

Significant China visit

New opportunities in prospect

WE have high expectations for the prime minister's 5-day state visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese premier, and hope that the trip will prove successful and fruitful on all fronts.

The rise of China as a global superpower can be a great opportunity for its close neighbour Bangladesh, and we trust that this visit will forge a new era of partnership and cooperation between our two countries that will be very helpful to Bangladesh's long-term economic development.

The prime minister has already taken a bold initiative with her opening to India, and we feel that moving swiftly to consolidate a good relationship with our other large neighbour is exactly the right thing to do. Friendly and mutually advantageous relations with both regional giants can only bring huge dividends to us and we stand to gain greatly from our vital strategic position in between the two.

China has proved over the years that it is a good friend to Bangladesh keen to collaborate with it in its infrastructure building efforts. The \$2.2 billion that Bangladesh seeks from China for new infrastructure projects would certainly be a major boost to our economy and the proposed projects seem to have been well chosen for maximum economic impact and benefit. Chinese assistance with the upgrading of our rail infrastructure is especially necessary and welcome.

We also welcome the focus on connecting Kunming to Chittagong, which we feel dovetails perfectly with this government's agenda for regional connectivity. We have always felt that connectivity is the key to Bangladesh's growth prospects and the Kunming initiative is an integral part of this vision.

We also hope that the prime minister's trip will spur more Chinese investment in the Bangladesh economy. Indeed greater investment in products aimed at the Chinese market would also go a long way to helping ease access to China's market which is a big potential boon for Bangladesh, that we hope the PM will also focus on in her trip.

We hope that the trip will be a resounding success and have every expectation that it will be. Having China as such a close neighbour should be of great advantage to Bangladesh, and if we can leverage this advantage and share in some way in its economic gains, the rewards would be immense.

Water transport strike

Negotiated settlement should come forth promptly

THE strike by inland water transport workers brought the sector to a near standstill, as thousands of launch passengers found themselves stranded at different river terminals across the country on the first day. The strike is reported to have been called after a tripartite meeting among the government, owners and workers, convened to hammer out a deal on introducing a new pay scale for the workers, failed to produce any results.

Although the workers after repeated reminders for redressing their grievances resorted to the strike, still they cannot be insensitive to the suffering the public are subjected to on account of their withdrawal of services. They cannot afford any sense of alienation from the public who are hardly responsible for the non-fulfillment of their demands. The strike call did reflect the workers' eagerness to get their demands fulfilled but it certainly showed no concern for people.

The workers' demand of a new pay scale appears to be based on sound reasoning since their pay package has borne no relevance whatsoever to the rates of inflation and general price hike in the last 30 years. It is not possible to justify a river transport worker getting a basic salary of not even a couple of thousands since 1980s. It is not clear why the owners could not address the issue before the workers' grievances blew up into such a widespread strike action.

The shipping minister has said that the crisis should be resolved by the owners and workers. But can the government wash its hands off when passengers and traders are put to great hardship because of labour unrest, let alone the fact that interests of both public and private sector employees are involved here. If the strike call by the workers was injudicious, it is equally so for the government not to have engaged the transport owners and the labour in a sustained process of negotiations to yield results.

The government has to make determined efforts, instead of taking a hands-off position, to end the strike that has cut off many places with the capital affecting public mobility and trade severely. It is also imperative that the people be kept informed of the moves the government is making to resolve the crisis.

We are hoping that by the time this column appears, a headway will have been made in resolving differences between the two sides with the strike being called off.

Righting a historic wrong

Isn't it ironic that while we celebrate our victory against economic exploitation and political subjugation by the Pakistanis, we tend to ignore genuine grievances of the indigenous communities at home?

ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

OVER the last few weeks the nation was on edge as violence escalated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Thankfully, the situation did not go out of control due to prompt action by the authority and timely initiative by the peace-loving people and community leaders.

Although calm now prevails in the hills, the incident has been a blow to the long-standing social harmony between the hill-people and the Bengali settlers. While there are many causes behind the unrest, the most important one is the government's failure to fully implement the CHT Peace Treaty signed in December 1997.

The indigenous communities viewed with increasing frustration the dillydallying in implementation of the treaty by successive governments, especially the open opposition by the BNP-led government. It was betrayal in the eyes of CHT leaders who had participated in the peace process. Non-implementation of the treaty has made their position untenable in the face of criticism by the hardliners who had opposed the peace process.

It is regrettable that a section of Bengalis is not sympathetic to the cause of the indigenous people and favours a "hard-line" approach. Isn't it ironic that while we celebrate our victory against economic exploitation and political subjugation by the Pakistanis, we tend to ignore genuine grievances of the indigenous communities at home?

Bengali migration into the CHT had started even before the emergence of Bangladesh. According to the 1951 census, there were only 9 percent Bengalis in CHT. This changed over the years with the gradual development of communication and expansion of trade and commerce; what started as a trickle soon became a deluge. With the commissioning of the Kaptai Dam in 1962, most of the scarce agricultural land in the CHT went under water. While the landless farmers were given some money as compensation, there was no agricultural land available for the affected people. Thus, a large number of indigenous people lost their source of livelihood and became internal refugees.

Today, Kaptai as a source of power generation (220 MW max) is not vital in the national context. However, it remains vital as a flood management installation for the areas downstream, especially for Chittagong. Therefore, while the people of the plains see Kaptai as a boon, the hill people see it as something that ruined their life forever.

We cannot undo the Kaptai project, although some development experts suggested just that -- undo the project,

take down the dam and give the land back to the owners. They argued that the economic and political gain of 772 sq.km of fertile land returned to the original owners would offset the loss of 220 MW of electricity that the project now generates. However, this is not feasible because Kaptai Dam remains vital as a flood control measure. What then can we do to mitigate the grievances of the indigenous people?

In addition to gradual migration of Bengalis into the hills, there was planned settlement of poor landless Bengalis in the so-called *guchha gram* (clustered village). The issue of these settled Bengali migrants had been the most serious bone of contention between the two sides. Migration was a favoured policy of two military rulers -- Presidents Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad (1975-1986).

Although the stated purpose was to rehabilitate poor landless people and make them economically active, it caused a demographic shift and gave rise to many social problems. Over the last three decades, these settlers have lived in makeshift camps as refugees. They depend on government ration for their survival. Some were given land high up on the hills or deep in the canyons, which, for these plain people, was unreachable and also economically not viable. There was little land available for distribution anyway.

Moreover, many of these people were not farmers, and giving a piece of land to someone does not make him a farmer; farming needs professional training, experience and hard work. There was little incentive for the settlers to work as long as free government ration was available.

From a sociological point of view, the idea of creating a community out of randomly collected people from different districts is preposterous. The concept of the *guchha gram* failed even in the plains, what to speak of the hills. A Bangladeshi village is a natural community grown over centuries, where generations of villagers are tied to the community in marital, commercial and hierarchical ties.

The people in the camps have no social ties, are often divided along regional lines and have very little cultural and recreational activities. The only thing that has a fast growth is the population. The number of children running around in any camp draws one's attention; most families have 5-6 children. More children means more ration, thus, the system encourages population growth rather than curbing it. There are hardly any schools, but there has been a proliferation of Quomi Madrassas and mosques financed by Islamic charities from around the world.

These migrants, coupled with other Bengalis who have settled in the CHT, have so enormously changed the demo-



Refugees in their own land.

graph pattern that the Bengalis are now a majority in some areas and nearly 49 percent overall. The indigenous population who are ethnically, religiously, culturally and linguistically different from the majority community are like foreigners in their own land.

What we need to do now is to return and rehabilitate the Bengali settlers to their ancestral hearth and homes. However, most of them are landless, whose homesteads have been lost due to river erosion or sold due to extreme poverty. Most settlers yearn for a return to their native places. Indeed, many have maintained links with their villages and sometimes visit their relatives back home.

Given some incentives, a sizeable proportion of Bengali settlers would prefer a return to the plains. Those who have nowhere to go may be moved to some of the industrial zones in the country, and seek employment there.

It is argued by people in responsible positions that as a citizen of the state one has the right to settle anywhere in Bangladesh; tribal area should be no exception. However, one should not forget that there are special rules about tribal lands throughout the world. Governments everywhere make special legislations to protect and preserve the way of life of the indigenous people.

We cannot allow the indigenous culture and civilisation to be inundated by the onslaught of the majority Bengali culture, just like we do not want our Bengali culture to be swept away by the onslaught of Indian or English culture.

Even though there are 876 persons/sq.mile in Bangladesh whereas it is 78 persons/sq.mile in the CHT, the pressure on agricultural land is as acute in CHT as in the plains. We need to, therefore, recognise that military dominated unrepresentative governments in the past made an ill-fated move that needs to be corrected now.

We need to encourage a resettlement of Bengali settlers. Those who want to return home or return to the plains may be encouraged to do so. They may be retrained for employment in industries and service sectors. Those who wish to return to agriculture may be rehabilitated in various chars or in the newly emerging islands in the Bay of Bengal.

If we could take out of CHT even a portion of the camp people, we would be righting a historic wrong done in the past. A little generosity by the majority community would go a long way towards healing the wound that had been festering for three decades.

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Salary hike for the high-ups

In addition to various other allowances and incentives, an MP will get Tk.40,000 a month for the maintenance of his/her duty-free car, which is equal to monthly basic pay of ten public servants at the lowest grade.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IN its regular weekly meeting on March 8, the cabinet approved in principle the hike in the salaries and privileges of the president, prime minister, speaker, deputy speaker, ministers, state ministers, deputy ministers, and lawmakers. The cabinet also approved the increase in the salaries and benefits of the chief justice and other judges of the Appellate Division and the High Court Division.

The proposal approved by the cabinet suggests the raising of the monthly salary of the president, prime minister, speaker, deputy speaker, ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers by more or less 83 percent. The monthly remuneration of the MPs has been proposed to be increased by 83.33 percent. The salary of the chief justice has been proposed to be increased to Tk.56,000 from Tk.30,500 while that of the judges of the Appellate Division and the High Court Division to Tk.53,100 and Tk.47,000 from Tk.29,000 Tk.27,000 respectively.

Besides salary, allowances and other financial incentives have been proposed to be substantially increased. In addition to various other allowances and incentives, an MP will get Tk.40,000 a month for the maintenance of his/her duty-free car, which is equal to monthly basic pay of ten public servants at the lowest grade. The proposed increase in the salary,

remuneration, allowances, privileges, etc. of the high-ups will be placed in the Parliament in the form of bills for bringing amendments to the relevant Acts, Orders, Ordinances, etc. and it needs no explanation that they will be made laws at the highest speed.

Three main reasons have been furnished for the proposed hike in the salary, allowances, privileges, etc. of the high-ups. These are: (1) changed economic condition of the country, (2) recent pay hike of the public servants, and (3) rise in the cost of living.

This has given rise to certain questions: (a) Does the changed economic condition mean improvement in the national economy and betterment in the lot of the people? (b) Does the recent pay increase of the public servants justify steep rise in the salary and other financial benefits of the public representatives holding such high posts? (c) When the high-ups from the public representatives are already privileged up to their neck, does the increase in the cost of living really affect them?

Let me discuss the first question first. We all know that the national economy is passing through a critical stage due to internal and external factors. Bangladesh is mainly an aid-driven country. No less than 50 percent of her ADP is dependent upon foreign aid. Foreign direct investment has been shy for the past few years due to global recession and absence of

investment-friendly environment in the country. There is a declining trend in overall exports.

Export Promotion Bureau data show that in July-January period of the current fiscal year, Bangladesh shipped products worth \$8.7 billion, which is around 4.69 percent short of the amount fetched in the same period a year ago. Food inflation at national level reached 9.50 percent in December 2009 against 6.83 percent in December, 2008. The overall inflation rate on a point-to-point basis reached at 8.51 percent in December last. This has made the lives of the low and middle-income groups miserable.

While there is stagnation in the export of our labour force, the newspapers are reporting forced return of Bangladeshi migrant workers almost regularly. Unless corrective measures are taken immediately, this is going to pose a serious socio-economic problem for the country.

The second question raises the important issue as to whether there should be any linkage between the salary hike of the public officers and the public representatives elected through general elections. The existing government rules provide that a public officer is a twenty-four hour servant of the republic. He shall not engage in any trade or undertake any employment or work other than his official duties. He shall not, without the previous sanction of the appropriate authority, permit any member of his family to engage in any trade in the area over which he has jurisdiction. Unless removed from service for misconduct or any other grave offence, a public officer continues to serve the state till attaining superannuation.

The tenure of the people's representatives elected through general elections is for a maximum period of five years. They

belong to this or that political party. They are not public officers, as stipulated in the constitution. They or their family members are not subjected to the severe restrictions on engaging in trade and business, as is imposed on public officers and their family members. The above comparison may justify that the raising of salary and other financial benefits of the people's representatives elected through general elections, whether holding executive posts or not, should not be linked to the salary hike of the public servants.

Regarding the third question, that is, the impact of rising cost of living, it is said that it may be difficult to find a minister, state minister, deputy minister, or MP who is not rich. A very large number of the MPs, ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers, are businessmen or industrialists. Some of them are fabulously rich. According to a sample survey conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the candidates who participated in the ninth parliamentary election spent about Tk. 3 million each -- on average -- in excess of the expenditure limit set by electoral laws. This amply speaks of the wealth of the MPs, ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers. What is obvious is that the rise in the cost of living has little or no impact on these high-ups.

In view of what has been stated above, the decision to go for a steep rise in the salary and other financial benefits of the high-ups needs a review. The government should go for a minimal increase in their salary and other financial benefits. The president, the cabinet and the MPs must feel the pulse of the people.

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