

Subsidy for Our Exporters

Export incentives are central to the viability of our export sector. In the international market, where every country, developed or developing, extends some sort of subsidy to the exporters, the question of abolishing it completely does not arise. In all the goods that Bangladesh exports have achieved some element of success — jute, leather, shrimp, garments — our direct competitors like India, Pakistan, Thailand etc. all extend considerable support including credit in preferential terms. How can our nascent export industry be expected to be competitive in the international market when others are giving all sorts of subsidies to their exporters and we are being asked to withdraw ours?

The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have asked Bangladesh to introduce a series of fiscal and monetary reforms that include the abandonment of preferential credit for the exporters. This was what the representative of the Bangladesh Bank was trying to convey to the meeting the other day when the Commerce Minister is supposed to have interrupted him and said "We cannot have any reforms against national interest."

At the outset, let us distinguish two very distinct issues; first, that of the need for monetary and fiscal reforms and second, export incentives for our exporters.

We must bring about reforms in our financial sector through streamlining our credit system and removing the indiscipline and mismanagement that appears to have crept into every aspect of this sector. This discipline does not necessarily have to be brought about by a credit squeeze, as the WB-IMF may have suggested. But by making sure that the credit is used for the purpose for which it is extended, that it is employed in the most efficient way, and that the commitments of the borrowers are all honoured timely and fully.

Regarding the question of incentives to our export sector, we fully agree with the Commerce Minister that it should continue as at present. However, it must be kept in mind that subsidy and preferential credits are "costs" that are only justified if the benefit to the nation is commensurate. We must also add that occasionally such credits are misused — taken in the name of exports but actually used for trading — putting those who have borrowed for trading at a great disadvantage. This can be prevented by setting up a monitoring mechanism which will follow the performance of exporters, rewarding those that are efficient and dynamic. Export incentives? Yes. But from the side of the exporters we must see greater efficiency, dynamism and entrepreneurship. No free rides please.

As reported in the media, the minister's policy decision that export incentives will continue, came out more as a retort to the statement of the Bangladesh Bank representative, which gave the impression—perhaps incorrect—that it was an instant, spur of the moment, decision by the minister. The Bank's representative was only doing his job — after all we cannot make light of our commitment to the WB-IMF. In this regard one has to bear in mind that the prescription of the WB-IMF are often based on certain formulas and principles and are not always suitable for specific conditions of countries like Bangladesh. We are trying to develop a free market economy, but while we are in the process of doing so, we need the help of extra market forces — such as export incentives — which are far from being unknown to the developed countries. In fact they are a bit too popular in the advanced market economies for the comfort of developing countries trying to find their niche in the global market place.

Need for Quality Hydrological Data

"Reducing uncertainty in flood frequency analysis" was the subject of a seminar held on Wednesday. Top people of the related technologies and sciences were at hand. The Institution of Engineers must be complimented for arranging such a topical seminar.

In Wells's "First Men on Moon" there's ludicrous situation at about the close of that fiction. The Selenites or the moon people — all the Selina's of Bangladesh must know they are moon-faced beauties and the word comes from the Greek — found it pretty hard to believe that the two newcomers were there from across an expanse of 2.28-million-mile space. The difficulty arose from the information received from the earthlings that man had not so far ventured beyond more than a few miles into the interior of the 8000-mile-diameter globe. Yet they have come sailing all these millions of miles to something they have little use for! Wasn't that foolish? Was man that foolish?

We are reminded of that sense of disbelief of the Selenites when we see SPARRSO keeping track of the weather through remote sensing by satellites and on the surface Bangladesh having no dependable mechanism for getting reliable data to get her bearings on the water front. The April 29 catastrophe was known to be coming for certain at 72 hours before the strike. And we didn't know a thing about the coming of the unprecedented floods in the eastern districts even a day before it was. And the slow-moving waters must have had been coming for days and days before engulfing the Sylhet region.

The weather office of the meteorological department and the SPARRSO is there to warn us of approaching danger from the sky and the sea. Who is responsible for cautioning us of an impending watery strike? We are not sure if it is the Water Board. The Board is there for decades — and one fails to recollect if there was ever any warning of an unscheduled yet dangerous coming down from the alien hills.

It has long been known that Bangladesh has never had quality data on hydrological situation and its developments. It should be by now plain to everyone that the challenge we are at present facing is, first of all, of sheer physical survival. Without a dependable tab on our water situation things are not going to be helped by any significant measure.

The scientists and technologists must go on discharging their part of the responsibility. It's for the society at large and the government in particular to heed their alarms and take their counsel. We again compliment the organisers of the seminar.

ANGLADESH rarely makes headlines for international dailies except in the case of natural disasters. Bangladesh cyclones are glaring exceptions and cannot escape international attention. To the international community Bangladesh is identified as a densely populated disaster prone country. According to official records Bangladesh has been victim of 57 major cyclones and tidal bores during the last 180 years. Annual and recurring floods in different parts of the country, erosion of the river banks, droughts, minor earthquakes, are commonplace incidents in the Bangladesh context. Regular floods, deaths due to diseases like cholera, diarrhoea, malaria, small scale famines, malnutrition etc. are normal occurrences. Few statistics are kept regarding these everyday incidents. Looking back into only three decades we see cyclones, in October 1960, claimed 5149 lives; on 9th May 1961, 11,468; on 28-29 May 1963, 11,520; on 15 December 1965, 873; on 12th November 1970, one of the greatest cyclones of the century, claimed five lakh lives. On 24 and 25 May 1985 in Urichar cyclone again claimed 4264 lives and left 6804 missing; a hurricane in 1988 hit Raimangal and Pathorghata killing 5708 and leaving 6000 missing. Tornado in 1989 killed 2000 people. Besides these cyclonic catastrophes floods in 1987 and 1988 killed 3000 people and left more than 20 million homeless. A famine in 1974 claimed 25000 lives.

It is common knowledge that the country is within a cyclone belt, that the main constituent of the habitable land is silt and sediment, that it is criss-crossed by so many rivers falling into the Bay of Bengal, that it is prone to land erosion and floods. Bangladesh

is also a victim of environmental effects caused by Farakka barrage resulting in desertification, droughts in the northern areas, desalination in the south and also untimely floods. Situated in an earth-quake zone Bangladesh is also vulnerable to earth-quake disasters though not any major disaster has yet been recorded.

The question is, why in spite of our knowledge about the condition of the country we are not prepared for these disasters beforehand. A lot of valuable lives and perhaps property could be saved if there were disaster preparedness in our national policies. Instead of making a lot of hue and cry after the incident, programmes should be made well in advance regarding precaution, survival after disaster, and rehabilitation. The reason

often stated as lack of preparation is poverty.

What is the standard of life of those who live in these frequently devastated areas? Can human beings at all be expected to build their habitat in places which remain covered by water during tide and are exposed only at ebb? What alternatives do they have? Can they come and settle in dryer and safer regions so that they do not have to brave out these storms and tidal bores and struggle for life in these inaccessible islands? The answer is obviously in the negative. Yet these people constitute almost one-sixth of our population and generally are excluded in our national policies of development. Probably, it is only during disasters of the recent kind that they manage to attract enough attention and sympathy for the fate they are left to face. It is now time to

incorporate these people and others who are similarly disaster prone and who have no option but to cling on to their homesteads, into our national development policies.

There are several phases of disaster awareness. First is the location of the possible sources of disasters and their frequencies, second is formulating the policies and actions for the prevention of disasters, third is — then disasters are imminent — to develop an effective warning system so that the people take necessary precautions and the government and semi-government organizations can remove the people to safer places till the calamity is over fourth is rescue and relief operation after the disaster,

complete other rehabilitation projects. Economic damages from cyclones like the recent one which may be equal to \$1.4 billion cannot be mitigated from any disaster fund but the preliminary rescue operations and salvage of the people trapped or marooned can be started before international aid short pouring in. Emergency supply of basic relief materials like dry food, oral saline, water purifying tablets, essential antibiotics and other medicines, soaps, clothes, plastic sheets for make-shift shelters, containers with drinking water should be prepared well ahead of the disaster striking period (usually from April to late November) so as to ensure

after the 1970 cyclone had been implemented. This plan called for building 2479 three-storey storm shelters along the coast for people and a similar number of earthen towers for livestock. Only 300 shelters and 157 towers have been constructed and those were not strong enough to bear out cyclones of this nature. Though technology is now advanced enough to get a clear image of storms and also predict almost accurately the time and direction so that precautions and warnings can be made well ahead, the scarcity of protection shelters and the lack of provision for mandatory evacuation pose a serious problem. This plan should be implemented in phases with the help of the National Disaster Fund the other programmes like giving long-term interest-

Children are the most vulnerable victims of these situations. Not only do they die in greater numbers during the incident, their number of deaths after a cyclone is also greater. These are caused by shock, dehydration, broncopneumonia, diseases, epidemics like dysentery, cholera, diarrhoea, measles and other malnutritional side-effects. The Expanded Programme for Immunization (EPI) should be made more effective so that these children do not meet deaths, after a catastrophe, with killer diseases. Snake bites, exhaustion and lack of parental care are the other problems for the children. Children left without parents have to be taken care by the government. Funds should be devoted to construct orphanages for children made orphans through natural disasters.

Another long term programme is the establishment of sufficient quantities of tubewells. The scarcity of drinking water after a cyclone is an acute problem. Drinking water dropped from air in plastic containers are often known to burst.

In conclusion, both long term and short term rehabilitations have to be considered through the National Disaster Fund. No doubt that this fund also like the Bangladesh National Budget will be completely dependant on foreign aids, even then keeping such a budget would enable the Government to be more prompt in rescue and relief operations and implement rehabilitation programmes. Let us not exclude these distressed people from our national sphere of development.

Naeela K. Sattar is a Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs, Dhaka.

"Should Disaster Strike: Be Prepared"—Why in spite of our knowledge about the condition of the country we are not prepared for disasters beforehand? ... Programmes should be made well in advance regarding precaution, survival after disaster, and rehabilitation.

and lastly it is rehabilitation of the victims and reconstruction. It is evident that none of these steps are conceivable without a great amount of finance and the trend is to appeal for international and local help after the disaster is over. This trend should be changed. There should be a National Disaster Fund with adequate allotment from the National Budget yearly set aside for disasters, great or small. A study of all the disasters in the past twenty years and the assessment of financial loss sustained through these disasters must be made. After making an assessment of the average loss per year and an average cost for rehabilitation, this sum should be set aside from the national budget and in cases where there has not been any major disaster, the fund should be utilized to develop previously affected areas and to

immediate dispatch to the affected areas. In relief and rescue operations the defence service and the police play the vital role. Voluntary relief workers consisting of doctors, paramedics, nurses, construction workers, and hardy people who can endure rough atmosphere should be trained into a voluntary relief force ready to be dispatched on emergency. Local people should also be trained with basic survival tactics and made accustomed to the warning systems and shelter spots. A lot of people died because they did not pay heed to the warning and forecasts and remained where they were in spite of available access to government shelters. Like 'fire drills', they have to be trained for shelter seeking drills.

The number of deaths could have been reduced if the typhoon protection plan devised

free loans to the affected farmers and fishermen should come within the purview of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Apart from shelter drills training programmes in basic survival skills should also be undertaken. This may include reconstructing tubewells contaminated by saline water, simple sewerage techniques, preparation of oral saline and using water purifying tablets, basic first aid and techniques of removing and burying corpses.

Vehicles to be used for bringing emergency relief must be well protected and organized so that they are not damaged by the storms. It is a pity that expensive vessels, helicopters and aircraft were not promptly removed from the danger zones in spite of repeated warnings starting from the 25th of April during the recent cyclone.

Back Comes the Controversial Flosse of Tahiti

David Robie writes from Auckland

GASTON Flosse, France's controversial former Pacific Affairs Secretary, has made a remarkable political comeback to regain the presidency of French Polynesia.

He has formed a new coalition government following a ballot also notable for significant gains by one of the major pro-independence and anti-nuclear parties, led by populist Faavao Oscar Temara.

Flosse, a 57-year-old part-Tahitian businessman, dominated Tahitian politics in the mid-Eighties. He fell from grace in the wake of corruption allegations and rioting in the capital of Papeete in 1987, and the defeat of the conservative government in Paris the following year.

Tahitian politics are volatile and the coalition could collapse even quicker than the last one Flosse headed. Flosse's party, Taboeraa Huiraatira (People's Rally), won 18 seats in the Assembly, not enough to govern outright. He teamed up with the centrist party Aia Api (New Country), led by maverick part-Tahitian Emile Merveaudon, which had five seats. The conservative Tahoeraa

France's controversial former Pacific Affairs Secretary Gaston Flosse has regained power in French Polynesia. While cleared on some corruption charges, he still faces more, and the future looks uncertain for Tahitians generally. In neighbouring Western Samoa, Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana has hailed what he called a "smooth step" towards democracy with the country's first election under universal suffrage.



GASTON FLOSSE Still facing charges is affiliated to the French Gaullist RPR (Rally for the Republic), partly led by former Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. Flosse comfortably won the presidency with 25 votes.

Twelve opposition Polynesian Union members walked out before the vote.

Flosse's success is far from being a triumph. News media interpreted the election result as showing that Polynesians strongly favour French rule and nuclear bomb testing.

In fact, Taboeraa Huiraatira gained fewer than 27,000 votes, barely 31 per cent of the total ballot. The losing Polynesian Union, headed by outgoing president Alexandre Leontieff and popular Papeete mayor Jean Juventin, gained the same percentage but won only 10 seats. Critics blame gerrymandered constituencies for the lop-sided result.

The Polynesian Union had headed the coalition government since the collapse of the Flosse administration after riots by jobless youth in November 1987. French Overseas Territories Minister Louise Le

Pensec warned that lack of an outright majority left Tahitians facing an "uncertain future."

In a territory made up of islands spread over a portion of the Pacific the size of Australia, and with a population of 160,000 communications are always difficult, especially in an election campaign.

Flosse, reputedly the wealthiest businessman in French Polynesia, had an advantage over other political leaders in being able to visit remote islands easily and generously distribute gifts, favours and promises.

Ironically, the day after the election, the Appeals Court in Paris partially cleared Flosse on corruption charges. It found there was not enough evidence to uphold charges filed in September 1989 that Flosse had used public funds to build a road to his private property. Flosse had already been

cleared on two other corruption charges last November. The judge ruled that he must face fraud charges over another property he owns. He is alleged to have used public funds to upgrade it in 1988, including building a carpark and developing a beach. He denies the allegations.

The Leontieff government had set up a commission of inquiry in 1988 to investigate persistent allegations of corruption against Flosse. As France's Pacific Affairs Secretary, Flosse had also been at the centre of controversy in several independent island states over allegations of "cheque book diplomacy."

To the West of French Polynesia, the independent state of Western Samoa has just held its first election under universal suffrage. Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana greeted what he called a "smooth step" towards democracy.

His ruling conservative Human Rights Protection Party provisionally won a majority of

10 seats in the 47-seat Fono, or Parliament.

The opposition Samoan National Development Party suffered a humiliation. Its leader, former prime minister Tupua Tamasese Efi, was defeated in his own electorate. Tupua, a harsh critic of the government, holds one of the nation's highest chiefly titles.

Many of the 56,000 registered voters in a population of 150,000 cast a ballot in a general election for the first time. Only matai (chiefly titleholders) have been allowed to vote since the country gained independence from New Zealand in 1962.

In spite of universal suffrage, only titleholders could stand as candidates. The Prime Minister hinted that candidates outside the matai may be allowed to contest future elections.

He rejected accusations that he had imposed electoral reform too suddenly on this conservative society. Universal suffrage following a closely fought referendum last October.

— GEMINI NEWS
DAVID ROBIE a New Zealand journalist specialising in Pacific and development issues has been editor or held senior editorial positions in newspapers in Australia, Africa and France.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Radio programme

Sir, I presume the number of TV owners in the city is microscopic and number of radio/transistor owners is slightly higher. Why then almost all the daily newspapers in Dhaka religiously publish TV programme and not a single of them care to publish radio programme? Is it 'bourgeoisie attitude' towards the proletariat? Should the radio owners/listeners stop buying daily newspapers which do not cater this requirement?

A M F Quader
Dhaka-1207

World Population

Sir, A report of the United Nations Population Fund says that the population of the world is growing at a rate, not thought of before; it is something quite unprecedented.

It says that about 90% of the population growth will be in poorer countries. Industrialised nations, even if any time do face an increase of population, will be able to cope with it.

or for that matter, in developing countries.

Thus the only way to prevent this from happening is to reduce the number of birth in these countries. We all know that family planning has not been a great success in countries like ours. So we should all take note and be prepared to take preventions, before it is too late. For, prevention is always better than cure.

Nafis Ahmed
Kolabagan, Dhaka

CI sheets

Sir, The director general of Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institute (BSTI) continues to publish standard specification of corrugated galvanized iron sheet (CI sheet) in various dailies regularly. The recent hurricane and nor-wester have damaged CI sheet roofing like pieces of paper or leaves. Why it is not possible to withstand wind pressures of hurricane or nor-wester by 26 G or 24 G sheet, meant for roofing in cyclone prone areas? I am tempted to point out whether there is any agency under government, who would check CI sheets as per BSTI notification and certify as stamped on CI sheets before the product is marketed. I am sure that none of those 26G sheets confirm to BSTI standard, but much thinner. It

is a crime and nation pays for it occasionally.

Jamuna bridge project

Sir, The Communication Minister recently told the parliament that the government raised Tk. 295.29 crore in levy and surcharge between October 1985 and April 1991 for the Jamuna multipurpose bridge project.

M. Zahidul Haque
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Sir, The Communication Minister recently told the parliament that the government raised Tk. 295.29 crore in levy and surcharge between October 1985 and April 1991 for the Jamuna multipurpose bridge project.

The question is, if the above fund is kept intact. Earlier reports were published in the press that the fund raised for the Jamuna project was spent in different sectors by the past autocratic government.

It is learnt that the Jamuna bridge project is not as yet incorporated in the country's fourth five year plan. Jamuna bridge is indispensable to speeding up country's development process and to ensuring equal benefits of development for the people of every part of Bangladesh.

Mental depressions

Sir, The other day I was quite surprised and at the same time happy to watch an advertisement on television sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, which was directed to make people aware of the fact that there is something like mental depression.

Most people in our country are not really aware of it. There is something like mental depression. This can be caused by a number of reasons.

Therefore, as soon as we may ascertain that we are not feeling very normal despite our best intentions and with nothing particularly wrong, we should consult a doctor immediately.

Telecommunication and cyclone

Sir, It is strange that the T & T Board has been charging the subscribers more and more every year but without actually providing them with proper services. Complaints of over billing, wrong and false connections, lethargic services, indifferent attitude of supervisors and ill mannerism of attendants-cum-operators are heard too frequently.

Now, what we see that technically also they are incompetent and lack ideas. The digital system has failed to provide 'better' services it was supposed to provide. In the post-cyclone period we find that all the microwave and VHF/UHF links have tumbled down. The engineers at the T&T Board have also failed to keep an alternate interface cable connection of the coastal and most importantly port city of Chittagong with the Dhaka system. It is high time that the T&T Board wakes up to reality and sees through the matter intelligently, thus saving the country from such lapses in future.

Mimi Nasrin
Dharmandi, Dhaka

OPINION

Disaster and the Administration

It is really unfortunate that within a very short time after the recently elected majority party took over their duties the severest storm of the century has struck our coastal areas.

Everything possible and feasible with our meagre resources is being done by the government, the general public, the NGOs. And our friendly countries interested in the welfare of the people of Bangladesh are also helping. Also we have noted with satisfaction that long term rehabilitation plans and programmes are being finalized. We deeply appreciate whatever is being done.

But still some confusions have been created in the minds of the public by various official and unofficial statements, not in conformity with each other. The approach and the modus operandi adopted have raised some questions in the minds of the general public. There cannot be any two opinions that the crisis caused by the recent cyclonic storm is national one and as such it deserves to be tackled nationally. All parties must be given an opportunity, commensurate to their organizations, to serve the people.

whether elected/ nominated/ acting, who is both the head of the state and head of the government whereas his appointed ministers, normally from the majority party in the parliament, may discharge their assigned duties and responsibilities at his pleasure on his behalf. Therefore, national functions including those falling specifically under those already assigned to the individual ministers, should be planned, coordinated, directed and controlled on behalf of the President. This is considered to be proper. Furthermore, any national calamity should neither be claimed to be anybody's baby nor their total responsibility. No partisan approach should be encouraged.

Any attempt, without any constitutional amendments, to change the President's prerogatives and privileges is only likely to bring disruptions in the smooth functioning of the administration leading to inefficiencies and wastage of efforts and possible chaos.

It is, therefore, felt that responses to our massive requirements for the relief and rehabilitation would have been bigger and wider both nationally and internationally if all things were done in the name of the Acting President of the country because he still belongs to all and is empowered by the constitution.

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Dhaka Cantt.