

Banglabandh prospect unfurled

Let it be the trade-link for the region

ANOTHER new overland trade point has been opened between Bangladesh and India on 22 January at Banglabandh in Bangladesh corresponding to Phulbari in India. This sees the fulfillment of a longstanding demand of businessmen from both the countries.

Considering the importance that geography lends to this point one hopes that this would open a vista of new economic and trade relationship, not only between the two neighbours but also between other regional countries. Given also that this point was opened on September 1, 1997 to facilitate Nepal-Bangladesh transit, but since then trade between the two countries has been going on at a low key, we would hope that the new arrangement will reinvigorate trade and transit between Bangladesh and Nepal as well as between Bangladesh and Bhutan.

The skewed balance of trade has been vexing problem between Bangladesh and India, and whereas Bangladesh had opened its market to unhindered access to foreign goods with the significant liberalisation of trade since the mid-nineties (the time of the BNP first tenure in office) Indian export benefited greatly by it also. Unfortunately, Bangladeshi goods have had to encounter all sorts of tariff and non-tariff barriers from India, which have not been removed completely as yet in spite of repeated assurances.

One should not overlook the fact that economic and trade issues, particularly between Bangladesh and India, tend to influence not only internal politics in Bangladesh but also affect the bilateral relationship. In that context, we consider the statement of the Indian Finance Minister, assuring Bangladesh of freeing another 60 items for export to India, during the ceremony at the borders on 22 January, a positive step on the part of India towards addressing the huge bilateral trade imbalance. One would hope that the pledge would be implemented soon given that being the larger neighbour, with an overwhelmingly larger economy, India must take the lead role in ensuring that Bangladesh's trade is not overwhelmed by it.

One must take into account the huge potential of the Banglabandh-Phulbari which perhaps will assume more importance in the long run than the currently largest land port, Benapole-Petrapole, because of its potential to become an international trade and transit point, given its geographical location. Apart from trade, with the assurance that immigration facilities will be in place in the next three months on the Indian side, travel between the two countries will become easier too, particularly to southern part of Northeast India.

Let the potential of the new trading point be maximised for the larger economic benefits of the region, Bangladesh in particular.

Jatiya Sangsad television

Greater transparency should lead to more responsible practices

SANGSAD Bangladesh Television, an exclusive channel for the parliament, is to go on air today with President Zillur Rahman's address to the new-year session of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS). We welcome the new station, which we hope will be a new and effective channel for the dissemination of news and information on matters related to parliament in particular and to politics in general.

Besides mainly airing live proceedings of the parliament, the station will also broadcast programmes on its history and discussions on important bills and legislative practices in other countries. What could be a better means of connecting the people to their leaders, making the latter visibly accountable to their electorate? The station is expected to create greater awareness among the people about their political and especially parliamentary history. In a time where citizens, more so the younger generation, are said to be turning increasingly apathetic to politics and where little interest is taken in the activities of the highest legislative body of the country, the television channel is expected to foster greater engagement between the people and their elected representatives. We may also hope that this new form of transparency will encourage lawmakers to take their task with even greater responsibility.

In a nation where state-owned media are little more than mouthpieces for the government in power, we hope that this new addition to the electronic media scene will reflect the issues and concerns of not only the government but also the opposition party. Since the telecast will put the JS proceedings in fuller public glare, how accommodating the ruling party is to the opposition in parliament will come under closer scrutiny, something the government would do well to remind itself of. In the same vein, we hope that it will also encourage the opposition to carry out its responsibilities by participating in parliament.

The station should be a clear, unblemished window for the people, enabling them to observe their leaders at work, better understand issues of national importance and to be more involved in the democratic process. While the advent of the channel itself is good news, its acceptability, which will be determined by its content and how inclusive it is, will determine its success in the long run.



All's not quiet in the hills

MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR

ALL is not quiet in the hills. The latest report of infighting in the region has given rise to genuine concern. The gunfight between members of Parbatya Chottogram Jana Saghati Samity (PCJSS) and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) in Rangamati last Friday left at least five people killed and more than 15 hurt.

Fight for supremacy over the region is reportedly the immediate cause of the conflicts. In fact, this region has always been in want of peace. Socio-political unrest has been brewing for many decades, resulting in sporadic violence and loss of lives and properties. Inhabitants there enjoy freedom of sorts since the bumpy terrain makes it difficult for local administration to react effectively to any unpleasant incident.

The conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts began when the political representatives of the natives protested against the government policy of recognising only the Bengali culture and language and designating all citizens of Bangladesh as Bengalis. In talks with Hill Tracts delegation led by Chakma leader Manabendra Narayan Larma, the then government insisted that the ethnic groups of the Hill Tracts adopt the Bengali identity.

Thereafter, in 1973 the armed wing of PCJSS, the Shanti Bahini, was formed to fight the government. The New York Times in its June 11, 1989 issue carried a report by Sanjoy

Hazarika that, for more than a decade, India had secretly provided arms and money to tribal insurgents fighting for an autonomous state in Bangladesh, and rebels were given sanctuary in this border area. Media was replete with reports of kidnapping and bloodletting until we all got tired of this and resigned from the issue. Army was deployed in the area to fight the insurgents. The region had always been in a state of war.

After much ado, a peace treaty was signed in December 1997 during the tenure of the previous Awami League

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government. The agreement recognised the distinct ethnicity and special status of the tribes and indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and established a Regional Council consisting of the representatives of local government councils of the three districts of the Hill Tracts.

The council was to be composed of men and women from the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Murang and Tanchangya tribes; the delegates would be elected by the district councils of the Hill Tracts. Elected for a five-year term, the council would have authority and responsibility to maintain law and order, social justice and tribal laws, oversee general

administration, coordinate disaster relief and management, issue licenses for heavy industries and oversee other development projects. The central government would be required to consult the regional councils over all issues concerning the Hill Tracts.

The agreement also provided for the setting up of a Ministry of Tribal Affairs to be headed by a person of tribal ethnicity to administer the affairs concerning the Hill Tracts. The agreement also laid out plans for the return of land to displaced natives

and an elaborate land survey to be held in the Hill Tracts. But the accord failed to create the national consensus desired by the AL government.

And peace in the region remains illusive till today. During the last 13 years, there were, if at all, half-hearted attempts to execute the accord in the area, and Shantu Larma continues to put the onus on the government for the present state of affairs. "The politicians have committed on paper, but up till now there has been a lack of initiative in implementing the accord," said Shantu Larma, president of PCJSS, at a conference in Dhaka on November 29, 2010. The conflict is far from over.

Reports say, at least 300 people were killed and around 900 others injured since the signing of the accord in 1997. Not only are the clashes causing colossal loss of lives and properties, they are also a major setback for peace in the area, each clash and each death makes the prospect of peace remote and uncertain.

Domination apart, there are political differences as well. Pundits say it is the political differences over the signing of the peace treaty that are the underlying cause of the continued conflict. PCJSS wants implementation of the accord while the UDFP stands against it.

After all these years of turmoil and uncertainty, we all wish to see the greener part of our beautiful country as a place of ethnic harmony. The population in the hills should be aware of the fact that it is their responsibility to keep their calm and make the region peaceful and allow congenial atmosphere for any development activities to be sustained. The country cannot move forward with one part ailing.

The government ought to come out with full support for addressing their grievances and the parties in Hill Tracts should also show their commitment in realising the ground reality. Peace and political stability are the prime need of the time to translate the dreams of development into reality.

MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR IS ASSISTANT EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

Needed: A hawk who can sing

M.J. AKBAR

SALMAN Bashir, Pakistan's foreign secretary, became fleetingly famous in Delhi when, after the last round of talks with his counterpart Nirupama Rao, he curled a lip and dismissed India's carefully prepared case against the Lashkar e Tayyaba, mentor of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, as "mere literature." Press reports indicate that he will be the next Pak high commissioner in India. Is that good news or bad?

Normally, hawks are not the best occupants of an embassy designed to either sow or cultivate that elusive and sometimes hallucinatory crop called peace. But since abnormality is the normal state of relations between India and Pakistan it makes sense to take a less obvious look at this appointment.

There are some indications that there could soon be a mild thaw on the Indo-Pak iceberg as both nations realise the futility of behaving like schoolchildren who have lost their marbles. At the moment of writing former Pakistan foreign minister Khurshid Kasuri is on an aggressive rapprochement mission in Delhi, in the fertile company of his friend and peace-activist Mani Shankar Aiyar.

Kasuri has been repeating his claim that if the lawyers' movement had not derailed Pervez Musharraf in March 2007, he would have invited Dr. Manmohan Singh over to Islamabad for a long chat and a grand

finale marked by a settlement on Kashmir, with an option for a review of the treaty after 15 years.

Foreign ministers tend to be far more optimistic after they leave office, but we should not discount such a confident assertion. A little buzz has risen that the next round of talks at Thimpu might produce the opening for larger initiatives.

India's Home Secretary G.K. Pillai told an audience in Delhi last week that paramilitary forces should be reduced by 25% in the Kashmir valley.

This is an era in the India-Pak dialogue when we need that unusual bird, a hawk who can sing. We know that Basheer can be a hawk when he wants to fly up. We will find out in Delhi whether he can sing as well.

It is true that within 24 hours he was hopping on his other leg, claiming that Pakistan had not done anything to bring the perpetrators of terrorism to justice, and was in fact indulging Hafiz Saeed and his like. But this sort of dance is familiar in the subcontinent's rhetoric: one leg moves deliberately to a different beat from the other.

One reason for Khurshid Kasuri's confidence is the fact that he was foreign minister of an army regime. It is axiomatic that the army will be guardian of hawks, so if the Musharraf-Kasuri Kashmir plan had the approval of general headquarters, then there is a chance that, at least in

theory, it might walk.

Alas, time is the enemy of theory. Pakistan has changed since the high noon of Kasuri's political career. Its extremists have shifted the discourse, most notably and recently through the assassination of Salman Taseer. It is unnecessary to name names, but Pakistan's liberals are in obvious retreat, because the state's security structure can no longer be guaranteed to protect. This is not all. There is widespread popular support for crucial, if not all, aspects of the kind of

Islamism propagated by the Jamaat e Islami.

Some sane commentators are articulating the thought that the fringe has morphed into the majority. There may be some exaggeration in this assessment, but the base of the fringe has visibly broadened. This is evident not only in the hero-worship of a murderer, but on television talk shows where the middle class sits in the audience.

Will the merchants of peace be able to persuade this decisively influential segment of Pakistan's political class that the "Jihad" in Kashmir should be abandoned before that "final victory" when their fantasy of a

Pakistani flag over Srinagar comes true? India-Pakistan relations cannot be structured through a blindfold, and even a marginal glimpse will reveal the interventionist power of this lobby. Governments cannot negotiate peace if their political class is not ready for it.

Any Indian or Pakistani envoy posted in Delhi or Islamabad must have the qualities of Janus, the Greek god whose two faces could look in different directions. He must have the capacity to calm tensions with his host, and the credibility to convince his own nation that he is not selling his people short.

There is always the possibility of a slip betwixt cup and lip in such appointments, but if Salman Bashir does reach Delhi, he would be perfectly suited to do the more important of his two responsibilities: reassure his audience back home that Pakistan's interests are in capable hands.

If there is going to be talk of peace, then Bashir needs a stronger shield protecting his back than the one protecting his front. This is an era in the India-Pak dialogue when we need that unusual bird, a hawk who can sing.

We know that Basheer can be a hawk when he wants to fly up. We will find out in Delhi whether he can sing as well.

M.J. AKBAR IS EDITOR, THE SUNDAY GUARDIAN, PUBLISHED FROM DELHI, INDIA ON SUNDAY, PUBLISHED FROM LONDON AND EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, INDIA TODAY AND HEADLINES TODAY.