

## ADB's good counsel

### Reform key to breakthrough

THE Asian Development Bank's analytical publication titled *Outlook, 2005* has made some forward-looking observations on our economy, meriting not just attention but also positive response. Taking stock of the economy, based on the readings of macro-economic indicators, ADB report has taken a look ahead. It has made a growth projection, identified the challenges facing our economy and recommended some responses whereby the effects of negative factors could be minimised.

Bangladesh needs a sustainable GDP growth rate of 7 to 8 percent to alleviate poverty in a programmatic way in order to meet the millennium goal of halving the number of poor by 2015. But it is forecast to grow at an estimated 5.3 per cent in FY 2004-05 -- thanks to the massive floods early on. Even so, we are doing relatively better than some Pacific countries with the industrial growth estimated at 7.8 per cent and exports projected to grow by 15 per cent in 2005. The services sector is also likely to grow by 6 per cent.

The inflationary pressures, fuelled by the rise in food prices against the backdrop of a reduced Aman crop, might ease off somewhat following the Boro harvests.

The revenue collection showing a downward trend, needs to be revamped up to augment domestic resources and this, coupled with rationalisation of expenditure, will help keep the budget deficit in check.

Bangladesh economy faces some challenges, two of which are governance-related, such as, law and order and confrontational politics, while the remainder is economic, like the rising international oil price and the post-MFA quota free regime for the garments export.

The world is changing, and if Bangladesh has to keep pace with it and seize the opportunities presented in a changed global context, she has to carry out some policy and institutional reforms. The Chinese example is relevant here, something that crosses our mind in presence of our honoured guest, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. China is the most deserving country to be emulated in terms of introducing bold policy and institutional reforms that put her firmly on the road to sustained and high-profile economic growth. It is to China's burgeoning market that top corporate investors from the USA and EU are gravitating today.

We have a big labour force and an expanding middle class, even though the buying capacity of our people is still limited. If we can reduce the rich-poor gap substantially, our market will be that much bigger to attract investments, both domestic as well as FDIs.

We can take a leaf or two from the Chinese experience, especially in terms of raising the level of their competitiveness in the international market-place.

## Death of devotees

### Our condolences

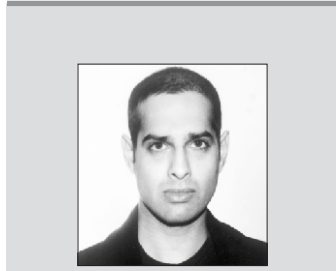
WE are saddened by the tragic death of seven devotees of the Hindu community in a stampede during a holy dip in a local pond at Gopalganj on Wednesday. It was even more tragic because the accident occurred on the first day of the weeklong celebrations marking the birth anniversary of a Hindu religious leader. Witnessing such a terrible end of life on an occasion that was auspicious for the community must have been a horrible ordeal for all those people who converged there for the holy bath. We express deep sympathies and condolences to the members of the bereaved families.

Such a huge gathering of thousands of devotees indicates the fervour with which the Hindu community observes its religious obligations in our country. According to reports, every year a huge number of pilgrims, not only from all over Bangladesh but also from neighbouring India come to join the festivities. Many dignitaries also grace the occasion. It is the tradition of religious co-existence and harmony that we treasure and value so much in Bangladesh.

Let an occasion like this be better organised in future with all the necessary precautions taken by the relevant management body and the local administration to avert recurrence of any such incident.

The loss of lives was most unfortunate and should be a signal to the local administrations of areas where religious festivals take place to make sure that the occasions pass off without any stampede.

# The big picture



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE conventional wisdom with respect to religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh generally falls into one of two categories.

One point of view is that Bangladesh has never had a history of fundamentalism and is not likely to in the future. It is generally accepted that the strength of the fundamentalists stands at roughly ten percent of the population, more precise figures being hard to obtain, and that the support for religious extremism among the general population remains miniscule.

This perspective dismisses out of hand the notion that Bangladesh may be heading in the direction of a fundamentalist state and suggests that those pushing such an understanding, both inside the country and out, are doing so to benefit politically from such a perception.

On the other hand, there exists a body of thought that casts a concerned eye over the growing strength and influence of the fundamentalist political parties, the rise of religious extremism, and the growing prevalence of social trends such as the hijab and madrasa education that signify the mainstreaming of fundamentalism in the country.

Both perspectives are incomplete because they do not ask the right questions about fundamentalism and its attractions.

The fact that Bangladesh does not have a history of fundamentalism is irrelevant to the current situation. History can never be more than the roughest guide to what the future portends, and it is precisely because we never have had a history of fundamentalism that it might appear so attractive to the disenchanting and the marginalized.

The right question to ask is whether the fundamentalists offer a vision of the future that is more compelling than anything else on offer.

The short answer to this question would be that the fundamentalists do offer a more compelling vision than anyone else in Bangladesh for

advancing at a rate necessary to keep up with the rest of the continent.

There are too few jobs and no government has had the vision or foresight to make the investments necessary in the infrastructure and in education that are necessary to create opportunity and to keep us competitive. Planning for the future has been non-existent.

The fundamentalists are the one group that has a credible explanation for why things are the way they are and a credible vision for how to dramatically change things for the better. The fundamentalists are the ones who feel our pain.

They are the ones who speak to

and conscience and expression that I know they would extinguish. I know full well that the fundamentalists do not have the grasp of economic and technological and geopolitical realities necessary to successfully navigate a changing world. I know that they would lead us not to a golden age but back to the dark ages and that they have no more regard for truth or justice than any other political entity. I know that the fundamentalists have not delivered a better order anywhere in the world and that they won't here either.

But they do have a vision -- of sorts -- and what vision -- of any kind -- does anyone else have? Nothing as far as I can see.

Their elegant explanation for where we have gone wrong is that

## STRAIGHT TALK

**If we ever want to achieve more than merely keeping our head above water then we need to be able to do two things: we need to be able to look squarely at our shortcomings on a societal level to appreciate fully how we have got to where we are, and we need to initiate a national debate to envision the future so that we can begin to take the steps necessary to develop into an advanced nation with opportunity for all.**

the very simple reason that no one else offers any kind of vision at all.

The point is that things in this country are far from ideal. Don't get me wrong. Things are not getting worse and it is not as though the situation has been an easy one to manage. Since independence, we have added some sixty million people to the population, and the fact that we have been able to dramatically cut the rate of poverty and malnutrition and improved health and welfare and posted steady economic growth is not to be dismissed lightly.

But while we have succeeded in keeping our head above water and have posted incremental gains in a number of areas, we are barely just staying afloat, and certainly not

the part of the Bangladeshi character that senses that at a fundamental level everything is wrong and that we have somehow lost our way in the world. They are the ones talking about the sickness at the heart of our society and the ones speaking about the social reform necessary to turn things around.

Look around you. Be honest and be unsparring. There is a sickness in the system, and until it is cured we will never advance. The reforms that we all talk about -- political reform, judicial reform, administrative reform, electoral reform -- all are ultimately covers for the most pressing of all reforms that we need -- social reform.

The dysfunctions in the polity and the judiciary and the administration

we have strayed from the path of righteousness, and that salvation lies in a return to a more traditional and conservative and Islamic (as they define it) society.

The fundamentalists promise a more moral and orderly and caring society, one that is not in thrall to western materialism or decadence and one in which every Bangladeshi can live in dignity with his or her head held high and would not have to gaze at the west with covetous and inferiority-ridden eyes.

It's a pretty compelling vision. If I didn't know what was in the fine print I might be tempted to sign up myself.

But I worry about the rights and treatment of women and minorities in the fundamentalists' world. I worry for the freedoms of thought

The lack of vision among our politicians and their supporters in the ruling class, and their inability to envision, let alone plan for, the future is breathtaking.

They focus on nothing except power and how to get it and how to keep it. They spend no time thinking about what they are going to do with that power once they get it and this is why they have achieved so little.

To be fair, this is not merely the fault of the politicians. It is the fault of all of us.

There is no public debate on the root causes of our problems -- the cancer at the heart of society and how to remove it. There is no national discourse on social reform -- reform of who we are and how we think, and how that might be holding us back,

and most importantly, what to do about it.

In terms of a solution, no one has a big vision of how to change things around.

There is no one trying to envision what the future will look like -- in Bangladesh, in the region, in the world -- and planning for it.

We need to first try to envision the future, and then see what needs to be done to find space in it for us, and then work to make it happen. Since in Bangladesh we have never crossed the first hurdle, it is no surprise that the result is a chaotic and ad hoc country with seemingly intractable problems.

The question is whether either of the main political parties can deliver this vision and if not them, then who. Can either of them transform themselves into the party of the future or will they always remain the parties of the past?

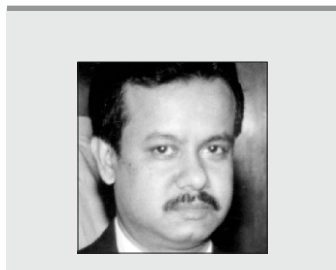
Nor is this a question for the political parties alone -- it is a question for all of us.

If we ever want to achieve more than merely keeping our head above water then we need to be able to do two things: we need to be able to look squarely at our shortcomings on a societal level to appreciate fully how we have got to where we are, and we need to initiate a national debate to envision the future so that we can begin to take the steps necessary to develop into an advanced nation with opportunity for all.

Too much time has passed already. Let us begin the debate today.

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# Why does the US look like us?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TWO things happened on Thursday, March 31, which were more than a coincidence. A presidential commission on US intelligence lapses concluded that assessments of Iraq's weapons of mass destructions were "dead wrong." And then Terry Schiavo, a seriously brain-damaged woman who lived in a vegetating state for 15 years, died 13 days after her feeding tube was removed. Mistakes happen and people die all the time. But what was the big deal about these two particular incidents?

Depends on how you take it. While the Americans are slowly waking up to their mistakes two years after they have wrongly wrecked another sovereign country, Halliburton, the world's largest military private contractor, which was once headed by US Vice-President Dick Cheney, has already made at least \$8 billion out of Iraq. But that is not the end of the story. Bunnatine Greenhouse, the highest-ranking civilian in the US Army Corps of Engineers, saw the contracts handed to Halliburton pass over her desk.

She objected to all of them on the grounds that the government was being too generous to the Texas-based company. Now it appears that she might lose her job.

Let us put it on the back burner for a while and talk about the other issue. The judge who ordered the removal of the feeding tube of Terri Schiavo needed police protection lest members of the religious right tried to attack on him. In order to placate the religious right, George Bush signed a bill and his brother Jeb Bush, Governor of Florida, tried to forcibly remove Terri Schiavo from her

name of God, which made a representative from Connecticut fume that the Republican Party had become a party of theocracy.

You would still be living in your mother's womb if you did not expect politics to have some of its ploys. People blame their mistakes on others and success in politics depends on who does it better. But US politics always boasted that it had certain standards. The American politicians refused to stoop as low as their counterparts in the Banana Republics or other hellhole nations.

Now the inquiring mind wants to

know: what is the difference? The wild goose chase in the rest of the world to find religious fundamentalists seems ludicrous when a God-fearing President sits in the White House and tries extreme measures to keep alive the living dead in the name of his faith. Now watch it, before you say anything. Nobody is saying, George Bush and his Christian friends are doing anything wrong. It is their God and it is fine so long as they keep it to themselves.

Also so long as they let others do the same and don't try to tell how others should profess their

faiths. If Bangladesh is a fundamentalist nation, our judges have not yet needed police protection from the religious right. Nobody has tried to kill a doctor for performing an abortion. We believe that life and death are in the hands of God. It has never been an issue whether a terminally ill person should live or die. The average Americans are not different from us. A recent survey showed that 9 out of 10 Americans did not want to die in an institution. When asked what would they do if they were told they would die within a short time, 82 per cent of them responded that

tense? What about killing and torturing innocent people in the name of protecting their rights and freedom? Those who rule also make the rules, and it is not difficult to understand why what is good for the goose is also not good for the gander. But these days you cannot even tell the difference. What happens in the United States is only an understated version of what happens in the so-called rogue nations of the world. Most interestingly, the United States is becoming its own nemesis. Everything it is blaming on others is

was indicating at corruption and religious extremism, which have given us a stereotyped image before the rest of the world.

True as that may be, the United States has no right to blame us for it, although it has all the might to impose that blame on us. We are a small nation, poorer and weaker, but we have not lied, cheated, or invaded another country. In any other respect, what happens here also happens there, all that corruption and religious frenzy, the gut-churning depravities of crime and prejudice.

In the end, it is all about perception. The United States with its power and wealth has managed that perception better than us. It has gone to steal from another country while we have been stealing from our own. It resorts to religion in its zeal to save the living dead. We resort to religion in our zeal to save the living from life after death. People make mistakes and people die. It happens all over the world, but the approach varies from country to country, religion to religion.

Cutting through the clutter, now it seems that the US looks a lot like us. Be it corruption, be it religious extremism, the Americans have lost their moral right to blame us. Someone needs to turn around and tell it to them to their face. The government will not do it, because all governments are like-minded. But we the citizens can, because corruption or right to die, at the end of the day, it is our bloody business.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

**Cutting through the clutter, now it seems that the US looks a lot like us. Be it corruption, be it religious extremism, the Americans have lost their moral right to blame us. Someone needs to turn around and tell it to them to their face. The government will not do it, because all governments are like-minded. But we the citizens can, because corruption or right to die, at the end of the day, it is our bloody business.**

hospice. It was the local police who made it clear that they were not going to let that happen without an order from the judge.

Tell me something. Do you smell the same rat that I smell? Isn't the US beginning to look a lot like us? The highest evolved democracy gives us the telltale signs of corruption in the highest places. Holy cow! Third World vices are seeping over the ramparts of American virtues. What about religious fundamentalism? Almost the entire Congress voted for a legislation to keep Terri Schiavo in the feeding tube in the

they would like to go home. Nearly 70 per cent of Americans disapproved that their President took a side on whether Terri Schiavo should live or die.

If you are talking about corruption, let me ask you why Bangladesh has been topping the TI list year after year? What is the total amount of money that passes hands in this country, when \$8 billion passes only a few hands in one deal in the United States? How about other aspects of corruption, about manufacturing stories, cheating the people, and attacking another country under false pre-

happening in its own backyard. Sounds familiar if you know of parents who criticize the upbringing of their neighbours' children only to find that their own children have gone astray.

It is the same age-old dilemma on a global scale. The small fries go to jail, while the big shots make laws. Imagine the reaction in the United States, if our parliament had taken sides with the religious right to annul a marriage, abort a pregnancy or pull the plug on a dying person! When the US Secretary of State referred to Bangladesh as a "troubling" nation, she

## OPINION

# Bangabandhu and Bangladesh are inseparable

SAIFUL ALAM

BEFORE delving into the topic special thanks for the bold and timely editorial in DS, dt 27-03-05 titled 'March 26 without Bangabandhu', calling a spade a spade. To begin with, after the formation of the Awami League (AL) the stage was set for materialising long cherished dreams of Bengalis. Because this is for the first time after the debacle at Plassey in 1757 that the Bengalis as a nation were steadfastly getting united for the struggle of a national liberation movement. But the task was a Herculean one. Though the Bengalis got an organisation but they were yet to get a leadership for that gigantic job of Himalayan magnitude. The leadership which was in the making for this task from the Baker Hostel of Islamia College of Calcutta was yet to blossom fully. But as an organiser he had already made his place in the arena of politics. This was demonstrated by

his getting elected as one of the Joint Secretaries of the AL in 1949. After the mysterious demise of his mentor Hussein Shahid Suhrawardy he came to the forefront of the leadership. The person in question is none other than Sheikh Mujib later Bangabandhu and finally the Father of the Nation.

He did not earn this recognition all on a sudden, emerging from a non-entity. Rather there is a long story behind his making, which needs no elaborate discussion, as every Bengali is well aware of this. Suffice it to say that right from the Language Movement of 1948-1952, the United Front elections of 1954, anti-education policy movement of 1962, Six-point movement of 1966, Agartala Conspiracy Case of 1968, Mass Uprising of 1969, Elections of 1970 to the Liberation War of 1971 he was omnipresent. To deny this fact is to deny the very existence of Bangladesh. Because Bangabandhu and Bangladesh are inseparable. So whenever one talks about an inde-

pendent Bangladesh one has to remember all these events and when one does so one cannot but remember Bangabandhu.

On the other hand, except for the War of Liberation in 1971, during various phases of national liberation struggle mentioned above, none among the Bengalis heard the name of Major Ziaur Rahman before his reading out the Declaration of Independence, which had tremendous impact on the people as everybody was taken aback by the Operation Searchlight, on March 27 on behalf of "our Great Leader, the Supreme Commander of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman," as he said, from Swadhin Banbglia Betar Kendra which was then stationed at Kalurghat, Chittagong. This fact Zia never ever denied or distorted in his lifetime.

Though in 1949 after the formation of the AL the struggle for emancipation started gaining ground but it was not until Bangabandhu held the helm of affairs of this organisation

that the struggle got momentum ultimately culminating into the War of Liberation in 1971. In this long struggle for independence many personalities played very significant roles, as has been rightly pointed out in the aforesaid editorial of the DS, but the role played by Bangabandhu surpassed them all in terms of volume and magnitude. Which is why Bangabandhu could become the undisputed leader of the Bengalis even before the starting of 9-month long bloody War of Liberation.

Whereas during the war Zia fought alongwith his other colleagues in the battle field as one of the sector commanders of the War of Liberation. The only difference between him and his other colleagues was that because of his reading out the Declaration of Independence on behalf of Bangabandhu he was (and will always be) enjoying a higher esteem in the minds of the people, apart from his becoming widely familiar which helped him later tremendously to consolidate his popularity among the

masses after coming to power.

As in the past, on the other hand, during the war too Bangabandhu was the inspiration of all activities. The name Bangabandhu became synonymous with the word Bangladesh. He became symbol of the Bengali nation. Though he was away from us but everything was being conducted in his name. The world opinion was always concerned about his fate. The freedom fighters used to start war with his name and, if won, triumphed by chanting slogans in his name. There was no controversy about his supremacy at the time. People used to pray and fast for his release. Their love and respect for him could be gauged on his homecoming day January 10, 1972 which is unparalleled in history.

So to read the history of Independence of Bangladesh is also to read the history of Bangabandhu. Ziaur Rahman shall occupy a good position in that history. But there is a gulf of difference between the two because had Zia been killed by the

Pakistani army when he was going to unload arms and ammunitions from MV SWAT his name might have remained unknown to the Bengalis like millions of unknown martyrs. Whereas by that time Bangabandhu was enjoying highest popularity and respect among the Bengalis and was the only concern for the Pakistanis. Had he been killed on the night of March 26 at his 32 Dhanmondi Residence by the Pakistanis, instead of being got arrested, the name Bangabandhu must have been revered even by those people who now, for petty political interests, question his place in the history. They must not forget that before the political birth of Zia on March 27, 1971 Bangabandhu had already become the household name among the Bengalis. Not only that in between March 7 and 26 Bangabandhu had reached such a position where merely his nodding rather than talking was enough for indicating what should have been the next course of action. During the long 24

years' relentless struggle Bangabandhu had to spend nearly 13 valuable years of his life in prison, while Zia did not have to spend even 13 seconds in jail for the cause of the Bengali nation.

Besides, without Zia an Independent Bangladesh was not only inevitable but also a reality because by March 27 it became an established fact. But without Bangabandhu an independent Bangladesh would not only be impossible but also could be dangerous, given the presence of huge Indian army and intra-fight among various political parties at the time. Zia seems to be aware of this fact. After coming to power till his death Zia uttered not a single word against Bangabandhu and his contributions to the Bengali nation. For this Zia deserves to be highly appreciated and respected.

An independent Bangladesh was a lifetime dream of Bangabandhu. A staunch critic of Bangabandhu and Bangladesh and a close ally of both Ayub and Yahya Khan, GW Choudhury (who joined the Pakistan

Cabinet in October 1969) revealed this fact while talking about a tape prepared by Yahya Khan's intelligence agencies (GW Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan*, C Hurst and Company, London, p-98). The subject matter was the Legal Framework Order (LFO) issued by the government on March 30, 1970. On the recording Bangabandhu said: "My aim is to establish Bangladesh. I shall tear LFO into pieces as soon as the elections are over. Who could challenge me once the elections are over." When the tape was played to Yahya Khan, he said: "I shall fix Mujib if he betrays me." After this revelation nobody should have any doubt about Bangabandhu's ultimate objective and the pivotal role he played for establishing an independent Bangladesh.

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