Our window on the world

Rafiq Hasan dissects the current malaise in the shipping sector and suggests that a deep sea port serving the entire region is the way forward

PORTS are the lifeline of a country. Most of the foreign trade of a country depends on its sea ports. There are many countries in the world which do not have any sea port. As a result, those land-locked countries face a lot of difficulties in conducting export-import business. We are fortunate that we are not a land-locked country. We have a vast seashore, a number of sea ports, and dozens of river ports. But it is very unfortunate that we could not use the seashore and ports properly.

Exports from Bangladesh have been increasing at a rate of over 25 percent for the last couple of years, while the import volume grew at a pace of around 20 percent. But the country's sea ports, the main channel for foreign trade, have not seen any major changes for facilitating the rising volume of export-import cargo in the last one decade. As a result, the Chittagong sea port which handles more than 80 per cent of export-import cargo is over-burdened, and has become a constant headache for the nation, taking heavy toll on the country's overall economy.

Although the export-import trade witnessed significant development in the last one decade, no new major port has been set up in the country for handling the additional cargo. A small sea port was, however, set up in Teknaf during the immediate past BNP regime, mainly for handling export-import cargo with neighbouring Myanmar.

An American company had come up with a proposal for setting up a new port at the estuary of the Karnaphuli river, besides the existing Chittagong port, during the previous Awami League period. The company, Stevedoring Services of America (SSA), had proposed to invest over $250 million in the first phase. The actual investment would have gone up to $1 billion had the port come into being.

But the initiative for a private port was resisted by the locals led by Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury. Although the high-ups of the then Awami League regime initially had agreed to the proposal, it was rejected later following massive agitation by Chowdhury's followers. Even though Chowdhury is a prominent Awami League leader, he did not support the AL government in this case. He argued that a new port at the very estuary of the shrinking river Karnaphuli would gradually diminish



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