

Plan for transport of Indian goods through Bangladesh provokes factional strife within country's elite

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A Bangladeshi government plan to allow India to transport goods to and from its remote, northeastern states via Bangladesh has become another issue in the bitter factional struggle between the ruling Awami League and its bourgeois political opponents.

In July, the Bangladesh cabinet agreed to a request from New Delhi to use Bangladesh's waterways, railways and roads to ferry goods to its landlocked northeastern states. The opposition quickly seized on the issue, in the hope of using nationalism and communalism to further its campaign to unseat the government and force new elections.

To protest the agreement with India, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and three allied parties called on their supporters to march on the Dhaka residence of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina Wajed last Sunday. The government responded by cordoning off the area with more than 5,000 police and paramilitary personnel and banning all meetings for 24 hours. Police later used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse an opposition rally after crude bombs were thrown by "unidentified persons." More than 150 persons were reportedly injured in Sunday's skirmish.

The opposition subsequently called a three-day national general strike to protest the government repression. The strike, which was slated to end last night, succeeded in paralysing much of the country. At least one person was killed and 200 injured in strike-related violence.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina claims that under the transit deal with India her cash-strapped country will earn US\$400 million annually in custom duties and transportation charges, and that this will result in the creation of 250,000 jobs. In the current fiscal year

Bangladesh is running a \$2 billion budget deficit and is thus under intense pressure from foreign lenders to find a means to close the budget gap. At the same time, the government fears that its political rivals will be able to exploit popular opposition to any attempt to resolve the budget crisis through further cuts to social spending and public sector employment.

Because of the potential economic benefits, big business is largely supportive of the transit agreement. The government also has political reasons for seeking to improve relations with India. The worsening economic situation has helped fuel an upsurge in Maoist guerrilla activity in rural areas. Many of the guerrilla groups operate from the Indian state of West Bengal. In the name of curbing terrorism, Sheik Hasina's government launched a massive crackdown against the rural poor last April, in which thousands were detained.

Responding to pressure from international investors who perceive the long-standing strife between the government and its opponents as disruptive to business and politically destabilising, the Awami League regime has coupled repression of opposition protests with appeals to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies to enter into a dialogue. In a televised address Monday, on the eve of her departure for the UN General Assembly, Sheik Hasina declared, "I am leaving the country at a time when the opposition has resorted to murder, arson [and] gun running to create an anarchic situation with an artificial issue and enforced the general strike in a pre-planned way. I am calling on the opposition to sit for talks and raise your objections either simply sitting across the table or at the national parliament."

The main constituents of the opposition alliance are the BNP, which is led by Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister and the widow of former military ruler Zia-ul-Rahman; the Jatiya Party, which is led by another former military ruler, Mohammed Ershad; and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamat-I-Islami. The opposition claims that the proposed agreement would undermine Bangladesh's "sovereignty" and "security" and that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has become a "puppet of the Indian government." In particular, they have raised fears that India might use the agreement to ferry troops and equipment to its northeastern states, which for the past quarter-century have been rocked by a series of secessionist agitations.

Sheikh Hasina denies the agreement gives India any right-of-way for military operations. She has also noted that in 1980 the BNP leader's husband signed a similar deal with India "giving land, water and rail transit facilities" and that other governments have renewed the agreement, although it has never been implemented.

Legacy of the communal partition of India

India is seeking cheaper transport facilities to the states of Assam, Manipuri, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram, which lie to the east of Bangladesh and are connected to the rest of India only by a thin stretch of land at the foot of the Himalayas in West Bengal's extreme north. India is also interested in developing closer economic ties to Bangladesh, particularly to participate in the exploitation of Bangladesh's newly found natural gas deposits.

Although India is not seeking to use the current transit agreement to strengthen its military campaign in the northeast, this is far from precluded in the future. India maintains a massive military presence in Assam and the Indian and Bangladeshi ruling classes have often collaborated in suppressing secessionist movements. Answering Indian critics of the pact, who have raised the possibility that it might be exploited by guerrilla groups to transport men and equipment, an Indian diplomat noted that it was the Bangladeshi government that apprehended United Liberation Front of Assam leader Anup Chetia.

Although the current Indian and Bangladeshi governments appear ready to open their borders for commerce, they are determined to enforce and indeed strengthen barriers to the free movement of people.

Both countries maintain tight border controls and have given their respective security forces orders to shoot down anyone who tries to cross the border illegally. The Left Front government of West Bengal is currently erecting a barbed wire fence along the border to stop the immigration of impoverished Bangladeshis. Last month security forces of the two countries clashed at a border village over rival claims for a small piece of land, called Muhurichar, which is situated in the river of Muhuri, the frontier between Bangladesh and the Indian state of Tripura.

The borders of India and Bangladesh do not conform to either geographic or national-linguistic frontiers. They were imposed as a result of the communal carve-up of the Indian subcontinent that was imposed in 1947 by India's departing British colonial rulers, with the connivance of the Indian National Congress of M.K. Gandhi and J. Nehru and the Muslim League of Ali Jinnah.

Final authority for deciding the frontiers was vested in a Briton whose chief recommendation for the job was that he had never before set foot in India and knew nothing about the country. Partition resulted in a million deaths, and cut the Bangali nationality in two, with millions of Hindu Bengalis forced to flee from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) to West Bengal and millions of Muslim Bengalis forced from West Bengal to East Pakistan.



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