

Blundering Biman

Nothing less than a national disgrace

THE latest dismal news from the grim annals of Bangladesh Biman is that the flight schedules have been more or less eviscerated due to the airline attempting to reach too many different destinations with a fleet that is insufficient for such ambitions. As a result, Biman has forced to reschedule as many as 17 flights in the coming few days, causing delays of up to 48 hours.

The story of Biman has been one of mismanagement and incompetence since its inception. It remains a matter of considerable national embarrassment that the national flag carrier should continue to perform at such a disgraceful level.

The principal blame for this sorry state of affairs must fall on the civil aviation ministry, under whose authority Biman is operated. It is no exaggeration to say that the continuing corruption and under-performance in this ministry has permitted the life blood to be sucked out of the airline. Successive governments that have done nothing to improve Biman's profitability are equally to blame.

The sad truth is that there is no reason why Biman cannot be run as a profitable and productive airline. It has access to much-prized international routes and no shortage of customers who would fly if it were to offer decent service. The reason that it has remained moribund has been the massive corruption and senseless decision making.

How can we justify the fact that Biman continues to run twice weekly flights to New York even though this incurs a loss of Tk 70 lakh per week? Not only that, but the carriers are now so old and over-flown that proper maintenance has been impeded, resulting in technical problems and flight disruptions.

The state of Biman is a national disgrace. In many ways a national airline is a face of the nation and the ongoing fiasco at Biman has created a very poor impression for the country overall.

For a government that is so obsessed with the image of Bangladesh abroad, perhaps a thought should be spared as to the image that is being created about Bangladesh when it is reported that the national airline is unable to keep to its flight schedules due to the scarcity of reliable aircraft.

Child theft

DMCH authorities owe an explanation to people

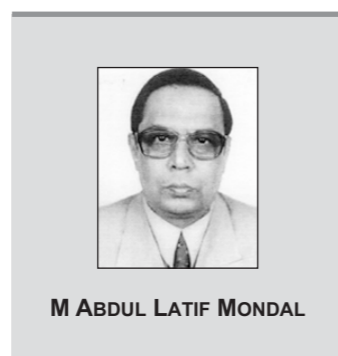
IT has been reported that an organised group of criminals are operating at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and kidnapping children, including newborns admitted there. This is going on at the country's biggest public sector hospital where a large number of people, mostly poor, seek treatment every day. The problems have remained unresolved for a long time now.

The latest incident of child theft occurred when two boys were taken out of the hospital. One of them managed to escape and return to his mother, but the other could not be rescued. Reports do indicate that the hospital has become an extremely insecure place for the baby patients. The criminals actually take advantage of the fact that many of the babies admitted to the hospital come from very poor families with their parents being unable to do anything even after losing their children. This is indeed a regrettable truth of the lives of the urban poor that their vulnerability is exploited by criminal elements in many ways.

Now the question is what have the hospital authorities done to put an end to this crime? A hospital should be a safe place for the patients and their attendants. Regrettably, patients often complain that even their personal belongings are not safe at the hospital where outsiders engaged in all sorts of illegal activities dominate. These outsiders, acting as middlemen, thrive on the sufferings of patients as they have control over matters like admission and availability of beds. But what is compromised very badly in the whole process is the security of patients. Child theft is a glaring example of how the patients remain exposed to criminal activities.

The service expected of a hospital cannot be rendered if patients and their attendants remain in a state of anxiety about their security. The DMCH authorities have failed to stop child theft despite these incidents happening from time to time. The hospital is beset with so many problems, so its management should at least try to ensure that child lifters do not find it a happy hunting ground.

Framing overseas employment policy



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

FRAMING a policy for the overseas employment of Bangladesh citizens has been in the news for over a year. The Daily Star reported on July 18, 2004 that the expatriate welfare and overseas employment ministry had already prepared the draft policy titled Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy (BOEP) and was seeking opinions of different ministries before finalising it.

Quoting UNB, another daily reported that the government was going to announce an overseas employment policy bringing manpower export into an effective system to ensure safety of job seekers abroad and explore job market. The report said that a meeting of the cabinet committee on overseas employment of Bangladeshi citizens held on April 17, 2005 decided to send the draft policy to a secretary-level committee for further vetting, and with its recommendation within May 2005, the policy would be placed in the cabinet meeting for approval.

At a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Oviobashi Mahila Sramik Association (BOMSA) at the capital on February 5, the secretary to expatriate welfare and overseas ministry disclosed that as different committees and experts were engaged in processing the policy, a little more time was needed. The speakers at the seminar demanded immediate finalisation of the policy. So, uncertainty looms over the finalisation of the proposed BOEP and its coming into effect.

BARE FACTS

It is really unfortunate that though we have completed about three decades of manpower export in its formal shape, we have not as yet framed a comprehensive overseas employment policy to bring this vital sector into a cohesive discipline. Such lapses have slowed down its real growth and deprived the nation as a whole of its true multiplier effect in overall economic development

Bangladesh is the one of the few labour exporting South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The two main objectives that guide the framing of overseas employment law or policy in a labour exporting country are: (1) finding employment for labour force abroad; and (2) earning the much needed foreign exchange. Available information reveals that more than 40 lakh Bangladeshis were working abroad in 2004 and around 2.5 lakh go abroad for jobs annually. Out of 40 lakh overseas employment since 1976, the work force employed in the Middle Eastern countries would be around 88 percent.

In his article "Unsung heroes of the economy" published in the 15th anniversary special of The Daily Star, Farid Bakht, a non-resident Bangladeshi wrote: "In today's economic war to earn foreign exchange there are two groups of people who are offering their labour. The garments industry, overwhelmingly staffed young poor women, is well known and deservedly so. The other is rather less well known and ignored. They are the millions of migrants, sending billions of dollars every year (at least 4 billion officially)."

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in overall economic development.

Available information suggests that the important functions of the BOEP will include: (a) exploring, promoting and developing overseas employment opportunities through institutionalising coordination and cooperation among relevant ministries and international organisations for bringing transparency and discipline in manpower export sector; (b) taking action for drug addiction, trafficking of prohibited drugs, gambling, possession of deadly weapons, damaging company property, misappropriation of company funds, prostitution, violation of sacred practices of the host country and breach of employment contract approved by the government; (d) entertaining complaints against a contract worker and taking disciplinary action by the government; (e) making registration of names with the government set-up data bank mandatory for every person willing to go abroad for job; and (f) ensuring exemplary punishment for those who will send people abroad illegally.

It may be noted that the following important findings and recommendations are available from the studies undertaken on labour migration from Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

The migrant workers have contributed significantly to the development and the reduction of poverty in the countries of origin, while at the same time contributing to economic prosperity and efficiency in the coun-

tries of destination.

Migrant workers, in particular certain groups, remain vulnerable to abuses during the migration process and in the country of destination.

The greatest weakness lies in the lack of sufficient collaboration both among sending countries and between sending and receiving countries

For the protection of migrant workers, some actions are needed and these include: (a) adoption of transparent and orderly migration policies; (b) bilateral and regional consultations; (c) protection of basic human rights of all migrants through ratification of international instruments; (d) coordinated and multi-pronged approach to protection of women migrant workers, especially domestic workers; and (e) information campaigns and orientation.

Although Bangladesh has not as yet framed a comprehensive overseas employment policy, some labour exporting countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia have formulated policies for the protection and welfare of their migrant workers.

Migrant workers and overseas Filipinos Act was enacted in 1995 to concretise the Philippines government's commitment to protect the rights and promote the welfare of migrant workers, their families and other overseas Filipinos in distress. It also provides the framework for concerted government action in dealing with the Filipinos abroad. Some important provisions of the Act are as follows:

Donors to dictate government policy



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE government has now agreed to accommodate direct involvement of the multilateral lenders and the donor agencies in formulating government policies. The Prime Minister's Office has confirmed on February 5 that the government had agreed to include representatives of the lenders and donor agencies in eight sub-groups formed recently along with the government officials, to formulate policies and monitor their implementation. The major areas of their involvement include the financial sector, civil service, and women's affairs and empowerment. The representatives will be from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, USAID, DFID, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Japan.

According to the latest government decision, representatives from the World Bank and USAID will be included in the sub-group on capacity building plan for the bureau of statistics. Representatives from the

BY THE NUMBERS

There was a time when it seemed as if the whole economic affairs of Bangladesh were being run by the World Bank and the IMF. The government was then compelled to go for many reforms under the pressure from the World Bank and IMF that did not suit the needs of the country. But the donors dictating in policy formulation has increased significantly during the regime of the BNP-led alliance government compared to any previous regime since independence.

World Bank and the DFID will be included in civil service reforms group, the representatives from the Asian Development Bank and the DFID will be on review of small and medium enterprise policies, and Germany, Sweden and Denmark will be on the sub-group reviewing policy of empowerment and development of women. Representatives from Japan and the World Bank will be on the sub-group for increasing block grants to union councils. World Bank will also be a part of the sub-group for implementing the procurement rules. All the sub-groups, however, are headed by the secretaries of the concerned ministries and divisions.

The lenders and donors have also asked the government to prepare performance indicators of the Public Finance Management (PFM), as its chance of getting future aid would depend on such governance-related benchmarks. The World Bank Country Director Christine I Wallich said, for the

shake of transparency in the PFM, the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Accounts (CAG), a key institution and watchdog of financial accountability, will have to be separated from the executive. She argued that the separation is essential to avoid any "major conflict of interest between those that execute and record budgetary transaction and those that audit their execution."

According to the World Bank prescription, the CAG should not rely on the government for its budgetary allocation and have no government influence on its administrative decisions. Wallich, in her speech, said given the budget's central role, improving public financial management and accountability is crucial for meeting the PRSP goals. She also suggested giving full autonomy to the Comptroller and Auditor General of Accounts (CAG) for ensuring financial accountability.

The Finance Minister strongly criticized the World Bank and IMF

saying that the two donor agencies "treat the Finance Minister as a clerk" in adopting policy prescriptions, particularly raising the fuel prices. Earlier the Finance Minister blasted the donors for their meddling in the domestic affairs of the country and said "Donors must understand that the development programs of our country are owned by us, not by them and we will decide how we will implement them." He also said that the government would not be interested in any sort of aid relationship that would allow the donor's dictation. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia while winding up her speech in Parliament on March 15, 2005 also categorically said that Bangladesh shall not be run by any dictation or order by any foreign force.

There was a time when it seemed as if the whole economic affairs of Bangladesh were being run by the World Bank and the IMF. The government was then compelled to go for many reforms

- Filipino migrant workers shall be provided with adequate and timely social, economic and legal services.
- An effective mechanism shall be instituted to ensure that the rights and interests of distressed overseas Filipinos, in general, and Filipino migrant workers, in particular, documented or undocumented, are adequately protected and safeguarded.
- Filipino migrant workers and all overseas Filipinos shall have the right to participate in the democratic decision-making process of the state and to be represented in institutions relevant to overseas employment.
- Issuance of travel advisories or dissemination of information on labour and employment conditions and migration realities and other facts to adequately prepare individuals into making informed and intelligent decisions about overseas employment.
- Institutionalisation of financing schemes to expand grant of pre-departure loan and family assistance loan to migrant workers and their families.
- Establishment of a 24-hour information and assistance centre in countries where there are large concentrations of Filipino migrant workers.
- Establishment of a mechanism that facilitate re-integration of returning migrant workers into Philippine society, serve as a promotion house for their local employment, and tap their skills and potentials for national development.
- Creation of a fund to be used to pay for legal services of migrant workers and overseas Filipinos in distress.
- Establishment of scholarship fund to benefit deserving migrant workers and/or their immediate descendants below 21 years old who intend to pursue courses or training in the

field of science and technology. Sri Lanka has had a policy of encouraging migration. The lead agency charged with matters connected with overseas employment is the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), a semi-government body set up by an Act of Parliament in 1986.

The salient features of the Sri Lankan policy for migrant workers and overseas are as follows:

- Compulsory registration with the SLBFE for all persons proceeding for foreign employment.
- Insurance of migrant workers.
- A period of compulsory training prior to departure.
- Stipulation of minimum wages by the SLBFE.
- Introduction of a contract registration scheme, which requires the verification of the credibility of prospective employers by Sri Lankan overseas missions prior to registration.
- Authentication of the agreement by the foreign sponsor/agent at the mission.
- Scholarships and material assistance to children of migrant workers.
- Establishment of an overseas workers' welfare fund to provide safe houses, legal assistance, repatriation of stranded workers.
- Establishment of transit homes in Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

The above references may be of some help to our government in framing a comprehensive BOEP. In view of the importance of the remittance of migrant workers and overseas Bangladeshis in our national economy, the government may consider soliciting the opinion of the public and the media on the draft policy. The cabinet may be benefited from public opinion in according approval to the draft BOEP.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

under the pressure from the World Bank and IMF that did not suit the needs of the country. But the donors dictating in policy formulation has increased significantly during the regime of the BNP-led alliance government compared to any previous regime since independence. The Prime Minister's claim about the obstinacy of her government to pressure would be more credible if the government could be more defiant to the dictation of the donors in its actions.

The Anti-Corruption Commission was compelled to pay Tk 25 million to have an organogram according to donor's prescription, from the consultants appointed by the donor. The Daily Star reported a few months back that Tk 108 crore was spent for the foreign consultants appointed by four nationalized commercial banks under donor pressure to advise them on reforms - which could be done by the local experts. Our Finance Minister claims that Bangladesh has now almost achieved the position to implement its development programs without financial assistance from the donors. If it is a fact, then the government must not capitulate to any external pressure, rather should administer a befitting reply to the donors dictating policy formulation.

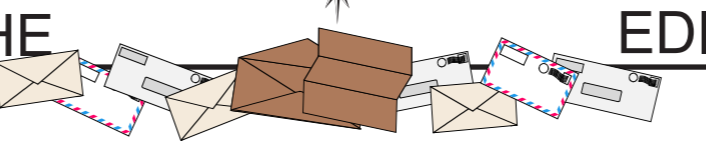
Though the pressure and prescription from the lenders and donor agencies were not a new phenomenon for a country like Bangladesh, their dictation and

direct involvement in government's policy formulation has added a new dimension to the government's submissive attitude. "We are undone as the bureaucrats have no access and right in policy formulation other than political leadership," said a high government official who was irked by the donors' dictation. The donors' direct involvement in the government's policy formulation is indeed a factor that has humiliated the nation's prestige. Everyone will agree that no sovereign government should be interfered with or dictated to by the foreign donors formulating its policies.

The Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK and The Daily Star jointly organized a roundtable on February 16, in preparation for a high level conference in London on March 6-7. The discussants at the roundtable stressed a broader and deeper partnership between Bangladesh and its donors for poverty alleviation and sustainable growth. But the issue of donor dictation in formulating policies needs to be discussed between the government and the donors on the basis of equals rather than yielding to the unwholesome pressure.

ANM Nurul Haque is a contributor of The Daily Star

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.

Road accidents

Every day some people are killed in road accidents. Apparently, nobody is taking notice of the problem. It looks like the concerned authorities have turned a blind eye to this problem. But I think a little attention of the authorities can save many lives from a tragic end. As a common citizen, I am suggesting some measures that can be considered by the traffic managers.

- Introduce stricter laws to prevent road accidents and enforce them.
- Curb corruption at BRTA especially when it comes to issuing licence.
- Provide training to all the road users including truck drivers, rickshaw pullers etc.
- Set up speed camera on the road to monitor speed.
- Test fitness of all vehicles every year and give a certificate, which will be valid for a year.

- Ban rickshaws or cycles on the highways.
 - Remove all bazaars from all the highways and build bypass roads where highways go through upazilla towns.
 - Don't allow parking or loading, unloading in unauthorised places, especially on the highways.
 - Increase number of personnel in the highway police and provide them with modern equipment.
 - Extend and improve the railway service, so that the pressure will be less on the road.
- The authorities should do something about this problem. Otherwise, we will keep losing valuable lives.
- Mainul Quadery**
West Bakalia, Chittagong

views

I have been watching a lot of discussion in the western media for the last couple of weeks. They put emphasis on the European culture and try to say that the rest of the world, especially the Islamic world, should understand it and change themselves accordingly, if they want to match the pace of globalisation. But one thing that I don't understand is why the Islamic world should be like the western world. This cartoon controversy has shown the western world that if they want to be part of globalisation, then they should think outside their own frontiers. Every time they use the word "International Community" about themselves, they should understand that the western world alone does not represent the international community. More than two thirds of the world population don't live in the western world and they should respect their views. The western media tries to protect

the freedom of speech. But it now appears that it is a freedom of insult. I will not be surprised if they try to uphold in near future the freedom of committing genocide. It is already a barbaric world with modern technology and low ethical standards. The western world should think from now how they can be part of the world at large.

Sohel Noor, Dhaka

Traffic mismanagement

Transporters plying the Rampura Road always remain overloaded, as thousands of people living in this area have to pass through this road. The worst is the Rampura Bazar point. Few buses have chosen to run seating service, which curtails their use to the general people. This does not work when the transports are scarce.

Unfortunately, we don't have BRTC bus in this road. This

creates further shortage of transport resulting in severe problems to the commuters. BRTC has expanded its service tremendously not only in Dhaka, but throughout Bangladesh. Overall transport management in Dhaka has also improved. We don't understand then why Rampura is ignored, which causes untold hardship to the people of the locality. I feel sorry when I hear people say that some influential persons are not allowing BRTC service on this route for the sake of their own transport business. I don't know whether it is true. But people continue to make scathing remarks against the government. I think our local influential political leaders may kindly come forward to solve this problem.

Every day thousands of people have to cross road at Rampura Bazar point on foot. It becomes very difficult to cross this road for women, old people and children because of the fast moving and

busy traffic. This is also very risky. Traffic always remain heavy in this road and to make matters worse, most of the vehicular traffic of south-eastern districts pass through this road on their way to and from Tongi/Tangail/Mymensingh and North Bengal. So a foot over bridge is very urgently required in Rampura Bazar area. Many road points in this city have got foot overbridges. This type of bridge just in front of Rampura Bazar will remove problems of the passersby greatly. I appeal to the concerned authorities to please consider this case sympathetically. Here also our local leaders can help.

I pass through the Maghbazar intersection regularly (Mouchak-Bangla Motor section), on my way to and from work and every time along with other commuters. I have to wait for a long time in this section while the north-south way (Circuit House-Tejgaon point) vehicles

pass through easily because they get longer time to move. Sometimes, it so happens that only one or two vehicles can pass in the green signal through east-west dimension. People suffer and they shout in unison to express their anger. On many occasions, they blame the government. Many passengers also complain that the North-South route is given extra time as VIPs move through this lane.

But we notice that Mouchak intersection could avoid similar problems by equally distributing the time to the transports of all directions, despite having to cater to more traffic. Why should the government take the blame when solution seems to be very easy?

I am sorry to note that the traffic managers do not bother about the problems that we face. I am not an expert. But I think that every traffic signal has some middle light (other than green and red light), which is lit for a few seconds before going red

or green to give time to the transports for stoppage or start. But in Maghbazar section, these lights are not used. Suddenly, the green and red lights are put on without giving a few seconds through the middle light. So when Bangla Motor-Mouchak section gets green signal (all of a sudden and of course for fewer moments), the vehicles cannot move as at that moment, some of the transports of the other section (north-south) still remain in the circle. And before this path is cleared, red light is switched on. Therefore, in most of the cases, to cover a few feet the vehicles need two or three green lights.

The authorities concerned should address the problems that commuters are facing every day.

A.K.M. Harunur Rashid
Dhaka