

Govt's welcome stance on press freedom

We hope it is for real

WE are relieved at Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu's emphatic statement made to the parliamentary body on his ministry, and repeated to the press later, that the government has no plans to restore a controversial provision of the Printing Presses and Publication Act of 1973, relating to DC's power to cancel newspaper declaration. It was known as 'black law' to gag the media or curb its freedom. It is undoubtedly a very judicious and prudent decision of the government towards protecting freedom of the press which is the cornerstone of a free, democratic society. The minister's assurance should now dispel misgivings about the government's earlier move to review the said provision by forming a committee to this effect.

We would like to highly commend the strong stance that the parliamentary committee on the information ministry took against the purported move to revive the controversial provision terming it 'suicidal and irrational.'

Mostly governments, in any part of the world, do not like a free press. But experience has shown that there is a direct link between good governance and a strong, free media. It is this experience that the people of Bangladesh have embraced. Thus, no government in the future will be able to gag the press without paying a heavy price in terms of public support.

We are glad that our government and our parliament have understood it and have pledged to support the free press.

Unionisation in EPZs

Step in the right direction

THE cabinet approved a draft law on July 7, which once enacted, will pave the way for workers to form unions in the country's Export Processing Zones (EPZ). This has long been a pressing demand by the United States and is thought to be one of primary reasons why Bangladesh lost its trade benefits under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) back in June, 2013. Regardless of the US position, we should have done it of our own volition than under pressure because it involved workers' right to have a bargaining agent which can take up labour issues with management.

The draft law requires 30 per cent workers in a factory to apply for registering an association. The current law, i.e. EPZ Workers' Association and Industrial Relations Act 2009 effectively barred workers from forming unions. We believe that the labour law reform that the government has undertaken since 2013 are going to bear fruit and workers in the EPZs who have till now had no recourse to voicing their grievances will benefit from the latest move.

EPZs should not be treated as islands in an oasis where workers are deprived of right to unionism. The right to having collective bargaining agents is a universal right and we believe that the proposed law, which has been prepared in consultation with all the stakeholders including the owners of industries in the EPZs will only help address issues most important to workers viz. wages, working environment, protection of their health and rights of compensation in case of injury.

With victory comes responsibility

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

THE part of the Bay of Bengal that should have been rightfully ours long ago has finally been proved to be ours. This has arrived in the shape of a verdict issued by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration. Not only have we been awarded with a big chunk of the sea but also for the first time we are about to draw our own sea-map.

Aside from being given a fair deal with extended maritime boundary lines in both east and west and the outermost tip drawn in the south, we will now have to protect and correctly make use of our gains. True that the main arguments for arbitration focusing on the location of the land boundary terminus, delimitation of the territorial sea, exclusive economic zone, and the continental shelf within and beyond 200 nautical miles have been settled but we have to be prepared to capitalise on the potential largesse.

With an expanded sea boundary not only do we need to increase our naval strength and patrolling, but also need to ensure the safety and proper exploration of our hydrocarbon deposits. For increasing fishing resources we will have to go beyond our fixed limits with advanced deep sea trawlers and also keep vigil on others to prevent them from fishing in our zone.

Markedly, after delimitation of the maritime boundaries we should now proceed to carry out a general seismic survey at the Bay of Bengal. Also BAPEX and Petrobangla will have to prove their competence in terms of exploring off-shore blocks for oil and gas.

However, in light of the latest maritime verdict, our responsibilities for controlling our portion of the Bay has increased. Effective, responsible and co-ordinated efforts of the concerned authorities are needed for protecting our maritime boundary and its properties. And here, there is no room for indulging in complacency. We must move forward dynamically.

Bangladesh now legally possess 118,813 square km of waters extending territorial sea and exclusive economic zones comprising out to 200 nautical miles. Accordingly, it will have to bear the responsibility of protecting the sovereignty of its waters and be accountable for managing the contents.

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BANGLADESH-INDIA MARITIME BOUNDARY AGREEMENT: A new horizon of cooperation

ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

THE judgment on the maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and India and its acceptance by both parties has ushered in a win-win situation for all. The maritime boundary between the two countries was not delimited since partition in 1947. The Radcliff Award that partitioned Bengal left the boundary between the two states at the "Mid-stream of the Hariabhanga River." In 1974, Bangladesh drew a line due south from Hariabhanga River in the west and the Naaf River in the east up to 200 nautical miles, bringing the whole region within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This was disputed by both India and Myanmar, who drew their own lines that included a large sea area claimed by Bangladesh.

Bangladesh had faced problems with both the neighbours with fishery rights and energy search due to the undemarcated maritime boundary. While our dispute with Myanmar involved a much larger sea area with higher economic potential, the dispute with India was often exploited as a political tool by elements within Bangladesh. The South Talpatty, a small island that emerged in the mouth of the Hariabhanga River became a bone of contention between the two states. In the early 1980s, the incident even led to deployment of naval and coast guard ships from both countries, trying to establish their claims. Thankfully, the tiny island that emerged after the Great Cyclone of November 1970 gradually disappeared by 2000.

From Bangladesh side, while there was much rhetoric, there was little substantial work done to solve the maritime boundary problem, either bilaterally or through international mediation. In fact, our preparation to build up a case in our favour was quite inadequate. Rear Admiral (Retd) Khurshed Alam, then a young Naval Officer, was a lone fighter -- writing, talking and arguing about the urgency of settling this issue, but hardly anyone was in the listening mood at the time.

Credit must be given to the Awami League government that came to power in 2008, when for the first time a process was started to build a case for EEZ for Bangladesh in the international tribunal. The initiative definitely belonged to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and then Foreign Minister Ms. Dipu Moni. Cdre. Alam was recalled from retirement and promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral, and a separate cell was created under his leadership within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deal with the issue of EEZ.

Thanks to the hard work, meticulous planning, collection and collation of huge details, and finally presenting a solid case, we have got favourable judgments in both Myanmar and India's case. In case of Bangladesh-India, of the disputed 25,602 sq.km, Bangladesh got 19,467 sq.km. i.e. 76% of what was claimed by us. Prior to both the judgments, the country was sea-locked, i.e. our access to the continental shelf was blocked by the two claimants on our east and west. With this judgment, we now have unimpeded access to the continental shelf.

Peaceful and amicable settlement of maritime dispute between Bangladesh and its two neighbours could be an

example in the international arena at a time when in many parts of the world maritime disputes are emerging as major flash points. For example, in the South China Sea, disputed maritime boundary between China and its neighbours -- Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines -- is causing grave tension. This has resulted in increased military expenditures, especially naval build up, in the region. US Naval presence in South China Sea is now at its height since the end of the Vietnam War. The recent decision by Japan to reorient its forces from purely defensive to offensive posture is also a result of the increased tension in the South China Sea. Against these backdrops, peaceful settlement of Bangladesh-Myanmar and Bangladesh-India maritime boundaries is a major achievement.



Peaceful and amicable settlement of maritime dispute between Bangladesh and its two neighbours could be an example in the international arena at a time when in many parts of the world maritime disputes are emerging as major flash points.

All the three countries now can go ahead with their plans of search and extraction of energy and mineral resources and exploitation of fisheries. This could be an occasion to remind ourselves that through mutual understanding, goodwill and if need be, with international arbitration, we can solve many issues that act as irritants and obstruct mutually beneficial relationships. It would be in India's long-term interest to speedily implement the Land Boundary Agreement and sign the Teesta River Water Sharing Agreement with Bangladesh. These will further open up new vistas of win-win relationships between the two countries.

The writer is Air Commodore (Retd), and Registrar, East West University.

Modi's 50 days in office

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

IF the first 50-odd days of rule by Prime Minister Narendra Modi are any guide, it is the rightist government which has taken over India. The Nehruvian ideology which tilts towards left has been jettisoned. Once again, free enterprise and unencumbered trade will motivate people.

This is a turnaround from the policies that have guided the nation so far. The public sector will shrink and the rich will expand their area of influence and operation. This is a logical consequence of a free economy. How far Modi will go to remove limitations on unplanned enterprise is difficult to say, but there is no doubting of governance by the rich and powerful. It is bound to drive the weak to the wall because the capitalist system knows no other way to grow. Yet Modi should be prepared to face stiff opposition from the beneficiaries of the system which is leftist in content.

However, there is nothing dynamic about the programmes and policies which Modi has unfolded. His election campaign promised so much and aroused the aspirations of people to such an extent that his budget is considered inadequate to bring about the changes which are necessary to go forward.

Modi's rule so far has been tepid and devoid of any spectacular step to pull India out from the mire of non-development in which it is stuck. The absence of push becomes all the more glaring when there is no lessening of poverty. Former RBI governor Rangarajan's report released a few days ago finds 3 out of 10 Indians below the poverty line. This is more than what we inherited when the British left in August 1947.

It is disappointing to see the Modi government not taking concrete and immediate steps towards bringing down inflation. After having experienced a long spell of non-governance under the Congress rule, I thought that the BJP government would spell out legal and other measures to set the strangled economy free to grow. The budget has not told us how and when.

Instead, the government looks too timid to take steps which would be considered risky. When the BJP on its own has a majority in the Lok Sabha, it is difficult to make out the reason for its halting approach. During the election campaign Modi had promised to cut red tape to ensure a rapid growth. When it comes to action there is hesitation, if not lethargy, on the part of the government.

The BJP should understand that development can mitigate the party's parochial image. In an atmosphere where the growth is slow people miss the pluralistic society all the more. The only redeeming factor is that the BJP government has not underlined its communal agenda. Yet who knows whether the Modi government will go back to the policy of dividing people after making them complacent.

In fact, it looks as if Modi is going out of the way to give the impression that after becoming prime minister he has changed his stance of promoting Hindu nationalism. His party, the BJP, talks about secularism all the time as if there is no contradiction between a Hindu state and a pluralistic society.

True, this is the line of the RSS which believes that all those born in India are Hindus irrespective of whatever faith they may be pursuing. Yet the BJP has kept a distance

from the RSS because it is seen as an advocate of hard line. In fact, the RSS men are joining the BJP to get advantage of the comparatively better image it has.

Modi remained within limits when he went to Srinagar a few days ago. He did not say that the state was an integral part of India as he did earlier. He merely remarked that he would pursue former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's line of humanism. Even the hartal in Srinagar on the day of his visit did not provoke him to react differently. Perhaps, he thought that he had already sent a message across by visiting the state of Jammu and Kashmir within days of his taking over.

The problem with Modi is his image. He is considered anti-Muslim in a country which has roughly 18 million Muslims. They, indeed, feel insecure. They still recall his complicity in anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002. Although a special investigation team (SIT) under the supervision of state high court has given him a clean chit, the tag of partisanship still pursues him. As prime minister, he should go out of the way to win the confidence of the minorities. His accommodative approach towards the Saarc countries -- three of them are Muslim -- is a step in the right direction. Yet he has to do more to win their trust as Vajpayee did.

The voters who have returned the BJP want to see the implementation of promises made by Modi. But then these are early days in his governance. We should wait for another 50-odd days to see before assessing his performance since that is the target he has set for himself and his ministers.

I do not see yet any glaring false step in the governance. Elections are such a torrid experience that even the largest political party or a popular leader takes time to get adjusted to the cold reality of failure. This is what has happened to the Congress and its leader, Sonia Gandhi. Both have not yet recovered from the loss on the parliamentary election after ruling the country for a decade. The Congress has been reduced to a rump of 44 in a 543-member Lok Sabha. It is time for the party to analyse what went wrong. But the statements by the Congress leaders reflect complacency.

The insistence by the Congress leaders to be recognised as the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) makes little sense. When the party does not have the mandatory one-tenth of members, that is 55, in the Lok Sabha it should have accepted the defeat and faced the facts. Telugu Desam Party, despite being the single largest outfit, did not get the LoP status some years ago. I can understand the Congress's predicament. But the party should not make it a big issue and instead leave it at that.

The voters who have returned the BJP want to see the implementation of promises made by Modi. But then these are early days in his governance. We should wait for another 50-odd days to see before assessing his performance since that is the target he has set for himself and his ministers.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BCB's decision just

Cricket is a gentleman's game, but unfortunately, Sakib has forgotten it. He has shown little respect or obedience to the cricketing authorities over the years, because he thinks he is indispensable to his team.

But the BCB has taken the right decision. If this too does not rectify him, he should be totally banned from playing cricket, and his passport cancelled, which was issued through the BCB's offices. This should be told to him in clear terms. We must be prepared for Sakib-less days.

If this is not done, other cricketers may do the same and cite Sakib's example as their justification. This needs to be nipped in the bud.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

It's a strange country we live in

Strange and objectionable incidents are taking place in the country. The government was formed defying 90% people's demand of a caretaker government and we got the strangest opposition. When Raushan Ershad is called the leader of the opposition, we have to wince from distaste.

Many MPs were chosen not for their capability to serve the people but for their ability to serve the ruling party; and they were given free rein to do it. When the head of the government did not hesitate to say openly that she would shelter the Osman family, then who could stop them from acting so brazenly. Thus emboldened, that lawmaker is doing and saying things in the most outrageous manner. His remarks about the media and journalists were so obscene that we gasped with disbelief and disgust.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Fake Facebook IDs

Nowadays Facebook is a very strong means of social communication. We can communicate with our friends, family, relatives, etc., on Facebook. But it is a matter of sorrow that many people abuse it by opening fake IDs and disturbing others especially girls. This trend has now become an epidemic. Sometimes these fake ID holders hurl abusive languages towards girls and try to harass them in several ways. So we should be aware of this situation and think twice before making friends on Facebook.

Rina Zannat
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Board dissolved," published on July 7, 2014

Tazim 1977

Despite the fact that board members of different banks were found involved in corruption, the government has not yet taken any stern action against those people. And as a result, corruption is being continued.

"DCs press for more powers" (July 7, 2014)

Mofi

Sounds like they want all the power of the world!

Aasfisarwar

I am confident that people will be better off without their unnecessary powers.

"BNP preparing for movement, polls" (July 6, 2014)

Molla A. Latif

In the name of resisting the election of January 5, BNP caused colossal damage to the country but achieved nothing but failure.

"Attack on CHT commission car in Rangamati" (July 5, 2014)

LPP Marma

Even human rights activists are not safe in Chittagong.

"Remittance fall raises concern" (July 4, 2014)

Taif

If we do not take this issue seriously, we will have to suffer a lot in the future.

Negative inflow from Middle Eastern countries, in-house political unrest and imbalanced foreign policy would make this worse. Authorities concerned, please wake up!