

Why \$3 billion buys zero political power

FARID BAKHT

NON-Resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) send back over \$3 billion every year. But they have no impact on the political direction of this country. A small European country can send one-hundredth of that amount, fund a few seminars and projects, and have more effective access to Ministers than any expatriate Bangladeshi group. The NRBs are being ignored and no one has asked them what they think, or what they need. We court the "donor" while we ignore our own.

During the tenure of this government, official remittances have increased by 60 per cent. We have the highest-ever foreign reserves. It would be churlish not to credit the government for some of the financial measures in encouraging this. The pity is that they were not listening ten years ago. In any case, this is part of a wider global trend. Remittances have been increasing in many Asian countries after 9/11.

Despite the rise in remittances, we have seen no new initiative or any change in economic strategy or direction. That's because all governments, past and present, look at remittances solely as a means to fund our import bill. The NRB is helping to keep the economy afloat. Those dollars are being used to fund not only essential items such as oil and materials. They are also being

wasted on luxury imports.

We could, for example, squeeze \$300 million and place it into a strategic fund for priority sectors such as agriculture or infrastructure. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking is absent.

Political parties

In one aspect, politicians do not ignore the NRB. They take their begging bowls to New York and London and promise the earth to the wealthier members of the NRB

tries. They fight over the same arcane issues, copying the same agenda from Dhaka. These issues are irrelevant to the Bangladeshis abroad.

Zero power

Unfortunately, the NRB is divided. NRBs are divided broadly into two groups, either "settlers" who permanently live abroad or "migrants" working on contracts for usually 5 years. Then you have the party factions. On top of that, the old

equation of power. A local business association can do more for him than distant, inconsistent NRBs. The NRB comes in December during the Christmas holidays or in July during his or her kids' summer break. They attend weddings, buy a bit of land, see their relatives, and fly back. They have no permanent presence. As long as they keep on sending money, they will be useful to their relatives and to the government.

The NRBs have many associations in their host countries. They do not count, however, as effective lobbying organisations. They do not direct any coherent message to political parties, government, or bureaucracy. It is dissipated in hundreds of requests from dozens of groups, all individually making their way to the Secretariat or the homes of politicians. Until they do so effectively and collectively, that little European country will wield far more influence using far less resources.

We could look to the Non-Resident Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos, and learn how they interact with their governments. We could apply similar methods.

NRB associations must talk to each other. They should agree on a few main points and work out how they can combine forces.

- They could start with a campaign to end harassment at airports.
- They could press for better treatment for migrants going abroad (training, reducing costs of travel and permits).
- They have no political representation. With anything up to 4 million abroad, NRBs should demand the right to vote. The extra electoral costs would be returned many times over by a more "engaged" NRB.
- They should also address the crucial issue of a "re-entry mechanism" for NRBs who want to come back and settle in Bangladesh. They need information, encouragement and incentives.

At the moment, some bureaucrats think a couple of exclusive housing plots; an often-empty booth at the airport and a tiny, under-resourced ministry is sufficient. They need to think again.

Future crisis?

What would happen if the annual flow of remittances halved? Perversely, NRB power would then increase because there would be frantic attempts to get the remittance flow back up again. There would be dialogue.

Crises do happen in migrant-receiving countries, such as Iraq/Kuwait in 1991 or SE Asia in 1997. They led to migrants being forcibly repatriated back and resulted in a sharp downturn in remittances. The Middle East is heading for a wider crisis with possible chaos in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States over the next few years.

The "permanent" settler NRBs in North America and Europe send several hundred million dollars/euros a year. They could easily double that. However, there is an immense risk they might turn their backs on investing "back home" if they see instability here.

Sentiment and emotion play a big role and they are not happy with the current state of affairs.

Some of these NRBs are entering the third generation. They must see something positive here. They must see some cooperation and feel they have a role. They need to see that the country is going somewhere, other than down. Or they will not "return" and will put their money elsewhere.

Fareed Bakht is a freelance contributor.

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community, especially before elections: "Please make a contribution to our party fund. We are going to win. Come and visit me in Dhaka and we will take care of you."

As we are about to enter an extended election season (lasting anything up to two years), we can expect to see "delegations" on road shows, appearing in restaurants and centres in migrant ghettos. Each political party, even the new ones, have their branches in those coun-

social differences have been "exported" too. Professionals are not keen to mix with the small entrepreneurs engaged in restaurants, leather factories, and retail stores. In fact, many resent the economic progress of these once-poor migrants.

So how does \$3 billion = zero? It is because money only equals power if one uses it effectively. Politicians are pragmatic people. They make their calculations. They understand the

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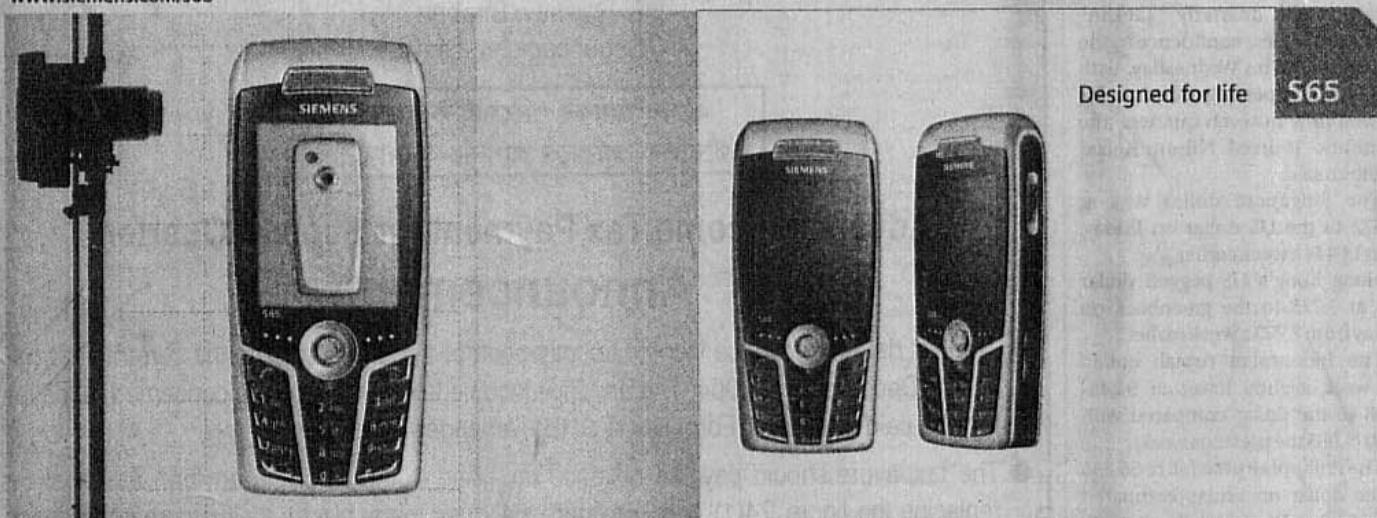
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