

Responding to export decline

Some revving up necessary

IT'S a foregone conclusion that with the war raging there would be a marketing crunch for Bangladeshi goods overseas. Export is very much a function of demand in importing countries. Apart from a possible reduction in the demand, our exports face shipment difficulties during wartime.

To illustrate the shrinkage in demand, we have to only cite two examples: first, the European Union and US markets comprise 85 per cent of our annual shrimp export but we encounter a prospect for cancellation of orders from them because of the war. Secondly, 70 per cent of fruits and vegetables of Bangladesh usually go to the Middle East markets where the war has come to intervene.

On another level, Bangladesh Jute Association and Bangladesh Jute Manufacturers Association tell us that freight charges have gone up with the war surcharge as their new component. Add to this the risk transshipment of goods tends to face in wartime.

One line of thinking is that fiscal measures like release of funds as cash incentive, waiving of interest on bank loans for a certain period and continuation of subsidy could help bolster exports. While some bailout measures would be necessary on the basis of demand assessment during the ongoing war, the focus of attention ought to be on finding alternative markets. To our mind, the best option for us would be to strike bilateral trade deals with countries in the region and also with countries which are not quite adjoining the area of hostilities. In this context, we welcome the prospect for trade liberalisation on a bilateral basis with India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Admittedly, the regional free trade experiment has not yet picked up. That is all the more reason why we can peg on to the wartime scenario and build up bilateral trade linkages on a stronger footing. Ultimately, of course, we have to go for both market and product diversification to leverage all kinds of situations.

It's good tidings that in the month of March as a whole, our manpower export has increased despite a war for the last two weeks. Even so, remittances are likely to be affected. This is an area requiring immediate attention. All the more because protracted war would leave many unemployed while several of them may have to be accommodated into our own economy.

As far as farm products are concerned, we have to make sure the enthusiasm of peasants, weavers and fishermen is not ultimately sapped by dwindling exports. Their interest in farming needs to be sustained.

Cleaning up Biman

A long overdue move

THE government decision to launch a clean-up drive in Biman, the national airline, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh is indeed a welcome move. Most people, however, believe that such an action should have been taken a long time back. The drive is not quite an all-out campaign against inefficiency, corruption and malpractice as it apparently sets the limited objective of pruning the personnel having served the organization for at least 25 years. Nevertheless, it may initiate the process of removing redundancies from the Biman and CAAB.

Biman has been a losing concern for most part of its existence, being badly incapacitated by strident trade unionism, widespread corruption and poor performance in almost every area. Mismanagement in the organisation has been so phenomenal that when the government began to think in terms of privatisation, there was hardly any response from prospective takers.

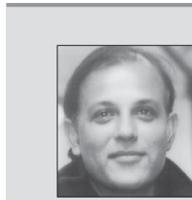
Strangely, despite the Biman's less-than-satisfactory performance, pressure has been mounting for some months on its management to raise the salaries of its staff a few fold. This is apparently part of the routine union manoeuvring, but a closer look will reveal a lot many things which go against the interest of the airline.

The aviation industry could hardly recover from the shock of 9/11 when the latest hostilities have broken out in Iraq to add another dimension to the depressing scenario. Leading airlines of Europe and America are going for drastic job cuts to absorb the impact of the war. Whereas the main concern of most of the airlines is to somehow keep afloat, trade unionism in Biman is demanding a pay-raise.

For Biman to attain a minimum level of operational and commercial viability, there is no alternative to the stern measures the government has decided to take.

We believe the clean-up drive should not end up being a mere rhetoric; it has to be pursued with determination so that the national flag-carrier proves true to its emblem.

Back to square one?



K.A.S. MURSHID

I am afraid that apart from personal problems that one finds oneself confronted with from time to time, the only other issue of any importance is the horror of Iraq. More precisely, the huge humanitarian disaster that looms large in the horizon continues to be mentioned in the media -- alluding of course that this is a result of atrocities perpetrated by pro-Saddam loyalists rather than by the aerial bombings and invasion of cities and built up areas. In fact the media onslaught is so great that even I have to remind myself that it is not Saddam who has invaded another country this time around but the US and the UK. I have to remind myself that US commanders have advised city dwellers to stay put in their homes rather than try to flee to safety, implying clearly that anything that moves on the ground is fair game for aerial bombings. I have to remind myself that food shortages and water scarcity in Basra for example, would not have occurred if food

godowns weren't bombed, supplies disrupted and water works destroyed. Undoubtedly the people of Basra are terrified and so would you be if you were under siege. To imply that the primary cause is elsewhere (e.g. B'aath Party activists) seems bizarre if not outright perverse.

While the unfolding humanitarian disaster should rightly concern us, the even bigger worry is the instability in

owns those) -- but alas, the process was deemed too slow and inefficient by Messrs Bush and Blair, and hence this attempt to speed things up a bit!

The world will never be the same again, whatever the ultimate outcome on the battlefield. Now I am not usually given to premonitions. However, I find myself constantly in the grip of a recurring nightmare. Allow me to share this with you in the hope that by

fail to see anything but uncertainty. YOU say you are liberators but it seems that even exiles and dissidents are having a hard time convincing themselves of that 'fact'. I am afraid the nice little story that was cooked up at the Pentagon (and that continues to be voiced even now) will soon be forgotten. I refer to 'Shock and Awe', followed by desertion, populist uprising, welcoming bands and joy ever after. YOU continue to sound hopeful, and I

been solved SO easily, given OUR extensive experience in organising mammoth public meetings and demos for or against any one or any issue. Nothing to do with hearts or minds, MIND you -- this is simply a matter of managerial expertise.

This question of the battle for hearts and minds is rather curious. Whatever the outcome of the war, this particular battle appears doomed. It is of course

won or lost? Neither you say, or perhaps both! Wars of this nature do not unfortunately produce clear, unambiguous conclusions. The war in Iraq is already beginning to look messy where the outcome, I fear, IS in considerable doubt. If my premonitions are anything to go by things will get a lot messier before there's a chance of any improvement. In the meantime, the Muslim world, indeed the whole world should prepare for the new, Golden Era marked by unprecedented political and economic turmoil.

What on earth should we do here in Bangladesh? I will not bother with the short-term -- I am sure our policy makers are fully on top of the situation with well thought out contingency plans under alternative scenarios. In the longer term, it is important that we carefully rethink the notion of globalization and our place under the global sun. There is always a strong case in favour of export diversification (by countries and commodities) -- that case has now become many times stronger. We would also want to revisit notions of self-sufficiency and autarky in key economic sectors once again -- after a span of some three or four decades. I fear that Mr. Bush's war will ironically lead to inward-looking policies and an insular mind-set right across the world. Back to square one? We will of course check this with the IMF and World Bank.

Dr K A S Murshid is an economist and Research Director, BIDS.

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

It is also useful to remind us of the other wars -- in Palestine and in Afghanistan. Have those wars been won or lost? Neither you say, or perhaps both! Wars of this nature do not unfortunately produce clear, unambiguous conclusions. The war in Iraq is already beginning to look messy where the outcome, I fear, IS in considerable doubt. If my premonitions are anything to go by things will get a lot messier before there's a chance of any improvement. In the meantime, the Muslim world, indeed the whole world should prepare for the new, Golden Era marked by unprecedented political and economic turmoil.

which the whole region and the entire world have now been thrown into. The biggest worry of all is the prospect that a victory to Mr. Bush will almost certainly usher in a neo-colonial era under which international rules are sought to be re-written and treaties abrogated or revised in the light of a newly emerging geo-political reality. The point of course is that the drive towards globalization over the last 10-15 years was, in fact, primarily designed to ensure market access to global businesses (and we know who

doing so the demon will have been exorcised.

I have visions of thousands of Arabs from across the region flooding in through the gates of Baghdad followed soon enough by many, many volunteers from all over the Muslim world. The war spills over into adjoining territories, and ultimately into South Asia as pro-American governments in country after country collapse under the weight of widespread popular discontent, even upheaval. YOU say that the outcome is certain, and yet I

can't blame you as you hope against hope, that there will be at least one small demonstration of support from the beleaguered people of Iraq. That however is proving to be as difficult as locating those damned WMD. Let me observe as an aside that the biggest mistake of the Pentagon was not to discuss their war strategy with our own General Ershad or even with some of our enterprising politicians. I mean this problem of organising a large 'popular' demonstration in support of one's cause (or ANY cause) could have

NOT surprising that Iraqi Sunnis would refuse to play along but WE did have certain expectations from the Shia in the South. The question is why should they trust us when we have already made our position clear with regard to their spiritual kin in Iran? And at the end of the day, one is an Arab and a Muslim -- by what logic could one be persuaded to fight for the infidel, even if his intentions were pure?

It is also useful to remind us of the other wars -- in Palestine and in Afghanistan. Have those wars been

Something more than meets the eye

MANZUR MURSHED

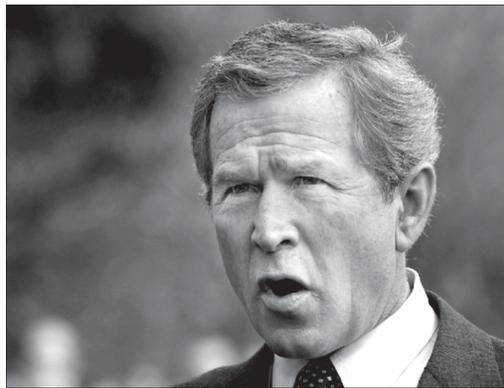
MANY people have begun to question George Bush's mental state. His actions are not rational and negates all tenets of justice and fair play. He seems to be, hell-bent upon having his own way in the Middle East, teaching a good lesson to Iraq as the first step. He has ignored the United Nations. He is not listening to wise counsel of the leaders of other nations and goaded by the cheerleader in the person of Tony Blair, wants to go ahead with the war, shedding Arab and American blood alike.

There is, however, a sinister method in his state of mind. It is not all madness, contrived out of the supreme ego of a nation, which gloats in its pride of being the most powerful nation on earth. It is neither all paranoia, stemming out of an insecure feeling of the American public, constantly in the fear of getting dislodged from their comfortably embedded life in which they are ensured of all the good things of life. Nor is it, for certain, the wish of an overzealous, missionary-like feeling for the people of Iraq that has propelled him to such risky adventure. So, what is it?

The answer is it is something more, something more than meets the eye.

The history of the United States of America is the history of émigré of Europe, who with their raw courage and hard work had built a nation. The great push to the American West is the story of sturdy pioneers, whose sole aim was to snatch away land from the Red Indians, the original inhabitants of America and establish themselves as farmers on the land they were on. When this was over, the Americans took on the colonial powers of Europe, notably Spain, to wrest away their New World possessions. The raison d'être was America must help other peoples of the American Continents to throw away the yokes of colonialism they themselves did away with, earlier.

In foreign wars America has always depended on superior combat strength and firepower rather than local support. In the present Gulf War, they have five-to-one superiority and the expectation was that the war would be short and quick. The other expectation was that an overwhelming number of Iraqis would welcome the coalition forces with open arms. None of these have come true. Now, even if they win a decisive victory, we have to wait and see when they will win the war and at what cost.



Bragging Bush?

trial surge of it the nineteenth century, when the opportunistic behavior of the American people became the standard. Moral norms were not important, material success was. If you can get away by stealing, you are smart and there will be no social sanction against you. Side by side with the industrial development we find a huge amount of corruption and criminal activities in the American society, which accepted the criminal or the corrupt if he had a lot of money. Many people became rich during the Prohibition and those monies were used to obtain political power. No one questioned the method of earning those monies, everybody admired the winner.

Such is the way in which money entered the American politics. It is an

integral part of politics and the Anti-Trust Laws could not stop the conglomerates from infusing colossal amounts of cash to influence the American political scene. Somebody said America goes up for sale every four years and the person who has cash or the person who has the support of other people with cash, buys the country, which is ruled by smiling, intitled gods. As the American big business is getting bigger, so is their power increasing in the field of politics, domestic and international.

Oil and gas is essentially American technology. They excel in it and the whole world has to depend on them to get it. Oil is still the cheapest and most ubiquitous source of energy in the

world. The industrial world is hungry for it and the ever surging demand for it makes it the most coveted fuel in the world.

The largest reservoirs of oil and gas are as follows: the US itself, Russian Federation, Venezuela, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, East Timor, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iraq and Iran. Except the last two sources, the rest are in firm control of America. Mexico and Venezuela are in her backyard and within the sphere of influence (never mind the recent petulance of President Chavez). Saudi Arabia is an old ally but not militarily strong enough to oppose America even if she wants to go her own way. East Timor has been freed of the Indonesian yoke and firmly in the grip of the Australians, another old ally still in the service of the British monarch. The American oil companies are now developing the oil resources of Russia. The Caspian States will soon be pumping their oil the other way, through the pipeline that is being built by US companies through Afghanistan and Pakistan. That leaves only Iraq and Iran out of the sphere of influence. Hence the war. After Iraq oil has been secured, it will be the turn of Iran, which is already war ravaged and ruled by inward looking Islamic clergy. In Washington's perspective, it may not look like an insuperable problem.

Then, the entire hydrocarbon energy source of the world will either be in American hands or in the hands of her allies.

There is a side benefit of the present Gulf War. With the fall of Iraqi regime of

Saddam Hussein, the coast will be clear for Israel to become America's policeman of the Middle East. There will be no power among the Middle Eastern States who can contend that, except, perhaps Turkey, who again is an ally, at least until now.

Another very important factor is China. The high growth of the Chinese economy has been a cause of concern of America. The average rate of growth of China has been in the region of 12 per cent and now, with the application of brakes, has come down to about 7.5 per cent. With this formidable growth rate China's GDP is likely to exceed that of USA by 2020. Chinese foreign trade is dependent on the US market. Nevertheless, China has not agreed to go off the "socialist market economy" to opt for full capitalist laissez faire economy like India has done. If the world's energy source is under the control of America, it will be easy to break the bucking bronco of Chinese economy and keep it trained within the limits US wants her to be.

The problem for America is that her wishes were not always fulfilled in the past. There are imponderables, like the aspirations of an independent people, refusing to be daunted by a foreign superpower that can never, ever be quantified by the computer models constructed by whiz kids in Washington. In foreign wars America has always depended on superior combat strength and firepower rather than local support. This was the reason of their undoing in Vietnam. In the present Gulf War, they have five-to-one superiority and the expectation was that the war would be short and quick. The other expectation was that an overwhelming number of Iraqis would welcome the coalition forces with open arms. None of these have come true. Now, even if they win a decisive victory, we have to wait and see when they will win the war and at what cost.

Manzur Murshed is a retired secretary and former ambassador.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"North Korea's stand"

I am a bit confused by the editorial on North Korea's stand (April 1). Is *The Daily Star* in its opposition to the war in Iraq trying to defend the North Korean stance?

The Americans have not threatened North Korea with war or sanctions as it had Iraq. Rather the US is trying to make the North Koreans live up to their past treaties and doing so multilaterally. It's ironic that everyone accused the US of unilateralism in the case of Iraq, now with North Korea, multilateralism is hardly working.

North Korea's very existence is the result of the Americans not taking the Korean War to its logical conclusion.

TAH
Dhaka

"Senator Byrd"

I refer to the letter "Senator Byrd" by Riki (March 26) on Senator Robert Byrd's letter and on the excerpts of Senator John McCain who, according to the writer is one of the 'greatest' men of American politics.

Senator John McCain who made an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic

Party nomination for the American presidency in 2000 against Al Gore is the father of an adopted Bangladeshi girl and not of a Bangladeshi boy as has been stated by Riki.

Nazmul Karim
Dhaka

What is "friendly fire"?

It seems that whenever the United States resorts to military actions, their partners in the battlefield face the biggest casualties. In Afghanistan, the Canadians lost soldiers to "Friendly Fire" a term most absurd in the long list of military and diplomatic jargons used by the Americans. In the ongoing Iraq war, the other day Britain lost a Tornado Bomber jet due to "friendly fire". The saying "Watch your back when you are in the battle field" takes on a new meaning, because you never know when an American might shoot you in the back and get away with it too!

Prime Minister Blair must be banging his head against the wall for siding along with Bush instead of Chirac!

Farhan Qudus
Old DOHS, Banani, Dhaka

Licensed fire arms

As per government orders during the month of November 2002 citizens who were holding licensed firearms such as: 12 bore shotguns, rifles, revolvers, pistols etc were advised to deposit their arms and ammunitions to the nearest police station.

Accordingly, I had deposited mine to the Kotowali Police Station, Chittagong. But till date the government has not yet returned the same to me for reasons unknown. Later in the month of December 2002, the government again announced through press media that those who have deposited their weapons are requested to renew their respective license for the year 2003, and accordingly I have renewed the same too.

It is now learnt that the government on special orders, presumably, the Home Ministry has advised the respective police stations to return the weapons belonging to VIPs, MPs, Senior Defence Personnel and persons who are paying above two lakh taka income tax. But I fail to understand why the genuine license holders have been deprived of receiving their weapons.

So my request to the Home Minister is to please look into the matter and pass the necessary order to the concerned department for return of the firearms to its respective license holders subject to scrutiny (if any) as soon as possible.

RIC, A licensed firearm holder
Chittagong

The duty free shop at ZIA

Bangladesh is a strange country where one in position can impose one's own law to suit his/her or collective interest.

As per Custom and Excise rules, a foreigner arriving into the country is entitled to buy 1 (one) litre of spirit and a case of beer consisting of 2 (two) dozens. But the sales staff at the arrival duty free shop would deny the passenger his quota on the plea that they have an internal circular by their own authority overruling the custom regulations. The passenger would have to have a choice of 6 (six) cans of beer or a bottle of spirit only. But all other duty free shops outside Bangladesh remains wary of the custom vigilance and try to push up their sales as much as possible in the interest of the country.

What happens here in reality is known to all. They make the passenger sign the receipt with lot of blank space in it only to be filled-up later on in their own way and dispose those off at a higher price to the smuggler employees working at the airport. Thus the sales staff do their private business out of a Govt. establishment without any check on their illegal activities. All these are possible because of the deep-rooted corruption in our offices from lower strata to the highest strata. Everyone concerned has a stake in the cake.

Besides above, if a passenger pays his bill in other than US dollar currency he would be cheated through the exchange mechanism though the bill would be prepared in US dollar only, thus tarnishing the image of the country to a foreign visitor even before he steps inside the country.

EZ
Dhaka

G Dubya and American Muslims

I have not met a single immigrant Muslim citizen of the US who had not

voted for Mr Bush in the (to borrow a page from the Saddam vernacular) "Mother of all (s)elections 2000".

It is also very interesting to see these very same group of people complaining about the current administration and its domestic and foreign policies. They rejected Mr Gore and Mr Ralph Nader because Mr Bush offered them "compassionate conservatism" and "family values".

What is left unsaid but an obvious fact is that anti-Semitism and misogyny was a major issue during the polls. Evidently, Mr Gore had done the taboo act of choosing a running mate who was Jewish. Mr Nader had the temerity and the nerve to choose a Native American woman as his running mate. Both a no-no for our conservative minded brothers. They went for the macho gung-ho NRA types who said they would be "compassionate".

I remember the saying: "You have made your bed. Now you have to lie in it."

How compassionate is a "precision" bomb over Baghdad?

"We must be realistic. We must demand the impossible." -Che

Guevara
Yahya
USA

Slums in Gulshan

I remember writing a letter on the growth of slums especially around the Gulshan-Banani lake areas that was published in December 2002. Since then nothing has happened or changed, the slums continue to grow and the resulting pollution therefrom (security risks, social crimes, health and hygiene risks, noise etc) is spilling more freely on the neighbourhood.

Please tell me who is the concerned authority on this and how do I draw their attention to this nuisance?

Z.A. Khan
Gulshan, Dhaka

TV Guide

A few weeks ago I wrote to the editor asking why the TV Guide carries listings with two different sets of time zones.

For instance, the timings for HBO, AXN, Star Movies etc. are in Bangladesh time while Star Gold, Channel V, Star World etc. in Indian time. I was and remain stumped for any logical reason why this must be so.

It's funny because there are often letters by people trying to explain why they write letters. Some try to justify their writings as attempts to change things for the better, others to share their outrage.

Mine is quite simple. I just want my TV Guide in Bangladesh time and not have to add +30 minutes to find out what time Baywatch is on.

Emile
Dhaka

Geneva Camp

Could your daily carry some in depth reporting on Geneva Camp, its residents, people residing around the camp, law and order situation in and around the camp area, should such a camp be retained for more than 30 years and when can people around the camp see some decisions taken and implemented?

I am sure you will come up with some suggestions for the Govt and also generate some public opinion.

I earnestly request you to pay attention on this issue.

Amin Al Haque, Dhaka