

Welcome 2005

Hope for good things to come

YESTERDAY, we said goodbye to 2004 with a heavy heart. Nature dealt us a severe blow, at the very end of 2004 perhaps to expose the utter helplessness of man against its fury which often strikes unannounced. Bangladesh was spared the wrath of the earthquake and the tsunami that it caused. While we count our blessings, we should spare our thoughts and prayers for those that perished and for those that have survived, but only just, and help them to come out of this terrible and distressing situation. It has reinforced our conviction that we have often articulated, of stronger cooperation regionally and internationally, in forecasting and tackling disasters.

At home we witnessed a continued hiatus between the government and ruling party. The parliament virtually remained a one-party show with the leading opposition party choosing to stay out of the parliament while the ruling coalition, even with the vast majority in the Jatiyo Sangshad, unwilling to give adequate time to the opposition in the Sangshad to ventilate their views.

The most significant political occurrence in Bangladesh was the grenade attack on the AL meeting, which cost 20 lives including that of a senior member of the AL. It was also disconcerting to witness more and more journalists being made the targets of killings and assaults.

There has been an apparent improvement in the law and order situation from what the country witnessed at the beginning of the year. But the manner and means of tackling the deteriorating law and order has given rise to moral, ethical, and legal questions that the government must address, sooner rather than later.

The New Year will usher in the quota-free regime that will expose our garment industry to stiff competition that will need planning and ingenuity to make us stand on our own feet.

A significant feature has been a rejuvenated interest of foreign investors in Bangladesh with Tata pledging to invest more than two billions apart from some Middle Eastern countries seeking avenues to invest. We hope the same vein continues in future.

The most welcome parting gift of 2004 was perhaps our win over India in cricket, first win on home soil.

Internationally the negative effects of the war on terror continue to impact the globe while regionally, we note with optimism the two big powers moving away from confrontation.

As we welcome the New Year we do so with hope and aspirations and not a little bit of trepidation on several counts.

While we pray that 2005 holds all the very best for us, our one and only wish would be to see an end to the confrontational politics in Bangladesh.

Steps to avoid launch disasters

Good move, but more needed to be done

THE new plan by the government to diversify passengers into different launch terminals of Dhaka based on their destinations certainly is a good move. Especially since the step is being taken prior to the next Eid-ul-Azha festival when number of homebound passengers is, quite expectedly, many times higher than normal period. This will definitely reduce the pressure on Sadarghat, the only terminal in Dhaka. We are also happy to learn that the move is going to be a permanent one, before the festival seasons every year. We hope the government will not waste any time to approve the plan drawn up by the department of shipping.

As it is, overcrowding at Sadarghat terminal, overloading launches with passengers and goods leading to capsizing, has been claiming hundreds of lives during festival seasons in recent times. Though the government had been announcing various measures to minimise the fatalities, it appears very little has been done in this regard. For example decisions like phasing out unfit launches, checking documents of launch masters, redesigning launches -- basically taking corrective measures required to safeguard the lives of innocent passengers have all fallen through.

Mainly because there are influential groups of vested interests in the business itself who want to continue with the malpractice. But we would like to remind them that ensuring passenger safety should be their topmost priority, not making profits through illegal means that put lives of innocent people in grave risk. We wouldn't like to see a repeat of the most devastating launch capsizing of recent time in July 2003 when hundreds of passengers perished. And that's why the government should realise that though taking sporadic measures to reduce accidents may work on short term, this alone can not solve the total problem. We demand that a comprehensive safety plan for the launch passengers to be put in place and most importantly implemented.

Looking forward to 2005



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

At the outset, I wish my readers a very happy New Year. May they have prosperity, peace, and good health throughout the coming months.

In many parts of the world, particularly in the US and in Europe, it is common for columnists to start the year with comments about how issues are expected to pan out in the future. Today, being New Year's Day, I shall attempt to do the same.

The past year has been turbulent - full of gory headlines and natural disasters. In terms of economic performance however, 2004 has been great for developing countries. In fact, the world economy has grown faster in the last twelve months than at any other time in the past 20 years. It has been an interesting mix.

This upturn in the economic trend is expected to continue throughout this year. It will, however, most likely be greatly influenced by two significant players -- the US and China. These two countries in their own way will impact on the global economy as well as global security.

The emphasis within the international matrix will, however, more likely than not, continue to be dominated by fundamental existing sources of instability -- Palestine, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, the issue of Kashmir, China's uneasy relations with independent-minded Taiwan, and the continuing "war on terror." Added to this political landscape will be other important unresolved questions related to environment, trade, aid, international debt, and sustainable development.

One could be cynical and state that it will be old wine in a new bottle. This would, however, not be completely true. There will hopefully be a difference and a movement forward.

My optimism stems from the fact that the US presidential election is over and out of the way. This also encourages me to think that there might be greater flexibility on the

part of US, both in terms of posture and approach. President Bush is only the fourth US president to have been re-elected since the 1950s. What we are looking at is a president who might be prepared to define himself for posterity.

George Bush came to Washington in 2001 as a "compassionate conservative." At that time he promised to bring in not only a new style of politics but also to usher in a strong foreign policy. The events of 9/11 put a twist on his ambitions. Unfortu-

Bush has already found out that ousting Saddam was the easy part. He now understands that rebuilding countries is much harder.

I believe that the new US administration will appreciate this time around the hard fact that the president can only get what he wants with some co-operation from the Europeans. They also have to realise that showing contempt for multilateral organisations does not help in the long run. With a bit of luck, they will probably also recognize that the

fact that the left-leaning partners in government might oppose many of the reforms.

India will also have to seriously address the issue of peace with Pakistan. The forthcoming Saarc Summit to be held in Dhaka might help as a confidence building measure between these two countries. A second round of "composite dialogue" between their foreign ministers is expected later on in May or June, but evidence of a movement forward will be required to sustain

the process. Otherwise, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf might be under increasing pressure at home to review his proposals. One must not overlook the fact here that his foreign policy commitments appear to be in conflict with his domestic political compulsions.

This in turn, as The Economist has noted, might "risk throwing away the best chance in a generation of a settlement" on Kashmir.

POST BREAKFAST

2005 might be a year of opportunities for Bangladesh. The government, if it is concerned, could take some bold decisions. The coming year may yet see the eventual separation of the judiciary from the executive, establishment of a National Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman. These are precious building blocks for effective governance.

nately, his efforts both at home and abroad made him a divisive president. The recent US presidential election bears witness to that. His reliance on conservatism and moral values might have endeared him to middle America, but at the same time, it has opened him up to charges of unilateralism and inflexibility.

President Bush has made a few changes in his Cabinet. He has also suggested a more hands-on approach with regard to several questions which affect American interests both at home and abroad. This, in my opinion, has opened a few windows of opportunity.

The conclusion of the presidential election in Afghanistan has created a new dynamic. The transformation aimed at legitimising events in Afghanistan is over. Completing a similar pseudo-process in Iraq this month could not only be a source of great relief, but also a spring-board for other ambitions in the region.

Bush however knows that the political evolution might be affected through haste. His team will advise him to be careful and not undertake any sharp reduction of US presence. There will, in all probability, be repatriation of some armed forces representation from Iraq but the level will still remain high till the end of the third quarter of this year. The Pentagon and the White House, both realise, that decreasing troops in great numbers immediately after the election might mean abandoning Iraq and that country's natural resources to further chaos.

neo-conservative dream of bringing democracy to the Middle East will fail if the festering Palestinian issue is not resolved.

It would be helpful in this regard if the US took heed of the recent comments made by the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal. The prince said that the Arab world understood US security guarantees to Israel, but could not comprehend how Washington's backing for regional democracy did not extend to restraining Israel in the Palestinian territories with regard to policies and actions that were contrary to international legality. Positive action on the Palestinian issue would greatly enhance US moral standing in the Middle East. Arafat's departure from the scene might introduce a more conciliatory approach. This will be the first year of his second term and an opportunity to prove that the US values stability in the Middle East. Any step in this direction will meet with support from both the EU as well as his friend Tony Blair.

After a record year for voters in 2004, the most important election in 2005 will probably take place in Britain in a few months. Tony Blair is almost certain to win a third term despite his unpopularity over the Iraq war. He has to thank his Chancellor of the Exchequer for that. The sustained economic growth in that country, as opposed to the economic vagaries in Europe will ensure a Labour victory. A re-elected, confident Blair, in charge of the presidency of the G-8, from the beginning of this year, will, I believe,

an engine of growth not only for themselves but also for their neighbours in Asean and South Asia.

China's stature in the region will also be further boosted by the recent evolution of events in Taiwan. The defeat of the independence-leaning alliance of the Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian in the recent polls, should, for the moment, stay further deterioration of ties between Taiwan and China and reduce tension in this area.

The world will also see a resurgent Japan. Leaning Japan has gained economic weight in 2004 and their military involvement in Iraq has encouraged them to push for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Recent structural reforms in banking will also ensure that the most damaging symptom of Japan's economic ills, deflation, will ease further. Prime Minister Koizumi's support rating might have plunged to 37 per cent, but that will not affect the gradual normalisation of its monetary policies. This is important, given the fact that Japan is the world's second biggest economic power-house.

In South Asia, India will continue to dominate the scene. Its ruling alliance, led by the Congress party, will however, in all likelihood, face obstacles. To stimulate investment, India will need to reduce its huge fiscal deficit, further improve public services, overhaul restrictive labour laws, bring more private capital into state owned businesses and reduce bureaucratic intervention. All these steps might turn out to be more difficult than expected -- given the

the process. Otherwise, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf might be under increasing pressure at home to review his proposals. One must not overlook the fact here that his foreign policy commitments appear to be in conflict with his domestic political compulsions.

This in turn, as The Economist has noted, might "risk throwing away the best chance in a generation of a settlement" on Kashmir.

India and Bangladesh will also probably initiate comprehensive discussion about the complex issue of the Indian River Linking Project which could result in great human and ecological disasters for both downstream Bangladesh and upstream India. A recently concluded international seminar in Dhaka has pointed out how the project would affect Bangladesh's agricultural and industrial productivity and other sectors like forestry and fishery. We are talking here of hundreds of millions of people across the divide and that raises the urgency threshold for both countries. India, being a co-riparian and a partner in the South Asian development process, has to understand that any unilateral action on its part can only promote instability and misunderstanding.

2005 might be a year of opportunities for Bangladesh. The government, if it is concerned, could take some bold decisions. The coming year may yet see the eventual separation of the judiciary from the executive, establishment of a National Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombuds-

man. These are precious building blocks for effective governance. The present government has been promising these steps for some time. What is required is political will -- and that must be found.

The political arena will most certainly quicken further with more intensive action by the opposition. This will take place both in the streets and also in the Jatiyo Sangshad. Disaffection will grow unless deterioration in law and order and the price spiral can be controlled. This year will see the general population monitoring domestic factors with greater care. This will include unpopular facets like politicization of the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Corruption will also come under focus ahead of the completion of the term of office of the present government in October 2006.

Another issue is expected to dominate national attention in the coming months -- that of the character of the next caretaker government. This constitutional arrangement appears to have been tampered with already through unnecessary amendments. Various other factors have also crept in and stirred controversy. Appointment of a new Chief Election Commissioner might add to the debate.

In the meantime, political parties associated with the Opposition will also be carefully following the organisational steps being undertaken by the ruling Alliance in anticipation of the next general elections. Reports have indicated that ruling party activists are being advised to ascertain at the grass roots the level of opinion of the general population with regard to the fulfillment of BNP election pledges. This is an interesting approach. One presumes that the opposition will also initiate similar action to prepare their subsequent manifesto ahead of the general election. This will generate seriousness and maturity in the political process and make 2005 an interesting and fascinating year.

One can also only hope that the recent visit of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia would encourage the present government to approach economic diplomacy and their look-East policy in a bipartisan spirit. This will be seen as a factor of stability and encourage investors to come to this country. They will then be assured of the safety of their potential investment against possible expropriation or nationalisation by a future administration.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Grassroots changes over the last three decades

MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA

RECENTLY I returned to a village named Dautia in Manikgonj, fifty kms from Dhaka, after an absence of 28 years. I first went there three decades ago as a participant observer under the guidance of two anthropologists. After an interval of 28 years, what changes did I see in the economy, society, and polity of the village?

Flood

In addition to the tangible indicators, signs of devastation were everywhere. How much the resilient farmers are braving the disaster is equally visible -- no matter whether external assistance came or not. Young plants are sprouting everywhere. For the people of Manikgonj, situated on the bank of the mighty major river, water is part of their way of life. *Bona amon* is their age old farming practice. Rice plants grow competing with flood water level, as I witnessed during 1977-78. Most with land are raised surpassing flood water level. No mud houses at all -- mostly tin-houses to live in seasonal water reality. If needed, when they move, their tin houses move with them.

Economy

Once the area was labour surplus. Now it is labour deficit, claimed Ahmed Khan, a freedom fighter, while dunking cookies in his hot tea in Dautia village market. He is now dependent on the external labour-

ers from Pabna to operate his ancestral land. During the seventies, labourers from Manikgonj used to travel to northern districts to work in agriculture. The village rich who used to live in tin houses now converted into *pucca* houses while seasonally unemployed labourers have more work as livelihood

Imagine what would happen if Nanno's sons, as part of future civil society, with American dollars, ideas and technology, come back to agriculture, back to their roots, back to promote grassroots democracy -- what then might the possibilities be after another thirty years! How will the villages look then?

option. More children are going to schools than before. Educated youths are increasingly working in enterprises in Dhaka. Rashed, Javed Khan's (a village shallikar) only son is happily settled in Savar with his own house and commutes daily to Dhaka to work for an audit firm. His happy father has a *pucca* house with subsidy from his son. Electricity has also brought more comforts to the rustic life.

Unlike many other regions, hardly anyone from the village and the surrounding areas is working abroad to enrich their ancestral villages. Thanks to Grapeen, everywhere in the villages there are pelli mobile phones -- an added livelihood in the villages. Bablu, whom I saw in his mother's lab twenty eight years ago, is now a successful DTW mechanics.

Dautia *hat* was found replete with local vegetables, frequented by farias as before. Changes were seen in the fish market. Every one going back home after shopping, carrying a pangsha, commercially produced, unlike what I saw 28 years before. SAP further enriched the rich landowners by adding technology, DTW,

Society

The rural power structure is declining, which is good news for the poor citizens. But at the same time the idea of community is also rapidly declining. Market is increasingly taking over. "Rustic folks are busier than before these days. They have time to hang around their *matabbars* for a *dekchi*, rather will pay taka 50 to "decorator" for a day use of a big *dekchi*," Mazid Molla, a primary teacher observed. Factions, as the single most indicator of rural power

structure, are now much weakened. Over generations, the factional rivalry of the Khan and Molla families over election, land, control over shalish is very different these days.

Nanno's two sons found life in America more rewarding than the village politics that they inherited from their father and grand father.

Culture

During 1977-78, sweets used to be served as the first item while serving food during a marriage ceremony. Among the lower classes, banana leaves used to be used to serve food. The menu these days is not too different from Dhaka. However, there are class variations.

Civil society

Emerging civil society seems a positive trend, taking increasingly pro-poor position, gaining some of the learning from professional NGOs. A senior journalist working as editor of a daily in Dhaka started pro-poor work in his native village Ghona and founded a new NGO. Three decades ago, many journalists thought that NGOs are foreign agents. A big encouraging shift in their perception is visible.

Gender relations

In many areas changes are visible, except gender. Market participation is 100 per cent men, as it was 28 years before. However, in the marriage ceremony I went to attend, equity participation was there, and very much urban influenced. Relatives

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from Dhaka, rather than *samaj* played a more active role in running the festival. The rural rich have more productive linkages than the poor.

Concluding remarks

"The village economy has slightly improved. People worked hard. The state did not work hard in improving the life and livelihood of the rural citizens," Ahmed Khan observed. The market is increasingly penetrating village life. Civil society is growing.

Imagine what would happen if Nanno's sons, as part of future civil society, with American dollars, ideas and technology, come back to agriculture, back to their roots, back to promote grassroots democracy -- what then might the possibilities be after another thirty years! How will the villages look then?

More and more of the next generation are going to schools -- no matter how low the quality might be. How are their dreams different from their earlier generations? How many of them will stay back in the village?

"Take me to the town. I will be happy with one meal a day in urban setting," a housewife lamented.

How much of their dreams will come into reality? Can the village be their future dream? What transformation will be needed in that regard?

Mohammad Zakaria works as an Advisor-Shared Learning for ActionAid Bangladesh.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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.

Well done, cricketers!
Bangladesh played good cricket against India. India lost the second ODI. Our players were consistent with the ball. There were fewer infield errors this time around. Mashrafe bowled brilliantly as did other members of the squad. Dave Whatmore did a great job as coach. The crowd enjoyed the match till the end. I enjoyed every bit of the game. Once again, my heartfelt congratulations to the Bangladesh cricket team.
Syed MMuntazir H Zaidi
Gulshan, Dhaka

find a suitable expansion of the letter.
Dipu
Dhaka

Circulation of money
We are now passing through the 21st century and our nation is already 33 years old! We had governments in the past and also at present pursuing ideologies like Nationalism, Socialism, Secularism, Democracy, and Martial Law, and lately, moderate Islam. No matter whichever ideology is being pursued by the 'elected representative' government or a 'martial law' government, it has to be accounted that neither the resident director of the World Bank nor the resident representative of the IMF are in the capacity to make the policies that we will pursue. Moreover, the prime ministers of Singapore or Malaysia would never

come to our country and lead us for the overall development of the nation. I am sorry to inform you that although we have crossed 33 years of our independence, but the prime duty and responsibility of ensuring the 'circulation of money' among all the citizens of our beloved nation still remains unresolved.
Golam Ashraf
DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka

Future of RMG
The RMG sector of Bangladesh is going to walk a tight rope as MFA will expire shortly. The termination of GSP facility will wreak havoc on the economy of our country. The RMG sector is very productive and lucrative to earn foreign currency. But the quota abolition may impede our sound foreign exchange reserves position. To cope with the challenges of this free market economy,

Bangladesh must be very much competitive in quality textile output. The insouciance of the government perplexes us immensely. After the expiry of the deadline, many small garments factories will have to close their production. Many workers will lose their jobs. The GDP will fall drastically. The society will be destabilised. If Bangladesh wants to survive in the quota-free regime, the RMG sector should be reshaped. This sector should be subsidised enormously. E-commerce can boost this sector. The port facility should be improved. The quality of our fabrics should be updated to vie with China and India. The rudimentary infrastructure should be modernised. The Bangladeshi missions can play a proactive role in this regard. They can explore and penetrate new markets beyond the EU and the US. They can promote international trade by showcasing the products of our

country. The BGMEA, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can work together to forestall the impending catastrophe for our RMG sector.
I hope the government will address the matter with due attention.
Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept. of English, DU

Eid and media
Eid has become a big celebration as far as media is concerned. Celebrities and luminaries are getting involved in this. New drama serials and tele-films were lined up to air for more than actual Eid holidays. How much it is part of the culture or business is a different issue.
Small and medium stories, essays, novels, and poems extended the volume of the Eid editions to one thousand pages. Colourful covers and advertisements made them

attractive.
I was eagerly awaiting the outcome of the print and visual media. I bought a few copies of the weeklies, browsed through internet editions of few and off and on watched many of the dramas and serials on my home TV.
These flamboyant writers are always critical about politics, governance and social ills. The pitch of their voice, harshness of their speeches, are always in the extreme.
Therefore, my expectations, my senses were lined up for the same theme in their works. But to my utter surprise, other than silly inconsistent love stories, out of the family-fiction, nothing was there. One can find no representative qualities in terms of pleasure of reading/watching.
If you put this against what they have been preaching, rubbing their

shoulders with their mentors throughout the year, is pure nonsense.
So we can easily conclude that only under the patronage of the business mentors in the media and under the political mentors on the podiums, these celebrities are only doing "what the sponsors are asking for."
This is the very fundamental reason why the civil society is so weak and ineffective.
MMHaque
Jeddah, KSA

Democracy...
The great sons of the soil fought for our freedom. For their courage and bravery, ours is now an independent democratic country, but is it fully democratic?
The word democracy means it is for the people. We may say that we are getting advantages of democracy, but

what about those who are working in our homes, what about the people who are working in the streets and searching for jobs, not being educated? If we ask them -- what is democracy? Can they answer? They just think they need to wake up in the morning and work for survival. Democracy also means it is of the people. Are the right people running this country? We do not even see debates or great competitions among politicians.
Democracy also means that it is by the people, but politicians always quarrel about fair elections. Another serious problem is that many do not care about voting, because they have lost faith in politicians.
I am not saying that the governors do not do their jobs, but much more must be done to call Bangladesh a country for its people.
Tahsin Hyder
Maple Leaf International School
Dhaka