

INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS

Significance of Modi's visit

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

RESILIENCE and renewal—these two words at the beginning of the joint statement issued after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dialogue with Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in Male on November 17 succinctly captured the essence of relations between the two countries that had been under considerable strain in the last three years during the rule of former President Abdullah Yameen.

Yameen, who was defeated by Solih in the September Presidential Elections by the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) lawmaker, had rebuffed India as well as the United States and Britain a number of times on a number of issues by jailing opposition politicians and Supreme Court judges, and imposing a state of emergency defying repeated appeals to respect the basic tenets of democracy. He riled India by moving decisively towards China, entering into a free trade agreement with the latter, allowing three Chinese Navy ships to dock at Male in August 2017, and by asking India to withdraw some of its defence helicopters and

personnel from the Maldives even though they were there at the Maldivian government's request.

So strong was the feeling of affront in certain quarters in India that it was suggested that New Delhi be assertive in hitting back at the Yameen government. However, India kept its cool allowing the political developments in the Maldives to run its own course and reach a logical conclusion. India has learnt lessons from the resentment in Nepal in 2015 created by the perception created in the Himalayan country that New Delhi was behind the economic blockade along the India-Nepal border.

Modi was in the Maldives to attend the anointment of Solih as president and the Indian External Affairs Ministry made it clear last week that it was not a bilateral visit by the Indian Prime Minister to the island nation. Yet two important points should not escape notice: i) it was for the first time Modi attended the swearing in of a foreign head of state or government and; ii) it had two key ingredients of a bilateral official visit—formal talks between the two leaders and a customary joint statement that accompanies



PM Narendra Modi (left) with Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

such visits. That is what lent substance to Modi's visit beyond the optics and feel-good atmospherics provided by Modi's famous bear hug of Solih, and of Modi sitting between two former presidents of Maldives, Mohd Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the two political rivals who had joined hands to put up Solih as the common presidential candidate to run against Yameen.

Modi's first visit to the island nation—his previous decision to do

so in 2015 had to be abandoned due to the political turmoil in the Maldives which was the only country he had been to before as part of New Delhi's "neighbourhood first" policy—clearly signalled India's determination to reset bilateral relations, temporary disruptions notwithstanding. It was reciprocated in equal measure by Solih. In his very first speech to the "majlis" (national parliament) as president, the only country which found mention in Solih's speech was

India when he said, "we will fortify existing ties with India." Interestingly, this part of his speech was described as a "special moment" by the spokesman of the Indian External Affairs Minister in his Twitter post. In the run up to the Presidential Elections, he had talked about restoring Maldives' "India first" policy in response to Modi's neighbourhood first stance.

Two key parts of the joint statement gave clear pointers to the direction India-Maldives relations would take under Solih's stewardship. Immediately after the reference to "resilience and renewal" in bilateral relations in the third paragraph of the statement comes the declaration by both countries that "during their meeting, both leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region." This has to be seen in the context of India's concerns over China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean region.

The Abdullah Yameen government had allowed mega investments running into millions

of dollars by Chinese companies in a series of infrastructure projects in the Maldives which also saw Male leasing large chunks of land to those companies.

The second part of the joint statement relates to the economic content of bilateral ties. During his talks with Modi, Solih sought Indian assistance to cope with the "dire economic situation" facing the Maldives as he took office and the two leaders discussed ways in which India can continue the development partnership, particularly to help the new dispensation in that country meet its pledges to the people. Solih highlighted the pressing need for increased housing and infrastructure and setting up water and sewerage systems in the outlying islands of the Maldives. The Indian prime minister assured Solih of India's firm commitment in assisting the Maldives. Modi also pointed to the "expanding opportunities" for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives in different sectors—which translates into India's footprints growing in a country where China had taken a lead in the last three years.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

ARMED FORCES DAY

The legacy of November 21, 1971

SYED MUHAMMAD IBRAHIM BIR PROTOK

BANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had laid the foundation for the Liberation War. The revolt and the war began on the first hour of March 26 with the Eighth Battalion pioneering the revolt under Major Ziaur Rahman in the city of Chattogram. Major Zia also went on air from Kalurghat Radio station (near Chattogram town) to declare independence in his own name but it was later reinforced by the second declaration in the name of Bangabandhu.

The First Battalion fought bravely against the Baluchis and was extricated from the Jashore cantonment under the leadership of young Captain Hafiz Uddin Ahmed. The Second Battalion under Major KM Safiullah had revolted from Joydebpur near Dhaka, moved to Mymensingh in

Calcutta (Kolkata) and collocated with the wartime Prime Minister's Office. Retired Colonel

Muhammad Ataul Gani Osmani, who was also elected a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan in the election of December 1970 on Awami League's ticket, was appointed the Commander-in-Chief of Bangladesh Forces. Another senior retired officer Lieutenant Colonel MA Rob had also been elected a MNA in December 1970 election. Colonel Rob was appointed Chief of Staff of Bangladesh Forces and was further appointed as head of the Echelon Headquarters of Bangladesh Forces in Agartala, on the eastern side of Bangladesh.

India had supported the war and the fighters in as many ways as possible. They had given arms and ammunition, clothing and ration, and financial support to the fighters. They had allowed the fighters to set up camps on their

sapping the vitality of the Pakistani Forces. When they would be weak enough, that would be the time for regular forces to launch a conventional offensive against the Pakistani Forces, entrenched in various garrisons like Rangpur, Bogura, Jashore and Cumilla. Weather was a factor; therefore, winter was the best option.

The headquarters of the Bangladesh Forces and those of the Eastern Command of the Indian Army, both located in Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), were working together to plan a joint offensive. The Commander of the Eastern Command Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora was appointed

commander of the joint forces. The planners at the highest level knew what the rest of the fighters did not. It was decided to activate or ignite the battlefields all along the border of Bangladesh before December began. So each of the

Pakistani Forces in the areas nearer to the border and their local collaborators became jittery and unstable. By November 30, the entire border area of Bangladesh was hot enough for the regular Indian Army Forces and Bangladesh Forces to launch major offensives. On the night of November 30/December 1, regular offensives began in many areas, for example in the area of S Force. We shall not go into details here.

The forerunner of the present-day Bangladesh Army is the Bangladesh Forces of 1971. The forerunner of the present-day Bangladesh Navy lies in the persons involved in Operation Jackpot of mid-August 1971 in Chattogram, Mongla, Chandpur and Narayanganj. The other legacy of the navy officials lies in the patrol crafts of sector 9 in the Sundarbans. In independent Bangladesh, the army, the navy and the air force developed the tradition of celebrating their own foundation day separately. When General Hussain Muhammad Ershad was the president of



The forerunner of the present-day Bangladesh Army is the Bangladesh Forces of 1971.

Third Battalion had suffered huge casualties in Saidpur cantonment before they could extricate and find shelter on Indian soil. The Fourth Battalion under Major Khaled Mosharruf revolted from Cumilla Cantonment and made the southern part of Cumilla district and greater Noakhali district their battlefield.

Most Bengalis serving in the then East Pakistan Rifles and the then East Pakistan Police revolted against the Pakistani authorities in their own way, extricated from the place where they were serving and either joined battalions or organised others to start fighting. Thousands of young gentlemen had joined the war within the first four months. They were trained by the Bengal Regiment in various camps and groups. The young boys were also trained in camps organised by Indian forces. The number of regular as well as guerrilla fighters swelled fast. To command the forces and to take the war forward, headquarters was needed. The headquarters was Bangladesh Forces organised in

progressed reasonably well.

By July 1971, the whole of Bangladesh was divided into 11 sectors—each having many sub-sectors. A fresh decision was taken to raise or organise three forces in the form of infantry brigades; it was completed by mid-September 1971. The Z Force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ziaur Rahman was positioned in the northeastern border of Bangladesh, poised to move towards Sylhet in phases. The S Force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel KM Safiullah was on the eastern border of Bangladesh, north of Agartala, poised to move into Bangladesh to clear Akhaura and reach Ashuganj. The K Force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Khaled Mosharruf was also on the eastern border of Bangladesh, south of Agartala, poised to move towards Cumilla and Chattogram. The aim of organising brigade-like forces was to involve Bangladeshi combatants in regular or conventional war alongside the Indian Forces when the time was ripe. The guerrilla warriors spread over the whole country, like fish in water, were

Beginning November 21, 1971, sectors and battalions of the Bangladesh Forces attacked various Pakistani defensive positions nearer to the border—the Pakistani paramilitary border outposts. While doing this, cooperation and coordination between the Indian artillery and Bangladesh Forces matured. The Bangladesh Air Force operating from the soil of northeastern India also launched daredevilish operations on targets inside Bangladesh. Whatever naval personnel were available had been gathered in Sector 9 which covered the whole of the Sundarbans in the southern part of Bangladesh. They had improvised local watercrafts to make patrol boats out of them. The Bangladesh Mukti Bahini flotilla also carried out a number of operations on Pakistani targets between November 21 and November 25. The guerrilla fighters of various sectors had been conducting small-scale operations in their area of responsibility.

But beginning November 21, they were told to multiply the number of their operations so that

Cooperation and coordination between Bangladeshi sectors, forces, the air wing and the flotilla of the Bangladesh Forces got a new lease of their relationship on this very day.

Bangladesh in the late 80s, he ordered the three services to celebrate their foundation day together in a befitting way. It was decided that November 21 is the best date because not only cooperation between Indian Armed Forces and Bangladesh Forces began on a new footing on this day in 1971, but also cooperation and coordination between Bangladeshi sectors, forces, the air wing and the flotilla of the Bangladesh Forces got a new lease of their relationship on this very day. This day, November 21, is celebrated as the Armed Forces Day.

As a freedom fighter, I join thousands and millions in gratefully acknowledging the contribution of the Indian Armed Forces to our Liberation War and our victory. As a freedom fighter and as a former general officer of the army, I join millions in felicitating the Bangladesh Armed Forces of today.

Maj Gen (Retd) Syed Muhammad Ibrahim Bir Protok is a freedom fighter and a former general officer of the Bangladesh Army.

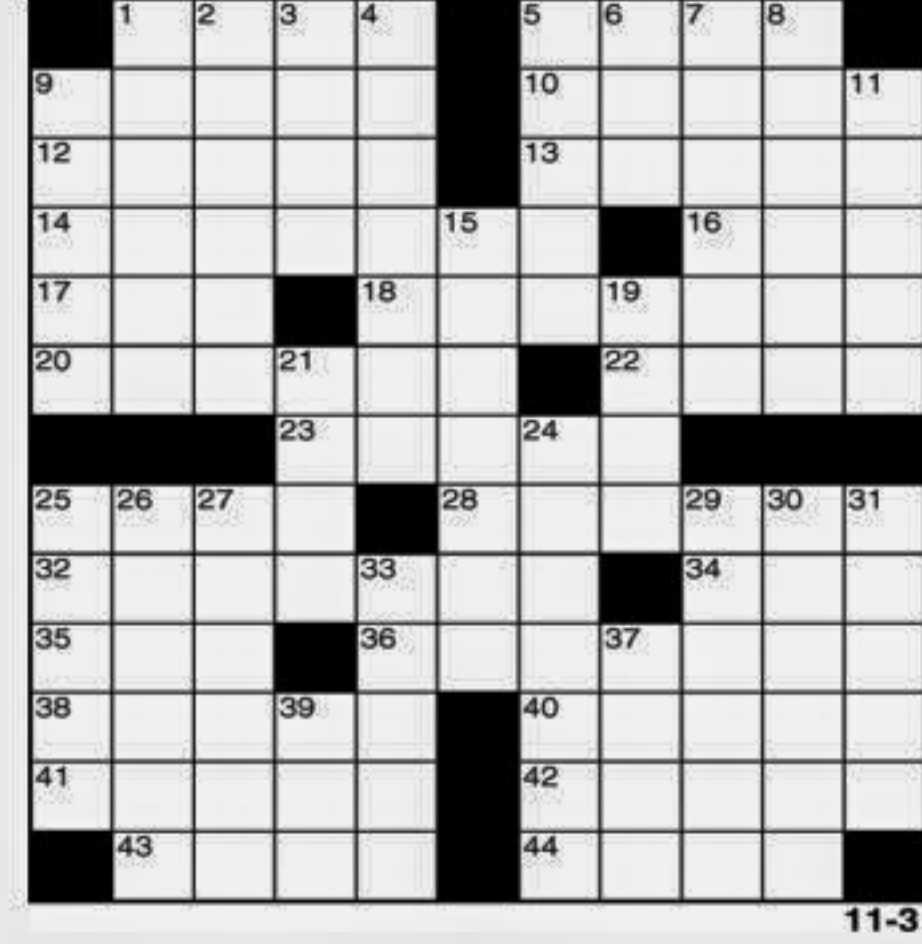
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sirius, e.g.
- 5 Small nail
- 9 Washington painter
- 10 Takes it easy
- 12 Rocker John
- 13 Clearly stunned
- 14 Bird dogs
- 16 Horror's Chaney
- 17 Low bill
- 18 Gofers
- 20 Starts a set
- 22 Assess
- 23 Texas player
- 25 Bustles
- 28 Power problem
- 32 Shackles
- 34 — long way (last)
- 35 Eastern "way"
- 36 Word components
- 38 Wear down
- 40 Fencing move
- 41 Archaeology find
- 42 Cut off
- 43 Tenant's fee
- 44 Peruse

DOWN

- 1 Moon goddess
- 2 Shred
- 3 Heaps
- 4 Misplays at cards
- 5 Big party
- 6 Cloth piece
- 7 Flowery shrub
- 8 Send overseas
- 9 Cuban cash
- 11 Good judgment
- 15 Make good as new
- 19 Easy run
- 21 Sweeping
- 24 Cattle thief
- 25 Chasing
- 26 More precious
- 27 "Becket" actor
- 29 To-do-list
- 30 Ate greedily
- 31 Moved carefully
- 33 Vote in
- 37 Melody
- 39 Racket



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

B I L L A W A Y
 A M O U R P A L E D
 L A N G E H I L L Y
 E G G A L I T T L E
 R E T I R E D H E R
 S I R E D M E D S
 M A D B O W
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