

Opening Up Infrastructure

Two initiatives — one merely an idea and the other a concrete plan — took off on Monday which could herald the beginning of a new era of private sector participation in infrastructure development.

Since the lack of a sound economic infrastructure is one of the principal reasons why Bangladesh's efforts to industrialise rapidly and attract foreign investment have been stalling, the initiative to facilitate private sector participation in roads, highways, telecommunications, power, port facilities etc., is a major step in the right direction.

On the face of it, the IIFC initiative, involving a 235 million dollar soft-loan window created by the World Bank to be disbursed through a government-owned company, appears sound.

Roads and highways and land-based telecom have remained closed to the private sector, while a move to allow private investment in port facilities is faltering in the face of resistance from vested quarters.

A Great Prospect

Who did they kill on the night of November 3, twenty-three years ago? The entire provisional government at Mujibnagar, save one. This government, the historic Swadhin Bangla Sarkar declared the de jure independence of one nation, waged war against a bloody occupation, earned victory and drove out the invaders and carved out in the annals of world nations the name of a new one by obtaining recognition from abroad and by occupying the whole of what is now Bangladesh.

And this was done to complete the assassination of the architect of our new state, fearing that if the four lived, especially Tajuddin who was Garibaldi and Mazzini and Cavour rolled into one the August 15 massacre would be ineffectual.

The nation welcomes the prospect at hand of bringing to justice the treacherous jail murder case. The murder of four citizens must be brought to trial. No less important is the need for healing the injury on our body-politic caused by allowing those to be murdered while in state custody.

The jail killing trial must not be allowed to be muddled by any desire finding its way to influence its proceedings and outcome. The nation and the world abroad must be convinced of the fairness of the trial which should be visible to all, irrespective of affiliations.

Keep It Up

Given the ramifications of the CHT peace accord it will be foolhardy to expect that with its signing all differences were left behind and its implementation would be a cakewalk.

From that standpoint, we should be heartened by the mutually engaging talks taking place between the government and the PCJSS, regardless of the differences of opinion surfacing from time to time on ways to implement the CHT peace accord signed nearly a year ago.

The first anniversary of the accord signing ceremony falls due on December 2. The occasion better be celebrated rather than just remembered with an implemental breakthrough made in a month's time — before that great day arrived, that is.

Blaming the Messenger for the Message

By pointing fingers at the economists, there is an attempt to sidestep the real issues. The questions that need to be asked include, but are not limited to, the following: Do we need periodic devaluation? Whose interest does it serve?

THE Honourable Finance Minister has taken the economists to task for stating what many people feel is obvious: in a country like Bangladesh where the export base is extremely narrow and imports include mostly commodities with inelastic demand, repeated devaluation will not improve the trade balance.

He has lashed out at economists for pointing out the risks involved in periodic devaluation. By raising the spectre of imported inflation, he believes, the economists are fueling inflationary fear in the economy.

It is true, as the Minister has pointed out, that prices of several imported commodities, such as oil, sugar, have declined in the world market. But the question is, has the savings, following lower import prices, been passed on to the consumers? I will leave it to the readers to decide for themselves.

Since July 1996, there have been more than a dozen devaluations lowering the value of taka by about 16 per cent. In fact, almost identical — it is necessary in order to maintain the competitiveness of our exports following changes in both the domestic and external economic situation.

In recent years, the rationale given for every devaluation has been almost identical — it is necessary in order to maintain the competitiveness of our exports following changes in both

gone. It has never seen a devaluation that didn't like! The exporters of readymade garments have continuously argued that they cannot compete with the other devalued currencies in the region.

This raises a pertinent question: if devaluation doesn't achieve the stated goals of the policy makers, why do they resort to devaluation so often? It appears that the reason is more political than economic.

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Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

The root of their problems lie not in the external value of taka, but in the structural bottlenecks that they face in exporting their products.

These include, but are not limited to, the difficulties in getting bank credit, opening letters of credit, labour problems, work stoppage due to political unrest, inadequate transportation facilities, corruption at all levels, lack of containers for export, etc. It would be in the interest of everyone if they concentrate their attention and effort in removing these impediments.

Why is an administration, both past and present, so eager to devalue? I can think of two reasons. First, it helps to appease one of the most vocal, organised, and powerful lobbying group in our country — the garment exporters. As I have mentioned repeatedly, the real solution to some of the genuine problems facing the industry lies in removing the structural bottlenecks that they face.

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The Finance Minister must accept the fact that for the sake of the entire nation and the long-term prospects of our economy, the administration is continuing to cater to the demand of a selected few. To him I would say, the exporters are trying to ride to prosperity on your back and on our expense.

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loans from the IMF under the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility, it would only make sense for them to adjust the value of taka before going for such a loan.

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Honourable Minister, the decision is yours, the fate is ours!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Peace without Real Price, on Israeli Terms

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Netanyahu has to convince the Jews that a smaller Israel at peace with the Palestinians and respected in the region will lead to the real Greater Israel. Netanyahu has to stop making excuses — such as his hands were forced — and adopt Rabin and Peres-like vision of a Israel at peace with its neighbours.

US. Had any other nation done so, their embassy personnel would have been sent packing.

According to Press reports, Israeli Trade and Labour Minister, Natan Sharansky's impassioned plea — that the Israeli demand for a comprehensive revision of the Palestinian Charter to excise the 26 articles calling for Israel's destruction was not a propaganda exercise but a fundamental insistence — swayed Arafat and Clinton.

The Arabs, represented by Yasser Arafat, with lower lip shaking uncontrollably, and Jordan King Hussein, portrayed weanily and his Israeli Netanyahu and his nation President Clinton were embodiments of health, vigour and power.

The 13 per cent withdrawal, only to be carried out after Netanyahu is satisfied with Arafat's security compliance, was an American compromise. The Palestinians were hoping for over 30 per cent. If this deal were to be consummated, 18 per cent of the West Bank would be under total Palestinian control, 22 per cent under joint Israeli-Palestinian control, and a whopping 60 per cent under total Israeli control.

According to the New York Times columnist Tom Friedman, the day after he lost the election to Benjamin Netanyahu in May 1996, the Labour Party leader Shimon Peres said: "The Israelis lost. The Jews won." Mr. Peres was

alluding to the fact that Israel had become a nation of Jews and "Israelis". The "Israelis", says Friedman, are secular, with primary loyalty to Israel and their own individual and material advancement. They see Israel's future in being in the peace process and in greater integration with the region and the world at large.

The "Jews" come from the traditional and Orthodox communities, the West Bank settlements and religious-Zionist movements. They are devoted to a traditional concept of Judaism and see the Israel state as a means to fulfil Judaism's commandments, not as an end itself. The Jews are skeptical of integration, which they equate with assimilation, and they see Israel fated to perpetually struggle with its non-Jewish neighbours.

Bibi's heart always seemed to be with the Jews, but his head — and his electoral future — with the Israeli hawks and doves. For two years, he did all he could to avoid having to choose between them, but when finally forced to do so — when presented with a credible Palestinian security plan, undergirded by the C.I.A. — Mr. Netanyahu opted for a deal based on what most Israelis wanted (better Oslo), not on what most Jews wanted (no more Oslo). He brought the Israeli hawks into Oslo, adding them to the Israeli doves, who were already there, and thereby put the Oslo accords on a solid foundation of 75 per cent of the Israeli public.

For the new deal to work, Netanyahu has to treat the Palestinians as real partners, not adversaries to be defeated and humiliated, freeze settlements and rein in Jewish extremists, every bit as much as Yasser

Arafat has to rein in Hamas. He has to believe less in Israeli military might than its morality. (Ariel Sharon, Netanyahu's new Foreign Minister, still refuses to shake hands with President Arafat, whom he calls a "terrorist". The truth is, Mr. Sharon was responsible for more Arabs and Palestinian deaths than Yasser Arafat was for Israelis.) Netanyahu has to convince the Jews that a smaller Israel at peace with the Palestinians and respected in the region will lead to the real Greater Israel. Netanyahu has to stop making excuses — such as his hands were forced — and adopt Rabin and Peres-like vision of a Israel at peace with its neighbours.

A Tribute to M Anisuzzaman

by Sheikh Rakib Uddin

DEATH is inevitable. The icy hand of death will touch everyone. The death of noted journalist M Anisuzzaman was tragic and untimely, particularly to those who came in close touch with him during his long chequered journalism career.

M Anisuzzaman started his journalism career in Calcutta in the Daily Ittehad, founded by great leader Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy. Late Abul Mansur Ahmed, a legendary figure in the domain of journalism and literature, was the editor of the daily. In the dawn of his career, Anisuzzaman also worked in the Times of India.

In early '50s, Anisuzzaman came to Dhaka with a renewed vow to establish himself as a journalist. He joined The Pakistan Observer, now The Bangladesh Observer. Thereafter, he joined the Daily Azad as a senior sub-editor. In the early '60s, he was promoted to the post of the news editor of the daily which virtually helped him flourish his talent and

different shades of opinion, including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. As a son Maulana Ahmed Ali, the editor of the Daily Nabajug published from Calcutta during the last days of British rule, he was fortunate to see many top leaders of the sub-continent like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haque.

His powerful writings impressed all his readers. After the crackdown by Pakistan army in the fateful night of March 25, 1971, Anis Bhai along with his sons and daughters took shelter at my residence for a couple of days. He was arrested and tortured by the Pakistan army during the Liberation War.

We pay high tributes to Anis Bhai who always treated his colleagues as his dear ones. His role in journalism will act as a model of honest and ethical journalism and will, hopefully, inspire the present generation of journalists to adhere to high professional standards.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, Anisuzzaman came back to Daily Azad as its Chief Editor. He resigned from the daily in 1975 after the responsibility of its management was returned to the family members of Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan.

Anisuzzaman, though believing in a particular political doctrine of socialism, developed close links with a number of political leaders, irrespective of merit. As the news editor of the Azad, he played a role of a courageous journalist and brought about a radical change in the policy of the paper which ultimately facilitated it to fight for the causes of the people during the mass upsurge in 1969 and the historic Agartala Conspiracy Case.

He was arrested under the Pakistan Defence Act. But it was an irony of his fate that the day he resumed his duty after release, the Azad management terminated him. Later, he joined the then leading weekly the Jananta as its editor. After the liberation of Bangladesh, Anisuzzaman came back to Daily Azad as its Chief Editor. He resigned from the daily in 1975 after the responsibility of its management was returned to the family members of Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan.

OPINION

Progress of Politics

A Husnain

South Asia is heaving from deep slumber, and the yawns might disturb the G7. But the yawns would be swallowed, for mutual sustenance. The struggle for survival is a noble aim, however cruel the labour, and however nasty the means. Both parties would have to come to an agreement for mutual existence, side by side, or at a distance.

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To the Editor...

Ironical, indeed

Sir, The illegal government of Khandekar Mushtaque was dislodged under the leadership of late Brigadier Khated Mosharraf. Bir Uttam, 2nd Mosharraf, Bir Uttam, 2nd Mosharraf, 1975. This was a red letter day in the history of Bangladesh, which paved the way for all successive governments including the most recent government of Awami League. But a price was paid in blood by Brigadier Khated Mosharraf, Bir Uttam, Colonel KN Huda, Bir Bikram, and Lt Col ATM Haider, Bir Uttam.

They all had tremendous contribution in our Liberation War. They were dragged and brutally murdered on the early morning of November 7, 1975 under the banner of so-called Sepoy Biplob. This was reportedly instigated by late Colonel Abu Taher, Bir Uttam, (ret'd) of JSD. After being murdered in cold blood, these three were dubbed as Indian agents and the day marked for a long twenty-one years as national holiday for celebrations and Bara Khanas. Their comrades in arms, many of whom are still alive, are in record of these three can only confirm whether such pro-Indian feeling ever existed in Khaled, Huda, or Haider. But one thing for certain — they were in no way pro-Pakistani. Whenever an army officer is

dubbed as an agent provocateur, he is usually stripped of all his ranks and citations. Isn't it a double standard for Begum Khaleda Zia that, she on one hand formally handed over the medals of honour and on the other hand was merely attending Bara Khanas on November 7, held in celebration of their killings.

What we do hold Colonel Abu Taher, Bir Uttam in high esteem for his role as a Sector Commander in the War of Liberation, we cannot condone his reported role in the premeditated killing of these three officers. He appeared to be at that time responsible for the martyrdom of Khaled, Huda, and Haider under the banner of his party's infamous slogan "Sepoy, Sepoy, Bhai, Bhai — Officer Der Rakti Chhal". Ironically this very political party who were actively involved in branding Awami League as pro-Indian after 15th August, 1975, similarly branded Khaled, Huda, and Haider as Indian agents after they had successfully obliterated Khandekar Mushtaque Ahmed.

It is now disheartening to learn that our government, instead of trying to bring to books the killers of Khaled, Huda, and Haider, is now voicing for inquiry into the circumstances of Colonel Taher's hanging. May

be there are good reason for that, but certainly if priority is considered here, the issue of Khaled, Huda, and Haider precedes that of Taher, even by chronological order.

Hasan Abdullah Dhaka

Cultivating official formality

Sir, Citizens must have noted with satisfaction that formality is returning at the government and state levels. During the Prime Minister's address to the nation on the evening of October 16, it was noted that behind her, on the wall, was the official state crest. Formal procedures have a philosophy behind its observance, and these take a long time to refine, and such environment leads to amicable official intercourse. It is hoped that the trend will be maintained without break.

Everything has its due place, without showing disrespect to any one person or situation on any occasion.

A Senior Citizen Dhaka