

Fresh Look at Exports

The slashing of export target for 1994-95 by 11 per cent, which is said to be around the corner, would be a purely theoretical response to the declining performances in the key export sectors. It won't be an action per se.

Whittling down of an economic target, nearly half-way through the year, can be hardly inspiring, although it may be an unavoidable exercise when our backs are to the wall. Yet, there is a valid question to ask about setting unrealistic targets in a fit of over-ambition to be self-pleasing and pleasing to others. We must realise that aiming high called for extra preparation and effort that were obviously not there.

There are two blind spots even in the revised frame of mind: One, we do not exactly know how badly we have fared in September and October, even though quite obviously it was bad enough over the July-August period. In keeping a tab over a volatile situation our statistics must relate to the closest possible calendar month. Secondly, we have just about eight months left of the current fiscal year to meet a target which has been only negligibly reduced.

It is thought-provoking that our industrial exports have declined markedly while the Third World's share in the manufacturing trade is poised to exceed that of the industrial world by the next decade.

Evidently, a new motivation has to pulsate through the government organisations and the banking institutions to provide the right kind of back-up support to the private sector export houses and smaller individual enterprises. Let there be a joint body of private and public sector leaders exclusively acting as a trouble-shooter when snags develop in customs and revenue clearances, shipping and air transportation. It may ensure the reliability of power supply to the industries. Our export prices have lost some of their competitive edges with higher costs of production. We need to, break new marketing grounds. Let's closely study the post-GATT scenario and fine-tune our trading stratagem accordingly.

We cannot let the much-vaunted idea of export-led growth receive setbacks so early in the day. The downgrading of the export target has to be accepted as an admission of our failure. One very cogent reason why we should feel obliged to improve the export performance is: we never tire of telling the countries we have trade deficits with that they are not buying enough from us.

Hollow Homage to Hero

It is good that we have found in Shaheed Noor Husain a symbol or a mascot, so to say, for our people's struggle for democracy. We shall be needing, as things after three years of a great democratic victory indicate unambiguously, many more long days of unrelenting fighting to realise just that modicum of democracy essential for sustaining a civilized society — and a symbol such as Noor Husain's would help us greatly in that frustrating fray. The national economy is not yet such as would spawn democratic attitudes and practices and sustain them. And socially too the nation is still enmeshed in feudal vertical arrangements and mental frames that go with the perpetration of those. Democracy is a formidably tall order for a society still not ready for it but, nevertheless, would die for want of it.

There are, however, very serious problems attending with the canonization of anyone into sainthood or a symbol for any noble collective striving. First, the pedestal tends to take away life from what has so long been living — the cause and the person who is being celebrated. The person elevated, specially by modern media hype, loses in living significance in inverse proportion to the build-up he or she is given.

A proof of that unfortunate and actual degradation occurring in the case of Noor Husain lies in the fact that the policeman who criminally shot him at point blank range as also the officer who was in charge of the killer have not been brought to book. And what indeed is the official or formal state position on Noor Husain? We do not think he occurs anywhere on state papers. So far for our building a memorial over the hero — hollow to the hilt.

Violent Times

The only child to the Crabtrees, 14-year old Matilda, was away to a friend's for an overnight stay. The parents had as such a patch of time to enjoy themselves and came home late from a party. Matilda had in the meantime changed her mind and got back home with her friend in tow. The two heads joined in devising a practical joke to be played on the Crabtree seniors. They made appropriate noises to lead Mr and Mrs Crabtree to suspect lurking burglars in the house. When Matilda jumped on them from her bedroom closet, the father cut her down with a single pistol shot. Matilda died with the fatal words on her lips, "I love you daddy" — fatal for Crabtree senior.

What went into building such an impossibly cruel, such inconceivably ludicrous mistake? A state of perpetual insecurity forcing entire populations to be hung on unrelenting tenterhooks, even in places like an American provincial township, one of the sleepest possible retreats in the world, does fashion such horrors as the Crabtrees are in now. The local police chief, supposed to arrest them and deciding not to, said it showed how scared people were in their own homes these days.

Can we imagine the state of mind families are in violent Dhaka or in a village — any village — in the interior, immersed in a hopelessly bottomless abyss of insecurity?

There is an air of unreality, not to say surreality, within the ruling circles in New Delhi. The Narasimha Rao government has not taken the scourge of plague so seriously as the goings-on in Uttar Pradesh. The prime minister did not consider the threat of an epidemic important enough to convene a meeting of state chief ministers to give the problem urgency during the nightmare of confusion, fear and helplessness, when the rest of the world was excommunicating India.

His priority was the political situation in UP. For hours he would be cloistered with the Congress leaders from the state to discuss how to propitiate Narain Dutt Tiwari, the UP Congress president, who wanted state chief minister Mulayam Singh's lead. Human Resources Development Minister Arjun Singh too was pressed into service to calm down Tiwari because there is good equation between the two. It has helped a bit.

But the Congress-run central government has not uttered a single word against its party-run Gujarat, whose lack of timely action might cost the country, a Planning Commission expert estimates, around Rs 20,000 crore, twice the amount of securities scam. Gujarat chief minister Chhabildas Mehta has neither been criticised, nor held accountable. But the demand for Mulayam Singh's dismissal has been increasing in loudness. Apparently, political considerations have greater pull than health, hygiene or hazard to people's life.

I do not know what the message of Mulayam Singh's dismissal, if and when it takes place, will convey. But I have no doubt that Chhabildas's dismissal would have awak-

ened the flabby, lethargic and inconsiderate administrations all over India to alertness, vigilance and responsibility. Strange, none in the Gujarat government has been put on the mat for their criminal neglect because it is established beyond doubt that the first case of plague in Surat came to notice on September 2 and was confirmed two days later by a central laboratory where it was sent for blood culture.

There is wilful intellectual dishonesty in the Government of India's behaviour. It closes its eyes to the crime of the Gujarat government but responds readily to the UP provincial Congress committee for the dismissal of Mulayam Singh. If discredited, defeated Congress in the state decides to withdraw its support from Mulayam Singh to play up to the electorate, it is its own business. None can find fault with the party on this count.

But when it goes on to ask for the ousting of Mulayam Singh and when the centre pays serious consideration to the demand, UP Congress is playing politics and the Narasimha Rao government is overstepping its constitutional limits. The Congress strength of 32 in a house of 425 sitting members is not even 8%. Why did the prime minister entertain the demand in the first instance? Narain Dutt Tiwari's resignation is part of pressure, not a sign of lower order breakdown.

In a recent judgment, the

Power by Proxy in UP

The Congress-run central government did not utter a single word against its party-run Gujarat whose lack of timely action, in the face of threat of an epidemic, might cost the country around Rs 20,000 crore..... The prime minister's priority was the political situation in UP.

Supreme Court has laid down that article 356, which authorises the centre to take over a state administration, would invite judicial review if such action is based on irrelevant or extraneous grounds. UP Congressmen have given two grounds for dismissal: one, the stir for the creation of Uttarakhnad, and two, the vandalism at the Allahabad High Court where even, the chief justice was not spared.

There is no doubt that the

Secondly, what happened at the Allahabad High Court is inexcusable. But Mulayam Singh himself took action against the police chief and some other government functionaries even before the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) began its inquiry following the Supreme Court's directive. The CBI has found a few officials, policemen and lawyers guilty. The action, which the Supreme Court has initiated against them, is fully

Court nor the CBI has held him or his government responsible. In fact, there have been worst examples of communal and caste rioting in other states. Nowhere has the chief minister been arraigned for the police failure. Never has the Narasimha Rao government even played with the idea of dismissing a Congress government. The firing at Muzaffarnagar and a few other places is reprehensible and has been justifiably condemned. But the police excesses are not peculiar to UP. The force all over the country behaves like the colonialists.

All that the Mulayam Singh government is doing is not everybody's liking. The criminalisation of politics has increased. While the Bharatiya Janata Party, the predecessor, divided the society on the basis of religion, he has polarised it on the caste lines. But the question is whether Mulayam Singh should be dismissed? It will create more problems and the step may come to be considered another onslaught by the upper caste on the backward since both PM and Tiwari are brahmins. The irresponsible Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Mulayam Singh's ally, may become more irresponsible.

Little does the Congress realise that the dismissal will give a halo of martyrdom to Mulayam Singh. He may return with bigger strength. The example of N T Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh is not very old. The dismissal made him hero

and he swept the polls. True, Narasimha Rao resisted the demand for the dismissal when Tiwari and his associates made the initial move. He even told UP Congressmen that the 'constitution is above sentiments'. But, the argument which went home was that the dismissal would alienate the backward communities. Mulayam Singh is a key backward leader — and might adversely affect the prospects of state elections, first in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in December and then in Bihar, Maharashtra and Orissa in March.

But the pressure has got a new lease after the police firing at Muzaffarnagar and a few other places. Sonia Gandhi, who says off on that she has no intention to enter politics, appears to have stepped in. It is very unlikely that Narasimha Rao will dismiss the Mulayam Singh government. He wants to wait till after the elections in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Even when he decides to dismiss Mulayam Singh, the dissolution of the assembly is not on his agenda; he will keep it in animated suspension. Central intelligence agencies have warned him that the BJP may come to power if the elections are held in the near future.

The suspension of the state assembly suits the UP Congressmen. The rule of the governor, who is the centre's nominee, will enable them to throw their weight about, to collect funds and to torment the Mulayam Singh group and others in the opposition. The mere withdrawal of support by the Congress does not mean the fall of the government. Hence the demand for dismissal which will give the state party an opportunity to drive from the backseat.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

groundswell of opinion in the hill districts in favour of Uttarakhnad. The firing at the Muzaffarnagar crowd marching towards Delhi has given a fresh edge to the agitation. But Mulayam Singh is not in the way of the state's formation. He has forwarded, in support a unanimous resolution passed by the state assembly to the centre, where it awaits the PM's nod. It is parliament that has to pass the relevant constitutional bill to alter the state's boundaries. If the agitation in favour of Uttarakhnad has not abated, the blame is not so much on the state as on the centre. Police firing in some parts of hill districts has consecrated the demand if some sacrifice was still needed.

backed by Mulayam Singh. Therefore, it is not a case where the state government is thwarting the course of justice and has to be removed for restoring the dignity of law.

How does the failure or involvement of some public employees and lawyers become the basis for the dismissal of an elected government? The step could have been justified if the Supreme Court had made any aspersion against Mulayam Singh. Even the CBI has found no link between the Mulayam Singh government and what happened at the Allahabad High Court. It was a local lapse. In an interview with me over the phone from Lucknow, Mulayam Singh said that neither the Supreme

Australia Seeks Free Trade Support in APEC Meet

AUSTRALIA has intensified its efforts to convince leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to make a commitment to regional free trade. Efforts have been stepped up especially in recent weeks because of the November meeting of the APEC in Bogor, Indonesia.

Although the Australian proposal lacks details and a time frame so far, Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, in his quest for wheat has been described as an "historic political commitment", has actively lobbied leaders who will be attending the Indonesian summit meeting.

These include United States President Bill Clinton, Indonesian President Suharto and Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama.

Special emphasis has been given to Japan. The Keating government believes a free trade agenda will gain little support from other countries in the region without a show of enthusiasm from Japan.

There is strong feeling within government circles here that the Bogor meeting must produce some sort of positive commitment to free trade (or, at least, trade liberalization) if APEC is to retain its relevance as an important force in the region. Only a commitment to a major issue such as free trade is likely to

ensure the future participation of heads of government at annual meetings.

The 17 member countries of APEC are Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

A commitment to free trade at Bogor will ensure APEC's dominance in the region in opposition to the East Asian Economic Caucus being pushed by Indonesian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Australia has a vital interest in the continued success of APEC since it was through its initiative that the group was formed.

But while Australia has tended to denigrate EAEC, Singapore supports both organizations. On a recent visit here, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made it clear he saw nothing abnormal about the two associations existing within the region. He emphasized his commitment to trade liberalization.

"The Australian" newspaper commented that "Singapore is the purest free trader in South-East Asia" and as such it has everything to gain and nothing to lose by promoting trade liberalization everywhere."

Vincent W Stove writes from Sydney

Prime Minister Keating believes trade liberalization is essential if Asia-Pacific countries are to sustain their economic growth

The newspaper stated that Singapore's interests almost always coincide with Australia's in the key areas of trade and security, and added that "both countries always stand to benefit from trade liberalization."

Australia has a strong ally in Singapore. According to the Singapore Prime Minister, both countries share a commitment to freer global trade and open markets.

Mr Goh stated: "We both want Asia to be integrated into the world economy and APEC to grow in strength. As Australia reaches out for a greater role in south-east Asia, it will have a friend and partner in Singapore."

He added that Australia was "the most Asianized country of Western origin".

As far as Australia is concerned, it only wants APEC commitment for free trade to be implemented some 25 years in the future. It believes that even such a long-term commitment is much better than nothing at all.

It is generally agreed by observers here that any Bogor

commitment to free trade is likely to be far from definitive: it will probably lack detail, fail to specify how it can be achieved, be vague about the essentials and have a somewhat blurred time frame.

A great deal more negotiating may have to be pursued before Japan, China and the US can agree on a workable Asia-Pacific free trade scheme — but a commitment (like an agreement for a clean environment or cultural exchanges) can generally gain lots of support.

As one commentator noted, the Bogor discussions will not be "about specific goals of trade reform, but simply about the date by which extremely loosely defined goals would be achieved."

He added: "The prospect is that even if the APEC meeting can agree on a deadline, whether it is 2010 or 2020, it will not agree on what should actually be achieved by that date."

Specifics will be part of an ongoing debate well into the 21st century.

Prime Minister Keating believes trade liberalization in the

Asia-Pacific is essential if APEC members are to sustain their economic growth rates.

"We have the opportunity in APEC to create a mutually reinforcing process of regional and global liberalization that would enhance the multilateral trading system," he said.

Not all Australians are happy with APEC. Some think it will be bad for the country.

Professor Helen Hughes of Melbourne University stated recently that APEC had become an arrangement to give local politicians an opportunity to dance on the world stage when they had pressing problems like high unemployment and an uncompetitive economy back home.

She said APEC had not added one grain of rice to anybody in Asia and it had not added one dollar's worth of trade to Australia.

Professor Hughes added: "If

APEC were to become another trading bloc and we were to be integrated into Asia in that sense, the cost to Australia would be enormous."

Some 55 per cent of Australia's exports go to Asia, but they constitute less than four per cent of Asia's total imports.

A recent report prepared by an APEC committee recommended maximum possible unilateral trade liberalization by individual APEC member countries. It also recommended a commitment to reduce trade barriers towards non-APEC members.

The report called for developed APEC countries to aim at achieving full trade liberalization by 2010. Developing APEC countries were asked to aim for trade liberalization by 2020.

The timing is in keeping with the widespread opinion that the 21st century will be the Pacific Century.

—Depthnews Asia

OPINION

Foreign Tour of Junior Students

KR Zakhmi

The Hon'ble Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had included two brilliant students of Dhaka Secondary Education Board into her grand entourage to New York when she left Dhaka on 29th September last year to address the 48th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The students were one boy and one girl who had secured 925 and 907 marks respectively in the SSC examination held that year.

Two more students who had secured highest marks in the HSC examination the same year were included in her entourage to Cyprus when the prime minister left Dhaka to lead the Bangladeshi delegation to the biennial conference of Commonwealth Heads of Government which was held from 21st to 25th October, '93.

The prime minister had justified her decision on the pretext that such bonanza will entice all the students with new spirit and they will devote themselves wholeheartedly to education. She had, also declared that this process will continue for ever, as a standing order.

The prime minister recently went to Malaysia on three days' official visit, but she did not include any student, who secured highest marks in the SSC examination of this year, into her entourage.

However, it is not at the back of my mind to plead for the inclusion of junior students who passed with merit the SSC and the HSC examinations. Rather, in my opinion, the decision of the prime minister appears, to an extent, sentimental instead of rational. Such tours are not likely to fetch any significant benefit for the nation. On the contrary, there may be the point, after all it is at the cost of public money. The students who were included in her last two en-

tourage of New York and Cyprus perhaps did not derive any benefits in real sense except looking at the boulevards and buildings with their eyes and mouths wide open.

Moreover, all the students who secured 'top ten' positions in the merit list of SSC and HSC examination results of all the four boards during the last decade have been found to be children of rich families. Some of such students took help from more than half a dozen private tutors, while some of them even had one highly paid coach for each subject. On the other hand, majority of students do not find themselves in a position to purchase all the required books, but pass the examinations in first division out, however, of the 'top ten' list.

It seems education has turned to be exclusively rich-men's privilege. But don't those students who secure simple first division marks without minimum facilities for suitable coaching and study at home deserve more appreciation, encouragement, honour and help from the government?

Besides, a man should know his own country first before proceeding on tours to foreign countries simply for pleasure. Bangladesh is a small country and one can reach the capital within 12 hours from farthest corners by train or bus, and vice versa.

It would be better if those students securing positions in the list of top ten in order to merit are provided all the expenditure for further education up to degree level and a site-seeing-cum-study tour of all the district headquarters of the country, maybe ending with a two-day stay at Fethi Sonar-gaon — instead of the said foreign tours. This may yield more benefit to the young students — at much less expense from the exchequer.

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.

Save the democracy

Sir, In the opening lines of his article in The Daily Star (Monday 26th Sept), Dr Q K Ahmed had the following quotation from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: "...The Fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Dr Ahmed goes on further to say, the fault dear reader is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are in a mess. I tend to recall this as the main news item of DS Staff Correspondent (November 10) says "Violence marks opposition's sit-in programme" while a heading in column 5 says, "Opposition calls day-long hartals on November 12 and 13."

The two parties, the BNP and the Awami League are now on a collision course. Great restraint, courage and leadership are now needed from both Madam Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Greater responsibility lies on the government to defuse the present crisis. Notwithstanding the provisions of the constitution, the only solution to resolve the national crisis seems the ushering in of a caretaker government. BNP believes in democracy, so there should not be hesitancy to face the electorate under a neutral caretaker government.

Democracy as it functions in London and Washington is not the same as it is practised in Dhaka. Our nascent democracy needs careful nurturing for many years to come. Shahabuddin Mahtab 51, Siddheswari Road, Dhaka

What is the solution?

Sir, Sheikh Hasina threatens at public meeting — "Accept demand or MPs will resign en masse" while "JP MPs asked to submit resignation to party chief" (The Daily Star 2-11-94). But both the Government and Opposition MPs were elected to run the Parliament and for doing so they have been enjoying allowances, benefits and facilities all, of course at the cost of people's money, isn't it?

Shall they return back the facilities they have enjoyed so long before their resignation for a cause trifle to the interest of general public? Well, BNP Government may not favour the proposition of a caretaker government for holding general election. Only one and half years are remaining before next general election. If the opposition parties have so much popularity and the caretaker government issue is such a popular demand, let the opposition parties come to power in next general election and insert the caretaker government issue in the constitution for institutionalising election under caretaker government.

One or two terms of election under caretaker government is not a solution of election problems in our country. If once election under caretaker government is held it may be seen that the opposition party/parties of the government elected under caretaker government again creating a new demand for say, election under

a government elected temporarily for holding general election. So, what is the solution, really?

Md Nur Hossain 151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka

The meetings of hope!

Sir, We, the entire Rohingya Muslims of Arakan, welcomed the meetings between the SLORC, the ruling military junta, and Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic leader of Burma, with smiles and tears of happiness. Revota Dhamma, a Buddhist monk from England, who is the main negotiator between the SLORC and Suu Kyi, to settle the stalemate, is invited again by the SLORC to visit Burma, this month. It is presumable that there is some progress in their meetings for the national reconciliation. It is also reported that US assistant under-secretary was also visiting Burma mainly for the release of Suu Kyi. And also UN Human Rights Commissioner Yazo Yakuta was visiting Burma in connection with the release of Suu Kyi and restoration of human rights and democracy in Burma. Hoping for the visit of ex-President Carter of USA to occur soon, we can regard November as the month of good hope.

Intermediaries in Burma are playing an important role in forging peace agreements between the ruling military and insurgent groups. A total of 12 rebel groups had signed peace agreements with the SLORC.

As for Rohingya rebel groups there are no negotiators or peace brokers between them and the SLORC. The SLORC regards them as alien rebel groups and declared that it would only talk with the rebel groups of 135 indigenous races in which Rohingyas are

not included, though Rohingyas was declared as an indigenous ethnic community of Burma and their language programme was regularly relayed from the Burma Broadcasting Service (BBS) of the democratic government of Burma.

Already much water has flowed down the majestic Irrawaddy river. It is high time for the SLORC to restore the indigenous status of the ethnic Rohingyas of Arakan and resolve all their problems through negotiated settlements. The SLORC should not ignore Rohingyas to the peace talks in the interest of peace and reality.

Jilani Maungdaw, Burma

Fortress Europe

Sir, This refers to the exclusive interview with Frans A Engering, DG of Foreign Economic Relations of the Netherlands, published in The Daily Star on November 6. Your question of "Fortress Europe" really embarrassed Mr. Engering as it was partially true. You may be aware, agricultural commodities of developing countries like Bangladesh have been facing high level while exported to the EEC market. At present, 547 USD/MT of lev is being imposed on Bangladesh rice which makes it totally in competitive.

Abdullah Al Maman Mirpur, Dhaka.

NOTICE We deeply regret the inadvertent publication of one line in our third editorial of yesterday, that refers to violence against women. We reiterate our editorial policy of being strongly against all forms of violence and discrimination against women.