

Lesson from Hong Kong *Our negotiating bankruptcy touches a new low*

TO say that we have returned empty-handed from the WTO Hong Kong round is an understatement. Actually, commerce minister Altaf Hossain led-delegation to the mega conference has come back with less than what we had been getting. If it was 100 percent for Bangladesh beforehand, it is almost zero now, as far as duty- and quota-free access of our apparels to certain markets is concerned. This is not to say though, that there will be any automatic withdrawal of the facility by the multilateral market like the EU but to get the access as a universally applicable and binding WTO rule is obviously much more coveted than any preferential treatment we are enjoying now.

The USA played the pivotal role in determining the extent of the excluded list of items that wouldn't be entitled to duty- and quota-free access from the LDCs to the world market. Ninety-seven percent of LDC products have been given duty- and quota-free market access, excluding textiles that account for forty-two percent of Bangladesh's total exports.

The US for quite sometime past had been responding negatively to our much-vaunted overtures from time to time for grant of duty- and quota-free access to our garment products. Our negotiators were well aware of the fact and yet they did not try to persuade the US from taking such a hard position when the chips were down in Hong Kong. It was also foolish for them to have done the cliff-hanging in hoping that their designated lobby in US Congress will make a difference for Bangladesh.

The grant of access to 97 percent of LDC products was squarely responsive to the requirements of an overwhelming number of third world countries. They were left with no stake in Bangladesh's apparel export anxieties. To make matters worse, certain textile importing developing countries fell foul with Bangladesh -- the role of Pakistan and partly that of Sri Lanka was unhelpful to Bangladesh's cause.

We have descended from a position of LDC leadership to a position where we are left to fend for ourselves. Bangladesh's voice used to be readily and intently heard at every WTO round of negotiation. This time an eerie silence enveloped the Bangladeshi ambience in and around the conference venue.

Surprisingly, we could not, or perhaps did not even try to, gain entry to the green room where informal, trouble-shooting discussions take place helping to thrash out last-minute differences through give and take, fence-mending and alignment and realignment of interests and concerns. While Senegal and Zambia could access the green room why couldn't Bangladesh do it, we wonder.

The reasons why the Bangladesh delegation drew a blank are: it didn't do any homework, had no analysis to anticipate how important countries might position themselves, how friendly countries might behave under pressure and how indeed they were going to turn things around for a better deal. We need to rebuild our negotiating capacity to make up for the lost ground through vigorous bilateral negotiations.

Onslaught on trees

Avoid plans that entail elimination

IT is sad news that 100 trees have already been felled, and another 900 more will suffer the same fate, as a thoroughfare in the city is being widened under Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) of the City Corporation.

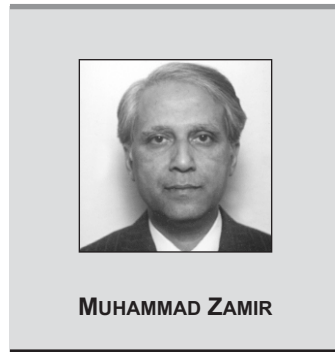
Trees and plants appear to be the first victims of any development work in the cities, and seldom have we watched any caution being exercised to save the greenery from such summary execution.

True, roads need to be widened and it is not surprising that certain trees and plants may have to be removed for the purpose. But what citizens might find a bit shocking is that the city planners do not act with a sense of sympathy. In the past we saw a huge number of beautiful trees being eliminated for apparently no good reason. Similarly, encroachment on parks and green patches is going on in different areas without the authorities concerned intervening to stop such activities. Even the note of dissent of the civil society is never greeted with a sense of approval, let alone appreciation.

The onslaught on greenery is also a blatant violation of what is being preached for turning tree plantation into a social movement. There are weeks and months observed regularly to add steam to the movement. But when it comes to protecting trees, the situation is very different.

We urge the DUTP authorities to keep the tree casualties at a bare minimum while broadening the road, for the role played by trees in maintaining a wholesome atmosphere in the city needs little elaboration.

Compromise text takes WTO process from bad to worse



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WTO Director General Pascal Lamy and Indian Trade Minister Kamal Nath were definitely in the minority when they suggested that the recently concluded WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong had achieved significant gains. It was particularly pathetic that they went on to observe that the compromise agreement reached in the Meeting had not only 'put the round back on track' but also 'given it a sense of urgency.' EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson was slightly more realistic and less euphoric. He commented that the agreement reached was 'acceptable' given the fact that 'Europe had gone further on its existing commitment by setting a clear date-- 2013-- for the elimination of export subsidies.'

Opinion of the vast majority of participants, both government delegations (from developing and least developed countries) and NGOs was however justifiably totally different.

The entire approach appears to have been the seeking of and deciding on least common denominators that would uphold and satisfy the interests of developed countries as opposed to those of developing nations. At the same time, there was no hesitation within the richer nations about marginalising LDC interests in the process. The whole purpose appears to have been to create a soft document intended to

guide ministers in further negotiations with the goal of approving a final trade liberalisation deal and completing the current round of negotiations by the end of 2006.

The agreement reached by the global body's 149 member governments in key areas included the following:

(a) in farm trade, governments accepted the elimination of all forms of export subsidies by the end of 2013. It is being hoped that substantial part of the cuts will be underway by around 2010. This was seen as a

cotton from the world's poorest nations will be allowed to enter markets in the industrialised world duty and quota free from 2008. This however did not tackle the question of the four billion dollars paid in subsidies by the US to its cotton growers which made entry into that sector that much more difficult for African cotton growers;

(e) in the sector of services, negotiations decided that there would be further liberalising of trade in this area, including banking, insurance and tourism.

Bloomer was characteristically articulate when he commented that 'small progress in agriculture was more than cancelled out by extremely damaging agreements on services and industry.'

It is quite clear that after this agreement, rich countries would still be able to protect key products such as textiles -- which would definitely affect African cotton producing nations.

Consequently, market access measures announced by the US will be meaningless as long as domestic

contention was 'agriculture subsidy.' Some sort of facilitation was achieved between the two sides. It did not however mean any fall-out for the poorer African LDCs.

Eventually, the Hong Kong Declaration has proposed the providing of duty free access for 97 percent of the LDC products sent to developed countries. This is considerably less than 100 percent or 99.9 percent that was being proposed by the LDCs including Bangladesh. The process in this regard has been further complicated by the fact that

Bangladesh and its RMG and textile sector (which employs millions of women), the US continues to refuse duty free and quota free access. It was therefore regrettable that the US Trade Representative had to remark that Bangladesh and Cambodia would not be given duty free and quota free access to the US market as 'it would be difficult to justify because of the global competitiveness of the two nations have achieved in this sector.'

This unreasonable means of protection employed by the US seems to be completely against all the doctrines that it preaches. That government seems to have forgotten that the war on terror is best fought by creating employment and generating development. This widens the number of stakeholders interested in stability and peace. It is most unfortunate that the Afro-Caribbean Bill continues to thrive within the US lobby at the expense of progress among LDC states in Asia.

The Hong Kong meeting has demonstrated once again that the developed world has its own agenda and its interests to protect. They will continue to do so at the expense of the developing and least developed countries. It has also raised agonizing moral questions as to whether removing poverty is really in the developed world's global agenda. The demonstrators and NGO representatives who braved policemen on the streets of Hong Kong have had their views amply re-affirmed about the inequity that prevails and persists within the WTO. Competitiveness has been thrown out of the window. We have missed the opportunity to eradicate poverty through a joint effort.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary, Ambassador and Member, Advisory Council on the WTO. He can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

The agreement will hurt Bangladesh severely. This is particularly unfortunate because this country has been trying over the last fifteen years to live up to its commitments towards further liberalisation. The Hong Kong meeting has demonstrated once again that the developed world has its own agenda and its interests to protect. They will continue to do so at the expense of the developing and least developed countries.

compromise between the EU, which pushed for a later date, and Australia, Brazil and the USA, which wanted a 2010 cut-off. In exchange the EU won a commitment that food aid, which Brussels says is misused by Washington to flood the US farm surplus, will be examined to ensure that they do not distort trade;

(b) in development, industrialised countries, and developing countries declared that they were in a position to give 'at least 97 percent of all goods from LDC states access to their markets from 2008';

(c) in the area of industrial goods there was least progress. In exchange for farm trade concessions, rich nations wanted developing countries to give them more market access for manufactured goods. The deal simply said that customs duties would be reduced to maximum levels but this was not set out with clarity;

(d) in cotton, it was agreed that

The developed countries have suggested that their concessions would be useful for the more than 2.4 billion poverty stricken population of the world. This does not however conform to analytical interpretation of the agreement.

It is generally agreed that the meeting after six days of grueling negotiations, adopted a text that delivered only paltry reductions in subsidies. It needs to be remembered that by 2013, the cuts in EU farm export subsidies will amount only to one billion euros. Action aid quite correctly points out that this pales into insignificance compared to the 55 billion euros that the EU gives in domestic subsidies every year.

In fact, rich countries, including the USA have conceded minimal access to their agricultural markets while opening up the sensitive industrial and services sectors of developing nations. Oxfam's Phil

subsidies persist and keep prices artificially low.

Similarly, in the services sector, the poor countries will now be forced to open key areas, including education, healthcare and water to developed countries, without getting too much of a reciprocal gain.

It is true that developed countries have pledged aid for trade. However, WTO's ministerial text does not provide any guarantee that money will actually materialise.

Deeper analysis also reveals that Annex F to the revised text of the agreement will continue to allow the US to protect about 420 product tariff lines. Japan will also be permitted to retain tariff protection on 400 products. This format is bound to further exacerbate the existing inequalities between countries.

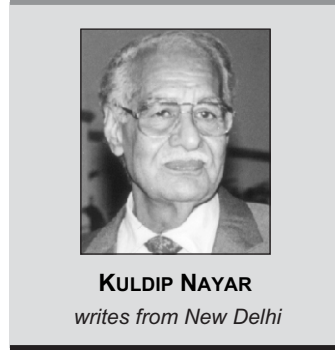
The WTO agreement was prepared following a compromise between the EU and G-20 led by India and Brazil. Their main bone of

the provider country will decide which products would be excluded from the duty-free basket.

In the case of Bangladesh, three percent tariff lines of the United States, at an eight digit level, could include over 300 products -- enough to cover all of Bangladesh's textile exports if not the most significant portion of its entire exports. In effect, after this Hong Kong meeting, doors have been opened for the situation to move from bad to worse.

The agreement will hurt Bangladesh severely. This is particularly unfortunate because this country has been trying over the last fifteen years to live up to its commitments towards further liberalisation. A democratic country, Bangladesh in its own way has opposed Islamic militancy and terrorism and tried very hard to move forward through trade rather than aid. Its success in this front is now beginning to work against it. Instead of supporting

How am I different?



KULDEEP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

FRINGE of liberals is emerging in Pakistan. They need to be supported by India through unilateral steps in the way of liberalising visas and reducing tariffs on products from across the border. I noticed the change when an audacious questioner from the audience in Lahore asked me after my lecture on Political Options in Kashmir why Islamabad had not stopped sending the jihadis into the Indian side of Kashmir. He said he had been in the Muzaffarabad area and saw for himself how army vehicles were transporting the terrorists to the Line of Control.

Yet another question from the floor was why I had not mentioned Gilgit and the Northern areas when talking about Kashmir on the Pakistan side. He was from Gilgit and said that miserable conditions had prevailed there since Islamabad took control of the area. I have been going to Pakistan since 1951 but never before had I heard such a talk beyond the drawing rooms. I find the distance between government and people increasing. Not only that but it appears both are trying to acquire more space than they

occupy at present. The nation seems to be at war within itself, at every tier of society. For example the controversy over the construction of Kala dam.

The old religious fervour is there in one form or the other. Textbooks still preach hatred against Hindus, but serious efforts are there to rewrite them. Private schools have already revised new textbooks which do not disseminate past prejudices. The Maulvi may be a pejorative

credibility because they are at the beck and call of rulers. The military is most to blame. It has tried to put a gloss of democracy over authoritarianism -- achan over khaki uniform. The military itself has become a problem, although it tries to give the impression that it is solving problems. Yet it is the only institution that works, despite its initial failure at relief and rehabilitation for the earthquake victims in Azad Kashmir.

True, adverse relations with

ensure implementation of judgment on prohibition of wasteful and exorbitant wedding feasts. (I wish we could emulate the example). Still the judiciary seldom locks horns with the military.

However one may blame the military, it is a product of the feudal attitude that prevails in Pakistan. The talk of Musharraf's exit is laced with the return of Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif. Issues are not discussed, personalities are. My fear is that if one of

Khurshid Kasuri is correct when he says that the Pakistan press is far more critical of its government than the Indian press which he described as 'pro-establishment.'

In my lectures on Kashmir, one at Lahore and the other in Islamabad, I proposed a solution to the problem: the Azad Kashmir, Gilgit and Northern areas should be merged into a state and integrated with Pakistan. The state should enjoy power over all subjects, except foreign affairs,

evoked any official reaction, except that it could make a basis for a solution. Many Pakistanis met me after the lecture, both at Lahore and Islamabad, to convey their favourable response. Some said ultimately such a formula would solve the Kashmir problem. I think that it should be saleable in India because Jammu and Kashmir has already a special status and the instrument of accession gave New Delhi only three subjects: foreign affairs, defence and communications. Moreover, the Kashmir problem would be out of the way once and for all.

However, the best way of selling such a formula is to increase people to people contact, which is somewhat lessening day by day. The impression in Pakistan is that India is not "flexible" and, to quote opposition leader Maulana Fazlur Rahman, "New Delhi has not reciprocated Pakistan's gestures even by an iota." I was criticised by a retired Lieutenant General when I said that Indians and Pakistanis were "similar" people. His argument was that since they were not similar, they left India and created a new country. I wondered whether religion made people from the same subcontinent different. We have the same history, speak the same language and enjoy the same food. As for me, I have spent my youth in Pakistan studying in the same colleges as the Muslims did. On this side, there are as many followers of Islam as in Pakistan. I have close friends in the community on both sides. How am I not similar?

Kuldeep Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

In my lectures on Kashmir, I proposed a solution to the problem: the Azad Kashmir, Gilgit and Northern areas should be merged into a state and integrated with Pakistan. The state should enjoy power over all subjects, except foreign affairs, defence and communications. A similar autonomy should be given to Jammu and Kashmir. The sovereignty of the first should vest in Islamabad and of the second in New Delhi. The LOC between the two Kashmirs should be abolished and the two can jointly have trade offices abroad, an international airline and directly seek aid from foreign countries or the World Bank.

term and very few joint issues with him, but the combination of his parties, Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, rules over the NWFP and has a solid presence in the National Assembly. But it is generally said that they are a creature of President General Pervez Musharraf who uses them against the India for cross-border terrorism, although now to a lesser extent.

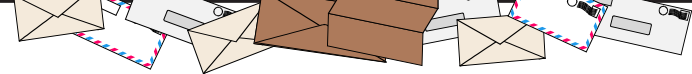
Nonetheless, the feudal behaviour continues to prevail in every segment. Military commanders, politicians and bureaucrats act like masters in their domain, not allowing dissent. This is the main reason why institutions have not come up. A few which have, lack

India have made people dependent on the military and they have a feeling that it stands between them and India which is not trustworthy. However, the price the military exacts is heavy: it has most of the top civilian positions, most of the big contracts and most of the expanding businesses. The judiciary is a check, but in a country where the military has been in power for more than four decades, judges have been overwhelmed at times. No military coup -- Pakistan has had three of them -- has been held unconstitutional. It is impressive to find the Supreme Court directing federal and provincial governments to

them -- Benazir or Sharif -- were to come back to power, the feudal outlook would not change. They would use their parties in the same way as they did when in power. The party is the means, they are the ends. The media is free and there is an explosion of TV networks. Journalists have never had it as good as now because their salaries have trebled. One thing distinctive about the Pakistani press is that it is conscious of the Lakshman rekha, the limits beyond which it cannot go. The government too issues "advice" on what not to use. The press has dutifully obliged. Still, Foreign Minister

defence and communications. A similar autonomy should be given to Jammu and Kashmir. The sovereignty of the first should vest in Islamabad and of the second in New Delhi. The LOC between the two Kashmirs should be abolished and the two can jointly have trade offices abroad, an international airline and directly seek aid from foreign countries or the World Bank. The representatives elected to the Pakistan National Assembly from the integrated state of Azad Kashmir should sit in the Lok Sabha and those elected from J&K to the Lok Sabha in the National Assembly. The formula in Pakistan did not

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.

Let's stress on morality

This is in response to the letter of Quazi Md Mahboobul Haque, Comilla on religious education published on 2nd December 2005. Religious education is imparted here for hundreds of years. Our country is one of the most religious one in the present day world. Every office has a mosque, for the devotees working there. Yet we don't find good number of honest people in these offices. Perhaps religious teaching has not been able to build their character.

We should now stress on morality and ethics for better life in temporal world. So religious education should be left to the family.

Ahmed Shah

Dhaka

Political parties

To cripple AL, BNP allowed nesting space to Jamaat and allied Islamic parties. The myopic vision was shattered after two years. Now both AL and BNP will fade out by believing too much in charisma neglecting national issues. Awami League appears to be more myopic and inward looking and more lazy, indolent, and spoilt. Both these parties have nothing more to sell or build.

The aged leaders should retire gracefully, and allow changes. It is time for a change let us have it!

A Mawaz,
Dhaka

"Bomb blast and Islam are contrary to each other"

The bomb attackers said that their aim of blasting bombs was building up the 'Islamic rules' in this country. But, on behalf of the innocent people, I want to ask them, have you got anywhere in the 'holy Quran' or in 'Hadith' that Islamic rules can be established by blasting bombs? Islamic state can be built up by killing the innocent general people? Of the victims someone is some one's sister or mother or brother or father. Have you ever thought that, that man who had been a victim of bomb attack, was the only bread-earner of his family? By whose salaries, his sick parents' medicines were bought. By that money, his family members could eat and live on this earth. By that money, his children went to school to build up themselves as enlightened persons. No, you haven't thought

ever. Are you human beings? Only God knows.

Your threats of bomb attack go to the schools of the little children and to the colleges. The schools and the colleges remain closed now by the leaflets distributed by you not by political activities. Your threats go to the courts where the innocent people go for judgement. But they have to return home as dead bodies. The mothers along with their babies cannot feel free even in home. They always remain in doubt and in tension that whether their school or college going children are alive or their office going husbands are alive. It seems that the 1971 has returned to us in this 2005 with a new face. On behalf of thousands of brothers losing sisters, I am requesting you that we have lost many brothers during the

tremendous war of 1971. So, we don't wish to lose more brothers. "Don't kill more." On behalf of thousands of daughters, this is my request to you that my father is the only source of income for our family to live on this earth." Don't make me orphan." From the thousands of mothers I want to request you that don't take away my little "sonamoni" from my breast. "Don't make it empty."

Such kinds of deaths are not desirable to us. We wish there should be only natural deaths. That children, that fathers and that brothers all are innocent. So, why are these punishments? Are these miserable deaths, which we have to see, the punishments of your inferior thoughts? Islam doesn't mean bomb blast. Islam means making the enemies friends. Killing the innocent

people doesn't mean Islam. Islam means tolerance, not terrorism.

Our Prophet (Pbuh) built up an Islamic state without any bomb blasting. He has told to preach Islam but not to blast bombs. He has told about the freedom of people to choose any religion. He has taught us to live with people of another religion side by side but even not to insult them or make quarrel with them. Rather he had been a victim of attacks but he never took revenge when he got opportunities. This is Islam. So, without following your prophet's path and by spoiling the innocent lives, which Islam do you want to establish? Try to love people, 'do your best for love' -- these are the essences of any religion. Don't be ferocious like beasts. Islam never supports such kind of acts. It never can be Islam. You

can't be of any religion, you can't be of any nation, you can't be friends of anyone, and you can't be human beings. Bomb blast is completely contrary to Islam or any other religion. Try to realise. Try to get the honey of religion.

Nasrin Akter Sathi
IUC

Reckless driving

Now-a-days reckless driving is becoming a passion with every type of drivers. They are driving their cars or taxies almost carelessly. Sometimes some drivers do not abide by the traffic rules. I think some drivers when they drive their car or taxi in the road they think the road is only for them. They cannot think that their carelessness is going to be responsible for any person's death. Only for their reckless driving

any men or women many lose their beautiful life. Few days ago a man lost his life in road accident that happened on the GEC crossing. The road is always busy because there are a lot of shopping malls, restaurants, departmental stores and banks on this road. Car, taxi or truck-bus drivers drive very carelessly and accidents occur only for careless driving. The truck drivers don't care the rickshaw, taxi or any people crossing the road and they didn't slow down. So we must wake up now and take some steps to prevent the road accidents or careless driving. We should follow our traffic rules hard and fast and also make others maintain the rules.

Irin Sultana
IUC