

Khaleda's predictable reaction

Her accusation of a secret deal should be substantiated

BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia has made her party's position clear on the prime minister's trip to Delhi by summarily rejecting the India-Bangladesh joint communiqué. Much of what the opposition leader said could be anticipated, but the extent to which she has gone has taken us by surprise.

Given the nature of politics prevalent in our context today, her punching hard at the joint communiqué was perhaps a routine response but a knee-jerk one that should have been avoided. Highly insidious is the charge leveled against the government that it has struck a 'secret security deal' with its Indian counterpart. It is precisely here that the merits or demerits of everything else get overshadowed by a greater concern for wild speculation such an allusion might trigger. If the leader of the opposition is in possession of solid evidence that such a deal was indeed struck, then she should provide evidence for it, then it is also the media's duty to share it with the people. But if she does not have anything to prove her point, it can be harmful to our national interest and might also be interpreted as an irresponsible utterance. Then, it will be the media's duty to condemn it.

In politics, aggressive tactics are often adopted to corner the adversaries, but in a truly democratic set-up the parties cannot or do not make claims that they fail to substantiate. A secret security deal is certainly not something that can be taken lightly or used as a weapon to gain political mileage only. Finally, if Khaleda really believes that such a deal was struck, then it can and should state her case in parliament, where there will be ample scope for discussion on the issue with, as the PM promised, unlimited time for her.

We would like to make the point that the government should have included opposition MPs in the government delegation. Whether such an invitation was actually extended we do not know. At the same time, while the opposition has every right to criticise to bits a joint communiqué; but does it fall within diplomatic norms for the opposition to reject it summarily?

The point made by the opposition leader that a country of 150 million people cannot be run only by renting out roads and ports is surprising too, as there are many instances of countries generating huge revenues through regional interconnectivity.

We would expect that the politicians will raise the level of their debate, instead of hurling accusations at each other with a monotonous and totally ineffectual regularity.

Do something about Dhaka traffic, please!

Life has become unbearable

WE address our plea to the Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police and his deputy commissioners in charge of traffic of the capital.

Mobility has become extremely difficult with traffic snarl-ups becoming an agonizingly regular feature in the daily life of Dhaka commuters. Getting about within the city in any form of transport has become a nightmare. Life has become severely restrained because of the serious bottlenecks that occur on a regular basis in the city particularly at peak hours. By some accounts the daily loss incurred due to traffic jam runs into millions.

The Dhaka metropolitan police have been experimenting from time to time with the traffic system by introducing newer methods of traffic flow, but regrettably, all exercises to ease traffic movement and enhance the flow have failed miserably. In fact, if anything, every time new rules were introduced, the condition on the city roads had gotten worse. Merely making a particular road no go area or doing away with the system of traffic police controlling traffic movements manually may at best be a short term palliative not a long term solution.

One of the reasons why experiments have not worked is because the drives were not only occasional, they were also conducted rather halfheartedly and without addressing the structural deficiencies including lack of adequate parking space.

A case in point is the much vaunted 'lane' system which is not a new concept, and which in any organised society drivers automatically follow. But for us it was new! And look at what has come of it now? It is back to the old ways. No one, including the traffic police, seems to be bothered about anyone following the lane system. And filing cases against the offenders, which seems to be the major preoccupation of the traffic police, is not necessarily the best way to motivate compliance of rules.

We understand that there are some inherent constraints associated with the capital's roads. And there are more new vehicles coming on the roads every month than the roads can absorb, that are adding to the clog. That is why something quick and innovative must be done, and both medium and short-term measures should be formulated. Certainly, occasional drives to improve the congestion will not do.

However, at the end of the day, whatever strategy is evolved, much of the success will depend on the persons entrusted to implement the system, the traffic police. Regrettably, their level of competence, one has to admit, needs improvement.

The India Card

The people of Bangladesh who are serious about economic growth of the country to lessen the poverty of the millions must take a stand in favour of rationality. This does not mean that the democratic rights of protest should be put on hold. Those rights must be exercised rationally and sensibly, not based on prejudices.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE honourable leader of the opposition (though this role is yet to be fully played by her in the right forum, the Parliament) Begum Zia deserves some credit for her consistency. Her position has been consistent since the interruption of January 11, 2007, the fateful day when a military-backed government replaced her administration.

Begum Khaleda Zia, since that intervention, has consistently alleged a grand conspiracy against her government and her party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Her decision to boycott the Parliament, not to accept the election of December 2008 as fair (thus the Awami League-led grand-alliance government is not legitimate) etc, are based on such allegations. Now, she has moved on to deduce that all these conspiracies were not just against her and her party, but also against the sovereignty of Bangladesh. The equation becomes clear; the interests of her party are the same as national interests.

In an act of life imitating art, Begum Khaleda Zia dwelt on comparing Rabindranath Thakur with Kazi Nazrul Islam. The echo of a popular song by Shayan was clearly evident. Such a distraction in an otherwise glum press conference can be quite a relief if it were not also an example of demands that are too much to meet, placed on the prime minister by Begum Zia.

India and Bangladesh are going to jointly celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Thakur, the Nobel laureate poet, next year. Kazi Nazrul Islam was born in 1899. The celebration of his 150th birth anniversary must wait for another 39 years as it falls on 2049. In principle, I agree with

the BNP chairperson that a joint celebration of Kazi Nazrul Islam's 150th birth anniversary is a good idea. But to expect that kind of foresight on the part of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a meeting happening in 2010 is, perhaps, a little bit too much to expect. Hopefully, future leaders of the two countries will discuss that in the 2040s.

If this was a point about history (and ironically, future), the other is about geography. It is great that both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia are in favour of regional connectivity, but to demand the inclusion of Sri Lanka to use the ports of Bangladesh is somewhat baffling. I was imagining that, maybe, Sri Lanka would like to import stuff to Chalna Port, take the shipment to Mongla Port using the newly set up infrastructure, and then trans-ship it to Colombo. Or maybe mythical Hanuman can be invoked to carry stuff from Chalna and Mongla to Colombo and other places of Sri Lanka.

There are many important issues in the briefing of the BNP chairperson, which must receive careful consideration of the government. But it is difficult to accept the BNP chairperson's assertion that BNP is not anti-Indian. BNP has been very successful in exploiting and sometimes fomenting the anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladesh, the existence of which predates the formation of BNP.

The thesis implicit in the briefing can be stated in the following words. On January 11, 2007 there was a conspiracy against the national interest of Bangladesh, thus an army-backed government took over political power, which allowed the Awami League-led grand coalition government to take office in January 2009 after, what she



Let us not oppose for the sake of opposition.

continues to claim, a rigged election.

Now in January 2010, the prime minister of Bangladesh has sold Bangladesh out to India. In order to give a dramatic twist and suspense to this thesis she interjects -- sinisterly -- the BDR massacre of February 2009, which saw the gruesome assassination of 57 army officers on BDR duties. Now, on top of all these rather serious allegations, she adds the so-called "secret treaty" during the visit of the prime minister.

Every Bangladeshi must take these allegations of the BNP chairperson seriously because there are many in Bangladesh who will buy her thesis as gospel without raising a single question.

Some of my friends in the BNP camp related the story of how planes were delayed in Dhaka airport so that black-clad soldiers from an unnamed country bordering Bangladesh (does a name have to be mentioned?) could board a Saudi Arabia bound flight (apparently to mislead the innocent minds) and take a long detour back home.

If some serious-looking people can

believe that, they will also believe the story of selling Bangladesh despite the fact that a number of guests in various talk shows have reminded us that a country is not a potato or tomato that can be sold.

We have read that America bought Louisiana from France in 1803 and Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867. But neither Louisiana nor Alaska was a sovereign state recognised by the international community.

For the part of the government, a blow by blow response and full disclosure of the treaties and MOUs must be disclosed in print as well as in the official website. The people of Bangladesh who are serious about economic growth of the country to lessen the poverty of the millions must take a stand in favour of rationality. This does not mean that the democratic rights of protest should be put on hold. Those rights must be exercised rationally and sensibly, not based on prejudices.

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Asymmetric relations

To the prime minister and her true-blues the visit has been a "total success," but the BNP secretary general termed the visit as a "total failure." Neutral observers tend to see it as a "mixed bag." To them, the assessment of both sides is grossly exaggerated, moreover it is too early to gauge the full implication of what has been committed by the leadership of both the countries.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE long awaited talks with India over unresolved bilateral issues came at long last when last week the summit between the prime ministers, Sheikh Hasina and Dr. Manmohan Singh, took place in New Delhi amid wild speculation as to its scope and prospects. Bangladesh being a country at the receiving end of this exercise, its people pinned much hope on Sheikh Hasina's ability in exacting our dues from India on the basis of universally acceptable good neighbourliness.

Even though an outline of the talks has been offered for public consumption it lacks essential details, which makes it difficult to draw any conclusion as to its positive or negative impact on Bangladesh.

However, to the prime minister and her true-blues the visit has been a "total success," but the BNP secretary general termed the visit as a "total failure." Neutral observers tend to see it as a "mixed bag." To them, the assessment of both sides is grossly exaggerated, moreover it is too early to gauge the full implication of what has been committed by the leadership of both the countries. We have to wait a bit longer to see it unfold.

Our past experience in dealing with India can also be a useful guide. Only after that exercise will we know that the AL's claim is certainly not abracadabra mouthed by the sceptics. Neither is the BNP's assertion the whole truth. To build, nourish and maintain an asymmetric relationship has always been difficult anywhere. Look at the whole spectrum of the asymmetry to understand how complex can it be.

cannot be achieved overnight, that too with a country of India's standing and potential. Smaller than China, India is the second largest country of the world by population, ranking tenth in engineering and technological skill. It has the world's fourth largest army, sixth largest navy and tenth largest air force. It is has nuclear and ballistic missile power. An Indian satellite is already in orbit. This asymmetry is characteristic of South Asia, and India is pre-eminent in the region's power structure.

After the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, India's position was further strengthened -- duly endorsed by the great powers. Following independence, Bangladesh's relations with India were most cordial and warm. During the war, India proved to be the closest and strongest ally of Bangladesh. At the same time, Bangladesh's victory at an enormous cost vastly enhanced India's security. Pakistan, cut down to former West Pakistan, no longer flanked India on two sides, and drained in economic and military strength she ceased to be the threat she was to India's security. On the other hand, the emergence of a friendly neighbour on the eastern flank, with practically no military ambition, radically metamorphosed the region's power structure, putting India at its centre.

In these changed circumstances, both India and Bangladesh vied with each other in becoming mutually friendly and helpful. So much so that both tended to ignore the formal interstate boundary, and even the idea of trans-border movement from one country to the other without passport was aired. Initially, Indo-Bangladesh relations were euphoric to say the least. But



Time for cooperation, not confrontation.

then a relationship fed only by emotions does not last long and eventually requires a more rational approach to attain a more stable footing.

After our independence, the leaders of both the countries appeared to make the initial moves with correctness, caution, prudence and objectivity in creating a base for good neighbourly relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was unequivocal in attributing the victory in the War of Independence to the patriotism and sacrifices of the people of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur, in like manner, was steering in expressing the gratitude of the people of Bangladesh for India's valuable and enormous contribution during the war. Both leaders took timely action for the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh. The differences over the trial of prisoners of war also appeared to have been ironed out quietly, and finally settled through the tripartite agreement.

The relationship flowered till the seeds of future discontent appeared to have been surreptitiously sown, mainly due to failure to complete the land boundary demarcation, negotiate and settle the basic frame of a long-term

agreement to share the waters of the Ganges on the expiry of the 3-month trial run agreement and leaving the maritime delineation unattended.

It also appeared that the cordial relations developed during and after the war had not completely succeeded in obliterating the old fears and suspicious, which were exacerbated by new irritants. When relations are brought on an even keel and the irritants are removed some unforeseen and unexpected issues disturb the equilibrium, creating new problems in the carefully nursed equation.

We do have a number of agreements and memorandums of understanding with India, including a 30-year water agreement, but they yielded nothing for us and, in spite of the much-hyped water agreement signed during Sheikh Hasina's last regime, the grim spectacle of the Ganges in Bangladesh is a fact of our lives.

Yet, the resumption of talks between the two countries on a host of bilateral issues is indeed great news. Sheikh Hasina's achievement is that she couldn't be cold-shouldered by India and was afforded an audience in New Delhi.

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