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Five nations cooperating to combat Covid is a welcome move

It can boost economic and social recovery

IT is indeed encouraging that Bangladesh has called upon four other nations namely China, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka to share their experiences of combating Covid-19. This has come because of the possibility of a second wave in the coming winter which will no doubt have negative economic and social impacts on Bangladesh reeling from the shocks inflicted by the first wave. Some of the countries participating in the virtual meeting are among those that have been successful in containing the spread of infections in the early stages through extensive testing, quarantining those infected and contact tracing. They have also strictly enforced health guidelines which have significantly reduced the spread. Knowing details of these strategies is invaluable as we know that we cannot afford big shocks to our economy which is already suffering. Thus the lessons learnt from the virtual meeting are greatly welcome. Regional cooperation is an effective way to combat a crisis like this pandemic and we believe it will be beneficial for all countries concerned.

We welcome the willingness shown by China to help all the other parties in testing, diagnostics, treatment and medicine and provide them with containment supplies. A major aspect of this meeting was of course to facilitate regional cooperation in trade, investment and development—all of which have taken hard hits due to Covid. It is expected that if Bangladesh and the other countries can contain the pandemic it will boost economic recovery and development in all of them. No doubt China has its own interest in advancing its Belt and Road Initiative through infrastructure connectivity. For Bangladesh it is important to ensure smooth supply chains for its manufacturing industries especially such as the garments industry and attract foreign investment. While it is reassuring that we will be strengthened in our fight against this pandemic through this regional cooperation, let us not forget that there are many things we can do ourselves for the economy to keep going. This includes mandating health guidelines such as mask wearing and social distancing in streets, transport and workplaces, increasing testing, improving health facilities and eliminating corruption and inefficiencies in the health sector, all of which if taken seriously could have reduced the spread of the virus and the number of fatalities. In order to recover in terms of public health and economic recovery we need all the help we can get from outside. But we also need to rectify our own failings first.

Bangladeshi RMG workers trapped in Ethiopia's conflict zone

Our embassy should help relocate them to a safe place

WE are worried about our expatriate garment workers trapped in Ethiopia's conflict-torn northern Tigray region as an escalating conflict has killed hundreds of civilians there recently. Reportedly, Ethiopia's central government launched a military operation in the northern Tigray region last week accusing the local TPLF ruling party of attacking the military bases. During the conflict, a Bangladeshi garment factory owned by DBL group had also been bombed. Although the employees of the factory are now safe, they need urgent assistance from the embassy to leave the region as there are risks of further violence in Tigray. The UN rights chief has warned that a protracted internal conflict will inflict devastating damage on both Tigray and Ethiopia as a whole and it could also spill across borders, potentially destabilising the whole sub-region. The UN has also warned that aid agencies are unable to restock food, health and other emergency supplies in the region which may trigger a refugee crisis. The DBL authorities are also concerned at the depleting food stock for its employees and requested the foreign ministry to relocate the workers from the conflict zone. The DBL group, a leading Bangladeshi apparel exporter, has only started operating a knitwear factory in Ethiopia's Tigray region in 2018, encouraged by the duty benefits for exports from the African nation to the US markets. As their factory premises have been bombed and there are fears of further conflict, our government has little time in hand to relocate the workers to a safe place. We urge our embassy in Ethiopia to help relocate the 104 expatriate workers stranded in Tigray region as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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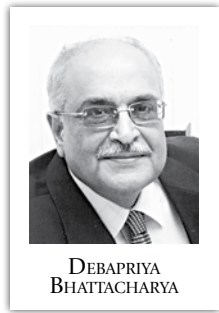
Chinese loans and investments in Bangladesh

The Chinese government, as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), invested huge amounts in the form of loans in Bangladesh. However, there is a real danger that Bangladesh might fall into a Chinese debt trap. For example, a few years ago Sri Lanka had to give control of the newly-built Hambantota port to the Chinese in order to compensate for the inability to pay back their debt. There are other countries as well which are likely to fall into the same trap. According to a report, China had pledged an investment of USD 38 billion in Bangladesh for BRI projects. Although the investment is vital for economic growth, our government must be careful in taking such loans from China and also try to diversify the sources of investment so that Bangladesh is not solely dependent on Chinese investment for economic growth and development.

Arif Bin Hossain, by email

Bangladesh's LDC Graduation

'To be or not to be' is NOT the question



DEBAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA

THE most quoted line of modern English: "To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .", as is known, is the opening stroke of a soliloquy from William Shakespeare's celebrated drama *The Tragedy of*

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Here the Danish Prince is tormented by the contemplation of death—lamenting the agony and injustice of life, but acknowledging that the alternative might be worse. One wonders whether such a "Hamlet's moment of truth" has arrived for Bangladesh in the context of exiting from the group of least developed countries (LDCs). As may be recalled, in 2018 Bangladesh met all three eligibility criteria for leaving the LDC category in the next six years. This is of course subject to two satisfactory reviews by the United Nation's Committee for Development Policy (CDP). The second of these two triennial reviews is to take place in end February 2021. Things were going pretty well for the country till the Covid-19 intervened as a spoiler in the first quarter of the year. Currently, the vexing question fretting the concerned stakeholders (internal as well as external) is: are the Covid-19 induced damages substantive enough to derail Bangladesh from its scheduled path of leaving the LDC group?

Latest available data suggest that two eligibility criteria, i.e. Gross National Income (GNI) per capita and Human Assets Index (HAI) have significantly increased in Bangladesh since the last triennial review (2018). In spite of marginal deterioration, the third criteria, namely Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI) also remains quite positive for the country. Notwithstanding the immediate and visible adverse impacts of the contagion, all the three core criteria of Bangladesh will most probably be above (or below) the required thresholds. This projection is guided by the fact that the pre-pandemic scores had been high enough to withstand certain level of erosion. Moreover, even if the country does not fulfil one of the criteria, it will still be eligible for graduation based on the two other criterions. Signals from official quarters suggest that the government of Bangladesh remains committed to the current path of exiting from the LDC group. It would

be only politically opportune for the country if the triennial review in 2021 provides the final go, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the country's independence. Incidentally, none of the fellow LDCs slated for transition in the coming years are yet to indicate that they are looking for a deferment because of Covid-19. For instance, Vanuatu will be going out of the list next month (December 2020), while Bhutan in 2023 and Laos and Myanmar in 2024. And the same may be said about Nepal and Timor-Leste. However, a final decision on all these candidate countries will be informed by an ongoing United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) mandated study by CDP as well as recommendations by the respective country Rapporteurs, a newly instituted procedure.



Thus, it seems we are going to witness what the celebrated dramatist Bertolt Brecht would have called epic theatre (as against classic theatre). Epic theatre is not characterised by a tidy plot and story, but leaves issues unresolved—often confronting the audience with uncomfortable questions. Brecht believed classical approaches to theatre were escapist and he was more interested in facts and reality. For example, we need to consider a discernible opinion in the country which propagates that Bangladesh, in view of the evolving pandemic situation, should defer its exit from LDC group. Such postponement will allow Bangladesh to enjoy all the LDC-specific international support measures (ISM)—particularly duty-free and quota-free market access of the country's exports—for an extra three-year period. There are of course instances when a candidate LDC has asked for more lead period given special circumstances

affecting their development prospect. Maldives did that after the tsunami in 2008 and Nepal after the earthquake in 2015. Sometimes, such delaying efforts are not successful as was in the case of Sao Tome and Principe. A three-pronged approach It may be recalled that Hamlet's tragedy was of a man failing to deal with his critical circumstances. In contrast, recall Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Hamlet and Brutus were both good men, wanted to do the right thing but contemplated too deeply with the tasks in hand. But Brutus was able to act immediately, while Hamlet was not. The lesson? Bangladesh needs to take an evidence-based political decision soonest regarding LDC graduation, keeping the Covid-19 in perspective. Accordingly, the

country will be well advised to pursue expeditiously a *three-pronged approach* to prepare for a smooth and sustainable graduation from the LDC group. First, Bangladesh has to articulate and campaign for a comprehensive agenda of transitional ISMs for the graduating LDCs. Admittedly, the country cannot expect to exit the LDC group and continue to enjoy all the current preferences for a protracted period. Thus, it is necessary to have a cleverly conceived and carefully crafted design including enabling ISMs ranging from trade measures to access to concessional finance to intellectual property right to availability of Covid-19 vaccines. Indeed, Bangladesh is well poised to lead this initiative globally on behalf of the graduating LDCs. Second, the country has to develop and implement an "augmented LDC graduation strategy" in line with the concept of "build back better" from the pandemic impact. Such a strategy

RTI in Bangladesh

Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

they are uncomfortable to let it operate freely and ready to muzzle it whenever feasible. We see this during the Covid-19 pandemic. The good news is that such efforts often fail in the face of resistance from citizen groups. Though such groups are yet to emerge as a force in Bangladesh, there is reason for hope. NGO efforts over the years to promote the law have begun to bear fruit with the slow but steady growth in the number of RTI users and, more particularly, in the increasing sophistication in the use of the law. They have also contributed to greater interaction between citizens and public officials. If the trend continues, more citizens will mobilise to make the law

to find out the officially fixed registration fees for students to sit for the SSC exam. He drafted an RTI request addressed to the headmaster of a local school asking for a copy of the circular sent by the education ministry setting the exam fees. When he went to submit the application, the headmaster denied having received such a circular and declined to receive his application. Mizan then explained the provisions of the RTI Act to him and the likely consequences for disobeying the law. This made the headmaster agree to receive the application. Three days later Mizan got a call to pick up the requested information. Mizan spread the information around, as a result of which guardians were spared the extra amount



easier to use and to resist any efforts to erode it. Three more examples illustrate this trend. Inhabitants of the Sadar Upazila of Satkhira District were surprised to find increased water bills from the local municipality without prior notice. An aggrieved group of citizens, sensitised by an NGO on RTI law, submitted an RTI request to the Designated Officer (DO) of the municipality asking to see the official decision on the increase and related information. The very next day the mayor called the applicants to inform them that the increased rate was withdrawn. After being sensitised by a local NGO about RTI, Mizan of Kaliganj Upazila of Satkhira District decided to invoke the law

they had to pay in the past. Kunal, an RTI activist of Dinaajpur District, had submitted an RTI request to the Divisional Commissioner's office of Rangpur seeking particulars of Designated Officers (DOs) of all public offices of the Sadar Upazila of his district. In due course, he received a response and asked a friend in Rangpur to fetch the information on his behalf. After providing the information to him, the DO took him to the office of the Assistant Divisional Commissioner. The latter informed him that as this was the first RTI request to his office, the Divisional Commissioner had included the subject on the agenda of the monthly meeting with senior officials of his division. At the meeting, he directed the

has to be coherent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030 Agenda and embedded in the upcoming Eight Five Year Plan (2021-25) and the Perspective Plan (2021-41). This will bind together the three projected development milestones of the country, i.e. 2024/25, 2030 and 2041. Third, delivery of such a heavy-duty strategic design would demand enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of the current institutional arrangement of the Bangladesh government dealing with the LDC graduation. There is a National Task Force (NTF), created in January 2018 under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), with the SDG Coordinator as the Convenor. Curiously, all the 10 members of the entity are government officials and thus devoid of representation from private sector or knowledge community. Reportedly, last month (October 2020), the NTF met for the first time after one year. However, a well-conceived and comprehensive strategic document is yet to come by from this entity. Concurrently, under the External Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance, there is the "Support to Sustainable Graduation Project (2018-2024)"—costing more than USD 16 million of which two-third is coming from Japanese Debt Relief Grant Assistance-Counterpart Fund (DRGA-CF). It transpires from the website of the project that its activities are limited to awareness raising endeavours. As Bangladesh enters the last lap of its race to the LDC finishing line, it is critical to have: (i) a strengthened work programme of the NTF; (ii) improved inter-ministerial coordination (at least among ERD, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce); (iii) expanded participation of stakeholders (by inclusion of private sector and knowledge community) in the official process; and (iv) superior internal and external communications (particularly with the international development partners). If the Danish Prince would have been around today, he would have possibly called upon Bangladesh not to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", but to "take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them". What would that mean in our current parlance? Bangladesh is destined to confront the pitfalls of LDC transition competently and make the best of the potential opportunities to secure a "graduation with a momentum" as planned. Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya is a member of the United Nation's Committee for Development Policy (CDP) and a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).