

Less rhetoric, please

The BNP's reaction is nothing surprising, since anti-Indian propaganda is the party's forte. This is in tune with the rhetoric of the Pakistani era, when any Bengali leader who was devoted to the cause of the Bengalee people was called an "Indian agent."

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

FOLLOWING the prime minister's press conference on the successes of her recent visit to India, the BNP chairperson and leader of the parliamentary opposition also held a news conference, categorically opposing the PM's assertion, and went as far as accusing her of selling the country to India. One pro-BNP journalist did not even use the word "sell"; in his view, the PM has "gifted" Bangladesh to India.

However, the BNP's reaction is nothing surprising, since anti-Indian propaganda is the party's forte. This is in tune with the rhetoric of the Pakistani era, when any Bengali leader who was devoted to the cause of the Bengalee people was called an "Indian agent." During the liberation war, all freedom fighters were called "Indian miscreants" who, in the words of Pakistani authorities, were out there to make East Pakistan a state of India. The BNP chairperson is simply maintaining the continuity of that senseless India bashing.

In her press conference, the BNP chief termed the joint statement released during the visit as a communiqué of India and Awami League, disregarding the fact that she went to India as the PM of Bangladesh, not as the AL chief, enjoying the highest popularity rating for any PM in recent history. On most issues, the BNP chief was less on specifics, more on general.

According to media reports, the BNP chief dodged the query whether she would scrap the deals if elected to power again, saying: "I have not yet seen the agreements." Asked how she could term the treaties anti-state without seeing their contents, Khaleda said: "It can be understood easily if you go through the joint communiqué."

Is it not premature to make such a sweeping allegation of "selling the country" without knowing the full contents of the treaty. She will score some valid points if she returns to the Parliament and compels the government to disclose the full contents of the treaty on the floor of that august body. In that likelihood, details of the treaties and MOUs could be known to the people.

The BNP chief alleged that a "secret security deal" was signed during the prime minister's visit to India. She demanded a clear statement on the matter from the government. This is the most positive part of her press conference and the government must clarify it in no time.

During the last tenure of the AL government, the Ganges water sharing treaty and the Hill Tract peace treaty were signed. Both of these treaties were vehemently opposed by the BNP. For Hill Tract treaty, BNP chief warned the nation that due to the treaty, Feni and further south would be a part of India and she led a long march to the Hill Tract, albeit with very little support from the people.



The nation needs substance, not rhetoric.

A BNP leader and an alleged war criminal even hoisted some Indian flags in that region to prove her point. Apparently, that did not happen and the region still remains very much a part of Bangladesh. The treaty, in fact, boosted Bangladesh's image in the international arena and the then PM was awarded the prestigious Unesco peace award for her leadership in securing the peace deal.

The opposition leader also criticised what she termed as the prime minister's "indifference" to the Tipaimukh dam issue. She said that the joint statement released during the PM's visit suggested that she had sold out the interests of the country to India and

given a green signal to carry on the Tipaimukh dam project. In fact, nothing could be further than the truth. The PM in her own press briefing reiterated that the Indian PM's assurance that India would do nothing to harm Bangladesh's interest.

There is nothing wrong in trusting the assurance of the PM of the world's largest democracy. Furthermore, there was even a media report that Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had told Sheikh Hasina that India would not build the Tipaimukh Dam, according to at least two members of the Bangladesh PM's entourage.

Is the opposition leader suggesting taking the issue to an international

forum such as the UN? During her first term as PM, the opposition leader took the Farakka issue to the UN where Bangladesh managed to garner only two votes in favour her position; one was by her, and the other by Pakistan. Inciting people with anti-Indian rhetoric might secure some votes in the election, but it never serves the interest of the nation.

The opposition leader alleged that the 50-point joint declaration proved that the prime minister had sold the country's interests. In her words, the PM unilaterally gave her consent to allow India to use the seaports, which will undermine Bangladesh's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This is a

ridiculous accusation in the global village of the 21st century. If this is so, then most countries with international sea ports are not sovereign countries. To raise the issue of sovereignty on every matter pertaining to India is a cry of "wolf" for BNP. This is an insult to the dignity of a nation with 150 million extremely conscious people.

Regarding the plan of the two nations to jointly celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, the BNP chief alleged: "The PM ignored Kazi Nazrul Islam although both the poets bridge the cultural bond between the two countries." The leader of the opposition failed to encompass that it was the 150th birth anniversary of the Noble Laureate not of Kazi Nazrul Islam. She brought the issue out of context since Kazi Nazrul happened to be a Muslim.

It was Bangabandhu who brought the poet to Bangladesh and instituted him as the national poet. If the poet were alive today, he would surely not be an ideological ally of BNP, rather would most likely sympathise with BNP's political foe, at least for the secularist and liberal ideas that the poet propagated during his active life and through his works.

The BNP chief's credibility took a nose-dive when she once again questioned the fairness of the last general election. All her allegations on the current affairs are likely to be invalidated by the people when they know for sure that her observation about the credibility of the last election is utterly wrong. It seems there is nobody around her to tell her that telling a lie ten times does not make it a truth; it only results in a further sliding of credibility.

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

Beyond borderlines

When citizens have made borders irrelevant why should armies, state or non-state, uniformed or shadowy, respect lines drawn on water?

M.J. AKBAR

A good friend from Lahore, an activist deeply committed to people's rights and the integrity of Pakistan's legal structures, asked me a question so startling that it took a while to sink it in. What would India do if a million Pakistanis reached the Wagah border, demanding safety in India from the Taliban and its ancillary ideological warriors?

The prospect is only as unthinkable as an analyst suggesting, over coffee on College Street in Calcutta in 1969, that three million refugees from East Pakistan would descend on the city's maids within two years, forcing a war that would lead to an independent Bangladesh. Pakistan lost the trust of half its population within a quarter century of its birth. Within another four decades, half of what was left is in mortal fear of the other half.

Just as 1971 could not be contained within the geography of Pakistan, a second existential upheaval will also spill over into India. It cannot seep westwards into Afghanistan, because this is, in a sense, another east-west confrontation: the east is under siege from the frontier west, and the east can

only move further east for asylum.

How would India, and, more important, Indians, react? In various ways, surely: shock, smugness, gloating, concern -- both for those trying to stream in and for the volatile consequences of their arrival. But at some point, sooner rather than later, this range would have to coalesce into one broad sentiment that could then be translated into official policy. Would that be sympathy or cynicism? Would the human heart prevail as children, women and the young sought the comfort of India, or would antipathy make us dismiss them with a sneer: "You made your bed in 1947, now sleep on its thorns."

Punjab would have the decisive voice. I believe that most of Punjab, though not all, would speak from its heart, perhaps with tears in its eyes, even if a colder Delhi thought it a good idea to consign the refugees to thorns. Is this being sentimental? Perhaps, but it would be a cold life without sentiment. In 1971, West Bengal did not check the religion of refugees. Most of them were Muslims, but that was less important than the fact they were three million frightened and hungry Bengalis.

But there are also significant differences, both in time and space. India had never felt threatened by East Pakistan. Bengali Muslims did not forsake their language or script although there was pressure from Karachi "nationalists," in the early years, to write Bengali in the Urdu alphabet (just as, for instance, Kemal Ataturk made Turks abandon the Arabic script and switch to Roman).

The reaction was so severe that such ideas were quickly forgotten. There were riots in Bengal, as bitter if not as widespread as those in Punjab, but links were more firmly maintained. There were riots, and there was discrimination against Bengali Hindus; but East Pakistan was not emptied of Hindus, as happened to Hindus in Pakistani Punjab and Sind. Any anger against Indian "repression" was soon overtaken by the reality of West Pakistani oppression against Bengalis for reasons that can only be described as racist.

Time offers its own angularities. In 1971 Indians were angry at the aggression of 1965. War is a tragedy, but one which is acceptable as part of human experience; there is no lifetime in history that can claim it has not undergone the tension and cleavage of war.

The dominant experience of the last four decades has been of terrorism. Terrorism is a sly, surreptitious, contemptible evil that makes no distinction between innocent and enemy. How much will the horror of remembered terrorism faze eyes and ice up veins if, God forbid, there is clamour at the gates of Wagah? War will inevitably follow refugees into India; it is possible that a fifth column might camouflage itself in the misery of a human exodus.

When citizens have made borders irrelevant, why should armies, state or non-state, uniformed or shadowy, respect lines drawn on water? Who will be where in that war? Will the Pakistani armed forces be as divided as the country, split by ideology? Will half the Pakistanis fight alongside Indian forces? The imponderables chase the unthinkable.

One of the defining images of Pakistan's sense of itself is etched on the walls of its side of Wagah: a depiction of wrecked refugees streaming into the new country after Partition. The calamity was not one-sided; there were traumatised millions entering India as well. But India has not frozen that moment in stone, to remind everyone that this was once the brutal battlefield of a civil war. Perhaps Laboris will erase that image, wherever it is, before they reach the gates of Wagah.



Borders divide people, not humanity.

M.J. Akbar is Director, Covert Publications.

Replaying the past?

If such violent activities of the Chhatra League cannot be controlled within a very short time, there is a possibility that the government will lose support from all concerned.



PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

STUDENT politics in Bangladesh has a glorious history since leaders of different student organisations played significant roles during our national crises, including language movement, liberation war and the movement for restoration of democracy in the 1990s. However, these organisations have lost that glory. Nowadays, the perception of student's politics has changed. We usually see that they remain busy in establishing supremacy on the campus, exercising control over tenders, manipulating power etc.

In the past, we witnessed harmful activities caused by different student organisations. For instance, the activities of Chhatra Dal during 2001-2006 were vehemently criticised by the majority of our population. Such activities also demolished the image of the government.

During 1996-2001, the AL government did not have to face as much difficulty in controlling the activities of the Chhatra League as they are doing now. Since taking over state responsibility, one of the problems that the government has been confronted with is the activities of the BCL, which is a potential menace to the image of the government.

From the very beginning of the AL's term, BCL has been busy in intra-group conflict as well as inter-group conflict

in most of the higher education institutions in the country. Their main intention is to establish their supremacy on the campuses. As a result of such conflict, many of the higher education institutions, including public universities, have remained closed. Although some of the universities have opened, they are under strict security. We have learned from several newspapers that authorities have remained busy in managing Chhatra League's intra-group conflict instead of managing pressure from the student wings of the opposition. These sorts of activities are really unacceptable.

It is widely alleged that activists of BCL are involved in tender-related violence all over country. They are preventing bidders from dropping their tenders. Sometimes, they compel the bidders to come to an agreement with them in exchange of money.

Apart from tender-related violence, extortion by the BCL men has become another issue of concern for the government. Everyday, if we look at the newspapers, we find cases of such extortion, where the culprits are activists of BCL. Such activities have already created a negative reaction in the minds of the ordinary people. Questions are being asked about the sincerity of the government in preventing such activities of BCL.

On January 7, in Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute, Chhatra League men killed a student who was a sup-

porter of Chhatra Maitree, the student wing of Bangladesh Worker's Party. As a matter of fact, these two student organisations are the part of ruling grand alliance. In the past, it was generally seen that political clashes took place between student wing of the ruling party and the opposition. But, nowadays, most of the clashes in the educational institutions are taking place between different groups of Chhatra League.

One may wonder how long these activities will continue. We have seen in different opinion surveys that the people think that the inability of the government to control the activities of Chhatra League is one of its major failures. How long will the government tolerate these activities of its student organisation, which has already created a negative impact among the population?

There is no denying the fact that the government has taken a good number of steps to control such violent activities. For instance, the PM has withdrawn from the post of organisational head of BCL. Moreover, in their registration papers, Awami League has not recognised Chhatra League as its associate organisation.

Despite the above initiatives, the activities of Chhatra League have not yet been stopped. Now, the time has come for the government to take a well thought out decision on the activities of Chhatra League as well student politics. The government should consider the fact that the majority of voters in Bangladesh cast their vote in favour of AL in the last election where, Chhatra League did not play any role in molding their opinion. Thus, the government should reconsider its decision about the student politics.

One step would be to impose a ban on student politics for at least a couple of years so that the situation is not aggravated seriously. This sort of step would not affect AL and its government negatively since AL secured such a landslide victory without the support of the Chhatra League. It would also allow the leaders and supporters of Chhatra League to rectify themselves.

If such violent activities of the Chhatra League cannot be controlled within a very short time, there is a possibility that the government will lose support from all concerned. Thereafter, even a positive step will not assist them in regaining public support.

Dr. Pranab Kumar Panday is Chairman, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, and EC Member, Eminence, Dhaka. E-mail: pranabpanday@yahoo.com