

## A Green Miracle

There has never been any light thrown on un-achieved targets and amount of shortfall at the end of any FYP. There is little open public monitoring of FYPs and other magnum-size projects like the Varendra development programme. Still when one hears that — thanks to the ensuing Fifth Five Year Plan, national food production would rise to 25 million ton per annum by 2001-2 one cannot but warm towards the prospect and its planners.

Our agriculture sector has very creditably been one which has grown at a rate surpassing that of the population growth. This performance has come from the peasant — illiterate and unsupported though they are. There is of course the contribution of all kinds of improved inputs — HYV, fertilisers and pesticide and irrigation. The radical rise in food production now targetted or rather promised has been done without the thought of moving even a finger in the tenure or land ownership area.

The next best credit for sustained production should go to an increasing acreage and a corresponding decrease in fallow land area, rather than to the improved inputs. This we can hardly count on any more for we have by now hit the bottom of the quantum of unexploited land — in fallow patches and forests and natural water courses reservoirs — that we need to physically sustain this habitat of the Bengalee people.

This would compel the peasant to concentrate on intensive cultivation. Which is best done by well-supported small peasants while the lowest per acre yield comes all from big land holdings. Supporting the small peasant rather than the big is all important. It is gratifying that the FFYP strategies include one aimed at educating the peasants.

The planners are evidently in danger of not being wary of the perils of either HYV or the chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Cheering the peasant to an ever greater use of these would entail very grave land and environment degeneration on a massive scale. We are already very short on replenishing the ever-depleting land-nutrients.

From an average 19 million tons to jump to a 25 million annual food output in five years is a truly daunting task — made all the more difficult by a not too generous funding for a miracle at about 500 crore taka a year. And what will happen if the peasant and the investor in the town get wiser and start cutting the present cereal acreage in big chunks for fishery and livestock breeding? The more intelligent peasant is already tending to switch over to horticulture. That may not be helpful to achieving the 25 million ton target but could not be bad for the nation.

## Great Relief

The much-dreaded cyclone that sent the whole nation rolling in fits of anxiety night before last, has weakened away. Before fizzling out to the Indian state of Mizoram though, it grazed some offshore areas and belts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali and Bhola districts, with the last-named being the worst-hit. Even well short of crossing the Bangladesh territory the fury had subsided, so that the places actually lashed were not scarred as badly as was anticipated in the light of a snowballing SPARSO picture of the on-rushing phenomenon. Both in terms of overall expanse and the intensity of the battering where it occurred, the cyclone turned out to be a great providential relief the like of which this nation has never experienced before to go by the chronicle of cyclones.

Never before has a cyclonic storm advanced keeping so close to the coastline for such a long time as did this one. At one stage it seemed headed for Andhra Pradesh but barely 75 km off the coast it suddenly took a north-eastern direction and traversed a good 1200km upwards to be menacingly threatening Bangladesh. Then occurred the second change in its course with a loss of velocity and fury swerving away from our territory.

A September cyclone has been a rarity in Bangladesh and the change of tracks even a rarer phenomenon. Since the nature is growing increasingly aberrant, we must stay in readiness to meet the challenge on a short notice. The government is appreciated for organising a high state of alert and preparedness against the onslaught. Use of the armed forces in the evacuation work has been most effective.

The nature has spared us. Will the political parties cooperate adequately for whatever relief work is needed now to help victims back to their feet?

## Itching to Fight

It is untenable that DU students armed with axes, pickaxes, hammer rushed in a body to demolish a wall in retaliation of what the reports put as the harassment of a student leader by some shop-owners of the adjacent arcade. It is not clear what exactly provoked the two parties to kick up such an ugly shindig because reports are conflicting as far as the genesis of the spark is concerned. The eye of the storm seemed to be located somewhere else than the purported buying of flowers by some students. The university authorities have formed a committee to probe into the incident. Hopefully, they will come up with complete and correct picture behind Friday's trouble.

One thing is clear. Both the parties — the students and the shop-owners of the Kataban area had a 'semi war' preparation. Otherwise how could the businessmen could have so many 'gunners' on their side almost at a push? Some question can be asked about the students. How could they give such organised demonstration of collective militancy so quickly?

Our question is where are we going as a society? We are not overstretching a point nor are we over-reacting at any infrequent acquaintance with violence like this. We have seen serious skirmishes between shop-owners and students of Dhaka College and City College. Everybody has become so irascible and intolerant! It no longer depends on the educational or any other status of the person. Students, businessmen service-holders are all so tiry. Going at this rate of increasing self-destructive rage, it would not be long before we will have destroyed ourselves completely.

# Strengthening Export Supply Capacity of Bangladesh

*It is now being found that development of new industries to promote trade is essential for survival in the world's globalised competitive trade. There seems to be a mixture of both the concepts in the current emphasis on trade and growth.*

THIS last week was somewhat of a bizarre week for Bangladesh. While the major opposition party staged 'hartals' for two different days of the week involving its supporters and the government in fierce battles on the streets of Dhaka and other major cities and towns of the country which has left hundreds of people physically injured and hospitalised, there was an extremely useful, constructive and forward-looking seminar followed by discussion sessions for two consecutive days on 'Strengthening the Supply Capacity for Exports' held in Dhaka. There is no doubt that the former incidents could have been avoided by skillful negotiations between the government and the main opposition if both sides placed national interests above party interests and adopted rational attitudes instead of confrontational attitudes.

However, the seminar and the subsequent discussion sessions held on September 23rd were organised by the Ministry of Commerce and jointly inaugurated by the Minister for Commerce and Industries Mr. Tofail Ahmed and His Excellency Mr. Rubens Ricupero, Secretary General of UNCTAD. The inaugural and other sessions were addressed by Mr. J. Denis Behlise, Executive Director of ITC, Mr. Chandra K. Patel of UNCTAD, Mr. Sayed Alamgir Farruk Chowdhury, Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, Mr. Youssuf Abdullah Harun, President of FBCCI, Mr. Quasem, President of DCCI, Mr. Samson Chowdhury, President of MCCI, Mr. M. Rahman, President of FCCI, and participated by some members of parliament, civil servants, academics, high ranking business leaders, and NGO executives.

The discussion session on September 23rd was chaired by Professor Rehman Sobhan. The pre-luncheon discussion session of September 24th organised and chaired by Mr. Youssuf Abdullah Harun, President of FBCCI, was also addressed and participated by the Secretary General of UNCTAD and Executive Director of ITC, presidents of various chambers and business leaders of the country and a number of academics and researchers. The other important event of this day was the launching of the UNCTAD Secretary General's 'The Least Developed Countries 1997 Report'. This is the first time ever that such a launching of UNCTAD's publication has taken place outside of its headquarters in Geneva making Dhaka the focal point of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) painful experiences of successes and failures of development processes of a number of succeeding and failing countries.

### Has Bangladesh Gained Anything?

A narrow short-run cost-benefit analysis of these seminars and dialogues between the government officials and business leaders of Bangladesh and the high level UNCTAD and ITC officials, who are active trade promoters of the Third World countries, may not show any immediate high benefit/cost ratio, but the long run benefits to the country seem to have great potentials. This observation is made on the basis of two arguments. First of all, unlike officials of some other donor agencies who come with a fixed set of solutions to economic problems of trade and development almost force their solutions down the throats of government officials, as it were, this time the top level officials of UNCTAD and ITC did not seem to have come with such fixed and rigid text-book type solutions to Bangladesh's problems. Their attitude was to listen with care and attention to some

the problems that the government and the practical business people were facing over the years since the country began drastic liberalisation of its trade and industrialisation policies. There was a free flow of down-to-earth type questions and answers. The latter were by no means sounded rigid and orthodox. They responded with empathy to questions with their vast experiences and observations of development processes of a number of succeeding and failing countries.

funds are available for assisting the export sector on some of these activities.

Finally, as far as access to the world market was concerned, a number of business leaders were pointing out that the developed countries were raising new issues such as stiff environmental conditions, child labour, certificates of origin etc., which need to be taken up in international fora on which UNCTAD has been taking LDCs side and assures to do so in future too.

**INSIGHT**  
by  
**Kabir U Ahmad**

### Some Issues on Trade and Development

Three issues will be taken up in this section. First, the basic paper for the seminar was prepared by the Ministry of Commerce under the title 'Integrated Country programme for Strengthening Supply Capacity for Exporting Goods and Services: Bangladesh (1997-2002)'. The participants did not receive it beforehand and hence could not be discussed seriously. It is a substantive 39-page document. However, on a quick glance over the document, one finds that it needs to be revised and strengthened further. It also has some mistakes. It is worth pointing out some of these. It says, 'Collection of duties is conducted through auxiliary bodies like

Duty Exemption and Duty Drawback Office ...' (second paragraph, page-10). Duty Exemption and Drawback Office does not collect duties, rather it pays back the duties to the exporters which were collected by customs office at the time of importing the raw materials, spare parts etc. for the production of exportable items after the exporters have shipped their exports. Secondly, it says, 'The Export Credit Guarantee Department of the Sadharan Bima Corporation, a public sector insurance company, provides export credit insurance to exporters ...' (third paragraph, page-10). The Export Credit Guarantee Department does not provide export insurance, it provides guarantees which is substantially different concept from insurance. There are other mistakes also which need to be corrected.

The second issue that one wants to take up is the old question of whether 'Trade is the Hand-maiden of Growth' or 'Trade is the Engine of Growth'. This was Richard Cave of Harvard University who promoted the first idea as a challenge to the second concept by drawing on the Canadian and some European countries' trade experiences. But the trade and development theorists have argued both theoretically and empirically that trade is the engine of growth. This is the view prevalent now in all development agencies of the world. But it is now being found that development of new industries to promote trade is essential for survival in the world's globalised competitive trade. There seems to be a mixture of both the concepts in the current emphasis on trade and growth.

Finally, this writer feels that in promoting wider industrialisation for strengthening export supply base, there is a need for subsidy and protection to the newer industries for a limited period of time. What was Mr. Rubens Ricupero's opinion on this? Mr. Ricupero clearly agreed on this issue. It looks like Bangladesh will have a supporter in the personality of the Secretary General of UNCTAD if it subsidises and protects the newly developing export industries for a limited period of time, of course, until the year 2002.

The writer was the Team Leader of the Export Development Project of USAID/World Bank, 1991-93.

## Garments Factories: Turning into Death-traps?

by Md Asadullah Khan

*Despite the fact that a series of accidents have taken place in just about a month the licensing authorities or the administration have never showed up or visited these factories to see if these units meet the safety regulations and norms.*

**S**YSTEMATIC flouting of safety norms and a breakdown in regulations have turned the country's garments factories into veritable death traps. In another fresh incident on September 6 five more female garment workers of Novelle and Modern garments in the Mohakhali area of the Dhaka city were killed in a stampede as the panicked workers made a desperate bid to escape after hearing a fire alarm. This brought the total death toll to 40 in a series of accidents in about five weeks. Reports reveal that the total death figure mounts to 138 in fire-related accidents in the garments factories of the city till now.

A post-disaster sweep in some of the garments factories in the city has revealed the sorry state of affairs. About 1400 out of 2600 garments factories in the country lack adequate fire fighting gadgets like one asbestos or heavy woolen blanket or one bucket of water or one carbon dioxide extinguisher of 2 kg capacity per minimum.

The garments owners association (BGMEA) along with the Ministerial Committee set up by the government has so far identified ten causes for such mishaps. These include absence of alternative stairs or emergency exit routes, lack of fire fighting equipment and materials, faulty gas and electric line in the factory, violation of building codes that prohibit installing a labour intensive and fire-prone factory above second floor and non-use of fire retardant materials in walls and the roof, use of low quality fittings, lack of proper warning signal arrangement during a disaster, lack of disaster drill and training of the workers that helps them to quit the premises in an orderly manner without creating chaos in times of emergency.

After taking a detour of the garments factories in the city, one gets somewhat an unhappy impression. In most of these factories fire-safety checks are non-existent. The units are built in buildings least suited to fire-prone factories with poor safety standards, near absence of emergency exits and without a valid licence from the Fire Service and Civil Defence Di-

rectorate. Often fire-safety certificates are taken not from the Fire Department but the Electrical Inspectorate that knows little about the fire prevention system. Most shockingly, an industry that employs about eight lakh workers, mostly women, in the capital city and now ranks as the No 2 foreign exchange earner has given least attention toward ensuring safety and security of its workers. No sensible citizen in the country can compromise the idea of allowing such a vital industry to operate with so little accountability and so scarce periodic inspections of its electrical installations. While the long-term measure of relocating these industries in the outskirts of the city as suggested by the Ministerial Committee is a long way off, short term measure about installation of fire fighting gadgets in the building and creation of emergency exit routes must be taken up without further delay.

In most cases, building laws are violated with impunity.

Most of these factories have exit routes or stairs throttled with waste clothes and baskets full of wastes.

Think of the colossal problem that it is likely to create when some 500 to 600 workers, mostly untrained women from the rural areas, want to evacuate through such a narrow 3 ft staircase all at a time after hearing an alarm bell! Other than these, electrical lines are most fragile and a little spark or a short circuit can spread the fire through the whole installation in a twinkling of an eye. In some factories there are no buckets of water or containers to fetch water in emergency situation.

Despite the fact that a series of accidents have taken place in just about a month the licensing authorities or the administration have never showed up or visited these factories to see if these units meet the safety regulations and norms. Most of these factories situated in the narrow by-lanes and densely populated residential areas on high rise buildings

are almost inaccessible to fire tenders.

Recently, a Ministerial Committee constituted by the government has made some recommendations that the garment owners must follow. Sadly true, these laws were already there but management were reluctant to invest the extra money needed. Rather they lived with the risk of their factories and their workers being exposed to frequent hazards. There is hardly any plausible explanation as to why the main collapsible gate should be locked and the key or the security guard would not be available in emergency situation.

None would believe that the garments industries are a losing concern and as such any additional investment would render the business unprofitable. Smoke alarms and sprinklers that might cost only a few lakhs could have been put in most of these factories living with constant hazard of electric short circuit. None of these factories does have battery operated emergency lights that cost only a few thousand taka, a dire need to check stampede, chaos and melee when darkness envelops the premises in the event of a sudden short circuit.

Starting in the '80s this industry has made substantial impact on our economy, identifying itself as a vital foreign exchange earner other than providing job to a vast cohort of unemployed youths, especially women. This industry now employs about 13 lakh men and women that comprises almost 50 per cent women workers. The absorption of a large number of female workers — a big outflow of migrant unemployed and widowed or unwed women from the rural areas — has added to this industry with care and caution.

Recalling the fact that this industry was forging ahead creating job opportunities for people and earning substantial foreign exchange to the tune of

crores of taka, the hazardous nature of these installations prompts the entrepreneurs to enforce safety measures to prevent a premature collapse like the jute industry in the post liberalisation days. Too frequent fire incidents in those days are still etched in public memory and that to a large extent reduced the jute mills and the industry itself to ashes. Sensible citizen see the wreckage of these RMG (Ready-made Garments) units with such sickening regularity as metaphor for collapse of the buoyant optimism about the country's future development.

Hardly the garments owners have gone into actions that constitute safety and security of the workers. None of these factories should be allowed to operate without having a fire-safety drill of its workers. The Fire Service authority has a great role to play to the extent of sealing a factory building for fire safety violations.

The causes have been identified much earlier and now a maze of agencies like the PWD, DCC, Fire Service and Electrical Inspectors would have to play their part. Most cogently, the PWD must see that a factory premise is not chosen in a high rise building, especially above 2nd floor, that render fire fighting facilities inaccessible.

Speaking about the short-term measures, the stairs of the factories must be widened and there must be more than one stair as well as a number of safe and accessible exit routes with avenues for the fire fighting equipment to gain access to the building in times of hazards. Persons with agility and verve capable of standing face to face with any catastrophic situation and with previous training in fire fighting and thoroughly versed in electrical operations and safety control measures must be employed as supervisors or guards. Over and above, workers must come under insurance coverage without exception. Sadly true, garments owners are still hesitant to buy in-

surance coverage for their workers even at a minimal cost of Tk. 10.00 per employee per year. So far only 1.5 lakh employees of 33 factories have been brought under insurance coverage.

Precisely known to all, the series of incidents that go unchallenged with frightening regularity owe their origins to multiplicity of authorities each conniving their obligations, blissfully unaware of the implications, even in cases in exchange of cash reward. In fact, there are too many agencies — and usually the wrong ones involved in allowing these factories to operate without paying any heed to fire safety measures and illegal and faulty electrical installations. Like Novelle or Modern or Mirpur garments, many other units in the city have fire bombs sitting in their installation only waiting to go off. Callous management with

somewhat hilarious attitude about violations of the norms because no accident has taken place in their units plus the apathy of the regulatory agencies have added to the catastrophic situation.

It is high time we pondered if we could allow these fire traps to pass off as sophisticated industries where innocent and most gullible humans could put their sweat to earn a living. Neither the government nor the owners of the factories can absolve themselves of the responsibilities. Passing the buck and the blame does not solve anything. The best way we can achieve fire safety in these RMG units is by investing the total safety measure and responsibility in one authority instead of allowing it to be regulated by a panoply of controlling authorities. The administration must realise the gravity of the situation and must act promptly to save a valuable industry from extinction. Otherwise, Novelle or Mirpur garment's night of horror may be repeated elsewhere with too increasing frequency.

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## OPINION

### BELT Programme

**Md Masum Billah**

With a view to imparting effective training to the secondary school teachers of English in Bangladesh, BELT Programme has been introduced by Bangladesh Open University. BELT stands for Bachelor in English Language Teaching. For a strong footing in English, students at the secondary level need an effective English teaching. It can be materialised by a group of well-trained English teachers. English is now the language of the whole world. It is the language of science, technology, commerce, diplomacy, friend-

ship. Recently, the school organised a four-day workshop which was attended by tutors, education specialists and foreign ELT (English Language Teaching) specialists. They exchanged their views and reached the decision to make the programme a success through team work all over the country. Dr Shirin Huq, the Dean of the school and professor M Shamsul Hoque, the ELT advisor played the vital role at the workshop.

Bangladesh Open University was established on the basis of a Need Assessment Survey conducted in 1993 to help human resource development, to improve the capital of manpower and a large number of people who cannot derive benefit from the traditional education institutions may benefit through the open system.

The learners of BOU are: i) anyone interested in education, ii) anyone who wants to upgrade his knowledge, and iii) anyone interested in life-long education.

The different programmes of BOU have opened up a new vista of education for the professionals, service holders, women and housewives who could not benefit from the traditional system. It has spread its network throughout the country through the 10 regional resource centres and 80 local centres. Among all other BOU programmes, the recently-introduced BELT has sparked positive and encouraging response all over the country.

Malaysia, one of the economic tigers, wanted her own language to be the medium of instruction in the 1980s. When she discovered the step to be an absurd one, it brought 5000 English teachers from Great Britain at a huge cost. We cannot afford it. Our BELT Programme has emerged to cater to the demand which the nation expects in respect of English.

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## To the Editor...

### Playing with communal forces

Sir, The Fools' Paradise column is well-written because the writer is a journalist. The latter is supposed to write clearly and analyse better than the average reader of a newspaper is capable of. His column (Aug 30) discussed a sensitive issue on introduction of communalism in local politics; in this particular case the open stand taken by Awami League on the so-called Islamic fundamentalists, who are at the same time anti-state or anti-liberation (there are so many hair-splitting forces or groups that it is becoming difficult for laymen to read the mind of the politicians) and the alleged covert role of BNP.