

Break stalemate and change parameters for an effective foreign policy

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

RELATIONS with our big neighbor India continues to improve but the substantive issues that are of concern to Bangladesh are yet to be addressed fully by India. Apart from getting the maritime boundary settled with India amicably through international arbitration, nothing significant had happened in the foreign relations front in 2014.

The sharing of the waters of the Teesta River has not moved an inch. Even the conclusion of the Land Boundary agreement (LBA) was at a standstill.

Prime Minister Modi and his ministers continued to assure Bangladesh that relationship will pick up even more soon. Indian officials seems to have persuaded our officials to give more time to the new government in Delhi in order to have the West Bengal government to agree to a sharing of the Teesta waters. In the meantime, India continued to get transit through Bangladesh for carrying cargo and goods from West Bengal to North East India. India is seeking this in the name of connectivity.

There was great hope that the LBA protocol would be signed restoring the enclaves to the respective countries as envisaged, when the Indian parliament approves the transfer. Some politicians in

the state of Assam see this transfer as loss of Indian territory to Bangladesh, causing the Parliament to be hesitant in taking steps to end this impasse. Thus the matter looks to be shelved till taken up again sometime in 2015 after squashing the objections.

Cross border smuggling is still rampant along the Indian-Bangladesh border resulting in loss of valuable lives of Bangladeshis.

Trade with India is not bringing in dividends as much as wished for because India is moving at a snail's pace when it comes to upgrading its border infrastructure and in getting rid of innumerable non-tariff barriers it has put up to prevent easy access of Bangladeshi products into the Indian market.

What seems to be progressing is the use of US\$1 billion credit given to Bangladesh earlier to procure rolling stock and other items from India for immediate use.

India is also moving fast to sell electricity as much as they can to Bangladesh seeing the energy demand here.

Added to all this is the problem of getting Indian visa by Bangladeshis now. It is extremely difficult for anyone to get a date for an interview with the Indian High Commission authorities even if they have to go for medical treatment or for studies to India.

The question that bedevils us is what

Bangladesh should do to encourage India to take steps to resolve these outstanding issues between the two countries. However, we are glad to note that the Indian High Commission has made special arrangements for patients seeking treatment in India.

The other country with whom Bangladesh has not been able to move forward its relations as such it might, is the USA. The USA has unilaterally imposed GSP restrictions on the ready made garments exported to the country. Bangladesh has to pay heavy taxes before it can access that market. This is in spite of Bangladesh having met most of the US requirements regarding safety and the labor laws required to be effective to relieve it of the penalty. But here also Bangladesh is asked to wait before the conditions improve further.

2015 should be the year when our foreign policy establishment should let it be known that our policies have not been fully reciprocated us in spite of our sincere dealings and the immense goodwill that we have for India and the USA. We must now consider changing some of the parameters which have been guiding our bilateral relations. We must let these friends know that Bangladesh's friendship should be reciprocated. We must devise alternative policy options to tackle these relationships in the future. Everything

must be based on reciprocity and there should be little or no unilateral behavior.

The Land Boundary Agreement should be concluded as agreed upon way back in 1974. So also, coming to an agreement on the sharing of the waters of the Teesta cannot brook further delay. Visa to Bangladeshis must be eased. Border killings must end also.

The US is a friend of Bangladesh in spite of its frivolous and casual behavior with us. It must be understood that Bangladesh commands a geo-strategic advantage in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. We are not without powerful friends. We should see that denial of GSP facilities endlessly does not go without appropriate countermeasures. The US Ambassador here has been telling us that the bilateral relations between our two countries are deepening and widening; we are yet to see this happening.

In the 21st century relations between countries are based on mutual trust and confidence in each other. Indeed each country and their people have long memories. We hope 2015 will usher in a new paradigm in our relations with these two countries.

The writer is a former Ambassador and a commentator on contemporary matters.
E-Mail : ashfaque303@gmail.com

