

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA TUESDAY MAY 26, 2015

An insensitive remark

The focus should be on the root causes

WE find the prime minister's remarks on taking steps against illegal migrants along with human traffickers inhumane and insensitive. Instead of laying out any plans on how to tackle the humanitarian crisis that has drawn the attention of the world, the prime minister seems to be more concerned about the country's image. By terming people's risky and desperate attempts to go abroad "sort of a mental sickness", she has ridiculed the desperation and plight of some of the most vulnerable people of the country. This is a strange comment from a democratically elected leader.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), an estimated 25,000 migrants took to seas in Southeast Asia in the first quarter of this year. As the tragedy unfolds, it is becoming clear that it is not simply a case of human trafficking but of mass murder, torture, human deprivation and greed of the most despicable kind. The PM's comment becomes even more inappropriate when seen in this bigger context. Unfortunately, we are yet to see any serious actions initiated by the government to address this tragedy.

The only sustainable solution to illegal immigration is changing the conditions that compel them to put their lives at risk in the first place, which are poverty, unemployment and sheer hopelessness of their condition. All these must be addressed effectively. At the local level, social safety nets must be expanded, human capacity should be developed and a massive campaign that goes from door to door must be launched immediately.

And as for immediate action, a comprehensive, multi-country effort is needed to crack down on human traffickers and their masterminds with Bangladesh playing its due role in the upcoming 15-nation regional meeting on "irregular migration" through the sea on May 29 in Bangkok.

Highway safety takes a dip

Focus on deficiencies and address them

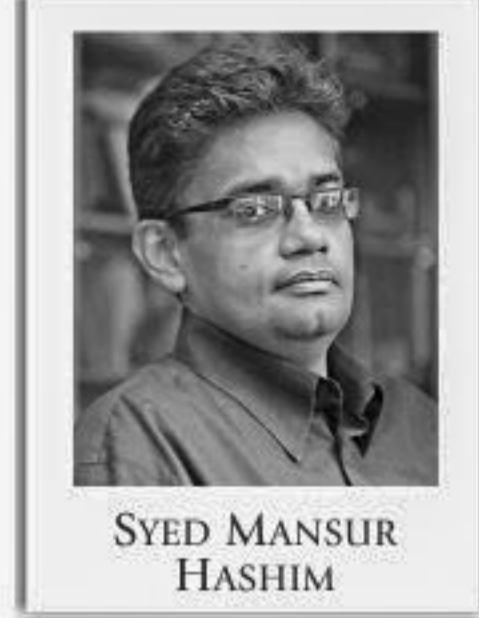
A number of people are being killed and maimed almost every day in road accidents both in the cities as well as in the highways across Bangladesh. As a shocking testimony to that, 13 people were killed and 44 were grievously injured all over the country last Sunday alone.

According to Road Safety Cell of the BRTA, the fatality rate in road accidents in the country is 85.6 per 10,000 vehicles in contrast to below 3 per 10,000 vehicles in developed countries. There is no denying that the police and vehicle operators have a fair share of blame in the ever deteriorating road safety scenario. There has been a dereliction of duty on the part of law enforcers who, allegedly in connivance with vehicle owners, turn a blind eye to unfit vehicles and under aged, unskilled drivers. We have an apology for a highway police force that lacks the logistics and hardware to track and punish offending drivers.

There are other factors that contribute to the safety crisis, which include lack of separation of lanes between motorised and non-motorised vehicles, faulty road-design, and risky roadside activities including makeshift bazaars. To make matters even more grievous, laws regulating vehicle control has not been updated in the last 32 years. This has fostered the culture of impunity that has made the roads even more unsafe for travellers and pedestrians.

We believe that unless laws governing traffic go through an overhaul and the police and the BRTA make a serious supervised effort to keep unfit vehicles and unworthy drivers off the roads, people will continue to lose lives.

Looming conflicts over water



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

CLIMATE change has prompted nations to lock in heated debates over the rise in sea levels. Yet not enough focus, it seems, is being put on the growing crisis of fresh

water which could in the foreseeable future lock nations in conflict over the precious dwindling resource. The latest report released by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) paints a gloomy picture whereby global temperature may rise anywhere between 0.3 to 4.8 degrees Celsius in the latter half of the present century. As pointed out by IPCC Chair Rajendra Pachauri recently, "Unfortunately, the world has not really woken up to the reality of what we are going to face in terms of the crises as far as water is concerned."

The availability of fresh water sources is compounded by droughts and floods – the intensity and frequency of which have increased over recent decades. Take those two factors and throw in man-made disasters such as the continual pollution of rivers and lakes, filling up on water bodies thanks to the rapid urbanisation process which is happening in both developed and developing nations and the diversion of precious water resources by upper-riparian nations, and we are basically sowing the seeds for future conflicts between nations.

As reported by a U.N. report made public in December, 2014, an estimated 2.9 billion people in 48 countries will be facing one form of water shortage or another in the coming decade. And the global water shortage is expected to hit 40 percent within a decade. While that may mean more water bills for owners of swimming pools in the first world, it poses a life and death situation for the world's poorest. Should the forecasts prove true, going to war over water will become a distinct possibility on various



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continents, particularly Africa and Asia. While we may take water for granted, usable fresh water stands at a mere 2.5 percent of all the water available on the planet whereas only 1 percent of it is readily available in rivers and fresh water bodies. The problem does not end there. The water that is available is not evenly distributed around the globe; it is concentrated in specific locations. Yet its use is global in nature and is varied ranging from human consumption to agriculture, agriculture to industry, sanitation to energy production.

Climate change has brought forth various problems for developing

nations. Weather patterns have become unpredictable, so we do not know exactly when and how much rainfall there will be. In the case of Bangladesh, when one takes into account the large dam infrastructure already installed or being built in India and China, major rivers and tributaries are dwindling. The case of Bangladesh is hardly a case in point. Pakistan for its part has taken its complaint to an international court that the hydropower dam being built by India in the Gurez valley in Kashmir will affect river flows in the country. The court has ruled in Pakistan's favour, but work continues in other

forms. India itself is in doldrums. As it builds large hydropower dams and nuclear plants to quench its thirst for energy, precious water gets diverted from agriculture. Water scarcity is a global problem, but the solutions to this global phenomenon are being taken by individual nations ignoring the needs of bordering nations – and there lies the crux of the problem.

Without cooperation on water in South Asia, conflict between nations cannot be ruled out. Yet, decades of mistrust stands in the way of putting in place regimes that will provide the platform for water sharing across borders. As pointed out by Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House Asia Programme in his article 'Preventing water wars in Asia': "Optimal utilization of water in South Asia has been stymied by distrust. For instance, in relation to India's western rivers, which flow into Pakistan and are currently regulated by the Indus Water Treaty, many water experts believe that the best position for dams would be in Indian Kashmir, part of a territory over which India and Pakistan have gone to war. But this is unacceptable to Islamabad."

It stands to reason that countries in South Asia to work together, as opposed to against each other, for sharing what is, essentially a shared resource. Water, electricity and food are all interlinked with one another and every nation needs access to all three for survival and development. The inability to access water due to deniability by another nation could potentially lead to conflict. Regional cooperation can lead to better planning and coming to terms on a pricing mechanism on water must become a priority issue for policymakers of countries in our region. As Gareth Price states, "Water in South Asia is frequently conceived of as a zero-sum resource. But there are models of collaboration at both local and international level that can lead to better outcomes. And while in many respects the glass of water in South Asia is half-empty, there are some emerging signs that it may, in fact, be half-full."

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

MODI'S FOREIGN POLICY

One year of the NDA Government

SMRUTI S PATTANAIK

ONE of the major contributions of the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in the past one year has been dynamism it has injected to the foreign policy decision making apparatus to further domestic economic agenda and to provide India both the visibility and stature in the global geo-political landscape. The policy paralysis that plagued the Congress led United Progressive Alliance government can be attributed to the political compulsion of a coalition regime and also political dynamics within the Congress party.

Internationally, Prime Modi comes across as a leader who can take bold decisions and has the parliamentary majority to see it through. His mandate gives him the confidence to act and project India as a global player. While the previous government was wary to take bold decisions and adopted a degree of strategic ambiguity on global affairs, the NDA government clearly expresses its foreign policy goals and its security concerns without the fear of antagonising anyone. For example, during the recent visit to China, India very clearly put forward its stand on bilateral and regional issues and conveyed to Beijing that its activities in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and its Pakistan policy vitiate the bilateral relations between the two.

Four aspects of Modi's foreign policy can be gleaned from the array of international initiatives that India undertook in the last one year which are interlinked. First is the economic aspect of attracting foreign investment in sectors like infrastructure-building rail and road network, industrial corridor etc., which would boost India's growth. He emphasised the need for a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, proposed to set up a mechanism to help investment by German companies in India, the emphasis on 'make in India' during his visit to France which focuses on manufacturing in India. His visit to China, South Korea and Japan earlier also caught headlines given their commitment to invest in the infrastructure sector. Earlier, its Act East policy was highlighted as PM Modi stressed on the need to sign the

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement during the East Asia summit to bolster trade and investment and re-energise India's economic ties with South East Asia.

Second, under the Modi government New Delhi is keen to play an active role in global governance structures. India would continue to emphasise on the need to reform the Security Council and would seek a robust role in it. It would continue to play a critical role in the climate change negotiation, WTO effort on trade facilitation agreement, etc. While aspiring for a role as a permanent member of the Security Council and a role in the international financial organisations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, India did not hesitate to join the China led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by China. It is poised for a robust role in Asia by seeking greater engagement with the United States and Australia and shape the evolving geo-strategic architecture in the region.

Third, its global role is enmeshed with evolving Asian geopolitics and the power game such geopolitics would entail. In the past one year, India has strengthened its relations with South East Asian countries to further its economic and strategic interests. It has defence and security cooperation with South Korea, Japan and Vietnam. India has bolstered its security through major defence purchases and also decided to jointly produce them under the 'make in India' initiative. This was evident in the Rafale deal with France. While NDA government has laid emphasis on resolving the border dispute with China diplomatically, it has taken steps to strengthen defence and build border infrastructure. It has pursued multilateral diplomacy to secure sea lane of communication to ensure that in the emerging Asian balance of power its geo-strategic interests do not get undermined. Therefore, New Delhi would continue to emphasise on freedom of navigation in South China Sea and seek to strengthen its relations with Indian Ocean countries to protect its interest in the face of an increasing presence of China which is trying to build ports and other maritime facilities in the Indian Ocean littorals. In the past one year, India was a major destination for the world leaders which

included President Obama, President Xi Jinping and President Putin.

Fourth, PM Modi has laid much emphasis on India's relations with its South Asian neighbours which is reflected when he invited SAARC heads of state for his swearing in ceremony which was followed by visits to Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. He is scheduled to visit Bangladesh next month. Though he skipped Maldives during his tour to the Indian Ocean countries, he has now received an invitation from Maldives to visit that country. "Neighbour first" policy has been augmented through proactive diplomacy sans reciprocity and improving trade and connectivity. Already Foreign Secretary undertook SAARC yatra which emphasises the focus on the immediate neighbourhood. India would pursue sub-regionalism vigorously outside SAARC framework given the regional dynamics. Several measures – bilateral and sub-regional – to connect India's North East with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh are underway.

The invitation to PM Nawaz Sharif along with other leaders from the region was surely a master stroke; it appears that India's Pakistan policy remains unclear. While India reacted strongly to the border firing beheading and border killings and cancelled the scheduled foreign secretary level talks after the Kashmiri separatists met the Pakistan High commissioner in New Delhi on the eve of the Foreign Secretary's meet, it was not clear why New Delhi decided to send its foreign secretary under the veil of SAARC yatra to "find common ground" and "narrow difference" with Islamabad. It is unlikely that India's relations with Pakistan will undergo fundamental change given the bilateral dynamics. Yet, efforts would be made to break ice and find new grounds for engagement. In spite of various challenges that India faces in terms of terror challenge, political instability, weak democratic regimes in the region, "neighbour first" policy would prevail. Putting neighbouring countries as a foreign policy priority remains one of the major achievements of this government which distinguishes Modi led NDA government from the previous Congress led UPA Government.

The writer is Research Fellow, IDSA.

COMMENTS

"JU expels 5 BCL men over sexual assault" (May 24, 2015)

Noorur Rahman

Expulsion isn't enough; a criminal prosecution should be initiated against them.

Zaman Khan

Very soon there will be Chhatra League's banners and festoons hung everywhere to oust Jahangirnagar University VC!

"Bus-truck collision kills 10 in Sirajganj" (May 24, 2015)

Liton Rahman

The Bangladesh government must change and update the traffic management system of the country.

"Dhaka-Guwahati trial bus service starts" (May 23, 2015)

Mizanur Rahman

It's good news for Bangladeshi people.

"Govt to bring Bangladeshi victims home" (May 22, 2015)

Shah Alam

All kinds of humanitarian efforts should be taken to ease the sufferings of these ill-fated migrants.

Ali Solaiman

The government should have taken steps earlier.

Zaman Khan

It's a huge task and has to be done as fast as possible.

Precautions to save the pitch from rain

The rainy season is on. The cricket match between Bangladesh and India will start in mid June 2015. Rain will most likely disturb the game and some matches may be marred by rain. BCB should take some precautions to save the pitch and outfield from the rain.
Shafkat Rahman
BIAM Laboratory School, Dhaka

The glut in real estate sector

A developer was telling me a few days back that they have almost finished construction of the apartments and are not being able to sell them. They are facing a financial crisis. There is an alarming glut of apartments and commercial spaces in Dhaka. The following reasons may be attributed for the glut and unsold properties.

1. Previously the building height was restricted to six stories in most of the places especially in prime areas like Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, Dhanmondi, Uttara, DOHS, etc. The land use was seventy five percent. With the surge of population in Dhaka, demand for apartments increased and hundreds of new buildings were built. Distance between two buildings got reduced to four feet on each side which is eight feet in total. The situation heavily compromised the privacy of the occupants.

2. There was clamour for improved building codes. FAR building code rules were introduced with less land use, more heights, fixed floor areas, more open spaces, etc. FAR rules also opened up scope for building more apartments than pre-FAR years. Add to it the greed of the landowners. The land price skyrocketed. Landowners started demanding unthinkable amounts for lands.

3. The builders started constructing more apartments. The market became over saturated. The prices of apartments rose astronomically - beyond the purchasing power of most of the intending buyers. The present situation is more apartments, less buyers. The builders are in trouble, so are the lending banks.

Bangladesh market can't absorb such huge numbers of real estate properties. We urge the relevant authorities to enforce height restrictions. Other land use rules should be applied as per FAR. The greed of the landowners will also have to be brought to an acceptable and rational level.
Dr. SN Mamoon, Dhaka

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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