

Recruitment run-around

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ABDUL WAHAB

A report on Bangladesh Railway was published in Prothom Alo (Apr. 10), under the heading "Railway is limping on," highlighting its manpower problem. The Daily Star (Aug. 2) and some other newspapers also printed similar reports.

In the West zone of Bangladesh Railway, due to shortage of station masters, 27 B class stations are kept closed full time daily and 45 are kept open for one shift only. This is a very alarming situation, and any inordinate delay in addressing it may lead the limping railway to fall into a slump.

With the liberation of Bangladesh, the railway inherited a war-torn network with a manpower strength of around 60 thousand. Railway had its own management under a Railway Board with policy making powers and separate budget. After liberation, the Railway Board was abolished and brought under the Roads and Railway Division of the Ministry of Communications and its budget merged with the national budget.

The government patronised the road sector with financial assistance and neglected the railway over the years, which led to losses in the railway sector. Then, under the prescription of ADB and World Bank, several reform programs for the railway were taken up under different titles. The consultants suggested reduction of its manpower to half of the existing strength. From 1985 onwards, a total ban

on staff recruitment was imposed, which continued up to 2005.

Meanwhile, in addition to natural attrition, the reduction of manpower was expedited by offering golden handshakes. That means there was no recruitment, and no re-enforcement over almost two decades. Now, most of the existing staff have reached retirement age. Thus, the railway is now running with 30 to 45 per cent shortage of staff in different categories. Though the reduced manpower target was fixed at 40 thousand, the present strength has come down to 30 thousand.

The present manpower situation in certain essential categories in the West zone is listed below:

The staff position in East zone of Bangladesh Railway is no better.

Recruitment in recent past

In the year 2004 permission for recruit-

Name of post	Sanctioned strength	On roll	Short	Will retire in 2009	Will retire in 2010
Station Master	534	364	170	18	34
Loco Master	762	557	205	56	66
Guard	207	152	55	16	18
Booking Asst.	255	132	123	40	44
Points man	695	627	68	51	52
Gateman (Traffic)	173	40	133	Against 133 posts engaged on daily basis	108 are
Mechanical maintenance staff	6062	4185	1857		
Railway Line staff	3216	1820	1396	-	-

ment of about 1700 staff against vacant posts of different categories was

accorded. Thereafter in 2006 recruitment of another 1500 staff in different categories was processed. But before completion of the recruitment it was cancelled on the plea of corruption. The recruitment was stopped, but retirement of staff speeded up in last few years. The alarming position was explained to the policy decision makers from time to time asking permission of immediate recruitment. But as bureaucratic practice would have it, it took a long time to convince the authorities to get the permission.

Present order for recruitment

Permission has recently been given to fill up 80% of the vacant posts in some categories. This will enable the railway to fill up about 3500 vacant posts. But ironically, the most essential staff -- assistant station master and guard -- cannot be recruited right now because some of the applicants of 2006 recruitment for these two posts have filed court cases against new recruitment. The Court has issued stay order on recruitment of these two categories.

The ongoing recruitment will take 6 to 8 months. The new recruits must undertake training of two years before taking up their duties. Hence, recruitment will not provide instant solution for keeping the

stations open and running the trains with minimum standard of safety.



No staff, no passengers!

What is the immediate solution?

In the present situation, to prevent closing down of stations and cancellation of trains for want of station masters, guards and loco masters, the following steps may be immediately taken:

- A proposal has been forwarded for contract appointment of retired station masters and loco masters. This proposal, if they are appointed for a period of at least two years, will help to arrest further deterioration of the situation;
- The cancelled recruitment process of 2006 may be revived and completed for appointment of guards and assistant station masters. This will solve the court case problem and enable the railway

administration to fill up the vacant posts.

- With the retirement of each station master, the number of closed stations increases. The government may consider, as a special case, extending the services of stationmasters and loco masters for 3 years, or on yearly contract basis.

Conclusion

The new government has shown keen interest in development of railway in the country. The Padma Bridge will have a railway-line extending up to Jessore. Reopening of Pachuria-Faridpur and Kalukhali-Bhatiapara Ghat lines, with extension up to Tungipara, is underway.

On the one hand the government is planning extension of the railway, but on the other, the existing rail network is heading towards extinction because of men and material shortage.

The people also demand improvement of the railway sector. In agreement with the people's desire, we hope that the government will consider the above proposals and help the railway to operate with the minimum standards of safety and service quality instead of limping on anyhow.

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New configuration of Obama's Asia

China and US are both experiencing a significant transformation. America is at a crossroads between further decline on one hand and transcendence on the other. China could emerge as the second biggest economy in the world. Their closer partnership is surely both a necessity and a reality.

SHEN DINGLI

SIX months after the election of a new US President, China and US are set to launch their first Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Tough words spoken about China's "currency manipulation" and predatory trading during and in the aftermath of the election are now a distant memory.

The reality of the global economic crisis and the emerging issue of global climate change have added new impetus to closer cooperation between the world's two leading countries.

During the Bush era, Beijing and Washington initiated two high-level talks -- a Strategic Dialogue and another Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED). They played an important role in addressing timely security and economic issues at national, regional and global levels, and coordinated their positions through adjusting their respective policies.

Some two months after being sworn into office, Obama agreed with Chinese President Hu Jintao to combine the aforementioned two talks and lift them to a higher level -- to further their relations through the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) platform.

Indeed, it is impressive that the two countries have set the tone of their relationship so soon under the new US President. It is more important to note that the two countries will address security and

economic issues at such a crucial time.

This is a critical time when US has a new leadership with great challenges and new priorities. US faces one of the gravest economic recessions due to the financial crisis. With the unemployment rate approaching 10%, such an economic downturn is affecting many aspects of American life and much of the society. It is likely that Obama would list this as the most pressing national security threat if the White House were to draft a new National Security Strategy Report.

In a highly interdependent world, no one can be immune to such a global challenge. China has been affected already: its GDP growth rate in the fourth quarter of 2008 declined by nearly half from the prior year, although in the second quarter this year it grew 7.9%. Tens of millions of Chinese migrant workers have felt the threat of America's lost interest and ability to consume.

China's competitiveness in export has suddenly turned vulnerable, making it more difficult to appreciate its currency.

As China and US are highly dependent upon each other, they have to address this crisis collaboratively. Both need to stimulate their respective economies while creating opportunities for each other. Both could be tempted to "Buy America" or "Buy China" but have to distance themselves from such a simplistic vision.

While US needs China to keep buying Treasuries, the US government has to be

more responsible for the recovery of American economy and foreign assets in America, including those of China.

Given Obama's progressive policy on international cooperation on global issues, China and US are seeing increasing chances to cooperate, as well as to collide. On cooperation, Beijing and Washington are now more inclined to consult each other at international forums before making major decisions, either for resuming the Six Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear program and imposing sanctions on DPRK's recent missile and nuclear tests, or for exploring the potential collaboration on clean energy technology.

The incidents at sea involving US reconnaissance and survey ships and Chinese vessels in China's economic zone in March have underlined the growing tension over the control of waters and seabed resources. Recently there have been unfortunate incidents involving the USS Impeccable and Chinese vessels, as well as a Chinese submarine hitting an underwater sonar array being towed by the destroyer USS John McCain. Such incidents indicate increasing chances of physical collisions of the two navies in China's exclusive economic zone, and deserve special efforts to avoid their recurrence.

The Bush administration was deaf to global efforts to cool down the earth and hence withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol. But Obama is committed to reducing carbon emission and has thus presented a challenge to China. China and US could develop a type of new confrontation -- the need to commit to reduction of greenhouse gases, with specific time-bound obligations.

As a signatory of the Kyoto Protocol, China has been supporting this regime, taking voluntary measures to reduce the increase of carbon dioxide, without being under a quota compulsion to do so.

However, with the Obama administration re-committing America to climate change China feels unfair pressures to follow suit.

China doesn't feel the need to reduce its net increase of carbon emission, and is not ready to cut it. Rather, Beijing believes that as a major industrialised country, US has been the lead emitter, on a per capita and total level, in the world for the past 150 years.

While all countries have to cut their carbon emissions, they have to share their responsibility according to their ability and the amount they have emitted. Developing countries might echo this view while the developed countries would feel it unfair if China and US, responsible for 43% of the world's carbon emissions, would not at the same time assume the responsibility to cut their total emissions rather than the net increase.

The White House and US Congress are debating a carbon tax scheme that would levy a tax on US consumers who buy commodities from foreign countries without spending adequate efforts on climate change. This has prompted a strong reaction from China as it views such a policy as a new trade barrier, violating WTO rules.

These issues will be tackled at the S&ED. They are of the nature of both cooperation and competition. It is obvious that China-US relations are increasingly more mature and complex: while those areas of collaboration are ever expanding, the focus of their competition, based more on interests than ideology, is also shifting.

Apparently, those "traditional" areas of tension -- Taiwan, human rights, nonproliferation, and trade imbalance -- have not disappeared, but newly emerging issues -- fair economic/trade relationship, currency conversion, carbon emission etc. -- are defining how the two countries will nurture their partnership.

Noticeably, the contentious maritime



Meeting half way.

disputes underline their mutual strategic hedging, but these might be addressed at their future meeting of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA).

Again, China and US are going to handle their relations through talks and negotiation. Through giving and taking for thirty years, they are already experts in knowing that they share stakes too vast to risk with serious confrontation. Also, they are experts in conducting negotiations to balance respective interests.

At such a vital time, the S&ED should serve not only to exchange strategic perspectives and test strategic intentions, but also to settle emerging disputes and strengthen cooperation. Such tasks entail the pressing demand and commitments of

top-level leadership. The S&ED is the exact venue to attain such a purpose presently.

China and US are both experiencing a significant transformation. America is at a crossroads between further decline on one hand and transcendence on the other. China could emerge as the second biggest economy in the world, and expects to assume more responsibilities commensurate with its added capacity. While a G2 between the two is quite out of the picture, their closer partnership is surely both a necessity and a reality.

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Why Madonna is smart to adopt



MADONNA is having trouble adopting a second child from Malawi.

The wealthy pop star, 50, is too old to adopt a Western child, and anyway prefers gathering small, brown, needy people to share her mansion. I wonder if I can persuade her to adopt me? I'm house-trained, most of the time, which is more than can be said for babies.

Madonna and I are already mentally in tune, anyway, since all my children are adopted. There are huge advantages to acquiring kids that way instead of the biological way.

The most useful is the "instant disownership" option. Whenever my offspring commit gross acts of misbehaviour in public places, I just slightly adjust my body position to face away from them. Hey presto, they look like someone else's kids. Heh-heh.

If their tantrums reach truly horrific proportions, I turn back and glare in a hostile manner, as if to say: "I wonder which utterly useless parent dragged up these vile brats?"

One can even leave the scene, assuming the children will eventually notice and follow. (And if they don't, well, is that the worst thing that could happen?)

Incidentally, this technique also works if you have a spouse of a different ethnic background. If my wife is doing something deeply embarrassing, such as drooling over pictures of Johnny Depp in a celebrity magazine at a bookshop, I simply step away, shaking my head in amazement at the base nature of modern women. (My

wife usually notices I have gone after a brief interval of half a day or so.)

The other advantage of adoption is the level of hygiene involved in "initialising" the procedure. During conventional conception, there are numerous huge risks, the biggest being germs, stickiness and embarrassment, not necessarily in that order. Contrast that to the adoptive parents' technique of sitting fully clothed in an office and filling in Form A-162 (b).

An unexpected advantage of having adopted children emerged when the kids started going to school. Natural offspring wave the genetic flag of their parents. If the child turns out to be pitifully dull or shows violent criminal tendencies, mom and dad feel personally to blame.

But adoptive parents can relax. Every time junior does something bad, you blame the birth parents. If does something good, like solve Fermat's Last Theorem at the age of three, you take full credit. "I showed him that," you say.

An intriguing bonus of adopting children is the little genetic surprises that they have hidden within them. For example, my family all love Chinese food but recognise that some dishes can be non-child-friendly. At one restaurant, large bowls of a particularly ghoulish glutinous soup were put in front of my offspring. I expected howls of protest on the lines of: "Yuk! It looks like a bowl of snot." But my genetically-Chinese kids lapped it up and asked for more.

Of course, some of the genetic surprises that are in store for us may be less desirable. Mine showed an obscenely early desire for mobile phones, even before they could walk or talk.

But all I had to do was shift my shoulders and do the disownership trick.

Look at those revolting brats. Their parents should be shot. I wonder who they are? Heh-heh.

For more on the advantages of adopting children, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com

