

## John Kerry's visit

Break new grounds and clear the air

IT is after long four years that a US Secretary of State is visiting Bangladesh. He is coming at a time when the country is going through a testing period. And we acknowledge the US' words of support and offer of help at this trying time of ours.

That said, we would not be remiss to suggest that over the last few years BD-US relations have endured strains on several counts, particularly on the issue of GSP facilities for Bangladesh. The facility was withdrawn in June 2013 mainly for three reasons – work place safety, labour rights i.e. rights of association, and no headway in arresting the accused killer of Aminul Islam, the head of AFL-CIO chapter in Bangladesh.

The fact on ground is that since the time the trade preference was withdrawn, Bangladesh has addressed the major issues quickly and decisively. For example, the 2006 Labour Law was amended in July 2015, granting full freedom of association to the workers. And a guideline was formulated by the government last year spelling out the actions mandated on the factory owners to ensure workers' safety in work places. Even the Accord & Alliance, a third party inspection body of US retailers, have so far visited more than 3,000 RMG factories in Bangladesh to inspect the structural, electrical, and fire safety standards of the factories. Many factories that have not met the required standard have been closed down. And as for the accused killer of Aminul Islam, who is absconding, legal procedure is underway to confiscate his property.

Bangladesh is a small country with a large population, but in spite of that it has made great strides in human development, agriculture, and meeting the various development goals. It is better than most countries in South Asia as far as the human development index is concerned. Therefore, we fail to understand why the US should continue with the GSP ban despite the fact that Bangladesh has met almost all the 16 conditions laid down by it. The US is the second largest destination of Bangladesh in terms of RMG but, unfortunately, a good part of earning from its garment export to the US goes in taxes.

We feel that there is not an appropriate acknowledgment of our achievements on the part of the US, and that is mainly due to a fragmented and partial judgment of the developments taking place in this country and not a comprehensive view. And that, we are afraid, has created a perception in this country that, in spite of the US statements from time to time, we feel, it is not with us in the way we would like it to be. We hope that John Kerry's visit will break new grounds and that it will help clear the misperception in our minds by assuring us, among other things, of quick and positive actions towards lifting the GSP restrictions.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### TMC needs strong local units

Trinamool Congress (TMC) has made significant electoral success in the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal under the leadership of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and is currently looking for transforming TMC into a truly national party. However, it is also important to be realistic at the same time. India being a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religion and multi-language society, it is never going to be easy for TMC to become a major political force in the Hindi heartland of Northern and Western India. Hence, the best place to look for establishing TMC will be Eastern (Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh) and North East India (Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura) where there are various proportions of ethnic Bengali Hindu and Muslim populations. Both Eastern and North Eastern (NE) India also represents a large number of different ethnic communities with a strong support for Mamata Banerjee's leadership and charisma; and TMC has to bank upon these opportunities to establish the party in these belts. But the best bet for TMC currently is Tripura. TMC right now has rightly consolidated their efforts for sustained growth in Tripura and one could visualise strong promises for TMC in the next assembly election in Tripura. TMC needs to develop strong local units in all these Eastern and NE Indian states to establish the party slowly but steadily.

Saikat Kumar Basu  
AB, Canada

### Ensure quality education

58,276 examinees obtained Grade Point Average (GPA)-5 in this year's HSC exam. I congratulate all who passed but I am concerned about what they are actually learning. We have seen in the past that a lot of GPA-5 holders have failed to prove their competence in the admission tests of the public universities as they lack basic knowledge of most of the subjects. I think instead of numbers, we should focus more on quality.

Rifat Munir Eti  
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# The utility of Farakka Barrage?

## The Bihar CM suggests its demolition

MD. KHALEQUZZAMAN

THE recent proposal by Bihar's Chief Minister Mr. Nitish Kumar to demolish the Farakka barrage caught attention both in Bangladesh and India. Many environmentalists in India are giving a thumbs up to the proposal while also raising concerns about potential damage to river ecosystems should such demolition of the barrage actually take place. Environmentalists in Bangladesh, on the other hand, have been demanding the decommissioning of the Farakka Barrage for a long time. They have also been asking the government of Bangladesh to demand compensation from the government of India for the loss incurred due to salinity ingress caused by the decline in water and sediment flow to coastal plain in Bangladesh.

Most of the write-ups in the Indian news media are only concerned with the well-being of ecosystems and the economy within India. Some of the environmentalists are raising concerns about the future of the newly proposed 105 national waterways in case water levels decline in the Ganges due to potential decommissioning of the Farakka Barrage. In a recent opinion piece in The Wire, Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar writes, "On the other hand, the experts have also cautioned that such a desiltation policy would require careful monitoring and supervision to ensure that the ecosystem of the river is not damaged. The environmentalists are also fearful that unmindful dredging of the Ganga and other rivers may be allowed under this pretence, as the Centre is also planning to create 105 national waterways for which a certain depth will be required in all the rivers for vessels to pass through."

After reading the opinion pieces written by some Indian environmentalists on the Farakka barrage issue, one leaves with the impression that the Ganges River is fully owned by India and it only flows within the territory of India. Opinion pieces, like the one written by Bhatnagar, sound like as though the decision to build or remove a barrage and to prepare a national silt management plan on the Ganges within India will have no consequences on downstream Bangladesh.

It is, however, heartening to see that Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP), in his blog post titled "A tale of two dams: Is Bihar's unprecedented flood an avoidable man-made disaster?", posted on August 23, recognises the fact that "Farakka barrage has led to drainage congestion in the upstream, has led to increase in Ganga river bed level in upstream areas and also has reduced the carrying capacity of the river." He also points out the need to "institute an independent review of usefulness of the Farakka barrage, its



PHOTO: STAR

costs, benefits and impacts in the upstream and downstream. The review must look into all options including operational and structural decommissioning of the barrage." I hope that the environmentalists in India will think more like global citizens who view the environmental issues from a systematic perspective, as opposed to assessing the issues from a national point of view. We can also hope that they will advocate for a partnership among co-riparian nations in managing water and silt in all transboundary rivers within the GBM basins, because these rivers impacts the life, livelihood, economics, and ecosystems in upstream and downstream regions that are outside the geographic confines of India.

Himanshu Thakkar highlighted very important aspects of the natural delta building process in his post while also claiming: "Today we do not seem to understand or appreciate the role silt and sediment plays in the functioning of our rivers and river basins. This neglect is playing havoc on our rivers and also river basins, right up to fertile plains and deltas, which are shrinking and sinking due to silt not reaching the deltas. So while deltas are deprived of silt that is necessary for their survival, the same silt and sand is creating havoc in the upstream riverbeds and reservoirs." While this statement would be true of any delta in the world, it is illusive and falls short in acknowledging the fact that the delta building process that is being hampered by reduction of silt and water flow in the Ganges River is the one that is located in downstream Bangladesh.

Also, it should be pointed out that geoscientists all over the world recognise the role of silt and sediment in the functioning of river ecosystems and the delta building process. The Bengal delta, of which Bangladesh is a part, has been created by deposition of river-borne sediments. A delta can only grow seaward and upward against a rising sea level when river-borne sediment influx is adequate. Two-thirds of the sediment supply to Bangladesh is carried by the Ganges and its tributaries. The water and sediment carried by the Ganges is therefore vital to the existence of the country. Adequate flow of the Ganges River is vital for such basic functions as irrigation and navigation, as well as to preserve fisheries and other components of Bangladesh's ecosystem.

The Farakka barrage has been a major obstacle in India-Bangladesh friendship since its inception. The economy and environment in downstream Bangladesh have suffered tremendous losses due to the lack of natural flow in the Ganges River. The Bengal delta in Bangladesh has suffered accelerated rates of erosion and submergence due to decline in sediment flow from 2 billion tonnes/years in the 1960s to about 1 billion tons/year in recent decades.

The life and livelihood of over 40 million people in Bangladesh directly depend on the flow of the Ganges, and the natural delta building process completely depends on the water and sediment flow to the coastal regions of Bangladesh. Since the Ganges is a transboundary river, and since the Farakka Barrage has a direct impact on

downstream Bangladesh, it would be expected that any decision to desilt, or decommission, or demolish the Farakka Barrage would involve the government of Bangladesh and other co-riparian nations. In addition, there exists the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996, which requires a bilateral decision on the management of the Ganges River and her tributaries.

In this backdrop, the real question that begs an answer is: Will the government of India listen to the CM of Bihar Mr. Nitish Kumar and demolish the Farakka Barrage? We will have to wait for an official statement, and most importantly, the plan of action put forward by the central government of India before an answer can be found. However, based on the positions already taken by environmentalists in India, it is not clear if they are supporting the proposal because it will be beneficial for the people and the environment of India, or because it will be the right thing to do for all people and ecosystems in the Ganges basin. If the latter is the case, then it will be expected that the government of India will take initiatives to involve all stakeholders in the Ganges basin in all phases of the decision making process about the future of the Farakka Barrage and all transboundary rivers, because this is what is expected in light of the existing Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 and the UN Convention on the Laws of Non-navigational Uses of International Water Courses 1997.

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# The tragedy in Yemen

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

WHILE the slaughter of Yemenis continues, the world remains silent in response to their screams. Why is that? Has the world lost its senses, especially to feel the sufferings of the tormented? In an alleged effort to defeat the Houthis rebels, a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, supported by the United States and the United Kingdom have been bombarding Yemen, already one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, with air-strikes since March 2015, sending it literally back to the stone-age.

The war has triggered a major humanitarian crisis. Since the air-strikes began, "food prices [in Yemen] have gone up 60 percent, leaving 14 million people across the country classified as 'food insecure'." (Yemen's children die from bombs, bullets, hunger, ABC News, August 23) According to figures provided in the New York Times, "the war has killed more than 6,500 people, displaced more than 2.5 million others and pushed one of the world's poorest countries from deprivation to devastation." ("America Is Complicit in the Carnage in Yemen", August 17) Other reports have shown these figures to be much higher. Meanwhile, the United Nations has blamed the coalition for at least 60 percent of deaths and injuries to children last year, warning along with human rights groups, that the coalition may have been "commissioning international war crimes" (Saudi-led coalition could be committing 'international crimes' bombing civilians in Yemen, UN warns, The Independent, March 19).

At a press briefing at the United Nations on June 29, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International revealed that, "Unlawful air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition have killed and maimed hundreds of children in Yemen

and damaged dozens of schools, but the coalition strong-armed the Secretary-General in an attempt to escape scrutiny." That is, to have Saudi Arabia removed from the UN's list of shame. The Secretary General Ban Ki-moon himself after being bullied said, "There has been fierce reaction to my decision to temporarily remove the Saudi-led Coalition countries from the report's annex. This was one of the most painful and difficult decisions I have had to make. The report describes horrors no child should have to face."

Yet, the media, and especially the western media, continues to keep mum.

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Why? Well, one explanation may be that because the coalition consists of those allied with the West, the western media does not want to report on the alleged war crimes that they may have committed. Another reason for such deafening silence, however, may be because most of the killings are actually being committed using weapons supplied by the West.

According to the Washington Post, the US has sold the Saudis a total of USD 20 billion in weapons over the last one year. Britain too has sold close to USD 4 billion worth of weapons to the Saudis. The Obama administration, despite

aggressively lobbying for greater gun control in the US, "has discreetly brokered and authorised the sale of more arms to foreign governments than any other US president since World War II", according to Owen B. McCormack. During the first five years of his tenure alone, "new agreements under the Pentagon's Foreign Military Sales programme — the largest channel for US arms exports — totalled over USD 169 billion," exceeding the amount authorised during the entire tenure of his predecessor by almost USD 30 billion.

And, of course, the main recipient of

imports to the Middle East in the latter period. Saudi Arabia rose to become the second largest importer of major weapons worldwide in 2010-2014, increasing the volume of its arms imports four times compared to 2005-2009."

Not surprisingly, many of these weapons are being used to devastating effect in Yemen according to the likes of Human Rights Watch, Oxfam and Amnesty International, including the British made cluster bombs, even though the weapon was banned in conflict decades ago because of their catastrophic effects on civilians ("British-made cluster bomb found in Yemeni village targeted by Saudi-led coalition", The Independent, May 23).

And so it goes, with innocent Yemenis being torn to shreds by the most horrific of weapons out there, the Lords of War continue to make windfall profits. Fortunately for them, the media's silence guarantees that there is no significant pressure to end the supply of weapons to maim and kill a bunch of poor people here and there. After all, how else will the demand for these weapons keep up with their massive supply? As the fictional character in the movie Lord of War, Yuri Orlov said, "where there's a will, there's a weapon". And the "coalition of the willing", whether it be to go to war in Iraq, or for the destruction of Yemen, have been more than ready to oblige to the will of western arms manufacturers. For the Yemenis, however, the horrors of having these weapons used on them are, unfortunately, very real. As should be our shame for failing to genuinely care for the lives of innocent men, women and children, despite repeatedly saying otherwise, as evident from our remorseless silence in the face of their desperate screams.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team.