

India, Bangladesh sign water-sharing treaty

On Dec. 12 in New Delhi, just four days before the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Bangladesh, visiting Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda penned a 30-year historic pact which will ensure Bangladesh its required amount of water from the Ganga (Ganges) River. The issue had been a major obstacle to the improvement of relations between the two nations, especially since 1988 when a two-year treaty expired.

The 30-year treaty spelled out clearly that the two republics have reached the agreement "determined to promote and strengthen their relations of friendship and good neighborliness, inspired by the common desire of promoting the well-being of their people." Asked by a Bangladeshi journalist what India sought "in return for water," Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda replied, "Peace and friendship with our neighbor."

The treaty became necessary when India inaugurated a barrage at Farakka on the Ganga in 1975 to augment the flow in the Hooghly River, with the purpose of desilting the port of Calcutta. An unintended result of the Farakka barrage was a reduction in the flow of water in the Padma

River (the Ganga becomes the Padma once it enters Bangladesh), which in turn caused the drying up of the fertile northwestern districts of Bangladesh. The problem has festered for 20 years, during which regional geopolitical equations prevented a solution.

Under the new water treaty, the sluice gates of the Farakka barrage were reopened on Jan. 1, 1997, to ensure the required supply of water to Bangladesh.

It is envisaged under the new regional development plan to build a dam some 25 kilometers into Bhutanese territory, so that the water of the Sankosh River can be discharged into the Tista River canal system. From there, a 143-kilometer-long feeder canal will be built which will end at Farakka. The funds for the project will be provided by Delhi under the Ninth Five-Year Plan. The additional water of 12,000 cubic feet/second provided by this diversion will be crucial during the "leanest of lean seasons" in April each year. The plan also calls for India to purchase power from Bhutan. Roughly 4,000 megawatts of electrical power are proposed to be added to the Indian national grid for the benefit of the power-starved northeastern region.

Sheikh Hasina's triumphant return to Dhaka following the signing of the agreement indicated that despite efforts by disruptive forces within and outside of the country, the water-sharing agreement has strengthened her government.

pendent on distant donor nations and the World Bank-International Monetary Fund duo, had blocked infrastructure contacts between the sparsely populated, and decidedly independent, mountainous northeastern states and mainland India. Lack of railroad and highway connections with northeast India, which led to poor economic development, made the area a breeding ground for secessionists and terrorists trying to carve out independent nations.

Development on the agenda

From the very outset of the visit, both prime ministers kept the focus on larger issues. The Indian prime minister, who was accompanied by a high-level delegation that included External Affairs Minister Gujral and Home Minister Indrajit Gupta, told newsmen that he had not come with "a bagful of demands or concessions," but to develop "a long-term partnership between our two countries" and to look at the "nuts and bolts of establishing a better infrastructure and ways to encourage commerce."

On infrastructural linkages, better transportation and telecommunications were given priority. Bangladesh welcomed India's backing for the Trans-Asian Railway and Trans-Asian Highway, plans that have been under consideration by the

Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) for decades, which would integrate East and South-east Asia with South Asia, providing an opportunity to boost the economic activity of a sub-region consisting of Bangladesh, northeast India, and Myanmar (Burma). "We intend to take further steps to facilitate trade and economic contacts between Bangladesh and the contiguous parts of India. To this end, better transportation facilities covering all modes need to be extended and improved upon. Both the countries acknowledge this need, and in this context, the two countries will also support construction of a regional transportation network under the aegis of the Asian Highway and the Asian Railway," the Bangladesh prime minister said.

In tune with the transportation and telecommunications linkages, both prime ministers pushed ahead with the concept of a sub-regional development zone, consisting of Bangladesh, northeast India, Nepal, and Bhutan. This concept had first emerged during Sheikh Hasina's recent visit to India, but questions were raised by some about the bottlenecks arising from its weak financial status. Sheikh Hasina has proposed possible financing from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for the arrangement.

"Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the region of India im-