

## On the ICT road

*We have many more miles to go*

THE PM has laid out her government's vision for the use of information technology to reach its benefit to the people. A good start has been made, and many creditable steps have been taken in this regard as a first step.

No doubt more intensive use of ICT would also help inculcate greater transparency and accountability in the administration. The idea to deliver service to the people rather than people having to go after it, sometimes at great cost and personal distress, is indeed very laudable.

The plan, as articulated by the PM, will mean a leap forward for IT in the country and would certainly go a long way to help achieve the objective of digital Bangladesh.

The steps taken so far in getting some of the initial infrastructure in place and to have appropriate curriculum incorporated in the course content at secondary level is laudable indeed. However, without sounding pessimistic, we would like to suggest that more needs to be done to see the plan through to its fruition.

The matter is not as simple as it appears at first glance; we say this primarily because many similar projects had floundered in the past mainly because the sustained effort needed for success was found lacking. It has been distressing also to see plans falling through because of the parochial manner in which certain policies of one administration were treated by the succeeding one.

Several things would have to be ensured for success. For one thing, the vision would need formulation of achievable plans laying out the methodology; to succeed the plan would have to embrace the nook and corner of the country, and for which a huge initial investment would be necessary. And this is where the role of the government would be crucial. Apart from a sustainable action plan, the government would also need to create environment that would encourage private investment to see the plan through. In fact this can become a good example of private-public partnership.

We feel that there is also need to cull from experiences of others, particularly of our neighbours who have made very significant strides in the field of ICT, like India. We should also make use of our own knowledge and skill in this regard. We have in mind the matter of production of national ID card and the updating of the voter list with picture during the last caretaker government, the former being a completely new venture. We have a large crop of well trained computer operators who were employed in that project and who can now form the core group of basic level trainers. But above everything else, the idea of a digital Bangladesh may not come to pass in its true sense if the greater majority of our population remains unlettered. All said and done will commend the PM for the support she is giving to this important project.

## 80,000 unfit cars?

*Greater coordination among agencies required to bring order on roads*

IT defies logic as to how nearly 80,000 cars continue to ply city roads with expired fitness certificates contributing immensely to the perennial traffic congestions. The statistics have been collected by the communications minister Syed Abul Hossain from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authorities (BRTA) and placed before parliament on Wednesday. The minister has revealed that BRTA has two mobile courts led by two executive magistrates taking action against vehicles running without fitness certificates. But the reality is that there is clear lack of coordination between BRTA and the authorities responsible for traffic management. Therefore, if the relevant government agencies cannot rise above their petty differences and vested interests, and if magisterial actions are not effectively supported by strict imposition of rules, no qualitative change can come about on the roads.

We already know about these 80,000 unfit vehicles and we have been writing about them repeatedly for the government to take them off the roads. A number of good suggestions have also come from experts at many seminars and roundtables, but so far no government agency has come forward to implement effective short-term action plans to contain the fast sliding situation. To be candid, the long lines of stranded vehicles on the roads and alleyways are testament to total failure of the traffic control system in the capital city.

The capital city is fast becoming un-motorable and unlivable, therefore the government has no alternative but to take immediate actions to remove dilapidated and unfit vehicles from the roads and at the same time construct new roads, lanes and bylanes as well as one-way lanes to ease congestion. The communication minister, in order to streamline traffic management, might have to take personal initiatives to end the stalemate that exist at the moment among various government agencies that have a role to play in improving the situation. The sooner he does it the better.

## Unity through diversity

It might be useful to arrange the visit to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of a parliamentary team composed of representatives from all the parties present in the Jatiya Sangsad and the re-activation of the CHT Refugee Affairs Task Force to ensure the identification of the internally displaced persons for their eventual rehabilitation.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

IT was painful watching the photograph of a Pahari woman gathering burnt rice from the ground where her house used to be in Sathaiyapara, Khagrachari before inter-community violence made her homeless. Such photographs also appeared with regard to Bangalee settlers who have lost their homes through arson in other villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The Preamble of our Constitution states that Bangladesh, as a state, will have as its fundamental aim the realization of the democratic process and a society free from exploitation -- based on the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice -- political, economic and social -- or all its citizens. This assertion connotes social and economic justice which has been re-affirmed in Article 8, Part II of the Constitution. Respect for the dignity and the worth of the human person has been stressed in Article 11. These principles pre-suppose not only equality of opportunity but also equality in treatment and protection as citizens of the state.

It does appear that the authorities responsible for protecting the different communities living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have failed to perform their responsibilities satisfactorily.

This has happened despite clear aspirations and directives regarding this region as articulated on several occasions by the Prime Minister. This government, in the past (during its tenure from 1996-2001), as well as in the present, have always tried to stress that unity needs to exist in Bangladesh within the matrix of diversity of ethnic cultures, religious faiths and traditions. This has created a high moral standard and a benchmark of tolerance that does not permit any form of discrimination. This approach is also consistent with us gaining international recognition for our sacrifices undertaken with regard to the spirit and ethos associated with Ekushey.

Consequently, the recent violence in our Hill Tracts should give the whole nation a sense of pause. We need to take a step back, reflect and ask ourselves whether we are performing as we should.

Reports that the violence was orchestrated by certain agent-provocateurs from outside the Hill Districts render the situation even worse.

It has been clear for sometime that a section of the settler community, supported by their political friends and with greed for land, have been opposing the government's decision to withdraw military camps from that area. This same group had earlier opposed the creation of the three Hill Districts in the late Eighties and then again the Hill Tracts Peace Accord signed on 2 December, 1997. It was also their xenophobia and chauvinism that prompted the two governments in power between 2001 and 2008 not to take effective steps towards the meaningful implementation of the provisions of the CHT agreement. This had a direct influence on the functioning of the Land Commission for the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The current government, aware of the sensitivities involved, has been trying to adopt a pro-active approach towards guaranteeing the comprehensive implementation of the CHT agreement. Several capacity building measures have been initiated. This has included the appointment of a Commissioner for Land Administration, withdrawal of temporary army camps located near tribal habitation, strengthening of the executive and judicial framework in the three Hill Districts and the devolution of the administrative process. There has also been mainstreaming of economic opportunity for the population in general and the tribal population in particular.

Efforts have been taken in this regard within the ambit of tourism development, non-traditional agriculture and cottage industry. The transport network and the telecommunications facilities have also been expanded. Measures related to primary education and healthcare have also received special focus, thanks partly to our development partners.

Nevertheless, there are still some facets of the 1997 agreement that have not yet been totally addressed. The principal among them is the question of land disputes. We have yet to complete cadastral land survey for the entire region. This has led to non-resolution of disputes and

emergence of fresh contention. Various political groups have unfortunately used this to foment trouble. This has in turn created instability. The latest flare-up originated in the remote and rugged Sajek valley over a land dispute that the Upazilla administration was trying to resolve through negotiation.

The other unresolved factor is the creation of necessary bye-laws and implementing regulatory regime pertaining to maintenance and disbursal processes regarding revenue generated from village markets.

Certain issues have still not been fully resolved but one wishes that the European Union authorities would have exercised some restraint before making their allegations about what has happened in the Hill Tracts. Criticism needs to be constructive and could have come after discussion with the authorities concerned. This would have greatly encouraged future steps with regard to relief and rehabilitation efforts in the three Hill Districts.

I also take this opportunity to commend the proposals suggested by the Parliamentary Group responsible for monitoring conditions within the Hill Tracts. In addition to urging the speedy implementation of the CHT Accord, they have reiterated the need to restore confidence among the tribal community. This will enhance the credibility of the government. They have also underscored the need for the initiation of a judicial inquiry to ascertain the causes and to identify those responsible for the criminal acts and to include more persons of tribal origin in the police force employed

in the Hill Tracts. All these are worthwhile and deserve serious consideration.

The immediate threat has diminished and clam of sorts has returned to the scene. Nevertheless, on a parallel track, intensive efforts need to be undertaken by the authorities concerned to positively engage with the followers of the United Peoples of Democratic Front (UPDF) who oppose the CHT Accord and those amongst tribals involved in cross border smuggling.

We also have to impress on the tribal population that they are inhabitants of Bangladesh, where they must co-exist with the rest of the country and share their latent economic opportunities with others. This includes the services sector associated with the hospitality industry. A classical example is the manner in which inhabitants of every region in Thailand are cooperating with each other to derive maximum gain for all stakeholders.

It might also be useful to arrange the visit to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of a parliamentary team composed of representatives from all the parties present in the Jatiya Sangsad and the re-activation of the CHT Refugee Affairs Task Force to ensure the identification of the internally displaced persons for their eventual rehabilitation.

We have a difficult task ahead, but all measures have to be taken to integrate our ethnic minorities within the 'national narrative'. We cannot allow any further stains on our collective conscience.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at [mzamir@dhaka.net](mailto:mzamir@dhaka.net)



Neighbourhood on fire.

## Elusive peace talks

Perhaps the civil society on both sides can help. Some persons who have been working on the improvement of relations between India and Pakistan for years can meet to pick each other's brain to see if they have some new ideas on which they agree. The proposals made by them may change the situation which remains frozen in helplessness.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT is unfortunate that Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor hijacked a successful trip by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Riyadh. Tharoor's remark that Saudi Arabia could be an interlocutor for talks between New Delhi and Islamabad from the soil of Saudi Arabia itself was indeed embarrassing.

I concede that Tharoor is indiscreet and does not yet know the ropes of diplomacy or politics. But I suspect that his observation was not off his own bat. Somewhere, somehow, he got the impression that the Prime Minister would go along with him. True, an interlocutor is not a mediator. But he participates in talks.

Tharoor's remark may well have been a trial balloon. Apparently, it did not work due to a strong reaction against it in the country. India's enunciated policy after the Shimla Conference in 1972 has been to talk to Pakistan, without involving a third party. Was there a rethinking? Whatever the import of Tharoor's observation, it gives oxygen to the dead dialogue between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan.

Islamabad's reaction to Tharoor's remark was on the expected lines: it is ready for talks without conditions. This throws light on the talks held last week at Delhi. It means that Pak foreign Secretary Salman Bashir found himself constricted in talks. No doubt, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao made it clear to Salman Bashir that the talks would be confined to terrorism. But Bashir touched all points, including Kashmir and water, although

not at great length. Yet the whole dialogue was cursory as if the two sides had to go over an exercise.

The talks must have been a formality because a few hours later I found both foreign secretaries sitting separately, engaged in an animated discussion, at the Pakistan House in Delhi for dinner. There was no recrimination, no rhetoric, no raising of voice. They talked about confidence-building measures and conciliation. Both foreign secretaries were a picture of understanding.

This is how the two sides behave when they are relaxed and normal and when they have no agenda to sell, no government message to convey, no gaze of publicity, no anxiety to say what will go down well back home. In fact, the Indians and the Pakistanis are the best of friends when they are not talking at each other.

However, the talks which were resumed even after one and a half years show that both countries are prisoners of mistrust and hostility. The reason why the two remain distant is their inability to overcome prejudice and bias that they have nourished against each other for decades. True, India refused to have the "composite talks" which were broken in the wake of terrorists' attack at Mumbai. But was the use of that particular phrase necessary? It only underscores the point that they cannot get out of the corner in which they have painted themselves.

However, both looked like having an understanding that they would conclude the meeting at the stage of talks, without in any way breaking or suspending them. Two foreign secretaries did not know what political masters contemplated for the future. Still, had the foreign secretar-

ies fixed the date for the next meeting at Islamabad, the people on both sides would have taken a positive view of the talks.

How far Bashir could go was known to him because before arriving in Delhi, he had met President Asif Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani and the army high-ups. Bashir was surprised by India's allegation of involvement by the two Pakistan serving majors in the 26/11 carnage as was Nirupama by the charge that New Delhi was involved in Baluchistan.

The arrest of Hafiz Sayeed, the Lashkar-e-Toiba chief, is New Delhi's criterion to judge Pakistan's "sincerity" in fighting against terrorists who are reportedly operating in India. His latest ultimatum of war to India irritates New Delhi. It concedes that the law courts in Pakistan are independent but wonders why he is free to indulge in war cries against a neighboring country.

What may have made Bashir, otherwise suave and soft-spoken, lose his cool at the press conference was the strong message that National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon gave him. Menon reportedly minced no words in accusing Pakistan of sending terrorists to India as part of Islamabad's state policy. He repeated many a time that he was the Prime Minister's adviser.

Since the meeting with Menon before the press conference, Bashir did not maintain the equanimity which he showed during the talks with Nirupama Rao. Bashir used Words like 'Don't lecture us' were probably meant for Menon. Yet Bashir's observation that India's dossier against Sayeed was a "literature" was indiscreet. Bashir was quiet when he met the National Security Adviser. Was Menon conveying the mind of New Delhi? I have my doubts because Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is considered a dove. He reiterated at Riyadh that he was willing to go an extra mile to make up with Pakistan.

Since the Manmohan Singh's government is increasingly on the defensive because of abnormal price rise and infla-

tion, I do not think that it is in no position to take any bold initiative on Pakistan. The opposition, led by the BJP, has created an atmosphere where it is difficult for New Delhi to break the status quo, either on Pakistan or Kashmir. This should not surprise either Islamabad which is prepared for a long haul or Washington which is more focused on Kabul and Islamabad than New Delhi.

The silver lining is Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's reiteration that there was no option to talks and that the two countries must come to an agreement to live like good neighbours. In the last 62 years since independence, both the countries have trodden the same path again and again, knowing well that it reaches nowhere. Maybe, both have new fresh ideas to pursue. Maybe, both have come round to accept their inability to solve the problems which confront them. For example were they to pick up courage, do they have a solution on Kashmir?

Perhaps the civil society on both sides can help. Some persons who have been working on the improvement of relations between India and Pakistan for years can meet to pick each other's brain to see if they have some new ideas on which they agree. The proposals made by them may change the situation which remains frozen in helplessness.

The governments on both sides would find it difficult to reject the suggestions if they have the unanimous backing. If these persons fail to arrive at a consensus they would put a question mark against their like mindedness. They would probably prove to both New Delhi and Islamabad that there was no go from a wider people-to-people contact to remove the mistrust which has got ingrained because of acts of omission and commission of the two governments. Ultimately, the pressure of the public on both sides will make the governments relent. Are the persons, committed to rapprochement between India and Pakistan, ready to go through fire and water to prove their credentials?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.