

KALEIDOSCOPE

Growing Dhaka-Ankara ties

The move to benefit both the countries

THE return visit of Bangladesh prime minister to Turkey last week has opened a new vista of bilateral relationship between the two countries with very longstanding fraternal ties. The renewed endeavor was commenced with the visit of Turkey's Prime Minister Erdoğan to Bangladesh in November, 2010, the first Turkish Prime Minister to do so in almost 21 years. Hasina's reciprocal visit opens up the prospect of deepening the economic ties between the two countries as the several deals signed between them show. We note with satisfaction the commitment of the two leaders to enhance the volume of trade to 3 billion dollars by 2015 that stands at 1 billion at the moment. Given the significant rise in the bilateral trade volume since 2002 when it was only \$47 million the figure had reached \$658 million by 2009 and is \$1 billion at present, the figure of \$3 billion is very attainable if the content of the export basket was increased as was suggested by Bangladesh. And the prospect of enhancing the volume of trade between Bangladesh and Turkey is even greater particularly after the two countries sign FTA as agreed during the visit.

The signing of the investment cooperation agreement will facilitate Turkish investments in Bangladesh since it is particularly interested in relocating its labor-intensive industries such as textile and garment.

Turkey happens to be the sixth largest economy in Europe and the sixteenth in the world. And it so happens that Turkey and Bangladesh are also a part of the D-8 designed to facilitate arrangement for development cooperation within the group that also includes Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria and Pakistan.

The deals that have been inked and the commitments made by the two leaders for cooperation in other areas will help both the countries in their economic development as well bring the two peoples closer.

The sequel to Noboborsha

Let it be a new dawn

WISHING our patrons and readers Shovo Noboborsha, later than Pahela Baishakh, has its advantage. It enriches the greetings with the knowledge of the day seen, felt and lived to the core with its many-hued cultural representations.

Baishakh ushers in the new, the fresh and the youthful in the renewal of our commitments towards productivity, creativity, rejuvenation and unity of purpose and pursuit of collective advancement.

Year to year, there has been a spate in the cultural surge and participatory enthusiasm centring around Bangla new year. But the sheer scale of this year's Noboborsha observances with their suffusion of colour, depth of folk traditions, diversity of performing arts, revisiting our roots and placing ourselves in the contemporary context surpasses anything we have known before. The sprightly participation of the various ethnic communities itself bore testimony to the universal appeal of Pahela Baishakh.

It's truly a secular, non-communal and inclusive occasion both in the manner of its origin -- during Mughal Emperor Akbar linking it to harvest and revenue collection -- as well as its evolution as an embodiment of cultural expressions. This only flourished after the birth of Bangladesh. The more some detractors tried to profile it with a touch communal implication, the more reinforced its appeal got in the minds of the people.

In purely material terms, festivities related to Bangla new year contribute to both urban and rural economies. Various crafts are rejuvenated with handicraft making a hey as textiles, masks, flutes, assorted gift items, art pieces, paintings are put on sale. The transformation in fashions and designs that takes place in the prelude to Pahela Baishakh has a value added effect to the growth of fashion industry. Many new musical CDs hit the market. By one estimate, Pahela Baishakh alone registers 15 per cent growth in business.

For a day at least, the dawn of Bangla year marks a confluence of humanity transcending political, economic and rural-urban divides. But it is of paramount importance that the essence of the day is upheld and lived up to

Railway minister's predicament



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE midnight drama involving a huge sum of money in the microbus of Assistant Personal Secretary (APS) to the railway

minister has thrown the government into yet another embarrassment. As a veteran politician and parliamentarian, Railway Minister Suranjit Sengupta will have to come clear to save his status as minister. Though he has been trying to put on a bold front all through, it is clear that the incident has laid his image on the line.

A number of probe bodies have been formed. The minister himself ordered formation of two enquiry committees, while the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and the parliamentary committee have formed others. The police are yet to swing into action against those held by the Bangladesh Border Guards (BGB) at its headquarters at Pilkhana area of the city on the night of April 9. As reported earlier, they were railway minister's APS, general manager (GM) of Railway (Eastern Zone) and a senior security official of the railway. Many questions have already arisen about the departmental enquiry committees ordered by the minister into the midnight episode.

According to the latest report on April 15, the GM (east) and security commandant of the railway have been suspended, while the minister's APS sacked. So far so good. This is certainly a positive step. But that does not answer some discomfiting questions such as why has it taken so long (some five days after the midnight scandal) to take the action? What has happened to the money?

When will they be taken under police custody to unravel the source of the money?

A leader of the Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad has pointed the finger at the GM (east) for graft over the recruitment of employees in the railway. Similar accusations have also been made against the minister's APS. Others in the Parishad, who have been holding demonstrations demanding removal of the GM (east), further alleged that there were instances of massive corruption in the railway's



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east zone over the recruitment of some 3200 posts.

Now that the GM (east) has been suspended, the exact reason for which he has been suspended remains to be known. Is it for the money hauled at the BGB Headquarters, or for his alleged involvement in the railway

staffs' recruitment business?

Some employees at the Central Railway Building (CRB) in Chittagong have also alleged that as the minister has not issued any instruction to stop further recruitment, the appointments to different posts are continuing as usual even after April 9's incident at the BGB headquarters.

As a possible explanation for this, the same quarters at CRB said, if the recruitment stops the candidates who were assured of their jobs in exchange for bribe, but did not receive any appointment letter thus far in the wake of the furore created over the April 9 drama, might create a scene at CRB taking advantage of the present situation. In

money in the APS's car, he also refused to take any responsibility for the incident in his reaction to the media. Even while responding to a question during his interview with the BBC, the minister last Friday threw a counter question at the interviewer as to why there rises the question of (his) resignation, since it was a case with a railway official's and the APS in the April 9's midnight episode!

In the style of a lawyer's argument it might seem plausible, but being the boss of those held at the BGB Headquarters as well as that of the railway can he really escape his responsibility altogether and continue to shrug off all these questions thrown at him from different quarters in the same manner? Will he produce a similar argument in response to the Transparency International, Bangladesh (TI, B)'s call urging him to step down at least on moral ground?

Many among his critics, who are suggesting his resignation, may well be his well-wishers, and not his enemies, as he may like to think.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Recasting civil-military ties



PRAFUL BIDWAI

ON April 4, The Indian Express reported that two Indian Army units, a mechanised infantry formation from Hisar in Haryana and 50 Para Brigade from

Agra, made an un-notified movement towards New Delhi on January 16.

This "spooked New Delhi" because it happened the night before Chief of Army Staff Gen. VK Singh petitioned the Supreme Court amidst bitter contention with the defence ministry over his date of birth.

The suggestion that Gen. Singh threatened the government not-so-subtly shocked many who correctly assume that the Army is apolitical and wouldn't question civilian supremacy in this crude manner.

All such speculation is dangerously irresponsible. No protocol or standard operating procedure demands prior notification of sub-corps-level movements. The two units were halted without resistance and quietly returned to base. That's not how coups are staged.

If it wanted to, the army could have landed paratroopers directly into Rashtrapati Bhavan, instead of sending them by road. Or it could have mobilised the thousands of soldiers present in the Capital for Army Day (January 15) and the Republic Day (January 26) parade.

That apart, the speculation seriously misunderstands the culture and ethos of the Indian Army, which discourage the idea of questioning civilian supremacy, let alone usurping power. No evidence remotely supports the Express's allegations.

However, there's no doubt that relations between the armed forces and the defence ministry have been recently vitiated. Both are culpable for the prevalent suspicion, distrust, intrigue and skulduggery.

Besides, numerous factional groupings are active in the army, which leak sensitive internal information to the media. Among these is the allegation that the army recently intercepted

telephone conversations between high defence ministry personnel.

This has all the makings of a disinformation campaign. There was also the leak of a confidential letter from Gen. Singh to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the army's lack of preparedness in air defences, night-fighting abilities, artillery and other weapons systems.

Such letters aren't unusual. But this leak was instantly linked to the controversy over Gen Singh's date of birth (DoB). There was no dispute over the

next month. This is a dead-serious matter.

The government has already, prematurely, announced Lt-Gen Bikram Singh as COAS-designate although he has two court cases pending against him: the first involving a fake "encounter" killing in Kashmir in 2001, and the second regarding Indian troops' misconduct, including rape, during a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Congo in 2008.

Propriety and convention demand that Lt-Gen Singh shouldn't be so

Corruption has risen to dizzy levels since Kargil (1999), when India started buying huge quantities of weapons from the West, becoming the world's biggest arms importer in 2007-2011. The manner in which import tenders are framed strongly favours pre-determined sellers, while promoting bribery. Because the armed forces are shielded from the normal scrutiny of the Comptroller and Auditor General, scams rarely come to light.

DoB till 2006. Gen. Singh was cleared for top-level promotions, with 1951 accepted in army records as the year of birth.

Gen. Singh is a man of high integrity who has sincerely tried to fight corruption. Opinion may be divided over who was responsible for turning the DoB into a controversy, and whether Gen. Singh should have dragged the government to court. But on balance, he has been in the right.

A much greater, and darker, truth lies behind these murky developments: The army is rife with factionalism along caste, community, regional and regimental loyalties, and mired in corruption scandals.

A well-substantiated Supreme Court writ petition by former Navy chief L. Ramdas, former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswami and three ex-generals, alleges that former army chief JJ Singh manipulated the COAS succession process years ago so that Eastern Army Commander Bikram Singh would take over from Gen VK Singh

designated until he's cleared of these cases.

The defence ministry hasn't covered itself with glory on many other issues either. Confronted with Gen VK Singh's writ, also withdrew its earlier order determining the DoB as 1950.

The ministry has also failed to formulate a long-term security policy and integrate three separate service-based war-fighting doctrines. It follows antiquated procedures for procurement. Its financial mismanagement has resulted in the surrendering of over Rs.22,500 crores to the exchequer since 2002. The Defence Research and Development Organisation is even worse.

However, the armed services too remain mired in corruption scandals, such as the Sukna land scam (in which 71 acres was illegally transferred in West Bengal to a realtor), and Mumbai's Adarsh Housing Society case, in which two former COASs were given apartments. Not even rations and eggs are bought and sold without bribes exchanging hands.

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Even more worrisome is the erosion of norms which must regulate the conduct of the armed forces in democracy, including their apolitical character, non-interference in policy matters, and civilian supremacy.

Thus, Indian generals now think nothing of making public statements contrary to the government's views or policies on matters such as the Siachen glacier dispute, the world's highest-intensity and highest-absurdity conflict.

Siachen has claimed over 2,000 lives mainly thanks to frostbite, and driven thousands of soldiers into acute psychological disorders. India and Pakistan came close to resolving the dispute at least three times, including in 1989, 2006 and 2011.

In 2006, Gen. JJ Singh publicly ruled out the Indian army's withdrawal until its positions on the glacier are marked and recorded. The local commander had journalists flown in to announce that the army wouldn't withdraw barring on its own terms.

Similarly, during last year's debate on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, and a growing consensus on suspending it in Kashmir because of a dramatic reduction in cross-border infiltration amidst declining militancy, several army commanders lobbied against the move. Some even threatened to stop counterinsurgency operations if the draconian Act is lifted.

Such conduct is unacceptable and must be punished. Or, the armed forces will lose their integrity and credibility in the eyes of the people -- with disastrous consequences for democracy.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 16

1853

The first passenger rail opens in India, from Bori Bunder, Bombay to Thane.

1919

Gandhi organizes a day of "prayer and fasting" in response to the killing of Indian protesters in the Amritsar Massacre by the British.

1963

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pens his Letter from Birmingham Jail while incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama for protesting against segregation.

1993

The United Nations Security Council votes to create a safe haven for Bosnian Muslims under siege in the town of Srebrenica.

2001

India and Bangladesh begin a five-day border conflict, but are unable to resolve the disputes about their border.

2007

President of Côte d'Ivoire Laurent Gbagbo declares the First Ivorian Civil War to be over.