

## How to Make Bus Journeys Safer

Mohammad Hanif couldn't stand the sight. He fainted and never recovered. The sight that killed Hanif was the laid down row of 19 bodies of people killed on Wednesday in the Shibalay bus plunge tragedy. Although of the entire nation shocked by the news, very few will have Hanif's empathy. These incidents of collective dying on the roads must be stopped to save the society from dangerous lacerations inside its soul.

Hanif's extremely sensitive reaction would be approximated by all users of inter-city buses who without fail would say on viewing the bodies in the print media, it could be me. And the number of such would run into tens of thousands. Who would care about their resulting trauma and their gradual submission to anti-life fatalism?

If only we could be certain that here was a case of a genuine error of human judgement and/or a machine gone haywire, we could dismiss the unfortunate deaths as accident and finished it up all with appropriate feelings and expressions of condolence. But, as in the case of most other similar incidents, there are compelling reasons on the contrary to suspect that the Shibalay deaths have been caused by negligence and rash driving. Negligence because the driver took out his vehicle on the route amidst a thick shroud of fog. The mishap occurred at 7.30 in the morning. Some passengers got panicky at the way the driver was speeding in a condition of very poor visibility and asked him to decelerate. According to survivors they were shouted down by a jeering driver. He himself could not survive his fit of rashness.

It is a wonder that more people do not die on the roads. But whoever do and in whatever number, do so because of there being literally no control on fast intercity bus service and, on the part of the operators, a mindless indifference permeating the question of passenger security. Are the long-haul bus trips, fast because of the distances to be covered and time to be consumed, subjected to any kind of supervision by any kind of government or public body specifically charged with during so? No, but why?

Such bloody and violent deaths in such big numbers warrant going into the causes leading to the mishaps and determining the responsibilities thereof. A deep and circumspect probe could tell the government and the operators and the people making bus journeys how to minimise the risk of such mayhem reducing buses into veritable death traps. Such a probe is yet to be set up by the government patently because they take these for 'accidents' built into the business of bus service. That is wrong and government should, without waiting for a hundred or a thousand more to die, institute an enquiry seeking from it recommendations aimed at making bus journeys safer.

We have one recommendation to make, unsolicited but dictated by what killed Hanif. Do not allow any bus to cover the distance between Gabtali and Aricha in less than two hours. Now they do it in one and a half and even less. Very close to a kilometer a minute or 17 metres a second. Considering the meandering road and the night-marish bridges, this is a remarkable feat by any standard. But the bus operators must be ordered out such fun and the government must expert itself to enforce it.

Over the last few years fog has been bedevilling road and river communication very dangerously. Can we not go for a fog warning system making it binding on commercial transport operators to obey the signals?

## Ministerial Mien

A Jessore-bound Biman flight was delayed for long eight hours at Kurmitola airport on Tuesday. On the silly pretext of a heavy fog, the 8 O'clock domestic flight was detained until 4 pm, report says, deliberately to give chance to two ministers to avail themselves of it. Sounds unbelievable! Then another incident of the same day reported in a different vernacular daily, concerning the carrying of eight cars from Natak Sarani (Bailey Road) by a mobile crane to Ramna Thana gives a glimpse of what some men in power are capable of. In this case, the order to take away the cars parked near the Mahila Samity Manch was reportedly given by no less a person than Home Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury. The owners of the cars — themselves prominent personalities who were attending a theatre show — had their vehicles released later on from the thana paying a fine of Tk 250 each, but without receipt.

This is not the first time that a regular commercial flight has been delayed for ministers, or a small inconvenience of someone in high position has led to a reprisal for respectable people. Ministerial hiatuses express themselves in confoundingly myriad ways. In a manner of speaking, what happened at Kurmitola airport saw exactly the opposite to be enacted at the Natak Sarani with the difference that the administrative response to the few minutes' delay suffered by the Home Minister due to traffic jam was prompt in that the private cars were punished because of their part — albeit indirect — in causing the trouble. The passengers of the Jessore flight, on the other hand, achieved nothing through repeated protests against the wilful delay. Those who caused the delay went unscathed.

Now the question is: why the differential treatment? The ministers are supposed to set the standard for others to follow. If they can go as far as exerting their influences and using their positions in total disregard for rules and other citizens' rights, the system is bound to smack of anything other than the democratic. A commercial flight of a public sector airline — in contrast to that of a personal or government airliner — after all has to be as businesslike as any other services on offer. If the commercial principles are breached, the passengers can legitimately claim compensation. That it was an outright lie that fog at Jessore airport made the delay was proved by the fact that the planes of the air force were very much in their training session on the day at that airport.

The excesses done in both cases underline a dangerous mentality not suited to a democratic dispensation. The ministers concerned know better why they went beyond the parameter of their rights. Since in the name of ministers, their minions sometimes overstep limits, it is all the more necessary that they are careful about it. One of the cardinal principles of democracy is accountability. When wielding of power in excess makes a casualty of that accountability, democracy loses its meaning for the people, which is undesirable.

# Bangladesh-India Economic Relations: Reducing Trade Gap

by Abdul Bayes

THE Bangladesh-India Joint Economic Commission was established under an agreement signed by the two Governments on 7 October, 1982. The main objectives of forming such a Commission were to promote and foster economic and technical co-operation between the two neighbouring countries interwoven by the thread of many commonalities. The first two meetings were held in a consecutive order in New Delhi and Dhaka in 1982 and 1983 while the third one was held after a big gap in 1990. The recently concluded fourth session of the Bangladesh-India Joint Economic Commission (JEC for short) in Dhaka stood out with special ramifications on more than one count.

First, both the economies were inward-looking once and, at the moment, are edging towards an outward-looking strategy for economic growth via a plethora of reform measures adopted during the last 5 years or so. Inward-looking economies as they were, production and trade patterns, in many cases, conformed to a notion of self-sufficiency without taking so much into account the domestic resource cost of producing goods and services. The change of status from the inward to the outward, quite obviously, necessitated a revision of thoughts on bilateral trade and production policies keeping the emerging imperatives in mind. Second, the trade deficit of Bangladesh with India has been monotonically increasing over the years and of late, heaved to Tk 4427 million. The underlying factors contributing to this built-in trade imbalance needed

to be identified to come to grips with these on the ground. And third, the waves of regional economic integration all over the world tended to localise global markets where a small economy such as Bangladesh or even a big one like the Indian, badly needed to explore more avenues for trade within the region, especially between SAARC partners.

### Layman's Lament

A layman's error tends to haunt many of our minds. Since Bangladesh is a very small country and economy, as compared with India, economic transactions between the two are said to result, always, in an unfavourable outcome for Bangladesh. And the apparent 'truth' in the error seems to be furthered by the yawning trade imbalance between these two countries.

However, text book economics, on many occasions, tends to reject this notion. The theory of comparative costs suggests that a big and small economy might gain from trade if there is free and fair trade between them to take advantage of the optimum resource allocations.

In practice, the trade among the members of NAFTA and EC with varied geographic, demographic and economic sizes, the existence of a small country like Chile with growth and investment rates surpassing its big neighbour Brazil, the expressed fear of the Arabs of the economic muscle of tiny Israel etc. appear to support the hypothesis that, *ceteris paribus*, the favourable outcome might occur to both the trading partners. The relative share in the incre-

mental pie, of course, would depend on factors such as: (a) productivity of the factors of production; (b) pace at which the constraints bedeviling investments are done away with; (c) ease with which religious and political fanaticism in the countries are relegated to make room for economic imperatives to be at play; and (iv) political will of the leaders to work for economic emancipation of the people. Each of these factors tends to have little relevance to the size of an economy.

### Bangladesh Imperatives

The burning issue, as far as trade with India is concerned, is how to reduce the existing trade gap. It should be mentioned here that such a high imbalance exists, in our trade with some other countries also and even as between other countries of the world e.g. US vs. Japan. But the irony here is that since 1972-73 to 1992/93, i.e. within two decades of trade relations, the balance with India never turned positive and is therefore, something that calls for careful probing. With a view to reducing the trade gap, we can consider both short and long run measures.

### Short-run Measures

At present, as far as goods are concerned, Bangladesh's comparative advantage appears to lie in the production of newsprint, Jamdani Sari, Jute Carpet, Urea, writing and printing papers, finished leather, sanitary wares, insulators, fish etc. which seem to have promising markets in India but, at the same time, are subject to higher levels of tariff.

Bangladesh should be given, following the Bangkok agreement, duty concessions to these products and, as the least developed country's privilege, tariff concessions on a non-reciprocal basis.

Second, Bangladesh should increase the supply base of commodities with promising potentials in Indian markets. And to increase the supply potential, adequate incentives need to be provided to local manufacturers of some of the items like spare parts for agricultural equipment (including diesel engines), jute and textiles etc. which are now being imported from India.

Third, the credit lines offered by India should be used not only for import of goods but, as far as possible, for the production of import substitutes and exports.

### Long-run Measures

It should be clearly borne in mind that the above-mentioned measures would marginally affect the trade imbalance but to make a real dent in this, serious efforts need to be made to augment supply of products and services having demand in both the countries. Needless to mention, India is a vast market in this sub-continent that has been witnessing a flood of foreign investments from different parts of the world. With rising per capita income, the prospects in India are placed just below China where the world would see a surge in consumer demands. To capture just a nut out of this vast consumers' preference would mean much for Bangladesh. And for this to happen, not just

Bangladesh-made goods would be sufficient but exploring the possibility of joint ventures and joint co-operation appears to be the need of the hour.

For example, Bangladesh could not develop its package tours due to various hindrances. India, with its good marketing network all over the world could help Bangladesh in this regard. Tourism activities between these two countries could be furthered through joint marketing, joint publicity etc. facilitated by exchanging experts, tour operators and travel writers. Similar collaboration could be sought for hotel industry. Again, joint efforts to share the world jute market on the basis of some criteria are needed. On the other hand, business and industrial circles argue that bright prospects for joint ventures and collaborations do exist in such areas as: composite textile mills with spinning, weaving and finishing facilities, electrical and electronic goods, cement, machine tools, spares and instruments, fish processing, leather goods including shoes, upper and foot wear, luggage, sports goods etc. India is endowed with scientists having worldwide renown and market value. Technical assistance for agriculture and industry could be of immense importance to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh can meet the demands for many products in the North-eastern states of India through improved infrastructural facilities or, else in the short-run, earn revenues by allowing transit facilities for movement of Indian goods.

### Indian Imperatives

In all the meetings held so far, the Indian side hardly

showed any disagreement with the need for reducing the trade gap and more often than not, shared the views relating to the imperatives. However, many of the agreements could not materialise due to unknown reasons. The moot issue now is to give a relatively more energetic attention to areas where joint ventures and joint co-operation could be worked out.

However, at the out-set, the tariff level on commodities that Bangladesh exports to India should be reduced. Given zero or very low nominal tariffs, Bangladesh could, probably at a competitive price, supply cement, iron and steel, machinery for export to eastern states of India. On the other hand, Bangladesh's claim as LLDC, to enjoy non-reciprocal tariff reduction should demand due respect. There is no denying the fact that Bangladesh has been moving at a relatively faster pace with tariff reductions, so much so that Indians good are allegedly flooding Bangladesh markets.

### The Last Word

Since politics has a definite say on economic relations, much of the imperatives discussed above could fall prey to political considerations. In the past, the relations between these two countries seemed to be strained by political and religious factors. It is assumed that politicians of both the countries understand the economics of a relatively wider market for trade rather than the trade of religion and politics for domestic markets.

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"DOCTOR, is my child brain damaged?" Will the child be able to walk? Will the child be able to lead a normal life? "Is there something in our blood that has caused the damage?" — These are the everyday enquiries of parents of children presenting with neurological and developmental problems. It is definitely the responsibility of the doctor to be able to answer such simple questions. Sadly, such is not the case. When medical science has moved forward in most countries, our physicians in Bangladesh still work their 'magic wand' based upon clinical and empirical evidences. Why is this so?

The clinical practice of the neurosciences has seen a revolutionary change in the past few decades in developed countries. This has mainly been possible due to the increase in knowledge about brain biology and neuropsychology, as well as advances in diagnostic techniques such as CT-scans, MRIs etc. and isolation of specific enzyme defects by neurochemists. Newer drugs has made it possible to treat specific neurological disorders. Surgical interventions

are being applied regularly for the treatment of intractable epilepsy and other traditionally 'onsurgical' cases. In developing countries the nature of presentation of neurological disorders, especially in children, is confounded by problems of general and specific malnutrition, infections, poor perinatal care, large families, poverty etc. Epidemiological survey of childhood disabilities has revealed that about 15 per cent of children have 'impairment' of some function related to the nervous system, with possibility of future disability. In the same survey, 8 per cent of children had some disability in walking, seeing, hearing, speech, comprehension, behaviour, or related to epilepsy. With the present size of the child population of Bangladesh, the numbers affected may stretch into millions.

What is not readily obvious to us all, is the long-term effects of chronic environmental deprivation of nutrients (including micronutrients and trace elements), psychosocial depriva-

## Let's Give Our Physicians a Scientific Break

by Dr Naila Z Khan

tion and chronic underfeeding, on the overall development of the brain and the mind, all of which are now proven to have deleterious effects on the growing child. Are we then headed for a whole generation of 'developmentally and intellectually less able' children?

In clinical practice 10-20 per cent of all admissions in general hospitals are related to some form of neurological insult. Commonest are fits (febrile and non-febrile), epilepsies, intracranial infections, peripheral neuropathies, head injuries, etc. Many of the children admitted to the neonatal units have neurological signs, and on discharge are certainly at 'high risk' for developing some form of disability. Needless to say, there are thousands of 'birth asphyxiated' children never brought to any centre.

The Child Development and Neurology Unit of Dhaka Shishu Hospital, opened in early 1992, is being inundated

with children from all parts of the country. A multi-disciplinary team of professionals comprising of developmental neurologists, neurosurgeon, psychologist, social worker and therapist has been set up, with the aim of giving comprehensive service to the child and the family. The limited diagnostic services available in other institutions are being utilised in the field of neuroradiology, neurophysiology and neurochemistry. Even such limited services are proving to be a great help in preventing disability in many children, and also the families are getting relief, reflected in the high compliance rate of follow-ups. From the numbers of children coming, it is time that more such units are set up within other national health institutions of the country.

Unfortunately, many problems are faced by professionals working in this field today. Firstly, the children come late, when damage is already irreversible and disability a certainty. So problems of 'early identification', a domain of the public health and primary health care sector, remain. Parents have no access to information as to where to take their children, and go door-to-door for help. Secondly, there is no institutionalized acknowledgement of paediatric neurosciences as an important subject for study, training and research. This makes it difficult for young and enthusiastic physicians to take a long-term interest in the subject. Thirdly, it is difficult to impress upon authorities the multi-disciplinary nature of the work, which goes beyond the subject of paediatric neuromedicine into surgery, neuropsychology, therapy and social work. Fourthly, diagnostic back-up services are rudimentary, especially in radiology, neurophysiology, and neurochemistry. There seems to be 'missing links' between the specialised laboratories and service industry, that need to be bridged. But these are only few of the vast problems faced.

Dialogue between all these various groups of professionals is urgently required to provide both a futuristic and realistic approach to the policy-makers and health professionals of Bangladesh, on how to develop this discipline in the mainstream health institutions of the country. Let's give the physicians of this country a scientific break!

Thus the question posed today, 'What is the future of the Paediatric Neurosciences in Bangladesh?' needs an urgent reply. On the one hand, there are the vast millions of children whose future as non-disabled individuals needs to be assured. On the other hand, there are major technological advances that have been made in developed countries, that would definitely strengthen the diagnostic and rehabilitative aspect of the work. The neurosciences also needs to attain legitimacy within each national health institution of the country as a multi-disciplinary subspecialty.

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## Bhopal's Poisoned Legacy: Victims still Wait for Justice

ALMOST a decade after 3,000 people were killed and 250,000 injured in the world's worst industrial catastrophe, the Bhopal balance-sheet is still askew.

On December 4, 1984, a pesticide plant belonging to the transnational manufacturer, Union Carbide, leaked toxic gases as hundreds of thousands of residents around it slept in the central Indian city of Bhopal.

In human terms, the disaster has proved unending. Up to 100,000 people who were exposed to the deadly gases continue to suffer from a range of illnesses: respiratory disease, impaired lung function, loss of vision, gastro-intestinal ailments, fatigue, menstrual problems, anxiety and unrelieved depression.

In legal terms, the story is sordid: Union Carbide has got away by paying a paltry sum of money, which adds up to less than twice the size of company's total insurance cover. There

has been no legal ruling on liability in this case.

As far as environmental protection and management of hazards goes, experts say no lessons have been learnt.

Location policies for the Indian chemicals industry have not changed: large clusters of hazardous plants and store-houses of assorted poisons continue to be promoted, built and expanded in densely populated areas.

Most victims have only received the pathetic sum of 200 rupees (US\$7) per month as 'interim relief' while their compensation claims remain pending.

The claims courts have decided just five percent of all claims. The total compensation paid so far works out to less than half the interest earned by the government on the US\$470 million that Carbide deposited under the controversial settlement of 1989 to secure its release from all civil litigation.

If Bhopal City retains all its

Justice has yet to come to the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster and no lessons have been learnt, says Prof. Bidwai in this report for Inter Press Service from Bhopal, India

squalor despite the roughly US\$70 million that has been spent there, that is because the money has been neatly and efficiently recycled out of the pockets of the poor.

Consider this: more than US\$30 million have been spent on 'medical relief'. But the special Nehru Medical Hospital near the Carbide plant is without adequate equipment in functioning order. The doctors there and in other public clinics are indifferent to the victims.

Roughly US\$7 million have been spent on 'economic rehabilitation'. But less than a hundred gas victims receive gainful employment under official schemes. Even the sewing centres that once employed 2,300 women have remained closed since July last year.

"Everything the government runs here in the name of relief is a racket," says Abdul Jabbar Khan, convener of the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Gas-Affected Women's Association), which has waged a relentless battle for justice.

"Most of what reaches the real victims is quickly taken away from them by the same vested interests that caused their suffering: multinational corporations, unscrupulous bureaucrats and corrupt doctors and lawyers," he adds.

Khan estimates that once the average victim has paid the cost of documentation, the local court's charges, the lawyer's fee, the doctor's bribe, the bank clerk's commission, and other levies, all that is left is a tenth

of what was originally awarded.

The victims are now discovering an altogether novel form of humiliation: the claims courts set up to award compensation. At the pace at which they are proceeding, the courts will take 128 years to settle all the claims.

They have rejected 63 per cent claims on flimsy grounds: inadequate documentation and lack of certification by doctors of the victims' exposure to toxic gases that fateful night nine years ago.

But it is well known that the victims, many of them illiterate and powerless, lack individual medical records. A veritable racket operates in concocting documents and getting doctors to make false but favourable depositions.

The courts have also been remarkably niggardly. In general, only the earliest deaths have figured in the compensation awarded so far. The average compensation has been

US\$3,000 in the lowest end of the range indicated by the Indian Supreme Court.

Activists campaigning for the gas leak victims say it is imperative that the government must treat Bhopal as a national disaster and set exemplary medical and psychiatric standards and combine them with an economic rehabilitation programme.

They say it should lend full support to the proposed non-government organisation sponsored International Medical Commission on Bhopal, which will include eminent epidemiologists, toxicologists and specialist physicians.

Activists also say the government must honour the Indian Supreme Court's mandate to prosecute Union Carbide and its executives criminally.

Punishing those who caused the victims so much suffering and pain, they say, is part of society's obligation to atone for one of the most horrifying events of our times.

## 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.

### T and T

Sir, The prime need of having a telephone in one's house, office etc. cannot be underscored, because it is extremely essential to communicate with others, at a distance. In case of emergency, for calling a doctor, a police station official, hospital, fire station etc. it is indispensable. A sizeable number of Bangladeshis working abroad make longdistance calls to their relations in Bangladesh and vice versa. Possessing a telephone is no longer a status symbol, it's a necessity.

However, it becomes embarrassing and irksome when a person intends to call his relative or friend, doctor or police station, particularly when it is an emergency, and finds the

phone dead or conked out. It remains so following earnest appeals to T and T Dept. for days together.

We have noticed that linesmen do carry out so called regular test-checks with connection boxes posted on the roads and it is here may be that all mischief is done, so far we believe. These linesmen often furtively call on the houses, establishments etc to enquire whether the phone is working and when told that it is dead they set the phone alive after they are palm greased which in their parlance is 'bakshish'. If one fails to give the tips, the phone shall sleep like a log of wood.

Another disturbing feature is that while talking over the phone, there is abrupt cross

connection in which various voices are jumbled together which results in hanging up the receiver and after a while one has to make another call which inflates the telephone bill.

Some allegations have also been levelled against T and T exchanges that a few or more commercial establishments make local and long distance calls for considerable length of time but the billed amount remains just minimal or marginal by 'arrangement' may be on monthly basis.

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### Savings and discouragement

Sir, The World Bank vice president, the International Monetary Fund — not to mention our esteemed Abu Ahmed and S B Chaudhuri — all are quite happy and contented that the interest rates have been lowered. But to hell with the small savers...

M Ahmad  
Uttara, Dhaka

### St. Martin island

Sir, St. Martin is a beautiful coral island in the Bay of Bengal. It is located off the southeast tip of mainland Bangladesh. It is known to us as a coral reef surrounded by blue water of the Bay.

St. Martin is a 3.37 square kilometre island inhabited by 3,315 people who live on fishing. But it is a matter of regret that most of the Bangladeshi

people are rather deprived of visiting this beautiful island due to lack of easy communication system.

So I want to draw attention of the Tourism Department as well as other concerned authorities to make such arrangement as to facilitate visit to St. Martin island by most of our people.

Md Moazzem Hossain Minto  
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### Forest tree saplings

Sir, Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia has been asking the people to plant Neem trees because of their great economic importance. A great deal has also been written, in the newspapers and magazines, emphasising the medicinal values of Neem tree. According to a recent press report, Australia is keen to buy 30 lakh saplings of Neem tree. Now Australia has just suffered a huge loss of her natural for-

est due to a devastating fire around Sydney.

Every year a large area of forest is being destroyed by devastating fire in Europe and America. I think, to raise the forests, these countries need a huge number of forest tree saplings. Hence, there is a bright prospect of exporting not only Neem tree saplings but other forest plants (saplings) to Europe and America from Bangladesh. In order to make this saplings export business both profitable and successful, I think two important measures are to be taken: (i) Arrangements have to be made to raise sufficient number of saplings. (ii) International market has to be explored by the Bangladesh Missions abroad and by sending special delegations to prospective countries for promoting sale of our forest tree saplings.

M Zahidul Haque  
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