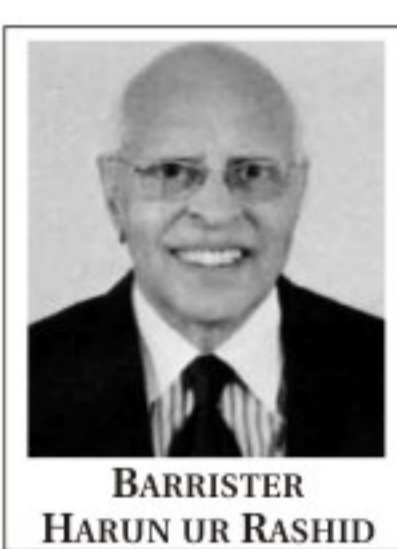


BOTTOM LINE

Tipai Dam: Response to Dr. Rizvi



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE proposed construction of Tipaimukh dam on the trans-boundary Barak River for generating hydro-power has raised deep concern among the people of Bangladesh, irrespective of political affiliations.

Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister, Dr. Gowher Rizvi presented his views on Tipaimukh Dam (*Daily Star*: December 13). I would agree with him that we have to "depoliticise the issue and put our national interest above factional and parochial interests."

If I understand correctly, the essence of Dr. Rizvi's position in the paper is that the dam, unlike a barrage, will not divert water and that since it is situated nearly 140 miles away from the Bangladesh border, it cannot have adverse impact downstream.

I would suggest that rational, objective and scientific examination needs to be carried out by water experts to determine whether the dam would not cause any harm to Bangladesh. Pending the outcome of a joint study by experts, Dr. Rizvi's statement appears to be too early to conclude on the impact of the dam on Bangladesh.

We appreciate Dr. Rizvi's claim that the Indian prime minister would welcome a Bangladesh delegation or study team to share all the information, including the environmental impact and project design.

In my view, sharing of information will be helpful but is not enough because Bangladesh experts must draw conclusions not only from the information and documents provided by India but also from an examination of the impact of the dam on Bangladesh from the geographic, geological, hydrographic, hydrological, climatic, ecological and other perspectives.

A study in 2005 by the Bangladesh Institute of Water Modelling shows that during a drier monsoon season, when Bangladesh needs water for cultivation and fisheries, the dam will hold 27% more water in June, 16% in July, 14% in August and 4% in September than an average monsoon year.

Another hydrological impact study in Bangladesh suggests that if India builds Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak River, 26% of *haors* (wetlands) in Sylhet and around 11% in Moulvibazar will run dry.

One noted Bangladesh water expert says that it has been a common characteristic of dams that they increase water inflow in summer, which may cause flash floods in the Sylhet region during *boro* harvesting time (April-May). Furthermore, the geological structure of the region is like a bowl where water gets stuck for a longer period than it does on the plains. If the water inflow becomes irregular, it will hinder agriculture.

The construction of dams on rivers for hydropower is a much discredited idea in the 21st century and the benefits have been seriously questioned by experts. Construction of dams or artificial interference of rivers arise because of the erroneous attitude that any river water passing to the sea is a waste and needs to be commercially used. The fate of the Colorado River provides an example of this misconceived approach. This fabled river reportedly dries

up in the South Californian desert.

The World Commission on Dams, in its report in 2000, having examined the technical, financial, economic, environmental and social performance of the dam projects, concluded that the overall benefits of dams have not justified their financial, social and other costs.

For example, Aswan Dam in Egypt has reportedly caused major agricultural and environmental problems. It increases the salinity of the Mediterranean Sea, which affects the Mediterranean's outflow current into the Atlantic Ocean. This current can be traced thousands of kilometers into the Atlantic.

There are many precedents that due to objection or opposition from a co-riparian country construction of dams has been cancelled or suspended pending a joint study of the project.

For example, on December 8 this year, Laos suspended a \$3.5 billion dam project on the lower Mekong River while Japan leads a study into the environmental impact. The four countries -- Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia -- that share the lower stretches of the 4,900 km (3,044 mile) Mekong, failed to reach an agreement on construction of the 1,260 megawatt Xayaburi dam.

An earlier environmental impact assessment by the Lao government was criticised as inadequate by environmentalists and activists. Experts had warned that dozens of migratory fish species would become extinct if the dam was built. Fish stocks would dwindle, hitting the income of fishermen and the food supply of people residing along the Mekong River.

Environmentalists have warned that damming the main stream of the river would trap vital nutrients, increase algae growth and prevent dozens of species of migratory fish from spawning upstream.

A dam could also prevent the movement of fertile silt needed to replenish agricultural land and, as a result, crops that are vital to domestic consumption and exports would be starved of nutrients.

Even inside a country, a dam is seen as harmful for ecological reasons. Last September Myanmar suspended a \$3.6 billion China-aided dam project which was proposed to be built at the head of the Irrawaddy -- the confluence of the Mali and N'Mai rivers -- for hydropower in an area of rich diversity.

Finally, the Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development between Bangladesh and India, signed by the two prime ministers in Dhaka on September 6, mentions enhancing of "cooperation in sharing of the waters of common rivers" in Clause 2.

Accordingly, India must come forward to engage in a constructive dialogue with Bangladesh in putting up any construction on the common Barak River. This would necessitate a joint study and India's commitment not to go ahead with the project until the experts' committee arrives at a definitive finding.

The quicker the study is completed and the outcome known, the better it will be for Indo-Bangladesh relations, which have unfolded a new horizon of opportunities following the visit of Bangladesh prime minister to India in 2010.

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Power play in Indo-Bangla relations

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

RECENT developments between India and Bangladesh have again begun to raise the question of where the relationship really stands. The caption of a recent newspaper article by a former diplomat -- "Vexing neighbour and tongued government" -- encapsulates, pretty much, the nature of the relationship. Sadly, after forty years of sharing neighbourly proximity, the bonds of mutuality, reciprocity and trust between the two nations remain weak and uncertain.

India's dominating role has been recounted in various forums: The waters of strategic rivers have been diverted unilaterally, causing great distress and adversity for Bangladesh; India's border guards (BSF) have cold-heartedly gunned down Bangladeshis, even a few days ago, instead of adopting a more humane stance of taking captives and repatriating them; barbed wires have gone up over large tracts of the border, sending a dour message; Bangladesh's markets have been overrun by Indian products without reciprocal access (some claim systematic manipulation of the tariff structures in Bangladesh to curb local production, thereby sustaining unbounded access of Indian products); Bangladesh's trade with Bhutan was hindered for long because of India's intransigence to allow overland transit; and the matter of maritime boundaries remains disputed as India eyes the natural resources within Bangladesh's territory.

And now the planned construction of the Tipaimukh dam stares Bangladesh menacingly in the face, despite assurances of fair play and no adverse consequences.

There are indications that Bangladeshis (including many policy makers) know little about the project's details -- the size of the structure, intended use, impact downstream and related questions. Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) has, in recent times, raised many pertinent questions about the project and its consequences for Bangladesh. If India is serious about pursuing the project, Bangladeshis would like to have detailed answers to the concerns raised by BEN to allay their concerns. A live conversation on TV between experts on both sides would be a step in the right direction to fortify India's non-threatening intentions. This dam project may even be a ploy to try and extract more from Bangladesh.

Ploys and power plays like these, time and again, indicate the intense demands that India has continued to make on Bangladesh without giving much back. Even a senior Indian journalist, Kuldeep Nayar, recently stated: "What India promised is nowhere in the horizon." And despite the flurry of cross-border negotiations and the visitations of the highly ranked, much remains suspended in "what has been said;" there is far too little on "what has been done." How can two neighbours co-exist in harmony when the bigger party's attitudes and intentions are non-committal and murky?

Reasonable and analytic thinking does exist among the cognoscenti on the Indian side about the

need to maintain a reciprocal relationship. One recent article was captioned: "Why Bangladesh should matter to us." Yet, such words of wisdom fail to trickle into the consciousness and conscience of India's politicians.

Being the junior partner in the asymmetric relationship it is in Bangladesh's interest to maintain good ties with India and leverage it for mutual gains. But when India with its power advantage -- militarily, economically, and politically -- displays a casual, almost benign, attitude towards Bangladesh's concerns and continually rebuffs Bangladesh's attempts to befriend it, especially from a regime that is purported to be favourably disposed toward India, the relationship becomes open to interpretations. And this provides grist for the mill among quarters, within the country and outside, who do not want to see the relationship flourish.

Despite the power asymmetry, while India might arguably feel it can influence, even push, Bangladesh as it pleases, the trust deficit in the relationship will moderate India's actual influence, especially because expectations of desired outcomes from India have now become uncertain. Thus, Bangladesh's cooperation will decidedly dwindle under the status quo and is likely to reach new lows. And if India resorts to applying pressure, while there may be grudging compliance initially, gaining Bangladesh's favour over time will wane as various options are considered.

For example, to counterbalance India's revealed spirit, stronger links with China or other neighbours can be ratcheted up -- from increasing trade to conducting joint military exercises. If China begins to divert water from the

Himalayas, India's protestations will likely fall on Bangladesh's deaf ears if there is a critical UN vote. Bangladesh can bring matters of discord to various world forums in a stream of vociferous complaints that can impact India's image in the global community. Bangladesh can also choose to look the other way if India's difficulties with insurgencies escalate. The corridor to India's northeast can be shut down, making it costly for India to monitor the region. And stifling access to a market of 160 million should sting.

If India continues to be intransigent about resolving the outstanding issues in fair and amicable ways, a downward spiral in the relationship would only be natural: from cooperation to compliance to conflict to relationship termination. This process is also likely to be hastened if there is no movement on the burning issues, a situation best avoided by both parties because of its serious implications -- human, social, political, and economic.

Investing in good neighbourly relations, on the other hand, can build a level of social capital that can be very useful in times of need. Nobody likes a thorn in their sides and Bangladesh need not be one, if only Indian leaders appear more progressive and statesmanlike, and less conniving and driven by pure self-interest.

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The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

The Iraq we left behind

REIDAR VISSER

WHEN the last remaining American forces withdraw from Iraq at the end of this month, they will be leaving behind a country that is politically unstable, increasingly volatile, and at risk of descending into the sort of sectarian fighting that killed thousands in 2006 and 2007.

Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has overseen a consolidation of military force, but the core of his government is remarkably unrepresentative: It is made up of mostly pro-Iranian Shiite Islamists. The secular Iraqiya Party, which won a plurality of votes in the March 2010 parliamentary elections, has been marginalised within the cabinet and was not represented when Maliki visited Washington on Monday.

This Shiite Islamist government bodes ill for the country's future. And, unfortunately, it is a direct product of America's misguided thinking about Iraq since the 2003 invasion: an approach that stressed proportional sectarian representation rather than national unity and moderate Islamism.

This flawed policy has been more important in shaping today's Iraq than the size of the original force that occupied the country in 2003, the Abu Ghraib prison-abuse scandal in 2004 or the "surge" of 2007. And it is to blame for the precarious condition in which the United States is leaving Iraq today.

In the 1990s, America envisaged post-Saddam

Hussein Iraq as a federation of Arabs and Kurds. At the time, Kurds focused on their own autonomy; Shiite Islamists rejected federalism south of Kurdistan; and many other Shiites explicitly ruled out an Iranian model of government for fear that it might alienate secularists and the Sunni minority.

The fateful change in American thinking came in 2002 as the Bush administration was preparing for war. At conferences with exiled Iraqi opposition leaders, Americans argued that new political institutions should reflect Iraq's ethno-sectarian groups proportionally. Crucially, the focus moved beyond the primary Arab-Kurdish cleavage to include notions of separate quotas for Shiites and Sunnis.

When Americans designed the first post-Hussein political institution in July 2003, the Iraqi governing council, the underlying principle was sectarian proportionality. What had formerly been an Arab-Kurdish relationship was transformed into a Sunni-Shiite-Kurdish triangle. Arabs who saw themselves first and foremost as Iraqis suddenly became anomalies.

Remarkably, Iraqis themselves turned against this system. After the violent sectarian conflict in 2006 and 2007, Iraqis rediscovered nationalism. The American surge and growing nationalist criticism of the country's

new constitution provided the necessary environment for Maliki to emerge in 2009 as a national leader who commanded respect across sectarian lines. Some Sunnis even began considering a joint ticket with Maliki.

But in May 2009, with President Obama now in the White House, Shiite Islamists who had been marginalised by Maliki in the local elections regrouped in Tehran. Their aim was a purely sectarian Shiite alliance that would ultimately absorb Mr. Maliki as well.

Thanks to the American's own flawed policies, the Iraq they are leaving behind is more similar to the desperate and divided country of 2006 than to the optimistic Iraq of early 2009.

The purging of Sunni officials with links to the former government, known as de-Baathification, became their priority. By this time, however, Washington was blind to what was going on. Instead of appreciating the intense struggle between the cleric

Moktada al-Sadr's sectarian Shiite followers, and moderate Shiites who believed in a common Iraqi identity, the Obama administration remained steadfastly focused on the Sunni-Shiite-Kurdish trinity, thereby reinforcing sectarian tensions rather than helping defuse them.

After faring poorly in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Maliki switched course and adopted a pan-Shiite sectarian platform to win a second term as prime minister. But Obama administration officials failed to

see how Maliki had changed. Nor did they appreciate the chance they'd had to bring Maliki back from the sectarian brink through a small but viable coalition with the secular Iraqiya Party scenario that could have provided competent, stable government to Iraqi Arabs and left the Kurds to handle their own affairs.

Instead, an oversize, unwieldy power-sharing government was formed, with Washington's support, in December 2010.

The main reason Maliki could not offer American forces guarantees for staying in the country beyond 2011 was that his premiership was clinched by pandering to sectarian Shiites. As a result, he has become a hostage to the impulses of pro-Iranian Islamists while most Sunnis and secularists in the government have been marginalised. His current cabinet is simply too big and weak to develop any coherent policies or keep Iranian influence at bay.

By consistently thinking of Maliki as a Shiite rather than as an Iraqi Arab, American officials overlooked opportunities that once existed in Iraq but are now gone. Thanks to their own flawed policies, the Iraq they are leaving behind is more similar to the desperate and divided country of 2006 than to the optimistic Iraq of early 2009.

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