

Mamata's goodwill visit

MAHMOOD HASAN

WEST Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has just concluded her 3-day visit to Dhaka. She came at the invitation of Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali to pay respect to the martyrs of Ekushey February. During her brief stay in the capital she called on President Abdul Hamid, met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and paid tribute to the martyrs at the Central Shaheed Minar.

Mamata's visit is considered significant for several reasons. She is the chief minister of West Bengal, with which Bangladesh has close affinity. Bangladeshis know Kolkata much better than Delhi. Relations between Dhaka and Delhi depend to a large extent on relations between Bangladesh and neighbouring Indian states. Most of the cross border issues -- trade, water sharing of common rivers, smuggling, BSF shooting, insurgency etc -- involve these bordering states. Thus, if they are cooperative many of these issues can be easily resolved between Dhaka and Delhi.

Since 2009, with the coming to power of the Awami League government, relations between Dhaka and Delhi witnessed an upturn. However, two long-delayed issues but extremely important to Bangladesh remained unresolved -- the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and the Treaty on water sharing of Teesta River.

After lengthy and arduous negotiations the LBA was ready for ratification by the Lok Sabha. The Treaty on water sharing was also ready for signing during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011. Manmohan Singh's UPA government supported by Trinamool Congress (TMC) was confident that Mamata Banerjee would be on board when concluding the two agreements with Bangladesh.

But Mamata Banerjee, due to internal political expedience, objected to the agreements and refrained from coming



to Bangladesh with Manmohan Singh, who was deeply embarrassed. Sheikh Hasina felt let down.

Meanwhile, Narendra Modi's BJP swept into power at the Lok Sabha Elections in 2014, decimating Congress. The change of guards in Delhi was a major setback for Mamata's TMC. BJP immediately focused on how to uproot TMC from West Bengal. It was at that time that Mamata's tune showed signs of change.

Two issues were brought to bear on TMC. First was the scandal related to the Saradha chit fund, in which several top ranking TMC MPs and ministers were alleged to be involved. The second was the bomb blast in Burdwan. BJP

accused Mamata of not giving priority to security issues and for giving sanctuary to Islamic fundamentalists.

The changed political scenario has put Mamata under tremendous pressure from BJP and CPI (M). Already there have been defections from TMC to BJP. The electorate in West Bengal is said to be rejecting the Left Front and opting for BJP as the opposition to TMC. Mamata's political future will face serious challenge at the West Bengal Assembly elections in 2016. She is desperately trying to lift her sagging popularity.

Thus, internal political imperatives have forced Mamata to change her stance on the LBA and the Teesta Treaty.

TMC has withdrawn its opposition to the LBA and the related bill is expected to be passed by the Lok Sabha at its next session. Mamata has asked for funds from Delhi for rehabilitating the people of the enclaves.

As for the Teesta Treaty, Mamata has asked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to have "trust" in her. The Treaty has already been initiated by the two countries, awaiting formal signature. What exactly will be the share for Bangladesh will not be known until the Treaty is made public. Presently, the flow of Teesta in Kurigram in Bangladesh is so low that it is clear that India has been withdrawing massive quantum of water from the

upstream of the river.

It is clear that Mamata Banerjee, as chief minister of a state, cannot promise anything on a Central government subject. But she can, and she has in the past, thrown a spanner on a bilateral issue.

Sharing of water of common rivers will remain contentious between Bangladesh and India, primarily because demand for water will keep increasing with each passing year. Experts say that both Bangladesh and India can get the benefits of common rivers if cross border water management projects are undertaken by both.

In a sense Mamata has probably made Delhi's position rather tricky on this issue. Can Prime Minister Narendra Modi backtrack on the promises he made to Sheikh Hasina at Kathmandu during the Saarc summit last November? There are unconfirmed reports that Modi may visit Bangladesh on March 26, 2015 to attend the Independence Day celebrations.

Accompanied by a large cultural delegation, Mamata's visit was in fact a public relations exercise to prop up her image in West Bengal. She has offered to set up a "Bangabandhu Chair" in Kolkata University and construct a "Bangabandhu Bhaban" in Kolkata. She also invited Sheikh Hasina to Kolkata. Mamata also wanted closer cultural ties between West Bengal and Bangladesh. She emphasised the need for more trade between Bangladesh and India.

Mamata visited Dhaka at a time when the Bangladesh polity is deeply fractured. A disunited nation cannot expect benefits from other nations. The current political turmoil in Bangladesh may give Delhi excuses to delay the signing of the two important agreements.

Thus, though Mamata Banerjee has radiated all the positive vibes before departing from Dhaka, her goodwill may not be translated into reality anytime soon.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

Constitutional government does not yield to petulance

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ONE can hardly disagree with Syed Abul Maksud when he states in his write-up ('Climb not too high'), published in The Daily Star on Wednesday, February 18, 2015, that democracy in Bangladesh now faces the guillotine. One is not sure, though, that the present crisis is the gravest in their history that the people of this country happen to be going through. No greater conflict, no greater period in fear and uncertainty can beat the darkness we waded through in the course of the War of Liberation forty three years ago.

Syed Abul Maksud is, however, absolutely right in pointing to the bad language which government as well as fourteen-party alliance politicians have been taking recourse to in recent days. An underpinning of democracy is certainly the right of dissent and ensuring that such dissent is not dismissed as being of little or no consequence. Therefore, when as respected an individual as Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhiht employs the term 'stupid' to denigrate former prime minister Khaleda Zia, we are surely not amused - for such attitudes militate against the fundamental norms of social decency and political civility.

Again, one will have hardly any reason to disagree with the writer when he questions the language, obviously of a political nature, that has of late been used by civil servants, police officers

and others in their attempts to explain how they mean to handle troublemakers and bring conditions back to normalcy. It is not for the servants of the state to go political even if circumstances around them are provocative enough for them to respond with an outburst of anger or irritation. We as citizens must roundly condemn such expressions of political sentiment by those who serve the state and will likely do so in future.

That said, one wishes Syed Abul Maksud had given us a whole, and wholesome, picture of the realities obtaining in the country. He is perfectly within his rights to inform us that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been turning a deaf ear to all suggestions and entreaties made by civil society and political parties for a dialogue with her detractors. But there is too the crucial question of whether a constitutionally elected government, despite certain reservations regarding the January 5, 2014 election, must really be expected to yield to demands made by a political party unwilling to acknowledge the hostage-like conditions it has pushed the country into. The writer would have made a far more morally acceptable point if he had informed us that for any dialogue to get underway, the first move should be coming from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). To insist that the Awami League (AL) should go for a dialogue without cautioning the BNP that its violence-driven politics precludes any possibility of

such a dialogue is a weak and therefore untenable argument.

The writer should have reminded the BNP of the grave damage its agitation has been causing to the economy, to education, indeed to normal life across the country. He in fact echoes the BNP's position -- that the sole responsibility for the impasse is the AL-led government's. It is somewhat like your neighbour asking you to hand over your valuables to a burglar in order to appease him without in any way telling him that he is committing an act of criminality. Syed Abul Maksud refers to government figures coming down hard on members of civil society who, while advocating a dialogue between the government and the agitating politicians, are not equally vocal about the agitation pushing citizens to death. Frankly speaking, has civil society ever come forth with an unambiguous statement asking the BNP and its friends to end their violent agitation and condemning them for the insensitivity they have been demonstrating toward the sufferings of citizens whose only care has been to ensure a normal life for themselves and their families? Sheikh Hasina's attitude, which the writer describes as unbending, is one that whole swathes of people agree with -- because it stands against anarchy and for constitutional politics, because it is a principled stand. The unbending, on the contrary, is to be spotted in the attitude of the BNP chairperson, who has never wavered in her belief that this

government must be pushed from office. In the process, people have been roasted to death, many others have been maimed for life and pluralistic politics has quite possibly been damaged beyond repair. These are points missing in the article.

Let there be no doubt that all citizens of Bangladesh are today gravely concerned about the worsening conditions in the country. All of us are deeply embarrassed that ours is a state which once again is turning into an object of pity in the global community. That foreign diplomats based in Dhaka inform us once again of what our politicians must do in order to arrive at political accommodation is again reflective of our fresh new retreat into the backwaters of contemporary history. To have UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon write to Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia on the need for a dialogue is for all of us an irony. When our soldiers keep the peace in countries traumatised by political conflict and armed insurrection, it is a shame knowing that the very country they come from is today in need of outside intervention that will remind its leaders of what democracy is all about.

Every citizen of Bangladesh needs and respects democracy. Each one of us would like nothing better than for a new, productive phase of pluralistic governance inaugurated the country. But the first move must come from the BNP chairperson, for she imposed the blockade and the hartals and has

expressed no contrition over the resultant violence. One must not expect Sheikh Hasina and her government, or any government constituted in terms of legality, to negotiate under duress. Asking the prime minister to go for a dialogue with the former prime minister, before asking the latter to call a halt to her 'movement for democracy,' is to let citizens in on the thought that violence pays, that in future other

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politicians can put the country under siege and force governments established by law to quit office and run for life.

Please remember Gandhi and Chauri Chaura 1922, if you can.

(This write-up is a response to an article by Syed Abul Maksud published in this paper on February 18, 2015)

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Observer.

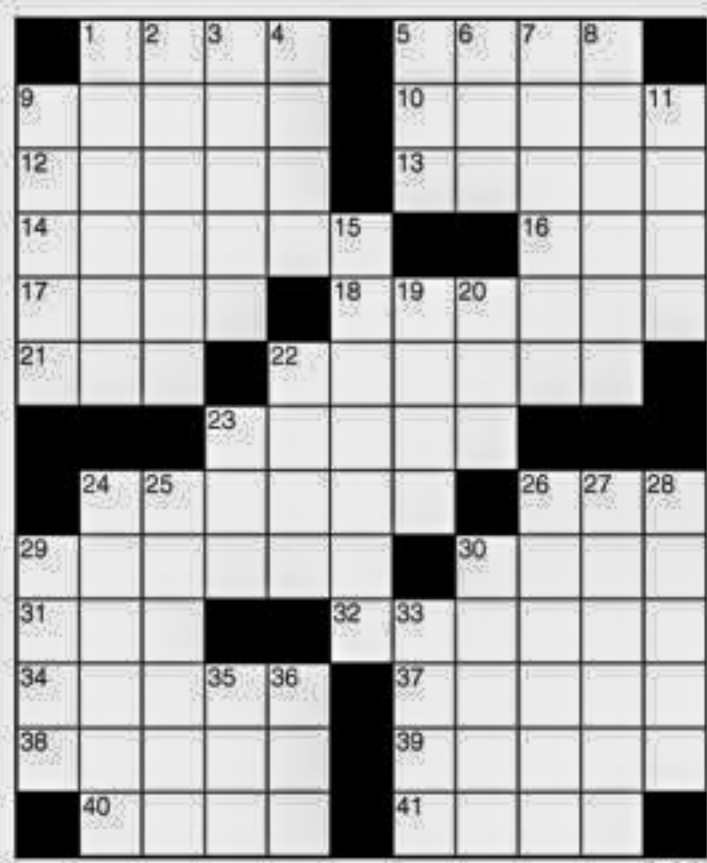
QUOTABLE Quote

Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it.

Thomas Paine

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
- 1 Constructed
- 5 Stepped down
- 9 First performance
- 10 Tablecloth material
- 12 Make suitable
- 13 Basil-based sauce
- 14 Curator's place
- 16 Make mistakes
- 17 Previously owned
- 18 Flowering shrub
- 21 Small tablet
- 22 Is real
- 23 Narrow cuts
- 24 Cold and damp
- 26 Cribbage marker
- 29 "Bye!"
- 30 Opera set in Egypt
- 31 Stretch of history
- 32 Champagne bottle
- 34 Bona fide
- 37 Secretary of state under Carter
- 38 Rob Petrie's wife
- 39 Fencing swords
- 40 Spring
- 41 Cincinnati team
- DOWN
- 1 One of the Gorgons
- 2 Humbled
- 3 Hood-winked
- 4 "---, Brute?"
- 5 Swiss peak
- 6 Tell tales
- 7 Fly or flea
- 8 Block-dropping pastime
- 9 Block
- 11 Nick Charles' wife
- 15 Upper limit
- 19 Metropolis
- 20 Braying beast
- 22 Sailors' saint
- 23 Put into words
- 24 Breakfast choice
- 25 Group of teams
- 26 Like losing wrestlers
- 27 Draws out
- 28 Toy store section
- 29 Vend
- 30 Visibly stunned
- 33 Declare
- 35 S&L offering
- 36 Spigot



Yesterday's answer

B	A	J	A	H	O	N	O	R	
A	L	O	H	A	A	W	A	R	E
I	L	I	A	D	R	E	S	I	N
T	O	N	O	A	K	S	E	E	
S	T	U	M	P	S	D	A	N	E
S	P	I	T	I	T	O	U	T	
D	U	K	E	I	T	O	U	T	
C	A	R	Y	N	A	R	N	I	A
O	R	B	E	N	S	E	X		
I	N	A	W	E	I	N	S	E	
L	I	N	E	N	C	A	R	O	L
S	T	E	E	D	P	E	N	S	

CRYPTOQUOTE 1-12
BZHOO L YAXCHI LO IAK DGRR, GM DGRR
ZHYLGX L YAXCHI OMGR.
-- OAKZUH KXCXADX

Saturday' Cryptoquote: THERE'S TWO TIMES OF YEAR FOR ME: FOOTBALL SEASON, AND WAITING FOR FOOTBALL SEASON.
-- DARIUS RUCKER

HENRY by Don Trachte