

30/01/2001

KL-Delhi ties set for resurgence

Abdullah Ahmad

DESPITE their poverty, India first and later Pakistan - arch-enemies - now have nuclear weapons, raising the chances of nuclear war on the subcontinent to new and dangerous levels. I believe their decisions to produce the weapons were legitimate and had a clear enough rationale.

India, in particular, resents the way it is regarded by the world at large despite being a stable democracy, a resurgent economy and is viewed by many as moving towards becoming an IT superpower of sorts.

India is believed to be presently enjoying 60 per cent of the world's software market. Both Vietnam and Indonesia have asked India to help them in software development. India will give Vietnam 100 million rupees (RM8.3 million) to set up a software training centre.

It has also agreed to train 30 nuclear scientists, while India and Indonesia have agreed to co-operate in defence training. India also will provide technical assistance and equipment. They are setting up a joint commission to co-ordinate defence activities.

I was deeply saddened to hear about the tragic earthquake in Gujarat that is feared to have taken over 20,000 lives, but we did not feel it in New Delhi. I only learnt about it from the next day's newspapers.

India's new diplomatic push in Asia, Asean in particular, began with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Vietnam and Indonesia last month. Vajpayee will arrive in Kuala Lumpur next week on an official visit, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in five years.

Narasimha Rao came in August 1995 and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a reciprocal visit the following year.

India, it is said, is starting a new round of diplomacy on how it should be looked upon in the new millennium: a makeover, a new image, a declaration that it is a serious contender for a bigger role in international relations, as it once was under Jawaharlal Nehru.

Foreign policy, under Dr Mahathir, has been playing a bigger role after he recognised that it was and is a relevant economic asset. It is not just an afterthought.

Malaysia-India historical links are centuries old. Their bilateral relations have always been strong. New Delhi was one of the select few capitals where we set up diplomatic missions at ambassadorial level at Independence. We have no problems in relations with India.

India continues to be Malaysia's largest trading partner in the subcontinent and in 1999, bilateral trade amounted to RM9.759 billion. The balance of trade has always been in Kuala Lumpur's favour, slightly more than half of the amount.

Malaysia's single biggest export is palm oil, contributing RM3.4 billion, making India our biggest importer.

India has 179 industrial projects in Malaysia, worth RM106.5 million (between 1988 and 1999), while we are one of India's top foreign investors (RM1.715 billion). We invested largely in power generation, telecommunications, highway construction (including part of the Mumbai-Pune highway), and India's most modern LPG facility in Haldia in southwest Calcutta which I visited last Wednesday. It will be operational in May. Malaysians have also invested in plantations and manufacturing.

I have been informed that bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding will be signed during Vajpayee's visit, involving Avoidance of Double Taxation, Extradition Treaty and several MoUs on Civil Service

Co-operation, among others.

In a week's stay which took me to Mumbai, Calcutta and New Delhi, I have only sighted one news item in the Indian media regarding Malaysia which was about the extradition proceedings of Ottavio Quattrocchi, an Italian who lives in Kuala Lumpur, for alleged involvement in the Bofors arms scandal. He is now free on bail pending court hearing.

In my travels through India the friendship towards Malaysia was evident everywhere. Even ordinary Indians asked me about developments in Malaysia. We seem to have impressed them - the inevitable Petronas Twin Towers among them. An airport official in Calcutta spoke to me at length about Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr Mahathir - two Malaysian names most Indians easily recall.

Vajpayee and Dr Mahathir are also expected to discuss the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). Perhaps Pakistan's application to join ARF will be reviewed. There is no consensus on the subject. India, which is a full dialogue partner of Asean since 1996 and a participant in the ARF, is pushing hard for an Asean-India summit. Pakistan at present is only a sectoral dialogue partner.

I understand that Malaysia and several of the members believe that for the time being, Asean should focus on consolidation rather than expansion. Besides it does appear there is a "little difficulty" here, in that Asean cannot consider any enhancement of its relations with India without taking into account the Pakistan factor.

India-Malaysia bilateral relations are burgeoning as India is moving on a fast track diplomacy in Asia. I believe this is only the beginning of new Delhi's efforts to integrate itself into the Asian economy, political aspirations in the face of a new world order.

I welcome what seems to be the Indian leadership's new script for India, a revisiting of the East as it were. It is done, of course, as much for economic as for geopolitical reasons.

Vajpayee's visit, his first and also the first of the most senior Indian leader to do so since India conducted its nuclear tests in May 1998 and another recently will, I expect, cement a stronger bilateral relationship and better understanding of each one's perceived role in developing a new international political orientation and alignment. There are vast areas of potential co-operation and synergy. I am sure the Indians will like the quality and cost-effectiveness of our highways, roads, bridges and other infrastructure and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Putrajaya and the Petronas Twin Towers.

And on our part, we are impressed with the Indian genius in computers, mathematics, science, telecommunications, the ability to maintain a high standard of English even after 53 years of independence when it was relegated to a second language, its film industry and cricket.

The good thing is that both Dr Mahathir and Vajpayee are heads of coalition governments. They are, therefore, very conversant with the politics of compromise and in any relationship, there must be give and take.

The friendship between India and Malaysia has always been very good. The only potential outcome, and a certain one, is bright indeed. India beckons, an immense opportunity.

(END)