

Chittagong port congestion

Capacity needs to be built to handle rising trade

THE fact that Chittagong seaport faces tremendous congestion and that ships have to wait for days to even receive berthing space is doing immense damage to the country's trading prospects, and the government must turn its attention to building capacity adequate to handle the increasing volume of trade that comes through the port.

Bangladesh's global trade has been rising steadily. In recent years there has been a jump in imports passing through the port of 25 per cent and of exports of 15 per cent. The number of feeder ships operating between Singapore and Chittagong has also risen from 29 to 47.

The port's infrastructure is simply not well developed enough to handle this volume of trade in a timely manner, and as a result, ships must queue up for days at a time to berth, adding \$10,000 to \$20,000 per day as the cost of sitting idle. This is one reason why the turn around time for global trade to and from Bangladesh is so slow and renders local businesses uncompetitive internationally and imported products expensive.

The government should have rectified this problem far sooner. It is imperative for the government to invest to develop infrastructure so that international trade is not hampered. The cost to the nation of this kind of crumbling and insufficient infrastructure is incalculable.

Not only is the problem insufficient investment in infrastructure, but also inefficiency and mismanagement when it comes to the port authorities (in this case) or other government functionaries in other cases of facilitating business.

Bangladesh will never achieve the truly robust economic growth necessary to pull the entire economy upwards if we continue to be hampered by sub-standard facilities and infrastructure and if the government cannot adequately provide the basic facilitating services needed.

The problem with the Chittagong port is a microcosm of the general insufficiency of government attention to the matter of infrastructure and capacity development. This short-sighted approach is hampering our global trading relations and helps create the impression that Bangladesh is not ready to compete on the world stage.

Border fatalities

An avoidable chink in friendly ties

THERE have been deaths of Bangladeshi citizens in BSF firing recently. The last victim is a farmer killed on Sunday in Naogaon. Earlier on Friday, two farmers were gunned down on Borogram border in Dinajpur. All this is regrettable.

People living in the border areas have every reason to feel worried over the sudden spurt in shooting that is totally out of place with friendship exuded at other levels between the two countries. Of course, there are peaceable mechanisms to try and solve any localised tiff or problem without having to behave in a trigger-happy manner.

The official protests lodged by the Bangladesh side after such incidents are said to be not promptly responded to by the other side nor do the routine flag meetings have had the desired sobering effect on the ground. The BSF authorities either dismiss the reports as exaggerated, or label the victims as criminals or smugglers. Even if anyone of them is alleged to be so, aren't there standard procedures available to take recourse to a legal process there? Murdering of any innocent is not the stuff of which good neighbourliness is made.

The issue of border tension has featured in Indo-Bangla talks times without number. There has been a clear commitment from both the sides that they would refrain from doing anything provocative. Great emphasis is often laid on good neighbourliness. However, as things stand now, the commitment to peace in border areas appears in dire need for graduating from talking to fulfilment.

Higher authorities of India need to have a closer look at the issue. Their intercession together with the implementation of pledges accumulating from periodic high level cross-border meetings can signal contribute to the preemption of any untoward border incident between two otherwise friendly neighbours.

The development distress

Restrictive policies rob economic freedom and without it, there can be no development; and instead only pervasive ill health, corruption, and privileges for the few. It is for the Free Society of Bangladesh to remind the government that freedom is not for the government to give but a natural condition of man that government is responsible to protect. For a nation to develop, in all sectors, this is the only way forward.

NIZAM AHMAD

DEVELOPMENT in Bangladesh is commonly visualised as building of roads, bridges, schools, high-rise office blocks, or well-lit shopping malls. People generally, and the government of Bangladesh, almost exclude medical care in their development paradigm.

Bangladesh's poor, the vast majority, rely on fate for their good health and remain unaware of medical safeguards as routine blood tests or a BP check. Furthermore, the majority are uninformed about the importance of proper diet or exercise. They are also ignorant about simple First Aid methods that can save lives in accidents or sudden illnesses. Statistics reveal that average longevity in Bangladesh is around 60 years, but if satisfactory healthcare were available and people better informed, that figure would surely soar as in the developed world.

Annual government allocations are in few thousand crores in the health sector, a priority, but national output is below standard the past 35 years. There have sprung up countless but wholly unreliable private providers in urban areas. The rural areas, where the bulk of our population live, are worst in matters of healthcare as they are in all other aspects of life.

Reasons for poor medical care

are many but mainly boil down to stiff government protection from competition that foreign providers may offer in Bangladesh. The protectionist policy pledges to employ doctors and nurses that our few medical institutions produce. It would also save foreign currency by reducing reliance on anything foreign. Protectionist policy and restrictions on foreign currency apply to all segments of the economy and are responsible for poor performances of local industries and services from tourism to healthcare.

Few individual units may be doing well as the pharmaceuticals but how far these have succeeded in bringing benefits to the people, with reliable drugs, is quite unknown other than corporate claims in the media. Until early 1980s, people had complete trust in the quality of drugs produced in Bangladesh by foreign pharmaceuticals as Pfizer or Squibb, but the market view today, on medicines produced by wholly Bangladeshi-owned companies outgiving those multi-nationals, is not the same.

Individuals and households, however, do not wait for the government to provide services, neither do they depend on the disorganised private medical facilities when in dire distress, but find alternate means for medical attention abroad with great difficulty and cost. All

through the year, Bangladesh sees an exodus in thousands to foreign destinations seeking medical attention. The vast majority leave it to their destiny to whatever care is possible within the country and millions go without any.

The Bangladesh healthcare arrangement is highly protective and vested stakes of medical professionals aligning politically force governments to prohibit foreign entry. Neither does the government make it easy for people going abroad for care. Stamping visas that are increasingly complex, getting additional foreign exchange by hundi means, and finding accommodations in a foreign land are no happy experience for most unless a VIP or rich.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has a mammoth requirement of reliable medical services that the locals cannot supply and will never until their vested opposition to foreign input fades away. Our domestic doctors find foreign involvement a threat to their jobs but foreigners could well be keen to utilise local experience and enhance knowledge and skill for both if working together. It has become impossible for foreign medical organisations to set up services in Bangladesh unless a powerful member of the society is directly associated with it. However, this cannot be the national norm or the manner to develop

health sector or any.

Not long ago, only the rich would fly overseas for treatment but today people on low incomes flee Bangladesh for care abroad. Kolkata, Chennai, Singapore, Bangkok, are competing foreign destinations for our people in need of healthcare. Numerous Kolkata centres thrive on Bangladeshi patients and business abroad is so good that hospitals in Singapore and Bangkok have Bangla speaking receptionists, translators, and other logistics for visiting Bangladeshi patients.

For speedy improvement of medical care in Bangladesh, and to increase its capacity, the government should permit free entry of foreign medical service providers and reverse the unhappy trend of Bangladeshis forced abroad for treatments. A simple and straightforward policy would encourage foreigners to set up medical systems in Bangladesh.

For any service or industry to grow and deliver, competition is compulsory, which foreign services would provide. The only protection a government can extend, and is obligated to give, is protection to life and property. Government's protective cover to doctors or industrialists from competition is counter-productive. People suffer most by this policy that is unjust in protecting few and enriching that few at the expense of the majority.

Policies that control foreign currency are an integral part of protectionism and this restriction increases the cost of foreign money that people must carry for treatment abroad. It always poses a hazard and a guilt feeling when doing something that rules do not permit. No government restriction stops a black market to provide foreign currencies for treatments in Kolkata

or Singapore, or to prevent illegal Taka markets to operate in foreign countries frequented by Bangladeshis. Taka, if officially convertible, can become an acceptable mode of payment with foreign doctors and institutions, but the likelihood is jeopardised by government controls producing a national and international network of illegal and criminal activities.

Nevertheless, informal economic activities, celebrated by the Austrian Free Market School and classical liberals, are constantly at work to meet human wants, and this unrestricted human action is the fundamental nature of a prosperous economy not bureaucratic or expertly devised lawful plans.

Government proscriptions complicate methods, increase cost, and produce nothing but poverty and corruption. Human wants remain unfulfilled, as entrepreneurs stay unfree to act and unleash creative enterprise. Unfortunately, the protectionist wisdom continues by the bureaucratic governments powerfully backed by groups of intelligentsia believing in the merits of a mighty government to generate jobs and distribute wealth without creating it.

The notion of saving foreign currency and valuing it more than the welfare of the people has taken a ridiculous proportion in Bangladesh. Our policy makers like an ostrich showing its head in the sand and believing no one can see it. The macro economists, the government, and agencies as the World Bank and IMF have forced upon us a view that preserving Dollars are more important than spending it on life.

Ideally, and as in the informal market, Bangladesh can permit an open multi-currency regime to meet

individual requirements without bureaucratic limitation. Furthermore, governments, to meet their obligatory role of protecting life, and property, should engage in punishing criminals counterfeiting currencies not coercively restricting genuine use and ownership.

The US is the biggest exporter of its own currency but as the economic system is freer than most in the world, Dollars held by foreigners, and by foreign governments, return to the US to redress national deficits. Policies that support competition inform that an economy is free. The country then becomes a secure FDI destination to meet foreign currency requirement of the people and of the government.

No country sustains in isolation. People are dependent beyond their nation in many matters as we experience in education, health, or commerce. Individuals must enjoy open access to foreign money to satisfy individual needs according to individual capacity. No one is saying that the government cannot hold on to its foreign currency that it earns or receives, but there can be nothing to disallow people to do the same from open currency markets.

Restrictive policies rob economic freedom and without it, there can be no development; and instead only pervasive ill health, corruption, and privileges for the few. It is for the Free Society of Bangladesh to remind the government that freedom is not for the government to give but a natural condition of man that government is responsible to protect. For a nation to develop, in all sectors, this is the only way forward.

Nizam Ahmad is Director of Liberal Bangla, UK.

What should we do?

PLAIN WORDS

What can be done is simple enough, if only the people stop to think. Pakistan's biggest problem is absence of free debate in an organized way. That is not possible except in a truly free and democratic dispensation where the people can actually feel that they have the power to make or break governments without let or hindrance from "agencies."

MB NAQVI writes from Karachi

TIME was when it was useful for Pakistan to be a satellite of the US. The US has now changed; it cannot abide Islamic revolutionaries once the latter targeted the US mainland. Now they have to be fought. Pakistan could not change the way the US did. Its rulers had immensely benefitted from the Afghan Jihad. The people who helped achieve 1992 Afghan victory, and that gave Pakistan an imperial sway over Afghanistan, albeit piggyback on the US, had been trained carefully. Any intelligence outfit is loath to ditch its "assets." Pakistan officially toes the American line and is supposed to have been fighting al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders who could have taken refuge only in Pakistan for the last four years. But what is the position?

The evidence so far suggests that Pakistan is ruthless where al-Qaeda is concerned. God know how many hundreds of al-Qaeda-linked individuals have been arrested and handed over to the Americans and many more are being killed in frequent operations in FATA, if indeed those killed are al-Qaeda-connected people. Pakistani and

American officials will immensely benefit themselves if they read up the British colonial literature on the Frontier, especially on the point of the reliability of Afghan informers. The Brits found many examples of the same piece of intelligence being fed to British authorities as well as to, say a Faqir of Ipy, collecting cash from both. But where Taliban are concerned, well, the severity of Pakistani action is conspicuous by its absence.

Taliban, after all, were useful Jihadists who helped keep steady pressure on the Indian army in Kashmir. They cannot be treated the way al-Qaeda was. While the latter are foreigners, Taliban are Pakistanis and hail from sensitive areas and each belongs to a large extended family, all of whom are armed. Pakistan government had publicly asked the American authorities not to shun "all" Taliban and to distinguish between extreme and "moderate" Taliban.

One never heard the Americans' reply, though newspapers spoke some months ago about Americans and Karzai government were in contact with "good" Taliban. There were also confirmed reports that an arrangement has been made under

which the Taliban were given a role in the maintenance of law and order in certain areas while the troops were to stay inside their camps and posts. For all one knows, the arrangement may still be in force in certain areas. For the reports that Taliban are collecting taxes, trying and executing "evil doers" and virtually ruling certain areas were not denied. If true, it is a victory for Musharraf diplomacy, though the Indians and Afghans will not be happy.

However, the issue of issues for Pakistan today is the prevalence of intolerance, especially religious and political. Taliban power in Balochistan, FATA and even NWFP, is bad news. Law and order in the country leaves much to be desired. There is an insurgency inside Balochistan in addition to what Taliban are engaged in. There is a confused sort of insurgency in FATA areas and Taliban-like ideas are all too popular with the NWFP's MMA government. Taliban are still being idolized; they, or their other like-minded splinters of old Sipah-i-Sahaba -- and Karachi's Nishtar Park outrage was symbolic -- are reminders that the country is dangerously drifting toward much

conflict and travail.

What can be done is simple enough, if only the people stop to think. Pakistan's biggest problem is absence of free debate in an organized way. That is not possible except in a truly free and democratic dispensation where the people can actually feel that they have the power to make or break governments without let or hindrance from "agencies."

Primary need is to create this sense of power and responsibility among the citizens. That requires regular changes of government, reflecting the changing popular preferences, enhancing citizens' sense of power and responsibility. Free parliament must ensure good laws and force governments to stay on the straight and narrow.

The system should permit utterly free speech, free political activities and enforce all laws and should themselves obey the law. Administrators should be subject only to law, should implement government's clearly-enunciated policies without fear or favour and keep the armed forces perceptibly subordinated to law and constitutional government.

This is not really a long list to do this or that. Much of it happens in the democracies all the time, though a lot of evil still creeps in through manipulation of public opinion by governments' media policies. Some of it cannot be prevented totally. But its incidence can be exposed through free universities, TUs, most importantly political parties, think tanks, human rights organizations, and other NGOs. Organized political parties, sustained by passionate commitment and rigorous cognition of problems, are a vital necessity,

and Pakistan lacks them. Existing political parties are corrupt and scheming cabals (often an individual) and crowds held together by flashy rhetoric or past association. An independent judiciary is central to democracy.

What will this do? Some tolerance will ipso facto result. More will be promoted by laying out a plain playing field for all ideas to be presented, discussed and heard. Rational argument needs to be given a fair chance. Such a political dispensation promotes rational thinking, indeed scientific method of reasoning. Free politics is the solution. Let there be no distraction of military freebooters promoting emotive rhetoric-spouting Mullahs. Let the religious lobby come into politics and sell their religious programs by rational argument, in free competition with truly secular -- all politics is a wholly secular affair -- parties presenting their programs. Citizens will judge. They will opt for the program that enables them to live this earthly existence a little better. Hereafter can be taken care of by regular prayers, fasting and giving Zakat or going on Haj. There is no further Islamic farz for individuals. Secular politics leaves all religious matters to the free choice of citizens.

In this country, people have taken secular politics to mean something anti-religious. This is wholly erroneous. Secularism refuses to pronounce on religion; it does not oppose religion; this is simply outside its scope. Quran or even Hadith nowhere lays down any requirement of running your country like this or that. There is only this social dictum: settle your affairs by consultation. Islam does not prescribe any reward or punishment for a purely non-

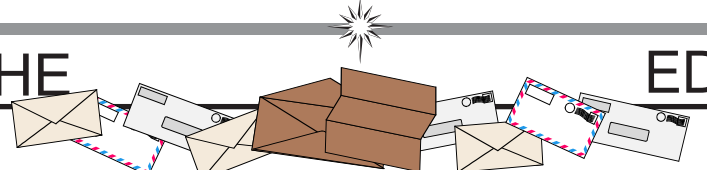
individual, or collective, action. It is neutral on most social issues. That is the only reality. That is where Mullah politics, of all schools, are simply another secular politics that should be judged on the touchstone of how it will materially and socially affect the citizens' living conditions. But most rhetoric is irrelevant. What is relevant is what the people need and want. Let that be the leitmotif and scope of all politics.

Most important matter in politics concerns who governs: all citizens or an individual. The time has come to make a clear choice. In all Islamic religious politics, the consensus is over a Caliphate, one man rule, a Mullah Umar who will be religious, military and political boss and will make all decisions. This flies in the face of Islam's richly plural reality. There are hundreds of sects and schools, each claims to be the only true Islam. None of these will accept another sect's Caliph. It is a prescription for denying equal human freedoms to all sects and to all men and women, by setting up an absolute dictatorship of one biased man, on the one hand, and inviting interminable strife among all the sects, schools and groups, on the other. No thank you; this is neither practicable nor desirable.

Why not settle for a simple secular democracy that gives something to all citizens, especially the hope of betterment of their life for now. It makes no eternal or para-human promises and it allows for the evolution of political and economic solutions to suit the people.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

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.

A pattern emerging?

The mayhem at Bir Shresto Shahid Ruhul Amin Stadium does not seem to be an isolated incident.

There were reports on the beating and injuring of Prothom Alo photographer Munir Hossain and Amar Desh photographer Md. Ibrahim by the workers of Nabisco Bread & Biscuit Factory and the attack on Md. Sohrab Hossain, chief editor of Dainik Mukto Sangbad, in Gazipur.

It seems to me that someone has just given the go-ahead signal to suppress the press and a pattern is emerging. **Sazzad Hossain**
On e-mail

Space for social development

Regular readers like me have acknowledged your pursuit in the domain of objective reporting & publishing articles on various socio-economic issues. I You have pages for some specific topics, like Business, Sports, etc in the daily to focus on the news and activities of these

fields. We are happy to note the importance given by you to highlighting the success & contribution made by them to build a better future. It also occurred to me that there were some other important activities silently going on in the society that we live in.

For example, non-governmental organisations along with other stakeholders in the civil society are involved in shaping our future. It is important to review their contributions as well. It is not wise to always presume that whatever they are doing do not deserve any mention or encouragement.

Rather, they should be made a part of the total development initiative, even in the pages of your daily. I look at the issue suggesting that these initiatives deserve a sense of direction, if they are not on the right track.

I would request you to cover development issues elaborately. **AT Siddique**
Project Director
ATSEC, Bangladesh

Passing the buck

In this country called Bangladesh,

are we all just playing a passing game? Each citizen is living life by somehow passing each day, each government department is passing on the responsibility (for our problems) to others. What is going on? **CNR**
Chittagong

Umpire's decision reversible?

Can anyone imagine an umpire making his decision following the 'orders' (well the body language speaks it all) of one of the playing captains on the field? No way! Right? But we had to observe a far more ridiculous and as unacceptable occurrence on the first day of the 2nd Test between Bangladesh and Australia. Yes, I am talking about the dismissal of Rajin Saleh.

It's not the decision of giving him out. But "HOW" the umpire made his judgment came to me as an astonishment! The credible (?) umpire passed the decision of 'not out' taking a long time to come to the decision. Then the drama started, the fielding captain, who

happened to be the captain of the best cricket team of the world, was not happy about it. He put pressure on the umpire to reconsider his decision! Wasn't it a behaviour that falls in the category of breaking the code of conduct?

That was not all, what's most surprising is the action of the umpire that he re-evaluated his verdict and changed it to 'out' after giving 'not out'! It's a quite common phenomenon that after a decision is made in the field by the umpire, it is proved to be wrong after technical analysis! But no one is allowed to raise a question on the credibility of the judgment of the umpire, let alone changing the decision otherwise!

Isn't the decision of the umpire in the field, irrespective of technically sound or not, the final verdict? I want to know why the action of the umpire i.e. changing the decision being forcibly influenced by a player in the field should not be counted as a "breaking of umpiring code of conduct".

Since the demanding captain

represents the best team of the world and the other team happens to be the last one on the list, the umpire went for re-evaluating the judgment of Ricky Ponting!

I am no cricketing expert, just a passionate fan of the game, so I would like to have an explanation from the proficient cricketing experts and the authorities concerned about the incident that has not been seen in cricket before.

I) Does a player in the field have the right to veto the passed judgment of the umpire and force him to re-evaluate and change it? If the answer is yes, then there's a long list of dismissals that were questioned. Why they were not re-evaluated after analysing the TV replay?

II) Can an umpire, the final judge on the ground, change the decision that he has already passed officially?

III) Is their any special rule to favour the officially declared 'best team of the world'?

IV) Was it legitimate according to cricketing rules and regulations? **S. Reza Shosme**
Dhaka University

The cruel month

With April, the cruellest month as TS Eliot once said, creeping into our life weather has been behaving in a hostile manner --- life has become simply unbearable because of the heat.

It's become doubly difficult for us as the acute power shortage is always there it is indeed the worst part that with the indifference from nature there is the undue indifference from the power station that does not pay any heed to the cries of the people at large.

Benevolent nature! Pour down thy shower on the dried soil and salvage us!

And there was some shower from the heaven finally, though in scattered drops. **Rafiqul Islam Rime**
Agrabad, Chittagong

Where are we going?

I'm a Bangladeshi living in Australia. I often talk to the locals how we are moving ahead with our education, social development, literacy of women and, of course, cricket.

We are now talking about cricket with them with confidence and like Ponting, they are now very cautious about commenting anything negative on our cricket.

What the cricketers have seen, what the world has seen live on TV from Chittagong stadium, moved us back on to the wall! We are ashamed of talking about cricket.

Are we moving back? **Azad, Sydney, Australia**

Image not decoupled from reality

Image is not decoupled from reality. Democracy is languid. Extra-judicial killing by a government-sanctioned outfit is rampant.

Bomb blasts in almost every district have raised the temperature of religious fundamentalism to a new high. And yet, our minister for a very important portfolio of home ministry! Well, the Bangladesh government is eager to project an image of a democratic and moderate Muslim country. I do not know how this catchy phrase came about

but this definitely is a highly sought after image. Despite the desperate need and/or wish to have such image, our government unfortunately, and possibly deliberately, ignored or at least failed to do the right kind of groundwork.

Image, indeed, is a perceived construct of one's own being in the minds of fellow humans. Components of such construct are nothing more than a series of information. Thus manipulation of image can only be accomplished by a differential flow of information with a specific image in mind. In this age of World Wide Web, such manipulation is getting increasingly difficult, rendering it virtually impossible to culture an image that is decoupled from ground reality.

I hope our government stops blaming newspapers and/or opposition and have a hard look at their own deeds and misdeeds! **Mohammad Zaman**
Cary, North Carolina, US