

NBR Poses Problems

It's good to see the National Board of Revenue (NBR) getting into a round of dialogue with the trade bodies to discuss with them problems of businessmen with regard to taxes and duties. The process of policy implementation often brings out new issues which also call for urgent attention for ensuring success of the measures introduced. This is even more true where fiscal policy is concerned. Such issues can best be sorted out in consultation with the people who are directly affected by the policy measures.

A dialogue ceases to be meaningful unless it is backed up by prompt follow-up action. NBR's performance in the area of action does not look as commendable as its readiness to talk to the leaders of trade and industry. The problem of tariff anomalies, arising out of measures taken by the NBR, had been acting as an irritant since long before the formulation of this year's budget. NBR had been telling the business community to bring up specific cases so that these could be referred to the Tariff Commission for obtaining its findings. Well, NBR's attitude could not exactly be faulted although one could have asked why should such anomalies arise at all. However, latest information rather suggests that NBR might have been sitting over some of these problems.

Representatives of trade bodies have asserted during their current dialogue with the NBR that they have referred innumerable instances of rampant tariff anomalies but till now very little redress had been given to the affected industries. They are saying that even the cases recommended by the Tariff Commission after due examination, remain pending with the NBR indefinitely. This, indeed, is unfortunate.

Tariff anomalies place domestic industry at a serious disadvantage vis-a-vis competing foreign product, often by making the value of its essential input costlier than the price of the imported finished goods. Delay in the correction of discrepancies in bonafide cases does irreparable harm to the concerned local industry. Trade liberalisation would not work unless tariff anomalies are removed promptly on diction.

Application of tariff value instead of the price shown on the invoice, for the purpose of levying duties on imported goods, is another long standing source of complaint of the business community. In a sense, tariff value is an antithesis of trade liberalisation, discouraging, as it does, procurement of goods from abroad at competitive prices. Perhaps, the realities of a situation where some importers are prone to under-invoice goods to reduce duty burden, have prompted the NBR in recent years to prescribe tariff value for a large variety of items. Nonetheless, tariff value remains a major irritant for the lab abiding importers.

Metropolitan Chamber's suggestion to the NBR to do away with tariff value in case of low-duty items, appears to be a sensible one. As they have explained, there is little incentive for under-invoicing where the rate of duty is low. In all fairness, one could argue that low rate and hence low incidence of duty, might also induce over-invoicing of imports for underhand transfer of funds abroad. That perhaps, is the reason why NBR charges duty on the basis of the tariff value or the invoice value, whichever is higher, albeit a practice which seem quite inconsistent with the precepts of the tariff value theory. However, with convertibility of Taka on current account just around the corner, the inducement for over-invoicing also should fade away soon enough. Thus, the idea of discontinuing fixation of tariff value for low-duty items still remains a sensible one.

The call for a regular dialogue with the leaders of trade and industry should claim the attention of NBR. Trade bodies observe the impact of policy measures at close quarters and can tell NBR what really is happening. Besides, NBR also will find such meetings an occasion to put forward its own ideas. A forum for discussions, meeting at regular intervals, would benefit both NBR and the business community.

Late Action against Rabies

The City Corporation has taken out a rather splashy advertisement in some of the national dailies to make an important public announcement. The announcement reiterates Section 8 of the Municipal Administration Ordinance of 1960 and makes it clear to the members of the public that it is a statutory requirement of all residents of urban municipal areas to get their pet dogs licensed. And it requests such residents to collect the necessary licences and to keep their dogs in chains within their own houses. Violation of this would be legally proceeded against, it said.

Why such a notice after so many years and almost out of the blue and in such an intimidating manner? Explanation follows very soon, in the very next paragraph in fact. Rabies is a dangerous contagious disease and dogs are its principal carrier. The corporation is going to eliminate all unowned dogs and it has sought co-operation of all in the matter.

Our people in their ancient wisdom have always been extra-cautious of the dogs in heat from the onset of their mating season in Bhadra and continuing through Ashwin. But newspaper reports of the past six months speak of outbreak of rabies in many towns and villages of the country well before this season. Why is then the warning so late?

Louis Pasteur, the anti-rabies hero, was a man essentially of the last century. It is a riddle that rabies should continue to bedevil our life so many decades after it has elsewhere been possible to eliminate this disease. The municipal action, emboldened by the 1960 ordinance, is going to hopelessly root out rabies from the towns; what will happen to the villages? There is round the year the complain of there being a shortage of rabies antidotes in very many towns and population centres. How about improving that situation?

The dog is man's oldest friend. Our ancestors of the Austric stock had struck up this friendship to here in these parts long before history began. This is a prize friendship considering the fact that the wild dog must have taken at least a couple of millions of years to become a domesticated boy-scout of an animal, a never-failing stalker of games for man and guard of his shelter and family. The unequal friendship continues, the injustice of the relationship sometimes mitigated by the unusual love that is heaped on it by some. The municipalities mounting the campaign, specially the DCC, must take care that their operations do not become open exhibitions of sadistic exercises hurting the sensibilities of people, particularly the children.

An Unhealthy Trend Prevails in the Health Sector for the Last One Year

by Sharier Khan

STARTING from September 19, 1992, nurses in eight medical college hospitals and 38 medicare centres across the country abstained from work at least for 14 days last year, to force the government to accept some of their demands.

During the same period this year, the nurses under the leadership of Bangladesh Diploma Nurses Association (BDNA) resorted to similar work stoppage for at least a week.

The nurses along with the doctors abstained from work for a couple of days in the country's biggest hospital, the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) in late January protesting an attack by some miscreants on the doctors and nurses in the DMCH.

Class four employees launched another work abstention programme at the Orthopaedic Hospital lasting for nearly three weeks following a dispute with the doctors that occurred on March 12 last.

At the Salimullah Medical College Hospital, on September 10, a group of agitating nurses ransacked the director's office demanding withdrawal of a decision to relocate the nurses' sickroom which they had been occupying since 1991. The nurses also abstained from work for three days.

Early this year, there had also been some other work

stoppage programmes by doctors and nurses in the Mymensingh Medical College Hospital and Sylhet Medical College Hospital.

Interestingly, the work abstention programmes in the hospitals had nothing to do with the patients. Yet the nurses, and sometimes doctors too, virtually gambled with the lives of patients to realise their demands from time to time.

The reason of the last work abstention programme of the nurses, from August 19 to August 26, was a government order which transferred the Nurses Directorate under the jurisdiction of the Health Directorate.

Does this reason justify the nurses' action lasting for a week? Why should nurses launch a movement which made at least 10,000 innocent people admitted to the eight medical college hospitals and 38 medicare centres suffer for a week? What was wrong with the transfer order?

Leaders of the BDNA (Kohinoor group) say that their action was justified because they had no alternative means of creating pressure on the government.

Previously in 1989, the government had issued the same order and received a similar feedback from the nurses.

Sources in the Nursing Directorate informed The Daily

Star that, till 1977 the nurses' directorate was only a section under the DG Health. Former President Ziaur Rahman, to expand and promote the services of the nurses, made it a separate directorate. The total number of registered nurses then was around 2,500.

Since then, the nurses, in 1985, abstained from work demanding an increase in wages which they eventually won. Last year, they launched the same

posts under the Nursing Directorate are vacant because, there is no qualified person to do those jobs," he said. "That is why the government tried to transfer it under DG Health."

Regarding the transfer order of the Nursing Directorate, the source said, "While the Nursing Directorate lacks expertise, I agree that the transfer of the Nursing Directorate under the DG Health would not do much good to the nurses."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

movement twice for similar causes. The government bowed to the pressure and partially met their demands. The last movement was participated by about 15,000 nurses and student nurses which included 7,500 registered nurses.

"Nursing services have deteriorated alarmingly," a well placed source in the Health Ministry told The Daily Star. "We have been thinking about large scale reform in this sector for a long time but the nurses are constantly resisting that."

The source added that the Nursing Directorate was not functioning efficiently. "Amazingly, 29 senior level

The Health Directorate has a vast working field, it has its own problems which remain to be solved for a long time," he said and added that there also were some indiscipline and corruption in the Health Directorate. "But, to reform the nursing sector, the transfer order was supposed to be the initial step which we had withdrawn."

The Health Directorate is corrupt and inefficient," alleged the general secretary of BDNA, Mofizullah. "It cannot solve the problems of 80,000 doctors of the country, so how can it do anything good or the nurses'?" Under the jurisdiction of the

Nursing Directorate, the nurses enjoy some advantages — probably because, its administration is very weak.

"No one transfers a nurse from one medical college to another for any reason," said Kohinoor Begum, the top leader of BDNA. "But, as soon as the government had issued the transfer order on the Nursing Directorate in 1989 which empowered a civil surgeon to issue transfer order of nurses, the surgeons had started transferring nurses on a wholesale basis. The surgeons do not like nurses, she said. "So, nurses will never accept any government order which will make them suffer like that," she added.

The nurses' leaders feel that since most of the nurses are females, a transfer order would greatly disturb their family lives.

Ultimately, the government had to yield to the pressure of the nurses on August 26 last and agreed to set up a committee which would recommend to the ministry the means of reform for the Nursing Directorate.

The committee, headed by Joint Secretary of Health Dr Khalidullah included DG Health, Director of Nursing, related representatives from different bodies including some BDNA leaders. Interestingly, there are four

other rival groups of Kohinoor led BDNA making the scene more dirty than vibrant. The four other groups criticised the Kohinoor group following the agreement with the government to withdraw the work abstention (strike is an illegal work in nursing).

One incident will portray their dirty politics. During the BDNA led work abstention programme last year, the Kohinoor group kidnapped a leader of the rival group, Marium, from the PG Hospital and held her in a room of the DMCH for a couple of days.

The Kohinoor group alleged that Marium was designing a conspiracy with the government to foil the nurses' movement. Marium was tortured and her head was shaved. The news was published in national dailies in early October last year.

Some doctors of the PG Hospital, DMCH and SSMCH told The Daily Star while the services of the nurses were very poor, some nurses were allegedly involved in 'business' like illegally selling hospital medicines.

"The nurses are far away from the noble objective of the profession," the doctors maintained. "They must realise that cooperation with the government in its effort of reform would make the profession better. They must stop these work abstentions from now on."

Services Accord may Further Media Imperialism

by Chakravarthi Raghavan

The Uruguay Round's proposed General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) could be used by the North to enable its media companies to expand their market in the countries of the South. Countries which desire to preserve their cultural and political sovereignty should therefore ensure that they do not make any commitment in GATS to 'liberalise' their audio-visual services.

THE acquisition of the Hong Kong-based STAR satellite TV company by Rupert Murdoch, the media tycoon, and the reaction against it in Asia, bring to the fore some of the old and new issues in this interface involving communication, culture, trade and political sovereignty.

Murdoch, it may be added, has been shedding and acquiring nationalities to ensure control of his media empire — having acquired US citizenship without which he could not run TV enterprises there, an obstacle not faced in media ownership in many other places — and proving the validity of Gresham's law not merely in currencies but culture too.

Over the last decade or more some of the communication/culture and trade and political sovereignty issues have been blurred in the neo-classical, neo-liberal philosophies behind which the US has been pushing for free trade in communications and using it as an instrument to further what Vincent Mosco, Professor of Journalism at Carleton University in Canada, has described as 'Building a World Business Order'.

Old Order

Two recent publications which deal with some of these questions in the overall political context of the US attempts to bring in the old order of transnational laissez faire capitalism under the garb of a New World Order are *Transnational Communications*, (1991) ed. by Gerald Sussman and John A. Lent (Sage Publications) and *Beyond National Sovereignty* (1993) ed. Karl Nordenstreng and Herbert I. Schiller (Ablex Publishing Corporation) — with a number of individual essays and contributions by many authors involved in the New World Information and Communication Order issues and debates of the 1960s and 1970s, who have taken a fresh look at the issues in the light of the subsequent developments.

A common theme (against the background of overviews in both books on the nature of the new world order and its inherent crises) has been that many of the issues of culture and development raised by thoughtful communicators of the 1960s, and which got mixed up with the Marxist-Soviet ideologist views at the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and elsewhere, have not

disappeared but still remain valid and need to be tackled.

Several of these articles also bring out how the competencies and more democratic decision-making efforts in several of the international organisations have been side-tracked by the United States in its drive to secure and create international regimes through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its Uruguay Round negotiations.

Mosco, in his chapter in *Beyond National Sovereignty*, points out how the theory of free trade in communications that the US got incorporated in the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has been sought to be pushed through the GATT.

Audio-visual services is one of the services covered by GATS and, within that sector, the transborder delivery of such audio-visual services as one of the envisaged modes of delivery.

If countries, say the countries of Asia, agree to 'liberalise' this sector in their initial commitments on services trade and agree to permit transborder delivery, then service providers like STAR TV can get a legal foothold, expand their market in each of the countries involved, and would be guaranteed earnings and repatriation of earnings — whether by sale (licence or other fees that users might pay) of the TV programmes and/or the advertisement revenues that could be generated.

So far, most of the countries that have put in 'initial offers' have not scheduled audio-visual services among the list of services they would liberalise, and even fewer of them for its delivery by transborder means. Those that have placed no limitations on transborder delivery, including Japan, Korea and the Nordics, are also those where the common language is not English or other dominant ones and, given the smallness of their markets, would need both local expertise and more money for broadcasts in local languages.

To the Editor...

Third View

Sir, It was delightful reading the Third View by Mahfuz Anam. It seems he is the only one at this moment talking sense. Because everybody else seem to have taken leave of their senses. As is evident by the wonderful act of the Mayor and DMC renting out the city roads for public meetings.

The Mayor consulted the poor tax payer before his arbitrary decision or has he also been afflicted by the power disease syndrome? It seems infectious, this disease. For whosever comes to power, seems to take leave of all coherent thoughts. History repeats itself till it is blue in the face, and yet no one ever seems to take a lesson from it. Its the Mahfuz Anams of the land, who still manage to keep our spirits up. The only thing which bothers the like of us, do the authorities ever bother to read the sensible things a solitary Anam bravely writes or are they so busy with their roads and its renting, that they do not have the time? Not that that should stop Mahfuz Anam carrying on his somewhat

lonely crusade. I would have Mahfuz Anam know, that his brilliant piece was read and vastly appreciated by a majority who have some good sense left yet.

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Investment climate

Sir, If we examine the global economic scenario, we will find recession prevailing all over the world. In order to activate the economy the government has taken a good number of measures. But even then the investors are not coming forward as expected. The main reasons behind such state of affairs may be the following. There is no market at home; most of the people do not have any purchasing power. Many seldom wear new cloth and shoes. The only market is outside world. But it is very difficult to get in the world market facing the stiff competition. Besides, production cost in Bangladesh is also very high compared to many other countries. The only thing available is cheap labour. But this cheap labour is not skilled

Second Language

While this language problem also applies in Asia, in most of the South and South-East Asian countries, English is very much a major second language and the language of the elitists and consuming classes.

However, the US and others having an interest could push countries to make such commitments (in the negotiations ahead before the Round is concluded) or even, if they don't do it now, take it up in bilateral or further rounds of multilateral negotiations.

Any country seeking to preserve its cultural and political sovereignty would thus need to ensure that in the services commitments, audio-visual services, or at least their transborder mode of delivery, are excepted and perhaps even reserve in their schedules the right to impose quotas on imported films and programmes and licensing for distribution or display by state or private sector channels and broadcasters, trade experts say.

Interestingly, Hong Kong has not bound itself to allow transborder delivery of audio-visual programmes.

While GATS would provide a framework of legal rights and obligations, there are some rules of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) relating to broadcasting, particularly TV broadcasting into other countries without their permission, though under the present leadership the ITU is trying to promote both private business interests in telecommunications and acting to promote GATT.

Mosco has brought out how the US-Canada free trade agreement, which is also the model for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is being used and pushed as a model in GATT and the Uruguay Round. If the Third World effort in international communications has been one to build a NWCIO, the FTA is among a number of steps towards creation of a Western version of a new World Order," he says, adding: "But like many 'new and improved' products in

a world of advertising illusions, the 'New' New Order presents little that is actually new. Rather it deepens and extends the pattern of the Old Information Order for an electronic age."

In the Uruguay Round, a major US-EC difference has been over the issue of audio-visual services and cultural exceptions.

'Television Marti'

In contrast to the FTA, Moscow says, the EC has taken a different approach, albeit within a market model and its charter provides for some protection of public institutions, including public education, social welfare, occupational health and safety and national culture.

In the same book, in the chapter on Television Marti: Open Skies over the South (Television Marti is the TV programme beamed by the US into Cuba, a cross-border delivery, though not using satellites), Laurien Alexandre, Dean of Academic Affairs of the Antioch

University of Southern California, deals with US violations of international law in this TV broadcast invasion of Cuba.

He points out that the US actions clearly violated the ITU regulations and was also counter to several of the UN General Assembly resolutions and declarations including those on inadmissibility of intervention and interference in the internal affairs of other states and the Declaration on the Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States. Though these declarations are not treaties and don't have the same force, in areas where there is no treaty, UN Assembly declarations are one of the sources of international law.

On the TV Marti broadcasts, the International Frequency Registration Board (IFRB) of the ITU ruled in April 1990 that the US broadcasts violated regulation 2666 which requires that the power of stations utilising frequencies in the 5060 kHz to

41 MHz bands (used by TV) should not exceed power necessary to assure a national service of good quality 'within the limits of its territory' and all technical means should be used to reduce to the maximum extent possible radiation over territory of other countries 'unless an agreement has been reached previously'.

The IFRB though made clear that it had no enforcement authority, and the US has always functioned on the basis that it could pick the international rules and laws it would observe and disobey others, and did so in this case by stating that it disputed the IFRB interpretations.

The problem faced by many countries in the face of unauthorised beaming of broadcasts, especially TV broadcasts, over their territory particularly via satellites is lack of technical means to jam and interfere with them. But with such attempts at broadcasts likely to be resorted to by private corporations, thus committing 'piracy' of national 'audiovisual-space', countries might begin to look for technical solutions too.

— Third World Network Features

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Media Peeved with the Beeb

The venerable BBC is accused of colonising the airwaves. Lucy Johnson of Inter Press Service reports.

THE colonial sun may have set on the once mighty British Empire, but it still shines brightly on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

For 50 years now, BBC World Service radio journalists have passed through the vaulted portals of Bush House on their way to broadcast Britain's voice to more than 125 million people around the world, from Ho Chi Minh City to Honduras.

Forty years after the service changed its name from Empire Service, 'The Beeb' as it is endearingly known, is staple for listeners and viewers across the world as an impartial and intelligent source of news and analysis.

But its critics in the developing world say the BBC's virtual monopoly of global information dissemination is tantamount to colonising the airwaves.

This domination — and its foray into satellite networks — are blamed for a form of cultural imperialism that imposes Western views and development models on the rest of the world.

"Although the BBC claims it's interested in international issues, it's very much the posture that we will take British culture out to the outside world," said a documentary maker in a small London production company that focuses on Third World issues. He withheld his name for fear of losing BBC funding.

The criticism has surfaced in recent months as the role of the BBC has come under increased scrutiny. Seventy years after it was set up, the public broadcasting monolith that produces the World Service and its sister service, the British BBC, is wrestling with a financial and identity crisis.

Severe cuts in government funding and the BBC's loss of viewers and listeners to new commercial television and radio channels have convinced many in the corporation that they must shake off old-style management and move toward the free market.

Led by new and controversial director John Birt, the BBC has introduced management plans once deemed unthinkable.

Under the new system of 'Producer Choice', the BBC divided staff into 'buyers' and 'sellers'. Programme producers 'shop' for crews and other needs inside and outside the BBC. Sellers — from camera operators to librarians — must do enough 'business' to keep their jobs.

Management says this radical restructuring is the BBC's only means of survival in an increasingly competitive market. But the old-timers and several development-oriented media companies and charities fear the BBC is sacrificing its educational role and quirky creative dynamism to the mass-production, fast-buck mentality of the commercial media.

A recent report by the International Broadcasting Trust, on behalf of 50 development organisations, found that in the two years to 1992, the BBC slashed its Third World coverage by a third.

Malcolm Harper, director of the United Nations Association and chair of the Third World Environment Broadcasting Project, says the "alarming" drop in such coverage casts doubt on the BBC's stated commitment to extending viewer and listener choice.

Critics are concerned that most of the BBC's Third World coverage is on the news, where war and famine take precedence over the day-to-day life and culture of South countries. Said Harper: "We are concerned that, increasingly, the public will see the world through news and current affairs programmes, which, however good, concentrate on conflict, war and disaster."

Along with other development analysts, he fears this one-sided perspective will give people in the North a skewed and unduly pessimistic impression of the Third World. "Part of the BBC's task is to provide a well-rounded view of

the world to the people of this country," said Julia Felthouse of the London-based charity Action Aid. "The BBC has become incredibly insular."

Media analysts also point out that while the BBC is reducing its coverage of the Third World for viewers and listeners in Britain, it is expanding its news networks in the developing world.

Last year, the World Service launched a 24-hour news and information service across Asia to challenge the global dominance of the US-based Cable News Network (CNN). The service, transmitted by Hong Kong's Star TV satellite, is already available in some 11 million homes in Asia.

The First World perspective of much of this coverage worries development experts and Third World media figures, who say the news bias influences those in developing countries and shapes their view of the world. This view has been strengthened by the purchase of Star TV in July by Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Some media experts say the World Service has been a positive force in many countries struggling to establish multiparty democracies, enabling listeners in those countries to circumvent rigid censorship laws.

"For some of these countries, the BBC has been extraordinarily liberating as it has given them a lot of news they could not have otherwise got," said Jenny Richards of the Television Trust for the Environment.

The BBC denies establishing a cultural oligarchy and says most of the services it broadcasts to the developing world are staffed by Third World journalists.

Says a spokesperson for the network: "It's a complete misnomer to say that it's dominated by the West when in a quarter or even half of our programmes, we employ specialist staff from countries in the South."