

South Asia Gets Little Attention in the Campaign

Experts for Development Projects

Finance Minister M. Saifur Rahman is right in urging multilateral aid agencies and donor countries to show increased preference for local talents as against foreign nationals in obtaining consultancy services for development projects. He also has a point in stressing the importance of "competitive remuneration" to indigenous experts or to expatriates of the same country, living abroad, to "help the transfer of technology in a sustainable way."

This is precisely what a programme sponsored by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), known as Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) is all about. The programme, now in its sixth year in Bangladesh, has benefited some 32 different countries, while 90 such consultancies in this country have been performed by local or Bangladeshi residents abroad, during the same period. The Finance Minister has done well in supporting the programme at a workshop held here on Wednesday and, what's more, in offering a few new ideas for its improvement.

However, Rahman's otherwise sensible presentation is marred by somewhat sweeping generalisations. In one such remark, the Finance Minister has accused donors of tending "to prefer consultants having the least knowledge of the subject only because they are foreigners." The remark obscures the fact that it is the aid recipient country, whether it is Bangladesh or any other developing nation, that finally decides whether a particular consultant should be accepted or rejected, a decision made after a careful scrutiny of his or her biodata or even an interview. Under the UN rules, no expert, foreigner or local, can be dumped on a project. One problem is that the slow-moving administration in a country like Bangladesh takes too long in accepting or rejecting a consultant offered by an aid agency, with the result that a last minute decision tends to be a hasty, probably a wrong, one. If some of the reports by these consultants pile up in the Planning Ministry as suggested by Rahman because of their poor quality, they should be returned to the agency concerned for action during the evaluation of the project.

Again, the Finance Minister's allegation that such multilateral bodies as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank with which Rahman appears to have the best of relations show "discriminatory attitude" against local consultants must be taken up by the Minister at the highest level of these two organisations with specific instances. It is too serious a charge to be aired at a seminar and then pushed under the carpet.

Much can be done to plug the loopholes in the system relating to the selection and use of consultants in development projects. We are all for hiring local experts in sizable numbers. However, it is important to maintain a flexible open approach, keeping in mind the expertise of the consultant, his or her understanding of local conditions and the cost effectiveness of the project. After all, if Bangladeshi consultants can serve in projects in other countries, there are no reasons why foreign experts *per se* should be subjected to somewhat sweeping criticisms. It is also important to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas among consultants of different backgrounds and nationalities, as once actively propagated under another UNDP programme, "Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries" (TCDC). Indeed, in our view, TOKTEN and TCDC complement each other in helping the development process in the Third World.

Costly Neglect

Thirteen physiotherapy machines, according to a report published in this daily yesterday, have been lying unpacked at the Dhaka Shishu Hospital ever since they were received from Saudi Arabian mission in Dhaka. This is despite the fact that the physiotherapy unit runs short of equipment and is in a shambles. The reason for not putting the machines to operation has been cited as the space problem in the department concerned. However, the two adjacent rooms cleared seven months back are now empty and no plausible explanation could be offered by the hospital authority for the inordinate delay for restructuring the same department.

Considering the wide use of the machines yet to be unpacked — the machines are used for treating more than a dozen infantile diseases — the authority's indifference, as manifest, leaves a question mark on the service the doctors are rendering at the hospital. By their own admission, it emerges that the hospital is in short supply of modern equipment that seriously hamper treatment of a number of complicated child diseases. The equipment for which accommodation could not as yet be made are the ones highly sophisticated and very efficient.

One ought not to be cruel enough to comment that the machines have been left to suffer the authority's neglect because they have been procured free of cost. But the way they have been left since the first quarter of 1991 to face an uncertain future is unjust and unexplainable. When dearth of equipment causes severe setback to medical service in the country, it is intolerable that medical appliances received as a gift should be left unused for such a long time. The Bangalee would not simply stop finding excuses for their lack of initiative. But it is unpardonable even when the required facilities have been there only to be made use of after some efforts were expended to make them ready for the purpose.

Such is the astounding notoriety and callousness of people in the public sector that sophisticated machines and goods imported for crores of taka are exposed to elements of nature for months and even years on end. Reports of such incidents are not hard to come by. By cultivating such a dangerous attitude to life and society, a nation inflicts to itself grievous wounds. Men who do not value national interests, can go to any extent to invite such self-inflicted tragedies. Therefore, a real shake-up of the attitude concerning specially the public property, service and collective interests of society is most needed. How this can be done is what the administration must work out. But one thing is sure that both persuasion and punitive measures will have to be applied to accomplish the task.

BOTH the US and Canada, which I have visited briefly, are facing what haunts the Third World all the time: uncertainty. But since we live on the periphery of life, we are used to the turbulence. They are not.

Take the US. The presidential election has brought to the fore the fear of economic recession that has tormented the Americans for long. Not confident of their future, they are nervously assessing who out of the two major candidates, George Bush of the Republican Party and Bill Clinton of the Democrats, can lead them from stagnation to better days.

Clinton's clarion call to change the status quo has won him large support and if the present mood of the Americans lasts, he is as good as elected. The response to the television debates among the three candidates indicates that what presently goes down well with the people is the panacea for their economic ills. Clinton is an untired horse and so he is the beneficiary. It is a panicky reaction but there is nothing better that the Americans can do. They are torn asunder on their doubts about tomorrow.

I wonder how Clinton can retrieve the economy if the people do not help themselves. I did not sense any such mood in America. Even the search for answers to the questions of recovery has not yet begun, much less the cost in terms of sacrifices. There is still too much wishful thinking and too much confusion.

Maybe, the Soviet Union provided the US with its ethos: economic challenge does not stir those emotions. It is as if America needed an ideological opponent. When it disappeared, there is a feeling of nullity. Strangely, I found America still talking about its military prowess. "We, the only superpower" is the phrase often heard. My fear is that the US, instead of digging in for fighting recession, may seek an easy way out by keeping its military expenditure as well as the machine, more or less intact. Clinton has talked of sophisticated weapons, not of cut in military budget. He, like Bush, has endorsed the NATO and stationing of American troops in Europe. This is in sharp contrast to the refrain of several American intellectuals and journalists I met that America will be inward looking after the election.

The vast paraphernalia of defence industry can be dangerous for the Third World. The US or, for that matter, the UN can interfere in any country's affairs and may even stoke a fire or two to sell its armaments. The bush wars which are raging in developing countries can come in handy to Washington. One such war has been there in the subcontinent for many decades.

Both New Delhi and Islamabad appear to believe that in the world context they count. But the end of the cold war has practically finished whatever importance they had. Islamabad, particularly, does

not realise that its importance for Washington has vanished after Moscow's capitulation at Kabul.

Although the State Department has constituted a separate section for South Asia and does not link it with the Near East as it did until August, the importance of the subcontinent has not gone up. I found that America would not lift even its small finger if the area were to burst into flame. Its concern is confined to the signing of the non-proliferation

treaty. The new administration will not be in any way less insistent than the Bush government.

New Delhi may come under pressure on one more count. It has probably unwittingly rubbed the Democrats on the wrong side. They have not liked the presence of Lalit Mansingh, then acting Indian ambassador to the US, at a Republican fund-raising dinner in June. Some high-ups in the Democratic Party have also a feeling that New Delhi has circulated word among the Indians settled in America to vote for Bush.

I do not blame either the Democrats or the Republicans but both have failed to check the practice of discrimination. I experienced it first in

cash the tariff for three days in advance but told at my face: "We do not trust everybody." The room was booked by the Indian embassy and an official from the mission was accompanying me.

Canada, too, has a colour problem. But it is far limited. Since it is more ethnic in character — Canada has only 26 million people — it is far more tolerant than America. Canada's problems of ethnicity are different. One is that of the French-speaking population in Quebec, which has been agitating for an autonomous status for a long time. I found the Canadians seriously worried because the demand for more power to Quebec has assumed the shape of secession.

The heat generated by the

referendum on whether Quebec wanted to stay within the Union or separate has soured relations between the French-speaking and other Canadians. The country is discussing nothing else except the referendum and unnecessarily putting all the blame on the French-speaking population. The fact is that the entire power has been monopolised by Ottawa and Quebec has been more or less left out.

No doubt, the integrity of Canada is now a question mark. Still some formula can be worked out to let provinces enjoy more autonomy. If Ottawa could retain only a few subjects, including defence, and transfer the rest to the provinces, the danger to the Canadian unity can be averted. A federal structure can keep Canada intact. However, the majority opinion feels that if the federation becomes decentralised, the constitutional arrangements made for it will be impractical.

Again the situation is nothing new for the Third World. Movements for secession are cropping up all the time. But since it has got accustomed to confront such developments — colonial masters are responsible for some of the centrifugal forces in the areas — it has begun to learn to live with them.

What is happening in Canada has a lesson for Third World countries, particularly India and Pakistan. Many of their domestic problems may lessen if they decentralise power. Mere unity is no solu-

tion to emotional or ethnic differences. Germany is one example; its problems began after unification.

The problem with the world is excessive leadership. Prime Minister John Major of Great Britain is one example. Bush is another. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada is yet another. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and President Premadasa of Sri Lanka belong to the same category. Their domineering style of governance has weakened democratic institutions. Therefore, there is increasing demand by the people to have more say. But the government's response is that of denial.

When communism collapsed the people's anger against the ruling elites began. The Third World can also face the retribution of public anger. A different kind of crisis faces it today. It is a crisis of change, not stagnation. It is a crisis borne out of the incapacity of present institutions to respond to a deep and far-reaching process of social turmoil. How does it sort it out?

Having run its course, the old order in the West has lost its earlier legitimacy and dynamism. Old relationships are being questioned in America, Canada and the rest of western countries. The answer perhaps lies in giving new social content to the functioning of institutions. I found both America and Canada too tired and too afraid to do that.

persistently trailed by at least ten points behind Gov Clinton. This was before the TV debates and this is so today. Where as President Bush has taken pot shots against Gov Clinton personally, Gov Clinton has managed to hold the high moral ground of "a vision for the US in the 21st century. In front of the TV cameras Gov Clinton comes out as an articulate, attractive and dynamic personality. President Bush looks vulnerable and tired.

Another astonishing aspect of US elections-92 is that there is a world wide consensus that President Bush has already as good as lost the elections. Yet it was only eight months ago that Jhon Major was not given a whiff of a chance to defeat Neil Kinnock and Major caused a sensational upset.

The writer is Retired Ambassador and Assistant Secretary-General, OIC

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Arshad-uz Zaman writes from Istanbul

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Will Bush Win in an Upset Result?

Arshad-uz Zaman writes from Istanbul

I N the summer of 1992,

UN: A Victim of its Popularity?

Ian Steele writes from the United Nations

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.

Negotiated marriage

Sir, A scene in a famous movie called "Nun's story" haunted me for many many days in my young age. A much beloved angel-like nun was hit on the head suddenly by an African man whom she used to like and care very much. She died without knowing why she was dying with an expression on her face of astonishment, reproachment and helplessness. Very recently I was the same expression on a face of a young educated girl, who is not a victim of an African tribal superstition but a victim of negotiated marriage system of my own country.

As it happened, she was chosen by the relatives of a man (obviously lives abroad) as his bride. Without even knowing the man's name well, her marriage was settled in a very hurried manner as it always happens. Because the boy or man would have to leave his country soon! (Much of his time had been wasted for choosing bride). Because her parents could not bypass the chance of having a son-in-law

who lived and earned outside Bangladesh! Then again one day before the day when the marriage was fixed she was told that the guardians of the boy now did not want her to be the bride. May be some other girl? Prettier than her? Daughter of a richer man?

As a matter of fact the girl did not know why exactly she was chosen earlier and then again why she was rejected? She had all the qualifications to be a good wife. It has all happened although she had no part in it; subsequently victim is she and it is her life which has been affected with no fault of her own! When shall we do away with these negotiated marriage system?

Munira Khan, Green Road, Dhaka

Export promotion

Sir, In his recent illuminating and incisive article Mr Shah AMS Kibria, the renowned diplomat and economist, has stated "Given the poor resource endowment of Bangladesh, we do not have

any option other than transforming our abundant labour into exportable goods. Other countries in Asia have successfully done it. Why can't we?"

The reasons are very clear to those who govern the country and those involved in manufacture and export. Mr Kibria has cited a singular success story in this context i.e. garments. Perhaps, he is not fully aware of the trials, tribulations and harassments the exporter faces and has to overcome specially from the time he is ready to export his goods.

Without going into the aspects of critical law and order situation, labour unrest, frequent power failures, difficulties of importing vital inputs required in manufacture, I would mention the handicaps standing in the way of quick export of the garments. Once the goods manufactured over-coming all the ordeals are ready for shipping, the exporter has to meet multifarious export procedures complying numerous rules and regulations, filling forms, obtaining permissions from various authorities. Practically at every stage, the process is delayed by inefficient, corrupt and greedy minor officials under various pretexts unless their pockets are lined up.

It is well known that many export orders worth crores of takas were cancelled by overseas buyers because goods could not be delivered on time

schedule. If a strict system of accountability was enforced, then any one responsible for adopting unnecessary avoidable delay could be punished.

It appears tragic that we as a nation seem to have adopted a philosophy of anti-survivalism at all levels.

Our Finance Minister very rightly promised to reduce rules and regulations to the bare minimum and bring transparency in administration. Earnest and sincere his intentions may be, it will be difficult for him to succeed when the whole bureaucratic set-up is in a mess.

S Mutahir Uddin, Lt Comdr (Retd) Dhanmondi, Dhaka

No-smoking area

Sir, The Prime Minister must be congratulated for declaring her secretariat a non-smoking zone. We hope the officials, specially the senior ones, will abide by the restrictions with all seriousness. Even then a small room away from the main block may be designated as smoking area for the incurables.

We now request the PM to extend the restriction to various public places. Airport terminal building should get some attention. Two reasons for this request: One is to keep a public place clean and safe.

Second reason is a little deeper. The arrival lounge, which is air-conditioned remains crowded with people who have no apparent reason to be there. Their movement indicate that they do not have to pay the entrance fee payable by visitors who go there to receive passengers. These people are continuously smoking to while away their time.

M A Haq Green Road, Dhaka

Assuring agriculture

Sir, The initiative taken by the Premier declaring the Prime Minister's secretariat a no-smoking area is really a good one. But why only the Prime Minister's office? Why not the hospitals, colleges, universities, cinema halls, and other public places be declared as no-smoking zone? Will the government think about it?

Zeshan Khaja Dewan Ist Lane, Dhaka

Assuring agriculture

Sir, Recently, while speaking as chief guest at the inaugural ceremony of the national seminar on "Agriculture and Environment" arranged by Agriculturists' Association of Bangladesh (AAB) at BARC au-

ditorium in Dhaka, the Agriculture, Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control Minister M Majid-ul Haque said that the government was preparing a new national agriculture policy and fifty per cent of its preliminary work had already been completed. This new policy will be based on the actual socio-economic and environmental situation of the country. A number of papers on various aspects of environment and agriculture were presented in the seminar by prominent agriculturists and experts. The speakers stressed on the need for conservation of our environment through efficient use of the available and renewable agricultural resources and appropriate application of scientific methods to different fields of agriculture including forestry, livestock etc.

It is learnt that the Agriculturists Association of Bangladesh (AAB) is going to launch an elaborate programme to help the nation achieve self-sufficiency in the food sector. It is said that the AAB is a professional voluntary organization engaged in the sacred mission of establishing a self-reliant, poverty-free Bangladesh. So many assurances. Well, let us look ahead.

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