

Malaysia expresses regret over ill-treatment of Indians

KUALA LUMPUR, MARCH 14. Malaysia today expressed regret over the detention and ill-treatment of over 200 Indian IT professionals here and said the allegations against police were "serious" that could impair bilateral relations.

The acting Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has asked the Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Norian, to personally investigate Sunday's incident and report to him by next week, according to official Bernama news agency.

Mr. Abdullah expressed regret over the incident and said the allegations against police were "serious" and could impair "the excellent bilateral relations we have with India", the agency quoted him as saying.

"From the reports that I've read, there are certain facets to the incident which trouble me. I've directed Tan Sri Norian to personally handle the investigations and report to me directly by next week at the latest," he added.

Police on Sunday raided an apartment building in Brickfields here and rounded up the Indian nationals, mainly IT specialists, suspecting them to be illegal immigrants.

Those detained alleged that they were treated roughly and some claimed that their passports had been defaced.

Asked about the allegations of tampering of passports, he said: "Yes, I'm aware of that. That will be one of the things Tan Sri Norian will be looking

into". The Indian High Commissioner, Veena Sikri, had also lodged a diplomatic protest against the ill-treatment of the Indian nationals.

Mr. Abdullah assured the Indian Government that he would personally get to the bottom of the incident.

Asked about claims that the police action was targeted specifically against Indian nationals, he said: "That is not true. The authorities have been constantly taking such action against illegal immigrants of all nationalities".

The Malaysia Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, who met Ms. Sikri today, said he hoped that the incident would not jeopardise ties between the two countries. — PTI

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MOVE ON

AN UNFORTUNATE EPISODE of obvious police high-handedness against Indian software professionals is threatening to cast a shadow over the relations between India and Malaysia, the South East Asian tiger. New Delhi and IT industry spokesmen have conveyed their anger in full measure and Malaysia's response has so far been lukewarm. There is no reason to suspect that the authorities will not investigate the matter thoroughly. A visiting Malaysian Minister has expressed regret. But, an apology from Kuala Lumpur is in order besides suitable recompense to the victims of the official excesses. If complaints that the visa papers and passports of some of the Indians had been tampered with are found to be valid, there will be ground for initiating stringent action against the officials responsible. The incident comes at a time when the bilateral ties have begun to emerge from the shadows of decades of mutual neglect and are set to flourish, founded on the firm base of technological cooperation. The Narasimha Rao Government with its Look-East policy ended the decades of drought and the Vajpayee Government has been intensifying the effort to renew the country's ancient links with Malaysia and others in the region. Exchange of visits at the highest political level had helped cement the trend toward closer cooperation. The row over the latest incident has injected a sour note.

While it will be self-defeating to dismiss what happened on Sunday in the Malaysian capital, during which Malaysian police behaved in an unacceptably uncivilised manner, as an isolated incident, New Delhi must ensure that it does not overreact and allow it to cloud bilateral ties. Certainly avoidable, it was the result of bureaucratic overstepping by immigration and security officials. In the downsized democracy that Mahathir Mohammed has permitted in his country, such high-handedness by an overzealous bureaucracy is an inevitable consequence and must be a daily phenomenon. In the context of the "sons of

the soil" policy of positive discrimination pioneered by Dr. Mahathir in response to domestic compulsions, the national effort to tackle the serious problem of illegal immigration has been accompanied by a degree of aggressiveness and even insensitivity. The country launched an amnesty scheme and announced a deportation policy during the summer last year to evict illegal immigrant workers who had been useful as cheap labour for Malaysia's building and road construction industries. Indian immigrant labour, semi-skilled and unskilled, were by no means the only victims of this proactive approach. Indonesian labourers bore the brunt of the fury of the Malaysian deportation squads.

The latest victims of such brazen behaviour belong, however, to a different category. The highly skilled, highly sought IT professionals who were roughed up by mindless policemen and who were denied access to the Indian High Commissioner were in Malaysia at the invitation of the host Government to help the nation leapfrog on the IT track. The IT factor is an excellent example of cooperation between two developing nations and deserved better than the treatment that the Malaysian police and immigration officials meted out to the skilled foreign labour on its soil. Malaysia, alone among the ASEAN seven sisters known for its prickly behaviour, was also the first in the grouping to demonstrate enterprise and entrepreneurial interest in expanding trade and commercial ties. As head of the Non-Aligned Movement, a special responsibility devolves on Dr. Mahathir to ensure that nothing is done to hamper South-South cooperation, particularly at this critical juncture in globalisation of trade. As for New Delhi, statements such as the one that the Foreign Office spokesman made on Tuesday in which he declared that "it cannot be business as usual with Malaysia", have hardly any place in today's world. Having registered its strong protest at the treatment of its IT professionals, New Delhi must now move on

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ILL-TREATMENT OF INDIANS / MALAYSIA NOT TO CONDONE ACTION

Minister expresses regret

By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, MARCH 12. The Malaysian Minister for Entrepreneurial Development, Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz, met the Union Human Resource Development Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, today and expressed "regret" at the ill-treatment of Indian nationals in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday.

An official statement on the meeting quoted Mr. Abdul Aziz as saying that the action against Indian nationals, a majority of them IT professionals, was unfortunate and his Government was "seriously looking" into the matter. Mr. Aziz maintained that action would be taken against the authorities responsible for the incident. According to him, the Malaysian Government had no intention of condoning the action.

Admitting that there were excesses on the part of Malaysian authorities, he requested Dr. Joshi to see that the incident did not have any negative impact on the friendly relations between the two coun-

tries. For his part, Dr. Joshi hoped that the incident would not be repeated and demanded "strict action" against those guilty.

In a related development, the Foreign Office spokesman said if Indian nationals were targeted in a drive against illegal immigrants, then the campaign was "misguided" in its implementation. Making it clear that the "issue was very much on the table", the spokesman said it was important to note that the drive was aimed at unskilled workers. Indian IT professionals, on the other hand, had even been issued smart cards by the Malaysian Government. Asked what the assessment of the Government was on the drastic action taken by the Malaysian authorities, the spokesman said he would not like to hazard a guess. India, however, was keen to get at the root of the matter.

The spokesman had no hesitation in saying that the incident had cast a shadow on bilateral relations. "We have reiterated our

request for quick answers (about why it had occurred)."

CII deeply distressed

Our Special Correspondent reports:

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) today wrote to the Malaysian High Commission about the ill-treatment of Indian IT professionals in Kuala Lumpur.

In a letter submitted to the High Commissioner, the CII said it was "deeply distressed" at the harassment. It pointed out that these personnel had been working in that country "with proper permission and approvals, providing a service to Malaysia and the Malaysian economy".

The CII urged the High Commission to take up the issue with the Malaysian authorities and "advise it of the causes of this action and the remedies going forward". The action taken against the IT professionals would create a "crisis of confidence" and serious apprehensions about the policy towards trade and technology cooperation.

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KUALA LUMPUR INCIDENT/ 'BILATERAL TIES COULD BE AFFECTED'

India conveys displeasure to Malaysia

By Our Diplomatic Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH 10. India has termed as "unacceptable" the roughing up of many of its nationals by the Malaysian police in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday and conveyed its displeasure to the Malaysian Government.

R.M. Abhyankar, Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, called in the Malaysian High Commissioner, Choo Siew Kioh, today and took up the "high-handed manner" in which the Indian nationals — most of them information technology professionals — had been treated.

Mr. Choo was told that this could not but adversely affect bilateral relations. It could also affect Malaysia as a destination for Indian IT professionals.

Asked whether any further steps could be taken, the Foreign Office spokesman said a decision would be taken on the basis of clarifications provided by the Malaysian Government. "I don't have any information about the provocation," he said to a question on what might have led to the high-handed action by the Malaysian police.

The spokesman said that at about 7 a.m., on Sunday, the Malaysian police rounded up 270 Indians and then took away about 160 to the police station. The treatment was rough and following intervention by the Indian High Commission most of them were released. Eight or nine persons continued to be in the custody of Malaysian authorities, he added.

'Signs of tampering'

PTI reports from Kuala Lumpur:
The passports of at least 70 of the 270

Indians rounded up by the Malaysian police, suspecting them to be illegal workers, here showed signs of being tampered with even as about a dozen of the arrested remained in custody for the second day today.

The Indian High Commissioner, Veena Sikri, who protested to the Malaysian Government against the police action, said: "there is no justification for the way our citizens were treated by police and there is a need to investigate the matter".

She said that almost all those who had been rounded up had valid visas and passports.

"We now have all the details, their names, passport numbers and what happened when they were in police station."

Reports said that when the passports were returned to the Indians, about 70 of them showed signs of being tampered with, photographs were badly scratched and data on the visa page rubbed out.

Nasscom condemns harassment

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH 10. Taking a serious view of the harassment meted out to Indian IT professionals in Malaysia, Nasscom strongly condemned the incident.

It said the IT professionals were working either with Malaysian companies or Indian companies which had set up base there. Not one of them was an illegal entrant. The association of software companies was currently collating details of the entire episode and the reason behind it, including the names of companies whose officials were harassed.

Nasscom was also in touch with key authorities to ensure the safety of the

Indians. "We are closely in touch with our partners in Malaysia, the Multimedia Development Corporation, with whom we have a MoU, to verify the details. We are also in touch with the MEA to ensure there is an early resolution to the issue and Indian IT professionals can resume their work," the Nasscom president, Kiran Karnik, said.

He pointed out that India had traditionally had excellent relations with Malaysia and many Indian IT companies were looking at that country as a location for their activities.

Mr. Karnik hoped that the incident was an aberration, which the Malaysian authorities would quickly remedy.

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IT professionals among 270 Indians roughed up in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, MARCH 9. Malaysian police today rounded up around 270 Indians, including many IT professionals, and allegedly defaced their passports, slapped and kicked several of them before releasing all but five of them later.

Police carried out a dawn swoop in search of illegal immigrants on a high-rise apartment in the ethnic Indian-dominated neighbourhood of Brickfields in central Kuala Lumpur.

"There were around 270 of us, and we have already got the signatures of 178, and we'll get the rest by tomorrow," said Dilip, an IT professional, who presented a petition to the Indian High Commission on behalf of all those detained.

A Malaysian police officer earlier told PTI that some 164 Indians were picked up during the raid adding they were released following the intervention of the Indian High Commission and proof that they had valid visas.

Some showed they were working for companies registered in Malaysia's multi-media Super Corridor, the information technology project zone running from Kuala Lumpur to Cyberjaya, some 45 minutes' drive away, he said.

"This has been a black day for all of us," the Indian High Commissioner, Veena Sikri, said addressing the people who were released. "We have taken the matter to the highest authority, and we will get to the bottom of the issue."

Police initially denied Indian officials access to those taken into custody, but later relented.

Several showed PTI their passports, pointing out that their visas had been scratched.

A Malaysian immigration official, who verified the defaced visas, said the individuals and their employers would have to apply to his department for fresh visa.

The detainees recounted how police burst into their homes and herded them to a nearby police station, from where some were taken to jail

"We were handcuffed and made to kneel or sit in the police station car park, some of us were slapped and kicked," said Nagaraju Cheekoti, another IT professional working for WWI Malaysia.

Some said they were ordered to do sit-ups, while others said they were stripped, slapped and kicked inside the station. Police confiscated their cellphones and refused to give them access to telephones.

Police officials at the Brickfields station refused to speak to PTI.

"We don't want to stay in this country if we are treated like this. We have come here at the invitation of Malaysian companies," said one of the detainees to a chorus of approval from other detainees. "We don't feel safe," he said.

Most of the detainees were men from Andhra Pradesh. A couple of women were also taken into custody, but they were not handcuffed.

One group said they were just visiting friends in Kuala Lumpur, after making the short trip from next-door Singapore.

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Think beyond SAARC, Sinha tells S Asia

JYOTI MALHOTRA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

SEEKING to cut through the fog of regional illwill and plain political mistrust with a strong dose of economics, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha today outlined a vision for South Asia that sought to draw upon the native desire to profit and prosper.

Inaugurating a seminar at the capital on South Asian cooperation far away from the Indian diaspora jamboree, Sinha had the advantage of making his proposal in favour of a South Asian union—that

incorporated a free trade area—pretty much out of the media limelight.

"It is very important that we knit the region together into a trading bloc...but lets also think forward in terms of a South Asian union. Africa has one, so does Europe, as well as the Asean. In course of time, the South Asian union will not merely be an advanced economic union, but also acquire political overtones. This is not an end to SAARC, but an upgradation of SAARC," Sinha said.

Aware that his enlightened South Asian audience this morning consisted of people



with long experience in sifting the statesman from the mere politician—like Syed Babar Ali of the Lahore University of Management Studies and Rehman Sobhan of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka—Sinha was clearly attempt-

ing to look beyond the bitter, bilateral prism of India-Pakistan politics that has for years effectively grounded the big, regional idea.

"India is ready to enter into a Free Trade region tomorrow. Lets make the whole preferential tariff arrangement irrelevant and look in concrete terms of a Free Trade area," he said, adding, "We have had too many reports, too many committees. What we need is political will. I am trying to demonstrate this political will on behalf of the Government of India."

But with former prime minister I.K. Gujral sitting on

the seminar high table, Sinha knew that his new vision for South Asia could not be a mere repeat of the "Gujral doctrine", which had just under a decade ago envisioned a gentler, kinder India in embrace with its neighbours.

So although Sinha's rider on the shared history-geography/lesson came right in the beginning of his speech, his security warning came almost at the end. "We have a shared history and we are joined together by geography, there's no way we can ignore each other. But there is an element of geography beyond our control, and that is India's size... (which)

shouldn't be held against us. It arouses suspicions in people. We have no desire but to live in peace and friendship with our neighbours," he said.

For the most part, economics as the building block for a richer, prosperous South Asia dominated. A free trade area, Sinha said, should be approached through the prism of a "negative list", which would cover all items except those on the "injury list".

But it was Gujral who had the last word: "If we take this new road (as envisaged by Sinha), the misunderstandings of the past will automatically vanish."

Tying in with Tokyo

With many common concerns it makes sense to shape a strategic partnership with Japan

THE visit of the Japanese foreign minister, Yoriko Kawaguchi, to India on Tuesday is only another indication of deepening Indo-Japan relations. Bilateral ties have steadily improved since the early 1990s in spite of the hiccup caused by the nuclear tests of 1998. In October 2001, Japan lifted the sanctions imposed by it after the tests. But contact and relations between the two nations has continued to grow along with high-level political visits from both sides. This happened in spite of the sanctions, in spite of Japan's pre-occupation with its economic challenges and in spite of remnants of an old mindset that perceived India through the prism of the Cold War. But both countries are strongly wedded to striving for peace, stability and prosperity in Asia. It's time, therefore, to move energetically towards building a strategic new partnership for a better world and Asia.

The area that needs urgent attention is that of trade and economic relations. It is unfortunate that bilateral trade has been declining after it peaked at \$4.8 billion in 1995-96. It was a mere \$3.6 billion in 2000-01. Our exports to Japan dropped from \$2.2 billion to \$1.8 billion in the same period in spite of a significant increase of exports in the information technology sector. Japanese investments in India (with actual inflow of \$1.06 billion in ten years) are a fraction of what goes into even Vietnam. The fact that both

trade and investments have registered decline since the mid-1990s would imply that India's nuclear tests were not the primary factor for the trend. Nor can Japan's own economic slowdown explain this. The roadblocks are many, not the least being the perceptions and reality of inefficiency, corruption and shortcoming in infrastructure. In fact, some of the notable projects in which Tokyo has invested are in infrastructure like the Delhi Metro and the Simhadi thermal power station.

Prominent Japanese have been making it clear that what their country seeks in its relationship with India is a move toward a strategic partnership. They believe that the relations between China, Japan and India would be the driving force of future geopolitics and security in the Asian continent. We need to recognise that Tokyo has maintained close relations with Pakistan over the years. But concerns about Pakistan's continuing domestic instability and proliferation policies, which now pose direct challenges to Japan's security, are issues that should encourage Japan to consider building a strategic partnership with this country. The threat of war in Iraq, the stagnating global war against terrorism, the complex energy situation in the world, the North Korean situation, stability in Afghanistan, are some of the key areas of common concern. Managing these challenges successfully certainly requires Japan and India to get closer.

India (S. 12/2003)
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India, Japan to discuss N. Korea-Pak. nuke ties

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By C. Raja Mohan

NEW DELHI, JAN. 3. Amid a rapidly deteriorating security environment in East Asia, the Foreign Minister of Japan, Yoriko Kawaguchi, arrives here early next week to inject some strategic content into the bilateral relations with India.

The crisis created by North Korea's threat to restart its nuclear weapons programme in defiance of the international community is expected to figure prominently in Ms. Kawaguchi's talks with the Indian leaders.

The clandestine nuclear and missile cooperation between Pakistan and North Korea, the details of which have been revealed in the U.S. media in recent weeks, is likely to come up for detailed discussion when Ms. Kawaguchi has consultations with the External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, on Tuesday.

During her two-day visit, Ms. Kawaguchi, a former civil servant and Minister for Environment, will also call on the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani.

Security planners here and in Tokyo are painfully aware that Pakistan's assistance to North Korea's nuclear weapon pro-

gramme and Pyongyang's transfer of missile technology to Islamabad have tightly linked the sub-continent's problems to those of East Asia.

Will the shared misery drive India and Japan towards purposeful strategic cooperation? Displaying characteristic caution, Japanese sources are not willing to either publicly criticise Pakistan's role in nuclearising the Korean peninsula or speak up on its political consequences for New Delhi and Tokyo.

International media reports say that Ms. Kawaguchi had decided to call off her visit to Islamabad after the Bush Administration had recently briefed Tokyo on the nuclear nexus between Pakistan and North Korea.

Denying the reports, Japanese sources say, Ms. Kawaguchi had to scrap the Pakistan leg of the visit because of scheduling problems. Ms. Kawaguchi had initially planned to visit Colombo, New Delhi and Islamabad.

Despite the cautious public position being adopted by Japan, there is no doubt that North Korea's atomic arsenal, built with assistance from China and Pakistan, has begun to unravel many traditional premises of Japan's security policy.

Besides the nuclear challenge

from North Korea, Japan is also concerned at its increasing economic and political marginalisation in Asia by the growing clout of China. The rise of China and its implications for Asian balance are of long-term significance to both New Delhi and Tokyo.

It is in this context that Japan's interest in expanding political cooperation with India must be seen. Ms. Kawaguchi, sources say, wants to convince the Indian leaders that "Japan attaches considerable importance to developing relations with India from a strategic point of view."

But she will have to overcome scepticism in New Delhi that Japan really means it this time. While India and Japan have put behind the bitterness generated by Tokyo's harsh reaction to New Delhi's nuclear tests in May 1998, their relations remain wary.

Even when political leaders in Tokyo have signalled a positive direction on India, the Japanese bureaucracy has relentlessly stifled any movement towards strategic cooperation.

Japan's earlier attempts to appear "balanced and even handed" between India and Pakistan and occasional diplomatic initiatives from Tokyo on the Kashmir question have irritated

New Delhi. India is also keeping an eye on the new Japanese interest in gaining a role in the current peace process in Sri Lanka.

Although the two defence establishments have begun to engage each other, India is yet to find Japan ready to freely share its security concerns and look ahead for constructive political cooperation.

If Ms. Kawaguchi comes up with worn-out formulations on non-proliferation and Indo-Pak. dialogue, the Indian side might respond with a big yawn. But if she offers a serious analysis of the shared threats facing the two countries and imaginative proposals on launching a strategic partnership, India will be all ears.

The whole of Asia knows that an expansive agenda — from combating terrorism, to energy security and preserving the Asian balance of power

— is inviting India and Japan to work together.

Analysts here underline the potential for a new beginning in Ms. Kawaguchi's visit, but are also aware of the long story of missed opportunities in the past. So, when Ms. Kawaguchi says she is looking for a strategic partnership with India, the Government is waiting with an open mind and crossed fingers.

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Japan's 'over-reaction' to Pokhran soured ties

Nilove Roy Chaudhury
in New Delhi

Jan. 3. — Despite the immense potential, Japan's recent relations with India have not taken off because of the former's "over-reaction to the Pokhran (nuclear) tests". But efforts are on to amend the situation. Japanese foreign minister Ms Yoriko Kawaguchi's proposed visit to New Delhi on 7 and 8 January will aim at "reviving the deep dialogue" the two countries shared decades ago.

Ms Kawaguchi wanted to visit India last June, shortly after taking over, but given the high state of tension between India and Pakistan then, New Delhi told Tokyo the visit would not be "convenient".

Ms Kawaguchi, who had

studied here, will make the visit to "strategically important" India, but would "skip" the earlier-scheduled Pakistan leg of the tour, diplomatic sources said. Not to indicate Japan's displeasure at Islamabad's nuclear relations with Pyongyang, but, apparently, because of pressing engagements back

want Sinha. Sources said Japan would not press India for a dialogue with Pakistan, but hopes a dialogue will resume after cross-border terrorism ends.

Both countries are strong contenders for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council when an expansion takes place; Japan for its

Leaders to avoid Netaji issue

NEW DELHI, Jan. 3. — The issue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's ashes will not be raised in talks between the visiting Japanese foreign minister, Ms Yoriko Kawaguchi, and Indian leaders. The issue will be avoided, a source said, it's very "delicate". Netaji's ashes are reportedly kept at Renkoji temple in Tokyo. — SNS

home.

Tokyo and New Delhi agree that they need each other enough to want a "strategic relationship". Ms Kawaguchi will meet the President, Prime Minister and his deputy, besides being hosted at a dinner and delegation-level talks by the foreign minister, Mr Yash-

economic prowess and India by virtue of its size and being the largest democracy.

Besides bilateral ties, in which Japan is planning to raise its over-

seas development assistance to India to the level of China, other major items on the agenda are the anti-terror war, 'international relations' that includes Iraq, North Korea and Afghanistan, and matters of 'regional' concern, including the Sri Lanka peace prospects and China.

Neighbours keep distance from Delhi

By N. S. Ramesh

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Jan. 1: As South Block mandarins continue to grapple with the problem of Pakistan's brinkmanship on the nuclear issue, a fact staring the Indian foreign policy establishment in the face is Delhi's miserable failure in managing its neighbourhood.

To add to India's problems with Pakistan, fresh strains have also crept into its ties with Bangladesh and Nepal. About Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan, policy makers in Delhi are almost clueless.

When Yashwant Sinha took over as foreign minister in June last year, he began his stint in South Block with a visit to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The signal then was loud and clear: Indi-

an foreign policy would focus on, among other things, the neighbourhood and in strengthening relations with its South Asian neighbours.

However, six months down the line, Delhi's neighbourhood policy lies in shambles, raising serious doubts whether India, which cannot manage its immediate neighbours, can play a meaningful role in international affairs.

The strain in India-Pakistan relations is well known and is also perhaps better understood. That the two countries have so far managed to avert a war, despite coming so close to doing so, is something that the outside world can cheer about.

However, Delhi's relations with its other neighbours have worsened far more than expect-

ed in the last one year.

Nowhere is this more glaring than in India's relations with Bangladesh. By publicly charging the BNP government of harbouring not only Northeast insurgents but also al Qaida and ISI operatives, Delhi has lost whatever leverage it had with Dhaka. If in the past Delhi had any hopes of getting Bangladesh's cooperation in dealing with militants based on its soil, they have been dashed by the repeated accusations made against the Khaleda Zia government by the Indian leadership over the past few months.

"If there is a secret ballot among Saarc members to choose their favourite country, India will perhaps be at the bottom of the list," says a foreign policy expert. "The way we have allowed

our policy with the neighbours to drift is a sad commentary on the importance we attach to our relations with them."

South Block, however, waves away such criticism with the customary argument that India cannot be expected to be apologetic about its size and the apprehensions of many of the neighbours, which more often than not results in hostility because of the "small neighbour-big neighbour" syndrome.

"We have been more than generous with most of our neighbours. But some of them are not willing to keep Indian sensitivity and security concerns in mind. This is what has contributed to the problem in our relations with some of the neighbours," a senior foreign ministry official said.

Many of the neighbours don't test this view. They argue that what Delhi gives with one hand it takes away with the other.

Despite promises by the Indian leadership, the domestic business lobby has managed to restrict free access to the country's huge market by smaller neighbours. This has, in turn, created a situation where the trade gap between India and its neighbours has been ever increasing.

In the last year or so, the image of "ugly Indian" is back with a bang in most South Asian countries. A situation has been created where most countries in the region are today either trying to look for stronger allies to counter India or are keen to keep a safe distance from Delhi, not willing to allow India to come in and meddle in their affairs.

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THE TELEGRAPH