

A Priority Concern

Our readymade garments export to the crucially important US market has been shaken...

The garments export crisis must hit the political leadership, register with them, and sink in their hearts and minds in order that it is not left to be wrestled with in the exclusive preserve of the BGMEA but taken up in earnest at the heart-land of government.

It is no use lamenting the orders cancelled by US buyers in the thick of our political volatility. But what we need taking to heart and doing something concrete about are: (a) our own lapses, if any, in terms of inventory-building, trans-shipment and customs and banking arrangements; (b) order losses to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, India and Vietnam; (c) our lagging behind in the forward cover of orders, which means that effective demand for our apparels has clearly been on a downswing; and (d) in view of the quota crash or demand reduction on certain items, our exporters are enjoying little flexibility for a swing or shift from one category to another by way of bridging the gaps in quota fulfilment.

A recovery plan must have three basic elements. First, the banking, customs, fiscal and freight facilities ought to be fully geared to accelerating the pace of quota fulfilment within the four months remaining of the schedule for it. Secondly our government needs to negotiate with the US government to ensure that the market temporarily lost by us to other countries during the crisis-ridden days is fully restored to us at the earliest and the dropping cutting and making rate is upped to make it profitable to the factories. Thirdly, our missions abroad ought to put their best efforts in for expanding our market reach, and more importantly, helps us secure new investments for developing backward linkages in Bangladesh for her garments manufacturing units.

Vote of Thanks

We find no reason why the president's speech should not go through the convention of a vote of thanks at the Jatiya Sangsad. The outgoing president has fulfilled a constitutional obligation by making his address to a new parliament which now awaits thanks-giving in accordance with a standard parliamentary practice. If, there be any reservations about the content of his speech, these need not warrant a break in the tradition because it is likely to create an exceptional and not necessarily a healthy precedence.

One must bear in mind that the president was nominated by the BNP to the post and has all but served his term of office. By tradition though a president's speech reflects the policies and programmes of the government of the day, but then he made the address in a transitional phase of his incumbency.

We believe the bone of contention is something on which both the Treasury Bench and the president could have reached a compromise, so that neither party were required to lose face. Why make a precedent of something that does not go well with the spirit of flexibility and compromise we so much crave for in our national political life today.

On top of everything, a vote of thanks does not necessarily have to be laudatory on the entire content of the presidential address. There is an opportunity for expressing divergent views on the contents of the President's speech. So where is the problem?

The tradition of vote of thanks on the president's speech needs to be upheld for a broader co-operation and consensus between the ruling party and the opposition.

Flood Relief

The government appears to be well aware of the need for relief and rehabilitation of the flood victims. A meeting of the council of ministers presided over by the Prime Minister has decided to step up relief operations and take up rehabilitation programmes immediately after the flood waters recede. However, the trail of damages left by the receding waters sometimes proves difficult to be addressed. There also remains a wide gap between a plan drawn up and its implementation.

It is really good to know that the issue of post-flood rehabilitation has come up for consideration so early in the day this time round. This means that no impromptu solutions to problems facing the people in flood-hit areas are envisaged. But it is too early to judge the merit of the rehabilitation programmes being put in place. However, at the present moment, we would like to draw the attention of the authorities to the attendant ills of floods, namely the diseases that break out in an epidemic form. Cabinet directives to repair tubewells free of cost to users, or sink new ones, where needed, are welcome steps. But these must be implemented at the earliest to ensure supply of pure drinking water which together with oral salines holds the key to fighting off epidemics.

Involvement of a huge number of relief workers or volunteers would be of crucial importance as far as reaching succour to the marooned people goes. Rafts and speed-boats will be of great help, but we have not got many of them. So here is an area where the focus should be lent to.

Better coordination is an imperative necessity. If fewer people fall victim to diseases, the rehabilitation costs will be that much less.

Mutual Relations: An Opportunity in Bangladesh

Much is made about West Bengal's insistence on flushing the Hoogly by the Ganges waters. This has turned out to be a myth. The Calcutta port is as much dependent on dredging now as it was before the Farakka barrage was constructed.

THE other day, the telephone bell rang at the residence of foreign minister I K Gujral at midnight. He found to his surprise Bangladesh foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad speaking from Dhaka to say 'hello'.

More than anything, it reflects the warmth of relationship. Suddenly, the sentiment of liberation days has returned. There is an overflowing feeling of friendship that had got dry for the last 21 years when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed.

India helped Bangladesh in its liberation struggle. Many of our soldiers died. Nineteen ninety-six is the 25th year of liberation. It is strange that not a single memorial, not even a brick, exists to commemorate the days when Indian and Bangladeshi soldiers fought side by side. Maybe, the Awami League government should take the initiative to build a memorial.

Sheikh Hasina's government at Dhaka wants to hark back on the time when the blood of Indian soldiers mingled with that of Bangladesh freedom fighters, the Mukti Bahini. Foreign Secretary Salman Haider, India's first representative visiting Dhaka was struck by friendliness in the government. The same bureaucrats who were rigid earlier, were now forthcoming.

This puts a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the Deve Gowda government. How to pick up the thread from where Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had

left off is not an easy proposition. People in Bangladesh have been fed on misinformation about India. On the other hand, some of the government officials at New Delhi have played in the hands of hawkish bureaucrats.

Nonetheless, there are now better prospects of an understanding. There will be a spirit of give and take, which our foreign secretary perceived during his visit. That the Bangladesh foreign secretary is returning the call in the next few weeks indicates the speed with which Dhaka wants to solve the existing problems. That she will be accompanied by the home secretary shows that Bangladesh is serious about taking action against the insurgents too.

As Salman Haider found, everything seems to hinge on the sharing of the Ganges water. Emotionally, it is a Kashmir for the Bangladeshis. They will judge not only India but their own government on the equitable sharing of the Ganges waters. Indeed, some of their best land has been reduced to a mere bowl of dust. They have suffered a great deal in the last 14 years.

Come to think of it, the Farakka barrage, which diverts the Ganges to the Hoogly, was built without consulting the other side. Sheikh Mujib agreed to a trial run but no

agreement was reached. It was Ziaur Rahman, the husband of former prime minister. Khaleda Zia, who reached a settlement in 1977 for five years on the basis of 60:40, Bangladesh getting 34,500 cusecs of water and India 20,000 cusecs. And this was to cover the dry season, from January to May 31.

When Mrs Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she did not like the agreement but allowed it to run its time up to 1982.

has not made Hoogly navigable even for ships of smaller size.

The other day, I briefly discussed the matter with West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu in Calcutta. He was all for a new agreement and seemed to favour the division of waters more or less in the same proportion as was done earlier. He said he would consult his engineers. I think we should be generous in our gesture. Salman Haider was told at Dhaka that when New Delhi

exporting goods worth Rs 3,000 crore and importing only worth Rs 100 crore. Naturally, this gives credence to the argument of exploitation. New Delhi has allowed the Bangladeshis Jamdani sarees to sell in India without duty. But that is not enough. Indications of some liberal attitude are available but they are not adequate.

There is yet another point of irritation between the two countries. That is the India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty. Many people in Bangladesh have questioned its utility. Since it was signed when the Indian forces were still in Bangladesh, it is considered a treaty under duress. It would be more politic for New Delhi to allow the treaty to lapse when it runs out its period in the next few months. The Bangladeshis should be assured that India wants friendship but with no strings attached. Even otherwise, a treaty between two friendly countries does not make sense.

My fear is that Khaleda Zia will not sit idle. Her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) may try to stoke the fires of anti-India sentiments. It played the anti-Delhi card in the recent election but did not succeed. Maybe it is still looking for an opportunity to bring people on the streets. It tried to arouse them by alleging that

the polls were rigged. But this did not work because nearly 150 teams of observers, which watched the polls, said that they were fair and independent.

However, if there is no agreement on water — both countries have time till January 1 — then Khaleda Zia would not have to do anything. The disappointment would be so deep that the banks of forbearance would burst to see the people out on the streets. Therefore, all those engaged in improving relations between India and Bangladesh must concentrate their energies on the solution of water.

One hopes that Bangladesh does not again slip into a state of confrontation. The country has paid a heavy price for it. Political instability has affected the country adversely. Donor nations are still a big help but foreign capital has been shy. This has made the sluggish economy still more sluggish. Easy ways to make money have been found, for example, smuggling.

Not long ago, a newspaper implicated the security forces after 6000 Indian cattle appeared for sale at the local market. Illegal trade also includes sugar, eggs and sarees. A survey by the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies finds that the local politicians and politicians at a much higher level are the beneficiaries of smuggling.

Bangladesh and India both need rapprochement and conciliation.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Subsequently, very little water was released from the Farakka barrage. During the Rajiv Gandhi period, it was reduced to a trickle. It was more cussedness on our part than the need.

Much is made about West Bengal's insistence on flushing the Hoogly by the Ganges waters. This has turned out to be a myth. The Calcutta port is as much dependent on dredging now as it was before the Farakka barrage was constructed. Exports have themselves admitted that the water diverted through the barrage

gave 34,500 cusecs of water earlier "it should give more now."

Once the issue of water is out of the way, the anti-India lobby will be defeated. Even the fundamentalists, who are assumably exploiting the absence of an agreement over the sharing of water, will find less support. The last election which has brought the Awami League to power, has shown the fundamentalism playing a very little role.

New Delhi will also have to do something about the enormous deficit in trade. India is

Political Somersault and Reaping Dividend

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

If we try to trace the intention of party deserters we shall have a clear picture about each individual involved in the shifting. We shall have no illusion that personal gain has been the mainstay of such gambles. But it is true that very few could reap benefits in the new party while many of them could not create any impact.

S O, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, like his compatriot in the legal profession, Barrister Abul Hasnat, has come back home. A champion in political somersault Mr Ahmed took pride in expressing his feeling that it was a blissful experience of "home coming". Sitting beside the BNP chairperson in the press conference the debonair barrister-cum-politician could scarcely draw a smile, which, upon reflection in a mirror could present to the viewers rather a pathetic countenance.

Begum Zia, on her part, could however hide the furrows of uncertainty, write largely on her face. Except in the case of Dr Md Alauddin (former Awami League) of Rajshahi her warm welcoming of deserters from other parties, particularly from her arch-rival Awami League, was pitifully unproductive in the June 12 election. Even those from Jatiya Party in earlier spells cut a very sorry figure.

Coming back to Barrister Moudud Ahmed or Barrister Abul Hasnat we have a similarity in diversity. The former, goaded by wild complacency jumped into an uncertain decision to contest from two seats simultaneously. Perhaps his own measurement or weighing of popularity was pampered by sycophants to assume hypothetical weightage. All these proved futile and he fell flat on his stomach at both the constituencies. His coming back to BNP was not without interest anyway. Begum Zia has already decided to put Moudud in the Laxmipur seat which she vacated. But his joining BNP could not so far rouse much enthusiasm amongst the party ranks and files. More particularly the BNP president of Laxmipur district and other leaders have already expressed their displeasure on the issue. In spite of such belligerence within the local party leadership, in the end, they will have to bow down to the dictates of the high command. For some time, therefore, Barrister Ahmed shall have a breathing

time. One has to wait to see if the by-election on BNP ticket could salvage him at long last.

As for Barrister Abul Hasnat, Begum Zia had no other alternative. Mir Shawkat, also an original 'Dhakaiya' could not be nominated by her because of the bad name he earned on different counts. His alleged implication in a number of murders in Lalbagh-Dhanmardi-Mahammad area (Commissioner Shahbuddin of AL being the latest casualty) had already ennobled the image of the ex-soldier. Hasnat was placed in the Lalbagh seat with the hope to more fruitfully exploit his 'Dhakaiya' connection and ancestral linkage. Incidentally his coming back to BNP was also not an welcome augury to die-hard BNP workers and upcoming leaders. The decision of the high command proved here too, abortive and even unsound.

If, by the way, we try to trace the intention of such party deserters we shall have a clear picture about each individual involved in the shifting. We shall have no illusion that personal gain has been the mainstay of such gambles. It is true that a very few could reap benefits in the new party while many of them could not create any impact. Here, between Moudud Ahmed and Abul Hasnat the former may have an edge over the latter. This I say because Mr Ahmed has been assured to be nominated to the vacated place of Begum Zia at Laxmipur. Any pitfall excepting, Barrister Moudud may have an easy sail capitalizing on Begum Zia's personal stature.

Whatever be the case Moudud's pretext for leaving Jatiya Party could be termed as ridiculous and in Mizan Chowdhury's words as "lame excuse". He alluded to the almost unilateral decision of the

party chief Ershad to give Awami League unconditional support. In his explanatory observations he claimed many of his fellow party men were against such an 'authoritarian' decision of the chairman. He could not however give any convincing reply when his attention was drawn to the Jatiya Party constitution where the party chief has been given absolute authority to decide off such issues of party discipline. He has been with Jatiya Party for long and as a leader of some repute no body shall have any reason to think Mr Ahmed was not aware of such over-riding powers of the chairman. Therefore, scanning the sequences that preceded Barrister Moudud Ahmed's decision to quit Jatiya Party (being forgetful of how Ershad saved him from the gaol), one can easily locate the material gain that BNP could give him in the shape of nomination for the ensuing by-election.

The Jatiya Party leaders and workers in the two constituencies from where Moudud fought the last election on 12th June are now openly castigating the barrister for having done nothing tangible for the party. There is also an oblique comment from some of them that Moudud Ahmed has never been able to rise above his personal interest. His re-induction in BNP has been too a bone of contention amongst many old guards whose natural heart burning shall be rather very difficult to neutralize.

Not only Moudud or Hasnat, there were some more joy-riders or day dreamers who have had not too ceremonial entry in BNP. I would exclude Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury of Chittagong as he has been enjoying a sort of "managed

and manipulated popularity" in his constituency. His joining BNP can just be considered as the inevitable step at winding up his National Democratic Alliance (or Front?). In any case, he does not go by default, rather, his shift to BNP gave the party bigger momentum to bag majority seats in Chittagong.

But, how would we look at Anwar Zahid? This gentleman tried his luck with a number of political parties after his unceremonious removal from Ershad's cabinet. One may recall that during his time in Jatiya Party he was ecstatic about his loyalty and allegiance to his leader that he expressed readiness even to sweep the streets if Ershad had desired so. Thus he gave vent to his stigmatic mental upkeping in order to remain near the power centre. His fortune did not however favour him and he was sacked.

Subsequently, he made an abortive attempt to establish link with Khondker Mustaque Ahmed in order to come to limelight again. Being eventually in a total mess he did later join hands with a group of the so-called Freedom Party led by Col Rashid. He named his new party as National Democratic Alliance and concurrently led a youth front named Jubo Command. During this brief period he chose Awami League and others upholding the ideals of the War of Liberation as his twin targets of attack. Here too, he could not hold on the ethical role of a politician. So, he gave up in utter frustration and now declared his willingness to join BNP. Even though Anwar Zahid's joining BNP had no palpable impact, Begum Zia gave him a berth, ostensibly out of pity.

Following such inconsequential shift he tried to impress upon the BNP high command that he had immense popularity to win a Parliamentary seat. In the February 15, 1996 "farical election" he managed nomination from BNP for Jhenidah constituency. His self infatuation ultimately turned into a veritable hallucination. He was pitifully defeated. Undaunted, he continued masticating the bitter dish till the second election on June 12. He was co-opted as a member of the BNP National Electioneering Committee where too he made a mess of everything by his over-enthusiastic utterances, even against the international observers. Thus, he earned all the credit for damaging BNP's prestige to both the national and international community. His political somersault rewarded

him with agonizing results.

Reverting to Jatiya Party's unconditional support to Awami League in the formation of a government by consensus, Moudud Ahmed's overtures and his alluding to many JP members' opposition to Ershad's unilateral decision, we may assume that at least one member of the JP presidium who would silently (for the time being) corroborate the Barrister's contention. Stuck to sullen silence Kazi Zafar Ahmed must have been ruefully ruminating upon his unsuccessful bid to gain a seat in the Jatiya Sangsad. Even the other day, he was very vocal about "rigging and terrorism" of his AL opponent in the election. Mr Ahmed is known for his 'eternal' dislike for Awami League and from that view point he could be one to protest JP's unconditional support to Sheikh Hasina. Nevertheless one may not be surprised if sooner or later, he also follows Barrister Moudud. Only time can prove it or a green signal from Begum Zia can wake him up to action and a ceremonial 'home coming'!

OPINION On Roads and Congestion

Abberali A Africawala

A recent news item has drawn my attention: "Air conditioned buses are being introduced in the roads of Dhaka". It is no doubt a very wise and bold decision. Wise because it has a far reaching positive effect. Bold because in a country with total economic hardship will this venture be successful? If it is then perhaps the vehicular congestion in the roads of Dhaka and Chittagong will be greatly eased.

Lots of talks, discussions, seminars have been held on the issue of resolving this problem. What is the result? We stand where we were — the same traffic thickness haunts us both at Dhaka and Chittagong day in and day out. There has been no implementation of any viable decision that may have taken place. Now that a newly elected government has taken its seat, may I have the honour to present a few view-points on this issue with a most fervent hope that the present authority will take due notice of these views and others to ease traffic congestion.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh is growing into a gigantic city. The once satellite town of Narayanganj and suburb of Tongi are now part and parcel of the metropolis. Millions flock in and out of the city every day. Movement of trains, buses, cars, tempos and rickshaws commence from the early hours in the morning and remain so almost till the zero hour. With all due respect to all the pundits concerned, I, being a layman, take the liberty to suggest the following for Dhaka City:

FLY OVERS: Fly overs may be erected connecting the most vital points, whereby vehicles may reach/cross the points at ease. This will definitely ease the traffic jam, for example, of Kawran Bazar, Bangla Bazar, Mogh Bazar and other points of city Dhaka. The golden question of how it will be done can be best left to the experts, who have already submitted their proposals to the government.

Tube-train: Introducing underground tube-train will be extremely beneficial, connecting the most important points, for example, from Mirpur to Motijheel, Gulistan to Uttara, Mohammadpur to Motijheel. Once these trains start operating, naturally the pressure on roads will ease.

Circular trains: Dhaka is expanding. It's no more a provincial capital. It is a capital city of an independent country.

Territorial boundaries have expanded from the previous boundaries to Narayanganj and Tongi/Savar. So, if a rickshaw is introduced from say Kamalapur going to Tongi, Gazipur, then to Savar heading towards Mirpur, Mohammadpur and back to Kamalapur Railway Station, it will be very beneficial to the people. Then millions of floating people squatting these places will not feel necessary to stay in Dhaka City and prefer to stay at their respective jobs/business and return by evening. This will not only ease the traffic congestion but also lift off population pressure on the capital city.

Rickshaws: Dhaka was once known throughout the world as a city of mosques. Now alongwith that ideality it is also known as a city of rickshaws. No matter what one wishes, rickshaws cannot be done away with if one so desires. Phase-wise they have to be reduced. Meanwhile, adjacent to foot-path, four ft lane for rickshaw may be designated on both sides of the road. Chains or half walls may be raised so that rickshaws do not cross over on the main traffic lane. In this way rickshaws will not create jams any more. They will be controllable leaving the main road thoroughly clear for vehicles.

Taxes, baby taxis, tempos: Of course, we have very little taxes on the street, the culture of having taxis plying on street fitted with meter is yet to grow. However, baby taxis must have meter, this will regulate the plying of such vehicles and thereby ease congestion on the streets.

Similarly, if the same measures are adopted in the port city of Chittagong with specific modifications, then traffic will easily flow also there. Concentration on odd part of the city, like permanent posting of traffic police at Station Road, Sadarghat, Madarbari to Barik Building point will ease the situation. Flyover may be made at Fakirhat, Agrabad, Kadamtali and other places to be specified by experts.

As I said, the views above are of a layman who sincerely wishes that the traffic congestion at Dhaka and Chittagong is eased and we as citizens venture out in the streets with ease and comfort. The authorities may well do to give their views on this.

The writer is chairman of Bangladesh Steel Re-rolling Mills Ltd.

To the Editor

An unpleasant experience

Sir, Various letters, opinions, reports and criticisms are often found in the pages of newspapers and magazines about the indiscipline, irregularity and the topsy-turvy systems of treatment in the government hospitals. Recently, I had to go to a government hospital and there I observed the plight of the general patients.

On 6.7.96 I and few of my relatives went to PG Hospital with my aunt who was pregnant and nearing the delivery. We went to the emergency division of the hospital to get herself admitted there. I like to mention here that earlier my aunt issued necessary cards in the hospital and call on the doctor regularly. Entering into the hospital we saw many people thronged there and they all were waiting for their turn. My aunt enlisted her name in the waiting list of the hospital.

I noticed that who could bribe a little to the doctor's peon got the opportunity to meet the doctor faster. I also noticed that the doctor kept all the patients waiting and frittered away more than one hour gossiping with the representatives of a medicine company.

After waiting more than three hours my aunt got the chance to meet the doctor. She entered the doctor's room in a critical condition but the doctor was average to get herself admitted into the hospital. Moreover he astonishingly told my aunt to come after 10 days what was not only amazing but also unbelievable. The doctor at that time did not think whether my aunt would survive

or not within the period. Besides this, the doctor's peon at his convenience gave us an address of go there as it was associated with the doctor. So we were in a dilemma and could not decide what to do. In the meantime, my aunt's condition was deteriorating and her life was in peril. So having no other alternative we went to a near-by private hospital and immediately got herself admitted there. On the next day (7.7.96) she brought forth her son in the hospital.

Like us hundreds of thousands of people everyday in our country are being neglected and deceived in name of treatment in these government hospitals (in private clinics also). But government is not still taking any measures about it. Is there no end of this suffering?

Sheikh Hasina, our new prime minister, before being elected sought the opportunity to the people for serving the nation. She has got the chance. She should seize the opportunity.

Shahidul Islam Khan Dhaka College Class XIII Roll No. 243

Join BCL or...

Sir, I like to bring the incident of Salimullah Medical College to notice of general public and that of the government as an affected guardian. The students who are neutral and do not belong to any of the parties (Chhatra League, Chhatra Dal or Chhatra Shibir) are being intimidated and taken forcefully to the Chhatra League office and asked

to join Chhatra League. Upon denial, they are being notified that unless they join Chhatra League they may consider their studies in SMC to have come to an end. As of 16th July they were barred from attending an important exam.

This is happening even when the Prime Minister has pledged openly that she will exert all her efforts to curb violence in the educational institutions. We request her to take an immediate action to restrain her own party's students from activities which will lead to nothing but violence.

An affected guardian Dhaka.

Law and order workshop

Sir, Recently the first ever workshop on law and order under government initiative was held at Osmani Memorial Hall, Dhaka. The objective of the workshop was to find out ways and means to combat terrorism.

Some learned speakers presented some important papers and made some valuable suggestions. However, the organisers did not adopt any resolution or recommendation at the workshop. We strongly feel that with view to maintain law and order and combat terrorism in the country, implementation of following two pragmatic and concrete steps, in theory and practice, is imperative:

i) The police administration should be made more conscious about the rights of the people and about the mainte-

nance of law and order. ii) The judges and the lawyers should be more responsible in finding the correct information about cases and expeditious disposal of cases.

O H Kabir 6, Hare Street, Wari Dhaka-1203

Making the country investment-happy

Sir, According to a recent World Bank (WB) report on Bangladesh labour market, Bangladesh has a large number of unions that are linked to political parties but represent a small fraction of the labour force. The report observed that highly politicised and fragmented labour movements which organise massive strikes and are associated with violence give industrial relations in Bangladesh a bad name and discourages investment.

The World Bank report suggested that government should reduce its role in labour market and allow the interaction between enterprises and the trade unions and also improve the present dispute resolution mechanism.

It is sincerely expected that the present democratic government will take pragmatic measures on the basis of the above mentioned WB report and thereby create favourable atmosphere for more foreign investments.

M Zahidul Haque BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207