

## Why the foot-dragging on the Padma Bridge graft probe?

*ACC should act independently*

THE letter sent by the chief of the World Bank-appointed external panel to the Anti-Corruption Commission, ACC, on Tuesday expressed concern about the scope of the probe being conducted into the alleged graft in the Padma bridge project. This is unsettling.

So far we have been getting confusing reactions from the ACC about the WB panel's position on the ongoing probe. The chairman and one of the anti-graft watchdog's commissioners have been providing a rather positive impression to the press about WB panel's stance on the probe.

But the tenor of Tuesday's letter of the WB panel contradicts this view as in its reference to the First Information Report, FIR, the latter has made its 'concern' rather explicit.

We note that he WB external panel's chairman in an earlier letter to the ACC chairman on January 9 urged him to provide clarifications about some queries it had made in it about the probe as well as the FIR.

But the last letter makes it clear that the WB panel is yet to get the clarifications from the ACC "to assess whether a complete and fair investigation is underway." The ACC must come clean about the probe to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Why is it that the Padma Bridge, the realisation of which seemed so near, is being pushed away in this manner?

In its 60 years' history, the World Bank never revived a loan after cancelling it. What can be a more glaring example than this of its steadfast commitment to the Padma Bridge project?

From the very start, the ACC seems to have set itself on a programme to play down the conspiracy allegation and has been continually shooting itself in the foot knowing full well what repercussions it may lead to.

It appears that the ACC has gone out of its way to exonerate somebody or other from the allegation. Why must one single person be allowed to stand in the way of the Bridge risking a second time cancellation of the loan?

The external panel is independent of the World Bank and is manned by experts of global standing in establishing integrity. The silver lining is that the WB panel has kept the ACC engaged in order to get to the bottom of the truth.

If ACC is really an independent anti-graft body, it should behave like one and help the WB panel to clear the way for the loan to build the nation's dream project.

## Acid violence continues despite laws

*More effective implementation needed*

YET another woman has made news headlines as a victim of violence. Sharmin Akter Ankhi, an Honours final year student of Eden College, had acid thrown on her face and body and was subsequently stabbed, by an acquaintance named Monir Uddin. The incident occurred at a marriage registrar's office in Chankharpur where the woman was allegedly taken by force, and, upon refusing a marriage proposal made by Monir Uddin, attacked. Though some media reports have attempted, directly or indirectly, to question the relationship between the man and woman and what actually happened, nothing can justify the crime.

Despite a positive decline in acid crimes over the years, there have been 3112 incidents since 1999 with 3424 survivors, according to Acid Survivors Foundation. Last year, there were 71 reported incidents with 98 survivors, down from almost 500 incidents as well as survivors in 2002.

Following a lengthy movement by women's rights activists, the government in 2002 enacted the Acid Crime Control Act to control acid use and prevent acid violence. Under these laws, the maximum sentence for acid throwing is the death penalty but convictions have been hard to come by. Flaws in the legal and administrative system allow many perpetrators to get away with impunity. Coupled with this is a social stigma against victims of acid crimes. And while the numbers may have declined, even one is too many for the survivors who are left to live a life of struggle.

The fact that acid crimes still occur means that acid is available and the poor conviction rate reflective of a culture of impunity. If not stricter laws, then their more effective implementation is necessary to punish culprits and deter potential ones. With the recent, alarming rise in violence against women, the government must do everything in its power towards guaranteeing their security

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 17

1946

The UN Security Council holds its first session.

1981

President of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos lifts martial law eight years and five months after declaring it.

1991

Gulf War: Operation Desert Storm begins early in the morning. Iraq fires 8 Scud missiles into Israel in an unsuccessful bid to provoke Israeli retaliation.

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

going to be held in 2014. And in that context the CTG, for understandable reasons, is being demonised and projected as a possible precursor of another 1/11 by the AL.

We are not only confused but apprehensive about the direction we are heading towards. The uncertainties that visited us seven years ago at the fag end of BNP regime are revisiting us, and we are worried too that the same situation might revisit us like the one in 2006, because the same folly that prejudiced the thoughts of the BNP at that time seems to have engulfed the mind of the AL too.

And that stems from the supreme overconfidence of the ruling alliance; not so much from its performance of the last four years but from its perceived ability to ramrod an election come what may, mirror imaging the behaviour of the BNP and its alliance in 2006.

Or perhaps the ruling alliance is unwilling to credit the BNP and its partners with the ability of the AL's, to precipitate a situation as would allow no other alternative but a stopgap arrangement; perhaps through a presidential decree.

Our confusion occurs from vari-

ous comments regarding the manner of holding the next election coming forth up to now from all levels of leadership of the AL and its partners. Having come out with different views so long, it seems that they all have now fallen in line with what the PM and leader of the ruling coalition had said, or rather left unsaid, about the next election in her speech marking the end of the fourth year of the alliance rule.

The Supreme Court verdict on the 5th Amendment and the 15th

Amendment is a good pretext for the AL and its allies for not reassessing the issue. The law minister's recent comment is a case in point, as if the Constitution is a consecrated document that cannot be altered. And any reference to the Supreme Court's suggestion of holding the next two elections under a caretaker government, notwithstanding it being declared by the same court as being "in conflict with the constitution," is carefully avoided.

In citing the successful holding of various elections in the last four years what the PM did not say, but conveyed eminently well, was the AL's position on the conduct of next election. It seems that the seal of finality have been put by the PM on the modus of the next election,

age of these events has been fairly quiet; certainly nothing similar to the high indignation witnessed in India, probably owing to the fact that it was not Pakistani soldiers who were the victims.

For now, it would seem that the incident may not have further consequences along the LOC, though it would be premature to discount the possibility. Neither side has engaged in measures that presage intensified armed confrontation nor are there reports of spreading conflict elsewhere along the LOC. It is possible, nevertheless, that other aspects of bilateral ties could come under pressure.

Already there are reports that trade across the LOC in the Jammu area, where the incident took place, has been halted by the uncertainty that now deters traders; this may

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have more to do with the traders' own reluctance to continue to trade in the present circumstances than to any official proscription.

No such slowdown or halt is reported from the Kashmir area which is relatively distant from the affected section of the LOC but some individuals have expressed the view that the regular movement of goods and people across the international border at Wagah should be restricted. If such a decision is taken, it could affect the hard-won agreement after several rounds of tortuous negotiations on modalities for permitting easier cross-border access for older people of 65 years or more, the revised rules for which are to become operational within the next few days.

As yet there is no strong move in this direction, nor is there any

forcefully reconfirmed by two of her ministers soon after her speech.

One wonders whether the PM will remain as rigid as her current pronouncements suggest, certainly since she cannot be oblivious of the potential direction the respective stands of the two parties are taking the country towards.

The BNP likewise seems to have left no space for the government to manoeuvre by saying that it will talk on nothing else but a caretaker government, and at the same time threatening to bring down the government through "mass upheaval."

Thus the nation has been left with a fait accompli. Take it or lump it. What is the alternative if the choice happens to offer nothing better than the devil or the deep sea?

One fails to see why a caretaker system should automatically mean another 1/11? The specter of 1/11 is being projected again. And that too by a party that has not only taken credit for the dispensation that followed but has been the greatest beneficiary of it. But what is perhaps most disquieting is the hint of military intervention in the event of the parties failing to uphold the political process.

Is it a display of intellectual bankruptcy to suggest military as being the alternative to the potential polit-

strong demand for putting a halt to sporting ties, though similar restraints on people-to-people contact have been applied in the past at times when it has been considered necessary to bring about a slow-down in relations.

A further step that has been urged by a few observers is to suspend the process of dialogue that has been taking place for nearly two decades - what has been referred to as the "composite dialogue."

This process has had its ups and downs, for there have been several fluctuations in the Indo-Pak relationship that have interrupted the regular exchanges on identified issues to which the two sides are committed, yet it has been persisted with because it has yielded some results -- nothing as substantial as had been hoped for when the dia-

ical impasse the germination of which has already started? Or is there an ulterior motive in articulating such a possibility?

There are clearly two options before the AL. First, hold elections as per the provisions of the 15th Amendment, and second, give in to the opposition demand for CTG. The former presupposes the AL's ability to not only hold the elections but also absorb the resultant uncertain developments. And here perhaps the AL and its allies are banking on their perceived inability of the BNP to not only thwart holding of elections, as was done by the AL in 2006, but also to create enough trouble to nullify the results and go for fresh elections.

Frankly, even for the most inveterate democrat, it would be hard to accept a situation where elections are held with the current parliament in vogue.

The second option, and more peaceful even if that, to some AL stalwarts, means 'swallowing pride.' And here the BNP too must move away from its rigid stand on CTG. What the public is interested in is an election under a system that would ensure a fair and participatory election, whether it is called caretaker or interim matters little.

As for the election run under a non-elected dispensation, AL's reluctance to do so now seems absurd; they having benefited from the same on two occasions.

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## Fallout from the beheading

SALMAN HAIDAR

THE incident on the line of control (LOC) in which Indian soldiers lost their lives and their bodies were mutilated has shocked the country and cast a pall over relations between India and Pakistan.

There have been calls for retribution and demands that such actions should not go unpunished. The government has been put under pressure to respond, its strong statements and diplomatic demarches not being sufficient to allay public indignation or to meet the demand for action, not words.

The situation continues to develop and it is as yet not clear what shape it might take. What is evident, however, is that there is no effort at this stage on the part of the political leadership to fan the flames and heighten tension. In fact, from the start the official attempt, even while expressing anger and revulsion, has been to exercise restraint and not permit dangerous escalation.

In keeping with this approach, New Delhi has asked for a flag meeting of the opposed commanders, to try to cool passions and minimise the risk of further armed exchanges. As of now, Pakistan is yet to respond, and there are reports of continued firing along the LOC. In the circumstances, the respective Directors General of Military Operations (DGMO) have been asked to be in contact with each other -- they have a hot line link that has been in place for several years as an important CBM whose aim is to reduce the chance of misunderstanding and to try to solve problems as they arise.

Pakistan has denied responsibility and has called for investigation of what actually took place, suggesting that the UN force stationed in Kashmir might be approached for this purpose. This last is hardly a serious proposition, given the well-known differences between the two sides on the role of the UN in Kashmir. In Pakistan, media cover-

logue commenced but still enough to encourage further effort.

In recent months it is in the area of cross-border trade that the most considerable results have been recorded, so that trading exchanges have become more than just a negligible blip on the South Asian economic screen.

However, divisive issues on which talks have been in progress for many years, such as Sir Creek, have remained more or less where they were, though it can be argued that regular talks about these matters have served to keep tensions under control. The most tangible benefit obtained from sustained engagement is the agreement to maintain tranquility along the LOC which has endured for many years and has greatly improved the lives of people whose homes are in the forward

areas. They now fear the revival of the armed strife from which they suffered for so long. The repercussions of the recent incident can thus be extensive and it is well that they are being handled with due care and circumspection.

We should also take note of the calls for restraint and tranquility along the LOC made by a number of civil society groups in both countries. These groups have spoken up, as they often have in the past, in a bid not to let matters get out of control, and their initiative is a reminder that public opinion has other facets than what is commonly seen in the media.

While the damage from the recent incident may be contained, the longer term concerns will remain. Armed confrontation between the armies in "eye ball to eyeball" proximity can result in the sort of appalling incident just witnessed. Despite occasional proposals, no pullback has been possible.

In contrast, in the East where India and China face each other, a withdrawal to a safer distance was achieved by mutual agreement in 1996, making for a more tranquil border. Along the LOC such a measure cannot be contemplated for fear that it would accentuate the ever-present threat of infiltration by terrorist groups based in POK, so the danger will continue.

Meanwhile, views attributed to Pakistan's army chief suggest that he regards the chief danger before his country as coming not from external sources but from the terrorists within. What is meant by such observations and the impact on Pakistan's India-oriented military posture needs to be carefully explored. It is to be seen whether a strategic re-thinking is implied in his remarks that could benefit peace and tranquility along the LOC.

The writer is a former Indian foreign secretary. © *The Statesman* (India). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.