

Dhaka-Delhi war of words

C. Asia News 18.2.03

Under the heading, "Delhi fumes as Dhaka sends ultimatum" published in a Dubai based English newspaper *Khaleej Times* of November 29, 2002, it was reported that India and Bangladesh exchanged sour notes over the allegations that the latter was being used by Pakistan to foment terrorism against that country. On February 8, the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee addressing a conference of State Chief Minister said that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was using the territories of Bangladesh and Nepal for terrorist purposes. Dhaka immediately criticized and denied Vajpayee's remarks and asked India to stop such allegations.

With the "war of words" getting intensified between India and Bangladesh on the issue of Pakistan using Bangladesh for anti-India purposes, the obvious contradictions in Indo-Pak relations tend to gain more prominence. The story published in *Khaleej Times* also mentioned that India had agreed to send the intelligence report to the Bangladesh Government that apart from talking about Pakistan using that nation for terrorist operations against India, states that wanted terrorist Osama bin Laden's number two, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, had taken shelter in Bangladesh during the last two months. Dhaka had vehemently denied such charges which were made by the Indian External Affairs Minister Yaswant Sinha in a statement given in the parliament and asked for proper evidences. Delhi responded by saying that India can share the evidence provided Dhaka assures of actions against such terrorists. As compared to the tenure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) Indo-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated significantly after the electoral triumph of Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party in October 2001. Responding to the allegations about the activities of ISI in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina had remarked that when she was in power she was not allowing her country to be used against its neighbours and after the end of her rule, Bangladesh was becoming a sanctuary for Islamic extremists.

The dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh relations must be examined in the light of six important facts. First, the frequent clashes between the Indian Border Security Force and Bangladesh Rifles on the question of human trafficking. Second, unresolved territorial issues, particularly those concerning enclaves. Third, dumping of Indian goods in Bangladeshi markets. Fourth, India's demand that Bangladesh provides trade and transit facilities so as to link West Bengal to the Northeastern states. Fifth, the allegations made by Delhi that Pakistan's ISI is using its former eastern wing as a launching pad for terrorist activities against India, particularly in the northeastern states. Sixth, charges made by India that members of al-Qaeda and various Islamic extremist groups have found a safe heaven in Bangladesh. While the first four areas of discord between India and Bangladesh are quite old and the two countries from time to time have been holding talks on these issues, the last two are quite serious.

After September 11, 2001, not only India but the main opposition party of Bangladesh Awami League are blaming the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party of encouraging terrorist groups. Sheikh Hasina during her visit



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to the Western countries went to the extent of accusing the government of Khaleda Zia of providing shelter to the members of al-Qaeda. The purpose of such allegations was to create a cleavage between the BNP regime and the United States and to use that opportunity for embarrassing Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. For India, the objective of blaming Bangladesh of allowing ISI and al-Qaeda to continue with their so-called terrorist activities was simple: to force Dhaka acquiesce to Delhi's big brother posture, including agreeing to provide trade and transit facilities and sell gas to India. New Delhi also got offended when Bangladesh rejected India's demand that Katmandu should become the permanent venue for holding the summit conference of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) because according to the SAARC Charter all South Asian capitals will host summit conferences by turn. Hence, the Indian demand lacked rationality and was contrary to the charter of SAARC.

For India the biggest source of disappointment is Bangladesh's unwillingness to subscribe to its policies in the region. From 1972 till the assassination of Mujibur Rehman on August 15, 1975, to a large extent India had a free hand in Bangladesh. But the events taking place after the overthrow of Awami League government greatly disappointed India because all its investments which it had made in the course of Bangladesh Liberation War proved to be futile. Ironically, Delhi had forgotten the fact that the people of Bangladesh had fought against the injustices of the West Pakistani elite and were not ready to compromise on their hard earned freedom and turn their country as an Indian colony. The freedom conscious people of Bangladesh through their resilience against the Indian attempts of domination have proved the fact that they can never accept the dictate of their gigantic neighbour. Correct, India can militarily take over Bangladesh in couple of hours, but it cannot hold 130 million people of that country under its physical subjugation.

Even the soft domination of India is unacceptable to the people of Bangladesh as has been evident from time to time. After having disappointed from coercing Bangladesh to follow a pro-Indian line, Delhi embarked on a barrage of propaganda on ISI's so-called infiltration in Bangladesh and the Islamic terrorist network in that country supported by the al-Qaeda. Saner elements in Bangladesh have also criticized the manner in which India and Awami League are trying to depict Bangladesh as a fundamentalist country or as an emerging hub of terrorism. Particularly, in case of Awami League, it has been asserted by opinion leaders that despite political differences and animosity with Khaleda Zia and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Sheikh Hasina and her party leaders should not have gone to the extent of proving their country as a supporter or Taliban or Islamic extremism. That in politics, the struggle for powers makes

sense, but it should not be at the expense of the reputation and image of the country.

What should be the policy and stand of Pakistan vis-a-vis war of words between Dhaka and Delhi? Should Pakistan seize the opportunity of growing rift between the two neighbouring countries or should it remain neutral? There are three important factors which one can keep in mind while formulating an opinion on Indo-BD relations. First, given the asymmetrical nature of Bangladesh-Indian relations, Pakistan definitely has a chance to find more space in Bangladesh, particularly in those circles which are deadly against growing Indian interference in the affairs of their country. The visit of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to Dhaka in July 2002 in which he categorically supported the independence and sovereignty of Bangladesh is a case in point. Second, Pakistan needs to be very careful while reacting to Delhi-Dhaka raw because any expression of Islamabad's anti-Indian stance in favour of Bangladesh may be counter productive. Despite the majority of the people of Bangladesh who are freedom loving and want to protect their country from Indian expansionism, there are elements in that country who are well organized and entrenched and who have strong relations with Delhi. Given historical reasons and the unpleasantness of the events of 1971, such elements will exploit any opportunity which can prove Pakistan's involvement in anti-Indian process in Bangladesh. Third, there is a need on the part of Pakistani establishment to create genuine goodwill and amity among the people of Bangladesh. President's Musharraf's visit no doubt helped in clearing some past misgivings but Islamabad need to go beyond official relations and encourage non-governmental or people to people contacts with Bangladesh. The agreements/MOU's which were signed during Musharraf's visit must be implemented in letter and spirit and the pending issues like the question of division of assets and liabilities and the return of stranded Pakistani should also be settled through mutual accommodation. Along with these matters, the issue of the registration for Bengali population settled in Pakistan, which is emerging as an irritant in BD-Pak relations must be resolved in a just and fair manner.

For the sake of brotherly relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan it is essential that there should be minimum unresolved issues and there is more and more economic, trade, cultural educational and political relations. If past misunderstandings are removed between Dhaka and Islamabad then it will be possible for the people of Bangladesh to effectively cope with the asymmetrical nature of their relations with Delhi. But, Pakistan should not try to overtly exploit Dhaka-Delhi war of words for its own interests because such a policy will be counter-productive and not serve Islamabad's interests. It would have been ideal had there been cordial relations between all the South Asia countries but since we are living under the shadows of Himalaya and our history since the emancipation from the British rule is marred with unresolved conflicts, wars, proxy war and terrorism, Dhaka-Delhi-Islamabad are also not able to escape from such a situation. If India behaves in a proper manner and shuns its policy of coercion vis-a-vis its neighbours, much can be done to ameliorate the sufferings of the people of South Asia.