

Khaleda Zia's India visit

We hope the rapprochement is real

THOSE who have followed BNP's India policy over the years under Khaleda Zia's leadership, both while in power and especially while in the opposition, must be quite surprised by what she said during her just concluded 7 day visit to India.

Her comments that Bangladesh will never allow anti-India insurgents to operate within its soil must have sounded like music to Indian ears. Her position that her party will not be opposed to transit in the context of overall connectivity is also a position that her hosts must have cleaned their ears several times before being sure of what they were hearing.

This is so because BNP's long standing position has been to oppose to transit and look the other way while the Indian insurgent operated freely in the border areas while in power.

This newspaper has always advocated a win-win relationship between Bangladesh and India and believed that national interest of both sides can be attained through dialogue rather than mistrust and vilification, which BNP's stance often appeared to be.

We find Khaleda Zia's statements while in India to be heartening. It is a definite shift from what she and her party stood for ever since she took over the helms of BNP. We hope that this shift of policy is not a convenient posturing to placate a powerful neighbour prior to the elections due early 2014, but a reflection of a new pragmatism arrived at after serious discussion within her policy making hierarchy.

Now that she is back it will be interesting to watch how she handles the segment of her party that will find the rapprochement with India unpalatable and will, no doubt, do everything in their power to throw a spanner in the new thinking. It will not be wise for the BNP chief to be fickle on this matter and she is likely to lose whatever credibility she has gained during this tour if she changes her mind about relations with India.

If Khaleda Zia's recently articulated views prove to be more real than a set of passing remarks made to please hosts who were unusually warm and welcoming- a fact that has not been lost to the ruling Awami League-, then it will mark serious maturing of a vital bilateral relationship that has suffered from arrogance, neglect, prejudice, misinformation and big brotherly attitude.

Bangladesh's sustained progress

If only politics were detoxified we could do wonders

THE British magazine Economist has spoken highly of Bangladesh's socio-economic progress during the last two decades calling it 'big and excellent' achievement. This has actually brought to the fore of global consciousness the name of Bangladesh being spelled after China and India. The Economist article may have done us a world good -- image wise.

It is an amazing tale of a quiet revolution taking place in spite of 'dysfunctional politics'. Whereas GDP had grown at 2 percent a year since independence until 1989, thereafter it has been growing at a steady and 'respectable 5 percent a year, in real terms'. People below the poverty line dropped from 49 percent in 2000 to 32 percent in 2010. Food output has trebled since independence.

The credit goes primarily to the productive strength of the people spearheaded by improvements in almost all major social indicators. School enrolment of girls has outstripped that of boys, child mortality has rate has fallen and our life expectancy is better than in India and Pakistan.

The Economist noted the successive governments' stress on voluntary family planning as opposed to restrictive measures. These have yielded three dividends. First, the baby boom has dropped closely to net replacement rate auguring well in terms containing the population. Secondly, the number of working age people between 15 plus and 59 is at its peak compared with children and old age people. This holds the prospect of demographic dividends in terms of fast-tracked development processes. Last but not least, smaller family size makes household planning easier.

Another very important feature is the multiple benefit of making women central to development. This has been possible thanks principally to Grameen and Brac micro-credit programmes ensuring women's contribution to the economy, women working in garment industries and their part in remittance earnings -- have all gone into empowering women. Because they are earning they have voice in family decision making including size of family and where money would be spent such as on child health, education and welfare.

With such global recognition of Bangladesh's progress and its latent potential, our leaders must rise to the occasion opting for constructive politics and massive infrastructure building. Let Bangladesh be a favourite destination for FDIs, the critical missing link in our develop-

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StarEDITORIAL

Rohingyas and Bangladesh

MO CHAUDHURY

THE bouts of ethnic violence in the Rakhine region of Myanmar since mid-2012 have once again triggered the attempted exodus of Rohingyas into Bangladesh. The purpose of this commentary is to explore key dimensions of the Rohingya tragedy and potential courses of action from the Bangladesh perspective.

First, the conflicting and growing strategic interests of the global power players in the land and sea area surrounding Myanmar (and Bangladesh) continue to prevent any strong independent action on the part of these players to bring about and enforce a mutually fair redress for the Rohingya trgedy. Such a redress would perhaps involve creating an autonomous Rohingya-majority territory in Myanmar carved out of north-western Rakhine with its political and governance structure similar to the territories of Canada and USA, for instance.

Second, the Government of Myanmar (GoM) continues to deny citizenship to the Rohingyas claiming that the Rohingya ancestors, originating from areas now part of Bangladesh, unlawfully trespassed into and settled in the Rakhine region. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB), on its part, argues that it is an internal problem of Myanmar, and a more accommodative GoB policy regarding the Rohingyas would simply encourage continued governance failure in Myanmar.

Meantime, the tragedy continues to deepen with all of its manifold implications for Bangladesh, such as economic rehabilitation, cultural assimilation, risk of strengthening of anti-secular extremism, risk of counter violence against the Buddhists in Bangladesh, risk of infiltration of illegal arms and weapons, risk of border tension in case of Rakhine insurgency (of ethnic alliances of separatists) operating from within Bangladesh, risk of strengthening of separatist forces in the southeastern areas of Bangladesh, etcetera. The blame game (as much as the blames may be true) and the associated lack of commitment to the humanity of the Rohingyas do not seem like productive courses of action for Bangladesh.

Third, there is no legislation in Bangladesh specifically targeted at handling refugees or asylum seekers. Instead, the GoB relies on the 1946 Foreigners Act that grants it sweeping power. Further, Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. This legal void has provided

utmost discretion to the GoB in dealing with the Rohingya refugees. For example, Bangladesh is yet to document/register the vast majority (221,000 out of the reported 250,000) of the Rohingyas already in Bangladesh, most of them since 1991-92.

Without any legal status, these Rohingyas do not qualify for any official humanitarian assistance and have been living in sub-human conditions. While respecting the international law of non-refoulement, Bangladesh did not expel the undocumented Rohingyas, but the 2012 actions of repelling the asylum seekers indicate a reluctance to respect this law going forward. Further, in November 2010, the GoB suspended the UNHCR programme for resettlement of Rohingyas abroad and has since rebuffed strong appeals from the UNHCR to revoke the suspension.

Granted that the internal security concerns of Bangladesh may be well-taken, the question is why twenty years (since 1992) is not a long enough period of sub-human living for the undocumented Rohingyas without access to lawful employment, education, health, freedom of movement, justice system and international assistance.

Fourth, the 250,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh represent a tiny 0.17% of the country's population of 150 million, and only one-eighth of the annual growth (1.37%) of population. Further, if the documented Rohingyas are rehabilitated in low density areas, additional amenities and infrastructure needs will be minimal. With legal status, it is also expected that the economic productivity and consumption of the Rohingyas and the inflow of international assistance for them will rise. Thus, their registration is not likely to result in either a population burden or an economic baggage. Without documentation, however, not only the are economic benefits foregone, the Rohingyas may in fact become increasingly desperate and vulnerable to recruitment by crimi-

nals, extremists and political opportunists.

Fifth, there is a risk of ethnic clash and separatist turmoil if the Rohingyas are all rehabilitated in the south-eastern region of Bangladesh. For example, if all 250,000 Rohingyas are relocated to the Bandarban district, they will become a dominant ethnic majority there. Therefore security concerns warrant a spatially diversified rehabilitation, possibly dispersing a significant number of Rohingyas to the northern and western districts and perhaps the off-shore islands of Bangladesh.

Lastly, it is in the long-term interests of Bangladesh to be seen as a nation that genuinely cares about the sufferings of fellow human beings. Unbalanced concerns about internal security and geopolitics should not cloud the recollection of traumatic ethnic and political persecution of the Bangladeshis themselves in the not so distant past, nor should it be lost that a sufficiently large segment of the world was always there for Bangladesh whenever it needed economic and humanitarian assistance, especially at times of severe natural calamities. The care and assistance needed by the Rohingyas surely pales in contrast.

While mindless compassion can be reckless, so can be heartless pragmatism. Hence, it is a reasonable balance between the two that Bangladesh needs regarding the Rohingyas.

Clearly the transition from defending minorities within own borders to accommodating minorities across the borders is fraught with unpleasant challenges, but continued deferral of taking up the challenges is not a sustainable choice either.

Such a recognition could perhaps start with: (a) unequivocal condemnation of the acts of violence in Rakhine as unacceptable by the GoB, civil society and other collective forums, (b) registration of the undocumented Rohingyas in Bangladesh, (c) cooperation with relief organisations to channel humanitarian aid to the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, (d) articulation and enactment of a comprehensive refugee policy, and (e) leadership by the GoB in orchestrating a multilateral alliance to address the Rohingya tragedy. In other words, a combination of unequivocal moral support, refuge and relief efforts within an internationally accepted legal framework, and mobilisation of interested powerful partners are called for.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Too much power at Centre

WHATEVER happens in the next general election -- my bet is early 2013 -- India will emerge an extremely divided country. The usual assumption that the two main political parties, the Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), will have between them a majority of seats looks like gong awry. Both have gone down so much in the public estimate that neither of them may cross even the three-figure mark.

It's obvious that there will be parties of all religious and ideological stripes in the field this time. The vote is bound to be divided. A party which wins more than 50 seats can become a fulcrum and try to attract others. This will mean that quite a few parties will have to gather on one platform to garner 273 seats for a majority in the 546-member Lok Sabha, the lower house.

The Congress and the BJP have been mauled by charges of corruption, the BJP because of its president Nitin Gadkari's fictitious companies and the Congress because of a series of scams topped with bogus land purchases by Congress President Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law, Robert Vadra. Worse is the arrogance of the two parties, which is shown in their contempt for the people demanding an independent inquiry.

Allegations of corruption will chase the Congress in its electoral campaigns. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a cleaner person, may not escape the slings when the scams could have been nipped in the bud if the PMO had acted. In fact, its connivance, if not complicity, has been a common feature of scams.

The union cabinet's reshuffle cannot revive hopes when the general impression is that the Congress has become a den of corruption. Most in the cabinet are neither clean nor competent. And when a comparatively honest minister, Jaipal Reddy, is removed from the petroleum ministry, it is confirmed that the Congress is helpless before the corporate sector in view of money it amasses for elections.

In comparison, the BJP is less guilty, simply because it has not been in power for more than

eight years. The states, particularly Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, have brought the party a bad name. Yet corruption in the BJP-run states may not get so much importance as the government of India's scams which will become the topic in the general elections.

The slight advantage of the Congress will be outweighed by the communalism factor of the BJP. The party is too parochial and too much linked with the RSS, the mother of all communal hatred. The way in which the BJP went back to support Gadkari once the RSS backed him proves once again that the BJP is fiction and RSS the fact. It will not surprise the electorate if the party projects for prime ministry the name of Narendra Modi, who planned and executed the ethnic cleansing scheme in Gujarat in 2002.

The Congress still has the advantage of its secular appearance. However, most Muslims have moved away from the party in the states where they have an alternative to the BJP. In straight contests, Muslims will side with the Congress but not at places where there are other parties, like in UP, Bihar and West Bengal. Civil society, which normally tilts towards the Congress, is disillusioned by the fact that a person like Manmohan Singh keeps quiet because of pressure from Sonia Gandhi. It is looking for a third alternative.

Since the Congress and the BJP have fallen in the people's eyes, other parties, particularly the ones embedded in the states, have come up. The assembly elections, first in West Bengal and then in UP, have shown that the electorate prefers regional parties to those which have dispersed themselves in the entire country. This tendency is not because the people are becoming parochial

but because the all-India parties have failed to present a united picture of India. Hence the next Lok Sabha may see many parties, even the tiny ones, trivialising the scenario. The jats, the dalits or the Rajputs and Yadavs may come to articulate their caste and sub-caste. Yet this divisive picture does not mean that the country is coming apart. Diversity is its strength.

Demands for an identity of their own may become still louder. The answer does not lie in suppressing such voices and dubbing them anti-national but in decentralising power. There is no doubt that the centre has too much power. It has reduced the federal structure to a unitary system. The states feel redundant in many ways. Bihar has raised the standard for a special status. More and more states will follow suit. After the general elections, the demand may become irresistible when the spokespersons will be the indigenous, regional parties.

In fact, the constitution has been frugal in giving powers to the states. There is need for another look at the constitution so as to give more subjects to the states. Article 370 gives a special status to Jammu and Kashmir. It was meant to be a temporary provision but had to be continued indefinitely. Why should the same dictum not apply to other states? All of them need a special status, the status which will not curb their initiative and where they will not have to act like a supplicant before the centre.

The centre should have defence, foreign affairs, communications, currency and planning. Probably, it can have one or two more subjects but after a careful consideration so that it does not become too powerful. It is leader among the equals. However, decentralisation should be effected all the way, from Delhi to state capitals and from there to districts, the power ultimately reaching villages, to enable the people to rule themselves. Regional parties would do well to keep this in mind if they do not want to meet the fate of all-India parties.

Many years ago, a Baluch nationalist leader, Mir Ghouse Bux Bezano, told me: "Take the lesson from us. Too much concentration of power at Delhi may one day result in a situation which Pakistan is facing today."

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The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 5

1996
President of Pakistan Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari dismisses the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and dissolves the National Assembly of Pakistan.

2006
Saddam Hussein, former president of Iraq, and his co-defendants Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti and Awad Hamed al-Bandar are sentenced to death in the al-Dujail trial for the role in the massacre of the 148 Shi'as in 1982.