

'There isn't and shouldn't be any divide'

Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), a US-based non-profit collaborated with Democracy and Development in Bangladesh Forum (DDBF) and the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University to hold the recently concluded "Bangladesh in the 21st Century" conference at Harvard. **Shayera Moula** caught up with **Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb**, BDI president and professor of marketing, Pennsylvania State University, to discuss the goals of the conference and what comes next.

Could you explain the ideas that went behind holding the conference?
Overseas remittances are the backbone of the Bangladesh economy, and many Bangladeshis abroad do care deeply about their nation. The conference was an acknowledgement of this, and we hope to build a community of researchers who can harness their resources to help build a better land that they are still very much a part of.
What were the main objectives of this discourse?
The main point of the conference was to let the government of Bangladesh know that we exist and that with our ideas and contacts there can be a better partnership

established with prominent institutions around the world. Some real power does exist outside the country, and this can be utilised to benefit political and economical advancement in Bangladesh. We can therefore be the link between Bangladesh and the rest of the world. The conference emphasised the importance of building communities where everyone can and should contribute their best for a healthier nation. We cannot work alone; we need strong affiliations.
What is the key to development?
Education and research. The libraries and books in every classroom in Bangladesh are by foreign authors who are very distant from the culture here. Many of the other

sectors such as technology or engineering are also the result of a one-way teaching and learning strategy and so many students here are unable to conduct proper research on their own.
It is important to generate local knowledge. BDI has published a Journal of Bangladesh Studies and we have also published our sixth book with UPL to bring in some understanding of our locality.
For MA or PhD students in the research committees here, we offer a group of intellectuals and experts who can ensure guidance for them. We want these students to be more critically aware and solution-oriented.
I myself am very involved with

research in the health sector here and am conducting a workshop with 22 young and enthusiastic faculties, whom I call my army of researchers. They are learning standardised methods of research because not knowing how to evaluate properly means wrong research, meaning wrong conclusions, and therefore a loss of time and money over a wrong concept.
How can professional Bangladeshis abroad contribute to a stronger economy?
Months ago in The Daily Star, there were several articles noting the psychological bond NRIs have with their country. Many Bangladeshis professionals outside have considerable expertise in the fields of health, technology, etc. We can come together and help universities and other organisations to improve and sustain the image of Bangladesh and maintain good relationships with the corporate or other local bodies here.
Even our neighbouring country, India, has built a powerful link with NRIs through which they have reshaped the image and development of their nation through edu-

cation and technology. Bangladesh, too, must nurture this two-way relationship, because Bangladeshis living abroad do want to come back with a sense of purpose and provide growth to the land that raised them.
In your conference, you mentioned Bangladesh in a constant "war with itself." How can we overcome this?
I agree that it will take time, but the election taking place this December is possibly the first step to find the right leader. This is at least a start towards something that can turn away from the crisis within this nation. It is not possible to overcome this overnight but it can be done, and by electing the right public figures we can at least start over. The problem, of course, is that we are uncertain about who will rule next, of what their background is or the ideas and options they will be providing for the betterment of the country.
You have mentioned the need for a selfless leader. How can we develop such a leader?
There can be a resolution to the many educational, socio-political,

and economical issues but for that to happen, we need peacemakers and healers. They must be patient, have wisdom, integrity, humility, and must be very confident in dealing with our problems. They must build trust with their people who have otherwise been drowned by corruption and lies.
In a recent article by Prof. Rehman Sobhan in Forum magazine, he mentioned that we need "an extraordinary leader to serve in extraordinary times" and I have written elsewhere that there is a difference between leaders and rulers. This country has been consumed by the latter, who have been unilateral and not inclusive, maintaining no real democracy. The real answer will arrive when we are able to carve out the path of true democracy and hear everyone's voices and needs.
What are the next steps?
There have been many conferences like ours, but we have a different flavour to ours. Where most conferences are unable to provide visible outputs, we have already designed a three-phased method to expand our ideas to a

larger community.
The first is the "Harvard Recommendations" which is a 20-30 page document on the details of various sectors that require development. This includes recommendations for NGOs, health, education, foreign policy, environmental issues, and so on. Once finalised, the government will be provided with copies in order to build awareness.
Secondly, summaries of these recommendations will be available for the general public and a more elaborate set of these same proposals will be prepared for presentations to the media, educational institutions, and other key organisations.
A set of books entitled "Bangladesh in the 21st Century: The Harvard Papers" is soon to be published as well.
Any last comments about the nature of Bangladesh today?
Our education has failed this nation and built a place where people are unable to think for themselves. We have become robots who can only take orders. Our culture, too, adds to this, where a junior cannot speak over a senior even if he or she is right. BDI aims

to help these suppressed voices, over-ruled by bad ideas and options, to come forth and be heard. A replacement in ideologies based on critical thinking, intellectual pursuits, and rational engagements is needed.
For those who will go into Parliament, we need to establish criteria. I am told that the general people are not wrong in their votes and despite the lack of education they have an innate understanding of what is good. We need to therefore transform that innate voice so that the real narration can be heard.
I am still hopeful as I see the desire of the young generation who wish to take the country back from poor leadership. The global Bangladeshi society can work together as human resource to undertake tasks for more investment. Imagine the power and economic benefit that can be obtained. Bangladeshis, with or without passports, care about their nation. There isn't and shouldn't be any divide.
Shayera Moula is an Editorial Assistant, The Daily Star.

Exporting our way out

Effective steps have to be taken to establish a cordial business relationship with the business community of our country and foreign importers. The officers of our foreign missions have to act as special messengers to maintain liaison with the foreign business community.

ABUL QUASEM HAIDER

IN the 2006-07 fiscal year total export earning was more than \$12 billion, which increased by 16% in the fiscal year 2007-08. In only the last month of the previous fiscal year the growth rate was almost 10%, i.e. export earning was \$1.2 billion.
Exporters considered the earning of the last fiscal year a great success. The main items exported are knit and woven garments, which have been able to maintain the upward trend of the rate of growth. A report of the Export Promotion Bureau says that export earning from knit garments increased by 19%, and from woven garments by 14% compared with the previous year. Total earnings from woven and knitted garments were \$4.658 billion and \$4.554 billion respectively.
Besides readymade garments, export earnings from frozen food, leather, textiles, agricultural products, engineering products, handicrafts, and agricultural

processed items also increased. Though a good number of buyers of America and Europe imposed conditions, Bangladesh could still earn \$515 million through exporting frozen foods, with a growth rate of over 12%. From the last fiscal year, different kinds of value added commodities have been tagged with frozen food, and that resulted in overall increase in the volume of export. Export earnings from textiles increased by 55%, leather 3.4%, pharmaceuticals 2.5%, and 16% from handicrafts.
But necessary measures are needed to be taken to further increase export earnings. The government has to encourage exports in different ways and means. It can be done some times by framing rules, in the form of financial assistance, and more so by motivation. Without proper motivation and patronage by government, export will not increase. So, in order to encourage the exporters, the government as per rules, should declare VIP and CIP from among the potential exporters every year. If appropriate steps are not taken at

national level to encourage and recognise the exporters it will be very difficult to maintain the upward trend of exports.
At present, political and social stability is prevailing in the country, and the government has to take necessary measures to ensure its continuity. Development of the country is dependent on social and political stability. The country is now heading towards prosperity under the leadership of the present caretaker government. This trend of development should be upheld. Politics and economics should not be amalgamated. To create a transparent economy for the country, transparency in politics is necessary.
To increase export earnings, our foreign missions need to be strengthened further. The commercial attaches of the foreign missions have to take strong initiatives to publicise our commodities to those countries to expand our export volume. They have also to be vigilant to hold commercial fairs in those countries. Effective steps have to be taken to establish a cordial business relationship with the business community of our country and foreign importers. The officers of our foreign missions have to act as special messengers to maintain liaison with the foreign business community.
The present caretaker govern-

ment after its assumption of power created remarkable infrastructural facilities and took effective steps for overall development. This trend of development should be maintained. The extensive plan as taken by the caretaker government for reducing the lead time, enhancement of infrastructural facilities of Chittagong, Mongla, and Benapole ports for benefit of exporters and importers should be implemented on urgent basis.
The government has in the meantime taken the decision to postpone the work for construction of a deep sea port in Chittagong. I would like to request the caretaker government to reconsider the issue, because no political government will be able to take up and complete such an expensive project with due foresightedness. The country as a whole and the next generation will be highly benefited if this project is implemented. It is expected that this project may alone contribute lion's share of the national budget.
Price hike of essential commodities in the country is still on. It is said that increase of price of commodities in the world market is responsible for price hike in our country. But the general mass of the country is not willing to accept this hypothecation. So, in order to tackle this unmanageable price hike we have to increase the volume of exports and earnings thereby. And for this purpose investment, both local and foreign, should be increased.
In order to revive economic stability, the government has to allow more time in the import-export sector and to take both long and short term views. If the price of essential commodities cannot be kept within the reach of the people, economic solvency is not possible. In that case they will not have peace of mind, and consequently social stability will be at a stake. Businessmen, entrepreneurs, importers and exporters should come forward. The general mass of the country have to be relieved of the unbearable burden of price hike by creating job opportunities and thereby increasing the per capita income of the people.



Exports - a way to economic stability.

The writer is a former vice-president, FBCCI, BGMFA, BTMA and chairman, Eastern University.

Food security of marginal farmers

The Foshol project was launched to improve sustainable food security and livelihoods of the agriculture-dependent resource-poor households in Bangladesh by adapting and implementing appropriate technical, social and organisational improvements.

Z.A.M. KHAIRUZZAMAN

YEARS of hardship and labour in agricultural fields of Baro Kashipur Moddha Para village of Sarulia union under Tala upazila in Satkhira have worn 40-year-old Hajera Begum to the bone. A single woman by choice, she walked out on her husband 10 years ago and survived.
Yet Hajera's eyes sparkle today with a new zest for life. Perfectly turned out in a traditional cotton sari, she says: "All that's in the past now. I have built my own house and have a poultry farm."
Hajera's story captures in a nutshell how some asset-less villagers have become self-sufficient. The Food Security for Sustainable Household Livelihoods (Foshol) Project of Action Aid Bangladesh (AAB) is unique in the fact that it is the country's first sustainable project for and by poor farmers. In the process, marginal farmers have changed the quality of life in their villages by empowering themselves.
Hajera's rising fortune is a story that has been repeated hundreds of times in the lives of farmers who live in the hamlets in various districts. Within three years of its founding in 2005, the European Commission-funded project transformed the villages, enabling farmers to emerge as powerful catalysts of change. The project has changed the face of villages in six districts.
Baro Kashipur Moddha Para is one such village where the living standard of the people has substantially improved and the environment has completely changed. The village is on its way to becoming a model, developed village.
The Foshol project was launched to improve sustainable food security and livelihoods of the agriculture-dependent resource-poor households in Bangladesh by adapting and implementing appropriate technical, social and organisational improvements.
The project is underway in

Kurigram, Satkhira, Khulna, Patuakhali, Noakhali and Sunamganj. Six partner NGOs -- Jibika, Uttaran, Jagroto Jubo Sangstha (JJS), Speed Trust, Noakhali Rural Development Society (NRDS) and Voluntary Association for Rural Development (VARD) are helping to implement the project.
Jibika works at Ulipur and Sadar upazilas of Kurigram, Uttaran in Tala and Sadar upazilas of Satkhira, JJS at Rupsa and Koira upazilas of Khulna, Speed Trust at Kalapara upazila of Patuakhali, NRDS at Begumganj and Sadar upazilas of Noakhali and VARD at Vishambhapur upazila of Sunamganj district.
Project activities revolve round a Foshol house of farmers. The secret of success of the project lies in a novel way of formation of the house.
Initially, a two-month training is imparted to field workers of partner NGOs. On conclusion of the training, they start working in collaboration with the central coordination and management team of ActionAid.
Foshol community development facilitators (CDFs) headed

by team leaders select the impoverished unions. During selection, they walk through the unions and organise discussions at various levels. A similar procedure is followed in selection of villages. Key information and output of discussions with the elite, union parishad chairmen and teachers are taken into consideration.
Project team members enlist names of probable Foshol farmers. If necessary, CDFs are at liberty to delete anybody's name from the list. They visit houses of the enlisted farmers to ensure that the criteria are fulfilled. In the next step, CDFs hold meetings with the newly-selected farmers in groups. Each group consists of 25 to 30 members.
In the meetings, participant farmers realise that Foshol won't provide them with loan, instead, it will point out their problems and help resolve those.
At the initial stage, the meetings are held at the courtyard of any house. At one stage, they come to the realisation that they require a house to meet in. CDFs extend their hands of cooperation towards them. They hold participatory meetings. They build the Foshol farmers' houses through mutual cooperation. There are 20 to 25 Foshol houses in each union.
In the houses they discuss issues relating to food security, rights, access to government facilities, gender discrimination, restriction on participation in

economic activities of women, polygamy, gambling, early marriage, dowry and social exclusion that affect their food security.
Alongside, efforts are being made to raise their organisational capability, create funds and encourage leadership. Participants tackle issues like rise in production, marketing of their produce, and rights and women's empowerment issues. They also maintain liaison with government and non-government service oriented organisations from the houses.
Later, Foshol Krishok Moitree, an alliance of farmers, is formed with two members of the executive committee of Foshol house. Krishok Moitree gears up activities of the grassroots organisations, helps in materialisation of their programs and ensures that farmers are not deprived of their due services from government and non-government organisations. Moitree houses are set up in the middle of the unions.
Members undertake various programs and training courses to raise their leadership quality. They strengthen the organisational foundation of Moitree by contributing generously from profits earned by selling their produce.
In the process, a Foshol house emerges as success house of farmers which ensures their food and livelihood security.
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Will I get the next meal?

Let's all try and be a bit nastier to each other

SIBLING rivalry is breaking out all over. But not between kids; between countries behaving like kids.
The latest war of words is between Hong Kong and Singapore.
Neighbourly feuding has a long and illustrious history in Asia. It's been a particularly popular pastime for South Asian siblings -- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
The funny thing is that the rest of the world is convinced all the above are one country. If I had a dollar for every time someone said to me: "You're from Sri Lanka -- that's part of India, right?" I

would have two dollars. Maybe more.
Fortunately, those four nations have recently been expressing their hostility through cricket, a sport in which one needs every ounce of mental energy to deal with bizarre rules and terminology (one fielding position is called Silly Mid-On and you often hear suspicious, off-colour phrases such as "bowling a maiden over").
Yet the squabbling South Asian family is a total love-fest compared to Taiwan and mainland China. At regular intervals, China releases a statement saying: "Taiwan is an integral part of

the Motherland, always has been and always will be," and then shows the depths of its filial love by raining ballistic missiles into its neighbour's waters. The message is clear: "We are family; die, scum."
Now all parents know that the closer kids are, the worse the infighting is. This is really true for Hong Kong and Singapore.
They're not just sisters but identical twins. Both are city-states. Both have a colonial past and a Chuppie (Chinese yuppie) present. Both claim to be the busiest port in Asia. Both claim to have the best airport. Both have more smartphones than smart

people. Both are pimples on the bottoms of larger countries.
The latest round of fighting broke out when a survey claimed Singapore citizens would be richer than Hong Kong's. Hong Kong commentators sneered about the poverty of freedoms in Singapore.
In Internet chat rooms, one Hong Konger claimed Singapore was "one big, ugly housing estate" while another dubbed it "Stepfordpore," a reference to a creepy story about a place populated by seemingly well-behaved zombies.
Singaporeans were outraged. The most creative response came

from singers Katie Oh and Taz the Raz who wrote a song in Singlish mocking the fact that Hong Kong had failed to keep its colonial architecture: "Our old buildings are renewed, but theirs? Where got it!" The song was emailed around the Internet and inevitably ended up on YouTube (look up "Singapore vs Hong Kong"). It comes with an invitation to respond, and horrified Hong Kongers have grabbed guitars to do so.
As someone who has lived in both cities, I feel it is my duty to do what I can to escalate this pointless, unnecessary, and highly enjoyable battle. I have

access to studios and cameras and will be happy to help anyone with songs, videos, poems, jokes, et cetera to keep the level of debate suitably low.
Some people will accuse me of merely looking for a cheap way to generate copy to fill this column, and my reply to them is: Yeah? So?
Sibling rivalry is one of the drivers of self-improvement, psychologists say. So let's all try and be a bit nastier to each other. Or in the Singlish words of Katie Oh: "Eskew me? Why you look at me lida?"
There'll be lots of comments on this piece at www.vittachi.com.