

Pranab Mukherjee's Visit to Dhaka Towards Great Integration?

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The publicly-stated purpose of India's Minister for Finance, Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Dhaka on 7 August 2010 for about six hours is to witness the signing of the US\$1 billion loan agreement to Bangladesh for 14 projects related to infrastructure, river dredging and power transmission from India. The mainstream opposition party BNP, however, strongly criticized the agreement for harsh and unfair conditions of the loan, alleging that the projects covered by the loan would benefit India more than Bangladesh and called upon the government to cancel the loan agreement, while the government of Sheikh Hasina stoutly defended the loan which would be used for infrastructure of interconnectivity and would make the country a hub of economic activities within the region.

Analysts say the real purpose of Mukherjee's visit is to calm down the anxiety within the Bangladesh government leaders about the painfully slow implementation of matters that were accorded priority in Bangladesh, in the 'joint communiqué' released after the Bangladesh Prime Minister's visit to New Delhi from 10-13 January. It may be recalled that the visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister to New Delhi this year ushered in a new era of opportunity in bilateral relations and put in place a comprehensive framework of cooperation in all possible areas.

While India gives top priority to transit facilities through Bangladesh to northeastern India and denial of sanctuary for Indian insurgents in Bangladesh, Bangladesh's top priority rests on water sharing, and water management of common rivers (54 rivers flow to Bangladesh from India), implementation of land border agreement of 1974 and duty and hassle free access of Bangladesh's products to India's market. With regard to bilateral trade, both countries agreed "to address removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers"

and establishing border hats on selected areas including on the Meghalayan border. Bangladesh wanted to open the border hat on Bangladesh-Meghalaya border on 14 April (1st day of Bengali Year) but could not be opened. Recently Bangladesh Commerce Minister expressed his disappointment at the delay in establishing border hat and removing tariff and non-tariff barriers

People expected that by this time at least an ad-hoc water sharing accord on the Teesta River would be concluded and no Bangladeshi national would be killed because it was agreed that respective border guards would “exercise restraint” to prevent loss of lives but as of mid July, 101 Bangladeshi nationals have been killed by the BSF. Furthermore, nothing tangible occurred with regard to the implementation of the 1974 Bangladesh-India Border Agreement. It is noted that although extensive discussions are taking place at the government-to-government level on bilateral issues, the public in Bangladesh want results on the ground.

As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding lies in eating. Many Bangladesh people believe that India with its vast resources and more than a trillion dollar-economy, would be forthcoming in following the ‘Gujral doctrine’ which means strict reciprocity is not intended for smaller neighbours and whatever accommodation India is able to give, it provides without reciprocity. Regrettably many in Bangladesh take India’s promises with caution because in the past, either the promises were not delivered or were put into cold storage due to the federal-state bureaucratic maze in India.

In the book ‘The Jamdani Revolution’ (2009), India’s former Foreign Secretary and High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Krishnan Srinivasan writes: “The political will and attention span have been lacking in New Delhi...In other words the Indian government has tended to allow the hardliners and Hindu chauvinists to set the agenda for its policy towards Bangladesh, when a more rational approach would have been to come to some understandings on Dhaka’s agenda”

We hope that the visit of the Indian Finance Minister will bring benefits to the Bangladeshi people in facilitating the early implementation of core bilateral issues; cutting off the bureaucratic hurdles in India. Finally, the state of overall Indo-Bangladesh relations has to be viewed in the context of the public opinion in Bangladesh. Public opinion will be easily won over when benefits become evident from India’s action on the ground. The sooner it is done; the better it will be for promotion of bilateral relations.

Source: <http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/pranab-mukherjees-visit-to-dhaka-towards-greater-integration-3208.html>

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