

EPZ Worries

Will nothing remain unscratched in this country? Well, if what the investors alleged the other day about Saver Export Processing Zone is true then the answer is a straight depressing no. The standing committee on foreign investment and joint venture comprising local and foreign entrepreneurs in its last meeting laid open a whole bag of complaints. The meeting dwelt on how problems of traffic congestion and extortion are playing havoc with the notion of an EPZ. Customs hassles at the Zia International Airport are a long harped problem and unless the government goes for a drastic integrated reform there, things will not fall in their places.

Now, what about taking care of problems like traffic congestion and extortionism? Ensuring security in the context of the whole country may be like wrestling with too vast a problem with too little resources but the same can't be the case with the security question pertaining to the Export Processing Zones. They are specially carved out zones to facilitate the process of export — small pockets complete with priority security status and infrastructural arrangements. One idea to separate these zones from the rest of the country was also to keep them at a safe distance from the pervasive onslaught of criminality on our society. The news of these special zones being affected by all the familiar evils comes to show that all those tall talks of the authorities have come to nothing. This is most unfortunate. Because wooing foreign investment has been at the heart of almost every government utterance about bolstering our sluggish economy. And here we are caught napping with the challenge of taking the first steps in the right direction. Is decriminalising areas as small as EPZs so difficult for the government?

Lack of surveillance and coordination seems to have made the government promises sound hollow there. Unless it gets rid of this twin problem soon and does something that will reflect its intention more effectually, the government might be misunderstood by foreign investors.

The Continuing Ordeal

Our rivers are again on the rise. The major ones swelled specially and further deterioration of the flood situation is a certainty. What can this mean? One consequence is clear enough. The Mahakhali hospital for diarrhoeal diseases or the ICDDR,B is being literally mobbed by patients. The hospital, only of its kind in the country, is now treating three to four times more patients every day than usual — some 600 to 700. But these are patients from only the inundated Dhaka metropolitan areas. Government figures put the number of diarrhoea case in all of the flooded districts at 62,000. And we know it is a very conservative figure. The right number may be a number of times over. Likewise the death toll of 311 is a highly tentative figure. There is no knowing the casualty with any exactitude. But we can plan for the reduction of human suffering and death during and after the floods. We are not sure we have so far planned for minimising misery and loss.

There are, however, some gratifying claims to achievement. First, the not very disturbing CFR or case fatality rate. Of the 25 lakh attacked by diarrhoea in 95-97, only 2679 persons died, about one in a thousand. Then 3473 teams comprising 1,866 doctors and other staff are deployed in the flooded 37 districts and also that 75 new temporary health centres have been set up to cope with the challenge. These are impressive figures, together with that of 15 million Taka worth medicines distributed to the flood victims in only 20 days. These are impressive as long as we do not know the enormity of the problem. At any rate, there should not be any let-up on the supply side.

In 1988, in spite of General Ershad holding the state and society in thrall, lot of thinking went into the problem of deluge-size flooding. Changes in habitation patterns were suggested by some experts. This year even democracy has proved a failure to get the best of government and private intellects to be involved in water thoughts. Is this complacency? Or intellectual inertia, or bankruptcy? The nation is as poor as hardly any other is. And it is economically and socially organised in a most unjust manner. While flood waters reduce 20 million to the condition of being swept away, the top of the dryland millions know little about it. This explains all our inaction and unthinking.

Up North a Dangerous Brew

The Afghan volatility has touched a new low. To all appearances, the Taliban Islamic militia has taken military control of all the four provinces of Afghanistan. Mazar-e-Sharif and Taloqan in the north, where the anti-Taliban coalition made their last stand have fallen into the hands of the Islamic militia. This does not, however, signal the end of the civil war which has kept convoluting all the while since the vacation of Soviet occupation two decades ago.

Most people had thought then that with the end of the Mujahideen phase in Afghan life they would wholeheartedly devote themselves to managing their own affairs and re-building their country from the ashes of an externally imposed war. But no, the incipient internecine conflicts came on to the fore feeding on drug money, neighbourhood training and arms trafficking. An overt foreign intervention got replaced by a covert, remote and not-so-remote stew of external interferences. A new set of geopolitical stakes grew externally to take advantage of the internal Afghan contradictions. Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are said to be siding with the northern alliance while Pakistan is accused of materially and militarily supporting the Taliban.

After the Chechnyan experience, Russia is apprehensive of an Islamic fundamentalist surge in the area. The Taliban take-over in Afghanistan may also be eyed with suspicion by some western powers who have traditionally regarded the whole region to be vulnerable to a possible crescent sweep. China and India are nearby countries. Afghanistan has the portents of a vortex into which conflicting extraneous interests might get drawn to the final doom of peace prospects there.

The Pakistan-brokered peace between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance failing, we are expecting the OIC and the UN to dynamise in tandem to bring about an immediate ceasefire across Afghanistan. The civil war must end through a negotiated settlement, a solution that should also contain an antidote to any form of future external interference in Afghanistan's affairs.

The Afghan Scene: Who is Really Winning the Game?

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Should Taliban be able to govern Afghanistan without any visible and effective resistance from the opposition Northern Alliance, it will gradually be recognised as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Observers believe that in that scenario Pakistan is likely to become stronger because on the one hand it has become a nuclear power and on the other it will have the capacity to have great influence on Afghanistan via Taliban administration.

Recent events in South-west Asia did not receive as much media attention as they should have as they are likely to change the political landscape in the region, the full impact of which may not be appreciated for some time. Here I refer to first, the failure of international mediation in Afghanistan and Iran's testing of a new intermediate range missile.

All these point out to an emerging new reality in the region. Essentially, the matter boils down to the fact as to who will call the shots in South-West Asia. Afghanistan has come to prominence for its strategic and commercial reasons. Let me explain.

Fight for Oil Pipelines: Proxy War in Afghanistan

A view prevails that Iran and Russia, supporting anti-Taliban forces, are now locked in a "proxy war" in Afghanistan with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, backing the Taliban.

The three Central Asian Republics, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan,

have common borders with Afghanistan in the north. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have huge oil resources from the Caspian Sea. Experts believe that the Caspian Sea area may have as much oil as the Persian Gulf. Uzbekistan has oil reserves in Kyzylkum Desert. If pipelines could be set up through Afghanistan to Pakistan's Arabian Sea for oil exports, Afghanistan will be able to control the distribution of oil. (Some analysts believe that the primary purpose of the invasion by the former Soviet Union to Afghanistan in 1979 was to reach warm waters of Arabian Sea). To put simply, to control Afghanistan is to control oil distribution from Central Asia.

It is reported that Russian strategy is to reassert influence over Central Asia and its vast oil reserves. Moscow is reported to have begun to play a supporting role on the side of anti-Taliban Alliance with the supply of

heavy weapons, training and logistics. The Russians find themselves in "loose collaboration" with Iran in containing the power of Taliban. Observers believe that Russia and Iran want to ensure that many of the planned Caspian oil pipelines traverse Iranian or Russian territory. As a result they do not wish to see pipelines set up across Afghanistan to Pakistan's coast in Arabian Sea. Interestingly, the US takes a lukewarm interest in Afghanistan situation and supports neither side in the civil war.

Civil War in the Country
Taliban (the word means scholars or students) captured Kabul in September, 1996 and vowed to create the world's "purest Islamic State". It may be pointed out that Taliban are Sunni Muslims while the Northern Alliance consists of mostly Shi'ite Muslims. (Iran's ruling elite are

Shi'ite Muslims). Taliban's ideological dispositions and draconian laws against women have appalled Iran and the Central Asian Republics in the north. Iran is reported to have described the Taliban as "medieval". Russia is also believed to be concerned as well with the growing momentum and spread of Taliban's ideology and wants to ensure that the militant form of Islam of the Taliban does not spill into Central Asian Republics.

The Taliban are ethnic Pashtoons while its opponents are Tajiks and Uzbeks. The Pashtoon community were disillusioned with Tajik and Uzbek leaders after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1979. The rivalries between the warlords during the earlier governments in Afghanistan brought lawlessness in the country. Taliban's appearance in the scene in 1996 initially brought a relief to the ordinary Afghan people. But their ideology has antagonised the Tajiks and Uzbeks. Two thirds of Afghanistan are under the control of Taliban and their goal is to capture the rest. The Taliban are yet to achieve international recognition.

It was reported that on 8 August the Taliban forces were able to capture Mazar-i-Sharif, the largest city in northern Afghanistan and a stronghold of anti-Taliban Northern Alliance of Massoud and Dostum. The rival troops of the Alliance were in disarray. Last year the Taliban forces briefly brought Mazar-e-Sharif under their control but soon were repelled by Uzbeks. This time the control of the city under Taliban appears to be much more secure than in the past. It is a severe blow to the opposition Alliance as the capture of the city cuts off opposition's supply routes from Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics. The city is strategically important for both the Taliban's and its opponents.

There is a view that the little resistance the Taliban forces encountered from the Alliance

in Mazar-i-Sharif could be a part of their strategy for regrouping with more arms and ammunitions from the Central Asian Republics. It is reported that Ahmed Shah Massoud is getting ready to fight another battle with Taliban forces to oust them from Mazar-i-Sharif. Massoud's faction is reported to have a base in neighbouring Tajikistan where some 20,000 Russian troops are stationed. From the base, weapons and other supplies are airdropped into Massoud's forces in Afghanistan. In the meantime Russia and Uzbekistan support another anti-Taliban group of Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Afghan army general.

During the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban, 10 Iranian diplomats and one Iranian journalist who were stationed in Mazar-e-Sharif were reported to be in the hands of Taliban. Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi sent a letter to UN Secretary General calling for multi-faceted efforts and immediate help to free its nationals. Iran also stepped up pressure on Pakistan, a power broker in Afghanistan, to help secure the Iranian nationals' release. However Taliban is reported to have denied their knowledge of the Iranian nationals.

Conclusion

Should Taliban be able to govern Afghanistan without

any visible and effective resistance from the opposition Northern Alliance, it will gradually be recognised as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Observers believe that in that scenario Pakistan is likely to become stronger because on the one hand it has become a nuclear power and on the other it will have the capacity to have great influence on Afghanistan via Taliban administration. Pakistan will also be able to have a say in the distribution of oil through Afghanistan. This regional influence by Pakistan is likely to pride Pakistan as a strategic ally with the US. The US and the Europe will not be able to ignore Pakistan in mapping out any strategic decision in this region. It is expected that the US sanctions against Pakistan will be drastically scaled down.

Pakistan's "dominance" in South-west Asia has the potential to have an impact on relations between India and Pakistan. India will not like that Pakistan plays a key role in South-west Asia. Furthermore, China has a common border with Afghanistan and would like to consolidate further its bilateral relations with Pakistan. If the international community wants to avoid the risk of contributing to the instability of South Asia, it is time that they should seriously engage themselves in a mechanism to resolve the Kashmir dispute, otherwise the arc of instability may become an even source of great concern for the international community than it is today.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.



Civil war in Afghanistan is continuing for decades despite much attempts in and outside the country for restoring peace. This 1994 AFP file photo shows desperate Afghan women demonstrating in Islamabad against factional Afghan leaders' failure to reach a compromise.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Are they aware of...?

Sir, With great anguish and a sense of helplessness I have been reading about the circumstances that led to the death of Rubel. It reminds me of the police atrocities on innocent citizens during the apartheid regime in South Africa or the fascist rule in Haiti or Liberia in recent times. Even during the oppressive Pak regime when I was a student of Dhaka University, the police never dared such heinous acts; but yes, they did so during our liberation war in 1971.

It brings one to question the nature of training the police receive at their training centres. Would anybody in the relevant administration kindly enlighten us — what are taught at these centres besides PT? Do they have the occasion to learn issues like function of democratic society, the civil rights of the people, the limits of power and duty of a police, value of human rights, ethical issues of a civilized society and related aspects that tend to help uphold mutual respect of human beings and humanity at large, individual morality and sense of accountability to the state as well as to their own conscience?

"P.S. Please do not mention my name at the end of this letter — I am, indeed, afraid of police!"

A Citizen
Dhaka

We are indeed afraid

Sir, The recent brutal act of so-called 'protector of civilians' has hopelessly frustrated the countrymen. Rubel's killing is not the first nor will be the last. In 1995, 'murders' were committed by the custodians of law in Dinajpur, Pabna, Dhaka, Satkhira and several other places all over the country and as on today not a single accused has been given exemplary punishment.

The only sweet news newspapers publish are "... so many police have been closed" and "action is being taken for abuse of power (??)".

Are these enough? Loud and clear answer is a big and a very big 'no'. Nothing has been done so far to 'take preventives'. Who are these dreadful brutes (DB) in a civilized society? Do they at all know their duties to the nation and its citizens? The poor citizens, who are becoming the predators' prey, pay them till the last day of their lives. Police are entitled to monthly salary, all known allowances, ration, retirement benefit and life time pension and God knows what! The washing allowances of their uniforms is also paid by millions of people of this poor country.

This false vanity and aggressive attitude of police who are people's servants in a demo-

cratic set up should be changed. Right from the IG to a constable should be made aware of the fact that they salute civilians for one reason and that is, they are under the administrative and functional control of the civilians i.e. right from a Magistrate to the President. They have no power whatsoever to punish a civilian. Civil courts are there to decide cases and BPC clearly define the procedure/s or the course of action thereof.

I request the Prime Minister and President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to come out of the palatial Bangabhaban and face three questions: First, how many innocent persons are under (police) custody (dreadful dens) at present undergoing inhuman tortures all over Bangladesh? Second, how many arrests have been made during the last two to five years without 'warrant of arrest' or unnecessarily being harassed throughout the country? And finally, when/how will this illegal police desultory action stop for good and we can sleep peacefully?

Worried Citizens
Banani, Dhaka

SSC Results

Sir, The jubilation is just over for SSC 1998 results and at the same time several suicides have also been committed for being unsuccessful. Last year government announced that 1997 candidates will be given a chance with compartmental, but now we have seen nothing of this kind in this regard.

It was to the utter dismay and shock to the students who saw that they got plucked only in one subject and only for 2/3 marks and all doors closed in front for another three years which is simply unbearable. We fail to understand how all registration could be closed for the year 2000 before they knew their result. Do these pupils have no right to education in this independent country? Will our popular government come forward to save some more valuable and young souls from ruin? We hope the education ministry will do some humane jobs for these wretched students.

Ahmad Hossain
Malibagh, Dhaka

Perpetrator and protector

Sir, At about 6:15 in the afternoon of 28th July, '98 I was going in a Pajero jeep, with two others, to Kakrail from Motijheel.

sudden a big block of brick hit the side window of the jeep and smashed it. I found to my horror that a young man was madly rushing towards us with a long bamboo raised over his head while his accomplices were busy breaking cars all around. Our driver hurriedly made a U-turn in the same lane but got stuck in a jumble of vehicles. The man with the bamboo reached us in no time and delivered a mighty blow on the back of the jeep.

Inside, we were utterly befuddled at the sudden ordeal and ferocity of the unprovoked violence. I saw a middle aged man in the driver's seat of a sleek car by our side, imploring the rampaging gangsters with folded hands to spare his car but to no avail. Gleefully they carried out their mischief. We were in a state of shock and surprise in the midst of wanton vandalism which was being committed, we came to know through the national dailies the next day, as a demonstration against the killing of Rubel by the police.

The driver of our jeep was making frantic manoeuvre of flee the place. To our great relief a group of policemen came running across the road and countered the rogues of the street. The police charged and chased the hooligans who turned tail and took to their heels. The police saved us just in time.

We drove back through Rajbargh-Shantinagar road once again discussing the police, this time about how the police can save the common people from the clutches of the anti-social elements of society.

A M Chowdhury
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Vexed Viagra

Sir, The potency pill viagra has taken the world by storm bringing renewed hope to those who are frustrated in their sex life. Many countries of the world including a few of Asia are using this potency pill for those who are suffering from frigidity with good results. But for Bangladesh, still it remains a vexed question as to whether this stimulant pill is to be imported or not.

Recently the Bangladesh Association of Urological Surgeons in a statement has urged the government to take necessary steps to import Viagra pills. On the other hand a top official of Drug Administration has expressed his apprehension for the misuse of the pill if available in local market. Unlike developed countries, we don't have correct statistics to show the actual number of sexually inactive people in our country. But the number of such patients is not less as it is clear from the business the quacks — both home and unani — are doing by selling the so called aphrodisiacs.

In my opinion the government should take immediate steps to import this stimulant pill to save the frustrated people

from the clutches of these quacks. Stoppage of importing such an important medicine on grounds of its misuse is not a good logic at all.

To get rid of headache, cutting the head off is no remedy.

T Ahmed
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Thanks, BRTC

Sir, Recently, the BRTC has started a separate bus service for women in the capital city. We take the opportunity to congratulate authority for taking this fruitful initiative. As Bangladesh is the second largest Muslim country this attempt is very essential because of religious as well as social reasons.

However, from now on our women won't face any kind of problem as they were facing before.

Ranak
Khilgaon, Talota

Helping the flood affected

Sir, Half of the country is now under flood water and millions of people in the affected areas are in dire straits. Cattles have been drowned; and roads, bridges and culverts have been damaged.

But with receding of water situation will get worse. There will be shortage of food, and diseases like cholera and diarrhoea will break out in an alarming way.

The flood victims need international help. I request our authority concerned to arrange tour for the foreign diplomats so that they can see the situation for themselves and come up with help.

S M Enamul Quader
Chittagong.

Bangladeshis in India!

Sir, We are surprised and shocked that the BJP government of India in alliance with the Shiv Sena is illegally engaged in ousting the Bengali speaking people from New Delhi and Mumbai branding them as Bangladeshis.

The unfounded and malicious propaganda of BJP government that millions of Bangladeshis are living in India may embitter the friendly relations between these two countries.

However our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her return from the SAARC summit and the meeting with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has categorically denied such allegation.

We would like to tell the BJP government that it has already done great harm to India by conducting the unfortunate nuclear tests. Therefore, they should refrain from making baseless and malicious propaganda and thus save India from further condemnation and thumbs-down.

O. H. Kabir
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OPINION
Consumer Awareness

Alif Zabr

As a local consumer (representing million of silent ones who do not write to the press), I feel my pride hurt by the huge trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh, which is also stepped up several years now (two local regimes involved). I silently berate our government and the Indian go-slow policy.

The previous regime generously eased the import tariffs on Indian goods in good faith, but the same has not been reciprocated by India on our pretext or another even now (during the current AL regime as some cynics point out). Any lay person can grasp the potentiality that for India, Bangladesh market of 120 million is big and just across the border — and is up for grabs!

Lately our powerful Minister for Trade and Industries has been making some noises, but the FCCI is conveniently passive on the issue. On the other hand, some local papers bring out at regular intervals 2-page advertisement supplement of Indian goods and services. FCCI may adopt some resolutions and brief the press for its own transparency. We should know how to counteract outside pressures. The SAARC is dead, long live the spirit of SAARC!

India, as the big brother in the SAARC set-up, is projecting a wrong image to the citizens of Bangladesh: at peer level, although we are much smaller in size and population. The Indian game is well understood locally. It is to put

pressure for transit facilities of Indian goods between the Indian mainland and her NE states. This is confirmed by the prompt arrival of Indian diplomatic teams to Dhaka soon after the opening of the BJM Bridge, and eager participation in seminars arranged by interested local NGOs, with presence of our government officials.

More regular statistics may be published on the legal and illegal border trade Bangladesh and her neighbours, to assure the public that the administration is taking adequate steps to contain the adverse situation. The smuggling should be down as the Rupee has weakened to 43 to the dollar (compared to BDT 47).

Another point: the retail prices of Indian goods here are not coming down as the Rupee depreciated successively from 29 to 35, 39, 41, 43. Why the retail consumers are not getting the benefit, may we ask the government and the FCCI? There are too many secret agendas for the public to fathom!

It is time to have a semi-autonomous and demi-official consumers' monitoring machinery, (which should be able to work and get results, not dummy models seen in the shop windows). In this country, everybody is the limelight except the consumers. The rich don't care, and the poor are not cared for. The middle class is between the political and business devility and the shallow Bay of Bengal. There is oil/gas on both sides.

Ombudsman in Bangladesh?

A Husnain

Almost every regime for half a century have played with a wishful toy to keep the people in good humour when the administration is in distress. It is the merry issue of the creation of the post of Ombudsman (what is the Bangla equivalent?). The idea is floated at an appropriate time, and then allowed to die its unnatural death. Harmless diversionary tactic to gain time maintaining 120 million souls in agony.

Earlier feasibility reports must have been encouraging in the search for an official scapegoat to transfer the burden of non-doing. Perhaps it is a fatigue syndrome. The press may like to enlighten the readers in which developing country in the Third World the Hon Ombudsman is able to discharge his duties swiftly, and to public satisfaction; or the respected gentleman was obliged to discharge himself honourably.

No disrespect is meant, and the comment is not sarcastic. Here is a key question: what are the pre-conditions necessary for the appointment of this one-man-un-ruler? The administrative, social, political, and cultural environment and the infrastructure must be right to enable the incumbent to work smoothly and at reasonable speed. History suggests that this post works in mature democracies in developed countries, which have settled down to routine governance for, say, a mere century.

What is wrong with Bangladesh? Do we have political stability (without which no system in any sector will function)? Have democratic norms been established, excluding the teething period? The latter part of the statement is important as our teething period since 1971 is certainly not yet over even af-

ter 27 years. How the Ombudsman will tether so many bad teeth?

Should the Ombudsman come in (in midstream) before the urgent and long overdue reforms have been carried out, namely of the civil service (administration), and the judiciary? The delay in the appointment of Ombudsman is like the delays in carrying out these two reforms (corollary: and Police reforms).

In addition, should not this august post be kept pending before the lower tiers of the new local government set-up have started functioning at the lower levels and got its bearing? The outcome of these far reaching changes will take some years to appraise, before any decision could be taken to add one additional high-level post in the form of Ombudsman. Money is no matter, the bad banking system matters more.

That is not the end of the story. The divorce proceedings of the SOEs (state-owned enterprises) are getting stalled again and again. The civil morality is in turmoil, deeply engrossed in corrupt practices and rent seeking. Can one person hold the floodgate? How to handle the trigger-happy boys?

We have a powerful secret weapon: a Time Delay Machine possessed by the bureaucrats, who can put Einstein to shame ('she left on Tuesday, and arrived on Monday'). The post of Ombudsman is an envious one: he can work leisurely at the speed of a country boat with sail. Without sail, the boat is at the mercy of joar and bhata (the tides). It is a floating life, amidst the water hyacinth.

It appears that the post is right, but the timing factor had been left out of consideration.