

A new phase ushered in Indo-Bangla relations

Commitments will have to be fulfilled for mutual gains

THE emphasis that the present leaders of Bangladesh and India have laid on creating a mutually beneficial and productive relationship between the two next-door neighbours has been epitomised by the joint communiqué issued on Tuesday after the Hasina-Manmohan summit in New Delhi.

Significantly, the communiqué acknowledges the vital issues having important bearing on Indo-Bangladesh relationship exhaustively and expresses a common resolve to address those. Most important, it does not just stop short of expressing the intention to resolve the tricky issues, but make clear commitment to work together with a new sense of urgency.

Admittedly, during the past seven years at least, no serious effort at the highest government level could be made to resolve the outstanding issues hindering establishment of an atmosphere of constructive engagement between the two countries. The proactive diplomacy of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reciprocated by the Indian leadership has paved the way for breaking the ice and expanding the horizon of bilateral relationship out of the box.

Now that the joint communiqué provides a comprehensive framework for cooperation and development on the either side of the border, the two governments should get down to brass tacks of implementing the commitments made. These cover India's access to Chittagong and Mongla seaports, sharing of Teesta waters including those of other common trans-boundary rivers, demarcating the maritime boundaries and so on.

The prospect of India's and other neighbours like Nepal's and Bhutan's using the two Bangladeshi seaports opens up a new vista of cooperation on economic and commercial fronts. Bangladesh will gain from it by way of earning revenue from the overseas business the neighbours may carry out through these ports. It holds out the potential for a regional hub to be created. However, it would be important to see that all the countries involved could share the advantages of connectivity that the provision would create.

Similarly, for Bangladesh, sharing of water from Teesta and other common rivers is a critical issue to her delicate ecosystems fed by those rivers. On it also hinges the economic sustainability of the country. So, the announcement as made by the two leaders to instruct the ministries concerned to hold meeting of the Joint River Commission (JRC) by the first quarter of the new year should be materialised in earnest. Hopefully, the urgency that has been reflected at the summit would permeate the meetings to be organised not only at the ministerial, but also down the line at the official and technical levels.

Equally important is the issue of the proposed Tipaimukh barrage in India. Though India's commitment at the summit to the effect that it would do nothing harmful for Bangladesh there is reassuring, we would still be looking forward to see concrete steps towards materialising the commitment.

The agreement to amicably demarcate the common maritime boundaries is an achievement of the summit. Admittedly, the summit between the two top government leaders of Bangladesh and India bears a mark of maturity in handling the sensitive issues vital to the mutual interest of both the neighbours.

Occasional unrest in garment sector

Evolve trouble-shooting mechanism in each unit

THE garment sector, the country's premier foreign exchange earner, has not yet found an effective solution to the almost chronic labour unrest, which sometimes turns violent and obstructs production. The latest outbreak of such agitation was witnessed in Ashulia where production in at least 30 factories had to be stopped, as workers took charge of the situation and clashed with law enforcers coming to the rescue of the owners.

The situation is regrettable, particularly when the national economy has to absorb the shock of global recession. It is a testing time for the garment sector when everything should be functioning smoothly. But the existing worker-owner relations do indicate that the sector as a whole is not well-equipped to face the challenge, rather it is limping with strikes and violent incidents which stop production.

The demands put forward by workers, at least in the latest instance, relate to routine fringe benefits, which the management of the factories should have been able to meet without any incident. The factory managers appear to be in an impervious mood and are not attaching due importance to the workers' grievances. Otherwise, matters like paying conveyance and lunch bills would not have created such a tense situation that ultimately went out of control. Clearly, management failure is, at least partially, responsible for the workers getting agitated.

As for the workers, their survival hinges on productivity and regular functioning of the factories. They have to go by the rules, instead of going on the rampage at a moment's notice. Slight delay in fulfillment of their demands must not drive them to frenzied action.

The garment owners are apparently relying on law enforcers' support to manage the agitating workers. In the past, in 2008 to be precise, their desperation reached a point where they demanded deployment of armed personnel in the factories to maintain peace and order. But only a durable solution can come through strict adherence to labour laws and full compliance with the tripartite agreement under supervision of some authority. The truth of the matter is that labour issues have to be settled within the precincts of the factories. Some auto-reactive trouble-shooting mechanism should exist in the industrial units. Deployment of law enforcers can at best be a temporary measure. Owners have to give workers a patient hearing and solve the problems within the framework of existing agreements.

A bagful of commitments

Certainly it is a bagful of commitments, and they are all in black and white, unlike in the past, which no party should be able to wriggle out of. The important thing is to work out the minutiae of implementation of the commitments made.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THAT the meeting between two leaders of Bangladesh and India at the highest political level has taken place on bilateral plane after many years is in itself a ground-breaking event. No two countries can exist in an environment of animus and distrust as Bangladesh and India have done in the last several years (Bangladesh alone is not to be blamed for it), and it is in that perspective that Hasina's India visit must be seen.

The hype that was generated on the eve of the visit and the expectations built up by various quarters was but only natural. And one is certain that Sheikh Hasina was fully aware of the fact that she was representing the hopes and aspirations of fifteen million Bangladeshis, many of whose psyche has been shaped by the fact that some commitments by India have remained unfulfilled.

Many are inclined to see the outcome of the summit as 3 agreements, 2 MOUs and a bagful of commitments only, while some see it as a foundation on which future relationship can be built upon. Some have dismissed the Bangladesh-India summit as an exercise in void, that Bangladesh has come away with very little of immediate consequence but has given away too much to India. I am disappointed that some of the past unresolved issues did not feature specifically in the talks.

Thankfully, terrorism and security were not the only issues on the agenda, and one must feel happy that a large number of issues have featured in the talks, including the Tipai Mukh on which a solemn commitment has been

made by India. However, inclusion of some issues has surprised many since they were not specifically subjects of public discourse prior to the PM's visit, nor were they mentioned directly or indirectly in official pronouncements, like the one related to the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports by India. But this falls within the rubric of connectivity, one could say.

In the absence of details and without going into the fine prints of the agreements a detailed critique is somewhat difficult. Therefore, for the present we shall dwell only on a few issues and, basing on the materials appearing in the media, it will be worthwhile to go into the three agreements before going into one of the other issues that found mention in the communiqué. These are all related to security with terrorism being the main focus.

There is nothing new as far as the agreement on cross-border terrorism is concerned. There are existing Saarc protocols that already mandate the regional countries to cooperate on the stipulated issues of cross-border terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking.

We are not aware of the details but intelligence sharing is one of the provisions stipulated in the recent agreement, something that is also provided for in the Saarc protocol. This is perhaps mere reaffirmation of our commitment to combat terrorism, both on bilateral and regional basis, and given the nature of terrorism that has evolved over the past several years in South Asia there is the imperative to address the matter regionally. And such reaffirmation with other countries of the region also would make eminent sense.

Of the two other agreements, the



Now to move forward.

motive behind one that relates to handing over of convicted prisoners has perhaps to do with a particular individual wanted by India, whose handing over to it would be facilitated by this agreement. It is my belief that a single individual or event should not be the criterion for entering into mutual agreements but principles and values that we hold true to our hearts. Otherwise, we tend to become servants of expediency rather than upholders of principles. Lack of formal agreement should not stand in the way of acting on moral convictions and principles, and exchanges can be done without any quid pro quo.

Of the other issues that has surprised many is letting India have use of the two ports, one, because it was not in the original agenda, and two, because of the so called security implications related to it. In principle, there should be no harm in letting others have the use of one's communication and trade facility. The question is what are the economic and strategic gains for us? The former I shall leave to the economists to work out, but the potential of

Chittagong becoming an international maritime hub should not be lost on the critics of the policy.

Insofar as its security implications are concerned, one finds it very weird the argument that the use of the ports by India will be fraught with danger, and that it will involve us directly or indirectly with the insurgency movement in the Indian North East. By the same argument are we to believe that those, who are cooperating militarily with India or supplying them with arms and ammunition, and which are being used against the insurgents, are indirectly parties to the anti-insurgency campaigns?

There is a need too look into the outcome of the visit in a dispassionate manner. Certainly it is a bagful of commitments, and they are all in black and white, unlike in the past, which no party should be able to wriggle out of. The important thing is to work out the minutiae of implementation of the commitments made.

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Challenges to food self-sufficiency

The prime minister definitely kept these challenges in view while expressing her government's determination to attain self-sufficiency in food by 2012. Experts are of the opinion that Bangladesh has a huge potential to increase crop productivity, fisheries and livestock despite climate change effects if the right policies are followed.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE addressing the nation over radio and television on January 6 on the occasion of her government completing one year in office, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her government's determination to make Bangladesh self-sufficient in food by 2012. This courageous statement of the prime minister has been welcomed by the people.

There are no two opinions about the need for attaining self-sufficiency in food. But, let us bear in mind that while food self-sufficiency is not unattainable, it is at the same time very challenging. This article, therefore, makes an attempt to discuss some of the challenges that stand in the way.

Population growth outpaces food growth: Statistics of the last ten years show that annual population growth rate is outpacing annual food grain growth rate in the country. This happens not only in the case of rice, but also for vegetables, pulses, meat and fish, milk, egg, edible oils and fruits. According to various studies, the population will double to 280 million at the current rate of growth by 2080 and reach about 180 million as early as 2020.

How much food will be needed for "active and healthy life" of the 180 million people in 2020? According to the Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES)-2005 (published in May, 2007), average per capita per day intake of food at national level stood at 947.7 grams, out of which cereals (rice and wheat), vegetables, pulses, milk and milk products, edible oils, meat and egg, and fish constituted 469.2, 157, 14.2, 32.4, 16.5, 20.8, 42.1 grams respectively.

According to experts, per capita per day intake of some of the above items is not enough for maintaining active and healthy life of our people. For instance, the average national intake of vegetables is 157 grams against the recom-

mended requirement of 200 grams per person per day.

Due to shortfall in domestic production and dependence on import, the prices of lentil recently reached all time high, making it almost impossible for the common people to consume this poor man's protein. Due to mismatch in annual population growth rate and food growth rate, the gap between food requirement and availability of domestically produced food is widening.

Inconsistency in the growth rate of food grains: There is inconsistency in the growth rate of food grains, particularly rice, which is the staple food of Bangladesh and provides about 93 percent of the country's cereal intake and above 70 percent of calories in the Bangladesh diet, due to vagaries of nature and inadequate infrastructural facilities. Food grain (rice and wheat) production in 1971-72 was 100.46 lakh tonnes, which reached 160.80 lakh tonnes in 1985-86, 190.80 lakh tonnes in 1996-96. For the first time since independence, the country attained near self-sufficiency in food grain production in 2000-2001. The food grain production in 2000-2001 stood at 267.58 lakh tonnes. But the increasing trend in food grain production could not be sustained.

Food grain production in 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 stood at 259.05 lakh tonnes, 266.94 lakh tonnes, 274.42 lakh tonnes, 261.33 lakh tonnes, and 275.90 lakh tonnes respectively. In 2007-08, the aman production suffered heavily due to two heavy floods and the cyclone Sidr. Due to a bumper harvest of boro in 2008-09, the food grain production in that year stood at 325 lakh tonnes.

It is yet to be ascertained whether food grain production target for 2009-2010 will be achieved. But indications are there that aman production target may not be achieved due to drought-like situation at the time of transplantation of aman in the country's north-



We can produce enough for everybody.

ern region, known as the granary of Bangladesh. This may affect the total growth rate of food grains in 2009-2010.

Loss of agricultural land: Loss of agricultural land due to habitation for growing population, river bank erosion, industrialisation and other development activities continues to be a serious problem. The country is losing approximately 80 thousand hectares of agricultural land annually. What is more alarming is the scientific forecast of loss of land from sea-level rise due to global warming.

According to IPCC's forecast, just a one-metre rise in sea-level due to global warming might cause around 17 percent of Bangladesh's landmass to go under water, displacing some 20 million people in coastal areas.

Dropping ground water level to affect boro cultivation: Boro, an irrigated crop, is now the principal food crop of the country. Both surface and ground water are the sources of irrigation. A number of studies show that ground water-based irrigation system is experiencing difficulties in different parts of the country, as shallow aquifer level is getting out of reach due to fast depletion of water table.

Experts have attributed the falling of groundwater to decline in river flows and inadequate rain caused by climate change and heavy withdrawal for irrigation.

Loss of food grain due to improper

harvests, processing and storage: At a workshop organised by the CIRDAP at its head office in the city on November 23, the speakers, including a senior official of the food and disaster management ministry, revealed that improper harvests, processing and storage led to a loss of nearly 15 percent of food grains produced in the country.

It was further revealed that, for fruits and vegetables, post-harvest losses ranged between 20 and 25 percent while losses for highly perishable fruits and vegetables might be as high as 40 percent.

The prime minister definitely kept these challenges in view while expressing her government's determination to attain self-sufficiency in food by 2012. Experts are of the opinion that Bangladesh has a huge potential to increase crop productivity, fisheries and livestock despite climate change effects if the right policies are followed. Bridging the yield gap, scaling up farmers' management practices and bringing fallow land under cultivation may help. Surface water will have to be made available for irrigation and reducing dependence on irrigation based on ground water. The people should be motivated to accept the proposed "one couple, one child" norm on voluntary basis and financial incentives be given, if necessary. Annual food growth rate must be higher than annual population growth rate.

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