

Dhaka-Agartala bus service

The task now is to exploit its full potential

THE long-awaited bus service between Dhaka and Agartala has finally materialised, with the first bus leaving Dhaka on its way to the capital of the Indian state of Tripura on Friday. It was a fulfilment of a long-felt need of the people on either side of the border.

We welcome this valuable addition to the communications network between India and Bangladesh. It took a longer time than usual to introduce the service, considering the fact that a bilateral agreement was reached on it quite a few years ago. But better late, than never.

The service has opened up a great number of possibilities insofar as bilateral trade and commerce and people-to-people contact are concerned. The Bangladeshi businessmen have long been talking about the possibility of expanding trade ties with the eastern Indian states. So the huge trade potential that is embedded in the communication inter-span must be exploited fully in the interest of both the countries. The prospect for a steady flow of goods and services between two geographically contiguous regions should not be lost on both sides.

Tripura has cane, wood and a host of other herbal products to offer. Bangladesh, for its part, can supply cement and other construction materials along with toiletries and many other products. The list can be endless.

However, some infrastructural improvements have to be made before the new communication link can produce the expected results. The infrastructure includes not only the road, which is not smooth and broad enough at some points on our side, but also the checkpoints, which must perform efficiently, and quickly to serve the purpose for which the service was introduced. To put it more clearly, the facilities must be designed to meet the needs of the travelling public and business community alike.

A window of opportunity has opened on striking trade deals with the state government of Tripura and examining the possibilities of expanding trade ties with a vast region across the eastern border.

The talk of regional economic cooperation, which has overshadowed everything else in recent times, can be meaningful only when the nations are brought closer to each other through a communications network. Viewed from that angle, the Dhaka-Agartala bus service is a step in the right direction.

Catastrophe at ship-breaking yard

Authority can't ignore the risks any longer

WE share the concerns expressed by environmentalists over pollution taking place at and around the ship-breaking yard in Chittagong. Their worry stems from the recent disaster at Sitakunda after toxic gas spewing from the yard caused respiratory and skin problems as well as burnt trees and harmed animals in the area. In fact it should be an eye opener of sorts for the concerned authorities to the lack of proper management in order to prevent such disasters. In other words, if certain precautions were taken, such pollution could easily have been prevented.

So the obvious question would be why weren't any steps taken? Didn't the authorities turn a blind eye to what was happening? Maybe they were just waiting for a big disaster before taking any action? We have reasons to feel that way. Though the recent development got widespread media coverage bringing the issue to the fore, such incidents had occurred in the area, maybe in a smaller scale, in the past. Explosions of gas cylinders while cutting iron with gas, fire erupting from the oil tankers had almost become a part of the daily work pattern in the yards. Many a labourer lost his life in those accidents, many lost either their limbs or arms, and almost all of them did not get any compensation.

Activists had many times in the past emphasised on proper precautions for the workers. They had also demanded a stop to using minor labour in the yards. But all the exhortations fell on deaf ears. Because those flouting the laws were not taken to task, they could get away with everything. None of the investigation reports on the accidents saw the light of the day; very few companies were either punished or brought to trial. It's high time the government took the matter more seriously. It would benefit the exchequer even further by fetching more foreign currency if ship-breaking were streamlined. It's not just a matter of individual gain or loss, lack of proper control over the trade can cause catastrophe to a larger number of people.

Cancun: A post-mortem

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

CANCUN may turn out to be a more important watershed than Seattle in signaling how the global economy is going to be run. When protesters raged on Seattle streets in 1998, it was a moral cry against corporate indifference. In Cancun, the signals have been much more portentous. When the cheering and the blame game take a back seat, it may be time to take a hard look at what transpired and where the road will now lead to.

Part of the Cancun script could have been foretold, indeed was foretold. In the wake of Seattle and its angry street images of protest, corporate power players behind WTO adopted a populist tone and christened the next Doha Ministerial as the start of a 'development round' of trade talks. This was an acknowledgement that global trade talks could not just be a technical issue but had to be about fairness and ensuring well-being and growth prospects of the developing world. From the moment the Doha Meet ended, however, developed countries have done their utmost to backtrack on every one of the lofty commitments made there. Developing countries went to Cancun with a real sense of anger at this display of double standards and the anger came not just from the civil protesters but also from the governmental delegations.

From the outset, the dominant issue in Cancun came to be agriculture. Two separate issues were involved here: opening up the protected markets of USA, EU and Japan through reducing tariffs; and secondly, eliminating agricultural subsidies in developed countries which amount to more than 300 billion dollars a year. The most dramatic consequence of such high levels of subsidies is their depressing effect on world prices of key agricultural commodities such as cotton. Much of Africa has been devastated by the loss of income through such depressed world prices. Developing countries were determined to press home the

demand for elimination of subsidies and reduction of agricultural tariffs. Brazil led the assault and African and Caribbean LDCs won a rare success in projecting US subsidy on cotton as a critical concern. The voice of protesters too had a new edge; it was not just civil society activists who were on the streets but also actual producers. Ten thousand Mexican campesinos (peasants) descended on Cancun and a Korean farmer's leader became a martyr for the cause of a just trading order.

The corporate cabal which has so far dictated the WTO process tried every trick in their divide and rule policy to override this most legitimate of demands from the developing world. When this did not succeed, they brought the so-called Singapore Issues to the fore as a

one and agreeing on them at this stage would have effectively meant handing over developing world economies to the multinationals. At the last moment, the EU Trade Commissioner floated the idea of unbundling the Singapore issues, taking two of the four at this stage. To their credit, developing countries saw through the ploy and stood firm on not crossing this particular red line. South had refused to be brow-beaten. North succeeded in derailing the talks and protecting their farm lobbies. Cancun became history.

And where was Bangladesh in all this? No one really expected Bangladesh to be an important player on its own. But as the supposed leader of LDCs, there were some expectations. Or were there? Local media had made much of the Dhaka decla-

some text somewhere as was indeed going to be the case if there had been an agreement, what real operational potential is there for the pursuit of such a 'right' through the WTO process? In a post September 11 world where security considerations have come to dominate as never before, it is the domestic security policies which is determining the scope for such movements. This and the inventiveness and initiative of the common people. The more revealing statistic here is that neither September 11 nor the Iraq war has seen any slackening in the rate of external migration from Bangladesh.

If there was one lesson from Cancun for Bangladesh, it is that we cannot go far in trying to secure our advantages from global trade by relying on feel-good rhetoric.

capacity for collective action by developing countries, Bangladesh's long-term WTO future may lie in finding intelligent ways to link up with such a bloc.

If Seattle made anti-globalization fashionable, Cancun has demonstrated that the debate is really not one of for-and-against globalization. Countries like Bangladesh have as much a stake in improved trade access as does the developed world. The fight really is about what will dictate the globalization process. Will the narrow interests of a corporate cabal rule or will the diverse interests of ordinary peoples around the world hold the centre-stage? Easy victories are unlikely. Protesters cheered on the news of Cancun failure. The cheering was understandable in that South was not browbeaten into

voices within the Bush administration. The mosaic of trade interests across the globe is a highly complex one except when it comes to 'red-line' issues such as GATS (General Agreement on Services), TRIP (trade-related intellectual property rights) and the so-called Singapore Issues. On these, the divide is really between North and South. Any attempt to re-open these in the run-up to the meeting of WTO bureaucrats scheduled for December must be fiercely resisted. But individual countries have also to attend to their specific trade interests. For countries like Bangladesh, the question is also not just about trade interests. How important is trade talks if you do not have sufficient items to trade in the first place? In this context, developing our product-base is as important a priority as looking for trade advantages. This will not happen if we ignore our domestic market. The export sector is something of a pampered child in Bangladesh. In contrast, the domestic sector is like the proverbial poor relative, just about tolerated. And yet, today's producers are tomorrow's exporters. Bangladesh cannot hope to gain from the WTO process by ignoring its own domestic producers, not just the business elite of Dhaka but the millions of producers and entrepreneurs struggling in the villages and the district towns to bring about a new economic reality.

Will the post-Cancun world be a free-for-all where WTO is fatally marginalized? Will the corporate cabal regroup and re-impose its writ on WTO on the safer shores of Geneva? Or does Cancun signal the beginning of a new WTO process, one ultimately more democratic and fruitful for the global economy. Nothing is pre-ordained. The future is ours to make.

Hossain Zillur Rahman is Executive Chairman, Power and Participation Research Centre

If there was one lesson from Cancun for Bangladesh, it is that we cannot go far in trying to secure our advantages from global trade by relying on feel-good rhetoric. Dependence on 'cut-and-paste' advisers will only ensure that we become only a perplexed bystander at these crucial of global meetings. To its credit, however, when the ultimate moment came to stand up to the bullying of the corporate cabal, Bangladesh too was shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the developing world to say enough is enough.

pressure ploy. These so-called Singapore Issues are all about extending WTO's rule-making jurisdiction to wholly new subjects such as foreign investment, competition policy, government procurement policy and trade facilitation policies. The first attempt to ram through a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) by the corporate world came in 1999 but it was successfully stopped by civic protests. For the lay person, it may appear counter-intuitive why investment should be such a red-herring for WTO debates. In reality, investment is merely the code-word for a policy offensive which will lay bare developing world economies to all categories of predatory capital flows which masquerade as investment and reduce government's ability to protect national interests. The playing field on the Singapore issues is a completely asymmetric

ration of May this year that emerged out of the LDC preparatory meeting attended by 25 of the 49 LDC countries and the concurrent civil society meeting organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue. What had loomed large in the Dhaka headlines, however, scarcely made it into the Cancun script. For one, LDCs did not speak with one voice. Indeed, the only LDC voice which found a place in the Cancun headlines was that of African and Caribbean countries who succeeded in getting the global spotlight on the cotton subsidy issue. The Dhaka declaration, a brainchild of the Commerce Ministry and the Centre for Policy Dialogue, was brutally exposed for what it was, an exercise in feel-good rhetoric. Nowhere was this more exemplified than in the so-called demand for right of movement of natural persons (unskilled labour). Beyond the feel-good inclusion in

Dependence on 'cut-and-paste' advisers will only ensure that we become only a perplexed bystander at these crucial of global meetings. To its credit, however, when the ultimate moment came to stand up to the bullying of the corporate cabal, Bangladesh too was shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the developing world to say enough is enough.

The one big surprise at Cancun was the emergence of a new kid on the block, the so-called G21 grouping of developing countries led by countries like Brazil, India, China and Malaysia. In terms of the power politics of global trade, this has been a truly significant development. Little surprise that developed countries did their utmost to prevent the consolidation of such a bloc. It will be interesting to watch how and whether this bloc endures after Cancun. If it does signal a new

signing an unjust agreement. But the time for cheering may soon be past when the challenge of re-engaging on global trade talks is at the door. Cancun may have had no agreement. But the issues remain. The corporate strategists already had a game-plan for the post-Cancun world. If WTO proves too troublesome, go for bilateral and regional trade pacts. USA is already well ahead on this path: bilateral pacts with Chile and Singapore are already in offing within this year. Central America, Morocco, Australia next year. This is a real dilemma for the developing countries. A corporate-driven WTO is not welcome but the loss of multi-lateral space the WTO affords surely cannot be cause for cheer.

The developed world is not a uniformly monolithic front. In recent times, WTO has twice ruled against USA earning the ire of influential

What will happen to the Dukhimon Begums?

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE Daily star of July 24, 2003 published a back page article entitled "When Death Looks Greener than Starvation." The story behind the headline goes as: On July 22, 2003, Dukhimon Begum, a 40-year old mother of four from Durgapur Upazila of Rajshahi district, had a quarrel with her rickshaw-puller husband, Manik Chand, over buying a saree for her niece on the occasion of the latter's marriage. The family did not have any food at home to eat that night and the husband went to pull rickshaw next morning hungry. Facing with such abject poverty and starvation, Dukhimon fed her two small daughters pesticide-laced biscuits and ate some herself in order to be free from the misery. Finding them screaming from pain, neighbours took them to the Upazila Health Complex, where little Moni, 6, and Mitu, 8, died, but the mother survived. Dukhimon now screams at her well wishers -- "Why do you want to save my life? I do not want to live...We do not have food and clothing...Why should we lead such a life?" She also pleads with them: "Please let me go home and take the poison again..."

The story of Dukhimon Begum is not an isolated case. There are countless Dukhimon living in the nooks and corners of the country -- they are perhaps the single majority of our citizens. According to knowledgeable observers, their numbers are increasing everyday.

Last year, on invitation of a non-government organization, I, along with Professors Muzaffer Ahmed of Dhaka University and Mohammad Masum of Jahangirnagar University, went to a village in Jamalpur. We spent a few hours with a group of women there. During our conversation we found that none of the women get to eat more than two meals a day. They normally cook rice in the afternoon and eat with chilli peppers or cooked leaves and vines. If there are any leftovers, they eat those next morning -- otherwise they starve. One of them said with much pain that she had to marry off

her adolescent daughter to a blind because she could not afford to feed or protect the girl.

Dukhimon Begum and the women of Jamalpur are citizens of Bangladesh, owners of this country. The liberation struggle of 1971 was for them -- to free them from the exploitation of the Pakistanis, especially the 22 families of Pakistan. Millions willingly gave lives in that struggle. After independence, the politicians gave countless promises, and are still doing so, to improve their conditions. The policymakers also, to this end, formulated many plans based on the trickle down principles. They accepted many prescriptions of the donors. Alas, the conditions of

organisations. Their misdeeds earned Bangladesh the dubious distinction of being the most corrupt country in the world and brought shame for the entire nation. Many of these individuals have also been showing off their riches in the most naked and obscene manner.

The evidence of mounting disparity of income and opportunities between the rich and the poor can be found in government statistics. According to Bangladesh Economic Report, 2003, the share of national income of the richest 5 per cent families of our country increased from 23.62 per cent in 1995-96 to 30.66 per cent in 2000. That is, during this short span of five years, the share of the national income of

export-import transactions. Some indulged in smuggling. Some grabbed public property by flexing muscles. Some illegally "bought" official patronage. Some took bribes or otherwise engaged in corruption. Still others "looted" banks. Some did all of the above. Consequently, nearly Tk. 60,000 crore of black money and about Tk. 25,000 of defaulted loans exist in our country. Few have courage to say anything against these bandits and defaulters. For they are now the most respected persons of our society and the Dukhimon Begums are on the receiving end of their "generosity." Unfortunately many of these people have been our "leaders" and policymakers in recent years.

country. However, people rarely raise serious questions about economic governance, which is a major problem. In our country, many of the economic decisions are made in order to provide patronage to the vested interests. Many projects are unnecessary and are undertaken in the interests of the powerbrokers -- not for the wellbeing of the Dukhimon. Thus establishing transparency and accountability in the budget making in our country is a serious issue at this time. Our Honourable Finance Minister himself recently spoke strongly on this issue in his meeting with the Secretaries.

What is most disheartening is that the greed and needs of our rich

In the last 32 years, hundreds of thousands of crores of taka have been brought from abroad to this country by the government and non-government organisations as loans and grants. Regrettably, much of these huge sums of money were looted by a few thousand individuals and they have become unbelievably rich over a very short span of time. The Dukhimon, unfortunately, did not even get the crumbs of the resources that were brought from the donors to alleviate their poverty.

Dukhimon Begums have not improved much over the years! In some cases, their conditions manifestly worsened.

Unfortunately the intolerable misery and the abject poverty of the Dukhimon Begums have been sold by many and in countless ways since independence. In the last 32 years, hundreds of thousands of crores of taka have been brought from abroad to this country by the government and non-government organisations as loans and grants. Regrettably, much of these huge sums of money were looted by a few thousand individuals and they have become unbelievably rich over a very short span of time. The Dukhimon, unfortunately, did not even get the crumbs of the resources that were brought from the donors to alleviate their poverty. As a result, most of the "leaders" of our "poor" country have become millionaires many times over. Same is true for unscrupulous businessmen and many leaders of governmental and non-governmental

the richest 5 per cent families increased by nearly 30 per cent. During the same period, the share of the remaining 95 per cent families obviously declined from 76.38 per cent to 69.34 per cent. What is most startling is that the share of the income of the poorest 5 per cent Bangladeshis families declined from 0.88 per cent in 1995-96 to 0.67 per cent in 2000. In other words, during this five year period, their share of national income declined by nearly 24 per cent. With the growing disparity of income like this, the social stability of our nation could be under serious threat. Shame on the donors who are still continuing to impose the trickle down policy -- a policy which is primarily responsible this naked deprivation of the common people!

There is nothing wrong in becoming rich by earning money with honest means. But many of the rich in our country have amassed huge wealth through illegal and immoral means. Some cheated through under and over invoicing in their

Another reason for the growing disparity between the rich and poor in Bangladesh is the widespread system of graft and payoffs that prevail in our society. For example, the prices of essential services such as water, electricity and gas are required to be occasionally raised because of the prevailing incompetence, mismanagement and corruption of the relevant functionaries. Such increases unfortunately cause transfers of resources, in a legal manner, from the service recipients to the corrupt officials. In addition, less privileged persons have to pay twice for these services once as their official prices and the second time to cater to the illegal demands of the corrupt employees. Thus, the slum dwellers like Dukhimon Begum pay higher rates for electricity than the residents of posh neighbourhoods of Gulshan and Baridhara.

There is now an almost unanimous demand to establish good governance by eradicating corruption and hooliganism from the

seem insatiable. We can see the evidence of it from the recent decisions to raise the salaries and benefits of our Ministers and Members of Parliament. Many of our policymakers are rich -- owners of crores of taka. They also get many governmental benefits. Nevertheless, they voted, by one estimate, Tk. 150 crore worth of benefits for themselves in the last budget session of the Parliament, while the Dukhimon Begums are trying to kill themselves to free themselves off the intolerable pains of poverty. This cruel situation reminds us of the two famous lines of Rabindranath Tagore's Dui Bigha Jomi: "...Alas! In this world those who have much, they want still more..."

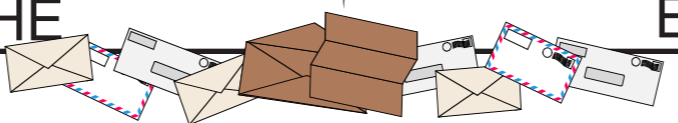
The goal of politics should be to serve the people. However, in our country it has, especially in the past decade, become the best means of serving naked self interest. The mainstream politics is now focused primarily on enriching those who are involved in it, rather than the wellbeing of the Dukhimon. It has

unfortunately degenerated into a "business" people are using governmental authority to earn personal gains. Democracy has come to be mostly an election-centred exercise to promote the interests of the elected officials. However, democracy is not all about elections, it is primarily about what happens in between elections. Thus, if this trend of self-serving politics continues, our democracy is in danger of turning into a "leasocracy." Even the donors, who have indirectly aided the process of criminalising our politics, are now sounding alarms. The head of The World Bank Mission in Bangladesh, Mr. Frederick D. Temple, spoke last July, before his departure, of the need for "deep reforms" in our election process.

Shameful as it may seem, we have managed to create "two Bangladeshes" in the last 32 years one for a limited number of the rich and the powerful, and the other for the Dukhimon Begums. Even though they are the vast majority, Dukhimon are in weaker and relatively helpless situation. They have the right to vote, but no representation in the policymaking. There are also few champions of their causes -- it appears that the number of idealists in our society are declining. Thus, the question that haunts many of us now: what will happen to the Dukhimon Begums? Will they in the future get their due share of our national resources? Will they get a significant proportion of the \$2 billion expected from the Brettenwoods institutions as a result of our preparation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)? Will the youths of today come forward to ensure that the Dukhimon are treated fairly by the society? Will they thereby play their due role to remove the shame of having "two Bangladeshes" exist side by side in the same land, under the same flag?

Badiul Alam Majumdar is Country Director, The Hunger Project-Bangladesh.

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.

Governance crisis in Bangladesh

Nowadays a much talked about phrase, 'good governance' is being discussed in the Third World countries like Bangladesh.

Donor agencies and countries have been emphasising this in their prescription for development. Bangladesh, a politically unstable country, is really facing governance crisis causing it to slide down the human development index (HDI).

As a result, our country remains underdeveloped. Our successive governments neither implemented the donors' suggestions nor developed effective policies to administer the country in a proper manner. I suppose the pattern of governance

by which we are governed, should be termed as 'BNP/Awami League style of governance'. People have become frustrated. It seems to me that our political leaders always try to make our country rich by the style of their own. My query to them: is it good or bad?

Shamsul Alam Monir
Dept. of Public Admin, University of Dhaka

Recruitment, appointment and promotion of government officers

Over the past thirty years it has become a common phenomenon in our country to make large-scale,

unreasonable and unjustified recruitment, appointment and promotion of government officers.

We fail to understand what rules and regulations, formalities, O and M (Organisation and Method), modalities and criteria are followed and practised in these cases.

Not to speak about the long tale and mystery of past three decades, let us discuss in brief the performance of our present government.

During the last two years, 493 Senior Assistant Secretaries, 174 Deputy Secretaries and 97 Joint Secretaries have been promoted.

On 27th August, 2003, 97 officials were promoted as Additional Secretary and 49 officials as Joint Secretary. Most of the officials have been made Officer on Special Duty (OSD)

in the Establishment Ministry.

We wonder if the above 146 posts of Additional Secretaries and Joint Secretaries were justified, necessary and sanctioned?

What are the financial aspects involved in the promotion of these 146 officials? Would the Establishment Secretary kindly let us know, if he has taken prior approval from the ministry of finance for the financial expenses involved in respect of pay and allowances of these 146 additional posts?

We would highly appreciate if government rules and regulations are strictly followed and maintained by all concerned for creation of new posts, recruitment, appointment and promotion of government officers in the interest of public

service.
OH Kabir
Dhaka

Forgery

I am shocked by the revelation that two teachers of the Architecture faculty of BUET have been found guilty of forging documents. They did it to advance their careers. One of them produced a letter from UK university which turned out to be false. An investigation committee was formed and the allegations were proven. But then came the more astounding part of the story.

The syndicate resorted to nothing less than a whitewash. Instead of the sacking the teachers, token punishment in the form of withhold-

ing increments was meted out. This is indeed shameful. No one accused of forgery should have a place in any faculty.

Now as the syndicate has failed to do justice, for political reasons possibly, I would request the VC to look into the matter again. Will the teachers concerned show some self respect and resign?

Khalid Hasan
Grand Terrace, New Eskaton, Dhaka

Danger ahead!

I was shocked to read about the illegal activities of an Islamic radical group called "Jamaatul Mujahedin." It is our duty to take precautions and actions against these radical

groups. We must not take this issue lightly. It will be difficult to control them if they continue to spread their wings around the country. Therefore, I should say that the government must do something to eradicate these sort of radical groups once and for all before it's too late.

Minhaj Ahmed
Uttara, Dhaka

A good decision

It's a great pleasure to learn that the High Court has spoken against an election fraud by a veteran Jamaat leader. The verdict as pronounced by the High Court will be a milestone in our political and judicial processes.

Our sincere appeal to all concerned is: wake up with the call from the highest judiciary body and our civil society including fair politicians to work unitedly and stand against all political frauds. I hope, united we stand, fair democracy will prevail and evils will be on the run and dedicated politicians like Dr. Kamal Hossain et al will come forward to develop our nation with sincerity and devotion to make our politics and parliament more effective and meaningful to all.

Gopal Sengupta and Shyamali Sengupta
Barclay Avenue, Montreal, Quebec, Canada