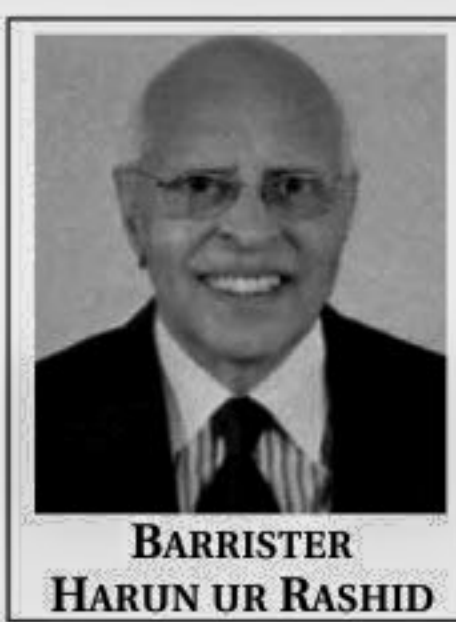


BOTTOM LINE

Turkey spreads its wings in Arab World



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE much expected visit from the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the rebuilding nations of the Arab Spring -- Egypt, Libya and Tunisia -- commenced on

September 12, a time that was particularly significant after the recent crisis between Israel and its last remaining friends in the region, Turkey and Egypt.

Observers dubbed Erdogan's visit as the "Arab Spring tour" as Turkey, with its proactive foreign policy, has a strong say in the region.

The timing of the long-time planned Arab Spring tour carries extra significance when Turkey's row with Israel echoed its allied Middle East country of Egypt.

Although officials confirmed Erdogan's plans to visit the three countries, it appears that plans for the controversial visit to Gaza had fallen through. The premier has for months expressed his desire to go to Gaza, whose liberation from the Israeli blockade has been at the top of Erdogan's agenda for years, but entry by a prime minister into the Gaza Strip runs a high risk of resulting in diplomatic havoc on a global scale.

In a signal that the Gaza visit will actually be left out of the tour, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu told reporters on

September 11 that Libya and Tunisia were included on the itinerary, but the visit was going to remain limited to those countries.

Vendors distributed posters of the Turkish prime minister and his face looked down from giant billboards in the Cairo centre. In Egypt, he has become hugely popular because of his tough stance with Israel. He berated Israel's behaving like a "spoiled child" in reference to its attitude towards Palestinians.

The standing ovation, chants and fists thumping from the audience began before the Turkish prime minister stood to speak in Cairo's opera house on September 14. In his speech, he chided Washington and called on the administration to rethink its plan to oppose the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN General Assembly.

Earlier, in an address to Arab League foreign ministers, he said Israel would "lose in the end." He said it was an "obligation" to support Palestinians at the UN.

It may be recalled that, on September 10, crowds of Egyptian people took to the streets and trashed Israel's embassy in Cairo, forcing the embassy staff to flee the country.

Although the ousting of one of the last two remaining Israeli embassies in the region came from a mob attack that overpowered Egyptian security forces, the incident hurt the vital ties between Egypt and Israel in the

strategic partnership concerning their stance with the other nations in the region. The last remaining Israeli embassy in the region is now located in Jordan.

A large number of Egyptian intellectuals and public persona have advised Egypt to follow Turkey's example and axe strategic proximity with Israel over the killing of five Egyptian policemen by Israeli forces on the common border between the countries last month.

In light of the arrogance, intransigence and uncompromising attitude towards

Turkish nationals and an American of Turkish descent died on a Turkish ship leading a convoy of six vessels taking aid to Palestinian territory of the Gaza Strip in a raid by Israeli special forces in international waters.

Israel did not apologise to Turkey but only expressed regret. The Turkish prime minister has been furious about the Israeli attitude. On September 6, Prime Minister Erdogan announced a total freeze of military and trade ties with Israel.

Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador one week before the declaration of suspen-

sion of military and commercial relations. It has been critical of Israeli policy towards the Gazans.

The heavy sanctions rang alarm bells in Israel, which risked further isolation in a region that has been unwelcome of the Jewish state.

Commenting on Israel's increased distance with the rest of the region, Davutoglu stated that Israel was out of touch with the region and unable to perceive the changes taking place, which makes it impossible for the country to have healthy relations with its neighbours. "Isolation is inevitable for Israel; it will be even more isolated from now on," the minister added.

Egypt is a vital partner for Israel in the region, with the Rafah border between Egypt and Palestine being the gateway that allows entry into Gaza, a region ruled by Hamas

that is perceived as an imminent threat by the Israeli administration.

In line with the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the countries remained allies and Egypt kept Rafah under tight military control to prevent trespassers from Gaza into both countries, but in a number of incidents, the control failed, resulting in casualties in Israel.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was in Cairo on the same dates with Erdogan, a visit that created grounds for a meeting between Arab country leaders and Turkey. Abbas' visit announced by the state-run Egyptian news agency, MENA, included talks between the Palestinian chairman and Erdogan along with Hussein Tantawi, the head of Egypt's Higher Military Council.

Turkish foreign policy has been "look to the East," and it has been a major regional player. Its proactive foreign policy has brought economic dividends to the country. The visit to the three Arab countries -- Egypt, Tunisia and Libya -- which have shaken off authoritarian rule is another step to extend Turkish influence in the Arab World, and Turkey's tough line on Israel has drawn wide support from the Arab people. Egypt and Turkey are the most populous countries in the region, and if they act together they will emerge a powerful force which no one can ignore.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

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Palestinians, Israel is being gradually isolated from its neighbours.

The Turkish-Israeli alliance was forged as a counterweight to the radical Arab alliance led by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, which merged with Syria to form the United Arab Republic, and against the background of tensions between the superpowers in which Turkey's big neighbour and traditional rival, the U.S.S.R., supported Egypt.

The close relations between Turkey and Israel disappeared in May 2010 when eight

Regional connectivity: Problems and prospects

MOHAMMAD MOHIUDDIN ABDULLAH

AN integrated transport system at the regional level is essential to facilitate and sustain the economic integration process in today's interdependent world economy. The absence of an integrated transport system adversely impacts on economic competitiveness and impedes intra-regional trade. The transport systems in South Asia, particularly in this subcontinent, have developed only in a national context, with little consideration given to cross-border issues of compatibility, uniformity of standards in infrastructure and equipment design.

The provision of physical infrastructure in the form of an integrated transport network is an essential but not major condition for efficient and effective international movement. It is necessary to have adequate facilitation measures to address all the non-physical barriers so that goods, vehicles and people can move freely across international borders. Load capacity of regional and national highways in Bangladesh is 8-10 tonnes, which is unable to bear international, particularly Indian, vehicles.

Percentage of paved roads varied between 25% in Bangladesh to 63% in Pakistan, with India at 53.2%. Our roads need widening up to 4 lanes along with increase in load capacity up to 15 to 18 tonnes. Other physical/non-physical barriers identified included the lack of parking places, immigration and custom offices, baggage scanning equipment, telephone and warehousing at several border posts as well as EDI/IT and standardisation of working hours and weekly holidays, and complicated customs procedures and lack of transparency in inspection.

With regards to rail transport, it is observed that about 70% of rail network is broad-gauge in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, while in Bangladesh only about 25% of the network is broad-gauge. In the context of transit or regional connectivity, some of the major barriers are lack of standardisation of technologies, operation and maintenance practices including different types of gauges, braking system, incompatibility of rolling stock etc.

Some of the other major physical barriers included inadequate loop lengths, some missing links of shorter lengths in the borders areas, lack of physical infrastructure at interchange points, load restrictions on bridges, lack of coordination for gauge conversion programmes on different railway systems and capacity constraint in certain sections of the identified corridors. The railway management may not be able to implement the existing development projects in time on the one hand and operate international traffic on the other.

Some major barriers in Bangladesh inland waterways include high rates of siltation, bank erosion, inadequate navigational aids and draft restriction of 1.83m, as well as poor coordination of jetties and piers, and lack of sufficient storage space, cargo handling equipment and support craft. With regard to maritime transport, the major barriers are capacity constraints at many of the gateways, together with heavy siltation at channels where depths fluctuate with tide. Channel markings are also not adequate and are poorly maintained, and cargo and ship handling equipment as well as floating craft are quite old in Mongla, Ashuganj and Chittagong ports.

India and Bangladesh are facing prob-

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lems such as lack of agreements for smooth movement of freight and or vehicles between the countries and those relating to delays in cargo clearance, facilitation or speed money payments, cumbersome transportation documents and custom procedures, etc.

Some delays are associated with the preparation of custom documents and inspections due to a lack of standardisation of documents and implementation of modern customs procedures. For example, at the India-Bangladesh border, a consignment needs at least 21 documents, more than 54 signatures and a minimum of 116 copies for the final approval. Each country requires different documents, such as transit, export and import declarations. Exports need separate documents on each side of the border, resulting in errors. Average time for cargo to pass through the border is 5-10 days.

A comprehensive approach is required to address the above problems effectively, involving relevant government ministries, agencies and the private sectors.

Feasibility studies should be conducted and huge investment will be required, which should be ensured by the government.

In addition, the issue of transit has been pending since long, but it is not understood why the present government is in

such a hurry to solve it without any detailed study. It can be mentioned that India will build a strong defence line along with the North Eastern border if transit/connectivity is given through Bangladesh. Without solving unsettled issues and detailed feasibility studies, the government should not have any agreement on transit with India alone. Bangladesh cannot be benefited without connecting with its neighbours.

We should have thorough reading of the geo-social realities and economic expediency in the context of global recession. We should take note of recent global economic strategies. Some advocated a new trade term with India, bringing transit into the bilateral dialogue. The eyes of the people are set on how things move regarding the 250-mile corridor in the name of transit/connectivity. However, no transit agreement has been signed by the two countries as yet. Transit should not be linked with other issue. Connectivity is a regional issue, not a bilateral one.

Bangladesh has a unique geographical location, with two land-locked neighbours (Nepal & Bhutan). We are fortunate to have two sea ports (Chittagong & Mongla) and potential for developing a deep sea port. Nepal and Bhutan, even China, have shown interest in using our sea ports. If regional transit or connectivity is provided by Bangladesh to these hinterland countries and territories, including access to its sea ports, tremendous opportunities could open up to trade in transport connectivity. It is also important for the sub-regional countries to recognise that no country other than Bangladesh can provide transport connectivity and services.

Bangladesh could emerge as a transport hub for the sub-region comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India if it opens up its transport system to provide regional connectivity. Transport connectivity with India only will not create a win-win situation for all countries involved i.e. Nepal and Bhutan. We need to include China and Myanmar in the framework of regional connectivity to reap the highest benefit. What is required is coordinated and focused commitment of sub-regional/regional member states to resolve the barriers, which requires substantial investment, to achieve improvements in regional transport connectivity. The transit/connectivity among South Asian countries should be conceived within the framework of regional economic integration, where all natural and environmental resources, facilities and opportunities should be exploited for the benefit of all countries in the region/sub-region.

The writer is a former Joint Chief, Planning Commission.

Monitoring foreign workers

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

PEOPLE are moving around the world in search of jobs.

This has been going on from ancient time, but the current movement of people is somewhat different from the past. These days, people even take risk with their lives to move from less developed countries to relatively developed countries. In fact, the growing demand for skilled manpower in developed countries prompts people (particularly skilled) to take risks.

It is estimated that labour migration started some six thousand years back to satisfy peoples' needs. Around two thousand years back people began rehabilitation in the Pacific islands. The Greeks started their expansion as early as 728 B.C. The export of manpower started around the eighteenth century. This practice, however, degenerated later into slavery, which started in the Middle Eastern countries and Asia between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. The business expanded because of growing demand for labourers and managers.

The process of globalisation gained momentum in the 20th and 21st centuries. The driving force behind this phenomenon was trade in commodities, service, capital and free flow of manpower. Europe and U.S.A were centre points. Japan entered the process in 1950. In 2000 China and India joined in. Despite obstructions from developed countries to contain the flow of labour migration, the "push and pull" factor of the process of labour migration is increasing.

Though our country is one of the biggest exporters of labour in the world, we are not aware of the number of foreign workers in Bangladesh. It seems our administration has not yet been able to realise the importance of watching the movement of foreign workers in the country. With the global increase of terrorist activities, monitoring the movement of foreign workers has become all the more important.

It is said that we have 300,000 foreign workers staying legally in our country and 500,000 are staying illegally. Unfortunately, neither the National Board of Revenue (NBR) nor the Bangladesh Statistical Bureau (BSB) has any accurate figures of illegal foreign workers. It is reported that some of them are involved in activities regarded as threat to the security of the country, and some are engaged in the narcotics trade.

It is learnt that many foreign workers do not renew their work permits. It is suspected that these people are not paying income tax, causing loss

of revenue to the government.

Our government has set up an eight-member committee under the chairmanship of Chairman Board of Investment to prepare an updated list of foreigners staying in Bangladesh. Regrettably, the said committee has not yet been able to start work as per Bangladesh Information Service (a research organisation). The majority of foreign garments workers are Indians.

According to Bangladesh Enterprise for Security and Services, the number of illegally staying foreign workers is more than 500,000.

According to BGMEA, the number of registered buying houses in Bangladesh is more than 1,400. In addition, there are some unregistered buying houses. It is reliably learnt that about 500 unregistered buying houses are run by foreigners who are using fake passports. In some cases, it is alleged, even the validity of visas has expired. Technicians and IT experts are working with tourist visas.

The fact is that some Indians are showing interest in entering Bangladesh garments industry because of much greater profit due to cheaper labour. Furthermore, Indians are occupying important positions in factories owned by Indians. Due to lack of availability of Bangladeshi experts in fashion and design, Bangladesh has become dependent on India and Sri Lanka.

It is unfortunate that foreign companies are siphoning off more profit from Bangladesh each year compared to investment. During the last ten years (2000-2010) foreign companies have taken away \$4.8 billion worth of profit and dividend. The rate of profit was 385% and rate of increase in investment was only 72%. This is possible because of weak investment policy of Bangladesh.

Simply collection of statistics, or high level meetings, or arresting some foreign workers or investors do not solve the problem of investment or siphoning of profit. We must have sound investment policy. We have to concentrate on monitoring foreign workers. It is well known that Bangladesh is vulnerable to infiltration or entry of terrorists.

In formulating a sound investment policy, the following points are to be focused:

- Substantial improvement in maintaining data about foreign workers;
- Repatriation of profit and remittance of foreign workers' salary, etc. may be closely monitored;
- The employing firms (both local and foreign) may be made accountable about payment of income tax by foreign workers, and
- The jobs of BOI may be professionalised.

In adopting a policy for monitoring the foreign workers let us be careful about our treatment toward them. They must not be harassed or discouraged. The policy will have to be balanced.

The writer is a former Joint Secretary.