

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, June 2, 2000

## Anxiety over FDI Bottlenecks

ON the face of it, what the Head of the European Commission Delegation in Dhaka Antonio De Souza Menezes told the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) on Tuesday was a statement of the obvious: bureaucratic tangles and corruption impeding foreign direct investment in Bangladesh. Deeper down, however, it is more than a critique or a diagnosis of the ailment. He has, in fact, as a mark of difference from being merely critical of things, accepted a degree of obligation for the EC by commissioning a study on FDI situation in Bangladesh.

We read in this a prospect for the EC to become a greater investment partner of Bangladesh now that its role as a trade partner is an established fact. It is good augury, too, that the choice and design of EC's development projects and programmes will henceforth be cognizant of the 'impediments to FDI' (bureaucratic tangles and corruption) in order that the latter could be overcome as an aid to the process of development in Bangladesh. We welcome the EC's increasing attention to Bangladesh's development concerns, especially in the wake of the consummation of EC-Bangladesh Cooperation Agreement.

The plethora of rules and regulations is basically an expression of a fierce retention of discretionary powers which in turn breed corruption not just at the top-end of the administration but also lower down the order because nexus expeditiously guarantees immunity before law. The end-result is prohibitive investment cost compounded by the investors' inability to plan lead time for a project's successful completion.

We never tire of singing in praise of the investment regime or incentives package we offer to prospective foreign investors little realising that minus their implementation on the ground they are but coloured festoons overhanging a barren field. Since the officialdom formulated the incentives package they were the best-placed people to devise ways and means to stave off any bureaucratic roadblocks at the time of materialisation. But obviously they did not do that, thereby predisposing the package to failure. Right from their arrival at the airport through their calls at the corridors of government agencies for approval and licensing to the acquisition of land and procurement of machine-material and work permits for their personnel etc. it has been uphill all the way. This is a rather nightmarish experience which invariably puts us in an adverse light vis-a-vis our oft-repeated slogan about Bangladesh turning into an 'investment destination of the world'.

Our much vaunted 'one-stop service from under the same roof' has been more or less a debacle, if not a complete hoax. Only decentralisation of authorities with decision-making powers invested in a composite body accessible to potential foreign investors can make things happen the way we want. It is the long-drawn-out referral system riddled with queries that must be replaced by a responsive, well-oiled mechanism to quickly dispose of investment proposals so that we are in a reckoning with other countries in this highly competitive global business of attracting foreign investors.

## Friday Mailbox

## "Larma's Very Wrong Angle"

Sir, I would like to thank DS for the editorial "Larma's Very Wrong Angle" (May 28, 2000).

Mr Larma is often found to be trying to get the AL government on the wrong foot charging for non-implementation of the provisions of the CHT Agreement. He has been agitating equally on issues and non-issues. However, this time he appears to have overstepped by asking for a voters' list for the tribal people only as if the settlers are politically non-existent forfeiting their constitutional rights. CHTs are by all means an integral part of Bangladesh and the people of that area irrespective of Tribals or Settlers are the citizens of this country. And therefore, they have same constitutional rights, duties and privileges.

Mr. Larma must be told in clear terms that he should honour the 'Agreement' in letter and spirit as it has already provided them with more than enough concessions in every sphere of life including education and jobs. It is advisable that he refrains from creating a situation of troubled water to start fishing at the cost of innocent people.

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## Orion Infusion dividend

Sir, A retired general of our armed forces declared cash dividend as chairman of Orion Infusion Ltd—a public limited company, at the annual general meeting held in February '97. However, more than three years have elapsed but no dividend could be paid though annual audit report was prepared by chartered accounting firm. Stock exchanges have stopped transaction of Orion Infusion shares while Security and Exchange Commission is silent so to say! Recently, the said general (chairman of Orion Infusion) has expired as I could gather from newspaper reports. Now I am worried about my shares and dividend declared in 1997 as no more AGM has been held since the last one. It is time to investigate whether Orion Infusion has diverted the dividend money or the chartered accountants made fabricated audit reports through juxtaposition of figures. SEC and other investigation agency should look into the matter for the sake of transparency and accountability.

Mahbubar Rahman  
Dasani, Bagerhat

## Our parliamentary image

Sir, Our parliament (Jatiya Sangsad) looks grand from the outside, from the architectural point of view. Now, inside, there are 300 architects of the nation, chosen by the people, and they cannot plan or approve any project for designing a better Bangladesh. In fact only one side of the JS coin is in public view. What about the other side of the coin? In fact, the JS should be symbolised by a sphere or ball—the same view from outside—from any angle.

Now the JS parliamentary Standing Committee Chairmen are clamouring for defining their status (DS editorial, May 25), as the ministers and the ministries cannot run the show as they wish. Now both the JS and the JSSCs are more or less defunct: the crowd outside are off-time strollers, without any business

## Pakistan on the Way to Talibanisation?

EVER since wresting power from Mian Nawaz Sharif, Chief Executive of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf has been besieged with multifarious problems despite the fact that his assumption to power was more or less welcomed by the people. Support came not only from the common people but also from the political class. So exasperated people had been by the misgovernance, corruption and inefficiency of the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif that they were ready to give the military another chance, to bring the country back from the brink of an impending disaster.

However, his rule was, and still is, challenged externally, by India in particular. New Delhi made it clear that it was in no mood to have any kind of relationship with Islamabad as long as General Musharraf remained at the helm. Seven months after his take-over, the problems remain as intransigent as ever.

His inability to rid the administration (whatever that means) of corruption and put back the nearly-ruined economy on tracks, all of which were to make way for restoration of democracy, has rendered the situation all the more complicated. The most ominous amongst the problems Musharraf now faces is the increasing challenge to his rule by extremist religious parties and groups.

The intelligentsia, the media and the civil society including the women's organisations, wary of increasing influence of the ultra-rightist religious parties and extremist groups in the political process, expected the general to go for reforms and crack down on obscurantist forces. Even the women's groups, who are usually against any non-democratic/autocratic regime, seemed to have rallied behind General Pervez. According to a woman activist I met in Nepal recently, these groups appreciated the military ruler's attempts to bring these extremist religious groups under control, something that the democratic regimes of Bhutto and Sharif had failed to do. Besides their desire to see correction of the dysfunctional nature of democratic politics, the people in Pakistan also wanted to see the end to the unusual sway of the religious and extremist groups. Initially, General's Musharraf's actions were directed towards that goal i.e. bringing the religious extremists under control. His administration's attempt to bring the existing autonomous madrasah syllabi within the purview of regular school board and to intervene physically into the previously invincible madrasah premises were greatly appreciated by the citizens' groups. Unfortunately, the latest developments suggest that

So, in effect, General Musharraf has been able to get where he is today due to the vacuum created by the inability of moderate political parties. They figure that if the military itself gets discredited and there is no one to fill the emergent void the only other alternative would have to be parties like Jamaat-e-Islam. Obviously then these forces would continue to keep the heat on the General and more he succumbs to their pressure, as in the case of the blasphemy law, the easier it would be to establish their hold.

Musharraf's government is weakening and the period of stern actions is over. He appears to be buckling under pressure from the groups intelligentsia and others wanted him to control.

The first retreat was evidenced when Musharraf backed off from a decision made in April – which he himself announced at a human rights conference – to modify the controversial blasphemy law. In his announcement he did not even try to repeal the existing law, which empowers a junior police official to register cases and consequently is heavily misused against the religious minorities. All he aimed at was to make change in the rule requiring a probe by a senior district administration official before a case is registered. A move though not sufficient to guarantee minority religious rights but was well received by the human rights groups and thought to be, at least, a right step in the right direction however little that might be.

General Pervez Musharraf's backtracking even on such small concession on the religious minorities in the face of the demand of the religious parties and extremists groups as such, demonstrated their growing authority. The call for countrywide shutdown (last week) to press for their demand to incorporate Islamic principles in the constitution, ban citizens' groups and keep hands off Islamic schools is now being considered a success by the religious extremists. A coalition of religious parties now claim that response from the public (the strike coincided with traders' strike against the General Sales Tax, an endeavour by Musharraf to broaden the tax base) demonstrated that Pakistanis disapproved the bid by the "NGO Mafia" in the government to rob the country of its Islamic identity. Their latest demand has cast a shadow over the very fate of the state. Is it becoming a fundamentalist state? Will it be Talibanised?

Demand for incorporation of Islamic principles into the constitution and declaration of Pakistan as a religious state is as old as the country itself. Although the country was created on the basis of religion its founding father Jinnah and his comrades refused to declare it a theocratic state. The Objective Resolution passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1949 sought to base the state on the ideals of Islam and people's sovereignty, ruling out any special place or authority for the *ulemas*. The issue was much debated but no scope was created for the *ulemas* to have any say in the running of the state machinery. The debate centred two groups – one that saw the compulsion of creating Pakistan in order to protect the social, economic and political rights of Muslims and the other who claimed it to be a religious state.

It is to be noted that during the first two decades of Pakistan's existence religion did not come in the way of state policies. The state was determined to maintain its 'secular' character which was evidenced in the way the campaign against the Ahmadi Muslim by a section of Sunni Muslims was ruthlessly dealt with. Another example has been the Family

Law Ordinance restricting practice of polygamy. Three factors: domination of state apparatus by western educated political class, nature and style of politics in the East Pakistan, and public perception of Jamaat-e-Islam that opposed creation of Pakistan — came into play and kept the demands of the extremist religious parties at bay.

Subsequently, however, the religious parties began to regroup and organise within the state of Pakistan due to a number of developments, both domestic and international. First, disappearance of the influence and practice of religious toleration emanating from the nature of politics in East Pakistan

with the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Second, failure of Pakistan's political parties both in consolidating the nascent democratic order following the end of the second stint of military rule in 1971 as well as in fulfilling people's hopes and aspirations. It created a political vacuum that propelled Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to court the religious parties. His quest for a popular base led him into giving in to the Islamic religious parties' demand and declaring the Ahmadi as non-Muslims. Lastly, assumption of power by General Zia that coincided with Islamic revolution in neighbouring Iran, and similar development in Afghanistan.

General Zia was greatly encouraged by the developments in Iran and adhered to strict Islamic principles and Islamic conservatism. During his ten-year tenure the state was instrumental in introducing strict Islamic laws, which curtailed minority as well as women's rights. In addition, numerous madrasahs were set up all over the country, which became the springboards to spreading of Islamic militancy. Zia's policies flowed partly from his personal conviction and partly due to the same reasons for which Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had needed the support of the religious parties.

Islamisation in Pakistan got further impetus and, at the same time, became intense and fragmented with external support from Iran and the Gulf States along Shite and Sunnis lines respectively. However, no factor was more damaging to the weakening of the society and strengthening of religious conservatives than Islamabad's own involvement under General Zia in providing training and creating Islamic militant forces for Afghanistan in which the madrasah network played a significant role.

The militants trained to fight the Russians have now turned their attention to internal affairs once Afghan Taliban forces established their hold on Kabul. Support and example of the Taliban inspired religious conservatism into growing in strength and power. Their steady use of Islam as a tool of influence has been reflected in curtailment of minority rights and subjugation of women and through introduction and implementation of strict Sharia Law and Hudud Law.

Many saw development in Afghanistan as an opportunity to push their agenda beyond Pakistan and thereby capturing the imagination of young minds to their cause. Its sway infected even the state apparatus. The rise of Hindu nationalist BJP gave further boost to their *raison d'être*. Consequently, for the first time in Pakistan's fifty-year history the religious extremist parties and groups have emerged as a formidable force that contains the potential in turning the country into a theocratic state. That danger has become all the more potent with the collapse of the democratic system brought about by politicians' greed, corruption and inefficiency. The fundamentalist parties' contribution to its collapse is no less significant. It was, in essence, a well thought-out strategy, which, according to analysts, would further their cause. The fundamentalists view the military take-over as a positive development. The military take-over, they say, was inevitable in the backdrop of the vacuum created by the inability of the mainstream political parties to deliver goods and benefits to the people. Also, progressive deterioration of law and order alienated people to such an extent that they embraced military rule in the hope that it would be able to correct the malaise that was eating away the very foundation of the country.

He will have increasing difficulties in carrying out his agenda. And if the military fails, the void in such eventuality can only be filled by religious parties. Pakistan seems to be on the brink and runs the risk of falling into the hands of religious extremists, thereby getting Talibanised.

They figure that if the military itself gets discredited and there is no one to fill the emergent void the only other alternative would have to be parties like Jamaat-e-Islam. Obviously then these forces would continue to keep the heat on the General and more he succumbs to their pressure, as in the case of the blasphemy law, the easier it would be to establish their hold.

Tragically, recent developments demonstrate that the administration is falling in that trap and is having difficulties in containing these forces, especially in the context of enhanced Taliban activities in North West Frontier Province that borders Afghanistan. Their impacts are also being felt as more and more women are being subjected to violence like honour killing and other forms of cruelties. In last year alone as many as one thousand women have been killed by their relatives because they allegedly deviated from their brand of Islamic values, and thus became the victims of honour killing, a practice rampant practised by the Taliban. Only in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan women are not allowed to work and girls are banned to attend schools after they reach eight years of age. Examples of religious conservatives in Pakistan would like to emulate. One could however argue that there is nothing novel about the women's situation in Pakistan as violence against women is quite pervasive all over South Asia including Bangladesh. But it has to be kept in mind that in no other countries in South Asia except Pakistan cruelties against women get tacit societal support and are carried out in the name of Islam — a religion that gives dignity and honour to women, and not disrespect and indignation.

The ominous trend in Pakistan's body politic i.e. the power of the religious conservatives is becoming increasingly evident through the declamatory statements of these groups and increasing violence against women. It is equally ominous to note that the administration of Pervez Musharraf, like its predecessors instead of dealing with them sternly, is trying to appease them. The appeasement policy is aptly discernible from the recent speech of the Police Chief of Islamabad. He sounded very much like the leaders of the Islamic parties while addressing the students of a female college in Islamabad when he advised them to cover their head with scarves and not laugh out loud and maintain stern facial expression while in public in order to avoid rape and other heinous crimes against them. If the response of the law enforcement agency of the government to women's violation of human right, which is rampant in Pakistan, is in line with what they Islamic parties say and demand, one can well imagine the kind of inroads these groups have made into the body politic of Pakistan.

General Musharraf has to realise that his efforts to win them through appeasement are not going to work. Appeasement will only embolden them, give them the strength to have a tighter grip on the administration, which will not augur well for the country.

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## Hearken the Footsteps of the Future?

THE future is surely coming like the past is gone. But what does it look like? Does it look like the dying world described in *The Time Machine* by H G Wells? Or, does it portray ghastly consequences of crime and population control envisioned by Anthony Burgess? If the present is nothing but a fleeting wedge between the putrid past and the formative future, how does it indicate what the world has in store for itself?

That question is nothing new. Thomas More wrote *Utopia* to describe an imaginary society, which will correspond to the deepest longings of man. Subsequently, the hope for the individual and social perfectibility would be expounded by Italian friar Campanella in *City of the Sun*, German humanist Andrea in *Christianopolis*, and Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward*. But dystopian trilogy soon countered the Utopian image of the world. George Orwell's 1984, Russian Zamyanin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* would express a mood of hopelessness for the human race.

In between the longings of man and his languid soul, the new century is likely to mark the advent of dispassionate times. The Time magazine has recently done an exposition on how life is going to transform in next twenty to thirty years. The human society started its journey from hunting-gathering economy for hundreds of thousands of years, which ended in agrarian economy lasting for 10,000 years. But when the industrial society came, it lasted for less than two hundred years. Currently, we are most-of-the-way through the information age, which will not have run longer than 75 to 80 years. What is next? The answer is the age of bio-economy.

Hearken the footsteps of the future! Judging by the loss of ethical standards, it does not seem too far. Why else should a twelve-year-old boy die in the hands of his classmates? And how does a cold-blooded killer of two brothers, who is frequently sighted by victims' family, remain invisible to police like some apparition which appears and vanishes at the shaman's wish.

What will characterise this bio-economy? All of the biological processes will be digitised by then. There will be many more kinds of information besides numbers, words, sounds and images. These are smell, taste, touch, imagination and intuition. If the bio-economy, the basics of what makes a smell can be captured molecularly and expressed digitally on a chip at reasonable price. There are US companies, which are developing medical-diagnostic technology that can smell diseases. Cloning, bio-engineered foods, eugenics, genetic patenting and certainty about inherited diseases will be leading issues of the bio-economy. Tissue engineers will be able to build liver, kidney, heart, bladder and intestine tissues, and gene programmers will use digital genome maps, gene therapy and "smart" molecules.

In these predictions? Time compression is likely to transport changes in the West to Bangladesh probably quicker than before. But certainly there is going to be time lapse between its growth in the West and gestation in our country. History abounds with examples of similar time lapses. The advanced Paleolithic age was clearly determined in France and Spain and it had extended over much of central and southeastern Europe, southern Russia and part of western Asia, notably Palestine and Syria. It penetrated Africa much later and by that time the

USA will be either destroyed or altered in the next 10-15 years. The aggression of dot.com businesses, enterprise software, outsourcing, the Web and time compression will fundamentally change the face of working life.

Amongst other jobs, two of the most coveted positions of the twentieth century are likely to be eliminated. CEOs will be no

longer required as top-down decisionmaking will become archaic and between in-vitro fertilisation and cloning, fatherhood will become virtually extinct.

How does our future figure

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time compression has reduced the length of the time lapse between history's growth in one territory and gestation in another. If the gestation of bio-economy starts in USA by the first quarter of this century, it may be expected to start in Bangladesh by the end of the second quarter.

This will be the condition of the physical world. How will be metaphysical world fare in these changes in the longer run of history? The futurologists are apprehending that ethics will be the main problem in the emerging world. When man will be armed with the technology to reproduce man, when biotechnology will enhance longevity and diminish fear of death, it might be difficult to restrain him within the moral parameters.

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## CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHsan

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