

Contemptuous comments

We condemn

GOYESHWAR Roy has shown the temerity to call the martyred intellectuals "anti liberation elements" who "died like fools". We are disgusted by the crass and cussed comment that spewed from the mouth of the BNP leader regarding our martyred intellectuals. Coming on the heels of his Chairperson's comments that questioned the number of the victims of Pakistani genocide, and especially in the month of December, it is like rubbing salt into the wounds that we have been living with every day of the year for the last forty four years. He has not only denigrated the martyred intellectuals, he has also, by his insensitive and unwarranted remarks, maligned the Liberation War and the three million martyrs of 1971. Such remarks deserve to be treated with the greatest contempt.

We wonder why the BNP has taken it upon itself to open resolved issues of 1971. And why should these become subjects of politics? And anyone who uses the adjectives that Goyeshwar has in respect of our intellectuals, needs to have his faculties tested.

Of late we notice a propensity in some quarters to denigrate some aspects of our fight against the Pakistanis. We consider the Liberation War too hallowed to be slighted and made light of and nobody but nobody should say anything that hurts the collective psyche of the hundred sixty million people of this country.

Killing of a journalist

Security of journalists must be ensured

THE brutal murder of Mashiur Rahman Utsho, a brave young newsman, has sent a wave of fear throughout the journalist community. The police are suspecting drug peddling gangs to be behind the killing as Rahman was quite bold in his reports on drug rings in Rangpur where he worked and lived.

Journalists who investigate crime are particularly vulnerable to attacks by those they write against. This is especially true for district journalists who have little protection against powerful gangs or influential individuals. It is not the first time that a journalist has been attacked and killed in the line of duty. In such a scenario it has become increasingly difficult for reporters to write on criminal activities. This will make police work to bust criminal gangs all the more difficult. It was on the basis of Rahman's reports that the police were able to raid some of the dens of drug peddlers. Sadly, the police could not provide the security Rahman needed for taking such risks.

The law enforcers are obligated to vigorously investigate Rahman's killing as there is more at stake than seeking justice, which of course is the primary objective. Unless the killers of this courageous journalist are identified and brought to book, the practice of intimidation of the media will continue. It will only encourage criminal gangs to continue their nefarious activities without the crucial deterrent that investigative news reports provide to aid the law enforcers.

The police must provide protection to journalists so that they can do their job without fear for their lives and those of their loved ones.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS IN 2015 and the year ahead



MACRO MIRROR
FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE year 2015 is ending with some positive notes for the Bangladesh economy, though challenges continue to accompany them. The New Year will, to a large extent, be shaped on the basis of how the economy has performed and what have been achieved in 2015. The political turmoil, amidst the protest of the opposition party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, demanding free and fair elections marked the beginning of the current year. As the government celebrated its second year of assuming power on January 5, 2015, the opposition party that boycotted the national parliamentary elections of 2014 on the condition that elections be held under a neutral caretaker government, voiced its demand once again.

But political unrest, as always, had turned into violent actions for some time in January and February 2015, with both parties trying to stick to their respective positions. Due to general strikes called by the protesting party, the economic and social life of the country was disrupted for a while. The year 2015 consisted of the last two quarters of FY 2015 (January-June 2015) and the first two quarters of FY 2016 (July-December 2015). Therefore, the economy felt the heat of the political unrest to some extent during the third quarter of FY 2015. This had a toll on the economy in the short-term since production,

transportation and various services were disrupted, which in turn impacted the supply chain of commodities across the country as well as the livelihoods of people.

The government targeted a 7.3 percent growth of gross domestic product (GDP) in its national budget for FY 2015. The actual GDP growth was, however, 6.5 percent in FY 2015, even though it was 0.4 percent higher than the previous year. This has been due to a relatively calmer political situation since the fourth quarter of FY2015 and the government's efforts to make up for the loss.

Political stability, however, has not removed political uncertainty. Though the government seems to be governing confidently while the opposition party seems to be getting weaker day by day due to a lack of space for its activities as well as a lack of leadership, investors are not fully free from worries about the future.

If investment figures are any indicator, their cautious moves in regards to investment decisions are obvious. The investment-GDP ratio hovers around 29 percent. In FY 2015, the total investment was 0.7 percent lower than what was targeted for, but 0.4 percent higher than the previous fiscal year. Private investment increased by only 0.1 percent in FY 2015 compared to the previous year. Public investment couldn't achieve its target either and fell short of the target by 0.6 percent. Low implementation of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) during July-November 2015 is a major factor for lower public investment. Political unrest has impacted the ADP implementation efforts. Decline in subsidy that

comprises a major expenditure of the government has also contributed to this. Subsidies declined due to low commodity and petroleum prices in the international market. However, lower public expenditure is worrying, since infrastructure requires huge public investment for the private sector to come forward.

Remittances, one of the important sources of foreign exchange reserves of the country, showed a downward trend for some time of the year, but achieved 7.6 percent growth in FY2015. However, the remittance growth has been negative from July to November 2015, despite manpower export going up by 41.3 percent. Export numbers have not been encouraging, either. During FY 2015, exports grew by only 3.4 percent against the target of 10 percent. This has prompted policymakers to set export growth target at a lower level of 7.3 percent in FY2016. From July to November 2015, export growth was at 6.7 percent, mainly driven by higher exports of readymade garments (RMG) that picked up recently. Though still competitive in the global market, the RMG sector will have to learn to absorb higher costs due to stringent compliance requirements through increasing productivity.

The challenge of domestic resource mobilisation continues since last year. The target growth for FY 2015 was revised downward from 24.2 percent to 12 percent. And the actual growth was 1.2 percent higher than the revised target. But the budget for FY 2016 has once again overestimated revenue collection effort. The target for FY 2016, set at 29 percent will be challenging at

its current pace. From July to September 2015, revenue grew by 9.6 percent, indicating that during the rest of FY 2016, the revenue collection has to be invigorated at a rate of 34 percent.

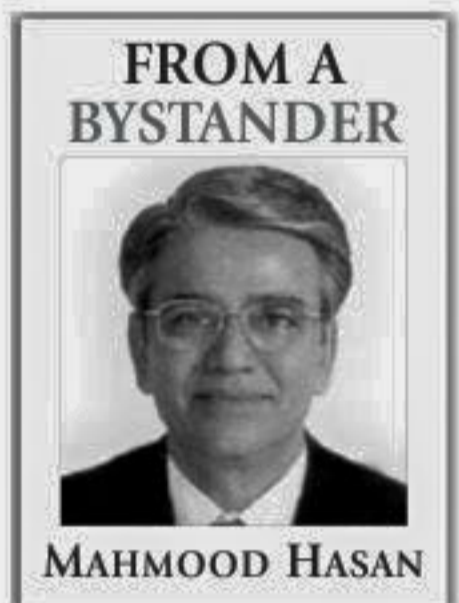
Inflation has been a silver lining in the economic landscape in recent times. Lower international commodity prices has contributed to this. Additionally, restrained monetary growth and a stable nominal exchange rate between Bangladeshi taka and US dollar has also pushed inflation downward. The mean average inflation reached 6.21 percent in November 2015, close to the target of the central bank to keep inflation at 6.2 percent by June 2016.

The year 2015 has also been significant for Bangladesh as country's position has been upgraded from a low income country to a lower middle income country status with a per capita income of USD 1,314. Despite challenges, achievements such as this are encouraging for Bangladesh.

In the short term, the global economic outlook for 2016 does not look promising. Major economies are struggling to recover from shocks while a few others are facing the threat of deflation. Therefore, the main boost for Bangladesh economy has to come from within the country. Fiscal prudence and revitalising investment will be critically important for achieving the growth targets. Institutional reforms, a daunting but essential task, have to be completed to realise the potential of the economy and fulfil the aspirations of accelerating and sustaining growth and prosperity.

The writer is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Modi's Christmas gift to Sharif



FROM A BYSTANDER
MAHMOOD HASAN

ONE is too familiar with the complicated love-hate relationship between India and Pakistan. But over the past three weeks, some dramatic developments have taken place between these two countries.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after his official visit to Russia, flew to Kabul to inaugurate the new India-built Afghan Parliament building on December 25, 2015. From Kabul, on his way to Delhi, Modi stopped off in Lahore to meet Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif the same day before returning to Delhi after a couple of hours. The two leaders discussed bilateral issues, including Kashmir and cross-border terrorism.

Modi had apparently called Sharif earlier in the day to wish him on his 66th birthday, when Sharif requested him to stop over in Lahore for lunch. Modi accepted the invitation and Sharif received Modi at Lahore airport and then took him to his Raiwind residence. It was described as a spontaneous goodwill visit.

The news of Modi visiting Lahore has caught the senior officials, political parties and the media of both countries by surprise. The media in Pakistan welcomed the visit of Modi while also reacting with caution. Pakistan's Peoples Party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Tehreek-e-Insaf Chief Imran Khan welcomed Modi's visit to Pakistan. But in India, an acrimonious debate started about Modi's unorthodox diplomatic overture to Pakistan.

When Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India, he invited Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014. The Modi-Sharif bonhomie there was wasted, however, when fierce shootings across the LoC in Kashmir killed several soldiers on both sides in July 2014. The army chiefs of these two nuclear armed countries threatened each other of serious consequences.

As tensions persisted, both leaders went to New York for the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, but they did not even exchange courtesies, as Nawaz Sharif raised the Kashmir issue at the General Assembly. Later, the two men met in November 2014 in Kathmandu for the SAARC Summit amidst high drama. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in Russia in July 2015, Modi and Nawaz met on the sidelines and issued a statement with both leaders condemning terrorism and agreeing to eliminate it. They agreed that the National Security Advisors of both countries should meet to discuss all terrorism related issues. Pakistan finally accepted that terrorism was a reality and had to be eliminated. Since the terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008, India has changed its terms of reference for engaging Pakistan. There was no mention of Kashmir in the statement.

After 18 months of the stop-and-start drama, an important diplomatic contact between the two countries took place in Bangkok on December 6, 2015 when the



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in Lahore

PHOTO:PTI

National Security Advisor of Pakistan Gen (ret'd) Nasir Khan Janjua met his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval. The meeting discussed "peace and security, terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir, and other issues, including tranquillity along the LoC." Bangkok was chosen because India had earlier cancelled the visit of Janjua to Delhi as he wanted to meet Kashmir separatist leaders of Hurriyat.

Soon after the Bangkok meeting, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj led the Indian delegation to the Heart of Asia Donor Conference on Afghanistan held in Islamabad from December 9-10, 2015. Apart from attending the conference, Sushma Swaraj also had a "warm" meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and met his Adviser on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz. Modi and Sharif reportedly decided at the COP 21 Conference in Paris to organise these diplomatic exchange meetings.

The sideline meeting, during the Heart of Asia conference, between Sushma and Sartaj produced a three-paragraph statement which reveals that both leaders agreed to a "comprehensive bilateral dialogue" as they addressed their core issues in the statement.

As the foreign secretaries of the two countries are scheduled to meet in January 2016, Modi's stopover in Lahore seems like a show of one-upmanship. It probably helped the two leaders to build a personal rapport that may give the comprehensive bilateral dialogue the necessary impetus.

There are now some serious questions. Can Modi carry his own party hardliners and critics in pushing for normalisation of relations with Pakistan? Congress has scathingly attacked the visit. In a hostile atmosphere, can Modi bring his party's political allies, RSS, VHP and Shiv Sena together to build a consensus and move forward?

As for Sharif - has he been able to get his army chief General Raheel Sharif on board? Besides, will non-state actors - different terrorist outfits (some sponsored by ISI), for example - accept the normalisation of Pakistan's relations with India?

Though Indian sources have described Modi's Lahore trip as an impromptu gesture, it is difficult to believe that no back channel intermediaries were active to bring Modi and Sharif together. The name of one Sajjan Jindal has repeatedly come up in the Indian media as the person who has been working behind the scenes to initiate a healthier political relationship between the two men. Critics say that Modi has outsourced Indian diplomacy, while supporters described the event as "imaginative diplomacy".

To normalise relations, Pakistan can probably take a cue from Sino-Indian commercial ties that are flourishing despite serious border disputes. Kashmir and terrorism have held hostage cooperation from SAARC for far too long. In the past, attempts at Indo-Pak dialogue led nowhere. But now officials from both sides are upbeat about the upcoming dialogue, though there is deep mistrust.

However, both countries have to remain on guard not to let vested quarters spoil this opportunity. To recall, the bus diplomacy to Lahore in 1999 by former Prime Minister A.B.Vajpayee was followed by the Kargil War.

One wonders whether Sharif and Modi will have the courage of conviction to guide the talks to achieve a breakthrough. Modi's Christmas gift to Sharif must not be wasted.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.

COMMENTS

"Pope backs peace efforts in Christmas Day message"
(December 25, 2015)

Masum Billah

I think the unique message of every religion is peace.

Lamia

We are living in an age of turmoil and turbulence. This call for peace and reconciliation is most relevant and necessary now.

"Bangladeshi shot dead by BSF"
(December 23, 2015)

Iqbal Ahmed

When will BSF stop shooting Bangladeshis?

Ayesha Siddika

How many innocent people will have to die in the hands of BSF?

Mahedi Hasan Jewel

Is this how a friendly country behaves?

Exhausted ArYan

We can't accept it anymore. Our government must take necessary steps to stop the border killings.

"5 mayor aspirants pledge to accept people's verdict"
(December 22, 2015)

Md Ziauddin Jaber

All candidates pledge to work together before the polls. But once the polls are over, they don't seem to feel the same way.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dilapidated Chuadanga-Kushtia road

The Chuadanga-Kushtia road is in very bad shape which causes immense sufferings to the commuters. There are so many potholes all over the road. It may be mentioned here that this road had been repaired a few years back but the quality of the construction materials was so poor that the road got damaged again within a very short period of time. We urge the authorities concerned to repair the road and bring an end to people's sufferings.
Md. Abdul Karim
Alamdanga, Chuadanga

Create cleanliness awareness through media and SMS

Bangladesh is becoming a popular place for tourists, foreign businesses and international cricket; more foreigners are visiting Dhaka now than ever before. But piles of garbage on the roads are a common scene in Dhaka and it's embarrassing to see foreigners covering their noses in disgust when walking past open rubbish dumps. Many are not used to this as it is not the normal practice in their part of the world. The government sends messages and notices

over text messages all the time. They can use this way to ask people to not litter on the streets. They can use the internet, Facebook, radio stations and even local TV channels to create mass awareness among people about the urgent need for cleanliness. At this day and age, beautification of our cities and cleanliness is of utmost importance.
Aminur Rahim
Mohakhali, Dhaka