

Bengal wants Dhaka to do a Bhutan

Satrajit Moitra in Kolkata

Dec. 25. — The state government plans to approach the Centre for requesting the Bangladesh government to mount a Bhutan-like operation to flush out anti-India insurgents from its territory. Tripura chief minister Mr Manik Sarkar had made a similar demand recently.

A highly-placed official told The Statesman that the decision would depend on the outcome of the interrogation of the five top leaders of Kamtapur Liberation Organisation who were caught in Bhutan and subsequently handed over to the West Bengal government through the Indian Army.

“The state Intelligence officials and senior police officers are jointly interrogating

the KLO activists. If the questioning reveals that training camps for insurgents, such as those in Bhutan, exist in Bangladesh, the West Bengal government would approach the Centre to initiate talks with Dhaka,” he said. The state government cannot approach Bangladesh directly due to reasons of protocol.

Home secretary Mr Amit Kiran Deb told The Statesman that Intelligence Branch had already been asked to keep a tab along the Indo-Bangla border. “Intelligence officers will work alongside BSF deployed along the border. The officers have been asked to focus on the quality of Intelligence.” Mr Deb also said the IB has been requested to keep an eye on madrasas and mosques that have come up in the border areas.

THE STATESMAN

26 DEC 2003

Khaleda's hypocrisy

9/12/03
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13/12
Indian envoy exposes Dhaka's duplicity

The extreme dissatisfaction expressed by Begum Khaleda Zia's government over the outgoing Indian High Commissioner Manilal Tripathi's statement that Bangladesh continued to provide sanctuary and support to various North-east insurgent groups despite India's strong protests is uncalled for and unwarranted. What Tripathi said was nothing new. Even Indian Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani had accused Begum Zia's government of harbouring such elements for destabilising the North-east. To add to Dhaka's dissatisfaction, the Indian deputy high commissioner on being summoned to the Bangladesh foreign office for handing over the protest note refused to accept it saying that he too endorsed Tripathi's views.

The foreign office had to fax the note to the Indian mission to put its strong protest on record. It is increasingly clear that, like Pakistan, Dhaka's present regime is following a double-faced policy towards India. Just as Pakistan denies aiding and abetting terrorist groups and calls terrorists operating in Kashmir freedom fighters, Begum Zia too while denying any involvement with the Indian insurgents calls them freedom fighters and sons of deliverance fighting a heroic battle to free the north east from the colonial yoke. While the Begum maintains that there are no ULFA or other insurgent camps in her country, the ULFA commander Paresh Barua himself informs the Indian media that he is operating from Bangladesh. Requests for ULFA leader Anup Chetia's extradition or those of Tripura insurgents now in Bangladesh custody have repeatedly been rejected despite the knowledge of their involvement in dastardly killings in the north east. Some of Begum Zia's advisers encouraged Chetia and other insurgents to write letters to her requesting her to grant them political asylum.

What has irked Begum Zia's government most is that Tripathi in a no holds barred speech on the eve of his departure laid bare the hypocrisy of the regime. He exposed her duplicity and severely embarrassed her government. Actually Tripathi by calling a spade a spade was giving vent to Delhi's annoyance over Begum Zia's dubious role of supporting Indian insurgents while professing friendship towards India. Also he was serving notice on the Begum that Delhi was fully aware of her government's insincere posturing and she must not take its sensitivities lightly.

The Begum must realise that even Hasina, whom she calls an Indian stooge, as prime minister and despite her best intentions could not fully clamp down on the insurgents because of what she said material and moral support they get from wheels within wheels of the Bangladesh administration. But she, unlike the Begum, never spun the myth that there were no Indian insurgents in Bangladesh. The inanity of such denials is underscored by reports in responsible Bangladeshi dailies which not only mention their presence but also the covert and overt support they get from the present government.

THE STATESMAN

13 DEC 2003

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New Delhi-Dhaka agree to remove major irritants

Julia
Banerjee

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, APRIL 29. India and Bangladesh have agreed to remove major long-standing irritants in their bilateral relations, including problems with border demarcation, exchange of enclaves and illegal cross-border movement of people. The broad-based agreement, seen as a major development, was reached at a Foreign Secretary-level meeting here today.

The meeting also addressed issues such as duty-free access of more Bangladeshi items, free trade and establishment of transportation links. The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary, Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury, led the home side while the External Affairs Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, who reached here last night, led the Indian team at the talks that lasted for over two hours. Officials here said the two sides also discussed signing of two agreements soon — one on bilateral investment protection and another related to science, officials confirmed.

India also offered two new ideas one about cyclone-tidal surge-reduction management and another cooperation in IT sector. The meeting agreed to hold an overdue ministerial-level meeting of the Joint Economic Commission in the middle of

this year and a Foreign Secretary-level meet in New Delhi early next year. It was decided that the Bangladesh Finance Minister, M. Saifur Rahman, would visit New Delhi in two weeks' time to discuss the issues related to bilateral trade and economic cooperation.

Mr. Chowdhury told reporters that the talks were held in a free and frank atmosphere and all the bilateral issues came up. He said such meetings would continue at different levels to resolve the outstanding problems and strengthen the friendly relations between the two countries.

In another high-level conference, the BSF and the BDR Directors General continued their discussions on tricky border issues in the 4-day talks that began at the BDR headquarters here on Monday.

The DG of the BDR, Major General Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, is leading the home team while BSF DG, Ajoy Raj Sharma, is heading the Indian side. It is learnt that the BDR alleged that the BSF had tried to push into Bangladesh more than 5,000 Bengali-speaking Indian nationals between January and March this year.

The Indian side sought strengthening of BDR-BSF coordination to prevent border

crimes, ensuring border security and environment conservation. It also wanted to know the latest position on the implementation of 1974 Mujib-Indira Accord. Members of both the delegations would visit frontier areas in south-western districts of Jessore and Khulna, BDR sources said and added that elaborate discussions on border problems would come up in the next two sessions scheduled later.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sharma met the Bangladesh Home Minister, Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, and discussed border issues. Both the sides reached a consensus to take effective steps to maintain peace along the border and check smuggling. Both the Home Minister and the BSF DG felt the urgency to introduce joint patrol teams along the border.

Copter crash

By Our Staff Reporter

SHIMLA, APRIL 29. Four persons were killed when a private helicopter crashed near Aleo Nallah in Manali, Kullu district, this morning. The helicopter took off from Bhunter airport in Kullu. The victims were two foreign nationals, a Manali hotelier and Capt. K.P. Tomar of Panchkula.

30 APR 1985

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Sibal on Dhaka peace mission

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, April 14: In a bid to iron out differences that strain the country's ties with Bangladesh, foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal will visit Dhaka later this month to hold wide-ranging discussions with his counterpart Shamsher Mobin Chaudhury.

The three-day talks, scheduled to begin from April 28, will allow the two neighbouring countries to review the entire gamut of bilateral relations, with special emphasis on issues related to security.

The foreign secretary-level talks will be preceded by a high level meeting between the directors-general of the Border Security Force and the Bangladesh Rifles, the focus of which will be boundary related disputes.

The meeting between Sibal and Chaudhury is of special significance given Delhi's concerns over the growing activities of Pakistan's ISI and the Northeast insurgents in Bangladesh.

The fact that BSF and BDR top brasses will also be holding parallel meetings in Dhaka has raised hopes in the two capitals about possible resolu-

tion of some of the long-standing disputes.

Relations between Dhaka and Delhi face considerable strain, particularly on the issue of illegal immigration into India from across the border.

In February, a week-long standoff between the security forces of the two sides over the nationality of 213 snake charmers in Cooch Behar ended only after Bangladesh decided to take them back following a failed attempt to push them into India.

Bangladeshi foreign minister Morshed Khan, who arrived in Delhi within a few days of the incident to hold talks and resolve the crisis, met with little success.

The standoff between the security forces ended, but Morshed failed to strengthen bilateral ties.

The Indian leadership, that



Sibal

told the Bangladeshi minister some home truths, felt Morshed's unwillingness to accept Delhi's security concerns stood in the way of progress during the talks.

Arguing that Pakistani intelligence operatives were also present in India, the visiting foreign minister had downplayed growing ISI activities and presence of Northeast insurgents on Bangladeshi soil.

South Block hopes that Sibal will have better luck when he meets Chaudhury later this month.

The main thrust of the discussions will be on how to further bilateral relations. The Indian side will highlight security-related issues and Dhaka's indifference towards Delhi's concerns.

The standoff between the BSF and the Bangladesh Rifles

in Cooch Behar was an indication of the strain in relations between the two neighbouring countries.

The firm stand taken by India to "push back" the Bangladeshi snake charmers also suggested that Delhi would no longer take a soft view on the issue of illegal immigration.

Bangladesh, on its part, is likely to draw India's attention to the huge trade deficit that exists between the two sides in favour of the latter.

The country also has complaints about lack of access for Bangladeshi goods to the Indian market.

Last month, the commerce secretaries of the two sides identified more items on which India could remove tariff barriers and narrow the wide trade gap that exists between the two sides.

India has made it clear that it is more than willing to accommodate Bangladeshi concerns in this regard.

However, at the same time, Delhi insists that Dhaka should take some urgent steps, particularly those relating to India's security concerns, to show that it is willing to improve bilateral ties.

15 APR 2000

Criticism of ULFA: New Delhi gets a stinker from Dhaka

Bangla minister called ULFA leader a
freedom fighter, Indian envoy objected

JYOTI MALHOTRA
NEW DELHI | NOVEMBER 15

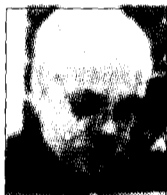
INDIA's already tense re-
lationship with
Bangladesh has hit a
new low with Dhaka for-
mally criticising comments
made by outgoing Indian
High Commissioner
M.L. Tripathi about
Bangladesh's al-
leged protection of
wanted ULFA leader
Anup Chetia, at a
farewell dinner
hosted by the Oppo-
sition Awami Lea-
gue party Sheikh
Hasina some three weeks
ago.

New Delhi has rejected
the charge.

Earlier this week, the
Foreign Office in Dhaka
summoned Indian Acting
High Commissioner Dilip

Sinha to protest against
Tripathi's rather frank
analysis of the India-
Bangladesh relationship at
the Awami League dinner
on October 24.

At the dinner, Tripathi
had protested remarks by
Bangladeshi Parliamentary



M L Tripathi

Affairs Advisor
Salahuddin Quader
Chaudhury about
Chetia being "a
greater freedom
fighter" than Mu-
jibur Rahman. This,
Tripathi had said,
"amounted to politi-
cally endorsing a se-
cessionist movement in a
part of (India). This has
caused serious concern in
India".

So when Dhaka sought
to hand over an 'aide-mem-
oire', a diplomatic form of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

INDIAN EXPRESS

16 NOV 2003

Khaleda sure of stronger ties

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ
২৭/১০
Dhaka, Oct. 27 (PTI): Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is confident that her country's ties with India will become stronger in the coming days.

"Our bilateral relations would be further strengthened in future," she told outgoing Indian high commissioner Monilal Tripathy, who visited her yesterday in a farewell call.

During the meeting at the Prime Minister's Office, Khaleda stressed that the member countries of the Saarc, a forum to boost regional cooperation among South Asian nations, should increase trade among them for the benefit of their economies.

She urged India to see Bangladesh as a market for ready-made garments, tea and leather products and said any problem between the neighbours should be resolved through discussions.

Dhaka denied India's charge that it was sheltering insurgents from its neighbour's northeastern states. "Bangladesh does not allow its soil to be used for insurgency activities against any country," foreign minister Morshed Khan said, reacting to Tripathy's assertion that top insurgent leaders from the Northeast were operating from Bangladeshi soil.

THE TELEGRAPH

28 OCT 2003

Khaleda hopes for 'acceptable solution' to water issues

By Haroon Habib

Ind. Bangladesh

DHAKA, OCT. 11. The Bangladesh Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, has expressed the hope that an acceptable solution to the water-management problem could be reached through discussion at the top political level between Dhaka and New Delhi.

In an address to the nation on Friday marking two years in power by her alliance, Begum Khaleda said that being a lower-riparian country, Bangladesh would face a natural catastrophe if India implemented its planned river-linking project. "There has been extensive discussion in national and international media over India's proposed river-linking project. Even conscientious people in India criticised this project," she said.

Referring to the recent Joint River Commission meeting held in New Delhi, she said her Water Resources Minister had expressed Bangladesh's concern to his Indian counterpart at the talks.

"We'll hope Ministers of the two countries and top political leaders would reach an acceptable solution to the water-management problem through discussion."

On her Government's foreign-policy focus, Begum Khaleda said Bangladesh laid stress on economic diplomacy and deepened her relations with countries in Southeast Asia under the "Look East Policy".

On the domestic front, she called for a "greater consensus among all political parties" on democratic norms and principles, development strategy and foreign and defence policies to further strengthen the base of Bangladesh as a state.

In her 40-minute address, Begum Khaleda said her Government had been relentlessly making efforts to make the development road map a success.

But she urged all concerned to remain alert about any attempt to create blocks of indiscipline and anarchy in the implementation of the road map in the name of movement, broadly indicat-

ing that the Opposition parties were preparing for a "greater anti-government movement".

Without explaining, she also hinted at re-structuring of the Government system saying, "If necessary, we can go ahead by bringing about congruity and re-structuring in Government system and also in the existing political culture and in the ambit of party differences to protect the greater interest of the country and its people."

While Begum Khaleda highlighted her Government's "successes" in her national address, the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, has called for "a grand unity of progressive and democratic forces" against the "corrupt, terrorist and oppressive" regime. Addressing a gathering to mark the Government's "misrule of two years", Sheikh Hasina said the nation "is hostage to the misrule. The people want the BNP-Jamaat Government to step down conceding its failure and misgovernance." Sheikh Hasina, who was the country's Prime Minister for five years from 1996, said she would not claim cent per cent success in all spheres of national life during her rule.

"There might have been some unwarranted mistakes. But we've the honest courage to learn from our mistakes and move forward."

She said the coalition's performance in two years proved that those who occupied power through "widespread rigging" cannot ensure the welfare of the people. In her 35-minute speech, Sheikh Hasina spoke of the Government's failures and lapses in economic, social and political fields stressing two major points — failure to combat terrorism and curb corruption.

She blamed Begum Khaleda, "a special bhaban", Ministers and her party leaders for "harbouring terrorists, patronising corruption and siphoning off huge money abroad".

The Government at the end admitted the existence of militant (Islamic) terrorist groups in the country although they initially ruled it out. She said the country's image has been tarnished abroad.

Begum Zia's game

Diversionsary tactics on river interlinking

Delhi did right by pointing out to Bangladesh at the recent 35th Joint Rivers Commission meeting that it would be "too premature" to talk of river interlinking by India. Neither has the central government discussed the matter with any of the state governments, nor has the task force set up for studying the feasibility of the ambitious project submitted its full report. This makes Dhaka's "strong protest" with Delhi on the issue wholly premature and unwarranted. It is not difficult to understand why Khaleda Zia's BNP-Jamat government has created such a ruckus over the issue knowing fully well that India's river inter-linking project is at a nascent stage and that some Indian states have contested the assumptions of the National Water Development Agency for transferring water from "surplus" to "deficit" basins. Begum Zia by making a lengthy statement in parliament about the "serious threat" gave credence to the strident campaign already launched by the anti-India lobby that the real purpose of the proposed interlinking was to turn Bangladesh into a desert. Already her government has internationalised the issue by raising it at two fora recently.

The question arises why Bangladesh's ruling elite has raised such a hue and cry over a project that is far from taking off. The reason is simple. Unable to find fault with the agreement on the sharing of Ganga waters, although it had promised to renegotiate the agreement with Delhi when voted to power in 2001, Begum Zia is desperately looking for an emotive issue to divert her people's attention from inadequacies of governance. The intention is to counter the Awami League-led opposition movement that, by focussing on her failures, has begun to seriously challenge her government's authority. Such diversionary tactics have not worked in the past; and if they do now, it will be a first for Begum Zia.

THE STATESMAN

11 OCT 2003

Bangla fears on river interlinking allayed

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2. — In a bid to pacify Bangladesh following its protests on the river interlinking project, India has given an assurance that the project is at a "nascent stage" and all apprehensions raised by Dhaka about the projects are premature and imaginary in nature.

At the 35th Joint River Commission meeting, after a two-and-a-half year gap, the Indian government told Bangladesh minister Mr Hafizuddin Ahmad that the task force set up to study the feasibility of the interlinking project is yet to submit its report.

"So much so, we have not even discussed the project with our state governments. It would be too

premature to talk of a project which is not yet cleared by the task force," said Union minister for water resources Mr Arjun Charan Sethi.

The two sides also discussed progress on the implementation of the 1996 agreement between India and Bangladesh on sharing of Ganga waters, reviewed the arrangement concerning Teesta and six other common rivers, cooperation in flood control operations, and arsenic mitigation. In a positive move towards strengthening Indo-Bangla relations, the Bangladesh minister invited Mr Sethi to visit Bangladesh for the next meeting of the commission. The marathon meeting, scheduled to be over by 5 p.m on Tuesday evening, stretched

to well past midnight, before either side signed a joint statement agreeing to meet again to resolve pending matters.

The river-interlinking project, which has been an emotional issue in Bangladesh, was listed as a "miscellaneous item". It, however, dominated discussions during the two-day meeting. Soon after the meeting, Mr Ahmed said his country had lodged a protest following announcements about the river interlinking project made by the President and Prime Minister Mr AB Vajpayee.

Bachispeak

All rivers in the country will be interlinked by 2016 for the judicious use of water

and ensuring that there is adequate water for irrigation, Union minister Mr Bachi Singh has said, adds a report from Chandigarh. The Union MoS for science and technology was speaking at the inauguration of a Rs 1.50 crore tissue culture centre at the CCS Haryana Agricultural University in Hisar last evening.

Storm brews as Bangla
sends team to stop project

Dhaka in river link scramble

9 and
Bangla
7-6
28/9

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Sept. 27: A fresh water-sharing row seems to be brewing between India and Bangladesh.

Alarmed at India's attempt to inter-link the Ganga and the Brahmaputra that both countries share, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is sending a high-level delegation to Delhi tomorrow for talks to deter the Vajpayee government.

The Bangladeshi team, led by water resources minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, will appeal to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee not to go ahead with the project that could put a new strain on bilateral relations.

The team also plans to visit Bengal and hold talks with chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee on the proposed project on October 3.

Bhattacharjee is scheduled to visit the two observation sites at the Farakka barrage on the Ganga two days before the guests call on him.

The two-day talks between India and Bangladesh will start from Monday. Since senior officials of the Joint River Commission are part of the meeting, discussions will also be held to finalise an agreement on sharing Teesta water.

But Ahmed's focus will be on the proposed project to inter-link the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.

Ahmed's Indian counterpart, Arjun Charan Sethi, will head the Indian delegation, which includes senior officials of the foreign ministry, at the two-day meeting. Delhi has tried to allay Dhaka's fears by making it clear that the proposal to inter-link

the two rivers was at a "conceptual" stage and there were no plans of diverting water from the Ganga. It has argued that any diversion of water from the Brahmaputra's northern tributaries will benefit both countries.

But Bangladesh is sceptical. It feels Delhi's attempt to link the two rivers is contrary to international laws and conventions.

"Bangladesh will have to face grave consequences if water from the Ganga and Brahmaputra are withdrawn," Khaleda told Parliament last week.

"Irreparable destruction of the environment, agriculture, industry, fisheries and forest resources will be the result if water from the two rivers is withdrawn," she added.

Water sharing between upper riparian India and lower riparian Bangladesh has always been a sensitive issue.

After years of hard-nosed bargaining resulting in a lot of bad blood, the two countries signed an agreement on the sharing of Ganga water in 1996. Despite minor hiccups, the agreement has so far worked well. But if India goes ahead with the new proposal, it might trigger a fresh row.

Khaleda expressed a similar apprehension when she told the Parliament: "Since our country is committed to good neighbourly relations and is a member of the Saarc, Bangladesh always maintains good relations with India. Bangladesh has never behaved in any way that is harmful to India.... Similarly, Bangladesh expects that India, too, will refrain from any plan that will be harmful to Bangladesh."



Khaleda Zia

Bangladesh influx

Buddhadeb should make up for past

Just as he did on the issue of madrasas suddenly mushrooming in North Bengal border districts, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has now engaged in some plain speaking on the old problem of illegal immigrants from across the border. The menace has continued ever since the creation of Bangladesh and it is only fair to recall that the BJP have been pointing out for years that the issue has explosive potential. Socio-economic problems the chief minister now talks about have long been obvious but were swept under the carpet for purely political reasons. Jyoti Basu's government turned a blind eye to the large-scale influx because he did not wish to ruffle other Left parties who joined the CPI-M in creating and expanding vote-banks. The result has been alarming: the trickle has turned into a flood and spread from Bengal into other parts of the country.

It does no good to place the ball in the Centre's court although, at another level, there is need to tighten vigil by the BSF in the highly porous border. There is also the need to convince the Bangladesh government, which refuses to acknowledge the existence of infiltration that something needs to be done at the level of the two governments. But at the state level, it has become necessary to check vested political interests that raise a hue and cry every time an effort is made to identify and repatriate infiltrators. While a compassionate view needs to be taken of the human aspects of the problem, the potential threat to the country's stability and well-being can no longer be overlooked. Political and other motives attributed can only enhance tensions as Buddhadeb has rightly suggested. His concern, although late is welcome, if it leads to subordination of party interests and a better concern for the country. It is to be hoped that for once, Alimuddin Street is fully behind the Chief Minister.

India, Bangladesh agree to pursue FTA

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JULY 16. The crucial Joint Economic Council (JEC) meeting between Bangladesh and India has ended with the announcement of substantial progress towards enhancing bilateral trade as the two countries agreed to initiate talks on the India-proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in October next.

The two countries also decided to start a direct bus service between Dhaka and Agartala in the first week of August. If this materialises, it will be the second such land route after the Dhaka-Kolkata bus service opened in April 1999.

The agreements came following the hectic JEC meeting held on Tuesday, which was led by the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, and the External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha. "We've achieved very, very positive gains at the JEC... We made very substantial progress and we will continue to remain engaged to resolve other issues between us," Mr. Sinha, who delayed his return home overnight, told a press conference here in the morning.

The press conference was preceded by the signing of a Joint Agreed Minutes by the two Ministers. Mr. Khan told journalists, "We've discussed all bilateral issues and we have achieved huge, huge gains."

It was learnt that the two countries could not reach any consensus on the crucial issue of grant-

transport its goods to the north eastern States through Bangladesh territory. There has also not been any agreement on India's proposal for commissioning a passenger train service between Sealdah (Kolkata) and Jamuna Bridge.

On Bangladesh's main concern for non-tariff and para-tariff barriers on its products by the Indian authorities, the two sides agreed to meet in mid-August and sort it out.

About Bangladesh's new list of more than 100 products for duty and quota-free access in the Indian market in a bid to reduce the trade gap of \$1 billion heavily tilted towards New Delhi, Mr. Sinha said the matter would be taken up when the two sides open dialogue on FTA.

It was decided that the Foreign Secretary-level FTA standing committee would meet early next year to review the progress of the first round of talks on FTA in mid-October.

Mr. Sinha said the proposed accord on protection of bilateral investment, now under discussion, would be signed by the two countries shortly.

The meeting also decided that the Foreign Minister-level JEC would meet annually and the Foreign Secretary-level JEC standing committee every six months.

Mr. Sinha said the state-to-state credit of Rs. 200 crores earlier sanctioned for various development projects in Bangladesh would be renewed and it would continue to be extended until the

THE HINDU

17 JUL 2003

Dhaka, Delhi nod for talks on FTA

Press Trust of India

DHAKA, July 15. — India and Bangladesh today made substantial progress in improving their bilateral economic relations including agreeing to initiate discussions on a Free Trade Agreement as well as an investment protection and promotion agreement.

Though both the sides deferred till tomorrow morning the much-awaited joint statement at the end of the talks, the external affairs minister, Mr Yashwant Sinha, said that talks began on a "positive note" and "our discussions have been very fruitful and we hope that we will be able to take necessary steps soon to strengthen our multi-faceted co-operation."

Mr Sinha, who led the Indian delegation in the first Joint Economic Commission meeting in six years with Bangladesh team led by his counterpart, Mr Morshed Khan, also announced that Bangladesh has agreed to initiate discussion on FTA by mid-October.

Later, a source in the Indian camp said that both sides agreed that it should be concluded as early as possible while they also agreed to an early finalisation of Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement (BIPPA).

Mr Sinha also called on the Bangladesh Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, during which she referred to the friendly bilateral relations existing between the two countries and expressed her desire to expand them further.

During today's discussions at the JEC meeting, while noting the fact that substantial increase in trade and commerce has taken place between the two countries, the parties resolved to address issues of interest to each other, the sources said.

THE STATESMAN

16 JUL 2003

Hope for Bangla trade pact

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, July 15: India and Bangladesh have agreed to begin talks on a free trade agreement later this year in an attempt to urgently tap "the vast trade and investment opportunities" and narrow their wide trade gap.

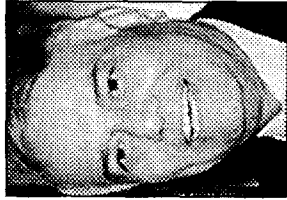
The huge trade imbalance in favour of India has long been a major grouse for Bangladesh. The lack of easy access to Indian markets and the existence of non-tariff barriers have made it even more difficult for Bangladeshi goods to be competitive across the border.

But if the proposed free trade agreement does come about, it will help remove those hurdles

and narrow the trade gap.

"It is gratifying to note that Bangladesh has agreed to initiate discussions on the agreement this September-October," said Yashwant Sinha, while chairing the sixth meeting of the joint economic commission in Dhaka today.

Speaking at a luncheon in his honour at the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the foreign minister said the discussions began on a "positive note". He added that the entire gamut of relations, especially economic and commercial issues, had been discussed.



Sinha: Positive

Copies of Sinha's speech were made available in Delhi.

"Our discussions have been very fruitful and we hope we will be able to take necessary steps soon to strengthen our multi-faceted cooperation," the minister said.

He pointed out that some headway had been made on the trade agreement due to the encouraging example of a similar pact between India and Sri Lanka. That agreement had resulted in a multi-fold rise in Sri Lankan exports to India and had increased the island's export basket through the addition

of new items.

Referring to Bangladesh's complaint about the heavy trading imbalance in India's favour, Sinha said Dhaka is Delhi's sixth largest trading partner.

"We are alive to the concerns of the business community of Bangladesh, especially regarding trade imbalance," the minister said.

"I am confident that given goodwill and sincerity on both sides, these issues can be addressed sincerely and in a spirit of cooperation and friendship for mutual benefits," he added.

A number of bilateral issues, including border skirmishes and trans-shipment facilities for Indian goods, were discussed at the commission meeting.

Indy Sinha

16/7/8

Of land, people and security

By Wasbir Hussain

9 July 1979

A discussion in a recent international meet in Colombo on how demographic 'invasions' in South Asia are impacting on the region's internal security, a leading Bangladeshi scholar said people from her country would rather make the Western nations their destination, and would certainly not go to a poor, underdeveloped region such as India's Northeast. The problem lies with Bangladeshis taking such a position — that the Northeast has no economic incentive for their people — despite being aware of the ground realities. This is general Bangladeshi position except for a few who admit that "some migration" to Assam has indeed taken place. Again, Bangladeshi think-tanks like to point out that migration is a normal and natural phenomenon and cannot be stopped. They would even like New Delhi to treat anyone who has come into India, even if illegally, from a 'humanitarian' point of view. But, if the illegal infiltration from across the border reduces the tribal population in Tripura to a minority, giving rise to major ethnic insurgencies, or forces Assam's entire politics to revolve around the issue of citizenship with fears of the indigenous population being overwhelmed by the aliens, one cannot sit back and watch.

It is in this context that the Vajpayee Government's recent move to repeal the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983, needs to be viewed. The Bill introduced in

the last session of Parliament by the Deputy Prime Minister, L. K. Advani, says: "The detection and expulsion of illegal migrants under the Act has been very tardy. The operation of the Act in Assam alone has been hurting the Assamese psyche and is one of the contributing factors for the feeling of alienation in Assam. It has, therefore, been decided to repeal the

tionals or any other illegal migrant and gather thousands of such people of doubtful citizenship with 'proof'. Will that solve the problem? The answer unfortunately would still be no. While the law-makers are free to get a piece of legislation repealed and replace it with something they think is going to work and protect the nation's interests, the key question is:

The need is for a comprehensive dialogue with Bangladesh... Dhaka must be made to understand India's security concerns, which are definitely linked to the migration issue.

1979 with the aim of achieving a 'sovereign, socialist Assam,' the rebel leaders thought that a democratic movement to protect Assam's interests by organisations as the AASU would not pressure New Delhi enough. It was widely expected that the ULFA rebels would throw their weight behind the movement against illegal migration into Assam. But by 1990, when the ULFA started facing the counter-insurgency heat, its leaders and cadres crossed over to Bangladesh and opened shop there. And the ULFA's stand on illegal migration underwent a radical change, more perhaps, for 'military needs.' By 1992, ULFA started saying the migrants of East Bengal origin have now become a 'major part of the national life' of Assam.

In such a scenario, the priority for New Delhi should be to plug the inflow of illegal migrants, detect the post-March 25, 1971 (the cut-off date for detection and expulsion of the aliens as stipulated in the Assam Accord) migrants and convince Dhaka to take them back. A more practical approach would perhaps be to plug the flow and pursue a policy of assimilation, as the former Asom Sahitya Sabha (Assam's apex socio-literary body) chief, Homen Borgohain, pushed for, by recognising the migrants who are already in as an integral part of the greater Assamese society.

(The writer is Associate Fellow, Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi)

Act so that the Foreigners Act, 1946, which is applicable throughout the territory of India also becomes operative in the State of Assam to expedite detection and deportation of illegal migrants." As the ruling NDA does not command a majority in the Rajya Sabha, it may have to take recourse to a joint session of Parliament to get the Act repealed.

But, will the repeal of the IM (DT) Act and its replacement by the Foreigners Act, 1946, solve the issue of illegal migration? The answer is a certain no. The IM (DT) Act is cumbersome. A complainant has to pay a fee to lodge a complaint against a suspected illegal migrant under the Act. Once the Foreigners Act, 1946, comes to be applied in Assam, the police can swing into action, issue notices to suspected Bangladeshi na-

When the ULFA was formed in

Bangla migrants: Political pawns, ignored prisoners



Bangladeshi women and kids in a police van before appearing in a Howrah court. Reuters file photo

SUBRATA NAGCHOUHURY
KOLKATA, JUNE 5

FAR removed from the zero line and international glare, nearly 500 Bangladeshi migrants continue to languish in the 20-odd jails of West Bengal. To all purposes, they are forgotten — Bangladesh has shown no interest in getting them back, and India seems to be in no hurry to deport the men which are often pawns in the state's political battle.

Unlike the western border, where release of every Pakistani prisoner from an Indian jail and vice versa is greeted with reams of newsprint and flashes of camera bulbs, and considered a step towards confidence building, the Bangladeshi detainees don't figure on the diplomatic scale.

Waiting without trial for months, most of these detainees are either fishermen accused of straying into Indian waters in the Bay of Bengal or migrants trying to illegally enter from various land borders. In many cases, say jail officials, prisoners continue to linger on despite their jail terms being over because official formalities are yet to be completed.

There are even instances in which a child and mother have been separated. While the mother is lodged in a jail, the child is growing up in some government 'home'.

But it is not so much for diplomacy, as it is for pure economics that the West Bengal Jail Department has woken up to the crisis. "They have been eating into our pockets," says Inspector General (Prisons) J. Chakravarty. Moves have been initiated to ensure the speedy deportation of these il-

legal migrants, he adds.

A senior official says the department spends over Rs 67 lakh per year on the Bangladeshi prisoners, and since many of them have been imprisoned for over two years, the expenses run up to Rs 1.35 crore plus. Added to these are the expenses for special diets, medical aids and the resources mobilised for their travel to courts for trials and back to prison.

The IG admitted that many prisoners continued to be in jail despite the end of their terms as deportation was a long-drawn process. Chakravarty added that the department was interacting with the Bangladesh High Commission in Kolkata to work out a way for speedy disposal of the cases.

The Bangladesh government's approval and verification of an arrested migrant's bona fides is required before a Bangladeshi national can be officially deported.

However, a senior Bangladesh High Commission official says the delay was not from their side alone. "There is a wide gap between what the higher-ups in the government plan and the realities at the ground level," he says. According to him, for the past two years, the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission has been trying to get a list of those detained in Bengal jails and the charges against them, but without success. It wrote to the state home department in July 2002 seeking details but never got a reply.

Sources point out that at the lower level, in jails, these detainees are a source of earning for the prison staff. The more they stay inside, the more the earning.

Indo-Bangladesh ties

By K. K. Katyal

There are some faint signs of pragmatism having the better of partisan considerations but there may be no alternative to caution in the relations between New Delhi and Dhaka.

A BRIEF stay in Dhaka last week was enough to bring to light the complexities of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, with tough bilateral factors further complicated by the confrontational nature of domestic politics. There are some faint signs of pragmatism having the better of partisan considerations but there may be no alternative to caution in this delicate area. The conventional wisdom that the ties with India tend to ease under the Awami League rule and take a turn for the worse when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is in power has been upset in actual practice.

In 1996, Sheikh Hasina began the five-year term of her Awami League Government with a promise of relaxation in the dealings with India but towards the end a chill developed, rather inexplicably. It was perhaps because of internal political compulsions. A section of the Awami League rank and file suspected New Delhi's sympathy for the BNP and its leader, Khaleda Zia, at the time of elections. This did not prevent apprehensions of a setback in bilateral ties when Begum Zia assumed office about two years ago — and these were strengthened by the eruption of communal trouble and the bellicosity of the Jamiat, a BNP ally. The tactless response by New Delhi compounded the problem.

There is no originality in the causes of tension — border incidents, presence of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India, stalemate on the trade and investment front, Dhaka's reservations to the supply of gas to New Delhi and transit facilities for the far-flung north-eastern areas which, ironically, were enjoyed by India before 1971 in East Pakistan. As is often noted, Bangladesh is India-locked and the north-eastern areas are Bangladesh-locked.

The border issue has three sub-parts — the undemarcated 6.5 km-long tract, the existence of enclaves in each other's territory and the areas in adverse possession on the two sides. Why these problems were allowed to hang fire in the last three decades, even as there was little doubt about their potential for trouble, is difficult to comprehend. Of late, there were signs of seriousness with the Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, visiting Dhaka for talks with his counterpart and the

border security heads discussing specific measures calculated to prevent violent incidents. This time, we were assured, the two sides meant business. The rhetoric in India on the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, which assumed ominous proportions a few months ago, has considerably reduced — for the time being, in any case. Their number, as was known, was put at 1.5 crores by the Central Government — but Bangladesh disputes this figure forcefully and, in turn, draws attention to the illegal Indians on their side. But, happily, the glass is now described as half-full, not half-empty.

Here is one instance. Not long ago, the 6.5 km border tract remaining undemarcated was cited as a case of monumental neglect. Now the problem is sought to be de-emphasised — “after all, it is merely 6.5 km out of 4,100 km.” The lull in rhetoric is to be welcomed, no doubt, but only a permanent solution can ensure against its reappearance. The mechanism to prevent border incidents was supposed to be in place but, surprisingly, it did not work satisfactorily. It has to be streamlined and strengthened.

The gas supply, essentially an economic matter, has acquired sharp political overtones over the years because of which an objective view becomes difficult. Sheikh Hasina, though supportive of the proposal of exporting gas to India, felt constrained when it came to implementation. Had not Begum Zia, then the chief Opposition leader, spearheaded a major campaign on the issue offering to spill her blood if gas were supplied to India? Her Government now has to live down the postures of the past.

In the present-day changed global context, Bangladesh (like India) would like to be on the right side of the U.S. Washington has already acquired a new leverage in Bangladeshi affairs. The leading U.S. company, Unical, is engaged in the exploration of the country's gas reserves. Guided by purely commercial considerations, it makes a strong case for supply of gas

to India. How else would Unical get returns on its huge investment? This economic logic has yet to prevail upon political factors — the hostility towards India of certain sections which would not touch, even with a pair of tongs, anything that could be of help to New Delhi, even though it benefits their country as well. Obviously, it is not in Bangladesh's interest to stick to this self-destructive logic.

Both on this and the issue of trade, the ruling establishment, hopefully, may tend to take a realistic view. How long could it run against the objective reality — apart from geography, close ties in many fields. Several thousands of Bangladeshi students study in India; Calcutta and other centres are the first choice for the Bangladeshis needing medical treatment in acute cases. India is the biggest importer of Bangladesh's goods, China being the next. And, of course, its imports from India are by far the largest — \$1 billion dollars officially and between \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion through “informal channels”.

Many in India who have had held responsible positions, have advocated unilateral free trade treatment to Bangladesh. During my interaction in Dhaka last week, I heard more than once, the feeling of regret that New Delhi had messed up a golden opportunity for not only integrating the economies of the two countries but also of exerting a beneficial effect on the political climate. The opposition to transit facilities and gas supply to India would have lost its sting by now in the event of a unilateral trade-related gesture by India — thus goes the oft-repeated argument. The situation could be partly retrieved if New Delhi were to take some such step now. After a few years, under the proposed SAARC free trade regime, these concessions would have to be extended anyhow. After an avoidable delay, India has now offered the Sri Lanka-model of free trade arrangement to Dhaka — envisaging a longer negative list for it and a longer time period to

reach the zero tariff level. This package could be improved from Dhaka's standpoint. Bangladesh pleads for a more liberal treatment because of its status as the least developed country. Given the suitable political will, a way out should not be difficult.

The BNP is the party of trading classes and, as such, there is an urge from within to expand trading ties with India. This, coupled with American exhortations, may well help counter the pressure from the incorrigible India-baiters, some of whom wield influence in the ruling camp.

The support received from Bangladesh by the terrorist groups, active in the north-eastern region, is a major sore point with New Delhi. Some of these groups have set up camps in Bangladesh, others use its territory as a safe haven when pursued by the Indian security forces. The Deputy Prime Minister, L. K. Advani, and other responsible leaders in the Government had been talking of the anti-India activities of the ISI, based in the Pakistan mission in Dhaka. This charge could not be stretched beyond a limit.

The presence of intelligence personnel in foreign embassies and missions is the hard fact of diplomatic life all over the world. And the Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka is no exception. The Bangladesh Government could not be held responsible, just as India could not be blamed for the presence of ISI-linked persons in the Pakistani mission in New Delhi. But Dhaka is responsible for the support and help extended to the various separatist and terrorist groups operating in Assam and other States of the region.

Till recently, Dhaka denied any such links while repeatedly emphasising its general resolve of not allowing anti-India activity from within its territory. That is not enough. A pro-active line is called for in curbing the role of 'jehadi' elements and supporters of terrorist outfits. Curbs on the activities of terrorist groups is all the more necessary for, at some point, they could pose a major threat to the Bangladeshis themselves. Besides, any action on this front will be a major input in the efforts to improve ties with India. A measure of expedition needs to be imparted to the efforts to arrest the slide in India-Bangladesh relations.

10-10-2/6

2 JUN 2003

India, Bangladesh must find solution to refugees' problem

By Our Staff Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MAY 24. Political parties in Bangladesh often blame each other for perpetuating "atrocities" on Hindu minorities and it is the ordinary people who come to the rescue of the minority community. This is the impression that a 34-member women's delegation got after meeting ordinary citizens and leaders of various political parties, including the Home and Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, during their week-long visit to that country.

"Atrocities increase during election time and it is the losing candidates who often accuse the minorities for being the reason for his defeat," said Syeda Hamid, a member of the visiting team that went under the banner of Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA). However, it was always the Muslim community which inspired the minorities to stay

back and also took responsibility for their personal security.

Releasing a joint statement on behalf of the Indian and Bangladeshi women at a press conference here today, WIPSA called upon both the Governments and civil society to adopt strong measures in the public and private spheres for tolerance and respect for all. It suggested more dissemination of information and interaction between the two countries at various levels.

All governments in South Asia should reduce their defence budget and liberalise the visa regimes to allow for greater people-to-people contacts, the statement said adding that efforts should be more towards making SAARC into a viable and living reality for the benefit of the people living in the region.

Aiming for a nuclear-free South Asia, the statement demanded an immediate end to production of weapons of mass

destruction by all countries.

"We believe that movement of people across borders needs to be addressed with human understanding of economic compulsions. The Governments of India and Bangladesh must find rational solutions based on international human rights standards to the cross-border movements of people than resorting to witch hunts and forced 'push back' and 'push ins', the statement said. Every year, five lakh Bangladeshis cross over to India while only 60,000 Indians visited Bangladesh.

The mission was to articulate women's common understanding and aspirations in Bangladesh and India for peace and security in the region. It was to establish that women have had the highest stakes in peace. The situation was peculiar in Bangladesh because of trafficking of young girls and women, said Mohini Giri, social activist.

25 MAY 2003

THE HINDU

Dhaka wants Delhi to open border on 'experimental basis'

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, MAY 23. Bangladesh has proposed that India open its border for six months on an "experimental basis" for free access of its products to the latter's market. "Let's see for six months on experimental basis how much we can export," the Bangladesh Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman, said on his return from New Delhi.

He made the proposal amid the country's trade deficit to the tune of over \$1 billion per annum with India, and limiting Bangladesh export to India due to imposition of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers. "I don't think the export will grow by \$100-200 million," Mr. Saifur told newsmen at the Zia International Airport on Thursday.

The Minister, during his visit, called on the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Ministers for Finance, External and Commerce and Industry.

"The discussions were

more on broader perspective, particularly the regional economic cooperation." He described the visit as a positive outcome to create an understanding between the leaderships of the two neighbours.

"I am convinced that they are really interested in enhancing trade and economic cooperation. It has created a new environment."

The Minister said it would help remove misunderstandings between the two leaderships as well as other small issues.

Some issues, such as push-in and push-back drives, often created misunderstandings but those have been removed to a great extent following the Foreign Minister, M. Morshed Khan's recent visit to India.

"I am convinced that there is definite changes in the mindset. There is no more cross-border infiltration. This is more or less a past chapter."

On the proposal for a Free Trade Arrangement (FTA) between the two countries, he said Bangladesh would encourage the new phenomenon.

India was now negotiating FTA with Thailand and Singapore after having the agreement with Sri Lanka.

Explaining the concept, he said it had to be on selected items that have to be worked out through mutual interaction. "They offered FTA so that the trade goes in favour of us."

On gas export, Mr. Saifur said they have no headache about it, but said, "you'll decide yourself what you really want to do."

Meanwhile, the national dailies said the Minister has assured India of giving due consideration to the gas export and transit facility to the neighbouring country.

He urged India to work closely with Bangladesh in all fields, particularly trade and commerce, for the benefit of the people of South Asia region.

20 MAY 2003

THE HINDU

Dealing with neighbours

By Wasbir Hussain

17-10-2005

Handwritten signature/initials

INDIA AND Bangladesh were engaged in high-level bilateral contacts in Dhaka against the backdrop of Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's latest "hands of friendship" policy towards Pakistan. It was not surprising, therefore, to find media coverage of the meeting between Indian Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, and his Bangladeshi counterpart, Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, and that of the chiefs of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), lost in the heat and euphoria of what is seen as a thaw in Indo-Pakistan relations. But, what has generally been lost sight of is the thaw in relations between India and Bangladesh that seems to have been brought about by the meetings between Mr. Sibal and Mr. Chowdhury as also the interaction between BSF Director-General, Ajai Raj Sharma, and the BDR chief, Jahangir Alam Chowdhury.

Thirty-two years after India directly helped in the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistani yoke, it is rather ironical to talk of a thaw in relations between the two neighbours. At the same time, it would be naive to expect Dhaka to be ever grateful to New Delhi and, therefore, expect an undiluted India-friendly foreign policy. The reality is that relations between India and Bangladesh, which share a 4,095 KM long porous border, have been stormy for more reasons than one.

From New Delhi's point of view, there are three major areas of discord: first, is the issue of separatists in the Northeast operating out of well-entrenched camps in Bangladeshi territory. Then comes the contentious issue of illegal migration of Bangladeshis into India. And, third, Dhaka not allowing India access to the Chittagong Port that can service the northeastern States. In so far as Bangladesh is concerned, it wants duty-free access to the Indian market for its goods and to improve the balance of trade that is heavily tilted in India's favour, with the annual official trade gap being put at \$1 billion.

Going by the responses of both sides, the Foreign Secretary-level meeting in Dhaka, held for the first time since December 2000, has been hailed by the media in Bangladesh as well as in India as being on the right track. Bangladesh responded to India's concern and specific mention of locations of camps of Northeast insurgent groups in that country by saying that it would not allow its territory to be used by forces "inimical to India's interests". It was also agreed that procedures previously arrived at to stop illegal

in the country to watch out for transactions by rebels themselves or their front companies, rein in radical Bangladesh Rifles commanders on the border and make sure that operatives of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) do not get to contact the Northeast separatist leadership.

This could be New Delhi's wish list, but Dhaka may find it difficult to give in to many of them. But, Bangladesh may begin by admitting the presence of Indian separatists in the country — as Bhutan has done —

Relations between India and Bangladesh have been stormy for more reasons than one... Sometimes, a small goodwill gesture can go a long way.

cross-border movement of people will be implemented. What has enthused the Bangladeshi media is that the two sides focused on the positive aspects of the relationships between the two nations rather than the negative areas. As *The Daily Star*, a leading English newspaper from Dhaka, said: "What seem to have been the icing on the cake are some (of) the new ideas struck for cooperation in the IT sector and in the area of storm surge reduction management." Sometimes, a small goodwill gesture can go a long way, and that is what seems to have happened when India offered to help Bangladesh in the IT sector as well as in cyclonic-tidal-surge-management. Mr. Sibal said that two schools would be selected from each of the 64 districts in Bangladesh and would be provided with five computers each. Besides, 250 schoolteachers would be trained by Indian experts in IT.

These are smooth steps. What remains to be seen are specific measures taken by Dhaka against insurgents from India's Northeast operating from Bangladesh — deny them access, snap ties between these rebels and their local Bangladeshi collaborators, instruct banks

rather than consistently deny their existence within its territory. Dhaka's single major claim of not giving anti-India forces any leeway, the arrest in 1997 of Anup Chetia, general secretary of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), does not seem to cut ice anymore. What is needed are concrete steps to dismantle Indian insurgents' camps within that country. Within a 24-hour stretch on May 6 and 7, tribal insurgents killed as many as 32 people in Tripura, one of the massacres taking place at a location just half-a-kilometre from the border with Bangladesh. After the massacre, the Tripura Chief Minister, Manik Sarkar, said that unless the militants' camps inside Bangladesh are dismantled and the rebels are denied safe sanctuaries across the border, insurgency in his State was not going to end. He quoted locals as saying that the suspected rebel cadres belonging to the outlawed All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) who carried out the May 6 midnight massacre of 19 non-tribals at Simna Colony, 45 km north of Agartala, crossed over unchallenged into Bangladesh after the attack.

Dhaka's claims that no Indian rebel group has camps inside Bangla-

desh, and that it would not encourage any anti-India activity from within its territory need to be viewed in the context of reports in recent months of terror groups becoming active in the country. The western media has been saying that Bangladesh has become a new theatre of Al-Qaeda and other Islamist fundamentalist groups. Late last year, *Time* even went to the extent of saying that ULFA representatives too were among those who attended a meeting of jihadi groups at a secret rendezvous in Bangladesh. There are also suggestions that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia described as a mix of "religious nationalists, militant fundamentalists and subdued communists" is either lending support or is being soft towards the radical jihadi groups and their supporters. The ruling BNP aiding these forces or the ULFA attending a meeting of jihadi groups may not be true. What cannot be ignored, however, are the discussions in intelligence circles of a local terror group, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), with an estimated strength of 2,000, being quite active in Bangladesh, and that this outfit is allied to Al-Qaeda.

With the fast-paced developments on the counter-terrorism front across the world after 9/11, it would be in Bangladesh's interest, as much as India's, that Dhaka clamps down on terror groups in the country. It should apply the same yardstick in cracking down on both local terror elements as well as the Indian separatists. After all, the Indian separatists and their possible global partners could pose a greater risk to Bangladesh. Political sabre rattling to please the domestic audience has been a hallmark of politics in the subcontinent. Dhaka must confine things to just that, and not indulge directly or indirectly in anti-India operations. Nothing but a strong bilateral relationship can be beneficial to the millions of ordinary people in the two nations.

(The writer is Associate Fellow, Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi)

India masses 4,000 for push-in: Bangla

Press Trust of India

DHAKA, Jan. 27. — Bangladesh has claimed that Indian security forces have assembled at least 4,000 people on the border to push them into its territory.

"India made at least six attempts recently to push in Bangla-speaking people into the country and at least 4,000 Bangla-speaking Indian Muslims were being assembled on the border by the Border Security Force for push-in," state minister for foreign affairs Mr Reaz Rahman told diplomats here last night.

Around the same time as the diplomats were being briefed, Dhaka summoned India's deputy high commissioner Mr Dilip Sinha to register its protest against the alleged push-in attempts.

(The West Bengal IG-law and order, Mr Chayan Mukherjee, said today that such push-ins were routine, SNS adds from Kolkata. Bangladeshis staying illegally in India are rounded up and handed over to BSF on court orders, he said. The Petrapole border post is the most common point for such push-ins. He,

however, refused to comment on BDR's reported attempts to resist push-ins, saying these matters were dealt with by BSF and BDR.)

Mr Sinha rejected Dhaka's allegation and iterated New Delhi's concern about Bangladeshis illegally living in India. He called upon Bangladesh to acknowledge the gravity of situation and address it in a sincere and pragmatic manner.

Mr Rahman told the diplomats that the timing of such attempts was a matter of concern because those coincided with joint secretary-level talks between the two countries, the media reported today. The minister hoped that the situation would not deteriorate because of the "humanitarian ramification of the evolving situation".

All diplomats, barring those from South Asian countries, attended the hurriedly-called briefing. Dhaka has reacted harshly to Delhi's concerns about infiltration and activities of anti-India groups on Bangladeshi soil. It also rejected Delhi's charge that millions of Bangladeshis live in India illegally.

Alert on border

DHAKA, Jan. 27. — Bangladeshi troops along the border with India are on high alert after Indian soldiers allegedly tried to force hundreds of people into Bangladesh over the weekend.

"Patrols and round-the-clock vigilance in every nook and corner of the long border is being maintained," an official said. — AFP

28 JAN 2003

THE STATESMAN

Throw Bangladeshis out of India: Advani

■ **CRACKDOWN** | I-cards in 13 states from April '1

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 7

THE government has ordered a crackdown on 15 million Bangladeshis in the country as they pose a 'serious threat' to the internal security. This comes close on the heels of the crackdown ordered on over 11,500 Pakistani nationals staying illegally in India.

Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani today said that directions have been issued to the states and Union Territories to immediately locate all Pakistani nationals and Bangladeshis staying illegally and "throw them out of the country." He was inaugurating a conference of chief secretaries and director generals of police.

To facilitate the process of weeding out Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals, the government has decided to launch the Multi-Purpose National Identity Cards (NIC) scheme as a pilot project in 13 states from April 1.

The government has also decided to beef up internal security in order to effectively counter the looming



threat of terrorism. On the recommendations of the Group of Ministers (GoM), the Home Ministry has already set up a multi-agency centre (MAC) that will collate intelligence inputs received from the Research and Analysis Wing (RA&W) and Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA). The actionable intelligence after being assessed by the MAC is passed on to the Joint Task Force on Intelligence (JTFI) that energises the State Governments into action. Both the MAC and the JTFI are currently being headed by Intelligence Bureau Special Director A.K. Doval.

"There is an urgent need to strengthen intelligence agencies in the states. Lack of timely advance information about terrorist activities, and ground level intel-

ligence was sorely lacking," said Union Home Secretary N Gopaldaswami, giving details of discussions and the decisions taken during the conference.

The Task Force on Intelligence would get inputs from various states and other agencies including Central Para Military Forces, Intelligence Bureau, R&AW and also from the Defence Intelligence Agency. "All the information will be collated and actionable intelligence culled out and acted upon. This would ensure better coordination and quicker action," explained a senior intelligence official.

The home secretary said that setting up of such an agency had become imperative since the menace of terrorism was not confined to the states of Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast. "All states have to be alert to prevent terrorist acts. The states have been asked to set up special task forces — comprising highly trained persons — to effectively counter terrorist activities," he said.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Feeling under the weather? Come right in!

Rahul Das in Kolkata

Jan. 1. — A large number of Bangladeshis sneak into Indian territory every year to receive "free medical treatment" at state-run hospitals. "This new trend is quite disturbing," says DIG (BSF) Mr RP Singh.

According to BSF officials, a large number of Bangladeshis are regularly taking advantage of "the ambiguities in the health Act" and "poor nationality test" to avail free and subsidised treatment in government hospitals in West Bengal by furnishing "fake" Below Poverty Line certificates. A nexus between elected representatives and touts in the border areas provides these certificates for a price.

A patient whose income is less than Rs 2,000 is eligible for a BPL certificate from the local representative at the village, block or district



The quiet influx. — The Statesman

level. This entitles him to free treatment. More than 500 Bangladeshis patients undergo "long-term" treatment every year at Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute (NCI) alone. "Only 15 per cent of them are in the BPL category," an employee at NCI said.

A case in point is that of a 12-year-old Bangladeshi girl who was admitted under the BPL category on 18 December. The girl was travelling on a tourist visa and had her address recorded in the hospital register as Janapatti village, Janapatti PS, Dhaka. She was referred there by a private clinic in Barrackpore.

Indian law, however, does not allow foreigners to be treated free. "India does not even have a bilateral agreement with Bangladesh on sharing clinical expertise," a health department official said. But BSF inquiries have revealed about 20-30 per cent of the arrested Bangladeshis come to this country seeking medical facilities.

In 2002, the BSF arrested 7,075 Bangladeshis from the South Bengal border and seized goods worth Rs 64 crore, which included narcotics and cattle, the BSF said.

2 JAN 2003

Russian arms will give India the nuclear edge

19/1
By Manoj Joshi
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi/Moscow: India will lease nuclear bombers and a nuclear propelled submarine from Russia as part of a \$3 billion package that includes the aircraft carrier, Admiral Gorshkov.

Combined with the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile that is to be tested next week, India's nuclear deterrent will at last get some real teeth. The broad outline of the deal was disclosed in Moscow by defence minister George Fernandes at the end of his six-day visit to Russia on Friday.

The Russian weapons systems are part of the package whose various elements have been under intense negotiation for the past decade. The centrepiece is Russia's free gift of a mothballed 44.5 thousand tonne aircraft carrier, Admiral Gorshkov. The added muscle will enable India to easily outstrip Pakistan's capabilities and finally provide a credible deterrent against Chinese capabilities in the coming years.

The BrahMos cruise missile made by a \$250 million Indo-Russian joint venture—whose capital is to be boosted by another \$50 million under an agreement on Friday—will be the principal weapons system for the Akula-class submarine and the TU-22M3 strategic bomber. Though touted as a 280km range anti-ship missile, the BrahMos, based on the existing Yakhont, is expected to be used by India to develop a long-range nuclear weapon delivery system.

The two sides have not yet decided on the price for Admiral Gorshkov's refit and the MiG-29 K aircraft that it will carry.

Mr Fernandes said in Moscow on Saturday that the package would be finalised by the end of March under the terms of a protocol signed earlier in the day with Russia's industries, sciences and technology minister Ilya Klebanov. "Gorshkov is part of the package that has been agreed on in the inter-governmental agreement, and all the three deals would be signed together," Mr Fernandes confirmed.

The defence minister said that there was now a "a sense of urgency on both sides" since they had been negotiating for so long. "All the technical aspects have been agreed upon, only the issue of price remains to be settled [for the Admiral Gorshkov]" he said.

Mr Fernandes denied media reports about Russia pressing India on the inclusion of MiG-AT advanced trainer jet in the package. "MiG-AT AJT was not found acceptable by the Air Force," he said. Responding to questions over the delay in the delivery of three Krivak-III class stealth frigates under construction in St Petersburg, Mr Fernandes hoped that all the three warships Talwar, Trishul and Tabar would be handed over to the Indian Navy by the end of April.

Comment: The acquisition of the submarines and strategic bombers will complete India's nuclear triad — on land, sea and air. However, this would also make it vital that we exercise even greater restraint vis-a-vis this awesome power.

DELHI-DHAKA TALKS / 'ACCORD WITH CHINA NOT AGAINST ANYBODY'

'Illegal immigration on both sides'

By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, FEB. 15. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Mohammed Morshed Khan, said today that the recent defence agreement between Dhaka and Beijing was not aimed at any "third country".

Speaking to presspersons, Mr. Khan, who called on the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, stated that the Dhaka-Beijing defence cooperation entailed training and "things like that". The agreement was not for "purchase of missiles or anything like that".

Asked about India's stand that Pakistan's ISI was active in his country, he said that the ISI was of course present in Bangladesh, but its presence was 20 times more in India. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) also had a presence in Bangladesh. "We don't have any technical cooperation with the ISI and the RAW," Mr. Khan said, adding that no anti-India insurgents were present in Bangladesh as per the information available with him.

No insurgents were operating with the knowledge of the Bangladesh Government, he said, pointing out that he had hand-



The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, with the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Mohd. Morshed Khan, in New Delhi on Saturday. — Photo: S. Arneja

ed over a list of 200 Bangladeshis who were reportedly living in West Bengal and Tripura.

Asked whether Bangladesh accepted that there was illegal immigration into India, he said that illegal immigration on both sides was a concern. "There are illegal immigrants from India in Bangladesh. We don't know the numbers." There was a need to strengthen the immigration system. Both countries would discuss these issues on a sustained, continued basis. "Without mu-

tual trust, no relationship can be developed."

'Cannot divorce neighbour'

Asked by a Bangladeshi reporter whether he had obtained any assurance from the Indian side there would be no more "push-ins" in the future, Mr. Khan said the two countries would remain engaged to avoid the use of force on the border. Bangladesh needed to have peace at home and to work together with its neighbours. "You

can divorce your husband or wife, but you cannot divorce your neighbour."

Mr. Khan said that bilateral issues between the SAARC countries should be dealt with bilaterally as specified under the Association's charter, but should not be allowed to come in the way of multilateral matters. The SAARC should be permitted to move ahead.

Till 1947, Mr. Khan said, South Asia had a common market and common currency — a goal only recently achieved by the Europeans. A poor and poverty-stricken Bangladesh could be a threat. "We have to grow in harmony."

On the Iraq issue, he said these were testing times. A concern in West Asia was of great importance as there could be no winner in such a conflict. "I don't know of any country achieving peace through war."

On sale of gas to India, he said the issue should be decided commercially, not politically. The Commerce Minister, Arun Jaitley, would visit Bangladesh to discuss the trade issues. Pointing out the wide imbalance in bilateral trade, he said there was considerable illegal trade between the countries. The illegal movement of people and illegal trade were linked.

Bengal police to intensify vigil against infiltration from Bangladesh

By Malabika Bhattacharya

KOLKATA, FEB. 15. Concerned at the heightening tension in the districts along the border with Bangladesh, the West Bengal Government has asked police to intensify vigil in these districts as they bore the brunt of the infiltration.

The DIG (Headquarters), Narayan Ghosh, said here today that detectives had been deployed to supplement the efforts of the Border Security Force (BSF) in containing the unauthorised entry of Bangladeshi nationals through the porous border. "We have put our mobile task force on the highest alert in the border districts.

"All the detectives making up the force have been asked to bring the districts under the microscope and pass on

all information pertaining to infiltration to the BSF.

"We have reasons to believe that different Bangladeshi agencies may re-launch efforts to push people into the West Bengal side."

Apparently, the Bhattacharjee Government has decided to supplement the BSF's efforts after the failed attempts of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) to push Bangladeshi nationals into India came to light following the stand off at Saatgachi, in Coochbehar along the North Bengal border, over a group of gypsies.

In one such instance on Thursday, the BDR tried to push in about 200 persons at Hilli in north Bengal.

The attempt failed as the BSF personnel at the Gosainpur outpost pushed the group back. According to reports, the BDR tried to resist the BSF action but relented after evidence was presented to it at a flag meeting.

"After this incident we cannot leave anything to chance in our backyard," Mr. Ghosh said.

On Friday, BSF men opened fire at Notaphala village along the border in north Bengal while chasing a group of Bangladeshi cattle

smugglers. One Bangladeshi national, Motaleb Ali, a resident of Shilkhuri village, was apprehended, while the other members of the group succeeded in escaping with the cattle.

According to reports, many Bangladeshi villagers tried to cross the Kaljani river to save the smugglers but were stopped by the BSF before they could enter the no-man's land.

The infiltration and the rising temperature in the border figured prominently over the past two days in meetings the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, and the External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh, had in Delhi with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan.

The bulk of the inputs for the papers Mr. Advani presented to the Bangladesh Minister had been provided by the Bhattacharjee Government over the past several months.

Joining Mr. Bhattacharjee was Tripura's Chief Minister, Manik Sarkar, whose Government too is faced with the problems of infiltration from Bangladesh and cross-border terrorism.

Significantly, the CPI(M)-led Governments in two important north-eastern States, eschewing their

ideological differences with the BJP-led NDA at the Centre, have come forward to lend force to the national campaign against infiltration and cross-border terrorism.

"We are determined to check infiltration and rid the country of illegal settlers," Mr. Bhattacharjee has told the Centre as well as representatives of different foreign missions who met him over the past several months.

Mr. Bhattacharjee's concern is not difficult to comprehend. For, his Government and the police agencies have gathered irrefutable evidence that Pakistan's ISI was taking advantage of the infiltration to send in agents.

Police have busted several gangs run by Bangladeshi crimelords based in Kolkata and elsewhere in Bengal. Many of these criminals, flush with funds and contacts, have relocated themselves in Bengal to escape action in their homeland.

Besides, the infiltration is rapidly changing the demographic profile in many parts of the State, often changing the political configurations to the disadvantage of the ruling Communists.

Amr Datta

DELHI-DHAKA TALKS / ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION DISCUSSED

'Irritants will not stand in the way'

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By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, FEB. 14. The External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, and the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, today said they had a "candid" exchange of views on the entire gamut of bilateral relations between the two countries.

In brief remarks to the press after their talks that went on for about three hours, Mr. Sinha "complimented" Mr. Khan for the constructive and positive spirit in which the talks were held.

The meeting took place amid rising tension and rhetoric between the two countries on the issue of illegal immigration. New Delhi has also expressed concern at Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence "operations" from Bangladesh as well as the presence of Indian insurgents on Bangladeshi territory.

The two sides took note of the suggestions made at the discussions and these would now be discussed at the level of Foreign Secretaries in the first week of April, Mr. Sinha said. The India-Bangladesh Joint Commission, which had not met since 1997, would meet before July 15. Other bilateral mechanisms for discussion would be kept active in preparation for the Joint Commission meeting.

Mr. Sinha said the discussions were held in a "very friendly spirit" and he was "very sanguine" that the two countries would be able to move their relations forward in the same spirit that was on display this evening.

Concurring with Mr. Sinha that the discussions had taken place in a candid manner, the two countries, he said, were "destined" to work together. Irritants would not be allowed to stand in the way.

Mr. Khan said it had been agreed that if problems could not be sorted out then these would be taken up at a "higher level" and, if necessary, the two Foreign Ministers would talk on the telephone to resolve differences. Bangladesh was very happy with the outcome of the talks.

Separately, the Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, said that



The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Mohd. Murshed Khan, with his counterpart, Yashwant Sinha, at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Friday. — Photo Rajeev Bhatt

all agenda issues were discussed. There was a willingness to listen. The dialogue was in the nature of "clearing the air" and assessing each other's intentions.

Both sides, Mr. Sibal said, had agreed to address the problem of illegal immigration back

in 1992 when Begum Khaleda Zia was the Prime Minister.

Asked whether India was prepared to apply zero tariff to imports from Bangladesh, he said such gestures did not make any sense. Instead, like Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh should move towards a free trade ar-

angement.

Earlier, addressing a meeting organised by CII, Mr. Khan said the issue of illegal immigration had to be addressed with all sincerity. In response to a question, he said there were international rules and standards to deal with it. He did not think any Bangladeshi national was coming to live in India and this was a job for the immigration authorities.

India and Bangladesh could overcome all their "small, small" irritants and that Mr. Sinha was not just his counterpart but his "brother". There was no "fundamental conflict" between the two countries.

"There will be irritants among the family members of the SAARC," Mr. Khan said. In 1971, Bangladesh and India shared their agony and Bangladesh accorded "due respect" to this. India-Bangladesh relations had to be based on "mutual respect", he added. Interestingly, he stressed the need for South Asian nations to find their "own solutions" to their problems without the involvement of third parties. India and Bangladesh looked at the world through a "common lens" and Dhaka had a strong commitment to tackle terrorism. Bangladesh was the largest contributor to U.N. peacekeeping missions.

"We are not a Muslim democracy, we are an undiluted democracy with a Muslim majority," Mr. Khan said, adding that Bangladesh had an extremely free press.

His country did not have sufficient exportable commodities to India and there was need to think of Indian investment in Bangladesh.

He called for an "equitable" balance of trade between the two countries as opposed to an "equal" balance of trade.

Speaking on the occasion, Saikat Datta, former CII president, said that if India were to announce a unilateral tariff-free regime for all imports from Bangladesh — with an agreed value addition — there would be immense improvement in bilateral trade and economic relations. "We have done this with Nepal and we should move down this road with Bangladesh," he said.

Bangladeshi intruders pushed back

BALURGHAT (WB), FEB. 14. The BSF has foiled an infiltration bid by 15 Bangladeshis, including women and children, at Sonarpur border in South Dinajpur district.

Gyanbant Singh, DSP, told reporters that following the BSF action the group was now camping at a point near the border in Bangladesh.

Talks were in progress between the BSF and its Bangladeshi counterpart BDR, Mr. Singh said.

Faced with strong diplomatic pressure from India, Bangladesh had earlier taken back 213 of its nationals from the no man's land on the Indo-Bangladesh border on February 6, ending a seven-day impasse. The 213 Bangladeshi migrants, most of them snake-charmers, were stranded on the no man's land since January 31, when BDR's attempt to push them into India was aborted by the BSF guards posted along the Indo-Bangla border. —PTI

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India hopes Bangladesh will adopt fresh approach

By Our Diplomatic Correspondent

NEW DELHI, FEB. 13. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, M. Morshed Khan, arrived here today for talks with his Indian counterpart, Yashwant Sinha, on Friday and meetings with the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, on Saturday.

Mr. Khan's visit comes at a tense time in bilateral relations, with a six-day stand-off in the Coochbehar sector of the border ending earlier this month.

Senior officials said that India hoped for a fresh approach and made it clear that it was not interested in sharpening the tensions with Bangladesh. The visit was not in the nature of an inquisition and there was no desire on India's part to put Mr. Khan (who is in Ajmer today) "on the mat," they stressed.

However, it was not good for Bangladesh to be in "denial mode" as far as bilateral

issues were concerned. Bangladesh should speak to India constructively on the issue of illegal immigration and the operations of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate and on the presence of terrorist camps in its territory.

India gave extensive documentation to Bangladesh in December 2001 about the presence of 99 terrorist camps and 88 infiltrators on its territory. Dhaka, the officials claimed, had never responded in a credible and constructive manner.

On the issue of Al-Qaeda operatives in Bangladesh, the officials said this was in the realm of speculation and the reports about the presence of these terrorists required more investigation. "Private demarches" were not eliciting any response from Dhaka, they pointed out.

Whatever the estimates of Bangladeshis living illegally in India — it was put at between 12 million and 15 million — it was impossible to identify and evict them. Ban-

gladesh needed to recognise the problem and contain it. Way back in 1992, the then and current Bangladesh Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, had admitted in a joint communiqué that illegal immigration was a problem. Ten years later, Bangladesh could not say there was no problem, the officials said. Asked whether it was Dhaka's "state policy" to infiltrate people, they said it was not a conscious policy but an apparent decision not to address the issue.

Referring to Bangladesh's concerns over its trade deficit with India, he said India had already extended 50 to 75 per cent duty concession on 110 out of 121 items. However, on transit rights, Dhaka had been unwilling to move. The issue was not simply that of trade imbalance.

A spokesman for the Bangladesh High Commission told this correspondent that all issues would come up for discussions. "We don't want to turn the clock back. We want good relations with India," he said.

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Settle disputes under international laws: Dhaka

7/3

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, FEB. 6. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, M. Morshed Khan, has urged India to follow international laws to settle all outstanding bilateral issues including that of so-called illegal immigrants. "There is not a single Bangladeshi migrant in India," he told the *News Today* on Wednesday when his attention was drawn to the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani and the Defence Minister, George Fernandes.

He is due to visit New Delhi shortly at the invitation of his Indian counterpart, the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary, Shamsur Mobin

Chowdhury, said at a news briefing here today. He said that after "a very fruitful discussion" the Bangladesh High Commissioner to New Delhi had with the External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, on Tuesday, Mr. Sinha phoned Mr. Khan and extended him the invitation.

Mr. Chowdhury described the development as "a positive sign" saying this would also help remove bilateral irritants as well as give scope for holding discussions on all other bilateral matters. The Foreign Office, however, did not specify the date when Mr. Khan's visit to Delhi will take place.

In the interview with the *News Today*, Mr. Khan

110-12

ited a recent instance in which Bangladesh was requested by India to verify the nationality of over 200 fishermen arrested there. "We found the fishermen to be of Bangladesh origin and made arrangements to repatriate them."

He said, India, being a close neighbour, should pursue policies that only add to the amity between the two countries. Bangladesh believed in friendship with all neighbours and the country's image as a peace-loving nation was acclaimed even by the U.N. and the international community, he said.

"Bangladesh is always ready to help India, provided Delhi comes up with documentary evidence of the so-called illegal migrants", he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Khan has dismissed Mr. Fernandes' claim that the border situation has gone "out of control". "I don't believe the situation has gone out of control," he told the BBC last night.

"We are extremely cautious in our comments, actions and remarks. There is no provocation from our side." He stressed that any difference between the two countries should be resolved through negotiation, not confrontation.

"They have the right to send troops to the border. But I think Bangladesh is a friendly neighbour." However, he said Bangladesh would do everything to protect its border.

7 FEB 2003

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2003

AVOIDABLE UNPLEASANTNESS

THE CRISIS OVER the 200-odd people who were stranded on the India-Bangladesh border for a week has blown over with Bangladesh apparently agreeing to take them back. The impasse over the illegal immigrants, which had resulted in a diplomatic war of words and sporadic exchanges of gunfire across the border, had shown no signs of ending until recently, with both New Delhi and Dhaka adopting diametrically opposite views about where the stranded group of snake-charmers came from and where it was migrating to. The manner in which the crisis ended, with the group dispersing quietly in the dead of night into Bangladesh, would suggest that India was correct when it claimed that these stranded people were Bangladeshi intercepted at the border when attempting to cross over. Dhaka, of course, has denied accepting the snake charmers, but it could hardly be expected to admit this having repeatedly declared that the group was made up of Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims that New Delhi was trying to push across the border.

While it is a matter of relief that the trouble over the snake charmers is over, it is truly unfortunate that this trifling issue should have escalated to such a disagreeable and potentially dangerous level. A disagreement over a small group of poor snake charmers should never have been allowed to develop into a situation where tensions ran so high and where strong words and volleys of gunfire were exchanged. The manner in which the crisis ended — in a show of diplomatic sabre-rattling rather than a spirit of mutual understanding — reflects the complete lack of cooperation between India and Bangladesh on the illegal immigration issue. Therefore, any relief about the fact that the immediate crisis has blown over must be tempered by the sober recognition that the larger issues concerning immigration remain to be sorted out.

There is arguably a greater need to do this now than ever before. Relations between India and Bangladesh are at a palpable low and the immigration issue has contributed towards this

in no small measure. Of late, Dhaka has been repeatedly complaining that New Delhi has been attempting to coerce people across the border and into Bangladesh. With some Bangladeshi officials alleging as many as 30 such "push ins" over the last few days, the allegation here is of the existence of an extensive and coordinated Indian programme to force what Dhaka euphemistically describes as Bengali-speaking Muslims across the border. The "push in" allegations have followed the Union Home Minister, L.K. Advani's blunt and recurring calls for Bangladeshi migrants to be "pushed out" — resulting in a cycle of retort and recrimination.

India has allowed its relationship with Bangladesh to slide in the recent past and although other issues such as territorial disputes have contributed their share towards this, the main sticking point that has emerged is that of illegal immigration. The BJP-led Government, particularly Mr. Advani, has chosen to address this issue in a politically provocative manner — its strident and emotive calls to throw all Bangladeshi migrants out failing to address the impracticality of such a move. Bangladeshi immigration into India has taken place steadily over three decades and the task of distinguishing migrant from non-migrant is next to impossible (particularly when many of the immigrants have exploited the lax procedures to acquire ration and voter identity cards). Rather than repeatedly talk of "pushing them back", New Delhi would do better by implementing measures that check further Bangladeshi immigration which, according to estimates, continues at an undiminished rate of three lakhs a year. The real challenge before New Delhi is to plug a permeable border which is all of 4000 km long and not to indulge in rhetoric about mass-scale deportation that is impractical, unreasonable and runs the risk of provoking Bangladesh — which has been less than helpful and cooperative on the illegal immigration issue — to adopt even more stubborn and unaccommodating postures.

Dealing with Bangladesh — II

By Muchkund Dubey

INDIA CLAIMS that its allegations regarding the increase in the number of camps in Bangladesh, of Northeast insurgents, the link of Dhaka-based ISI operatives with these camps, and that of some of elements of fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh with the Al-Qaeda, are solidly backed by intelligence reports and other credible evidence. However, we know that the credibility of such reports and evidence has not been beyond reproach. In relation to the activities in India of Pakistani jihadi elements, we have failed to convince Western countries about the basis of such evidence. Our courts have refused to admit cases based on such evidence. And there has been hardly any conviction on the strength of such evidence. Unfortunately, in India we have come to a pass where most instances of serious breach of law and order or terrorist violence are attributed to Pakistan's ISI. It is bad enough to do so as a cover-up for the virtual collapse of law and order in the country. But it is far more serious to do so for wantonly spoiling bilateral relations with one of our most important neighbours.

Insurgents in the Northeast have been using Bangladesh territory for several years, dating back to the time of the Mujib Government. Successive Governments in Dhaka have privately admitted the presence of such insurgents and have promised to take action against them and, at times, even joint operations have been taken. But such is the nature of the problem — rooted in domestic factors — that it refuses to disappear. Even the more friendly country, Bhutan, finds itself helpless in taking action against Indian insurgents hiding on its territory. Then why single out the present Bangladesh Government? Should we not take a more realistic view of the problem and refrain from playing it up the way we are doing?

In any case, there is little justification in repeatedly going public on this issue. This can only introduce an avoidable jarring note in the relations between the two countries. The Indian Government has argued that it went public only after the failure of repeated efforts at all levels to elicit Bangladesh's cooperation. But have the public statements yielded the de-

sired result? In fact, they have made it even more difficult for Dhaka to cooperate. In the process, our overall bilateral relations have sharply deteriorated, putting in jeopardy the prospects of cooperation in other areas also.

The question then is: why, in spite of these valid considerations, is the Government bent upon following the present counter-productive course of dealing with Bangladesh? Several observers of the Indian political scene believe that the recent stridency in the Indian Government's tone in

is not surprising that ulterior political motives are being attributed to the BJP-led Government's attempt to resurrect this controversy.

It is indeed difficult to believe that a leader of the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's vision and stature would condescend to holding our relations with Bangladesh — and for that matter with Pakistan — a hostage to electoral exigency for well over 20 months to come. In the process, we will be instrumental in weakening the position of secular democratic forces in Bangladesh and

It is not surprising that ulterior political motives are being attributed to the BJP-led Government's attempt to resurrect the controversy over migration from Bangladesh.

dealing with Pakistan and Bangladesh is part of the BJP's strategy to apply the Gujarat formula of exploiting and accentuating communal polarisation, for garnering Hindu votes in the coming elections to State Assemblies, leading up to the general elections in end-2004. This is seen as a cynical device to appeal to the Hindu voters by invoking the image of Mian Musharraf on the West and the danger lurking on our eastern border with pre-dominantly Muslim Bangladesh. This theory has gained greater credibility with L.K. Advani's out-of-season public statement on the deportation of Bangladeshis. We all know it has been a part of the BJP's political platform, invoked from time to time. It is also an issue which in the past has generated bitter controversy and great deal of animosity and anxiety both in Bangladesh and India. First, the figure of 15 million itself is highly exaggerated and almost impossible to verify. Second, its relationship with India's security remains unsubstantiated. Third, this issue in the past has assumed communal colour and emotive character and has been used for divisive purpose within India. This has enhanced the sense of insecurity of the Indian Muslims. Finally, the proposition of pushing back 15 million people into Bangladesh is manifestly impracticable as it is bound to be regarded as an assault on Bangladesh's sovereignty, to be resisted at all costs. Therefore, it

lead to the further polarisation of Bangladeshi society.

It seems that the Indian Government has come very close to giving up on the present Bangladesh Government. It argues that in spite of all initiatives taken by it, Begum Khaleda Zia's Government has shown no sensitivity towards any issue of major concern to India and has appeared to be too willing to play second fiddle to Pakistan. In my view, this judgement is self-defeating, if not erroneous.

Bangladesh is too important a country for India to give up under any pretext or circumstance. It is one of the largest markets in the world for our manufactured exports. Developments in that country have a close bearing on our long-term security interests. Maintenance of a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society in that country is an essential element in the preservation of our own pluralism. It is also safe to proceed on the assumption that no government in power in Bangladesh — whether the BNP or the Awami League — will play second fiddle to any outside power, including Pakistan or would compromise on its sovereignty and independence of action. The fundamentals of the relations between the two countries are still healthy and sound and the knitty-gritty of the relations are still being persevered with in spite of all the vituperations in public. A number of bilateral dialogues at the expert and

official levels have been held recently. What is needed is to stop misreading each other's intentions, and restore confidence in each other. The most essential and urgent first step in this direction is to refrain from conducting diplomacy through public statements and media publicity. All bilateral issues must be taken up and resolved quietly and privately through diplomatic channels. Moreover, all the bilateral institutions already in place should be revived. Besides, people-to-people contacts should be vigorously pursued at all levels and for this purpose special programmes and events should be organised.

Finally, some major initiatives should be taken to put the relations on a new positive track. This gesture should more appropriately come from the bigger neighbour, India. Mr. Vajpayee's visit to Bangladesh can be a major step forward to break the present logjam in the bilateral relations. When it comes to mending relations between close neighbours, there is no point in sticking to petty protocol considerations of which head of government last visited the other country and whose turn it is now to pay an official visit. As is the practice in the European Union and among countries in Latin America, a head of government should be able just to call his counterpart in order to undertake a mission to the neighbouring country whenever the situation so demands. It is worth recalling that the Chinese Prime Minister and Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf visited Dhaka soon after Begum Khaleda Zia assumed power.

Such a gesture by the Indian Prime Minister will prove fruitful in restoring confidence and setting the relations on the right course even if during the visit itself there is no breakthrough on any major issue. The visit can be imparted much greater significance and its impact made longer lasting if it is accompanied by a package of really liberal and far-reaching trade concessions by India. After all, Mr. Vajpayee has yet to redeem the pledge he made during his last visit to Bangladesh in May 1999, for providing duty-free and quota-free access to Bangladeshi exports in the Indian market.

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BSF, BDR FLAG MEETINGS IN VAIN

Bangla guards on high alert

6/2

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, FEB. 5. Tension along the India-Bangladesh border has increased as allegations and counter-allegations over push-in and push-back of Bengali-speaking Muslims continue with no sign of rapprochement between the two countries.

According to officials here, the Border Security Force continues to push in "Bengali-speaking Indian nationals" into Bangladesh and 34 such bids had been made in the last week. The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) has been put on high alert, following reports that the Indian side started evacuation of the bordering villages in northern region, adjoining Coochbehar.

Dhaka hinted at various levels that it was waiting for a diplomatic solution to the problem under international laws but said that it was not going to budge from its stand.

Reports from Lalmonirhat adjoining West Bengal said 213 people were still stranded in no man's land for the past six days, while the BDR and the villagers were resisting their entry into

Bangladesh, claiming that they were not Bangladeshis.

The Bangladesh media reported that after "failure in repeated push-in bids, the BSF had started evacuating the villagers across the Patgram in Lalmonirhat and Panchagar borders in the northern region".

The BSF stepped up vigilance along the border, following break-up of the BDR-BSF flag meeting.

It reportedly mobilised heavy arms at Satgachhi and took positions in bunkers and trenches.

Several thousands of villagers reportedly left their homes fearing a possible exchange of fire. The local people said truckloads of Bengali-speaking nationals were brought to Madanbari and Sukani BSF camps. But they "could not push them" into Bangladesh due to stiff resistance.

Another report from northern Thakurgaon district said the BDR was on red alert. Border villages were cautioned about the "BSF movement" and attempt to push in "Indian nationals". The BDR threatened "necessary actions" unless the BSF stopped its 'push-ins'.

"The situation may deteriorate at any moment, as the Indian security forces have created a war-like situation," Lt. Col. Ashrafur Islam, Commanding Officer of the 19 battalion of the BDR, told a leading daily.

Tension in Panchagarh district increased after the BDR reportedly foiled an attempt by the BSF to "push in" over 2,000 Bengali-speaking people on Tuesday.

The BDR claimed that it had "thwarted the BSF's attempts to push Indian nationals into Bangladesh through Barashasi, Boathgaon, Atowari, Boda, Dunakata, Malekadanga and Goalgoach areas".

Earlier, three flag meetings between the BDR and the BSF ended inconclusively.

Sinha reviews situation: Page 11

They have no right to stay here: Advani

KOLKATA, FEB. 5. The Deputy Prime Minister, I. K. Advani, today said Bangladeshi infiltrators have "no right" to reside here permanently. "Today in India, a large number of Bangladeshis are coming in. In no country of the world, such illegal immigration takes place," he told newsmen, during a 50-minute stopover of his special flight for refuelling here on way to New Delhi from Singapore.

Referring to the situation that had developed in Coochbehar district, over the deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants by the BSF, Mr. Advani said he spoke to the External Affairs Minister in Delhi on the issue and had been informed that the External Affairs Ministry, the Union Home Ministry and BSF officials had held a discussion on the situation in New Delhi today. — UNI

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2003

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Bangla

A BRUSH ON THE BORDER

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572

TENSIONS ALONG THE India-Bangladesh border seem to be growing disturbingly as the two neighbours argue over the nationality of over 200 people who have been trapped in a "no man's land" near a border post in the Cooch-Bihar area for four days now. Indian officials contend that these people, mainly Hindu snake-charmers and their families, were intercepted at the border post when attempting to cross over from Bangladesh, which is refusing to take them back. Dhaka claims that the stranded group comprises Indian Muslims, whom New Delhi is trying to push into Bangladesh. Ordinarily, there should be no difficulty at all in establishing the true identities of these stranded people, who have spent the past few days in open fields and in very trying conditions. That India and Bangladesh could bicker for days about what are easily verifiable matters of fact reflects the complete lack of trust and cooperation between the two neighbours on the sensitive immigration issue.

With three flag meetings between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) failing to make any headway, the situation called for immediate and sincere diplomatic efforts to resolve the problem about the disputed group and initiate steps to reduce the attendant tension along the border. Unfortunately though, what has ensued is a diplomatic war of words. As a measure of its displeasure over Dhaka's refusal to abide by the agreed rules for accepting back people detained while trying to cross the border, New Delhi has handed an *aide memoire* to the Bangladesh High Commissioner. In turn, Dhaka has stated it will never allow what it claims are Indians to enter Bangladesh. Perhaps not altogether surprisingly, these unhelpful exchanges in the theatre of diplomacy have spilled over worryingly into the front line, with exchanges of gunfire across the border.

That an incident involving a group of 200-odd poor people could have grown into a controversy of such proportions, and could threaten to snow-

ball even further, is a reflection of how relations between the two countries have deteriorated in recent years. Cross-border tensions and skirmishes, either over disputes over migration or over differences over territory, have been much too recurrent to ignore — the most serious crisis occurring in April last year when a number of BSF personnel were killed in a war-like situation that prevailed at a particular border outpost. Over the last month or so, the BJP Government has sought to draw attention to the illegal immigration issue by raising it repeatedly. Rather than address the problem constructively and pragmatically, the issue has been raised in an emotive way, typified by the Union Home Minister, L.K. Advani's strident and impractical call for the throwing out of Bangladeshi migrants (who now number over 15 million and who now are armed with documents such as ration and voter identity cards).

Such statements may be intended for a domestic political constituency, but they have caused perceptible disquiet and anxiety across the border, resulting in the recurring allegation that India is currently engaged in a massive and systematic drive to "push in" what Dhaka describes as Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims into Bangladesh. As the larger and more powerful neighbour, India has a considerable amount at stake in forging a healthy long-term relationship with Dhaka and it must not allow illegal Bangladeshi immigration — which continues across the porous 4,000-km border and which Dhaka annoyingly refuses to acknowledge or be cooperative about — to come in the way of this larger interest. Illegal crossings must be addressed by efficient border management and not by using words or adopting measures that provoke the other side into adopting an even more uncompromising or intransigent posture. If India and Bangladesh are truly aware of where their common and long-term interests lie, they could never have allowed a small controversy over a group of snake-charmers to escalate to such an unpleasant level.

THE HINDU

- 5 FEB 2003

Dealing with Bangladesh — I

By Mukund Dabry

9/10/03
Bangla
10-10 5/2

RELATIONS BETWEEN a big neighbour and a small neighbour need to be nurtured with great care and sensitivity. For, psychological factors play as important a role in shaping them as the objective ones. Besides, such relations cannot stand still for any length of time. If they are not imparted fresh impetus every now and then they tend to deteriorate very sharply. What the big neighbour may regard as benign neglect is very often seen as an insult and humiliation by the smaller neighbour.

For quite sometime now — going back to the last few months of the Awami League Government — India-Bangladesh relations have not displayed much dynamism or buoyancy. For the last few months, they have seemed to be sliding on the downward path. Both sides have been indulging in accusations and counter-accusations. Each side has been making public statements the other side regards as malevolent and spiteful. In the perception of several influential and well-meaning Bangladeshis, the relations have plummeted to a new nadir. This is perhaps not true, but an understanding of the perceptions of the other side is important for making a beginning towards mending the relations.

The present impasse has arrived in spite of the fact that the Indian Prime Minister sent a special envoy to Begum Khaleda Zia almost immediately after she assumed power. The envoy conveyed India's respect for the people's verdict which brought her to power, and its desire to move forward with the new Government on all fronts of bilateral relations. He flagged India's interests in major areas and showed sensitivity towards Bangladesh's interests. Finally, he extended the Indian Prime Minister's invitation to Begum Zia to visit India.

The visit to Bangladesh in late August last year by the new External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, was designed to dispel the generally prevailing impression of Indian foreign policy makers' obsession with

Pakistan, leaving very little space for nurturing relations with smaller neighbours. A subsidiary purpose was to help activate various bilateral institutions for conducting relations which had been lying dormant for long intervals. Mr. Sinha met the right persons, said the right things and struck the right constructive note and without indulging in any hyperbole, rhetoric or pontification, conveyed the importance that India

Sheikh Hasina, happened to be in New Delhi on a visit to deliver a memorial lecture. Mr. Sinha's statement was, therefore, regarded as grist to the Awami League's mill of the vilification of the government in power. On November 29, the Defence Minister, George Fernandes, asserted at a meeting with media-persons in Bangalore that India had in its possession, intelligence reports and other evidence to buttress these

Bangladeshis are particularly resentful of the allegation that their country has become the hotbed of ISI activities.

attached to its relations with Bangladesh.

A few weeks after the visit, started the downward drift in India-Bangladesh relations. The process is still continuing, with a quickened pace recently. From Bangladesh's point of view, this has been triggered by a spate of ill-considered public statements emanating from the Indian side. On November 7, the Deputy Prime Minister, L. K. Advani, talking to media-persons in Bhiwani, Haryana, voiced serious concern over what he termed the growing activities of the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh after the change of government in that country. He also alleged that the Bangladesh Government was lending covert support to insurgents in India's northeastern region. On November 10, the Indian High Commission in Dhaka took the unusual step of issuing a statement highlighting the Bangladesh Government's support for these insurgents. On November 27, the External Affairs Minister informed the Lok Sabha that the Pakistan Mission in Dhaka had become the nerve centre of the ISI's activities encouraging terrorism against India and that some Al-Qaeda elements had taken shelter in Bangladesh. This statement became all the more controversial because it was made on the day the Awami League leader,

charges. By far the most jarring note in India-Bangladesh relations was introduced by Mr. Advani when he stated while addressing a meeting in New Delhi of State Chief Secretaries and Directors-General of Police, on January 6, 2003, that 15 million Bangladeshis who were staying in India illegally posed a serious threat to the country's internal security. They would, therefore, be located and deported.

These statements have given rise to strong resentment in Bangladesh both in official and non-official quarters and have elicited strong protests. The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary summoned the Indian High Commissioner and is reported to have conveyed his Government's concern and indignation at Mr. Advani's Bhiwani statement. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, characterised the statement as "baseless, unfounded and malicious". Speaking at a seminar in Dhaka on December 11, the Bangladesh Planning and Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman, a senior Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader who is generally favourably disposed towards India, described India as "an aggressive and difficult country to live with".

In Bangladesh, these statements and media reports and comments based thereon, have been taken as a deliberate attempt on the part of In-

dia to tarnish Bangladesh's image in foreign countries. This, according to Bangladeshis, has the effect of putting their country outside the international mainstream and undermining its economic prospects. This view is not only held by the Government, but also widely shared in the country. In some of the seminars I attended recently, I came across Bangladeshi scholars with unimpeachable secular credentials, who harbour these feelings and feel badly let down by India.

Thus, these statements have generated a whole chain of negative reactions in Bangladesh, projecting an image of India which is arrogant, overbearing and insensitive to Bangladesh's interest. This has vitiated the climate of bilateral relations to an extent where it has become extremely difficult for either side to address issues of major concern, including those being raised by India, in a dispassionate and serious manner. Moreover, a view commonly expressed in Bangladesh is that it does not behove a Government that is callously polarising Indian society on communal lines for the purpose of serving domestic political purpose, to project Bangladesh as a bastion of Islamic fundamentalism.

Bangladeshis are particularly resentful of the allegation that their country has become the hotbed of ISI activities. They say that, after all, they did not make the great sacrifice for liberating their country in order to mortgage themselves back to Pakistan.

Of course, the Pakistani Mission in Dhaka has ISI elements as does its Mission in Delhi. And at times, they tend to become too active not only in Bangladesh but also in India. As a matter of fact, Mr. Advani himself has been repeatedly highlighting the greatly enhanced activities of the ISI in India. If a country like India with its vastly superior law and order machinery and endowed with much larger resources than Bangladesh, cannot keep a tab on or effectively control the ISI activities, how does it expect Bangladesh to be able to do so.

Tension on Indo-Bangla border

119-1
By Our Special Correspondent

4/2
KOLKATA, FEB. 3. Tension is running high along the Indo-Bangladesh border at the Satgachi outpost in Coochbehar district of West Bengal where three days ago the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) resisted a move by 213 Bangladeshis to re-enter their country.

According to officials of the Border Security Force, the 213 Bangladeshi nationals are Hindus and snake-charmers from Porabari in Manikgunj sub-division of Bangladesh.

They are now stranded on the zero line, unable to re-enter Bangladesh as talks between the BDR and the BSF have failed to resolve the impasse.

"Residents of Satgachi and its nearby areas are likely to be evacuated in view of the tension along the border," the DIG (HQ) of Police, N.C. Ghosh,

said today. "Evacuation may begin any moment in view of the highly volatile situation."

Kamal Guha, West Bengal Agriculture Minister and Forward Bloc MLA from Coochbehar, has urged the Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, to take up the issue with the Union Home Ministry before it developed into a border skirmish.

AP reports from Dhaka:

Bangladeshi and Indian border troops traded gunfire today as Indian authorities tried to deport more Bengali-speaking people to Bangladesh, a Bangladeshi border official said. There were no reports of casualties.

The latest shooting incident happened early today in the remote northern district of Panchagarh, a Bangladesh Rifles official said on conditions of anonymity.

Issue taken up with envoy

By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, FEB. 3. As the fate of 213 persons stranded on the "zero line" between Bangladesh and India remained undecided, a senior official of the Ministry of External Affairs, Mira Shankar, met with the Bangladeshi High Commissioner to India, Tufail K. Haider, here today.

The Foreign Office spokesman said there was a discussion on the "detention" of the 213 Bangladeshi nationals, who were not being allowed to return to their own country. The spokesman said they were currently near the Border Post No. 867 in the Cooch-Behar. India would provide humanitarian aid, if allowed by Bangladesh.

There had been three flag meetings between the Indian and Bangladeshi border securi-

ty officials since January 31, but the issue had not yet been resolved. Referring to the meeting with the Bangladesh High Commissioner, the spokesman said that an "aide memoire" had been handed over to him by Ms. Shankar.

To questions, the spokesman stressed that the citizenship of the 213 was not an issue as far as India was concerned — they were all Bangladeshi citizens and some of them were even carrying electricity bills.

In a related development, Mr. Haider told this correspondent that he was made aware of the gravity of the situation only today. The developments involving the 213 persons were taking place far away from him. He was seeking clarification and instructions from his Government.

Mr. Haider claimed efforts were on to "infuse" a "new element" into the strained relations between Bangladesh and India. After talking about militants from India taking shelter in Bangladesh, the Al-Qaeda factor was the "new element" that had been introduced in the situation. "You don't push in people," Mr. Haider said.

Asked if reports that the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, would visit New Delhi were true, Mr. Haider said a "political contact" between the two countries was quite possible. He also said India should not use the word "infiltration" as it had a different connotation, but speak of "illegal immigration" or "economic migrants" while referring to Bangladeshi citizens crossing into the Indian territory.

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- 4 FEB 2003

India has a major role: French PM

By Vaiju Naravane

PARIS, FEB. 2. Excerpts from an exclusive interview with the French Prime Minister, **Jean-Pierre Raffarin**, conducted by *The Hindu's* Paris Correspondent, **Vaiju Naravane**.

Question: Prime Minister Raffarin, would it be right to say that France has made a strategic choice in favour of India? What do you expect this visit to yield?

Jean-Pierre Raffarin: This is a choice that personally involves the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac. Since I was appointed Prime Minister, the President insisted that I make India my first major trip. So it's a clear choice, a visit to India only — not part of a larger trip to the region — that speaks of our conviction that India has a major role to play in the world today. It also underlines the importance we give to the development of our relations. At the highest level, we wish to develop a strategic partnership with India. My personal objective is to deepen our ties, particularly in the economic and commercial fields. I am accompanied by a high-level delegation that includes the head of MEDEF, French business leaders' association. If we are to change stereotyped perceptions of each other, communication is vital as are exchanges among civil society. We must make the realities of the two countries known. Official relations cannot replace the vitality of links between two peoples. The proof lies in the success of recent films like 'Lagaan' or 'Monsoon Wedding.' I also believe in student exchanges. We have significantly increased bursaries for Indian students and researchers and there are plans for a programme under which the French and the Indian artistes can live in each other's countries.

What message would you like your visit to deliver?

I would like a better understanding of India by the French media and businessmen. Beyond this visit, I would like concrete projects to see the light of day.

How do you account for the baffling lag in the political and economic ties between the two countries?

The political leadership has to do its work. Which is why I am accompanied by several top-level businessmen, elected officials and cultural personalities. With 180 French companies operating in India, I would not say our presence is negligible. However, France is a tradi-

tional country and has woken up late to the need to globalise, to reach out. Cultural differences also act as a brake. Although there is genuine affection and fascination for your culture it appears too complex, too distant and we have to build bridges. One of the strong points of my visit will be the opening of the 'Season of France' in India which will be a window on what the French companies have to offer.

In the defence sector, what type of contracts and sales is France proposing to India?

With India, we are developing a defence relationship based on mutual confidence and good understanding. Our industrialists are tying up partnerships with the Indian armaments industry to develop joint projects, especially in the aeronautic and naval sectors. I have confidence in the future development of this cooperation.

INTERVIEW

There is a perception in India that the West practises double standards, making a difference between local and international terrorism. Even if France condemns terrorist acts in Jammu and Kashmir, it is seen as being soft on the Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf.

Let us be clear. France firmly condemns terrorist acts and their authors, whatever their motivations. France has been hit hard by terrorism and we have no complacency towards perpetrators of such barbarous acts. Eleven of our compatriots were killed in an attack in Karachi last year... We share this combat with India. We support the Indian proposal for a convention against terrorism and have been working together since 2001. Pakistan has made commitments to fight terrorism. It is in its interest and its responsibility to respect these commitments, whether it concerns internal terrorism or the use of its territory for attacks elsewhere.

You will be in India when (the U.S. Secretary of State) Gen. Powell makes his speech before the Security Council. How would you describe the French position on Iraq?

I cannot enunciate the French position before it has been adopted. There is no happy war and quick wars are rare. So we are alerting decision-makers that there are other means, besides war, of dealing with the disarmament of Iraq.

We feel that war has serious consequences, that the region is extremely fragile and that it is necessary to have a multipolar vision of international balance of forces. As for France, we have every intention of retaining our autonomy. We shall weigh the arguments the U.S. has to offer and decide on our position and if that happens when I am in India, I shall express my thoughts then.

With reference to the letter signed by nine European leaders supporting the U.S. position on Iraq, do you think the Franco-German alliance frightens your European partners? Does European disunity sadden you?

There is certain sadness because I would like us to be more united. I don't think the Franco-German alliance frightens our partners, but it's the same old story. When the Franco-German marriage fails to work, Europe stagnates, and when it works it stimulates the others. We are in a phase of European stimulation. That's legitimate. We stand on the eve of major changes in Europe. It's a moment when Europe is expressing itself in all its diversity, with the Franco-German couple giving the impression that it wants to lead the pack. That's not our intention. The divergence over Iraq is a reflection of the 20th century, rather than the 21st century Europe. I think the new Europe will have a different face, a different approach. Today, the European president changes every six months, there is a dispersal of responsibilities that makes for incoherence. The day Britain joins the Euro Zone, the day we have an elected president and a Constitution, Europe will be more sure of its own future and less dependent on its external partners.

In France, is there a feeling of fear towards Islam?

Islam is the second religion in France and my Government has acted so that it finds its place in the nation's community. Prejudice fed by ignorance subsists, but I decry those who speak of an inevitable clash of civilisations.

There is growing extremism everywhere. Does Hindu nationalism worry you?

France is extremely sensitive to the extraordinary lesson of tolerance India carries in her. The figure of Mahatma Gandhi, the spirit of non-violence with its ancient roots are at the basis of India's democracy and continue to inspire those fighting for peace and freedom. The secular nature of the Indian State is part of

this historical process which gives India the prestige and authority it enjoys today. These are the values on which we have built the partnership between our two countries. I have full confidence in the authorities and people of India to avoid the dangers and pitfalls of all forms of extremism and fundamentalism.

Prime Minister, one of the factors that casts a slur on France's reputation as a great humanist society is the question of immigration and racial tensions.

That is a problem. Traditionally, we have had an open society. But proof that our policy of integration had failed became clear when French youth born of immigrant parents booed the national anthem during a France-Algeria football match. They did it because they did not feel part of the French society. We have now decided to introduce new policies not only on immigration and asylum but also on integration. When someone adopts the French nationality, it must be a wholehearted gesture. France was not used to this racial and cultural and religious mixing, intermingling. But today, Islam is the country's second religion and the question is not do we open our door. It is how do we integrate those who are here. We are taking new measures so that the country accepts these inter-racial, inter-cultural realities in the best traditions of Republican France.

How do you see the question of immigration and what sort of policies should Europe adopt?

The problems posed by immigration must be dealt with responsibly and humanely. Europe, because of its economy, employment opportunities and resources, has become an attractive destination for migratory flows. Most immigrants come here legally but several others come in illegally, often with the help of human traffickers. While it is our duty to welcome legal immigrants with a well thought-out policy of integration, we are also determined to fight illegal immigration and trafficking. France plays an important role in discussions at the European level because there has to be a joint strategy on this question.

Prime Minister, what makes you tick?

A mission. I believe in President Chirac's vision, I participated actively in the strategy behind his election which resulted in this mission. So I have a certain number of goals to achieve, reforms to carry out. I am active, alert, mobilised but also serene.

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2003

'PAK. HAS A DUTY TO FIGHT TERRORISM'

France for strategic ties with India: Raffarin

By Vaiju Naravane

PARIS, FEB. 2. France has made a strategic choice in favour of India. "This is a choice that personally involves the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac. It speaks of our conviction that India has a major role to play in the world today and underlines our desire to develop a strategic partnership with India," the French Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, told *The Hindu* in an exclusive interview ahead of his departure to India for a two-day state visit.

Mr. Raffarin is heading an impressive delegation of over 170 persons that includes four crucial Ministers — Finance, Infrastructure and Transport, New Technologies and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, over 20 top industrialists, MPs, Senators and cultural personalities.

In the interview covering a wide range of subjects, including divisions within the European Union over Iraq and France's ties with Pakistan, Mr. Raffarin said that fighting terrorism was "in Pakistan's interest." Pakistan had a duty to honour its commitments to fight terrorism, internal or external.

During his trip, Mr. Raffarin will visit the Aero-India show in Bangalore. In New Delhi, he will have meetings with the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, and



the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, as well as Indian business leaders. Mr. Raffarin said his personal objective was to deepen ties with India, particularly in the economic and commercial sectors. "If we are to change stereotypical perceptions of each other, communication is vital as are exchanges between civil society in the two countries."

India is expected to finalise a contract for the purchase for six Scorpene SKK submarines from France, a contract valued at \$1.8 billion. India is also negotiating the purchase of some 60 Airbus aircraft for Indian Airlines and Air-India. The French Transport Minister, Gilles de Robien, accompanying the Prime Minister on this trip, is expected to push

hard for an early conclusion of the deal. India is also negotiating for the outright purchase of 18 Mirage 2000H fighter planes and the construction in India of the remaining 108 planes for a contract estimated at \$8 billion.

The French manufacturer of aircraft engines, Snecma, is signing an MOU with Hindustan Aeronautics for the manufacture of PM333B engines under licence from the Snecma subsidiary, Turbomeka. The engine developed in India will be called Shakti.

French officials are at pains to point out that France's relationship with India is "qualitatively different" from its ties with Pakistan. "There are no new contracts under way. We are cooperating with India in advanced research, high technology. There is genuine transfer of technology in defence. India is a strategic partner. We do not have the same discourse with Pakistan," officials here told *The Hindu*.

Mr. Raffarin underscored this when he declared: "With India we are developing a defence relationship based on good understanding and mutual confidence. Our industrialists are tying up partnerships with the Indian armaments industry to develop joint projects, especially in the aeronautics and naval sectors."

Details on Page 12

3 FEB 2003

India, Bangladesh talks inconclusive

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JAN. 24. A two-day meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Working Group (JWG) has ended here without any positive outcome. The meeting failed to issue a joint statement at the end of the deliberations on Wednesday.

The two sides discussed several outstanding issues, including the demarcation of the land boundaries, but did not make any headway.

Kamaluddin Ahmed, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Home, led the Bangladesh team while his counterpart, A.K. Jain, led the Indian side.

Dhaka mission to mend fences

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Feb. 9: The standoff on the 213 snake charmers trapped on the no-man's land near the Cooch Behar border may be over, but irritants in ties between Bangladesh and India remain.

Bangladesh foreign minister Morshed Khan is coming here on a four-day official visit, beginning February 13, in what appears to be an attempt to remove some of the obstacles that stand in the way of improving relations between Delhi and Dhaka.

Khan was scheduled to arrive here tomorrow for a two-day visit, but the dates had to be re-worked to give the minister more time in India and not force him to hurry back to Dhaka for Id on February 12. His visit here is important, both in terms of the message it sends out and also in the content that comes up for discussion between him and the Indian leadership.

This will be the Bangladesh foreign minister's first visit to India. An invitation was extend-

ed to him by Yashwant Sinha when the Indian external affairs minister visited Dhaka in last August.

The Bangladesh minister will start his official tour with a visit to the *dargah* of Moinuddin Chisti in Ajmer. On February 14, Khan, who will lead a high-level delegation, will have his main interaction with Sinha and the Indian delegation.

Over the next two days, Khan will meet Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and leader of Opposition Sonia Gandhi. He will leave for Dhaka on February 16.

The thrust will be on how bilateral relations can be strengthened. Delhi will stress on security-related issues and Dhaka's indifference to address them. The level of concern in the Indian establishment can be gauged from Vajpayee's mentioning at the chief ministers' conference yesterday that Bangladesh is one of the countries where Pakistan's ISI has been spreading its anti-Indian activities.

Bangla minister on Delhi mission

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Feb. 6: Bangladesh foreign minister Mohammed Morshed Khan is arriving here on Monday to iron the creases in its relations with India even as the crisis over the snake charmers stranded on zero-line ended this morning after Delhi made it clear to Dhaka it will not accept the "Bangladeshi nationals".

Morshed will lead a high-level delegation that will include senior officials of the Bangladeshi interior ministry and agencies involved in border management. His main talks on the two-day trip will be with Indian foreign minister Yashwant Sinha. The two sides will try to iron out differences over illegal immigration to India and how future crises can be averted.

The end of the week-long impasse over the 213 snake-charmers on the border followed a late night phone call made by Morshed to Sinha. India made it apparent during the telephone talk that though it wanted to break the standoff at the earliest it was in no mood to give in to Dhaka's propaganda that the nomads were Indians.

Though Sinha was extremely courteous with Morshed, he did not hide the fact that Delhi was firm on its stated position — it would not allow any "illegal migrant" in, especially since the

Bangladeshi government seemed to be playing an active role in pushing them across.

Sinha's insistence that Bangladesh should respond to India's proposal for an immediate flag meeting between the inspectors-general of the Border Security Force and the Bangladesh Rifles broke the deadlock.

A meeting at the I-G level would mean the two sides would have to jointly verify the nationality of the snake-charmers and their families, stranded on the zero-line in Cooch Behar since January 31. Over the past few days, suggestions of a joint verification had been turned down by the BDR.

Delhi, which held firm from Day 1, was confident that it had enough evidence to prove that the stranded people on the border were Bangladeshi nationals. Having realised that the situation was fast slipping out of its grasp, Dhaka blinked first.

For a fig-leaf, it continued to insist that India had taken back the hapless group. But having seen the snake-charmers and their families melt into the night across the border into Bangladesh, it was a claim Delhi could live with.

Morshed had first conveyed his desire to visit Delhi through high commissioner Tufail Karim Haidar. Over phone, he told Sinha he was keen to visit Delhi at the earliest.



BSF jawans look over a patch deserted by the snake charmers on Thursday. (Reuters)

Nomads off beaten track

ALAMGIR HOSSAIN

Behrampore, Feb. 6: The ordeal the nomad families faced in Cooch Behar in the past week, caught between the guns drawn by the Border Security Force and the Bangladesh Rifles, is something the groups are gradually learning to avoid at the cost of livelihood.

Used to living for generations in a world without boundaries, pitching their tents to sell charms and herbal cures, entralling villagers with their music, magic, jugglery and handling of snakes, these gypsies — *bede* in Bangla — are now coming to grips with a new reality.

Rajinder Bede arrived here yesterday with a group of about 25 and pitched his tent on the roadside. "For quite a few days

we were camping near the border at Bongaon but did not get a chance to enter Bangladesh, unlike other years when no one stopped us from walking across and back. This time, it was very tense along the area, we could sense it and decided to come here instead," he said.

"Both are our land, we belong to wherever we can find means to earn a living. We have seasons. Around this time, we camp in Bangladesh to collect birds and honey. A month later, when the harvest is over, we sell medicinal plants and charms to villagers," the nomad said.

The other members of Rajinder's group said for about six months every year they roam the streets of Khulna, Chuadanga, Kusthia, Meherpur and other parts of Bangladesh.

They return once the "season" is over at the onset of monsoon. Once back in India, they travel the length of Bengal, from East Midnapore to North Dinajpur.

Camped on a field adjacent to National Highway 34 was another group of gypsies where Hazrat Bede sat smoking a bamboo pipe.

"We have been travelling on well-laid out paths for generations. We wanted to move towards Bangladesh when we heard from another group that it was mighty difficult to cross over, the situation was so tight that even the police (the BSF or the BDR) were refusing to be bribed to let us through," Hazrat said.

Hazrat's wife Pankari was worried that her father-in-law, Bholu, was still in Bangladesh.

7 FEB 2003

THE TELEGRAPH

BANGLA MINISTER'S VISIT CLEARED Dhaka rules out joint verification

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Feb. 5. — Bangladesh today rejected India's offer to jointly verify the 213 people stranded in the "no-man's land". But, a silver lining appeared this evening after the Bangladesh High Commissioner, Mr Tufail K Haider, met the foreign minister, Mr Yashwant Sinha. Mr Haider sought clearance for a visit by the Bangladesh foreign minister, Mr Morshed Khan, and was informed that Mr Sinha would be happy to receive him. Mr Khan is likely to come in the next few days to resolve the worsening humanitarian crisis on the Indo-Bangla border.

Bangladesh has deployed additional forces along the border. The foreign ministry spokesman said India had offered joint verification of the antecedents and nationalities of those stranded on the Zero Line. "Unfortunately this was not agreed to by the BDR," he said.

According to modalities agreed upon by both countries, persons apprehended while attempting to cross the border would be accepted on the basis

of disclosures made by them, or within three days, if verification was needed. These people have been stranded since 31 January.

Tension on the Cooch Behar frontier mounted today around 2.15 p.m., when the BDR refused to accept two letters from the DIG BSF (Cooch Behar sector), Mr DL Chaudhary, SNS adds

from Cooch Behar.

The letters protested against the BDR's decision to cancel tomorrow's flag meeting with the BSF and the former's announcement over the public address system at Nazirgoman village last night asking the people to be armed with lathis, bows and arrows.

At 1.45 p.m., the BSF started waving the yellow flag on the Zero Line, an indication to the BDR to come forward. After about half-an-hour, a subedar, Abdul Halim, did come forward but said he would have to seek permission from the higher authorities to accept the letters.

He didn't return.

Mr Halim came to the Zero Line once before, around 11.30 a.m., to hand over a letter from the commander of the BDR's 19 battalion, Mr Enayat Karim. In the letter, Mr Karim said the BDR could not attend tomorrow's flag meeting because of some other engagements.

The letter dashed hopes raised in the morning after the BDR waved the blue flag, indicating willingness for talks.



'Illegal migrants must go back'

Statesman News Service

KOLKATA, Feb. 5. — The illegal Bangladeshi immigrants would have to go back, Mr LK Advani said here today. "No country in the world accepts illegal immigrants. The illegal Bangladeshi immigrants cannot permanently reside in India," he said commenting on the stalemate created by BDR's refusal to accept the 213 Bangladeshis on the zero point in Cooch Behar district.

Turn to page 2

Indo-Bangla treaty extended, page 9

Snake-charmers cross over

Sudipta Chanda in Satgachi
(Cooch Behar)

Feb. 5. — Stranded on the Bangladesh border near Satgachi in Cooch Behar since 31 January night, the 213 Bangladeshi snake-charmers are "technically" back inside Bangladesh since late last night.

Separated from their homeland by a narrow aisle for the past five days, the 213 Bangladeshis stepped across the zero line last night.

A near saffron coloured flag planted by the BSF and a blue one planted by the BDR on the aisle mark the border

line. The stranded people are now on the other side of the aisle. "Technically they are now in Bangladesh," said the BSF's Cooch Behar sector commandant, Mr DL Chaudhary.

BDR officers have seen the change. They summoned three of the snake-charmers to their camp in the morning and threatened the group with dire consequences unless they stepped back into India. But the victims have chosen to ignore the threat. In fact, women of the group are drawing water from wells on the Bangladeshi soil.

But stranded they are still now because the BDR and Bangladeshi

villagers would not allow them further inland.

The BDR has dug three more trenches beyond the 150 yard zone from the border line this morning to place more guns.

A team from Bangladesh, led by the director-general, survey, will visit Malda tomorrow to hold talks with state officials, including the district land and land reforms officer, to review the situation on the border. SNS adds from Malda.

A routine joint survey of the border will be undertaken. The survey will finalise the demarcation and setting up of border pillars where necessary.

6 FEB 2003

THE STATESMAN

Indo-Bangla trade treaty extended

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI, Feb. 5. — Amid the ongoing border tension, India and Bangladesh have agreed to extend the tenure of the existing bilateral trade treaty for another three months until May. Official sources said here that the treaty expiring on 4 February 2003 has been extended since the two sides have been unable to finalise the changes sought in the existing treaty.

Extension of the bilateral trade treaty also comes close on the heels of India granting deeper tariff concessions on 111 items exported from Bangladesh, under the fourth round of SAPTA (Saarc Preferential Trading Arrangement) negotiations which concluded in November 2002.

The tariff concessions on a comprehensive list of items which includes marine products, cut flowers, nuts, meat, toiletries, perfumes and cosmetics, soaps and leather articles has

been extended by India to Dhaka. India has extended tariff concessions ranging from 15 per cent to a high of 75 per cent of the basic customs duty on the range of products.

While the concessions have been extended by India to all Saarc member countries categorised as Least Developing countries (LDCs), Bangladesh is the main beneficiary since other LDCs — Bhutan and Nepal are already covered through bilateral preferential agreement with India.

Maldives had also benefited in a few tariff lines under these concessions granted by New Delhi.

Under the concessions notified by the finance ministry recently, Bangladesh has been granted 50 to 75 per cent tariff concession on leather articles, 50-60 per cent concession on soaps and other washing agents, 25 per cent concession on copper products, 60-75 per cent tariff concession on footwear and 50-75 per cent concession on ceramic products.

Delhi and Dhaka box themselves into corner

PRANAY SHARMA

9/2/2003

New Delhi, Feb. 4: Both India and Bangladesh appear to have been caught in a Catch-22 situation over the fate of 213 snake charmers and their families stranded along the zero line of the border in Cooch Behar.

Both sides are hoping that it will be the other flank which will blink first. Neither seems to be in a mood to give in, fearing that such a move may have an adverse political impact back home.

"We are very clear in our stand. They are Bangladeshi nationals and it is for Dhaka to decide what they want to do with them," a senior Indian official said.

Foreign ministry officials claimed in Delhi that it was the Bangladesh National Party government which has landed itself in a jam.

"Bangladesh knows that they

6.8

have goofed up by trying to push the people onto the Indian side. Now they are not in a position to take them back." He said the tough stand taken by Bangladesh is mainly because it fears that there will be a domestic backlash in the event of a climb-down.

India is drawing a distinction between the past and the current crisis. When people crossed over the border to seek jobs in India in the past, they did so without the active support of the government in Dhaka.

"But the current situation has given a new dimension to the entire problem. This is for the first time that illegal migration is taking place with the government's connivance," an Indian official said.

India is cutting a brave public front on the situation, but several officials conceded in private that Delhi does not have too many options.

5/2

By giving food and medicines, though on humanitarian grounds, India has already committed itself. If Dhaka wants to act tough and continues to be indifferent towards the suffering of the stranded, there is little that Delhi could do.

"We will see it for a day or two. Then we may be forced to take some tough action," a foreign ministry official said.

He added that if push comes to shove, India would also refuse to provide the stranded humanitarian assistance. "If Bangladesh does not care for its nationals, why should we?" the official asked.

He pointed out that any Indian shift at this juncture would set a precedent that could be exploited by Bangladesh later.

Going by the tough stand taken by the two sides, an early solution to the crisis seems remote unless the political leadership intervenes.

5 FEB 2003

THE TELEGRAPH

A tragedy unfolds

5-13

512

But for the human tragedy, it would have passed for a theatre of the absurd. More than two hundred impoverished, shelterless people, including women and children, are gathered on the India-Bangladesh border by India's Border Security Force. India claims that the people — illegal migrants — belong to Bangladesh and wants to send them home across the border. But Dhaka disowns them and sees India's move as a hostile act. In a tit-for-tat exercise, the Bangladesh Rifles collects a smaller group, allegedly Indians, on another part of the border and waits to push them back into India. Gunshots are exchanged and public passions roused, even as the hapless families spend days and nights under the open skies, braving rain, cold and hunger.

Obviously, both governments have been more jingoistic than realistic. For Dhaka to deny the fact of migration to India is far more absurd than Mexico denying the illegal migration of its people to the United States of America. India is not a land of opportunities that the US is. Even for Bangladeshis, the Arab Emirates, some African countries or Malaysia in the east are better destinations than India insofar as unskilled job opportunities are concerned. It is the poorest of Bangladeshis who have traditionally entered India and stayed on illegally to scrape a living.

To deny this is as much diplomatic rubbish as Dhaka's refusal to admit that some militant groups in the Northeast take shelter in Bangladesh. But that is what successive governments in Bangladesh have done. Even the previous regime of Hasina Wajed was no different on this from the present government of her *bête noire*, Khaleda Zia, although India-Bangladesh relations improved considerably during the former's tenure to enable the two countries to sign the Ganga water treaty and introduce bus services between Calcutta and Dhaka for the first time since Partition.

The problem is no government in Dhaka can really do otherwise. Which government can admit the presence of illegal Bangladeshis in India, thereby opening a Pandora's box of endless Indian attempts to send such people back home? India and Bangladesh can never agree on the modality of detection, let alone deportation, of such migrants. In fact, Dhaka can justifiably ask how India's deputy prime minister, L.K. Advani, estimated 50 million Bangladeshis are illegally living in India. Who counted them and how? Bangladesh will never accept the

India and Bangladesh fail to see that the border dispute is fast becoming a tool in the hands of fundamentalists in both countries, argues Ashis Chakrabarti



No entry

Indian intelligence or home ministry reports that make such estimates. And, if Advani knows about the illegal migrants, how does he propose to identify and deport them?

No one knows the enormity of the problem better than Advani. Why then this sudden Indian outcry over illegal Bangladeshi migration? After all, neither the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in New Delhi nor the Marxist rulers in West Bengal raised the anti-Dhaka pitch so high over the atrocities on the Hindu minority in Bangladesh and the illegal migration of hundreds of them to India before and after the last general elections in that country. On the contrary, there was a curious similarity in the manner both New Delhi and Calcutta sought to play it down.

The ostensible Indian reason for the hardening of its position towards Bangladesh is a new threat perception. India believes that the new regime in Dhaka is turning Bangladesh into a vassal state of Pakistan and is allowing Pakistan-sponsored terrorists to use that country for their subversive agenda against India. This is in keeping with the Pakistan army's traditional theory that an eastern front is the best guarantee for its defence of the border with India on the west. What is more, not just India, even Hasina Wajed has complained of the

presence of al Qaida in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh naturally denies all these charges. There are two broad explanations in Dhaka for the sudden Indian "aggressiveness". India is upset, it says, because the Khaleda Zia government has withstood Indian pressure to force Bangladesh to sell its natural gas to India. Second, Advani's anti-Dhaka rhetoric is believed to be part of the *sangh parivar's* strategy to see Muslim enemies all around and thereby add to the *Hindutva* appeal on the eve of the crucial state elections this year and the parliamentary polls in India next year.

India's keenness to get the Bangladeshi gas is not unknown. Hasina Wajed's government too balked at the idea because that would have further condemned her as an Indian agent and helped her opponents at home raise a huge political storm. Surprisingly, it was Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party that hoodwinked India into believing that if elected to power, it would open negotiations on the gas. It was not unknown in Dhaka or New Delhi that a top BNP leader close to Khaleda Zia had met the owners of a big Indian company to discuss a possible gas deal.

The gas hope probably explains why India did not find anything wrong in the Bangladesh elections in which several hundred thousand Hindu voters were al-

legedly not allowed to vote. Soon after the elections, Brajesh Mishra, principal secretary to the prime minister, visited Dhaka. The discussions were never made public but gas is believed to have figured prominently in them.

Mishra's Dhaka dialogue was followed up during the visit of the new Bangladesh foreign minister, Murshed Khan, to New Delhi. Things were not so bad even when India's new foreign minister, Yashwant Sinha, visited Dhaka and offered to work for better bilateral relations despite the controversies surrounding the gas export and transit facilities for Indian goods through Bangladesh. India moved even further by agreeing to delink trade from the transit issue and withdrawing the tariff barrier on the export of 31 more Bangladeshi products to India. Although it did not fully satisfy Dhaka's old demand for duty-free access of many more Bangladeshi goods to the Indian market, the two countries were still talking trade and friendship.

Then things started changing fast, both the content and tone of statements from both sides becoming confrontational, rather than conciliatory. The border stand-off led Dhaka to register its protest with the Indian embassy and other diplomatic missions there.

The danger is that the diplomatic row is slowly becoming a tool in the hands of fundamentalist elements in both countries. There was always a possibility that the presence of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Khaleda Zia's new coalition government and its equations with the pro-Pakistani lobby in the Bangladesh army would strengthen Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh and incite anti-India sentiments there. The more the Indian rhetoric is seen as the BJP's anti-Muslim agenda for India's domestic politics, the more the religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh exploit it to their divisive ends.

It is futile for Dhaka to pretend that it can do without India, no matter how much it tries to keep up that pretence with its new "Look East" policy. Harboring terrorists or promoting religious fundamentalism will ultimately harm its people much more than it will hurt India. Befriending Pakistan and baiting India may serve the interests of a small elite in Bangladesh. For the country and its people, it could be suicidal.

When the Bangladeshi migrant groups were brought to the border, India knew what Dhaka's reaction would be. The attempt to send these people back home is only the medium; more important is the message it is meant to send to Dhaka.

Delhi issues diplomatic warning

Mob battle on Bangla border

MAIN UDDIN CHISTI AND
PRANAY SHARMA

Satgachhi/New Delhi, Feb. 3: The India-Bangladesh border standoff over a group of 213 people of disputed identity descended into a bloody civilian conflict this morning, raising the diplomatic temperature several notches.

Delhi describes the group as Bangladeshi nationals, a claim Dhaka has rejected, causing a stalemate on the Bengal border where these people have been stranded for four days in the no man's land between the two countries.

Efforts by the Border Security Force (BSF) to push the group back into Bangladesh were resisted by its counterpart, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). At a half-hour flag meeting this morning on the Satgachhi border, the BDR again made it clear that it would not allow the group — described as snake charmers — to enter Bangladesh.

The foreign ministry today summoned Bangladeshi high commissioner Tufail Karim Haidar to convey to Dhaka that the crisis would be resolved only if it took back its nationals. Delhi's determination is shared by the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government in Bengal. The chief minister declared: "We want it (infiltration) stopped completely."

Tension rippled on the border with Bangladeshis from the

Nazir Gumani village on the other side attacking the stranded group this morning. Last night, there was allegedly an attempt to kidnap some of the women in the group.

According to the BSF, around 11 pm the group's leader, Din Islam, was called by the BDR for talks. He was taken into a bamboo grove at Nazir Gumani where the villagers set upon him.

Displaying wounds on his forehead, chest, belly and leg, Islam said: "I was told some official from Dhaka has come to talk to one of us. I went over to Nazir Gumani. But before the BDR said anything, villagers pounced on me."

Islam alleged that BDR soldiers stood by as he was being beaten. Islam ran back towards the no man's land, chased by Bangladeshi villagers, who then attacked the rest of the group. Many, including 67-year-old Bhanu Bibi, 50-year-old Nur Begum and one-and-a-half-year-old Mousumi Khatun, were injured in the attack which broke up after Indian villagers and the BSF approached from the other side.

Still badly hurting from the beating, Islam alleged that last night Bangladeshi villagers had tried to whisk away at least three women, Mamonni Khatun, Akhija Bibi and Bulbuli Khatun, but backed off after an alarm was raised bringing the BSF to the spot.

Jarip Mian, 50, said: "Villagers of Nazir Gumani are try-

ing to kill us with BDR encouragement. They don't want to take us back."

BSF officials have been told to provide food and all humanitarian assistance to the stranded group. Indian officials alleged that though they had made arrangements for food and allowed Red Cross workers to examine the unclaimed people, no such offer was made by Bangladesh.

In Delhi, the additional secretary in the foreign ministry, Meera Shankar, told the Bangladeshi high commissioner that the nationality of the 213 people was well established as they were carrying proof of residence like electricity bills and there was no justification why Dhaka should refuse to take them back.

"The fact that they are not getting any humanitarian assistance from Bangladesh is causing them a lot of problems," Shankar said.

Haidar admitted that he came to know about the crisis through media reports and promised to take up the matter urgently with his government.

The two countries have an agreed guideline on resolving such crises. Under this, people caught illegally crossing the border are immediately handed over to the side from which they came. If there are doubts over nationality, three days are given to determine which country they belong to. (See Page 6)

STRANDED BANGLADESHIS CLASH WITH BDR IN COOCH BEHAR Border on evacuation alert

4/2/03 SF-1 gub. Bangla

Statesman News Service

KOLKATA/COOCH BEHAR /NEW DELHI, Feb. 3. — The Cooch Behar district administration today asked about 5,000 families living on the Bangladesh border to be prepared for evacuation, if necessary. The Centre, on the other hand, served an aide memoire to Bangladesh, second in three days, asking it to take back its 213 nationals stranded on the zero line since Friday night.

The state home department today asked the Union home ministry to deal with the impasse on the border. Mr Narayan Ghosh, DIG (HQ), said the BSF and BDR held another flag meeting today, but failed to resolve the issue. The talks at Lalmonirhat in Bangladesh lasted 45 minutes.

Though the BSF produced enough documents to prove that the stranded people were all Bangladeshi nationals, the BDR refused to accept the fact, Mr Ghosh, said.

The Cooch Behar DM, Mr Chandan Sinha, said the stranded Bangladeshis clashed with the BDR today. They tried to force their way into Bangladesh when the BDR, backed by "others", stopped them at gunpoint on the border.

The BSF is keeping a strict vigil on the 522-km border. The alert, sources said, was in response to army mobilisation on the other side of the border.

Mr Kamal Guha, state agriculture minister and North Bengal Development Board chairman, blamed Mr LK Advani for the crisis. Describing the situation as "serious", he said he would raise the issue at the Cabinet and core-committee meeting on 5 February.

In Behrampore, the chief minister said the BSF had done the right thing by not allowing the Bangladeshis to sneak into India.



GUN-TOTING WATCHDOG: His job apparently is to ensure that Bangladeshis don't cross over to Bangladesh. A BDR jawan with some from among the 213 stranded Bangladeshis at Satgachi near Cooch Behar on Monday. — AFP

In Delhi, the additional secretary in the foreign ministry, Mrs Meera Shankar, summoned the Bangladeshi high commissioner, Mr Tufail K Haider, and handed over the demarche. "It is hoped," the demarche reads, "that these 213 Bangladeshi citizens who were caught attempting to illegally cross over into India will be accepted by Bangladesh" because the issue was fast deteriorating into "a humanitarian crisis".

New Delhi urged Dhaka to implement the bilaterally agreed modalities for accepting citizens caught when trying to cross the border. According to the modalities agreed at

a joint working group meeting in January, "persons apprehended in

Indian handed over a demarche to Bangladesh, asking it to take back its 213 nationals stranded on the zero line along the Cooch Behar border

the process of inadvertent or deliberate crossing over the borders would be accepted on the basis of disclosures made by them". If verification of these claims was required, they should be resolved within

three days.

The spokesperson said the 213 people (including 50 children and 80 women), now at point BP 867/8-S, have electricity bills and other documents which prove their Bangladeshi nationality.

Dhaka, however, claims these people are not its citizens, and are being "forcibly" pushed into its territory. They also question why the issue of illegal migration has suddenly assumed such proportions now.

On 1 February, Delhi had served Dhaka a demarche, asking it to get its act together on illegal migration of its citizens into this country.

BSF jawans beat back BDR push

HTC & Agencies
Cooch Behar, February 2

THE BSF on Sunday evening foiled a second bid by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) to push about 100 people into India near the Jamaladah border outpost. To make matters worse, the much-expected flag meeting between the BSF and BDR failed to break the logjam.

The latest incident has heightened tensions between the two forces standing eyeball-to-eyeball ever since the border crisis erupted three days ago. Reinforcements have been called by both sides and the BSF has sent a company of commandos to the hotspot to tackle any BDR "misadventure".

Trapped in no-man's land, between hundreds of soldiers on either side, are nearly 213 would-be infiltrators, which neither side

wants to accept.

A flag meeting between the BDR of Nazir Gomani BOP and BSF of Satgachhi BOP on Sunday failed to break the logjam with the BDR refusing to accept documents like electricity bills as proof of the infiltrators' Bangladeshi origin, district magistrate Chandan Sinha said.

All security posts along the 522 km India-Bangladesh border in the district have been put on high alert, Sinha said.

The BDR had tried to infiltrate 100 people near Jamaladah around 5 pm on Saturday too but beat a hasty retreat when it saw the heavy deployment of BSF jawans along the border, he said.

"All 37 families are Hindus. They claim they were forced out by the Bangladesh Government," BSF DIG P.P. Gupta said. Sources told

Hindustan Times that they are snake charmers from Porabari in Manikganj subdivision of Bangladesh, who go by the name "Bajjikors". Police officer N.C. Ghosh said the BDR had tried to force the group across the border after Bangladeshi villagers accused them of being cattle stealers.

The Bangladeshis, stranded six yards inside the Indian border at Mathabhanga, had been starving for three days until the Red Cross came to their help, distributing medicines, plastic sheets, food and baby food. Some children are reportedly suffering from pneumonia.

DIG BSF (Cooch Behar sector) D Chaudhury is camping at Satgachhi BOP. Acting IG R.C. Sharma also visited the area. A company of commandos under KC Sharma has been put on standby.

Border residents to get I-cards

Dipankar Bose
Kolkata, February 2

THE NORTH 24-Parganas administration will issue special identity cards to villagers to enable them to cross over the barbed wire fences for cultivation.

The border has been sealed since Monday after tension erupted between the BSF and BDR over pushing back of infiltrators. Since then, the mainly agrarian families of the area have had a harrowing time, unable to look after their fields.

The administration realised that the farmers couldn't be shut out any longer and decided that the best way out was to issue identity cards to all border residents. "Moreover, this would also minimise the chances of harassment of the local people and also help the BSF identify illegal immigrants from Bangladesh," said district magistrate H.K. Dwivedi.

3 FEB 2003

Xr 6 3p Dhaka in denial

KHALEDA ZIA'S assumption of power in Bangladesh doesn't seem to have been a happy event for the country, either internally or in respect of its relations with India. Inside the country, the deteriorating law and order situation has forced Dhaka virtually to hand over the task of policing to the army. This evident act of desperation has had a disturbing fallout in that the army is now being accused of human rights violations. Where India is concerned, it isn't only the succour provided to the ULFA militants which denotes Bangladesh's lack of goodwill towards its neighbour, even more worrying are reports that remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban may have found shelter in that country.

Clearly, the resurfacing of the longstanding differences with India over the presence of Bangladeshi nationals in this country is only one of the many problems which have come to the fore under Begum Zia. These cannot but be regarded with deep unhappiness by India, a country which played the role of a midwife in 1971. Dhaka's refusal to accept that any infiltration takes place is one of the most perverse acts of purblindness that one can think of. Evi-

dently, it hurts Bangladesh's prestige to concede that people are fleeing 'Sriar Bangla'. But the rampaging fundamentalists, who have been targeting the minorities ever since Begum Zia's election victory, and the failure of even the army's repressive measures to restore calm are evidence enough of the continuing turmoil in Bangladesh.

The BJP may have its own reasons to rake up the issue of illegal immigrants in India. It helps its electoral cause to point an accusing finger at the presence of suspected *jehadis* in this country and their supporters among the 'pseudo-secular' parties. The best course would be to provide them with identity cards, as had once been suggested by L.K. Advani, so that they are unable to vote. It will also be an acknowledgment of the economic factors which make migrants all over the world take enormous risks in seeking greener pastures. But such a move will rob the BJP of an opportunity to malign its opponents. The answer lies not in trying to 'push' the migrants back into Bangladesh, but in evolving a viable solution in consultation with all the parties and by convincing Dhaka that it cannot continue to ignore the grim reality of migration.

Flag meet fails, Bangla border stays on the boil



A Bangladesh Rifles soldier with fellow citizens on the Indo-Bangla border. (Reuters)

MAIN UDDIN CHISTI

Cooch Behar, Feb. 2: As a flag meeting between the Border Security Force and Bangladesh Rifles failed to end the Satgachhi standoff, the authorities said a fresh attempt by the BDR to "push in" infiltrators was foiled last night at Jamaladah in the north Bengal district.

District magistrate Chandan Sinha said the BDR had tried to get some 100 Bangladeshis into the Indian territory under the cover of darkness at Jamaladah. They were, however, spotted by the BSF jawans patrolling the

border. "The jawans have been on high alert since Friday, when the BDR tried to get 213 Bangladeshis into our territory at Satgachhi. They immediately foiled the BDR's design," the district magistrate said.

The two border forces today held a flag meeting at Satgachhi in an effort to end the three-day stalemate. But the meeting remained inconclusive with both sides refusing to budge.

"The BDR refused to accept documents like electricity bills as proof of the infiltrators' Bangladeshi origins," Sinha said.

BSF officer Dhanalal Choud-

hury said: "The interest shown by India towards solving the problem was not being reciprocated from the other side of the border."

Despite the BDR's repeated denials, some of the stranded families told visiting journalists that they were indeed from Bangladesh and were "pushed in" at gunpoint.

"We fail to understand why they (BDR) drove us away from our own country," Amina Begum, a stranded mother of three, said.

The impasse has started to tell on the health of those strand-

ed in the open. A number of children have fallen sick and some of the babies have developed pneumonia.

Chowdhury said the Red Cross has been providing medical help and aid to the stranded families.

Jarip Mian, one of those stranded, said he and several others were voters of the primary school booth at Savar in Bangladesh.

Mian added that the BDR had forced them to cross over to Satgachhi on Thursday night. Mian said they were snake charmers who sold herbs for a living.

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BSF-BDR talks fizzle out

Statesman News Service

COOCH BEHAR, Feb. 2. — Fresh BSF-BDR talks today yielded no results with the latter still refusing to accept the 213 stranded persons, mostly snake-charmers, as their nationals.

The BSF foiled yet another attempt by the BDR to push about 100 people across the border last evening near Jamaldah border post in Mekhliganj. The BDR backed out after seeing the BSF deployment on the border, Cooch Behar DM Mr Chandan Sinha said.

Today's meeting was held between the BDR of Nazirgamani BOP and the BSF of

Satgachi BOP at 10 a.m. BDR's increased deployment along the border has been matched by the BSF. A sectoral meeting between the two may soon take place.

Two of those stranded on the zero-line, Amina Begum and Md Ali, claimed that they were Bangladeshis and that they were supporters of the ruling BNP. They named their MP as Md Salauddin. They said they were followers of Jadu-Samrat Hanif.

The Red Cross has reportedly distributed dry food, medicines and plastic sheets to the stranded families. A team of doctors too has visited them. The snake-charmers seemed to be concerned about their 150 snakes, some of which have reportedly died.

3 FEB 2003

THE STATESMAN

New equations in Indo-Bangla ties

Nilova Roy Chaudhury
in New Delhi

Feb. 9. — The mysterious way in which 213 people, including women and children, apparently disappeared from the Indo-Bangladesh border in the dead of night, without a trace, and no country acknowledging their presence, reflects the strange new equation in bilateral ties between the two nations.

Though the immediate problem has tided over, Bangladesh foreign minister Mr Morshed Khan is due to arrive on Thursday (a day after Eid) for a couple of days of talks with Mr Yashwant Sinha on how to take the deteriorating bilateral rela-

tionship forward. Mr Sinha renewed an earlier invitation when he called Mr Khan earlier this week and urged him to come India to discuss outstanding problems.

Part of the problem stems from the attitude of a physically smaller country bristling at suggestions that its population might want to desert it for better prospects within its larger neighbour's boundaries. And part from knowing that, despite it being true, it cannot afford to acknowledge the fact.

Mr Tufail Haider, Dhaka's envoy to New Delhi, reflects this disturbing split. At the height of the standoff involving 213 people stranded on no-man's land between India

and Bangladesh, with neither country willing to accept them, and Dhaka refusing to acknowledge them as their own, Mr Haider went on private Indian television channels and, rather abrasively say observers, said the Indian government was pursuing a domestic agenda by pushing in Indian citizens into his country.

Not a part of normal diplomatic functioning, Mr Haider's observations did not go unnoticed by the foreign ministry, even though they were not commented upon. "We are a democracy and we are not in the practice of muzzling foreign diplomats here," a senior official said.

Last year, Mr Haider had viola-

BSF reinforcements

SILIGURI, Feb. 9. — The BSF has deployed additional forces along the Bangladesh border in North Bengal after foiling attempts by Bangladesh Rifles to push in large groups of Bangladeshis yesterday, BSF sources said here today. — PTI

ted normal diplomatic courtesy by failing to turn up at a dinner hosted by Mr Sinha for the leader of the Opposition in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. He did not even inform the foreign ministry that he would absent himself, causing some eyebrows to be raised.

10 FEB 2003

THE STATESMAN

Borders in the mind

NOBODY quite knows what became of those 213 people, with their dented aluminium utensils, plastic buckets, babies wrapped up in rags, wailing women — nomadic snake charmers from Porabari village, some said, of uncertain religious extraction. For a while their tribulations spluttered incandescently on national TV screens as they stood between two sets of guns, one belonging to the Bangladesh Rifles, the other to our Border Security Force. Then thankfully, for our nerves that were beginning to fray, they disappeared, almost as abruptly as they had appeared. So where are they now? Not in our territory, said Bangladesh. Ditto, said India. If this scenario seemed straight out of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh", that is no coincidence. The fate of Toba Tek Singh alias Bishan Singh has been the fate of the innumerable Nowhere People of the subcontinent, since the days Sir Cyril Radcliffe drew his straight lines on paper maps.

Nobody, also, quite knows how many of these border-crossers live amidst us today. The home minister, in January, spoke of "nearly 20 million illegal migrants". The Intelligence Bureau puts the number from Bangladesh at 16 million. A task force on Border Management reported in August 2000 that the number stood at 15 million. The fact is that not only are these attempts at enumeration largely guesswork, they make little distinction between the status of various groups of people who go by the collective term "Bangladeshis", and which point of time they came in.

Indeed, the public discourse on Bangladeshis has been characterised by abysmal ignorance, class prejudice and the most cynical politics aimed at engineering mass anxiety over an apparent flood of humanity threatening our existence. The tendency is to either "invisibilise" them as people who do not matter and therefore have no entitlements, or visibilise



Bangladeshis: a nowhere policy for a nowhere people

■ PAMELA PHILOPOSE

them as aliens, Muslims, bearers of trouble, disease, insecurity, who are out to ruin our economy, inundate our neighbourhoods and plant grenades in our cities. To the purveyors of vituperative politics, if Bangladeshis did not exist as the perpetual incendiary in the backyard, they would have had to be invented. Every now and then features on how "Bangladesh will destroy India" by swamping it with its people appear in the media, fears that ironically mirror those voiced by the British National Party over how the unending flow of Asians into Britain is ringing its death-knell. ☹

But feeding mass frenzy, as the Shiv Sena and BJP attempt to do, especially when elections come

more accurate description for them then is "migrant workers", many of whom have lived in India for decades and got integrated into its local economy, either as agricultural labour, petty traders or unorganised workers.

International law recognises such a category. According to Article 2 of the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the term "migrant worker" refers to a person who is engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national. The Convention also provides for various categories, such as seasonal worker, self-employed worker, frontier worker

Nothing marks the ugly nature of the discourse than the loose fashion in which the military term 'infiltrator' — meaning intruder with hostile intent — is routinely used

around, is no way to tackle a complex human crisis like the migration of vast numbers of people across national borders. Before we evolve a cogent domestic policy for Bangladeshis in India, we need to know just who these people are. Refugees? Migrant workers? Displaced people? Infiltrators? Nothing, in fact, marks the ugly nature of the discourse than the loose fashion in which the military term "infiltrator" — meaning intruder with hostile intent — is routinely used to describe those who are motivated to enter this country in a desperate search for a livelihood. The great majority of Bangladeshis are also not refugees for the simple reason that they have not been recognised as such. The

and so on. Why then cannot the Indian government come up with a simple, streamlined system of registration and work permits for these people?

Certainly the present approach of unilateral deportation by India of those it regards as "illegal migrants" — a category decided primarily on the basis of religion — is not just inhuman, it is wholly impractical. International law does not provide for such action should the country of origin choose not to respond. Begum Khaleida Zia's government is quite aware of this. Dhaka has, in fact, opted for the flat bat approach to New Delhi's concerns, describing as "baseless and absurd" reports that there

were 20 million Bangladeshi illegal migrants in India. Its foreign secretary, Samsher Mobin Chowdhury, went as far as to deny that any Bangladeshi lives in India illegally.

How, then, does New Delhi hope to convince not just its eastern neighbour but the world that the Bangladeshis it wishes to deport are indeed people from across the border? The problem is made more intractable by the complexities of Partition, which had left enclaves of Indian land on the Bangladesh side of the border, and vice versa. Some of "Bangladeshis" who've migrated to India from these regions, or been driven to migrate, have every right to an Indian citizenship. Therefore, even if the ambitious plan to fence off the entire border with Bangladesh in some of the most geographically challenging regions of the world is completed by 2007, as projected, it is unlikely to stem this movement of people into India.

There is no obvious alternative to a process of negotiation between the two countries. If the Union government is looking for a permanent settlement, and not just a handy issue to pump up the votes, border scuffles cannot be a substitute for substantive dialogue conducted in a spirit of compromise. The only time some forward movement took place on this issue was when New Delhi and Dhaka sat across the table in 1991 and thrashed things out, and for a brief spell when the Gujral Doctrine of good neighbourliness was given an airing. Unfortunately, in the testosterone-laced diplomacy of today, such an option appears exceedingly unlikely.

We are left then with the Nowhere Policy of periodically demonising a Nowhere People, men, women and children, with plastic buckets and dented utensils, ensnared in the barbed wire of history. For them the last line of Manto's short story continues to be the perfect epitaph: *In the middle, on a stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh* ☹

Dhaka team of three raises doubt in Delhi

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Feb. 13: Bangladeshi foreign minister Mohammed Morshed Khan arrived here this morning on a three-day official visit. But two dampers accompanied him: one, reports from Dhaka that he will not be the foreign minister for long and, two, he did not have a high-level delegation but only two middle-ranking officials with him.

The telephone conversation between Khan and his Indian counterpart Yashwant Sinha last week, which broke the stand-off between the two sides on the border in Cooch Behar, indicated the Bangladeshi foreign minister's keenness to visit Delhi with a high-level delegation.

Sources said the Indians were given to understand that the delegation would consist of senior officials from the interior ministry in Dhaka and also those who deal with border management.

The "one plus two" delegation has raised doubts in South Block. "It seems he is here on a public relations exercise and not really to address issues that plague relations between the two countries," a senior Indian official said.

Over the past two days, South Block has been receiving reports from Dhaka that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia may soon change her foreign minister.

The reports stem from the fact that Bangladesh's relations with two of its most important partners, the US and India, have taken a nose-dive in the past few months. Though Morshed is a leading businessman of his country, he has failed to bring foreign invest-

ment into Bangladesh. Sections in the Indian establishment have now started raising questions about whether Morshed will be the "right interlocutor" with whom Delhi should engage to remove the strains in bilateral relations.

But despite the hiccups, South Block is determined to present the Indian stand in an "unambiguous manner" to Morshed when he starts his interactions with Sinha and other senior officials.

"We have received reports that raise doubts about Morshed's longevity in office. But for us he is still the foreign minister and we will give him the due respect that we normally show to an honoured guest from a friendly country," a senior foreign ministry official said.

The official added that irrespective of whether he is removed in the coming weeks or not, India will take the opportunity to make Bangladesh realise the problems that afflict the relations and how they could be sorted out.

India has made it clear that on the trade front — an area where Bangladesh has had complaints of tariff barriers and not enough access to the Indian market for its goods — it was willing to accommodate as much as possible. That includes even a free-trade regime and access to Indian technology.

But in return, Delhi wants a sincere commitment to urgently address Indian security concerns.

There are two issues that the Indians are worried about — illegal immigration and the growing activities of the Northeast insurgents and the Pakistani ISI in Bangladesh.

14 FEB 2003

THE TELEGRAPH

Atal and Advani mince no words

Big Two bitter pill for Dhaka

Jude Bank

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Feb. 15: As Bangladesh foreign minister Mohammed Morshed Khan today appeared to back off from his admission of illegal immigration, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee told him that relations between the two countries would improve only if Dhaka addressed Delhi's security concerns.

Morshed had raised hopes yesterday by acknowledging that "illegal immigration" was a problem that stood in the way of improving ties. But in less than 24 hours, aware perhaps that the admission would not go down well in Bangladesh, the visiting foreign minister had changed his tune.

Throughout the day — during his interaction with the media in the morning and his meetings with Vajpayee and deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani in the afternoon — Morshed tried to play down the migrants problem and the growing anti-India activities on Bangladeshi soil.

At the meetings with Advani and Vajpayee, Morshed argued that "illegal immigration" was a two-way traffic and a large number of Indians had crossed over to Bangladesh. When the issue of activities of the Inter-Services Intelligence was put before him, the foreign minister

said that while there were such elements in Bangladesh, their number in India was at least 20 times more.

The Prime Minister brushed aside Morshed's arguments, saying: "What we are talking about is not only the presence of the ISI. We are trying to raise our concerns over the growing anti-India activities that it is indulging in."

Vajpayee told Morshed that adopting "an ostrich-like stance" on illegal immigration would not help. "We want good neighbourly relations with Bangladesh. But this can only happen if our neighbour takes care of our security concerns."

Chastised, Morshed tried to lighten the atmosphere by telling Vajpayee that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia would be "pleased" to see him in Dhaka at the earliest. In response, the Prime Minister only smiled.

The "diplomatic fireworks" had started even earlier, at the meeting with Advani. He, too, had made it clear to Morshed that Delhi expected Dhaka to

take urgent steps to address the security problems.

When Morshed tried to argue that more ISI elements were present in India, Advani told him that even if this were true, Delhi had taken several steps to deal with them. The same, however, could not be said about Bangladesh.

What appeared to have peeved India was Morshed's attempt to use the media here to score diplomatic points. Not only did he try to play down India's security concerns, he also made "unnecessary" references to the postponement of the Saarc summit because of the hostility in India-Pakistan relations.

During his discussions, Morshed submitted a list of Bangladeshi criminals who, he said, were hiding in India.

Though the two countries have agreed to accept the joint communique of 1992 as the base for moving forward on illegal immigration, South Block appears to have lost much of its confidence in Bangladesh to seriously deal with the situation.

"We got the opportunity to tell him (Morshed) what is standing in the way of improving bilateral ties. There are two options before him. He can either convey our concerns to his government. Or, he can use this visit as a public relations exercise to bolster his own image back home," a senior Indian diplomat said.

■ Fresh crossover bid, Page 9

QUOTE

We want good neighbourly relations with Bangladesh. But this can only happen if our neighbour takes care of our security concerns

AB VAJPAYEE

Uneasy borders, distant neighbours

By E Rammohan

TWICE this year the India-Bangladesh border hit the national headlines. On 31 January, a patrol party of Border Security Force's 91 Battalion intercepted 213 Bangladeshi nationals on zero point near boundary pillar No. 867/8-C at Satgachi outpost in Cooch Behar. All of them were Muslims. The elders in the group said they were itinerant snake charmers and folk singers from Dhaka. Police had rounded them up in the Bangladeshi capital and, they were pushed across the border by Bangladesh Rifles personnel. The group comprised 68 men, 65 women and 80 children. The elders in the group, men and women both, begged the BSF to let them cross over into India, for if they returned, BDR men would beat them up.

The BSF team immediately reported the matter to its BOP. The company commander and other senior officers rushed to the spot, and informed the Battalion and Sector headquarters about the incident. The commandant contacted his BDR counterpart immediately. He told him that 213 civilians had been pushed across the border by BDR men and that they had said they were from Dhaka.

But the BDR commander refused to acknowledge the truth, even though the group's elders said their local member of Parliament could recognise them. They were abused and beaten up by the Bangladeshi guards. Instead of arranging for food and cover to shield the hapless people from the open winter sky, the BDR kept pressuring them to enter India.



Atal Behari Vajpayee with Bangladeshi foreign minister Morshed Khan at New Delhi recently. The latter said he was "concerned" over illegal migration after India announced a drive to deport millions of Bangladeshis it said had crossed over to India. — AFP

To make matters worse, BDR men dug up trenches and took up positions against the BSF, forcing the our border guards to seek reinforcements, for they were determined not to allow the group to enter India. But the BSF was humane enough to provide food and temporary shelter to the Bangladeshis. BSF doctors attended to the sick, particularly women and children.

The stand-off continued for six days during which BSF officers met their BDR counterparts. In their presence, the leaders of the stranded group reiterated that they had been rounded up in Dhaka and that their MP would recognise them.

Open forum

The decision not to allow infiltration had been taken earlier, at a Joint Working Group meeting. Foreigners were to be handed back to the country on whose side they were found. Both sides generally followed this practice. But BDR used to honour this only in cases of inadvertent crossing. But if it was pushing people consciously to the other side why would it honour its commitment? This is exactly what happened on 31 January. And precisely because of that, a BSF request for a flag meeting elicited no response for two days.

BDR wilted under BSF officers' pressure to have the meeting but said the

213 civilians were Bengali Muslims of Indian origin, who had been pushed into Bangladesh by BSF men.

On 7 February morning, the 213 people were seen moving into Bangladesh in small groups. They had vanished within an hour.

I've always held that Bangladesh is the only country which pushes out its nationals at gunpoint. We saw a living example of that at Satgachi. I've also held that Bangladesh has a policy to 'export' its nationals. Hence, migration is not limited to innocents crossing over for economic reasons. This too was substantiated by the recent stand-off.

On 8 February, a Sangabari BOP patrol party in Cooch Behar saw a group of 500-600 civilians near border post 886/1-S on the Bangladeshi side. BDR men were seen coercing the group to cross over into India. The patrol party alerted its BOP immediately, which in turn informed the Battalion HQs. Reinforcements were rushed to the spot. At a flag meeting BDR officers were told about the group's movement near the zero line. As was expected, the BDR officers denied any attempt to push the civilians into India. The next morning, this group too had disappeared. The chance detection of the group near the border had probably foiled the attempt.

There's a school of thought in India that deplores the attempt to fence the border, terming it a harsh step. It's against deporting illegal migrants too. But it should think well before advocating a soft line after Satgachi. Its advocates should ponder too on who was humane. India or Bangladesh?

(The author is a former director-general of the Border Security Force)

THE STATESMAN

22 FEB 2003

Despite her "anti-India" image, Khaleda Zia came closest in 1992 to accepting the existence of the illegal immigration problem and it is time to revive that spirit

IMMIGRATION IMBROGLIO

By PRAKASH NANDA

If anything, the absence of a joint statement or official communique on the talks between the Bangladesh foreign minister Morshed Khan and Indian external affairs minister Yashwant Sinha is a pointer to the deteriorating relations between New Delhi and Dhaka, of late. The main irritant is the issue of illegal immigration. Mr LK Advani says that there are nearly 20 million Bangladeshis illegally staying in various parts of India and that they need to be sent back to "their" country. Bangladesh asserts that there is not even a single such person, denying thus the existence of the problem at all. In fact, Khan surprised Indian journalists by saying that there were illegal Indian immigrants in Bangladesh! For India, the problem is further compounded by the fact that there is no national consensus on how to confront the problem.

It is sheer partisan politics that while the BJP would not allow a single illegal Bangladeshi to live in India, some leaders of the Congress and two Communist parties see a communal angle and challenge the criteria for determining these "foreigners" who, incidentally, are believed to have voted for these parties, especially in the border states of West Bengal and Assam. This lack of consensus in India has emboldened Bangladesh to say that most of the alleged Bangladeshis in India are essentially Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims.

In a sense, the non-BJP parties are right. Because, no Indian government has so far revealed the basis on which they have quantified the number of illegal Bangladeshis. At the same time, it will be wrong to deny the existence of the problem. The following facts will make that clear. On 9 May 1975 the then Deputy Minister for External Affairs, Bipin Pal Das informed the Rajya Sabha that "following the severe floods in Bangladesh last year which aggravated conditions of scarcity and hardship in certain areas, it was observed that sizable movement of persons from Bangladesh into the neighbouring Indian States, parti-

cularly West Bengal, started taking place from July 1974".

PM Sayeed, then minister of state for home affairs, told the Lok Sabha on 17 August 1995 that the "large-scale infiltration of Bangladeshi nationals is one of the factors responsible for growth of Muslim population in West Bengal and other border areas". Giving reasons for the influx of the Bangladeshis, Sayeed said "there has been a continuous influx of Bangladeshi nationals

movements ... The natural trend of population overflow from Bangladesh is towards the sparsely populated lands ... of the North East in the Seven Sister side of the Indian subcontinent".

It may be recalled here that before Partition, the Muslim League had left no stone unturned to have the then undivided Assam in the proposed Pakistan. So much so that late Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali wrote in his book "Myth of Indepen-

"Our bulging population might find a welcome in adjacent lands inhabited by kindred people"



into India for a variety of reasons, including religious and economic considerations".

Similarly, Indrajit Gupta, India's first Communist home minister, told the Lok Sabha on 6 May 1997 that there were one crore (ten million) illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India. Now, his successor talks of this number having nearly doubled over the last six years. It may be a little too much from the credibility point of view. But that does not minimise the gravity of the problem, particularly when the Bangladesh government closes its eyes towards it officially, while encouraging the trend otherwise.

Abdul Momin, a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh wrote that "the runaway population growth in Bangladesh resulting in suffocating density of population in a territorially small country presents a nightmarish picture ... our bulging population might find a welcome in adjacent lands inhabited by kindred people". Sadeq Khan, a former Bangladesh ambassador wrote that "there is no reason why regional and international cooperation could not be worked out to plan and execute population

dence that "it would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan ... One at least is nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to east Pakistan. To these, Pakistan has very good claims". Before the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, even its founder Sheikh Mujibar Rahman had written in the book titled "Eastern Pakistan: Its Population and Economics" that "because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc. Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong".

Migration of people, both legal and illegal, for better opportunities is a global phenomenon. The United States faces a similar problem from its Latin American neighbours. But India is not as endowed as the United States which has got more land space, a stronger economy and better technological means to regulate illegal immigration. From time to time, the US has had liberally

legalised many illegal immigrants by making them citizens. But India cannot resort to this beyond a point. Similarly, late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to put barbed wire fence on the Indo-Bangladesh border so as to prevent illegal immigration has not proved workable.

Under these circumstances, India may find the German model of treating the illegal immigrants interesting. Germany, which encouraged after the end of the World War II immigration of Turks, is now tightening laws against the entry of Turkish labour.

The large Turkish population in Germany has been allowed to stay and work but they have been declared stateless citizens and denied the political rights of voting. India could attempt similar measures provided the Government does it in a transparent manner and on the basis of objective criteria.

Simultaneously, one can also apply the theory that "greater development support should be extended to the illegal migrants' countries of origin to alleviate the poor economic conditions that propel emigration" as the best antidote to the illegal immigration from that country. But for this to happen, Bangladesh must shed its official policy of not recognising the problem and sincerely negotiate with India.

Viewed thus, there is hope that the present Khaleda Zia regime in Dhaka would extend a cooperative hand to India. For, notwithstanding her "anti-India image", here is the only government Bangladesh which once came closest to accepting the existence of the problem of illegal immigration.

After all, the joint communique of 18 May 1992, issued at the end of her visit to New Delhi as the Prime Minister, had said: "Taking into account the problems being caused due to large-scale illegal migration of people across their borders, they (the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh) expressed their determination to stop illegal movement of people across the border by all possible means including the strengthening of existing arrangements and mutual cooperation in this regard". It is time to revive the 1992 spirit.

The author is a National Fellow with the Indian Council of Historical Research.

Border troops beat back Bangla intruders

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Jan G. ...
Behrampore, Feb. 22: Indian border troops foiled another attempt by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) to push in over 100 nationals, including women and children, across the border near Ramnagar village in the Lalgola police station area of Murshidabad district yesterday afternoon.

Villagers at Ramnagar said the Indian jawans fired at least three rounds in air to force the

Bangladeshis to turn back. But the district administration and Border Security Force (BSF) officials denied that the guards had fired to repel the intruders.

"Yesterday, around 3 pm, over 100 Bangladeshis made an attempt to cross into India, but the BSF personnel at the outpost there were alert enough not to allow them entry. Some time later, the intruders went back," said Murshidabad district magistrate Manoj Panth.

He confirmed that the intruders returned to their country and were not stranded in no-man's land as had happened at Satgachhi in Cooch Behar earlier this month.

Though the Padma forms most of the border between Murshidabad and Bangladesh, in some areas like Ramnagar and Udaynagar in Jalangi the division is over land.

"It was through this land route in Ramnagar that the Bangladeshis attempted to

cross over with the active support of the Bangladesh Rifles on the other side," a BSF officer claimed.

He said the group, escorted by the Bangladesh Rifles, had crossed the Padma, which flows inside Bangladesh in the Lalgola area, and then walked a few kilometres over a sandbank to reach no man's land near Ramnagar village.

Islam Sheikh, a villager, said the BSF jawans sprang into action when the large group

halted at no-man's land across the border.

"The men, women and children stood there till the Border Security Force men fired at least three shots over their heads. This made the group retreat," he said.

Vigil along the border has been stepped up following the BDR's latest attempt to push Bangladeshis into India, BSF officers said.

The BSF presence in Ramnagar and Udaynagar, where

the border is demarcated on land, has been strengthened.

During Partition, the Padma formed the entire border in Murshidabad.

Over the years, the river shifted course, moving 10 km away from Ramnagar into Bangladesh and 15 km into India in Udaynagar and created a 25-km land border. The BSF outposts here have been supplied with night-vision equipment to maintain a round-the-clock vigil.

Eight-hour shootout across border

OUR BUREAU

Malda/Dhaka, Feb. 27: The Border Security Force and Bangladesh Rifles traded fire at Mahedipur for nearly eight hours today in one of the worst border flare-ups in recent times.

The firing broke out as smugglers tried to push in a herd of camels into Bangladesh. Two camels were wounded in the skirmish but no human casualties were reported.

The firing comes when relations between the neighbours have hit a low, with New Delhi and Dhaka accusing each other of trying to push in illegal migrants.

Local border commanders of

the two countries held two rounds of talks later in the day to ease the tension.

BSF deputy inspector-general R. Chanda said the smugglers were trying to take the camels across the border early in the morning. The men apparently fled after the BDR personnel ordered them to stop, leaving the camels on no-man's land.

The BDR personnel opened fire when the BSF jawans tried to bring the camels back. "Our jawans fired back after they were shot at. The attack on our men was sudden and unprovoked," Chanda said.

The BSF official accused the "low-ranking" BDR personnel of

being in cahoots with the smugglers, a charge the Bangladesh border force denied.

A BDR official, on the other hand, accused the BSF of helping the camel smugglers. Bangladesh recently placed its border guards on alert after India announced plans to deport illegal Bangladesh migrants living or working in the country.

The two countries intensified border security along the Hilli frontier in South Dinajpur where a family of six men, women and children has been stranded for more than a week. The BSF deported the six "illegal migrants", but the Bangladesh border guards refused to accept them.

Deputy inspector-general of police (headquarters) N.C. Ghosh said the firing between the Indian and Bangladesh border guards in Malda went on for nearly eight hours.

Trucks carrying fruits and other foodstuff backed up for miles at the Mahedipur border as the guards exchanged fire till noon. "The BSF shut down the checkpoint as soon as the firing started. Not a single truck crossed the border during the day," customs officer K.K. Sen said.

BSF personnel kept away curious villagers, drawn by the crack of guns, from the border. "We could not take out our cattle for grazing. The jawans would

not let us," said Ambar Ghosh of neighbouring Piyashbari village.

Residents of the village said they had seen from a distance bodies lying on the no-man's land. They also pointed to patches of dried-up blood on the stretch, locally known as "zero point".

BSF personnel dismissed the claim. They said the blood was that of the wounded camels. The sudden flare-up left people from both countries waiting to cross the border stranded. "I am on my way back from Calcutta, where I went for treatment. I don't know what to do," said Emtamul Haque of Rajsahi, squatting by the road with his wife and son.

28 FEB 2003

Turn to other border, it's time to sit down for talks



J.N. DIXIT

SEMI-CONFRONTATION-IST rhetoric has characterised the government and media discourse between India and Bangladesh over the last three or four months. Smug, inaccurate, conventional wisdom of Indian analysts has been that this was to be expected from the BNP Government led by Khaleda Zia. That interaction between India and Bangladesh is acrimonious is a bit of an anti-climax because at least the Government of India and some knowledgeable circles were not subject to the prejudice mentioned above. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee was among the first Asian leaders to send a message of congratulations to Khaleda when she came to power after the Bangladesh general elections last year. The message was followed by a visit by Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, to Dhaka. The objective was to convey to Khaleda that New Delhi does not suffer from any prior value judgement about her India policies. He also conveyed India's desire for a positive relationship with Bangladesh, a relationship which would respect and serve the mutual interests of India and Bangladesh.

Mishra made a special point: that India would not put pressure or impose on Bangladesh on any aspect of Indo-Bangladesh relations as far as Dhaka's policies did not affect Indian security and stability.

Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha continued the process of high-level political interaction in line with his foreign policy assessment that India should give particular attention to its relations with its neighbours instead of marginalising them, as was happening during the dispensation of his predecessor. Sinha had detailed discussions on substantive issues with his Bangladesh counterpart, including those related to migration, terrorism, economic cooperation etc. The visit helped in reviving a good atmosphere for structuring bilateral relations. But since December 2002, relations have taken a negative turn.

New Delhi became critical of Bangladesh on two crucial issues, accusing Dhaka of not cooperating on them. The first was about Bangladesh being a base for terrorist and subversive activities against India, sponsored by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The second was about Dhaka not taking any meaningful action to prevent illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and senior Home Ministry officials issued a number of statements over the last six weeks affirming this accusation. The situation was compounded by a fortnight-long confrontation between the BSF and the Bangladesh Rifles in the northern sector of the Indo-Bangla border, where BSF troops stopped a number of Bangladeshis trying to cross over to India. This group of Bangladeshis remained stranded in No-Man's land for over ten days with an armed confrontation between the BDR and BSF barely avoided. This particular crisis was resolved after a telephone conversation between Sinha and his Bangladeshi

counterpart Morshed Khan, followed by the latter's visit to Delhi between the 13rd and 16th of February.

It is worthwhile examining the substance of the two issues of controversy in the current phase of Indo-Bangla relations. As far as Bangladesh being a sanctuary for separatist terrorist movements in the Northeast is concerned, it is a phenomenon stretching back to over a decade. New Delhi had definite and foolproof information about training camps being run by the ISI in collaboration with some segments of the Bangladesh intelligence agencies. India also had definite information about the sanctuaries and the banks in which separatist groups like the ULFA and the Bodos had their accounts in Bangladesh.

Between 1991 and 1994, the then Home Secretary, N.N. Vohra, and I, as Foreign Secretary, visited Dhaka and gave detailed information on this matter to our counterparts there. There was a two-point response from Bangladesh to our presentation. About sanctuaries and bank accounts, the response was that they would investigate the matter and take remedial action for closing them down. As for the second issue, Bangladesh categorically denied the existence of such training camps and the activities of the ISI.

India has also referred to the critical issue of large-scale illegal migration from Bangladesh to India for nearly a decade-and-a-half. But Bangladesh has repeatedly denied its occurrence.

Estimates are that between seven to nine million Bangladeshis have migrated to India and are illegal residents



The involvement of Bangladesh's intelligence agencies with the ISI is rooted in the Khaleda Govt being in a coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami, which had links with Pakistan's Jamaat. Added to this are undercurrents of Islamic affiliations and apprehensive hostility towards India. Hence, the reluctance to act decisively on New Delhi's concerns regarding terrorism... Bangladesh remains a prisoner to perceptions of its Pakistani past, and India subject to "we did so much for you and you have behaved in a negative and ungrateful manner" syndrome

within Indian territory. The phenomenon of migration is a more complex one. The origins of such migration perhaps pre-dated the creation of Bangladesh. Our governments in Assam in the '60s encouraged migration of Bangladeshi Muslims and smaller number of minorities into the state, allowing them to merge with the population and giving them voting rights. This

processes within India, which has obvious pernicious and negative implications for Indian policy. Such a solution will take some time but some steps need to be initiated. The proposed arrangements should also include security considerations.

As far as Bangladesh being a base for anti-India terrorist activities goes, Dhaka's denials are not going to cut



A file photo of illegal Bangladeshi migrants at the Indo-Bangla border

was a deliberate and narrow exercise in electoral politics.

The second wave of such migration was during the Bangladesh War in 1971. The third wave was Chakma tribals from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts migrating into Tripura and Mizoram and, to some extent, into Manipur. Here also, local political leaders had an inclination to absorb these migrants for electoral purposes. But fortunately things did not go out of control. There was also a separatist movement of these migrants receiving support from the Indian authorities for a brief period. Fortunately, the issue was resolved by negotiations and many of them went back to Chittagong Hill Tracts. The last wave of migration is a continuous phenomenon. In all objectivity, one must acknowledge that the Bangladeshi Government is not actively sponsoring this migration. The land to people ratio of Bangladesh is becoming increasingly critical. Social and economic conditions in Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas, is bad and subjected to extreme poverty and unemployment. The consequence is large groups of Bangladeshis seek opportunities across the border for employment and survival. This migratory movement has been going on for nearly two decades. While Dhaka may not be sponsoring this illegal migration, it is certainly not inclined to take any purposive steps to stop it, for the obvious reason of reducing its own socio-economic burdens.

The levels of migration must have reached a point where it is destabilising the demographic, social, ethnic and linguistic balance in the Indian states. Hence New Delhi's open articulation of the issue and more assertive stance on it. The solution does not lie in Indian accusations and Bangladeshi denials. The two governments should sit together and negotiate a practical solution if regional economic cooperation arrangements or sub-regional cooperation are to be in place. Bangladeshis could be given work permits for temporary residence arrangements so that the migrants stand identified and do not become part of the political

any ice. The involvement of its intelligence agencies with the ISI is rooted in the Khaleda Zia government being in a coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami. The Jamaat of Bangladesh had links with Jamaat and other Islampassand parties in Pakistan. Added to this is undercurrents of Islamic affiliations and apprehensive hostility towards India. Hence, the reluctance to act decisively on Indian concerns regarding terrorism. Dhaka should realise that given the international campaign against terrorist violence, its own credibility and internal stability depends on putting a stop to subversive activities against India within its territory. Bangladesh should also realise that India is in a strong and convincing position to take countermeasures against terrorist activities sponsored by Pakistan from Bangladesh. Dhaka should also take note of the fact that fragmenting the Northeastern states of India or the Indian Republic has been a continuing strategic objective of Pakistan's policies since the early '60s. Its involvement in such policies will unnecessarily identify Bangladesh with Pakistani policies, which is not good for its security or Indo-Bangla relations.

One cannot wish these issues away. They have to be tackled in a practical and peaceful manner through political means. It is a pity that neither government has come to grips with the prospects of cooperation for mutual benefit, the potentialities of which are enormous in the sectors of trade, investment, technology, transit, energy and utilising the water resources.

Purposive action to translate these prospects into reality is stymied not due to functional or practical reasons. There is no progress because Bangladesh remains a prisoner to perceptions of its Pakistani past, and India subject to "we did so much for you and you have behaved in a negative and ungrateful manner" syndrome. Space does not permit the listing of other controversies which afflict Indo-Bangladesh relations which really should not be points of contention. It is not only desirable but necessary that the two sit and reason together.

India-Bangladesh trade prospects

By Muchkund Dubey

The free trade agreement option needs to be looked at seriously by the two Governments.

19-10 215
INDIA AND Bangladesh offer natural markets for each other's export products. In their mutual trade, they enjoy the advantages of reduced transaction costs and quicker delivery due to geographical proximity, common language and a heritage of common physical infrastructures. That is why soon after the launching of liberalisation in Bangladesh in 1982, India's comparative advantage in the Bangladesh market started asserting itself and Indian exports registered unprecedented growth. The value of exports increased from only about \$20 millions in the early 1980s to nearly \$200 millions in the early 1990s, to about \$1 billion in 2000-2001. If the informal trade is included, then India's exports to Bangladesh today are at the level of \$3 billion. Bangladesh is one of the 10 largest importers of all goods, and the third largest importer of manufactured goods, from India.

Bangladesh's exports to India have also increased, but not at a commensurate rate. This is partly because liberalisation in Bangladesh has been more far-reaching than in India and partly due to supply constraint. As a result of the asymmetrical growth in exports, the trade deficit for Bangladesh has increased sharply and now stands at an unacceptable level.

This writer has been suggesting for the last 15 years, the extension by India of unilateral free trade treatment to Bangladesh. This would have pushed the trade exchanges to a much higher level, substantially reduced the trade gap and integrated the two economies in several ways. This, in turn, would have had a beneficial spillover effect on the political climate, which would have improved the prospects of cooperation in other areas.

In the context of the demonstrated comparative cost advantage for India, any increase in the import capacity of Bangladesh by virtue of an expansion in its exports is bound to be reflected in enhanced imports from India. Similarly, any growth in

the GNP of Bangladesh has implicit in it prospects of larger imports from India. For, a sizeable part of the import content of the growth is likely to come from India.

Unfortunately, India lost all these opportunities by adopting an incremental approach to responding to Bangladesh's request for restriction-free entry of its goods into the Indian market. India did extend tariff concessions to Bangladesh from time to time. But the manner in which it was done generated frustration and mistrust all round. India took three years in granting duty free entry for 40 out of the 191 items on Bangladesh's request list. Recently it agreed to allow duty free entry for 39 more items. But Bangladesh has found the concessions given by India too little, too late and not very relevant to its export interests. These concessions have not helped Bangladesh to increase its exports because they do not include such principal items as jute goods, footwear and readymade garments. Besides, they make no dent on non-tariff barriers.

The Government of India, on the other hand, has also felt frustrated, because there has been no appreciation of what it has done in the face of formidable domestic constraints. In the last Commerce Secretaries meeting held in New Delhi in late March this year, India indicated to Bangladesh that further liberalisation would be possible only within the framework of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). India's offer for an FTA is under consideration in Bangladesh.

Though unilateral free trade would have been highly desirable from several angles, it has not apparently proved feasible proposition. Therefore, the FTA option needs to be looked at seriously by the two Governments. An FTA is no panacea for bridging the trade gap or solving oth-

er trade problems. Besides, designing an FTA between two countries placed in a highly asymmetrical economic position, is by no means going to be an easy task. However, there are obvious advantages in an FTA which cannot be ignored.

First, an FTA will take the two countries out of the present rut of commodity-by-commodity negotiations and will provide for duty free entry for all goods except those included in a short negotiated negative list. Second, it will provide for the elimination of all non-tariff barriers in a time-bound framework. For, removal of such barriers is an integral part of creating an FTA. Third, an assured access to the large Indian market within a long-term contractual framework, will enable Bangladesh to create export capacity for even those products in which it has potential competitive advantage but which currently do not figure in its export basket. Fourth, such assured access would result in an enlarged flow of foreign private capital for investment for building export capacity in Bangladesh. Fifth, by arguing that an FTA is in India's larger economic interest, the Government of India will be able to overcome the pressure of domestic lobbies and reservations of a political nature. Sixth, an FTA can provide for measures for deeper integration, such as freeing of trade in services, free flow of investment, trade facilitation, harmonisation and mutual recognition of standards and coordination of macro-economic policies.

Besides, an FTA is likely to improve the over-all competitiveness of the Bangladesh economy through access to the marketing network, skill and technology of Indian manufacturers and trading partners. Finally, having travelled much further down the road of liberalisation than India,

Bangladesh will be in a stronger negotiating position, and India will have to make the major adjustments.

The experience at the end of three years after the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA) went into force shows that Sri Lanka has gained substantially from the Agreement. In 2002, Sri Lanka's exports to India increased by 136.9 per cent as against a rise of 48 per cent in India's exports to Sri Lanka. The trade imbalance for Sri Lanka improved from 8.5:1 to 4.9:1. Sri Lankan exports registering substantial increases included such non-traditional items as sausages, biscuits, chocolates, toys, furniture and ceramics. And, above all, Indian investments worth \$1 billion have either already been made or are in the offing in Sri Lanka.

In the ISLFTA, the question of asymmetry has been addressed by allowing Sri Lanka to have a longer negative list (1,180 items against India's 429) and a longer time period (eight years as against India's three years) to reach zero tariff level. Since Bangladesh is a least developed country, these provisions can be better calibrated in its favour. Besides, the following additional measures can be adopted to enable Bangladesh to derive equitable benefits from the FTA: (i) Some of the items such as tea and readymade garments in which Sri Lanka has both export capacity and competitiveness have been put under tariff quotas in the ISLFTA. In the FTA with Bangladesh, such items can be put in the positive list. (ii) There is no provision in the ISLFTA for phasing out the tariff quotas or the negative lists. The FTA with Bangladesh could provide for an asymmetrical phasing out of the negative lists. (iii) If there is a provision for special safeguards in the FTA, Bangladesh should be given greater flexibility with regard to sector coverage, duration of safeguards, establishment of injury etc. (iv) Within the FTA, India should establish a sizeable fund to substantially enhance the export capacity of Bangladesh.

No hide-&-seek, Dhaka is taking back 232 fishermen

SUNANDO SARKAR &
BARUN GHOSH

Calcutta, March 5: This "push-back" promises to be different.

After the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation on the border in Coochbehar over the fate of Bangladeshi nationals staying illegally in India, Dhaka is back to playing the friendly neighbour. Two hundred and thirty-two

Bangladeshi nationals — all of them fishermen who "inadvertently" crossed over to this side of the often-vague border in water — are now set to be taken back by their country.

This comes days after the Coochbehar stand-off fizzled out following the not-so-red-carpet welcome given to Bangladeshi foreign minister Md Morshed Khan. (The visit saw deputy

Prime Minister L.K. Advani telling him clearly that India could not be expected to carry the burden forever).

"The government-to-government communication was completed on Tuesday," a senior Bangladeshi deputy high commission official here said. "All of them are going to go back to Bangladesh within this week," he told **The Telegraph**.

A cloud still hovers over the fate of 24 others — housed in Presidency Jail like these 232 — but officials appear confident they, too, will be taken back "very soon". "We have been given to believe that the remaining 24 are going to go be taken back as well in the near future," a senior state home department official said.

Officials said the nitty-gritty was complete and the Bangladesh-

his would begin to move either on Thursday or Friday. "They will travel in either two or three phases," a Bangladeshi diplomat said.

The logistical details were discussed over the past few days and it was decided that one group would travel by water and the rest by land, officials said.

"The trawlers and boats with which they were caught on this

side of the border have to be taken back as well," an official explained. "But only the number required to steer the trawlers and boats back to Bangladesh will be going back by the river route." The rest will go by road. Details of the two routes have been decided.

Those travelling by boat (or trawler) will board their vessels at Shamsheernagar in North 24-

Parganas and paddle towards Kaikhal in Satkshira district of Bangladesh. The rest will take the more conventional route from Petrapole, also in North 24-Parganas, to Benapole in Bangladesh.

"The Border Security Force has been told of the shift and asked to stay alert," a home department official said. "But we don't expect any problem as far

as this round of 'push-back' is concerned," he added.

Like the people going back home, the Presidency Jail administration heaved a sigh of relief. "This prison is overcrowded and has too many important detainees," jail superintendent S.R. Hussain said. "Keeping so many people, who had no reason to stay here, was a burden on the administration," he added.

New Delhi-Dhaka agree to remove major irritants

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, APRIL 29. India and Bangladesh have agreed to remove major long-standing irritants in their bilateral relations, including problems with border demarcation, exchange of enclaves and illegal cross-border movement of people. The broad-based agreement, seen as a major development, was reached at a Foreign Secretary-level meeting here today.

The meeting also addressed issues such as duty-free access of more Bangladeshi items, free trade and establishment of transportation links. The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary, Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury, led the home side while the External Affairs Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, who reached here last night, led the Indian team at the talks that lasted for over two hours. Officials here said the two sides also discussed signing of two agreements soon — one on bilateral investment protection and another related to science, officials confirmed.

India also offered two new ideas one about cyclone-tidal surge-reduction management and another cooperation in IT sector. The meeting agreed to hold an overdue ministerial-level meeting of the Joint Economic Commission in the middle of

this year and a Foreign Secretary-level meet in New Delhi early next year. It was decided that the Bangladesh Finance Minister, M. Saifur Rahman, would visit New Delhi in two weeks' time to discuss the issues related to bilateral trade and economic cooperation.

Mr. Chowdhury told reporters that the talks were held in a free and frank atmosphere and all the bilateral issues came up. He said such meetings would continue at different levels to resolve the outstanding problems and strengthen the friendly relations between the two countries.

In another high-level conference, the BSF and the BDR Directors General continued their discussions on tricky border issues in the 4-day talks that began at the BDR headquarters here on Monday.

The DG of the BDR, Major General Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, is leading the home team while BSF DG, Ajoy Raj Sharma, is heading the Indian side. It is learnt that the BDR alleged that the BSF had tried to push into Bangladesh more than 5,000 Bengali-speaking Indian nationals between January and March this year.

The Indian side sought strengthening of BDR-BSF coordination to prevent border

crimes, ensuring border security and environment conservation. It also wanted to know the latest position on the implementation of 1974 Mujib-Indira Accord. Members of both the delegations would visit frontier areas in south-western districts of Jessore and Khulna, BDR sources said and added that elaborate discussions on border problems would come up in the next two sessions scheduled later.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sharma met the Bangladesh Home Minister, Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, and discussed border issues. Both the sides reached a consensus to take effective steps to maintain peace along the border and check smuggling. Both the Home Minister and the BSF DG felt the urgency to introduce joint patrol teams along the border.

Copter crash

By Our Staff Reporter

SHIMLA, APRIL 29. Four persons were killed when a private helicopter crashed near Aleo Nallah in Manali, Kullu district, this morning. The helicopter took off from Bhunter airport in Kullu. The victims were two foreign nationals, a Manali hotelier and Capt. K.P. Tomar of Panchkula.

30 APR 2003

THE HINDU

It is time India and Bangladesh translate positive options into operation

Ignored neighbours

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American military operations in Iraq, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's interaction for normalizing relations between India and Pakistan, and the visits of the American deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, and of the assistant secretary of state for south Asian affairs, Christina Rocca, have hogged both media and political attention in terms of India's external relations. In this pre-occupation, there is a general trend of neglecting India's relations with other neighbours like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Myanmar, and others. An indication of this neglect in public perception is the visit by the foreign secretary, Kanwal Sibal, to Dhaka (which took place in the fourth week of April), being more or less ignored both in reportage and analyses.

Sibal's discussions at Dhaka was the first high-level interaction after a gap of time in a crucial political context. The meetings took place as Vajpayee was commencing his latest initiative on normalization of relations with Pakistan and as mutually critical rhetoric about Bangladesh harbouring Pakistan sponsored terrorists on its territory abated after reaching points of high controversy. Sibal's visit also took place in the context of Begum Khaleda Zia not having paid a single visit to New Delhi after she came to power this time in October, 2001. Vajpayee has not visited Dhaka at all. It is time to indulge in an over-view of India-Bangladesh relations after more than three decades of Bangladesh emerging as an independent country.

First, the important position which Bangladesh should occupy in our foreign policy scheme, and the reasons for it. Bangladesh is the third most populous country in sub-continental Asia. Strategically, it occupies an important position in the northern segment of the Bay of Bengal and along the coastline from Cox's Bazar down to the western coastline of Myanmar. It is India's third largest trading partner with potentialities both as a market and as an area of investment and transfers of technology for mutual benefit. Bangladesh also lies athwart the northeastern states of India and the rest of India.

Its borders with Myanmar, and with Manipur in India, add to Bangladesh's importance in terms of India's border security concerns in that region. Bangladesh is an important link in the land and land-based trading routes between south Asia and southeastern countries stretching from Myanmar to Malaysia, including countries of the former Indo-China region. Bangladesh is a repository of natural gas reserves which could contribute to the energy security of India, after fulfilling the needs of Bangladesh. All this, apart from long-

standing linguistic, cultural and religious commonalities between the peoples of the two countries transcending their respective national identities or recent history.

These factors, together with the role that India played in supporting the liberation war of Bangladesh, should have resulted in a substantive and positive relationship between the two countries. This has not happened because of some atavistic elemental factors affecting Indo-Bangladesh relations. First, India expected the general conformity pattern of gratitude from Bangladesh for India's support to that country's liberation struggle. Second, India, although sensitive to Bangla-

in human terms, both India and Bangladesh have taken a political and rejectionist stand on this important issue, Bangladesh saying there is no illegal migration and India claiming exactly the opposite and threatening to take punitive action against the phenomenon.

Kanwal Sibal must have broadly touched on all these factors affecting bilateral relations, but the focus must have been on expanding bilateral economic relations, finding ways to expand mutual cooperation against international terrorism and for consolidating regional security, as well as to see the extent to which Bangladesh would be interested in cooperation in



Sibal's discussions at Dhaka were the first high-level interaction after a gap of time in a crucial political context

desh's threat perceptions because of being surrounded on three sides by Indian states and the Bay of Bengal dominated by the Indian navy in the south, has not been responsive enough in political and security terms. Third, India has not been as forthcoming in meeting Bangladesh's economic requirements because of India's narrower and short-term policy orientations on issues related to trade and transit.

Bangladesh's deliberately cultivating a closer relationship with Pakistan under successive regimes of the country since 1975-76 has not helped matters. In fact, developments became more complicated with the Pakistani inter-services establishment establishing a foothold for its anti-India activities in Bangladesh nearly a decade and half from the mid-Eighties of the last century onwards. There has been delay in settling pending territorial issues with Bangladesh, like the exchange of border enclaves, which have been pending almost since the time of India's partition. The demographic pressure on land in Bangladesh has perhaps unavoidably resulted in the illegal migration of Bangladeshis into India. Instead of tackling the problem

the energy sector with India. Geo-strategic and general political benefits of mutual cooperation, ensuring mutual security are too obvious and need no elaboration. It is in the economic and technological fields that India should be more forthcoming and generous while Bangladesh should discard its irrational inhibitions about economic cooperation with India.

The volume of India's exports to Bangladesh is of the order of \$1 billion in terms of formal exchange of goods. If informal trade is included, India's exports to Bangladesh would be of the order of nearly \$3 billion. Bangladesh is the third largest importer of manufactured goods from India. Though Bangladesh's exports to India have increased over the last 30 years, Bangla-

des has an adverse balance of trade with India. Bangladesh's trade deficit with India can be economically debilitating with the passage of time.

There are two broad steps which can be taken to remedy this predicament. First, India should extend unilateral free trade treatment to Bangladesh. Not only would this result in the expansion of Bangladesh's exports to India, but it would also help in reducing the trade gap, and establishing strong and fair links between the economies of Bangladesh and India. A positive political fall-out of India playing a role in contributing to Bangladesh's economic strength and development is obvious. Although India has extended tariff concessions to Bangladesh off and on, this has been done piece-meal and in an inhibited manner which has only generated misunderstanding and apprehensions in Bangladesh. The Indian government's approach of allowing transit facilities through India to Bangladesh has been conditional to Bangladesh giving reciprocal facilities to India through its territories in India's northeastern states. Though this is a fair demand, perhaps India could extend these concessions first, to which Bangladesh could respond later after assessing the benefits of a mutually trustworthy economic relationship.

If Bangladesh gives up its political inhibitions and decides to export its surplus natural gas to India it would be a major step benefiting Bangladesh and qualitatively reducing its adverse balance of trade position with India. Although India does not have any intention of making a demand on this subject or imposing on Bangladesh, Bangladesh would be the loser if it does not take an early positive decision in the matter. India is discovering new oil and natural gas reserves on land and its coastal seas. Multilateral financial institutions like the Asian Development Bank are exploring oil and natural gas projects in central Asia and west Asia, targeting the Indian import market. India itself is investing in its energy security in countries as far away as Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation on the one hand and to Sudan on the other. It is for Bangladesh to objectively calculate the implications of India moving away to alternative sources of energy. If this happens, Bangladesh would be sitting on an asset which it would not be able to use as effectively as it can (if it does not move into the Indian market).

The problems of illegal migration and Pakistan-sponsored terrorist bases in Bangladesh need to be addressed through a rational and cooperative approach. Options regarding both these problems are available and have been widely discussed. It is time that governments of the two countries translate positive options into operation. One hopes Sibal's visit to Dhaka might have made a beginning in this direction.

The author is former foreign secretary of India