

Trade Fair Window

There is a clear recognition among government circles that trade has a critical role to play in national economic growth. Over the years, successive governments have rightly laid emphasis on increasing exports, but there is also a great deal of necessity to ease procedures and cost of imports particularly of products servicing local manufacturing industries. But while fiscal measures and simplification of procedures can go a long way to boost trade and thus stimulate local industry, the need to project national manufacturing capabilities to a wider audience, and give local industries focused exposure to what others have to offer, remains paramount. In this context, the Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF), which since 1995 has become the biggest annual economic fair in the country, has assumed crucial importance.

The Fifth Dhaka International Trade Fair, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina a day before yesterday, is expected to give a major boost to the country's trading prospects. The optimism is based on the fact that companies from 28 countries, in addition to 291 local firms, are taking part in this year's DITF. The figure for foreign participation is a substantial increase over the previous year, when the DITF attracted companies from 19 nations. Interest in the DITF among local companies has been phenomenal this year, with 776 firms applying for space. All these suggest that the fair has caught the imagination of those who matter, both at home and abroad. It also shows that Bangladesh, as a source of, as well as a market for, manufactured goods, has placed itself firmly on the global map.

While the DITF goes from strength to strength, it is necessary to ensure that the image projected through the fair is enhanced. Local products on display at the fair are likely to determine perception of potential foreign buyers about the overall quality of Bangladesh manufacturing. Potential investors would also obtain a clear picture about the efficiency of local management, labour and the cost of operation through their evaluation of products on display. Therefore, it is vital that local firms strive to improve the quality of their products and ensure an attractive price through efficient management and production at the plant level. The DITF provides an excellent window of opportunity to increase trade and attract investment, but this window could shut as suddenly as it has opened. This is one opportunity Bangladesh cannot afford to miss.

Sombre, Yet Festive

The Ekushey Book Fair is about to get underway at the Bangla Academy premises as a major cultural event with strong commemorative moorings. Since it reminds us of the martyrdom in the 1952 Language Movement on a forward-looking note about how we have fared with our books, there is an element of robust futurism to the event. We try to repay our debts to the martyrs in solemn remembrance of their deeds by putting on display a wealth of books bearing testimony to the advancement of Bangla language as a medium of knowledge dissemination.

The Book Fair over the years has emerged, as a matter of eclat, something of a cultural gravitational point — a rendezvous, at it were, for writers behind the books and their admirers who might not all turn out to be enthusiastic buyers when the books are closed. Even so, our otherwise troubled publication industry receives a boost, not merely by some instant purchases and supply orders placed with them but also for the impressions created on the visitors, including foreigners on a jaunt who are exposed to various titles — Bengali books carrying properly translated English titles, too. The experience is a peep into our arts and culture.

So, we would like the Ekushey Book Fair to be festive and colourful on top of being businesslike and sombre. Some instances of rowdiness had been observed in and around the book fair venue in the past, but last year it was something of an exception because Bangla Academy had it confined to its premises and more or less did away with non-book stalls of variegated kinds.

It would be in the fitness of things, we believe, that the fair is not overly insulated and totally bereft of fanfare, colour and montage. Let there be festivity, but not at the expense of security, decency and order, of course.

The Sticker Question

When the first announcement came from Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) for procuring coloured stickers for private and public vehicles about a month back, the transport owners were thrown into confusion. After press reports criticising the announcement were published, BRTA came out with a clarification which again proved inadequate. Now BRTA has once again announced that three types of stickers have to be obtained by private and public transport owners to be properly displayed on each vehicle. The process is supposed to start from tomorrow, February 4, 1999. Each token will cost an additional Tk. 40 over and above the prescribed annual fees for road tax, fitness and route permits.

Presently a white token is issued free of charge when road tax is paid by the owners. The announcement has given rise to some pertinent questions which seek answers immediately. Is the new system applicable only for transports registered in the capital? Are all post offices authorised to issue stickers meant for road tax, if not who will go where? Has the BRTA its branches in all the 64 districts of the country? If not, where would the owners go for fitness and route permit tokens? Since the vehicle owners pay normal taxes, why are they to pay for stickers separately? Is there any guarantee that these stickers cannot be forged? But the most important question is whether these stickers carry a full guarantee to save the owners from harassment. We would like to know the answers from the BRTA as early as possible. Because we feel these are vital information that need to be publicised in the interest of taxpayers.

Reforms Can Help Strengthen Madrasah Education

There is little scope or reason for anyone to call for "closure" or "banning" of madrasahs, even less of Islamic education as a whole. But what the debate does need to focus on is the manner in which madrasahs are being used by extremist political elements for their own partisan ends.

support to madrasahs. Sadique, however, warned that the government would deal harshly with any student or teacher of madrasahs if they were found to be active in terrorist groups.

This is not the first time, of course, that madrasahs have found themselves embroiled in controversy. During the street campaign against writer Taslima Nasreen and the daily *Janakantha* in 1994, it was evident that madrasah students, organised by their teachers, formed much of the crowd. It was also evident that many of the extremist religious-political parties, which took to the streets to call for Nasreen's head, were based at various madrasahs.

It was felt strongly at the time that madrasahs had indeed become hotbeds of a particular brand of political extremism, which used religion to win allegiance of devout young students. It was alleged then that teachers including principals of some madrasahs had personally motivated their young students to go on street demonstrations. In other words, far from being noble seats of Islamic learning, the madrasahs had been turned into schools of intolerance and bigotry.

The attempt on Shamsur Rahman's life was probably the most serious assault on liberal and secular thought in Bangladesh since the mass murder of intellectuals in December 1971. This was not only an attack on person but on all the enlightenment and progressive values for which Rahman stood. If the would-be assassins and their mentors could be traced back to madrasahs, then a reaction against the extremist groups would naturally

spill over into anger against the institutions themselves.

However, such reactions and anger need to be voiced with a measure of reason and wisdom, because madrasahs or Islamic education itself has never been the cause of the intolerance that some political groups display. The problem lies elsewhere.

Recent press reports about thousands of terrorists being trained at the Lalkhan Madrasah in Chittagong now look to have been a major hoax. There is hardly any evidence on the ground to suggest that the madrasah was ever used as a terrorist base or training camp.

People have traditionally looked upon madrasahs as necessary compliments to the general, secular primary and secondary schools and not as rivals. Many families even send their children to general schools after putting them through few years of madrasah

education. There has never been any public discontent towards these institutions. This remains the case even when the vast majority of families in Bangladesh prefer to send their children to general schools where the education is focused more on the humanities and sciences.

Given such circumstances, there is little scope or reason for anyone to call for "closure" or "banning" of madrasahs, even less of Islamic education as a whole. But what the debate does need to focus on is the manner in which madrasahs are being used by extremist political elements for their own partisan ends.

The government may also consider expanding the madrasah curricula and incorporate more humanities and science subjects, while keeping the existing religious education intact. This is necessary for the students as well, since they would be going into a world where a good grasp of modern subjects would be necessary for them to succeed in higher education and the job market.

Another aspect of madrasahs that needs government monitoring is the source of any foreign funding they receive. Madrasahs receiving voluntary private donations from foreign nationals may not be a bad thing, but if these funds are being provided for political purposes then the government certainly has a duty to investigate.

The government now needs to think hard on ways to monitor and supervise the way madrasahs are run. This is necessary to prevent these institutions from being used by extremist political groups.

What the recent spate of statements and counter-statements has demonstrated is that madrasahs do need some sort of scrutiny from the government. But the scrutiny needs to limit itself to whether the institutions are being used by teachers as political platforms, whether students are being organised for political acts, whether terrorist groups are able to shelter in their premises to serve their political agenda. The same principle should apply to madrasahs.

In o'er words, what civil society ought to campaign about is reform of the madrasah system, rather than its abolition.

In fact, such reforms should be welcomed by madrasah principals and teachers because these would strengthen them, not weaken them. The religious education they impart would then be appropriately placed within the context of the modern world.

To achieve this goal, both the government and madrasah authorities need to discuss matters dispassionately, with only the interests of the students and reputation of the institutions in mind.

The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

But what these stories have done is to inflame passion on both sides of the debate, and throw a smokescreen over the real issues.

One such "real issue" is the way madrasahs are used by religious bigots to fan intolerance, and breed cadres for various extremist political groups.

The British colonial rulers introduced the modern version of madrasah education in Bengal when the Aleya Madrasah was established in Calcutta. The idea was to provide a specialised school of Islamic teaching, with the goal of producing Islamic scholars as well as allow ordinary families the opportunities to provide religious education to their children.

Given the basic noble char-

acter of madrasahs, there has never been any public discontent towards these institutions. This remains the case even when the vast majority of families in Bangladesh prefer to send their children to general schools where the education is focused more on the humanities and sciences.

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'Sick' Yeltsin and 'Sickening' Russia: What Next?

by AMM Shahabuddin

Undoubtedly, Yeltsin is gradually losing his grip over the whole situation. It's really difficult to pin-point who controls whom. Is it the current Prime Minister Primakov, or some army General behind the scene?

course of action. Things didn't look up as desired, both for Yeltsin and his friends. There are many things between earth and heavens which we don't know.

Change of Pilots Not the Engine

After dismissing Chernomyrdin in March last year, Yeltsin appointed a young man, Sergi Kirilenko, as a new Prime Minister. But within a couple of months the poor fellow, before he could adjust his 'musical chair' properly, was removed and brought in there the earlier dismissed Prime Minister Chernomyrdin again. Giving his sad experience Kirilenko told pressmen hours before his dismissal that, he knew that he had 'stood by policies of political suicide.' His so-called 'suicidal' policy included his decision 'to cut the rouble from the dollar bag' and 'freeze on billions of dollars of government debt,' which he considered as the "only possible response to the crisis." Meanwhile, the score has changed and the Prime Minister's office is currently occupied by another new face, Mr Primakov (who knows when he goes!). In the context, I would like to share a popular joke with my readers (if irrelevant, just forget it): At an airport, waiting passengers were told that the flight would be delayed, further due to some engine trouble. Then after a couple of hours, passengers were requested to be on board, as the plane was now ready to take off. One curious passenger asked a flight official: 'Did you change the engine?' Prompt came the reply: 'No. We have changed the pilot.' So Yeltsin is changing, rather trying, one pilot after another. But the poor pilots after flying a while return to the base with continued

'engine trouble.' It's indeed a risky job!

Economy — a Horror Picture?

The Russian economy today is at its lowest ebb. The 'rouble' is literally lost in the 'rubbles'. 'Galloping' inflation with the free fall of rouble, sky-rocketing foreign debt of over 100 billion US dollars and a huge internal debt of 400 billion roubles, continued food shortage, recklessly rising unemployment, accompanied by beyond-the-reach price-hike, and increasing street crimes — all together give a most depressing picture of today's Russia. Even the employees working in different government and non-government organisations have not been paid their salaries for months together. Once honourable citizens of a highly prosperous country — a super power — are seen either begging on the streets of Moscow or selling their household goods to buy food-stuff. Poverty is writ large on everybody's face except the 'neo-rich' class. It just can't be called a mess, it's a 'horror picture' of a totally devastated economic scenario. How can this almost 'dead' economy be resurrected to put a new life in the Russian people?

On one hand, America is insisting that Russia should go ahead with its economic reforms programme, on the other, US-dominated IMF, which often jumps in with bail-out loans for ailing nations, is now feeling shy, to get involved in the Russian mess. The IMF had already 'frozen' disbursement of a sanctioned loan of US\$ 670 million, perhaps keeping an option to release the loan in installments according to the suitability of the situation. The western observers, however, think that Russia needs financial assistance urgently to sta-

bilise its markets and 'shore up' its 'sinking' rouble.

IMF : Why this 'Shyness'?

As they say, 'once bitten twice shy.' Has the IMF been 'bitten recently'? Perhaps being stung by the criticism of its mishandling of Asia's economic crisis, says an western analyst, IMF is keeping a safe distance from the 'fire'. Japan's Deputy Finance Minister, criticising IMF's role in Asia and Russia's economic debacle, said that its reform prescription means 'market fundamentalism' and 'US dominance'. Hence IMF is following a policy of 'wait and see.' But according to some analysts, IMF now 'appears to be using the crisis to force Russia to undertake some of the tough measures it has advocated in the past.'

A manager of an western financial organisation, which has invested some US\$ 180 million in Russia, was frustrated when he was quoted as saying that it was 'a clear sign that Yeltsin had completely lost his grip on the whole situation... A sign that the country is in complete political chaos.' Even a Moscow Radio commentator had said some time back that Yeltsin had now 'turned into a clown. He has no credibility, no trust.'

Under the circumstances, if Yeltsin goes out, as he seems to be at the end of his political journey, what happens next? The West, particularly America, has three options before it. First, to accept a former communist-turned nationalist hard-liner Chernomyrdin, as the next Russian leader in place of Yeltsin. Secondly, to accept communist party chief, Gennady Zyuganov, who came second to Yeltsin in the last presidential election. Thirdly,

To the Editor...

(News)paper-less days

Sir, Recently while addressing a conference of the Bangladesh Sangbad Samity, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that she could not conceive of the idea of passing three consecutive days without newspapers. She was expressing her concern over the complete newspaper shutdown during Eid holidays.

We appreciate the PM's concern and would urge upon the newspaper management to make special arrangements to bring out newspapers on Eid and other holidays.

Meanwhile it is heartening as well as assuring to learn that our Prime Minister starts her day with a cup of tea and a bundle of newspapers which she reads and reviews for taking appropriate action on the basis of the reports published in the newspapers.

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Cause and effect

Sir, I would differ in approach from the DS editorial (Jan 24) to the problem our intellectuals and liberals are having for quite some time with the religious 'fundamentalists', which is alleged to have resulted in the physical attack on one well known poet by an alleged international group of Islamic terrorists, now training and operating in Bangladesh. Is this not an isolated movement. Even the super-

this the tip of an iceberg?

It was emphasised that deeper intelligence and security activities handling the 'effects' what about the 'causes' which led to such desperate measures as physical assaults? These fundamentalists have been under intense propaganda campaign and provocation by their opponents.

The causes cannot be ignored, suppressed or distorted. The causes are very much facts of life — the master plan for operation, however objectionable. These causes and motivations have to come out in the open or public discussion and debate and joint sessions to reduce the communication gap. Without understanding the problem, there can be no satisfactory solution.

Therefore look at the iceberg, not simply at the tip.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

NO on environmental protection

Sir, A news published in the DS of 24 January was interesting, me because it was about a decision of a grassroots representative, a Union Parishad chairman affecting the decision making of the top level decision making body, the ECNEC.

A 20 crore taka renovation project of the Natural Gas Fertilizer Factory (NGFF) at Sylhet, provisionally approved in a pre-ECNEC meeting could not be approved by ECNEC due to the failure of the factory authority to submit a No Objection Certificate (NOC) on environmental protection from the local government authority. This re-

quirement of NOC was made obligatory by an environmental law introduced by the Ministry of Environment in July last year. The chairman concerned did not issue an NOC to the company demanding the assurance of compensation for people who would be affected by the factory waste, employment for the local people and that the factory would not cause environmental pollution.

Although the project has been delayed because of the UP chairman's decision not to use the NOC before realising the demands he placed, I don't think the chairman is to blame for this. Even if the demands are not valid that should be resolved through investigation and negotiation through a proper mechanism.

I would like to appreciate the chairman for his responsible decision concerning his people and environment. I think the exercise of the newly given power to him should be respected for the sake of effectiveness of the law. At the same time this respect is necessary for the empowerment of the local government.

However, the UP chairman's authority has been ignored ultimately in the same event. The NGFF authority, later, has managed to procure an NOC from the TNO concerned and expecting the approval of the project in the next ECNEC meeting. This raises suspicion about the effectiveness of the law.

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power is at its wits end how to confront international terrorism. Now it appears to have nested in Bangladesh, for different reasons. The charged situation appears to be only the beginning, and is grave. Hence the steps towards peaceful coexistence have to be carefully planned.

If the intention is to 'wipe out' the offending point of view, then terrorism has to be met with terrorism, by whatever other name it is called and propagated (the United States is not officially indulging in terrorism against some nations or groups).

Therefore look at the iceberg, not simply at the tip.

Personal and individual freedom and liberties are at stake today in this country, and the onus is on the state to take drastic measures to boost up public confidence, not only in day-to-day governance, but to nip future anti-public actions in the bud.

Let us all pray the episode will not snowball, and it is not too late to