

Bangladesh-India Secretary level meeting

Peaceful border requires more than mere expression of intent

THE secretary level meeting between Bangladesh and India this time was held in the backdrop of border killings due to BSF firing, the most recent being that of a 15 year old girl on 7th January. The recently concluded meeting of the home secretaries had evinced keen interest among the media and political observers, in Bangladesh particularly, because of the deaths.

Regrettably, the otherwise peaceful nature of the Bangladesh-India border has been blemished by very unfortunate, and we feel avoidable, deaths of Bangladeshis at the hands of the BSF, as a result of firing as well as torture. We are happy to note the expression of commitment to bring down the killings to zero, as well as regret from the Indian side for the recent death, at the meeting. One hopes that this is not just another pledge of the many that Bangladesh has received from India in the last several years. We would like to see the articulation of intent transformed into action on ground, in keeping with earlier assurance of 'gun freeze' in the border for one year.

It merits repetition that the Bangladesh-India border is not like any other border, and for very compelling reasons requires sensitivity in its management, a sensitivity which has been belied by the trigger happy attitude of the BSF. Unfortunately, border killings have to some extent overshadowed the otherwise harmonious relationship between the two countries.

Needless to say, Bangladesh-India relationship, after being in the doldrums for more than five years prior to 2009, has been revitalised after the Grand Alliance government's assumption of office in January 2009. The relationship has taken a new trajectory, and the credit must be given to Sheikh Hasina's government for this. There is a change of mindset about India in Bangladesh, an attitude that has sponsored a proactive action on matters related to India, on the part of the Bangladesh leadership.

In that positive mind frame, Bangladesh has acted timely to address the security concerns of India. Its counter-extremist actions, which have a bearing on India's security too, is worth the mention. One would have liked to have seen Bangladesh's security concern addressed in equal measure, particularly border killings.

If for India the border is a cause for concern, by the same token are the killings a highly sensitive matter for Bangladesh. So much so, that for every mile of progress made in respect of bilateral relationship in other sectors, we regress two miles with every death of Bangladeshis in the hands of the BSF.

As for other issues related to the border we are happy to note that the two countries have expressed the hope of reaching consensus on solving all the outstanding ones in a couple of months. That is indeed great news given that some of the major border issues have resisted resolution for a very long time. We are confident that those can be resolved if there is political will which, we have witnessed in the recent past, Bangladesh has never been lacking.

Government's move to revitalise TCB

It mustn't end into tokenism

HARD-pressed by market manipulation of vested quarters inexplicably causing rice prices to rise and hover at a high notch despite two successive good harvests, the government has to look for ways to leverage the market with a public sector role.

But the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) established with a lot of fanfare following independence of the country is a mere shadow of its former self. Over the years, with pressures growing for free market operations and as the cartels feeding on political patronization took a firm hold of the market, the state trading agency diminished into a point where it is comatose now. But the rationale for its role, even in a free market situation is incontestable. For, whenever the government faces the dual problem of erratic supply and price spiral it feels the need for the TCB, no matter how emaciated it was, to take some of the heat off the market by importing and distributing essential commodities through its outlets. Usually, this happened during festival times, but with the present government finding it difficult to keep the prices down, there has been a rethink on the issue of giving TCB a greater role as a market player.

That is why, we hear of the government moving to amend the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) Order 1972 in a bid to empower the state owned trading agency as a tool to intervene in the basic commodity market. To activate the TCB and enable it to play a decisive role in the market it will have to be adequately restructured and staffed, if necessary with a private sector representative on the board. Basically though, it mustn't compromise on its regulatory character and purpose. Simultaneously, it shouldn't be placed on a shoe-string budget like Tk five crore which it is now. It must have a start-up fund of Tk 1000 crore, as suggested by some experts.

It reflects on the incompetence and lack of vision on the part of successive governments that they could not internalize the fundamental message that free market and a state trading corporation are not mutually exclusive, rather they are necessary parts of modern day market governance. Great Britain and India have state trading corporations as market regulatory bodies, let alone the USA in a different name. The government must have an agency whereby it can intervene in the market for the good of the

The baneful interference

Police in their professional capacity have to be apolitical and impartial in their application of law. Interference with the statutory duties of the police contrary to the provisions of law has to be deprecated at all times, and more so when it impedes the performance of their duties in the maintenance of public order and investigation of cases.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE Daily Star editorial of January 15 that points to "the revelation by a business leader that a sub-inspector has so much clout that he can go over the head of his departmental chief and have a minister of state cancel his transfer order" makes disturbing reading. Undoubtedly, it brings into sharp focus the parlous politicisation of police. In plain words, it raises the issue of political interference in police work.

The alleged intervention and its ill impact is not a new phenomenon and only a few years ago, in their justified anguish, the media had sought the intervention of the chief executive of the country to stem the rot and take corrective measures before the nation found itself in an ungovernable scenario.

For appreciating the harmful dimension of the issue, there has to be a clear understanding of the dividing line between state and government/party interests. Such realisation assumes heightened significance in polities that have been subjected to colonial rule for a long time. A People's Republic ought to be different from the governance culture of dictatorship or the colonial administration and the same must be a manifest reality to emulate and to draw lesson from.

Unfortunately, however, our feudal mindset has not changed although feudalism is a relic of the past. It is such mindset that demands personalised and partisan attention from the services of the republic and would not let institutions grow to support and sustain our not-very-adult and mature democracy.

Our politicians appear to be peril-

ously oblivious to the reality that the regulatory outfit of police must be demonstrably impartial to ensure public confidence in the governance ability of the ruling class. The ruling parties in their misplaced exuberance forget that the police was the dominant visible symbol of repressive imperial alien power and that decolonisation requires large-scale behavioural and attitudinal changes of the political masters and the public servants belonging to this vital organ of the state.

Thus, while admonitions from the pulpit come in plenty for rational behaviour on the part of enforcement officials, in reality, unhealthy pressures are exerted to carry out the wishes of the ruling coterie in the most expeditious manner.

The police needs to be insulated from political, executive and other interferences in promotions, postings and security of tenure. The people must not get an impression that the investigation agencies are very efficient while taking the required action against those not in power and that as against those in power, their edge is blunted. If police act impartially, credibility would be restored to the investigative authorities. This is very important because as long as the impression persists that a policeman is not an unbiased friend of people, the concept of an orderly society would not be achieved.

We have to remember that since our police system was conceived and grew in a colonial ecology and is now planted in a developmental, democratic and prismatic environment where a new ruling class is passing through numerous stresses and strains, it becomes difficult for the police to obtain and secure close cooperation of the people and



thereby discharge its functions and fulfill its role efficaciously.

There is, therefore, a need to appreciate the role perception of the police system in our changing environment so that we can understand and identify the challenges emanating from the systemic stresses and strains and be able to formulate viable responses.

It needs to be understood that police is the most significant subsystem of the criminal justice system. It is also a limb of the executive system and the judiciary which takes its energy from the legislative system. Our constitutional value depicts general spirit of service to weaker sections, women and children, serving the people and functioning as per rule of law and due process of law. Therefore, if due to politicisation the police start acting at the behest of extralegal persons, which is a genuine suspicion, then mostly they will round up innocent persons and permit the guilty to escape.

It would be worthwhile to remember that a politicised police force will not be able to ensure a sense of security in the community and will not succeed in enlisting the cooperation and participation of people in crime prevention programmes.

Food price hike: Role of government

To protect the food security of the poor, the state must build its food stock in advance and compete effectively with the hoarders in the market. This requires a large public company with fund, autonomy in the use of the fund, large scale storage facility and above all a group of patriotic efficient business cadres.

M.M. AKASH

THE rate of inflation in Bangladesh has nearly reached double digit level, and food price index has already crossed the double digit level.

This is alarming for the present government. It had promised in the manifesto to keep the price of essentials, especially food price, within reach of the general people. The price of food is a very sensitive issue for Bangladesh since more than 50% of the people spend more than 70% of their expenditure on buying food.

Selim Raihan's exercise showed that in 2005 a 10% increase in food price had actually pushed a large number of people from the margin to below the poverty line. The recent price hike has pushed even a portion of lower middle class people to stand in the OMS line and procure rice at a lower price. This is because of the price difference between OMS and general market has become as high as 40%!

In other words, food price increase results in the fall of real income of the poor and lower middle class people, especially for those who are on the margin of poverty, and thereby increases both the proportion and the depth of poverty.

Sometimes it is argued that food price increase gives incentive to the peasants to grow more food. Or, alternatively, since the cost of food grain production has increased so a mini-

mum remunerative price should be given to the growers of food grain to ensure production.

Last year, the procurement price of paddy was determined at Tk.18 per kg. So rice price must be at least Tk 18x1.50= 27.00, by adding 20% extra margin for profit and transport cost, the total retail price will have to be determined at Tk.33 per kg. But those who earn less than Tk.70 per day cannot buy rice at Tk.35 per kg.

Thus the dilemma for the government is meeting the interests of both the growers and the poor consumers. One way to solve this dilemma is to provide generous subsidy and introduce more productive technology to reduce the domestic supply price of rice. But that may not work well if our rice market becomes integrated with the global/Indian market. At the current level of input subsidy, the retail price must be at least Tk.33 per kg. And if there is influence of Indian/Thai market, where rice price is still more, then the retail price may be more than that!

In that case the only way to ensure food security for the poor in the short run will be to ensure subsidised supply of food for them through non-market channels. And in the meantime, long term policies should be undertaken to increase the real income of the poor at a faster rate.

The current non-market channels available are: various safety net measures and fair price cards for target groups, rationing for priority groups,



OMS operations by the government etc.

The problems with these measures are: They are seasonal or emergency type programmes and have short term effect, they have a high amount of leakages and their coverage is inadequate. Managing food supply in kind is also a huge challenge in terms of maintaining adequate stock, arranging godowns for the stock, supplying them to the poor in time, etc.

Today, on the one hand, markets of food items have become globally integrated but on the other hand, to maintain national food security, the countries have become very cautious about export, especially when there is a universal crisis in production. So every country must build its own buffer stock of food in advance. If private market does that then it may cause hoarding and profiteering. Even in case of domestic production rich peasants with higher staying power can follow the same course.

Thus to protect the food security of the poor, the state must build its food stock in advance and compete effectively with the hoarders in the market. This requires a large public company with fund, autonomy in the use of the fund, large scale storage facility and

Similarly, the politically driven functionaries may not appreciate that their job is not to encroach upon the rights and liberty of the individual and the premonition is that they may look upon themselves as mere pawns in the hands of governing elite. They cannot be expected to be accountable to the real sovereign, the people. Such policemen will inevitably compromise the dignity of the individual citizen. In such a scenario, democracy will gather deficits at our peril.

Few things in the world of police service can damage the police image as much as police involvement in politics. Police in their professional capacity have to be apolitical and impartial in their application of law. Interference with the statutory duties of the police contrary to the provisions of law has to be deprecated at all times, and more so when it impedes the performance of their duties in the maintenance of public order and investigation of cases.

If this is accepted as an article of faith and conviction then a serious and sincere attempt should be made to recruit the best type of young persons at grassroots and intermediary levels of the police organisation and train them appropriately. Police officials at these levels come into contact with the common man. Recruitments at this layer, therefore, may be entrusted to a very broad-based committee as against the existing departmental arrangements.

It is the considered view of many that as long as the policing function comprising detection of crime and prosecution of criminals remains under the control of the executive it may not be easy to bring about a reduction in unjust political interference in police functions. The well grounded fear is that the undesirable subordination of the investigative police to the executive breeds a cynicism that corrodes all positive cultural values. The investigating organ needs autonomy and constitutional protection made possible through radical conceptual and structural changes. Tinkering with the issue will not help.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA IS A COLUMNIST FOR THE DAILY STAR.

above all a group of patriotic efficient business cadres equipped with the latest information/communication technology. TCB, if restructured properly can serve that purpose.

To correct the middle-man problem in the domestic market chain, the only way available is formation of cooperatives at both ends, i.e. both producers and consumers.

Then finally comes the last constraint, i.e. the man-made crisis by the so-called syndicate and middle men. This is possible in those commodity markets where the number of suppliers/importers is only a few and when they form a syndicate. This problem can be tackled if the above alternative distribution channel is there to offer a choice to the consumers. If that is not there and government takes administrative measures against the strong players, they may resort to further negative actions and situation may deteriorate further. Thus as long as the government is not ready with its public distribution system, any kind of laws or punitive action will lead to more harm than good.

M.M. AKASH IS PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS, DHAKA UNIVERSITY.