

Indian premier's visit

Our expectations

WE look to the forthcoming visit of the Indian premier to Bangladesh as much more than just a visit by a leader of a big neighbour. It is a historic visit and has all the potentials of becoming a major turning point in the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India with wider implications for the region. For us there is every reason to look expectantly to the visit, and to what it might deliver for Bangladesh.

It has been 20 months since the signing of the joint communiqué, but there has been very little of substance coming from India since then, a view that is shared also by many in India.

It is Bangladesh that took the first stride towards improvement of ties with India.

As for security, Bangladesh has gone the whole hog to address India's concern.

There is a lot at stake for Bangladesh in the success of the forthcoming visit of Mr. Singh because, for us, failure is not an option. And to our mind a good deal of the success depends on how India addresses the longstanding issues of Bangladesh's concern, which mainly are: border issues, trade, transit, water sharing, particularly the Teesta waters, and security.

As for the border issues we understand that there is progress as far as enclaves are concerned but the 6.5 kilometres still remains un-demarcated, which should be finally resolved. And we do not want any more Bangladeshi victims of BSF firing on our borders.

As for trade, we understand that the negative list has been shortened, but we would like it to be done away with altogether.

There are mixed signals on water issues; as the lower riparian we would expect that our concerns would be addressed vigorously.

As for transit, our intentions are very clear. However, there is need for the infrastructural development and for which we expect Indian investment through grant or easy term loans and guaranteed tariff.

On its part Bangladesh has delivered. And we have done it with an open heart. The onus is now on India for making the visit a success, a success that will have far wider ramifications than merely Bangladesh-India relations. Anything short of visionary actions on the part of India will be highly disappointing for us.

The battle for Libya

It is yet to be over

THE Gaddafi era is over. The bigger truth is that the National Transitional Council is yet to be in full control of the country. With battles still being fought, especially around places like Gaddafi's birthplace Sirte and the town of Bani Walid, one is not sure if there will be a peaceful end to the struggle for power soon. The deposed Libyan leader has not been making things any easier by urging his loyalists to keep up their struggle against people he derisively refers to as rats. And the latest decision by the NTC to hold back on moving its interim government to Tripoli for a week only confirms the continued volatility of the situation.

Meanwhile, the recent meeting of western leaders in Paris, styled as friends of Libya, to work out a plan for the battle-torn country's transition to democracy appears to have raised a lot more questions than it has answered. For one thing, a fairly large number of Arab nations either stayed away from the meeting or sent low-level functionaries as observers. For another, the African Union, in the setting up of which Gaddafi played a leading role, was not enthused by the conference. Additionally, the fact that Nato has been aiding the anti-Gaddafi opposition, actively through dropping bombs on Gaddafi's forces, has not quite endeared the NTC to many in Libya and outside. Comparisons are already being made with conditions in Iraq after US and British forces occupied the country and toppled Saddam Hussein's government.

The Libyan situation thus remains fluid. It is now for the global powers and the UN to devise a pragmatic programme for Libya's future. Elections and constitutional rule in the country are certainly the objective, but before that Libyans must be persuaded to believe that the NTC exercises legitimate authority, that it can and will stabilise Libya by bring-

RESTORING COMMONSENSE INTO INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS (PART-1)

Graduating diplomacy and politics into the 21st century

REHMAN SOBHAN



IT is quite remarkable, almost unbelievable, that the forthcoming Indo-Bangladesh summit on September 6-7, 2011, is the first such bilateral summit since the historic visit by Indira Gandhi for the Dhaka for the first summit with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in March 1972. Other Indian Prime Ministers have since visited Dhaka but not for a bilateral summit. Over these years, Indo-Bangladesh relations have been caught in a time warp set sometime in the 1970s if not further back. This relationship needs to finally come of age by moving its discourse into the 21st century. Diplomacy embedded in the past means we are solving problems which were put on the table 40 years ago. Hopefully, the imminent summit between Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Manmohan Singh promises to move this relationship forward and in the process, resolve a number of outstanding problems which have constrained Indo-Bangladesh relations over these many years.

Most of the problems being addressed in the forthcoming summit were on the way to resolution 35 years ago when the regime change following the murder of Bangabandhu interrupted the process. In the wake of the second summit in New Delhi between Bangabandhu and Indira Gandhi in May 1974. Dr. Kamal Hossain, the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and his counterparts, Sardar Swaran Singh and later Mr. Y.B. Chavan, were intensively exploring constructive solutions to the problems of the maritime boundaries, enclaves, adverse possession of territory and demarcation of the land boundaries. The growing imbalance in trade, in favour of India, was being addressed through the meetings of the Indian and Bangladesh Planning Commissions. We recognised that India's larger, more diversified economy, was likely to export a good deal more to Bangladesh than we could export to India. To reduce this imbalance in trade we had conceived of several joint-venture projects, such as producing urea, sponge iron and cement, in plants to be located in Bangladesh which were designed to add value to our natural resources, thereby diversifying and significantly enhancing our exports to India.

Whilst Bangladesh had agreed to the trial operation of the Farakka Barrage, during this phase of the interim agreement a significant share of the flow was assured for Bangladesh. In a climate of cooperation, based on actual experience with operating the barrage, it was envisaged that a long term agreement would be worked out which could be mutually beneficial to both sides. At the suggestion of Dr. B.M. Abbas, during the first summit in March 1972, it was agreed that a Joint Rivers Commission would be set up. The Commission was intended to be an high powered and active organisation designed to address the issue of how to optimise the use of our shared waters which it was envisaged would unite rather than divide our countries.

This promise of a new era of cooperation between India and Bangladesh was informed by our shared enterprises of liberating Bangladesh from the genocidal occupation of our land by the armed forces of Pakistan. However, it was recognised that such sentiments of camaraderie and gratitude could soon dissipate if Indo-Bangladesh relations were not built on more durable foundations. Bangabandhu was extraordinarily sensitive about the potentially unequal relationship between a country which surrounded us on all sides, was the upper riparian for 58 shared rivers, had an overwhelming larger, stronger, more diverse economy and was militarily much more powerful than us. He envisaged that such a

relationship needed to be handled with great skill where Bangladesh needed to take full advantage of the initial goodwill which mediated our relationship. Failure to establish mutuality of benefit would generate resentment within Bangladesh over the hegemonic relationship which was inherent in any dealings between two neighbours of severely unequal dimensions in all areas.

Keeping Bangladesh's newly acquired sense of sovereignty in mind Bangabandhu made it a precondition for Indira Gandhi's first visit to Dhaka that this should be preceded by the withdrawal of the Indian armed forces involved in the liberation of Bangladesh. Such was the authority which Bangabandhu exercised in his relationship with Indira Gandhi that she, without hesitation, acceded to his request. In March 1972, within 3 months of the surrender of the Pakistani forces, many of us who are still alive, witnessed the hand over by the Commander of the Indian forces of the flags of the Indian regiments then in Bangladesh, to Bangabandhu.



Whilst Bangladesh may legitimately expect more generous treatment from a friendly but larger neighbour we should be prepared to get not what we deserve but what we can negotiate. We will, accordingly, need to be well prepared and capable of negotiating harder but constructively with the goal of seeking mutually beneficial settlements rather than prolonging disputes through inaction.

In that historic and emotion charged moment in the National Stadium in Dhaka, all Bangladeshis were suffused with pride at this reaffirmation of our nationhood.

Indira Gandhi recognised the extraordinary authority that Bangabandhu exercised over the people of Bangladesh and the respect he commanded amongst the global community. She believed that he could make and keep agreements and was thus willing to go the extra mile to accommodate his requests. This is not to say that even at that stage Indo-Bangladesh relations were not without their problems or that various elements in India were not seeking to take advantage of our vulnerabilities. What was, however, evident was that a climate prevailed, built upon mutual respect between two leaders and two peoples, which was conducive to solving outstanding problems. Provided Bangladesh did its homework and could bargain with intelligence and confidence, most of the problems which remain unresolved after a lapse of two decades or are about to be resolved in the forthcoming summit, could have been resolved 35 years ago.

The assassin's bullets transformed what promised to be an amicable relationship into an essentially adversarial relationship. Whilst attempts were made by the regimes which held office between 1975-1996 to resolve some of these problems, the climate for negotiations mostly tended to be conflictual. The regimes which ruled Bangladesh in this period believed that India was basically a hostile neighbour rather than a prospective friend. This perception of

India by Bangladesh's leaders became a self-fulfilling prophecy as India became equally recalcitrant and eventually indifferent in its approach towards resolving mutual problems.

Bangladesh's approach was derived, in part, from the nature of our adversarial domestic politics where confrontation with India was seen as a point of differentiation with the political forces who were seen as 'Pro-Indian'. This intrusion of Indo-Bangladesh relations into the fault lines of our domestic politics has made the resolution of outstanding problems with India all the more difficult. One side feels compelled to demonstrate its muscularity in standing up to India whilst the other side remains inhibited in resolving problems because it may have adverse electoral consequences. This meant, in practice, that on all outstanding issues under discussion, Bangladesh's negotiators tended to adopt a maximilist position which they remained unwilling to modify lest they be seen as being soft towards India. This negotiating position would

and on other shared waters. Here it would be sensible for her to address further water related issues within a longer term framework of cooperation covering all our shared waters. This could also include the issue of the Tipaimukh Dam which for the moment seems, for domestic reasons in India, to be at a standstill. It would be even more sensible if these negotiations could at some stage be broadened to include Nepal, the source of the Ganges and Bhutan. Eventually China, the source of the Brahmaputra, which has plans to build dams upstream in Tibet, should also be involved in consultations over the use of the Himalayan waters.

In other areas such as the land boundary demarcation, adverse possession and exchange of enclaves, hopefully solutions which were on the table as far back as 1975 may eventually be resolved 36 years later in 2011. Unfortunately, the lives lost due to the irresolution of these boundaries, the years of suffering experienced by the abandoned inhabitants of the enclaves on both sides of the border, cannot be retrieved. The maritime boundary is now being arbitrated at an international level but again we could have resolved this bilaterally and could have long ago been exploring our sea bed for much needed energy resources.

If Bangladesh is to graduate Indo-Bangladesh relations beyond the arena of domestic confrontational politics into the realm of diplomacy, whoever is in power among our principal political parties will need to adopt a more consensual approach to this important relationship. In any relationship between big and small neighbours, the broader the constituency of support the stronger the negotiating authority of the government. Unfortunately, official negotiations with India not only tend to exclude consultations with the opposition but rarely draw in parliament, hold discussions within the ruling party or draw in civil society in the consultation process.

In building such a consensus, those political forces who have thrived on using the anti-India card as a political resource will need to graduate their politics from the 20th to the 21st century. The world has changed a great deal from the days of the Cold War when they forged their original confrontational postures and so has India's position in the prevailing world order. It is to Bangladesh's advantage to derive benefit from the enhanced standing of its neighbour in global affairs. To push Bangladesh into an adversarial relationship with our immediate neighbour, largely for domestic political gain, is doing no service to the country, and less so, in the years to come.

Recognising the changed position of India in global affairs does not, however, mean that our leaders should genuflect to India on all contested issues and accept whatever crumbs they throw our way. However, we cannot turn the clock back to the idealistic phase of the relationship which prevailed in the aftermath of the liberation of Bangladesh. A new generation is in command in both countries with different perceptions of their national interests. Whilst Bangladesh may legitimately expect more generous treatment from a friendly but larger neighbour we should be prepared to get not what we deserve but what we can negotiate. We will, accordingly, need to be well prepared and capable of negotiating harder but constructively with the goal of seeking mutually beneficial settlements rather than prolonging disputes through inaction. India, in turn, will also have to realize that enlightened statesmanship in its relations with its neighbour will bring higher political returns at relatively lower economic cost to it. In my following discussion I will attempt to apply this approach to negotiations to address the two most topical issues governing Indo-Bangladesh Relations, transit and trade.

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(Part 2 will appear on September 6.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 5

1960

The boxer Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) is awarded the gold medal for his first place in the light heavyweight boxing competition at the Olympic Games in Rome.

1961

The first conference of the Non Aligned Countries is held in Belgrade.

1969

My Lai Massacre: U.S. Army Lt. William Calley is charged with six specifications of premeditated murder for the death of 109 Vietnamese civilians in My Lai.

1972

Munich Massacre: A Palestinian terrorist group called "Black September" attack and take hostage 11 Israel athletes at the Munich Olympic Games.

1978

Camp David Accords: Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat begin peace process at Camp David, Maryland.

1991

The current international treaty defending indigenous peoples, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989, came into force.

1997

Mother Teresa, the Nobel Peace Prize winner dies at the age of 87.