

## Another Wrong Signal to Investment

WHAT happened on Tuesday at Sarak Bhaban should make our heads hang in shame. It had to do with tender paper submission by representatives from two Chinese companies for Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Project-III in Barisal-Gopalganj area. Just when they were handing in the papers, a bunch of terrorists with a Juba League label sprang on them to snatch away their quotation offers. That the thugs could not have gained an entry into the roads and highways headquarters without some insider help appears proven from the instant laying off of the Project Director Mozammel Hossain Chowdhury after the incident.

The project is rather small, worth Tk 64 crore only but we have sent out some hugely negative signals to all concerned - thanks to the misdeed of a handful unstoppably flaunting ruling party clout. Understandably, the Chinese embassy and the resident office of the World Bank, the project having been listed under a WB credit programme, are in the know of things. They cannot look kindly on what has happened, can they?

There are several implications to such an untoward incident concerning international tenders. We need to be fully seized of them so that corrective measures are in place to thwart its recurrence in future. At least two wrong signals might be read: first, even utilisation of a WB loan may be seen as facing the knock-on effect of a poor law and order situation; and secondly, it is the visage of an 'inclement weather' we put across to potential foreign investors. In fact, there are reasons to believe that local businessmen and entrepreneurs are themselves growing cynical about further investment owing to highhandedness of some vested quarters out to monopolise everything. Since foreign investors attach great value to local investment while deciding to put their money in a country, it is the overall field situation that needs improving.

But in the immediate run, let's have stepped up security at the offices at the time of receiving tenders as well for their safe-keeping against attempted tampering or grabbing before opening them.

## Trade in Women

IT'S more or less the same story. A young woman comes out of her home in search of a job; gets deceived by pimps in the guise of recruitment agents being taken to a city on fake promises; and finally lands in a brothel for an ignominious and inhuman living for the rest of her life. In case of more than one hundred distressed women who were forced into prostitution upon their arrival in the Middle East in quest of a 'secured and prosperous' life, the difference is in terms of distance from home. They are far away from their native land, caged amongst sex-starving strangers. These hapless women have been doubly wronged, for they were deceived into paying for a life in veritable hell. Those who have somehow managed to escape from the clutches of brothel owners and their agents and returned home now face a life devoid of dignity and full of trauma - physical, psychological and, needless to say, economic.

The firsthand account of some victims as related in a front-paged report on Tuesday's *Prothom Alo* leaves us livid with anger as well as in pain and shame. While incidences of trafficking of women and children have been steadily on the rise, the authorities have been painfully sluggish in response and have made little or no ground in the fight against the perpetrators. We have, along with women's rights organisations and civil society exponents, persistently demanded an orchestrated effort to weed out the criminal elements engaged in exploiting the vulnerably placed women, but to no avail.

Basically the tragedy stems from our inept economic management. Beneath the pompous claim of positive GDP growth lies the cruel truth that we are yet to devise means and ways to generate economic activities in the rural areas. It is our failure to create jobs in the countryside that has forced so many to migrate to the country's urban centres in search of fortune, eventually to end up in extreme misery.

Therefore, alongside stepped up law enforcement and civic surveillance, we need to generate more economic activities and thereby more employment for the rural populace, so that people don't have to leave the villages for cities for 'secured and prosperous' life.

## Tribute to Sirimavo

TODAY we pay rich tributes to a person who became a political dynamo from a shy housewife some forty years ago. Sirimavo Bandaranaike joined politics perforce upon the assassination of her husband Solomon Dias Bandaranaike who was elected Prime Minister of the island democracy in 1956. Once in power she ruled Sri Lanka with iron hand and political foresight keeping in mind the importance of maintaining good relations with her big neighbour India. Her policies of nationalisation of big industries came under criticism but strangely enough this paid off handsomely and helped shut her critics out. There had been shift in her foreign policy and in 1970 she ordered the United States Peace Corps out and Israeli embassy closed. In 1972 she made the country a republic and the year before she crushed a Marxist insurrection in which about Twenty thousand were believed to have died.

Sirimavo was the first woman Prime Minister of the world, a position to which she did not aspire but history beckoned her. A democrat at the core of her heart Sirimavo accepted the decision of the Parliament which expelled her in 1980 accusing her of misusing power and banning her from office for seven years. Her civic rights were restored in 1986. But Sirimavo showed remarkable resilience of character coming from the brink time and again and playing her historic role for the island nation. Even on a wheelchair she could not stay away from casting her ballot just before falling to the icy hand of death. May the good work done by this indomitable human being be continued by her people.

Our profound condolences to the bereaved family and the friendly people of Sri Lanka at her demise.

# Poverty in Pockets of Plenty

The huge challenge that besets developing countries needs local initiatives and global cooperation. Locally, political leader have in learn from past mistakes and embark on right policies in right earnest. While, on the other hand, international agencies should help home-grown attempts of developing countries to succeed.

recent survey on five villages by the writer, in rural Bangladesh 35-40 per cent of the people live on less than \$1 a day. At the current exchange rate, this amounts to Tk 53/day. Having spent 60-70 per cent of this income on basic food items, these people are left with very little to purchase other items that make man "healthy, wealthy and wise". However, globally, the gravity of the poverty syndrome is further compounded by, a la WDR, the following facts: (a) as many as a fifth of children in poor countries fail to reach their fifth birth day. This compares with less than 1 per cent in developed or rich countries; (b) almost half of the children under 5 are malnourished in poor countries compared with less than 5 per cent in developed countries. In a vicious circle phenomena, these deprivations tend to deter development. This destitution persists even though human conditions have improved more in the past century than in the rest of history global wealth, global connections and technological capabilities have never been greater. But the distributions of these global gains is extraordinarily unequal".

The basic feature that lies at the heart of a differentiation between the poor and the non-poor is well-known. While the former lives without the fundamental freedom of action and choice, the latter lives with them. The bundle of choices that the poor is faced with tends to be thin while for the non-poor it is thick. "They also face extreme vulnerability to ill-health, economic dislocation and natural disasters." And they are often exposed to ill treatment by institutions of the state and society and are powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives. These are all dimensions of poverty", says the WDR.

There are, reportedly, six billion people in the world. The daily income of almost half of them is less than \$2. Another one-fifth lives on less than \$1 a day. This taken together, two-thirds of the world's population live on \$1-\$2 a day. Again, of these earning less than \$1 a day, 44 per cent come from South Asia. According to a

example, despite debilitating effects of the financial crisis that East Asia was fraught with between 1987 and 1998, the proportion of people living on less than \$1 dropped drastically (from 420 million to 280 million). On the other hand, the numbers of those soared in Latin America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Most disconcertingly, in transition market economies, the number of people earning less than \$1 increased more than 20 fold!

a BIDS researcher: (a) the incidence of poverty is 19 per cent in households with access to electricity while it is 44 per cent in households without electricity. Further, 96 per cent of the poor come from households without electricity; (b) the incidence of poverty is 64 per cent in case of those without formal education compared to 45 per cent who passed primary level and 10 per cent for those who obtained higher secondary education. The impact of good roads on poverty alleviation has been documented by other authors. Bangladesh has only 12 per cent as paved roads compared to 80-90 per cent in Malaysia and Thailand, only 3 telephones per 1000 people compared to 198 and 84 in Malaysia and Thailand, public expenditure on education is 2 per cent as against 5 per cent in the other two countries.

Needless to mention, perhaps, that attainment of these objectives would require accelerated actions to spur economic growth. But at the same time if the distribution of growth (as well as its

poverty (living on less than \$1/day); (b) ensure universal primary education; (c) eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education (by 2005); (d) reduce infant and child mortality by two-thirds; (d) reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters and so on and so forth.

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