

BGMEA caught in an alarming bind

Obtain duty-free access in the very least

THE die seems cast for the RMG sector. Its leaders have had to scale down their combined demand for duty-and-quota-free access to duty-free access only. We are having to do this at the advice of the US lobbyist firm Trade Partnership-Worldwide whom we had appointed to pursue our case in Washington. Their prognosis is that it would be 'impossible' to obtain quota-free access as the US textiles lobby is certain to resist it on the ground that there will be job cuts in the US market. Half a loaf is better than no loaf, but to our understanding it is going to be slightly less than half a loaf assuming that we are accorded a duty-free access in the end. The benefit of quota-free access would have been larger in terms of increase in the export volume and creation of jobs in the RMG and textile industries.

On balance, we find it supremely important that the duty-free status is attained at the very least. For, this will put a brake on the downhill journey of the RMG sector helping it to bounce back to a reasonable level of viability.

We cannot forget that our exclusion from the list of countries comprising Jordan, Mexico, Israel and 72 Sub-Saharan and Caribbean countries which were accorded both quota and duty-free access to the US market dealt a body-blow to the local garments sector. This, combined with the after-shock of the 11 September terrorist attack that exacerbated recession in the USA rendered 4,000 workers jobless in our readymade apparel and textile industries.

After the virtual failure of the two successive delegations going to the USA to procure concessions from Washington on the induction of BNP rule our government should be obliged to redouble its efforts to shore up the RMG sector at any cost.

The US lobbyist group may need to be assisted with the clout the government can muster in Washington to clinch the duty-free access deal.

A new child-attacking virus thrives as pollution heightens

A time to choose between the child and the car

A new variant of a virus has been hitting small children of Dhaka with debilitating effect attacking their breathing system. Many of the children have already been hospitalized and more have been misdiagnosed as suffering from acute respiratory infection. The children have in most cases been given antibiotic that is not useful in combating viral infections. However, what is alarming is that the medical community appears unprepared and unequipped to deal with this new viral strain.

Some medical experts have blamed it on the high level of urban pollution. This is a fact that smoke and dust causes huge damage to children and adult health. Furthermore it reduces immunity that makes children more vulnerable to such viral attacks. The baneful impact of pollution is well documented as is our inability to deal with it in a meaningful manner.

But it appears that this viral infection has more to do with the understanding and managing of a particular strain of a disease causing agent that may have exploded into active life due to encouraging factors of which pollution may be a part.

The rise of the virus in the last three decades points to the unchallengeable power of many natural elements. In the last few years we have seen the attack of many new forms of diseases including viruses that we understand very little. A disturbed nature can mutate in order to take natural revenge or protect its habitats. The Ebola and the AIDS virus were released from natural captivity because habitats tampered with the habitat's of the virus.

Out here we have two problems. One, there is an immediate need to understand the behaviour of the virus and take action. If the virus is spreading through smoke there is an

urgent need to take pre-emptive action, more so because it harms children. For that training and treatment facilities are required.

But the equally significant need is to explore the encouraging factors including pollution. The cost of living in Dhaka is being seriously increased by this hazard and on top the medical management facilities are not adequate. It seems dying in Dhaka is becoming a long stretched out business which we can barely afford.

Mismanagement of diseases and the environment always ends up killing babies. This has been no exception this time. One has to remember that the arrogant roar of an engine can easily drown the crying of a child. One has to choose between the baby and the car.

Test of patriotism



S H IMAM

I think it was Erleen Fisher, the Associated Press Bureau Chief for South Asia in the late nineties who asked me in a somewhat concerned tone, 'Tell me Imam, what is the future of Bangladesh?' The conversation was set against the backdrop of 1988 floods in the country. I wish I could tell her, 'Wait till Bangladesh is discovered floating on gas (whatever that means with a finite resource) to gaze into the country's future with some confidence.' I just beckoned her to remember the lad holding a Bangladesh flag aloft and fluttering from a tin-shed top barely visible in the sea of flood water! The news-photo captioned 'capacity for survival' had been seen by her too, she nodded in response. But at heart I knew like her that it was survival context we are

stuck with and how much we needed to graduate from courageous resilience to material development. Frankly, I was not sure Erleen was impressed by my reply but that's the best I could pull off knowing well that survival did not make a future by itself.

Then a *deshi bhai* (compatriot) put it to me sometime ago sounding equally if not more disparaging, 'Just look around, do you see any future for Bangladesh? Obviously, he had the depressive humscape in the streets of Dhaka, its traffic congestion, monoxide fumes and the dust-faecal overhang in the metropolitan atmosphere in his mind.

The two questions haunted me, as would anybody who heard them, until last Friday evening when I thought I finally got a convincing answer at The Daily Star-DHL Business Awards Ceremony. I think

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

The quality that we need to acquire is to accept the people of the country as the arbiter of our destiny. In times of strains and stresses their role is appropriately valued but in normal times they are sidelined. That after the elections they are largely forgotten is all too known. Such fluctuating valuation of the public's profile will have to go.

it was Nitun Kundu of Otobi Limited, the Enterprise of the Year award winner who said, 'With our 13 core people there is market for any good enterprise.' This I thought was a profound statement of our prospects.

Utilising this huge market potential is basically a function of politics. More so in our country where political victimisation of the economy has been rampant, to say nothing of the fragility of our economic institutions. There are some 17 countries in the world with low-to-moderate intensity civil wars going on in them. The advocate of the devil would say their economies are running away; so what if our politics is anarchic, it could still go on grinding. In fact, we have heard it said in disgust over continuing stretch of political standoffs that we have attained food self-sufficiency in spite of the poor quality

politics in the country. Actually we need to cultivate a zero level tolerance of troubled politics refusing to countenance it in any form or shape. Indeed, had it not been for it, the country would have grown so much more by now.

The problem is perhaps that we are not action-oriented. In the past we were victims of theories that would not work in our country. And now when innovative ideas are flowing all around, the output even outstripping that which one notices in the advanced world, our governments seldom try them out. So, while action research is heard of, action itself is missing.

There have been talks of consultation with economists and planners outside the government and the business, civil society and professional group leaders, but hardly has the process been sustained.

Perhaps they should now be heard in parliamentary committees or taken onboard the official committees in an advisory role that could impact favourably on the implementation of projects. This approach has the potential to cut across party lines as well.

Nationalism is a given endowment. It has a clear-cut geographical configuration to it with a set of ethos and distinct marks of identity to characterise it. It is as much historical as it is anthropological and genetic and hence it is a fixed, settled fact of life that eminently deserves to be incontrovertible. The good sign is that it is no longer debated as fiercely as before but again this discourse has been followed by self-defeating attributions to pro- and anti-Liberation forces.

Patriotism ought to be the hand-

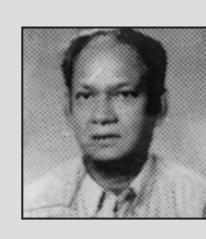
maiden of nationalism but sometimes it may be at a discount depending on how certain people behave. When Bangladeshi wage earners abroad having remitted foreign currency to the country, exceeding what we receive as foreign aid or RMG sector export earnings arrive in the country, they deserve to be treated well. Yet at the airport it is the exact opposite that happens. The overseas Bangladeshi remitters and NRB investors evincing keen interest in the country's development reflect patriotism but it is unpatriotic on the part of those who do not make them feel cared for. The instances of our unpatriotic behaviour can be multiplied.

The second quality that we need to acquire is to accept the people of the country as the arbiter of our destiny. In times of strains and stresses their role is appropriately valued but in normal times they are sidelined. That after the elections they are largely forgotten is all too known. Such fluctuating valuation of the public's profile will have to go.

After the results of the last general election were announced we pinned hope on some positive competition to ensue between the BNP and the AL to win the hearts of the people. This expectation remains unmet.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

Despair over ME peace process



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE PEACE PROCESS launched by the US several years ago appears to have reached the dead end. Another US administration or another set of circumstances have to arise in order that we may discern the light at the end of the tunnel.

What has gone wrong with the Peace Process? Nearly ten years ago the Peace Process was very seriously launched in Oslo, the capital of Norway, following intense secret negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. A framework was set for a five-year period for the completion of the peace negotiations and the signing of a peace accord. The main actors of the Peace Process, President Bill Clinton of the US, Chairman Yasir Arafat of Palestine, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel were totally committed to a successful conclusion of the negotiations.

During the eight-year of presidency of Bill Clinton, there were some roadblocks. The Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin was murdered in Israel by Israeli terrorist. Israel elected Benjamin

Netanyahu, to succeed him. He did not appear to have the same degree of commitment to the successful conclusion of the Peace Process as his predecessor. Israel went back to its bad old days of continuously stalling the Peace Process. Mercifully the Israeli population, thirsty for peace, elected a new Prime Minister Ehud Barak. He was an ardent disciple of murdered Prime Minister Rabin. More important he was elected on a peace ticket. He vowed to sign a peace agreement with Palestine.

In the more than half a century of Palestine-Israel conflict the second term of Clinton presidency witnessed a near signing of the peace accord between Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and Israeli leader Ehud Barak. The differences were narrowed down to what has always been the heart of the problem -- Jerusalem. President Bill Clinton

threw himself totally to find a solution to the conflict. Yet Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Barak of Israel appeared to hit the granite of Jerusalem. If we look at the public posture of Israel, she claims Jerusalem as her eternal capital. For Arafat it is unthinkable to give up claim on Jerusalem even if it is only one part. Jerusalem is the first Qibla of Islam and more than a billion Muslims hold Jerusalem very dear to their hearts.

The fact of the matter is that neither of the two leaders could rise above their partisan considerations and President Clinton found his eight years of labour wasted. Ehud Barak went before his voters and as he had failed to deliver on peace promises to his people, he was soundly defeated.

He has been replaced by that crusty old general Ariel Sharon. He has not promised peace to his

people but has rather expressed his determination to wage war against the entire Palestinian people. He has promised security to his people. Yet, the climate of hatred he has generated throughout the area, the Peace Process has been blown away.

President Bill Clinton has been replaced by the Republican George W. Bush. He was elected President in controversial circumstances. He was in search of an issue to brighten his tarnished image. He thinks that with his war on terrorism he has such an issue. Following the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September last, the US public has undergone such a trauma that they have backed up President Bush whole heartedly. How long this situation is going to last is very hard to predict.

Meanwhile the Peace Process between Palestine and Israel has

gone to the back burner. Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon has visited the White House four times in one year, whereas Arafat is yet to meet President Bush. The antipathy of Bush towards Arafat appears to be pronounced. During his latest trip to Washington, Sharon has made the extraordinary demand from Bush that Arafat should be eliminated. Indeed he has publicly regretted that he did not kill Arafat in 1982 in Beirut. I recall the incident vividly. I was invited to visit the PLO headquarters in Damascus as the Acting Secretary General of the OIC in order to show our solidarity with our Palestinian brethren. There used to be daily bombing raids by Israel of Lebanon where Palestinian fighters were trapped along with Yasir Arafat.

A pall of gloom has descended on the Middle East. The international community has wrestled for many decades in order to find a solution to this conflict. After many attempts it became evident that the only superpower, with her strong leverage on Israel could find a solution to this conflict. President Bill Clinton tried valiantly but failed because the leaders of the region let the opportunity slip. Once again the US has tilted towards Israel and therefore it would be foolish to imagine that a solution could be found in the short run.

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

OPINION

AL- BNP consensus and NAM apartment grab

OMAR KHASRU

THE ruling quartet, led by the indubitable BNP, is fiercely backpedaling, according to the reports published in The Daily Star and other news dailies, on a variety of issues, including a few election pledges. Some of these, continuing with the contract for under the sea submarine cable deal for example, mentioned in the recently published White Paper, highlighting Awami League corruption and misrule, are breathtaking instances of duplicity and rank hypocrisy. The BNP hokey-pokey, hackneyed lame excuses and dubious equivocation, trying to justify this recanting and about-face is an attempt, similar to the myriad actions of the previous regime, of underhand and incredulous acts that would cost the people many millions of excessive amount of money.

The two successive governments disavow, disown, disallow, disclaim, and blast and blemish everything that the predecessor did. Sheikh Hasina

and her gleeful gang of party hacks and henchmen, for example, repeated ad-infinitum and ad-nauseam as to how nothing good was done in the preceding twenty-one years, between the first rule and the second coming of Awami League. Except when they tried to do something controversial, slightly unpopular and somewhat unpalatable, such as granting transhipment and port facilities to India. They blamed BNP for getting the ball rolling and claimed, like innocent lambs, they were just continuing the process. BNP is using the same old banal trick to rationalize continuation of lame duck projects of the previous government, that are exorbitantly expensive, and with fraud, deceit and depravity written all over them. At the cost of the wellbeing of the people and the country, interests of whom they are pledge-bound to uphold.

There is cozy and comfy consensus between the two major parties when it suits them and when it comes to enhancing own privileges, perks and booties. The shameful and wretched harmony and desk-

thumping all party cheers to facilitate tax-free import of luxury vehicles, and access to exalted red passport for the members of the parliament are two such examples. It is difficult to imagine elected representatives so self-serving, self-absorbed and self-centered, with such scant concern for the wellbeing of the struggling masses anywhere else. The concept of conflict of interest is nonexistent. Our parliament representatives add on these bonus privileges for themselves with impunity and without any compunction.

The merry band of legislators is eyeing and planning to gobble up another opulent, extravagant, upscale, elegant and pricy privilege in not too distant future. And we the frustrated people, the helpless commoners and the indignant electorate will watch this contemptuous display of avarice and slum-dunk quick grab with contempt and disdain but nary a meaningful and tangible action dissent.

The previous government, incessantly beating its own drum, especially that of the leader, gar-

nered the next Nonalignment Movement (NAM) summit uncontested and tried to present this as a great achievement. One of the few good things the current regime did was to cancel this white elephant of a mainly dinner and recreational gathering of third world leaders. This earned the ruling alliance deserving praise and a few brownie points. Not much water has flowed down the Ganges due to Indian noncompliance with water sharing treaty, but many cores of hard earned money has been spent in constructing luxurious apartments for the NAM Conference guests.

The current government has now come up with this inane, economically irrational and arcane notion of allotting these apartments to parliament members. There was another display of desk thumping glee by the few legislators present in the Assembly. The legislators will add another feather to their caps with high opportunity cost for the nation.

It is not difficult to imagine that the opposition lawmakers would give wholehearted support to this proposal. The Finance Minister is globe

trotting in order to beg and borrow money from foreign governments and strident donor agencies such as IMF and the World Bank, and crying hoarse about the economic mismanagement of the previous government and the state of sheer shambleness that the economy is mired in. His cohorts and comrades are planning a great grab of the lavish NAM apartments, all located in prime real estate. This sort of incongruity, conflicting signal and great flat grab is obscene, unbending and unacceptable for a poor country like ours.

It can be said with some degree of certainty that these extravagant dwellings will represent the very best, most expensive and lavish housing of any lawmaker in the world. Some representatives in the US Congress sleep in their offices because after meeting the expenses of their family back home they cannot afford a loft in expensive Washington, D.C. But we do not have to go that far. Look at our next door neighbour, with long and distinguished democratic tradition. Do they even dream of living in comparable government spon-

sored, government financed and highly subsidized housing in New Delhi? This would be beyond their comprehension and imagination.

I am praying and hoping against hope that our legislators will set aside their collective greed and delusions of grandeur for a while, come to their senses, and act rationally and selflessly for a change, and show just a bit of love and care for the country. Let our representative shelf the ill-conceived notion of grabbing the NAM apartments at Gulshan, Banani and Manik Mia Avenue. Instead, let the government sell these to the highest bidders, especially, perhaps even exclusively, to foreign companies or others, who will pay only in foreign currency. This will fill the empty government coffers to an extent and mitigate the dire strait of foreign currency reserve to some extent. The members of parliament will gain a semblance of much needed trust and respect and overcome the sordid image the general public has of them.

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Part of the commitment

Look at The Daily Star's front page of Friday and Saturday (8 and 9 February 2002). What you see is more than 50 per cent of the page devoted to advertisements.

Looks like you are committed to the "People's Right to Know-- the advertisements"

Masood ur Rahman MBA

Dhaka, Bangladesh

"Detritus of marriage and love"

The article "Detritus of marriage and love" (February 8) by Mohammad Badru Ahsan is a very sentimental piece of literary composition tinged with emotions and romanticism. It seems it's a real life incidence and having practical implications in the author's life. I have read the article in

one go and verbatim and was highly moved by the heartstrings of the lady. I also felt a pang of sadness for the hapless deceased as well as the husband, who also lived a lonely life amidst kith and kin.

Overall, the article appealed to me tremendously for its emotional as well as its superb literary contents.

Kazi Asif Ahmed

Washington DC, USA

Saifur Rahman and our economy

Our condescending Finance Minister Saifur Rahman is spending too much time lecturing about the broken economy inherited from the Awami League government.

I wish to bring to the notice of the

authorities and of the private operators such as Nitol, Nirapod and Premium bus services that they start a bus service from Dhanmondi No 2 via Mohakhali.

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