

Trade Reform

Instead of increasing, Bangladesh's share in world export has come to dwindle over the years, says a recently published World Bank study paper. In 1972 we contributed .09 per cent of the total volume of global export. Twentytwo years later, in 1994 that figure scaled down to .06. This indeed is a sad commentary on the performance of the interregnum governments in this vital aspect of national economy.

So, to be anywhere near the nations that have stolen march over us in the quest for economic consolidation and stability, we need to make up for the lost time in the most vigorous and innovative way possible. Although the government is committed to an export-oriented growth strategy and has put one vaguely in place, the same has not gathered desired pace, observes World Bank Action Note. This is owed to the dearth of some further reforms in our already reformed trade policy. Singling out the successes of the reformist policy as seen in the narrowing of difference between world and domestic prices, a fact that should work as a disincentive force to smuggling, the paper calls for further removal of incentives of smuggling and duty evasion through the underpricing of imports from the current trade regime.

While the substance of the technical observation that trade policy reform is yet to shift incentives fully towards the production of exportables is incontestable, the prescription for further import liberalisation and tariff reform as *sine qua non* for this to happen, does not settle on our consciousness with such consummate ease. Bangladesh has gone for import liberalisation in a big way by either removing or minimising tariff barriers for various items intended for our market. This has led to a further deterioration of the emaciated health of indigenous industries.

An import policy weighted towards a larger procurement of capital, intermediate and production-related goods as distinguished from shopping luxury or consumerist items is considered to be ideal for the growth of exports.

In the ultimate analysis, however, export competitiveness is made up of the price and quality of the merchandise we offer.

Does not Wash

Former President and Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad does not seem to have changed much: he continues to spring surprises the way he did when he was in power. The latest of his surprises concerns his recalling a desire to return to the barracks after the polls he had wanted to hold in 1884 but did not quite succeed in doing so. The JP chief earned the same as a master juggler and the same streak can easily be discerned in this latest statement by him. He blames the BNP in particular for its refusal to participate in the '84 and '86 elections. The former autocrat is desperate to give the impression that if the political parties had agreed to take part in his proposed polls of '84, the course of the country's history would have been different. What he wants to say is that he was reluctant to continue with the martial law.

Why is Ershad so keen to convince people of a different role he wanted to play than the one we all know he played, calling into action all the guiles and manipulative skills at his command? That the man has political ambition is no secret and he seems to be preparing his ground inch by inch. What he says is not what he always means. If this was a trade-mark of his politics before his ouster from power it has not changed since. Politics of this kind must look for a scapegoat and Ershad has a ready one in the BNP. A closer look into the motive of this man might reveal that he tends to heighten his own image. In that exercise who could be a better target than the BNP which is now in the opposition?

The deposed ruler is trying to give yet another impression of his love for democracy. We all know how democratic he was when in power. Dwelling on political horse-trading he once again holds the BNP responsible for the vice and the message he wants to drive home is that it was the BNP which actually delayed the process of democracy. We doubt if the ploy is going to work any more. He may have thought that people have failed to read between the lines of his speech. He is mistaken. People understood well what he said and what he meant. It is wrong to think that people are foolish. They hardly need lecturing from anyone — least of all from a proven autocrat — on democracy.

Plastic Poison

We have joined the anti-plastic bandwagon. But how effectively? Until now this solidarity has been an ineffectual one with people hardly grasping the deadly effect of the unscrupulous use of plastic materials and polythene bags.

These temptingly handy containers are used in the carrying of all sorts of buyable necessities. Alarming, they are more in vogue at the groceries, the places that provide the ingredients for our daily meals. Elements threatening human health which are inherently present in the polythene bags very easily make their way into our health and render us vulnerable to a frighteningly long list of diseases ranging from stomach ailments to leukemia. Their prolonged use jeopardises the functioning of the kidney and brain, too. Besides these multiple health hazards, we have this enormous threat to our ecosystem. Polythene is imperishable or indestructible. They will either disrupt the drainage system or tell on the fertility of the soil because the chemicals they are made of eat away earth's ability to purify oxygen.

We do not seem to have any idea the enormous health problem we are destined to face if we continue to be such professed friends of plastic containers and poly bags.

The health department of the government needs to launch a vigorous and relentless campaign to warn people about the health hazards posed by the rampant use of plastic. Along with immediate and effective ban on the production of polythene bags, the government should make the optimal use of the mass electronic media to help people form a plastic-free habit.

Current Indo-Bangladesh Relations: A Preliminary Assessment

The Indo-Bangla Joint Economic Commission would have met and decided on some relevant issues by the time this article is published. People would hope that our government does not commit itself to doing things which are disputed and a large section, if not a majority of our people, are doubtful about its propriety.

To make an objective, albeit preliminary, assessment of a highly sensitive, supercharged subject as this one is almost an impossible task. Any such attempt is fraught with the danger of being branded as partisan, prejudiced, uninformed and even distorted. Yet, some people have to make an attempt, though it may be like hitting at the hornet's nest.

Next week, the famous or infamous Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty is due to expire. Whatever may have been the rationale of the Treaty at the time of its signing has lost its validity and usefulness quite some time ago. Both the ruling party and the opposition have publicly committed themselves not to renew the Treaty on its expiry. The government is expected to abide by it and to make a policy statement. Without this, an element of uncertainty may be added to its future course of action which is not desirable.

The resumption of power by the Awami League government in Dhaka has caused a remarkable stir towards promoting multi-faceted cooperation between the two countries.

It appears as though the Indian government had been waiting for this day when a friendly government of their choice sits at the helm of affairs in Bangladesh and becomes beneficiary of all what the former could provide. There are historical reasons for it, no doubt. That does not necessarily mean that the other governments were not friendly. But even if they have been, they were not as friendly as the present one. As a matter of fact, all intervening governments have, in some measure, tried to solve some of the outstanding problems between the two countries. The Indian response, for diverse reasons, was not that warm.

The most vexed issue obviously has been the one relating to the sharing of waters of the river Ganges. The Awami League claims that they have done wonders by concluding a treaty on the water issue and of substantial duration which other Parties had not been able to do. The fact that the Indian government has been made to make some formal commitment to sharing the waters of

the Ganges after so many years of inaction is, in fact, an achievement for the Awami League government. Whether the Treaty is fair and that it has taken necessary measures to safeguard all interests of Bangladesh is another matter. There are substantial differences of opinion on this aspect of the issue among people here.

The Treaty has been subjected to criticism mainly on grounds that it has incorporated in itself a juggling of figures which have not been substantiated and may not be able to stand the test of time. The discharge of water to Bangladesh has been less than the quantum envisaged so far. The absence of a guarantee clause and that of a provision of arbitration which exist in almost all such international agreements also appear to be among the principal drawbacks of the Treaty.

From the negative side, the West Bengal Chief Minister's statement that the interests of his state and its capital have been adequately safeguarded nullifies the earlier contention that the availability of waters at Farakka is not adequate to meet the demands of both West Bengal and Bangladesh. The absence of a befitting provision in the Agreement, pledging a time-framed course of action for undertaking effective measures sincerely for permanent augmentation of waters in the Ganges, constitutes another shortcoming of the Treaty.

What is being much talked about in this connection is whether any concessions or facilities have been granted to India in return for the water treaty. The government has vehemently denied any *quid pro quo* made on this deal. The opposition believes otherwise.

They contend that even if no formal declaration was made, there must have been tacit agreement between the two governments as to what would India get in return. They cite the cases of Asian Highway transiting through Sylhet-Tamabil point, sub-regional grouping and perhaps the Chittagong Hill Tracts

issue. There may have been others. No amount of discussions, arguments and persuasion would deter the government from doing what they had committed earlier, according to many BNP stalwarts and the rank and file.

The next burning issue relates to the massive disparity of trade between the two countries. It is monumental, in an unheard of ratio, against Bangladesh. The Indian government has to agree to taking effective measures to rectify at least a reasonable part of this gross imbalance. What is even more dangerous is the bulging illegal trade between the two

work. The SAARC Charter itself envisages within its own framework such cooperation among some of its member countries. Under Article 7, provision has been made to constitute form action committees to implement a specific project. These action committees are to be appointed by the Standing Committee, which is composed of Foreign Secretaries of SAARC countries. So, without establishing a parallel institution, the same cooperation can also be forged.

Let India take up one issue, such as long-term augmentation of waters of the Ganges, invoking cooperation with Nepal.

Current and Crosscurrent

by M M Rezaul Karim

countries, especially in border areas. The cheaply produced Indian goods are flooding Bangladesh, threatening indigenous industries to peril. From the Bangladesh side, mostly all types of imported electronic, chemical and other materials are smuggled into India, thereby causing the hard-earned foreign exchange of Bangladesh to deplete. Unless satisfactory measures are taken to redress the situation, the Bangladesh-India relations will be in doldrums, no matter how much we wish to implement our commitments to SAFTA and SAFTA.

Again, the quantum of investment from India is relatively very poor and does not reflect the desire of the two peoples in promoting even a loosely-woven economic unit. There was of course heavy drain in foreign exchange in the recent stock market debacle, but it is our own fault and no other country is to blame for it.

As for the sub-regional group, a large section of the people of Bangladesh are not in favour of making a separate formal institutional frame-

And also, the granting of Nepal's request for the short corridor to Bangladesh, lying pending for over two decades, will initiate cooperation among at least three countries of the region. This will also help establish India's credibility for seeking genuine and mutually beneficial cooperation among these countries.

In regard to transit, the BNP has been willing to grant to India the proposed Asian Highway's transit facilities through Bangladesh to a third country which is, in this case, Myan-

mar. All the 24 countries through which the Asian highway is expected to traverse envisage transit from one country through a second country to a third country, and not instead of the third country back to the first country again. BNP would be happy, like all other Asian partners, to grant India transit to a third country through the traditional Chittagong-Cox's Bazar route.

It was stated that the BNP government also once agreed to allow the Sylhet-Tamabil point for transit as one of the two routes. In support, it was claimed that Myanmar was reported to have preferred this route to the traditional one. But, as far as one knows, the Myanmar government has not so far taken any public stand, indicating their choice of the route for the Asian Highway. On the other hand, construction or improvement of the highway from Akyab, the opposite point of Cox's Bazar, to Yangon is progressing satisfactorily. So is the case about the highway from Akyab to mid-point on the existing Yangon to Kunming (in China) highway. Our present Commerce Minister also recently stated that the Yangon Government had no objection to allow the transit route by improvising the old Cox's Bazar-Akyab road. So, why should one insist on the Sylhet-Tamabil point of transit for the Asian Highway? Anyway, the Sylhet-Tamabil border point is expected to remain open for authorised bilateral trade with north-eastern India.

A highly sensitive bilateral issue for discussion is the problems relating to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The talks are going on at present and every patriotic person should hope for its prompt and peaceful solution. Any leak, accidental or deliberate, could cause embarrassment and may even jeopardise negotiation. From that point of view, any suggestion to withdraw our soldiers from our own land is not only unjustified but tantamounts to the infringement of our sovereign rights. Of course, there could be agreements on suspension or termination of military operations on both sides. But it is our inherent right as a sovereign nation to decide where we should maintain our garrisons and outposts in the CHT in the same way as we decide in the rest of our regions and districts.

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OPINION

Flood Control Embankments and Epidemic Kala-azar in Bangladesh

Stephen F Minkin

population attributable risk fraction was 78.8 per cent.

These are large increases in risks. Kala-azar is known to be a volatile disease responding to environmental changes. It is also the cause of very high mortality. The FAP 16 study contained a number of recommendations which were ignored. These included the need for increased surveillance in the FAP 3.1 and FAP 20 project areas.

The FAP 20 Project Area was Kala-azar-free at the time of the study but is surrounded by Kala-azar endemic highlands. Changes due to FAP 20 would similarly delay or prevent floods thereby potentially increasing the risk of the disease. (Are the Dutch, Germans and EEC listening?)

Kala-azar cases were clustered within flood protected areas in contrast to other patients, who came from villages outside embankments... Living completely within embankments substantially increased risk. People living within embankments were found to have a risk of developing Kala-azar that was 17.69 times higher than among those living outside embankments. A high proportion of Kala-azar morbidity can be explained by living within embankments. In this the attributable risk among the exposed was 88 per cent and the

I am very concerned about the potential impact of the Jamuna river training on Kala-azar and on environmental health, in general. Unfortunately because the findings from the Kala-azar study were ignored, larger issues relating to engineering, environmental, health, and disease with continue to plague the nation.

The fact that Kala-azar is a deadly disease affecting thousands of people a year warrants immediate attention. We have

Prospects of Bangladesh Cricket

Md Eradatullah

In the field of games and sports Bangladesh has not as yet been able to earn international name and fame in any sector compared to other countries of this region namely, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. The only ray of hope that is still alive in the minds of the sports lovers of the country is cricket. It was all the more illuminated by the glorious success in the last ACC tournament held in Malaysia last year when our national team clinched the title by defeating UAE in the final. Like myself, many expected that Bangladesh boys would be able to repeat the similar performance in the SAARC tournament recently concluded in Dhaka. But as we all know, this time, they have failed to live up to the expectation.

With very little time left when ICC tournament is going to start in Malaysia which will decide the fate of Bangladesh whether it would be able to play in next world cup (to be held in England in 1999), a careful homework seems essential. We have a painful memory of the last ICC tournament held in Kenya in 1994 when we failed to secure a berth among the first three. Does the same fate await this time also? This question is haunting many cricket fans, though the cricket stalwarts like Zahir Abbas and Srinath spoke highly of Bangladesh team particularly mentioning about the few talented players like batting prodigy of Aminul Islam Bulbul. In their opinion there is nothing to be disappointed at the poor result of SAARC tournament since in ICC tournament they will not have to face such strong contenders and they expressed their firm conviction that Bangladesh will surely play in the next world cup.

We had stated in the past that if the essential services, like supply of water and electricity is not stopped, buses, motor vehicles and rickshaws can ply on the roads, train, water transports and aeroplanes can operate, radio and TV can function, hospitals and police stations are open, essential food items and medicine are available in the market, police and army can attend duty on the national holidays and weekly holidays, then why can't we make an arrangement also for the publication of newspapers on holidays?

Without being so much optimistic about our team, let us first figure out the defects and lapses of our team which led to our failure last time though I will not say there is ignominy for Bangladesh team to be placed at the bottom against Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka.

Rather any result would be surprising as we all know all these countries have test-playing experience of long long years and each country had the honour of becoming world cup winner at

We think the selectors would do well in making small reshuffle of the team by making a few changes in the forthcoming ICC tournament.

Keeping in view the effective

role of spinners, Sk Salahuddin and Saifullah Gem may be included if Rafique is unfit to play. Our pace attack is not also infallible. The battery of pace attack like Saiful, Anis, Shanta and Zakir do not ignite as much fire as is needed to create panic in the opponents' batting squad. As reinforcement Khaled Mahmud Shujan can be taken who had creditable performance in last ACC tournament. His domestic record is also good.

Some rethinking is also as respects the openers. Golla and Jahangir Alam's performance have not been consistently well, though Atar Ali Khan is impeccable. We may consider Habibul Bahar Simon and Harun-ur-Rashid Liton alternatively. The retention of Durjoy in the side as all-rounder since his performance in last ACC tournament has frustrated many.

Thus a careful selection, serious practice in fielding and bowling particularly intensive exposure by playing international matches at home and away to gain experience more and more under the government patronisation and BCB in general and private sponsors in particular and above allimbibed with national spirit, there is lot the national cricket team can give us and help fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the millions of cricket lovers who are eagerly looking forward to see their most favourite team coming out victorious in the ensuring ICC trophy so as to play in the World Cup — the dream of millions.

We have no doubt lost SAARC tournament but nevertheless gained and enriched the store of experience. Harping on the tune of Zahir Abbas we can not hope that the day is not far off when Bangladesh will play one-day international and test matches? The writer is the Tax Adviser to the NBL

To the Editor...

Weekly holiday

Sir. Starting from Pakistan to Japan in the entire South-South East Asia and Far East — including this subcontinent, it is only in Pakistan and Bangladesh that Friday is being observed as weekly holiday.

Even in other countries like Indonesia, the biggest Muslim country, and Malaysia are observing Sunday as weekly holiday.

Of late, it is learnt that Pakistan has also opted to observe Sunday as weekly holiday. The reason is obvious. We still have our economic and trade relationship with Western and Far Eastern countries. Thursday as half-day and Friday being weekly holiday in Bangladesh, and Saturday and Sunday being weekly holidays in the areas mentioned above, we are cut off from these countries for 3½ days.

Considering these facts Indonesia never tried Friday as weekly holiday and Malaysia although started observing Friday as weekly holiday, probably this is the reason Pakistan recently has also made Sunday as weekly holiday. For the sake of convenience of export and import trade, we should consider very seriously whether emotion will play a vital role or reasoning to activate and rejuvenate the economy of the country and declare Sunday as weekly holiday.

It is suggested that the Bangladesh Retired Government Servants Welfare Association take initiative to meet from all the SAARC countries to discuss their common problems and exchange views to solve them.

M A Lashar
Tajmohil Road,
Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207

Mosha

Sir, I think sense of self-respect and the sense of dutifulness are directly related. Devoid of that, nothing much is expected out of anyone. Before the City Corporation polls, none chased the present Mayor to make Dhaka city mosquito-free. But when he became the mayor, he gave a lame excuse that his rival political party in power was not cooperating with him. So far as I remember, in the Save Dhaka RTC of *The Daily Star*, Mayor Hanif was vocal against the then government and there he fertilised his brainchild — a 'unified centralised body'. He advocated it as a panacea for Dhaka city's all nagging problems.

Since then, he also took shelter of that unified centralised body's demand whenever any mediaman asked him about the rise of crime, unruly traffic congestion, crisis of gas, water, power, telephones and on mismanagement of road repair and conservancy. Lastly, when AL came to power, our *Janata Mancha* hero was found coaxing the AL Chief to become the governor of Dhaka (similar position as the head of said body). However, a body was formed with LGRD minister as its head. This body declared that by March 1997, Dhaka would be turned into a world-class city!

It is March. But that body and its head are far away from each other and their magic lamp.

It is also very conspicuous that after AL has come to power, Mayor Hanif seems to have lost his glamour. His voice is no more echoed and his *Manchas* are not getting activated for the citizens to vent their fumes. The mayor with another excuse

himself had stopped fumigating city area against mosquitoes. Consequently, mosquitoes took control of Dhaka city. They are now taxing the citizens and the brain