

Visit of India's Foreign Secretary to Dhaka: Any positive move in sight for Bangladesh concerns?

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India's Foreign Secretary Ms. Nirupama Rao's two day visit from 6th June to Dhaka was perceived as important as some outstanding issues needed to be resolved before the proposed visit of India's Prime Minister to Bangladesh which would take place "well before" the end of the year as stated by Ms. Rao.

It is reported that bilateral has focused primarily on

- the sharing of the Teesta river water and other trans-boundary rivers
- demarcation of land boundary with India
- exchange of enclaves and adverse possession of territories
- killing of Bangladeshi nationals along the border with India.
- gross deficit of Bangladesh trade with India
- relaxation of 80% of project materials from India under the \$1 billion Indian loan

The talks with Ms. Rao provided an opportunity for both sides to take a stock of the progress of implementation of decisions on the above issues.

On 7th June, at the joint press conference, India's Foreign Secretary could not indicate final settlement of any of these issues and an impression is reasonably concluded that India's response to addressing Bangladesh's concerns has been found to be painfully slow.

Even the opening of "border hats" along the Indo-Bangladesh border has taken more than two years, much to the frustration to Bangladesh Commerce Minister Furthermore India's promise to export 5 lakh metric tons of rice for the 2007 cyclone Sidr victims remains unfulfilled.

The main bottleneck in reaching water sharing accord on Teesta appears to be on India's disagreement on the percentage of sharing water (50:50) as proposed by Bangladesh. This issue needs to be decided at a political level and Bangladesh has to wait for the visit of India's Prime Minister to Dhaka.

The talks on demarcation of land boundary and exchange of enclaves continue without any time-bound frame-work. It is reported that Bangladesh-Meghalaya border has yet to be demarcated.

Border -killing of Bangladeshi unarmed nationals by "trigger happy" Indian Security Force (BSF) arouses most passions and anger in Bangladesh and has been extremely damaging for India.

The picture of gruesome killing on 7th January of a Bangladeshi young girl Felani (15) returning with her father from his work place within India and the way her was flung on

the barbed wire fencing demonstrate graphically BSF's brutality According to Odhikar, a human rights organisation in Bangladesh, between January 1 to May 10, 2011, 12 young unarmed Bangladeshi nationals were killed by BSF.

A culture of impunity prevails for BSF, says Kirity Roy, head of Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), a Kolkata-based human rights organisation. The Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission has raised the issue in writing with its counterpart institution in India but no results have been achieved.

On the issue of border killing, Indian Foreign Secretary has stated that her government has decided to use non-lethal weapons to stop loss of life in some areas on experimental basis. One waits to see its implementation on the ground.

Trade imbalance for Bangladesh with India continues to be huge for years together. It is reported Bangladesh's official imports from India during 2009-10 stood over \$3.2 billion while Bangladesh was able to export only \$304.63 million. Besides formal trade, informal imports from India stand to billion of dollars.

To boost Bangladeshi exports, there has been no substantive progress in implementing Bangladesh's proposal to remove from Indian negative list of Bangladesh's main exportable products together with non-tariff barriers.

Bangladesh has agreed transit/transshipment with India, Nepal and Bhutan through its territory. Although India has agreed to allow its territory for Bangladesh to use for trade to Nepal and Bhutan subject to signing of necessary protocols as stated by Ms. Rao, transit/transshipment through Bangladesh has not yet been in operation for Bhutan and Nepal as they need India's agreement to use India's territory.

With regard to the \$1 billion loan under condition that Indian companies will supply 80 percent of the project materials, Ms. Rao's reply was vague as she said there was still scope to discuss it as "we want to help Bangladesh with open heart and see the prosperity of the Bangladeshi people."

Whatever India wanted from Bangladesh, Dhaka has moved quickly to address Delhi's concerns on cross-border terrorism and transit/transshipment to the North-East. However it appears the implementation of the bargain on the Indian side has not been met as yet after the lapse of two and half years.

Noted Indian columnist Kuldip Nayar in his recent article after visiting Bangladesh in mid April writes: "It (Dhaka) has given the transit facilities to enable northeastern states to have better and quicker connectivity with the rest of India... I have never been able to understand why New Delhi drags its feet when it comes to trade with Bangladesh ... India is too squeamish when it comes to dealing with neighbours." (DS, 23 April 2011)

Observers suspect the issues concerning Bangladesh get low priority within the cover of discussions in many technical committees, sub-committees and joint working groups. Whether bureaucrats of New Delhi or state governments are responsible for the delay, the

ultimate responsibility rests on the government of India to facilitate the smooth implementation of outstanding issues quickly. Many friends of India in Bangladesh think that it would be a missed opportunity for India to create goodwill unless India delivers the goods within a reasonable period.

In settling the disputes, Bangladesh's gains do not have to come at India's expense, or vice versa. Win-win solutions are possible on all the issues, given the comprehensive new vision for bilateral cooperation following the Bangladesh Prime Minister's visit to New Delhi in January 2010

Hopefully, Foreign Secretary's visit will make Indian leaders and top bureaucrats realise that India has to move quickly on issues, such as, stoppage of border killings, agreement on water sharing of Teesta river, agreement on border demarcation together with exchange of enclaves and removal of bottlenecks of trade.

Given the right spirit and the desire to live together in cooperation, there is no reason why the two countries cannot move on a mature partnership on political, economic and social level.