

Procrastination Cost

WE take a serious view of the costly drift of business from our country's shores to those of some neighbouring countries triggered by our own faults. The severe jolt of a news is that worker agitation at the factory of US towel manufacturing company Qualitex in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone has had its management entrust the sister units in India and Sri Lanka with export orders worth four lakh sterling pound. More than the monetary loss it is the scratch on our goodwill that ought to be taken seriously by us.

One major attraction we have held to deserve foreign investment has been the availability of abundant, cheap and trainable labour in our country. To maximise the benefit out of this endowment we devised a special environment for the Export Processing Zone in Chittagong in which the labour force would work without the distractions of trade unionism. But somehow this made an inroad into the portals of the Qualitex factory in CEPZ where 4,000 workers have abstained from their duties since June 11 demanding cancellation of termination orders against 15 of them. The trouble seems rooted in their nearly two-month-long agitation for wage fixation in accord with the 1993 slabs in place of what the 1989 circular offered.

Of course there are labour issues that call for periodic attention of any management but we have known these to be swamped by corruption and vicious political partisanship almost routinely practised by trade union leaders for self-aggrandisement. While they cry hoarse over labour rights it is their group and individual interests that rule the roost.

So much for the counter-productive trade unionism. We would like to know what the export processing zone authority, or for that matter, the government has done over the last two months that the situation boiled over to contain it to the satisfaction of all concerned. The authorities ought to have kept a constant tab on the developments and interceded where necessary so that the trouble and the business loss could both be headed off.

Our procrastination in most things pressing is exacting a heavy toll from us. This time we should have learnt it the hard way. One drift away from Bangladesh could make other companies lose faith in us. In view of the possible concomitant effect we urge the government, the labour ministry, the CEPZ authority and the management of industries to see that productivity of export processing zones is never allowed to decline.

Prisons Bursting in Seams

FIGURES show an increase in the number of under-trial prisoners, up from 26,000 in 1995 to 37,000 in 1999; and a decrease in that of convicts, down from 15,730 to 13,422 over the same period. The disturbing digits, in our view, point to crucial failure of both the executive and the judiciary.

The government may argue that more detainees essentially exemplify enhanced enforcement activism; leave aside the fact that not all detentions prove tenable in the court of law. As for the fall in the rate of conviction, it might try to pass the buck on the judiciary as it so notoriously has for quite some time. On both counts, one must say, its reasoning is premised on fragile footing. Does the sharp rise not indicate an alarming law and order downside, especially when one adds to these figures those of unreported and unattended crimes? Regardless of its self-professed success in improving the law and order scenario and braggadocio over the much-vaunted countrywide anti-crime drives, the crime curve has only gone up and up. Recent figures on murders and other felonies would testify to that. While many criminals remain at large, the ones arrested and arraigned to court, more often than not, slip through the fingers of law due to poor prosecution forced by inadequate investigation at the field level. Besides, framing of charges take unusually long time.

It is common knowledge as well that the country is beset with a very sluggish justice delivery system. Prudent minds in the judiciary including the incumbent chief justice and his predecessor have underscored the need to clear the heavy judicial backlog at different seminars and symposia. While separation of judiciary from the executive has been identified as one potential to facilitate judicial activities, no government has really tried to initiate the process. Legislators have been critical of lengthy litigation system but have not placed bill for judicial reforms.

Therefore, we are dealing with a two-dimensional problem here that requires concerted effort from the executive, legislative and judicial organs of the state. Speedy trial is of the essence in law enforcement and we must devise ways to ensure this. Already, there have been telling signs that the public is losing confidence in the law and its enforcers. Rise in lynching incidents bears strong testimony to that. The message is clear, we need to act on it now.

Caring for Hilsa

Hilsa, the Bangladesh delicacy of international renown is in danger. Reduced hilsa catch this year has made fishermen, wholesale fish traders and fish exporters in Barisal region worry about their future. The bleak scene is indicative of waning hilsa production in general. Indiscriminate fishing of jatka, the fishing, has caused a decline in availability of adult Hilsa. A section of corrupt officials and law enforcers are reportedly supporting unscrupulous fishermen in carrying out the illegal business. Allegation of 'eyewash drive' of the authority against jatka-hunting is not without foundation in view of reported palm-greasing of petty officials. The problem needs to be addressed because Bangladesh is the source of seventy per cent hilsa in the region and we can earn around Taka 600 crore annually if the catching of jatka is stopped.

We suggest strict enforcement of the ban on jatka-fishing by vigil mounted at community level. This calls for convincing the fishermen about the baneful practice through the efforts of the government's mass communications department. They need to be persuaded — both by enforcing the law and awareness-building — that they themselves be the losers from a drastic fall in Hilsa population. The skits to increase awareness among fishermen should be re-introduced on an urgent basis. Since the first quarter of the year is the time for jatka-fishing, we need to keep vigil at that point in time to ward off the illegal activity.

Bangladesh and the Thirteenth NAM Summit

For the sake of convenience, tradition has it that the summits are usually held preceding the UN General Assembly sessions in the autumn. But what is sauce for the goose may not be quite so for the gander. 2001 is our election year and given the present political atmosphere in the country, one would not have wished to add to the tremendous uncertainties that may lie ahead.

"BANGLADESH admittedly has to grapple with more than its share of natural disasters", said a visiting foreign journalist, whom I have known for years. "yet, you all seem to have a propensity for creating problems for yourselves that need not really exist". What she had in mind was obviously the political stalemate that artificially divides the nation today, and I had no reason to disagree. As I sit down to write about the thirteenth NAM summit scheduled to be held in Dhaka next year, it does occur to me that this attribute of ours of creating man (person) — made problems goes beyond the pales of the national political scenario. In proposing to hold the NAM summit in Dhaka next year, I think we have unnecessarily created a costly problem for ourselves.

This is not to suggest that, because of the contextual changes in the global political scenario, NAM has suddenly become irrelevant or unimportant for Bangladesh. It can perhaps be argued that in so many ways it has not. It is just that the time seems to be the most inopportune for us to set about preparing for a Summit, in which 113 Heads of state and Government, thousands of participants, hundreds of media men and scores of representatives of international organisations and the like, when the nation is beset with social, political, economic and I dare say, psychological problems of extraordinary magnitude.

To start with, Bangladesh's experience in holding international conferences is limited. So is the availability of the required facilities. It so happens that, of the few regional and international conferences held in Dhaka, I have been directly associated with three, viz. the Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in 1983 and the first and the seventh SAARC summits held, respectively in 1985 and 1993. I was the Chief Coordinator of the 1983 Islamic Conference, for which I was given the lead preparation time of 18 months, even when we used the newly constructed, and then not very frequented (not that it is now), Sangsad Bhaban as the conference venue. We were under martial law those days and implementing a government priority, which the conference then was, turned out to be comparatively easy. I even attended the NAM summit in New Delhi, held in March 1983, as a member of the Bangladesh delegation, basically to observe and learn how to arrange a big international conference. In 1985, as the Foreign Secretary of the host country Bangladesh, I acted as the Secretary General of the first SAARC summit that created the organisation. Subsequently in 1993, retired by then from the government, I happily responded to the request of the then government to

serve in an honorary capacity, as the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee of the seventh SAARC summit. I have gone into all these seemingly unnecessary personal details if only to establish some credibility to say that, compared to the magnitude of a NAM summit, conferences held in Dhaka in the past years were like tea parties! In a sports metaphor one can say that, compared to the holding of the recent Asian cricket games, it is like holding an International Olympic Meet. The question is do we, at the present time, have the knowledge, resources and above all the conditions conducive to holding a summit in an acceptable and proper manner? Speaking frankly, as the title of my column impels me to, the answer has to be an emphatic "No!". Here I must elaborate.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the organ of the government responsible for holding such conferences, unless of course they have now abdicated this somewhat mundane duty in pursuit of other lofty goals. I say this, having made several unsuccessful attempts to find out the state of summit preparations from there. One has to painfully record that the authorities there did not display much consideration and courtesy in responding to the request of, hopefully a well meaning and concerned columnist, if not an erstwhile colleague. It is however possible that they themselves entertain doubts about our capacity to hold properly the NAM summit the next year, but do not consider it expedient to express those in public. If that is so, they are not, I must say, being fair, either to their political masters or to the public, who will after all, at the end of the day, have to pick up the huge summit tab.

The NAM summit draws a gathering of more than five or six thousands people, including heads of government, other participants, observers, media men, security personnel and the like. On the other hand during the SAARC summit two of which have been held in Dhaka, the number of people involved was hardly more than a couple of hundred, including only senior heads of state. Further, the difference is not confined to the number of participants alone. SAARC has English as the official language and the participants speak it in varying degrees of proficiency. As a result, the conference does not call for interpreters, translators, simultaneous translation and the like, which NAM, participated by people speaking a variety of languages, does. Only a handful of people, coming from similar cultural background with common food

habits and a shared history participate in SAARC, whereas in the NAM summit it is quite different. A NAM summit brings together people from all corners of the globe, representing diverse culture, climate and history and it therefore calls for thousands of supporting staff, including highly qualified and expensive translators, interpreters, multilingual guides, chefs and the like. Setting up of the media facilities is a difficult job, so are the huge and multilingual documentation facilities. SAARC now has its own Secretariat whereas in the case of NAM, this task will have to be performed by the host country, in this case Bangladesh. We hardly needed to undertake any capital expenditure in the case of SAARC, as ready made facilities for a small conference exists. However, in the case of NAM, such expenditure is likely to cross the six hundred crore taka mark. In short, NAM cannot just be compared with any other conference that we have so far hosted.



Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

Basically NAM summit needs psychological preparedness, the part of the entire nation as does, says the international Olympics, for which the lead preparation time is at least eight years, if not more. It is for us to ponder whether Bangladesh, a nation politically divided such as it is today, and with its extremely limited infrastructural facilities and poor human resource base, can satisfactorily perform as the host for such a conference.

Dhaka, with its limited number of roads and congested traffic, unplanned structures and slums, the unsatisfactory law and order situation and the mosquito menace, has become an unbearable city to live in, even for a few thousand foreigners who have to do so essentially to make a living. Once it used to be said that "foreigners used to cry twice, once when they came to Dhaka and once when they left". And now, the saying is that "the tears keep on rolling till they leave". I have just heard the case of a foreign Ambassador, whose professed love for the poor people of Bangladesh vanished in the thick polluted air of Dhaka and he left our shores for good within a couple of months of

his arrival. Dhaka is a city that is four hundred years old and it bears testimony to the travails of our people and to the evolution of our history. No other place in the world means more to us than 'good old' Dhaka. But that is not to say that it can be made ready to hold 'the greatest political show on earth', within eighteen months.

Our Chinese friends are building a beautiful Conference Centre for us. We are confident that it will turn out to be as useful as the ones they have built in Islamabad and Colombo and that it will stand us in good stead in the future. One is also confident that, barring any long drawn out political disturbances, the conference hall will be made ready before the scheduled time of next August. The Chinese who, in the late fifties, built Beijing's The Great Hall of the People in nine months, have all the expertise in the world to satisfactorily complete the comparatively easy task of building Bangladesh a conference hall. However, building a conference

hall is only the beginning, and not the end of the Summit preparations. One wonders whether any thought has been given and action initiated about building up a qualified team for the maintenance and the running of the conference hall. We will need hundreds of interpreters, translators and conference guides who will have to be recruited from outside and properly trained up. A government that does not have enough officials to go round running its own ministries cannot obviously depend on its permanent officials to do this stupendous job.

Then, there is the all-important question of the security of the participants. Whether we liked it or not the Americans thought it advisable to make us create a little Bangladesh within the safety and security of their embassy for the benefit of President Clinton, only for security reasons. In this security perception about Bangladesh, we will be called upon to provide security to dozens of high-security risk heads of government and our security people are just not up to it. And what about airport facilities? Zia International Airport is perhaps the most ill managed

airport in the world, which shows pathetic signs of strains even when handling a couple of simultaneous arrivals. It is beyond me to imagine as to how in its present state it can deal with scores of special flights that will bring the heads of governments and others to Dhaka, arrange for the parking of the aircraft as well as for their departures, in some cases within hours of their arrival! The less said about accommodation for the summit participants the better. Hotels and apartments cannot be built, furnished and maintained with a magic wand. Those who say that accommodation, in the form of new hotels and apartments will be ready in time, either do not know what they are talking about or perhaps some of them know too much. I am convinced that a vested interest of self seekers have now been created, who see in the summit, a God sent (or shall I say, devil sent?) opportunity to make a quick buck. The fact that it could be at the cost of our national prestige is furthest from their minds.

Now, to transport arrangements for the conference. It does not need an expert to foresee that we will need hundreds of new cars. Further, to satisfy the demands of protocols, these will have to be of good make and of uniform types for all delegations. The point is subsequent to the conference, what use do we make of the huge fleet of expensive vehicles? The same question holds good for the apartments that we are reportedly planning to build. Apartments made for heads of governments and furnished for them will be far above the required standard for government use. Similarly creating excess capacity in hotel rooms defies any cost-benefit calculations.

So much for the infrastructure and human resources for the summit. More important surely is the intellectual input at all levels expected of the host nation. Do we have the wisdom and sagacity to lead the non-aligned movement during the coming years? What impelled us to offer Dhaka as the Summit venue when there was no other 'taker' from Asia? Why did we have to go in where others feared to tread? Misplaced ambition, a false sense of glory, a step taken in ignorance are some of the thoughts that cross my mind.

An offer of this magnitude called for a national consensus and a thorough discussion with the opposition parties, for parliamentary democracy that we claim to be practicing, may indeed pass on the governmental torch to the opposition. This brings one to the question of the

timing of the conference. For the sake of convenience, tradition has it that the summits are usually held preceding the UN General Assembly sessions in the autumn. But what is sauce for the goose may not be quite so for the gander. 2001 is our election year and given the present political atmosphere in the country, one would not have wished to add to the tremendous uncertainties that may lie ahead. Indeed we have the propensity, as the visiting journalist remarked, of creating problems where there should be none!

It is for the government to set the course in this regard. This article has been intended to strongly argue that it is not practicable for us to stage the summit in the autumn of the next year. Notwithstanding the points made above, the authorities may go ahead and hold the summit on schedule. If they succeed in doing so in an acceptable fashion, nothing will please me more. As a citizen it will do me proud and one will find eating one's own words delicious! A way out could also be to find a 'taker' from Asia (for, I am told that this is Asia's turn) and offer to hold the summit here in 2004. But, obviously that may not be agreed upon for it will be some other region's turn then. It is however just possible that holding the NAM Summit, not currently being the most popular of governmental pastimes, may not have any volunteer from the designated region, and that Bangladesh may get its wish. If not, we may give this turn a pass and take it up when the torch comes round to Asia again. Another way out could be to seek a postponement of the Summit by a couple of years or so, and set about preparing for the Summit calmly and in a well planned fashion dovetailing the infrastructural and other preparations to our national needs and requirements. There is at least one precedent of a postponed summit by three years, when after the Cairo summit in 1964 the Lusaka summit was held after six years, in 1970. There is something called a 'troika' comprising the last chairman, the current Chairman, South Africa and the future Chairman, Bangladesh (or does not say Chairing State!) and, at Bangladesh's initiative, they may meet and discuss a new date or another venue.

In the light of my own limited experience of what summit entails, I have objectively put forward my belief as to why the NAM summit cannot be, and indeed should not be held in Dhaka, next year, I would rather wish that this burden did not at all fall on us at this stage of our national development, that call for our urgent attention in so many other priority areas. May one be presumptuous in hoping that the authorities will pause and ponder?

The Curse of Corruption

That is the essence of the curse of corruption, the misuse of connections and influence by the "untouchables", those who bring mud to what has been a very fine uniform to wear. If one really wants to wipe out the curse of corruption from Pakistan, let us start by nabbing those who matter whatever their position or source of strength.

DESPITE the excellent work being done by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), corruption is alive and well and prospering in Pakistan. Unlike Saifur Rahman's Ehtesab Bureau (EB) which targeted only the real or perceived enemies of Saif's mentor or Saif himself, mostly not in that order, NAB has established a reputation for being even-handed even though some times it can be ham-handed. As the NAB Chief has himself acknowledged, where the target was not politically motivated EB did some good work. In balance EB failed because it differentiated between friend and foe in holding only foes accountable. The public perception about NAB is that they are going about their business without fear or favour though it is unfortunate that the 'physicians' have been restrained from healing either themselves or the 'judiciary'. This restriction undercuts the absolute credibility NAB badly needs and for that matter, deserves. However something is better than nothing, the already beggared can hardly be choosers, one's only recourse is to be satisfied with whatever crumbs are thrown our way, at least a few of the infamous are being held accountable. Amjad has lived up to the reputation he arrived with to establish NAB, that in itself is a very positive sign. The character of integrity of leadership of any entity must not only be above question, it must be genuinely and universally admired to be of support to the ultimate purpose of its existence, in this case accountability with credibility.

Whether it is NAB or any other accountability unit, its effectiveness is only as potent as the integrity of its personnel, especially its lead managers and investigators. Unfortunately entities tend to misuse the military's determination to wipe out corruption for their own nefarious purposes. Let us take the example of the 1000 or so CBR people dismissed by the Government. First of all, the purge was weighted in favour of the senior CBR personnel, the fact is that most of the corruption is at the top. Yet 850 of the 1000 suspended were class-3 employees, making a pittance for their own pockets compared to those in the upper echelon. And except for a handful of notorious cases among the senior CBR personnel, the rest were those generally without any "connection". In the meantime, the corrupt thrive on the strength of this cleansing, they now have an open cheque to loot the country. The disappointment among the more honest CBR personnel was double — shock at seeing some general honest personnel among the 'dead' and frustration as well as confusion at the very known corrupt surviving the axe. The question one asks, why was this cleansing operation muddled? And by whom? "Why" we can easily answer, to frustrate the process of accountability in CBR, "by whom" is more difficult.

To maintain its reputation of being the only institution above board, the Army has to ruthlessly ensure that its personnel at any rank or level do not get involved in any personal motivation in their actions. At the lower ranks "fraternisation" with "civilians" is frowned upon, particularly if it involves possible misuse of authority for ulterior purposes. Particularly for those closely identified with the military hierarchy, any action for personal gain almost invariably will become public knowledge. Those targeted for accountability have a vested interest to air this "secret", to embellish the truth so that the credibility of the Army is undercut, compromising their capacity to carry out accountability. Of particular concern are those involved in regular public dealing and thus more prone to controversy.

There are many examples of how "godfathers" misuse their position to influence contracts awarded for their favourites. Initially they ensure that tenders are drawn in a manner that would be "suitable" for their favourites. If that does not happen they still have a capacity for manipulation. In a tender qualification several months ago the questionnaire accompanying the bid ran into a hundred or so pages, that document was at least a 2 kgs plus, in triplicate. Obviously the tendered document came to much more, so much that it required two men to carry the load. There were two bidders, one gave in only a slim A-4 size manila envelope. Naturally the ones with the "heavy document" were ecstatic. How could those who had not answered the extensive questionnaire ever get their tender accepted? Guess who got the award? It was so blatant a manipulation that there was no question as to the scam and who were the puppet-masters behind it.

Another way is to "contact" corporate entities and "recommend" the services of a favourite company. Obviously

where the entities themselves have something to hide this initiative is god-sent, it provides them invaluable flank protection. It is a mutually convenient arrangement where not only those who provide the services profit but those acquiring the services can afford to continue on their illegal course, this time with support from quarters that matter. Unfortunately such things become known. In another variation, the corrupt entities themselves actively seek out those who can provide protection. This is only a variation of the age-old "Client-Patron" relationship that has bedeviled Pakistani society for the past five decades, corrupting it to the core. Unfortunately even honest people put under pressure buckle under to secure themselves and their families from being harassed and defamed. They quickly form unlikely alliances with those who can provide cast-iron guarantees, essentially a "barter" arrangement. It is difficult to fault such people. One senior banker whose courage and integrity one really admires has also succumbed to such compromise. With his family on the Exit Control List (ECL) he was desperate to find "connections" with NAB so as to get at least his family to safety. When the connection was made the reward for the facilitator's company was services for the bank.

In third world countries like Pakistan, almost everyone uses contacts. A couple of those nabbed in the recent past have such an extensive network it is mind-boggling. If one were to sit and write about it, it would extend from personal to business to multi-national companies, a full-fledged encyclopedia. The problem is that when men in uniform start getting involved in scam with the notorious it does not remain a secret, it compromises the reputation in the public perception of all those in uniform. This is unfair to 99.99 per cent of the Khakis that lead, clean honourable lives. It is said that when you tell the truth you can shame the devil but what do you do with those who remain without shame in matters both personal and professional?

Look at the PTV tender calling for bids for collecting TV and Dish Antenna fees for 2000-01. Everyone and his uncle knows that during the first three months, at least 30-35 per cent of the owners of TV sets go

by themselves to the banks/post offices to renew their licences. During the last two years this has amounted to approximately Rs.200-240 million or about 800,000 TV Licences. In one of the most blatant of scams PTV is promising to give Rs.20 commission on a sliding basis upto Rs.120 per license. It is only after the first three months of the financial year (July to September) that the collection company gets into the act. In the first year of private contract for collection (1998-99) comprehensive documentation had already been made and records were available. So a windfall of almost Rs.16-20 million was given to the contractor in 1999-2000 for doing nothing. Why? That is a Rs.20 million question. Why not award the present tender to the present contractors (period 1999-2000) who have done very well from Jan 01, 2000 onwards mainly because of the army taking power and people refusing to pay their taxes and other dues? Why have any 'service fee' for the first three months of the new contract when the contractors have no role during that period? And why a sliding fee upto Rs.120 per licence? Why not a flat fee of Rs.30 per licence? And if that is not enough, a maximum of Rs.50? Even at Rs.50, PTV will save Rs.60 million. Why is this largesse being given out? Why is PTV becoming generous with money that is not theirs. And not to worry about awarding the contract by 30 June. What "compulsion" made PTV wait till the last minute to go to tender?

To the Editor ...

Misguided zeal in education

Sir, The piece "Misguided Zeal" in education by Ardeshtir Cowasjee (DS June 19) may be made compulsory reading for the senior teachers, policy makers, and, of course, the politicians.

The latter, in Dhaka are fired up with guided zeal, for the salvation of 130 million souls; subjecting the entrapped citizens to a lot of zealotry of the 'right kind'.

Ironically, the problem for many citizens is the choice between divine and political guidance. Can we have some learned discussion on this sensitive issue, because it affects the future generation?

A citizen
Dhaka

"Naming culture"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter of Mr Uttam Das published on June 13, 2000, in response to my letter under the above heading (May 20, 2000).

In the letter Mr Das wanted to know why direct object naming of Patenga Airport, Chittagong as M A Hannan Airport. In this regard he also informed me that throughout the world many airports have been named after great personalities like King Abdul Aziz International Airport, Saudi Arabia; Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi; John A F Kennedy Airport, New York etc.

It is quite natural and justifiable that establishments should be named after a king, President or Prime Minister in our country also there are many establishments which bears the names of a President, Prime Minister or a renowned person.

But could Mr Uttam Das cite example of at least one country where after a party came to power it started changing the existing names indiscriminately naming almost all the establishments after one person, even when people protested about it and expressed their dissatisfaction? Since it is unprecedented, he won't be able to do it.

And most importantly, I would like to inform Mr Das that I never intended to undermine Mr M A Hannan's contribution during our liberation war. Like him I also recall Mr Hannan's contribution wholeheartedly. And I think if Mr Das keeps an open mind he will be able to grasp the gist of the matter.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Telephone installation scheme

Sir, To cope with the 'telephone famine' in Bangladesh, the government may consider a new step of offering free installation (only) of telephone connection at the residences of gazetted officers (who are not eligible for official residential phone); but the officers will have to pay the monthly telephone bills from their own pocket (most cannot afford the high installation charge for private connection). This may be classified as an innovative perk.

If the scheme be successful, it may be extended to other state personnel.

A M A
Dhaka