

# 'Ensuring our security is a must'

**Anisul Islam Mahmud** is a presidium member, Jatiya Party. He is a former foreign minister and is currently the chief of the parliamentary standing committee on expatriate welfare and overseas employment ministry. **Rashidul Hasan** took the interview.

**The Daily Star:** How do you evaluate the prime minister's recent visit to India? What have we achieved from this visit?

**Anisul Islam Mahmud:** When we evaluate a state visit made by the prime minister, we should put emphasis on political content rather than other issues. For the first time, the prime minister has boldly faced several specific matters. There was a high possibility to become unpopular from the electoral point of view and the so-called political point of view. Sheikh Hasina has stood up and is facing it boldly, and is taking a great political risk to do certain things, which in the long run, I think, would be very good for the country.

The relation between the two countries was at a standstill and she has tried to remove those causes. The most significant outcome of the prime minister's visit to India has been the beginning in building confidence between the two countries. The prime minister has taken a bold step saying that Bangladesh will not allow its territory to be used for any kind of terror activities against another country. All the issues including trade, water, security, land boundary, maritime boundary, connectivity for which we

were waiting a long 38 years for are being addressed in the joint communiqué.

It's been 38 years since our independence. But we still have not resolved many of the issues with our neighbouring India, who had helped us a great deal during our Liberation War. Why?

Over the last 38 years, we could not resolve many of the issues with India except for sharing the water of the Ganges River and the issue of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

As for the question why we could not resolve other problems -- both India and Bangladesh are responsible for it. Both the countries had a lack of confidence in each other. Still, we haven't been able to get rid of the two-nation theory for which reason the sub-continent divided itself into two countries -- India and Pakistan.

Besides, the thing is that the successive government that came to power after the assassination of Bangabandhu dealt with anti-Indian politics. Though India helped us a lot during our Liberation War, the two countries did not have a good relation for long, especially after the assassination of Bangabandhu.

The subsequent governments were not thought to be a very friendly government towards India. Even the government in which I



Anisul Islam Mahmud

was involved in, as a minister, had the same perception. They were either more helpful towards other neighbouring countries or not very helpful to India.

And there was also a perception that we were with in a proxy war, we got involved or we acted more like a buffer state for other countries. If India thought similarly, then why would they help Bangladesh? I would also say that there are anti-Indian politics in Bangladesh.

India used to think that Bangladesh bears a hostile relationship with them. So they too were not sincere in wanting to resolve the problems between the two countries.

Ensuring our security is a must. And we have to have some amount of collaboration with India who surrounds us. And this can only be done in a situation where we don't have this legacy of two nations. The legacy of the two-nation theory has to be removed from the politics here.

Some say that the present government has sold out Bangladesh to India. Any comments? Some are saying that we have sold out the country by signing the three agreements and joint communiqué. But if you see the joint communiqué, it gives an outline of the issue, which is outstanding and now recognised by both the countries as problems that should be resolved. They also alleged that the country's security will be put under threat once we implement those agreements signed between the two countries.

Many are now saying that our security has been put under danger. I don't see any reason as to how our security interests are being affected by these agreements. Let BNP and Jamaat explain how our country has been sold through the agreements with India.

The opposition leader has termed the visit as a total failure. What is your comment?

I totally disagree with her. No one is giving anything to anyone through joint communiqué; we must understand this. Communiqué is not an agreement; it's an understanding. The two countries will go forward on the basis of the joint communiqué. I will say that the evaluation of this visit lies in future.

I am really surprised to hear the opposition's negative opinions on the agreements and joint communiqué. BNP has raised a question on the joint celebration of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore and how such an initiatives were not taken for Nazrul Islam. But you see; there is about more or less 40 years to come until we celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Nazrul. And obviously,

the two countries would celebrate this jointly.

Do you see any damaging elements in the agreements or in the joint communiqué? I don't see anything harmful in the three agreements or in the joint communiqué. Does the agreement to combat drug trafficking and terrorism go against our country's interests? We have seen a rise of extremism in our own country. So in signing agreements to combat terrorism and control trafficking of drugs, how are we selling our country? I will say that the agreements signed with India were very necessary for us.

The opposition parties suspect that the government did not ensure the country's interests regarding Tipaimukh Dam.

You know, the fact is that this project started in 1939 in relation to the flood that took place in Sylhet and other adjacent parts. But the project did not proceed since 1979. In 1979, the issue came again at the meeting of a joint river commission while Ziaur Rahman was in power.

After the massive flood in 1988, the Tipaimukh Dam issue came up again when the then government was preparing the flood action plan. When we went there, the Tipaimukh Dam was suggested as a means of flood mitigation.

There are two projects in the dam -- one is the Tipaimukh Dam and the other is a construction of a barrage for irrigation project at Phuler Tal area. Now the thing is that we are totally against any barrage or withdrawal or diversion of water from the Barak River.

But we are in favour of Tipaimukh Dam, which will regulate flood in our country. And if any damage takes place due to the dam, this will happen on the Indian side since the dam is 210 kilometres away from our country. Just like the Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh.

We will have to make an agreement with India making sure that the dam doesn't harm Bangladesh.

And you see a double standard here. We have told Nepal to construct a dam there for our flood regulation. If we can support Nepal, then why not India? Many people say that India doesn't keep its word. But you see, India did not violate any international agreements including the sharing of river waters with their rival Pakistan.

India might say: This is our country; we will build whatever we wish. But they have said that they will not do anything that will be harmful for Bangladesh.

BNP and their like-minded alleged that Bangladesh will become a market for India.

It is the result of BNP government's policy. They have opened the Bangladeshi market for India in the name of trade liberalisation. Now BNP is claiming that we are selling the country, we have made the country a market for India. We support the then government's decision. But you cannot blame another government for the consequences caused by their decision.



## Summer of 1965

If we link Indo-Pak harmony to a solution of the Kashmir problem, we will remain frozen in a subcontinent-wide Siachen. Harmony will induce steps towards a solution; not the other way around, because there are impenetrable barriers on the way around.

M.J. AKBAR

HERE is a duality but not a contradiction running through the complexities of the India-Pakistan relationship. Friday's newspapers, for instance, reported a confrontation between Home Minister P. Chidambaram and Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani: the former is convinced that Islamabad is protecting the widely-acknowledged principal architect of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, Hafiz Saeed, chief of the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. Gilani thinks India has not supplied sufficient evidence against Saeed. Chidambaram counters this with, "What can I do if a government closes its eyes to the evidence?"

Outside the squat offices of power, a virtual festival of Indo-Pak peace is being celebrated in major Indian cities, with full participation by Pakistani writers, musicians and its cultural elite. Why isn't this a contradiction?

There has always been a peace constituency in both India and Pakistan, but it consisted of idealists, regional-romantics and do-gooders. It used to be drowned out by a coalition of viewpoints and ideologies ranging from indifference to hostility to blood-thirst. Change has come in most categories of opinion, on both sides of the border, though not on a mirror-track. The bloodthirsty lobby in India began to lose its appetite after Bangladesh, an outcome beyond its imagination. For a while it compensated by continuing to target Indian Muslims as a surrogate enemy, but that too has waned since there is no longer any electoral reward in domestic conflict, an important consideration in a democracy.

Pakistan's fanatics flourish because they have lifted elements of their multi-level agenda above the compulsions of domestic power. We should not waste newsprint on their fantasies, except to note that their terrorism remains the single greatest provocation for a fourth, and potentially devastating, war between India and Pakistan.

Perhaps it is just such a prospect that has driven the most useful lobby on the subcontinent, that of realists, towards peace. Realists have clearly strengthened Pakistan's variable and possibly fragile peace constituency immeasurably. You don't have to fall in love to be a good neighbour; in fact romance can have harmful side effects. But good neighbours do not pelt each other with stones (through media) or test nerves with sniper fire during their waking hours.

Peace has to be defined, or it will remain elusive. It has to be a specific, objective, negotiated condition, neither too ambitious nor too insignificant. If it is mere absence of formal war, then we have found it already. The search continues because we know that the present uncertainty is inherently volatile, prone to exploitation by anarchists and terrorists. If we want a mutually fruitful peace, we need to diagnose the causes of war.

There are two defining dates in the Indo-Pak relationship, only one of which is recognised for its spawn of consequences. There have been, in effect, two partitions of India: the one in 1947 is in every child's history book; the one in 1965 has not been adequately understood. 1947 divided the land; 1965 divided the people.

Till Pakistan launched, in 1965, its second effort to seize our part of Jammu and Kashmir through a formal military offensive, people travelled freely on easily-available documents, the rail border at Wagah bustled with business even if the occasional customs officer bristled with pompousness in an effort to disguise harassment and petty corruption, the border on both wings was so porous that humans and goods were easily smuggled in both directions, businessmen retained cross-border investments, media was freely available and conflict was the prerogative of politicians and military brass. In 1965, we built a wall between neighbours that the Cold War architects of the Berlin rampart could have envied.

Those who want to reverse the reality of 1947 are either fanatics or fools. (Terrible as they are, the former could be less troublesome than the latter.) India and Pakistan are separate nations, and may they retain their present borders for eternity. Those Pakistanis dreaming of breaking India should be sent to a mental asylum, where they can befriend those Indians who want to capture Islamabad.

Sanity demands a return to the summer of 1965 (war began in September) and not a return to the summer of 1947 (partition came in August). This objective has the merit of being possible. If we link Indo-Pak harmony to a solution of the Kashmir problem, we will remain frozen in a subcontinent-wide Siachen. Harmony will induce steps towards a solution; not the other way around, because there are impenetrable barriers on the way around.

A road with dual carriageways is logical; a road with contradictions is an invitation to deathly accidents.

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## Behind the glitz

Unless those who make up the expatriate labour force of the emirates are allowed a voice, their progress will continue to be a product of exploitation of poverty. Indeed we must demand accountability for the rulers of the emirates without being duped by the luxurious facade of their towers.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

DUBAI'S 100-storey Burj Khalifa stands as the world's tallest building, with the world's highest swimming pool and perhaps also the world's highest mosque. Amidst the fanfare, the legendary tower has finally been thrown open, with its majestic doors accessible to the public. Its golf course alone will require over four million gallons of water a day.

The prototype was the design and vision of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Sky City, which was to be built in Chicago. However, it was never realised due to lack of funds and labour. Neither of those were seemingly a problem in the construction of Burj which employed thousands of labourers from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh for several years for its construction.

According to reports, the vast majority of these workers have never been to the top of the building they spent years constructing. But not being able to see the view from the top is hardly the biggest problem faced by those who constructed the Burj; there are allegations that many of them died during the construction.

Records kept by the Indian mission for only one year showed that nearly 1,000 Indian workers had died in total, and more than 60 of them during accidents at the site. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi missions don't keep such records, because they are deterred by the criticisms of the UAE authority. Based on rough estimates, the total number of workers killed in such construction projects is believed to be well into the thousands. But who cares!

Days after the opening of the Burj, recently renamed in honour of the ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of UAE, a UAE court absolved the president's brother for beating and torturing an Afghan grain merchant -- an event that was videotaped.

Sheikh Issa bin Zayed Al Nahyan was recorded brutally thrashing the man, stuffing sand into his mouth, burning his private parts with cigarettes, and beating him with a nailed board. The video, which is available on the internet, shows the sheikh literally pouring salt on the merchant's bloody wounds.

The court that heard the case acquitted the sheikh on the grounds that he had been under the influence of drugs. Put simply, despite incontrovertible recorded evidence, the sheikh was simply too powerful to be brought to task for hurting a man who was in the emirate scheme of things little more than a slave.

The inauguration of the tower and the acquittal of the sheikh is a lurid juxtaposition of the hypocrisy, gluttony and crude injustice that lies beneath a glitzy facade. None of the glamour in the emirates is indigenous. The architecture is American, the designers European, and the labourers South Asians.

Only 10 percent of the population is indigenous and actually has some say in how the emirates are run. The next who matter a bit are either the labourers or the educated middle-class from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, who are only too happy to swallow their pride and meekly accept second-class status as gratitude for employment. The slave-like labourers languish in camps hapless and helpless at the hands of employment companies.

In the meantime, the lurid contrast of limitless wealth and gluttonous consumption is seemingly lost on middle-class expatriates. The experts, bankers, doctors, and engineers with work permits, who escape the dim prospects in their own countries, unquestioningly consume the capital without ever contesting the injustice of its political solvency. They wander in the malls, stare in veneration at the towers and flaunt their designer trinkets without thought.

Never once do they ask what bias of justice allows a government to pay people different amounts of money based on their nationality.



Achieving greater heights, but at what cost?

Nor do they wonder at the justification for a virtual labour camp, where workers toil for 18 hours a day and are not paid for months -- a condition that would result in protest in any part of the developed world.

Similarly the tourists from around the world visiting the emirates happily delight themselves with the fireworks, beaches and now the tallest tower, without taking a moment to question the inequity that fuels them or the injustice that makes it possible.

Unless those who make up the expatriate labour force of the emirates are allowed a voice, their progress will continue to be a product of exploitation of poverty. Indeed if the world is revolted by reports of torture in Guantanamo, it must then also demand accountability for the rulers of the emirates without being duped by the luxurious facade of their towers.

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