

Welcome Accords

The signing of four business and investment accords by members of the visiting British trade delegation reaffirms foreign traders' and investors' faith in the country's potential. Earlier the Japanese delegation expressed its optimism about the industrial and trade prospects of the country but members of that team did not commit anything in practical terms. Both the high-powered trade teams from the UK and Japan made it clear that they were extremely hopeful about the future prospects of our country.

Compared to the Japanese, the UK trade team has gone quite a few steps further. The four areas of their collaboration should boost our confidence as the host country. The selected areas of collaboration are mainly oil, gas and power generation. Automobile and textile come next.

These are quite natural deals between the two sides. With the proven gas reserve and some hint of hitting oil reserve as well in the Bay of Bengal, we must go for further exploration of the natural resources. This is an area of big investment and even bigger returns. As for power generation, we have hardly any choice other than going for more production. For that purpose inviting private companies to invest in the sector seems to be the only answer, specially when the government-owned agency miserably fails to meet the demand and the World Bank won't release fund for the overhaul of the aging generation and distribution system. The Bedford trucks and textile equipment have their special utility for us — the former for its durability and suitability for our terrains and the latter for our expanding garment industry.

The start is encouraging and we surely can count on more such deals in future. But in the same breath we must say that compared with the pace of foreign investment in some of our neighbouring countries, ours is moving at a snail's pace. The fact remains that we still have not tried to push the ball hard that has long been in our court. It is time we did that and quite seriously, so that the foreign investors find this country a better place than, say, Vietnam, for investment.

Wrong in the Basics

The tourism month began on Tuesday amidst a colourful pageantry. Bangladesh is said to have earned 60 crore Taka in 1993 from tourism — a 100 per cent rise over the earning of the previous year on the same account. If the observance of tourism month had any part in that phenomenal increase, such promotional exertions are all right. But the first such month was held only at the end of 1993 and couldn't have contributed in any way to that. Still if the tourist wallahs think that such pageantry could help treble the earnings over '92, they are most welcome to holding such shows. But can it?

If we somehow sound a little unenthused that is because we feel that the government approach towards developing tourism is flawed fundamentally on two or more counts. One, the whole of our tourist promotion effort is targeted on foreign holidaymakers and vacationers. Two, none of the programmes offered as part of the month are traditional festivals, held according to their traditional calendar and as genuine expressions of our life and culture. These are made up things as hollow as anything. Three, the above two factors make the 'month' as also the tourism industry as a whole something very alienated from the people of this country.

How is earning from tourism counted? Who is indeed a tourist? Are the hordes of specialists and experts coming in connection with different international and world organisations' projects here, tourists? If we exclude people who come here on business or professional engagement, will the earnings run up to the same encouraging figures? And how much money do we spend on catching these sightseers from abroad? Do our spendings justify our real earnings? The other side of the same question is, are we spending judiciously whatever we are spending? Maybe we should spend more. But how can we tell, because there is so much hidden in the so-called 'facts and figures'.

An essential prerequisite for tourism to grow is to popularise sightseeing and vacationing domestically. Only a robust domestic tourist trade can lead to foreign tourists coming here. A change must be effected in the basics.

A Miracle Jump

Man proposes and God disposes. Exactly so was the case with Ethan Frankel, 24, who, 'despondent', tried to take his life by jumping 17 storeys down from a roof in Greenwich village, New York. He did not die. He is in hospital in a serious condition.

What will be the impact of a 70-kg object hitting earth from a height of 60 metres? That's a question a student of elementary physics would work out. But all would agree the result would be a shapeless heap of flesh on a pool of blood if the object was a human being. Frankel was spared that certainty by intervening tree branches. His father, for one, was sure this was miracle. What will Ethan think when he gets round to move and think again? A devil's work? And nothing that the devil does is a miracle — all miracles are unexpected good turns. A 'despondent' Ethan might well already be feeling betrayed.

Perhaps next to the doctors, the policeman will take care of Ethan. Failing in a suicide bid is a criminal offence. This is very much an attempt to kill someone — no matter if that someone is one's own goodself. You succeed and you get out of law's way. Fail and law is after you. It is long that many have thought this was hard on those that have come past the horrific experience of a 'suicide'. After all right to life should include a right to death also otherwise, the first will lose much of its meaning. The question whose life it is and whose death is what puts on social significance to concepts of life and death. If it is one's own in both cases, why should society — or law — bother? A good answer to that is still to come while we cling very humarilly to the very unclear but infinitely sacrosanct idea of the sanctity of life.

Can we live with the flood? The question is redundant. We have been living with floods since time immemorial. There is flood every year including this year of relatively much less rainfall. During monsoon months, a vast sheet of water practically engulf the whole country. The major part of the land-mass, the flood-plains, have been formed over millions of years through deposition of silt brought in by the flood waters. Without floods, there would be no country called Bangladesh today, and the annual flood bring in the vital nourishment of the soil, or the soil itself. That is how the ancient Samat has been formed and therefore so much is grown and so many are crowded in so few land. The productivity of our nine million hectares of cultivated land in simply phenomenal and therefore we not only survive — we are in the process of becoming a rice exporting nation. Given hard work, we can also become a prosperous country in the not too distant a future. Let us thank the blissful flood for that.

The first FAO mission to Dhaka in early 1972, in its report to the government submitted that in spite of dense population and its continued high growth rate, Bangladesh can continue to feed itself for years and decades to come. Such agricultural productivity is rare in the world and it is because we have learned to live with floods. The cropping patterns and crop varieties cultivated are suitably adjusted to the rising water levels induced by the inevitable overflow of the rivers every year.

Flood is a time-bound, natural phenomenon, and if the rise of the water level is not stopped by artificial embankments, it may cause very little damage. Let the homesteads be well made, above high water marks, then movements except by boat may not be feasible for 3 to 4 months in a year, and we would wait out the flood-months like snowbound winter in the northern hemisphere. As the dry weather sets in, people go out to the field and work for two bountiful harvests before the flood sets in again. Our cropping patterns as well as our living styles, are all well adjusted to

MALTA'S booming tourist industry is creating problems — but they are the problems of success rather than failure.

Arrivals have been increasing in recent years and this year looks like it will set yet another record. By the end of 1994, the small Mediterranean island of 346,000 inhabitants will have hosted some 1.2 million visitors, up from 1.06 million last year.

Tourism is the largest foreign revenue earner, with earnings last year topping 233 million Maltese liri, or almost 220 liri per visitor.

More than 8,000 men and women are employed in hotels and catering, and thousands more earn part of their living from tourism.

Britain is still the biggest source of visitors, providing about 45 per cent of the tourists. But arrivals from Germany (200,000), Italy (100,000), France and Scandinavian countries are growing, thanks to a vigorous publicity campaign, one of the aims of which is to decrease dependence on the British market.

"Tourism has become the backbone of the Maltese economy," says Major Alfred Cassar-Reynaud, chief executive of the National Tourism Organisation.

And there is every indica-

Living with the Flood

When a river flows in a delta region, overflowing of the river is also inevitable and we must learn to adjust to it; lessen its adverse impact rather than try to prevent it — since failures would not be infrequent and more harm than good would be the result.

the annual flood. Why should we be bothered about it? Please recall that the annual flood of the river Nile gave rise to the world's oldest civilization. The ancient land of Bengal also thrived due to the overflowing of its river banks during monsoon months. How come then flood is a problem? I can never understand.

In fact, flood waters of monsoon make for easy and comfortable communication by boat. With hardly any field work, it is the ideal time to visit relations in distant villages — a tradition long cherished by village women in particular. It is the time to stitch embroidered quilts, the time for poetry and music in the midst of a unique landscape of vast sheets of water and villages appearing as tiny dots of small islands. The most amazing part of it is that the floods vanish, the islands disappear and sixty-five thousand villages are reborn every year.

Root Cause

Flood, as a problem, is of recent vintage — result of silted waterways, high population density and the lack of an adjustment mechanism during particularly high flow years when floods are abnormal and village homesteads also go under water. Lack of drainage is the root cause of evil when beneficial floods degenerate into evil forces of wanton destruction. The problem is further accentuated by the high priced consultants who must prepare the embankment-based flood action plan, deny the soil of its essential nutrients and create out of our wetlands — for reasons best known to themselves — a dry-land agriculture, artificially made expensive through application of irrigation water and chemical fertilizers. In addition, fish habitats will be unnecessarily destroyed since the ill-considered objective has been conceived to be the (unfounded) desire of the peo-

ple not to live with the flood when fishes cannot survive without the water. Apart from the vested interests waiting for large construction projects to be generated by the flood action plan, there are convinced patriots as well, who consider flood as the evil and must be controlled for the salvation of their soul as well as prosperity of the land.

The ideal flood action plan for Bangladesh would inevitably imply improving the drainage conditions by dredging the rivers, once mighty and deep, and digging the canals, waterways and moribund lakes (haors, baors etc.) so as to facilitate the passage of a huge volume of monsoonal water across the floodplains and onto the Bay of Bengal. At the same

control leads to flood disaster. When a river flows in a delta region, overflowing of the river is also inevitable and we must learn to adjust to it; lessen its adverse impact rather than try to prevent it — since failures would not be infrequent and more harm than good would be the result.

So let us go for digging and dredging and not embankment building. The Brahmaputra Right Bank Embankment (BRBE) could not prevent flooding in North-west Bangladesh. It had been breached at innumerable places, in fact it caused more flooding due to unnecessary drainage congestions. Embanking an area like DND project near Dhaka, for total and complete flood preven-

minimize the probability of early flood in June. At the same time, we have to dig up the canals, other natural waterways, depressions etc., so that all impediments, small or big, to water flow are removed. This would also result in early drying up of the low lands, although remaining moist, since flood water is likely to recede by early to mid October at the latest.

A two crop rotation, *rabi* immediately followed by early *kharif* will become the general pattern in the low-lying floodplains. Immediately after the water recedes in October, *rabi* crops will be sown or transplanted using the coolest part of the year, October-June, when rice is not the ideal crop to plant. Therefore, the HYV rice grown between February/March to May/June can increase the average yield of paddy upto 10 tons per hectare because of easy access to surface irrigation from the deepened waterways and channels as well as plenty of sunshine during the period.

In the very low-lying areas where floods even in June are inevitable, maize fodder, linked to a productive dairy industry would be ideal, since such a fodder crop can be cut and stored. More important, even with the onset of early flood, the crop would not be entirely lost like immature paddy. There is nothing new about what I have suggested here. In Bangladesh, such wetlands are traditionally devoted to fodder growing. That is why, milk-shed areas have emerged in the most flood-prone areas of the country.

A significant advantage of the drainage-based strategy instead of embankments and total flood-control will be the preservation of the vast open floodlands as the vital breeding grounds of fresh water fisheries of Bengal. Embankments are the death-knells for fisheries; consequently, a sure

recipe for accentuating the existing problem of nutrition deficiency in the country. Let us, therefore, live with the floods but ensure enough of fish protein for a well-nourished Nation. So long the issue of fisheries have been ignored and as a result, fresh water fisheries are already on the decline. Let us reverse the trend and this can only be done through emphasis on drainage rather than embankment.

The issue of fisheries is of highest importance and it leads me to believe that the flood action plan is too important to be left to the engineers alone. The entire nation is at stake. Let us try to understand the problem and then find an optimum solution. At the height of a very severe flood, a maximum of two-third of the total land area of the country might go under water. I would say, let it be so except that we develop the road network as well as protect the human habitations, from the smallest village to the capital city. Then even if the rest of the country goes under water — we can eventually overcome the odds and live with the floods.

Imagine Sweden in winter, when the whole country is under at least ten feet of snow for atleast three to four months of the year. But life does not stop. Villages and cities continue to thrive. Only there is no agriculture, out in the fields which are all snow-bound. Let us imagine a parallel situation: We can have protected villages, towns and cities; while road/rail communication remain unaffected by rising flood levels. Like snow, floods are also a time-bound phenomenon. Inevitably, they go away. It is a matter of few months only and life in the villages would return to its normal cycle of activities; while manufacturing need not suffer, in any way whatsoever.

The flood action plan, as formulated at present is basically wrong since it involves the denial of the most important reality of our environment. We should plan for living with the floods. There is nothing new about it. We did so in the past. We have been doing the same at present and we ought to do the same in the future.

that is, attracting wealthier tourists. To some extent, this is occurring already. Many hotels have been upgraded with the twin aims of attracting a richer clientele and filling rooms all year round, by 'conference tourism' and by catering to specialised groups such as those interested in archeology, history and culture.

The latter would help the under-used south of the island, which contains ancient temples. It would also draw visitors to the historic cities of Cospicua, Vittoriosa and Senglea. These cities now form the dockyard area in the grand harbour of the capital, Valletta, but they have a quaint beauty of their own and the 16th-18th century fortifications with which the Knights of St. John surrounded them are architectural gems.

Despite the warnings that tourism is on the verge of reaching saturation point, the quest for more visitors continues. The national airline, Air Malta, is expanding its routes and is expected to open a service to New York in an effort to tap the United States market. A US hotel chain, the Seattle-based Westin, is expected to manage a new 300-bed, five-star hotel due to open in 1996. — Gemini News

JOE SCICLUNA is a freelance Maltese journalist.

Tourist Boom Brings Problem of Success

Joe Scicluna writes from Valletta, Malta

Tourism planners in many countries are racking their brains over how to attract more visitors. But tiny Malta is facing the opposite problem: how to deal with a rise in visitors so steep that it is putting a strain on the island's infrastructure.

tion that the numbers will continue to rise. Economic Services Minister Dr George Bonello Dupuis says arrivals could reach 1.8 million within five years.

But the very success of tourism is worrying some Maltese, including people in the industry who fear that continued growth could overstrain the island's infrastructure.

Among them is Major Cassar Reynaud himself. "In numerical terms we have surpassed our targets and our expectations, but now sheer volume may well become an embarrassment," he reportedly told an in-house marketing conference.

He also described Malta's economic reliance on tourism as "disturbing."

During the summer sunbathing season, overcrowding on the most popular beaches

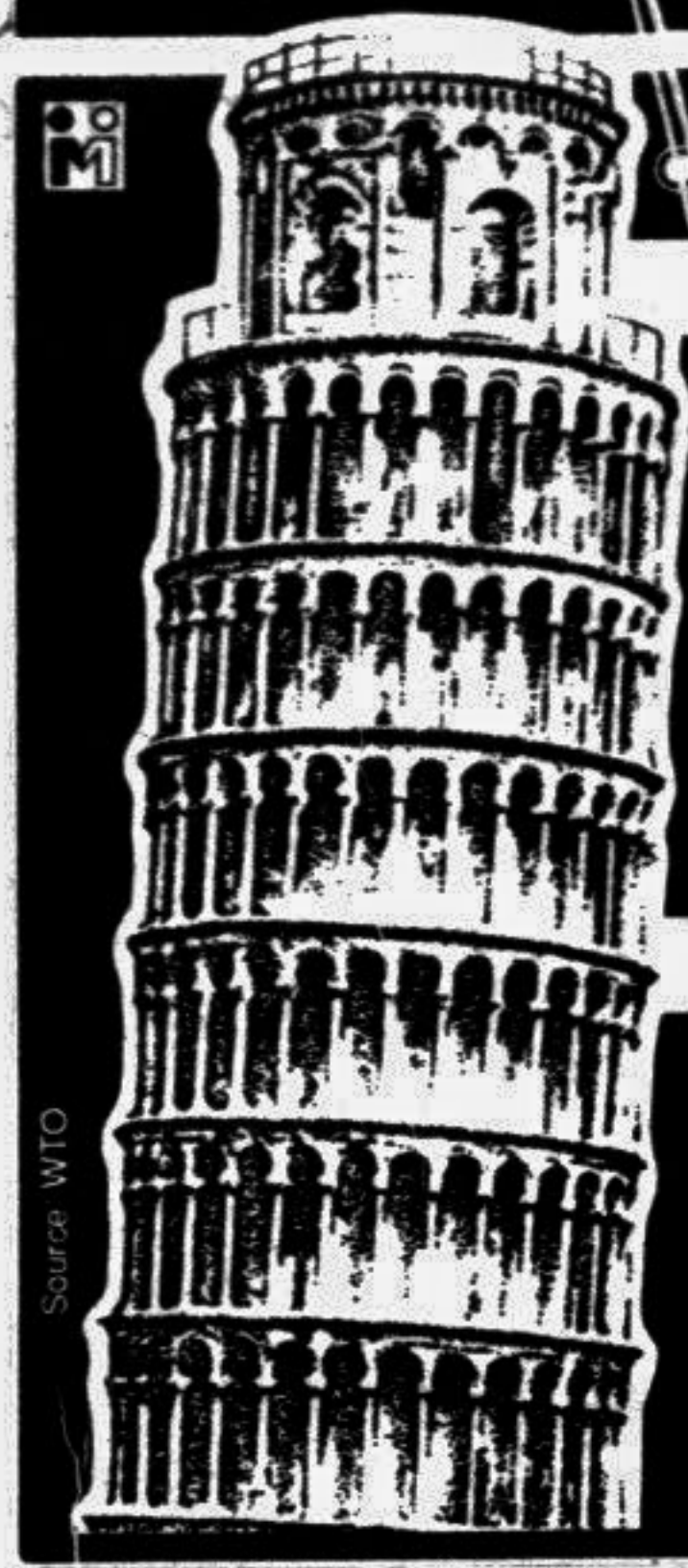
in the north of the island strains water, electricity and other services to the limit; sometimes they fail altogether.

Fears have been voiced that further strain could result in the closure of some beaches on grounds of hygiene, though attempts are being made to tackle the problems. This year, for instance, the usual cuts in water supply did not occur, and there were stricter inspections of hotels and holiday flats to ensure that they were up to scratch.

Even those who believe there is scope for continued growth, such as Dr Joseph Psalja Savona, the recently-appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism, argue that changes are necessary.

He believes, for example, that increases in numbers must be matched by "increasing the socio-economic class of the visitors" —

World winners



Tourism in 1993

Top Destinations

France	61m
US	46m
Spain	41m
Italy	26m
Hungary	23m
Britain	19m

Top Earners

US	\$56bn
France	\$24bn
Spain	\$21bn
Italy	\$19bn
Austria	\$15bn
Britain	\$12bn

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.

Bangladeshi banks abroad

Sir, A few lakhs Bangladeshi are working abroad in different parts of the world to earn their bread. Most of them have left behind their kith and kin at home and are remitting substantial amount of foreign exchange to them. But a good portion of remittances are coming through clandestine sources. As a result, the country is not getting the benefit of hard earned valuable foreign exchange.

The reason why people tend to send their money through clandestine sources is non-availability of Bangladesh bank's branches in many of the places where there is concentration of Bangladeshi people. Another factor is that unofficial channels of remittances are very prompt. Money racketeers abroad collect the foreign exchange from people and their local agents either through fax or telephonic instructions pay cash to the relatives of the wage earners the next day. But official channels, even wherever it exists, are very slow and cumbersome. So, the problem has got to

be attacked on two fronts. Bangladesh banks should open their branches in sufficient number in various cities of the UK, the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Middle-East etc, and the modus operandi should be such that money must reach the relatives of the wage earners within two three days of remittances. This is likely to improve foreign exchange earning a lot. Will the Ministry of Finance and Bangladesh Bank ponder over it?

Saleh Ahmed Choudhury
Dhaka Cantonment

"DUTA's proposed action"

Sir, I wish to thank Mr S Ahmed of Banani for expressing his concern about the "political slaughtering of the education system" in a letter published in your daily on November 10, 1994. I wish the learned writer had also pointed out how the armed cadres of different political parties are holding the general students as well as the teachers of not only the universities but also the colleges of this country as hostages, only to

serve the political interests of their respective parties. Further, I wish that many more conscious citizens of this country would come forward to speak about the political slaughtering of the education system, so that mass awareness of the tragedy arises and the system can be rescued.

The Mr Ahmed has expressed his feelings against the recent action of DUTA regarding the issue of the national anthem not being played at the first Senate meeting of the National University. However, I would request Mr Ahmed to be better informed before writing a letter to be published in a national daily, and think a little more rationally. DUTA did not consider to expel the Vice-Chancellor of the National University. To expel him from what? The Vice-Chancellor is not a member of DUTA. In fact, DUTA considered expelling one of its members, who is also a member of the Senate of the National University and who had reportedly spoken against the playing of the national anthem in the said Senate meeting, and not a Syndicate meeting. Further, I request the writer of the mentioned letter to appreciate the difference between the Senate and the Syndicate of a University. The Senate is the parliament of the University. The DUTA took a unanimous decision to serve a notice on the learned member asking him to show cause why his membership should not be cancelled for having spoken

against the playing of the national anthem in the first Senate meeting of the National University, and also to boycott DU Syndicate meetings unless his Syndicate membership is withdrawn. It may be mentioned that this member is not an elected representative of the teachers of the DU to its Syndicate. One could debate whether forgetting to play the national anthem in the Senate meeting is a folly or not, but DUTA members felt that speaking against the playing of the national anthem in the said meeting is much more than a folly, and a person who does so, should not be in the decision-making bodies like the Syndicate. In doing so, they may have appeared to be politically motivated as Mr Ahmed claims, but they may feel proud to have done so, since their intention is to save and preserve the national spirit.

M M Rahman
North Fuller Road, Dhaka

have been developed by our Agricultural Research Organisation. But farmers are not well informed as well as not properly trained due to lack of sufficient extension service. They are poor and illiterate, so commercialisation of agricultural technology, as suggested by the president of the seminar, would affect our sustainable agricultural production.

What benefit does Bangladesh get out of such frequent foreign tours? Are not most of the foreign widely known tours 'pleasure trips'? We would request our democratic government to have a strict surveillance, on all tours made by our ministers, public leaders and government officials to justify to the members of the public the accountability of expenditure of the public money.

We strongly feel that we may minimise our expenses on visits abroad when we have already a large number of ambassadors, high commissioners and innumerable officials posted abroad.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Official tours abroad

Sir, It appears that there is a mad rush among some of our ministers, public leaders, secretaries, chairmen of public sector corporation, and top officials of the government to visit abroad to attend various meetings, conferences, seminars, exhibitions and other various functions at the expense of the government.

How much money do we spend per head per foreign trip? What amount of public money have we spent during the financial years 1991-1992 and 1993-1994 for visit abroad of our ministers, public leaders and government officials? Does the Ministry of Finance maintain any account of it?

One minister goes to a foreign country. On his return another minister rushes to visit another foreign country. Some ministers visit abroad 5-6 times in a month. Similar is the case with some of our top bureaucrats.

Smoke and fume

Sir, Everyday consciously or unconsciously we are polluting our environment by cigarette smoke and black fumes released by the faulty vehicles. Cigarette smoke and black fumes are poisonous and hazardous to human health. These cause early death.

The Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment has been requesting everyone to 'stop smoking and start living' and to 'check release of black fumes from vehicles.' Why not everyone is conscious of the danger, and many seem to be hoodwinking the warning?

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof. BAI, Dhaka