

CROSS TALK

Mr. Ershad goes to Delhi



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN the Sena tor of an unnamed western state in the United States abruptly died in office, the governor of that state was given

the responsibility to pick a replacement. The governor was pressured by his corrupt political boss to pick a handpicked stooge, but the popular committee wanted a reformer and his children wanted him to select Jefferson Smith. He decided to flip a coin, which landed next to a newspaper story on one of Smith's accomplishments. That's how the story begins in the 1939 American film Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.

Though it isn't how the story begins in its Bangladesh sequel. In Mr. Ershad Goes to Delhi, Hussein Muhammad Ershad dropped everything and rushed to the Indian capital two weeks ago, because the Indian government wanted him for urgent consultations. He met with the Indian prime minister and the newly appointed president. They talked about Bangladesh and its bilateral relations. The apparent became obvious. Ershad wants power. India wants grip.

The Indian press gave zesty coverage to Ershad's abrupt visit, extolling the virtues of how the leaders of the world's largest democracy and a one-time military ruler enjoyed heart-to-hearts for the greater good of their respective countries. Our press has been somewhat mute on their response over what can be termed as one of the most uneasy moments in the history of two countries. Never before has the Indian beck-and-call

been flaunted so openly on the political scene of this country. It must be said we are going through desperate times in this country. The filth of last 41 years has choked people in their optimism; they are now standing on the brink of an abyss. It's true that Ershad's name often comes up as an alternative. But that isn't so much because he is more

which will be wedded to power in the next election, it underscores the fact that rightly or wrongly it likes him. Perhaps he is an ideal compromise between his short-term ambition for power and India's long-term plan for Bangladesh. Perhaps he is useful for the Indian strategy as much as a disposable syringe in medical service. We don't need an Einstein to tell us



STAR ARCHIVE

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popular but because other leaders are losing popularity. If anybody wishes he were running the country, it's for the same reason a distraught father is ready to offer his daughter's hand to the next willing man after the groom's party walks out over differences on dowry. There is an element of frustration to it.

Whether India wants Ershad as the next ruler of this country or simply as the best man to the political party,

that Ershad cannot be a lasting solution for this country. His political resurgence can at best be a band aid on gangrene. His age and past records are equally dicey for a country that requires more than a talisman to heal its political crisis.

It's amazing that Ershad still carries himself as a weapon of mass seduction in Bangladesh politics. BNP courted him in the past, and might do so again if he fits into their scheme. Awami

League is already in a relationship with him. India invites him. At least some people of this country are beginning to think he would be a better choice than "the two ladies."

The whole thing brings us back into a scary focus. After talking so much about a "Third Force," now we are looking at the prospect of settling for a spent force. It's no longer a concern as to who will win the next election. The concern is that the future of this country remains captive to its past. A discarded ruler is going to return like an old penny.

We might be in for long haul to stew in our own juice. If 1990 is remembered for the mass uprising, historians should be prepared to rewrite that history. Next year might be remembered as the mass surprising year if the former dictator gets to show his sleight of hand with the Indian blessings. Nur Hossain may be ready to turn in his grave. He might look more like a symbol of decadence than democracy.

We don't know what they discussed in Delhi. We don't know what they agreed on. But it has the smack of a joint venture production in which Ershad is likely to have either the lead role or a supporting appearance.

Parental guidance is required, because this movie may have contents unsuitable for children. Its plot is thick with compromise and conspiracy, which may upset younger or more sensitive minds. Children will find it hard to reconcile why one of their politicians has to dash to Delhi on the double, when it never happened the other way around. Patriotism, national pride and dignity will ring hollow with their impressionable minds.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

A flicker of hope, at last



KULDIP NAYYAR

SOME recognition at last: That both President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should send messages

of good-will to the Hind-Pak Dosti Manch is a welcome development. The Manch is engaged in an endeavour to improve relations between the two countries. This was the 17th year for its members from the Manch and SAFMA in Pakistan to light candles at midnight on August 14-15, when the two countries were born, on the Attari-Wagah border. The sky was rent with slogans like: "Long Live India-Pakistan Friendship" and "Dono bhaiyon ko mil ne do" (Let brothers meet one another).

Messages by the two governments are an admission of their mistake to have run down the tiny step taken in 1995, which has become a long stride, towards improving relations between India and Pakistan. Zardari has commended the efforts "in pursuit of shared destiny in the sub-continent." He has paid homage to all those who have been making systematic and concerted efforts for promoting peace and cooperation in the subcontinent.

"The present democratic government and the people wish to see peace and cooperation flourish in the subcontinent. We are committed to it and hope that the search by the two countries together for a peaceful resolution to all disputes through a sustained and productive dialogue will bear fruit. The two countries need durable peace and security to focus on the social and economic development of their peoples," said Zardari. Manmohan Singh too wrote in the same vein. In his message, he said: "I am happy to know that the Hind-Pak

Dosti Manch is organising the 17th India-Pakistan Peace Festival at Amritsar on August 14-15, 2012 as part of its efforts to build public opinion for peace and friendship in South Asia. The Manch is pursuing a worthy cause because sustained peace and friendship in this region are necessary for South Asian countries to effectively focus their energies on tackling challenges such as hunger, poverty, illiteracy and disease."

It has not been a pleasant experience to light candles at the border.

The anti-Pakistan feeling was dominant when we started the journey. Threats, demonstrations and abusive words were hurled at us whenever we came to the border to light candles or held seminars to determine what was wrong between the two countries and how it would be eliminated.

All these years we have not faltered in our resolve that people-to-people contact is the only way to normalise relations. Both the Congress and the BJP would scoff at the effort and call us "mombatti wale" to belittle the efforts made to rise above the bitterness of partition. The Indian government has become somewhat cooperative because it gives us permission to go right up to the zero point, even though the border is under curfew from 8 p.m. However, the Pakistan government has given permission to go to the border at midnight after the Zardari government assumed power. At the border, we exchange flags and sweets and we also sing together Faiz Ahmed Faiz's couplet "Hum

dekhenge..." It is an emotional journey for all of us because, for most who come to the border, it is not nostalgia but a commitment to see that the line drawn does not divide the centuries' old composite culture. Both Hindus and Muslims have lived together for hundreds of years and shared joy and grief, apart from festivals like Id and Diwali. Why could not they have lived side by side after partition?

I feel that it is possible to bring back that spirit provided people from both sides consider that the happenings during partition were a blot on their

long history of togetherness. It should be a written off as an aberration. Still, I wonder why the relationship going back to hundreds of years collapsed like a house of cards. True, the seeds of bitterness were sown long before partition. Yet killing neighbours or kidnapping their women shows that

both sides have not risen above the medieval, religious thinking.

We still carry the baggage of history. Books on both sides depict partition from their points of view and underline the differences over religion. Therefore, it becomes inevitable that the borders between India and Pakistan should soften so that people can go into each other's country without the hassle of visa or police reporting. But the worst is the role of fundamentalists, more in Pakistan than in India. They are out to wreck the democratic polity on this side. They are still waging a war of jihad and the messages and images sent by them to foment the migration of people of the Northeast from the different states to Assam show that. Some Indians too

have helped the fundamentalists from across the border in this devious move. I am glad to see that the two countries are cooperating in detecting the guilty and punishing them.

However, the manner in which people from the Northeast were forced to migrate to Assam is a sad commentary on our secular polity. Mere two hundred messages from across the border have exposed India's secularism. Suppose there were to be two thousand next time, what would be the state in the country? This is a serious matter which civil society and government should ponder over because even after 65 years of independence, we have not been able to achieve national integration.

My greatest worry is to find India and Pakistan stuck in the status quo. Both the countries are traversing the same old beaten path and making no progress. The visit of India's Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna early next month provides both sides with a new opportunity to span at least some distance, even if they do not sign any specific agreement. What they should be discussing is Afghanistan. If Kabul is taken over by the Taliban, it would have disastrous consequences in the entire region.

The recent attack on a Pakistan air force base near Islamabad should be a warning. This means that the Taliban have the capability to strike at any place at any time. On the other hand, Pakistan is not seen doing enough to eliminate terrorism. When people in India find that Islamabad is dragging its feet on punishing the perpetrators of 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, they wonder whether the statements by Pakistan against terrorist are credible.

Pakistan is sending mixed messages. It wants to increase business but some of its leading firms have cancelled big deals at the last minute. In economic times lie the hope. The two countries must realise this.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

Leave Limon alone

Govt intervention at the highest level called for

THE college student from a poor family of Jhalakathi, Limon, was attacked by a local thug, allegedly a Rab source

As if that was not enough, he has also been implicated in a murder case by the same attacker. In the face of continued threat to his and his family members' lives, he has been compelled to seek police protection.

It may be recalled that members of Rab shot Limon in March last year mistaking him for a criminal. Badly injured in the Rab shootout, his left leg had to be amputated. Limon was later released on bail by a High court order.

Latest incident shows that a powerful law-enforcement organ of the state would not let this hapless adolescent off its hook. He is being constantly pursued on one pretext or another, even though the DG Rab last year admitted that Limon was innocent. But the recently submitted police report that clears the responsible Rab members of their mistake of shooting at Limon flies in the face of that admission.

Civil society members including the anti-graft watchdog Transparency International (TI), Bangladesh have condemned the Eid day's attack on Limon and demanded prime minister's intervention in the matter.

It's bizarre that state's law-enforcement organ is so hell-bent on stalking a helpless individual and his family members. The way Limon is being harassed relentlessly reflects badly on the state's role as the protector of its citizens as well as the state of rule of law, human right, civil liberty and even of democracy.

If law-enforcement members become vindictive rather than protective towards people, who would they turn to?

We condemn the attack on Limon and his family members in the strongest term and demand initiative from the highest level in the government to ensure security of Limon and his family members. We further demand that the attackers be brought to justice sooner rather than later.

Talk of peace in Syria

US sceptical of offer!

WITH the Syrian civil war entering its 17th month and casualties numbering more than 17,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands made homeless, the latest offer by Syrian authorities for a negotiated settlement that would oversee President Assad step down for a participatory election caused some stir and disbelief. That was more than evident in the US reaction to the statement made by Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil while in Moscow for talks.

The conflict has been disastrous in terms of human suffering. With tens of thousands citizens fleeing to neighbouring countries and an increasingly isolated regime bombarding densely populated parts of the capital city, the latest offer appears to be a desperate bid to preserve an Alawite foothold in the country. Unlike the Libyan scenario where the great powers came together for a decisive intervention, Russia and China, the two permanent representatives of the UN Security Council have deterred every attempt for an intervention in the country. Both China and Russia remain adamant that there is no forcible "regime change" in Syria by US and allies. Russia continues to view the Assad regime as a staunch ally which has allowed its navy to have its only foreign naval base and is a major procurer of Russian arms.

The latest diplomatic move comes in the backdrop of US President Obama's statement on August 20 that there would be serious repercussions should Syria deploy its chemical weapons arsenal. Such a strongly worded statement is viewed by China and Russia as a prelude to outright military intervention to oust the Assad regime. Given the fact that both the government and opposition are locked in a battle to the finish and where regional geopolitical considerations have involved the world's great powers, there is little to indicate that a military solution can be found readily. Hence, a negotiated political settlement involving all UN permanent representatives appears to be the best bet for this enduring disaster

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 24

1690
Job Charnock of the East India Company establishes a factory in Calcutta, an event formerly considered the founding of the city (in 2003 the Calcutta High Court ruled that the city has no birthday).

1814
British troops invade Washington, D.C. and during the Burning of Washington the White House is set ablaze, though not burned to the ground; as well as several other buildings.

1931
France and the Soviet Union sign a neutrality/no attack treaty.

1949
The treaty creating NATO goes into effect.

1991
Mikhail Gorbachev resigns as head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1994
Initial accord between Israel and the PLO about partial self-rule of the Palestinians on the West Bank.