

Making Bangladesh picture perfect

In spite of her rich cultural heritage and large natural capital base, Bangladesh does not present a pleasant picture of her tourism industry. The website of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) shows that international tourist arrivals stood at 207,662 in the year 2005. In the year 2001, when the writer was chairman of the BPC, the number stood at 207,199.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

SEPTEMBER 27 is observed as World Tourism Day (WTD). The theme of WTD 2009 is "Tourism -- Celebrating Diversity," which focuses on the world's cultural wealth and the important role sustainable tourism plays in revitalising local traditions and making them flourish as they cross other countries.

A huge variety of local customs co-exist throughout the world, be they languages, religions, architecture, food, politics or natural environment. This diverse environment has allowed the travel and tourism industry "to thrive and become the largest single export industry" and a leading force in the service sector.

Tourism has become a popular global leisure activity. Available record shows that in 2008 there were over 922 million international tourist arrivals, with a growth of 1.9% as compared to 2007. International tourism receipts grew to \$944 billion in 2008, corresponding to an increase in real terms of 1.8%.

The growth in the tourism industry has, however, been suffering from a slowdown since June 2008, due to world-wide recession and outbreak of the H1N1 virus. But the tourism experts are

hopeful that the industry would be able to regain its growth rate as soon as the recession is over, which has already started showing a positive trend, and the outbreak of H1N1 is brought down to a tolerable level.

Now, let us see as to how diversity such as rich and varied cultural heritage, archaeology and architecture, religions, festivals and celebrations, natural capital base, etc. can help enrich Bangladesh's tourism industry.

The culture of Bangladesh has a history. The land, the rivers and the lives of the common people formed a rich heritage with marked differences from neighbouring regions. It has evolved over the centuries, and encompasses the cultural diversity of several social groups of Bangladesh.

The folk and tribal music and dance forms of Bangladesh are of indigenous origin and rooted to the soil of Bangladesh. In relatively modern context, Rabindra sangeet and Nazrul geeti form precious cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

The Muslims celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha and Muharram with great fervour and enthusiasm while Durga Puja, Christmas and Buddha Purnima are celebrated by the Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists respectively with great

enthusiasm. Although these are basically religious festivals, they form an integral part of the cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

The first day of the Bangla New Year, Pahela Baishakh, and the Language Martyrs' Day on February 21st are the greatest celebrations of the people of all walks of life irrespective of religion, caste and creed. They form an integral part of our culture.

Archaeological remains of the 3rd 2nd century B.C. at Mahasthangarh, the 8th century A.D. Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur, Mainamati-Lalmai ridge of the 8th-12th century, are some of the attractions for local and international tourists.

Like any other industry, tourism industry requires capital, both financial and human. Fortunately, Bangladesh's large and attractive natural resources, such as the world's longest unbroken sandy beach at Cox's Bazar, mind-boggling beauty spot of sunrise and sunset at Kuakata, the world's largest mangrove forests called the Sunderbans (beautiful forests), the scenic beauty of the "Sylhet Valley" with the three largest tea gardens of the world, and dazzling beautiful spots of the hill districts are some of the natural capital base which, if quantified in financial terms, would represent a huge capital base. But, we have not been able to make proper use of the natural capital base to promote and develop the country's tourism industry.

Available sources suggest that the theme of WTD 2009 will further highlight the importance of tourism and globalisation, the job opportunities that tourism creates in many industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, retail trade, and the important components of tourism businesses such as guide ser-

VICES, shopping, transport, entertainment, accommodation, and photography.

Tourism is vital for many countries, such as the UAE, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Tanzania, the Gambia, Greece, the Maldives, the Bahamas, Fiji, and the Seychelles, due to the large intake of money for businesses with their goods and services and the opportunity for employment in the service industries associated with tourism.

In spite of her rich cultural heritage and large natural capital base, Bangladesh does not present a pleasant picture of her tourism industry. A visit to the website of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) shows that international tourist arrivals stood at 207,662 in the year 2005. In the year 2001, when the writer was chairman of the BPC, the number stood at 207,199. This means an addition of only 463 foreign tourists in four years.

What is unfortunate is that the website does not provide any information about international tourist arrivals in the country after the year 2005. However, a visit to the website of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism shows that from January to August 2007, the foreign tourist arrivals in the country stood at 176,749. No data on international tourist arrivals after August 2007, is available in the website.

Why such a low arrival of international tourists in the country in spite of existence of the aforesaid tourism products? This is generally attributed to:

- Bangladesh's image problem abroad as a tourist destination,
- Lack of knowledge among the planners and policy makers about the fast growing global tourism industry, and of its role as an important earner of



This could be a major tourist destination.

- foreign exchange,
- Discontinuity in the policies and programs for tourism promotion with the change of governments,
- Insufficient infrastructural facilities,
- Poor investment from private sector,
- Lack of encouragement to foreign investors to develop tourism in islands such as Saint Martin's, Sonadia, etc. (especially for the foreign tourists), lack of appropriate steps for promotion of rural based tourism,
- Lack of skilled and professional manpower, and
- Lack of easy availability of visa for regional and international tourists.

lems and constraints to a considerable extent, and the government gives priority to develop infrastructural facilities to a satisfactory level, the country, with its rich cultural heritage and huge natural capital base, may become an important destination for regional and international tourists.

This will enable Bangladesh to get a reasonable share of the big cake provided by the largest and the fastest growing global tourism industry. The observance of WTD 2009 will then be meaningful.

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Who are they fooling?

While a mass amnesty for political prisoners is part of the junta's seven-stage roadmap to multi-party elections, activists accuse the junta of cynically releasing these political prisoners to deflect international pressure, especially at the United Nations

LARRY JAGAN

BURMA'S military rulers are up to their old tricks. The regime has released more than seven thousand prisoners over the last week as part of their preparations for next year's planned polls. Most of these are petty criminals, although around 200 political prisoners are amongst the freed.

Many analysts believe these releases are intended to increase the credibility of next year's multi-party elections the first in twenty years. The regime has been constantly told that these elections are critical for Burma's relations with its neighbours and the world as a whole. "The elections must be an inclusive and transparent process if they are to be at all credible," the Asean secretary-general, Surin Pitsuwan recently told *The Daily Star*.

While a mass amnesty for political prisoners is part of the junta's seven-stage roadmap to multi-party elections, activists accuse the junta of cynically releasing these political prisoners to deflect international pressure, especially at the United Nations, where the annual general assembly got underway this week. Burma usually comes under intense scrutiny during this meeting.

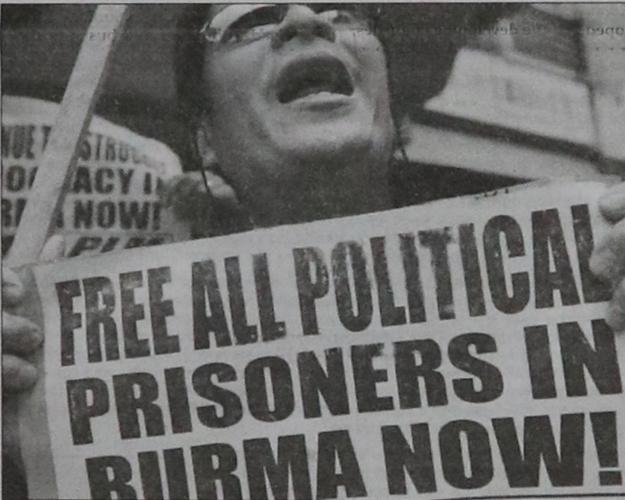
"Every one of these prisoners is a person, and it is unacceptable that the junta uses them as chips to bargain with and play the international community," said David Scott Mathieson, the Burma researcher for the US-group Human Rights Watch based in Thailand.

At least 127 political prisoners have been freed according to the Thailand-based group, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners - Burma (AAPPB), which closely monitors the situation inside Burma. So far more than 40 members of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy have been freed, three of whom were elected as members of parliament in 1990.

Six members of the 88 Generation Students group, who were sentenced to more than 60 years in jail for their alleged part in organising the Buddhist monk-led mass protests two years against rising food prices, were also among those released from jail. Four monks arrested after the Saffron Revolt in 2007, four journalists, thirteen students and a lawyer were also freed, according to the AAPPB.

"These releases are a show case to ease international pressure," Bo Kyi, the head of the AAPPB told Inter Press Service. "We expect more than 200 to be released within the next few days," he added.

The government's announcement last week that exactly 7114 prisoners were to be released on compassionate grounds, came on the eve of the anniversary of the current military rulers ceasing power on 18th September 1988, and the start of the UN's annual meeting in New York. This year the Burmese prime minister, General Thein Sein will attend the highest junta leader to attend the UN session in more than 15 years. It is usually the foreign minister and a large team



The sign says it all.

of diplomats who defend the regime during these UN proceedings.

"The choice of 7114 prisoners clearly smacks of the influence of astrologers," said Bertil Lintner, a writer and Burma specialist based in Thailand. The regime's leaders always consult the astrologers to establish the most auspicious dates and times for key events, and number like this. It is meant to bring them luck.

Many analysts and activists believe this amnesty is intended to deflect criticism of Burma's human rights' record at the UN meeting and to show the international community that the military regime is co-operating with the UN.

Some of the political prisoners that have been freed were on the UN's priority list submitted to the junta's leaders by the UN secretary general's special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari earlier this

year. The General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon also raised this issue with the top general Than Shwe during his failed mission to Burma in July, when Mr Ban was refused permission to meet the detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

At the time, Mr Ban was promised that a substantial number of political prisoners would be released before the elections in 2010.

"Clearly, this is a gesture in response to Ban Ki-moon's request, made on behalf of the international community, during his visit to Myanmar earlier this year," the Burma researcher for the UK-based human rights group, Amnesty International, Benjamin Zawacki told *The Daily Star*. "And as such it is disingenuous and insultingly insufficient."

Diplomats in Rangoon believe more political prisoners will be released in the

coming months, but that it these will be freed in drips and drabs. The junta's seven-stage roadmap to democracy includes a mass amnesty for political prisoners. This was agreed more than five years before the former prime minister, General Khin Nyunt now under house arrest -- and the UN envoy at the time, Dato Razali Ismail, according to the former UN human rights rapporteur for Burma, Professor Paulo Pinheiro.

Few believe that the regime will honour this promise, though a few more political prisoners may see the light of day. "Technically there is still time before the elections for this [recent] mass release to be only the first step -- with many more to follow in quick succession but all the signs and signals suggest this will not be the case," said Mr Zawacki.

"If the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) was serious about making the elections free and fair, they would all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi," said Zin Linn, a spokesman for the exiled-opposition, based in Thailand. "They may free other activists, but the key opposition leaders will certainly be kept behind bars until after the election," he added.

Everyone understands though that all political prisoners cannot be released simultaneously. The regime continues to fear that this might spark widespread social unrest and political protests though even 2 years after the Saffron Revolt, this seems unlikely. "The release of political prisoners is a process, and while they may not all be freed all at once, there must be significant and regular releases," Mr Gambari told *The Daily Star* recently.

Over the years there have been frequent mass releases of prisoners, usually to signal a new era. Some 44,000 prisoners have been freed since 2004, though less than 4,000 were political prisoners.

Amnesty International estimates there are still more than 2,000 political activists languishing in Burma's jails.

This latest mass amnesty certainly signals the start of the run-up to the 2010 elections. The forthcoming polls are dominating everything in Burma at the moment even though the voting date is yet to be announced -- according to diplomats and businessmen in Rangoon.

Another reason for the mass release of prisoners may also be in preparation for a possible crack-down on the opposition during the elections. "The junta cannot afford to allow the campaign to be free and fair," said Bertil Lintner.

"They are emptying the jails now to fill them up later that's what also happened in 1988, ahead of the mass pro-democracy protests, when thousands and thousands of activists were later locked up," he said.

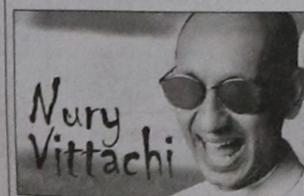
But what activists fear is that the regime is up to its old tricks. "The SPDC is still playing games," said Zin Linn. "Cracking down and easing pressure when it suits them, and then re-asserting their power when they need to."

It is all part of the military rulers strategy to keep control and prevent social unrest, according to activists and human rights groups. "Even if a handful of political activists have been free, others are still being arrested," said Mr Mathieson. "The message is clear: any threat to the 2010 elections will be dealt with harshly," he added.

Human rights groups and activists though agree, if the regime is serious about a mass amnesty for political prisoners and a credible election all political prisoners have to be freed and allowed to participate freely in the elections. "The regime should set up a time-table for the release of all political prisoners," said Bo Kyi. "Otherwise no-one will believe they mean to release them before the elections."

Larry Jagan, a Burma specialist writes for *The Daily Star* from Bangkok.

Long goodbyes



EVERY weekday morning I spend ten minutes lip-reading. So does the woman standing next to me and the man next to her. None of us have any idea what we're discussing. This is "Long Goodbye Syndrome," a challenge faced by anyone who has to

make extended farewells to loved ones leaving by train or coach or bus.

The school bus pulls up outside my housing block every morning at 8 am. Children climb inside. They press their little sticky faces against the windows (and frequently get stuck to them). Mommy or Daddy wave goodbye. In theory, the bus then heads off to school.

In reality, what happens is this. Child A fails to turn up. Child B realizes he has forgotten to put on his trousers and runs bare-legged home to get them. Child C has overslept and has to be carried to the bus.

Child D has drops her one-meter-

high clay sculpture of the decoded genome of a fruit fly and needs to be comforted while someone rebuilds it.

There is always a long wait during which parents on the street and children on the bus stare at each other.

At this point, the kids inevitably remember urgent things they need to discuss. "Wire brackish!" my youngest child mouthed frantically the other day. "Wire brackish arthroscopel! Arthroscopel!"

I turned to the woman next to me and asked for help: "Did my child just say 'wire brackish arthroscopel'?"

She nodded and said: "That's what it looked like." She told me she thought

an arthroscopel was "a tool for non-invasive knee surgery."

But after staring at my child's moving lips a little longer, light dawned. She said: "Aha! I think she's saying, 'choir practice after school.' But what do you think MY child is saying?"

Her child was jumping up and down in his seat, apparently uttering the words: "Cannabis culture bay delight. Police! Police!"

I watched him repeat his plea for a whole minute before I worked it out. He was saying: "Can Amy come to play tonight? Please, please?"

Some days it's easy to lip-read what they're saying. Other days we just nod

and smile. This is dangerous. It has caused me to make numerous promises I cannot keep, including buying her a Lamborghini and taking her to the North Pole. ("You promised!")

Lip-reading has been in the news. BBC TV has been bleeping out the foul language used by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. But deaf viewers had been lip-reading the show, and were outraged by Mr. Ramsay's lip-movements. So now the BBC places a big fuzzy spot over his mouth. (If only someone would do this to Mr Ramsay in real life.)

I'd like to propose an easier answer. Everyone should adopt the Italian habit of saying maledizione, which

means "bad word." If you step on an Italian's foot, he hops around and says "Bad word! Bad word!" Simple and satisfying.

This morning, there was a big delay and parents and children mouthed conversations to each other for more than ten minutes.

I have no idea what we talked about. Cannabis and non-invasive knee surgery were probably mentioned. I hate to think what I promised, but I just hope it was legal. If not, I will kick myself and say, "Bad word! Bad word!"

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