

Commitments at Kunming

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THE recently held 9th Conference of the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) Forum, which focused on fostering closer economic cooperation among themselves, should be seen as a major initiative towards sub-regional cooperation in this region.

The event was hosted by the International Regional Cooperation Office, Foreign Affairs Office of Yunnan Province at Kunming, China on January 17-19. BCIM Forum was first initiated in Kunming in 1999 as part of an initiative by the civil society organisations of the four countries.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has served as its focal point in Bangladesh from the very inception of the initiative. Indeed, Professor Rehman Sobhan was one of the driving forces in establishing this Forum in 1999. The objective of this initiative was to explore opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation among four neighbours who remain linked by "the inheritance of history and compulsion of geography" as stated by Professor Rehman Sobhan.

The seven states of North East India and Yunnan Province in South West China had much to gain from this sub-regional cooperation. For Bangladesh, the interest was to access the benefits of BCIM cooperation through better connectivity and higher flows of trade in goods and services.

Emerging economic power houses of the twenty-first century, India and China, provided a window of opportunities for Bangladesh. Myanmar also provided opportunities for Bangladesh by way of joint exploitation of rich natural resources and trade and investment cooperation.

Since 1999, nine conferences were held in the participating four countries by turn -- in Kunming, New Delhi, Yangon/Nay Pyi Taw and

Dhaka. They identified a number of potential areas of cooperation among the countries of the region, such as economics and trade, trade facilitation, investment, culture, connectivity and tourism.

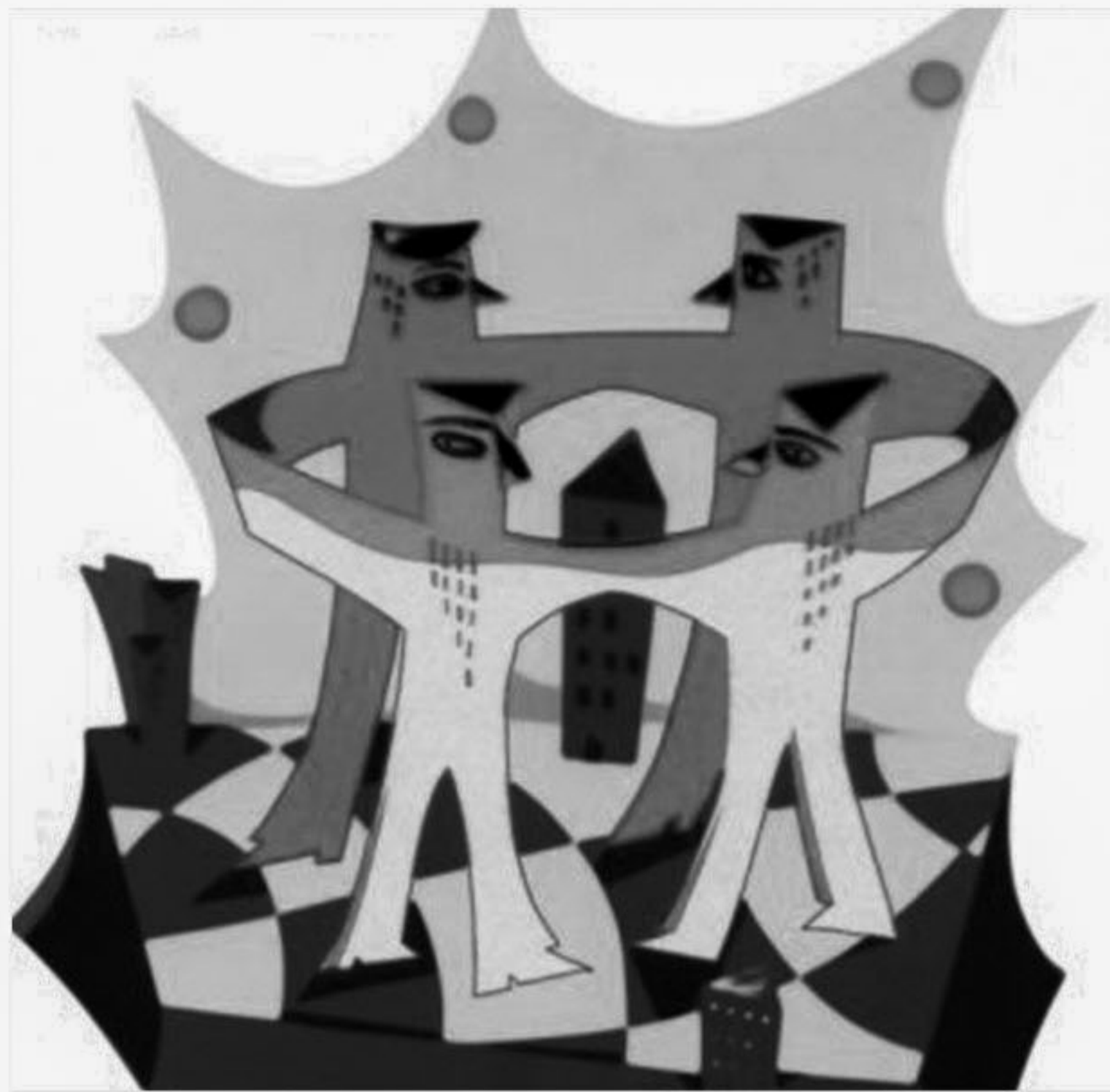
Bangladesh's interest in the Forum lies in the benefit it may reap from cooperation in each of these areas. The 9th Forum was particularly important for Bangladesh in view of the communiqué that was issued during the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to China in March 2010. The joint communiqué mentioned taking the BCIM process forward and establishing greater connectivity among the countries of the region.

The reflection of this commitment could be seen in the attendance at the 9th Forum of a high-powered five-member official delegation from Bangladesh led by the foreign secretary. The Bangladesh civil society team, which included a Member of Parliament, academics and business leaders, was led by Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD.

Focal organisations from other participating countries were International Regional Cooperation Office of the Yunnan Foreign Affairs Office (in Kunming), Institute of Chinese Studies (in India) and International Organization and Economic Department of Foreign Affairs Ministry of Union of Myanmar.

The Myanmar delegation was led by the deputy minister for foreign affairs, the Chinese delegation was led by the assistant minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indian delegation was led by former ambassador Eric Gonsalves, Member, Governing Body of the Centre for Policy Research. Each of these four delegations also included other high-level members representing the government, academics and apex bodies of the business organisations.

With participation of government representatives from Bangladesh, China and Myanmar the Forum



IMAGEZOO

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made a significant headway in terms of elevating the initiative from a predominantly Track-II status (civil society) one to a Track-I (government) one. This is an important departure.

The theme of this year's Conference was "Multi-track Approach: Programmes for Cooperation." The discussion at the Conference focused on regional

economic (trade) cooperation, regional connectivity infrastructure, exchange in social and cultural fields and institutional arrangement for smooth functioning of the Forum.

This initiative is extremely important for Bangladesh as cooperation with India and China will allow her to access large markets of Southern China, including Yunnan Province, and North East States of India

through reducing tariff, addressing non-tariff barriers and promoting trade facilitation.

The presentation on trade from India led to discussion on ways and means to enhance intra-country trade in the sub-region. The discussion also focused on locating and opening of new border trade routes and inclusion of trade in services covering tourism and energy. Participants agreed that trade among these four countries will flourish only when people, goods and vehicles can move across borders with minimum hassle and procedural obstacles. This would require development of a coherent transport system integrating all modes of transport.

Connectivity was perceived to be a critical aspect of BCIM cooperation. The keynote paper on connectivity, presented by Dr. M. Rahmatullah, Visiting Fellow, CPD, mentioned that the basic infrastructure and facilities to establish mutually beneficial inter and intra-regional transport linkages already existed along major possible routes. What was needed was political support.

He noted that follow-up actions would require revisiting of the existing routes, constructing and upgrading missing and weak links and undertaking transport facilitation measures for smooth movement of goods and vehicles across BCIM countries. The paper particularly focused on various possible surface routes that could connect BCIM countries keeping in view the transport cost, physical road condition and distance.

In the 8th BCIM Forum held in Myanmar in 2009, the representatives of the four countries agreed to hold a Car Rally between Kunming to Kolkata (K2K). The 9th meeting proposed to hold a route survey in 2011 and a Rally to take place in end-February 2012. It will hopefully coincide with the holding of the tenth Forum in India, perhaps in Kolkata.

Various routes for the Rally were proposed at the Forum; these will be finalised through discussion among relevant authorities.

A preparatory meeting for setting up a BCIM Business Council (BCIM-BC) was also held in Kunming. The main objective of this Business Council will be to build a platform to discuss ways to enhance trade and investment cooperation among these countries. A draft agreement, signed by representatives from the four participating countries, specifies modalities to implement this. All members also agreed to promote intra-regional tourism by jointly planning a number of activities.

Exchange of visits by teachers and students as well as joint academic projects were also proposed to improve cooperation in the area of education. To facilitate greater understanding among relevant stakeholders and to generate and promote knowledge about possibilities of cooperation in various areas, an MOU was also signed to launch a BCIM Newsletter.

As was noted earlier, the BCIM Forum, which began as a Track II initiative, is now gradually moving towards Track-I. At Kunming, all four countries had shown keen interest in taking the initiative forward by undertaking concrete steps. The BCIM initiative has been sustained for more than a decade now. With the commitment demonstrated in Kunming, the four countries are approaching a stage where many of the promising ideas of cooperation, which were articulated when the Forum was set up, have started to take a concrete shape.

However, to expedite this process, governments and the civil societies of the four countries will need to work hand in hand, do the required home work to identify the priority areas and pursue those towards concrete actions and initiatives.

The writer is Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Bangladesh, a country that contradicts the cliché

FRÉDÉRIC BOBIN

THE community centre, its corrugated iron walls set into a dirt floor, is jam-packed. It's collection day in Atalora, a village about 50 kilometres from Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. The "banker" is here, one hand on her accounts book and the other on her calculator, as she sits opposite about 30 women cloaked in their shawls. One after another, they get up and come to give a small wad of notes to the employee of the Grameen Bank, the "bank for the poor" devised by professor Mohammad Yunus, microcredit pioneer and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.

Outside, a cock is crowing. Taslima Begum hands over Tk.3,665 (37 euros) as repayment for the loan she took out to buy her fruit stall. Mofida, on the other hand, went into debt to put up a henhouse. Asia Begum opened a cosmetics and jewellery business. Just one figure sums it all up: 97% of the 8.3 million borrowers from the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh are women. "Now, my husband consults me on managing the family's affairs," says Asia Begum. "And I'm proud of that." The Grameen Bank is not the only one that prefers to deal with women, who are considered to be "safer" than men. The other microcredit institutions (Brac, Asa, etc.) do the same.

Bangladesh goes against the clichéd image. Here is a Muslim country -- or 90% Muslim -- where the women are the agents of a genuine silent revolution. From the remote villages to the palace in Dhaka, they can be seen. Sheikh Hasina is in her second term as prime minister. And if she were to

lose power at the next election, her place would be taken by another woman, Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition, who has already been at the head of government on two occasions.

Of course, these "two begums" derive their legitimacy from men. They are respectively the orphan and the widow of great men. Sheikh Hasina's father was none other than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, assassinated in 1975. And Khaleda Zia is the widow of Ziaur Rahman, another hero of independence, assassinated in 1981. Bangladesh is no exception to the dynastic approach at work throughout South Asia. Women there carry the torch for the clan as in Pakistan (Bhutto), India (Nehru-Gandhi) and Sri Lanka (Bandaranaike).

However, Bangladesh remains special, particularly in terms of its membership of the Muslim world. In contrast to Pakistan, where Benazir Bhutto scarcely sought to overthrow male hegemony in Islamabad, the government of Dhaka is much more open to women. Today, in addition to being at the head of the executive, women are leading important ministries such as the ministries for foreign affairs, the interior and agriculture.

And this is only the visible part of a more pervasive present in society as a whole. According to Unicef's figures, the rate of school attendance by girls at primary school in Bangladesh is higher than in Pakistan or India. The same applies to the literacy rate for adult women.

This special feature is related to the very circumstances of the foundation of Bangladesh, born

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in 1971 of a violent separation from Pakistan. The war was very bloody and, according to the official figures, left approximately 3 million dead from among the Bangladeshis -- most of them men. "So, the widows took responsibility for the country," explains Sultana Kamal, one of the most prominent feminists in Bangladesh.

This eruption of women into the public sphere only reinforced the secular dimension inscribed in the ideological "DNA" of the new state. In fact, Bangladeshi cultural nationalism, rather than Islam, is at the root of national identity. Of course, the country then experienced developments similar to those in Pakistan, where the army planted the seeds of Islamisation. The dying con-

vulsions of this tendency were seen in the explosion of fundamentalism in the early 1990s, culminating in the violent campaigns against the feminist writer Taslima Nasreen, who was forced into exile for "blasphemy."

However, the secular faction was able to resist. Heir to this tradition, the Awami League, currently in power in Dhaka, is carrying out a resolute campaign by the judiciary and the police against fundamentalist movements. Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister, who is herself the target of plans for Islamist attacks, has not yielded to pressure. It is in this context that in July 2010 Dhaka's High Court declared that the fatwas pronounced by village mullahs were "illegal." "The climate for women has become much more relaxed," acknowledges Sultana Kamal.

However, there is a snag. For even this government, led by the Awami League, champion of a secular approach, seems now to be attacking another sphere, non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Mohammad Yunus, who comes from this sector, is the target of a ferocious political conspiracy. The Grameen Bank, like other NGOs, has generously served the interests of women in Bangladesh. "It is sadly ironic to see women in power attacking a sphere which has made the advancement of women possible," laments Sara Hossein, Professor Yunus's lawyer, and erstwhile lawyer for Taslima Nasreen. Half of the Bangladeshi sky has its share of clouds.

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READERS' REACTIONS

Derailing Hena's case

Credibility has never been the most important asset of any profession in Bangladesh, unlike the rest of the world. Unethical behaviour is welcomed and rewarded in engineering, law, medical, accounting or any other profession. I hope the judiciary demonstrates its ethical steadfastness through Hena's case because it is the last bastion of a Bangladeshi civility.

Robin, California

Can the civil surgeon tell us what the cause of death was since there was no sign of any injury? When the whole nation was in shock -- our police personnel should have been more careful while reporting. In no way does this give our law enforcers a good image.

Dr Islam

BNP blamed for prices and shares chaos

The recent remarks of our PM signifies that her advisers are completely misguided her, as most of her advisers, unlike the elected senior and reputed leaders of her party, are technocrats who appear to live on the gulfs miles away from the people. Her advisers have alienated her from the people, from the realities, and she and her party may have to pay in ways worse than ever for the mishandling of serious issues such as peoples' livelihood and hard earned money.

Ms. Russel Talukder

Blaming the opposition and the media for their own failure to deliver is not only a sign of inefficiency but also of weakness of this government. Sheikh Hasina came to power with an absolute majority. But there are always some inherent dangers in the absoluteness of power, particularly in democracy. Because the love of power is like the indigence of liquor, it intoxicates the partaker, the consequences being the loss of control over speech and action.

AK Shamsuddin

Bangabandhu . . . under posthumous pressure

The article over exaggerates and disregards the very basis of Zia's popularity as well as the progress of the country made from a bottomless basket during his tenure. The extreme political view of the author will only misguide the nation. The many events that made Mujib's regime unpopular was not only among opposition political leaders but also those like Malik Ukil, Tofail who were very much from Mujib's own political party.

But the topic chosen has its own importance in writing a proper history of a leader and his role in Independence and his dreams.

Nazrul Islam