Bangladesh's water diplomacy: Crucial need for national unity and consensus

MUCH has been written and said on the subject of Teesta water sharing agreement due to virtual drying of the Teestariver and its devastating impact on Bangladesh. Movements by the political parties on the Teesta issue, particularly the recent one by the BNP, should have positive fallout for Bangladesh; these clearly reflect articulation of the wishes of our people and should strengthen the hands of the government in negotiating with the new government of India. This will also positively impact in mobilising public opinion at home and abroad and galvanising support of the International community in getting our legitimate share of water.

We have been consistently stressing on the crucial need for a national consensus on the vital issues of our domestic and foreign policies; the critical issue of Teesta and water sharing with India has opened a rare window of opportunity to achieve the objective given its vital national importance.

It is hoped that the government and the combined parties in power will seize the opportunity opened to achieve a broad-based national consensus in negotiating with India not only on the sharing of the Teesta water but of all common transboundary rivers including, among others, Ganges, and the issue of Tipai dam. Already, environmentalist lobbies and the people in India are voicing their serious concern about the grave ecological and other disastrous consequences of building of dams; there is now a worldwide awareness of its manifold negative consequences. Our environmentalists and experts should participate in these movements, cutting across the divide.

It is time for a durable and lasting solution to the water crisis not only for Bangladesh but for the region and beyond. The issue of water scarcity has assumed a regional and global dimension. The magnitude of the water crisis impinging on our non-military security including agriculture, food, energy, environment, climate change and overall development involving the potential for serious conflicts is beyond comprehension. Bilateral agreements can at best be short-term palliatives. The solution lies in wider regional and multi-lateral collaboration involving, among others, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China. The support of the UN and our development partners including USA, EC and Japan, and of the multilateral financial institutions including World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Islamic Development Bank is also needed. At this point of time, I believe water diplomacy should be the principal thrust of our foreign policy and diplomacy. We have to get out of the box of blame game. There seem to be little possibility that either Mamata Banerjee or the next Indian prime minister would be able to fully ensure Bangladesh's legitimate share of water in the long run given India's domestic constraints and its growing need for water. Had it been possible to get our legitimate share of water from India perhaps the best opportune time was during the tenure of PM Hasina's government given the personal equation between her and the influential Indian Congress leadership, including Sonia Gandhi, PranabMukerjee, Manmohan Singh, and the historic ties between AL and the Congress. This is the grim reality on the ground.

We now need an agonising reappraisal, particularly of our water diplomacy given its obvious national priority.

It is time for serious regional initiative and collaboration amongst not only the South Asian countries involved but also China to resolve the water crisis. Some experts estimate that both India and China may go for building 200 big and small dams on the Himalayan rivers -- Yangtze, Brahmaputra and Ganges -- to meet their growing water needs.
We need to keep in mind the models of joint and collaborative use, development and preservation of water by Europe, North America, Mekong Basin countries among others. For the proposed new diplomatic thrust on water diplomacy to succeed it is hoped that the AL coalition government and parties in power will initiate the process of consensus building on this critical issue by inviting all political parties, particularly the BNP and other opposition parties, to a series of dialogues to achieve national consensus on the issue. It can begin with a round table conference or any other format.

What is important is sincere and serious political will to achieve national consensus and unity on an issue which involves the survival of Bangladesh. Crucially, for the sake of larger national interest, all narrow partisan gains have to be set aside; no blame game or hidden agenda. This is the age of public diplomacy and transparency. Thanks to the media, there is an unprecedented awareness amongst the people.

It is our hope that the government will initiate this historic process of national consensus building which has so far eluded us, and that the opposition will respond accordingly. The issue is one of our survival; “who lives if the country dies and who dies if the country lives.”