

Indian Foreign Minister's visit

Yet more assurances

FOR us in Bangladesh, an Indian minister's visit, particularly when it is the foreign minister's, evinces keen interest in observers here. More so when our relationship goes very deep, and since the last four years it has been further bolstered, mainly because of the very substantive actions on the part of Bangladesh in enhancing bilateral relations, particularly in ameliorating India's security concerns.

The visit related to the Bangladesh-India Joint Consultative Commission that sits alternatively in each other's capital annually. And of the three MOUs signed between the two countries, what catches one's interest is the understanding on setting up of a joint foundation which, through greater economic, scientific, educational, technical and cultural cooperation promote greater understanding between the two countries. Apart from that, Bangladesh has been served up with another round of assurances on the three very important issues that have been awaiting India's positive response.

As for border killings, we have no doubt that India wants zero killings on the border too. But expressed intention has not been translated into action, and although admittedly, the frequency of border killings has reduced, we feel that even one death of unarmed people is one too many, whether it is Bangladeshi or Indian national. Not assurances but concrete action is what we need.

We are glad to note that at long last the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 will be up for discussion in the Indian Parliament, as the Indian government has recently cleared the proposed Constitution Amendment Bill necessary to ratify the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its additional protocol signed in 2011. We would hope that it would pass through the Indian Parliament without undue delay, and that the BJP will come on board given that it had joined the Assom Gana Parishad to protest against the protocol.

As for the Teesta agreement, the local factor, i.e. Mamata Banerjee's opposition to the deal, which the Indian FM said is impeding the process, needs more robust involvement of the central government to convince the West Bengal Chief Minister of the negative fallout of a scuttled Teesta deal on the bilateral relationship.

Accreditation council for private universities

A welcome move

WE welcome the government's plan to set up an accreditation council which will independently review the academic standards of private universities. This will increase transparency of the institutions, allowing people to know university rankings and to ensure healthy competition among private educational institutions and quality education overall.

Hundreds of private universities -- many of them unregistered and appearing and some disappearing at will without even providing certificates to students, let alone quality education -- have sprung up across the capital in the last 20 years. Some of them have been housed one on top of the other inside commercial buildings and even garment factories. Of even the 139 government-approved institutions, the quality of education imparted at many if not most of them has been questionable. More than anything, they are businesses, extracting exorbitant fees from students without any other higher education options. Despite the high fees, however, quality of faculty members, resources and facilities are generally inadequate. High grades and, ultimately, degrees, are easy to obtain. Commercialisation is key and governance is poor.

It must be mentioned though that in the face of limited capacity of public universities for enrolment, the private universities have by and large filled in the void. And, some of them have performed extraordinarily, providing excellent education.

While the matter has been taken up by the government and relevant bodies such as the University Grants Commission over the years, it requires a stricter and more structured approach. We believe that an accreditation council is a step in the right direction. It is important that the experts assigned to the task are just that -- experts in the field of education capable of judging the standards of the institutions precisely and objectively.

Thousands of students come from far and wide to enrol in private universities every year, their families sometimes investing beyond their means in what they hope will ensure good education and in the future, bright employment prospects for their next generation. They have a right to know what options they have available to

Policy of passing on the buck



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce & Industry (MCCI) has recently published a survey on the business performance of its member firms for the first half of the current fiscal (FY2012-2013). Though several

impediments were highlighted, overall production and investment have increased in the country. However, two barriers to growth that respondents highlighted were as follows: "Firms in general cited shortage of electricity and gas as the most serious impediments to production, much more than problems of physical infrastructure, access to credit and the fallout from political conflicts".

Indeed, the survey merely reaffirms what is already known. The present government has done reasonably well on the supply of secondary energy by installing several rental/quick rental power plants for managing acute shortages of electricity supply. Yet it has remained largely inactive in addressing the issue of supplying of primary energy. Today, in the last year of its present tenure, the government has finally decided to address this area.

From what has been published in *The Financial Express* on February 12, the government is taking hard-term loans (ECA) to the tune of about \$1.5 billion from export credit agencies for setting up five large power plants. Terms of payment on these loan packages carries a repayment period varying from 2 to 10 years. Since these are, essentially, short-term loans, interest rates will be much higher. So, what is the country getting for its \$1.5 billion? According to *The Financial Express*, a total of 2,700MW of new base-load power will be generated from the implementation of power plant projects following several contracts signed by the government.

All these contracts are for gas-fired power plants.

Within 2020, the projected power demand will be 22,400 MW. Since the Power System Master Plan (PSMP) of the government projects half of total power generation in the country coming from coal by the year 2030 and only 30% coming from gas. So, with about 3 billion tonnes of coal resources in the discovered coalfields in Jamalganj, Barapukuria, Khalashpir, Dighipara and Phulbari remain largely unutilised.

The PSMP points out that of all the discovered coalfields, Phulbari remains the most promising for commercial extraction. But thanks to the political sensitivity of the Phulbari situation, the present government opted to leave it alone. Furthermore, government has not taken any meaningful initiative to develop other coal fields except for the Barapukuria coal mine established by the previous

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government. It is ironic, because at this stage we are uncertain about where our next big gas field is going to be discovered.

Precisely what will happen to the country's precarious state of energy if no significant new gas field is discovered? By the look of things, i.e. going for hugely expensive credit to pay for essential base-load plants that will run on natural gas, the supply of which becomes increasingly uncertain, it is essentially a recipe for disaster. With limited gas supply, it is little wonder that policymakers have to put up a juggling act. Shutting down one sector to supply another has been the norm over the last few years.

Sadly, such undesired acts do not bring desired dividends. For instance, if we look at the situation of fertiliser production in the country, we are looking at an essential commodity needed for agriculture production. Due to the current shortage of gas,

limited gas is supplied to the government and private fertiliser plants, leading to production pitfalls. These need to be offset by imports that cost hard currency, which becomes another headache for policymakers since foreign exchange is a precious commodity.

The country's power generation capacity is hampered by a shortfall of a few hundred million cubic feet on a daily basis. For the sake of argument, should Bangladesh fail to make a major breakthrough in discovering substantial new sources of gas, what will the scenario look like? Precisely what is going to be the situation when 2,700MW of new energy comes online requiring additional approximately 675 million cubic feet of gas? The repercussions are simply too horrendous to contemplate.

Today, we stand at a critical juncture. Some fundamental decisions have to be made here. Natural gas production in the short term may add few hundred million cubic feet of gas. Assuming Bapex and the Petrobangla contractor GAZPROM successfully complete drilling 8-10 more wells in the existing gas fields to add 250-300 million cubic feet of gas (although it is not very clear why a development well drilled by Bapex produces approximately 20-30 mmcf of gas compared to Chevron's 75-80 mmcf of gas from Bibiana and Maulvibazar fields). But the demand for power plants will surpass the cumulative productions of natural gas from the new fields.

Our energy sector managers have successfully contained electricity demand growth both by rapid escalation of power tariff and by not providing connections to interested customers. But how long the unmet power demands can be kept waiting? How then will the very fundamental questions of power and gas supply as the major hindrance for the growth of industrial production identified by MCCI survey remain unaddressed?

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Divided Muslim Ummah holds Twelfth OIC Summit

MAHMOOD HASAN

THE Twelfth Islamic Summit of the OIC was held in Cairo on February 6-7 under the Chairmanship of President Mohammed Morsi. Though the Charter of 57-member OIC stipulates that Summits be held every three years, it was held after 5 years. The Eleventh Summit was held in Dakar, Senegal in March 2008.

This is the first Summit hosted by Egypt since its establishment in 1969. The theme of the Summit was "The Islamic World: New Challenges and Growing Opportunities." Only 17 heads of state and government attended. Other member states were represented by senior ministers and officials.

The Summit was held in the backdrop of widespread political instability and violence in the member states, particularly in the Arab region. The "Arab Spring" has aroused the entire Middle East. Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen are faced with grave political instability. Syria is in the midst of a brutal civil war. Iraq is far from being stable after the American aggression. Afghanistan is fighting an inconclusive war with the Taliban. The Palestinians are deeply divided and smarting under atrocious Israeli occupation. Jordan is under threat of disintegration. And a new conflict has broken over in Mali, where the French have gone to war against Islamic terrorists. Above all, the Shia-Sunni divide has become more pronounced over the past several years.

Egypt hosted the Summit at a time when the embattled President Mohammed Morsi has been fighting the opposition to save his presidency. The conference was held in Al-Tagammu Al-Khamis, a suburb of Cairo, well away from the sites of clashes between Egyptian protesters and police.

The 164-paragraph Final Communiqué discussed all the contentious issues facing the member states. The Summit focused on five areas: conflicts and disputes in the Islamic world; ways to combat religious intolerance and Islamophobia; humanitarian issues in the Islamic world; economic and trade cooperation between member states and promoting scientific and technological cooperation between Islamic countries.

During the two-day conference delegates were seized with the civil war in Syria, which has been going on since March 2011. Incidentally, Syria was suspended from the organisation at the 4th Extraordinary OIC Summit held in Makkah in August 2012, despite strong opposition from Iran. The Final Communiqué, while condemning the ongoing bloodshed, called for immediate cessation of violence and killing to save Syria from total civil war, which will threaten the security of the entire region.



The conference laid bare the multiple divisions within the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world over different conflicts bedeviling the Islamic Ummah. Egypt's Al Ahram has termed the meeting a "Talking Shop."

The Communiqué supported Lakhdar Brahimi's mission and called upon President Bashar Al Assad to start serious dialogue with the opposition forces in order to pave the way for a transition process that would lead the Syrian people to achieve democratic reforms.

The section on Syria in the Final Communiqué was driven by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Egypt -- all strongly opposed to the Alawite (Shia) President Bashar Al Assad regime. The 4th Extraordinary Islamic Summit setup a "Quartet" to find a solution to the Syrian crisis. It includes Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

Iranian President Ahmedinejad, who was in Cairo for the Summit, strongly supports President Bashar and is in favour of a non-military solution, but did not oppose the paragraphs on Syria. Iran, a member of the Quartet, was happy that the Summit did not ask Bashar Al Assad to step down.

Apart from attending the Summit, Ahmedinejad also sought to improve relations with Egypt, the regional heavyweight. "If Tehran and Cairo see more eye to eye on regional and international issues, many issues will change," remarked Ahmedinejad. Mohammed Amr Kamel, the Egyptian foreign minister reiterated: "Egypt's relationship with Iran will never come at the expense of Gulf nations." Grand Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb of al-Azhar said Iran should not seek the "extension of Shia reach" in the Gulf states.

Iran had severed relations with Egypt, following Egypt's recognition of Israel in 1980. Ahmedinejad's

visit follows the one to Tehran by Mohammed Morsi for the Non-Aligned Summit in August 2012. Though Morsi kissed Ahmedinejad on his arrival in Cairo, the bilateral meeting between the two on the sidelines of the conference helped little to break the existing frigid relations. The tour was soured when a Syrian expatriate threw shoes at Ahmedinejad when he was visiting an old Cairo mosque.

As is customary, the Summit adopted a separate Resolution on Palestine. It condemned Israel's systematic and gross violation of Human Rights of the Palestinian people. The Summit welcomed the decision of the UN General Assembly to grant Palestine non-member observer status in the United Nations. The Resolution strongly condemned Israel's ongoing building of illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian land and called on the international community to realise the two-state solution based on relevant UN resolutions.

The Summit also adopted a "Declaration on the situation in Mali." The conference, deeply concerned at the security situation prevailing in Mali, expressed full solidarity with Mali.

While condemning the acts of diverse terrorist groups it took note of a UNSC Resolution, which sets out a global approach for resolving the multidimensional crisis in Mali. The Summit decided to set up an OIC Contact Group on Mali to closely monitor the situation. The Declaration conspicuously omitted any reference to France, which is at war with the terrorists in Mali.

What is striking is the absence of any paragraph in the Final Communiqué on the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. The 4th Extraordinary Summit, however, dealt at length with the issue and adopted a separate resolution on the situation of the Rohingyas, calling upon the Myanmar regime to cease all kinds of discrimination against the minority community and ensure human rights.

The Summit nominated Saudi Minister Iyad Madani as the next Secretary General of the Organization. He will take over from Turkey's Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu in January 2014.

The conference laid bare the multiple divisions within the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world over different conflicts bedeviling the Islamic Ummah. Egypt's Al Ahram has termed the meeting a "Talking Shop." Past OIC summits had adopted strong resolutions over the Palestinian and Israeli conflict but member states failed to coordinate their energies to secure a solution. That is primarily because of the vested alliances that some of the strong and rich countries have maintained with the Americans and Europeans.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 19

1921 Reza Shâh takes control of Tehran during a successful coup

1948 The Conference of Youth and Students of Southeast Asia Fighting for Freedom and Independence convenes in Calcutta.

1978 Egyptian forces raid Larnaca International Airport in an attempt to intervene in a hijacking, without authorisation from the Republic of Cyprus authorities.

1986 Akkaraipattu massacre: the Sri Lankan Army massacres 80 Tamil farm workers the eastern province of Sri Lanka.