

Honouring our steadfast friends

It is heritage we uphold

OUR gratitude to all our friends abroad over their role in our War of Liberation remains as profound as it was in 1971. Over the past many months, the fact that the government of Bangladesh has formally honoured a large number of these friends is a move the spirit of which has resonated in our hearts and souls for more than four decades. A few days ago, when sixty of these friends of ours were honoured by the government, we certainly redeemed the promise we made to ourselves back in the time of our gravest crisis -- to be true to our heritage of remembering those who stood by us, to tell us that we were not alone in our tortuous journey through the dark.

In these past few days, we have heard those who came all the way to reciprocate our feelings. Among these good individuals were those who played a direct role in our liberation as a nation. And then there were those who were here as representatives of their illustrious parents, people who in 1971 made it clear that they empathized with us in our predicament, indeed agreed with us that we needed to be free of the asphyxiating control of the state of Pakistan. It is these individuals who, in their various ways, demonstrated courage in a manner that can only be a testament to the values that govern relations between people who understand the hard lessons of history.

We are a proud people once again. We remember the war we fought and won. And we recall those brave, conscientious men and women abroad who travelled that road of determination and grit with us, unwavering and steadfast.

Use of religion in politics

A phenomenon secularists must be wary of

A meet held in Dhaka recently, participants voiced concern over increasing use of religion in South Asian politics. Bangladesh too is facing its demon. The recent desecration of Buddhist sites of worship in Chittagong Hill Tracts drove home the message that obscurantist elements are never short of devious machinations. It points to secular and democratic forces not rising to the occasion to combat this new menace.

However, like Bangladesh, countries in the neighbourhood have their hands full dealing with their own home-grown extremism that freely indulges in using religion to advance political goals. That this is a regional reality is not lost on anyone. What is now obvious is that merely enshrining "secularism" in the constitution of a nation does not automatically guarantee that its spirit will permeate all levels of society. That the religious right has been partially successful in portraying secularist governments as "anti-religion" is ominous enough.

Religious extremism has gotten to a stage in certain countries in South Asia where we find that rather than meeting the challenge head on, some governments may be found negotiating with them. This is a common problem in South Asia. Since obscurantist forces are not averse to using violence to achieve their goals, we would urge governments across the subcontinent and beyond to increase cooperation in combating this very real threat.

Health hazards from coal ash at Rampal

ABDUL MATIN

THE proposed coal-fired power plant at Rampal, situated 14 km from the Sundarbans, has become a serious controversial issue. Environmentalists are rightly worried about the possible adverse effects of flue gases from the plant on the Sundarbans.

When coal is burned in a power plant, it produces mainly three kinds of solid wastes, called coal combustion waste (CCW). Fly ash is one of the by-products of coal ash that rises with the flue gases and consists of 74% of the ash generated. Another by-product is the bottom ash that falls below the furnace and consists of about 20% of the ash. The remaining ash is called boiler slag that melts and also falls below the boiler.

Fly ash used to be released into the atmosphere in the past. Environmental regulations now require the fly ash to be captured from the flue gases before release. Most of the fine solid particles in the fly ash, about 95%, are now captured by electrostatic precipitators, bag-houses and scrubbers. It is mixed with the bottom ash to form what is known as coal ash.

Coal ash contains toxic elements like sulfur, arsenic, mercury, lead, chromium and cadmium plus some radioactive element like uranium, thorium and their decay products like radon and radium. The toxins which would otherwise have been dispersed around the plant are now added to the coal ash increasing its toxicity.

The Rampal Power Plant may use approximately 4.5 million MT of coal and produce about 450,000 MT of coal ash, which is likely to be stored in lined ponds and landfills. Coal has also many uses. It can be used as a substitute for cement in concrete, for building embankments, bricks, and for conversion of sewage sludge into fertilizer or bio-fuel.

The toxins in the coal ash are, however, likely to contaminate both river water and groundwater in the locality and together with the radioactive elements may cause serious health hazards to the plant workers and the local population. The radiation level in bottom ash and fly ash can be as high as 7.7 and 9.7 pCi/g (pica Curie per gram) respectively.

While the issue of damages to the Sundarbans is being widely debated, not much attention is being paid to the possible health hazards to the plant workers and the local population around the plant. This issue deserves to be addressed by the environmentalists and public health specialists, whether the plant is built at Rampal or somewhere else.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Doing the tango with India?

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR
RAHMAN

IT is almost five years that Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in an avant garde, spirit turned to India to resolve some of the outstanding bilateral political and economic problems bedeviling the two countries. Her point was that India had some critical issues which needed their resolution before she could turn to solving the problems faced by Bangladesh. In her calculation this would trigger India and in a quick reciprocal gesture the small irritants would be addressed by that country. The ultimate goal of the prime minister was to deepen and widen the bilateral relations between the two countries, setting the stage for a renaissance in economic and political engagement. Bangladesh was also eyeing the immense economic possibilities that the north east of India offered to Bangladesh.

So in January 2009, she called on Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and signed an elaborate MOU with him detailing what would be done by the two sides in the next five years or so. The prime minister took on board Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, International Affairs Adviser Mr Gowher Rizvi, Economic Adviser Mr. Mashur Rahman and Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Mr. Tariq Karim.

Both the Indian and the Bangladeshi policy planners prioritised their task. Their first job was to secure the internal security of the eight North East Indian states. They took effective steps to root out all dissident elements who were creating security problems. In fact, those Indian rebel elements who had clandestinely taken refuge in Bangladesh territory were expelled and many of them were taken to serve sentences in Indian prisons. So in one sweep India was able to get rid of rebels who were making the North East India a dangerous place to live in.

The next Indian agenda was to complete the building of a gigantic power station in the north Indian state of Tripura. But it could not do so for long as it was almost impossible to transport oversized machineries to Palatina, the site of the new power station. Bangladesh, almost without any ado or cost to India, helped to move these gigantic items from the state of West Bengal to Tripura in a few months.

India had been under a lot of pressure for a long time from various countries of South Asia to open her market for sale of their goods. As a part of that effort, India granted duty free access to more than four thousand items to Bangladesh. But Bangladesh was keen to have three things done also. First it wanted to resolve the issue of transfer of enclaves as well as adverse possessions of land held by each country along the Bangladeshi border. Bangladesh also wanted to finally demarcate the land border between the two countries by completing the 6 km or so of undemarcated area. Second, Bangladesh wanted India to give it 3.5 bighas of land in lease for perpetuity in Berubari so that the Bangladeshi people could have permanent access to their land inside the enclave. The third priority was to have the waters of the Teesta river shared equally between Bangladesh and India.

However, on the matter of adverse possessions and

No step has been taken by India to address the key issues on which substantive matters can be resolved. These include sharing of the waters of all the common rivers, peaceful management of the border as well as cross border investments. What India has so far done is simply band-aid and will not stand the test of time.

the people of Bangladesh. This has been possible because the people of India have noticed how the Bangladeshi prime minister has taken such a bold political decision in the face of opposition by a segment of the Bangladeshi people, and that there is a warming of the people towards the present Awami League government. But with the elections in both the countries taking place soon the dynamics of relations are likely to shift and new parameters will take hold.

India had a golden opportunity to make historical changes in the relations between our two countries in the last few years. Bangladesh did the tango with India gracefully and in harmony. But this may not always be the same in the future. In fact, political leaders in Bangladesh would be wary of giving India any leverage without a reciprocating gesture from India. Indian internal politics need to change dramatically to cope up with Bangladesh's new regional posturing.

The writer is a former ambassador and a commentator on current issues. E-mail: ashfaque303@gmail.com

Shaping the future of sustainable energy

NOELEN HEYZER

THE world is at a critical juncture, with energy consumption rising dramatically. Even allowing for the positive impacts of the policy commitments and plans announced by countries to address global climate change, total primary energy demand in Asia and the Pacific alone is expected to nearly double between 2010 and 2030.

How will the Asia-Pacific region meet this demand? How will we grow in a sustainable way that is both equitable and efficient? How can universal energy access be achieved?

These are some of the key questions being addressed at the 22nd World Energy Congress in Daegu, Republic of Korea this month.

The world today faces two main energy challenges: providing enough light, warmth, and power for every household -- and at the same time shifting to cleaner energy sources to protect our increasingly fragile natural environment.

Just over a year ago, at the United Nations Rio+20 Conference, 191 Member States and observers recognised the critical role that energy plays in development. This is why the UN General Assembly declared the period 2014-2024 as the United Nations Decade of Sustainable Energy for All -- and why the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon launched his "Sustainable Energy for All" initiative in 2011, focusing on three major goals: improving energy access, energy efficiency, and the share of renewable sources in our energy mix.

Ensuring sustainable energy for all is additionally challenging in Asia and the Pacific.

Despite great progress in improving peoples' lives, the Asia-Pacific region still has 628 million people without access to electricity, and 1.8 billion people who still use traditional fuels such as wood, charcoal, agricultural residues and animal waste.

Widespread energy poverty condemns billions to darkness, to ill-health and to missed opportunities: children cannot study at night, clinics and hospitals cannot offer quality healthcare, and large numbers of people are unable to make use of the opportunities and information accessible through modern technology.

We must end this inequality, but we need to do so in a way that is smart and sustainable, utilising natural resources, while preserving the integrity of the ecosystems on which we depend.

In addition to the hundreds of millions without access to modern energy services, the Asia-Pacific region also has some of the highest levels of carbon intensity. Our primary energy intensity is among the highest in the world, despite rapid and significant reductions in recent decades. This limits long-term national and regional competitiveness -- jeopardising employment opportunities and income levels.

The Asia-Pacific region has some of the largest exporters and importers of fossil fuels, as well as the highest rates of fossil fuel subsidies. Worldwide, these subsidies were six

enclaves India could not amend its constitution and implement the 1974 Land Boundary agreement yet. On the matter of perpetual lease of 3.5 bigha land, India did not hand over this tiny piece of land. Instead, it made alternate arrangement for 24 hour access to this enclave. However this is a temporary arrangement and can be snapped by India at a moment's notice. The Teesta agreement was not finalised as the West Bengal chief minister put her foot down. So, in all these areas Bangladesh has to keep on waiting.

In the last five years India has done the following things in return for what Bangladesh did to secure the North East India states and for allowing the building of the Tripura thermal power station.

- Allowed duty free access of 4,000 or more Bangladeshi products into the Indian market as part of the general opening up of her markets to neighbours;
- Opened the Tin Bigha corridor for 24 hours to Bangladeshi residents in their enclave;
- Electrified the village of Dahagram;
- Made available information on water flow for flood warning;
- Introduced grid connectivity for power to be imported from India;
- Took on a joint initiative to set up a 1,300 mw coal fired power plant close to ecologically sensitive Sundarban forest;
- Issued a \$ 1 billion credit line of which \$200 million has been transferred as grant. Various rolling stock, trucks and vehicles have been procured for public use by this credit line. Whatever Bangladesh buys, it has to return to India with interest after a few designated years;
- Finally a joint initiative was proposed for joint basin management and exploration for hydropower.

We have detailed what the Indians have done in the last five years. But it should be clear from the list that no step has been taken to address the key issues on which substantive matters can be resolved. These include sharing of the waters of all the common rivers, peaceful management of the border as well as cross border investments.

Bilateral relations with India, though dubbed 'excellent' in official parlance, is in reality soured in some ways. The only thing that is improving is the attitude of the Indian people towards

the people of Bangladesh. This has been possible because the people of India have noticed how the Bangladeshi prime minister has taken such a bold political decision in the face of opposition by a segment of the Bangladeshi people, and that there is a warming of the people towards the present Awami League government. But with the elections in both the countries taking place soon the dynamics of relations are likely to shift and new parameters will take hold.

India had a golden opportunity to make historical changes in the relations between our two countries in the last few years. Bangladesh did the tango with India gracefully and in harmony. But this may not always be the same in the future. In fact, political leaders in Bangladesh would be wary of giving India any leverage without a reciprocating gesture from India. Indian internal politics need to change dramatically to cope up with Bangladesh's new regional posturing.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Dialogue the only way out

Ordinary people are passing their days in great tension over what may happen after 24th October as the government and the opposition are still adamant in their positions. Despite political instability, Bangladesh has made impressive economic and social progress over the past decade with steady annual economic growth of 5-6 percent. Bangladesh has also made momentous progress in MDGs. If this political rivalry goes on, Bangladesh might lose its track. Keeping this into consideration, the civil society should organise a dialogue between the two political parties. I would like to request politicians to create an environment where all the political parties can participate in a free and fair election which will ensure the country's stability and progress.

M. A. Kashem
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Then who killed 3 million people...

The ICT has delivered its verdict on some war crimes cases and a number of criminals are waiting to get the verdict. But the astonishing thing is that during the trials, the defendants claimed themselves to be innocent and denied their involvement in any crime! If so, then who killed three million people during the Liberation War and who raped 2 lakh women? The cities and villages and the eminent personalities of Bangladesh were unknown to the occupation force. They would not be able to wreak such havoc and destruction throughout the country without the direct collaboration of the Razakars, Al-badrs and Al-shams. It proves that they do not have the slightest repentance for what they did.

Md. Shahjahan Mia
Development Professional
Satmosjid Road, Dhaka

Stop releasing Bt Brinjal

Experiments related to GM crops are being conducted worldwide including in USA, Canada, Australia and even India. None of the countries have come to a conclusion that GM crops are safe for humans. So, it will be unwise to release Bt Brinjal in Bangladesh considering the health hazards it will create.

M. G. Ferdous
Senior research associate, BAU

Comments on news report, "Quest for nuke energy begins," published on October 3, 2013

Amit Srivastava

Greetings from India! We support Bangladesh in this endeavour.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Energy-starved Bangladesh needs more power plants but extra cautionary measures are must to operate this plant. Fukushima reactor disaster is still haunting the Japanese people.

Saleh Tanveer

Russia is not exactly known for its safety standards. However, it has vast amount of land so that if and when a disaster strikes, it can decide to pull people out of a 30 mile disaster zone. We hardly have this luxury. With people falling on top of each other, and a culture of not paying attention to details, where are our people going to shift when a disaster strikes? Our current leaders have made this critical decision arbitrarily that may impact generations to come with the stroke of a pen. They know fully well that by that time they will be long gone and out of power and can blame others for potential disasters.

"Anti-graft crusader in a Milk Vita stew" (October 3, 2013)

Samih34

The way things will go under the present government: Munir Chowdhury will have to pay by losing his job for being honest and for not being an AL loyalist!

Alam

Munir Chowdhury is a proved honest man. I humbly request honourable PM to save this innocent and dedicated man from harassment and punish those corrupt people who are behind all this as he did not give them illegal privilege.

Kalu_Mia

Give the dog a bad name before you kill it and it is happening in Milk Vita. Mr. Munir has been a famous and honest person so far. He has called several strikes against the polluters and free tax riders of our country. Now someone powerful within the government is feeling that Munir is not gratifying their dirty wishes.

Deepjelejai

Probably this real patriot will be defeated by other 'patriots' sooner or later. However, my whole heart is with Mr Munir.

Truthprevails53

This news deserves to be the lead news, so that the government is forced to acknowledge this great man and punish the people who are against him. Shame on the AL candidate. Munir Chowdhury is a hero. Bangladesh needs many more men like him.

Snr citizen

This is why we are not making progress as expected. Everywhere political muscle is present. When someone brings discipline and profit to an organisation, he is removed as vested interests are not at ease!

Saleh Tanveer

This is one more case of ruling party apparatus trying to get rid of someone because he stood in their way.

The writer is Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and Special Advisor of the United Nations Secretary-General for Timor-Leste.