

New Delhi rapped by Bangladesh for sealing international river



By M.A. MALIK
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — A spokesman of the Bangladesh government Tuesday accused India of blocking the water flow of "an international river," which was described by him as "the life-line" of a fourth of his country's agriculture.

B. M. Abbas, an adviser to the president of Bangladesh, said New Delhi had not consulted his "lower riparian" country prior to withdrawing the bulk of the flow of the Ganges River from a long-disputed barrage, (dam), adding that its unilateral action constituted a violation of the international law as well as a bilateral agreement between the two South Asian nations.

Abbas, 64, explained to the Frederick News-Post that the Himalayan river, with its upstream in India, serves agriculture in eight out of 19 districts of the four-year-old nation. India, he pointed out, has built a giant barrage at the town of Farakka, withholding much of its flow and channelizing it through a feeder canal to promote the navigation of its Calcutta port.

"The international law," he emphasized, "says that an upper riparian country cannot interfere with the water flow of an international river in a way detrimental to the interest of a lower riparian country." He also cited a 1966 accord, reached in Helsinki, to fortify his argument that India "must consult the lower riparian country, in any action she may take" to obstruct the Ganges water, which she had not done so far.

An engineer in river management, Abbas had led Bangladesh's (previously, East Pakistan) water and power development effort for over a decade. He has been adviser on flood control, irrigation & power for four successive Presidents of Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Last week he represented his country in a U.N. agency meeting, met World Bank President Robert McNamara, U.S. State Department officials and appeared at press interviews in an effort to draw international attention to his country's grievance against its mighty neighbor.

Bangladesh is surrounded on three sides by India, whose intervention in the 1971 civil war in Pakistan was instrumental in the creation of the new nation. The secession of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) followed widespread complaints of western exploitation, leading to the brewage of a Bengali independence movement.

The Pakistan army, consisting of West Pakistanis, cracked down in Bangladesh to suppress the movement, but was swamped and taken prisoners

by the much larger Indian armed forces. Bangladesh became independent in December, 1971.

The Indians, who initially had been hailed as "liberators" in Bangladesh, gradually incurred the wrath of a large segment of the nation, which became apprehensive that New Delhi might seek to clamp its political and economic hegemony over the new country.

Abbas dodged most of the political questions on the ground that "I am an engineer" and politics fall outside the realm of his responsibilities. He, however, stated that the present government of President A.M. Sayem has launched a determined drive to combat corruption.

He also said, Bangladesh this year has reaped a good harvest of food crops and the economy, which is among the poorest in the world, is seemingly drudging along the path of recovery.

Elaborating the Farakka Barrage dispute, Abbas said, India and Bangladesh had signed an agreement in April last year on test running of the feeder canal from the barrage "from April 21 to May 31" of 1975, providing for Indian withdrawal of a fourth of the water supply at Farakka, while releasing the remaining three-fourths to Bangladesh.

The agreement, according to the Bangladesh official, provided that "any withdrawal beyond that period should have been the subject of prior consultations" between the two countries.

The Bangladesh spokesman further explained that "dependable supply" of water at Farakka in the "lean period" following mid-April is 55,000 cusecs, of which his country has traditionally needed 50,000 cusecs for its agriculture.

But India, he complained, is "operating the feeder canal of the Farakka Barrage to its full capacity of 40,000 cusecs ... without an consultation and concurrence of Bangladesh."

He expressed the fear that the south-western districts of Bangladesh will face greater water shortage in the third week of April, when the Ganges records the lowest water level and discharge, and "a condition will arise which has never been experienced in Bangladesh."

Abbas claimed that New Delhi had dismissed his country's protests against the heavy withdrawal of water saying that the "monsoon" (raining season) that follows the lean period would supply Bangladesh with abundant water to compensate for earlier withdrawal by India.

The water expert produced statistics to show that "the difficult period" of

water shortage in his country starts as early as in November, and hence, "it is wrong to say that mid-March to mid-May is the only period when there would be any consequence to Bangladesh."

The Dacca government is asking India to consider the allocation of the Ganges water "for the whole year, and not for a fraction of the year," he added.

Stressing his country's dependence on the Ganges, Abbas said it has been helping sustain agriculture, support navigation, check intrusion of salinity from the sea and is viewed as a potential for future development.

The Ganges, he said, provides "life-giving waters" to 8 out of 19 Bangladesh districts. "About one-fourth of the total cultivable area of the country," he continued, "lies in these districts and about one-third of the population of Bangladesh or about 24 million people live in the Ganges basin."

Secondly, he pointed out that the coastal districts of Bangladesh are subject to tides from the Bay of Bengal twice a day. The lowering of the water table, the engineer went on, "will bring saline water along the river and creeks and overflow the adjacent lands leaving salt deposits." Aside from affecting agriculture, "intrusion of salinity will also affect the supply of sweet water to the industrial complex around Khulna," he added.

These apart, Abbas expressed dismay that saline water would adversely affect the fishing industry and forestry of the area, which account for the sustenance of a significant part of its population.

The Farakka issue has been one of the bones of contention between the two countries for the last quarter of a century.

Between 1951 and 1971, representatives of the governments of India and Pakistan met at different times and at different levels on the thorny question, but failed to produce any agreement.

The Bangladesh government's effort for a rapport reached its high water mark in April, 1975 when the two sides agreed on the test running of the Farakka feeder canal for a specific period, providing further that any withdrawal beyond that period would be subject to the concurrence of both the governments.

Bangladesh contends that New Delhi has been flouting that agreement, unilaterally withdrawing the water.

Indicting India

B. M. Abbas, adviser to the president of Bangladesh, was on the Washington scene Tuesday to tell officials and the press that India has violated the international law blocking the Ganges River, without consulting his lower riparian country. In the picture: Abbas (right) explains his government's case to Frederick News-Post staff writer M. A. Malik.

