

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Accord to share Ganga water extended

Steady progress in regional relations is upsetting some "patriots" in India.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Bangladesh President Ershad reached an agreement during their meeting in Nassau, where both were attending the Commonwealth Conference, on the issue of sharing the water of the Ganges, which flows through India before finishing its course in Bangladesh.

Along with the Assam problem of uncontrolled immigration from Bangladesh, which two years ago prompted the Indian government to decide to build a fence along the border, the water-sharing issue has been a central obstacle in relations between India and Bangladesh since 1975.

The agreement reached in Nassau does not represent a breakthrough on the substance of the issue; it simply provides for a three-year extension of the current "memorandum of understanding," under which the two countries are continuing studies and discussions to find a long-term solution to the problem.

Nevertheless, the agreement sustains the momentum to take relations with neighboring Bangladesh off dead-center and onto a more constructive course, a process begun by Prime Minister Gandhi in a series of initiatives over the past year. Several personal communications between the Indian prime minister and Bangladesh President Lieutenant-General Ershad, and the *ad hoc* sympathy visit of Mr. Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Jayawardene, following the disastrous May cyclone, has helped revive an open and friendly dialogue between the two countries.

Rajiv Gandhi has made a point of his commitment to the success of the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC), whose first head-of-state summit is set for early December in Dhaka. Significantly, India's new ambassador in Dhaka is a man who has been intimately involved with the SARC project as a joint secretary in the ministry of external affairs.

In a mid-June interview in Dhaka, President Ershad expressed his happiness and optimism, asserting that the "natural suspicions" which his small nation has had in dealing with India in the past are going away. "Mark my words. I am not saying I *hope* there will now be more cooperation between India and Bangladesh," Ershad told the *Hindustan Times*, a major English-language daily in India. "I am saying there *will* be more cooperation."

In India, Rajiv Gandhi has injected some balance in the public view toward Bangladesh, influenced as it is by a domestic lobby of self-proclaimed patriots which spares no effort to keep a paranoid focus on the "evil designs" against India being hatched by its tiny neighbor.

Poking fun at this mentality, which had been parlayed into the fantastic proposal to erect a barbed-wire fence all along the border with Bangladesh, Mr. Gandhi recently told a press conference that since barbed-wire fences couldn't even keep bluebills (a variety of undomesticated bulls found in India) from getting onto the runway of Delhi's Palam Airport, something better would have to be thought of to

deal with the problem of uncontrolled immigration.

Predictably, the water-sharing agreement in Nassau drew new "warnings" from the "patriots." "It would be wrong to ignore the inimical forces which still existed there, maneuvering to whip up another round of anti-India slander campaigns," declared one Saral Patra in the Oct. 22 edition of the *Patriot*, the Soviet Union's daily apologist in India.

Patra asserts that the dispute over the sharing of Ganga waters is a "device" used by Bangladesh as part of an anti-India campaign. Further, this "patriot" would have us believe that Bangladesh wilfully rejected the "eminently suitable solution" offered by India, and made provocative counter-proposals instead.

This is not the place for a detailed history of Indo-Bangladesh relations, nor for the tired chronicles of the water dispute itself. Suffice it to say, the problem is by definition straightforward and amenable to solution.

At immediate issue is India's need to divert water down the Hooghly River from the Ganges before it enters Bangladesh, to ensure year-round working of the Calcutta port, and the impact this has on Bangladesh's water requirements during the drought season. India's proposal for a long-term solution—augmentation of the Ganges water flow via a "link canal" running through Bangladesh from the Bhramaputra in India's northeast to the Ganges near Farakka—has not been accepted by Bangladesh for various reasons, including the fact that the control point for such a canal would be in India.

The larger, more interesting idea of a regional effort to manage the eastern Ganges-Bhramaputra Basin area has not received any attention to this writer's knowledge.