

Rajapaksa's visit

Boosting South Asian cooperation

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's three-day visit to Bangladesh can properly be looked at as a boost to bilateralism. The fact that as many as five memoranda of understanding have been signed --- in such crucial areas as trade, agriculture, fisheries, vocational education and science and culture testifies to the various possibilities of cooperation open before the two countries. As part of South Asia, indeed as members of SAARC, Colombo and Dhaka have been significant players in the region. The requirement now is for them to carry forward the spirit of bilateralism in a way that will further strengthen the links among SAARC nations.

The five MoUs are certainly an assertion of the way Bangladesh-Sri Lanka ties are poised to develop. The expectation is that these MoUs will take relations between the two countries to new heights of bilateralism at an active level. In this context, President Rajapaksa's emphasis on the need for strong political relations is a matter to be pondered by the leadership of the two countries. The president's discussions with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina focused necessarily on combating terrorism, which is just as well given the difficulties both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have faced as a result of extremism, albeit at different levels. Cooperation in dealing with and snuffing out terrorism in the two countries can be looked upon as a test case, the results of which could be applied to tackling terrorism in the SAARC region as a whole. There is too the matter of food security which Dhaka and Colombo, in league with other countries in the region, should be giving serious consideration to.

An all-important issue for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka is establishing direct air and marine connectivity, a point pertinently raised by the Bangladesh prime minister. Such a step will not only be a spur to greater people-to-people links but also yield encouraging results through promoting trade between the two nations. At a time when the nations of Europe and the Americas are exploring newer grounds of economic cooperation, it is vital that twenty six years after the founding of SAARC, the countries of South Asia break new ground in economic and political cooperation before they can break bread together.

Traffic gridlock horrifying

Tokenism will not do

Our traffic problem is more due to lack of management than oft discussed structural weaknesses. This is one sector where the government has been facing the toughest of challenges. Frankly, poor management of traffic is fast turning out into the governments Achilles' heels.

So far various measures were put into operation but these fizzled out as soon as they were attempted to be enforced. Steps taken so far were introduction of three-lane system in main thoroughfares, operating electronic signals, withdrawal of buses and minibuses more than 15 years old, enforcing use of seat-belts, helmets, barring people from using cell phones while driving and having the pedestrians take footbridges or underpasses. The main reason of the moves drawing a blank was lack of adequate homework, flawed planning and above all very poor management.

It is obvious that apart from some short-lived adhoc moves, the authorities seemed to have their eyes set on long and midterm solutions. If they would have concentrated on some immediate short term measures they could have regulated the traffic to a point of public tolerance.

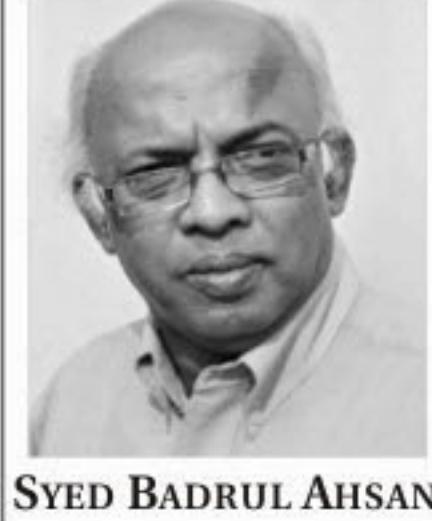
In this category fall adequate parking spaces, going underground and high-rise, ordering the unfit vehicles out of the streets, linking it to import of new fleet of transport, and clearing out the pavements off small businesses. Phasing out rickshaws and prohibition of stoppages of vehicles at undesignated points could also be important steps in this direction.

Traffic management and implementation of rules need supervised work on the ground level both to infuse efficiency as well as to fight petty corruption which is rampant.

Management skills of the ground traffic personnel ought to be raised and strict enforcement of rules ensured with no compromise at any level. Awareness campaigns may be introduced round the year to educate people on traffic rules instead of occasional traffic weeks which leave no impression whatsoever.

GROUND REALITIES

Diplomats carrying the torch in 1971



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

APRIL is that time of year when we recall the brave men who carried the torch for the future in 1971. Among those men who reassured us, despite all the uncertainty associated with a war we never sought but were burdened with by Pakistan, were K.M. Shehabuddin and Amjadul Haq.

They were young, they were junior diplomats at the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi when the Pakistan occupation army launched its genocide in what was then East Pakistan. Neither they nor the seventy five million people of Bangladesh knew at the time if or when Bangladesh would become a free state. And yet Shehabuddin and Haq did the unimaginable: they repudiated Pakistan on April 6, 1971.

Go back in time. Your sense of history will inform you that when Shehabuddin and Haq revolted, the Mujibnagar government-in-exile had not yet taken shape. No one knew where Tajuddin Ahmed was at that point. There was simply no trace of Syed Nazrul Islam or Mansoor Ali or A.H.M Quamruzzaman.

For that matter, the world did not know if Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had made his way out of Dhaka or had been abducted by the Pakistan army. At a time when reports of widespread atrocities in Bangladesh were filtering out to the outside world, it was quite possible that Bangabandhu was dead, at the hands of the Pakistan army.

This morning, therefore, it is our moral responsibility to salute K.M. Shehabuddin and Amjadul Haq for the sheer bravery they demonstrated in early April 1971. Their act opened a window. They informed the world that Bangladesh, even as it waited for its parameters to take shape, was preparing to go on a diplomatic offensive.

That battle was carried many miles further when Hossain Ali, Pakistan's deputy high commissioner in Calcutta, turned his back on Pakistan on April 18, a day after the formation of the Mujibnagar government, and with 65 Bengali officers and employ-

ees of the mission, switched allegiance to Bangladesh. Forty years on, it is our singular pride to recall that seminal moment when Hossain Ali formally hoisted the Bangladesh flag in Calcutta and proceeded forth along the route set on April 6 by Shehabuddin and Amjadul Haq.

All these years after what truly

families parents, siblings and others were in the occupied land and could easily be put through horrible suffering by Pakistan's soldiers. Human frailties are natural. All too often, it is the probable consequences of our actions which stay our hand. And we do not go forth into the region of the unknown.

Brave Bengali diplomats plunged into the dark in their sheer belief that at the end of it all there surely was light somewhere.



DAVID MADISON

a momentous year for us, it is time to enlighten the young as it is time to remind those of our generation suffering from selective amnesia of the superhuman efforts expended by Bengali warriors on various fronts toward highlighting the national struggle for freedom before the world. Bengali diplomats played a pivotal role in that struggle.

You admire their sense of patriotism. More than that, you keep reminding yourself of the grave risks they put themselves and their families to by rejecting the state of Pakistan at a time when none of us was sure when freedom would dawn or if it would dawn at all. Their larger

But these brave Bengali diplomats plunged into the dark in their sheer belief that at the end of it all there surely was light somewhere. As Pakistan's vice consul in New York, A.H. Mahmood Ali could have held himself back from going over to Bangladesh. He did not do that. On April 25, he quit the Pakistan foreign service and allied himself with the Bangladesh cause. Do not forget that Ali, Shehabuddin, Haq and Hossain Ali were all young. Note too the idealism in them, the same that spurred A.M.A. Muhith, economic counselor at Pakistan's embassy in Washington, into rebellion against Pakistan on 30 June.

The Golden Geese in limbo

M. SHAFIULLAH

EVEN with UN, US, EU sanctions on him, Nato bombings and US missiles falling on military targets, Col. Gaddafi lives on. He unleashed his war machine in full fury on Libyans who, he claims, "love him." According to the UN Secretary-General, to date half a million migrants from the oil rich country have crossed into neighbouring states for safety.

35,600 Bangladeshis returned home shattered and in tears, falling victim to organised looting by Gaddafi's hoodlums while fleeing into neighbouring countries. Nobody

knows the fate of the 30,000 left behind in war zones. Our hearts go out to them, particularly to those in Misrata which is under relentless shelling, and the Bangladesh Embassy staffs in Tripoli.

The returnees crossed the border empty-handed, which was but natural under the prevailing civil war.

Most of the migrant workers went to the oil rich country on borrowed money. Half-way through their term they were forced to return home. Life must go on for them and families, but how? Gaddafi is fighting an open-ended war with his people. There is no immediate prospect for the workers to go back.

There seems to be a silver lining in the horizon for the destitute returnees. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment requested the World Bank Dhaka Office on March 28 to advance a loan of \$30 million to reimburse airfare of

10,000 migrant workers to IOM, which will cost \$10 million. As a member country Bangladesh is meeting its obligation to IOM. The Organization, in fact, lifted nearly 27,000 out of the estimated 35,000 returnees. The balance amount -- \$20 million is expected to be disbursed among the returnees as subsistence allowance.

A few observations in this context come up here. Out of approximately Tk. 4000 crore in the Expatriates Welfare Fund, about Tk. 1000 crore

has been diverted to float the Expatriates Welfare Bank. With Tk. 3000 crore in the reserve fund what is the rationale behind borrowing money from the World Bank with interest?

Although the initial response of the World Bank is positive, the Bank obviously will take its own time to decide and allocate the requested fund. Secondly, the Bank wishes to channel the loan through the IOM for the sake of transparency, proper accountability and urgency to assist the migrants. The lead ministry, however, holds the other view, which is to distribute the money through the Expatriate Welfare Bank that will be formally launched on April 20.

It would be a good idea to start the Bank with a bang, but won't the new government bank have teething problems? How will a new institution with

no branches reach out to the returnees? Subsistence allowance to the returnees can be provided immediately from the amount readily available under the Welfare Fund through the networks of selected banks. In that event the waiting time to get the World Bank loan can be minimised to benefit the affected migrants. The World Bank loan received, as and when, can replenish the Welfare Fund if it is exhausted in the process of meeting the returnees' needs.

The Golden Geese will have to wait until their habitat is cleared of Gaddafi's men before they can lay eggs in Libya.

Ministries may need to turn to the Gulf War repatriation and compensation process. Perhaps it would not be out place to refresh the memory of the decision makers of today on how the sudden human crisis was addressed in 1990.

The Ministries of Overseas Employment and Foreign Affairs had before them experience of the Gulf War repatriation of 1990 and compensation to the migrants. In a nutshell, a comprehensive list of 65,000 refugees was made in Amman camps through assistance of about 100 educated migrants, while flights were worked out and arranged by IOM. Migrants did the job enthusiastically under the supervision of a three member Foreign Office Team, of which the writer was the group leader.

Each flight captain was given a passenger list. At the end of the repa-

triation the whole list was sent to the Labour Ministry and Foreign Office. Thereupon, a case for the migrants was lodged with the United Nations Compensation Claim (UNCC). After skilful and delicate negotiations, hard work and thorough verification, each worker was compensated with \$3,000 to \$4,000 according to the criteria set by UNCC. In the whole process of repatriation no ministerial visits with retinues were called for. Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud and A.F.S. Mustafizur Rahman guided the team from the headquarters.

The repatriation is still not over. More migrants are crossing borders. The Libyan National Council (LNC) has been exempted from the UN sanctions, and efforts are underway to provide LNC access to Libyan Sovereign Fund frozen abroad to meet its expenditure as well as to export oil from regions under its control.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was adopted to protect civilians from Gaddafi's forces, but the secretary-general admitted that half a million have been forced out of Libya already. It would be legitimate for the affected migrants' countries to ask for compensation from the Libyan Sovereign Fund under UN, US and EU administration, or from any other fund.

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The writer is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantrareq@yahoo.co.uk

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 20

1526

The last ruler of the Lodi Dynasty, Ibrahim Lodi was defeated and killed by Babur in the First Battle of Panipat.

1862

Louis Pasteur and Claude Bernard complete the first pasteurization tests.

1876

The April Uprising - a key point in the new Bulgarian history, leading to the Russo-Turkish War and the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman slavery, as an independent part of the Ottoman Empire.

1902

Pierre and Marie Curie refine radium chloride.

1961

Failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion of US-backed troops against Cuba.

1971

Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni, Sirajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, A.S.M. Abdur Rob and Shahjahan Siraj formed Bangladesh Liberation Force which is distinct from the Mukti Bahini and beyond the control of the Mujibnagar government.