

GROUND REALITIES

A new spurt in Dhaka-Yangon relationship

Time is propitious for it

WITH the start in the process of democratisation in Myanmar and its opening up to foreign investment, countries rich in capital, technology and expertise are making a beeline to invest in that country. Nations like the USA, Australia, New Zealand China and India are gravitating to a rather relaxed investment destination like Myanmar.

The country is rich with its endowment of natural resources like oil, gas, gem as well as timber.

Therefore, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took the opportunity of telling the outgoing Myanmar ambassador in Bangladesh U Min Lwin that she looks forward to a vibrant relationship with democratising Myanmar. She saw it as the stepping stone for building bridge with Southeast Asia.

It needs to be noted that Myanmar is the only other neighbour of Bangladesh with which it has been maintaining a friendly relationship. This is marked by Bangladesh's handling the two-decades-old issue of repatriating Rohingya refugees maturely and amicably with Myanmar.

It was a show of friendly gesture from Myanmar towards Bangladesh when it accepted the verdict of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) on the issue of long-standing maritime boundary demarcation between the two countries.

In fact, Myanmar has termed it a win-win outcome.

We think a new window of opportunity has opened up between the two friendly nations to take their relationship to a new height to the mutual advantage of both.

Bangladesh can import gas and raw materials from Myanmar and export pharmaceutical products, readymade garment and jute products to that country.

To enable taking full advantage of the potential that both countries hold out to each other, it will be necessary to increase connectivity between Dhaka and Yangon through road, rail and air links.

Overall, both countries can benefit from the fuller realisation of their potential for a two-way traffic of trade, commerce and investment cooperation between Dhaka and Yangon.

Attack on journalists

Becoming a regular feature

SHOCKING as it may sound; journalists in the country are regularly incurring the wrath of the powerful elites in society especially those involved in either in illegal activities or misuse of power. The latest incident of bodily harm to be suffered by a journalist took place in Pabna where the district representative of a national daily was assaulted in public allegedly led by a nephew of a ruling lawmaker for the 'crime' of having reported on the misdeeds of this individual. Today we are re-enacting the scripted drama all over again. A case has been filed against the perpetrators and the police are very active in trying to nab those accused, but for reasons known or unknown, they are yet to be successful. Protests by journalists continue in the meantime and a rally has been organised demanding justice.

What a strange situation we are in! Today the journalist in question is fighting for his life at a district hospital since the perpetrators acting with complete immunity could beat this man in broad daylight with murderous intent. This is certainly not the first time media actors have fallen foul of vindictive attitude of either ruling MPs or their cronies. In January, another ruling Awami League lawmaker Kamal Ahmed Majumder assaulted a female television journalist in Dhaka when she sought his comments on excessive admission fees being charged. The point here is that when lawmakers of the land decide that they are above the law and may mete out their own brand of 'rough justice' upon those perceived to be a threat, society can be deemed to be in serious jeopardy. For, if we are to accept this sort of behaviour as routine and acceptable, then the whole notion of 'rule of law' being the basis of a just society

Of Muhith, Heath and other men



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ABUL Maal Abdul Muhith has always been a lovable man. There is something of the gregarious in him, a spontaneity of friendliness you hardly come across in any other superannuated bureaucrat or present-day politician. There is then the humility which you cannot miss. In a society where pretensions run deep and pretence is generally the norm in social behaviour, Muhith is that rare personality who makes you feel at ease in his presence. His remarks to the media on the issues which this nation is confronted with are those you may not always or fully agree with, but you can be sure they come from somewhere deep inside him.

And because there are these admirable qualities in Muhith, it came as something of a surprise hearing him use the word 'rubbish' in his assessment of the Grameen Bank last week. Of course, there are the many points of view where the position of Grameen and its founder is concerned. But when you are hit by such unexpected words as 'rubbish' from a minister, and that too one whose record of service, as a civil servant, as a politician and as a freedom fighter, has been exemplary, you are a trifle surprised. The surprise is again something which reminds you of Edward Heath. No, the late British politician did not employ 'rubbish' in his public pronouncements. But he did use the word 'rejoice' three times when news came in of Margaret Thatcher's fall from power. So here you have a situation of Muhith using, in righteous indignation, the term 'rubbish' three times and

Heath, in celebration, crowing through making use of the word 'rejoice' three times.

The English language, in the hands of politicians, generally opens up a passage to the heights of oratorical charm. Then again, there are the times when it can reveal some of those dark instincts in men we thought did not exist. As the various layers of Watergate unfolded before him, Richard Nixon went before the media and told Americans, with not a blink in the eye, 'I am not a crook.' That turned out to be the most damning understatement of his career, for only months later it was his proven crookedness which pushed him out

there were those rare men, like Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito, who cared little for Stalin's imprecations. The Soviet leader once told the world, pompously, that he would shake his little finger and Tito would be gone. Stalin died in 1953. Tito would live till 1980, as president of Yugoslavia. In China, Deng Xiao-ping's theory of cats and mice landed him in huge trouble in Maoist times. It did not matter, proclaimed the diminutive Deng, whether a cat was black or white as long as it caught mice. Well, it did matter. For Mao, Deng was a capitalist roader. Such a man was to be punished. Deng paid the price.

of little use. Mrs. Gandhi saw to it that East Pakistan became Bangladesh and then, in magnanimity, stopped her army from destroying what remained of Pakistan in the west. Z.A. Bhutto needlessly denigrated Indira Gandhi at his public rallies through calling her 'mai,' a pejorative term for 'woman.' In 1972, he went with folded palms to Simla, to negotiate a peace deal with the Indian leader.

There are public figures who will be remembered for the language they used at some point or another in their careers. Bhutto once told anyone who would listen that Pakistanis would eat grass but would have the atom bomb. Well, Pakistan has the bomb, per courtesy of the theft committed by A.Q. Khan. But its people still wallow in gross poverty. And eating grass is a difficult proposition. In Bangladesh, our first military dictator Ziaur Rahman thought money was no problem as he went about directing 'development work.' He said he would make politics difficult. His party, in power, had its cronies make a lot of money. Out of power, it has not let parliament work. The Zia legacy?

Which reminds you of another legacy. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all he could to dismember India, for Pakistan to take form. He succeeded. And then he told the Bengalis of his country that they had to speak Urdu. That was how he set Pakistan on the road to disintegration. Time was when Rajiv Gandhi thought Calcutta was falling apart. He called it a dying city. Well, Calcutta is now Kolkata. It thrives still.

Ah, well . . .

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of the White House. It was a kind of remark that would in later times be replicated, almost, by Bill Clinton. He wagged his finger, looked stern and told Americans he did not have sex 'with that woman' (read Monica Lewinsky here). Ah, but he did. For as long as people remember Nixon and Clinton, they will remember these two statements they made. These have become part of their history.

In his times, Joseph Stalin made sure that no one could so much as hint at opposition to him. He sent numerous comrades of his to the firing squad in what we today know as the purges. Stalin's word was law, almost divine. But then

In a way, Morarji Desai too paid a price for his indiscreet description, in Hindi, of the young Indira Gandhi as a chhokri (a mere slip of a girl) when in 1966 the Congress syndicate decided that Nehru's daughter would succeed Lal Bahadur Shastri as prime minister. It would be a very long time before the cantankerous, urine-imbibing Desai would become prime minister, only to last a moment in historical time. Indira Gandhi was the target of other indecencies as well. Pakistan's Yahya Khan, outmanoeuvred by the Indian leader in 1971, warned 'that woman' against any precipitate action aimed at his country. It was

Cheese sandwich and white wine

E.R. CHOWDHURY

IN a democratic system, politicians exploit the mistakes of the opposition. They do so for their own reasons and justifications, they want to prove how wrong the other party was and at the same time project their own views and programmes on the same subject to gain popular support. However, politicians always maintain decency and courtesy in their language and make sure that they do not utter offensive words. Politicians by nature follow diplomatic manners and etiquettes. They normally will not say something unless they are certain. The British House of Commons is one place to see how deliberations are made and how they are responded to on the floor of the parliament. It is sad that even after 41 years of independence, politicians in Bangladesh have not learnt the language of parliamentary democracy.

The Nobel Peace Prize for Professor Dr. Yunus was a big achievement for Bangladesh. His Grameen Bank showed how micro-credit can make people self-reliant and keep them away from begging in the streets. The micro-credit system is now practiced in many countries. Hungry people do become violent and disturb peaceful coexistence. It is in this context that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Prof. Yunus.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, instead of congratulating Prof. Yunus, said that Dr. Yunus had been

sucking the blood of the poor to create his own empire. When she came to power, she removed Prof. Yunus from Grameen Bank. Very surprisingly, she later recommended Dr. Yunus for the post of the president of the World Bank. Was it mockery or was she trying to compensate for her earlier mistakes?

Another Bangladeshi, Sir Fazle Hassan Abed, established Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac), an NGO based on donations and mutual cooperation. He worked hard for it and has

undertaken many projects in Bangladesh. The NGO is now more or less self-financing and employs thousands of people. It operates banks and even a university in Bangladesh. Brac is now operating in many other countries. Sir Fazle was awarded Knighthood by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Both Dr. Yunus and Sir Fazle are respected all over the world. Bangladesh can surely feel proud of these two bright stars of the country. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had an exclusive meeting with them during her recent visit to Bangladesh.

The politicians feel very jealous of Dr. Yunus and Sir Fazle. In a recent political rally one of the ministers went to the extent of saying that microfinance or NGO activities

could bring no change in Bangladesh. He claimed to know how Nobel Prizes are awarded. According to him, when you go to western countries you must eat cheese sandwich and drink white wine. This will make you popular with them and you may even get a Nobel Prize!

The prime minister quoted some newspaper of UAE and said that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence gave money to Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its chairperson for their election campaign.

Later, it was found that some Indian had fabricated the story and there was no truth in it. Sheikh Hasina never apologised for her earlier accusation. BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia, in a public speech, said that she would make the government "lengra-lula" (crippled).

Bangladesh has maintained its reputation as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. The World Bank is contemplating to withdraw from financing the proposed Padma Bridge project because of alleged corruption and irregularities. Bangladesh reached a new height in corruption when a car full of cash money was caught with a minister's APS. The minister resigned but the PM preferred to keep him in the cabinet without any portfolio. This

was nothing other than open patronage for corruption from the highest level.

With regard to law and order situation in Bangladesh -- it is probably at the lowest ebb. A journalist couple were murdered in their bedroom and the response from the prime minister was: "We cannot guard or protect anyone in their bedroom." A BNP politician went missing and is still missing; and in this case the prime minister's initial response was: "He must have been hiding in the residence of one of the own party leaders to defame the government." She has not been able to substantiate her claim as yet.

At the end we have something to cheer about. Mr. Sohel Taj, son of the first prime minister of Bangladesh late Tajuddin Ahmed. Sohel realised soon after becoming a deputy minister that he had to toe the party line of corrupt practice and procedures. He preferred to resign. He is great. Like father, like son. Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed took over the helm during the War of Liberation in the absence of Bangabandhu. It was under his dynamic leadership that the nation fought the war and won independence.

I feel we have hit the bottom. It cannot go any further. It has to bounce back. Time has come. The young generation must rise and provide inspiration to people like Sohel Taj to return and rebuild the country.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 16

- 1568** Mary, Queen of Scots, flees to England.
- 1822** Greek War of Independence: The Turks capture the Greek town of Souli.
- 1943** Holocaust: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising ends.
- 1948** Chaim Weizmann is elected the first President of Israel.
- 1966** The Communist Party of China issues the "May 16 Notice", marking the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.
- 1974** Josip Broz Tito is re-elected president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This time he is elected for life.
- 1975** India annexes Sikkim after the mountain state holds a referendum in which the popular vote is in favor of merging with India.
- 2005** Kuwait permits women's suffrage in a 35-23 National Assembly vote.