

Lessons from Peelkhana tragedy

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THE BDR is going through a major reorganization to avoid recurrence of another tragedy and to restore the pride of the institution. The Darbar hall, where the unfortunate carnage had started a year ago, has recently got back to its original use - to sit down with the Jawans for one-to-one communication and exchange of views with the highest commander. The profession of arms with its tough environment and harsh demand in many ways is also democratic where a junior person can ask for redress of grievances or clear doubts from the top most people in the chain. Darbar is the name of those periodical meetings in the BDR and army where free and fruitful discussions take place between the commander and his under-command.

The present Director General (DG) is a thoughtful soldier with a strong personality. A leader of his kind is the need of the time to salvage the BDR or whatever name chosen, into a fine paramilitary force to guard our frontiers. Confidence building between men and officers is the utmost challenge of the time. He is on a salvage operation of a great institution in flux. The raging fire has subsided; the ongoing reforms will surely salvage and inject pride in the force. The border guards will surely uphold its past traditions of valour and courage and enhance its image in public eye.

The profession of arms makes the members psychologically more honour-bound than a job merely for a living. Imagine a soldier facing the danger of death in combat, which is a reality any day any time. If he is a bachelor, as they are for

at least fist half decade of their service, he thinks of the consequences of his death or incapacity on his ailing parents, dependent siblings living on his meager income; on the other hand, he could be married with a young wife and children. Such men as caring father, son or brother may hesitate to risk his life. If a military or paramilitary man is not honour bound; he is not likely to take high risks in a combat situation to uphold the cause of the nation. Serving in BDR is not far from army soldiering.

Year after year one had witnessed how happily soldiers and paramilitary forces risked their lives under severe constraints to help people after natural calamities that frequent Bangladesh. I have not served in BDR but have seen them from close quarter: how bravely they have fought to uphold the flag of Bangladesh. It is not so much from the command chain but humanitarian appeal from the heart that motivates soldiers to go and help the people suffering due to man-made or natural catastrophes. They were the first to suffer in Peelkhana on that black night of '71 and raise their arms as a body against the repression to liberate Bangladesh. Few culprits cannot erase the brilliant history of this institution.

The worst thing that could happen to an officer is allegation of financial irregularities. A distinguished Lt General of the Indian army is now facing court martial for allegedly taking some government land for personal purpose. It is difficult to immunize commercial activities from corruption anywhere, much less in Bangladesh. Commercial activities erode pride of profession. The decision of the DG to close down the BDR chain shops is right, thoughtful and courageous.

The inherent character, institutional training and safeguards build honesty in a soldier. Honesty is directly related to the ability of uniformed men to sacrifice for the nation. A dishonest person is likely to find excuse to get out of the demand of his profession during needs of the time. There is absolutely no scope for corruption, more precisely, weakness towards money and wealth in this profession.

When the subordinates are armed it is not enough for the leaders to be honest. The leaders will have to be extra careful to not only be honest, but also let the subordinates know of their honest behavior. A soldier needs to feel confident of the professional efficiency and character qualities to trust the judgment of his commander to risk his life on his orders. Honesty again is not an absolute trait in human behavior. It mostly thrives on training, institutional safeguards, and communication between the commander and his men. Trust and confidence should come first from the subordinates than superiors in the ability of a commander. It is a bottom to top situation for efficiency of command.

Business has many loose ends; if members of disciplined forces are exposed to such activities, need, if not greed, may tempt them for personal gratification. A slip and the first thing they lose is the pride of profession and then there is nothing to stop them from going down the drain. Disciplined forces have nothing to do with profit making ventures.

The need for discipline in the armed forces cannot be overemphasized. It is important to keep uniformed men contented within the limited resources of the state. The state must ensure satisfaction of the soldiers in the working condition,



and benefits without which discipline will not be natural but imposed. Imposed discipline is always susceptible to blow-outs. Uniformed men are educated today and well informed and know how much the nation can do for them.

We still do not know the causes of the mutiny; the government has said that there was neither foreign hand nor any conspiracy that instigated the mutiny. The leaflets distributed and the propa-

ganda spread before the fateful day contained many allegations. The nation must know why this propaganda worked to spark the gruesome killings and brutality that spread over all the BDR establishments. The taxpayers want to know the causes and remedies, not a witch-hunt.

We should draw lessons from this tragedy. The Peelkhana catastrophe offers the nation an opportunity to review the commercial activities of all uniformed

forces. One year on, let us convert the heart rending wailing of the near and dear ones of the victims into a resolve to discard all irrelevant and non-professional activities of the uniformed forces. Corruption, commerce and politics must be purged from the military and paramilitary forces as a first step towards restoration of professional pride.

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Regional integration in South Asia: Learning from Africa

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A very thought provoking and stimulating seminar was held recently at the Policy Research Institute (PRI). The topic was 'Regional cooperation in Africa: Lessons of experience and implications for South Asia.' The keynote presentation was made by Mr. KY Amoako, the founder and President of African Centre for Economic Transformation (ACET) and a former vice president of the World Bank. Mr. Praful Patel, also a former vice president of the World Bank assisted Mr. Amoako in his presentation.

Mr. KY Amoako and Mr. Praful

paradigm shift from regional cooperation, the stage where South Asia is stuck since the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), was formally launched in the Dhaka Summit of the South Asian Heads of State/Government in 1985.

In West Africa, the countries have been historically disintegrated. South Asia, in contrast, was once integrated and then disintegrated because of British colonization and is now trying to move back to where it was before the British left. There is thus a significant difference in the background of the two regions that, overtly, should have made integration easier in South Asia. However, British coloni-

lighted the commitment made by Sheikh Hasina during her state visit to India in January to fight with India jointly the scourge of terrorism. He said that Bangladesh soil would not be allowed to carry out terrorism into neighboring countries. The Adviser's point was well taken as a positive move towards integration but Bangladesh's commitment notwithstanding, participants in the seminar identified terrorism as another formidable obstacle in the path of integration together with legacy of history from South Asia's tryst with the British colonizers.

There were a few other issues that were raised by the two keynote speakers resulting in a great deal of vibrant

there was favourable reaction from the smaller western African nations for visa free travel all along, Nigeria, the largest and economically the most well placed country in the region, was steadfast in its objection for a long time. The visa free travel among the West African countries became a reality only after Nigeria withdrew its objection.

Participants regretted that in South Asia where the need for visa free travel is extremely important to start the process of integration, the concept has not yet found any favour. Some of the participants were critical about India. They felt it could play the role in the region that Nigeria has played in western Africa. The participants felt that terrorism in the region would cause inordinate delay in South Asia's move for visa free regime. India's size, both physical and economic, and its mindset in not living up to its natural dominance in the region were considered by a few participants as serious impediments to regional integration.

Mr. Praful Patel introduced water as an issue for integrating nations in South Asia. He gave the example of the agreement reached on sharing the waters of the Nile that involved 15 countries where conflicts and differences were overcome for common benefit of the signatory countries. He also spoke on the Senegal River development as another success story for achieving the region's economic integration. He provoked the participants to consider the tremendous benefits that could accrue for 700 million plus people in the flood plains in Nepal, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh if the four countries cooperated together for managing rivers, rain water, and water from melting snow of the glaciers in the Himalayas. Participants agreed that cooperation for successful management of the region's water resources could leap-frog the region towards regional integration and economic development. Mr. Patel identified lack of political will as a main reason for lack of cooperation in the management of the region's water resources.

Africa is achieving significant results towards integration that will allow it a paradigm shift in their integration and development efforts. South Asia unfortunately is still stuck, struggling to cooperate. In South Asia, legacy of history, terrorism, India's dominant but less positive role are some formidable obstacles that are holding South Asia from regional integration which is a key element for regional approach to poverty alleviation in the region. The abundance of water resource in the region, particularly in its northeast, where nature's blessings are being wasted, could be a very important factor for integration. The message that emanated from the PRI seminar is that politics and lack of political will is holding back South Asia from regional integration as opposed to the African experience and thus holding the 40% of the world's poor from breaking out of the vicious circle of poverty. The African experience has rich lessons for South Asia.

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India and Bangladesh: Mending fences?

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EVER since the Awami League came to power India and Bangladesh are exploring ways to converge and iron out their mutual differences. The political will in New Delhi and Dhaka is clearly visible. In keeping with the present camaraderie the recent declaration by the Home Secretary GK Pillai, of India considering a 'unilateral no-firing' on the border for one year, has been a cause for much cheer for both. The issue of firing at border by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has been a major irritant in Indo-Bangla relations. Its resolution needs immediate attention to bolster the already growing stronger bilateral ties.

Violent incidents on the border and subsequent loss of lives have been a recurring cause of concern to both the neighbours. Undoubtedly, the Bangladeshi media's preoccupation with this phenomenon has been far more noticeable than in the Indian media. More often than not the BSF has been accused of opening fire. There is hardly a week that goes by without Bangladeshi media referring to such an incident. In the beginning of April one report referred to the security forces of India and Bangladesh holding a flag meeting over one such incident on the Gobarua border in India.

Given the nature of terrain and overlap of villages and enclaves of India and Bangladesh the problems at the borders are many. Porosity is an important factor leading to smuggling and illegal movement of not only contraband items but also of livestock and human. Despite border patrolling, illegal trade has not experienced much decline if the state border trade statistics are any indication. The cross-border nexus of the smugglers are deeply entrenched, transcending nationalities and local loyalties. The BSF often resorts to firing to control the illegal trade and movements usually taking place after dusk. It is a pity that hundreds of lives have been lost in previous years. Both Indian and Bangladeshi citizens living on the border areas including those involved in smuggling have been victims of indiscriminate firing by security forces. Indeed going by the Indian Home Ministry data, more Indians are killed on these border incidents than others. Thus, the continuation of this meaningless violence was baffling to all and urgently begs resolution.

The use of non-lethal weapons by the BSF has been discussed at various levels within India. Suggestions for using rubber pellets or stunt spray gun were often rendered, but none have been implemented. Thus the Indian decision to consider modalities to ensure no border firing for at least a year couldn't have come a day too early. But its actual implementation on the ground will be the real test. As in the past, several laudable decisions have often been taken at higher levels, but rarely taken to its logical conclusion. The overseeing of such a decision at the ground level would remove one of the serious issues which have often vitiated the bilateral atmosphere. A resolution of this irritant would reduce the tension not only at the borders considerably, but also beyond that (for instance, to blunt the strident anti-Indian mode of Bangladeshi media).

The issue of open easily crossable borders are fraught with problems. The problem is not one sided either. While one of the problems surrounding that of border firings may be moving towards desirable goals, the other Bangladeshi cause of concern has not

figured in the bilateral parlance. The reference is to the issue of border fences. Ever since, in 1987 when India decided to fence some locations along Indo-Bangladeshi international border, (at present 2,859 km have been fenced out of the sanctioned 3,783 kms) Bangladesh has been upset. For Indians the influx of Bangladeshis across the border was a problem eluding any long-standing solution. The decision to fence was aimed at primarily curbing this menace along with other illegal cross-border commodity movements. This decision was not without a political cost bilaterally. Bangladesh always perceived it to be 'an unfair' move. And despite the passage of years Bangladesh is yet to be reconciled with the idea. For Bangladesh such a move reflected not only India's lack of trust towards its neighbour but also meant overlooking and disregarding what is largely considered as a historical trend of free movement across the subcontinent. Nevertheless, with the fences being built on Indian soil with Indian resources, there was very little Bangladesh could do to stop the process. It protested about these fences being defence structures, which are not permitted between the neighbours within 150 yards from the zero line.

As is well known, India has been for long raising the subject of illegal migration from Bangladesh into India. Similarly, Bangladesh in recent years has counter argued about Indians crossing borders and working illegally in Bangladesh. For every list of insurgents and their camps that Indian has forwarded to Bangladesh, Bangladesh has reciprocated with a list of criminals and terrorist who have escaped arrest within Bangladesh and fled the borders into India. Thus Bangladesh's objection to building fences seems mired in ambiguity. The fences would certainly in small measures address all those issues. Indeed, according to India's BSF the fences are working. They numbers of Bangladeshis that are detained at the borders have decreased over the years. Arguably, fencing decision also has not seen much domestic consensus in India beyond the security establishment. The fences have effectively cut-off many Indians from rest of India. They not only need ID cards to enter their own land but also are subject to the timings of the border gates, thus causing severe inconvenience to many. Also many Indians have argued that fences do not really deter Bangladeshis from crossing over to India as many continue to use the riverine routes. The fences themselves are subject to environmental decay and are also easily violated. It is widely recognised that undocumented migration takes place through agents who are engaged in well organised racket, which involves bribing at several points along the border on both sides. The effectiveness of the building border fence at the huge costs (Rs.28, 800 million has already spent) thus is often questioned both inside and outside India.

In the absence of any other more effective measures India is likely to continue with its fencing programme at present. However, its promise to check the border firing can be seen as a strong step towards ironing out the differences between India and Bangladesh. There remain several outstanding issues regarding the common borders, but the cessation of border firing is critical to the growing trust and faith between two friendly neighbours.

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Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)



Patel placed facts in their presentations that amazed many of the participants at the way Africa in general and West Africa in particular is integrating, highlighting in the process how South Asia is lagging behind. One hears of Africa, particularly West Africa, in the context of wars, civil conflicts, and human rights violations, courtesy of the international news media. Very rarely, one hears of the region in the light in which the two presenters represented West Africa at the Seminar. Some of the key elements that emerged from the presentations were extremely interesting. In the western African experience, the region is moving towards regional integration which is qualitatively a

zation left in South Asia certain fundamental problems that have so far proven almost insurmountable in integrating the countries of South Asia. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were identified as three South Asian nations where legacy of history has stood formidably against integration. In case of India and Pakistan, the two were encouraged to seek and own nuclear weapons for protection against each other.

Terrorism was discussed as a new factor that is complicating regional integration in South Asia. The Adviser to the Prime Minister strongly placed before the audience the initiative of the Bangladesh Prime Minister to tackle the curse of terrorism. He high-

achievements. Among the major achievements that Mr. Amoako identified towards regional integration in West Africa is the visa free travel among the members of Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS). In that context, the role of Nigeria was also mentioned. Mr. Amoako said that in achieving regional integration in West Africa, the Pan-African vision of such great African leaders as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere played a key role; such elements have never been present in South Asia's move for regional integration. The visa free travel is an instrument that has helped these countries significantly towards integration. Mr. Amoako said that while