

Pranab's visit proves forward-looking

Some positive assurances given

INDIAN Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee's trip to Dhaka has concluded on a positive note. It has been marked by a certain clearing of the air on issues that have been exercising the minds of people here. Simultaneously assurances were given on specific issues of concern to Bangladesh.

Pranab's visit had two major purposes before it. One was to bring to a closure the joint celebrations of the 150th birth anniversary of Noble Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore, the shared icon between the two countries. The second objective has had to do with evaluating the status of implementation of different protocols and projects envisaged in the Manmohan-Hasina joint declarations of 2010 and 2011.

The two objectives have been fulfilled to the mutual satisfaction of both governments. The periodic reviews can only lend urgency to implementation processes and provide better understanding of practical issues involved in them.

Assurances have come on the controversial river linking project and Tipaimukh dam and Teesta water sharing issues. Bangladesh will not be affected by the river linking project, Pranab has assured us, as the rivers originating in the Himalayas will be kept outside its purview. On Tipaimukh dam, a sub-committee with a powerful mandate under the JRC will look into all aspects of the project including joint participation by Bangladesh as indicated by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. As for Teesta water sharing, water experts of India have struck a formula which they hope would address the concern of West Bengal government and that of Bangladesh.

Consensus building process is on in India to ratify land boundary protocols with Bangladesh since the UPA is a coalition government and Congress does not have the required majority for the purpose. Pranab Mukherjee's candour on the subject goes down well with us. On border killing, Indian finance minister expressed his regrets and once again reiterated his country's resolve to address the issue.

We note that India has made a friendly gesture by announcing \$200m as grant out of the \$1b credit line. Also, she has promised to decrease rate of interest on the remainder \$800m and relax conditions on procurement of machine parts.

On the whole, the Indian finance minister's visit to Dhaka has proved useful.

France's revolutionary elections

Socialist president ushered in after almost two decades

THE French elections, which have brought Socialist Party candidate Francois Hollande to power, have reflected the surge around the world - that of change. From the Arab Spring last year, the world has been riding on the winds of change. This has been reflected in Europe, too, in the last three years since the debt crisis hit, and France's Nicolas Sarkozy is the latest and 11th successive casualty among European leaders to fall from power following his failure to counter a record 10% unemployment rate; his protectionist, anti-immigrant and even anti-European inclinations; accompanied by what some would call his arrogance.

And so, for the second time in the country's history since the election and re-election of Francois Mitterand in 1981 and 1988, the French have voted in to power a Socialist president. Hollande has benefited from -- besides a currently running anti-Sarkozy sentiment in general -- his image as a mild-mannered politician who has focused on a programme of raising taxes especially on high earners, financing spending and controlling the public deficit and his call for social justice. But, while the resurgence of the Left in France for the first time in 24 years comes almost as a revolution, Hollande himself is a leader seen by some as averse to reform, for example, in terms of his refusal to cut spending.

Right now, however, he is being welcomed by the nation as someone quite the opposite of what Sarkozy was; so much so, that where Sarkozy was considered a realist -- despite the fact that he was unable to tame reality -- Hollande is considered a dreamer. How the latter will tackle his new political reality, however, especially in terms of much of the continent's German-

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- May 8
- 1933

Mohandas Gandhi begins a 21-day fast in protest against the British rule in India.
- 1945

Hundreds of Algerian civilians are killed by French Army soldiers in the Sétif massacre.
- 1945

End of the Prague uprising, today celebrated as a national holiday in the Czech Republic.
- 1980

The eradication of smallpox is endorsed by the World Health Organization.
- 1984

The Soviet Union announces that it will boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, California.

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE flurry of activities at the diplomatic and political circles in Dhaka over US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit is over. And along with it, all media speculation about the possible outcome of the visit and the talks that followed has died down. There will still be some gossip about what else might have transpired in the talks that did not come in press reports.

As things settle down, the most important question that will now take centre-stage is what we have achieved from the visit of Hillary Clinton.

The "Joint Declaration on Bangladesh-US Dialogue on Partnership" does not say anything about what we as a least developed nation desire to get from the richest nation on earth, the USA. The declaration only says that "the dialogue will be held annually on bilateral relations and priorities in Dhaka and Washington by turn." But there are no specifics about what will come under the purview of these bilateral talks. Bangladesh could feel more assured if it also stated in clear terms that the US would open up its huge market for our readymade garment without imposing any tariff and/or non-tariff barriers. It did not say if the US is willing to facilitate more investments in Bangladesh from its private sector and provide government loans on easy terms and interests, including technical assistance for our manufacturing as well as service sectors to grow. Neither did it mention if we would have the privilege of being included in its Millennium Challenge Account (MCA).

However, at the joint press conference with our foreign minister, Dipu

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ONCE touted as a "bottomless basket" by an American statesman in the early years of its journey as an independent nation, today, the country has a vibrant economy that has grown at an average of 6% per annum over the last decade; it is a major player in the world apparel industry, and it is known for its innovative microcredit programme that is being replicated on a grand scale in various continents outside Asia.

Bangladesh deserves to be known for another reason, i.e. in the area of healthcare. The country has made enormous advances in life expectancy and child health. The fertility rate has seen commendable reduction and high levels of immunisation coverage have been achieved; which in turn, has led to unprecedented reductions in maternal and child mortality. All these are indicators of the revolutionary change that has been experienced in the health sector. But then such improvement did not fall out of the sky. The fact that the country's policymakers had the foresight to make health a national priority, which happens to be enshrined into the constitution, effectively guaranteeing every citizen the "right" to healthcare proved to be visionary.

These steps taken early on in its journey as a newly-independent nation contributed to significant decrease in total fertility among women aged 15-49. In the mid '70s, total fertility was 6.6 births per woman aged 15-49 years; in 1994, it was 3.4; and by 2007, it was 2.7 (according to Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey, 2007). Similarly, as per

Moni, Mrs. Clinton advised the politicians against the harmful sides of confrontational politics, stressed dialogue as the way to resolve differences for sustainable democracy and suggested holding talks among all parties to find a way for conducting a free, fair and credible election like the one held in 2008. She did not miss to pint out the negative message violent strikes including hartals send to prospective investors abroad.

We all know that and the civil society, the business community and the media have been consistently urging the political parties to give up such paths of protest. The media and the civil society have always been critical

Before anything else, we first want to learn from their experience and expertise and develop ourselves economically. With the US in particular, we look forward to building stronger economic, cultural and people to people relations in our efforts to achieve the goal of becoming a middle income nation by 2021.

of the government's high-handed attitude towards the opposition and its repressive tactics to stifle their voice and deny their rights to hold rallies and stage demonstrations. But its sounds like lecturing an inattentive, or delinquent, student by her/his teacher when it comes from a visiting foreign dignitary.

The US, for example, would not like a visiting political leader from Bangladesh or any other country to criticise US government for its policies in Iraq, Afghanistan or in any other third world country, or instances of human rights violations there at the hands of its security forces. But the US govern-

WHO statistics (2010), infant mortality has declined dramatically from 85 deaths per 1,000 live births in the late '80s to 52 deaths per 1,000 live births over the period 2002 to 2006, i.e. a reduction of 63% over a period of two decades. Again, huge improvements in "under-5" mortality have taken place: from 202 per 1,000 live births in 1979 to 133 in 1989 to 94 in 1995 in 2006. Consequently, Bangladesh is on track to achieve MDG4 to reduced under-5 mortality. Another area

Despite worthy progress made in a number of health-related areas, significant challenges remain. One major drawback naturally revolves around shortage of skilled manpower, i.e. doctors, paramedics and nurses. This is evident by the fact that 90% of children suffering from acute respiratory infection and/or diarrhoea must obtain service from the private sector and not public sector. This is partly because of the lack of qualified health providers in rural areas.

deserving special mention is the reduction is in maternal mortality across the board, i.e. both national and sub-national studies. Studies conducted in the '60s point to maternal mortality standing between 600 800 deaths per 100,000 live births. A national survey conducted in 2001 (Bangladesh maternal health services and maternal mortality survey 2001) reported a decline from 514 deaths per 100,000 in the mid '80s to 322 per 100,000 in the late '90s.

These advances were made possible since Bangladesh, like many other

ment respects scathing criticism from its media and civil society for such lapses all the same.

Some of our nationalistic and left-leaning friends expressed their resentments about those comments from Mrs. Clinton. But is it for the first time that foreign diplomats, government leaders, or top executives of multilateral donor agencies lectured us from time to time on similar issues and advised us to behave as a condition for continued financial assistance? And can we really stop them advising us in that way when our political leaders themselves take bagful of complaints against their rivals when they meet foreign government leaders

abroad and also when they (foreign dignitaries) visit us?

We hope the Mrs. Clinton's words won't be lost on our political leaders, both in the government and in the opposition.

So far so good, but was it all about the US-Bangladesh talks?

Before Mrs. Clinton's visit, we noticed the arrivals in Dhaka of a number of US diplomats including Robert O. Blake, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs; Wendy Sherman, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and Andrew Shapiro, US Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. A

South Asian countries, has a public system run by the state and a large non-state sector that play a major role in the delivery of health care services. The latter includes NGOs and private providers of modern and indigenous medicine. In the 1970s, the government developed a public health system along the *Health for All* model, with a nationwide network of hospitals, health complexes, family welfare centres, sub-centres, and Expanded Programme for Immunisation Out-

reach clinics. At the same time, a parallel network of family planning and maternal and child welfare centres was established, in some cases contracting NGOs to provide services. Some 2,000 NGOs work in Bangladesh and their activities are mainly concentrated in the rural areas, with recent expansion into semi-urban and urban slums. The non-state sector provides the overwhelming majority of outpatient curative care, while the public sector is used for a larger proportion of hospital deliveries and preventive care.

US- Bangladesh dialogue on the security challenges facing the two countries was also held on April 19 in Dhaka. It indicated an intensification of the US's foreign and securities policy focus in South Asia. But there was no mention of the express interests that the US diplomats had earlier shown about stronger security ties between US and Bangladesh in the Clinton-Dipu Moni talks in Dhaka. We heard nothing about bilateral defence relationship, and shared commitment to peace and prosperity in the region, etc., in the foreign ministry level Dhaka talks.

Small wonder the speculations are still going the rounds about what, if any, talks were held in camera that the press missed.

About regional security matters under the umbrella of US or another foreign powers, the government needs to set its foreign policy priorities right. Bangladesh will never be a threat to any foreign country. So, it does not seek any protective umbrella of any foreign power. And what Bangladesh looks for from US, Canada, the European Union countries, Japan, China, Australia, Russia and our close neighbour India is stronger economic and cultural ties. We hope they will treat us as a privileged partner in our efforts to build stronger trading and commercial ties with them and other countries of the world. And before anything else, we first want to learn from their experience and expertise and develop ourselves economically. With the US in particular, we look forward to building stronger economic, cultural and people to people relations in our efforts to achieve the goal of becoming a middle income nation by 2021.

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Yet at the end of the day, Bangladesh stands out as a country that has taken giant steps in healthcare. Long before the emergence of contemporary global health initiatives, the government placed strong emphasis on the importance of childhood immunisation as a key mechanism for reducing childhood mortality. The Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) in Bangladesh is considered to be a health system success because of its remarkable progress over the last two decades. It provides almost universal access to vaccination services, as measured by the percentage of children under 1 year of age who receive BCG (a vaccine against tuberculosis). This increased from 2% in 1985 to 99% in 2009. Coverage of other vaccines has also improved substantially (Bangladesh EPI coverage evaluation survey, 2009).

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