

Opening new embassies: The reality



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THE Ministry of Foreign Affairs is seriously contemplating to open a few new embassies. There are also pressures from the country's vibrant private sector for opening new embassies for economic reasons. Sources in the Foreign Ministry have said that the Government has decided to re-open the Embassy in Brazil and open a new one in Sierra Leone.

Bangladesh is a nation of nearly 160 million people. It has an economy whose GDP is now getting close to US\$ 100 billion. Nearly 7 million Bangladeshis now live abroad. They have remitted over 10 billion US dollars last year to the country. Its exporters are making significant inroads into the international market. Bangladesh is now a major player in the international

RMG trade. To consolidate such gains and make these sustainable, the private sector that is literally leading the engine of the country's economic growth needs all the help it can get. They would surely benefit from the opening of new missions because of the assistance they can provide in their endeavours overseas.

At present, Bangladesh has 46 Embassies/High Commissions. While Bangladesh's GDP has grown many times since the country became independent and the population has more than doubled during this period, the number of Embassies abroad has remained more or less static over the last few decades. Past governments felt no need for increasing the number of Embassies with the massive growth in the size of the GDP and increase in number of Bangladeshis living abroad.

In fact, a few embassies have been closed during this period.

Instead of opening new embassies, existing embassies have been systematically weakened over the years for unexplained reasons. In 1996 the AL led government made economic diplomacy the priority in its foreign policy that the BNP government also pursued. It escapes comprehension why both have failed to see the inherent contradiction between weakening an embassy and success in economic diplomacy where a strong embassy is unquestionably held worldwide as a precondition for effective economic diplomacy.

The point would be clear to the reader only when a few facts about how a Bangladeshi Embassy is structured and allowed to operate are examined. Bangladeshi Embassies are grossly

understaffed and those serving there are underpaid even when compared to embassies with economies on the same scale. The Embassies are also the most ill organized on a comparative scale for handling economic diplomacy, meaning assisting in expanding exports, enhancing manpower and providing services to expatriates. In the past, the Ambassadors used to be largely drawn from the Foreign Service cadre. They were thus naturally loyal to the Foreign Ministry as were the small number of non-cadre Ambassadors. These days, people outside the cadre are being made Ambassadors in larger numbers and sent to the major diplomatic missions who may not feel inclined to give the same degree of loyalty to the Foreign Ministry. As a consequence, the control of the Foreign Ministry over the Ambassadors, which is necessary for success of diplomacy in general, and economic diplomacy in particular, that is assured everywhere, has been weakened.

There have been recent newspaper reports that henceforth the Cabinet Division would recommend the appointment of Ambassadors, which the Government has not contradicted. If this information were correct, then it would be disastrous for the conduct of diplomacy of Bangladesh in general and economic diplomacy in particular. If it is not, the Foreign Ministry should have contradicted it because the news directly undermines its role and importance.

The above about the Bangladeshi Ambassadors are not the only disturbing news for a Bangladesh Embassy. The officers in the commercial, economic, labour, consular, and press wings in the Bangladesh Embassies come from cadres other than the Foreign Service cadre on a onetime posting. They are sent over without training in diplomacy or language skills, and represent their respective

ministry. They often bring to the embassy the well-known conflicts of their respective ministry with the Foreign Ministry, thus creating an environment that does not in any way help in the rational functioning of the embassy. The career diplomats who have the professional diplomatic skills are not allowed to perform economic or commercial functions: they write useless political reports that no one reads and perform protocol work for visiting VIPs and their relatives and friends that serves individual interests but are farthest removed from the interests of the nation.

Today, Bangladesh embassies function according to a prescription for chaos. To expect such an embassy to deliver on the demands of economic diplomacy would be unrealistic. Only the foolhardy would dare to post an officer, untrained in diplomacy, who has been working as a Deputy Commissioner in the District, or a Deputy Secretary in a Ministry or as Deputy Commissioner in the Income Tax Department as a Commercial Counsellor to Washington, Tokyo or Beijing and expect the officer to enhance the country's exports. If diplomacy would have been that easy, then countries would not have brought together in their Foreign Service cadre some of the best talents and spent huge resources to train them to become professional diplomats.

Something is seriously amiss. A lot of it come from the way foreign affairs and diplomacy is perceived outside the Foreign Ministry in Bangladesh; that conducting foreign affairs and diplomacy is anybody's job. This is also one reason why conducting foreign affairs in Bangladesh has been fractured and distributed across a number of ministries where the Foreign Ministry does not have a major role. In no country would it seem normal as it is in Bangladesh for the Commerce Minister

to say publicly that the Joint Communiqué, which was signed after the Prime Minister's official visit to India in January this year, and which was heralded by the Foreign Minister as a paradigm shift for the betterment of Bangladesh-India relations, has now run into trouble because of inefficiency of the bureaucracy in both the countries. The Commerce Minister would have been somewhat within his territory to criticize his country's bureaucracy; his criticism of the Indian bureaucracy was way out of line in the way diplomacy is conducted between nations. It only reflects the poor standing of the Foreign Ministry in matters of foreign affairs. It is now a routine matter in Bangladesh for other ministers to publicly discuss both major and minor issues of the country's foreign affairs as if the country does not have a Foreign Minister.

The systematic weakening of the Foreign Ministry and the state of affairs in the embassies are very serious issues. Where globalisation has increased the importance of the foreign ministry everywhere, it is not rational that in Bangladesh it is being marginalized. It must first be corrected. Simultaneously, the irrational environment in the embassies must also be corrected. All officers working there must be brought under the unquestionable authority of the ambassador. The ambassador, his/her background and way of appointment notwithstanding, must be brought under the control of the Foreign Ministry. Before these steps are taken to bring Bangladesh's way of conducting foreign affairs and diplomacy in line with principles and norms established in rest of the world, opening new Embassies anywhere would not serve the nation's interests.

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India-Pakistan: Reducing the lack of trust

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RECENT statements of Pakistani and Indian higher-ranking officials show an obvious shift in the approach of both the countries. They have finally realized the challenge lies in reducing the lack of trust between the two countries. Resumption of the Composite Dialogue is the only way forward to fix the nerve-racking relations shattered by the 2008 Mumbai attacks that New Delhi blamed on Pakistani militants.

In a news conference Prime Minister Manmohan said a major diplomatic effort was underway to improve ties between India and Pakistan, and he was hopeful the talks would succeed. He also reiterated India's willingness to discuss "all outstanding issues" as long as Pakistani territory is not used for attacks against India.

Prime Minister Manmohan's exceptional statement is not less than a major leap forward as diplomatic circles encircling Kashmir snarl as well in the statement about 'all outstanding issues'. Without solving the Kashmir issue, it looks impossible to have any improvement in other spheres. For Pakistan, the core dispute is over Kashmir, which both countries claim in full but rule in part. Issues including water, Indian intrusion in Baluchistan and use of Afghanistan soil against Pakistan have also surfaced in the recent times. In addition, for India, the main issue in its relations with Pakistan is security, which is threatened by attacks allegedly backed by Pakistani militants.

Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna will visit Islamabad on July 15 for talks with his counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi. The Indian minister's visit would be important in cutting the lack of trust. It would be the best opportunity for Pakistan to raise all outstanding issues with Mr. Krishna. It is a positive sign that India is ready to discuss the Kashmir issue as well. Pakistan must get benefit from the situation. Likewise, if Pakistan has solid proof of Indian involvement in Baluchistan, it should hand over those evidences to Mr. Krishna in his upcoming visit to Islamabad. Without solid proof, mere allegations and blame game cannot work well anyway.

At this critical juncture, extending hands for talks is a breakthrough needed to repair the broken ties. These bold statements reflect a 'change' in Indian overtone. Pakistan already had asked to dispel the existing mistrust and stressed to build trust on solid foundations so people of the two countries can live in peace. On this point, Pakistani foreign ministry spokesperson Abdul Basit said, "To this end, Pakistan looks forward to a sustained and meaningful engagement with India with a view to free our relations from all disputes and conflicts."

Relations between Pakistan and India remains cracked from 1947, when both the countries gained independence, to this day. In all these years, peace

remained the biggest loser and the stakes the winners. Now both are nuclear powers and cannot afford any war because of risks that it could turn into a nuclear war. What is needed is to bolster ties between both the countries for progress and prosperity of their people.

How would improved ties be turned into a great benefit for the two neighbours? Firstly, both countries are spending huge amounts on defence, which would be reduced in case of better ties. Secondly, trade would increase manifold and people-to-people contacts would be improved. This would be valuable both economically and culturally. There is also an urgent need to work towards a peaceful solution of the Kashmir dispute according to the wishes of the people of the area.

The most important thing will be "solid foundations" on which ties would be based as it is well said that if the foundations were solid, a building would be rock-solid. The trust should not be damaged by any mishaps like the Mumbai attacks. For this, both the nations must not have any ill intent to use their

soil against the other. As it is witnessed many times when both the countries aim to strengthen ties, some anti-peace elements have always tried to disrupt this process. It is not limited to a single country; both nations have extremist elements within their boundaries and both are facing home-grown terrorism in the form of Maoism and Talibanism. Terrorism threat needs to be addressed jointly for the greater safety of the South Asian region.

In the Indo-Pak context, confidence building measures can only come about when concrete moves are made in the most contentious areas. Trust is the foundation of any long-lasting relationship. It demands setting up peace on such solid foundations, that no one would dare to damage it. For this, leniency has to be shown from both the sides. Elimination of trust deficit is important for the peace and prosperity of the two people. The earlier it is done, the better.

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Army CMA Destroys 75 percent of US Chemical Weapons

THE U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency, or CMA, announced that on July 1, 2010, it achieved the destruction of 75 percent of its chemical agent stockpile as defined under international treaty obligations.

"This accomplishment marks another extraordinary team effort between our storage and destruction staffs consisting of both government and contractor personnel," said CMA Director Conrad Whyne.

This accomplishment represents destruction efforts since Entry-Into-Force, when the United States ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) treaty in April of 1997.

Also, 75 percent represents 22,958 tons of agent and more than 2.1 million munitions. CMA reached the 50 percent milestone in December of 2007 and the 60 percent destruction mark in April of 2009.

While not an official treaty-mandated achievement, 75 percent represents the ongoing progress the United States, under CMA's leadership, is making in fulfilling its international obligations to destroy the aging and obsolete chemical weapons stockpile.

CMA is on pace to meet the April 2012 deadline by destroying the 90 percent of the stockpile under its purview. The U.S. Army Element Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives (ACWA) program is responsible for destroying the remaining 10 percent under treaty.

In reaching the 75 percent destruction mark, CMA has also reduced the overall public risk from continued storage of the stockpile by 94 percent.

CMA's progress is reflected in the fact that neutralization sites at Aberdeen, Md., and Newport, Ind., as well as the incineration site at Johnston Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, have successfully destroyed their chemical warfare materiel stockpiles and are closed.

The four remaining CMA sites at Anniston, Ala.; Pine Bluff, Ark.; Tooele, Utah, and Umatilla, Ore., continue to use incineration, a proven safe and effective treatment, in accomplishing their mission. In addition, CMA's Non-Stockpile Chemical Materiel Project (NSCMP) has made substantial progress assessing and treating chemical materiel separate from the national stockpile.

NSCMP also beat the treaty deadline for destruction of the nation's chemical warfare production facilities and recently completed a mission at the Pine Bluff Explosive Destruction System site, destroying more than 1,200 recovered munitions.

"Our highly skilled government and contractor work force deserves a tremendous amount of credit for this achievement," Whyne continued. "We are another step closer to fulfilling one of our missions."

CMA remains committed to the safe and timely destruction of the nation's chemical agent and chemical warfare materiel. Final agent campaigns continue at CMA's remaining destruction sites - all four sites are destroying blister agent.

CMA continues to safely store chemical agent munitions at the ACWA sites near Richmond, Ky., and at Pueblo, Colo.

Afghan air force delivers on first airdrop

IN the sky over Kalat, Afghanistan, a C-27 Spartan crew member opened the bay door and two men stepped forward. They surveyed the target zone and with a well-practiced motion pushed the cargo out the back of the plane. Two seconds later the chute opened and the cargo descended under control to the ground. The mission was a success.

"This will be our first, full on, no playing around airdrop," said Lt. Col. James Piel, the 538th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron commander, prior to the mission. "We've spent awhile working up to this and today should go pretty smooth and maybe even be a little bit exciting."

Colonel Piel, who piloted the C-27 during the airdrop is one of the American advisers to the Afghan pilots, had a few concerns regarding the weather, as high winds were predicted and would've prevented the mission for a second time. Fortunately, the weather held and didn't seem to have any significant impact on the mission.

This drop was a final check of the aircraft's capabilities to perform these missions. "The C-27 is a capable aircraft which meets the necessities of the missions here in Afghanistan," Colonel Piel said. "The Afghan crews and pilots are learning these capabilities and gaining confidence in the plane. When we fully turn over control of these planes, they will be completely able to use these aircraft as intended and use them to perform the wide range of mission sets necessitated by the Afghan government."

This mission adds to the overall ability of the Afghan air force to assist in the war and promote the agenda of the Afghan government.