

Put in Extra Effort

Our garments export business is in a messy situation. Yet, we are not taking any alarmist view of this. We regard the bleak outlook as issuing an early warning to us. This should be heeded so that what now is a simple decline in earnings does not turn out to be loss of buyers.

The first steps must begin with the mind-set. We have to shun the far too generalised an approach of dishing out the whole list of drawbacks besetting the sector, as if this is new knowledge for us. Let there be a pinpointing of where things went wrong to cause a fall in the export earnings by as much as 24.11 per cent during the first two months of the current fiscal year. Secondly, the government ministry and the BGMEA should come out with an agreed version of the reasons behind the debacle rather than blaming each other. Recrimination is the surest way to repeat pitfalls that had caused the under-performance. The affair deserves utmost attention as the garment sales constitute 60 percent of our total export earnings.

For a couple of years, the world's cotton output has been low. The yarn and fabric prices soared to upset the costing of the exporters. Original production planning and shipment schedules came under threat. Many garment manufacturers have had to explore cheaper sources for the inputs to retain competitiveness of their prices. Loss of time led to cancellation of contracts in some cases. Switching to air freight from shipping in other cases in a desperate bid to respect time schedules in complicated matters. Air ferrying was costlier, still more so were the gluts at the airport. Other garments exporting countries are not entirely as import-dependent as we. Other snags came from customs clearance or NBR procedures at the terminal stage and load-shedding at the production phase.

The BGMEA is apparently in a verbal war with the government but hopes a positive outcome could emerge from a meeting with the Finance Minister on financial incentives. Will that be feasible during the present budget year? Grey fabric import has been free listed lessening the protection over the local industries which produce it.

The government seems to be content with allowing up to 75 per cent import of raw materials in this sector requiring of it to do local value addition of only 25 per cent. It is time the pattern of emphasis changed towards local fabric development for establishing the required backward linkage for this sector. We urge for a joint Government-BGMEA strategy in this specific direction. We are lucky to have a respite in the 10-year quota phase-out programme of the GATT. Items of importance to us do not come under the first phase of it.

Discipline at the Top First

Adept in admonition, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman sometimes unwittingly holds the focus of the prism on to his own ministry. One such self-critical statement came from him on Monday in his speech on the occasion of the World Thrift Day.

The finance minister has reserved his praise for the low-income groups for their contribution to savings but he has been highly critical of the privileged sections of society, who, according to him, have a record of misusing funds. He pointed his accusing fingers at the loan defaulters and people in high places of the administration.

He came with a mission and his crusade was against financial indiscipline and irregularities. After three years in office, the finance minister still makes the same appeal over and over again. His admonitions and appeals would have been enough to make further queries unnecessary. But when the exercise on his part has become almost ritualistic, we are obliged to ask in plain terms what has actually been done to make the undue advantage seekers behave. About 300 industries and factories were detected to be sick and about the same number of big loan receivers were found to be defaulters.

The finance minister knows well enough that the problems, left to themselves, will mount instead of getting resolved on their own. He may be genuinely concerned about the tax-payers' money but unless the concern is matched by any policy framework, we reach nowhere. Saifur Rahman has complained that public money is carelessly spent in government offices. So he should take appropriate measures to stem the rot.

Dead Coming Alive

Man's preoccupation with death is natural, because it is unconquerable and promises to be so in the future. Only in mythical stories and fairytales do we come across incidents where the mortals — although a very few — have come back from the nether world from where nobody returns. Yet the wonders of life are so much beyond our comprehension that these may allow death to play a practical joke on some people sometimes.

His last rites completed, Nan Buafan Payen Chaturas, a septuagenarian Thai Buddhist was about to be cremated. But suddenly the old man got up straight from his coffin and walked to a hospital for treatment. The fact is that the man, a diabetes patient, had suffered a heart attack the day before and was pronounced dead. So his family members and relatives arranged for the last rites only to be baffled by the turn of the event.

All those who suffer such cardiac arrests are not lucky enough like Chaturas. If the rites were not delayed by a day, the old Thai might have been done for. It is not unlikely that some people may have met their life's end without being actually dead. Specially for those who suffer strokes, the possibility of making it to the cremation pyre or to the grave cannot be totally ruled out. It has also happened for some patients of snake bites. So what is the message? There can be life after death and that too in this mundane world!

People like Chaturas have in a way tasted death. Yet they cannot give an account of the other world. In a state of unconsciousness, they are mistaken for dead but actually they still hold life by the thinnest of the thread. Even doctors have hardly any means to detect life in such people. We wonder what might our doctors do if they come across a few such patients. Anyway, at least heart patients should beware.

THE government opposition dialogue, which resumed Thursday overcoming a sudden setback last week, has reached a critical phase. Now, there are two specific proposals from the two sides on the form of interim administration for holding the national elections. The present phase of the talks is crucial indeed, since the parties concerned will have to take decisions on the basis of these proposals.

The negotiators representing the ruling party BNP at the Commonwealth-brokered dialogue, have put forward their proposal for holding next general elections under an interim government headed by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. The BNP's proposition has been designed to counter the opposition's demand to form a non-partisan 'caretaker government' during the national polls.

The BNP's proposal was based on Article 56(4) of the Constitution that provides for appointment of a Prime Minister in case of a parliamentary dissolution. The ruling party suggested formation of a smaller cabinet headed by Khaleda Zia comprising members from all the parties in the parliament.

The 'caretaker government' formula of the Awami League-led opposition announced earlier, suggests appointment of a 'non-partisan' person as the head of the interim administration during holding of the general elections.

The ruling party's proposal was formally placed at Saturday's meeting of the two sides held in presence of Commonwealth emissary Sir Ninian Stephen. The talks were adjourned for an indefinite

Dialogue: Only Consensus may Help

by Chapal Bashar

For amicable settlement of any dispute, the only solution is the consensus between the two contending sides... and our leaders have proved it on many occasions. Even, during this crisis, all the parties including the ruling BNP, have reached consensus on one point: 'necessity of establishing an improved framework for holding free and fair elections'.

nite period, to facilitate, both the government and the opposition to review the situation and study the proposals.

All attentions are now focused on the progress of this crucial dialogue, the result of which will determine the future of our politics.

Only three years back, it was almost beyond imagination that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), who led the democratic movement jointly for long nine years, would be locked in a state of confrontation on an issue like electoral process.

Following the general elections of February 1991, BNP was installed in power while the AL emerged as the major opposition party in the Jatiya Sangsad (JS). Both these parties added a significant chapter in our political history by switching over to parliamentary system from the presidential form of government which prevailed for about 16 years. This change necessitated the historic 12th amendment to the constitution and it was passed unanimously in the JS. The unique consensus of all the parties in the parliament — small and big — on that amendment, will remain as a glorious event.

Let's look back to 1980s, when the BNP, the AL and other democratic forces were

engaged in a relentless movement against the autocratic regime of Ershad, who was backed by army and his own creation Jatiya Party (now in opposition). A five-point charter of demands, jointly formulated by AL-led 15-party alliance and the 7-party combine led by the BNP, was the basis of the movement which grew from strength to strength and culminated with the resignation of Ershad in December 1990.

During those nine years — from 1982 to 1990 — the BNP and the AL moved together having consensus on strategy of the movement. However, the differences over participation in 1986 elections. Both sides had their own views about that election which kept them separated for quite sometime. Nevertheless, the BNP and the AL, along with other like-minded forces, were in the streets with the common goal — restoration of democracy. And to reach the goal, both the parties as well as the people had to suffer a lot. The consensus of the two principal parties for achieving democratic rights mobilised the nation behind them and the movement was crowned with victory.

Aspiration of the people for a better life acts as the catalyst in a democratic movement and this led the people to rally be-

hind the democratic forces. People's desire was simple and minimum — economic emancipation and rule of law. There is no question that political stability has no alternative to fulfill such aspiration while a true democracy is a must to ensure such stability.

Three-and-a-half years have gone by since the government of Begum Khaleda Zia assumed power, while the sovereign parliament, elected by the people in a free and fair election, still continues to function. The fifth parliament of the country is going to have its 17th session summoned on November 12. The Opposition has been boycotting the sessions since March in support of their demand for holding future elections under neutral, non-partisan caretaker government. They want the BNP government to place a bill before the parliament for amending the constitution incorporating provision of holding elections under caretaker administration. During the last eight months, four sessions of the JS including the budget session, were held keeping the opposition bench empty. This is yet another unique example in our politics! There is no reason to term a parliament effective which remained half-empty for such a long time.

Country's political arena during the first year of Prime

Minister Khaleda Zia's rule, was somewhat quiet. But afterwards, situation started changing generating heat both inside and outside the parliament on certain issues like repeal of indemnity Ordinance voiced by the AL. Besides, campus violence, particularly the clashes among the student activists belonging to political parties and the agitations by the workers, employees and professionals in different sectors deteriorated the situation.

Meanwhile, a number of by-elections to parliament and polls for local bodies including four city corporations were held in which all the major parties participated. The AL alleged rigging by ruling party in the by-elections of Mirpur and Bhola, yet accepted the results with reservations. But their grievances flared up during the by-election in Magura held in February. The AL as well as other opposition parties raised serious allegations against the ruling party and said that the government misused and abused its power to capture the JS seat.

The demand, for holding future elections under a caretaker government was raised by the AL last year, but they started all-out agitation to realise the demand soon after the Magura by-polls. All the opposition MPs started boy-

Though delayed, the opposition and the ruling party, are facing each other at the dialogue brokered by Commonwealth Secretary General Chief Emeke while his emissary Sir Ninian Stephen is here to facilitate the talks. It would be nice if our leaders could initiate the dialogue themselves without any mediation from outside through which they could earn more confidence of the people.

For amicable settlement of any dispute, the only solution is the consensus between the two contending sides. Consensus has no alternative and our leaders have proved it on many occasions. Even, during this crisis, all the parties including the ruling BNP, have reached consensus on one point, which is 'necessity of establishing an improved framework for holding free and fair elections'.

Since all have recognised the problem and feel the necessity of improving and strengthening the electoral framework, it should not be a problem for the leaders to find a solution. And that is the main task for the leaders at this critical moment for ensuring political stability, sustainable development and uninterrupted economic growth of the country.

COASTAL AFFORESTATION

The Most Cost Effective Method of Land Reclamation

by Ali Akbar Bhuiyan

TERRITORIAL gain by waging wars against other countries is almost unthinkable in today's world situation. On the contrary, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed rapid winding up of colonial domination in the wake of violent protests and armed rebellions by the natives of the dominated country. Nations have now re-oriented their strategy for prosperity and improving the quality of life, of their people. This strategy aims at increased productivity in the farms and factories; in the air, sea and underground, through adoption of improved technology and structural adjustment of administrative and fiscal measures. This may otherwise be termed as vertical expansion through resource building.

But some countries, because of their strategic location and skill endowment, are still able to expand the horizon of their frontiers without the need for engaging itself in 'battles or wars'. Travelling through Germany, Austria, Switzerland or France, a scene that frequently catches attention of the visitors is, scores of open railway wagons carrying stone boulders. When asked for the destination of such massive stone blocks, the answer is always the self same — the Netherlands. Some even sarcastically remark, 'You know, the Dutch are a funny people; they continually go on salvaging new landmass from the sea-bottom'. In fact, more than half of the present Netherlands is said to be reclaimed from the sea bed. Even the Dutch capital — Amsterdam — lies below the mean sea level. This was made possible by land reclamation through the process of build-

ing impenetrable dykes in the sea with stone and earth followed by balling out of water, desalinisation of soil and cultivating the land so reclaimed for growing agricultural crop or fodder. The booming Dutch agriculture, dairy or cattle ranching mostly owe their origin to the vast expanse of reclaimed sea bed. And the Dutch are quite proud of that. They have mastered the sea not only by sailing or fishing, but also by making the sea recede from their coast line.

It is true that the Netherlands demonstrated ingenuity in taming the sea and salvaging the productive land for its growing population and

Bangladesh, a sea coast country, and situated at the confluence of the world's three mighty river systems viz. the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna, is also poised for territorial gains but through a much simpler and natural process, largely improvised and eminently cost effective compared to the Netherlands' costly dyking process. The river system traversing Bangladesh mostly originate from the Himalayas and carry an estimated two billion tonnes of silt annually. Such a mammoth quantum of silt, instead of getting lost in the deep sea, if could be effectively trapped near the shore line by

of direction from the Sundarban forests whose presence outstandingly saved life and property of greater Khulna district for centuries from natural catastrophes. The afforestation mechanism thus consisted of creating a dense green wall of living trees for affording physical resistance to the exceedingly high velocity wind and monstrous waves, dissipating their demonic energy and help protecting the hinter land from gruesome damages.

Plantation establishment under this pioneering programme had been immensely successful both in terms of

twigs of plantation trees, trapping of floating debris by tree trunks and roots, and mortal remains and eddy shells of animals including fish, taking shelter in the plantation groves.

The World Bank, having learnt plantation success and high potentiality of land reclamation through plantation evinced keen interest in financing the coastal afforestation programme of Bangladesh. As against the overriding protection objectives of the pioneering afforestation project, the world bank rearranged plantation objectives prioritising i) stabilisation of accreted lands and ii) acceleration

tion to the country's forest cover for which the FD deserve nation's commendation. Admittedly, without afforestation, a vast chunk of these newly accreted land would have been lost to the sea again.

Afforestation accelerated siltation and quicker elevation of land surface, and also hastened land consolidation. In certain locations viz. along the coast lines of Sitakunda and Mirresswarai thana of Chittagong district, Comapangon and Sudharam thana of Noakhali district, the coast line is extended to the sea for a width of 1.5-2 Km through land reclamation by mangrove afforestation. These plantations, besides reclaiming the new land-mass, also created a vast wood resource for the country, generated employment in the plantation works and also in the future harvesting and marketing. Significant also to appreciate that whatever investment has gone to coastal afforestation, that was intended for creation of forest resource and not for land reclamation. Land reclamation and consolidation should thus be deemed as by-product concomitant with afforestation. This is the fundamental difference between the Dutch model of land reclamation and that of ours.

Whether it concerns an individual or a nation, people are frequently seen prepared to shed any amount of blood for gaining control over an inch of land or territory. Territorial conflicts had been and still is one of the main causes of bad blood or wars between nations. But reclamation of any extent of land from adjoining sea bed is a non-controversial issue which nations with wisdom must take advantage of, if technology permits. Coastal afforestation, in the light of the foregoing analysis should be considered by Bangladesh as the most cost effective method of land reclamation from the sea. It offers a rare opportunity of adding additional land area in the country's map for human settlement and productive use. Although there exists a national policy decision to specifically reserve all newly accreted landmass for afforestation in a bid to hasten stabilisation and promote further accretion, but such policy decisions are frequently violated at the local levels. This needs vigilance at the highest national level to ensure strict policy implementation in the greater and far reaching interest of the nation.

A much talked about cross-dam connecting Sandwip with Utrichar and Noakhali mainland offers a great opportunity for salvaging some 60,000 ha highly productive land which could be reclaimed for cultivation and settlement through initial afforestation and consolidation. This potential project calls for serious national examination and pragmatic decision for implementation. When implemented, this project is likely to permanently solve erosion and rehabilitation problem of this zone and open up opportunity for major agricultural production in the country like the historical Noakhali cross-dam project, which is a success story to draw inspiration from.

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expanding agro-industry for prosperity, but the country is not endowed with all the nature's gifts to effect such a reclamation technology. The country does not have the needed hard rock to build dykes in the sea which is the first pre-requisite for land reclamation programme, and thus looks for stone from the Alps which is a long way from Holland. The stone has to be purchased, carried all the way from Germany, Austria, France or the Swiss Alps to Holland at a considerable cost. Notwithstanding that, the Dutch find the programme economically viable and attractive. In the backdrop of territorial gain potential, the Dutch land reclamation endeavour is an enthusiastic programme which negated the cost element.

human intervention, new landmass formation would be a natural phenomenon of continuous territorial gains for the country. Afforestation on newly formed landmass offers such a potentiality for trapping river borne silt for a more accelerated island formation.

Coastal afforestation programme in Bangladesh conceptually emerged first as a protective contrivance for guarding and/or minimising the extent of damage to life and property of the coastal belt due to cyclonic storm and tidal surge. Commenced in mid 1960s as the aftermath of a series of devastating cyclones and tidal bores that hit Bangladesh coast in quick succession in the early 1960s, this afforestation programme drew its inspiration and sense

quality of plantations raised and as well as affording envisaged protection to life and property of the hinter-land against wind action and tidal inundation. But the most invaluable contribution of this innovative project had been the acquisition of a store house of knowledge and experience regarding siltation and land consolidation dynamics concomitant with afforestation. It has been observed that wherever plantation was raised on newly accreted land, the rate of siltation and ground elevation had been incredibly higher compared to adjacent unplanted sites. Likewise, land consolidation and layerification of soil profile was also quicker and distinct. Humus impregnation and fertility improvement of the soil was obvious because of fallen leaves and

of the process of land formation in the Bay of Bengal by mangrove plantations as the primary objectives of the future programme. The protection philosophy of coastal plantations is deemed to ensue automatically as a by-product when plantation is stabilised.

It must be of interest to understand the dynamics of siltation acceleration by plantation, which operates as follows: Mangrove species, because of the difficult habitat they thrive in, set forth aerial roots (pneumatophores) which often grow to a metre or a little more in height. The silt laden tidal surge while traversing through the plantation floor is intercepted by tree trunk and dense pneumatophores, and this way its velocity is retarded to almost stand-still such that the silt carrying capacity of the water is reduced and sedimentation of heavy silt particles take place on the forest floor progressively elevating the level of new formations. With the passage of time, the forest floor is raised, at times above the ordinary tide level. Depending on the location of the new formations and extent of plantation blocks in a given place, sedimentation up to a depth as high as three metres take place in a single year. Such enormous sedimentation in one year is inconceivable except with afforestation. Without afforestation the newly accreted land takes a long period to come up above the ordinary tide level, and when comes up, these are either grazed by thousands of cattle mostly buffaloes or cultivated. Because of hoofing action of the cattle or ploughing of the unconsolidated land for cultivation, many new landmass often sink down being washed away by strong tidal currents. Many char lands in the past disappeared due to unguarded use while still in their delicate and fragile stage.

Through mangrove afforestation programme, Bangladesh Forest Department (FD) has brought over 100,000 hectares (ha) of newly accreted land under plantation. It is true that in the past four decades, Bangladesh lost considerable tree coverage from the traditional forests and rural groves due to very many reasons, some are unsurmountable, but it is also true that this 100,000 ha plantation had never been a forest and in this context, it is a new addi-

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.

"A Poet Activist"

Sir, Your editorial titled 'A Poet Activist' on October 24, is very thought-provoking and full of creative thoughts on the occasion of the 66th birth anniversary of Poet Shamsur Rahman. It is a pity that the poetic richness and values of the creation of poet Shamsur Rahman have so far not been evaluated and disseminated in the form of English version for the English speaking people all over the world. From the war of liberation, Poet Shamsur Rahman and many others, through their writings, have kept the memories of the agonised hearts of the Bengali people alive and living to enkindle the hearts of the present progeny. I wish some serious readers with the patronage of some publishing house take up the project of translating the poems of Shamsur Rahman in English without any delay because the richness of his poetic production may fetch him the greatest prize for literature! And if it happens it would certainly be a pride for all of us in Bangladesh.

The essence of the Bengali minds in the literary field should be projected to draw the attention of the intellectuals and connoisseurs all over the world for the greater glory of our motherland.

Prof Abul Ashraf Noor Palma,

Telephonic ordeals

Sir, I write about one of the most frustrating and exasperating experiences an expatriate or foreign businessman can ever have in Dhaka. And that is the matter of long-distance telephone communication.

For obvious reasons, I request withholding my identity. But I am a European who has been working here over the past three years. I like Bangladesh. I intend working here for another two years at least. But each time I make a long-distance call I get discourteous, arrogant, and often almost illiterate telephone operators. When I sound a little angry, I get cut off. Each

time I ring, it is busy and no one answers as if they know I'm the one calling.

The government Minister in charge of long-distance telephones should get on the job. Train these operators to be courteous, efficient, reliable, and to always remember that this is the right way to get foreign investments, not the way it is run today which is outrageous. I hope something can be done about this.

A foreign businessman Dhaka

Market economy and smuggling

Sir, For the last several years some of our public leaders have been blaming our public sector corporations for inefficiency, irregularities and wasting crores of Taka from the public exchequer.

Today, side by side with the continuing poor performances and financial losses of our public sector corporations — our mills, factories and varieties of enterprises in the private sector are also languishing day by day.

Our government is advocating free market economy, encouraging private sector and trying to attract foreign investment and joint venture. But in fact, we have not achieved any tangible result as yet.

On the one hand, we are

importing varieties of goods and commodities and on the other hand, more and more foreign goods and commodities are being smuggled into our country everyday. Our markets in the cities, towns and villages have been flooded with contraband goods and commodities.

Due to various reasons which obviously includes hantals and strikes, higher cost of production, poor quality and scores of other demerits we cannot compete with quality and price of the foreign goods and commodities. And, as such, we not only fail to export our home-made goods and commodities but we also fail to sell our own products in our own domestic market. Our own people prefer buying foreign goods than Bangladeshi goods.

We feel that charity begins at home. If we want to make market economy a success in our country, we may prepare a list of goods and commodities which we are required to produce and manufacture in our country to meet our domestic requirements first. And then to boost and protect our own country's goods and commodities, we must ban the import and totally stop the smuggling of such goods into our land failing which the market economy policy would prove to be an act of suicide for us all.

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