

# New fencing at the Indian border with Bangladesh

by Susan Maitra in New Delhi

Two shooting incidents across the border between the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh Rifles have received the attention of the international press recently. Although the incidents were minor in nature and both governments have so far shown restraint, influential groups in both nations are using the incidents to fuel tension in the subcontinent.

The shootings on April 21 and 24 occurred as Indian workers were putting up a barbed-wire fence along the Indian-Bangladesh border, inside Indian territory, to prevent uncontrolled migration across the border. Some of the Bangladeshi citizens living along the border swarmed in and got involved in a shoving match with the workers. As tempers began to fray, the border forces watching the development exchanged shots.

## The fence plan

The Indian plan to go ahead with a fence physically separating Bangladesh from India was announced by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi last year. India's stand has been that the fence has nothing to do with defense but is only a measure to eliminate, or at least minimize, the illegal influx of Bangladeshis into India, and also to curb various forms of racketeering across the border.

The Bangladeshis insist that there is no need for a fence. The government's official claim is that there has been no Bangladeshi influx into India since the country earned independence in 1971. Under the circumstances, according to Bangladesh President Ershad, erecting the fence is a deliberate attempt to belittle Bangladesh and its people before the entire world.

Although the effectiveness of putting a barbed-wire fence along a border—part of which lies in the midstream of shifting river beds—is certainly open to question, there is no doubt that a large number of Bangladeshis have in fact crossed into the neighboring Indian states during the last decade. The

problem is a real one. The local people in Assam, one of the Indian states bordering Bangladesh, have been complaining for years and recently made it an issue, putting pressure on New Delhi. The Indian motivation to put up the fence, according to some, stems from the need to appease the dissident Assamese. Assam has long been a troubled state, where Mao-style guerrillas and foreign-inspired secessionists are involved in many anti-national activities.

"Project Fencing," as some call it, has many critics inside India. Some point out that the fence will constantly require patching and rebuilding, that it will in fact put a new premium on trafficking across the border, and will not, after all, stop the flow of immigrants. In the long run, a bigger crisis will be precipitated.

The real problem in the area is that both Assam and Bangladesh need concentrated investments in economic development in order to support the population of the region.

## Regional power politics

The fencing issue has become one more pretext for lobbies on both sides of the border to excite suspicions and hostility in the region. In India, some see in Bangladesh a security threat to the Indian Union, apparently for the reason that Bangladesh President Ershad has developed friendly relations with both China and the United States to receive aid which, if forthcoming, would help to stabilize his regime. This group has gone to the extent of accusing Ershad of "promising" a naval base to Washington, and has beat the drums of this non-issue since Ershad's visit to the United States.

In addition, certain "defense experts" here, according to a Press Trust of India report, believe that Bangladesh is becoming a naval force to contend with in the region.

The report that China has provided Bangladesh with six "Romeo" class submarines has apparently prompted this conclusion. According to these experts, this is a very significant addition to Bangladesh's navy, which also possesses nine "Fast-attack craft." It is not clear that the so-called fast-attack craft are anything more than vehicles to chase smugglers and poachers, but it is difficult in any case to see how the Bangladesh navy could compare to the massive U.S.A. and Soviet fleets prowling the oceans around India.

On the other side of the border, right-wing Muslim fanatics within Bangladesh are also busy trying to cash in on the border conflict. The Islamic fundamentalist faction—two of whose top leaders were relieved of their posts by President Ershad a year ago—is quite willing to precipitate a crisis for its own gain. The anti-India litany has been unleashed from this quarter, and a number of chanting demonstrations were organized in Dhaka.

At this writing, the Indian and Bangladesh governments are in consultation on the matter, and regular contacts have been established between the two countries' border security forces to prevent a recurrence of the shooting incident.