

Automation at Chittagong Customs House

Making it work without a glitch is the challenge

WITH the inauguration of the automation project of the Chittagong Custom House the forwarding and clearing operation of the port has potentially come at par with that of other international ports. All concerned agencies and institutions must be complimented for their role in completing this project within a very short span of time. This new addition comes as a part of the larger context of the port operation, which would have remained incomplete without this technology. The changeover is also heartening because it is a product of public-private partnership.

This modernisation, one understands, is a part of the overall reform project of Chittagong port which saw in the first part the operation of the port made more efficient by introducing procedures that have helped reduce the turnaround time of the ships from 14 days to three.

This is indeed a good start in respect of the government efforts to improve the overall commerce and business climate in the country. It is now for all concerned to see that the system functions without any hindrance, since there is a lot at stake for all of us in its being able to do so. There is also the imperative for consistent monitoring of the system to stave off any glitch, technical or manmade.

Apart from the fact that the cost of doing business will come down to almost half, which has been mainly due to the inordinate procedural delay imposed by the operatives of the past system and their corrupt practice, the steps for clearing and forwarding goods will be reduced to five from what is a most unseemly 42 steps. This will not only contribute nearly Taka 400 crores to the state kitty annually, which was being lost through tax evasion and paying the corrupt custom officials, there is the question of savings in terms of man-hour loss since it will not require traders' physical presence at the customhouse, as bulk of the paperwork can be done on line. Hopefully, we have seen an antidote to corruption in Chittagong Customs House put in place.

It is only but natural to assume that this step will reflect too on the price level of imported goods and fulfillment of export orders. If the consumers are not benefitted by the cost saving mechanism, and if the businessmen use the system to enhance their profit margin only, without reflecting the cost savings on the prices of goods, it will unfortunately be another system that will be by the rich and for the rich only.

We would hope that not only should the new system be fully utilised by all the concerned agencies, similar system should also be introduced in other ports of entry including land ports of the country.

BSTI seals absent on products

The body must be made more effectual

IT is surely a matter of concern that many products in the market do not carry the mandatory seal of the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution. In fact, there are hundreds of products that are openly being sold in the market, with hardly anyone to check whether these products, minus BSTI approval, can be offered to the public. Intriguingly, the BSTI always seems to be in the news every time there is bad news about what it does not do or how people can skirt around it. That says a good deal about what must now be done to turn the organisation into an effective body if goods sold in the market are to maintain safety standards.

Plainly, what has been happening around the issue of the BSTI seal on products is horrifying. When the requirement is that such a wide range of products as chemical goods and foods must be certified by the BSTI as safe, there is clear evidence to show that product manufacturers and in turn traders are flouting it with impunity. One very important reason why that is happening is that the organisation is clearly handicapped by a shortage of manpower. Only 22 inspectors are there (and 15 of them are in Dhaka alone). That fact is as mind-boggling as it is outrageous. It clearly shows that for all the good intentions behind the working of the body, there is obviously a need to prioritise matters, a job that must begin with an increase in staff. At the same time, it must be ensured that such staff are technically qualified to judge products and possess the confidence and integrity to come down hard on anyone contravening BSTI regulations.

BSTI has to depend on borrowed laboratory facilities to certify products or test suspected hazardous products. There should be a self-contained laboratory facility at the BSTI.

An institution cannot run on half-hearted measures. It is clear the BSTI is in need of a thorough overhaul if it means to make its presence felt. Appointment of qualified staff, especially quality inspectors, and a strict enforcement of regulations can make it move. Tokenism will simply not do where the question is one of a maintenance of public health. The BSTI case reveals the flawed prioritisation patterns that the authorities have been pursuing. In effect, the BSTI has been sidelined as a body. If it is to regain its health, a change in attitude is called for.

All those deaths... and all our questions

GROUND REALITIES

And yet there is more to the story than an adherence to history. Far too many sinister men have taken hold of our lives than we could ever conceive of. Long stretches of darkness have claimed increasing swathes of our lives. It is these sinister men who must be brought to justice, and it is that old darkness which must be rolled back.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SYED Muhammad Ibrahim started it all. The former military officer let it be known a few days ago that former army chief and president Hussein Muhammad Ershad bore responsibility for the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, and the murder a few days later of General M.A. Manzoor.

Ibrahim was soon joined by another retired officer, Ayenuddin, who echoed the former's sentiments. And now the debate has been joined by one more superannuated officer (and a freedom fighter at that). Mir Shawkat Ali has not been ambivalent about his feelings at all. Ershad, says he, knew everything. To be fair to Ershad, though, the former military ruler has tried explaining his side of the story.

In May 1981, says he, the responsibility for the provision of security to General Ziaur Rahman was not the army's because Zia was at the time a civilian, elected president of Bangladesh. It was not the business of the army to ensure his safety when he travelled to Chittagong on May 30. Ershad's point is obvious: when Zia was killed in a putsch the same night, it was a failure of normal security. The military had nothing to do with it.

And there you have it. After all these years, we have a new, neces-

sary issue before us that must be handled to the satisfaction of the country. General Zia, by any measure Bangladesh's first military dictator, survived eighteen attempted coups and was felled on the nineteenth. That was a tragedy, proof that the murderous politics that had been inaugurated through the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 was not about to end any time soon.

This truth came to pass within days of the Zia murder, when General Manzoor, ostensibly the principal figure behind the May 30 happenings, was shot and left dead by a roadside ditch in Chittagong. He had earlier been arrested while on the run by the police but was swiftly handed over to the army.

That should have ensured his security; a proper inquiry could have been ensured and the truth would have emerged. Indeed, the fact that a legitimate civilian government under acting President Abdus Sattar was in place should have been enough for Manzoor to feel reassured about his security and a subsequent fair trial.

That, of course, did not happen, which is why things have always remained murky about who did what in that period of darkness long ago. Who shot Manzoor and on whose instructions has remained a terrible secret.

And the secret was certainly not

unearthed by the court martial of the officers who were tried on charges of being complicit in the Zia assassination and eventually hanged. Those officers, with Brigadier Mohsinuddin at the head, were subjected to unspeakable humiliation in the course of their trial, which, of course, was conducted in camera.

All these condemned officers protested their innocence, and Mohsinuddin is said to have written to his family wondering what crime he had been tried for and why he had been sentenced to death. All these men went to the gallows, and not a word was said about the manifest unfairness with which they were treated between their arrest and their liquidation.

Now, all these years after the tragedy, it does become an imperative to ask the questions that have never been asked, to be given the answers that should have been made available long ago.

Mir Shawkat Ali's query about why a freedom fighter should murder another freedom fighter takes on particular relevance. Beginning in November 1975, and continuing up to September 1981, it was a systematic elimination of freedom fighter officers in the armed forces that turned out to be something of an norm.

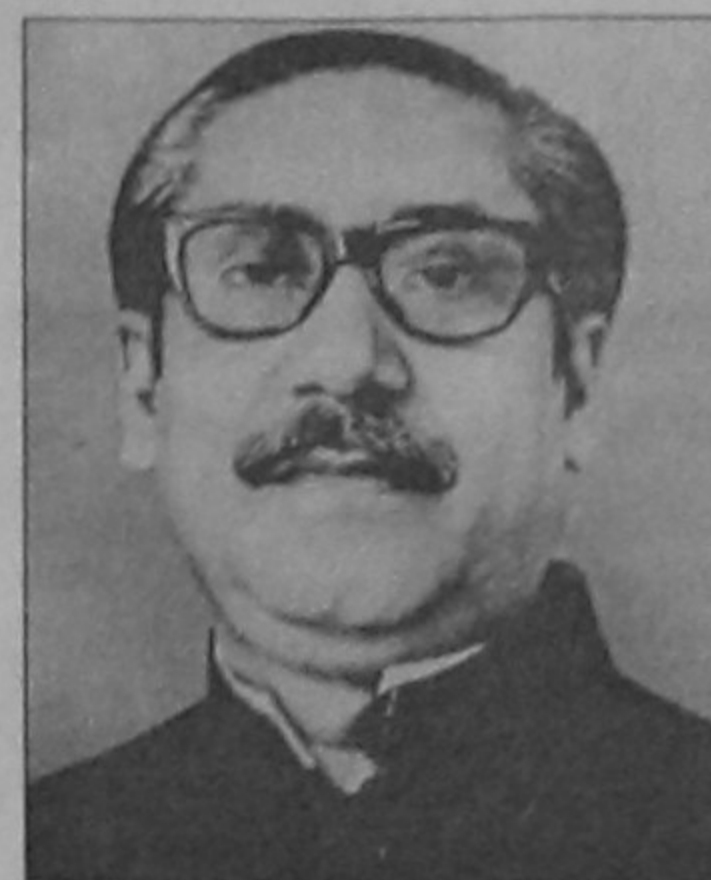
A revolution consuming its own heroes, in that historical sense of the meaning? Keep the answer in

abeyance, for now, and focus on all the things that should have happened, or should not have happened at all. In Algiers in 1973, Cuba's Fidel Castro was left stupefied when Bangabandhu informed him that all the military and civilian Bengali officers repatriated from Pakistan had been absorbed, without any screening, into the Bangladesh administration.

Syed Najmuddin Hashim, a captive in post-1971 Pakistan, told anyone willing to listen to him (or read his revealing Bondishala Pakistan) that significant was the number of Bengali civilians outraged by the vivisection of Pakistan -- and yet a whole bunch of these officers would go on to command the heights of bureaucratic authority in Bangladesh once the symbols of national liberation had been swept off the national canvas.

That is part of the story. There is the other part, where political fratricide comes in.

Remember November 1975? Colonel Taher made that arduous journey all the way from Quetta, Pakistan, in 1971 to link up with the freedom struggle in Mujibnagar. In 1975, he faltered. His shining intellect collapsed when he chose, of his own volition, to undermine the change that General Khaled Mosharraf had just brought about, through ejecting Khondokar Mosharraf and his murderous cabal from Bangabhaban.



Taher moved to free Zia, which was a brave act. And then he did nothing to prevent Musharraf, Huda and Haider from being done to death by soldiers persuaded into thinking that the November 3 changeover had been a conspiracy against the country.

No inquiry was ever instituted into the tragedy. No one knows who instigated those mutinous soldiers into murdering Musharraf and his fellow freedom fighters. It stands to reason to ask, at this remove in time, how many of the men involved in the so-called sepyajana revolution had been repatriated to Bangladesh from Pakistan between 1973 and 1974. And, therefore, it becomes quite legitimate to ask, today, about the whereabouts of the men who went into the odious job of murdering, almost in a rhythmic pattern, Khaled Mosharraf and his fellow officers in 1975; and Manzoor in 1981.

We need to ask, too, about the modalities employed in the court martial of the twelve officers sent to their deaths in the latter part of 1981. General Abdur Rahman presided over that sham of a trial. And then he died, in inexplicable circumstances, in Paris while on duty as the country's ambassador



to France. That death too calls for an inquiry.

Go back to 1976, to ask that a fresh inquiry be held into the secret trial and execution of Taher in July of the year. And that is not the end of the story. The haze that has surrounded the assassination of Ziaur Rahman, the identities of the men engaged in the conspiracy to kill him, the details of how the truth may have been hushed up must all be brought out into the light in the interest of history.

And yet there is more to the story than an adherence to history. Far too many sinister men have taken hold of our lives than we could ever conceive of. Long stretches of darkness have claimed increasing swathes of our lives. It is these sinister men who must be brought to justice, and it is that old darkness which must be rolled back.

Perhaps the wheel of justice will turn? Perhaps the cobwebs will be swept away and all those glaring truths, those that have been kept from us, will stand revealed? Perhaps a solemn rainbow moment will dawn, for us to be able to say with conviction -- Never again?

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The AL is lurching



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE AL is clearly in disarray and has lost its direction.

Or else why should it be wooing a fiendish tinpot dictator like Ershad for reorganising an alliance called mohajote. The disturbing rumour had already been in the air, and now it has been spelt out by the man himself. He claims he was in the mohajote and is still in it. Those who favour the idea are least aware that by subsuming him in the jote the entire alliance will spread a miasma, driving people away from it.

Although the storm of 1/11 blew over the AL with the same fury as that over other major political outfits, or even more, it also brought in its wake a windfall of opportunities, affording it extra political mileage over others. But it

PERSPECTIVES

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did not seem to have availed them. Finally, it has come to be equated with the much-condemned BNP and its allies. It's depressing for any well-wisher of the party.

It's an enigma that, at a crucial point of time when the national election is barely two months away, Sheikh Hasina, the party chief, is abroad, undergoing medical treatment -- interspersed with transatlantic jet-travel, match-making, and attending marriages, which makes her trip look a jaunt and junket.

Back home, the party is in the doldrums, awaiting her personal intervention, decision and guidance in vital national and party issues. In a highly centralised party set up, no one else seems to be

empowered to act in her absence.

Her party colleagues have not shown much finesse or expertise in resolving day-to-day problems facing the party. It's a pity that the committed grassroots activists are adrift aboard a rudderless ship, with their potential going totally waste.

Yet the advent of 1/11 opened the door for the party's rejuvenation through suitable reforms and restructuring, as well as by jettisoning its past unwanted baggage in term of outdated ideas and petered-out persons. The AL did nothing, except wait for an opportune time.

Even now, there may not be a dearth of flunkies and falterers, as well as ticket-seekers and

sloganeering supporters for this huge political outfit, the oldest and the largest in the country -- but that's not what matches the stature of the party that spearheaded the country's independence.

Compared to where the AL stands today, the stature of the BNP -- universally booed even the other day -- has gone several notches up because it took the matter of its survival rather seriously after it fell from public grace while the AL tended to relax and remained complacent with the result of their pre-1/11 movements.

The AL has since been in a stupor, restricting its party activities at the best to the drawing room of Ivy Concord, and has displayed little initiative and dynamism. The BNP



Joker in the pack?

and its alliance partners, on the other hand, created much more waves and noise, trumpeting their arrival afresh to the centre-stage of national politics.

The AL's low profile has perhaps emboldened the establishment to be gradually more hostile to AL, demolishing the caretaker government's much vaunted promise to construct a "level playing field" prior to the election.

Although Madam Zia is about to face another indictment over Bara Pukuria graft case, she has secured bail in all other cases against her. But Sheikh Hasina is still to obtain

permanent bail in all thirteen cases pending against her to avoid fresh incarceration as and when she returns. There seems to be no serious effort even to fight for her bail.

Perhaps as a result of this, a section of the media is also doubtful about her return any time soon -- whatever may be the reason. Political observers, both at home and abroad, are waiting to see how, in that case, the AL would manage its election amid the indecision and uncertainty.

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Is another Great Depression looming?



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

NO NONSENSE

To survive this crisis, the already debt-ridden America would need more borrowings from the rest of the world. This will indubitably hamstring the next president's ability to act unilaterally on anything other than critical national security issues. Foreign aid to developing economies is also bound to be tight-fisted.

rest of the global financial markets and economies along.

The culprit is the American model of less government intrusion in the private sector -- in particular, less regulation of the financial sector -- while turning a blind eye to unbridled growth of greed and deception of the CEO's of large corporations and the Wall Street manipulators.

The demise is essentially a reflection of the absence of ethics and morality in Wall Street. People's sense of responsibility for their own actions -- paying their bills or keeping their promises -- has plummeted.

Greed and deception of executives of financial institutions have skyrocketed, because the Bush administration and the politicians in the Congress unleashed dereg-

lations while partying with Wall Street millionaire CEO's.

"What we are witnessing, in the broadest sense, is the bankruptcy of modern economics. A hallmark of the crisis has been the stark contrast between the 'real economy' of production and jobs and the tumultuous financial markets of stocks, bonds, banks, money funds and the like," said Robert Samuelson (Newsweek, September 29).

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To slow the bleeding, a bailout package of \$700 billion was proposed by the US Treasury, and a modified version of it was passed by the Congress on October 3 amid opposition from many lawmakers and public outcries.

Harvard University economist and former Treasury secretary, Lawrence Summers, argues that the ultimate cost of the bailout is impossible to predict -- this will depend primarily on the economy as well as the quality of oversight and execution of the bailout provisions.

However, the ultimate cost will be less than \$700 billion since the bailout is an asset swap -- government bonds for banks assets.

The public cried "no" to the package as they saw it, in part, as a way of bailing out the crooked CEOs of Wall Street who will walk

away scot-free with millions of dollars of their benefit contracts while the law abiding tax payers take the burden of debt for no fault of their own.

The modified bailout plan's provisions made \$250 billion immediately available for purchasing bank assets, leaving \$100 billion to the president's discretion and \$350 billion subject to congressional review.

The concern, though, is about burgeoning budget deficits resulting from financing the bailout by issuing government bonds to be held by investors, which will crowd out other, more productive, investments.

One may plausibly argue that as long as the government buys banks assets -- such as mortgage-backed securities (MBS) -- with new issues of government bonds -- there is no crowding out effect. It's essentially an asset for asset swap -- although some losses (estimated to be 20-30%) are bound to be passed on to tax payers from some of the worthless MBS.

The loss is inevitable, given that Wall Street bankers leveraged \$1 trillion worth of MBS, which are valued at approximately 40 cents or

less on the dollar.

Martin Wolf of The Financial Times noted that US household indebtedness jumped from 50% of GDP in 1980 to 100% in 2007, while financial-sector debt increased from 21% of GDP to 116% over the same period. People boosted their standard of living well beyond what their income and wealth could support.

The potentially crippling problem now is the short-term credit markets, where banks are hoarding whatever cash they have in an effort to ride out the crisis and, thus, loans are few and far between.

This hoarding is creating a larger credit crisis that could begin to squeeze every business that needs cash flow -- from department stores financing inventory to credit card companies juggling millions of purchases every day.

The credit crisis has already crossed the Atlantic to the Euro Zone. In UK, the overnight bank to bank lending rates (LIBOR) doubled to 6.87% on September 30 from 2.57% from the day before.

The concerns in the US are the migration of the crisis from Wall Street to Main Street, where the

pain is only beginning to be felt. The government and the Federal Reserve are focusing on keeping money flowing in the credit system -- and thereby limiting layoffs, shutdowns and bankruptcies.

In his Market Watch commentary, Irwin Kellner said: "We are nowhere near a depression, so let's stop talking ourselves into one. [...] Now, don't get me wrong, I am not saying things aren't serious out there, but another Great Depression? I don't think so."

Some pertinent statistics reveal more differences than similarities between the 1930s and today:

- The 1929 stock market crash caused the DJIA to plunge 40% in two months compared to 22% over a year now.
- The unemployment rate jumped to 25% by 1933 compared to 6.1% today.
- The GDP shrank by 25% during the early 1930s; it is up over 3% during the past year.
- Consumer prices fell by about 30% from 1929 to 1933; and it is rising now.
- Home prices plunged more than 30% during the Depression versus about 16% today.

By 1934, some 40% of all mortgages were delinquent versus 4% today.

More than 9,000 banks failed in the 1930s compared with fewer than 20 over the past couple of years.

Looking back, almost everyone agrees that the Great Depression wasn't caused by the stock market collapse alone -- it was mostly caused by policy blunders. Instead of increasing the money supply (and credit flow) -- the Federal Reserve of that era reduced it by nearly 33%.

Today's automatic macroeconomic stabilisers, such as unemployment insurance, Social Security blankets, the government backed insurance of bank deposits (by FDIC: Federal Depository Insurance Corporations), and circuit breakers to keep stocks from falling too fast, stand as safeguards. The Great Depression can still revisit us -- but it is highly unlikely.

A recession is inevitable -- if not already underway -- and the policy makers are striving to make it less painful and short lived, if that is at all possible.

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