

## GROUND REALITIES

# Our Pakistan question

## Cancellation of PM's Islamabad visit

*The manner in which it was done is unfortunate*

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's cancellation of Pakistan visit to Islamabad in connection with the upcoming D-8 summit has raised more questions than answers.

What seems intriguing is the abruptness of the PM's decision to call off the visit after she had accepted the invitation that was conveyed by the Pak foreign minister in Dhaka. In fact, the PM's press secretary had informed that she would visit Islamabad on November 21.

Reportedly, her close colleagues had advised her against the visit in view of what they perceived as security risks. We think Sheikh Hasina's security concerns are a genuine issue and one that must always be given high priority. Her stand against extremist forces makes her particularly vulnerable in countries like Pakistan where extremists often play havoc with security bastions. However, if security reasons have prompted cancellation of the visit then why weren't these given due consideration before conveying a positive response in the first place? We think the PM was badly served by her staff.

The manner in which the matter has been handled is very disturbing. What message does it convey to the diplomatic circles at home and abroad? What is worrying is that the visit was not a bilateral one. Countries with important trade prospects like Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and Iran are also a part of the D-8 group.

The Bangladesh foreign ministry must be very careful about planning foreign visits by our head of the government as this kind of unpredictability in our diplomatic behaviour at the top level may tell upon our foreign relations and credibility abroad.

## To whom does the family turn?

*Shooting spree unmasks poor law and order*

THREE days have elapsed since young Parag; a six-year old was abducted from Keraniganj in broad daylight. What is shocking is the ferocity with which kidnappers shot and injured his mother, two sisters and the vehicle driver for resisting the incident. The boy was whisked away on motorcycles and hasn't been heard of since. It is not surprising to find that twenty or so bystanders did not intervene. What can a crowd of unarmed people do against criminals, particularly when the police were not at hand.

From what has been reported in the press, family members of young Parag are normal people leading normal lives. They are law abiding citizens. Their 'crime' perhaps was the fact that the kidnapped boy's father is a businessman owning substantial land assets and that wealth was reflected in the form of philanthropic activities in the area they live. The law enforcement authorities still have no inkling as to the whereabouts of the missing child. With no sign of police activism, rumours and speculations are rife in the area as to why the boy was abducted. And as there has been no demand for ransom, the family fears the worst and the emotional baggage of losing a young one has taken its toll on the family.

Our question is precisely why the police have not got any leads yet. Granted, kidnappers took care to hide their identities during and in the wake of the sensational abduction, but to state that they are mystified and have no leads in the matter is unacceptable by any standards. Keraniganj, where the incident took place, is not some remote island in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. It is a fairly developed area well within Dhaka division replete with administration and police presence. Making excuses and leaving matters to fate is inexcusable and authorities must act to restore public confidence in law enforcers.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE have been given to understand that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will not be going to Pakistan for the D-8 summit. The reasons, of course, are yet to be known given that the prime minister had earlier accepted the invitation brought to her by Pakistani foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar. Be that as it may, we now have a rather good opportunity to observe and comment on the wariness with which Bangladesh and Pakistan have circled each other since the surrender of the Pakistan army in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.

First, a basic point. For all their professions of brotherhood with Bangladesh, one needs to remember that a very large number of Pakistanis are yet to express contrition over the genocide conducted by their army here in 1971. Pervez Musharraf once expressed his regret over the tragedy, but regret falls far short of an expression of apology. So if Sheikh Hasina has opted not to go to Islamabad over the apology question, we have no complaints. She speaks for all Bengalis.

For more than two years after Pakistan's battlefield defeat in Bangladesh, you might recall, the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto described the Bangladesh government as the "Dhaka authorities" and did all it could to prevent the new nation from gaining membership of the United Nations and other global bodies. Worse, it sent out Bengali collaborators of the Pakistan army, then stranded in Pakistan, to the Middle East in order to influence governments in the region into staying away from a recognition of Bangladesh's sovereignty as a state.

But, then, Pakistan ate humble pie in February 1974 when leaders of Islamic nations gathering for a sum-

mit in Lahore pressed for Bangladesh's presence at the conference. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would not go without Islamabad's formal acknowledgment of Dhaka as a free country. Bhutto capitulated; and Bangabandhu travelled to Lahore, where the killer of tens of thousands of Bengalis in 1971, General Tikka Khan, then, ironically, Pakistan's army chief of staff, saluted him at the airport. At a civic reception arranged by the Pakistan government, a number of Pakistanis, apparently on cue from the authorities, attempted to embarrass the Bangladesh leader with incendiary questions. They did not succeed.

A few months later, in June 1974, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto demonstrated the

Bangladesh and ordered bags of rice to be sent to the "brotherly" people of Bangladesh.

On Bangladesh's part, some disturbing moves were made under the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman. The country, by then forced into counter-revolutionary rightwing mode, agreed to an exchange of ambassadors between Dhaka and Islamabad in 1976. And this was done despite the fact that Pakistan had yet to agree to a settlement of the Bihari question and arrive at a solution to the issue of assets and liabilities of pre-1971 Pakistan. It was capitulation on Bangladesh's part, a position to which substance was added when Ziaur Rahman made an official trip to Islamabad in 1978 for

Pakistan. She said nothing, but once out of Bangladesh airspace she made it clear that the Biharis were not Pakistani citizens. It was a frontal assault on the deal her father had agreed with Bangladesh in 1972.

These are the realities of history. Pakistan has not taken its citizens for resettlement in its territory. It has never been serious about the assets and liabilities issue. Its schools still teach wrong and bad history to the young and have never explained to them why or how "East Pakistan," once a part of the country, suddenly vanished. There are innumerable Pakistanis who will tell you that they did not know what their army was doing in Bangladesh forty one years ago. That is an untruth, for they knew all right and indeed looked forward to a suppression of the Bengali struggle. The defeat of their army was a shock they have not fully recovered from.

The men who played instrumental roles in the genocide -- Yahya Khan, Abdul Hamid Khan, S.G.M.M. Pirzada, Tikka Khan, Rao Farman Ali, Khadim Hussein Raja, A.A.K. Niazi --- were never punished, though the Bhutto government had publicly informed Bangladesh that if Dhaka agreed to free Pakistan's prisoners of war, Islamabad would on its own try these and other men over their transgressions.

And, of course, Pakistan has never apologised. Hina Rabbani Khar has advised us to leave the past behind and look to the future. Japan and Germany have atoned for their past and have marched, conscience clear, into the future. Pakistan has done no such thing.

Observe the irony. Today, the Pakistan army takes a bad mauling from the Pakistani Taliban in Waziristan. American drones kill hundreds in Pakistan and the army does not know how to respond. Guerrilla groups fight on for freedom in Baluchistan.

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contempt in which he still held the people of Bangladesh. He did not wish to visit the national martyrs' memorial in Savar but did so when the Bangladesh government made it clear that it was a procedure followed by all heads of state and government visiting Bangladesh. At the memorial, Bhutto refused to doff the Mao cap he had on and looked irritated. When the visitors' book was presented to him, he refused to write anything. He pushed it away, muttering: "Enough of this nonsense."

The Pakistan government was thrilled at the murder of Bangabandhu in August 1975. Many Pakistanis distributed sweets in Pakistani cities to celebrate the fall of a "traitor to Pakistan." Bhutto, happy beyond measure, publicly recognised, mistakenly, the emergence of the "Islamic Republic" of

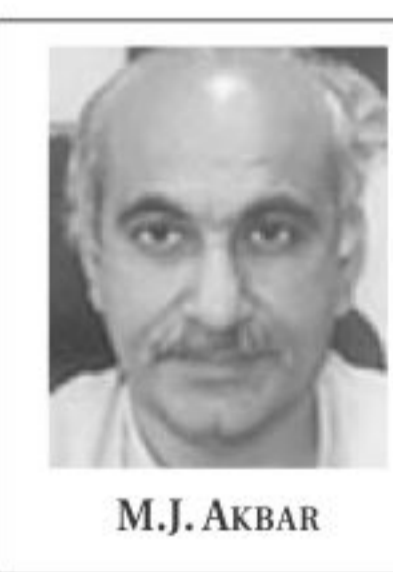
talks with General Ziaul Haq. Nothing of substance came of the meeting.

Ziaul Haq visited Dhaka in 1985 in the aftermath of the tornado at Urir Char. Quite a charmer, he visited the national memorial at Savar to place a wreath in honour of Bangladesh's fallen Mukti Bahini guerrillas. Asked for his views on Bangladesh's freedom fighters by Bengali newsmen, he smiled and made the perplexing comment: "Your freedom fighters are our freedom fighters."

In her time, Benazir Bhutto, who as a student in America refused to believe (because her father told her so) that Pakistan's soldiers could kill Bengalis, visited Bangladesh briefly to see a pir. In the process, the Ershad government raised with her the matter of the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis (Biharis) to

## BYLINE

# Prez Obama's rainbow finds its pot of gold



M.J. AKBAR

ANY politician who gets elected thanks to the worst financial crisis since America's Great

Depression in 1929, and needs the most violent hurricane in a century to get re-elected, obviously has the vote of the Almighty. Many Americans remain convinced that the divine benevolence Barack Hussein Obama enjoys is from a God called Allah, rather than the bearded old man of Christian iconography. Barack is not an English word, let alone an American one; it derives from the Arabic baraka, meaning blessing. Others, and Donald Trump comes to mind, accept that Obama was born, but wish he hadn't been, and certainly not in Hawaii.

Obama faced three potentially fatal obstacles, two of them snake-pits: race and religion. Certainty about his colour, and uncertainty about his faith, cemented the outraged determination of conservatives to limit America's first black president to one term. The third hurdle, the economy, was colour neutral in theory, but whites reacted more negatively than other voters. Obama lost the white vote in every category: 45 to 51 among those between 18 and 29; 38 to 59 among the 39-44 group; 38 to 61 among the middle-aged, 45-64; and 44 to 65 in the old. But you can also

see a new America emerging from this barren chrysalis. Obama's vote increases as the voter gets younger. The future is with him. Overall, Obama got 60% of young support as compared to only 37% for Mitt Romney.

Romney was straight from Republican central casting: well-brushed hair, a moderate public voice, a mean private discourse, all things to all people, and a business CV straight from a tax consultant's manual. What he did not have was sufficient population. The white electorate in America has dropped from 84% in 1984 to 72%, and will dip to 69% by 2016 as the demographic easel continues to mix colours. Romney invested in geography, as a look at any results graphic will confirm. Obama placed his bet on demography, and sliced Romney along the jugular.

Leadership is the art of extracting diamonds out of a coalmine. In a remarkable display of reverse engineering, with advice from that professor emeritus of American politics Bill Clinton, Obama mobilised the margins through positive discrimination, from rights for children of illegal immigrants to support for same-sex marriage and unprecedented health care for the impoverished, mainly Blacks. Every vote he got was obtained by commitment and

craftwork through his term in office.

Obama could depend on the insular and insensitive Republican right to rescue him when he needed help most, as when the argument seemed to be fading from his grasp. One American satirist, Andy Borowitz,

described the Republican message with less exaggeration than humour normally demands: "We're strongly opposed to FEMA and health care but basically OK with rape...When God

wants to create a hurricane or make a woman pregnant, big government should get out of the way."

The antediluvian Republican challenge to abortion helped Obama cleave enough of the white women's vote to ensure that two per cent margin which made his election safe. Any disappointment with Obama was not enough to dissolve their fear of the ruthless anti-abortion lobby.

Obama rearranged his base into a sparkling coalition of minorities, till the sum became greater than its parts. It is entirely consistent that white liberals, women and men, who voted for Obama were also a minority within their demographic.

But no engineering has ever been reversed as adeptly as Obama's repositioning of a still convalescent economy. He tried to display some green shoots: IMF has projected that the American economy will grow at

3% next year; 900,000 jobs a month were being lost in 2004, today 170,000 are being added. But they were lost in the incandescent rage of election advertising. Obama deftly turned the argument into a contest between the possessed and the dispossessed. Obama remains in the White House because of support from who suffered most in a faltering economy, the poor, the deprived and those struggling to enter the middle class.

Obama united the differences of America and inspired the collective to rise above snake-pits to claim a new centre. He has reset politics on a fulcrum that just might send Republicans into oblivion. In 2016

Democrats will have a white candidate sailing in the breeze of economic recovery, and anchored in the grateful commitment of diverse minorities. Republicans were once the party of Abraham Lincoln, guardians of national unity and uplift. Obama is Lincoln's child now, and Democrats the Lincoln vehicle. If Republicans do not change they will be forgotten like the Whigs of Lincoln's time.

A sigh of relief was audible across the world when Obama won. There was sullen anger in only three places: Republican America; Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's office; and Drone-peppered Pakistan. But that is a thought for another day.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 14

- 1922**  
The BBC begins radio service in the United Kingdom.
- 1965**  
Vietnam War: The Battle of the Ia Drang begins the first major engagement between regular American and North Vietnamese forces.
- 1970**  
Soviet Union enters ICAO, making Russian the fourth official language of organization.
- 1990**  
After German reunification, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Poland sign a treaty confirming the Oder-Neisse line as the border between Germany and Poland.
- 1991**  
Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk returns to Phnom Penh after thirteen years of exile.
- 2001**  
War in Afghanistan: Afghan Northern Alliance fighters take over the capital Kabul.