

Port Jam Again

Frankly we are at a loss to understand what is going on at our premier sea port. The latest situation is that more and more foreign ships are queuing up and are having to wait for 12 days to two weeks instead of the usual 5 to 6 days to unload their goods. Already the Feeder Trade Committee, a Singapore based organisation of feeder vessels, has warned of additional surcharge being imposed if the situation is not taken care of. Words to the effect that foreign vessels would try and avoid Chittagong Port if the clog worsens have already been conveyed.

What is the problem at the port that is defying any solution for so long? In our view lack of sincere direction and leadership. Few months back there was problem of introducing some private companies to operate cranes. Then it was the problems of port workers who were 'going slow' in protest. The present crisis is the continuation of the same 'go slow' policy of the workers. Our first question is why all the worker-related issues can't be dealt with at one go and solved? Why is it being allowed to drag for so long? Are we not aware that however inefficiently the rest of the country functions, our ports must operate at some minimum international level of efficiency simply because it is dealing with an international world - and a very competitive world at that. There is no way that our trade will improve if we allow some vested group and the dock workers to keep its stranglehold on our biggest port.

We are terribly disappointed at the performance of the shipping ministry, especially of its minister, who does not seem to be too bothered about the port situation. There cannot be any priority work more important to the minister than to restore normalcy at the port. Let him go there and stay put - for as long as it takes - till the matter is resolved. The minister should wake up to the financial and economic disaster that his ministry's failure may cause for the rest of us.

Seriousness Needed

That Jessore is one of the main points of transit for women and child traffickers is no news. What bothers us most is that despite repeated adjurations to free the places like Jessore from the curse of being the transit routes for this 'inhuman business' and the routine talkfest on this issue authorities are unable to come down on the rackets in this 'trade' with any discernible impact. It is not information or the want of it which keeps the law enforcing agency hamstrung because the police and BDR officers whom our correspondent approached in the course of his investigation did supply him with the name of the local kingpin. It is in nabbing and prosecuting these all too known, hardened criminals that our law enforcers are found wanting. Patronage of them by powerful 'untouchable' quarters tend to gum up the works on most occasions. Antiquated laws only make the matter worse.

It is, it seems, the lack of an integrated approach and the thrust generating from it which is holding the law enforcers from swooping on the trade syndicates. As it is the problem is not a mono-dimensional one. It has to be fought from more than one fronts. Just as mere teething of the law enforcing agency won't suffice, stepping gas solely on social awareness and resistance will also fall short of our expectations to bring the desired result. We suggest a task force comprising multi ministerial representation be formed to give a fresh look into the matter. Apart from ministers from the Home Affairs and Social Welfare ministries it should include members from various non governmental organisations that work for women's rights.

Smuggled women and children do not only end up in brothels or used as camel jockeys, a great many of them fall prey to organised group of organ transplanters, who rob them of their vital organs to sell them to people who need them and are ready to pay a price. More often than not these helpless people who set foot out of their homes under the compulsion of extreme poverty, do end up as carcasses, as scavengers' feed.

How long will the society be a mute witness to this human tragedy?

They Reign Strong, Still

Another tale of oppression in the name of fatwa (religious decree) has been uncovered. This time it is from a quiet village in Pabna. According to a report published in a leading Bangla daily yesterday, long time neighbours Akhtar and Nasreen are finding life a relentlessly hazardous struggle even after entering the socially approved relationship of marriage. The village matabbars, a powerful lobby of fogey religious bigots and opportunists have already made the two go through *dorra* (public caning) for what they alleged 'illicit relationship'. Not only that, a fine of Taka 25000 was slapped on them. Akhtar the poor farmer had to sell little land he had and the cattle to meet this pecuniary punishment. More than the shame, pain and financial loss these two put up with it was the monstrous act of public feeding that these village bosses indulged in with the 'fine' which brings out the pathos in this tale of crime and punishment with a difference.

One thing is clear. Despite the recent awareness campaign, particularly in the vernacular section of the press, *fatuwa*baaz continue to hold sway over the generally ignorant, religiously sentimental villagers in no insignificant manner. Everyday they are destroying the lives and dreams of innocent people at some part or the other in the country. Instances of defiance are not rare though. The large scale participation of women candidates in the ongoing UP elections is a fine example of how women, the main target of these crooked cliques, are making light of their evil influence.

But that is no reason to drop guard. In fact this incident shows how much we need to gear up the campaign in the rural areas. The more interior it is, the more vulnerable it is. It is a social curse that has to be fought off socially and none can power it more than the media - both print and electronic.

President's Advice to Political Leaders

"The Chief Election Commissioner as well as other Election Commissioners must be persons of high moral integrity and character and should be appointed on the basis of some form of consensus on consultation with the main political parties".

ALTHOUGH the government has been assuring the people that the economy is on the right track, macroeconomic variables are stable, and hence there is no sign of any danger to the economy, some recent observations by outside agencies seem to indicate a different picture. The most recent UN update of Bangladesh economy clearly states that in 1998 its annual growth rate will be only about 5 per cent as against 6-7 per cent projected by the government, the external trade balance is most likely to deteriorate because of devaluation and high costs of imports, and the domestic inflation rate is going to go up because of the government's pay award to its officers and staff. Similarly, the IMF has reported that the current domestic inflation rate is in the region of about 7.5 per cent which is way above the range of about 3.5-4 per cent that the government has been talking about. It has also been pointed out that the rate of growth of the industrial sector is staggering at around 3-4 per cent which is way below the 8 per cent rate observed until about two years ago.

The recent expressions of concerns by business leaders (represented by the officials of DCCI) about political disturbances and hartals as well as strikes in Chittagong Port causing inordinate delay in clearing cargoes combined with widespread terrorist activities for ransom are factors contributing to hesitancy in the minds of domestic and foreign investors to invest in Bangladesh. These are serving as bad omen for the economy. It is in this background

that President Shahabuddin Ahmed's anguish as well as advice to the political leaders ("Political Attitude Should be Harmonious"). The Daily Star, December 7, 1997, page-4) assume critical importance. The purpose of this article is to propose some basic legal reforms with a view to making the country's economic environment stable, safe and peaceful so that development activities can be carried on without much hindrance. Before taking up this issue, it would be useful to re-emphasize what President Shahabuddin Ahmed has dwelt on.

President Shahabuddin's Observations
The President in his address to the seminar at the Supreme Court lawn on December 6, 1997, a summary version of which appeared in the above article, has expressed the view that there cannot be a better system of government than a democratically elected one whatever may be its weaknesses. It is the election process which needs to be made "free and fair" for democracy to succeed. Fortunately, Bangladesh constitution "provides for an independent authority namely the Election Commission for performing all functions including preparation of electoral rules, delimitation of constituencies and conduct of actual poll." He emphasized that "the Chief Election Commissioner as well as other Election Commissioners must be persons of high moral integrity and character and should be appointed on the basis of some form of consensus on consultation with the main political parties". One observation here becomes immediate, which is that one hasn't seen over the last 7-year history of the appointments of Election Commissioners any consensus candidates having been placed in these positions.

The President further observed that "... in a parliamentary form of government, the opposition must work in close cooperation with the government, but this cooperation is totally absent in our country, and instead of mutual understanding and harmonious relation, we find bitter animosity between them". On charges of election rigging, he remarked with a deep anguish that "election is fair if it is rigged if it is, even if it is conducted by an Angel. If this is the political philosophy of our leadership, then, I am afraid, nobody can save democracy". One feels sure that every sensible, rational and patriotic person will share his anguish. On electoral process, he has observed that "the root of all trouble lies in the political parties themselves".

His advice to the political parties are that they (i) "... must seek support of the people and not of the masters and students", (ii) must not "enlist as their members the owners of black money such as bank loan-defaulters", (iii) "should change their attitude to each other and state not regard their rivals as enemy of the state of the country and the people. Nor should they regard themselves as the only patriots branding rival parties as villains and traitors" and (iv) "... must believe in peaceful coexistence

and give up the present politics of crushing the other parties These are essential ingredients of the value system from which democratic attitudes, beliefs and behaviours grow. There is a need for cultivating these fundamental values among both the politicians and the voters so that democracy is firmly rooted among the ordinary citizens of the country, who can then resist any imposition of undemocratic attitudes and behaviours upon them by any group of people however powerful they may be. Such a democratic vigilance of ordinary citizens is the only guarantee for ensuring democratic practice in a society. Finally, the President also emphasized the need for changing laws to prevent the bank loan-defaulters from participating in the election, and to enforce the election-expenditure limits on the candidates. These are essential measures to protect the democratic system from the clutches of the moneyed class.

How to Provide a Safe Environment for Economic Activities?
The changes in all the above laws, attitudes and behaviours will take long time. But the protection of economic activities for growth is an immediate concern of the country. As a first step, two legal measures should be adopted to ensure the safe economic environment for growth. The first is a law prohibiting strikes and hartals in the ports, railways and the main highways and waterways, while the second is to

exempt all export-related activities from the scope of hartals. A consensus on these two issues should be reached among the major political parties represented in the Parliament and

laws should be passed, as soon as possible. These laws will give some protection to the essential infrastructural facilities and export activities of the country. The important point here is whether the major parties could be brought to agree on these two vital issues that can minimise the economic bleeding of the country. One would argue that it is possible if the case is presented in a persuasive way. It is easy to show that it is a win-win situation for both sides of the Parliament. First of all, the present government couldn't have a better solution to the problem of political chaos hindering the export growth of the country under the present circumstances. They would love to have such a law in the statute book. The question is whether the main opposition could be persuaded to agree on this proposal. They can be shown to have a very practical long run benefit in agreeing to this proposal also because when they will form the government in future and the same tit-for-tat game will be started by the present ruling party being in opposition, the future government will have a sigh of relief to find such hartals and strikes being illegal and punishable under law.

The export activities and the infrastructure will be protected from the possible devastations due to political chaos. It will be a bonus for them too. But the leaders of the present opposition might like to argue that this will give the present government in advantage now in saving the economy which they would like to see deteriorating in the immediate future. This'll be the most unpatriotic stance that the opposition can take.

As against such a stance, if the opposition agrees to the proposal it will be able to demonstrate to the people that they were wise in the sense of protecting a critical segment of the economy from ruin, as well as patriotic in the sense that they had the interests of ordinary people who are employed in these sectors at their heart. They could also argue that it was their willingness to accept the proposal that has saved the essential communication infrastructure or the most important social capital of the country from destruction. This argument will be appreciated by ordinary citizens especially by the silent majority of the country. It will definitely improve their political image in the country and will be a better electoral strategy for them in the coming years.

However, the only person who can take the initiative and bring the two sides to a round table and make them agree is none other than the highly respected President Shahabuddin Ahmed himself. One doesn't see any other person to accomplish this task. If this task can be accomplished, it will open the door to a wider scope for further agreements on various other critical issues which are hampering the growth of the economy.

What is most dangerous is that 'dirty plastic' is being used not only for carry-bags but for toys and water bottles, largely used by infants and children. If the government is yet adamant and remain mum, the authorities can check use of very high percentage of plastic waste in our industries and ensuring quality products. All manufacturers must be warned of producing environmentally unsound products.

Now a days communication is being given the highest priority for development. Telephone is a great medium of communication. So, for infrastructural development, we need pervasive and speedy communication. The card phones can ensure us of proper and accurate communication.

So, considering the demand of the new age, the authority concerned should take necessary steps to set up card-phones immediately at the above-mentioned places.

Demand of card phones
Sir, The campus and premises of Dhaka University is called a VIP area. But the facilities here are very deplorable and poor. For a instance, there are no card-phone booths except at the Jagannath Hall.

In every hall, there is a coin box, but most of them are in out of order. But in arts, commerce and science faculties, there are no phone booths. The coin box is now has become obsolete. It is time to set up card phones in every faculty, annexe building, and in every residential halls also.

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Poly-bags: Deadly carriers
Sir, Polythene bags are in wide use in our country and it seems the government has no plan to stop their manufacture/use, even after many requests and representations. We are yet to have any law for the manufacturers to indicate by means of appropriate signs/writings the ones produced by recycling.

However we must know that the recycle trade is based on a network of rag-pickers, waste-collectors, waste dealers and more recycling enterprises are trading in polybags than plastic products out of say 50:50 ratio. In India 800,000 tons of plastic products are manufactured and the business is worth Rs 2500 crore annually. The situation is same, if not so large, in our country. Reports say 80 per cent of 1.3 million tons of the plastic used in India each year is recycled.

In contrast, in countries of EC a more 7 per cent is used and that in Japan the figure is 12 per cent. China 10 and South Africa 16. Experts say that the ratio between virgin plastic and used plastic should be 50:50. However, next time you carry fish and meat from the market, be sure you use something other than polythene bags, especially the coloured ones. For a significant percentage of the coloured carry-bags are made from recycled plastic and there is no guarantee if those are contaminant-free.

Parking-related jams
Sir, Some main roads in front of certain schools in Dhaka city are being used for car-parking creating serious traffic-jam and causing public sufferings.

Would the authorities concerned please look into the matter and take necessary steps for redressing the situation?

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CHT peace accord
Sir, The basic factor governing our political thinking is complete ignorance of geo-political situation and difference of socio-political condition as prevailing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the mainland settlers' security is very vital to our national interest. The very fact that complete truce is established in that volatile region augurs well for future population of the settlers with the locals.

The moment dialogue is initiated or the negotiation - not the military solution - is contemplated, the way to definite settlement of the problem of insurgency has to be tackled in an atmosphere of equality. The negotiating partners should be treated at par with each other otherwise the issue at stake shall ever be there like insurgency problem in all other countries of the world. Any government worth its salt cannot have peace or cessation of hostility without satisfying at least some of the demands of the rebellious segment of the population after all the very purpose of negotiation is defeated if both the parties maintain an attitude of intransigent belligerence.

The issue of CHT peace accord is very delicate and any political party trying to make it a political issue for capturing the

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To the Editor
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OIC Summit in Tehran

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THE just-concluded Islamic Summit of 55 Islamic states can truly be described as a milestone in the history of this largest Islamic organisation. If it has not charted a new course for the Ummah, it has cleared the debris of the recent past.

Let us consider Tehran as the venue of the OIC summit. Since the war broke out between Iran and Iraq in 1979, Tehran has repeatedly shunned the OIC. Having just established an Islamic regime after the overthrow of the Shah by a bloody revolution, she was well placed to play a leading role in the Islamic world. She had thrown out the Israeli Embassy of the days of the Shah, handed over the Embassy to the PLO of Yasser Arafat and was bursting with pro-Islamic sentiments. Indeed as the Assistant Secretary-General of the OIC I have heard an Iranian delegate deliver his speech in Arabic in preference to his beloved Persian.

The situation turned sour with the incursion of Saddam's forces deep into Iranian territory. For all practical purposes the Arabs lined up with Iraq. Thus began the war between Iran and Iraq, which was to last for eight years.

The OIC caught in the middle for the first time by a war between two major members of the Ummah attempted to mediate. The OIC summit was in progress in Makkah-al-Mukarramah and the Secretary-General of the OIC Habib Chatti was despatched to Tehran to coax Iran into attending the summit while I held forth at the summit meeting. The effort ended in failure. The Summit set up an 8-nation Heads of State Peace Committee to find a solution to the dispute. The Peace Committee was set up in great haste and Habib Chatti and I accompanied the Heads of States in their frequent trips to Tehran and Baghdad.

We submitted our Peace Plan to both sides, which was eagerly accepted by Saddam Hussein and rejected out of hand by Ayatollah Khomeini, who wanted us to label Saddam the 'aggressor'. In the end, after eight years of inconclusive meeting and lot of bloodshed and destruction on massive scale Khomeini accepted the UN Peace Plan and said: 'I have taken poison'.

Meanwhile, Iran distanced herself from the OIC and did not attend many of her activities. Time has slowly healed the wound. The Tehran Summit is the most vivid demonstration of that. Through this Summit Iran has cleared her decks and reconciled with estranged brothers. With 28 Heads of State or Government attending the Summit, Iran has succeeded in drawing virtually everybody and that also at the highest level. Saddam has been represented by his Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan. It puts the seal on the process of reconciliation between Iran and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia has been represented by Crown

Prince Abdullah. Since King Fahd travels less and less this is the highest level representation from the Kingdom. Crown Prince holds very important portfolios within the administration of the Kingdom and has held the position of Acting Head of State during the absence of King Fahd due to illness.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia had her sympathies with Iraq and supported her in every possible way. Crown Prince Abdullah's attending the Tehran Summit sets the seal to their normal relations. There was great enthusiasm for Arafat and the PLO following the Iranian revolution. The relations soured due to the Iran-Iraq war. Since the top leadership within the OIC felt that Iran was justifiably the aggrieved party the composition of the 8-member Heads of States Peace Committee was entirely non-Arab and Asian and African.

The one solitary Arab member was Arafat, whom the Iranians perceived as leaning towards Iraq. Arafat was further castigated for his Peace Accord with Israel and he was accused by the Iranians of 'sellout'. Arafat's return to Tehran

after 16 years is a clear signal that the decks have been cleared and normal relations may resume. It is also a vivid demonstration of the fact that the efforts of the US to isolate Iran has ended in failure. In fact, the US may be quite willing to resume relations with Iran.

The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has signalled their intention to mediate the differences between Iran and the US. The fact remains that thanks to the Islamic Summit Iran has assumed her important role within the Islamic family and virtually reestablished her links with her Arab neighbours. She has thereby established herself within the international community as a factor to be reckoned with.

The lone lady Prime Minister of Bangladesh within the 55-nation OIC has played a significant role. Now that she appears to be well settled within her own country, she is bound to play an increasingly important role in the international arena. In her speech, she made some valuable suggestions like setting up an appropriate permanent mediation mechanism to resolve disputes among member-states, and enhancement of the role and status of women and their induction into the mainstream of life. She made a timely appeal for a strategy to counter the malicious anti-Islamic propaganda.

The 142-point agenda, which included practically all issues under the sun, be they cultural, economic, political or social, will be forgotten under the mountain of paper that these meetings churn out. What will remain is that the Islamic Ummah has come out stronger through this exercise and more united than ever before. And finally the integration of Iran within the Islamic family is complete.



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

OPINION

"It Matters..."

In the write-up captioned *It Matters Because...*, published in the DS on December 14, 1997 Dr Sabrina Rashid spoke of American products with slogan "Made in America - It Matters" highlighting seminal motivation in a consumer to go for national products. The writer saw in the slogan, if I have understood her correctly, patriotic sentiments having an upsurge in choosing a national product.

In the same vein, the writer deplored the sensibilities of Bangladesh customers being partial to products made 'out' of Bangladesh. It is understandable that the writer's perception emanates from patriotism, and desperation at the baneful effects the bias for non-Bangladesh goods have on our fragile economy.

While sentiments expressed are praiseworthy - the realities of market forces are indeed savage. With open-door policy and free market economy, geographical barriers of countries are crumbling into a big global village. There was a time when nascent industries and indigenous products were protected from more efficient and competitive ones producing cheaper but quality goods by state policy

M Gholam Mostafa
of 'protect the baby, nurse the child and free the adult' in the shape of tax exemption, high tariff wall against imported goods, tax holiday for industries and the like.

Although these steps lent an artificial edge to our products over imported ones, records have it that it sated the spirit of efficiency and competitiveness which are watchwords of present-day economy wherein only the fittest survive.

In spite of massive state patronage and protracted sacrifices made by local consumers how many of our industries were able to 'free the adults' is a matter of record too well-known to merit repetition.

We are urging foreign investors to bring in much-needed foreign capital offering them a generous incentive package in order to expedite our economy citing cheap labour as one of major attractions. Mere cheapness of labour should not be the only criterion to attract foreign investment or to urge them to relocate industries on our soil. Cheap labour does not remain cheap over the years unless efficiency adds an edge to productivity. Many East and South

Asian countries basked in the sunshine of cheap labour which are presently relocating their industries outside as a result of escalating wages over the years.

Our export-oriented garment industry is earning an astronomical amount of foreign exchange, which is largely attributable to cheap labour of our work-force and benign quota bestowed by the importers to LDCs (both terms are euphemism for exploitation and compassion respectively).

After the turn of the century when labour will cease to remain cheap and quota will be lifted, our survival in this sector will hinge upon how efficient but cheap we are in a globally competitive market.

It is a harsh market reality that you can't ask a buyer to settle for a dearer product only because they are national to the rejection of similar foreign ones at a lesser price. Free market forces, more often than not, defy patriotic sentiments. The slogan 'Made in America etc' does speak more of quality than enlist patriotic sympathy.

Patriotic sentiments may goad a consumer horse to river-side but only market forces can make it drink water.

Because..."

Abu Imran

advantage of scarcity, the producers and the traders entered into unholy alliance, and arbitrarily, without any rhyme or reason raised the price of eggs to around 100 per cent i.e., it began to sell at about Tk 16 per four instead of Tk 8 to 10 over the price prior to the ban. Thus they began to fleece the consumers with least resistance since here there is neither the true concept of consumerism and nor any price control. There was however silent protest and indignation among the consumers. This perhaps reached the ears of the then Finance Minister who publicly said that if the price of eggs was not brought down to the pre-ban level, he would relax the ban. But who cared? Neither the price was brought down to the desired level, nor the ban was relaxed. The victims were none but the consumers.

The above is one example of the abuse of monopoly by the trading and producing community in consort with the authority. There could be many more examples of such exploitations which also were indicated by Dr Sabrina in her write-up. She correctly said that the quality and price of local goods might be low and high respectively in relation to the imported ones. Agreed, the quality can be low, but how come the price can be high? We know that the labour here is perhaps the cheapest. The only explanation to high price is the greed of the business units to

make windfall profits as could also be seen from the example of the prices of eggs quoted above.

Let's take the examples of very ordinary consumer items, like toothpaste, razor blade, ball-pen, etc. The quality and prices of the imported goods in most cases are fairer than the ones produced here; while the prices of the local ones are normally higher for making windfall profits. Now the people here may like to go for the low quality goods in preference over the imported ones provided the price is lower meaning the local producers also have to make a little bit of sacrifice in terms of get-rich-quick profits.

So the patriotism has to be a two-way traffic. Only then, patronisation of local goods could be possible. Only asking the consumers to be patriotic while the producers are let loose to fleece them would not be fair.

The government has also a dominant role to play. It can't dance to the tune of the global masters and follow their prescription of going helter-skelter way of adopting an open market policy. It has to see its problems from the local point of view. How much has paid by keeping the children out of garments? Many of them have now taken to more odd jobs than before. Protection to local industry with due control will cut cost to flourish local economy. And going for local goods then will be spontaneous. Otherwise, the hollow slogan - "Be Bangladeshi, buy Bangladeshi" will end in rhetoric only.