

The Daily Star

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 expediently 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.

B.A. Khan
54, Chamelbagh,
Dhaka

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.

Mahbubur 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 clannish 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

activity. Should the building be declared a monument (like the pyramids) and preserved for posterity?

Since 1947 (partition of British India), we have been trying to woo democracy; but only India has got the global recognition as the world's largest working democracy (as Md Nazrul Islam explained in a lengthy commentary, DS May 25). Both Pakistan and Bangladesh have been subjected to predatory (?) military rules more than once. Every event has a cause, symptom, and diagnosis; while the solution is a matter of opinion.

In Dhaka, the veteran politicians, coming out of the exile, have an instant alibi to explain their own political instability (weakness) since the 1990s. Today, socially, the society has crashed to the bottom of perdition, and the major political parties are playing a game of hide and seek amongst themselves, caring a hoot for public opinion. Vendetta politics is the current vogue for one decade now; and more is yet to come (no solution is in sight). An innocent question crops up: what is the price of freedom?

Let us decide how the country should be run; then allow the politicians to come in, democratically—not to spoil the broth once again. The people, shall, and can, judge.

Andaz
Dhaka

Love's labour lost

Sir, The appointment of the new CEC, under the polluted political environmental conditions prevailing for a decade, appears to be a case of love's labour lost. Sometimes going by the rules may not be practical (example: BNP regime's abortive general election in the mid-'90s). There is something known as 'gentlemen's agreement'. Alas, we don't have 'gentlemen's agreement', as there is a shortage of gentlemen in our leadership.

AZ
Dhaka

Unnecessary imposition

Sir, This is really astounding that for purchasing a landed property costing Taka ten lakhs it is required to spent Taka two lakhs eighty thousand for stamp duty, registration fee, capital gain tax, VAT etc. This is perhaps highest in the world. The government imposed all these taxes in order to raise its revenue but in fact the government is not getting the desired result. In almost all the cases the buyer and the seller mention a fictitious value of the land even to the extent of twenty five per cent of the actual negotiated value. There may be some justification for imposing capital gain tax if the property is sold after five years of its purchase but there are no justifications for imposing VAT on sale price of land.

It is, therefore, suggested that the government may withdraw some of the taxes or alternatively the rates of duties, fees and taxes may be reduced to such an extent that the total cost of buying landed property not exceed ten to fifteen per cent of the cost of land and thus save the potential buyers and sellers from telling lies to the authorities concerned regarding the matter.

Abu Ahmed
37/1, Lichubagan
Juarshahara, Dhaka-1229

Pakistan on the Way to Talibanisation?

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 intelligentia 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



Dilara Chowdhury

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 re-group 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 Ahmadies 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 en-



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.

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.

Hearken the Footsteps of the Future?

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 bioeconomy. 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.

The future will also change the nature of work and our office environment. Man will work more and more in isolation without having to enjoy the social aspects of work. Chances are people will work from their homes most of the time, applying for jobs, communicating with colleagues, receiving salaries and shopping, all through the Internet. Nearly 90 per cent of white-collar jobs in

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

Mesolithic age had allegedly started within the territory extending between Palestine and Iran. Again the age and duration of the Neolithic age varied widely in different areas. In western Asia it may have begun as early as the 8th millennium BC, but in northern Europe not until the 3rd millennium BC.

History is fundamentally a stepwise progression. It unfolds its advanced stage in one society, while migrating its earlier stage to another. The 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 bioeconomy 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 bio-engineering will enhance longevity and diminish fear of death, it might be difficult to restrain him within the moral parameters.

That means, the future is

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 cruelty. 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 extreme 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 conservatism is becoming increasingly evident through the declaratory 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 enforcing 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. 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.

CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN



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 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

going to be challenging not so much for material existence as for moral exegesis. The line between good and evil will become increasingly elusive because man will tend to confound character with convenience. It may eventually poise him at a critical juncture of his conscience when he will forget that he is human, an entity which Francis Fukuyama called the Last Man, who will compromise his scruples for physical security and material plenty. Zamayatin predicted in We that a brain operation similar to lobotomy was necessary to get rid of the human demands of human nature. In Huxley's Brave New World artificial biological selection and drugs and in Orwell's 1984 use of torture and brainwash would achieve that goal.

Is future going to put us face to face with our own antithesis? Sir Winston Churchill addressing the students at Harvard University in 1943 said. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind. In the past our minds wanted to shape the future. If we are still doing it, are we doing it without realising that the future is encroaching upon our minds? Each progress has exacted its price on us alongside its many blessings. The agrarian age spoiled contentment; the industrial age spoiled innocence; the information age destroyed privacy; and now the bioeconomic age threatens to ruin ethics.

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.