

Investment from France

One thing leads to another

THE statement made by the French foreign trade minister Francois Loos in Dhaka that his country plans to invest heavily in Bangladesh's energy, pharmaceuticals, water treatment, and infrastructure development sectors comes as very welcome news. These good tidings come not long after the expression of interest with respect to a \$2 billion investment was signed by the Tata group, and indicates that perhaps the tide is turning when it comes to foreign investment in Bangladesh.

There is no denying the fact that foreign investment in Bangladesh has been in the doldrums over the last few years. The macro-economic fundamentals and other economic indicators of the country remain strong, but it was other problems such as corruption and crime and poor infrastructure that created a poor business climate that kept foreign investors away.

The French foreign trade minister mentioned that a recent French trade delegation had expressed its satisfaction with the business climate here in Bangladesh, and it seems as though the business climate has been enhanced and investor confidence is at long last returning.

Right now Bangladesh is in serious need of foreign direct investment (FDI). Apart from the capital which is always welcome, foreign investors also bring much needed technological expertise and professionalism.

This has been a difficult year for Bangladesh. We have had floods and price hikes to contend with. But the good news as we approach year's end is that we seem to be turning the corner and things seem to be getting better with some major foreign investment proposals pouring in.

Good news begets more good news. One or two significant investments will go a long way towards improving the business climate and the general sense of well-being in the country, which will in turn attract more investment and lead to greater improvements.

Let's hope that this latest positive pronouncement is a harbinger of things to come.

The recruitment tale

Government must clear the air

We are heartened not only by the news of parliament standing committees sitting for business but also by the vibrancy manifested therein by exchanges between the committee members belonging to the government and the opposition parties. For instance, in one of the standing committees, the Standing Committee on Ministry of Establishment, an animated discourse took place centring around government recruitment to several thousand third and fourth-class posts.

The process of recruitment had come under severe criticism as this was apparently motivated by partisan considerations. Such was the lack of transparency and widespread allegations of nepotism, corruption and political interference, that the government was constrained to revoke several thousand appointments on 20 Nov only to rescind that order, however, under pressure from rank and file of the BNP, a week later.

The see-saw game gives rise to several questions in the public mind. In the first place, people felt that by annulling the appointments clouded by controversy, the government had done the right thing. If the PMO had felt constrained to revoke the appointment orders of so many applicants, there must have been compelling reasons to do so. That being the case, the revocation of the cancellation order itself is bound to create misgivings in the public mind.

Recruitment to government posts in whatever level, as must all recruitment everywhere be, transparent and open. The whole affair, in this case, of appointing-rescinding-revoking of the rescinding order has deepened doubts in the public mind about the credibility of government appointments, especially where huge numbers of vacancies are involved.

But the government didn't feel obliged, at any stage, to share information with the public about the extraordinary steps it took to cancel the original series of appointments (inexplicably, without having put a brake on it in good time!), and withdraw the revocation order subsequently that validated the earlier recruitment.

We would also like to share the general misgivings regarding the recruitment and suggest that the government not only come out with a clear-cut statement on the issue but also institute an inquiry into the entire episode.

Only democracy can work for Pakistan

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

DURING the Pakistani president's most recent visit to Washington and London, both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair effusively praised President Pervez Musharraf's courage in "standing firm against terrorism," his "vision for Enlightened Moderation in the Islamic World," and "his good stewardship of the Pakistan economy."

Yet Pakistani scholar Parvez Hoodbhoy has posed an enigmatic question: can Pakistan work? Such a question may be asked of countries standing on the brink of "failure" -- defined as a state unable to provide human security, justice, and basic necessities of life to its people. But can Pakistan be categorised as failing into such a group even if the most expansive definition of a "failed state" is taken into account?

Not if one is to give credence to the recent speech given by Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, and of his assertion of Pakistan's consistent economic growth at more than six percent per annum for the last several years, and of improved socio-economic indicators. But then Stephen Cohen, the highly credentialed and perhaps the leading American analyst on South Asia, has quoted Pakistanis who acknowledged Pakistan's failure as a state in the past, most notably in 1971 when East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

Cohen considered Pakistan as "a case study of negatives" -- a state seemingly incapable of establishing a normal political system, supporting radical Islamic Taliban and mounting Jihadi operations into India while its own economic and political systems were collapsing and internal religious and dramatic violence were rising and dramatically.

Hussain Haqqani sees Pakistan's weakness being embedded in disproportionate focus on ideology, military capability, and external alliance since the country's inception in 1947. Pakistan's progress has been faltering, not only in its inability to build up institutions supportive of democracy, but also in other areas compared to its nemesis India.

Pakistan's economy is the smallest among the nuclear powers. Pakistan suffers from massive urban unemployment, rural underemployment, illiteracy, and low per capita income. But perhaps Pakistan's greatest weakness stems from its inability to acquire a clear identity as a nation-state bereft of transnational Islamic ideology.

Stephen Cohen finds the "history and future of Pakistan being rooted in this duality, a complex relationship between Pakistan the state and Pakistan the nation -- mission bound to serve as a beacon for oppressed and backward Muslim communities elsewhere in the world." It is debatable whether

country being ruled by an establishment described by Stephen Cohen as a "moderate oligarchy" consisting of the military, civil service, judiciary, and landed aristocracy.

This oligarchy believes in implacable opposition to Indian pre-eminence, fight for the "liberation" of Kashmir, maintenance of nuclear weapons as a deterrence to Indian "designs" and as a status symbol, implicit belief in social Darwinism and consequent contempt for land reforms, closest possible relationship with the US despite anti-US sentiment among the general public, and use of Islam as the national unifier and as a force to deter Pashtoon, Sindhi, and Baluch sub-

tance in combating communism that could be more effectively fought by military-dominated autocracies than by democracies. Consequently the West encouraged military rule and in some cases kleptocracy in many third world countries as long as communism was denied political space in these underdeveloped societies. Pakistan was no exception.

When the intensity of the Cold War was on the wane, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan came as a God-sent blessing for General Zia ul-Haq, who based the Pakistani educational and legal system on Islamic law and formalised the state ideology as an official policy of

countries as propping up the failed autocratic governments in the affected countries, then the West should avoid pursuing double standards in its propagation of democratic values.

The US need for Pakistani cooperation in the war on terror notwithstanding, President Musharraf's decision to hold on to the post of Army Chief (though rubber stamped by the Parliament) and US silence on this important issue of disfiguration of democratic institutions may not be looked upon kindly by future generation of Pakistanis. Leon Haider (of the Cato Institute) who sees President Musharraf's joining the war on terror as not reflective of structural change in Pakistani policy holds the view of "Pakistan with its dictatorship, failed economy, and insecure nuclear weapons as a reluctant supporter of US goals at best and a potential long term problem at worst."

The point being driven at is that the West, particularly the US and Europe, should not have a myopic view of Pakistan where the army is apparently beating up the Al-Qaeda with some success, but should encourage secular pluralism instead of continued support to a military-reactionary combine. The emergence of a powerful Islamic fundamentalist group in Pakistan though discounted by Stephen Cohen for the present cannot be totally ruled out.

Cohen bases his argument on the premise that "regardless of what may be desirable the army will continue to set the limits of what is possible in Pakistan." If that were the case, then the guardians of global security and propagators of democratic values would be well advised to put a check on the "moderate oligarchy" and encourage Pakistan to follow the course of democratic pluralism. In the ultimate analysis, filtered judgement by many is always preferable to dictated conclusion by the few. For only democracy can make Pakistan work in the long run.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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Primary education: Are we on track?

MANZOOR AHMED

WILL the goal of quality primary education by 2015 for all children in Bangladesh be reached? The answer is no, if "business as usual" goes on, according to the Global Education for All (EFA) Monitoring Report of UNESCO released in November, 2004. If it is any comfort, the goal will also not be reached by our neighbours -- India, Pakistan and Nepal -- unless they can significantly hasten their rate of progress.

The EFA Monitoring Group at UNESCO attempted to assess the situation globally and rate countries according to their status and trend in EFA components of primary education, literacy and gender equality in education. Applying an education development index based on indicators in these areas, a global league table was prepared by the monitoring body. Bangladesh ranked 107th in a list of 127 countries, just behind India (106th) and ahead of Nepal (110th) and Pakistan (123rd).

In the annual Education Week (24-29 November) events, the authorities highlighted progress made and plans for the future in primary education. Indeed progress has been made in the last decade in increasing enrollment, reducing drop-out, and improving completion of primary schooling by children. A major achievement has been attaining gender equality in enrollment; in this respect we have done significantly better than our neighbours in South Asia (other than Sri Lanka and Maldives, which

had been ahead in basic education for a long time). Successful non-formal primary education programmes of NGOs in Bangladesh, implemented on a substantial scale, also have been internationally acclaimed and are cited as models of how the children left out or dropped out from the formal system can be reached.

The large picture in primary education is still of serious deprivation in access, on top of extremely

main national development effort in primary education. Although lauded as a sectorwide programme and supported by a pooling of assistance by major international and bilateral donors (with the Asian Development Bank as the lead agency), it does not cover or take into account the madrasas, non-formal primary education and institutions other than government and government-assisted primary schools. The two

ponderous way decision-making moves on both sides; and delays on the government's part in making key personnel choices and setting up a management structure. Some key actions that are conditions for activating donor funds release, such as an institutional analysis for initiating management reform and baseline studies of situation in schools, are still to be undertaken.

There are other concerns about how effective the implementation

How to make up for the already lost time, move away from the "business as usual," and inject a sense of urgency in the national primary education effort? The authorities concerned first need to recognise that there is a problem in this respect. One way of "jump-starting" the process is to cut through the bureaucratic maze and begin fast-track implementation of critical field level actions anticipated in the PEDP II programme, at least in a few upazilas in different parts of the country, while the overall implementation planning is elaborated.

CAMPE and others who could help

energise the implementation

effort, contribute to capacity building

and provide continuity in

professional capacity development

even after donor assistance ends and the external consultants gone.

The results of an implementa-

tion mechanism strictly confined

to national bureaucracy and the

external consultancy teams are

evident from the critical delay and

development and trial process, in which all national institutions and organisations who can contribute must be involved.

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Dr. Manzoor Ahmed is Director, Institute of Education and Development (IED), BRAC University.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Muftah Walli

Department of English

Jahangirnagar University

Rustle beside resonance

The year, after few days, will be drawn into the black hole of the cosmic era. The world will be adorned insouciantly or intricately to receive the New Year with open arms. With the thrilling resonance, most crucially, we will lose another year of our life, as if a dead leaf falling on ground bumping against gust, rustle beside resonance. Over the year, we've met many. We've triumphed, we've surrendered, we've shrugged off, and we've riveted on, we've furtively distored, we've implacably cast down, we've loved amorous,

we've reviled venomously, we've seen off with tear, we've received with rapture. But have we ever been ruminated on coming out of our vanity, stereotype, myopia, intoxication, greed? Have we ever thought out of our knowing something come true?

Rationalists are interrogated by themselves, every year in particular, if they've done anything irrespective of morality and let someone down. Individualistic fundamentalism, growing up with incongruous complacency, a shell, is scoffed; we must come out of. Soon after sore eyes will be dried out synchronising with the hustle and bustle. No matter a short life comes to an end, the smile inexhaustible world drowns on every morning. From where we come, where we go back, dark to light, light to dark. End of a year, end of a life, death, which are rustles beside

resonance.
Nasir Uddin Roney
Dept. Of Anthropology
University of Chittagong

Hope in despair

Despite the despair, a piece of tiny news on the DS on 7 Dec. brought a little hope and aspiration in my mind. Ravi Sharma, managing director and president of Alcatel South Asia, in talk to the DS tsaid, "It's high time for Bangladesh to get prepared for a stake in the global software industry before the country is connected with SEA-ME-WE4 network." He adds that Bangladesh can earn \$2 billion every year. I also agree with this statement. And urge for prompt steps. Govt. should at once take action to prepare a road map. Ravi rightly said that knowledge of computer among Bangladeshis and Indians are

almost same. If the engineers and software developers get proper facility they will not remain behind the other countries. These Engineers and students have already showed their skills abroad and in competitions. So why should they not be able to do so if they get proper facilities in their country? Now a large number of educated youths are seeking employment. If they do not get employed the frustration would engulf them and they would be derailed causing deterioration of law and order. Niharendra Nath Chowdhury
Palashbari, Gaibandha

To me poverty is a curse on anyone who falls victim of this situation.

Bangladesh was considered as "Sonar Bangla" in the past as she had plenty of fish, poultry, pulses, cereals, to feed her population. But after the liberation war in 1971 and because of natural calamities, she is engulfed with many problems and poor standard of living is one of the basic ones. She is mostly now dependent on foreign aids for survival. Eradicating poverty will of course take a long time but at least we can bring about a change and lessen burdens of poverty by taking a few measures, such as,

1) Reinforce the established law of two children for each family.
2) A family with more than two children will be deprived of any financial help from the government.
3) A family with more than two children will be deprived of special medical allowances from

the government.
4) There should be income generating programmes for the villagers.
5) There should be progressive tax system (for higher income groups) for increasing government funds.
6) Introducing strategic planning for helping distressed women to get employment and to eradicate illiteracy.
Above all, I feel, all the citizens should try whole heartedly to improve our standard of living and eradicate poverty from this country by all means.
Suraiya Zafar
One-mail

Leaders and followers
This is the season of work and also the season of parties! The leaders and followers of the political parties from the union level to the national

level, should become alert and careful so that they do not waste their time engaging themselves unnecessarily in the daytime talking over cell phones and land phones, and in the evening attending several important and unimportant dinner parties. The leaders and followers should be cautious so that their prime time for working for the growth of Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and increasing the National Income (NI) of Bangladesh are not robbed by the common businesspersons known as 'touts' and officials known as 'syphons'. The leaders and followers should take up appropriate policies and programmes, so that people at every union of Bangladesh and all the towns and cities including the capital city of Dhaka, would be able to earn and buy aubergines and green chillies at affordable price.
Golam Ashraf
DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka-1206