

Expanding inter-district air travel

It should boost business and tourism

THE move by the government to resume airline flights to all domestic airports next month is commendable, given especially the need for inter-district connectivity where business and tourism are concerned. It is important to modernise the transport system in all possible ways. And one of those ways is the use of airports and airstrips which have so far lain under-used or not used at all. We expect this new decision to be implemented in full and for advantages to accrue to the country from it.

While we appreciate the move, we must also point out some significant realities that should have been taken note of earlier. With the national flag carrier and a fairly good number of private airlines in operation in the country, it should have been for the authorities to devise the ways and means through which all airports, especially the four district airports now being emphasised by the authorities, could have been made and kept operational. Measures such as the availability of short take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft are of considerable importance in the context of our geography and particularly where there is a paramount need for an expansion of business activities within the country. The government has suggested that Biman and the private airlines coordinate their activities and ensure that at least one flight a week is made to each of the district airports and back. Ideally, more than one flight, say three, look more feasible in the sense that such a schedule will act as a huge spur to the business community as also help citizens in taking advantage of the flights to plan their travel schedules. In this day and age, countries go all the way to ensure that their airports not only remain functional but also have the capacity for expansion. That is precisely the approach we require where aviation is concerned.

There are quite a few steps the government needs to consider quickly if inter-district travel is truly to be ensured. In the first place, new STOL aircraft must be purchased for Bangladesh Biman to enable it to expand its network in the country. In the second, thoughts must also be given to the high charges, VAT, taxes and the like that the private airlines feel are restricting their ability to operate to public satisfaction. While it will be difficult for the authorities to subsidise the operations of the private airlines, we think that some common ground can be explored here. The private airlines must also convince the country that they are equipped to operate regular flights and be service-oriented, and that a sudden suspension of flights will not ruin the plan.

The question of price must receive serious consideration. Domestic air travel is expensive and acts as a serious impediment to market expansion. Reduced ticket price will greatly increase the market.

The producer's dilemma

Where do they store their increased output?

THE stacks of potatoes lining up both sides of the road in front of a cold-storage in Rangpur as shown in Star Business yesterday dramatically demonstrated the ordeal the farmers are having to face with their increased output. With potato harvest poised to exceed the target of 70.12 lakh tonnes set for the year, up from 67.46 lakh tonnes last year, the farmers are hemmed in by all sorts of constraints. In the first place, the storage capacity is 24 lakh tonnes, with the result that the producers have to make do with traditional preserving at their homes as the quality of the commodity is compromised.

As if space constraint was not enough of a damper, the cold storage owners have increased their rental charges pointing at a rise in electricity bill. The production glut to a very large extent owing to shortage of storage space and its being unaffordable too, has served to highlight a contradiction between the emphasis we put on higher productivity and our inability to provide storage capacity in keeping with an increase in output. Resultantly, the whole economics of potato cultivation is upset. Currently, the sale price of potato is not even meeting the cost of production. The anticipated bumper crop is being taken advantage of by both the store-keepers as well as the traders. The farmers are caught in the middle as remunerative prices elude them.

The farmers know it full well that if the can cold-store their surplus for a time they will get better prices in off-season, but given the lack of affordable preservation facility they can't possibly hold on to their produce in a scientific way. In other words, either they sell their produce at throw-away prices, or let it rot which is a loss not only to the cultivators but to the nation as well in terms of farmers feeling discouraged in producing the cash crop in future.

The answer lies in stimulating the private sector with bank finances to set up new cold storage facilities commensurate with higher productivity. A sufficient number of cold storages will make the business competitive in a fair way thus bringing the facility down to the affordability level of farmers.

Politics in the era of mosquitoes

Those who aspire to power make promises, once, and then go about making those promises happen. But if the promises are repeated endlessly, with naturally little sign of fulfilment, there is a danger of cynicism taking over citizens' thoughts.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE beauty of political power lies in its ability to abjure the platitudinous and go for the concrete in terms of ensuring public welfare. Those who aspire to power make promises, once, and then go about making those promises happen. But if the promises are repeated endlessly, with naturally little sign of fulfilment, there is a danger of cynicism taking over citizens' thoughts. That is when governments get into a vulnerable state, indeed reveal themselves to be hollow shells pregnant with a mouthful of words and nothing more. Everyone then gets to be embarrassed.

Now take the recent remarks of the commerce minister about price hikes across the world. He would like us to think that there is nothing to be done about rising prices of essential commodities in Bangladesh because of the trends in prices across the globe. We do not buy that argument, for the simple reason that there is a clear, sharp difference between traders outside our frontiers and those who manipulate our markets. In the latter instance, it has always been a cartel that has made a mess of life for us.

Now listen to the finance minister. He concedes that there is a cartel but he would like everyone to cooperate with the government in running the cartel out of town. But, frankly, it is not the job of the citizen to assist the government in handling wrongdoing. The citizen did his duty through electing these powerful men and women to office. It is now their job to cleanse the country of corruption, of everything vile and venal. Why pass the responsibility on to the people?

You get all these bad tidings of what the powerful are not being able to do or have simply not done for years together. Stand

before that gigantic, almost monstrous, edifice of what you know as Nagar Bhaban in the nation's capital. You would think with such a huge administration under and around him, the mayor would be doing wonderful things to improve the quality of citizens' lives. You would be disappointed, for there are still the mosquitoes to bite you and me and everyone else.

Hundreds of people are employed at the city corporation and not one of them knows how to disinfect the streets, the slums, the water bodies and make it possible for our children not to have to study under mosquito nets once evening falls! The mayor has been in office for seven years. Who will ask him why he and his men have lost their war with the mosquitoes? Or was there a war at all?

That old matter of accountability comes up again. The crime graph shows a clear upward mobility. From petty pickpockets to robbers and murderers, every criminal element seems to feel that the law will not touch him. The home minister keeps reassuring us that law will be restored and order will be reimposed. We look the other way, for nothing happens.

The violent men of the Chhatra League increase the level of their audacity and the general secretary of the ruling party tells us they are undermining the image of the party. But aren't they also undercutting our belief in democracy through the impunity of their acts? And shouldn't they be hauled up by the scruff of the neck and put away for their crimes?

Turn to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where fires have razed homes and murdered souls. In the hearts of those who have seen their dreams go up in smoke, there is a fire that can only leap higher in fury if we do nothing to reassure the adivasis that their homes and their land will be safe from here



Competing with sound bites from ministers.

on. The government reacts indignantly to European Union concerns on the crisis. That is all very fine, but let it also make sure that the concerns the EU raises are probed all the way. Four hundred homes of the adivasis have been reduced to ashes. Obviously it was a huge group of vicious men that did it. How many of these barbarians have been hunted down?

Right now, it is time to reflect on the huge number of cases backlogs in the courts all the way up to the highest judiciary in the land. These backlogs are proof, if you ever needed proof, of the absence of justice in Bangladesh. Think of the many who have died in their quest for fair play. Think of the tens of thousands who die, drop by drop and piece by little piece, in the receding hope of salvation coming their way from

the system.

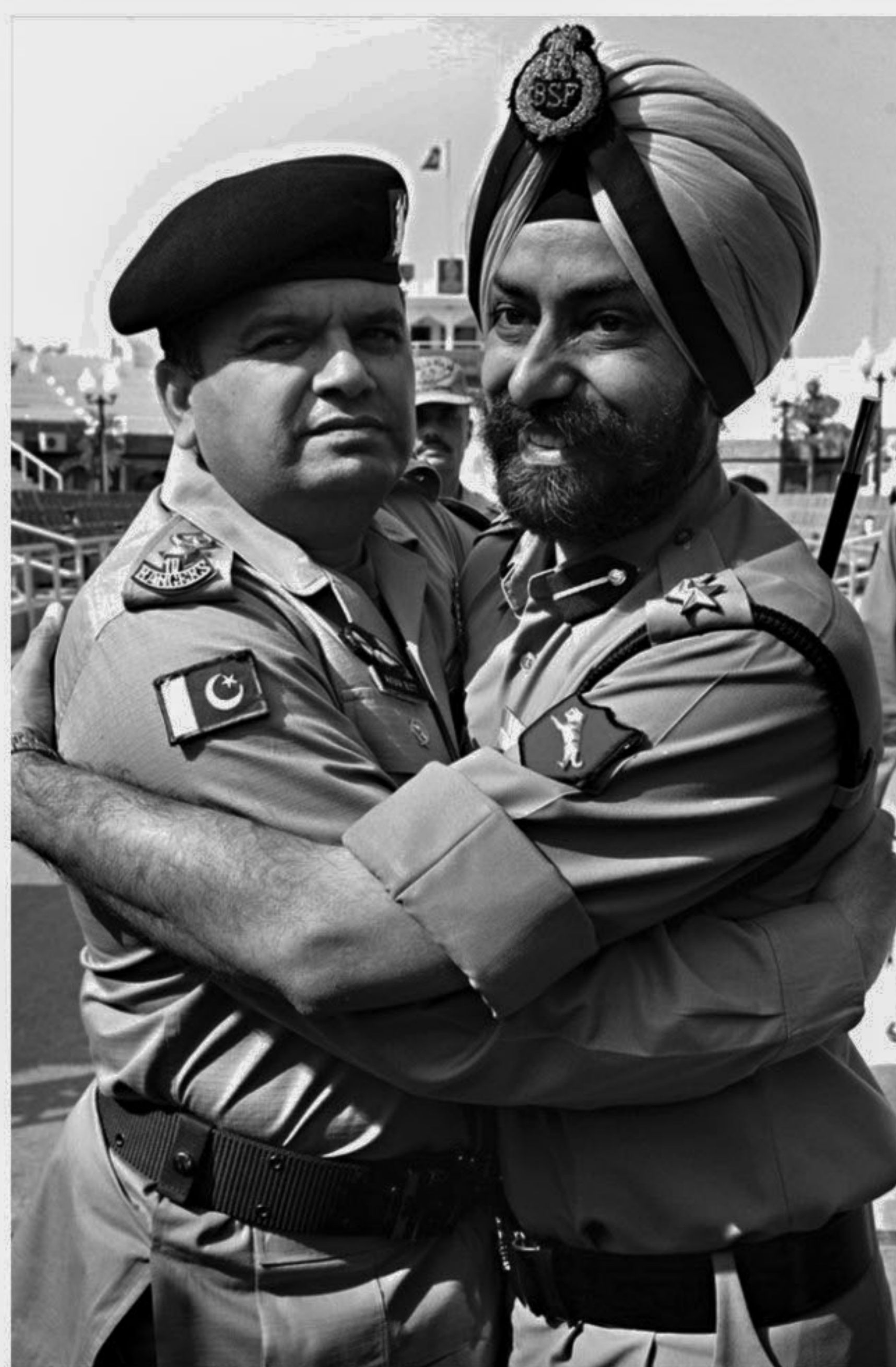
And reflect too on the venality of men out to drive the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority buses away from the roads and into the ditches. A parliamentary committee wonders why a minister not at all linked to road communication is doing everything he can to force the BRTA into abandoning the roads in the north of the country. A gang of unscrupulous private bus owners have been engaged in these foul deeds for years. Will the prime minister now reprimand that minister? Even better, must this man be a minister at all?

The mosquitoes keep buzzing. And biting.

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Is it a mere formality?

Analysts say that the talks were resumed because of the Indian prime minister's vision of India as an influential global player, which would depend on robust economic growth in the coming decade, which, in turn, would depend on Indo-Pakistan relations.



HARUN UR RASHID

THE relation between India and Pakistan is like a see-saw game. Sometimes it improves but often it goes two steps backwards. The reason is mistrust between them and rivalry on regional issues.

After a 14-month hiatus, the much-

publicised ice-breaking talks between the Indian and Pakistan foreign secretaries -- Nirupama Rao and Salman Bashir -- were held in New Delhi on February 25.

The general hype associated with an India-Pakistan meeting was reportedly absent in New Delhi. The talks on February 25 were sandwiched between the announcement of India's railway budget

on February 24 and the general budget on February 26. Much of the attention of the people had been diverted by these two mega events.

The usual joint statement that follows such meetings was not issued, indicating that this meeting was just a meeting for meeting's sake. At best, the talks have formally ended the freeze in ties.

After the meeting, India's foreign secretary was quoted to have said: "We have set out to take a first step toward rebuilding trust... We have agreed to remain touch." Nothing more was said.

The dialogue between the two countries was called off after the Mumbai terror strikes of November 2008 as public outrage forced the government to withdraw from the talks.

The agenda was not agreed upon because India wanted to focus on terrorism while Islamabad wanted all "core issues" and pressed for resumption of composite dialogue, which was suspended after the Mumbai attacks. Meanwhile, Pakistan has hinted at taking up the Kashmir issue during the meeting with Indian officials on priority basis.

The squabbling on the agenda demonstrates that very little trust and confidence have been restored between the two countries.

Furthermore, the volatility of the relations was made evident when a bomb exploded at a bakery on February 13 in Pune, killing 15 people. The Indian authorities suspect that the attack could have been orchestrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba, the same Pakistani terrorist group that plotted the Mumbai attack. The opposition party BJP demanded India should step away from talks.

Most fundamental for Pakistan is the Kashmir dispute, which has remained unresolved for more than 60 years. Pakistan is helpless because it cannot force India on the issue. Indian-controlled Kashmir has again become a battlefield for separatists and Indian security forces. India thinks that Pakistan is behind this. This has added to the problems between the two countries.

Currently, Afghanistan has become the power game between India and Pakistan. The Karzai government in Afghanistan suspects that Pakistan could be destabilising the country through militants.

The Afghanistan government supports the assistance and role of India in the process of bringing stability in the country. India has committed more than \$1.1 billion for the reconstruction of the country. It is also training teachers and civil servants in Afghanistan, giving scholarships for Afghan students in India, and erecting a new Afghan Parliament building.

Pakistan's perennial fear is of being squeezed between India on one flank and an Indian-dominated Afghanistan on the other. Strategically, Pakistan cannot let it occur because it will be suicidal for it.

Analysts say that, to counter this uncomfortable squeeze, Pakistan's intelligence agencies are likely to provide assistance to extremists in Afghanistan so that India does not succeed in holding sway over Afghanistan. Furthermore, until the Kashmir issue is resolved, jihadis will continue to target soft spots in India. To an average Pakistani, India poses a greater threat to its security than a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

Many analysts say that the talks were held to help the US create an environment between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, in which the American military effort against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be successful.

Another reason for the failure of the February 25 talks is the political instability in Pakistan. President Zardari has locked horns with the Supreme Court, and the leader of PML (N) Nawaz Sharif reportedly said: "If there is any danger to democracy, it is from these actions by Zardari. In my view, Zardari is the biggest threat to democracy today."

Furthermore, military chief Kayani's apparent distaste for the Zardari government is now barely disguised.

The Indian side argues that talking with the beleaguered Zardari civilian government of Pakistan is meaningless because the real decision-making power is far from the government.

However, analysts say that the talks were resumed because of the Indian prime minister's vision of India as an influential global player, which would depend on robust economic growth in the coming decade, which, in turn, would depend on Indo-Pakistan relations.

During the past year, the Indian PM repeatedly tried to keep the door open to Pakistan, and he was severely criticised by the opposition parties for doing so.

Salman Haider, the former Indian foreign secretary, said that there was no other way that India and Pakistan could address the issues, while former Indian high commissioner to Pakistan, G. Parthasarathy, disagreed and said that the government was undercutting its post-Mumbai position of refusing to negotiate formally until Pakistan took concrete steps to curb Pakistani terrorist groups that sought to attack India.

Finally, talks are certainly much better than freezing dialogue, as Churchill once said: "To jaw-jaw is always better than war-war."

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