

Worthy Move

Finally, it seems, the long harped lacustrine consciousness has dawned on the authorities. As a part of the programme to keep the city clean and ensure a desirable environment, the Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) ministry has just issued directives to re-excavate city lakes among other measures.

Dhaka has long been a source of helpless sighs and unreal feeling for its older citizens. Because theirs is a memory filled with the images of a lost world — an unspoiled, young Dhaka with sylvan shadows and silvery criss-crosses of lakes. The reigning reality about the metropolis is a stark and sickening shift from Dhaka's old image. Proliferation of population and pollution along with the unabated waning of the two colours — blue and green — nature once seemed to have bestowed in plenty, are some of its unlovely but unavoidable features today.

Dhaka's separation with its lacustrine legacy as the dead and moribund lakes would suggest, has not only been one of the reasons of its increasing ugliness but also the swelling tide of ecological and environmental hazards. One obvious reason why Dhaka gets projected regularly as a city of water-logging at the advent of even a modest spell of shower is the state of its lakes. Imagine the absurdity lying at the core of the whole situation. We are left to wander over boats for the streets of the city while its lakes are rotting to death. Reports on lakes published at various times have mostly been about the frightening pollution in what little water is left in them. Nobody seemed to see or read any cause of fear in the hazard this pollution has caused to aquaculture of the lakes.

The pollution this lakes are subject to today will affect the health of the urban population tomorrow. Besides, the death of the lakes can make the case of a recently felt national scourge — the paucity of water at both underground and surface level — only worse. When issues of such basic nature are involved with the necessity of reviving city's water channels, citizenry's futile complaint that there is hardly a quiet corner or a cool shade in Dhaka where the care-worn mind or the fatigued body can be revitalised with the blessings of nature, pales out in insignificance.

The Daily Star, one of the voices for a drive to give the lakes a new lease of life, congratulates the ministry concerned for its directives to revive the lakes as well as to develop and create parks, and hopes the words are soon translated into some effective actions.

Consumers Cheated

Bangladesh indeed stands out in the world with a distinctly unique 'shop culture' that not only doesn't allow the shopper to have his money's value but also gives as a bonus a dose of uncivilised manners. You cannot have your pick. Try it and you are in for some scalding.

The cheating is done universally through the use of non-standard weights and measures. Although there is a fair chance of many sellers not intending to cheat but the buyers are all cheated all the same. For non-standard weights and measures have a property of being less than the unit standards set by the government according to the universally accepted metric system of grams and centimetres — and never more.

Most traders have taken advantage of the confusion between traditional and metric units and have kept the confusion alive as a help for cheating. Jewellers justify their non-abdiance by the metric law by citing buyer's resistance to change *bhori* and *anna* to grams. No doubt people have been used to separate and indigenous gold measures for over tens of centuries. That does not mean they will not change. Why the Indians changed all right and within a couple of years!

The body charged with standardising weights and measures, the BSTI, feels that it cannot put into universal practice its standard. But surely the government can. A failure to ensure that none other than standard weights and measures would be available and usable speaks of the same ineptness of governance that cannot stop sale of non-iodized salt. Just keep a foolproof watch on the factories and shut down the recalcitrant ones.

There hasn't so far been any determined government effort to make traders use only BSTI-marked weights and measures. It is high time they launched a serious campaign to rectify their lapse for which the entire nation is paying everyday.

Three Cheers for Youth

He may or may not hog headlines as another runner in the lure reserved for the batting geniuses like Lara, Tendulkar or Waugh. But the 14 years and 227 days old Pakistani who had to be granted special leave by his school to make his Test debut against Zimbabwe in Faisalabad on Thursday, has got his name entered in the record book. The Karachi cricketer, deemed as a brilliant batting prospect, eclipsed compatriot Mushtaq Mohammad's feat of being the youngest cricketer ever baptised in Test cricket. The former Pakistani skipper was only 15 years and 124 days old when he made his Test debut in 1958. Thirty-seven years later, another Pakistani has bettered the feat.

Pakistan has always been a pioneer of sort in bleeding cricketers early. Belatedly and irregularly though, they are reaping the benefits of the policy pursued by the cricket authorities.

Raza's resonant entry at the highest level of the game is an obvious triumph of youth but it is also a poignant reminder of the reality here in Bangladesh. The generation of Aminul Islam, Minhazul Abedin and Akram Khan is on the wane and Bangladesh's quest for a membership in the Test Club has just begun. Sadly, and despairingly, the passage of a reasonably able generation is not marked by the advent of even an equally if not more talented group of individuals. We do not want to start with a litany for prodigies like Razas. For the time being, few Aminul Islams would do. Catch them young.

In a very rare and 'risky' move, the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League decided to elect Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the President of the Republic. The retired Justice is now the president of this country. Widely known for his honesty, dignity and non-partisan stances, the honourable Justice is crowned in this position for the second time. Earlier, in 1990, he was adorned with presidency through a consensus reached among the contending political parties. His only obligation to the nation at that time was to arrange for the peaceful transfer of power to the peoples' representatives. The widely acclaimed epoch-making neutral, free and fair election — the product of which was the 5th JS — was held during his tenure of office. In fact, Shahabuddin Ahmed is said to have headed the state at a time when the democratic institutions of this country were booted down by the autocratic regime, when fair and free elections were replaced by farcical elections, and above all, when darkness shrouded the rays of hopes of a civilised nation. The Justice successfully completed his tasks after which he retired and began to lead a solitary life.

But once again Justice Shahabuddin hit headlines by consenting to become the President of Bangladesh. However, the decision to offer him the presidency, apparently, seems to impose rarity as well as risks for PM Sheikh Hasina and her party. Bangladesh Awami League is a rare event since, on a very few occasions, in the past, relatively non-partisan personalities could enter into the choice set of the ruling party. More often than not it was, to put it bluntly, the 'most obedient servant' to be picked up as the head of the state. Quite obviously, the expectations that greased such a decision was that the incumbent would tow the party line of actions, act as a party cadre and thus do everything that would serve, especially, the party interests. The most recent episodes should, perhaps, bear the hypothesis out. Ipo fact, people generally seem to have lost all respects for and interest in this vital post of the country.

On the other hand, the decision to elect a man like Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the President also, seemingly, poses heavy risks to the mentors. It is because, unlike some of his predecessors, the person we are talking about it not likely to be swayed away by whims of the politics of the party in power that elected him. He is also unlikely to be a 'titular' in the sense that his predecessors were. But presumably, more often than not, he would speak out his mind for the greater interests of the nation. Therefore, it can safely be concluded that the PM of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina and her party this time played a risky shot in the game of politics. We can only congratulate her for taking such a move and wish that such a risky shot would bring hefty political dividends both in the short and the

long run. The President of Bangladesh, under the present constitutional arrangements, is considered to be 'powerless' implying, perhaps, that the President is endowed with no executive powers of the state. In fact, the constitutional changes made at the time of a switch-over to the parliamentary form of government devolved all executive powers to the head of the government (i. e. to the PM).

There is a reckoning the other way round. Some quarters strongly feel that our President is not that 'powerless' as he is projected to be. His powers are based on the moral suasion that he might impart upon the government. His strengths and weaknesses would lie in his capacity to advise the government. He has every right to comment on government policies/proposals bearing in mind that the ultimate decision on policy matters belong to the Cabinet. Late VV Giri, the In-

Welcome Aboard, Mr. President!

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Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



from the head of the state. According to the existing principles of governance, the head of the state is titularly there just to act in line with the advice of the PM. The last constitutional coup, transferred the most important defence matters to the President's desk (the objectives and ramifications of such a coup were evidenced on the eve of the 12 June elections). Besides that, by and large, the President of Bangladesh carries no executive powers, whatsoever.

There is a reckoning the other way round. Some quarters strongly feel that our President is not that 'powerless' as he is projected to be. His powers are based on the moral suasion that he might impart upon the government. His strengths and weaknesses would lie in his capacity to advise the government. He has every right to comment on government policies/proposals bearing in mind that the ultimate decision on policy matters belong to the Cabinet. Late VV Giri, the In-

terests of the nation. The President's moral stands on various conflicting issues of national interest should weigh more powers than his so-called executive powers. As said earlier, Justice Shahabuddin is relatively better poised than others because of his celebrated past and his non-partisan present. His hard earned credibility as a neutral man is his best asset. He seems to be the only person who can bring together different views on a table and work out a consensus. Thus we feel that he has, in fact, so much to do in the coming days that he could be robbed of his good sleep and comfortable leisure.

We repeat our congratulations to the present government for gifting the nation with a non-partisan person to head our state. We hope that Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed would leave no stone unturned to uphold his image of neutrality as the President and provide the government with suggestions for a good governance. Once again, welcome aboard, Mr President.

Investment Opportunities and Challenges

M Badrul Haque, Ph D writes from Potomac, USA

The global market for information services is already large and is growing. Bangladesh has both time and cost advantage to be competitive in this huge market. Prospect for developing this industry in Bangladesh is good as there is already a nascent information service industry in the country and a growing number of non-resident Bangladeshis are doing very well in this growth sector abroad.

THE new government has shown an ability to act quickly and decisively, with due diligence, on a number of policy measures that were under consideration of the previous government. Simultaneously, efforts to improve law and order situation have also been increased. Experience suggests that normally it takes two to two-and-a-half years for a new government to articulate its development strategy, especially one that has not been in power for a while. Yet, a number of legislation aimed at promoting investment were passed during the first session of the new Parliament. These decisive actions have raised expectations, both inside and outside the country, that Bangladesh can reach a higher level of development provided political stability prevails.

If high rates of growth are to be achieved, Bangladesh needs to reverse its rather poor performance in attracting foreign private saving. Total foreign investment over a five-year period has been only a mere US 100 million dollars, despite the introduction of a relatively competitive foreign investment regime. The new government has placed increased importance on attracting foreign private investment and associated technology transfers as well as on implementing a simplified investment process for all. Government ministers have indicated the need to go beyond policy initiatives and remove various physical impediments to investing in Bangladesh. Reported the workaholic habit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is promoting rapid decision making at the top with due diligence. Moreover, the government is considering making the Board of Investment a truly one-stop-shop to meet the needs of the investors.

During the Prime Minister's visit in the United States of America, she is expected to invite non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) and other potential investors to choose Bangladesh for their investment. The NRB community can surely provide their collective saving and knowledge in the development

of Bangladesh for mutual benefits. A concerted effort by the NRB community can be a catalytic force in attracting additional foreign investment. However, the authorities need to properly harness the resources of the NRBs in the development of Bangladesh by targeting the growing number of first and second generation NRBs who are involved in the cutting-edge technology in their respective fields. If a small number of professionals from these growth-oriented sectors go to Bangladesh, together with associated technology transfers, to establish businesses the benefits to Bangladesh and the investors themselves would be enormous. Passive NRB investment should also be promoted, but it is likely to become important only at a later phase of the development thrust.

The NRB community can play important roles through direct investment and technology dissemination to domestic investors in such export-oriented growth areas as information and health care services as well as tourism development. Even if Bangladesh can capture a fraction of the global demand, the development potentials of these sectors are far greater than what we have witnessed in the garment industry. It might be recalled that the phenomenal growth of the garments industry since the 1980s is based on a relatively simple technology and associated knowledge transfers, coupled with a facilitating role by the government. In any case, there is a critical need to diversify exports and focus increasingly on high value-added activities.

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Bangladesh is good as there is already a nascent information service industry in the country and a growing number of NRBs are doing very well in this growth sector abroad. The information services industry would generate employment for high school to university graduates of all disciplines. Even the history majors can be quickly trained in data punching, if nothing else. Unemployment among the post secondary school graduates should be eliminated except due to changes in jobs and locations. The value-added in information services is relatively high.

The government can assist in making Bangladesh a major supplier in the global information services market. Towards this objective, it can obtain a free diagnostic of the prospects and impediments to developing information services in Bangladesh by simply requesting such a study from the World Bank. In addition, grant resources of the Institutional Development Fund of the World Bank can be used to the Bangladesh introduce information services industry to major markets, promote establishment of joint-ventures and negotiate favourable telecommunication fees for the industry users. Without delay, therefore, the government should assign information services development a high priority and adopt an information services development strategy. This would encourage a number of NRBs to make the relatively small investment necessary to start information services business in Bangladesh. These investors would typically be taking leave from their existing jobs and provide information services primarily on contracts basis. As they establish reputation, their businesses will grow and, to-

gether, the image of Bangladesh as a centre for information services will become established.

With respect to health care services and tourism, an important pre-condition is the development of international airports in Chittagong and Sylhet, together with concomitant liberalisation of air transportation. Fortunately, the government has already taken preliminary steps to upgrade both airports and begun further liberalising air transportation. Development of international airports in addition to ZIA is important for two reasons. First, the Zia International Airport has suffered from past flooding and, with expected developments around it, future flooding are strong possibilities. Chittagong is an alternative, but not so during the hurricane season. This leaves the country's third largest airport at Sylhet for international links with the rest of the world in all seasons.

Second, upgrading of Chittagong and Sylhet airports will have substantial primary and secondary benefits. Even initially, international flights to both destinations, perhaps with a stopover at Dhaka, could be justified by passenger volumes from natives of these regions now settled in the UK, North America and the Middle East. Moreover, these destinations could then become natural centres for competitive export-oriented health care services (such as retirement homes) and tourism development with initial investment and technology transfers by NRBs. In addition, larger aircraft at Chittagong and Sylhet airports will have substantial cargo space, which could ship products from Bangladesh to the ethnic markets in Europe, North America and the Middle East. It would be possible to send out not only

specialty items such as the 'wikhira' of Sylhet region but all types of fragrant Bangladeshi flowers and other non-traditional exports. Here again, the NRB community can participate by marketing these exports and directly investing in the production processes.

With regard to passive investment, the NRBs would be careful in making their saving available for investment in Bangladesh just as they would be in the country of their residence. At a recent meeting organised by the Bangladesh American Foundation at the World Bank, the Finance Minister asked the NRB community to invest in Bangladesh for profit rather than any sentimental reason. The advice is pertinent. While investment in a country like Bangladesh has the prospect of very high returns, poor investment choices could result in losing some or all of the investment. After all, the Bangladesh government is losing over US \$500 million each year from the operation of state-owned enterprises. Moreover, a number of investors lost their initial investment in the many efforts in the early 1970s to mobilise NRB community's saving for investment in Bangladesh. Fortunately, the financial and regulatory framework today is much better in protecting the small investors. Nevertheless, present options to the NRBs are limited, while new options are likely to emerge only as the economy grows and the global demand for investment in Bangladesh rises.

The physical distance to Bangladesh is not a problem in this age of fax and electronic mail, which could be used to engage the services of Bangladeshi or foreign securities firms based in Dhaka for stock transactions. However, only a limited number of NRBs will take

advantage of this option due to a combination of perceived risks, relatively high transaction costs and unfamiliarity with stock transactions. The recently introduced quota of 5 per cent of all initial public offerings (IPOs) prior to stock exchange listings will encourage increased participation by the NRB community provided the IPOs are advertised, together with application forms, in expatriate newspapers.

The fundamental problem of passive investment is that most potential NRB investors are unlikely to have adequate information or time to undertake necessary research, especially for unknown companies, thereby limiting the community's collective investment in Bangladesh. This suggests mobilisation of saving by delegation of investment responsibilities to professionals whom the NRBs can trust. Recent legislation permitting private sector management of mutual funds in Bangladesh, together with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) effort in helping a Bangladeshi securities firm establish a mutual fund, in collaboration with a foreign partner, would facilitate some NRB investment in secondary market and provide a needed initial assurance that the fund managers will remain under the IFC's watchful eyes until a certain level of management maturity is reached.

However, the most convenient passive investment vehicle for the NRBs is designated Bangladesh country funds listed on major international stock exchanges. Overall foreign interest in a Bangladesh country fund, particularly from institutional investors, will develop when profitable investment opportunities expand in Bangladesh. Until then, relatively wealthy NRBs could invest the US \$5 to US \$7 million initial capital for such a fund to be viable. The challenge is to identify the interested potential NRB investors whose representatives could then seek a Country Fund manager and possibly IFC financial and technical participation.

To the Editor

Saudi ban on foreign nationals employment

Sir, It is felt necessary to bring to the notice of all Bangladeshis nationals, who are interested in overseas employment in Saudi Arabia, concerning embargo on the employment of foreign nationals. Only a few days back it was a talk of the Kingdom that the Saudi government is forcing foreign nationals to go back to their own country. Everybody from under-developed countries, specially from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, who are working here have become scared about their stay in Saudi Arabia.

It was officially announced on the 19th October, 1996, that Saudi Government has suspended employment of expatriates in 13 professions/ categories which has been published in the Saudi dailies. These professions are: Personnel Manager, Personnel Administrator, Treasurer, Auctioneer, Customs Clearance Officer, Pursuer, Messenger, Security Guard, Security Officer, Cashier, Watchman, Cargo Shipper and all Insurance jobs. That means from now on no visa will be issued on those categories, and at the same time, work permits will not be renewed any further whoever presently working here under those categories.

The Saudi government has also earmarked another 13 professions for which work permit will be renewed for 1 year only, those who are already working,

those deportees. The government should keep in mind that those people are earning or had been earning the valuable foreign currency for the country as a whole.

M Nurul Haque, FCA  
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Saudi Arabia

The aim of this move, is to provide about 660,000 jobs to the Saudi nationals, out of which 320,000 will progressively be replaced against the expatriates. This plan has been included in the next 6th five-year Development Plan.

Under this circumstances it is advisable for Bangladeshis not to come here for an employment under the above-mentioned categories. Our manpower agents sometimes cheat poor Bangladeshis giving high hopes for their vested interests. As such, the utmost request to the Bangladeshis job seekers to Saudi Arabia not to accept any offer/visa of those categories. Any visa of those categories is claimed to be false.

Very recently 30,000 Bangladeshis have been forced to go back from UAE to Bangladesh. It is also learnt that a good number of Bangladeshis are going to be deported next 6 months. The government should immediately take necessary initiatives to negotiate these deportation problems with the country concerned by developing diplomatic relationship or some other way that may seem fit. Otherwise, the government should make a masterplan to rehabilitate

those deportees. The government should keep in mind that those people are earning or had been earning the valuable foreign currency for the country as a whole.

M Nurul Haque, FCA  
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The Mayor's assurance

Sir, The Mayor has given assurance that he will present a neat city to the citizen of Dhaka by 31st of March '97. I feel very encouraged as Mr Mohammad Hanif, the Mayor of Dhaka, has decided to do so. I am confident that he will make that happen. This time it seems that the Mayor has finally taken firm determination which was lacking so long, to give the city of Dhaka a civilised look and I believe that he will receive all the cooperation from the city-dwellers including from all the service agencies concerned like DMP, WASA, RAJUK etc. We will keep watch to see which of the agencies do not extend legitimate cooperation to the efforts of the Mayor.

The city of Dhaka looks very clumsy, congested and dirty, mainly because all the footpaths of the city are unlawfully occupied by the hawkers, vendors and shopkeepers. First of all, these unauthorised occupants should be evicted from the footpaths and pavements and in this task, the Mayor will need cooperation from the DMP only. Once the pavements are

cleared off the city will look clean and open and it will be easier to carry out the rest of the tasks smoothly as well.

I request the Mayor to go ahead with courage and determination; we are all behind you.

MRR Khan  
38, Naya Paltan, Dhaka-1000.

Image of Bangladesh abroad

Sir, The image of Bangladesh to the western world is always of a poor and poverty-stricken nation. Specially in the North American countries the media tend to add the adjective 'one of the poorest' in front of Bangladesh. It may be true we are a poor nation in terms of wealth, but are we really poor in terms of humanity, culture, heritage and other good human values which these western countries do not have any more? The media of Bangladesh should take care of such nonsense utterances of the western media.

Farhad Chowdhury  
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Anomalous pay-scale

Sir, Due to the prevailing anomaly in their pay-scales, the professors and associate professors serving in the three government agriculture colleges of the country are suffering from frustration. They are presently drawing their

salaries in lower pay-scales. It is understood that the authority concerned has now referred the case to the new Pay Commission. But it may be mentioned here that in the Memo. No. Krishi-3/BARI-29/94/668, dt. 01.01.94, by which the Ministry of Agriculture gave administrative approval against 206 posts with pay-scales in favour of the 'Haji Md Danesh Agri. College Project' up to 31.3.95, the pay-scales for professors and associate professors were given Tk. 7800-9000 and 7100-8700 respectively.

May we request the competent authority to kindly once again review the pay-scales of Agri Colleges' professors and associate professors for ensuring their genuine pay-scales?

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Taxation vs WASA

Sir, The WASA water supply at New Eskaton, Eskaton Gardens, Moghbarar, Shiddeswari etc., continues to be a problem for the past 15 years as I am staying in this locality. The situation of water supply improved after sinking more WASA deep tubewells at Hafizabad colony, Eskaton Garden and Bangla Motor area. The landlords are in great difficulty due to frequent change of residences by tenants due to water crisis but WASA supply

will never be able to cope with the situation due to continuous construction of high-rise buildings and apartments. Enough guarantees in respect of a prosperous Bangladesh continue to be uttered by the government in power just like the former governments but none is ready to guarantee a few pails of clean water to all citizens of Bangladesh. Under the above situation, I would request tax collecting agencies like Dhaka City Corporation and Income Tax authorities to consider taxation in the context of WATER-scarce zone and fix taxation accordingly.

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The missed mazar

Sir, A picture published in the front page in The Daily Star on 12.10.96 showed that President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was placing wreath at the mazar of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and another picture in back page showed that the president was placing wreath at the mazar of late president Ziaur Rahman.

President could also place wreath on the mazar of Ershad had been a president dead.

Alas, Ershad missed the chance this time!

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