

# Focus on economic diplomacy: The priority tasks

FAROQ SOBHAN

THE newly appointed Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Mr. Morshed Khan, in his first day in office made it clear that he will be giving economic diplomacy the highest priority. In a meeting with the media he stressed that Bangladesh's Ambassadors must become the foremost salesmen of the country. Their performance would be judged on the basis of the foreign investment, exports and employment for Bangladeshis that they can generate. They must either produce results or they will be recalled.

Bangladesh is already in the throes of a serious economic crisis. The fact that this crisis is directly linked to the global economic crisis, will make the task of recovery a formidable challenge. In a shrinking global economy it will be twice as difficult to attract FDI, expand exports and find new jobs. Competition will be intense. In order to survive Bangladesh will have to make a special effort, both at home and abroad. The level of efficiency of the government as a whole, and BOI, BEPZA, EPB, NBR, PDB, in particular, must be improved manifold. Indeed in order to face this national crisis the country should operate on an emergency footing. Similarly our missions abroad should function on an emergency basis.

In Bangladesh today there can no longer be any doubt about the importance of economic diplomacy. The success of our economic diplomacy will require the full support and cooperation of all branches of the government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our missions abroad must be equipped to shoulder this responsibility. Above all there must be a well coordinated collective effort which also includes the private sector.

The essential thrust of our economic diplomacy must be to enhance the image of the country. We need to convince people, even some of our neighbours, that Bangladesh offers excellent investment opportunities and that the overall investment climate is conducive to foreign investment. However, at the end of the day we need to remember that there has to be a great deal of substance and fact supporting what is projected abroad. In other words no matter how much we try, the appalling conditions prevailing in Chittagong port, cannot be ignored. The daily traffic jams, the power cuts and the high level of pollution in Dhaka cannot be wished away. Law and order problems, toll collection, shooting incidents, inside and outside the universities, are not calculated to encourage investment. At the end of the day these pressing problems have to be addressed.

Foreign investors, from the moment they arrive in Dhaka, must be encouraged to feel that in Bangladesh they can look forward to receiving the full support of the government, and that the Board of Investment can take care of all their problems promptly and efficiently. Time is money. In Singapore, on average, it should take no more than

fifteen minutes from the time a passenger exits from the aircraft till he exits from the airport. In Dhaka today the average time is well over an hour. In fact the conditions both inside the terminal and outside at the Zia International Airport are calculated to give most first time visitors a very poor impression of the country. In Port Klang (Malaysia) the average time for a container to exit the port from the time a ship docks is seven hours. In Chittagong the average exit time for a container is measured not in hours but in days.

There are many sides to economic diplomacy. It is most commonly understood to mean furthering the country's economic and commercial interests. Thus attracting foreign investment, promoting exports and, in the case of Bangladesh, helping to find employment opportunities for our nationals, would be considered as priority tasks. This is where there is a compelling need for efficient coordi-

nation between our missions abroad and the private sector. If a potential investor is interested in investing in Bangladesh or if one of our embassies suggests the possibility of developing a market in a particular country for one of our export products, how should they proceed? Do they write to the BOI or EPB, the Chambers, the Foreign Ministry or individual companies? At present no satisfactory arrangement exists. This problem could be addressed by establishing a committee, which could meet twice or thrice a week, which would include representatives from the Commerce Ministry, the different chambers, BOI, BEPZA, EPB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This committee could be serviced by the Economic Wing of the Foreign Ministry. All communications could then be promptly handled by this committee, which would decide how best to deal with each case. A separate committee to deal with manpower problems could also be established.

Economic diplomacy also encompasses economic and technical assistance received by Bangladesh both bilaterally and from a variety of multilateral sources, the debt problem, investment agreements, avoidance of double taxation agreements, trade agreements and joint commissions. In the past competing for economic assistance, the terms and conditions of such assistance, were matters of paramount importance. Globalization and the new global agenda have prompted a significant shift in priorities. "Trade not aid" is the slogan of the day. Nonetheless for a country such as Bangladesh foreign economic assistance still plays a very important role in our economic development. The thrust of our economic diplomacy has been to ensure the continuation, and if

possible, the enhancement, of such assistance; at times this has meant dealing with irate donors and their complaints. The annual aid consortium meeting has for many years been the high point of the government's economic agenda. This meeting has been viewed by some as the critical factor in determining the success or failure of our economic diplomacy.

For developing countries such as Bangladesh, economic diplomacy has also meant playing an active, sometimes leadership role in multilateral agencies and conferences. Bangladesh has been chairman/coordinator of the 49-member group of Least Developed Countries for the past 25 years. Bangladesh has been closely involved in the preparation of the various action plans and programmes in support of the LDCs and the subsequent follow up action. In the WTO, the Second Committee of the General Assembly, ECOSOC, UNCTAD, ESCAP,

the Group of 77, the NAM, Bangladesh has traditionally played a very active role in either highlighting the problems of the LDCs or the developing countries as a whole. One of the major challenges facing our economic diplomacy will be the issue of duty free access to the United States and India for our exports. Dr. Badruddoza Choudhury as Foreign Minister and more recently Mr. Amir Khasru Choudhury, the Commerce Minister, visited Washington in this connection. Both these visits were extremely useful. The US government as well as the US Congress were fully briefed about the crisis conditions prevailing in the garment industry. What will now be required will be six months of intensive lobbying in the US. The Bangladesh Embassy and the Ambassador will have to work round the clock. The Bangladesh caucus in Congress as well as the Bangladeshi community in the US will have to be fully mobilised. Bangladesh's case for duty free access must be understood and supported by the different power centers in Washington: the State Department, USTR, the National Security Council, Congress, the major buyers and retailers like JC Penney, Gap, Walmart, Nike, etc., the media, NGOs and above all influential think tanks and organizations like the American Enterprise Institute, CSIS, Brookings, the Woodrow Wilson Center, the National Endowment for Democracy, to mention only a few.

At the same time every effort should be made to obtain duty free access to the Indian market, which was promised as far back as Begum Zia's first government. Both the Foreign Minister and the Commerce Minister should visit Delhi at the earliest opportunity. Our relations with India should be developed on a

whole. However, it will be essential to ensure that the smaller states in SAARC, such as Bangladesh, are adequately compensated by India within the framework of SAFTA. As a first step India should immediately open up its market to all the countries in the region while these countries will do so gradually.

Similarly energy cooperation among the countries of South Asia could transform the entire region, as could cooperation in the development and implementation of joint infrastructure projects. A Trans Asian highway and railway, a South Asian energy grid, the development of a deep sea port in Chittagong that service the sub-region, are only some examples of the enormous opportunities that exist today for cooperation in the region. Bangladesh's economic diplomacy must continue to give the highest priority to promoting infrastructure development at the regional and sub-regional level and to the implementation of projects in different sectors. Here too it is imperative to mobilise the private sector and NGOs in the region. One of the path breaking initiatives taken by Bangladesh in recent years was the holding of the Tripartite Business Summit in Dhaka in January, 1998. The presence of the Prime Ministers of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh on the same platform endorsing the need for the joint development of their infrastructure and inviting foreign investors to look upon South Asia as a single market, sent a powerful message to the international business community. Efforts are under way to convene an annual South Asian business summit, which will hopefully be attended by the heads of the SAARC countries, as well as business leaders in the region. Such an initiative will be in tune with Bangladesh's economic diplomacy and should therefore

receive the strong support of the government.

The export of manpower to the Middle East is another important achievement of our economic diplomacy. Today there are more than two million Bangladeshis working in the Middle East. Although Bangladeshis doctors, engineers and teachers had been working in Malaysia for some years, in 1985 the Malaysian government gave permission for semi skilled workers and agricultural labour from Bangladesh to work in Malaysia. This permission was given to only two countries, Indonesia and Bangladesh. This was made possible due to intensive lobbying and can be cited as another example of the importance of economic diplomacy. Today there are well over half a million Bangladeshis working in Malaysia. Priority attention should be given to Malaysia to ensure that this important market for Bangladesh's labour is preserved, while at

could chair a high level committee which would periodically review the progress of work and evaluate and assess the results achieved through Bangladesh's economic diplomacy. This high level committee would ensure that prompt action is taken by the concerned ministries and departments of the government, that the grievances and complaints of the foreign investors are dealt with promptly. These unresolved problems can have a multiplier effect and will discourage future investment.

Our missions abroad must be kept fully briefed and the Foreign Ministry must respond promptly to initiatives taken by our Ambassadors and our missions abroad. Our Ambassadors must be performance oriented. Their performance must be closely scrutinized. We must ensure that the right man is chosen for each post. Bangladesh simply cannot afford the luxury of non-performing Ambassadors. Economic diplomacy is vital to our survival and must be one of the key facets of government policy today.

Fortunately Mr. Morshed Khan is no stranger to economic diplomacy. In fact as the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, in Begum Zia's first government, he was the point man on economic diplomacy. As Chairman of the Special Committee on Foreign Affairs, popularly known as the Morshed Khan Committee, he produced an excellent report. Indeed many of points mentioned in this article were dealt with in great detail in the report. This report highlighted the importance of economic diplomacy and put forward a set of recommendations which would enable the Foreign Ministry to carry out its responsibilities in this area more effectively.

Farooq Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary, is President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute.

Lest we forget

## Yusuf Ali Chowdhury (Mohan Miah)

SHAMIM HOSSAIN

EVERY death is sad in its own way. So was Yusuf Ali Chowdhury's -- better known as Mohan Miah. The people of Bangladesh, especially of Faridpur, still remember him as one of the souls devoted for the advancement of the downtrodden.

Born in 1905, in the zamindar family of Khan Saheb Moezuddin Biswas, Mohan Miah had to give up his studies at Sorojini ME School when he was 18. He had no other choice but to run the zamindari at that very young age. This was because his father expired in 1923 and his elder brother was busy in Congress politics.

Mohan Miah was not a zamindar like those that one comes across while digging history. He was different in every aspect. At one point, he remarked "Sooner this bloody system goes, the better." This is what he told to the law makers who were debating whether the system should stay with the Muslim League in power.

Although the subcontinent was divided based on the "two-nation" theory, yet the then Pakistan government drifted into discrimination against East Pakistan, proving all was rhetoric. Mohan Miah protested against all the injustices inflicted upon the people of then East Pakistan by the rulers of the West.

His political talent is illustrated by Moulana Akram Khan's comment on Mohan Miah during the Pakistan Movement: "If there were 28 Mohan Miah in 28 districts, we would have reached our goal much before." Basically a Muslim Leaguer and an activist in Pakistan Movement for historical reasons, Mohan Miah was first dismayed and then, in 1952, could not ideologically agree with the Muslim League high-command on the cause of Language Movement. He wanted Bangla to be the language for the Bengalis.

In 1953, he joined Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque's Krishak-Sramik Party and became a Juktofront member of the Provincial Assembly. Professor Humayun Kabir, a celebrated educationist and litterateur of Asia, and former Indian Cabinet Minister is quoted as saying: "In the political arena, Mohan Miah is a practical student of reality and his methods are scientific and experimental." In charity, he was one of the best followers of Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar: Yusuf Ali Chowdhury made large donations for the society's advancement without thinking about his own materialistic interests.

Mohan Miah understood what 'education' really meant for the majority; and that was the reason why he established a number of educational institutions in (greater) Faridpur.

Yusuf Ali Chowdhury foresaw that Bangladesh was bound to happen; and that is why he tried to advise the erstwhile West Pakistan to be democratic and thereby hand over the state power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who won the election in 1970.



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## Global tourism: Crisis committee constituted

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

GEORGE W Bush, the President of USA is going to star in US \$20 million TV commercial shortly for promoting tourism. This has been necessitated due to the terrorist attack on September 11 and the US bombing on Afghanistan, which have given a severe blow to the global Tourism industry. The Travel Industry Association of America has already organized nearly 3000 representatives of 26 sub-sectors of US economy which serve tourism to formulate a legislative package to include low-interest rates for tourism business, tax credit for personal travels and formulation of Government Tourism Policy Council. The Government of USA has undertaken a US \$15 billion subsidy package in order to help domestic air carriers facing closure. In USA alone one million workers are threatened to be laid off by the tourism industry.

With a view to facing this crisis the world-wide tourism industry is responding with dozens of measures taken around the globe designed to strengthen tourism companies and restore public confidence in travel. Recovery strategies and an assessment of the current situation in tourism were presented recently in a meeting of the newly created Crisis Committee of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), held on the eve of the World Travel Market trade fair in London. The committee included tourism ministers from 21 countries mostly affected by crisis including India and Sri Lanka, 15 leaders of private sector tourism companies and associations, and representatives of the European Commission.

WTO's Crisis Committee includes Argentina, Bahrain, Croatia, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Greece, India, Jordan, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, Philippines, Portugal, Spain, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey from the public sector; European Commission and the International Air Transport Association from the international institutions and Air France, Association of British Travel Agents, Australian Tourism Task Force, BGB & Associates (UK), Conde Nast Traveller (USA), Egyptian Federation of Tourist Chambers, International Hotel & Restaurant Association, Reed Travel Exhibitions (UK), Savia Amadeus, The Taj Group of Hotels of India, Touristik Union International of Germany, Travel Industry Association of America, Universal Federation of Travel Agents Association, International Federation of Tour Operators (IFTO) from the private sector.

WTO reported that travel reservations worldwide currently stand

12-15 per cent below the levels of last year this time, as a result of the terrorists attacks, the war in Afghanistan and a global economy that was weakening even before September 11. The hardest hit destinations are the ones dependent on long-haul air travel, places that are heavily reliant on tourists from the United States and countries in the Muslim world according to the new WTO study "Tourism after 11 September 2001: Analysis, Remedial Actions and Prospects." The tourism sector has never before experienced a crisis of this magnitude. The enormity of the attacks, the fact that the United States was the target and the uncertainty inherent in terrorism have all combined to put the plans of thousands of travelers on hold. Before September 11 attacks,

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## Women's participation in local government

MD ALMAS ALI

WOMEN constitute about 49 per cent of population.

Various indicators reveal that the status of women is much lower than that of men. The development objectives such as accelerated economic growth, poverty alleviation, family well being and employment creation cannot be achieved without the contribution and participation of women. There is the traditionalization; social system and institutions place them in unequal and disadvantaged positions. The constitution of Bangladesh has granted equal rights to men and women both in matters relating to the state and public life.

The constitutional provisions (Article 9-10, 27-28, 37-39, 50 56 and 122) clearly outlined the steps to be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life. The term "women's participation in the local government" is an important issue in current development discourses. What participation means? Momtaz Soysal defines participation as all forms of action by which citizens "take part" in the operation of administration. The taking part refers to any level from macro to micro region or it may be of any type e.g. advisory or in decision-making or in implementation etc., people can participate through public or private bodies or organisations.

Political participation may, therefore, be considered as one of the most powerful indicators of the status of women both in social and economic spheres of life. The National Policy for Women's Development and the National Action Plan (NAP) for Women's Advancement: The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in end-1995 to analyse the progress made in implementing the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (NFLS) for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000. NFLS was drawn up in Nairobi in 1985. The Government of Bangladesh in 1997 also decided to adopt the "National Action Plan for

Advancement of women (NAP) to implement the decisions made at the Beijing Conference whose salient major features are as follows: to achieve the equal status of women as participants, decision makers and beneficiaries in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of life; and to empower women and men to work together as equal partners.

The emphasis of the Fifth Five Year Plan is on the reduction of gender disparity through integration of women in the mainstream of development. The thrust of the plan is on protection of women's rights and empowerment of women.

**Background and Functioning of Local Government Institutions:** The institution of local government in Bangladesh has a long history. In its present form, its origin can be traced to the demand for self-government in British India. Initially, local government was developed by the British to maintain law and order in the rural areas with the help of local elite backed by local police. The local elites were to be nominated in the local government institutions from among those who were trusted by the colonial authority and the village police, (the chawkidars) were to be paid by taxing the villagers (through the local government of the village panchayets in the 1870s and the Union and District Boards after 1885). More than one hundred and thirty years have passed since the creation of the act and local government at union level over the years has changed its name, area, function, power from time to time.

During the Pakistan period (1947-71), this dynamic trend of the growth of representative institutions was significantly lost particularly under the Martial Law administration of the Ayub Khan (1958-69). In 1959, Ayub introduced his particular variety of local government institution known as the "Basic Democracy" under which the local government representatives were known as "Basic Democrats". In 1969, during the period of anti-Ayub movement, the institution of basic

democracy came under severe attack.

After independence of Bangladesh, it was expected that the above perversion of the development of local government institutions would be corrected.

**Women in Politics (National and Local Level):** Bangladesh is a unique case in terms of women leadership in politics both the Prime Minister and the Leader of Opposition are women. There were 30 seats reserved (now abolished) as the female quota in the national parliament. Under the Local Government Ordinance, 1976, a Union Parishad was divided into three wards. Each Union Parishad consisted of a chairman, nine members, taking three from each ward. For the first time in the history of local government institution of Bangladesh, under this Ordinance two women were nominated as members in the Parishad by the sub-divisional officer from amongst the women of the entire Union. Later on this number was increased to three in the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983 and each of them represented one ward and they were nominated by the Upazilla Parishad. The Union Parishad Bill, 1993 was passed in this regard. In other tiers of the local self-government namely Upazilla Parishad (abolished in 1991-99 July), there were three nominated women members.

In Pourashava, which is a unit of the urban local government institutions, also the number of nominated women members were three. The government decision to broaden the base of women's participation has increased substantially the involvement of women in local politics.

After liberation the constitution of Bangladesh (1972) provided for local government units at each of these tiers of administration. It also endorsed special representation of women in local government. In the last 30 years six local government elections were held in Bangladesh (1973, 1977, 1983-1984, 1988-1989, 1992 and 1997). It may be mentioned that it was for the first

time in the history of the land that statutory representation of women was provided in the local government at the lower tier, the union parishad. In 1973 election only one woman from Rangpur was elected as the chairmen of Union Parishad among 4352 unions and was killed long before the completion of her term. In 1977 election four women were elected as chairmen of Union Parishads. In 1984 four women were elected among 4401 Union Parishads (one from Dhaka Division, two from Khulna Division and one from Rajshahi Division). Two more women were elected in by-election as chairmen. It is found that between 1973 and 1984, only eleven women out of over 4000 could be elected as chairpersons. In 1988, candidates for Chairman were 79, for members 863. Only one female chairman was elected. In 1992, 115 women contested for chairmanship and 1135 for membership. Only 20 members were elected.

In pursuance of the strategies outlined in the plan for building strong local government institutions as an integral part of democratic governance, the government set up the Local Government Commission in September 1996. The Commission submitted its report in May 1997 and recommended the formation of four-tier elected local government bodies at Village, Union, Upazilla and District levels. The Government has already approved the recommendations.

According to the commission report it is supposed to be a direct election of women to one-third reserved seats in local bodies. It is to be noted that 12,828 female members were directly elected in Union Council election held in 1997, moreover, 20 Chairmen out of 4,198 and 110 members of Upazilla Parishad (Local Government) were elected directly defying the fatwa of the fundamentalists. The initiative closely corresponded with the Beijing platform for action where political empowerment of women was one of the major conditions. More and more rural women will be

able to participate in self-governance activities, especially for poverty alleviation and rural development as well as for promoting women's equality and empowerment.

In Upazilla election in 1985, nine women were candidates for Upazilla Chairman but none could win. There are to be 1380 nominated women members for the 460 Upazilla Parishads. In the 79 Pourashavas, there are to be 237 nominated women members. In Dhaka and Chittagong Municipal Corporations, there are 10 and three nominated women Commissioners, respectively. Election to Zilla Parishad has not been held since the creation of Bangladesh.

On the other hand the government amended the Pourashava Ordinance of 1997 in 1998 and four City Corporation Statutes in 1999, which provide for direct election of women members to their reserved seats in the Pourashava and City Corporations. Elections have already been held for the Pourashavas under the revised ordinance. Election of the Chittagong City Corporation has already been held; elections of the others City Corporation are planned.

**Conclusion:** Twenty-first century is ushering in an era of new hopes and aspirations for the women-folk, as the women of Bangladesh can now look forward with pride and hope for having some outstanding and significant occasions that have taken place in the last two decades for their all out development. We require both our hands to pray to our Creator. So, the active co-operation between men and women is a must for real development of a developing country like Bangladesh.

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