

Citizenship for Rohingyas

High time for Myanmar to accord it

THE recent tragedy of hundreds of boat people floating in the wilderness of the sea without food and other basic amenities has drawn the world's attention to the protracted suffering of the Rohingyas. Various governments, UN organisations, human rights groups and eminent personalities like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have urged the Myanmar government to stop persecution of the Rohingyas and grant them citizenship and basic human rights. It is time the global community intensifies its effort to make the Myanmar government see reason and end the ordeal of the Rohingyas by accepting them as citizens of Myanmar.

In the wake of the recent crisis, the Myanmar government had denied its responsibility for the protection of Rohingyas. Rather, they blamed it out on Bangladesh by referring to the floating Rohingyas as Bangladeshi citizens. They even did not want to entertain any discussion on the issue. However, later the Myanmar government attended the emergency conference on boat people held in Bangkok. Although the meeting ended without any viable answer to the Rohingya question, that Myanmar at least recognised the crisis went down well with the observers.

As a solution to the problem, resettlement of Rohingyas to a third country has been discussed by various forums. For the time being it sounds plausible but in the long run it is not a sustainable option. Moreover, this precludes Myanmar's fundamental responsibility to accept its own citizens under international law. In a recent visit to Malaysia, US Secretary of State for Refugees Anne Richard said that the answer to the Rohingya issue lay in peace and stability in the Rakhine state and acceptance of Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar. We fully endorse her views.

Evicting hawkers from streets

Rehabilitation is key

THE two Dhaka city corporations are set to clear footpaths from July 1. That the small-scale eviction drive in Gulistan on June 2 fizzled out was a foregone conclusion. Given that the street hawkers have no designated spaces to ply their trade, it is hardly surprising that after the cleanup drive in the morning the traders returned to the same place in the evening.

Yes, the ubiquity of thousands of hawkers and street peddlers poses an obstruction to traffic. Yet, one cannot overlook the fact that they provide citizens belonging to middle and lower income groups invaluable service by selling ware nearby, at prices they can afford.

The reason why such drives will prove ineffective is primarily because they deprive hundreds of thousands of people in the city of their livelihood. These traders have families to support.

They cannot be wished away by ad-hoc measures. The new mayors should have taken into consideration the consequences of such sudden eviction drives. If each major locality in the city has designated spaces and hours of the day for the hawkers and small traders to carry on their business, it would secure their livelihood as well as cater for middle and low income group buyers.

The bottom line is, first provide them with viable alternative locations and then, take actions against those who persist in their old ways. To this end, we need to stamp out petty bribery and the influence of vested groups.

MODI'S FORTHCOMING VISIT A 'watershed moment' for our bilateral ties



SYED MUZZEM ALI

AS Bangladesh prepares to welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his maiden State visit to Bangladesh, I recall the words of President John F Kennedy at the Canadian Parliament: "Geography has made us neighbours; history has made us friends; economics has made us partners; and necessity has made us allies." This holds so true for Bangladesh-India ties as well!

Modi's visit comes at a watershed moment in our bilateral relations. Sixty-eight years after partition of 1947, and forty-one years after the conclusion of the Indira-Mujib Border Accord of 1974, the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between the two countries was finally unanimously adopted and cleared for ratification by both Houses of the Indian Parliament a couple of weeks ago.

Narendra Modi has demonstrated how a long-standing complex bilateral issue can be resolved unanimously through consultation, compassion, and consensus-building. Consequently, there was not a single vote cast against Bangladesh in either House. Indian Parliamentarians not only enthusiastically supported the resolution, but also made very generous comments about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's relentless efforts to eradicate the scourge of terrorism from our neighbourhood and beyond. The successful conclusion of the LBA also signals fulfillment of the vision of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had initiated the process.

Coincidentally, the long-standing maritime boundaries between the two countries were also resolved last July through UN arbitration. Good borders make for good neighbours, as disputed boundaries very often create tension. With the LBA, that chapter is now over.

Through Agreement, the two countries have resolved three complex and sensitive issues. These are: 1) the exchange of 162 enclaves between the two countries; 2) exchange of adverse possessions of each other's territories; and 3) demarcation of 6.5 kilometers of boundary. Fifty-four thousand people who were living in isolation in those enclaves have exercised their right to determine their choice of nationality, and they will get the opportunity to live like free citizens in

their own country. Premier Modi has rightly pointed out in an interview that "we had settled the long pending land boundary issue with Bangladesh by taking all parties into confidence" and if this "massive achievement" had happened "elsewhere in the world, it would have been cited as an example as big as the fall of the Berlin Wall". The finalisation of the LBA augurs well for the two countries, and one sees a resurgence of the "spirit of 1971" which had guided the countries to fight jointly for the independence of Bangladesh. The emotional bond stemming from the steadfast support and invaluable contribution of the Government and the

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people of India at that critical juncture of her nationhood remains a dominant factor in Bangladesh's political, cultural and social wave.

Prime Minister Modi's visit at this defining moment should be fully utilised to resolve other outstanding bilateral issues, and to establish and consolidate cooperation in all spheres for the benefit of the two countries whose destinies are inextricably linked. It is heartening to note that both countries increasingly recognise their shared prosperity. India is a fast emerging global power, and Bangladesh should take full advantage of the high growth of the Indian economy to further her own economic development. On the other hand, a strong and stable Bangladesh provides the best security guarantee for India. Furthermore, economically and commercially, the two countries are becoming increasingly

interlinked and interdependent. At the same time, as close neighbours, Bangladesh and India should take note of each other's sensitivities and vulnerabilities, and demonstrate greater political will to establish mutually cooperative ties. A stable, strong and friendly neighbourhood is a necessity for any country, big or small, and especially in our region where several armed terrorist groups are eager to exploit differences between the two countries to further their own objectives. It is precisely the security issue that had bedeviled Indo-Bangladesh ties in the past, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on assumption of power in 2009, has firmly controlled the situation and did not allow any terrorist activities, or any terrorist group, to use Bangladesh soil to launch any attack against India or any neighbouring country.

It is natural to have bilateral problems with one's neighbours, more so for India and Bangladesh which share huge land and maritime boundaries, and use common rivers, railway and road networks. They also exchange goods and services, worth \$6 billion, and often share natural disasters and pandemic diseases. Bangladesh and India can neither change their common history and heritage nor their geography. The only way to resolve the outstanding issues between them is through dialogue with an open mind. "Burden of history" should not make them captives of their prejudices and prevent them from looking at their long-term interest and security.

The Summit-level visit by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Delhi in 2010 and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in 2011 laid down the basis for the resolution of the long-standing bilateral disputes and, at the same time, opened up new opportunities for strengthening and expanding bilateral cooperation. India's granting of \$1 Billion loan for infrastructural development, and granting of duty-free access to Bangladesh exports to India, also ushered in a new era of cooperation in the economic arena.

Last year, Sheikh Hasina assumed office of Prime Minister for a consecutive second term. The year also witnessed the landslide victory of BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in India, and Narendra Modi took over as the Prime Minister of India. Since then Prime Minister Modi has taken several steps to further strengthen the existing cooperation between the two countries.

Prime Minister Modi views our cooperative ties as a catalyst for regional and sub-regional integration, progress and stability. Modi and Hasina had two rounds of very successful meetings in New York and Kathmandu on the sidelines of the UNGA and the SAARC Summits last year.

Bangladesh also figures prominently in Prime Minister Modi's 'Look and Act East' policy and both countries are working on strengthening sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and North-East India through intensified connectivity within the sub-region as well as with the South East Asian countries and beyond under the aegis of BBIN, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN. Bangladesh enjoys a unique strategic location as a land bridge between South and South East Asia, and her coasts offer great opportunities for the development of ports and greater rail, road and river connectivity for the benefit of the entire region. Bangladesh also has huge skilled and semi-skilled workforce for the development of joint venture projects.

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Bangladesh should enhance economic integration with the fast growing Indian economy through greater connectivity and greater energy cooperation. Trade and investment questions should be jointly considered to establish more balanced and stable trade and economic ties. People of the two countries should be given the opportunity to interact and travel to each other's country more freely. New bus, train and air services should be started, visa regimes should be relaxed, and more consular missions should be opened on both sides of the border to facilitate the process. The killings on our border should be brought down to zero level through a compassionate border management. The opportunities before Bangladesh and India are vast and unlimited, and both the countries should move and grow together for the common benefit of their people, with a spirit of cooperation and understanding.

The author is the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India, and the views expressed here are his personal views and does not necessarily reflect the official views.

Potential turning point

S M RASHED AHMED

FOLLOWING the unanimous passage of the Land Boundary Agreement by the Indian Parliament, there is widespread optimism amongst our people for a major breakthrough in our bilateral relationship with India including the signing of the treaty on Teesta water sharing during PM Modi's visit to Dhaka. However, the statement by an influential Indian minister that the Teesta water sharing agreement would be delayed has put somewhat of a damper on the people's expectations from Modi's visit. At the same time nothing can be ruled out in diplomacy. Even though Mamata Banerjee has said that she would be leaving Dhaka after signing the Land Boundary Agreement, her presence in Dhaka during Modi's visit should provide an opportunity for some tough negotiations involving the three leaders on the issue of Teesta water sharing.

Given that the treaty on Teesta water sharing will not be signed at all, it would be crucial for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to persuade Modi and Mamata to enter into a comprehensive framework of the Agreement and discuss about water sharing of all the common trans-boundary rivers.

The process of drying of the rivers and consequent desertification of Bangladesh due to the shortage of water, particularly in the lean season, has begun. Unless the process is reversed through a comprehensive agreement at the highest political levels during the visit, it would have disastrous consequences for Bangladesh's development, agriculture, food security and ecology, among others.

We are told of the domestic compulsions of Mamata Banerjee about the elections in West Bengal next year; this should not stand in the way of signing the Teesta treaty. Prime



PHOTO: AFP

Minister Sheikh Hasina has done her part in meeting the legitimate security concerns of India in North-East by not allowing Bangladesh's territory to be used for hostile activities against India. This is laudable; we did not achieve our independence to engage in a proxy war or conflict against our friendly neighbour. Crucially, our government has given transit facilities to India through Bangladesh to North-East states; India and its people including West Bengal are aware of the benefits it has accrued to them. It is thus a legitimate expectation of Bangladesh for Modi and the Indian government to reciprocate in kind.

Modi is in a relatively stronger position than any other Indian prime ministers in recent memory; it is hoped that our leadership would be able to mobilise collective political will to achieve a comprehensive agreement on the sharing of the water of Teesta and other trans-

boundary rivers with Modi during the visit. If we miss the bus, one can be rest assured of entering into another endless phase of futile wranglings and negotiations with the South Block and Indian bureaucracy. Bangladesh and its people have long historical ties with West Bengal and North-East, particularly Assam. The decision to start the bus services between Bangladesh, Guwahati and Kolkata is a most welcome development. In fact, it is time to restore the pre-1965 and eventually the pre-partition communication links between Bangladesh, the North-East and West Bengal covering rail, road and river.

What is called for is a much wider connectivity involving people-to-people contact and exchange at all levels through free movement of peoples across the borders to undo the negative consequences of partition due to the arbitrary manner in which Radcliffe drew the partition lines.

While welcoming the news

of the decision by India on easing visa restrictions, I need to state that this is not enough. What is required at this point of time is a bold decision and statement on part of the leaders of the two countries to come to an agreement for removal of the visa requirements eventually. There maybe some initial hiccups but no serious security implications are foreseen. The insurgents, the terrorists and the militants do not require visas to enter into each other's territory, given the porous nature of our borders. It is the ordinary people who wish to see their relatives and friends, or visit the country for medical treatment or shopping sprees who suffer most due to visa restrictions.

In this context we need to achieve a broader of peace and tranquility; it is crucial to ensure that ordinary Bangladeshis are not killed by the BSF. Lethal weapons should only be used when there is no other way to deter cattle smugglers, human traffickers and drug peddlers.

On trade and investment, the issue of tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff barriers with India, like water, has to be resolved at the highest political levels during Modi's visit. We need a firm decision from the Indian Prime Minister on the issue of the removal of tariff barriers for meaningful breakthroughs in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. This has to be backed by enhanced Indian public and private investments in Bangladesh to expand our export base to produce goods with buy-back arrangements to India in order to reduce the trade imbalance. At the same time, it is important for the Bangladesh government to remove restrictions to make it easier for our private sectors to invest in India, particularly for the markets in North-East and West Bengal.

Both Bangladesh and India are in the grip of a critical energy crisis. Apart from import of electricity from Tripura, we would need to collectively harness the potential of hydro-electricity in North-East backed by sub-regional cooperation to harness the huge hydro-electricity potential of Bhutan. Additionally, for the preservation of ecology, we need assistance of India and other developed countries to acquire green technologies for harnessing solar, wind, biogas and other sources of renewable energy.

It is time to work collectively to erase the inherited colonial legacies of the past. For us the imperative need of the hour is to convert SAARC, BCIM and BIMSTEC into concrete realities. One can hope that Modi with his vision and commitment to peace and development in South Asia would give substantive impetus to the process of building a peaceful, prosperous and stable South Asia during his visit to Dhaka.

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COMMENTS

"Jamaat hails Modi's visit"
(June 2, 2015)

Shakhawat

Politicians can say and do everything. This is just another example.

Tawhid

Are they expecting any gains from Indian PM's visit? I think they will be disappointed if they do so.

Shamim

Jamaat shows us yet again that they'll do anything for their own benefit. Maybe one day, we will see them in an alliance with Awami League! Everything is possible in Bangladesh's politics.

"The 'Idiot' and an MP"
(May 25, 2015)

Hafeejul Alam

Who is an 'idiot'? I am at a loss to understand as to how any sane person terms a renowned professor 'an idiot' who once taught American students at a prestigious university and decided to return to Bangladesh to teach Bangladeshi students and share his profound knowledge with the younger generations through his writings.

I would urge the honourable prime minister to look into the matter, for I believe she is the leader of Bangladesh, not just of Awami League. The ruling party must learn to respect intellectuals with different political and social views.

Anonymous

Dr. Yunus faced a treatment very similar to this.

Tarek Mollah

Our politics is governed by such elements that have lost their sense of dignity, integrity and professionalism. How can we expect good governance and national development from them?

Toufiqur Rahman

Not only the politicians but also the ordinary people are responsible for this shocking incident. Because they have forgotten how to raise their voice against such an arrogant MP. Prof. Zafar Iqbal is a person who dedicated his life to enlighten our young generation. He is someone who is still speaking about our glorious history and letting our generation know the truth. I thank the editor of *The Daily Star* for raising his voice on this issue.