

GROUND REALITIES

Severe ferry dislocation

BIWTA caught on the wrong foot again

THE choked ferry services along the Paturia-Daulatdia route on the Padma River have been exacting a heavy price. This cross-river ferry providing a link between the capital city and the southwestern districts carries a large number of passengers as well as goods.

Delays for hours at a time are resulting in huge backlogs in traffic. Trucks are waiting with perishable goods which are beginning to rot. Already, a substantial economic damage has been wreaked. Furthermore, the hardships passengers are enduring must also be taken seriously into account.

Rapid loss of navigability of the Padma and the Jamuna due to shoaling is a known fact. But to our dismay, nothing has been done to keep the channels clear through timely dredging. The level of water in some parts of the channels has dropped to five feet in place of the minimally stipulated eight feet for vessels to pass.

For all we know, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) had put out early warning signals to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) for action to keep the channels navigable. But, the dredging operations started as late as on September 6. Now, while BIWTA has deployed three dredgers at Paturia and two at Mawa, these are having difficulty in negotiating with fast receding waters.

The lessons to be drawn here is, as usual, there was no advance planning to meet an unfolding exigency, far less coordination between BIWTC and BIWTA. The net result is: an expensive operation like dredging is being undertaken at a rather wrong time, entailing waste as well as ineffectiveness.

The government has formed two task forces of six members each to monitor and ensure easier movement of ferries on this route. However, the core issue of dredging up river channels before these have been choked up needs to be addressed with a right mix of policy, operational coordination and logistical backup.

Media in vulnerable state

The portents are worrying

ONLY yesterday we commented in these columns on the draft broadcasting policy formulated by the government, arguing that such a policy would be retrogressive and counter-productive. We feel that pressure of various sorts being put on the media is a reflection of abrasive behaviour on the part of the powers that be as well as their supporters.

A couple of days ago, journalists were unceremoniously and humiliatingly made to leave a meeting to which they had been invited by Minister of Communications Syed Abul Hossain. Bizarrely, it was Minister for Shipping Shahjahan Khan and Minister of State for Home Shamsul Haque Tuku who rudely asked the media people to leave. That begs the question: since he had asked the media people to be present, why did the communications minister stay silent when the journalists were shown the door? A week ago, a television journalist's car was vandalized moments after he had spoken firmly on the need to take measures against road accidents.

These instances, together with the fact that all too often journalists are frequently taken to task over reports of corruption, are a sad sign of what could come to pass if attitudes do not change not only among the powers that be but also among those engaged in the pursuit of politics and in the administration. Outside the capital, there are recurring reports of how media people at the local level are often made the target of wrath by elements unhappy with reports of corruption and other forms of questionable behaviour. As if to add to their discomfort, journalists often face harassment through cases being filed by individuals and the resultant vigour with which the law enforcers pursue such cases. In other words, intimidation is often a weapon applied to silence media people serious about their professionalism.

We urge the authorities to step back and reflect on the negativism such onslaughts on the media have been generating. It is no exaggeration to say that journalists are becoming an endangered species in the country today. The sooner sanity is restored, the sooner the realisation dawns that media freedom must not be undermined, the

Diplomacy is not about closing doors



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

PEOPLE are still talking about the Manmohan Singh visit to Bangladesh. A good number of them are taking it out on Mamata

Banerjee and of course for the right reasons. Again, there are those who have been doing their best to pin the blame on prime ministerial advisors Gowher Rizvi and Mashiur Rahman for the "fiasco." They did not do a good job, so the argument goes. Well, yes and no. There are always the diverse analyses of summits between heads of governments, about their ramifications.

As you reflect on the results of the Indian prime minister's talks with his Bangladesh counterpart, you might remember the confidence (or naivete?) with which Foreign Minister Dipu Moni kept telling us till hours before Manmohan Singh's arrival that everything was in place, that the two leaders were ready to put their initials to the Teesta charter. And this when everyone knew that something was definitely going wrong somewhere. In Kolkata, Mamata Banerjee had already put her foot down. So we knew what was going to happen. Or not happen. Dipu Moni didn't.

Given everything that has happened around the visit and the consequent media uproar over perceived Indian perfidy and Bangladeshi smugness, you tend to wonder why all of that needed to come into the picture. Negotiations between states are always a critical affair fundamentally because of the national interests of the parties involved. Now, Finance

Minister Muhith has hazarded the guess that a Teesta treaty could be in place in the next few months.

To be sure, his portfolio does not cover a subject which is truly in the nation's foreign policy domain, but Muhith has done what the foreign secretary should have done. He has kept optimism alive and thereby underscored the relevance of diplomatic language even in conditions where diplomacy may not exactly be producing the results we wait for. For a government functionary to state publicly that one of the parties to the negotiations, in this case India, is to be held accountable for the deliberations being aborted is nearly to shut the door to the future. It is a bad attitude. It is poor policy.

Diplomacy is often a matter of looking back at precedent. President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev

ended up having an acrimonious meeting in Vienna in 1961, but that did not prevent Washington and Moscow from carrying on their links down the years, right till the 1970s when Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev inaugurated the SALT era.

In Bangladesh's instance, the years immediately after liberation were surely the most critical in terms of dealing with other nations, especially neighbouring countries. You might keep up your grievance over the 195 Pakistani military officers charged with war crimes in Bangladesh going

free less than three years after December 1971. But sit back and ask yourself if we could have come by anything better out of the tripartite deal involving India, Bangladesh and Pakistan in the early 1970s.

The difference between war and diplomacy is that in the former you must defeat the enemy; in the latter you have to create conditions which will keep the combatants feeling like winners. It was thus that India freed itself of all Pakistani prisoners of war, Pakistan got all its imprisoned soldiers back and Bangladesh had all its stranded citizens return home from Pakistan.

Not all negotiations are successful, though. That again is only natural. But, again, while abortive negotiations may lead to a pause in communication, they do not close the doors to the future. The talks between Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Dhaka in June 1974 yielded no results on the issues of stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh and Bangladesh's claim on the assets and liabilities of pre-1971 Pakistan. Both men parted company in grim manner.

But look back to a few months previously, when certain leading voices in the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) convinced Bhutto that for Bangladesh to be part of the OIC summit in February 1974, Pakistan would need to recognise it as an independent state. Islamabad

acceded to the demand and Bangabandhu travelled to Lahore. Diplomacy had worked most efficaciously.

There are times when bilateral negotiations proceed to near collapse but are then saved through last-minute efforts on the part of the principal negotiators. You could cite here Tashkent 1966, when Alexei Kosygin and Andrei Gromyko scrambled, along with Ayub Khan and Lal Bahadur Shastri, to patch together a deal that the Pakistani and Indian leaders could take back home. It was late at night when Pakistan's president and India's prime minister inked the Tashkent Declaration. Five and a half years later, the Simla talks between Indira Gandhi and Z.A. Bhutto would have been scuttled had the two leaders, one on one, not been desperate about reaching a last-minute deal.

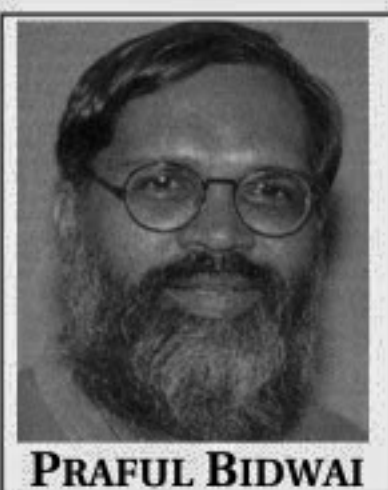
Negotiations where the agenda includes a sharing of common river waters, boundary demarcation and trade are always complex affairs and therefore need to be conducted with finesse and aplomb. There are few guarantees that they will succeed; there is always the probability of a collapse at the last minute. But carrying on is of the essence. Ayub Khan and Jawaharlal Nehru were in a position to piece together the Indus Basin treaty in 1960. Bangabandhu and Indira Gandhi negotiated a satisfactory deal in 1974. In the late 1990s, Sheikh Hasina and H.D. Deve Gowda successfully reached a deal on the Ganges waters.

The Teesta has gone on the backburner, for now. India and Bangladesh have not reached the end of the road, though.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Enforcing imperial legacy



PRAFUL BIDWAI

NOT many will shed tears if Col. Muammar el-Gaddafi is captured by Western-backed rebel forces, which are closing in on him.

Gaddafi ruled Libya for 42 years, tyrannising its people and using its oil wealth to finance various misadventures, including a terrorist attack on an airliner, and attempts to acquire mass-destruction weapons.

Yet, Gaddafi's departure cannot remotely justify the manner in which powerful Western states, led by Britain and France, plotted to dislodge him by flying as many as 22,000 warplane sorties (8,000 of them armed), and killing scores of civilians. They also tried to assassinate him.

The mindset underlying their campaign reeks of colonial arrogance, and bodes ill for fairness and balance in international relations, and ultimately for global security.

Gaddafi seized power on an anti-colonial platform. (Italy colonised Libya before World War-II, and Britain occupied it in the 1940s and 1950s). Yet, ironically, the same Western powers later propped him up.

Gaddafi deserved to be deposed, not once, but ten times over, by his own people, not by external forces. The Anglo-French attacks were carried out in the name of enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, especially in Benghazi, short of landing troops.

However, the Resolution violates the UN Charter's Article 2 (7): "Nothing in the present Charter shall authorise the UN to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state."

True, this cannot be a cover for genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity. But the Gaddafi regime, although despotic, didn't

quite indulge in this or threaten civilians on a mass scale -- any more than Western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or Israel's conduct in occupied Palestine, where it uses warplanes against civilians.

Even before the Nato countries launched air raids on Libya in March, they had been arming Libyan rebels, covertly training them overseas, and smuggling them back to fight Gaddafi.

The Western powers' single-minded zeal on Libya stands in sharp contrast to their deplorable coddling of Israel, undeniably one of the world's most lawless states.

The West's evocation of human rights and democracy to depose Gaddafi sits ill at ease with its close collaboration with his regime. Damaging evidence of recent collabo-

ration has emerged in documents found at the abandoned office of Libya's former spymaster.

These contain new details of the CIA's close relationship with the Libyan intelligence agency. The US, as part of its policy of "extraordinary renditions," sent terrorism suspects at least eight times for questioning in Libya despite its regime's reputation for torture.

The *New York Times* reports that Libyan intelligence cooperation was "much more extensive than generally known" with both the CIA and the British MI-6.

The CIA kidnapped and transported to Libya suspects from various countries, using luxury jets. Among them was Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the present commander of anti-Gaddafi forces in Tripoli, and former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who says he's a grateful ally of the US and Nato.

The West has been keen to intervene in Libya for three reasons. First and foremost, oil; second, the former imperial powers' craving for controlling the unfolding of the Arab Spring; and third, their long-term plans to retain their influence in all situations and regions where popular agitations for democratisation might break out, which they can selectively support or oppose depending on their narrow interests.

Libya has Africa's largest, and the globe's ninth-biggest, oil reserves. It's among the world's top dozen oil producers. Its "sweet" crude is of high quality. Western oil companies have a vulture-like interest in the oil and are

plans to undermine Iran.

To destabilise the Bashar regime, the West is setting the Sunni majority against it. This is likely to create new ferment in the "Shia arc" around Saudi Arabia, comprising Iraq (with a 65% Shia majority), Bahrain (80-90% Shia), Kuwait (35% Shia) and Yemen (where Shia imams ruled for centuries). Saudi Arabia too has at least a 15% Shia minority. Shia unrest could have unpredictable regional consequences.

The European powers' attempts to prop up different opposition movements selectively will weaken the latter's legitimacy, while destabilising North Africa.

Britain and France have learnt few lessons from the mess in Iraq and Afghanistan -- about the non-viability of slogans like eliminating mass-destruction weapons and al-Qaeda, or ushering in democracy.

They fail to grasp that regime change can only be legitimately accomplished by the people of a country. Their imperial agenda, promoted under the banner of protecting people from tyrants, is unlikely to fly.

The European powers built their empires in the name of a "civilising mission." Today, they're rebuilding them ostensibly to protect human rights and democracy. But people who long for democratisation are unlikely to be taken in by this.

There was until recently very little resistance to the US, France and Britain (P-3) in the Security Council. They got Resolution 1973 through because other members, including Russia, China and even India, abstained.

On Syria, however, India, Brazil and South Africa fought to prevent a harsh P-3 resolution. They won Russian and Chinese backing against authorising military intervention. But fighting the P-3 won't be easy unless there's strategic thinking and resolute action.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 14

1829

The Ottoman Empire signs the Treaty of Adrianople with Russia, thus ending the Russo-Turkish War.

1901

President of the United States William McKinley assassinated.

1917

Russia is officially proclaimed a republic.

1960

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is founded.

2001

Historic National Prayer Service held at Washington National Cathedral for victims of the September 11 attacks. A similar service is held in Canada on Parliament Hill, the largest vigil ever held in the nation's capital.