

Obama's India visit

We hope the special relationship will benefit the whole region

RESIDENT Obama's Indian trip is just as full of economic significance as it is pregnant with political and strategic developments. We welcome the growing friendship between India and the US but at the same time we must remember that everything the US is doing globally and in our region cannot be welcomed by any freedom loving nation or individual in the world.

We are fully aware that US policy in Afghanistan is flawed. It has foolishly and unnecessarily turned this area in a conflict zone, whose destabilising effects are apparent in other parts of the region. India has its own legitimate interest in that war-torn area. But now with this enhanced bilateral relationship with the US, she might become a tool of US policy in Afghanistan.

Obviously the special relationship between India and the US will have its repercussion on China. We have observed with satisfaction the growing economic ties between the two Asian giants, notwithstanding the existing military problem between them. We don't, in any way, want that the relationship should suffer. It is quite clear that the US would want to see India more as a rival to China, and not as complementary forces which we do in this region. Therefore we would urge India not to be overly influenced by US strategic vision of this relationship.

The American position on India's UNSC ambition resonates with the policy of Bangladesh. But while we agree that Delhi does deserve a permanent seat at the UNSC, we must also point out that India happens to have a number of bilateral issues with its neighbours which it must now address in a spirit expected of a global power. There is a clear need for India, in the aftermath of the Obama visit, to forge a visionary approach to its relations with countries in its neighbourhood and indeed let the engine of growth that powers it be felt as well in the economic progress of these countries. Delhi's approach to the disturbances in Kashmir has been more a demonstration of the power of the state than a concerted search for a political solution. The positive fall-out of the Obama trip should have a sobering effect on how the Indian government handles the security situation in Kashmir.

President Obama's visit has been a high point for the Indian leadership and is a clear statement that India has come of age. If earlier President Bush took ties with India a good many miles ahead through reaching a nuclear deal with it, today President Obama has placed them on a bigger diplomatic landscape. The trip is a huge boost for India. Let it all lead to a fresh new opening for South Asia as a whole.

Bangladesh wants to see India emerge as powerhouse of economic growth which will help to pull the whole of South Asian region out of its poverty trap. In that perspective, we would like to see the rising India-US relationship as an impetus to that economic growth process from which the region stands to gain enormously.

Mr. Obama should be going back home a happy man. His deals with India will clearly have a positive effect on a fraught American economy. It is surely a sign of how times have changed.

Zero tolerance to stalking

Dhaka University must lead the way

IN a demonstration of stern attitude taken towards harassment of female students by some of their male counterparts, Dhaka University authorities have expelled four students for a year. Normally, the incident would have made news anyway; yet, it makes us sit up and take note especially because all the expelled students who stand to lose an academic year are all members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), an associate of the ruling Awami League.

Those punished are guilty of double-count culpability: one, that they kept pestering a female student including hurling abusive words at her; and two, they assaulted six students who stood up to them protesting their stalking. They have also been asked to show cause by November 24 as to why they should not be expelled permanently.

The students should not get away with any light punishment if the authorities are to make their point forcefully with the desperadoes that are breathing down heavily on any notion of civility and sanctity of educational institutions. If institutions of higher learning have such black sheep what then are we supposed to expect in terms of decency, respect for women and courteous behaviour across gender from other academic campuses. What example are they setting for those who have not received the light of education and are unemployed with a plenty of time to loiter about and pester girls making their lives miserable. In some cases driving the victims to suicide that has recently rocked the nation.

No wonder, the pervasive nature of the crime has taken on a phenomenal proportion. Along with challenging nature of it, some response pattern is also emerging which is heartening. The relatives and peers are standing up to the stalkers and protesting their antisocial activity. What is awaited now is a resurgence of resistance against the menace at the institutional and community levels which has just about began. Let it gain further ground.

Giving teeth to the laws is being talked about; but we believe, enforcement of the existing laws and convicting and punishing the culprits without mercy can have the desired deterrent effect.

A home, the streets and revolutions



The streets, if you must know, are a perfect spot for agitation. And agitation, if you have some idea of the way politics works, is something we resort to when the space for politics is either too narrow for us or does not exist at all.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

MOUDUD Ahmed enlightened us somewhat the other day. The matter of Begum Zia's residence, said he, would be handled politically on the streets. And that is precisely where the enlightenment comes in. All these years we had thought issues of public interest were dealt with politically in Parliament. The streets, if you must know, are a perfect spot for agitation. And agitation, if you have some idea of the way politics works, is something we resort to when the space for politics is either too narrow for us or does not exist at all.

And who will understand this lesson of history better than the people of Bangladesh? When Ayub Khan, in the manner of a boa constrictor, tried suffocating us out of things political, we went for agitation and eventually drummed him out of power. With his successor, we did even better: we frog-marched his

country out of our land. And then, do not forget the blood and sweat and raving passion we brought to bear in our drive to have the Ershad regime run for cover through running away from the citadels of power.

Now, those were great issues over which we took to the streets. In the steamy season of nationalistic politics in Dhaka back in March 1971, we kept the seamy streets sizzling -- to let Yahya Khan and Z.A. Bhutto know that they could not hold on to power or come by it without first going into a battle of epic proportions ordained by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The streets, not only in Bangladesh but elsewhere around the world as well, have served as the great squares where the destinies of men are sketched before they are translated into reality. Think back now, on Moudud Ahmed's rationale for the kind of street agitation he speaks of. Yes, one could for good reason think that all this noise over whether or

not Begum Zia should be staying at her present accommodation ought not to have been raised by the government at all. There are more things on heaven and earth than a losing of sleep over a politician's sleeping quarters.

That said, you could now do the perfectly logical thing of asking Moudud Ahmed if the matter of where his party leader stays is an issue that has a bearing on the future of this nation. It hasn't. Of course the former prime minister is upset. Of course the BNP feels it is under pressure. Of course none of us wants to see all this squabble over a residence test our patience day after day. But settle scores on the streets? Whatever for?

There are better things we can do on the streets, or about them. For starters, let us reclaim them from those who have for years been taking away large chunks of them from us. Think of a street in this chaos of a metropolis where you can take a cool walk lost in reflections on some of the more beautiful aspects of life. You will not come upon any, for we have lost all our streets to the predatory instincts of men. All the pavements are gone; and those that remain do so in remnants. Tea stalls operate in profusion; huge refuse bins block pedestrian movement; and an unending proliferation of vehicles clogs the streets.

On our streets today, you have place

for everything. You have nothing at all for people. And note, if you will, that politics too has done its bit to take our streets away from us. The streets are prey to public rallies; marchers stride forth in slow rhythm all over the street to protest a new injustice or draw attention to an old one. Police engage in pitched battles with political party activists through suddenly emptying streets. The first step the young at college or university take as a sign of discontent is to occupy the streets, strut up and down them in the manner of triumphant invaders from alien land. And so coerce gentle citizens into terrified silence. The streets then turn into a metaphor for horror.

And that is how we have shrunk into the state of the insignificant. We the people do not matter. The acolytes of Begum Zia will have us know that only they and their leader matter. Perhaps they do. But why demonstrate that glory on our streets when they have an entire state of the art Parliament for themselves? They have their lawmakers, duly elected and sworn to a promotion of the public weal, to speak on any and every matter of public and individual concern in Parliament.

In these past many months, though, they have given us to understand that the last election was something they were never comfortable with -- because they lost it. And the oath they mouthed as lawmakers has been cast to the winds. They now look to the streets, for that is where they think a revolution will dawn, enough to propel them back to power.

Who will tell them that revolutions happen around homes which through historical time or contemporaneous events have become transformed as symbols of national politics? Think here of Bangabandhu's home at Dhanmondi Road 32. Revolutions are not shaped around a residence caught in controversy, around a home that Justice Sattar and General Ershad, for all their emotive response to the Zia assassination, ought not to have made an offering of to the widow of the nation's first military dictator.

Let the streets remain free of unwarranted intrusion. As for that residence, the BNP chairperson could do everyone especially the army, a favour by agreeing to give it up. It used to be the home of the deputy chief of army staff. Let it go back to being one, again. Alternatively, let the law deal with it. But do not commandeer our streets.

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Plans for higher-level meetings in future

Unless Pakistan initiates the process or mechanism to resolve the three issues in a pragmatic manner, there is a view that there will be hesitation among many people in Bangladesh to develop a full range and pattern of relationship with Pakistan.

HARUN-UR RASHID

SAARC is a regional political entity, and Bangladesh is keen to have close relations with all countries within the Saarc, including Pakistan, for addressing the common challenges of poverty and underdevelopment of the region.

On November 1, Bangladesh and Pakistan began the two-day fifth round of annual consultation at foreign secretary's level in Islamabad after a four-year interval, although they are expected to meet once every year under a protocol signed in 2002. The meeting is to be welcomed.

Bangladesh's foreign affairs secretary, Mohammed Mijarul Quayes, and his Pakistani counterpart, Salman Bashir, led their sides at the meeting. The last annual consultation between the two countries was last held in 2007 in Dhaka.

It is reported that the two sides held a detailed overview of bilateral relations over a wide range of issues including economy, trade, education, culture and consular matters. They discussed issues such as reducing the trade gap, strengthening economic cooperation through convening Bangladesh-Pakistan Economic Commission and restoring the link between the seaports of Chittagong and Karachi.

Both sides agreed to hold a senior officials meeting in the next few months as a follow-up of the discussions held. They agreed to initiate preparatory work for leadership level visits and intensify consultation. A decision was taken to hold a meeting at the foreign minister's level in the next

six months to pave the way for visits by the heads of government sometime in 2011.

The economic relation is not as robust as it should be. Pakistan does not feature among Bangladesh's top 15 export destinations. During 2008-09, Bangladesh exported products worth only \$76 million to Pakistan and imported goods worth \$288 million. Two-way trade could potentially rise to \$1 billion if earnest efforts are made.

Bangladesh's relation with Pakistan can never be easy after the war of 1971 when the Pakistan army brutally killed innocent Bengali people, and many survivors and families of the victims remember those atrocities to this day.

Observers believe that Pakistan has regrettably not addressed the sensitive issue of reconciliation adequately with Bangladesh people in a way that the survivors in Bangladesh may come to terms with the painful experiences at the hands of the Pakistan army.

It is argued there are primarily three issues which need to be addressed for development of full potentials of bilateral relations:

- Formal apology from Pakistan for the manifold crimes on civilian Bengali people in 1971;
- Division of assets of undivided Pakistan;
- Repatriation of the Urdu-speaking people ("Biharis") who opted for Pakistan in 1971.

First, there is a strong sentiment in the country that Pakistan leaders, including the military establishment, fail to understand the depth of feelings among the majority of ordinary people in the country for a formal apology by

Pakistan for the inhuman crimes perpetrated on Bengalis during the nine-month long war.

It is noted that Japan and Germany apologised to the countries where they perpetrated atrocities on the people. However, Pakistan has not yet apologised for the many crimes committed in Bangladesh in 1971.

What Pakistani leaders have so far done while visiting Bangladesh is "regret" the "mistakes of the past" -- an ambiguous phrase, which means different things to different people and may be interpreted in various ways.

Only Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, during his visit in 1998, came close to showing remorse for the crimes committed in Bangladesh by the Pakistan army, but when he returned to Pakistan it was believed that the foreign minister, under pressure from the army establishment, diluted the prime minister's remark in Dhaka.

The expression of regret is not an apology because apology has three elements. Apology means, first, acknowledgement of crimes committed, second, expression of remorse for the crimes in unambiguous words and, third, doing something to make up for what was manifestly wrong and hurtful.

Second, he quantifiable assets of undivided Pakistan can be easily identified, and Pakistan has obligations to divide these assets between Pakistan and Bangladesh. The assets include gold, foreign currency, defence equipments, Pakistan International Airlines and vessels of Pakistan Shipping Corporation. The value of the assets as of 1974 stood at \$4.32 billion.

It seems that Pakistan imagines Bangladesh will tend to forget this demand for division of assets the longer it takes to resolve the problem. This perception is misplaced and the issue needs to be addressed in a dispassionate matter. A joint experts' committee may be constituted to look into the issue and recommend the division of

assets.

Third, there are about 238,000 Urdu-speaking people in Bangladesh who wish to be repatriated to Pakistan because they exercised the option in 1972 to go to Pakistan for family reasons. Meanwhile the Bangladesh High Court has ruled that those born after 1971 in Bangladesh can remain as citizens of Bangladesh.

These difficult issues had been reportedly raised by the Bangladesh side during the talks and it was reported that the Pakistan foreign secretary stated that they remain "open" to continue discussion on all the outstanding issues at all levels.

Political wounds need to be healed, and it takes time. However, Pakistan can help the wounds to heal quicker by resolving the three issues discussed above. It is not understood by the people in Bangladesh why the new generation of leaders in government and military, who have nothing to do with the atrocities committed in Bangladesh, cannot offer apology to the people of Bangladesh when majority of the younger generation in Pakistan including academics, lawyers and journalists believe strongly that genocide and war crimes were perpetrated on the civilian people of Bangladesh in 1971.

It cannot be denied that the overall bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan has often been affected by unpleasant consequences of the 1971 War of Liberation. Unless Pakistan initiates the process or mechanism to resolve the three issues in a pragmatic manner, there is a view that there will be hesitation among many people in Bangladesh to develop a full range and pattern of relationship with Pakistan. Evidence in all regions of the world confirms that there is interdependence between political and economic relationship.

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