



Binnenhof, centre of govt quarters



Canal Houses, Amsterdam

Focussing on gender in Bangladesh

Women's emancipation

At the time of the first International Women's Conference of the United Nations women's emancipation appeared for the first time on the Netherlands' development cooperation agenda in 1975. Since then special efforts have been taken by the Netherlands Government across the globe, including in the Netherlands itself, to ensure that women are empowered.

Where are we now?

Over the years the Netherlands Government has promoted universal women's rights and committed itself to the implementation of international treaties like the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) of 1979 and the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing in 1995. Next to that, gender policies have focused on creating more 'space and opportunities' for women. In

the Netherlands itself, in the nineties, policies gradually turned its attention from the formal regulation of gender equality to the modification of the structures in society. Full equality before the law and in public life has in fact been largely achieved in the Netherlands; it is now a matter of ensuring that gender equality is achieved in practice and also for migrant women, a group that is at risk of discrimination still. The same applies for most developing coun-

tries. Laws and regulations are in place, like in Bangladesh, but the enforcement of these laws and regulations and its implementation lag behind.

What do we do?

Since the mid-1980s, the Netherlands has been among the most active players in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women in Bangladesh. Initially, the Embassy supported special projects for women, but in the late nineties a two-track approach was introduced: next to specific projects empowering women, efforts were made to integrate emancipation issues in each and every project and programme and in the sectors the Netherlands is active.

Nowadays achieving MDG 3 'gender equality and empowerment of women' is our prime focus. Three key issues are at stake: the protection and promotion of women's rights and safety, combating violence against women, as well as the political empowerment of women.

Some examples

In 2003, the embassy supported a study on Gender Budgeting by the North South University, which shed new light on the (in)equity in the distribution of public resources. It identified areas with a strong disconnect between the policy objectives stated by the Government of Bangladesh and the money that is available to implement these policies. These disconnects have especially - negative impacts on poor men and women. Since then the government has been addressing gender budgeting in its national budget. So far with only limited effect, since gender budgeting is a long term investment and will only show results in the long run. It should also be acknowledged that Bangladesh is in the forefront internationally with its gender budgeting. Not even the Netherlands has been able to incorporate gender budgeting in its regular national budget processes, despite some attempts in 2003.

The Dutch embassy has also given support to integrating gender issues in the first and second PRSP. For the formulation of the first PRSP the gender expertise of the embassy was recognised and utilised. It was only the Netherlands and Canada who were invited to the Government discussions.

Since 2004 the Netherlands embassy supports the Department of Women and Gender Studies (DWGS) of the Dhaka University. The DWGS is uniquely placed to generate information and data on women and gender issues by interacting with government and non-government agencies, and by producing young women and men with in-depth knowledge about gender equality.

The Netherlands embassy integrates gender in all its sector programmes: water, health and education. For example, in the water sector we promote women's rights and safety by increasing the participation of women in water management, succeeding in increasing their role in the planning, decision-making and implementation of the activities of the water committees. This has resulted in an increased involvement and knowledge by women on water management and water technologies, and has placed them in a better position to negotiate property rights, the availability of drinking water and availability of water for cultivation.

Specific focus on violence against women

Combating violence against women is our Minister's main focus. Violence against women is a universal phenomenon and a crime that often goes unpunished. It transcends boundaries and at a terrible human and economic costs. In the Netherlands it is estimated that approx. 30 percent of all girls and women experience some form of violence during

The Dutch in Dhaka

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Dutch Factory stood has been identified with the site where the present Mitford Hospital and Sir Salimullah Medical College are located. The transfer of location proved very beneficial as the Dutch officials could watch the trade and commerce of the city more closely.

Apart from trading the Dutch were also involved in local politics. For example, Governor Shaista Khan (1664-1688) sought their help in his attempts to exterminate pirates in East Bengal and to conquer the Kingdom of Arakan (in Myanmar). The General of the Dutch Company readily responded and sent two men-of-war to 'join the Mughal Fleet in the Bay of Bengal.' However, their services were not later required and Shaista Khan thanked them profusely for their response and good gestures.

The end of an era

The Dutch carried on their trade satisfactorily for more than one hundred years before the rise of the English East India Company as the major political and trading force in Bengal by the 1750s. Their presence in Dhaka was felt in many ways; and by the 18th century they owned as many as 31 houses in the city proper and the big house in Tejgaon.

After the British established their political and commercial hegemony in Bengal/Bangladesh they gradually forced the other European Companies to move out of the country. The Dutch in Dhaka had to surrender all their properties, houses and trade to the English in 1781. All the Dutch properties and houses were formally transferred to the English in 1834. The influence of the Dutch did not completely fade away. In 1834 the Dutch Government decided

to use jute for making coffee bags for exports to the Dutch East Indies. This decision provided great stimulus for the commercial possibilities

of Bengal's jute and it turned out to be a long lasting relationship. But the day of Dutch settlements in Dhaka were definitely over and

would only return when Bangladesh was established in 1971.

The writer is professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka.

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to the Government
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Queen's Day & National Day



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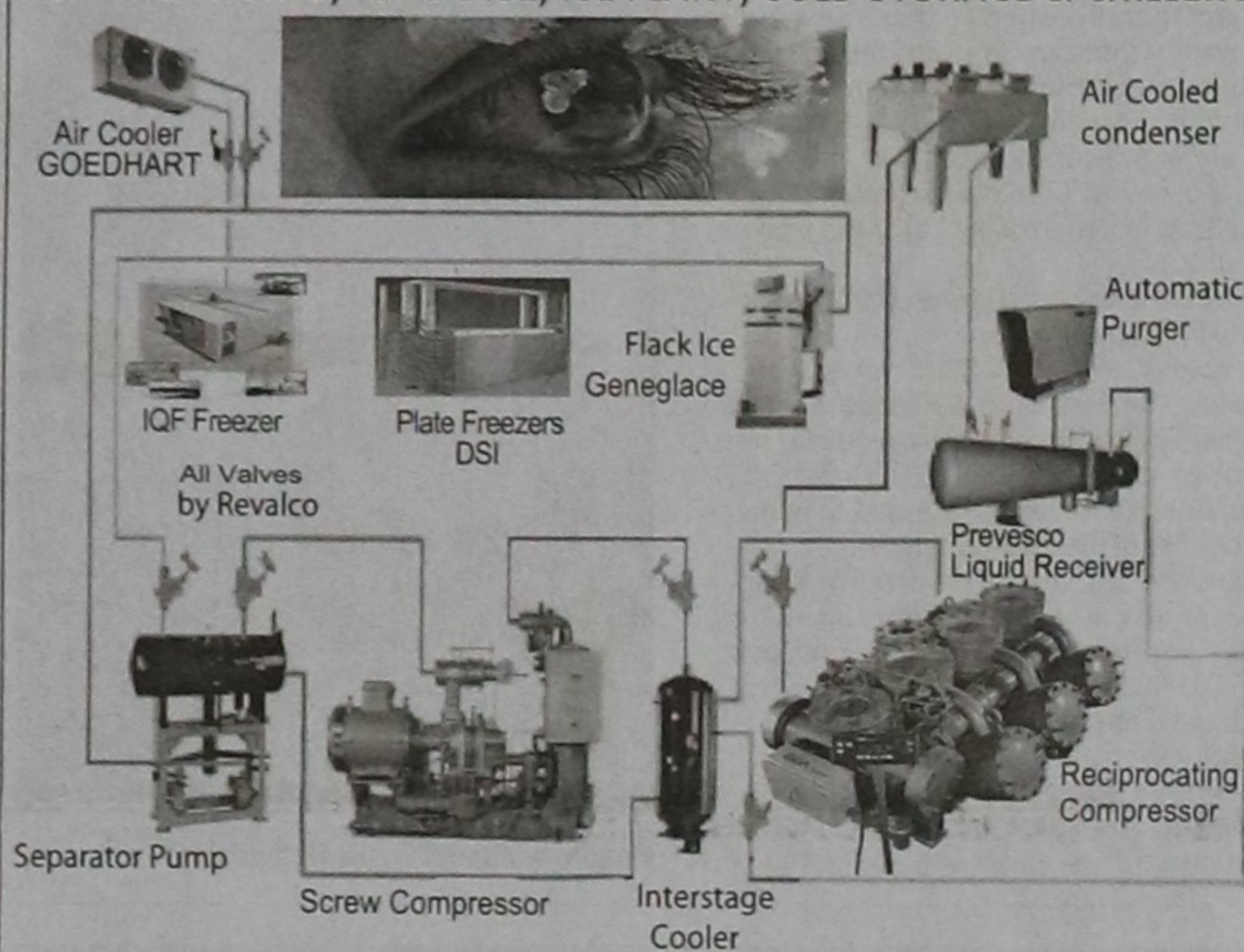
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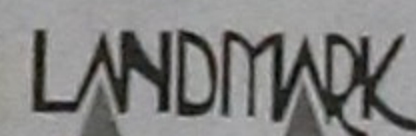
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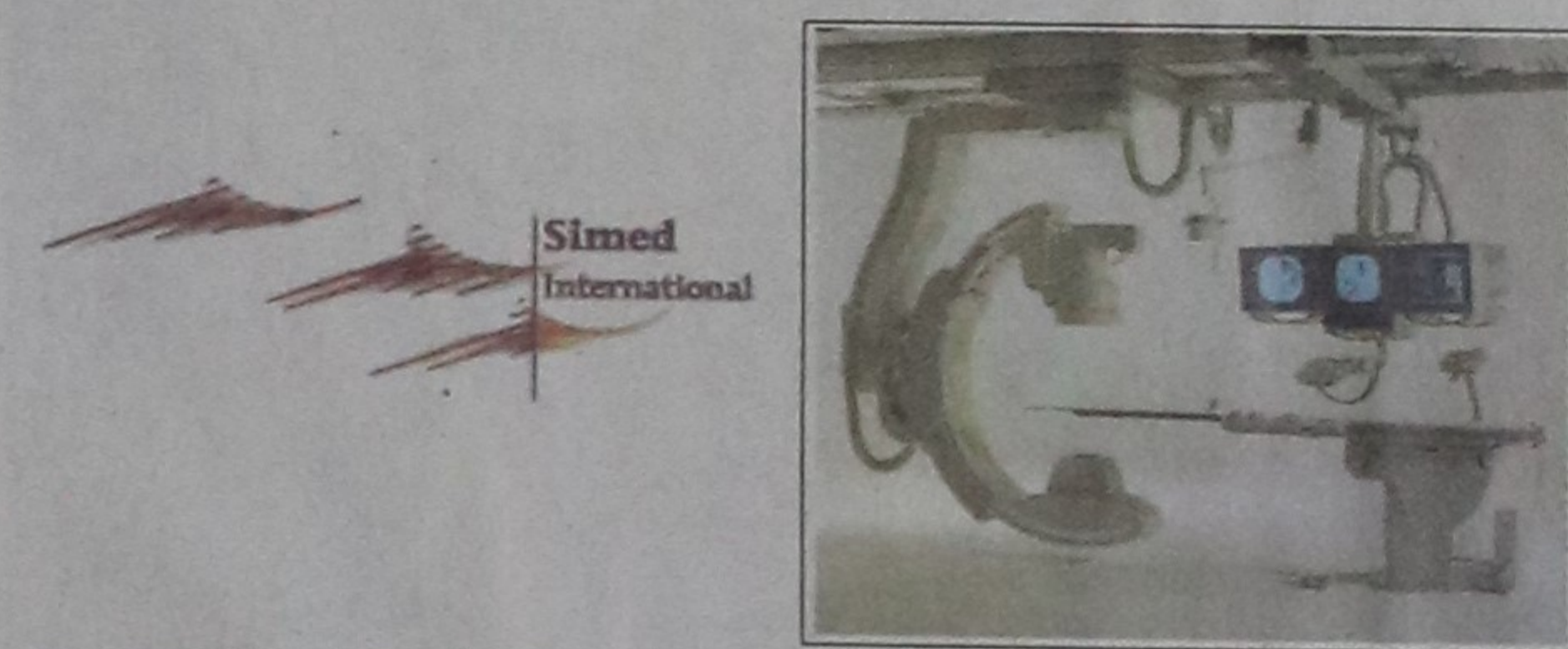
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On the Occasion of
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