

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

## High level Indo-Bangla interactions

*The historic opportunity shouldn't be lost*

WE see a flurry of high level visits from India lately. Its External Affairs Minister SM Krishna is already in Dhaka. His visit will be followed by those of Home Minister P Chidambaram, and President, Indian National Congress and chairperson of ruling national alliance Sonia Gandhi culminating in the much-awaited trip of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh. Even though Sonia Gandhi will be on a private visit to attend an autism-related programme, this can have an important bearing on Indo-Bangla ties.

It is, therefore, heartening for Bangladesh to note that India is according a high place of importance to her relations with us. We find ourselves on the priority list of Indian external and regional affairs radar screen. Bilaterally, this is a matter of enormous satisfaction for us.

India has been rather pre-occupied with her regional power status and taken up by its relations with China and Pakistan that Bangladesh felt being on the sidelines of India's consciousness. The change of emphasis is welcome.

In Bangladesh the feeling has been not only one of trust deficit but also that of a shortfall in mutuality. India being a much larger neighbour and a bigger economy, we have to say that the expectations from her have been that much greater.

One-and-a-half years have gone by since Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. They took momentous decisions in specific areas as embodied through a joint communiqué. But little or no tangible forward movement in terms of implementing the decisions has taken place thus far. And this is where a qualitative change is expected to occur with the visits of high Indian dignitaries to Dhaka providing a definitive impetus to the momentum of mutual cooperation.

We believe India would be fully respectful of Bangladesh's sensibilities and address her concerns on a sustained basis so that rhetoric may not overtake the quest for real and tangible progress like in the past.

Finally, let the historic opportunity presented through a clear expression of political will at the highest level between the two countries to forge ahead in bilateral relations and people to people contact be not lost.

## Illegal housing projects

*Prompter action from Rajuk necessary*

DEFYING High Court (HC) directive to the contrary, illegal housings projects have been displaying their billboards. Alongside it, work of developing the lands as well as erection of structures have also been going on in full swing on wetlands and public places. All this has been happening under the very nose of the administration and of the Rajdhani Unnoyon Kartripakkha (Rajuk), in particular. It needs mentioning that the latter is directly responsible for taking action against such illegal projects.

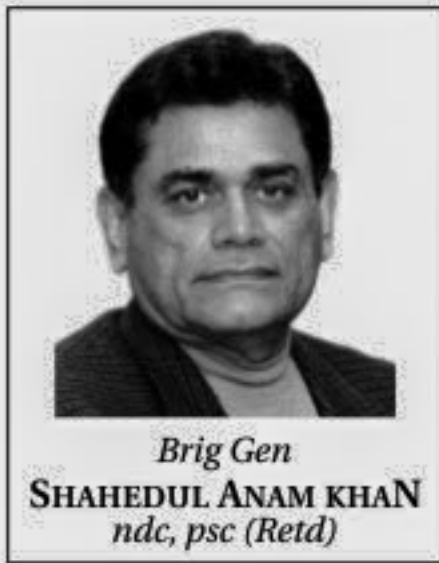
Surely, Rajuk is learnt to have taken action against eight such projects in and around the capital city by removing their signboards, knocking down walls as well as structures in some cases.

Questions remain as to how such illegal projects could run so long after the HC's having issued its orders to stop the work of some 77 unauthorised projects. According to a report, Rajuk action covered eight projects in Tongi, Kaliganj, Gazipur, and Khilkhet areas. But what stopped it from taking action earlier? Obviously, the finger would be pointed at Rajuk for its failure to act in time. Apart from this, we are yet to know what action has been taken against other projects out of the 77 that HC mentioned in its directive.

Unauthorised projects like these are not only openly cheating unsuspecting public with advertisements, they are also destroying ecologically vital wetlands and occupying public spaces. That calls for stronger and more proactive role of the administration, especially from Rajuk.

We appreciate Rajuk's recent move against illegal housing projects. But to be effective, it should play a stronger and more proactive role. That needs beefing up Rajuk's technical and manpower strength and bettering its image

# Handling the intelligence agencies



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

INVESTIGATIONS into the cases of Chittagong arms recovery and the grenade attack on AL meeting on 21 August 2004, have prima-

facie established the complicity of the NSI and DGFI, in both the incidents.

This certainly calls for a reappraisal of the working and utilisation of state agencies, particularly those that work to help protect national security and prevent hostile intelligence from preying on our assets. What we notice most regrettably is that in these two instances it is the very security of the state that was put at stake by those that are supposed to help guarantee it.

The arms recovery established the speculation that Bangladesh was a secure transit route of illegal arms transfer, and even worse, it proved the accusations of the strategic and security community in India that the Indian dissidents were being sustained, if not directly sponsored, by Bangladesh, given that it is now very clear as to who the arms were meant for. Neither did it help in defending our credentials as a country dedicated to curbing proliferation of illegal arms, or that of a friendly neighbour who was doing its part to prevent its territory from being used as a springboard for the hostile elements of the neighbouring country, against that neighbour.

What is most worrisome is that,

reportedly, the arms and ammunitions were procured from another friendly country by these two agencies. Could this have been possible without the knowledge of their controlling authorities? It does no credit to the country or the government of the day to suggest that the NSI and DGFI were working on their own volition.

The 21 August grenade attack was a most dastardly episode and only Providence knows what might have happened if the intended targets were affected. We saw for the first time that a lethal area weapon was used and

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that too of service category, and, by all indications, the attack was carried out by well-trained persons. And what we had expressed in these very columns after the attack and several times since then have been borne out by the investigation subsequently.

It is very important for us to understand the significance of the two incidents. Each in its own way had the potential of impacting on the political and security scenario of the country and the region with severe long term implications. It is a deeply distressing thought that these agencies were

working to fulfill the political objectives of a government, or its strategic objective, with internal as well as regional and international ramifications.

Thus we are compelled to revisit the issue of the role of the intelligence agencies, or to be more specific, address the fundamental question, that of appropriate utilisation of those organisations whose resources are geared entirely towards the security of the state. Of the two intelligence agencies, the DGFI has come under scrutiny and have been more severely

criticised than the other. And on this we would like to dwell for now.

It is worth repeating what we had said in this very column in March 2009. The DGFI was used as a political apparatus by the military rulers to establish and expand their political clout, to help set up political parties, to bribe politicians and to make new parties and break the old ones. It was the natural inclination of the military rulers to fall back on an agency they thought they could trust fully, these being banned by persons of their choosing.

But regrettably, the elected political governments too, over the years since 1991, have continued to use the DGFI in the same vein, only more so. The prime ministers, being the defence minister too, found it a very handy tool. The transgression of its TOR by the DGFI is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it entirely the doings of the military intelligence unit. While there was no scope for it to dabble in or influence politics, and in spite of having no specific role as such, it was nonetheless made to get involved in internal politics in much the same manner as was done by the ISI in Pakistan from the mid 1970s.

An intelligence unit will function only as efficiently as it is tasked. It has been so with all other intelligence resources available in the country. Most of them have been used to deter, and attack opponents of the government for purely partisan interest, and as investigations have revealed, have also been involved in cross border issues, with potentials for devastating fallout. Had that not been so we could have avoided or preempted 21 Aug 2004 and the 17 August 2005 country-wide bomb blasts.

In view of the tangle the intelligence agencies have gotten into, this is an opportunity for the PM and her security advisors to reassess the working of the intelligence agencies and, more importantly, ensure that they are made free of political influence and are oriented towards the interest of the state rather than that of the party in power.

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# The Delhi-Dhaka distance

MIHIR S SHARMA

A hundred years ago, the British moved India's capital from Calcutta to Delhi, and, by siting government here in these baked northern plains, in a town traditionally oriented to the dangerous northwest, subtly warped India's foreign policy today. Sometimes it seems as if everyone in Delhi is a Pakistan expert, with even those who grew up in the south able to recite bits of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and discuss the Hudood Ordinances. And, all the time, there's another neighbour to the east, almost as large and much more friendly, that New Delhi seems to have its back to permanently.

When the prime minister said that 25 per cent of Bangladeshis are "anti-Indian," he was just repeating tired old tropes that have informed too much of New Delhi's policy-making. It isn't just that the Jamaat-e-Islami -- which Dr Singh identified as the focus of anti-India -- emotion has never gotten more than 6 per cent of the vote. It is that the secular space there is expanding, not contracting, signalled by the decision last year by Bangladesh's supreme court striking down a constitutional amendment that, it said, infringed on its secular character. It is into this struggle for Bangladesh's soul -- not a new one, but one at a very crucial moment -- that Dr Singh's words have dropped, betraying New Delhi's apparent lack of understanding of how dynamic the situation is there.

Forty years after its formation, the scars of Bangladesh's early years have not yet faded. The struck-down amendment legitimised the actions of Ziaur Rahman's blood-soaked military dictatorship; Zia's rise to power followed the brutal murder of Bangladesh's first president, Mujibur Rahman, and most of his family. This is living history: the Bangladesh National Party, led by Zia's widow, is on the streets right now, leading a nationwide hartal against an Awami League government led by Mujib's

daughter. Mujib's surviving murderers were executed only last year. Zia's son was controversially charged on Sunday with planning a grenade assault on a 2004 Sheikh Hasina rally. The country remains deeply divided; even what you're wearing can be an unobvious political signal. Nehru -- sorry, Mujib jackets -- are the Awami League's, and safari suits are the BNP's. And it is with this backdrop of division that the country's secular character, its orientation towards India, and the role of the Jamaat-e-Islami -- which earned hatred in those distant days of liberation, for siding with the Pakistan army against the Mukti Bahini -- are all slowly being worked through.

The problem with the prime minister's words is not just the faulty, exaggerated numbers; it is also that saying the "the political landscape can change at any time" betrays a fatalism about Bangladesh's future. It seems that New Delhi may still not understand that relations with Dhaka must be improved till which political dispensation rules there is irrelevant to India's security and prosperity.

Though at least, you could think, the government understands that this period of the Awami League's unquestioned majority is one that India must take advantage of. Perhaps the PM was trying to convey that sense of urgency? Except that, since Sheikh Hasina's landmark visit to India in January 2010, an enormous amount of nothing has been achieved. Five joint agreements were signed then, focusing on cooperation against Islamist terror and on electric-

ity generation. Others, on boundary demarcation and trade transit, were being worked out.

And then India demonstrated not urgency, but its exact opposite. For each item, it appeared that the Bangladeshi side created the foundations for further cooperation, making what was already agreed-on happen. And, each time, the Indian side failed to reciprocate, or did so with sloth and delay. India postponed boundary discussions for almost a year after Hasina's visit, for example.

As for trade and transit issues, India's attitude has been abysmal.

When Bangladesh's commerce minister snapped, after meeting Anand Sharma, that the concessions being offered were "peanuts," his departure from normal diplomatic protocol was understandable. Sharma had just implied that a minor hike in Bangladesh's textile quota was a giant favour. It wasn't a fraction of what Bangladesh had a right to expect.

The Tamil Nadu textile lobby, in particular, based around Coimbatore and Salem, has been particularly vocal in demanding continued protection from Bangladeshi imports, and seems to be able to twist India's trade policy -- and its foreign policy -- around its little finger. Various tariff and non-tariff barriers come in the way of freer trade with India's neighbours, and that's just the way New Delhi likes -- it but it's petty and shortsighted, and hurts us above all.

Sheikh Hasina has to face re-election in two years. She cannot sink political capital into this relationship endlessly without reciprocation. So

fixated is New Delhi on the western border, that the benefits of looking east are continually forgotten: not just access to natural gas reserves, or to electricity for the power-starved belt of eastern India, but also the possibility that India's Northeast, long short of routes to the outside world, will gain affordable transit rights to the sea, completely transforming its economy. For the rest of India, too, longed for integration with the markets of Southeast Asia cannot happen if we have to go around Bangladesh to get there.

The prime minister's office has announced that he will visit Dhaka in September. Much must be done before then. Most importantly, New Delhi's mindset must change. India needs to go the extra mile, ensuring market access for Bangladesh, visibly demonstrating enthusiasm for détente, and not just on our terms. India's Bangladesh policy must be liberated from those who imagine the country as attitudinally frozen in time, when it is unfreezing itself quite ably. Its economy is booming; its human development indicators are better than India's, when income is accounted for; and it is boiling with cultural expression. (Its culture of photography, for example, is the most robust in South Asia.)

But they don't quote Faiz enough. So they will never, perhaps, have quite enough mindspace here in New Delhi, where poets from the other Punjab are worshipped, and inherited nostalgia for lost homes on that side of the border colours every political interaction. Another common culture, one perhaps richer, definitely shared by more Indians, spreads across the eastern border -- but in this Punjabi-dominated city, that will never quite give relations the shove they need.

Perhaps the time has come to outsource Bangladesh foreign policy to Mamata Banerjee? At least the railway connections might get built.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 7

- 1456**  
A retrial verdict acquits Joan of Arc of heresy 25 years after her death.
- 1770**  
The Battle of Larga between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire takes place.
- 1807**  
Napoleonic Wars: the Peace of Tilsit between France, Prussia and Russia ends the Fourth Coalition.
- 1937**  
Sino-Japanese War: Battle of Lugou Bridge Japanese forces invade Beijing, China.
- 1941**  
World War II: U.S. forces land in Iceland, taking over from an earlier British occupation.
- 1980**  
Institution of sharia in Iran.
- 2005**  
Bomb attacks on London. A series of bomb attacks on London's transport network kills more than 30 people and injures about 700 others.