

Need of the Hour: Sustainable Development

Special to The Daily Star

Trimming Our Missions

Closing our diplomatic missions in Namibia and Berlin, though unfortunate, was necessary in the face of current economic realities. This has given us an opportunity to thoroughly review our policy regarding maintenance of missions abroad. Once the principle, that it is necessary to streamline our diplomatic operations overseas, has been accepted as a fact of life, then it should not be difficult to take the process to its logical conclusion.

In the early years of independence, we established embassies in many friendly countries out of political considerations. Latter, diversification in our foreign policy orientation meant a greatly expanded service abroad. Twenty years on, we are clear about our priorities as well as limitations. Accordingly, time has now come for re-organisation.

In order to rationalise our representation abroad, we ought to emphasise the role an embassy or high commission can play in the economic development of the country. That would mean strengthening the economic and labour relation departments of embassies in countries where we either have a large manpower presence, or where the prospect of manpower export exists. Unfortunately, this is not the case at present. The situation has been made more problematic by the appointment to key posts from different ministries, thus hampering coordination. In the process of reorganisation, the composition of missions should receive as much scrutiny as the number and location of embassies themselves, in order to maximise the benefit we expect to derive from them. Furthermore, many appointments to key posts were made during the tenure of the previous political administration as favours, rather than on merit. This has proved to be a practice too wasteful for a country like Bangladesh to afford. We do not have money to burn, and political or personal favours at state expense should be eliminated from all government departments, especially the foreign ministry since that involves hard currency.

While the number of missions is expected to be reduced, the surviving embassies should be made lean and tight, cutting out all the expensive extras. In order to make the projected limited number of missions represent our interest effectively in all parts of the world, they ought to be adequately equipped with staff and resources. Ambassadors and diplomatic staff should be instructed to show more initiative than many do at present. Their jobs should not be to simply manage existing level of economic and political interactions, but to work to create new openings. In other words, a little entrepreneurial zeal ought to be shown to go with their diplomatic finesse.

We understand many of our embassies abroad were opened following the host country's decision to open missions here in Dhaka. If we close our embassies, some fear we may run the risk of losing their valuable presence here. But we hope our friends will understand the difficult position we are in at present. While we wholeheartedly agree reciprocity is a good principle to follow, it must also be within the framework of affordability. The rationale for the existence of missions abroad must be that they make sound economic sense.

Census and Race

While, in this country, we have made a case for providing as much information as possible about ourselves on the census form, information which would be useful in the economic planning of Bangladesh, the situation seems quite different in the United Kingdom.

Judging by opinions expressed in the correspondence columns of the British press, especially of The Times, a lot of people have taken exception to the inclusion of a section, titled, "Ethnic group" on the census form, which is now being filled by the British public. The move, said to be the first of its kind, is designed to establish the racial composition of the people in Britain. But it has understandably prompted an outcry among the liberals, both black and white, who argue that the Government should not be judging its people on racial or ethnic terms.

On the other hand, the Government may make a case that the exercise would help in promoting better opportunities for non-white Britons, in such fields as employment, education and housing, once the authorities knew how many different ethnic groups lived in the country. On the face of it, this is a somewhat weak argument. After all, the authorities should know by now, through its various ministries and agencies, how many Indians, Bangladeshis, black Africans or Caribbeans live in the country, even about their places of residence, occupations, educational background and incomes.

There must be considerable confusion when it comes to filling in the controversial portion of the census form. A second-generation Bangladeshi or a fourth generation Chinese would like to call himself a Briton or describe his (or her) origin as Asian. Again, a person of Indian origin whose people once settled in Caribbeans, before migrating to Britain, would not know where his ethnic origin lies, in India or in a Caribbeans. It would be more complicated in the case of people with mixed racial origins, whose number would now be pretty substantial.

From this distance, we may not be able to follow the controversy to the end. But it has certainly been most stimulating so far.

A political controversy has been raging around the question of what the proper goal should be of economic development in the Third World. The developing countries are being told: Not only must development be economically viable, it must be environmentally sustainable as well.

It means, developing countries should think twice before clearing up jungles to put in new factories and farms. Or chopping off precious hardwood trees to make doors and windows and furniture, even chopsticks. Or cutting new roadways through hills and paddies to absorb more gas-guzzling, fume-emitting, and often noise-producing cars.

In other words, they must avoid overindustrialisation, lest they damage their environment permanently.

Sustainable development. That's what it is called. This is the new slogan of the international economic community. The new economic mantra. The argument goes like this: If industry and the environment are not compatible, soon will come a time when one will inevitably destroy the other.

However, some Third World politicians are mad over this proposition and would hear nothing of it. Such talk, in their view, is nothing but a conspiracy of the rich nations against the poor, a thesis propounded to keep Third World countries perennially underdeveloped. This, by implication, was Malaysia's and Indonesia's answer to recent Western criticism of the decimation of their tropical hardwood forests.

Yet, in many of the developing countries, sustainability of the economic effort is, indeed, a real issue, and a very serious one.

In Burma, loggers are hacking away so fiercely at the teak forests along the country's border with Thailand - where most of the world's remaining teak reserves are - that within a couple of years, environment watchers are afraid, much of the forests will be gone.

The Philippines is being deforested at the rate of some

100,000 ha every year. There exists a ban on exports of logs and raw lumber, even a ban on logging itself in critical areas, but the devastation continues. Passing through the landslips of the Dalton Pass in north-eastern Luzon, or driving past Quezon National Park to the island's south, the extent of the devastation comes home like a rude shock, and one wonders if all those dollars earned by the timber industry were really worth having.

During the past four decades, some 700,000 ha of prime forests in Nepal are believed to have been lost in the terai region alone. At the present rate of loss, another 600,000 ha will likely disappear in the next decade or two. Jobs these forests are expected to provide will be gone. Exports will be lost. Activities in many other economic sectors will be affected. Already, eroded soil has begun to choke rivers. Flash floods have become frequent. Several species of flora and fauna have disappeared.

One simply has to look at

the esteros of Manila, the Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong, or the Hooghly in Calcutta to get an idea of the stinking gravity of water pollution in Asia. The Bangkok-based Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) estimates that close to 50,000 tons of agro-chemicals are used in the region each year. While these chemicals help increase the production of food, they also pollute our rivers. Around

toxic chemical was leaked into a river which is a source of drinking water for several million people. Acid rain has become a serious environmental problem in China, where coal is heavily burnt to generate power, run industries, and cook the family food.

Every day, the danger mounts. Every day, the need to act against it grows acuter. It is clear that the short-term benefits of economic development can have terrible

OPEN EYE: BY VEDETTE

Southeast Asia, coastal ecosystems, particularly wetlands, mangroves and corals, are rapidly degrading from agricultural, industrial and urban pollution washing down on them. Some 40 of Malaysia's rivers are said to be environmentally dead. South Korea's Minister of the Environment was recently sacked after it was found that large quantities of a highly

long-term consequences if economic aspirations and economic realities do not come to terms. In other words, development has got to be sustainable. Economic prosperity is desirable; but what good is it if, in the process, we also the very thing we want to be prosperous for - the quality of life? What can we possibly do?



The sway of the exports: Logs being transported to Manila for sale to Japan.

Of course, we can and must do some fire-fighting to contain the immediate damage. More vigorous reforestation plans can be made and implemented, stricter precautions against pollution can be taken, better pollution-fighting technologies can be employed.

One can also employ caution about allowing polluting industries, particularly from foreign investors. Western nations have the same problem of sustainable development and they will be increasingly tempted to move their polluting manufacturing to cheaper Third World locations. Third World countries need not pick up whatever comes their way.

But the only real sustainable course open to avoid the crisis is, first, for each country to rethink its development strategies and priorities, and then for all countries to decide

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what they can do together, among themselves.

Much of today's economic problems emanate from each nation wanting to do everything on its own from A to Z - have every industry that can be had, produce everything that can be produced, and then try and export everything. We lose sight of the competition that ensues, and when certain countries refuse to buy our products and raise tariff walls to keep our exports out, we go into tantrums and make an ideological issue of it.

But industrial prosperity is not the necessary condition of economic prosperity. It is foolish, for example, for a country like Bangladesh, so deficient in raw materials, to aspire to be an industrial power when it can deride its well-being much better and more sustainably from being a service economy. Bhutan need not have a steel mill of its own to improve the living standards of its people. Maldives does not need an aluminium plant. Singapore has proven beyond all doubt that a country can

prosper even without itself producing many of the things it needs. And there are few economies in the world today that are ecologically more sustainable than Singapore is.

What we need is a fundamental readjustment of our economic thinking. We need a sharing of economic resources and a redistribution of economic responsibilities. We need a network of inter-dependent economies in which each country will do only what it can do best and each will look beyond its borders for things others can do better.

Such a convergence of economic activities among nations, one has to agree, cannot be achieved through any international conference or agreement or fiat. Such a convergence can only be realised through an enlightened re-thinking of objectives, through

the combined effect of individual actions, through individual nations learning to live with, and not against, one another. Economic nationalism would have made sense in the Middle Ages, when the world was still big enough for the human race. It no longer is. In today's context, with so little to go by and so little economic room to manoeuvre in, economic nationalism can only be self-defeating, harming oneself in trying to harm others.

It's not a question of one world and two lifestyles that we face, as the nationalists would have us believe. It is a question of one world and too many disasters, too many lost opportunities. Lifestyles don't go up or down from having or not having certain industries or activities. Lifestyles depend on what we make of our physical environment, and if money is the underpinning, it doesn't have to come from factories alone.

An expert on Third World problems, the writer is a regular contributor to The Daily Star.

Kuwait Rulers Act 'as if Nothing has Happened'

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

Fitful moves towards democracy by the ruling family following the liberation of Kuwait are not pleasing the opposition. A major cabinet reshuffle has simply served to expose divisions among the Al-Sabahs. There is no definite date for an election. One opposition leader has said that in the wake of the invasion and partial destruction of the country the government seems to be acting as though nothing has happened.

THE most significant aspect of life in post-liberation Kuwait is that opposition groups are moving across ideological lines. Almost equally important is an apparent rift in the ruling Al Sabah family.

Both trends have grown since the expulsion of the Iraqi invaders. As the authorities have tried to restore a semblance of normalcy, the two sides of the Kuwaiti socio-political spectrum have seemed to drift further apart.

Latest indicator was the April 20 announcement of a new cabinet by Prime Minister Saad Al Abdullah Al Sabah, who is also the country's Crown Prince.

The move deeply upset the opposition, which was creating a new sense of cohesion within its ranks. It also exposed the division within the family headed by the Emir, Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmed Al Sabah.

The reconstituted cabinet

has been packed with Sabah supporters, and loyal technocrats. Pro-democracy activists have been left out. The key posts of oil, defence, interior, finance and foreign affairs remain in the ruling family or loyalist hands.

The exclusion of the Emir's brother, deputy premier Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, is seen as a sign of division at the top. The Dubai-based Gulf News quoted a Western diplomat in Kuwait city as saying: "The Emir's branch came out weaker while

the Crown Prince's lot are holding the key posts."

The opposition Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), a radical Sunni Muslim group spearheading the pro-democracy campaign, has been the most outspoken in rejecting the recent cabinet and criticising the Jaber and Saad leadership.

Eisa el Shaheen, an ICM leader, was quoted as saying: "The majority of Kuwaitis are frustrated with the new cabinet

Despite the immensity of the disaster (caused by the Iraqi occupation), the government acts as though nothing happened.

"This cabinet makes it apparent that the most important issues are not being addressed. There should be an urgent effort to bring in new leadership. In the West, when two trains collide, someone takes the blame. Not in Kuwait."

Shaheen said rallies for democratic reforms would be

resumed, and that pressure in other forms would be stepped up. The powerful ICM, he said, would continue to work closely with other opposition groups, which include Shia Muslims, both liberal and secular factions, who first came together to resist the Iraqi invasion.

A statement said to have been signed by all opposition groups said the government was "opening many doors, threatening national unity, blowing the winds of unease and doubts."

Earlier in April, the Emir only partly conceded opposition demands for restoration of parliamentary life under the now-suspended 1962 constitution.

The Emir dissolved the National Assembly, directly elected in 1985, a year later amid government accusations of a foreign conspiracy to destabilise Kuwait.

On April 7, Sheikh Jaber promised to hold parliamentary polls next year and raised

the prospect of giving Kuwait women the vote. He left the issue of revival of the constitution uncertain, nor did he set a date for the elections.

A senior minister later said that elections would not be held for at least 16 months - a much longer period than the opposition had expected.

Pro-democracy activists decided to treat the formation of the new government, which had resigned in March following widespread criticism of its failure to restore vital supplies and services quickly, as a test for the ruling family's desire to usher in change.

The new cabinet, whose composition took unusually long because of discord, came just before US Secretary of State James Baker was to visit Kuwait.

Kuwaiti dissidents are disappointed. Campaigner Hamed Juwan told the Washington Post: "The attitude of the US government is not to push things but to wish that things will go in the direction of democracy."

"That is a mistake. Wishing is not enough. Washington has to clearly say to the world, to the royal family, to all Kuwait, that democracy must be established in Kuwait." - GEMINI NEWS

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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.

Mother Nature strikes again

Sir, Foreign missions in Bangladesh including League of Red Cross/Crescent have come forward once again with urgent aids for the victims of the latest cyclone and tidal surge on the coastal areas of the country.

This climatic disaster appears to be the repetition of that of late 1970, and is one of the worst this delta has ever experienced, which caused colossal damages through killing thousands of people and livestock and destroying homes, crops, factories, transportation and other infrastructure. The intensity of this twister accompanied with the tidal surge that swept over the southern belt of this LDC was apparently beyond control even with forecast and precautionary measures. This type of periodic disastrous phenomena can be compared with "salt to the wound" and is not only a hindrance to the national development but also is a

step-back for this poor nation.

Fortunately, international humanitarian donations to Bangladesh have virtually become a regular programme lately because of the frequent natural calamities like flood, cyclone drought, epidemic, etc. Unless, solution-oriented schemes are implemented soon rather than combating the recurring and lingering ecological as well as economic problems, a Third World country like Bangladesh may never be able to replace the image of "International Basket Case".

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Government job

Sir, The Bangladesh Television has now intensified its audio-visual reporting programme. Recently BTB telecast a report on "Minimum age for government job is 30 years" in which public opinion on the issue was recorded. It is apparent that people have welcomed the gov-

ernment decision to raise the minimum entry age from 27 to 30 years for government job. But every one opined that more job opportunities have also to be created by the government.

In my view, the government can create job avenues for the unemployed people inside the country through establishing appropriate industries as well as outside of the country by exploring opportunities for exporting our manpower abroad.

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Chittagong University

Sir, The situation at Chittagong University is tense, to say the least. After four long months of unscheduled closer, the institution opened on the last week of April, only to be closed down again. A section of the students and teachers demands removal of the VC, while another wants him to continue.

Considering the valuable time lost by the students, the government may remove the VC and appoint a person more capable of handling the present situa-

tion. Closing the university again and again will only complicate the problem.

Md. Zakir Hossain,
Dhaka.

Gowher Rizvi

Sir, My attention has been drawn to your commentary on "Media Needs Open Channel" published on the front page of your esteemed daily on May 7, 1991.

I am surprised to see that in the said commentary you have described Gowher Rizvi "as a London based Pakistani expert on South Asian Affairs." My brother Dr. Gowher Rizvi is not a Pakistani. A Bangladeshi national based in Oxford, Dr. Rizvi is a MacArthur, Fellow in International Relations at Nuffield College, Oxford University and also the Director of the South Asian Visiting Scholars Programme at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford.

It may be mentioned here that even in the BBC programme Dr. Gowher Rizvi was properly introduced which you seem to have missed.

Shahinsha Rizvi
Bank of Credit and Commerce International (Overseas) Ltd. Dhaka.

The error is sincerely regretted. EDITOR

OPINION

Executive: delegation

A senior man must have the intuition and the capacity to choose the right person at the right time, for delegating responsibilities which the junior person can and should bear. The placing of a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the top man, who can be easily bogged down in details, if he is not careful, and does not delegate judiciously, but to do that, he must have the right man, in the right place at the right time. (A. R. Farid of the then Burmah-Shell).

In Bangladesh the top man would like to hold on to the smallest responsibilities. We have neither the broadness of heart, nor the intellectual honesty to trust and delegate work to our juniors. This problem of trust, and the delegation of powers is a serious problem which now vitiates the Government sector and also the private enterprises.

We owe it to our future generations to gradually train them, build them and motivate them to take up and exercise

more and more responsibilities. A man should be given prime responsibilities between the ages of forty and fifty, when he has acquired sufficient experience to shoulder higher responsibilities. It must be remembered by all of us "that all power is given to us, to be used, and not to be wrapped in a napkin against risk" (Robert McNamara). On the one hand, we are crying hoarse, saying "Delegate and Delegate", and on the other hand, we tend to hold power to ourselves.

Modern management and the sizes of the governmental machinery have grown so big and complex, that delegation is our only way for survival. The feeling that others cannot do what I can do is a poor way of thinking, and indicates only loneliness and distrust.

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