

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It's a matter of marking time for Bangladesh

We are deeply concerned

India's river-linking project warrants detailed clarification

IN the wake of a time-bound Supreme Court order, India will now actively consider implementing the controversial project to link 30 of its rivers and divert the waters of Brahmaputra and Ganges to irrigate its southern and western regions.

We are taken aback by the court order and the manner in which the project has proceeded so far, completely ignoring Bangladesh, a co-riparian country with a vital stake in common rivers.

Sadly, we are now watching alarming developments on a matter that vitally affects our interest. At no stage of the process has Bangladesh been consulted, which runs counter to fundamental norms of good neighbourly relations and international custom of engaging with affected neighbours when diverting water that flows through more than one countries.

We would, therefore, emphatically urge India to come out with a full disclosure of its plans and engage Bangladesh and other states who share the common river basins.

As we understand, if implemented, the river-linking project will spell unprecedented ecological disaster for Bangladesh. Many rivers including Teesta will be severely affected, Rising salinity level will destroy farmlands, ground and surface water systems, the flora and fauna on either side of Padma and Meghna rivers affecting the livelihoods of some 30 million people. Existence of the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, will also be under a grave threat

Given the enormity of the river linking project, it is clear that it will have a colossal impact on the ecology of the region and affect the lower riparian country tremendously. India cannot keep Bangladesh in the dark while it starts implementing this project.

We demand that all related studies and plans regarding those rivers that flow between our two countries be made available to us immediately. Let our experts study them and suggest ways to move forward on this project without harming our interest.

The spirit of good neighbourliness that now marks our bilateral relations demands the above. Ignoring our interest may prove disastrous for the future of our relations, as we had seen from the Farakka experience.

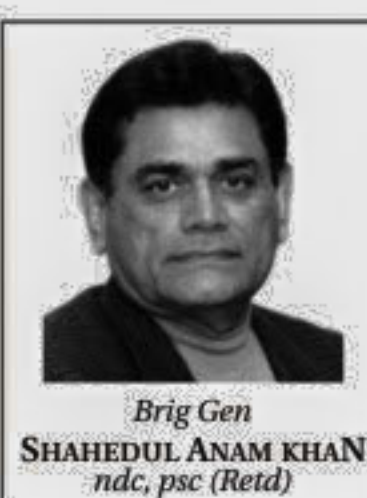
Encashing the demographic dividend

Can create more and better jobs

A report launched recently by the World Bank found a significant decrease in poverty and steady job growth in South Asia and projected the sub-continent as being the largest contributor to the global workforce over the next 20 years with demographic transition leading to 350 million people entering the working age population in the next 20 years.

This is also true of Bangladesh, with 1.2 million new jobs every year as well as improved job quality between the years 2000 and 2010. However, according to the report, the country needs up to 1.5 million new jobs each year for the next 20 years in order to accelerate economic growth. In fact, it could have generated more jobs for the working age population had the top five constraints -- namely, lack of electricity, political instability, corruption, lack of access to land and complicated tax administration -- not created hindrances. Power outage in itself has been said to cost the country \$1 billion through production loss and high costs of self-generation and reduce GDP by 0.5 percent. A high prevalence of bribe payment was found and bribe used to influence tax inspections has been found to increase costs of compliance and opportunities for corruption.

While the quantity as well as quality of jobs has increased and improved respectively, there has been little upward mobility among the self-employed, casual labourers and regular wage or salaried earners. Education remains the key to labour mobility, with educated youth often able to manage some form of employment but the uneducated group left helpless. The challenge for Bangladesh is to create jobs of higher quality and this can be done, besides addressing the abovementioned factors, by investing in education, health and nutrition, infrastructure, and economic reform. The demographic dividend must be encashed in order to bring significant change to the employment



Brig Gen
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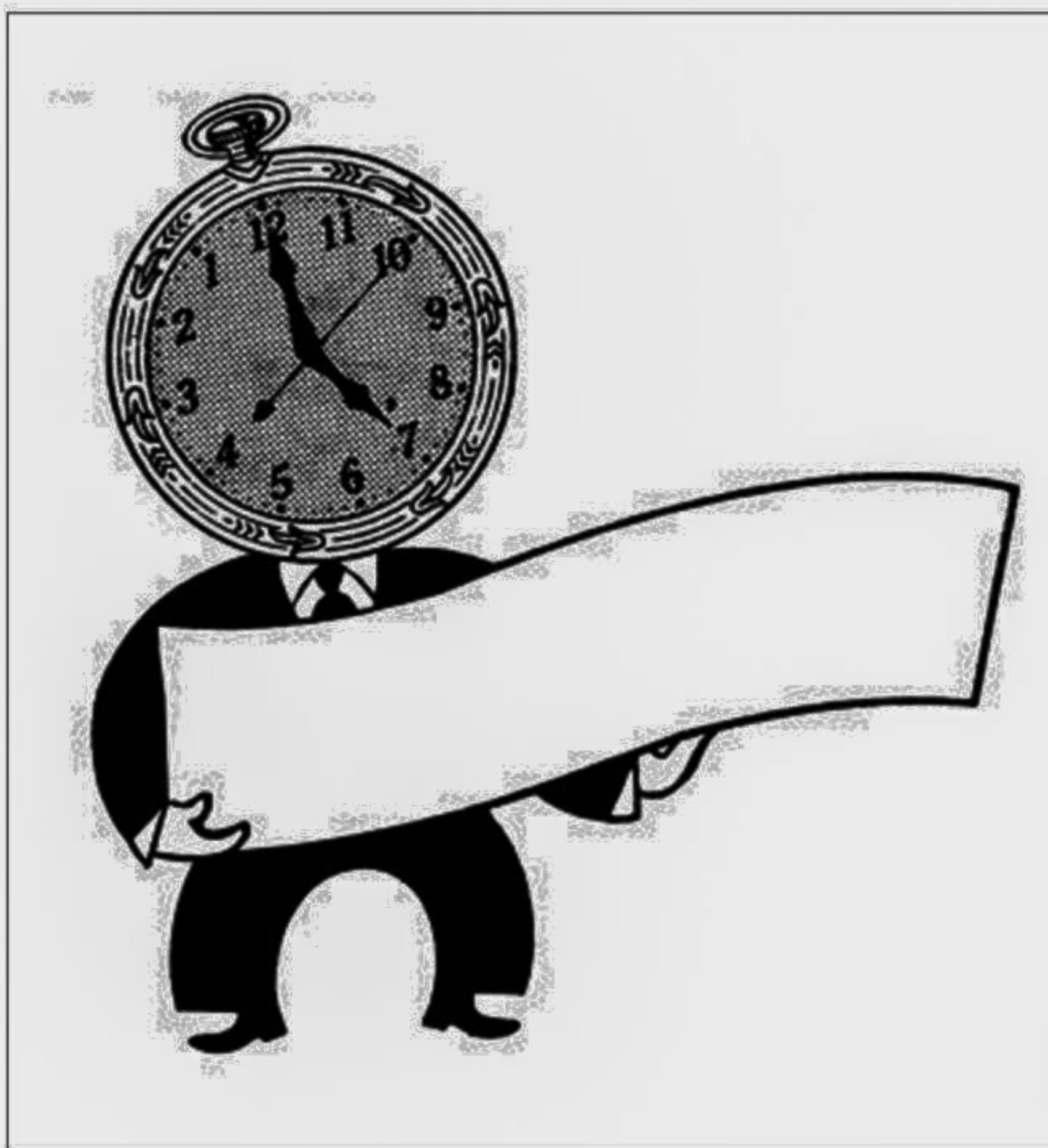
THE accuracy of the prime minister's very recent assertion that the bilateral relations between the two close neighbours

is on a new height and the equally positive comment of the foreign minister that the bilateral relationship is on the right track will depend on from what level one is looking at the bilateral ties. True, there has never been a better state of relations at the government level than now. The common man's perception of the issue is perhaps different.

In so far as Bangladesh is concerned it has been a matter of marking time for the smaller neighbour. We have been marking time in practically every aspect of our bilateral relationship. Marking time for the Ganges (for 22 years), for Teen Bigha, treading water for Teesta, and marking time for the implementation of the Mujib-Indira Land Boundary Agreement... the list goes on. And the recently concluded home ministers' meet in New Delhi suggests that we should brace ourselves for more of that.

Since the very beginning it has been one of struggle for formulating appropriate strategies to exist in the shade of a vastly predominant neighbour. The problem has been of determining the relevant factors in going about devising that strategy. But no strategy can work when one of the interlocutors is so deeply engrossed with own-country focus that the principle of give and take, which is the norm of conducting interstate relations, suffered badly. And that has been the case with our equation with India.

One can easily blame our leadership that have led the country since independence of being psychologically weighed down by the small-neighbour syndrome, but it is true that for a greater part of our existence we have failed to demand firmly what ever is our right by international law, but given rather compliantly whatever had been sought for by the other side. In fact, in recent times our eagerness



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to give has not been matched by India's willingness to reciprocate. Of course there is always the 43 items delisted by India after Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in 2011 to show for India's magnanimity, but there is very little progress on other matters of serious concern to Bangladesh.

We should feel happy that we have India's assurance that the 1974 Mujib-Indira Land Boundary Agreement is going to be ratified, at long last. At least that was what the Indian prime minister is reported to have told our home minister, that the Treaty was likely to be approved in the forthcoming Lok Sabha session. I am an inveterate optimist but in this case I shall

keep my fingers crossed. I am worried because of one single word, "likely" that precedes "to be approved." In dealing with our big neighbour the concept of probability plays a very significant part, because, according to statisticians, the confidence one can have in such a probability estimate (India delivering) decreases in proportion to the number of observations (India falling short) on which it is based.

There is bad news about Teesta so aptly couched in the statements emanating from both sides. Our effervescent adviser to the PM on foreign affairs indirectly asks us to be ready for more mark time when he says that

more work needs to be done, without amplifying which side it is that needs to do "more work" and indeed the nature of the work. One can call the "Didi without mamata" anything for the Teesta fiasco, but none can blame her for upholding her state's interest. Isn't that her job? The question is have we been able to uphold our country's interest?

There is nothing new in Manmohan's, "we are trying to solve the Teesta issue" or the Bangladesh foreign advisor's suggestions for need for more work. What is worrisome is that nobody in the Bangladesh government ever tells the truth about Teesta. The fact is we should brace ourselves for a long haul on it. Furthermore, the finance minister's putting a timeframe on the resolution of the matter, as he did when the issue was scuttled by Mamata, dilutes our case.

As for the border killings, this time we have a conditional commitment, which is that the BSF will not open fire except in self-defence, i.e. unless they feel threatened. That point was flagged by certain speakers at a seminar on Indo-BD relations held in Dhaka recently. And again, perception of threat is highly subjective. One will not deny that border guards can be susceptible to attack by miscreants, but so far we have not seen a picture of the weapon the dead Bangladeshi "miscreants" were supposed to have threatened the BSF with. And what ever happened to the rubber bullets?

One finds very little to be optimistic about the quick resolution of the outstanding bilateral issues even after the recent Sahara-Chidambaram meeting given the very ritual, customary and uninspiring statements made by both sides. We have our minister's word that the meeting has been successful, but success may be defined differently depending on what one is aiming for. As for Bangladesh, it has to remain satisfied with assurances and platitudes for the time being, and see whether India will deliver this time on what it had promised.

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Clear, present danger

EDITORIAL DESK: Philippine Daily Inquirer

IS any story worth risking a life for? Journalists grapple with that question whenever they find themselves in a place or situation where their duty to the integrity of their reportage also means putting their lives on the line.

To seek the truth and report about it sometimes mean butting heads with those who'd find such truth-telling injurious to their own interests -- not least, say, the well-armed government of a country desperate to hide from the world the oppression and violence it imposes on its unarmed citizenry.

Just as often, however, such formidable hurdles as war, revolution, state-sponsored lawlessness and the active and violent suppression of a free press have not prevented the world's best and bravest journalists from remaining committed to their work. Many continue to head out to treacherous territories anywhere on the planet where they feel they can help bring the true story out, no matter the odds.

Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik embody that extraordinary ethic. Colvin, an American correspondent for The Sunday Times of London, and Ochlik, a young French photographer, were recently killed when the makeshift media center they were staying in at the besieged city of Homs in Syria was hit by rocket fire. Syrian security forces had been

subjecting Homs to continuous bombardment in an aggressive, vicious counterattack against a growing popular revolt aimed at the administration of President Bashar Assad. The deaths of Colvin and Ochlik occurred on the 19th day of the assault on Homs, which activists said had already killed hundreds of trapped civilians.

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Colvin's last dispatch was, in fact, a graphic account of the toll on Homs' inhabitants -- among them a group of frightened women and children huddled in a cramped basement where "the only food here is rice, tea and some tins of tuna delivered by a local sheikh who looted them from a bombed-out supermarket."

"A baby born in the basement last week looked as shell-shocked as her mother, Fatima, 19, who fled there when her family's single-story house was obliterated," reported Colvin. "We survived by a miracle," Fatima whispers. She is so traumatised that she cannot breastfeed, so the baby has been fed only sugar and water; there is no milk formula. Abdel Majid, 20, who was helping to

rescue the wounded from bombed buildings, made a simple plea. "Please tell the world they must help us," he said, shaking, with haunted eyes. "Just stop the bombing. Please, just stop the shelling."

Colvin, a veteran of some of the world's toughest reporting hot spots (she lost one eye while covering the

rate news about an incipient civil war in a flashpoint corner of the globe, and to the cause of truth itself, which is considerably diminished when its messengers are cut down in the crossfire, or worse, targeted for doing their work.

Colvin and Ochlik's deaths are a reminder of the singular dangers the free and unimpeded exercise of press freedom is heir to. We need not look to Syria and other places to see this first-hand. Just last month in General Santos City, Christopher Guarin, publisher and editor of the local daily tabloid *Tatak*, became the 150th journalist to be killed in the Philippines since the 1986 Edsa Revolution.

Of those killings, only seven have resulted in convictions, mostly of common trigger men, while their powerful backers still skulk in the shadows, out of reach of the law.

The Philippines is now regarded as one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists, with the still-unresolved Maguindanao massacre (which includes the unprecedented slaughter of 32 media workers in one blow) cementing the country's prime spot in that disgraceful list. Whether in Syria or in the Philippines (which prides itself in its democratic revolution), a chilling reality prevails: Freedom of the press, and its practitioners, remain under grave threat.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 1

1815 Napoleon returns to France from his banishment on Elba.

1971 President of Pakistan Yahya Khan indefinitely postpones the pending national assembly session, precipitating massive civil disobedience in East Pakistan.

1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina declares its independence from Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

2002 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan: Operation Anaconda begins in eastern Afghanistan.