

NBR probes import

for the poor revenue growth. According to official statistics, in the first half of the current FY, imports marked a 23 percent growth, but the duty and other taxes for imports grew by only eight percent.

Worried by this trend, the NBR is now investigating into the matter to find out the root causes.

Sources said the board is also considering ways to seal 'leakage' at the customs clearing level and planning a departmental shake-up by transfers and new postings to check corruption.

"Our central intelligence cell is also probing into the assets and wealth of customs officials," said an NBR high official, admitting that among the departments of Vat (value-added tax), income tax and customs, the latter is the most corrupt organ of the NBR.

FIGURES REVEAL

According to Bangladesh Bank (BB) statistics, in six months to December 2004, import expenditure was \$6.145 billion, registering a 23 percent growth. While, in the corresponding period of FY 2003-04, the import growth was 19 percent with an expenditure of \$4.99 billion.

The BB data shows a general up-trend in imports in the current fiscal. In seven months to January, letter of credit (LC) opening registered a 23 percent growth, compared to an 18 percent rise in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal year.

Bangladesh typically imports 6,799 items. Of them, 519 items fall in the zero-tariff category, import of which marked a 50 percent rise, NBR sources said. It is followed by the 1,510 items under the 7.5-percent tariff category, which grew by 30 percent. Import of some 1,879 items under the 15-percent tariff category grew by 20 percent and 2,891 items under the 25-percent tariff category by only 5 percent.

The NBR figures, on the other hand, show a disappointing revenue growth.

In eight months to February, the overall revenue earning grew by 10.36 percent to Tk 17,453 crore. But the budget targets Tk 32,190 crore revenue this year, with a 19 percent growth.

Of the total revenue realised, only 8.17 percent came from import. The NBR earned Tk 9,066 crore in the eight months as against the annual target of Tk 16,000 crore from import duties.

This dismal scenario could have been worse if the growths in income tax and Vat and local-level tax were not good. The former grew by 17 percent and the latter by 13 percent.

An analysis of revenue growth at import and local levels shows that the overall revenue collection falls short of the target entirely because of poor tax collection at import level.

During the eight months, duty

collection on imports grew by 7 percent and Vat by 15 percent, while supplementary duty registered a 3 percent negative growth. On the other hand, at the local tax level, Vat grew by 19 percent and supplementary duty by 7 percent.

CORRUPTION LANDSCAPE
Talking to The Daily Star, a number of importers accused the customs department of corrupt practices and linked that to the government's poor revenue collection.

Importers said customs officials force them to offer bribe or face harassment. If they agree to come up with the bribes, the customs officials reduce the payable duties by putting the imported items in lower slabs or even the zero-tariff category.

For instance, there are some chemical items under the zero-tariff category, while some items have duties on them. Some import items get Vat exemptions and some do not. If bribed, a section of customs officials will put an item under the zero-tariff or Vat-exemption category, although it is taxable.

If the importers insist on honestly, the imported items are not released for a long time on various pretexts, importers complained.

A textiles entrepreneur said, "I tried to import some items by paying all the duties and taxes honestly. But, customs officials started to harass me. They asked for money saying, if I pay them, I can have the benefits of a lower duty slab."

This entrepreneur then went to an influential minister to lodge complaints against the corrupt officials. The minister talked to the officials concerned asking them not to harass him. But, when the entrepreneur went back to deal with the customs, the officials challenged him, saying do you think going to a minister will help you get off easily?

"After that they started harassing me even more. I can't go back to ministers again and again. So I had to strike a compromise with them," the frustrated entrepreneur described.

Admitting to corruption in the board, a top official at the NBR said, "NBR officials, businessmen and pre-shipment inspection companies are in the same league in such corrupt practices."

"Because of this corrupt system, an importer, who is bringing in one million tonnes of goods is paying duties for, let's say, 700,000 tonnes. There is also the practice of under-valuation. For instance, internationally the price of sugar is \$350, while the importer is showing it at \$200," the official elaborated.

"Some importers bring in raw materials for export items. But they are bringing these in quantity higher than they actually need and sell off the extra quantity in the market," he adds.

Move to make first

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co-ordinate the reports once they are completed, said sources.

The initiatives were disclosed at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on defence ministry yesterday.

Committee Chairman Lt General (retired) Mahbubur Rahman said the forces' goals once prepared would help to formulate the defence policy.

Explaining the need for a defence policy, the former army chief said question has been raised as to why Bangladesh should frame a defence policy. "We need the defence policy to specify our threat perception. Threats may stem from external or internal subversion," he said adding, "Besides, when the defence will procure any hardware, it should be in line with the defence policy."

Participation of Bangladesh Rifles, police, Ansar, Village Defence Party, cadet corps and cross section of the population will have to be ensured in the policymaking process, said Mahbubur Rahman.

The opposition lawmaker and member of the committee Colonel Shawkat Ali at the meeting said that no discussion about strengthening the armed forces would be fruitful without the defence policy, meeting sources said.

"We had discussed framing a defence policy in the seventh parliament as well. But it has not yet been formulated," he said.

Replying to the lawmakers, Committee Chairman Mahbubur Rahman said that they had discussed the issue at its second or third meeting over a year ago, and then asked the AFD to formulate the policy.

The committee chairman assured the opposition lawmaker that the armed forces division will send the draft policy to the parliamentary body once they are done with the task.

Policy on budget allocation
The defence ministry has been working on devising a policy on allocation of budget for the armed forces following the recommendations of the parliamentary body last year.

The parliamentary body had asked the ministry to formulate the policy with a view to bringing in dynamism and professionalism in the defence service as well as to build combat capability of the forces.

The defence secretary apprised yesterday's meeting that the job of formulating the policy will be completed by this year, said the meeting sources.

While discussing the progress in implementing the committee's recommendations, the opposition lawmaker raised the question of policy on budget allocation.

"It is clear that there is no proper policy regarding allocation of budget for the armed forces and different organisations under them," Shawkat Ali yesterday told The Daily Star.

The AL lawmaker said that the defence secretary told the meeting that the policy will be formulated before the next national budget.

The committee chairman said the allocation of defence budget should be rationalised and combat capacity of the forces should take priority over other development work.

"We will ask the government to allocate budget in line with the policy," the committee chairman told The Daily Star.

The parliamentary body also discussed the activities of Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka Cantonment.

There is a shortage of manpower including doctors and nurses in the hospital, said the committee chairman.

The army chief however told the meeting that a project of Tk 60 crore has been set up to expand the hospital, said the committee chairman.

BSF kills

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Afsar Ali Mondal, 30, son of Karim Mondal of Baradi village of the upazila, and Panchu Mondal, 25, son of Khalil Mondal of Kestoganj village in Krishnagar district in India.

The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) sources said that both were killed in BSF fire when they were chatting in the no-man's-land adjacent to pillar No. 81 at about 1:00am.

The BDR sent a message to the BSF asking them to return the body of the Bangladesh national.

Villagers, however, alleged that the BSF killed Afsar, a vegetable vendor, after taking him in Indian territory.

Nine news men sued in Sherpur

BDNEWS, Sherpur

An Awami League leader filed a case Monday with the district CR Cognisance Court against nine journalists of a local weekly magazine 'Chalti Khabar' including its editor.

Sources said forest and environment affairs secretary of the district Awami League Mohammad Amiruzzaman Lebu lodged the case in connection with a news published in the magazine in its February 27 issue under the headline "three gamblers held from Awami League leader's house".

The court has directed district information officer to submit a report after investigating into the matter.

The journalists who have been sued are editor and publisher of the magazine advocate Zakir Hossain, executive editor Zaimul Abedin, managing editor Bazul Rahman, assistant editor SK Sattar, chief news editor Merajudin, news editor Shahriar Milton, chief reporter Abdur Rafique, Majid, divisional editor Adil Mahmud Ujjal and Jhenaigali upazila correspondent Harun-ar-Rashid Dudu.

Meanwhile, Sherpur press club, Jhenaigali press club and Sherpur journalists' council condemned the case as it was filed without issuing any rejoinder or asking any explanation from the magazine.

Tornado victims

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as relatives of the affected people, rescue workers, medical teams and journalists rushed to the villages to see the devastation and help the victims.

MEDICAL TEAMS
A 28-member medical team of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) has been working in Gaibandha to extend medical services to the injured. During the last two days the team provided treatment to 154 patients, BDR Captain Tanveer said.

Another 8-member army medical team led by Captain Masud is providing medical treatment in the affected areas, our Gaibandha correspondent reports.

Bangladesh Medical Association members from Bogra, Rangpur and Gaibandha in cooperation with district health administration will begin today a weeklong intensive medical camp in the tornado-hit areas.

Tarique Rahman, senior joint secretary general of BNP, visited Naldanga in Gaibandha yesterday and distributed 10 kg of rice and Tk 2,000 in cash among each of the one thousand tornado-hit families.

He also distributed Tk 10,000 to each of the families of the dead.

Islam Shipbuilders, a private commercial operator of Bangladesh Railway, waived train fare for the tornado victims and the rescuers for their free movement between Naldanga and Gaibandha stations.

NGOs and voluntary organisations including Bangladesh Extension Education Services, RDRS, Gano Unnayan Kendra, Leprosy Care Project and Jibta Bangladesh have been working to help the distressed people since Sunday night.

The government, meanwhile, sanctioned 100 tonnes of rice, 1500 bundles of CI sheets and Tk 5 lakh in cash for the affected people.

About 5,000 families of Imadpur and Mirzapur unions under Mithapukur upazila who lost their homes are still passing days in the open. Upazila administration is distributing CI sheets and cash among the victims, though the amount was too small.

INADEQUATE TREATMENT
The condition of at least 12 fatally injured patients undergoing treatment at the Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH) was stated to be critical.

Relatives of the injured complained that the RMCH authorities did not take proper care of the patients. Many of them are lying at the hospital without treatment.

Jahedul, a six-year-old boy from Naldanga union of Sadullapur upazila, is still lying unconscious on the floor of Ward no 10 at the RMCH. His father Jamir complained that the doctor visited him only once in the last 24 hours.

Kazli, 20, of Dhopadanga village under Sundarganj upazila, whose left leg was fractured, complained that she did not receive any treatment even after 30 hours of her admission. She was seen groaning in pain.

Hospital sources said there is an acute scarcity of lifesaving medicines at the hospital and so the doctors advised the attendants of the patients to buy them from outside.

But Bokul of Dasalia village of Naldanga said they are too poor to buy medicines from outside. Almost all the victims are from poor families.

RMCH Assistant Director Mostafizur Rahman however denied the allegation and told The Daily Star that the hospital authorities were trying their level best to provide proper treatment to the injured.

Meanwhile, Deputy Minister for Food and Disaster Management Asadul Habib Dulu visited the injured patients at RMCH on Monday night. He directed the hospital authorities to take proper care of the patients.

Partha

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on charge of sending email threat to kill opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, will be furnished today.

The other case in which he was shown arrested is the one filed for August 21 grenade attacks at an Awami League (AL) rally in Bangabandhu Avenue last year.

Unknown people sent an email to the Daily Prothom Alo on August 23 last year, threatening to kill AL President Sheikh Hasina.

Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested Partha from his Elephant Road house on August 26 last year and produced him before the court on August 30, a day after CID filed a case regarding the email threat.

Galib's bail plea

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in Gopalganj Brac office on January 17. But Galib was not brought to the court on grounds of security, Court Inspector Mohammad Yunus told journalists.

The court fixed the date for further hearing on April 7.

Police nabbed the youths from Bashbaria in Tungipara with arms, ammunition and seven time-bombs, who later confessed their crimes and claimed that they were associates of Galib.

Galib was taken to Gopalganj from Gaibandha on March 19.

Jamaat Amir of Gopalganj district Advocate Arzul Hossain along with seven other lawyers pleaded for Galib and his associates.

Combine S'pore tech

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extend its investment and explore business in Bangladesh. He said Singaporean companies have so far invested \$ 700 million dollars in Bangladesh—and the investment and business operations would expand.

The members of the business delegation accompanying the prime minister and Singapore business community leaders, among others, attended the luncheon meeting.

Khaleda hoped that businesspeople from both sides would be able to identify more new opportunities for industrial investment and trade for mutual interest of both. The emergence of global production systems has now created new avenues for compatible economics, she said.

"Our government attaches great importance to social development and economic growth. We believe that prime responsibility of our government is to create a congenial business climate where private sector can function and thrive," she told the business leaders.

The prime minister said the government has been pursuing a free-market economic policy, and has made Bangladesh one of the most open and competitive locations among the developing countries.

She apprised them that Bangladesh is endowed with a large reserve of both natural gas and high-quality coal, making the country suitable for establishing energy-intensive manufacturing industries.

The country also enjoys natural advantage due to its geographical location, she said, adding that Bangladesh bridges the emerging markets of South Asia with the fastest-growing markets of the Asian countries.

Referring to bilateral trade which favours Singapore, the prime minister said there is a great scope for not only increasing the total trade volume but also reducing significantly the present imbalance to the advantage of both the countries.

A few ministers

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under process. Most of them involve canal digging, river dredging, reconstruction of sluice gates etc. These projects are implemented under 'food for work' programme as well as by cash payment to workers.

Prime minister's brother retired major Syed Iskandar MP got six of the projects while Hafiz Ibrahim MP from Bhola, who is also a member of the standing committee, bagged four.

Among the ministers, the constituencies of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed, Telecoms Minister Aminul Haq, Health Minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain, Commerce Minister Altf Hossain Chowdhury, PM's sister Women and Children Affairs Minister Khurshid Jahan Haq, State Minister for Land Asadul Habib Dulu, State Minister for Home Lutfuzzaman Babar and State Minister for Labour Amanullah Aman enjoy the benefits of such projects.

The constituencies of Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar and BNP lawmakers Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan, Ataur Rahman Khan, Jainal Abedin, Salahuddin Ahmed, Mazhar Hossain, Delwar Hossain Khan Dulu, Abul Khayer Bhuiyan, Reza Ahmed Bachchu, Shahidul Islam, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, Mohammad Shahjahan, SA Sultan Titu, Ruhul Kuddus Talukder, Sultan Mahmud Babu, Rajshahi Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu and KM Obaidur Rahman have the rest of the allocations except two.

These remaining two projects have gone to Jamaat deputy Delwar Hossain Saidee and Awami League MP Mohammad Ali.

What is the criterion for getting these priority projects, the meeting wanted to know.

"We believe such projects should go to areas where the population is affected by extreme poverty or floods, and allocations should be given on the basis of a set of criteria," committee chairman Akbar Ali told The Daily Star last night.

We also think the projects should be distributed more or less uniformly across the country, he added.

Meeting sources said some of the members remarked that many of those who bagged the projects could do so because of their influence, not because their projects had any priority. They also alleged wholesale corruption in the Water Development Board saying the chairman of union parishads bribe the WDB watchdog with Tk 2,000 per tonne of foodgrains to clear their projects without actually completing them. The foodgrains are used as payment to workers.

They said the project implementers do such poor jobs in canal digging

Bangladesh offers competitive price and quality for pharmaceuticals, footwear, ceramic, handicrafts, jute goods, leather goods, frozen foods and agricultural products. Singapore may consider importing these products from Bangladesh.

Despite many hurdles, the prime minister said, all relevant economic and social indicators depict Bangladesh as a rapidly and consistently developing country. "I can assure you all that the economy in Bangladesh today rests on a solid foundation."

During the last three years, net annual FDI inflow to Bangladesh has increased by 34 percent. And large TNCs like Orascom of Egypt, Tata Group of India, Dhabi Group of UAE, Lafarge of France and TMI of Malaysia have already commenced their investment activities in Bangladesh, she told the meeting.

The total investment outlay of these companies is expected to exceed \$ 5 billion in the next three years, she said.

Delivering a lecture on "Bangladesh Economic Priorities and Challenges" at Suntec Convention Centre in the morning, Khaleda reaffirmed her government's unflinching commitment to democracy, development and human rights, which remain key underpinnings in moving Bangladesh towards a stable, moderate and modern society.

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) organised the lecture. Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore Prof. S Jayakumar moderated and presided over the lecture session.

She said that \$1.3 billion in foreign investment has flowed into Bangladesh in the last three years and hoped that another \$8 billion will be invested in next three years.

Addressing the function Singapore Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Jayakumar said both Bangladesh and Singapore have embraced the changing global environment.

schemes that no water flows through those canals.

In case of embankment protection schemes, the implementers chose the rainy season, instead of the dry, to install protection boulders, they noted.

This perpetuates the protection schemes, as strong current drifts away the boulders, they observed. This also leads to massive wastage of the national resources. So, the committee recommended implementing these projects during the dry season only.

Discussing the power scenario, the committee members felt the poor implementation of power projects under the ADP reflects how badly fares the sector. Load shedding is plaguing the country, yet the ministry is going slow on project implementation, they noted.

"There are some power schemes in which they failed to spend a single taka," a meeting source quipped.

The ongoing massive load shedding specially afflicts the villages, where electricity remains absent for many hours affecting agricultural production, the committee members observed.

"We believe the load shedding will seriously affect this year's agricultural output," a meeting source said.

At the meeting, the finance minister admitted that soon after coming to office in 2001, they should have assessed the future demand of the country and the projects needed to meet that, sources said.

Saifur also said the government is considering awarding contracts for setting up small power plants up to 50 megawatt to companies on a selection basis to bring new power plants quickly into operation.

Remains

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kilometres south of the house of local upazila Chairman Abul Kashem Chowdhury alias "Kashem Chairman", the principal accused in the abduction case, and about half kilometre off the house of Kala Mahbub, a close associate of Kashem Chairman.

Hence a strong suspicion arose that the skeleton might be Jamaluddin's, also a BNP leader.

After inspection by Jamaluddin's family, police sent the skeleton to Chittagong Medical College and Hospital (CMCH) where a medical board had been formed with experts to examine the skeleton and conduct forensic tests if required.

"Police cannot confirm anything without having experts' report," Chittagong Superintendent of Police (SP) Mahbubur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

"It is difficult to identify a person from a skeleton. It has to be examined and tested by the experts concerned," he said adding that the board is expected to give its report today.

Jamaluddin's son Lito resented the fact that whenever any skeleton or remains of a dead body is found in Kanchan Nagar, it is thought to be that of his father. "It is shocking for us," he said.

Lito alleged that the police were trying to prove Jamaluddin dead in order to submit the chargesheet and put an end to the case with an incomplete investigation.

UAE stops visas

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employed are Pakistan, India, Egypt, Bangladesh, Yemen, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Sudan and Ethiopia, according to a release of the foreign ministry.

45 Ctg journals

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fined Tk 1,000 each, failing which they are to serve out one month in prison.

The court also handed down similar punishment to Bhorer Kagoj former editor Abed Khan and Publisher Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

The court sentenced Bhorer Kagoj reporter Samahes Baidya to two months of rigorous imprisonment and slapped a fine of Tk 2,000 on him for not only printing the news, but also the photograph of the additional judge in question.

The signatories to the statement include Reaz Haider Chowdhury, Ratan Kanti Debashish, Alamgir Sabuj and Sujoy Mohajan of Daily Pubokone, Kamal Parvez and Kazi Abul Mansur of Daily Janakantha, Chowdhury Farid of Channel-I, Rowshan Soma and Nasiruddin Haider of Daily Prothom Alo, Komol Dey and Soumen Dhar of Daily Bhorer Kagoj, Shuklal Das and Kirki Nayan of Daily Azadi, Majumder Nazimuddin and Shimul Nazrul of Daily Amar Desh, Tapan Chakraborty and Rubel Khan of Daily Aker Kagoj, Arich Ahmed Shah of Ntv, Shahnewaj Riton of Daily Ittefaq, Rashid Mamun, Azad Moimuddin and Shantanu Chowdhury of Suprabhat Bangladesh, Zober Hossain Sikder of The Daily Star and Shubhasthis Barua and Romen Das Gupta of Bir Chhattagram Mancha.

SENIOR JOURNALISTS REACT
Senior journalists in Dhaka yesterday also gave their reactions to the conviction of the journalists.

Advisory Editor of the Daily Amar Desh Ataus Samad expressed the hope that there will be a better understanding by the court of the press and also by the press of the ways by which a court has to function to give the best results.

Samad said judges are required to limit their social contact while journalists have to contact many persons and they come under pressure from many sides. "In such a situation it is not unlikely that sometimes there may be a gap in the perception of the two about many things," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said the press here has not triggered any debate neither has it created any issue even after the Supreme Court gave verdicts that went against public expectations. He referred to the Supreme Court verdict about citizenship of former Jamaat-Islami Amir Golam Azam. "The press here did not raise any question even after a number of judges felt embarrassed to hear cases," he said.

"Newspapers could have created debates about the issues but did not, as the press always tries to uphold the independence of the judiciary," said Samad.

"Clash between the government and a vibrant press is not unusual in a democratic country and in such a situation the court is the only place where anyone can go for justice."

On the alleged certificate tempering by a judge, he said, "A thorough investigation is necessary (into the matter) to know what had happened at Chittagong University, how the mark sheets were tampered with and who had done it? And, if necessary, the main examination sheets of the judge in question can be rechecked," he said.

Editor of The Bangladesh Observer Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury said the judgement would not discourage journalists from carrying out their professional obligation to report irregularities in any sector. "Journalists will work forward to fulfil people's desire to know," he told The Daily Star.

"We would have felt comfortable had the court not given this verdict," he said. The court has rights and independence to give any verdict. At the same time, newspapers have constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression," he noted.

The Observer editor said the nation expects these two institutions (the judiciary and the press) to work to uphold people's rights and establish democracy. The country's journalist community believes that these two institutions would honour each other's rights and independence.

CPJ CONDEMNNS
The New York-based independent, nonprofit organisation, The Committee to Protect Journalists, has condemned the conviction of the journalists.

"We are outraged by this ruling against our colleagues," CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper said. "Vaguely worded and outdated contempt laws are being abused to silence journalists in Bangladesh who are merely doing their jobs by exposing official wrongdoing."

Suppl chargesheet

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trucks to carry the huge cache of firearms and ammunition off-loaded and hauled at Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited (CUFL) Jetty on the Karnaphuli on April 2 last year.

Mirpur police arrested him from Lalkuti area in the capital on March 17. He is now under an eight-day remand and being quizzed by Joint Interrogation Cell.

The first chargesheet of the case submitted on June 11 last year showed a lot of discrepancies with the first information report.

The supplementary chargesheet was submitted on August 26 following a court order.

Seventeen accused including the four other prime accused -- Hafizur Rahman, Din Mohammad, Abul Kashem Madhu and Sobhan Haggi -- who owned the trolleys that carried the arms and ammunition are now absconding.

The first chargesheet of the case submitted on June 11 last year showed a lot of discrepancies with the first information report.

Hartal shifted

FROM PAGE 1
the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition.

AL leaders Abdul Jalil, Amir Hossain Amu, Abdul Mannan, Akhteruazzaman, 11-party leaders Nurul Islam, Rashed Khan Manon, Dilip Barua and JSD leaders Hasnain Haq Inu and Moimuddin Khan Badal were present at the meeting.

JS body for stern move

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