

Fate of BSRS still uncertain

By Sohel Manzur

The fate of Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha (BSRS) as a development financing institution (DFI) remains uncertain as no step could yet be taken to lift the embargo on the Sangstha's function.

Asian Development Bank embargoed BSRS in March, 1985 from further financing projects in the backdrop of its poor loan recovery performance and sickness of many projects it financed.

The government in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with ADB and some other donor agencies including UNDP and IDA agreed to improve the situation through appropriate measures.

In September, 1990 ADB in response to a government request for lifting the embargo on BSRS offered some advice as precondition for the proposed lifting.

The conditions include privatisation of at least 51 per cent share of BSRS in two

years, finalization of a pragmatic operating policy and strategy for the DFI providing it an additional function of a commercial and merchant bank as well as a clean-up of its portfolio so that all of its non-performing loans are taken out of the book of accounts.

The ADB also suggested that appointment of the BSRS MD be made by its Board of Directors, not by the government.

Although a number of measures are under consideration of the government, no definite move is likely until March 1992, a highly placed source informed.

The solution to BSRS problems will come as part of a comprehensive reform package for the units under all DFIs after being okayed by the Committee on Privatisation and the Sub-Committee on Sick Industries.

BSRS is currently confined only to providing working cap-

ital to some of the projects in operation and BMRE (balancing, modernisation, replacement and expansion) of some other projects with its full set-up, which is lying mostly idle, according to sources.

The BSRS set-up includes 311 staff and involves a total expenditure of Tk 45 crore annually.

Meanwhile, quite a few experts have left the agency as there is little for them to do in the DFI, sources said.

Meanwhile, the loan recovery performance of the agency, however, is disappointing, according to official figures.

BSRS, since its inception in 1972, provided term loans to the tune of Tk 3349.82 million for 302 projects, of which 90 are now sick. Legal actions were taken against about 85 projects for not paying back the loans. Two hundred 64 projects are now in operation.

The amount of total out-

standing loans, including interests, was Tk 8607.67 million in June this year while it stood at Tk 7736.27 million in June, 1990 and Tk 8077.92 million in June, 1989.

The total amount recovered till June, 1991 was Tk 4758.64 million and it reached Tk 4789.89 million in September.

With regard to the poor performance of the BSRS-financed projects, a high official of the agency said non-availability of working capital on time is a major problem for which the entrepreneurs cannot implement their projects timely and incur increased interests.

An official at the Economic Relations Division (ERD) told this correspondent that an accord with the World Bank was under process for further fund for BSRS to provide term loans and working capital. He, however, did not figure out the amount.

Political interest responsible for public jute sector over-employment: WB

Star Economic Report

Excess employment resulting in low productivity, large wage increases and stagnant export prices have significantly contributed to the poor financial performance of the jute industry in recent years, according to a World Bank (WB) report.

Small

Total losses by all 64 mills amounted to about Taka three billion, despite the government's export and interest subsidy of Taka 2.3 billion, notes the WB draft report titled "Bangladesh: Restructuring options for the jute manufacturing industry."

Financial losses of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) increased from Taka 1.8 billion in FY '90 to an alarming Taka 2.4 billion in FY '91 and unit cost exceeded the export price by 55 per cent, the report points out.

Addressing the employment and compensation issues are central to improving the performance of the jute manufacturing in Bangladesh because of the existence of large excess employment in the sector and the related low productivity, the high and rising employee compensation costs relative to the revenues, and the impact of these factors on the poor financial performance of the mills, the WB document states.

Excess employment resulting in low productivity and high and rising employee compensation costs have contributed significantly to the poor state of finances of the jute industry, the report notes.

Under social and political pressures, the document points out, the public jute mills function essentially as employment centres in Bangladesh. The government's interest in gaining workers' support has given the unions scope to pressure mill management to create jobs irrespective of the financial situation of the mill, the report went on to add.

The worker/loom ratio, used as the main employment norm in the mills, is about 45

per cent higher in the BJMC mills than the ratio achieved in India, according to the report.

Furthermore, labour productivity in Bangladesh is almost half of that in India.

Total employment in the industry is estimated at 157,318 in FY '91, of which 65 per cent is in the public sector and 85 per cent of them in both sectors are classified as workers while the rest as officers and staff.

However, the report also points out, it is difficult to establish the exact number of employees because of discrepancies in the mills records.

Over-manning, particularly in the public sector, is very high and productivity is low, the document says. Of the total number of workers, 75 per cent are designated as permanent and the rest are temporary ('badli') or casual workers.

The main causes of over-manning in the industry as a whole, the WB report notes, includes the inefficient use of machinery and equipment, assigning more workers to machines than warranted for normal operational requirements, setting employment targets on the basis of installed capacity, hiring more temporary workers than necessary and keeping a large number of officers, clerical staff and other personnel not directly involved in production.

The wage policy, the WB document points out, is determined by the government irrespective of the financial position of the mills.

For a level of demand of 500,000 tonnes, 37,178 employees in the sector need to be retrenched if labour productivity is to be increased 30 per cent and to the level of the Indian mills, the report says.

According to mill managers,

the study says, a 30 per cent increase in labour productivity could be achieved by phasing out labour assigned to currently redundant equipment and consolidating capacity in better performing mills.

For a level of demand of 500,000 tonnes, 37,178 employees in the sector need to be retrenched if labour productivity is to be increased 30 per cent and to the level of the Indian mills, the report says.

However, the report adds, for a credible reform programme labour productivity should be increased to the Indian norms and this would require retrenchment of about 45 per cent of the total labour (about 71,164 employees).

For an expected demand of 400,000 tonnes, excess employment would amount to 39 per cent for a 30 per cent improvement in labour productivity and attainment of Indian productivity would imply 56 per cent of excess employment in the industry as a whole.

The WB report recommends that a viable reform programme in the industry aims at retrenching about 30 per cent of the labour force (about 47,000 employees) immediately by closing some of the worst performing mills.

Phasing out the remaining

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