

Spring-board for Us

The World Bank is coming in a thoughtful way to promote private investment in our infrastructural sector. The initial funding by it — for up to two years — is likely to be around six hundred crore takas to propel local equity participation amounting to 20-30 per cent of project value in each case with another 30-40 per cent chipped in by the commercial banks and financial institutions of the country. So, the totality of financial involvement, both external and internal, would work out to Tk 1200 crore or thereabouts in the first phase of a massive undertaking called the Private Sector Infrastructure Development Project (PSIDP).

The PSIDP is happily designed to expand beyond the two-year phase, as is evident from the efforts to line up with ADB, USAID, ODA, OECF and CIDA for co-financing. It is learnt that a positive response has been received from the donor community.

Implementation of the first phase will be crucial to the fate of the whole undertaking. How is that to be ensured? Fund administration in the conventional sense of the term will not simply do. Drawing out suitable local entrepreneurs from the shells they have withdrawn into, partly due to an acute shortage of capital but no less on account of the bureaucratic impediments, would be a big job.

There are two ways of looking at the long maturity period of the loans to be offered — stretching over 20-23 years with a grace period of eight years to top it off. First, it is evidently designed to encourage the investment-shy local entrepreneurs. But, at the same time, it calls for a specialised handling of the affair. All kinds of tie-ups need to be forged between the WB and the relevant ministries and between them and the local financing institutions and the entrepreneurs at large. The much-vaunted one-stop service has to materialise.

The areas chosen for private investment are gas distribution, electricity generation and supply, inland and sea port development, expansion of container facility, telecommunications, road and bridge building, water supply, waste water treatment and disposal and solid waste management. Political will cannot be wanting in such fields. Let's get on with the project which can lead the way for a wider and efficient privatisation with a massive transfusion of foreign private capital into the process of industrialisation.

Nomination Hiccups

Simmering discontent and outbursts have marked the ruling BNP's nominations of candidates for certain constituencies of the next parliamentary polls. From Narayanganj to Nilphamari, from Shariatpur to Sylhet to Rajshahi the internecine feud has been manifest, sometimes in an ugly form. Supporters of candidates and their rivals have clashed at some places, elsewhere resentment has been expressed through calling hartals or bus strikes and still in other places the disgruntled BNP followers resorted to vehicle-damaging sprees.

The widespread public demonstrations are really puzzling. It forces one to ask the inevitable question: what kind of party discipline or order is at work in the ruling BNP? Well, one understands if opinions among supporters vary on the question of nomination of a candidate in just one or two cases. But why on such a scale? And look, what the party cadres are resorting to in full public glare for nothing more than espousing the cause of their ignored candidates! It is partisan politics in the narrowest sense of the term. There is no scope for confusing this with opposition programmes that at least have some characteristics of national politics.

What is so surprising — and shocking — is that the BNP leadership has neither come up with a public statement of clarification on all such unfortunate incidents, nor has it condemned protests organised by its followers. So the message is clear: either the party has yet to develop a system of percolatory discipline or some of its cadres have little regard for and confidence in their leaders.

Perhaps BNP's own rival factions might be a liability to the poll prospects of the party. Enforcement of discipline and order is of the essence in party politics which is the mainstay of a democratic order. Let the BNP do some soul-searching on this score.

Fires in Ctg

The port city made a news headline on Monday. Not because of any good tiding but for the devastating fire that broke out at the small hours of the preceding night. It turned a slum near the Chittagong Railway Bhaban into complete ashes.

The late night incident made fire-fighting particularly difficult as there was no source of water around to put out the flames with. It lasted two and a half hours roasting four alive, injuring some 15 and rendering four hundred homeless before being extinguished by water fetched from a far-out pond through a tanker.

The fire might have been caused either by the spark of an electric short-circuit in a nearby pucca house or it could have originated in an oven inside the slum area itself. Shanty-dwellers need to be sensitised about common sense fire safety precautions. What is urgently needed, however, is basic relief to the affected who are living under the open sky now.

As if to call for a review of Chittagong's fire-fighting status, another fire broke out on the same day at around 6 pm in the Panchlaish area bringing down a whole poultry farm and three dwelling houses. This one was put out solely by local people. That means something.

Change of Guard in Riyadh

A change of ruler in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has many dimensions not least of which is the spiritual one... To the spiritual has been added the temporal in the shape of huge oil wealth, which has drawn the wealthiest nations to their doorsteps

THE Court announcement in Riyadh stating that King Fahd Ibn-Abdel Aziz had handed over power to Crown Prince Abdullah Ibn-Abdel Aziz is a clear sign that the succession question in this large desert kingdom has been handled without any hitch. In the eighties King Fahd had ascended the throne following the death of his brother King Khaled Ibn-Abdel Aziz. In the present case the only difference is that Crown Prince Abdullah is a half brother of King Fahd and will exercise power during the 'convalescence' of his brother King. The Court announcement said, 'given your (Abdullah) praiseworthy qualities and our commitment to the public interest, we charge you with running the affairs of state during our period of rest and convalescence.'

King Fahd, 74, suffered a heart attack less than two months ago and has kept an indifferent health. In 1995 the reign of King Fahd has been marred by a bombing attack inside a mosque which killed more than half a dozen people. For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia such incidents are very few and far between. Also during 1995, giant oil producer Saudi Arabia with huge foreign exchange reserves has seen her reserves fall dramatically obliging her for the first time to borrow funds from the international money market.

King Fahd prefers the title Protector of the Holy Mosques, (Holy Kaaba in Makkah and the Holy Mosque

in Madinah). During my last visit to the Holy Kaaba two months ago, where I went to perform Umrah, I found that a whole new wing, made of beautiful marble stone, had been added and at the entrance was inscribed the name of King Fahd with the title of 'Protector of the two Harams.'

With Crown Prince Abdullah ascending the throne, although temporarily, this is the first time a non-Sudairi will occupy the top spot in this Kingdom established by King Abdel Aziz in 1932. Unlike King Fahd, Prince Abdullah belongs to the Shammar, a powerful Bedouin tribe from his mother's side. Indeed Prince Abdullah, who is 72 years old and enjoys robust health, has always been known to have a penchant for the desert despite of the modernity sweeping the Kingdom, thanks to the flow of huge oil wealth.

Prince Abdullah has occupied the post of Crown Prince since 1982 and is Head of the National Guard. This militia of 35,000 men drawn from the Bedouin tribes monitors strategic sites like the oilfields. This has given Crown Prince Abdullah a unique position in the power hierarchy of the Kingdom. If Crown Prince Abdullah assumes permanent charge of the Kingdom, as it appears likely, Prince Sultan

Ibn-Abdel Aziz, the Defence Minister, will stand next in line for succession. He is a Sudairi like King Fahd. His son is Saudi Arabia's Ambassador in Washington and he can be truly described as 'primus inter pares'. His access to the White House is the envy of his Ambassador colleagues.

If there is one country that takes exceptional inter-

ues to this day. The suffering of the Iraqi people not to speak of shut-down of lucrative trade with her neighbours has caused widespread concern and there are rumblings specially within the Arab world. Although the pipeline through Turkey remains closed, the border with Iraq has been opened and a lucrative trade has resumed.

imposed by the Security Council important countries have found ways to circumvent it.

Because of the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, it has become a lucrative market for the industrialized countries of the West. The most lucrative business is, of course, the sale of arms by the West. The deals often run into billions of dollars. The latest is the case of the Saudi dissident based in London, who, it is confidently reported, was expelled by the British Government because of pressure from British arms manufacturers. Riyadh hosts the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) whose members are the countries of the Gulf surrounding Saudi Arabia. They are all major oil producers although Saudi Arabia by her size and importance belongs to a different class. Jeddah is the headquarters of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) which is the

largest Islamic organisation. Here again Saudi Arabia has a very important presence.

In the peace process engineered by the US between the Arabs and the Israelis, Saudi Arabia plays a vital role. The process appears to be reaching its climax with the possible signing of a peace treaty between Syria and Israel under US prodding.

A change of ruler in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has many dimensions not least of which is the spiritual one. More than a billion Muslims bow their heads in prayer towards Makkah Al-Mukarramah. To the spiritual has been added the temporal in the shape of huge oil wealth, which has drawn the wealthiest nations to their doorsteps. Thanks to the oil, money the face of Saudi Arabia is now surely belongs to the developed world. Saudi society has undergone profound change with a new western educated elite. The new monarch Abdullah Ibn-Abdel Aziz will preside over this unusual country as it rushes headlong into the twenty-first century.



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

est in the affairs of the Kingdom it is the USA. This country, the largest oil exporter of the world, with known reserves unmatched anywhere else in the world, has deep ties with the US. ARAMCO, the giant oil company of the USA has an overwhelming presence in the Kingdom. The US presence has multiplied manifold since the Gulf War more than four years ago. Before the US along with her allies sent troops into Iraq, Saudi Arabia under King Fahd and Turkey under late President Turgut Ozal, shut off the pipelines carrying Iraqi oil into international market. That blow crippled the Iraqi economy and the ban contin-

Saudi-US relations are of such great importance that Defence Secretary William Perry has rushed to Riyadh, no doubt to have first hand contact with the new ruler. Prince Abdullah has the reputation of having sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi people, a sympathy shared largely by his countrymen. On the other hand he is too experienced an administrator to miss the point of the special nature of relationship with US. His Bedouin upbringing would undoubtedly make him lean emotionally towards the Arabs and now Iraq for whom there is widespread sympathy in the Arab world and beyond. In spite of the embargo

Reforming the UN: Towards Real Peace

by Dr Abu Obaidul Huque

ON the first day of every year, we customarily wish happiness for that particular year only to a person and/or his/her family. Next year we just renew the same piecemeal annual deal of greetings. In fact what we should do is to wish universal peace and happiness for the mankind not only for a particular year but also for the years to come. And this wish and its related sincere efforts for such everlasting peace and happiness for human beings must come from the universal body, the United Nations.

In this context, let us hope that the United Nations will initiate this real and everlasting peace-making and peace-keeping processes. Moreover their efforts, activities and strategies often do not seem appropriate to bring about really durable peace, order and justice in the societies on the globe.

Very luckily this point has attracted the attention of many people and some world leaders. In this respect, one would also thank and congratulate the US President Bill Clinton as well as Warren Christopher and Madeline Albright for their timely and bold stand for reforming and overhauling the United Nations to make its activities more effective to create real peace and justice for mankind. UN Secretary-General Dr Boutros-Ghali also expressed similar view to overhaul the United Nations which has become really imperative and urgent.

In the recent years, the outcome of seemingly too much expensive UN summits at Copenhagen, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo and Beijing has rather disappointed the world people. More shameful

is that the world people were seriously disheartened to observe the miserable failure of the world body in tackling the historically barbaric inhumanity in Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, etc. And quite passive watching of these cruel events by the so-called modern civilized world duly certifies the extremely devastating and catastrophic moral degradation throughout the world today. Possibly these are the reasons which have shaken the conscience of some concerned world leaders like President Bill Clinton and UN Secretary-General Dr Boutros-Ghali to echo in favour of reforming and overhauling the UN.

Now it is universally realised that the miserable failure of the United Nations lies mainly in the absence of moral and human approaches in its programmes, efforts and strategies. At present people of the world, losing confidence in the UN, have started believing that no efforts and programmes of the UN will be able to achieve the targeted result in yielding real and durable peace, order and justice unless and until they are touched upon by the essence of human and moral values and approaches.

Actually keeping this view in mind, I humbly initiated a proposal to the UN in 1991, entitled 'A Proposal to the United Nations on Moral Development Approach: A New World Order for Peace' suggesting some steps and strategies for universal moral development. Since this

moral degradation has become a universal problem, the world body must come forward to solve it universally, and all the UN member states should very sincerely and properly cooperate with the United Nations in accomplishing this tough task. During the past few years many seminars/symposia were held on this universal moral development (in the light of the proposal to UN) at different universities, colleges and social organisations and everywhere everybody opined that this universal moral development as a unified and integrated package approach is the ultimate solution to curb all the crucial social problems of the contemporary world like AIDS, environment pollution, poverty, terrorism, violation of human rights, oppression on women, drug abuses, smoking, etc. And in all the seminars/symposia all the speakers unanimously appealed to the United Nations and its member states to consider and implement this universal moral development approach to save mankind from the certain dark future.

So it is felt that in its reform and overhauling, the United Nations must incorporate the essence of moral and human approaches in all its efforts, strategies and programmes, if the world body sincerely wants to ensure welfare of the mankind.

The writer is professor and Director of Bangladesh Institute for Advancement of Science and Technology Teaching.

Aricha crossings

Sir, At least 36 districts are cut off from road communication with Dhaka due to frequent problems Aricha-Nagarbari-Daulatdia ferry services. The immediate solution as often given by the relevant ministry is to suspend bus services to and from Dhaka.

The often preachings of the government success in road transportation, is rather questionable when transportation between majority of districts are disrupted while railway communications via Jagannathanj-Sirajganj or Bahadurabad-Tistamukhghat are also suspended regularly due to siltation.

The communication via Aricha is just horrendous, especially for patients coming to Dhaka for better medical treatment or so while miseries of women, children and youngsters are beyond imagination.

Under the above backdrop, it is time to do something in this respect in the context of equal development of all regions. It is time to fix priorities in developing communication system while per capita expenditure based on population in this field is more justifiable!

Mahmud Ali, New Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Import performance

Sir, I read your editorial on import performance published on 9th January, 1996. The import figure may further sort out. During 1993-94, 1994-95, industrial loan exceeding thousands of crore of taka has been sanctioned by the NCBs and DFIs. The sponsors are now opening or have already opened many letter of credits for importing capital machineries. In that case, if it is not

'Improved' the present reserve of foreign exchange will further dwindle down. We have attained capacity to produce good quality washing soaps and other detergents. Many of our companies can produce good toilet soap, toothpaste, toothbrush etc. But what is happening, the market has been flooded with the same consumer goods from abroad. Free market economy does not mean that we will import anything that might harm our own economy.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury, 153 Lake Circus, Kalabagan, Dhaka

Bangabhaban children's park

Sir, There is hardly any park or children's park in old Dhaka city. If there is any, it is either only for ostentatious show or for the Dhaka City Corporation to palm off the park slyly and to gulp it for commercial purpose.

In between old and new Dhaka at the centre of city's most thickly-populated and congested areas — Wari, Nawabpur, Gullistan, Motijheel Commercial Area and Naya Paltan — in front of Bangabhaban, the official residence-cum-office of the President of the country, there exists a children's park.

The Bangabhaban children's park remains encircled with heavy traffic jam from all sides, surrounded and occupied by thousands of vendors and hawkers. The children do not like to go to the park for want of safety and security reasons. However, despite many demerits and disadvantages of the Bangabhaban children's park, its tall trees and greeneries help protect the environment of the thickly-

populated and heavily polluted area at the centre of the city and hundreds of men and women, young and old, go to the park for morning-walk everyday and to breathe in the fresh air.

But to our great surprise and shock, we learn that Dhaka City Corporation is going to construct a Metropolitan Natyoo (dramatic) Mancha (auditorium) at the children's park and the site has already been earmarked with CI sheet boundary for the purpose.

We strongly protest against the commercial utilisation of the children's park and request the authority concerned to kindly refrain from cutting down the trees and destroying the greeneries. If a natyoo mancha is to be constructed, it may be made in a less densely-populated area say at old Tejgaon Airport.

O H Kabir, Wari, Dhaka-1203

WASA service at New Eskaton

Sir, The WASA water supply at New Eskaton area continues to be a problem since 1986 as sufficient water could not be managed by WASA. A deep tube-well was sunk at New Eskaton Hafizabad Colony area in 1986 but water-raising capacity of this tube-well has been drastically reduced today as water is raised intermittently.

In view of construction of many a multi-storied buildings in New Eskaton area and these newly-built buildings having new WASA water connections of large diameter pipes, the older residents having small diameter water connections, are deprived of water. Under the above backdrop, let the WASA authority

look into the matter, since water is the most precious substance for human living. The penalties payable in the absence of quality water supply is immense and let the LGD ministry and other agencies look into the matter while supply of drinking water through peddlers is to be thought for future!

Mahmud Ali, New Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Price of book

Sir, The prime minister has justly advised the Bangladeshis to develop the habit of reading books, periodicals, papers etc., while inaugurating the National Book Fair on January 1, 1996.

I would like to mention that I could subscribe quite comfortably for two daily newspapers, Readers Digest at Rupees 15 for 12 issues, weekly Time magazine at Rupees 30 for forty issues in the year 1965, when my monthly earning was Rupees 800 only.

But today, I have retired and cannot afford to buy a copy of Readers Digest at Tk 90 while similar is the situation for other books and periodicals. However, West Bengal-published Pooja editions like Ananda Bazar, Ananda Mela, Anandaok etc., sell at Tk 110 each while the quality of paper and printing is superb. Our publications are no match both quality-wise (lower) and price-wise (higher).

In the context of SAARC, there is no harm if we learn the technique of publishing books and periodicals chiefly from W. Bengal and thus develop rather encourage the habit of reading.

Mahmud Ali, New Eskaton, Dhaka 1000

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



The Spin Doctor

THE word you will probably see more of in 1996 is downsizing. It's the word corporations use when they intend to fire half of the staff to save costs and make larger profits for the stockholders.

To facilitate the method of chopping people's heads off, companies offer 'buyouts' — usually paltry sums of money that are supposed to make employees jump for joy or go into the night quietly.

A recent example of downsizing is what AT&T did to bounce approximately 40,000 of its work force. The staff were told that if they didn't accept the buyout, they wouldn't get anything at all. Sometimes downsizing doesn't work as well as management might hope for.

Roger Tingaling, the spin doctor of a giant communications company, was practically in tears when I ran into him at the Princeton Club. 'I can't believe the way employees behave these days. When we made the announcement, all 40,000 of them threw old telephones at me. We're only trying to restructure the company to make it more competitive.'

'They have no manners,' I said. 'You tell someone you don't need him anymore and he wants to make a federal case out of it.'

Tingaling said, 'I have a good mind to fire the entire staff without 80 much as a Hallmark greeting card.'

'I know many companies that would do just that. What's your next step?'

'We're going to make a plea to their spouses and children. We'll say that downsizing is as American as apple pie. Someday they'll be happy that their loved ones took the money and ran.'

'No way. I'm the only spin doctor left after downsizing.'

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OPINION

Present Political Impasse

Tauheed Feroze

Mr Mahfuz Anam has rightly said in his article published on January 1 in The Daily Star that Bangladesh is gradually becoming a political basket-case. In view of the present political crisis facing the country, his observation is no doubt appropriate. Bangla-desh is now engulfed in a cloud of uncertainty. The nation is confused. The political arena has become venomous. The ruling and the opposition parties are in a total confrontation course. After nine years of autocratic rule through the massive upsurge of the people, democracy was established.

This democracy was the dream of the millions. But where does this democracy stand right now? The democracy so very cherished by us is in absolute jeopardy. During the autocratic regime, Bangladesh went backwards. Tremendous losses were incurred in various sectors. No significant developments were attained.

After the fall of the nine-year-long arbitrary reign, the people expected to see some concrete development. People thought that under the banner of democracy Bangladesh would proceed towards prosperity. They thought that they would at last be free from the curse of poverty. We started to dream of a new Bangladesh, we started to visualise a Bangladesh where the ruling and the opposition parties would exist on rapport and steer the nation towards development.

We felt relieved at the thought that at last the days of hartals and strikes are gone. We felt relieved to think that the days of political unrest have left us forever. These thoughts made us very optimistic. We all were looking forward to a new Bangladesh. A Bangladesh free of political bickering, hartals and strikes. But how wrong we were. Once again, we have plunged deep into an abyss of insecurity. The present stalemate has rocked the foundation of our infant democracy. Economic of the country has suffered a severe blow. Instead of heading towards development, the country is now heading for

destruction. Hartals, transport strikes, union strikes — all have returned much to the horror of the common man.

The country is passing through a tempestuous ocean. It is in a turmoil. With the political unrest, violence has increased. There has been a sharp escalation of violence in the last few months. But who can be held responsible for such a deplorable and tragic state of affairs? I am compelled to say that both the ruling as well as the opposition parties are equally culpable for the present miserable condition. Their obstinate attitude is the major ingredient fuelling the present political feud. Many steps have been explored to end this crisis but none of these steps has been accepted by either the position or the opposition parties.

International mediation failed only due to the stubbornness of our leaders — position and opposition alike — no one wants to compromise. Politics is for the people. Main objective of politics is to serve the people and the country. In the course of politics compromises must be made. Political compromises ensure the advancement of a particular nation, but alas! our politicians are not familiar with the word 'compromise'. This word does not exist in their dictionary.

Their allegiance and devotion is towards their respective parties, not towards their country and its unfortunate people. If the government and the opposition parties had been a little concerned about the country and what is good for it they would have resolved their differences in a short span of time.

But it is not the country or the people they are worried about. Their main concern is the materialisation of their interests. At this critical juncture, can we expect to see our leaders come to their senses, can we expect them to bury their petty differences and stabilise the political situation? These questions continue to haunt the minds of millions. But who will answer?