

Much-awaited Mamata's visit

New opportunity to resolve old concerns

We wholeheartedly welcome the first ever woman West Bengal Chief Minister, who is arriving in Dhaka today for a three-day visit. Her maiden visit to Bangladesh as the Chief Minister is undoubtedly good news for both the countries, as it revitalises the prospect of settling two long-standing unresolved issues, Teesta water sharing and Land Boundary Agreement (LBA).

The water levels of Teesta have dropped drastically, reaching a record low in 2014 as a result of obstructions at the upper reaches. Bangladesh's share should be equitable so that it does not severely hamper the biodiversity and lives and livelihoods of communities living near the river. Despite repeated appeals from Bangladesh, the Indian government, in the face of opposition from West Bengal, has thus far recoiled from addressing the concerns regarding Teesta water. In fact, in 2011, Mamata Banerjee had backed out at the last minute from the then PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh, opposing the Teesta treaty, which had all but been finalised.

The LBA bill, unlike in the past, has been endorsed by the Indian parliamentary standing committee on the external affairs ministry. Hopefully the deck will finally be cleared for the exchange of enclaves as per the LBA. Meanwhile, we have to combat terrorism that straddles the border jointly and for that the involvement of the Pashchim Banga government is as essential as that of New Delhi.

Now, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reassurance of resolving our differences, we sincerely hope that Mamata's visit will accelerate the process of reaching the deals within a foreseeable timeframe. With her august visit, we are looking forward to a heralding of warm relations between Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Impact assessment on Sundarbans oil spill

Sustained monitoring imperative

THE joint UN-Bangladesh impact assessment team on the Sundarbans oil spill has submitted its report. The incident involving sinking of an oil tanker and subsequent spill of an estimated 300,000 litres of furnace oil into the ecosystem of the forest is claimed to have had a limited effect on the delicate ecological balance of Sundarbans in the short term.

But there is no room for complacency, for us to fully understand what impact the spill has had on the largest mangrove forest, it has been recommended that the authorities build up permanent monitoring capacity to oversee passage of marine vessels, until an alternative marine route can be found. That the ban on marine vessels has been lifted and the lax monitoring of what vessels are plying the waterways crisscrossing the Sundarbans mean another disastrous incident may occur at any time.

What had become apparent in the aftermath of the spillage is the sheer confusion among various departments of the government on who is responsible for what in terms of response. This is an Achilles' heel that has to be addressed. We also saw a dearth of preparedness to deal with an oil spill and a lack of perception on what chemical agents could be used to contain a spill of this magnitude. The health hazards associated with using people who scooped up nearly 70,000 litres of the oil spilled without protective gear are yet to be ascertained. These are all

Are we rendering ourselves vulnerable?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

IT does not need an expert to say that we have landed ourselves in the most difficult situation as a result of the current political deadlock.

Regrettably, BNP remains totally unconcerned by the violence its political programme of *oborodh* and *hartal* has engendered. The AL on the other hand is loathed to see the current situation, not as a political gridlock, but only as a law and order problem.

It is difficult to believe that the more farsighted among our leaders are unaware of the serious consequences if the situation is allowed to linger.

Government's lack of a coherent strategy to address the current situation, which resides on two planes, violence and politics and which the government is unwilling to acknowledge, is apparent.

On the political front this has been reflected in the threats to lay siege to BNP's Gulshan office and force the BNP chairperson to submission.

On the violence front, the petrol bomb phenomenon had initially taken the law enforcing agencies by surprise. A large number of BNP-Jamaat cadres have been hauled up. But we will have to wait and see the efficacy of this policy. However, 'encounter' and 'shootout' killings are not the way to go. More security for the people should not mean less rule of law and abridgement of the legal process.

The BNP leader, being in the position that she is in, feels little concerned with the threats but feels she has everything to lose if she retracts from her position, continues to stick to her stand vis-à-vis *hartal* and *oborodh*. And the people are the ones crushed between a smug government, not willing to be seen as a 'loser' in this battle by offering a dialogue, and a pitiless political opposition inured to the sufferings of the people, especially the poor, and both are gripped by the one desire -- power. Neither of them realises the grave danger that the country might encounter should the current situation continue much longer.

In this context, we take the US ambassador's comment, during her meeting with the prime minister that the US would help protect democracy in Bangladesh, with a pinch of salt, given the untold sorrow that has been caused by US' effort to bring democracy in some countries. However, one would have hoped that the prime minister had informed the US ambassador that if a country cannot protect its democracy on its own, no amount of external help, however well-meaning, can help.

But, considering the situation as it has evolved in the last six weeks, it is no longer the question of survival of democracy alone but of the future of the country. The space that has been created by the current situation might soon be filled up by such elements who can enormously degrade the country's socio-political structure should they succeed in exploiting the situation.

Extremist groups have targeted 'democracy' and would want to establish that, 'Bangladesh is plagued by 'Democracy' --

a highly fatal disease for which there is no cure. By leaving this disease untreated, there is no brighter future ahead. Democracy has never brought any people good governance and peace since this system bestows unfettered legislative power upon a small group of political elite." In other words, these groups would like to see an end of democracy in the country; and democracy was the *raison d'être* for creation of Bangladesh. Do we need to look any farther for the threats we face?

Of the twelve proscribed extremist groups in the country there are several that have links with international extremist organisations. They are targeting democracy in the country. We cannot overlook the fact that over the past several months some persons have been apprehended with large amount of fake foreign currencies. And large consignments of gold have also been apprehended over the past several months. The purpose for which they were being carried needs to be seriously looked into.

We are facing a difficult situation. And its resolution can brook no further delay, resolution that demands a realistic strategy on the part of the government and the BNP. And formulating a good strategy would involve engaging all parties of national standing.

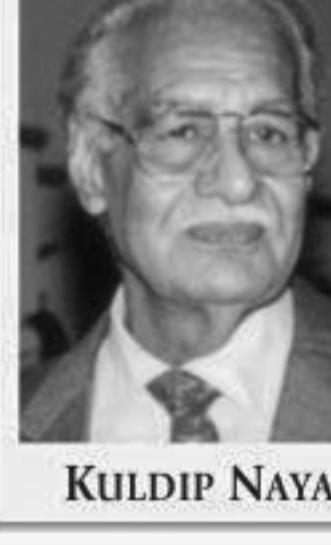
And thus one fails to understand why the suggestion of talks to resolve the situation is being rejected out of hand and why those who are trying to introduce the idea of dialogue are treated with derision.

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

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After all it's a game

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

SUPPOSE India had lost the World Cup cricket match against Pakistan at Adelaide, the reaction among its people would have been that of disappointment and remorse. But I do not think

that they would have initiated scuffles with the Pakistani spectators. The Indians would not have destroyed television sets as some did in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan. Of course, there would have been a sense of humiliation, but it would not have poured on to the streets in the shape of fracas or demonstrations.

This is not to suggest that the Indian society is more sophisticated. But there is no doubt that it is more tolerant and accommodative. A multi-cultural society as it is, India has learnt to live with different communities. The largest Muslim population, next to Indonesia, has its dynamics. It has taught the Hindus that they have to adjust if they want the society to progress.

Unfortunately, the radicals among the community -- they are increasing -- want the country to be Hindu. The RSS, extremist Hindu body, is pushing the society all the time to become a Hindu Rashtra. But the majority of Hindus have rejected its parochial approach.

The BJP, which is its political arm, seems to have learnt that the saffronisation does not go down well with the people. Therefore, it has adopted development as its creed. It may well be a cover for Hindutva. Yet, it indicates the realisation that communal outlook is counterproductive.

Probably this explains why Prime Minister Narendra Modi has finally broken his silence while addressing the Christian community in New Delhi. In an unequivocal statement, he said: "My government will ensure that there is complete freedom of faith and that everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence. My government will not allow any religious group to incite hatred against

others, overtly or covertly. Mine will be a government that gives equal respect to all religions." Apparently, he had the destruction of some churches in the country in mind.

Modi, who has an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, has been careful all these months in not pushing his party's agenda -- common civil code and deleting Article 370 in the constitution that gives a special status to Kashmir. He may not have become really secular but he knows that the society would not budge from the pluralism which it has accepted as a fact of life in India.

True, the minorities may still be molested because of the preponderant majority of Hindus. The situation becomes alarming when RSS chief

centrate, there are forcible conversions of women for marriage. And there is hardly any temple which has not been attacked.

According to a report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW), violent attacks on members of religious minorities rose significantly in 2014 as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government failed to ensure protection of religious freedom. The HRW has termed 2014 "a tumultuous year" for Pakistan in which sectarian attacks continued with impunity, and military operations in North Waziristan displaced more than one million people.

In a statement attached to the report, Phelim Kine, the Deputy Asia Director at the New York-based HRW regretted that "the Pakistan government is failing at the most basic duty to protect its citizens

diluted when Pakistan is on the opposite side.

It is a pity that there is not even an iota of realisation, much less action, that ways should be found to minimise enmity between the two countries. Pakistan has more to answer because it has even distorted history to show Hindus in a bad light. A student in Pakistan is a product of hatred which is kept alive through falsehood or half-truths.

Generally, it is not the case in India although the society should be vigilant because the history is being saffronised by the ruling BJP. The society is not yet contaminated because the sweep of the Aam Aadmi Party at Delhi testifies the voters' abhorrence to caste and creed.



Mohan Bhagwat says: "Ram Janmabhoomi and Sethusamudram are national issues. We can raise more such issues to send a message across about the real targets of Sangh." Yet he and the Sangh Parivar know that the Indian society cannot be converted into a theocratic state. This is against the grain of the people.

In comparison, Pakistan is becoming more and more radicalised. No doubt, the country was separated and constituted on the basis of religion. But its founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, said soon after its creation that religion and state would not be mixed. Yet the fact is that the minorities in Pakistan are only around 5%. In Sindh, where they con-

centrate, there are forcible conversions of women for marriage. And there is hardly any temple which has not been attacked.

Undoubtedly, many mosques in India have also faced the fury of fanatics. But here the media and a substantial number of liberals speak out and take both the society and the government to task. The minorities will continue to be under pressure until India and Pakistan bury the hatchet. Secular and democratic New Delhi is no less derogatory of Islamabad when tension comes to prevail. Muslims are dubbed as Pakistanis although India is ruled by secular constitution, not by the Hindu majority. This ethos gets

This phenomenon should become an all-India theme. It all depends to a great extent on how India and Pakistan sort out their differences. The minorities will benefit if they do. The sooner, the better it is.

Cricket is, no doubt, a game of skill but it depends on how a particular team performs on a particular day. Take the example of Ireland that beat the two-time world champions West Indies. The important lesson to learn is that the game should be played in the spirit of the game and not tagged to other issues between the two nations. Players seem to be conscious of this but not the spectators.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A suggestion to reduce arson attacks

Highly flammable projectile known as petrol bomb is being used in Bangladesh to carry out arson attacks. A quick solution which can be taken by the government is to request soft drink companies to stop processing their products in glass bottle and replace it with plastic bottle. It might reduce the use of petrol bomb in future.

Engr. Mohammed Arshad Alam

On e-mail

Relocate Khaleda's office

I fully agree with Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan's view about relocating Khaleda Zia's office. There are embassies and high commissions very near to this office. On February 16, a bomb was hurled at the Shipping Minister's procession which left 8 people injured. We know that our politicians don't care about ordinary people; but if any high profile person of these high profile offices get injured or killed in a bomb blast or in an arson attack, it will create a more negative image of BNP and Bangladesh. So it would be better if BNP shifts its office to another location.

Rownok

On e-mail

Carry fire extinguishers

We are watching in horror that the number of arson attack victims is rising everyday. The ordinary citizens are becoming the victims of the two political parties' fight. How can anyone perpetuate such attacks on innocent civilians? I think it would be of great help if buses, trucks and cars carry fire extinguishers. This might be useful at this time.

T Islam

On e-mail

Colvinod

I congratulate the people of Bangladesh for this great achievement. It happened because of single-minded dedication of the people towards progress and peace.

"Track down HSBC money"

(February 12, 2015)

Salim Ullah