

The New York Times editorial unfairly smears Bangladesh

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

IN its scathing December 14 editorial on Bangladesh, *The New York Times* omitted the most significant favourable fact about Bangladesh: that it is a democracy. Instead, Bangladesh was portrayed as a banana republic, "a culture hemmed in by extremism and corruption" which fosters "Muslim extremism," and which is "among the world's most dangerous countries for journalists." The Times editorial had absolutely nothing positive, let alone complimentary to say about Bangladesh. The New York Times' editorial contradicts the official US position on Bangladesh, articulated by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell: "Bangladesh represents an eloquent, compelling and greatly needed voice for moderation in the world...The United States deeply appreciates Bangladesh's support for global-anti-terrorism campaign." Presumably, Bangladesh earned the ire of the New York Times primarily because of its treatment of a pro-Israeli Bangladesh journalist. Under the caption, "The Risks of Journalism in Bangladesh," the editorial read:

"Salah Uddin Shoahid Choudhury, a Muslim editor and commentator in Bangladesh, has a rare virtue -- he champions dialogue and decency in a culture hemmed in by extremism and corruption. When his weekly newspaper, *Blitz*, published articles favourable to Israel, it was blacklisted by various companies. Some people demanded that the paper be banned. Mr. Choudhury was thrown out of a private television company.

"But all of this pales compared with what happened last month. As he boarded a flight in Dhaka, the capital, on his way to a writers' conference in Tel Aviv, Mr. Choudhury was arrested by security personnel, accused of being a spy and thrown in prison. The charges are a baseless sham. The Committee to Protect Journalists in New York and the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières have vigorously condemned his arrest. Governments, including Washington, need to demand his release.

"The Tel Aviv meeting Mr. Choudhury was planning to attend was called "Bridges Through Culture" and the lecture he hoped to deliver concerned the role of the media in establishing peace. Mr. Choudhury, who was going to open a Bangladesh branch of a group called the International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace, would have been the first journalist from Bangladesh to speak publicly in Israel.

"Mr. Choudhury's mistreat-

ment is not occurring in a vacuum. Muslim extremism is growing in Bangladesh. Moreover, violence against journalists who stand up to the ruling party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been increasing, especially in the south and especially for those exposing links between politicians and organised crime. On Dec. 4, a correspondent for a southern regional daily was beaten and stabbed by members of the party's youth wing after publication of an article critical of a key local politician.

"On Thursday, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Sans Frontières sent letters to Khaleda Zia, the prime minister of Bangladesh, expressing grave concern over these developments. Their alarm is quite justified. Bangladesh may now be among the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. That makes Mr. Choudhury's courageous stand for Muslim-Jewish dialogue all the more admirable -- and vital to defend."

Although *The New York Times'* accusations are laughable, no Bangladeshis should be amused. The accusations leveled are most serious. As America's most influential newspaper, the Times' opinion pieces are widely read and believed. Many Americans will now believe the fallacies propagated by Times about Bangladesh as facts. Let us look closely at the accusations. Any one perusing Bangladeshis newspapers will notice that pro-Israeli views are not at all uncommon. Recently, *The Daily Star* published pro-Israeli articles and letters written by Jewish Americans and others with Muslim-sounding names. Bangladeshis took these in strides as manifestation of freedom of speech and a free press in Bangladesh. It is inconceivable that *The New York Times* would publish pro-Palestinian articles and letters of similar bias. One has to worry now whether those pro-Israeli articles/letters published in the Bangladesh media were individual opinions or coordinated efforts to paint Israel favourably to Bangladeshis. With the apparent failure of those efforts, *The New York Times* now fires a proverbial shot across Bangladesh's bow, as though as a warning!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Because it considers Bangladesh a military and economic lightweight, The New York Times should not misuse its enormous clout to denigrate Bangladesh so unfairly, and peddle interests of nations other than the US. Bangladesh should refuse to be intimidated by mighty New York Times' threatening posture and continue to be what it is best at -- a moderate nation seeking progress and prosperity through peaceful means. Contrary to the Times' assertion, Bangladesh is one of the safest countries in the world for real journalists.

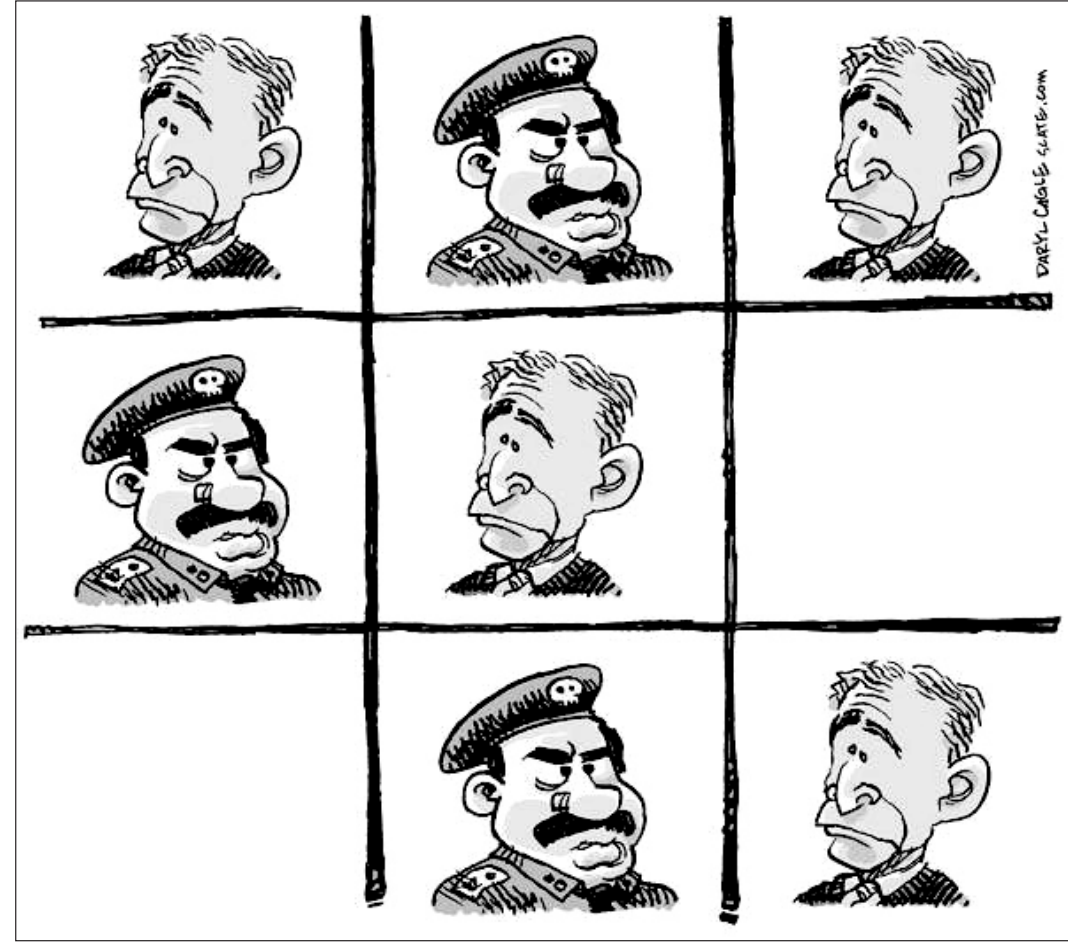
With pro-Israeli articles and letters appearing in the Bangladesh media, the Times' innuendo that Mr. Salah Uddin Shoahid Choudhury was arrested solely because he is pro-Israel does not hold much water. Another significant fact that the Times does not care to mention is that Bangladesh does not have diplomatic relations with Israel. That being the case, it is intriguing how Mr. Choudhury was going to travel to Tel Aviv from Dhaka, when Bangladesh passport explicitly forbids travel to Israel! Whether or not Bangladesh should recognise Israel, that is for Bangladeshis to decide, not for *The New York Times* to dictate. Personally, if a deal is signed that is acceptable to the Palestinians, the writer would be favourably disposed towards the Israel of proven peacemakers such as former Prime Ministers Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak, but would vehemently oppose overtures to the Israel of mass murderer Ariel Sharon until he reforms himself. New York's indomitable pro-Israeli propagandist Mr. David Harris of The American Jewish Committee is at it again. His current radio commercials wish Americans happy Christmas and Hanukkah, while at the same time reminding listeners that there is no religious freedom in (three Muslim countries he doubtless hopes Mr. Bush should attack next) Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran! Why doesn't some of these people understand that to be secure Israel does not need America to destroy all of Israel's Muslim neighbours; all Israel needs for security is to withdraw to its pre-1967 border!

The Times calls charges against Mr. Choudhury "baseless sham." How is it so sure? Does it have some inside information that Bangladesh is not privy to? The Times also urges Washington to demand Mr. Choudhury's release. *The New York Times'* display of colonial arrogance -- that Bangladesh's democracy notwithstanding, they have the right to demand what they want from our highest executive, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, on any matter however trivial -- is regrettable to say the least. This is no way to show respect for a democracy! One cannot read or

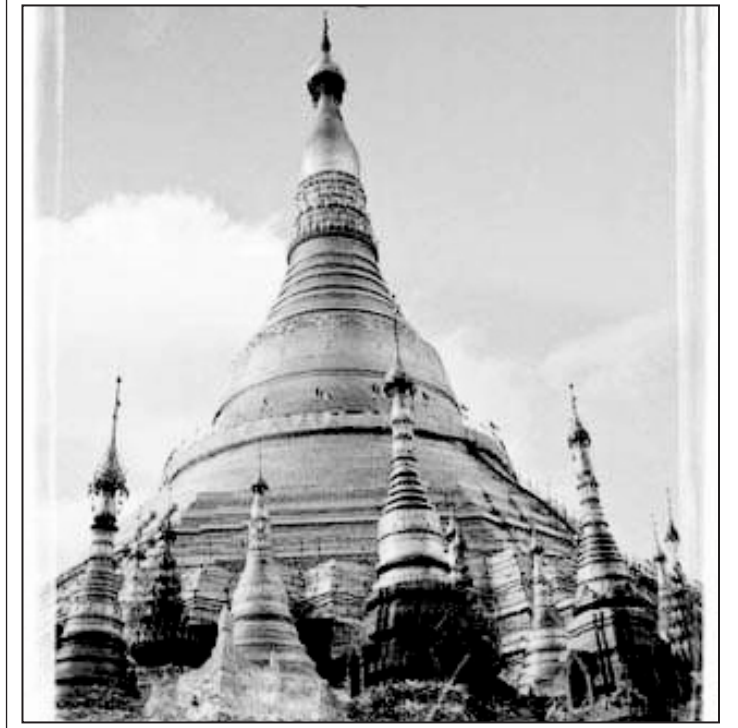
hear a single word about Israel in the American media without being bombarded with repeated reminders that Israel is a democracy. Bangladesh sticks out like a sore thumb in the western media because it shoots down their pet theory that no Muslim nation can be truly democratic. And the inconvenient fact that two democratically elected Muslim women have been ruling Bangladesh for the last twelve years, when America has never had a female President, therefore, must be suppressed at all cost! That is why there is no mention of Bangladesh's democracy in a Times editorial devoted entirely to Bangladesh. Would the Times have pressured Washington to release someone the US had arrested on espionage charges? Instead of showing disrespect for Bangladesh's democracy and justice system, the Times should be confident, as we expatriate

Bangladeshis are, that if Mr. Choudhury is not guilty, he will indeed be found not guilty by Bangladesh's justice system, without any foreign intervention. The Times should remember that during the tenure of our previous Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, the killers of her father, father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, although convicted, could not be executed because the case is in legal limbo.

One is left to wonder whether something sinister is afoot here. Zionists have such a stranglehold over American media that the brainwashing of Americans with pro-Israeli propaganda has reached epidemic proportions. In developing countries like Bangladesh, because of the freedom of press, opposing views on Israel are articulated. And in these days of the Internet, many



No time like the present



MALCOLM BETH

TIME stands still for no man. Time takes its toll. Time is of the essence. During a recent visit to Burma's Shan state, the heart of the infamous Golden Triangle, I thought often of those commonplace English expressions -- partly because almost none of the clocks told the correct time.

Perhaps there's good reason. Burma is half an hour behind Thailand. But the town of Mongla, on the Chinese border, ticks on Chinese time -- an hour ahead of Thailand. Traverse a mere 200 or so kilometers, south to north, and you zigzag between three time zones. Why even bother with precise timekeeping?

In Burma it's hard to know what year it is, let alone what time it is. The country is stuck in 1962, when it invented a brand of socialism that's a bit like the abandoned sandals I saw lying on the main road in Kengtung -- as if one day the Burmese simply stopped walking with the rest of the world. Water buffalo have yet to be replaced by modern agricultural equipment. The traditional longyi is still largely favored over trousers by men both young and old. In Kengtung, nighttime activity is usually conducted by candlelight, thanks to lack of power.

Time flies, you realize. Strolling around the bustling market in Kengtung, I was startled to find a copy of *Newsweek* from Aug. 9, 1999. The cover story that week -- a piece I had reported on as a London intern -- was on the solar eclipse of the century. Quite apt. If anyone has experienced a total eclipse, it's the Burmese.

Yet time is a river, too, moving on. Military checkpoints surround Kengtung, evidence of the old repression, even as a sea of rooftop satellite dishes beams in the BBC. Though most inhabitants still walk around town, Chinese motorcycles are multiplying like cockroaches. Capitalism is everywhere, at least unofficially. In the market, money-changers calculate kyat into yuan into dollars into baht with the hustle of Wall Street traders. There's a clear yearning for learning, too. Every Shan, it would seem, craves knowledge right now, asking questions and eagerly awaiting any answer other than one doled out by the government. And finally, there's the new road from Tachilek to Mongla, funded largely by Wa drug money. It now provides an easy transportation route for Chinese goods to Thailand, and tourists the other way.

Time takes its toll, clearly. The town of Mongla, capital of Special Region No. 4, is under the control of Chinese narcotics boss Lin Mingxian, a.k.a. Sai Leun. Here there once were beautiful poppy fields. Today it is a sleazy mini-Las Vegas for day-trippers from China's Yunnan province. "Democracy!" my Shan companion exclaimed. For better or for worse, that it is. Thousands of visitors cross the border to flit their yuan away at baccarat and in brothels, watch transsexuals from Thailand prance around and enjoy the surreal spectacle of elephants playing football. Mongla is an example of what can be achieved when opium is eradicated -- at least it was until a few months ago, when Beijing imposed a cash limit for exiting China and banned most overnight stays. Already Mongla is starting to look like a Nevada ghost town. Some tourists are still coming, but how long will it be before the poppies -- and the yuan they earn -- start looking attractive to Sai Leun again?

But that's a future Burma's residents will have to grapple with in due time. Let them deal with the present for now. On my last night in Kengtung, I heard a rooster belt out a loud "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" I looked at my watch. It was 1 in the morning. Amazing, I thought, as I nodded off to sleep. In Burma, not even the roosters know what time it is.

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Valuable minerals lying in the beach sand

DR ASMA HASEEB

A population of 140 million is struggling to come out of the grip of poverty in this tiny little land of just 144,000 square kilometres. The per capita land of this country is one of the lowest in the world. If one correlates the per capita land to the probability of finding mineral resources at/below the surface, then this country also has one of the lowest per capita probability of finding mineral resources. In this context, the discovery of any mineral resource in the country must be taken seriously and its commercial exploitation pursued vigorously in order to create the much needed wealth and job to repeal poverty.

Heavy minerals were discovered in the beach sand in the coastal region in 1961. But these minerals are yet to be commercially extracted. Over the years there have been newspaper reports/editorials, seminars etc. on the topic from time to time. These evoked cycles of optimism followed by inaction and pessimism. Reports published abroad also mention about the potential of these resources. The 1994 US Geological Survey Report on Bangladesh says: "... There are abundant resources of beach sands along the country's coastline, and some 17 separate areas have been identified to contain ilmenite, zircon, rutile, and magnetite..." Recently, an Australian company termed some of the minerals, particularly zircon and rutile, occurring in the coastal region of Bangladesh as "world class." Despite all these, the plain fact remains: the beach sand minerals are still unutilised after all these years.

Beach sand minerals are valuable industrial raw materials which have stable demand in the international market. Analysts predict that the demand of these minerals will rise steadily at the rate of 3-4 per cent per annum. These minerals are not recyclable after their use and hence each year higher production/new production facility is required to meet the increasing demand. Bangladesh therefore can

earn large amount of foreign currency by exporting the minerals and also save foreign currency by utilising the minerals locally as far as possible. It may be mentioned that at present Bangladesh is importing these minerals and products based on these minerals for various industries including paint, paper, ceramic, welding electrode, steel etc.

After their discovery in 1961 by the then Geological Survey of Pakistan, the beach sand minerals were taken over by the erstwhile Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. The reason for Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission to take the responsibility of the beach sand minerals was possibly linked to the fact that one of the minerals discovered, monazite, was radioactive. It turned out, however, that the amount of monazite in the deposit was quite small. On the other hand, besides monazite, a number of other minerals were discovered; the most economically important minerals found being ilmenite (a mineral of titanium metal, it also contains some iron), zircon (a mineral of zirconium metal), rutile (a mineral of titanium metal) etc. Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) surveyed the coastal region mostly between 1968 and 1986 and discovered 17 deposits: 15 deposits along Chittagong coastal belt, one deposit in Nijhum Dwip and one deposit in Kuakata. The Commission came up with an estimate of 17,62,116 tons of economic heavy minerals in the Bangladesh coast. BAEC estimates that the reserve of ilmenite, garnet, zircon and rutile in the coastal belt of Bangladesh are 10,25,558, 2,22,761, 1,58,117 and 70,274 tons respectively. Between 1975 and 1987, BAEC ran a pilot plant set up with Australian technical assistance and separated a few hundred tons of heavy minerals, notably ilmenite, zircon, rutile etc.

BAEC tried to commercialise the minerals in the country but without much success. BAEC however developed one application of ilmenite: it used several tons of this mineral in concrete walls for radiation protection purposes in its reactor at Saver. In 1987, the gov-

ernment decided to discontinue and sell out the pilot plant at Cox's Bazar. But the decision was reversed in 1991 and BAEC later submitted a project proposal to upgrade the pilot plant facilities. A project worth 5.3 crore taka was granted by the government and BAEC implemented the project during 1994 to 1998. In 2001, the Bureau of Mineral Development (BMD), Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources issued an exploration licence to an Australian company, International Titanium Resources Pty. Ltd (ITR) to make exploratory survey of beach sand minerals for commercial exploitation at two locations at Cox's Bazar.

The government policies regarding the exploitation of beach sand minerals have been vague, patchy. This is in spite of the fact that the beach sand minerals of Bangladesh have been proven to be good enough for commercial exploitation. Zircon and rutile can be commercialised directly and ilmenite after upgradation. It is regrettable that these valuable minerals are awaiting exploitation for so many years. In spite of the involvement of two ministries, the fate of the resources still seems to be as uncertain as ever.

Thus two ministries of the government, the Ministry of Science and ICT (through BAEC) and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (through BMD) have not been involved with the beach sand minerals.

In the mean time, a number of individual researchers at different Universities including the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), the Rajshahi University, the Dhaka University took interest in the minerals and started doing research. Although isolated and not at all coordinated, these research efforts brought to light some valuable information on the characteristics of the minerals of Bangladesh beach, and the feasibility of their upgradation and application in local industries. These efforts revealed that ilmenite grains, the most abundant among the valuable minerals in the beach sand, contain excess iron oxide at the microscopic scale as intergrowth. That is why Bangladesh ilmenite contains only about 40 per cent titanium dioxide, while the

minimum titanium dioxide content of commercially marketable ilmenite is more than 55 per cent. Research work directed towards the upgradation of Bangladesh ilmenite at BUET successfully increased the titanium dioxide content to more than 92 per cent which yields a high value added product known as "synthetic rutile". Research at BUET also revealed that zircon found in Bangladesh coast containing 65.23 per cent zirconium oxide (commercial grades contain a minimum of 65 per cent zirconium oxide) is of good quality. It has been demonstrated through trial tests that Bangladesh zircon can be used in

ceramic glaze, refractory and steel casting.

BAEC has done a good job in exploring and adhering to the beach mineral reserves for so many years and not giving up in spite of policy makers' neglect over the years. It has come up with an estimate of the reserve. But the calculated reserve by BAEC may be an underestimation in the present day context. BAEC seems to have made reserve calculation by including sand deposit having mineral content greater than 5 per cent (known as cut off value). This cut off value appears to be rather high in the context of availability of improved separation technology nowadays and the exhaustion of good quality deposit with time. In some deposits of the world e.g., Murray Basin deposits in Australia, the cut off value is taken as low as 1 per cent. Therefore, re-estimation of the reserve and more detailed commercial exploration survey are likely to give a higher value of reserve.

The first step in the extraction of

beach sand minerals is to separate them from ordinary sand with which they remain mixed in the beach (known as physical separation). This is what the pilot plant of BAEC at Cox's Bazar has been doing. If the minerals are of good inherent quality and the separation process is efficient, then the minerals obtained after physical separation can be sold directly. It appears that the pilot plant has been having trouble in performing the physical separation all right. That is why BAEC had to take the pilot plant upgradation project during 1994-1998 to improve the physical separation processes. But only physical separation may not

make certain minerals suitable for immediate use. This has been the case for ilmenite of Bangladesh beach. As has been mentioned already, this mineral is microscopically mixed with iron oxide, and therefore its valuable mineral, titanium dioxide content is only about 40 per cent as against the commercial requirement of 55 per cent minimum. In order to make this mineral commercially valuable, it has to be upgraded through metallurgical processing.

It appears that BAEC recognised, quite early on, the need for research on metallurgical processing. But no research work seems to have been done by BAEC along this direction. Even in the 1994-98 pilot plant upgradation project, BAEC remains completely silent about this and concentrated on physical separation only. It is to be noted that ilmenite is the most important economic mineral on tonnage basis: its amount identified by BAEC is 10,25,558 ton, while all other economic minerals altogether total 7,36,559 tons.

Regarding the involvement of Bureau of Mineral Development (BMD), nothing much is available on the exact details of the agreement between BMD and the Australian company International Titanium Resources Pty. Ltd. (ITR). Some sources say that ITR finds the mining project viable just on the basis of exploration of zircon and rutile. It will stockpile ilmenite for upgradation at a later period. Sources say that according to the agreement with ITR, GOB will get royalty at the rate of 12 per cent of the value of minerals at the pit mouth. This royalty rate is not the best, as higher percentage of royalty exists for beach sand minerals

in different parts of the world. Moreover, Bangladesh ilmenite having a lower percentage of titanium dioxide will have a lower price at the pit mouth. Its real value will be realised only after its upgradation to synthetic rutile. If the agreement fixes the price of ilmenite just at the pit mouth, then Bangladesh will lose a lot of revenue. Although ITR appears to propose that the mining of beach sand mineral from Bangladesh beach is economically feasible just on the basis of two minerals, zircon and rutile, any mining attempt that leave out ilmenite is unlikely to realise the full potential of heavy mineral resources of Bangladesh.

In fact by proper metallurgical processing, Bangladesh ilmenite can be converted into synthetic rutile as has been demonstrated in laboratory research at BUET. This processing will bring in huge value addition as the current market price of ilmenite is US\$ 75 per ton while that of synthetic rutile is US\$ 550 per ton. Such upgradation process is being used for ilmenite

in other countries including Australia and India. As for the other two minerals, rutile and zircon, research results suggest that proper physical separation should be good enough to yield commercially acceptable mineral grade. The state of activities of ITR at present is not clear. It has been learned that ITR stopped its activities and is now asking the government to extend the licence period.

At present it is not clear whether the Ministry of Science and ICT (parent ministry of BAEC) or the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (parent ministry of BMD/GSB) has any definitive, time bound plan for exploration of beach sand minerals. However, the fact that the government of Bangladesh (GOB) has issued exploration licence to a foreign company indicates that GOB is interested to exploit beach mineral resources through private investment. Now that two ministries are involved in beach sand minerals, question may arise regarding the role of BAEC and BMD. BAEC can obviously have emotional attachment with the beach sand minerals with which they have been so long associated. One may argue that BAEC should still play a leading role in this affair.

It may be noted that in India beach sand minerals are under the jurisdiction of Department of Atomic Energy of India. However, the counter argument can be the situation in India is quite different. India has big ambitious plans for nuclear weapon, defence and aerospace industries for which beach sand minerals are of strategic importance. Indeed Indian Department of Atomic Energy, defence and aerospace industry have made great progress in extracting strategic metals and alloys from beach sand minerals and in using them in nuclear, defence and aircraft industries already. But Bangladesh does not and is unlikely to have any ambitious nuclear weapons/aerospace programme in the foreseeable future. For Bangladesh beach sand minerals seem to be of economic rather than strategic importance. This has been the case for other beach sand mineral

producing countries of the world, including Australia and South Africa -- the largest producers. In these countries beach sand minerals are not controlled by the respective atomic energy authorities.

As for BMD, its parent organisation -- the Geological Survey of Bangladesh -- has reasonable successes in bringing mining projects into reality. BMD entered into the beach sand minerals arena recently by giving exploration licence to a relatively unknown Australian company, International Titanium Resources Pty. Ltd. Not much is known by the public about the exploration contract. Moreover, so far BMD did not make available relevant information to local entrepreneurs who may be interested to undertake exploration on their own or in joint venture with foreign companies. It is not known either how much attention has been given by BMD to environmental and radioactive disposal issues which are very relevant to beach sand mineral exploration.

The government policies regarding the exploitation of beach sand minerals have been vague, patchy. This is in spite of the fact that the beach sand minerals of Bangladesh have been proven to be good enough for commercial exploitation. Zircon and rutile can be commercialised directly and ilmenite after upgradation. It is regrettable that these valuable minerals are awaiting exploitation for so many years. In spite of the involvement of two ministries, the fate of the resources still seems to be as uncertain as ever. This situation in not acceptable and the highest level policy makers of the country have got to do, something immediately. It is high time that the government take decisive and transparent policy decisions backed by efficient and rapid action.

Dr ASMA Haseeb is Professor, Department of Materials and Metallurgical Engineering, BUET