

## BCL turfwar takes life

*A frankenstein on the loose*

THE uncontrolled violence perpetrated by the Bangladesh Chhatra League is becoming so dangerously repetitive that it is hitting at the very roots of good governance. Whatever may have the achievements of the government in the education and agricultural sectors, every single good act has been obscured by the unruly activities of the student wing of the Awami League, not in one or two but in almost all the major educational institutions of the country.

The latest eruption of violence was the result of intra-group clash of the BCL in Mymensingh Agricultural University on Saturday, which was initiated by attempts to dominate the turf at the BAU, and resulted in the death of a young boy of a nearby village. Equally disquieting are the people of that village venting their anger at the death by setting fire to the students' dormitories. And it is not the first time that the students and villagers have been involved in clashes.

The BAU violence is representative of the general state of things at many educational institutions in the country. And we had repeatedly urged the government to rein in the loose cannon that the Chhatra League has become or lose whatever credibility it has.

It is not enough for the AL to talk about infiltrators trying to defame their student's organisation. We have heard that for a long time. By now the BCL should have been cleansed of the bad eggs. Although it is somewhat reassuring to see the party and the administration move against the errant students of BAU, that is not enough. These elements should no longer be allowed the impunity that they have been enjoying. And any lawbreaker amongst the BCL, in all the other institutions also, must be treated under the existing law of the land and made examples of.

It is also surprising, and indeed unacceptable, that centers of higher learning should be repository of dangerous weapons, as we have seen in every instance of student clashes the use of firearms. It was time that the university administrations purged their campuses of dangerous weapons, and made the carrying of weapons inside the campus a cognizable offense.

## Fares rise before govt announcement

*Nobody to protect commuters' interest*

THE government's regulatory mechanism has, by and large, failed to work with the transport sector, nowhere it is more pronounced than in its intervention to regulate transport fares. The case in point is the breaking of the pledge that transport owners had given to communication minister Obaidul Kader in a meeting last Tuesday.

They started over-charging the commuters even before the government could re-fix the fares proportionate to the fuel price increase. This is not the first time that commercial vehicle owners and operators have hiked fares at their sweet will nor is it going to be the last perhaps.

Every time there is a hike in petrol or diesel price, transport companies fall in a race to outdo one another in charging higher fares far in excess of the raise in the fuel price. According to BRTA's cost analysis, an increase by Taka one in diesel price should mean an increase of poisha one in the fare. Since the cost of diesel has increased by Taka seven the bus fare should have gone up by poisha seven per kilometre. But the actual fare charged, particularly in long distance commutation, is much higher.

It has been expedient for the transport owners to factor in all costs borne on their side including even the purchase price of the vehicle, let alone other operating costs to fix their rates unilaterally.

The whole burden of higher cost is translated into impoverishing the commuters, of especially middle and low income brackets who are an overwhelming majority. This is very unfair.

It is the government's responsibility to protect consumer interest, but it seems as helpless as the commuters, or shall we say, playing into the hands of transport lobbies.

Our suggestion is the government announce any new addition to fares simultaneous with each installment of increase in the fuel price it resorts to. Of course this must be based on a rational formula arrived at through a consensus among all stakeholders. Anarchy in such a vital sector cannot be allowed to continue to the detriment of

## KALEIDOSCOPE

# Diplomatic dimensions of Russian arms deal



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE extension of the US\$1 billion Russian loan to Bangladesh for buying arms and ammunitions, in addition to the US\$ 500 million

credit in connection with Bangladesh's first nuclear power plant, evidently marks a major breakthrough in Bangladesh-Russia relations in the post-Soviet era.

It may be recalled that immediately after the independence, the then-Soviet Russia contributed significantly to Bangladesh's fledgling armed forces; it supplied sophisticated MiG-21 aircraft to Bangladesh's air force. Russia's navy was engaged in clearing the Karnaphuli channel of Chittagong port of sunken vessels, various types of debris and explosives to restore its navigability.

At the time, the Soviets also extended substantial assistance in developing the country's power infrastructure by erecting power plants. The relation was growing further when it was suddenly cut short with the 1975's changeover.

The governments that took office later shifted their foreign policy away from the Soviet bloc. For its defence supply, it started to depend on the People's Republic of China.

Moreover, the Pakistani arms and weapons left behind by the defeated occupation forces were mostly of Chinese origin. Bangladesh army of that time, as they were in the Pakistan army before independence, had also the experience of using Chinese-origin arms and weapons. China, in course of time, also turned out to be Bangladesh's major partner in external trade.

After a hiatus of two decades, Sheikh Hasina, during her first stint in power as Bangladesh's prime minister

echoed Putin's view through her words: "I believe, they would place our relationship on a firm footing and help in taking practical initiatives in the future."

In a free market economy, there cannot, of course, be any bar to an independent nation's freedom to buy commodities and making business deals with whichever other countries it may like. But defence deal is something more than just reaching a contract to buy one commodity or the other from the open market.

Arms deal has also its diplomatic ramifications, as it relates to a country's most sensitive sector -- its national defence. Now, considering the monetary worth of the defence deal signed in Moscow, it is the biggest ever made since Bangladesh won its independence.

The question is, has the PM gone for this deal out of her desire to diversify Bangladesh's source of military supply? Or does this deal have also its diplomatic implications?



We want to believe that on an issue as serious as defence diplomacy, the present government is being driven not by any nostalgia, nor reactively, but out of a clear-cut policy guideline.

(between 1996-2001), revived the lost link with Russia. It bought eight very advanced fighter aircraft, MiG-29s, from Russia.

However, this was obviously not the same Russia as the one with which her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had built rapport. Unlike the Socialist Soviet Russia of the 1970s, modern-day Russia, after the collapse of socialist system in late December of 1991, is as good as any other capitalist state of the Western hemisphere. Even so, Russia still evokes the memory of the long bygone years of great friendship between the two nations in the minds of many old-timers in politics.

Russian president Vladimir Putin's statement at the agreement signing ceremony at Kremlin -- "Our countries intend to expand their military and technological cooperation" -- is also an indication that Moscow is eyeing this South Asian market with seriousness.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also

But diplomacy cannot be guided by nostalgia, especially after the sea-change that has taken place in the geopolitical reality of the post-Cold War era. The world is no more divided between the Eastern bloc led by Russia and the Western bloc led by the US. On the contrary, the US is now the lone superpower.

Russia, no doubt, is still the second biggest producer and exporter of arms after the United States. But its arms sales now is driven more by pure commercial interest than any ideological and not meant as part of hegemonic design to beat the US. So, similar to the pre-1990s, the question of changing our diplomatic alignment from one power bloc to another does not also arise in this case.

Moreover, as an economic power, Russia is trailing far behind the US, China, Japan and European powers and is in a neck and neck race with India following close on the heels. So the question remains open as to what prompted the prime minister to make a huge defence deal with Russia?

As for India, after the 1990s, India has started to diversify its source of its weaponry. But Russia still overwhelmingly remains its supplier of arms. In contrast, Bangladesh, over the past three decades have weaned away from Russia as a source of defence supply. In these circumstances, has the prime minister carefully weighed up the pros and cons of going for this big spending spree on arms purchase and, that too, on credit from Russia?

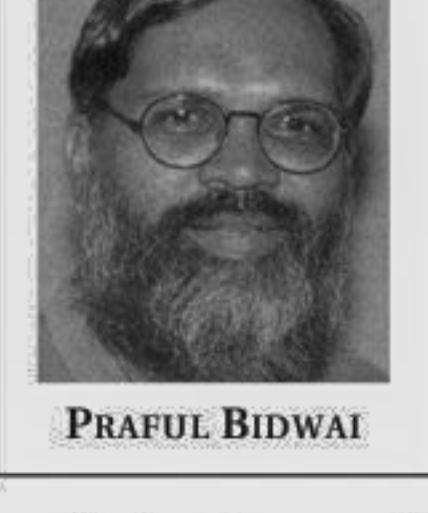
Is this decision the product of a well-thought-out policy on defence purchase, the existence of which we are not aware of?

We want to believe that on an issue as serious as defence diplomacy, the present government is being driven not by any nostalgia, nor reactively, but out of a clear-cut policy guideline. Otherwise, it is going to a big mess.

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## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# Quelling border clashes with Pakistan



PRAFUL BIDWAI

S KIRMISS ES at the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu have spilled blood. The crisis could snowball into a destructive

conflict unless resolved through skilful diplomacy. India and Pakistan will pay an exorbitant price if they don't reject calls for avenging what's regarded as one side's humiliation by the other and quickly end the shooting war.

This is a moment for sobriety and statesmanship, not frenzied beating of war drums. Defusing tensions shouldn't be left to the military, but must be driven by the civilian leadership.

The border clashes couldn't have come at a worse time. India and Pakistan have recently made significant progress in engaging each other on issues like Siachen and Sir Creek, improving economic relations, developing energy-sector cooperation, and liberalising visa regimes.

Civil society has breathed energy into the dialogue. Sports, media and cultural exchanges -- including joint music performances -- have lent credibility to idea of peaceful, mutually enriching, co-existence.

Pakistan's civilian government is about to complete its full term, for the first time. Last fortnight, the reconciliation prospect looked hopeful.

These positive changes came about because of a shift of stance in Pakistan's "deep state," or the Army, which approved the most-favoured nation trade status to India. Pakistan has moved from its insistence on resolving the "central" issue of Kashmir first, to a gradualist settling of other disputes.

Equally important is Army chief Pervez Ashfaq Kayani's acknowledgement that the greatest threat to Pakistan's security comes not from India, but internally. Jehadi militancy has emboldened the Tehrik-e-

Taliban-Pakistan to grievously attack the military, fed a Balochistan insurgency led by anti-Shia extremists, and fomented mayhem and crime, accelerating Pakistan's economic downturn.

A reordering of Pakistan's civilian-military balance seems under way. Tension escalation at the LoC will disrupt democratisation and improved relations with India.

As for the LoC clashes, it's necessary to sift facts and credible reports from rhetoric, itself inflamed by public outrage at the reported beheading of an Indian soldier. Trouble started brewing around Charonda village near Uri on September 11, when a 70-year-old grandmother crossed over to Pakistan-administered Kashmir, setting off alarm.

To counter this "vulnerability," reports *The Hindu* (January 10), an Indian Army unit started building observation bunkers. The India-Pakistan ceasefire agreement of 2003 bars such construction, but Indian commanders argued that the bunkers face Charonda and pose no threat to Pakistan.

As their construction continued, Pakistani troops started shelling the LoC, killing no soldiers, but three villagers. Indian troops retaliated. Tit-for-tat exchanges persisted for weeks, with no remedial action by either army's top brass or civilian leaders.

On January 6, an Indian officer launched aggressive action, apparently without top-level permission, killing a Pakistani soldier. It's not clear if Indian troops crossed the LoC. The point is such actions are unfortunately "routine[d]." This one spun out of control.

Two days later, Pakistani troops killed two Indian soldiers and reportedly beheaded one and mutilated the body of the other. In retaliation, Indian troops killed another Pakistani soldier. India's electronic media went

into overdrive demanding a "fitting reply" to Pakistan.

Both Indian Air Force and Army chiefs used belligerent language and threatened retaliation. India's Defence Minister AK Antony described Pakistan's conduct as a "turning point." Since then, Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid has cautioned against "revenge." There was a flag meeting between local commanders too.

However, there has been no focused India-Pakistan diplomatic engagement. An early diplomatic initiative could have tried to convince Pakistan that the Charonda bunker wasn't offensive; Pakistan could also build one on its side facing internally.

However, India wouldn't act unilaterally.

Had this failed, Indian and Pakistani diplomats could have worked out a non-military way of reducing "vulnerability" while maintaining the ceasefire's sanctity. Indian civilian leaders should have reasserted their authority over the military, and told it that the ceasefire is an essential precondition for India's security.

Regrettably, India's civilian leadership has increasingly ceded policy-making ground and allowed military commanders to speak out of turn on Siachen and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

This trend must be reversed. The defence ministry cannot function autonomously, but must be brought under the control of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office.

It's in India's own interest that peace and tranquillity are maintained at the LoC. The decade-old ceasefire has helped India avert external mediation and improve relations with Pakistan.

India and Pakistan haven't displayed maturity in dealing with

ceasefire violations. Scores of violations occur routinely. India claims there were 117 last year and 61 in 2011. Weekly "hot-line" calls between the Directors-General of Military Operations haven't worked. We need higher-level engagement between our diplomatic and security establishments.

Even more unacceptable is routine tit-for-tat shelling which treats soldiers as if their life had no value. And absolutely impermissible and illegal under the Geneva Conventions are torture, and mutilation of soldiers' bodies, which reportedly happened not just in 1999, but also last year.

However just a war's cause, it must be conducted justly. Cruel, inhuman and degrading methods are unacceptable.

Indian and Pakistani militaries must be compelled to behave in a responsible, restrained and civilised fashion across what's admittedly a difficult, rough-terrain border with huge troop concentration. There's no place here for actions which seek to inflict maximal pain upon adversaries.

The guns must fall silent. Or else, small clashes could escalate into major conflicts, as happened at Kargil, when both adversaries recklessly brandished their nuclear swords.

Such restraint is achievable. The US and the USSR were mortal Cold War enemies, armed to the teeth. Yet, despite systemic hostility and countless provocations, they never exchanged a shot; leave alone beat up each other's diplomats or soldiers.

Put simply, India and Pakistan must quit the habit of regarding their Hot-Cold War as normal and inevitable, and move towards completely demilitarising their borders.

Transition from suspicion and hostility to a culture of peaceful conflict resolution is a great challenge not just for our militaries, but our diplomats, policy-shapers and ordinary citizens too. On that depends our survival.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 21

1720

Sweden and Prussia sign the Treaty of Stockholm.

1908

New York City passes the Sullivan Ordinance, making it illegal for women to smoke in public, only to have the measure vetoed by the mayor.

1950

Acclaimed author George Orwell dies. The British writer George Orwell dies after a three-year battle against tuberculosis.

1968

Vietnam War: Battle of Khe Sanh, one of the most publicised and controversial battles of the war, begins.

1977

President Jimmy Carter pardons nearly all American Vietnam War draft evaders, some of whom had emigrated to Canada.

1992

UN threatens Libya with sanctions. Libya has been served with a resolution to hand over intelligence agents accused of two airliner bombings.