saw soon after the present government came to power last year. But talks aside little was done on the ground to minimise waste and conserve whatever little resources we have.

Notwithstanding the incumbent Al's lip service to austerity, the tradition of the spendthrift habits dies hard, putting a strain on our wobbly public exchequer. Indeed an opposite trend is in evidence to hide our inabilities as the administration becomes bloated because of political expediency. I often wonder whether several dozens are indeed required to run the government. I remember that the central cabinet of a much larger and more complex polity like Pakistan used to be composed only of half a dozen ministers, most of whom used to be considered national figures in olden days. We could ignore the mega size of our cabinet but, at the same time, its members carry a price tag

in term of their perks and privileges, and it is the public who is to bear the burden of each one of them.

The prime minister and her hand-picked foreign minister already have an enviable travel record. Our national airline has already nose-dived. As a result, I presume that most of the longer travels hops are made by exorbitantly expensive foreign airlines. They are often accompanied by delegations whose size cannot be justified. Whenever there is an opportunity of a junket, our officials busy themselves in such a way that they appear to be indispensable and have to be included in the delegation.

During the eighties, this scribe attended the IISS security conference in Norway. In one of the plenary sessions of the conference held in Oslo's Hotel Scandinavia, King Olaf V was invited to share his views on the subject under deliberation. To everyone's surprise, he simply walked into the hotel unannounced. He came walking from his residence located just across the road. There was no honour guard, no trumpets, no escort. He came as quietly as he left.

With few honourable exceptions, a large number of officials and ministers continue to make air dashes and move around with unnecessarily large escorts that, at the best, may serve so-called security requirements, although the actual purpose of such display is to rather message the ego of our VVIPs.

Such official profligacy is nothing new,



No room for luxury.

but is undesirable in this poor country. But recently, I read in a vernacular daily that fifteen MPs are going to visit seven countries to learn in situ about port operations. Isn't it a rather expensive way of learning? What has, however, made our spendthrift tradition particularly distasteful is that it comes at a time of severe economic stress. Although the government has been telling us about the overflow of money in the apex bank's vault, we see no sign of it either in the rehabilitation of Sidr and Aila victims or in the alleviation of poverty. There is only the oratory of the pundits in a comfortable zone of deliberation. In the meantime, the country has been looking towards the donors as the number of the poor keeps swelling.

Slashing the number of ministries and divisions is the need of the day, as is cutting down on other expenses that have more to do with pomp and splendour than official

business. No garlanding, no gates, no illumination -- that's the newly pronounced mantra for salvation.

The Second World War broke the economic backbone of Britain. The war ravages put almost all of Europe under rationing of the essentials. Unable to get along with the austerity, many fled to countries such as Australia. Britain itself had to embrace austerity to the point of hunger. She voluntarily dismantled her vast empire and subsequently bounced back to a new life.

Economics aside, there is a human element to the story. The government needs to show that it is alive to the misery of the people and is taking steps to alleviate their condition. One small step towards this goal is to refrain from unnecessary expenditure in these grave times.

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Media vs. ministers

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A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE third US President Thomas Jefferson famously said that he would prefer newspapers without government to a government without newspapers. Our ministers should ponder these words as they bash the media for disseminating news to help people to form opinions.

Recently, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave a call to the editors and owners of newspapers to help in uninterrupted functioning of hard-earned democracy and requested them to project successes and achievements of the government to the people and not to publish untrue news. She probably did not remember Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides freedom "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers," while giving the call.

When one talks about the relationship between the media and the ministers, two topics generally arise. One is media indulgence and the other is media bashing. Many ministers prefer to become most visible like the media stars through constant media attention. Most of the ministers like this media exposure though such visibility does

not improve their performance, but hampers it instead.

The downside of the media-minister relationship is the media bashing, which is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. When a media report is not in accord with the ruling party's stated position, it is labeled as a false or motivated one, and the dire consequence is the media bashing.

Stung by strong criticism in the media, many ministers lose their tolerance and sensitivity and often resort to physical assault on media persons. Giving punishment to the messenger of bad news was a practice of the absolute potentates of the days of yore. But it has not lost value for some among today's high-ups where the media is concerned.

Ministers and some BNP lawmakers launched an abhorrent attack on the media in parliament during their regime, accusing it of tarnishing the government's image by publishing what they called "fake news," and also demanded action against those responsible. The president, prime minister and information minister also expressed their willingness to amend the provision of the Press Council Act through adding a punitive provision to punish errant journalists.

The housing and public works minister of BNP government, Mirza Abbas, declared

journalists as pen terrorists in their quest for a transparent government. The commerce minister of the AL-led alliance government blamed the media for the price hike of essential commodities. Failing to perform well, many ministers take the recourse of blaming the media for all manner of ills.

Why are the high-ups in the ruling alliance so angry with the media, and why have journalists become their whipping boys? According to a study, the recent trend of physical attacks and violence against journalists is linked to the media's commendable role in exposing corruption and abuse of power by the ruling alliance and the persons in the corridors of power.

Bangladesh has been ranked 121st among 175 countries in the Global Press Freedom Index 2009, by a Paris-based global media watchdog -- Reporters Without Borders. The South Asia Media Monitor-2009 said that three journalists were killed and more than 200 were tortured and harassed in 2009 by law enforcers, political party activists and extremist outfit operatives in Bangladesh. Naturally, a look at the numbers gives an unambiguous picture of the environment in which the media operate in Bangladesh.

Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said: "For the past two centuries it was the law that provided the source of authority for democracy. Today, law seems to be replaced by opinion as the source of authority, and the media serve as the arbiters of public opinion."

This wise saying has a strong implication in a country like Bangladesh, where democracy is still in a formidable form. Media and democracy are like two sides of a coin, and once one side is scarred the whole coin

becomes useless. In other words, once a free media that articulates and shapes public opinion is compromised then the nation's walk on the way to democracy also plunges into uncertainty. So, both a free media and democracy are pre-requisite for improving governance in a country like Bangladesh.

The media in Bangladesh is claimed to be free in the absence of censorship or harsh laws to throttle free expression. This is a myth and not the whole reality. The issue that needs to be highlighted once again is that the media in Bangladesh is confined under the claws of the high-ups of the ruling parties, as any law to resist their repression is absent.

The openly hostile attitude of ruling high-ups towards journalists has instigated their lawmakers and activists to assume that they can repress journalists with impunity. Press freedom is thus incompatible with increasing persecution, intimidation and killing of journalists.

The journalists of Bangladesh have been playing a very vital role in their mission of unearthing all falsehoods under the dire circumstances the nation happens to be going through. They consistently tried to draw the attention of the government to the gathering strength of Islamic extremists in the country.

Journalists have kept our hopes alive by bringing to light the tales of torture, denial and violation of human rights, but they seem to be at the receiving end of despicable attacks masterminded by the high-ups of the ruling parties. The prevailing situation now calls for them to develop a sense of unity among themselves to resist the onslaught on their professionalism and dignity.

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Don't panic

The purpose of terrorism is to provoke an overreaction. Its real aim is not to kill the hundreds of people directly targeted but to sow fear in the rest of the population. Terrorism is an unusual military tactic in that it depends on the response of the onlookers. If we are not terrorised, then the attack didn't work.

FAREED ZAKARIA

IN responding to the attempted bombing of an airliner on Christmas Day, Senator Dianne Feinstein voiced the feelings of many when she said that to prevent such situations: "I'd rather...overreact than under-react." This now appears to be the consensus view in Washington, but it is quite wrong.

In fact, precisely the opposite is true. The purpose of terrorism is to provoke an overreaction. Its real aim is not to kill the hundreds of people directly targeted but to sow fear in the rest of the population. Terrorism is an unusual military tactic in that it depends on the response of the onlookers. If we are not terrorised, then the attack didn't work.

Alas, this one worked very well. The attempted bombing says more about al Qaeda's weakened state than its strength. In the eight years before 9/11, al Qaeda was able to launch large-scale terrorist attacks on several continents.

It targeted important symbols of American power -- embassies in Africa; a

naval destroyer, the USS Cole; and, of course, the World Trade Center. The operations were complex -- a simultaneous bombing of two embassies in different countries -- and involved dozens of people of different nationalities who trained around the world, moved significant sums of money around, and coordinated their efforts over months, sometimes years. And every attack succeeded.

On Christmas a Qaeda affiliate launched an operation using one person, with no special target, and a failed technique tried eight years ago by "shoe bomber" Richard Reid. The plot seems to have been an opportunity that the group seized rather than the result of a well-considered strategic plan.

A Nigerian fanatic with (what appeared to be) a clean background volunteered for service; he was wired up with a makeshift explosive and put on a plane. His mission failed entirely, killing not a single person. The suicide bomber was not even able to commit suicide. But al Qaeda succeeded in its real aim, which was to throw the American system into turmoil. That's why

the terror group proudly boasted about the success of its mission.

Is there some sensible reaction between panic and passivity? Philip Zelikow, the executive director of the 9/11 Commission and later a senior State Department official in the Bush administration, suggests that we should try to analyse failures in homeland security the way we do airplane catastrophes.

When an airliner suffers an accident, major or minor, the National Transportation Safety Board convenes a group of non-partisan experts who calmly and methodically examine what went wrong and then issue a set of recommendations to improve the situation. "We approach airline security with the understanding that it's a complex problem, that we have a pretty good system, but that there will be failures -- caused by human beings, technology, or other factors. The point is to constantly fix what's broken and keep improving the design and execution," says Zelikow.

Imagine if that were the process after a lapse in homeland security. The public would know that any attack, successful or not, would trigger an automatic, serious process to analyse the problem and fix it. Politicians might find it harder to use every such event for political advantage. The people on the front lines of homeland security would not get demoralised as they watched politicians and the media bash them and grandstand with little knowledge. Overreacting to terrorist attacks plays

into al Qaeda's hands. It also provokes responses that are likely to be large scale, expensive, ineffective, and perhaps even counterproductive. More screening for every passenger makes no sense. When searching for needles in haystacks, adding hay doesn't help. What's needed is a larger, more robust watch list that is instantly available to all relevant agencies in the government.

Almost 2 million people travel on planes in US every day. We need to isolate the tiny percentage of suspicious characters and search them, not cause needless fear in everyone else.

As for the calls to treat the would-be Christmas bomber as an enemy combatant, torture him, and toss him into Guantanamo, God knows he deserves it. But keep in mind, the crucial intelligence we received was from the boy's father. If that father had believed that US was a rogue superpower that would torture and abuse his child without any sense of decency, would he have turned him in?

To keep this country safe we need many more fathers and uncles and friends and colleagues to have enough trust in America that they too would turn in the terrorist next door.

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