

Port Authority Must Be Made Autonomous

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up a port, then the Chittagong Port will automatically shut down.

In Vietnam, along with free economy, they have changed their trade union. We don't want to stop our trade unions. We are a member of ILO. But what sort of trade union should be introduced in Bangladesh for the 21st century, that should be decided by all the political parties, all the industrialists, all businessmen and the government also.

Our government should have a specific target. We are not poor. Just think of the funds. There is a proposal for deep sea port of 14,000 crore dollars either between Maheskhal and Patenga or in the Sundarbans. We must decide. If 14,000 crore dollars is invested in Bangladesh, then the trade unions' demands for higher wages, bonus and increments can be considered.

We explain things negatively to the workers. We say they will lose their jobs if these private ports are set up. We must decide how much longer are we going to adhere to such negative politics. I have done politics myself. I have taken to the streets. We are not rawab. About our feudal system, our semi-feudal system, our mixed economy, our free economy, our socialist economy, we must decide what economy we will pursue.

Politics can continue, hartals can be held, but production must not stop. By the year 2001, the Patgaon and Patenga ports will operate. The US will not accept any obstacle where its investment is concerned. It will do anything that is required to ensure that there is no obstacle to its investment. This does not apply just to the US. This is the same for Canada, for Europe, for Australia or any country. Russia or China, anybody who wants to invest in Bangladesh. The 130 million people will be for them. The 130 million want three square meals a day. They will be for the foreign investors, not for our negative politics of blockading roads.

How does Chittagong Port shut down? My secretary said that there are 50 factors involved here. If the truck owners strike, the port closes. If the truck drivers strike, the port will close. If those who sew the sack strike, the port will close. If the launch, cargo, barge, coaster owners and drivers strike, the port will close. There are the political parties too and the trade unions.

The problems of the Chittagong Port are more from outside the port than within. It is political. There must be a political roundtable conference here on the issue. The political parties must say what type of politics they want to introduce for the 21st century and for free economy. That should be clear first. There has been enough cheap popularity politics and we will allow that no longer.

About equipment, we have a lack of 140 types of equipment. How can I compete with the private sector? We cannot simply blame the workers. We need roads, communication, telephone, electricity. We have to decide whether we want hartals, strike, trade unions, roundtables and long speeches. I have travelled to

40 countries of the world and only in our country have I heard of the owners going on strike without notice. One day the port is closed means our Golden Gate is closed. I have only two Golden Gates. We have no right to close the ports. The people have suffered enough. The freedom fighters are begging on the streets, their daughters have turned to prostitution. We should be ashamed about this.

We have the Bangabandhu Bridge. We will have the Asian Highway, Nepal, Bhutan. Even a part of India will want to use our port. Whether we give it or not is up to us. In Myanmar, why have they developed their port to use a million TUEs with the help of Singapore and Malaysia? Where will our business go? To Myanmar? What will happen if our economy is squeezed? Our politicians must think of these things.

The goods you are to get in four days, you want in one day. You have given them incentive. This is speed money, bribe, incentive, baksheesh. Today when you have gone for modernisation, competition, there is no dearth of such skilled workers, now you say you don't want to give this spill money. Yet this was introduced by us.

The port must be run efficiently. The management must be more efficient. The port closes because a truck driver has died. Yet the driver get drunk and give the truck to his helper to drive. They beat up the gate man if he doesn't allow them to enter the port. Our gate men have no guns. How can he protect himself? The moment the drunkard raises against him, the entire Chittagong Port collapses. The papers splash the news in the paper. But I have to, by any means, keep the port in operation. What law can you enforce here? Thousands of trucks without goods are lying in Chittagong Port.

Then there is the customs. If the ports are to be in operation round the clock, there must be a customs office. We need cooperation. We have no shipping policy, but we have to have a target. We can't fulfill the target overnight. We need teamwork. We are ready to be accountable to the people.

Mahfuz Anam: What will you do about Chittagong Port?

ASM Abdur Rab: What is to be done? Over the past 26 years since independence, no government took any decision on this. We need a shipping policy.

Mahfuz Anam: What will the shipping policy contain?

ASM Abdur Rab: The policy will contain what we want to achieve through our ports for the entire nation by the 21st century, how we want to further equip the ports. There will be the participatory issue.

Ships can't anchor at Mongla Port. Pakistan had said it would not be feasible to have a port at Mongla. For political reasons a port was made here. Unless there is dredging carried out every day, ships cannot dock at Mongla Port. We have allocated 40 crore taka for dredging. We want to computerise the Chittagong Port. The Ministry will be computerised. Only for container handling we are going to have six jetties. One container can con-



tain heroin, can contain gold or can even contain cosmetics for a poor businessman. The customs may hold the container and the poor businessman suffers. One businessman may not use one container. One container can carry three types of goods. We pile up the containers high. We have no computer. Now to get the first container, we have to lift the five above it. We want to computerise this. If we don't get foreign assistance, we will do it ourselves.

It is not as if no developments have taken place. The workers at Mongla Port said they will not strike for any issue without notice. We must take into consideration what these workers want, we must talk to them. For the first time we have had two advisory councils with workers, employees and users. So I don't think that the port will face sudden closure for so long again. We must change certain laws concerning CBAs and unions.

Mongla Port has no dredger. We have proposed for dredgers of the port. Our Prime Minister visited the place on the 8th and we submitted 25 points before her. She immediately issued instructions to implement some of the points. She has asked the others to be processed and send to her. She listened to us for two and a half hours with utmost patience. I believe we can now solve the problems rapidly.

You will be surprised to know that when the launches capsize in our country, we have a capacity to salvage 65 tons. We need heavy mobile salvage units for up to 2000 tons for both the ports and the entire nation.

Where we need 70 operators, we have 60. The Prime Minister has issued instructions to fulfill these posts. She has instructed that certain demands of the workers be fulfilled. She has issued orders for a dock management board and a permanent vice chairman there. She has spoken of dredging.

The most important is participatory management. We need decentralisation. All should not be privatised. Not the army, not the currency printing, not the foreign policy, but all else can be privatised. We have fought our Liberation War so that, after Almighty Allah, our people will have power.

Maqsoodul Mannan: We endorse the integrated approach that has been taken at Patenga. We have indicated to the government of the Bangladesh that we are planning to finance the common access facilities at Patenga and Patgaon. We also intend to finance the private sector initiation

ASM Abdur Rab: The tender of eight fork lifts have been finalised and purchase orders have been issued. We have explained to the Prime Minister about the 142 equipment items needed to resolve the prob-

lems at the port including labour unrest, owners' unrest and to dispel the congestion at the port. We have to do this whether by means of our own funds or by means of funds from anyone willing to assist us, whether it be World Bank, Netherlands, Belgium or the private sector.

The Prime Minister said that these must be purchased immediately. Naturally this can't be done in a day. What has been pending for 26 years, can't be done in two years.

Mahfuz Anam: What is the status of this now?

Mofazzel Karim: I would like to shed some light on this point regarding procurement of 142 very vital, important and costly equipment. The equipment which has to be purchased from revenue budget are being procured. As the Hon'ble Minister just said, eight fork lifts will be procured within a month or so because this has been finally cleared. Regarding gentry cranes, straddle carriers and other heavy equipment, with have a clear understanding with the Asian Development Bank that they are prepared to supply these equipment under the agreement we are going to have them very shortly. This is a matter of time now because we have done the ground work. The team is here and then there will be another team next month and hopefully we will be in a position to sign an agreement with the Asian Development Bank for the heavy equipment like gentry crane, etc. These are so expensive that it is beyond our capacity. Maybe the entire budget of Chittagong Port would be exhausted if we go for that.



Maqsoodul Mannan

Prior to the preparation of the shipping policy, let us collate all these comments together and let us implement the comments. Let us implement these.

Kamaluddin: Let me read a few lines from papers regarding equipment. It says here that the CBA leader stressed the necessity to purchase, without further delay, 142 pieces of equipment in keeping with the needs of the port. He said that the government would be responsible if the equipment was not purchased. He also states that there was a resolution through which the Finance Ministry has provided a liquidity certificate of 305 crore taka for implementing the project at the port, but the PCP has not been approved as foreign funding was not confirmed as yet. As a result, it was not being possible to procure the equipment. In the present circumstances, we want to know from the ministry what is the position of these 142 pieces of equipment.

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ADB. The Planning Commission has advised us to submit the PCP regarding all these points and the financial part of the project. It is being done.

Albab Akhanda: Just a few words to clarify our perception on the situation. This roundtable discussion has simply pointed to the incredible complexities of the situation. We have a multi-modal situation, we have different agencies involved, we have an enormous number of actors involved in ports' development. I must say that what we are saying at any given point is not new. The problems are known. What we are trying to do is simply develop a project over the past several months. We are trying to address only one part of the entire problem. That is the congestion at the Chittagong Container Terminal. We are not being ambitious. There is an enormous array of problems that we have to address and the project is only part of it. The need is immediate, urgent and in the national economic interest.

There is significant container growth that Chittagong Container Terminal alone will not be able to deal with it. We need the growth of inland container depots, we need new jetties and we need an enormous number of infrastructure developments to accommodate the container growth.

Now the question is, where are the problems. Basically, there is the matter of equipment. The Asian Development Bank has agreed to assist, but we are looking at the efficiency. We do not detract from the efficiency with which Chittagong Port has operated so far, but this is crisis management. The point is that the container terminal is handling an overflow of container cargo. Three dedicated berths are not enough. We will provide equipment, but also assist in landside improvements to increase efficiency. Gantry cranes are expensive pieces of equipment, these have to be handled in a particular way. We are asking for a system, for an experienced operator to do this, eventually, we will have to develop our own capabilities in Bangladesh. Nobody is detracting from that. If we talk about a lease agreement, it is simply that. The assets are still with the country. So we are proposing equipment, landside improvement, systemic improvements to customs as a composite, an integrated approach to the congestion problem. We give credit to what has been achieved but we are trying to supplement this to anticipate the enormous growth in container traffic that is going to come our way.

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We agree that unions are not there to be banned, but we do say that the unions should understand their role. Politicisation of the unions has come to a point where their role is confused with political direction. There are ways in which unions grow and behave. In the port we would like to have within our technical assistance package, a worker education programme. We would like to help the unions realise that it is really worker benefits and worker representation that they must be looking for and not so much being an extension of the political machine. Politics will always remain, but here the situation is critical and the national economic interest demands that we try to depoliticise the unions to a large degree.

On the Chittagong Port Authority, the management itself, on this point we are not going into a major restructuring exercise. However, we are proposing to provide a system not only to deal with the technicalities of any commercial arrangements we come to, but also to look forward to commercialisation of Chittagong Port and establish its land-locked role. We look to technical skills training to build a more effective machine. The Chittagong Port Authority has to be client oriented. The port users demand it, the workers demand it, and certainly trade demands it.

This is a complex situation. We have tried to develop a project that initiates a process of reform. I don't think we are going to be ambitious enough to undertake major reform of the entire situation. That is with the users, the people, the country itself. It is a direction we propose. My colleague from the World Bank mentioned certain conditionalities. It is not a matter of conditionalities. It is a question of partnership. Here the Bank is looking to the port and the stakeholders in the port as partners. That is why we are having this stakeholders dialogue and I thank not only *The Daily Star* but all the participants here for giving us this opportunity.

We have had one round of discussion with the port workers in Chittagong. It was very useful. We have had a very useful exchange of ideas here, which has given us some direction. In formulating our project, we are trying to initiate a process of change. Developing that process rests in the hands of those to whom the national interest belongs.

Nurul Haque Sikder: There is a lack of empty containers for exportable goods. CFS is piled up, many trucks going there cannot unload the goods because the goods cannot be loaded into containers. This is a very serious matter which needs immediate attention otherwise millions of dollars are at stake.

ASM Abdur Rab: There have been a couple of container yards set up outside to keep empty containers. We have no objection for the private sector's empty containers so you can handle the containers there. We can't do anything beyond our capacity or authority. We are doing as much as possible, particularly in the readymade garment sector. This is a priority for the Chittagong Port Authority.

Laila Kabir: Since con-

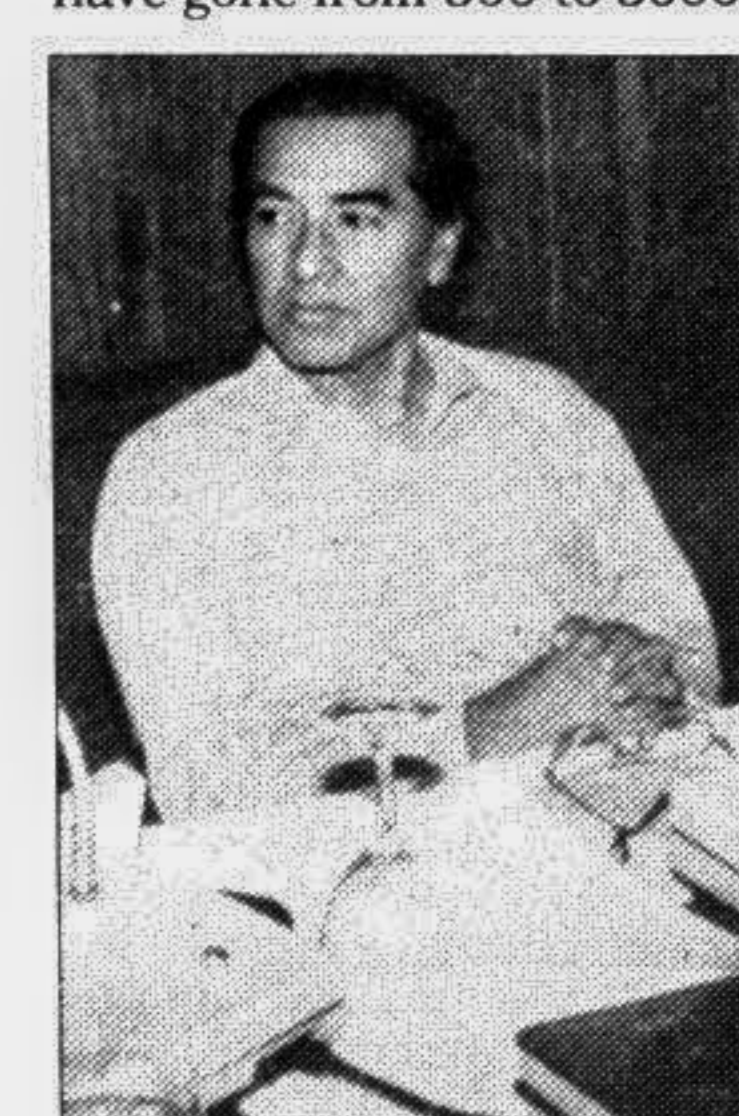
tainers are stacked many containers high, many people cannot take their containers out.

ASM Abdur Rab: Journalists are allowed in the port. Let them report on the situation and the Chairman must reply.

Albab Akhanda: We are trying to take a systems approach towards the modernisation of the port. This will take some time, but under the project we will have made some progress with the introduction of the equipment, landside improvements and tariff increased. It is not immediate and overnight, but it is certainly a part of the process of change.

ASM Abdur Rab: I want to thank *The Daily Star* for this open discussion. Such a participatory discussion among political parties, trade unions and everyone can help in resolving the nation's problems. We can perhaps have such discussion on television for all to see. I believe in accountability. I believe in accepting responsibility for my own failures. Thank you.

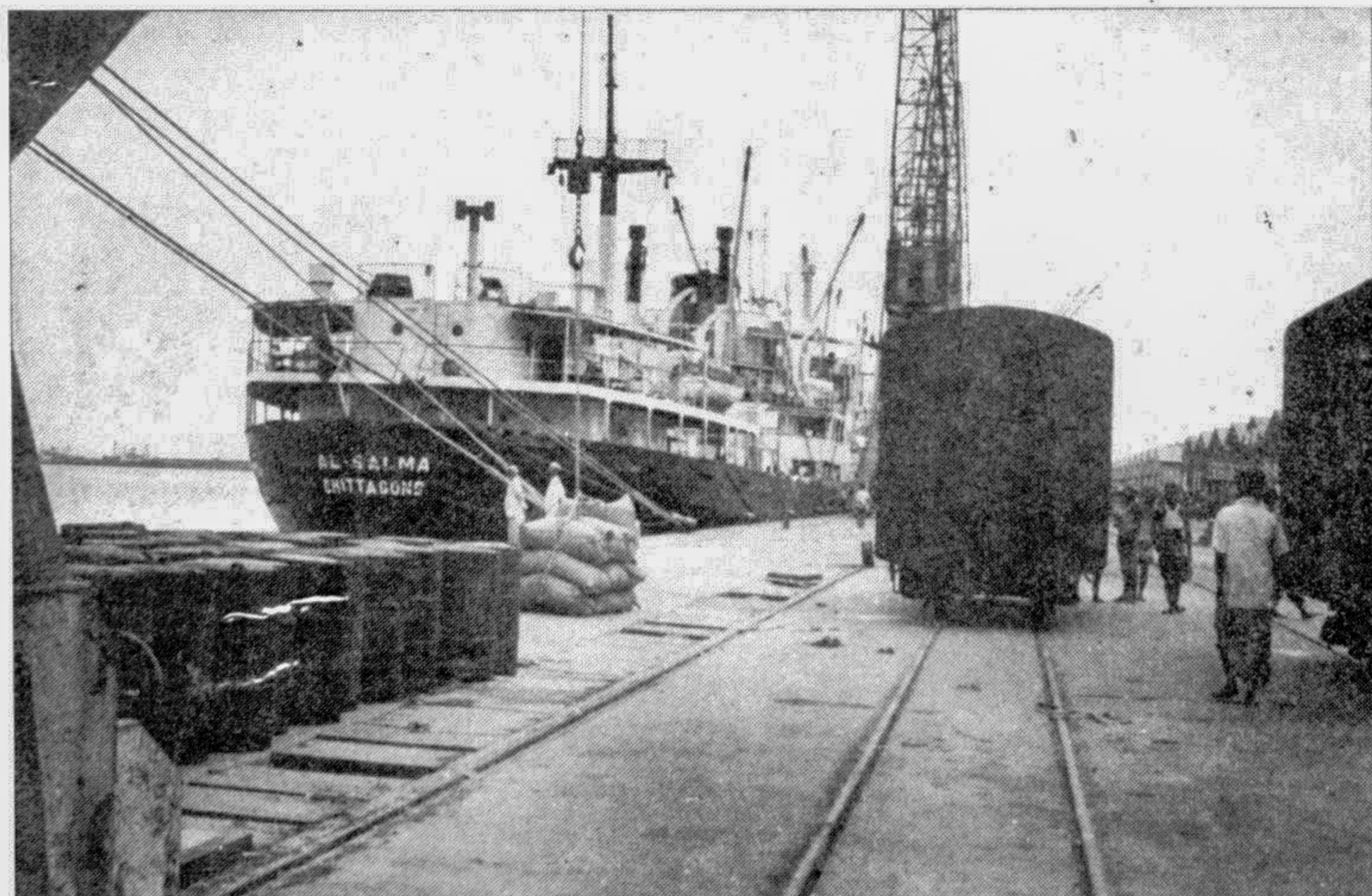
Mahfuz Anam: I would like to conclude with one sustaining thought. It is one thing to feel happy for our own achievements. We should not underestimate ourselves. We have a lot of good things happening and all that. But we also have to be in a competitive environment. Suppose originally we were five compared to other who are 500. From five we have gone to ten, so we are bragging 100 per cent achievement. The others have gone from 500 to 5000.



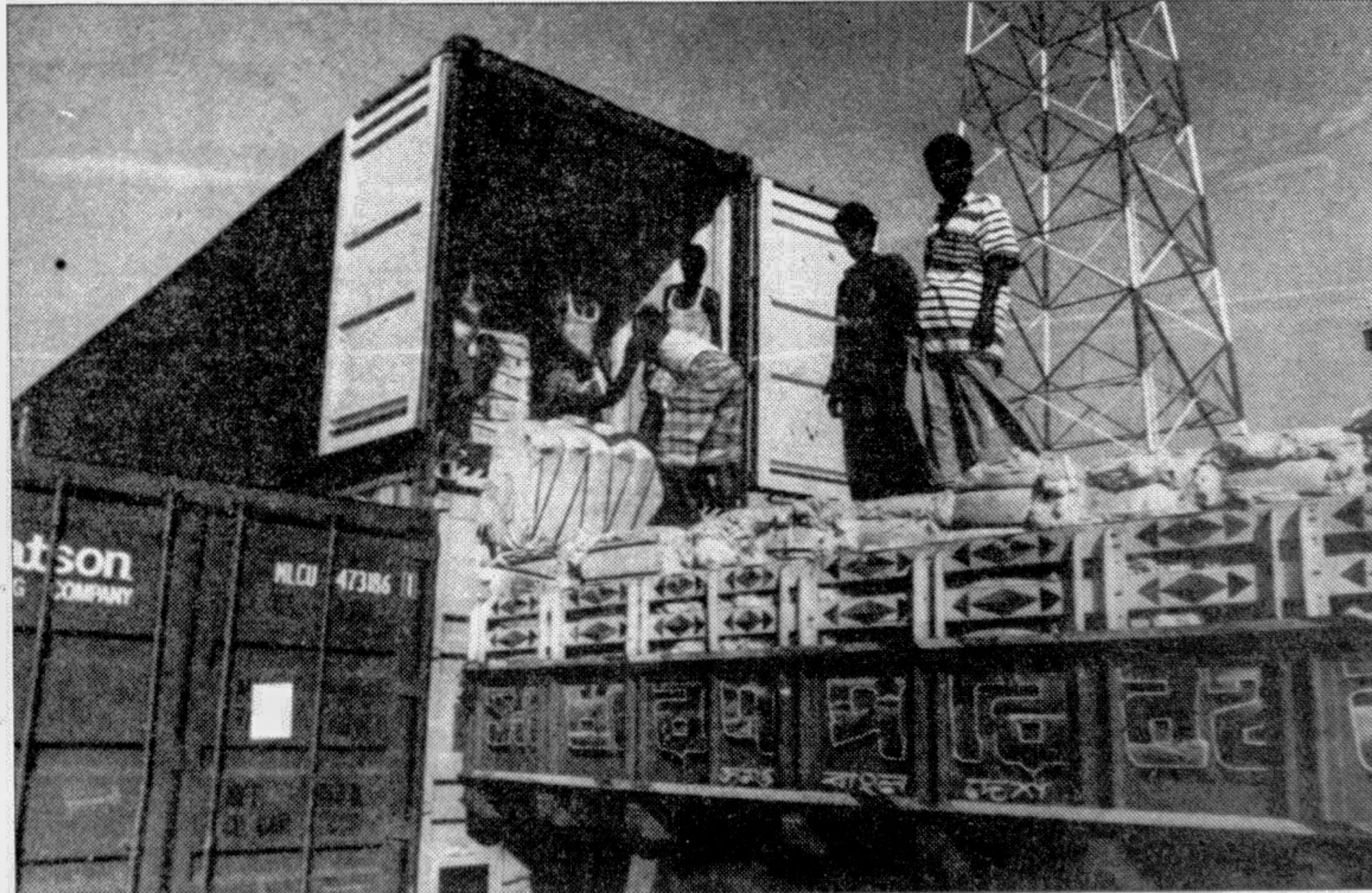
Mahfuz Anam

Now Korea had a literacy rate lower than Pakistan in 1947. Now where is Korea? Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, even Myanmar is making progress. Each time we say, 'unless we move fast, some other country is going to overtake us.' And each time it does. We have achieved a lot, but for 120 million people we have to go even faster and much more steadily. Chittagong Port is doing very well and that is fine. It is doing very well compared to what it did before. But compared to what it needs to do, what the country needs, where is it? I am not in favour of blaming the Chittagong Port. We must salute it for whatever it has achieved. But we cannot forget what we need to achieve. And this is the spirit in which we have held the dialogue. I assure you this is only the first of many of the initiatives *The Daily Star* will take. I invite other newspapers. We have to talk. We have to solve the problem. This country must go forward otherwise we have no future. Thank you very much.

Transcription: PROBE News Agency



A view of Chittagong Port



Container Service at Chittagong Port