

Planning for local investment buoyant

The challenge is to translate this into reality

THE figures for local investment proposals in the first ten months of the current calendar year showed an upward trend, according to statistics released by the Board of Investment (BoI). Even though all the schemes submitted before the BoI would not likely hit the ground; yet, the forward looking intent to industrialise through local capital somehow stands out. Indeed, it's a healthy departure from the cold feet local enterprise got for a good length of time since the anti-corruption-cum-accountability drive was launched by the interim caretaker government on assumption of power.

Also, this reflects the strength of local enterprise in the way it has felt undeterred by any perceived knock-on effect of the global financial meltdown on our export prospects, which admittedly though, would take time to sink in. In any case, the first few months since the onset of recession in the West has seen no dearth of investment proposals as reflected by the overall figures of the first ten months.

Significantly, most of the proposed projects are concentrated in the textile and apparel-based sectors but with a positive bias towards backward and forward linkages. This is indicative of Bangladesh receiving 'more response from international buyers to 'outsource clothing'. The more backward linkages we have to garment manufacturing, the more competitive our exporters become with a greater local value addition.

Even so, the concentration of industries in one or two sectors only could mean putting the eggs in one basket which might not prove prudent in the light of the still unpredictable impact of the world financial meltdown on our economy. So, local entrepreneurs should move into newer areas of investment to expand the export base. Three sectors that immediately come to mind are information technology, agro-processing and handicraft.

BoI chief has cited formation of Better Business Forum and Regulatory Reforms Commission and trade facilitation at customs and port points as having brought the country's business back on track. While agreeing with him, we would like to add that business confidence has been long in coming back and, this has to be consolidated and strengthened from here on by the elected government.

The biggest challenge is nagging energy and power crisis that must be overcome if we are to provide impetus to the industrialisation process.

Inferno at Islambagh

Lessons learnt are never applied

THE dreadful daytime blaze at Islambagh on Thursday took a heavy toll in terms of lives lost, people injured and suffering and property gutted. The loss is calculated at anything between Tk two and four crore. Not only poor people are having to live under open skies, the loss of shoe and foam factories has dealt a blow to local trade.

Even though the exact cause of fire was not immediately known, the most plausible seems to be sparks originating in a welding shop near the shoe sole factory that ignited a bush fire like hell-fire in an area stuffed with inflammable materials. As the drums containing chemicals caught fire and blew up so did an electric transformer with the fire being fuelled into a virtual inferno.

As with previous fire incidents, this time too, the fire service personnel had great difficulty controlling the blaze and putting it out, which altogether took three hours. With narrow or no access through the maze of alleys and blind alleys together with no water source nearby to be able to douse the fire, the 17 fire service units commanded from different fire stations had to literally struggle against daunting odds to be able to reduce the fire into dying embers.

This weaves like an all-too-familiar tragic tale of a fire breaking out from either an electric short circuit, or an exposed cooking stove, or a leaking gas line, or sparks from welding machine and then the hindrances faced by the fire service in getting to the area promptly enough to bring the fire under control. Other than a recital of problems what have we done to mitigate the situation through an action plan for fighting fire given all the constraints there are. We have quickly unlearned the lessons after each fire only to encounter a more ferocious fire the next time around.

Let's face it we cannot change the demographic realities overnight nor can we arrest the horizontal expansion of habitat. What we can do is keep the populous spots free from strings of factories or welding shops. If the latter should be unavoidable in some cases, then at least their owners must be required to have fire extinguishers in their premises. Sometimes, acts of sabotage were suspected in the case of some slum fires on the part of a rival group. This calls for intense policing and vigil on the part of communities. But basically, an awareness of fire hazards and how to minimise these, will have to be built among the citizens.

Tackling terrorism in South Asia

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE world has recoiled with horror and anger after the militant attacks carried out in Mumbai. More than 190 were killed and over 400 wounded in the carnage. It was clear that meticulous planning and "international collaboration" were undertaken by the perpetrators prior to the incident. It also displayed severe lapses of Indian security agencies.

What made it unique were the frontal engagements lasting for more than three days, carried out by young men armed with sophisticated weapons. They were also immediately labelled as Islamist because they tried to single out Americans, British and the Israelis from the foreign community residing in Mumbai. Unfortunately, once again, Islam (which forbids the taking of innocent civilian lives), has come under scrutiny.

The last five years have seen the rise of militancy and terrorism throughout Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Recently, this phenomenon in the western part of South Asia has been interestingly termed as an "AfPak" problem by an American general. Thousands of people in this region have died and tens of thousands have become disabled. One such victim is Sheikh Hasina, former prime minister of Bangladesh.

India has been reeling from several deadly militant incidents since 2003. Mumbai itself has been repeatedly hit by severe militant attacks over the past 15 years, the worst of which targeted its suburban rail network and killed more than 180 commuters in July 2006.

Responsibility for some of these attacks has been claimed by so-called "home-grown Indian Islamic militant splinter groups" with names stressing their local origins "Indian Mujahedeen" and "Islamic Security Force-Indian Mujahedeen." After the Mumbai attack, a group called the "Deccan Mujahedeen" (ostensibly of Indian origin) claimed responsibility for it.

Most security and strategic analysts worldwide have, however, refused to buy this claim. They have termed it as a "red

POST BREAKFAST

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herring" meant to create confusion about the antecedents of the terrorist group and also to convey an impression that the terrorists were home-grown.

The Indian government also has not given credence to the claim. Islamabad has denied any involvement, but the Indian prime minister has alleged "external linkages" and the foreign minister has pointed out that there was prima facie evidence of the attackers having links with "elements" in Pakistan. Pakistan has also been asked to stop cross border terrorism and curb the activities of terrorist outfits like the Lashkar-e-Tayebba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Lashkar-e-Tayebba has, however, denied any role in the Mumbai attacks.

To say the least, this latest attack will be a severe setback for the democratically elected Pakistan government and its efforts to improve bilateral relations with India (which has included a Pakistani offer of "no first nuclear strike clause"). It will also be disappointing for the Pakistani policy makers who are themselves recovering from a massive terrorist attack carried out recently in Islamabad.

I had, in my article, *The collection, sharing and protection of data*, on May 31, stressed on the need for South Asian countries to replicate the efforts being undertaken in the European Union in this regard. In this context, it would be worthwhile for the South Asian countries to try and implement the decisions agreed to by heads of state or government during the Fifteenth Summit

Meeting.

The paragraphs related to "Combating terrorism" are particularly significant. The leaders condemned all forms of terrorist violence and expressed deep concern over the serious threat posed by terrorism to peace, stability and security in the region. They also recognised the growing linkages between the phenomena of terrorism, illegal trafficking in narcotic and psychotropic substances and illegal trafficking of persons and firearms, and underscored the need to address the problem in a comprehensive manner. It was decided to strengthen the legal regime against terrorism through the implementation of all international conventions related to combating terrorism to which member states were parties. Special emphasis was also given to the operational functioning of the provisions outlined in the Saarc Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and the Additional Protocol to this Saarc Convention.

South Asian leaders have also agreed to abide by the contents of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) pertaining to restrictions on collection and acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts. In this regard, aware of the significance of the proposed UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, they also urged an early conclusion of the Convention.

These are all positive areas of convergence and assume greater importance,

given the already existing desire to have closer cooperation among the police forces of each country. To this has been added the finalisation of the text of the Saarc Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in General Matters.

The litmus test will now be how far and how meaningfully the intelligence organisations and law and order implementing agencies of Pakistan and India cooperate in not only identifying the perpetrators and their national backgrounds but also in the resolving of the post-crisis factors that have evolved out of the attacks in Mumbai. It will also be incumbent on the Bangladesh administration to extend all assistance, if asked.

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We must not forget the impending parliamentary election at the end of December. Stability is absolutely important at this crucial time. We have to remember that we also have home-grown extremist groups who need to be monitored very closely. The recent discovery of grenade making materials and other lethal explosives from the hideout of an extremist organisation located in Dhaka was ominous, to say the least.

Consequently, it would be pertinent for our relevant authorities to review very cautiously the standard operating procedures related to security in all areas frequented by foreigners and other soft targets like shopping malls, bus stands, railway stations and airport terminals. It is better to be careful than to be sorry.

We must all understand that contingency planning for tomorrow starts from today. The South Asian response to the destabilising influence of such a terrorist act needs to be transparent, categorical and convincing.

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Destruction of art works manifests intolerance

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE vandalising of "Balaka" sculpture is an act of intolerance by fundamentalists. Some radical religious groups are spreading their brand of Islam that also creates hatred and fear among the ethnic minorities. Since the early '80s state and religion have been mixed. Religion became a tool for exploiting people and the secular character of the constitution was changed.

Ever since, the fires of conflict, hate and intolerance have been burning, pitting Bangladeshis against Bangladeshis. This has also generated fierce rage that is destroying the soul of Bangladesh. Otherwise sane and sober people are inciting intolerance and even sanctioning violence and murder in the name of jihad.

The growing intolerance has created ultra-religious groups preaching new ethos in the name of Islam. This has also resulted in the mushrooming of madrasas, mostly foreign funded and imparting a brand of education bereft of modernity.

The destruction of sculptures is perhaps an expression of anger, a message rather than a mission. That, and the expressed desire to destroy the Shikha Onirban, exposes the face of religious radicalism. Vandalism of sculptures is a symptom, but it could develop into a threat. Indonesia, the biggest Muslim majority country, has hundreds of sculptures in different parts of its territory.

An upsurge of extremism, zealotry, and fanaticism has shaken the foundation of our fledgling democracy. Continued apathy, ill-governance and soft treatment of terrorists created a fertile ground for the militants to

BITTER TRUTH

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operate in. With election nearing, the new threat has serious implications, not only for the present CTG but also for the next elected government.

In their quest for political space, these fanatic groups have exposed the weakness of state power. At a time when the nation needs undivided attention to fight the battle on the economic front, these disgruntled elements are reviving divisive politics, factionalism and religious bigotry. Unfortunately, memories of our liberation war and the communal riots at the time of partition of this subcontinent do not haunt us.

Tolerance and goodwill are in danger of breaking down because of the inaction of the government. What is beyond doubt is that religious fundamentalism has very little to do with theology and is purely a political tool. The ground rules of politics have to be redrawn, and fomatic medievalism needs to be excoriated from public life. Secularism, though abused by politicians and mocked by fundamentalists, remains the bedrock of

our nation.

Malaysia stands out in the Muslim world for merging Islam and modernity. It has a modern economy and an educated urbane work force, and the diverse ethnic and religious populations coexist peacefully. Women occupy the highest ranks of decision-making and even outnumber men in the universities of Malaysia. This has been achieved because, it is a Muslim country with a vision blended with modernity.

The success of Malaysia in building a vibrant economy and a cohesive national identity from a patchwork of cultures has shown that Islam guides its believers toward knowledge, progress, tolerance, good governance, promotion of human dignity, and justice.

Malaysia has been able to succeed where other predominantly Muslim countries still fall short, in large part due to how we understand our faith. Malaysia has eschewed a literalist and obscurantist understanding of Islam which focuses exclusively on the prohibitive and punitive aspects for a pro-

gressive orientation that gives primacy not only to the "letter" but also to the broader objectives of Shari'ah laws.

Our understanding of religion should be both textual and contextual, drawing on the true principles of Islam to understand contemporary problems. It is this understanding that can meet the demands of modernity as well as provide a spiritual bulwark against avarice and depravity.

There are indications galore that this progressive understanding of Islam is under threat. Political Islam has taken advantage of heightened religious consciousness and tries to convince Muslims that the state of affairs in the country is anathema to the authentic vision of Islam. Self-appointed clerics increasingly claim monopoly over religious discourse and interpretation, crowding out voices of reform, progress and logical interpretation of Islam.

The growing conservatism may now be a very thin layer over the whole shell. If left unchallenged, it will mutate into a radical and reactionary force that rejects modernity, generates intolerance, and imprisons the minds of the Muslims behind the bars of dogma and blind imitation.

The country's political leadership must take steps to promote justice, equality and, most importantly, freedom for all. In such a situation, if Bangladesh surrenders to rigid conservatism and blind fanaticism, the hopes for revival and resurgence of the democratic culture and institutions and enlightened nationhood will be irreparably damaged.

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Changed vision imperative for health sector

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

IN fact, achievement of super specialties in different faculties, enrichment of diagnostic procedure and excellence in technology are not enough to be acclaimed where poor and distressed people are deprived of desirable service easily and efficiently. Health service can claim credit and excellence when it can attend a patient in time with appropriate medication and client's satisfaction.

Besides the globalization of health and invention of tele-medicine, medical transcription and gene-mapping etc, the confidence building in health service depends on many choices and preferences which in turn call for new vision in the policy and service delivery system.

The vision of the health policy should, therefore, be the creation of enabling environment where people can get the opportunity to reach and maintain the highest attainable level of health service. The vision should recognize health as a fundamental human right to promote health care as imperative for social justice.

Such a vision is attainable at a stage where political commitment with adequate mobilization of resources can promote sustainable programme approaches. Political parties in their election manifestoes must make commitment of prioritizing health care and ensure good governance at any cost. Weak governance in health sector might cause the poor and vulnerable members of the society to suffer in terms of both costs and deficient service delivery as evident in our country at present. The weak governance is characterized by staff absenteeism, pilferage of drugs and

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essential supplies, maltreatment and negligence of the poor clients, illegal payments to service providers at the public health premises.

In the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and its directorates, corruption has been noticed by Anti-Corruption Commission during its drive against institutional grafts in 27 areas like project formulation, appointment and transfer, posting, promotion and deputation, allocations and grants, training, procurement of logistics and even processing of pension cases of their own colleagues.

The meeting held on 19.11.2008 in the Health Ministry agreed to build up resistance and awareness within the institutions and amongst public against corrupt practices. The changed vision must concentrate on eradication of corruption of any nature in the health service delivery system.

The mobilization of domestic resources for health sector financing is the critical issue to get rid of donor dependency and pursue visionary planning suitable to the genius of the nation. Presently, private and

public sources of health financing are insufficient to achieve full coverage with even a basic package of health services.

On an average, about 3.2 per cent of GDP is allocated to health, nutrition and population sectors in Bangladesh. The per capita expenditure on health is only about US\$ 13.0/year, of which public spending on health care is hovering around US\$ 4-5 /year. The rest is privately financed through out-of-pocket spending. The annual per capita spending is US\$ 34.0 in the developed world.

Therefore, the priority should be radically changed in the investment criterion and fixing the budgetary provisions to address the health care system provided significant improvement is made in the production and distribution of drugs and medicines and other logistics required for extending quality services.

The most important intervention is the programme planning and implementation. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has adopted the Sector Wide Approach and planned to implement Health, Population, Nutrition Sector

Programme worth Tk. 37,348.11 crores by 2011 AD.

To maintain the trend of success stories and also to address issues of climate change and globalization of health, there must be new strategies to develop human resources, establish good governance in logistics management, continuous focusing on ensuring proper safety net for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized population.

Health sector's financing by the government alone is insufficient. Expansion of private sector investment to bridge the gap, cost sharing by well-to-do patients when treated in the public hospitals, health insurance as alternative source of financing and outsourcing for the maintenance of few infrastructure might be considered as changed vision for ensuring better health service.

Above all, the implementation of changed vision requires direct partnership and active participation of mass media, academia, professional groups, community based organizations, civil society organizations etc not only to generate health care awareness but also as right to know the ways of availability of quality services.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a well-organized and sustainable health system with changed vision must be in force to respond to the needs of the community for improving the health condition of the poor and serve the distressed in particular.

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