

BGMEA's Role

Elections to the executive committee of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) usually attract public interest. But this year's elections, which were held on Thursday last, held a little more interest than previous ones. The role of the BGMEA in promoting growth of the garments industry has increased immensely over the years. The BGMEA has also acquired a high profile political role, thanks to various wrongdoing — alleged or real — by garments exporters, such as poor safety records, quota manipulation, abuse of tariff facilities etc. On the other hand, the garments sector is now seen as a potential source of investible surplus funds, which are badly needed to build up a high quality textile industry. Indeed, this backward linkage is vital for the prosperity of the garments sector itself.

Against this backdrop, the election of a new executive council of the BGMEA has the potential to inject new ideas and approaches, and fresh enthusiasm in the association. The BGMEA is at a crossroads today. On the one hand, it is perhaps the most professional and forward-looking among all the business associations in the country. The BGMEA's role in eliminating child labour from the garments sector stands as an example for other industries — indeed, other countries — to follow. On the whole, the BGMEA has played the role of a catalyst in turning garments into a dynamic sector. But this means the association carries a great deal of responsibilities as well, from helping to secure the industry's future in the global market, to ensuring its members refrain from manipulation of facilities.

The garments sector now requires a major re-orientation in attitudes among the entrepreneurs who drive the industry. There is an urgent necessity to increase value addition, through establishing forward and backward linkages. The industry's excessive reliance on buying houses for marketing of products may have been necessary in the early stages, but that needs to change. Growth of local textile industries is a must if garments exporters are to remain competitive in the world market in five years' time. But such backward linkages would not take place, unless garments exporters began sourcing their inputs locally, rather than from overseas. The BGMEA's new leadership can play a major role in establishing a partnership, which would help the growth of textiles and ensure a prosperous future for readymade garments.

Tax Dodging by MPs?

Given our scale of improprieties committed by the high and mighty, the news of 186 MPs out of a total of 330 in the Jatiya Sangsad evading income tax payment may not quite strike as a bombshell. But this is certainly an instance of the worst breach of trust on the part of lawmakers to-date. A parliamentary majority, mind you, has by some strange, but not quite an inexplicable neuro-chemistry, opted out of the tax obligation. On top of the piling up of telephone bills by MPs this disclosure on tax evasion sheds ample light on the tumble taken by the lawmakers' respect for the laws of the land.

To our mind, the list of income tax payees among the MPs sent by the NBR to the Parliamentary standing committee on Finance at the latter's request which cracked open the story, speaks of an accountability process having been already initiated. Now this needs to be carried forward to a conclusion. The allowances they draw as Members of Parliament are tax-free alright, but these do not constitute all their sources of income. If they had paid taxes before they became parliament members and have not entirely delinked themselves from their previous avocations then their incomes must have been taxable. When anybody earning more than Tk 60,000 per annum has to pay income tax there is hardly any reason for an MP to be placed below that measly income bracket. They had got elected on a campaign expenditure ceiling of Tk 3 lakh each, which many of them might well have overshot in the actuals. With that recorded spending capacity and their identifiable sources of income it defies understanding as to how they could have dodged their dues to the national exchequer.

The non-payees cut across party lines, belong as they do to AL, BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat. We thank the parliamentary standing committee on finance for the initiative it took to establish transparency at the highest level of public representation. It would now be in the fitness of things if the JS committee pursues the matter to a point of getting the taxes paid where due together with statements procured on the sources of income of all the members of parliament.

Crimes in Chittagong

There has been an alarming rise in the incidence of crime in the port city in recent times which ranges from mugging to murder. Reports of armed robbery, murder and abduction of businessmen for ransom by political hoodlums have been published in abundance by almost all leading dailies of the country. The crimes committed at Chittagong Polytechnic Institute have resulted in the murder of 10 youngmen during the last 15 years. The Institute has been identified as something of a spring board for extortionist forays by maastans who included students wing of the ruling as well as the opposition political parties. The Institute had been under the control of Chhatra Dal and Chhatra Shibir but now it is the Chhatra League which holds sway. The chronology of events shows a bizarre nature of crimes committed by the armed goons in the city and how the police showed helplessness in nabbing the culprits. The business of toll collection is so lucrative that often the involvement of police has been alleged by knowledgeable circles. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the whole issue of law and order is the rising incidence of abduction of businessmen. A number of such cases were reported to the police and leaders of the business community recently voiced their concern over the spate of crimes in a meeting with the police boss. The recent attack on a city police station in broad daylight has sent a chill down the spine. Citizens have started asking questions about the motivation and efficiency of the law enforcing agencies. Instead of lecturing the public the administration must tighten its grip over the vices and bring the culprits to book. The citizens must get the protection of agencies they pay for.

A summit of the eight populous and developing Muslim-majority countries from Asia and Africa (Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey) commonly known as the D-8, was held for the second time in Dhaka for two days on March 1 and 2. Bangladesh Prime Minister inaugurated the Summit. The Dhaka Summit is reported to have focused on the areas of co-operation among the eight countries in various sectors.

The D-8 bloc of countries was initiated by Turkey in 1997 and the first Summit was held in Istanbul on June 5, 1997. The pertinent questions that arise are: Why was it necessary to constitute another small group of Muslim countries? Is the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) perceived ineffective because of the deep divisions among the Arab countries? Why did the D-8 exclude oil-rich Arab countries of the Middle East?

Why D-8 bloc?

The stereotyped image of Muslim countries to the West is that they are being torn by the Islamic militants and represent by and large Islamic fundamentalism. This image obscures the fact that many Muslim countries are moderate and democratic and have sustained economic growth in their respective countries. Most of the western media fail to take account of the quiet revolution going on in their economic architecture.

In the days of fierce competition and globalisation of markets and financial transactions, Turkey took the initiative to group large and populous Muslim nations as the D-8 comprising almost 800 million

people. Each member-country is important within its respective region largely because of their large populations and potential markets.

Furthermore, all the member-countries have embarked on moving to a market-based economy and privatisation has been in full swing in these countries. The liberalisation of their economies is bound to attract foreign investors and all of the eight countries have already attracted foreign investments. Another common factor in all the member-countries is the democratisation of political institutions through periodic elections.

It would not be incorrect to say that the OIC is going nowhere. A view prevails that it has not been able to play a meaningful role politically or economically in the affairs of Islamic countries because of the divergence of views among the members. During the Iraq-Iran war the ineffectiveness of OIC was glaring, although it attempted to negotiate a peace deal between the two nations. The Islamic Summits produce pious statements of intentions without any concrete steps to follow. However, the Arab countries appear to find the Islamic Summits valuable since the Summits provide forums for all Arab countries to meet, even though often they hold diametrically opposite views on many issues. There is a view that if

Gulf Arab countries were included in this group of the D-8, the deep divisions among them on the lines of anti-West and pro-West will surface and no cohesive economic strategy could be formulated by the D-8 group.

It may be noted that Turkey, a member of NATO, could not yet become a member of the European Union when they are willing to admit three East European countries as new members. Further Greek-dominated Cyprus's application received better treatment than that of Turkey by the European Union. Turkey needs to demonstrate to the European Union that it has a strategic edge and is seen to be economically and politically powerful if it can group together another seven large Muslim countries from Asia and Africa.

Other member-countries found the group as a convenient vehicle to fulfil their national aspirations. Each member-country wish to play a meaningful role in regional and world affairs. A few of them within the D-8 desire to become permanent members of the UN Security Council when the membership of the 15-seat Council is increased. By being a member of the D-8 the standing of each member-country is being strengthened. It is the self-enlightened interests which led the 8 countries to form this group and why not?

Is it a good strategy?

Turkey's role is to be lauded because the truth is that we live in an unequal and harsh world where a small minority of countries have the bulk of world's finances. In this year the UN reported that there are 225 billionaires who collectively own \$1 trillion which equals the annual income of almost half the world's population. About 30 individuals have assets exceeding the total GDP of SAARC — group of countries. In the days of globalisation of financial markets, the developing countries appear to be at the mercy of western capital markets. The financial crisis in South East Asia largely originated from the flight of capital by the western investors and this has driven home the point that the economies of all the developing countries are very vulnerable to the whims of foreign short-term investors.

The developing countries are powerless to control the directions of the world economy. The challenge to the developing nations is to mobilise and deploy their resources more effectively, nationally and collectively, to energise their development, draw strength from joint undertakings, exploit global opportunities, and to make international system more responsive to their interests. In this context the move to form the D-8 appears to be a sound strategy. The developing

countries wish to see a truly interdependent world organised on the basis of human equality and human variety in pursuit of jointly defined common purposes where there is peace, security and dignity for all persons and all peoples.

Another feature in the economic domain is that no country, however big and powerful, can remain alone in the interdependent world. In every region the countries have constituted their own exclusive clubs for economic interests. We have witnessed the growth of the economic clubs in Europe, in the Americas and in Asia. Again we have witnessed some mega-clubs which transcend the regions. For instance, APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation) groups together Asian, Pacific, Australia, New Zealand and North as well as South American countries and is expected to embrace Russia as a member.

These economic compulsions make the D-8 group relevant. The purpose of D-8 countries appears to become increasingly self-reliant and to make greater use of their own resources, national and collective. It also stresses the role of united action by the D-8 countries in increasing their strength as a group and in securing a voice in the global affairs in the negotiations with the industrialised countries. Each of the eight countries has

its own strengths. Primary commodities such as jute, cotton, rubber, wheat, tobacco, cocoa and tin, are still the mainstay of the member-countries. We may not forget that two member-countries, Nigeria and Iran, have large oil reserves.

Conclusion

The collective resources of all the member-countries have great promise and can be exploited fruitfully to benefit the nations. If there are long-term co-ordinated policies and programmes among the D-8 countries, in areas of business and industry, services, food security, agriculture, health, science and technology, environment and information, they will certainly bring economic dividends to the D-8. After all D-8 countries must recognise that their basic growth impulses must be found in their collective national economies and that self-reliance among the D-8 will be a great economic strength in the new global context.

In my view, it is a sound diplomatic move for Bangladesh to host the second Summit in Dhaka. It demonstrated the importance Bangladesh attaches to the D-8 group. If the Dhaka Summit achieves in re-inforcing the collective efforts in strengthening and consolidating economic co-operation among the member-countries, they have a fair chance to lift themselves out of poverty. The future of the D-8 depends on how committed and sincere the leaders are in moving forward in implementing the programmes. We wish all the success for the D-8 countries.

The writer is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

D-8 Summit in Dhaka and its Future

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

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UN's Uphill Task in Afghanistan

Syed Talat Hussain writes from Islamabad

The crucial question now is whether the Special Envoy can ensure safe and secure return of the UN Staff in Afghanistan without compromising on the basic principles of the UN Charter and other understandings reached between the UN and the Afghan Authorities embodied in the Memorandum of Understanding of May 1998?

UN absence from Afghanistan, which has brought to a halt most of its work in Afghanistan, except for the World Food Programme's food assistance, which met 90 per cent of its target for year 1998, looks all the more odd against the presence and work of other international agencies such as the ICRC and some NGOs which have been weathering Afghanistan's many storms in the line of their duty.

How handicapped the UN has become since its August pull-out to respond to the needs of the Afghan society has been clear in the most recent earthquake which badly hit Mayan Wardak and Logar provinces, one hundred miles south of Kabul. The devastating tragedy left 65 dead, 498 injured, some 6356 houses destroyed, and 11,000 damaged besides 278 mosques. While the ICRC and International Federation teams were able to reach the spot in less than 24 hours and started relief and emergency work in the next 48 hours, the UN emergency response began nearly a week later when the ICRC was almost done with its relief and distribution work.

The most notable difference between the ICRC and the UN response was that of proximity and presence. The ICRC was there on the ground and could move swiftly. The UN was not there with full force and thus moved late. Similarly the World Health Organisation's operations are also badly affected by the fact WHO has to operate through the local staff.

Their assessments on what is going inside Afghanistan, the changing profile of the Taliban movement, the new needs of the Afghan people and the worsening of the existing ones, is based on second-hand information and 'guesstimates', divorced from reality. Worse, since the UN pulled out its staff last August, the Taliban have become increasingly suspicious of the motives of the UN in Afghanistan as they identify UN's absence from their soil as part of the US-led sanction centred response of the international community to their rule in the country.

So whereas their own problems of assistance and diplomatic recognition are forcing them to talk to the UN and to give guarantees of security to the UN staff, the level of trust between them and the UN is at rockbottom.

This is bad for the UN because the most important prerequisite for it to successfully carry out its operations in Afghanistan is to have the trust of the local population and of the ruling political authority with which it has to deal, and with the co-operation of whose offices it has to discharge its various responsibilities. The

Spot the quality and quantity of leadership in the continents. Global leadership is a scarce commodity, bringing in uncertainty, delays, loss of direction, releasing multifarious problems, which nations, big and small find it chaotic to control or solve. Today's leaders cannot get out of the traps set up by the self and the societies. The world has to be led nobly.

Confining the focus to Asia, the most populous, with most of the poor, (with Africa competing in the poverty factor), one odd factor stands out: Japan, the most prosperous materially and financially, is unable to provide the mobility and confidence which sound leadership should provide to the teeming masses — save and salvation.

It is not that the industrious Japanese cannot get their, and other's, bearings, but the Japanese way of life and thinking has built up an invisible wall in this closed society which prevent the citizens from extending a helping in the management of world affairs.

It is because Japan did not deliberately mix business with international politics. They produced better and cheaper products and dominated the world markets, and became the richest nation in the world, with the highest foreign ex-

change reserve. Now the global business slump has stumped the Japanese. Who are good as innovators but weak in adjusting to external changes. The American prosperity is spread thick and thin — and sometimes the toast is buttered on both sides!

The formality observed by the Japanese inside and outside the business hours is admirable, but this very rigidity, and stalls, further incursions into the human minds beyond Japan. Now comes the shocking news of the loss of 1.2 billion dollars by the Japanese communications giant NEC. The recession continues, and the Yen rides too high for comfort.

Are the rigid Japanese institutions cracking up — under pressure or vacuum? Bangladesh suffers from the human factor or the human systems. It is the reverse with the Japanese. Are they too dehumanised, although they are good souls? Islanders have some complex — note the love and hate equations prevailing between Britain and the European continent.

Human relationships are changing in the age of the global village. These changes in this information age are providing too fast for isolated, traditional

and formal societies, regardless of their GNP and GDP (which indirectly indicates that money or prosperity cannot affect the human soul, deep inside).

Today the world is ruled by surface effects, and cosmetic movements shake up the foundations and basic concepts of the past. Adaptability is the severest test of the times. There are many failures and few survivors. At the end of the century the crackup of the mores and the moods has started, and it is difficult to forecast the end products. Cultivate the open mind along with the open market, and the glass panes of the heart will open.

A new world order appears to be in the making. The motto of the time is better to change than to stagnate; better to adjust and be accommodating than to allow cracks through strain maintaining rigidity. Adaptability is consideration, and consideration leads to adaptability. It is the flow that matters — the difference between flowing and stagnant waters, the blessing of the flowing breeze, the changing clouds, and the changing shadows with the changing position of the sun.

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which though competent, finds itself either too stretched out to measure up to health and disease challenges in Afghanistan, or, on occasions, not well-equipped to do quick diagnosis as has been the case with the spread of a mysterious virus in Badkhis province which has already killed 300 people. It is understandable why Mr. Brahimi wants to re-engage Afghanistan and why it is one of the topmost items on his agenda.

The crucial question now is whether he can ensure safe and secure return of the UN Staff in Afghanistan without compromising on the basic principles of the UN Charter and other understandings reached between the UN and the Afghan Authorities embodied in the Memorandum of Understanding of May 1998?

Back to Asia. The Asians diversity is majestic and magnificent, but isolated in the masses of poverty and islands of prosperity. Search for the leveller, for mobility to function. What is life if the circulation is sluggish? Life depends upon the liver, both internally and externally. The liver tonics are available in different models: in allopathic mega doses, or molecular homeopathy. Some mix up capitalism with materialism, and materialism is again mixed up with consumerism. Consume what? Leave something for others.

The legendary gentleman who whispered 'His need is greater than mine' is dead, but the idea is very much alive today, dormant, rested, and ready to be awakened on one of the five billion human beings, the noblest creature in the Universe.

We are being apathetic and startled like the man of my story, only thinking but not doing anything positive. Some people are being frustrated and thinking nothing good will happen to us any more and we will remain the same as before — one of the poorest nations of the world. Frustration and idleness become habit. If we stop our people from working, it will become a habit not to work.

It is high time we started to rescue our family members like in the story (if they are alive), try to recover our valuables, some of which are still floating on the water in this stormy weather.

I am asking all concerned politicians to think and to act unitedly. They must find other ways to show resentment against each other, to press their demands, to achieve their political goals without harassing the lives and properties of the people in jeopardy, without ruining the country's economy.

They should start afresh without recalling their past.

To the Editor...

Dhaka Press Club meeting point

Sir, The authorities may consider banning the area in front of the Dhaka Press Club for holding public and protest meetings, and shift the venue elsewhere to maintain traffic flow. This location is popularly used almost daily perhaps to draw media attention. This is an arterial road with heavy density of traffic almost 18 hours a day.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Health service

Sir, With the existing woefully pitiable condition of government hospitals, general attitude of government doctors, private clinics, registered or unregistered, on top of it the countries practices in the offices of Civil Surgeons, how does the government proposes to achieve its oft repeated goal 'health for all by the year 2000'?

I beg to differ from you when you say, 'I am not wrong.' There is hardly any mechanism by which these death chambers (private clinics) can be detected and their owners are brought to book' (DS, Feb. 25, 99). The Directorate of Health Services (DHS) has in its disposal three agencies that can conduct necessary enumeration of all existing private health service providers and the government has its own rules and regulation to deal with unauthorized clinics and the quality of all service providers. These agencies are: Management Information Service (MIS), The National Institute of Population and Social Medicine (NIPSOM), Lastly, The Bangladesh Medical Research

The two-stroke Turkey

Sir, It's good to see that, under the auspices of World Bank funding, the government is taking measures to control pollution and traffic. While importing unleaded fuel is long overdue, I am dubious about conversion of 2-stroke to 4-stroke engines. A drive in the chaos of Dhaka city traffic makes it abundantly clear that 3-wheelers make life intolerable on the roads.

Our emphasis should be on developing a mass transit system which works, and also providing a decent taxi-cab service to the residents of Dhaka. The initiative should also address rehabilitation of the displaced workers. If the government funds new taxi-cab service, the workers could be trained to drive them. Ultimately, the problem stems from too much development in Dhaka at the expense of the rest of country, which aggravates migration into the city. It's time to decentralise and bring development to the people.

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OPINION

Leadership in Asia

A Husnain

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change reserve. Now the global business slump has stumped the Japanese. Who are good as innovators but weak in adjusting to external changes. The American prosperity is spread thick and thin — and sometimes the toast is buttered on both sides!

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What is Happening to Us?

Munira Khan

Who are to be blamed? Who are accountable to us for all these losses: lives, private and public property and state earnings? I hear that Indian High Commission, Thailand and Singapore Embassies issued a large number of visas to Bangladeshis people because many thought it wise to go outside the country for a few days, as they did not want to be bored at home. How much foreign currency was spent when these people spent time abroad?

I believe many like me will hold the politicians responsible for all these. Not only now, we the people were always against hartal. Nobody can snatch our right to do what we wish. Nobody has any right to stop us from going to work, our own transport and drive through the road for which we pay taxes, nobody can stop us from working or doing business if we choose to do that. Well, if the politicians give such programmes, then certainly their supporters can observe the programme voluntarily and freely. Nobody has any right to check it. At the same time, the administration or I can say the government machinery has the ultimate responsibility to give us protection from the hoodlums when we exercise our civil rights. They cannot sit idle. Losses incurred from the har-

could not earn, all other development works were stopped, ports came to a standstill and all of us remained captive in our home watching television or feeling irritating towards the politicians.

So many things have been said against hartal, so many statements and write-ups were published in the newspapers and magazines, but no visible effect was noticed. The politicians went on, finding no other weapon against each other, making the citizens prisoners in their own homes. During recent hartal one of my good friend's husband expired — I could not go to her place and help her with funeral arrangements. One of my colleagues who is a social worker broke her leg and was lying in a clinic with severe pain almost unattended, waiting for operation when the hartal was over.

Many of my own relatives died during earlier hartals due to lack of treatment or delay in treatment. I am not taking account of the useless killings of innocent people or loss of limbs from bomb explosions as, to us, they are only nameless victims of hartal not our relatives. Nobody feels for them except 'their' near and dear ones. We have gone beyond all humane feelings.

Once I heard a story about a man who was travelling by boat from one place to another with his family and belongings. After two days, a storm raged and the boat sank. The man somehow swam ashore and sat with his hands on his forehead. Some of his belongings were still visible, floating on the water. Somebody from the river-side asked him: 'What are you thinking about, why don't you try to salvage some of your belongings and also see whether anybody is alive? Perhaps you can still rescue somebody if you try.'

The man replied: 'I am not thinking about my wife and children who must have died because they could not swim. I am also not thinking about my savings. I am not thinking how I am going to live without my family and belongings — I am only thinking, *halo ta k?*'

After three days of appalling hartal we are also thinking 'what is happening to us?' Year after year politicians are giving hartal programmes against their rivals keeping the citizens hostage and we cannot do anything about it but to say 'what is happening?'

The children could not go to schools, the patients could not get treatment because the doctors were not available, poor labourers, small businessmen