

Have Bangladesh-India relations hit a snag?



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RECENTLY in a seminar arranged by the Policy Research Institute (PRI), the Minister for Commerce made a statement that poured cold water on the spin of optimism that the foreign minister had succeeded in giving in the media to the Prime Minister's state visit to India in January. The foreign minister had given the visit a perfect score. She also spoke in a number of seminars arranged to evaluate the visit. In these seminars, she articulated herself brilliantly, based on the agreements and the Joint Communiqué of the visit, to convince everybody that Bangladesh-India relations were poised for a paradigm shift for

the better to the mutual benefit of the two countries. She had then said that India's sincerity was amply manifested in its positive response to Bangladesh's power needs in giving Bangladesh a US\$1 billion credit and a host of other offers that spoke of India's goodwill in improving Bangladesh-India relations.

The commerce minister regretted that even after six months of the visit, specific decisions on the agreement on removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers have not been implemented. In speaking to the media after the PRI seminar, he criticized the bureaucrats on either side for things not moving the way they should have following the Prime Minister's successful visit. The foreign minister did not appear

before the media for clarification on her colleague's statement. Her silence and that of her Ministry on the commerce minister's statement has surprised many who are following Bangladesh-India relations and left them guessing about what is exactly happening.

A few other developments have added to the confusion. The foreign minister seems to have lost her enthusiasm in the visit rather abruptly. Meanwhile, the task of coordinating follow up action on the agreements and the Joint Communiqué to move relations forward has been entrusted to the Economic Adviser of the Prime Minister who led a delegation to India some months ago for the purpose. No news has come out from his office or

from him about his visit. In fact, if anyone would know about the current state of affairs of Bangladesh-India relations in the context of the Prime Minister's visit, it is the Economic Adviser and not the commerce minister who has spoken on it and the foreign minister, who has not spoken on the visit lately.

The government has not presented the agreements reached during the visit in Parliament nor made these public, which has added to public confusion. A few important decisions that had encouraged the public to hope that the Prime Minister had indeed succeeded in achieving a major breakthrough have not gone the expected way. The 250MW of electricity that India had agreed to give will require a 100 KM transmission line to join the power grids of the two countries. This transmission line will take two years to build after the award of the contract, for which a decision is yet to be reached. Agreement on sharing of water of Teesta seems to be getting perpetually delayed although in the meantime the Bangladesh water minister had given hope some months ago that an agreement was just round the corner. India has recently expressed its determination to build the Tippiamukh dam although during the visit Sheikh Hasina was assured that India would pay heed to interests and sentiments of the people of Bangladesh.

There is news which suggests that things may be moving in the right direction in some areas. An inter ministerial committee was formed in July last year with the Prime Minister in the Chair and with her Economic Adviser as the prime mover for economic integration of Bangladesh with the economies in the region, including India's northeast states. The foreign minister is a member of the committee. This development is positive but curiously it has not been given publicity. The development appears even better when seen in the context of what former Union Minister Mani Sankar Aiyar had to say on a recent

visit to Bangladesh. He said that the Indian government has a plan to spend Rs 20 lakh crore for development of India Northeastern provinces that lacks managerial, technical and technological support, by the year 2020. He felt that Bangladesh could, by extending its hand of cooperation, get a good share of that cake. In the case of such an integration, where politics must play second fiddle to the dictates of economics, Bangladesh will surely benefit as it has what India's northeast provinces lack. Bangladesh, in addition to its managerial, technical and technological abilities, has the ports that could figure in a major way in the success of the proposed integration and also the success of the Indian investment.

Historically and economically, such integration makes great sense. I remember sitting in a meeting that Sheikh Hasina had during her 1996-2001 tenure with the chief minister on one of the Northeast Provinces of India. To convince the Prime Minister that Bangladesh should allow border trade, the chief minister said that the trouser and the shirt he was wearing were manufactured in Bangladesh as was his belt and shoes. He said that most of the people in his province were using a lot of Bangladeshi manufactured goods that were being smuggled and wondered why the two governments could not formalize the illegal exchange of goods that would drive the smugglers and the middlemen away and allow legality to come into the economic reality to the mutual benefit of the two countries.

Of course, things were then as it is now, not easy to do as the chief minister had then wanted. India has been seeking land transit through Bangladesh to its Northeast so that the economic benefits of the Taka 20 lakh crore go to investors and businessmen in India and not Bangladesh. Therefore, although one would like to believe with Mani Sankar Aiyar that Bangladeshi businessmen would be allowed to play a significant role in the development of India's Northeast,

India's past in dealing with Bangladesh does not encourage analysts of Bangladesh-India relations to hope too much into the prospects of Bangladesh's integration in that development and benefit from it.

There is reason to look seriously into what the commerce minister really intended to say. Indian bureaucracy is powerful and capable of working independently of its political masters. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi as the new Prime Minister of India made gestures to give Bangladesh its water needs. The then Bangladesh High Commissioner in New Delhi was AK Khandker who was about to send a very optimistic message to Dhaka. On second thought, he sent his officer dealing with water issues to the Indian Joint River Commission to check if what the Prime Minister was hinting was really true. The Member of the Indian JRC told the Bangladesh High Commissioner official bluntly that there was no likelihood of any change in India's position, the Prime Minister's hints notwithstanding.

Bangladesh-India relations can change positively when the political leaders in New Delhi and Indian bureaucrats dealing with Bangladesh are in agreement. That does not appear to be the case on trade and water issues, where the core of discord rests on Bangladesh's side. Bangladesh has, meanwhile, handed in more ULFA insurgents, a key Indian concern. Bangladesh has also followed up on areas where it needs to act on the Joint Communiqué and the agreements despite its weak bureaucracy and serious problems in coordinating functions involving many ministries. It is time for India to show its hands on the concerns of the commerce minister and on water where an immediate agreement on Teesta is crucial. More importantly, the return visit of the Indian Prime Minister has to take place soon to motivate the Indian side to positive action.

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General Petraeus faces a daunting task in Afghanistan

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GENERAL David Petraeus, who was credited with turning around the Iraq war, has taken over the responsibility of the commander of the United States-led NATO forces in war-ravaged Afghanistan following the sacking of General Stanley McChrystal for insubordination. The general lost no time in arriving in Kabul following his appointment by President Barack Obama and subsequent approval by the Senate. He has also paid a visit to Pakistan and held talks there with key figures since that country is also inextricably linked with the Afghan tangle in many ways.

Afghanistan is the most intractable international crisis for the United States as Washington is directly involved with the long-running war there against the radical Islamist 'Taliban', whom the American forces toppled from power in the aftermath of 9/11. Osama Bin Laden was then living in the Afghanistan with the support and close collaboration of the Taliban government. The then president George Bush did the right thing when his administration militarily removed the Taliban from the helm in Kabul and looked for Osama Bin Laden, who mysteriously is still at large. Osama remains a kind of a mirage with conflicting news regarding his whereabouts. Some say he is already dead, but it is generally believed that he is hiding in the difficult rugged mountains on the Afghan-Pakistan border while the Americans and its allies are sparing no efforts to nab him. The search for Osama continues as he manages to remain elusive.

The Taliban were in total disarray after the US-led operation and only its remnants were somewhat

active in the far-flung areas especially in southern Afghanistan. However, over the years they gained strength and for the last three/four years have once again become a force to reckon with, causing considerable headache for Washington. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which has troops from NATO and other countries, has been battling the Taliban and had considerable success in recent times. However, the fact remains that the battle is far from over and the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai and his patrons the United States and its allies seem to be still a long way from the cherished objective: the total dismantling of the radical Islamic opponents. Washington has of late decided to increase its strength by another 30,000 soldiers, who have already started arriving in the country, in a bid to fully crush the resistance. This brings the total number of foreign troops in the embattled nation to nearly 1,50,000.

A change of guard in the form of a new commander of the foreign troops was sudden and least expected at this critical time and this owes mainly to issues not much related with the battle scenario. General Stanley McChrystal was doing a reasonably good job in the eyes of Washington and its allies as far as the situation in the war-front was concerned. The problem came somewhat as a lightning bolt when some of his remarks in a newspaper interview were seen by the authorities in Washington as totally reprehensible and outrageous. Talking about the Afghan war, he and some of his associates referred to some of their government officials back in the United States as "clowns" and directly made disparaging comments about Vice-president Joe

Biden. By connotation, President Obama himself was not also spared. This came as a big surprise to the administration for understandable reasons and not unexpectedly, he was summoned to explain the conduct. Even though the general apologised, the president could not be lenient on such a highly sensitive issue and what followed was simply the obvious. He was replaced by his senior General David Petraeus in the midst of a furore about the civilian-military authority in the Afghan war.

The new commander is an Iraq-war veteran, known for his vast knowledge of counter-insurgency strategy, and many think that he will be able to discharge his new job with a great degree of efficiency. However, one must not lose sight of the fact that his predecessor was not removed for shortcomings or failures in the battlefield as such, but for objectionable remarks against the higher authorities. But this has also to be remembered that the development came somewhat as a damper to the foreign troops, particularly the Americans, since it involved political and military leadership. According to some reports, the troops in Afghanistan cannot remain fully oblivious to such a development and its fallout. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who had tremendous confidence in the ability of General McChrystal, was unhappy with the actions taken against him and this points to adverse reactions to the entire episode of the Afghan government. However, Karzai has also acknowledged that it was a case of insubordination that is unacceptable and wished the new commander success.

General Petraeus certainly needs to heal the discouragement within his troops because of the abrupt removal of his predecessor, as greater cohesion is now required to fight the opponents more decisively. He has also to build solid rapport with the Afghan government as well as troops of other countries.

The new commander has a mandate to finish the Afghan war as early as possible since the duration of the war is seen by many in the United States and allies, particularly Britain, as unexpectedly long and costly both in terms of loss of human lives and materials. General McChrystal was under mounting pressure to quicken completion of the task by eliminating the Taliban, who are refusing to give up and are fighting the foreign troops in their several strongholds. The deaths of foreign troops are causing a lot of anguish in their respective countries and the month of June was one of the deadliest in terms of casualties. Evidently, the US and the allies cannot afford such losses for too long even though they have to absorb the damages as well.

General Petraeus is definitely conscious of the ground realities and have to make the final push, which is certainly a daunting task. He is emboldened with larger troops, but is under pressure to deliver the results. Only time will tell how far he will be successful in attaining his goals in the given precarious situation in Afghanistan.

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Iran-Turkey-Brazil Nuclear Agreement

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TURKEY and Brazil in a meeting with Iranian President Ahmadinejad managed to secure an agreement which few international observers had thought would be possible. Prior to the meeting, leaders such as Russian President Dmitry Medvedev put the chances of an agreement at 30 per cent, while American leaders scoffed at reaching any achievable agreement. The significance of the 17 May 2010 agreement was that it offered Iran an alternative to processing nuclear fuel to weaponised status, and addressed concerns of enrichment being in the hands of states which it did not trust. However, the caveat to the deal was that it offered too little and came too late for legitimacy with the international community.

According to the agreement, Iran was to send over 1,200kg of its enriched uranium across the border to Turkey, in exchange for about 125kg of uranium enriched to 20 per cent for use in their low-wattage Tehran Research Reactor. The deal is very similar to a deal which was offered to Tehran in October 2009, but was rejected then. Under the original proposal led by the IAEA, Iran would have shipped most of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Russia for further processing. Russia would then send the material to France, where it would be converted into fuel rods for use in a medical research reactor in Iran.

The idea was to disable Tehran from having a stockpile of nuclear fuel thereby stemming their race towards weaponisation of their nuclear program. Furthermore, the deal would have negated Iran's argument that under present UN sanctions, since it cannot buy enriched nuclear fuel from abroad, it is justified in producing its own. Iran in a bid to counter that proposal, suggested that it would send the nuclear material to Russia in stages, rather than in one large consignment, thereby allowing for an available stockpile of nuclear fuel. It further argued that Iran should be entitled to getting fuel from abroad since the enriched fuel for their reactors from France would arrive only nine to 12 months later.

To the Western powers, the new agreement indicated two developments: One, the significant rise of Brazil and Turkey in international crisis diplomacy, and secondly, the ability of Iran to play these countries against the West and create further divisions within the Security Council, where both these states are presently non-veto member states. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has in recent years been critical of the West's dealings with Iran, and despite historic rivalries has lent weight to the Iranian voice in the international arena, while Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has argued for a new nuclear world, which is sympathetic to Iran's nuclear program.

An important reason why the West is unwilling to trust the Iranian regime and the new agreement is that while uranium enriched to 3-4 per cent is suitable enough for electricity and civilian purposes, uranium enriched to 20 per cent is sufficient enough to produce a crude nuclear weapon. The Iranian nuclear program is improving around 19.75 per cent at the present rate, and its capabilities to significantly improve enrichment are quite high. Under the original proposal, US President Barack Obama favored Iran's transfer of 1,200kg or 68 per cent of its LEU because it would have easily set Iran's nuclear program back by five months. This time frame could have been used for international negotiations to pursue Iran to give up its nuclear program.

Under the present agreement, Iran is willing to provide nearly about the same amount of fuel to Turkey as it was asked to last October. However, based on IAEA reports on the cycle of uranium volumes produced, Iran would have generated more than 2,497 kilograms of LEU. Therefore, Iran would only be sending half of its stockpile to Turkey, while having significant amounts of LEU left with it, for use in further enrichment activities. This would defeat the original purpose of the fuel exchange. Additionally, the deal falls silent on another key feature of the original proposal-inspections for the nuclear facility at Qom. By failing to acknowledge the suspected enrichment facility in the city, and demanding for international inspections of the site, the proposal was fated to be a non-starter with the international community.

Iran is using the agreement as an argument against the West, citing the failure of the acceptance of the resolution as evidence that the West is implacable. The agreement did raise significant voices of support and detraction in the international community, including an initial welcome from the French Foreign Minister's office, and outright support from Japan. Iran would have wanted to use the deal as a means of dividing the Security Council over future deliberations on stricter sanctions. Indeed, despite the international community's rejection of the deal, rifts within the Security Council continue to be witnessed over the Iranian question.

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