

Bangladeshi seafarers Going, going, gone...

ZAKI AHAD

FOR at least a century, Bangladeshi seafarers had an unparalleled reputation of being the most obedient, hardworking and sought-after seamen in the world. The best ship owners, Clan, Hansa and Bank Line, to name a few, employed exclusively Bangladeshi seafarers. This rapport passed on from generation to generation. Those seafarers took pride in their profession and passed on their skills from one generation to the next.

Then the question comes, why this article and what went wrong, when did it start going wrong and what is wrong today?

The answer is not simple. Putting it in very simple terms, we were not able to keep pace with the rest. The rest would mean India, the Philippines and even Myanmar. Why we could not keep in pace? Simple answer is we did not educate ourselves. When did education start going downhill, sometime after our liberation? Why the downward trend? Let the politicians answer that. The current literacy figure may sound comforting in the Annual Development report but let me assure you it is the quantity and not the quality that is being referred to.

How much education does a 'Jahazi' require? Let me tell you that at this time, it is quite significant. The only International Maritime Convention which Bangladesh accepted (not acceded) is known as Standard of Training, Certification and Watch-keeping Convention of 1978 as amended in 1995. This convention requires a level of competence-based performance rather than a bookish knowledge-based one. In other words, performance became the main criterion and seafarers are required to prove, demonstrate and perform at a required level specified which should be compatible to their rank. All very well said, but what is wrong?

Until a few years back we did not realize that training centres were required to train ratings. A seaman training centre was set up at government initiative in Chittagong. The aim was good, possibly so was the importance and the facility. What is wrong is the capacity, which should be significantly increased. Most of the seafarers who are in their late forties or early fifties have no formal basic education and training or, to put it in other words, they cannot be trained so easily. Those fortunate enough to avail themselves of this seaman's training centre normal curriculum are indeed fortunate as

most of the ratings have basic education up to S.S.C. This particular breed of seamen should be able to meet the challenges of the industry, but then who will find jobs for them in the highly competitive world market? A few reputed manning/crewing agents in this country is not enough. The government needs to explore the market, provide schemes to train crew to cater to the ever changing spheres of seafarers' employment market and definitely implement in action rather than prepare five-year plans, which are basically paper tigers. Seafarers' employment plays a significant part in the economies of many nations. The Philippines is an excellent example. Not surprisingly, the Philippines has a significant number of private institutions to train seamen to cater to the world market. If there is one thing we do not lack, it is our population. How can we make this population productive?

Definitely, by producing skilled manpower for the international market. Seafaring industry is one of the most prospective sites. We have sufficient instructors, i.e. skilled officers in the mercantile marine sector. Possibly due to fund constraints, the government cannot exploit their merit, but the private sector can. It is time that the government allows the private sector to participate in training ratings for the international market because as mentioned above, one seaman's training centre is not enough.

Another two institutes in the public sector exist. These belong to I.W.T.A and cater for its requirement. Nevertheless, they are well equipped to prepare seafarers for ocean going trade and of international standard. One of these, known as the Deck Personnel Training Centre at Narayanjanj is possibly better equipped than most institutions in South Asia who are producing officers, let alone ratings. Some ratings after completion of training there find themselves suitable for employment in coastal ships abroad. All this at their own initiative. I have been told that the expenditure incurred from public coffers for training each of these seamen is over one hundred thousand taka. The students themselves pay nothing and their employment is not guaranteed by B.I.W.T.A. Why waste so much on so few? Give it to the private sector but at the same time monitor the training. Give them a Seaman's Book on passing out and let them prove their merit and find their own employment. In some institutes in neighbouring states, officers are produced with far less

training. What is lacking for these seafarers is the utter ignorance of the government about the industry and its lack of will to find placement for them in the world market. The Philippines did it. India is doing it all the time, Myanmar is not far behind, what about us?

Let us now look at the prime maritime institution of the country. Bangladesh Mercantile Marine Academy had the reputation of being one of the finest in the world. It is also a branch of the World Maritime University. Possibly no other institution in the region is better equipped for the advancement of the seafaring profession. How is it faring now? In the years 1977 and 1978 there was such a great

administration of our country. Who is paying the price for this now? The entire mercantile marine officers' community of this country. Personally I have nothing against these officers who intruded into a rather elite community and proved their competence to become officers of various grades, but was an equal opportunity provided to all those who had the required qualification in the country? Why was a double standard followed?

The other maritime institute of the country that deserves mention is the Marine Fisheries Academy. This was designed to cater to the need of the fishing fleet of the nation. Some of the cadets who passed out of this institution later on switched over to

where discipline for the cadets, administrative support staff and instructors are rigid and defined to the extent that everyone is accountable.

Cadets who have passed out from the Marine Academy now find it hard to get a job. During the late seventies if I remember correctly, I hardly had any time with my family before I was appointed in Bangladesh Shipping Corporation. Joining the Academy at the time meant the job was not only assured, but a career was ensured. There was nothing that I paid for my tuition or boarding in the Academy. Now the guardians have to foot the bill and even after so much sacrifice and talent on part of their dependants

Human resources must be recognized as a potential and their skill should be exploited to the benefit of the nation.

Let me now discuss as to why the job opportunities for Bangladeshi seamen is on the decline. Bangladesh having accepted the STCW Convention required its seafarers to have some basic training before the implementation of the convention which was originally scheduled to come into force on 1st February this year and has now been extended by six months. The resources available to the two training institutions I believe was inadequate to prepare our seafarers to meet the requirements of the convention in time. A

Bangla and readily understood by all on board. When we buy ships from other countries, can we get all this done in Bangla or is it feasible? The practical option open is to learn English. The faster our seafarers adapt to this change, the better it is. If Chinese crew can do it, so can we.

The other problem that Bangladeshi seafarers are now facing is totally beyond the control of the seafarers themselves. The events of 11th September has made the access of our seafarers difficult if not impossible to some countries. Some countries have slapped a 15 days processing requirement on the entry visa and that too without any guarantee whether a visa would be finally granted or not. Crew changes on ships is a regular phenomenon and 15 days are not always available after to process documents once a requirement is let known to the manning agent. This is particularly so in cases of emergency like a crew has to be immediately replaced because of injury, family emergency etc. At least one country has gone to the extent that all crew on board require a valid visa before entry of the ship into its territorial water. That visa is possibly the most difficult visa for us to get. Even persons who have been to that country several times before are now being denied access after the eventful September incident. But why pick seafarers? There is no record of sabotage being committed by our seafarers on foreign soil. No shipowner would like to go through the extra headache of removing a seaman from his ship before sailing for particular state as because he cannot get a visa. If ships do have to call ports in such particular country, the only option left to the shipowners is to either employ a watchman or many watchmen to ensure that our crew without visa cannot land ashore. Who will pay for the watchman? The shipowner is not interested anymore. The job of a Bangladeshi is gone and in future he will ensure that Bangladeshis are not employed in that particular trade if not in that company.

The most vital reason for our losing in the international employment market is crew desertion or in other language 'jumping ships'. Bangladesh Merchant Shipping Ordinance of 1983 clearly dictates the punishment to deal with desertion of Bangladeshi seamen on board Bangladesh ships as well as foreign ships. Could anyone site an example where the full punishment was meted out to anyone who had deserted a vessel in a foreign port? I believe that laws are meant to be exercised and offenders should be deterred. If stringent punishment was handed over, overseas employer would have gained some confidence in our legal system. Lenient views taken by marine courts have in other words encouraged offenders to desert. I have heard of incidents where a crew had returned home after many years of

desertion and has again been employed on board in the same company. Many companies have altogether stopped employing Bangladeshis because of this problem.

What can we do for the future? Sorting out visa problem for seafarers could be a priority. Improving the standard of training could be another area. As our government resources are limited, private sector should be encouraged to ensure quality control over the training imparted. Strict monitoring should be exercised not only on private training institutions, but also on the public sector. At the same time stress should be paid to English language fluency, Computer literacy could make an impact in the job market. The Merchant Shipping Ordinance could be rewritten as the declining value of taka has made the impact of penalties worthless. As of now, the majority of Bangladeshi seafarers are employed by foreign shipowners, a shipping office could be maintained in Dhaka to avoid the trouble of going to Chittagong after every voyage to endorse the Seaman's Book. Similarly, consideration could be given to the facility of routine medical examination of seafarers in Dhaka. All incentives enjoyed by wage earners should be available to seafarers. Leaflets should be distributed to seafarers showing the advantage of foreign exchange remittance through proper channel.

The Department of Shipping of the government is a specialized body dedicated to maritime safety, marine environmental protection, regulating shipping laws concerning the seafarers and shipping as a whole. It is time we work hard to make this specialized body a truly effective one. Lack of manpower in the Department, coupled with lack of resources is gradually crippling it. Expertise in this particular sector can only be build up by seafarers who can use their professional knowledge together with their experience both at home and abroad to broaden the safety net. Recent disasters in inland waters of Bangladesh become news headlines, the hard facts are that even when effective inquiry is carried out, follow-up of recommendations if any are made, they stay in files for record only. When the next incident occurs, officials can say that we recommended so and so but due to lack of this and that, it could not be implemented. This cannot go on for ever. We have people who can develop plans to remedy the situation; what we lack is the will and resource to implement such plan. Bureaucratic red tapes and the lack of qualified people with sufficient knowledge to implement such plans can leave the condition stagnant for decades. The time to act is now.

Zaki Ahad is vice-principal in charge of the Dhaka campus of Bangladesh Maritime Training Institute.

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demand for cadets passing out of this Academy that they had to follow a short course (I am referring to the Nautical Cadets 13th and some of the 14th batch cadets). Even some time later the intake of the academy was increased from the then nominal figure of 22 cadets in the Nautical branch and 22 cadets in the engineering branch to more than double the number. Accommodation was adequate, training facilities were sufficient and the instructors though few were highly qualified. Presently this prime maritime training centre is in dire shortage of conducting pre-sea training for the cadets, let alone conducting post-sea courses. What happened after that? Our national flag carrier, Bangladesh Shipping Corporation started going downhill. Some private shipowners started operating ships but lack of expertise in the trade made their survival short. What also came with privately owned ships is that they started employing personnel as Cadets, bypassing well trained Marine Academy cadets. These cadets were mostly the dependents of the shipowners or their relatives or of some 'resourceful persons'. The result was that the overall standard of the Mercantile Marine Officers started going down. The reputation build up over the years by Academy cadets or officers was gradually being tarnished. Who was responsible for this? Definitely the maritime

mercantile marine trade and later on became officers in the merchant navy. Some of them did very well in their profession and went on to become Captains and Chief Engineer Officers in the merchant navy. My hats off to them.

Let us now see the plight of Bangladesh Mercantile Marine Academy. An advertisement recently published in a national daily sought instructors for the Academy. To the best of my knowledge, not a single application for the vacant posts were received even though the salary offered was more than thirty-four thousand taka per month, which you will agree is very high compared to the national standard. Let us first see why vacancies had in the first case been created. An easy, though inaccurate answer would be that Captains and Chief Engineers draw over taka two hundred and fifty thousand on an average per month in a foreign flag vessel. Even the steward who attends to these officers on ships would draw more salary per month than that offered by the Academy. The actual answer should be that the correct environment does not exist there for those patriotic senior officers who had agreed to draw a fraction of the wage they would otherwise earn at sea. An investigation into what I have stated may reveal the truth. How can we overcome this situation? Make the environment correct. Let it function like an academy

who graduate out of the academy every year, they stay idle at home for as long as a year. Why this plight?

To start with, local supply outweighs local demand, i.e. the number of Bangladesh flag ships have reduced to less than half. The main cause behind this reduction as I see it is the lack of foresightedness. Whereas the global trend in the seventies had shifted to full containerized ships we were purchasing dry cargo ships not designed to carry container and even up to the beginning of the nineties, we went upto the concept of buying multipurpose ships which are basically designed to carry dry cargo and limited amount of container. This meant that the port stay of the vessels were elongated and turnover per voyage was far less than the current market. Even today, in BSC there is only one fully cellular container ships. Let's see what India did. As early as late seventies they foresaw the future to the extent that they themselves were making their national flag carrier is one of the biggest in the world. Someone could argue that the Philippines is not a major ship owning nation but yet it is one of the main crewing nations. In this context, I would say that the government could take initiative to market its manning abilities instead of buying substandard ships.

bold and drastic step was taken by the government to allow private institutions to flourish. Three such institutes have since come into existence and by and large Bangladesh is prepared to meet the requirement of the convention in time. This was one positive side of the acceptance of the convention. Some smearing comments had recently been made in a national daily against such institutions. I cannot, without proof accept or decline such accusations but to be honest, such allegation can be made against government institutions as well. Whereas, they lack instructors in their basic function of training cadets and seamen, where will they have sufficient instructors to train officers and ratings who are already serving or have served many years at sea in ancillary courses? The advertisement in the national daily is a proof of their shortfall. The step by the government to allow the private sector was both bold and timely. When we talk of implementing the convention, we seem to forget that the ISM code or the International Safety Management Code for the Safe Operation of Ships and for Pollution Prevention comes into force internationally for all ocean going vessels on the 1st of July, 2002. This code requires a common language on board so that orders can be given in a clear and concise manner without any chance of being misunderstood in the interest of safety and pollution prevention. By and large, most foreign ships are now manned by multinational crew. The common language of the sea is English, like it or not. How good are we at that? If we for instance say that the common language of a Bangladesh flag ship is Bangla, then all the manuals, safety documents should be in

Sustainable development: Summits of action or rhetoric?

QUAMRUL ISLAM CHOWDHURY
back from New York

S HALL the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg be a moot action leading to a far-reaching global deal? Or shall it be another summit of rhetorics? If the third meeting of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom III) for the WSSD held in New York from March 25 to April 5, 2002 is any indication then the negotiators appear to be travelling along the wrong path of rhetoric. Most of the delegates were not adequately prepared for the previous three PrepComs. The result -- a most inconclusive third PrepCom. The negotiators were now informally consulting to draft elements of a political document and finalise it from May 24 to 26, just before the forthcoming fourth meeting at Bali, Indonesia from May 27 to June 7.

True, the Millennium Summit set the targets; Monterrey elicited the pledges. The major question now is whether Johannesburg will actually succeed in defining the programme of action to enhance the implementation of sustainable development goals. The purpose of PrepCom III was to consider the Chairman's Paper and address ways of

Southern negotiators should be well prepared if they want to help achieve sustainable development, especially in the developing countries of Asia-Pacific, Africa and Latin America. G-77, under the leadership of Venezuela, should play its strong role for protecting the interests of the developing countries. Bangladesh should also play its part within G77. Despite earlier setbacks there is still some ray of hope that Johannesburg will indeed be a summit of actions, as chair Dr. Emil put it, and not simply of words.

strengthening institutional frameworks for sustainable development, and to evaluate and define the future role and programmes of the Commission on Sustainable Development. It was also supposed to agree on the text of a document containing the results of the review, assessment, conclusions and recommendations for further action. These were to be transmitted to PrepCom IV in Bali for information. Delegates had hoped to produce some broadly agreed text. The PrepCom III achieved neither of the objectives and in the real sense failed to fulfil its mandate. The shortcomings and frustrations at this meeting were attributed to a number of factors, both internal and external, to the negotiating process, including weak political commitment, gaps in institutional memory, poor organization of the PrepCom's work, and a lack of

clarity on how the overall process should have been managed to achieve the PrepCom's goals.

The problems perceived at the Third PrepCom underline the desperate need to muster high-level political support necessary to ensure Johannesburg's success. Many felt that logistical constraints and lack of direction provided an opportunity for certain delegations to circumvent decisions and principles agreed to in Rio, while pushing for a language that would make existing multilateral environmental agreements subservient to WTO rules. However, a handful of delegates with experience from the Rio process felt that it was too early to pass judgment on the fate of the WSSD, arguing that what transpired during PrepCom III is an inevitable stage in any multilateral negotiating process, including the Rio preparatory process.

WSSD Secretary-General Nitin Desai stated in a press conference at the close of the third PrepCom, "The test of a negotiation is not simply reaching agreement, but whether the agreement meets the challenge of the conference." For this kind of a process to succeed, it is essential that three aspects of the negotiation are clearly defined -- process, content and direction. These aspects hinge on the existence, or lack of, political will and engagement.

Most of the delegations, especially those in the G-77/China, were not fully prepared for the third PrepCom. The Group's preparatory meeting in the intersessional period was held concurrent to the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey the week before PrepCom III. This meant that key negotiators were absent and their late arrival from Monterrey or capitals subsequently delayed the elaboration of a Group position in New York. This poor preparation was not confined only to the developing country groups. Some suggested that the EU too was experiencing some problems in trying to coordinate a group position, as was

the US that repeatedly called for deferment of discussion to allow for more time to prepare.

One should not blame the Chair Dr. Emil Selim for the lackluster performance of the session, as some were inclined to do. Then of course leadership requires a strong Chair and Bureau, and an effective Secretariat, backed by political engagement at both the UN and national government levels. Some preferred higher visibility of the Secretary-General of the WSSD in this process. Some felt that his presence would have served to boost the morale of the delegations.

The time available for the third PrepCom was also insufficient. The entire first week was devoted to hearing views and receiving comments from delegations on the Chairman's Paper. This was a time-consuming task, which was not made any easier by the fact that meetings had to end at 6:00 pm, due to UN budgetary constraints. Then came another shock. When the text was finally released at the start of the second week, it took the form of a compilation text five times larger than the original Chairman's Paper. This text was criticized by many participants as being unwieldy and difficult to negotiate. Some participants questioned why submissions were not requested during the intersessional period for timely compilation.

According to the mandate given by the General Assembly, the session was required to prepare a concise and focused document that would call for global partnership to achieve the goals of sustainable development, and for an integrated and strategically focused approach to Agenda 21 implementation. Some of the delegates seemed unclear regarding the substance of a document that would ensure deliverables.

Another drawback was the reversion by delegations to tired negotiation text. The US, with Canada, Australia and Saudi Arabia, attempted to re-open old debates, a tactic tantamount to renegotiating

aspects of Agenda 21. The G-77/China's focus was on previously agreed text on ODA and new mechanisms. Another shortcoming was the failure to address how new actions would be implemented, or how proposed actions would actually result in sustainable development. Repeated attempts were made to use language from Monterrey and Doha and even Agenda 21 rather than new formulations that better address the issues of sustainable development implementation. This clearly fuelled frustration, as delegates questioned the added value of the WSSD, and whether world leaders were being invited to a Summit to re-adopt previous agreements.

The developing countries failed to lead the process. Delegations from the developed countries were well prepared, more articulated and determined in the third PrepCom. Discussions on two categories of outcomes were brought to the fore -- Type 1, which are multilaterally negotiated and agreed outcomes, and Type 2, which would involve a series of voluntary, non-negotiated implementation partnerships and commitments. Many developing countries remain skeptical of the Type 2 outcomes, arguing that they might detract from political commitments.

The whole negotiation process came under big question mark. Events at PrepCom III led to the conclusion that the current situation resulted from lack of clarity on the content, direction and process of the negotiations. Therefore, the biggest challenge facing PrepCom IV is how to move the debate from its focus on policy formulation and give more guidance to concrete implementation.

As delegates are off for Bali to have their informal consultations, one should remind the southern negotiators that they should be well prepared for this final PrepCom, if they want to help achieve sustainable development, especially in the developing countries of Asia-Pacific, Africa and Latin America. G-77, under the leadership of Venezuela, should play its strong role for protecting the interests of the developing countries. Bangladesh should also play its part within G77. Despite the setbacks of PrepCom III, there is still some ray of hope that Johannesburg will indeed be a summit of actions, as chair Dr. Emil put it, and not simply of words.

Quamrul Islam Chowdhury is Chairman, Forum of Environment Journalists of Bangladesh.