

Trade imbalance with India

Follow-up on Delhi's assurances needed

THE Indo-Bangla trade talks have ended in New Delhi on a positive, even an upbeat note. To say that these have yielded a mere expression of intent, or reiteration of it, by India to try and reduce her whopping trade surplus with Bangladesh would be taking a narrow view of the outcome. It appears that a sense of urgency is being reflected by New Delhi to come to grips with the yawning trade deficit facing Bangladesh that puts the latter's economy at a disadvantage.

This is evidenced by the time-bound approach taken by Indian commerce minister Kamal Nath to start resolving the problem in earnest. He has given assurances to Bangladesh commerce minister Altaf Hossain that 'necessary measures' would be taken by February to remove trade barriers that restrict Bangladesh's exports to the Indian market. The Indian minister has apparently set his ministry a target to make sure he did not come empty-handed to Dhaka in February when he is likely to visit Bangladesh capital at the invitation of his counterpart in Dhaka.

Hopefully, the time-frame is not rhetorical. What's crucial for better Indo-Bangladesh relations is that a right beginning be made, and a new direction or thrust be given towards achieving a balanced inter-penetration of markets between India and Bangladesh. If a process is truly set in motion to alleviate the trade imbalance with Bangladesh by February we would be more than happy. If Kamal Nath's assurances have been duly backed by a political will at the highest level of Indian leadership then the job is more than half done.

We agree that bilateral trade could be expanded from the present level of \$2 billion to \$5 billion in a couple of years' time in view of 'the potential that exists', but an increase in the volume of trade by itself wouldn't make much of a difference in the situation; indeed, it could lead to a self-defeating exponential growth in the imbalance unless Bangladesh's exports get a better deal, gain full access to the Indian markets.

The rigid import regime in India needs to be radically relaxed if more Bangladesh products are to enter her market. The earlier understanding on zero tariff access to Bangladesh goods coupled with the Indian minister's affirmation of commitment to the fundamental principles of MFN should leave us in an optimistic frame of mind that something tangible would be soon done to reduce India's huge trade gap with Bangladesh.

Vanishing species

Biodiversity put to graver risk

THE prosperity bonanza and mighty power-play are blind-folding us to the reality of the many ways in which the world around us is diminishing and eroding. A serious attrition of our flora and fauna is taking place without realising the magnitude of the danger it poses to the existence of mankind. This is an impression one gathers from the World Conservation Union's red-list of *threatened species* released recently. Aside from the countless numbers of animal and plant species we have lost to oblivion since the antiquity, 15,589 species face extinction today because of the destructive activities of mankind.

Grim as it is, even this piece of news isn't reflective of the true extent to which life around us is atrophying. For one thing, only a fraction of the known species has been assessed leaving out the whole lot of the rest, so that full picture of the damage is unavailable. For the other, less is known about marine species; suffice it to say though, there has been an unbridled exploitation of fish and aquatic resources. Extinction of plant life which must have been phenomenal already hasn't been globally assessed, far less addressed.

The disaster of breaking life chains is evidently man-made, and should therefore, have been avoided by human intervention, or more precisely, by policy interventions from the developed world, especially the United States. Overexploitation of natural resources, destruction of habitats, pollution, climate change and global warming are causing severe erosion to biodiversity, the mainspring of life in all forms. Even the greenhouse emission cutting standards set by the Kyoto protocol which the US has not signed up to, are not considered adequate to avert global warming and rising sea levels that could further threaten life in the planet.

The World Conservation Congress in Bangkok has brought together five thousand scientists, environmental activists and experts from 181 countries to debate the extinction crisis and draw up a conservation blueprint for the next four years. Let's not forget, some of the long-lost species have been recovered after concerted conservation campaigns.

The silent revolution in rural Bangladesh



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

IMPORTANT changes are taking place in rural Bangladesh. Several factors are creating positive conditions for women and girls and empowering them to play a more significant role within the emerging social matrix.

Civil society representatives involved in rural development activities have recently presented some interesting facts in different workshops. They have referred to the expansion of physical infrastructure in rural Bangladesh -- roads and bridges, rural electrification and the growth of marketing outlets. They have pointed out how such factors are urbanising the rural landscape in terms of opportunities.

Options of earning livelihood are also undergoing changes and expanding in terms of scope -- particularly in the non-farm sector. Apparently, this has been facilitated to a large extent by increase in remittances received from abroad. Petty savings of expatriate Bangladeshis working in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia and in parts of Europe have enabled many marginalised rural family units to get a fresh lease of life. This is reflected in better housing and the steady growth not only in the number of small shops

but also in the variety of services that these shops are dealing in throughout the rural landscape. Now there are more small enterprises in the villages. These include petty trading, tailoring, embroidery work, handicrafts based on reeds, cane and bamboo. There has also been a steady increase in the number of rickshaws and in rickshaw-pullers in the rural services sector. This has been facilitated by a growing network of rural feeder roads.

beginning to acquire their own identities by taking advantage of new opportunities.

Rural Bangladesh has traditionally been very conservative and the central role of women have over the years been restricted to a life cycle of early marriage, motherhood (most often in the teens) and need for drastic adjustment with husbands (who are usually about eight to twelve years older) and in-laws. DFID research in Bangladesh has

Women in Bangladesh, particularly those living in small mofussil towns and in villages have always worked very hard. However, till now, most of this labour was unpaid. Surveys carried out recently demonstrate that there has been a drastic change.

A growing number of women -- both rural and urban -- have undertaken paid work, particularly occupations outside their homes. Such activity has in turn increased

clear from the study. This growth was not restricted only to the urban sector. It was also evident that there was substantial rural to urban migration of rural women looking for formal employment with a regular wage and more secure workers' rights. In addition, sociologists in separate studies also concluded that this growth of association of women in the external work force in a largely Muslim country is creating a more

ing women to seek work as domestic labour or even as common labour associated with earthworks or food for work. This is a basic change in survival strategy. It is a big step forward.

Some conservative and fundamentalist elements have at times been critical of such exposed work for women and have claimed that it increases their vulnerabilities. Results have, however, demonstrated that such a view becomes inconsequential given the positives that flow out from such an involvement. It provides the women with necessary self-confidence and enables them to inter-act more effectively within a male dominated traditional society. I believe that these changes in the social norm are effectively 're-negotiating' the extent to which the negative elements of culture applies in rural society.

The income derived from these opportunities is today going a long way in improving nutritional intake and ensuring health care for children in poor families. Their participation in the external environment is also opening doors and windows and giving them their own voice. It is enhancing their ability to initiate required activities like family planning, to effect late marriages for their daughters and facilitate the education of their children (irrespective of gender) at least till primary or junior secondary levels. These factors are acting as catalysts not only towards their personal well-being but also for their families. This is generating hope for the erosion of poverty in the rural economy.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

According to the BGMEA, the RMG sector alone employs nearly two million people of whom 80 per cent are women. Significant numbers, estimated at around four million are also working openly in the fields as agricultural labour, particularly in the labour intensive sector of horticultural crops. In rural areas, growing awareness of dignity of labour is also encouraging women to seek work as domestic labour or even as common labour associated with earthworks or food for work.

Expansion of micro-credit has also created other small enterprises. These small units include poultry farming, pisci-culture, agro-processing, handicrafts and dairy farming. Many women have also availed of such credit to buy mobile phones and set up mini-telecommunication centres in villages. This has enabled expatriate Bangladeshis to access to their relatives back home (without telephone connections). Such a facility is particularly useful during family emergencies. This has been repeatedly demonstrated during the recent floods.

One sector of rural society has been particularly influenced by these gradual changes. Girls, specially women, are slowly

indicated that restrictions on social inter-function are also clearly evident in female-headed households, whether de jure (widowed, divorced or abandoned) or de facto (where the man of the house is absent from the home for periods of time). Such a situation has, quite understandably, led to women in rural Bangladesh society struggling to achieve authority, status and access to opportunities. It is this aspect which is slowly changing, and that too for the better. There is a silent revolution taking place in the rural heartland of Bangladesh.

The changes that rural women are bringing across in the economic front, as human capital, is re-writing the socio-cultural dimension.

their spending power and their ability to exert more influence within their households, specially in decision making. The emergence of garment and other factory work along with professional jobs like health workers and NGO workers have facilitated this process.

A study undertaken by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in 2003 revealed that the participation of women in the employed labour force has been increasing in absolute and relative terms. The female share of increase in the labour force was 23 per cent between 1983-84 and 1989. It rose to 48 per cent between 1989 and 1995-96 and rose again to 72 per cent between 1995-96 and 1999-2000.

Two important facts were also

secular approach to women's lives.

Today, women are active in all the three main sources of economic growth in this country -- ready made garments, crop production and informal agro-processing related to poultry farming, dairy farming, pisci-culture and the production of various kinds of conserved food items like achar, morobba and dried sweets. According to the BGMEA, the RMG sector alone employs nearly two million people of whom 80 per cent are women. Significant numbers, estimated at around four million are also working openly in the fields as agricultural labour, particularly in the labour intensive sector of horticultural crops.

In rural areas, growing awareness of dignity of labour is also encourag-

Saffron humbug



M.J. AKBAR

IT all depends of course on what you mean by ordinary and extraordinary. The dictionary definition of "ordinary" is "expected." In that sense, the Uma Bharti outburst at the BJP meeting of plenipotentiaries and high officials last Wednesday was ordinary.

Uma Bharti is a saffron-humbug power-addict who has climbed the greasier part of the BJP ladder by a careful use of petulance and virulence. Her petulance is reserved for her Hindutva colleagues. Her virulence is concentrated on Muslims. Even her saffron is humbug, for she is as far from renunciation as anyone could possibly be. Flaunting it as a uniform cannot disguise the fact that her addiction to power is pathetic.

Her tantrums are an instance of acute withdrawal syndrome after she was lured out of the chief minister's chair in Madhya Pradesh by a relieved BJP high command since her quirky behaviour was guaranteed to destroy the party. A quick search on the net throws up this definition for Causes and Symptoms: "Acute withdrawal syndrome begins within hours of abstinence, and includes a full range of physical and psychological symptoms. More long-term, or sub-acute, withdrawal symptoms, such as intense drug craving, may occur weeks or months after detoxifica-

tion has taken place." Substitute the word "drug" for "power" and you have an accurate diagnosis of Uma Bharti's malaise.

She was lulled in the first phase of detoxification by visions of flag-waving heroism, and since intellect is not her primary asset she thought she was headed straight for the history books. But she is clever, and when the patriotic jingles petered out into nothing, realised what had happened. She has re-crafted

was a prim desk at the head of class at which the triumvirate were assembled to reinforce the mood of judgment. Vajpayee looked like a chairman of the board deeply reluctant to face facts that were smirking at him. He kept his head generally down. Jaswant Singh, to the left of Advani, had the impenetrable uncertainty of a back-up enforcer without a Plan B in any of his multifarious pockets. Advani, centre stage, had the distinct

not hold herself or her club of true believers responsible for the debacle of the party. As she has often told us in her confidence, she holds Vajpayee and Advani responsible, for they sold out the Ram temple in order to stay in power. Instead of hearing a reprimand, she would have loved to reverse the roles. That is why she stomped off in a holy rage.

What I found extraordinary is that Advani should have opted to rebuke his assembled functionaries in front

the rickshaw union in his constituency when, to his surprise, he won the election of 1999 and, to his total shock, rose quickly to become cabinet minister. Today he leads the nation from a multi-crore farm-house.

It is possible that Advani summoned the cameras in order to reach the party cadre. He did make the point that he had no answers when the cadre queried him about the sordid name-calling that has

She has chosen to become the voice of a strong section in the Hindutva family that believes that Vajpayee and Advani have together betrayed the Hindutva agenda. Her outburst is part of a pattern that has been building up for a while. Pramod Mahajan was only the stalking horse. The Ram temple is only one point on the agenda. The larger objective is to refashion India into a Hindu state in which the minorities become second-class citizens. Truth to tell, there is enough evidence to suggest that Vajpayee, Advani, and Jaswant Singh have been trying to steer, as discreetly as they can, the party away from Muslim-hatred. They were tolerated by the vitriol-sprayers as long as they kept the party in power. With defeat, the claws are out.

Advani will do his best to prevent further stress on the frayed tensile strength of the BJP, but a very harsh truth contains the difference between 1984 and 2004. After the demolition of the 1984 elections, in which the BJP got only two seats in the Lok Sabha, Advani emerged as the hope for the future, particularly of its hardliners. Today, they see him as the past, and as part of the betrayal. For Uma Bharti and the core base, he is yesterday's man in the struggle for the future.

Who is the future? It is a law of party politics in a democracy that the pivot of a rebellion never -- well, almost never -- becomes the successor. If the rebellion succeeds, the succession goes to the silent man in the wings, who has remained silent in order to play the healer.

As you enjoy, or cringe at the cacophony let loose by Uma Bharti and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, remember one thing. The silence of Narendra Modi is more eloquent than the hysteria of Uma Bharti.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

It is a law of party politics in a democracy that the pivot of a rebellion never -- well, almost never -- becomes the successor. If the rebellion succeeds, the succession goes to the silent man in the wings, who has remained silent in order to play the healer. As you enjoy, or cringe at the cacophony let loose by Uma Bharti and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, remember one thing. The silence of Narendra Modi is more eloquent than the hysteria of Uma Bharti.

herself as a victim, adding pious self-justification to the bleeding resentment-anger against the two men who have run the party for the last two decades, Lal Krishna Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee. Her periodic trips to the Himalayas might be considered the perfect metaphor for the ultimate withdrawal symptom.

So that takes care of the ordinary element in the low drama.

What I found extraordinary was a particular decision by Advani.

That the BJP president should want to chastise the upper echelons of his flock is unexceptionable. That he should do so in a setting reminiscent of a classroom is entirely appropriate, for the much-vaunted Generation Next has been behaving like delinquent school-children ever since the lollipops of Delhi were snatched away from them. The party office on the day in question looked like a room in a school for habitual offenders. There

manner of a tired war-horse only one stage away from despair. He should have kept a Malacca cane in his hand. Instead he merely lashed out with his tongue. The Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva of the BJP did not seem a very confident lot.

In front of them the party gods seemed like Indra and his fellow deities just after they had been defeated and driven out of *savargavas* by the demon Mahisha. These chaps still have not understood what happened during those halcyon days of India Rising and Vote Falling. The generals of this once-mighty divine host -- well, general secretaries at least if not quite generals -- were penitent white and handgloved looks. Gone were the resplendent colours they had once flaunted, along with chubby cheeks, and hungry television screens. The one exception to humble white was of course Uma Bharti, but then she was not in the least bit penitent. She does

of television cameras. All party presidents have to throw the rule book at offending deputies from time to time. Defeat is always a bad period for morale, and when you can't fight the opponent you naturally choose the next best option, which is fighting between yourselves. This is the therapy of despair.

So why did Advani invite television cameras to record an internal castigation? Does he believe that self-flagellation works only if accompanied by public humiliation?

This may well be true of the BJP's Generation Next. Six years ago, with the exception of an Arun Jaitley or a Pramod Mahajan, they were nobodies. Six years of unexpected power spoilt them. Some -- not all, I hasten to add -- have benefited deeply from the gravy train on which they got first class seats from the lottery of life. One cabinet minister, to provide an example, was leader of

become par for the course between faction leaders. The BJP claims that its traditions and ideology provide a glue of discipline that unites the party through good times and bad. Even if this was once true (say in the time of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya), it is not a myth. The factions have denuded the BJP of even a fraction of credibility. And Uma Bharti provided the Congress with a handsome Diwali gift.

There is a serious question that awaits an answer. Is the BJP in effect split? It was certainly fear of an open split that persuaded Advani to think again just after he ordered the expulsion of Uma Bharti from the party for six years, through a public statement by Jaswant Singh. Arun Jaitley is not a weasel. But he was given the weaselly task of amending that order to "further notice" from six years, and blaming the press for getting it wrong.

Uma Bharti's strength lies in the simple reality that she is not alone.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Bush, not Saddam

This is a response to the letter of Mr. Greg Smith published on November 10, 2004. Some of the comments of your letter have caught my attention as those seem to me very interesting. You said, "Americans and the rest of the world still view Bangladesh as third world phenomenon." I don't know whether Mr. Zafar Sobhan is irritated by your negative remark on Bangladesh but as a Bangladeshi I am still not irritated. Do you know why? The very third world phenomenon is actually supporting the US economy in many direct and indirect ways. Thanks to third world phenomenon, US companies are outsourcing jobs in third world countries for a long time to remain competitive in world business. Without the support of cheap labour resources of third world countries, US companies can never gain competitiveness in world market. As third world countries are weak in terms of politics, administrative and

judicial system, education and so on, business of natural resources in those countries become very smooth and easy for the US energy giants. US energy companies can easily corrupt and manipulate local political leaders and other influential persons of those third world countries and reap maximum profit (that is absolutely unthinkable in West European countries) disregarding ethical values and environmental issues. Many inexpensive garments products are exported from Bangladesh to the US each year.

I don't know about Zafar Sobhan's preference for Saddam Hossain but I think Bangladeshi people shall certainly not import Saddam Hossain if they ever need a dictator because Bangladeshi people are smarter than you. They shall rather import the person who you re-elected as the president of the US recently. Saddam Hossain is a dictator of a certain country but the re-elected president of the US is a

dictator of the whole world! Naming differently is not going to change the fact that Mr. Bush is a mass murderer just like Saddam Hossain is.

Md Mamunur Rashid
Utara, Dhaka

Theo Van Gogh

Norwegian filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, was killed in Amsterdam. It is assumed that he was killed by Islamic fanatics for one of his recent films, where he criticised the role of women in Islam. In retaliation, some of the anti-Islamic elements have burned an Islamic school in Amsterdam. I believe, when someone decides to attack a culture for their practices, it needs to be done in a sensible way.

It's sad that someone who was out to make a difference was killed and it wasn't right, but maybe Theo van Gogh could have gone about spreading his message in a different manner. And I don't have anything to say about the anti-Islamic

elements - because by burning a school they are already proved to be as fanatic as Islamic extremists.

Abu Md Fazole Arif

Windsor, ON, Canada

Goodbye Oxford of the East

On September 15, 2004, we were reading the letter, "Our Campus" by Moazzem Hossain in which he says a senior teacher once commented "This place is a goddamn zoo". Our fathers told us that Dhaka University was known as the Oxford of the East when they had graduated from the Political Science department in 1949. At that time, it was India. Our fathers told us that it was the time of Prof. Razzak and Sardar Fazlul Karim. At that time, they used to write with quill pens and they were interested in education. We lived abroad for many years. We came to visit Dhaka University in 1984, in the English department. We were visiting for six months, and we were

very disappointed so we told our parents that we were leaving. My (FM Chaudhury) Native American Indian friend Mary also came to visit the language institute. She mentioned that the man continuously passed rude and dirty comments. I also met a student (with huge glasses), and she told me that there was a lady who was wearing a long dress and singing songs by Tagore. The students said that the lady should not be singing Tagore songs because she must wear a sari. I found the student to be very biased and prejudiced. I walked away from her, and I still remember her. She would always talk about me and my friends in a humiliating way, she said, "I feel so bad for them." I don't think she had any respect for people. Instead, she looked at people with pity. We didn't need her pity. There were many people in the English department who thought like her. Dhaka University, and some of the teachers were very different from the people of 1949. I didn't find

any element of education or enlightenment. I left, for a long time. I said goodbye father, I do not believe in your ideas, and goodbye Oxford of the East. We crossed the Ganges and many other oceans. Why should I stay somewhere where there is no love or respect? FM Chaudhury, Suchitra A Sufia, M Shahi, M Chaud Gulshan 2, Dhaka

Stop taking a condescending attitude to US voters

First of all I would like to congratulate George Bush as the duly elected president of Bangladesh. And address Mr Sobhan's article. There was a free and open debate and Mr. Bush was chosen as the better candidate. Maybe Mr Kerry wasn't able to clarify his vision or maybe he didn't have the courage to speak his convictions, but either way Mr. Bush won fair and square. I think

Americans are a people of faith and more power to them. Every Empire which was worth anything has had a moral compass, starting with the Muslims' own beloved Ottoman Empire which is brought time and again up as an example of a prototypical Empire. But Americans do use their religion for deeds, rather than limiting themselves to words. The Americans, as far as I have seen try to improve the community around them with charitable works, food shelters and so forth. I don't see any reason to take a condescending attitude to religious voters in the states, who do more or less read about the issues and try to come to an informed decision, even if you don't agree with them on the issues such as abortion, gun control and security. In this case Mr Kerry was just not the man for them. To label them as 'blind', goes to show only the arrogance of the so-called 'educated elites'. I disagree with some readers

who would like to misconstrue voting for your moral or religious convictions with fundamentalism. We wouldn't be humans if we didn't. Lastly, I don't think Mr. Kerry would have been in Bangladesh's interests anyway. Maybe we should take a hard look around our surroundings in Bangladesh and come to the conclusion that our own leaders have failed us, due to their own faults, despite thirty years of independence. We have to take our own responsibility as an Independent Nation. What good have we done by denigrating the moral and social convictions of our own more or less pious people? We should remember religion, or faith is here to stay as a force for good or for bad in the world, maybe we should use it for good and in a socially conscious constructive way in Bangladesh's context. If the civil society wants it will happen, as it has in America. Khurru Siddique
One-mail