

ADP implementation at snail's pace

Stakes get that much higher for the coming months

IN truth, those who are aware, as most people are, of the sluggish historical trend of ADP implementation in the first quarter of a financial year would hardly be surprised by the news. That only ten percent of the ADP got implemented between July and September, 2009 does, however, make us sit up and take note. If only because of (a) the fanfare and aplomb with which the AL government had announced an all-time ambitious ADP for fiscal 2009-10 amounting to Tk 30,000 crore; and (b) the news of under-performance coming from those who are perceived to have had a role in implementing the ADP such as the finance ministry and the NBR.

Let's put our criticism in the right perspective. Three factors must have weighed with the AL-led Mahajote government behind its announcement of an ambitious ADP for fiscal 2009-10. First, as an elected government it bore the responsibility of making up for the dismal ADP performances in two successive years of caretaker rule. Secondly, it had to deliver on the electoral pledges that won it a victory over its rival; last but not least, it had to raise the level of public spending in development sectors in contrast to revenue expenditure. The avowed aim was to bolster demand in the market and create employment opportunities in a bid to cushion off the effects of global economic meltdown.

On all these three counts, what one is reminded of is an adage -- 'well-begun is half-done'. Since the beginning has been slow, much out of sync with what the planning minister had stated about the ministries taking up work early in the day with arrangements for timely release of project funds, it is now incumbent on all ministries, lead and line, to make up for the lost time through tackling structural deficiencies. Not only the financial targets but also the physical targets will have to be met to their closest approximations so that the economy is revved up with internal resource mobilisation, timely fund disbursements and investment. They have only to match a BIDS research result to the effect that at least 50 percent improvement in the capacity of project implementation machinery could only make a definite difference in the rate of project execution.

Prime Minister's visit to Bhutan

New vista opens in ties with Thimphu

IN a world confronted with newer crises nearly every day, the importance of regional cooperation, be it at bilateral or multilateral level, cannot be denied. Which brings us to the role SAARC has been playing in South Asia since the mid-1980s. Perhaps the potential that was once noted about the organization has not quite been realised to the extent one would have expected, but the fact remains that the body has brought the countries of this region together in remarkable ways. The recent visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Bhutan underscores this reality. The three-day trip has now thrown up certain new opportunities for Dhaka and Thimphu to explore.

List among these opportunities the matter of energy cooperation. With Bangladesh currently in need of energy to meet domestic requirements, the good news is that Bhutan with its hydro-electricity reserves can bail it out. Indeed, the two countries have reached a deal on the subject, which should be seen as quite a breather for Bangladesh. Bhutan has also waived all duties on Bangladeshi goods imported by it. That has been reciprocated in the way bilateralism should work. The Bangladesh leader has decided to reduce tariff on 18 Bhutanese items from 15 per cent to zero per cent. Now, all of these are a happy augury for the future and are clearly steps that will boost cooperation in trade. And then comes the question of land connectivity between the two countries. The operative term here is an exploration of the possibility of such connectivity actually taking place. Obviously, it will involve the Indian authorities, who in their turn should respond in light of the cooperative process that has been going on in South Asia.

Overall, the prime minister's visit to Bhutan should be seen not only as giving a spurt to bilateral cooperation in the region but also as a hint of how cooperation among SAARC nations can be expanded, substantively and purposefully, in the times ahead. Difficulties, of course, are always there. But it is the spirit, which again is a reflection of changing times, that matters. In Thimphu, the cooperative spirit was served rather well.

Overseas trips, towels and tables

Decency does not call for towels to be on display in offices. And now this small matter of the table around which the council of ministers meets regularly for its assessments of conditions in the country. It is a bad legacy, that table and those chairs and the geography that comes with them, we have inherited from dictatorial times.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina is, like many of us, worried about the frequent trips civil servants periodically make abroad. On the face of it, we should not be overly worried about these trips. For if civil servants, or people in other areas of life for that matter, are invited to seminars and conferences abroad, who are we to grumble? Obviously, there must be some very real, some very good reasons why all these men at the centre of administrative authority are provided with the opportunity of going abroad to speak for the country.

And yet there are all those naughty questions which sometimes assail us, to a point where we begin to wonder if this poverty-stricken nation can afford to have those bureaucrats make all those trips to foreign lands. And from that point of reflection we have another that seems to make sense: to what extent are we as a nation enlightened by these men returning from abroad with all their newly accumulated experience? Ah, but before that, there is the inevitable

query: do these peripatetic bureaucrats at all come by enlightenment themselves as they go around the world?

It is agreed that the prime minister had a point. From what we have seen of the doings of the bureaucracy in this country, we do share her point of view on this pretty vexing matter of foreign travel. But then, barely a day after that exhortation served on our civil servants, she headed straight for Stockholm to speak for the country on climate change and assorted questions. Of course, it is a fine thing for a national leader to be projecting her country abroad, to be symbolising all the good that we have consistently held on to as part of our heritage.

But there are some lines that must be drawn, too, where a trip abroad by a head of government is concerned. You can happily be part of the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly, for that is one place where powerful men and women gather from diverse regions of the globe once September comes round. Stockholm a few weeks ago was unlike New York, though. You can simply count on your

fingers the prominent people who were there. The halls were largely empty. It makes no one happy when your prime minister speaks and the camera zeroes in on all those empty chairs in the cavernous hall.

It is perhaps time for a change in culture. We refer obviously to what those in authority should be doing in order to give the country a sense of the seriousness they attach to their work. How about doing away with the frills that come with an exercise of power? But, first, let all those towels (and you see them on the backs of the high chairs ministers, bureaucrats, businessmen and so many others use as a mark of the power they wield) be thrown out the window. Decency does not call for towels to be on display in offices.

And now this small matter of the table around which the council of ministers meets regularly for its assessments of conditions in the country. It is a bad legacy, that table and those chairs and the geography that comes with them, we have inherited from dictatorial times. The huge distance separating the head of government, literally, from her cabinet colleagues is awe-inspiring, often to the point of being fear-inducing.

Must a cabinet based on the Westminster system of government look like a class of school children being lectured to by their headmistress? The answer should be obvious. So what is called for is for more proximity and therefore more rapport between the prime minister and her colleagues. Have that table replaced or packed off to the museum. And then have our powerful men and women take a leaf

out of the books which Barack Obama and Gordon Brown happen to have on their shelves. In short, why should our government figures not sit around a table of the sort the American or British government sits around and is evidently comfortable with?

That said, there is this point about not making an entire cabinet and an entire diplomatic corps troop down to the airport every time the prime minister leaves the country and then returns to it. There is nothing modern about it. Indeed, there is a whiff of the medieval, of the feudal, about the entire protocol here. It must be speedily dispensed with, which act will be a potent sign of governance finally getting to be a serious affair in Bangladesh.

And governance infinitely gets to be better, a most charming thing, when ministers and other public figures choose not to be seen on the media day after day. As a rule, people are not terribly impressed with ministers constantly, sometimes insistently, finding themselves before a battery of microphones and throwing pearls of wisdom before the country. Wisdom is invaluable and pearls are a delight. But they must come through concrete action rather than empty rhetoric. Politicians in office and civil servants are or should be too busy to go around town inaugurating art exhibitions or speaking at a ubiquity of seminars. If they are on their feet all the time, it is the country which screeches to a halt. Will someone tell them that?

Ah, but let us call it a day.

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Prime minister's visit to Bhutan

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Bhutan is a testimony to the implementation of Bangladesh's foreign policy of cooperation with neighbouring countries for mutual benefit. She is also expected to visit India in December.

HARUN UR RASHID

BHUTAN (Druk Yul -- the land of the Thunder Dragon) is a land-locked country located between India and China. It shares 470 km border with China and 605 km with India, out of its total border of 1,075 km. Since the mountains are very high on the north, its connectivity on land with the external world lies in the south through India.

Bhutan lies to the north of Bangladesh and is separated by 30 km of Indian territory. It was the second country to recognise Bangladesh -- on December 7, 1971 -- after India's recognition on December 6, 1971.

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The four-day visit of the prime minister was her first to any Saarc country after her assumption of office as the head of the government. A 24-member delegation including Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni accompanied the prime minister.

It is noted that the prime minister arrived on the day of the second anniversary of the accession to the throne by the

king of Bhutan.

The prime minister was accorded a warm welcome on her arrival at Paro Airport. She was received by Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley and his wife.

She was led in a procession from the airport to Thimpu, Bhutan's capital city, with school children and Bhutanese people lined up along the highway with Bangladesh's flag.

The prime minister discussed bilateral and regional matters with King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and other dignitaries.

The issues that reportedly dominated the talks were increasing trade, opening more transit land points between Bangladesh and Bhutan including direct bus service, transit rights for Bhutan's use of Bangladesh's sea ports, combating effects of climate change, and export of hydro-power.

Both sides reportedly agreed to take steps in these matters. A trade agreement was signed between the two countries, updating the 1980 agreement, during the visit.

The Bangladesh prime minister handed over some earthquake relief materials to

her counterpart on November 7. On September 21, Bhutan was hit by the 6.1 magnitude earthquake in which at least 10 people died, monasteries were damaged and homes collapsed.

Bilateral relations

As early as April 1972, both countries expressed the desire to establish close relations. The first official commercial contact between Bhutan and Bangladesh began in the late '70s, and in 1978 a Bangladesh trade delegation paid a visit to discuss the prospect of bilateral trade. A trade agreement was concluded in September, 1980.

Bangladesh opened its diplomatic mission in January, 1980 headed by a resident ambassador. Likewise, Bhutan appointed an ambassador to Bangladesh in the same year.

Last October, Bhutan proposed signing of a free trade agreement with Bangladesh. In fiscal 2007-08, Bangladesh imported goods worth \$13.73 million from Bhutan while its exports to Bhutan amounted to only \$1.35 million.

Bangladesh imports from Bhutan mainly boulders, dolomite, gypsum, dust coal, slate, graphite, timber and fruit products, and exports to Bhutan include consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, jute products, newsprint, chemicals, detergents and light machinery.

Bhutan's Seed Corporation signed an agreement in February 2000 with a non-government organisation (Brac) in Bangladesh to supply onion and radish seeds.

Both nations are members of Saarc and

are keen to develop the regional forum into a dynamic and vibrant one. They are Least-Developed Countries and have a common approach to economy related policies in the multi-national forums. Both joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1973. Both are parties to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Bhutan Airlines operates between the two countries and people-to-people contact has increased considerably. The visit will further strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries.

Democracy in Bhutan

The year 2008 saw a remarkable change in Bhutan. The 4th king abdicated his throne in 2006 and decided to introduce democracy in the country. Elections were held for both chambers of Parliament (Gyelyong Tshogde and Tshogdu). The newly convened parliament, in a joint sitting, adopted the country's first ever written constitution.

Finally, on November 6, 2008, the fifth King (Druk Gyalpo), Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, was enthroned and received the Raven Crown from his father, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk.

Bhutan has struck a balance between progressive development and preservation of its ancient culture and traditions. How often does one witness an absolute monarch voluntarily giving up his powers, introducing democracy and abdicating the throne in order to pave the way for the younger generation!

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Tackling labour unrest in RMG sector

It is unfortunate that though the RMG sector is a key factor in our economic growth and the largest employment sector, successive governments have not been able to contain intermittent labour unrest satisfactorily.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE RMG sector is our second largest foreign exchange earner. Virtually with no past experience our private sector has been able to prove its dynamism by becoming the fourth largest supplier of readymade garments in the world, even though Bangladesh is heavily dependent on imported fabrics and yarn from other countries. The success it has gained is mainly due to its competitive price, which is due to low wages of garment workers.

The RMG industry started without any direct assistance from the government. It was the brainchild of late Mr. Nurul Quader, a freedom fighter and retired civil servant. Now, RMG has become the number one export item. In fact, due to remittances from our workers abroad and our export earnings we have so far been able to survive the global economic meltdown. Our government is hopeful of economic

growth of 6% this year. Indeed, commendable for a developing country like Bangladesh.

It is unfortunate that though the RMG sector is a key factor in our economic growth and the largest employment sector, successive governments have not been able to contain intermittent labour unrest satisfactorily. It is not clear as to why they failed to handle the problems efficiently and why they did not probe deeper in to the problems when they were fully aware of the importance of RMG sector in our economy.

By arresting some labour leaders, by resorting to police action or seeking advice from BGMEA, or mildly reprimanding the concerned factory owners for their lapses (deliberate or otherwise) we may not be able to find an acceptable solution. The government may have to take more interest in solving the demand for a minimum wage of Tk 5,000 per month.

With the present rate of growth it may not take too long for Bangladesh to become

the 3rd largest readymade garment exporter in the world. We are already receiving big demands from many countries, particularly Japan -- one of the largest markets in the world. Apart from this, foreign buyers consider Bangladesh as an attractive destination for global outsourcing because it is capable of manufacturing quality items at a cheaper cost.

Two major problems of RMG lie in productivity and worker turnover, along with workers' unrest. Most workers are migrants from the villages. They live on meagre rations, and paying high rents for living in miserable conditions. An increase in minimum wages a couple years back could bring very little change for the garment workers. Thus, the solution cannot be purely financial.

If the factories are located in rural areas workers can live in their own homes, in their own villages, traveling to the factory daily and spending their day off each week with their families. This would be a much better situation for the workers, with low living costs and increased income to share with their families.

Furthermore, this would help improve the rural economy. It would increase productivity, worker satisfaction and benefits for owners. Such a situation will certainly help in ending the violent unrests that we have seen recently.

There are a couple of barriers to implementing the above. They are:

- Investment, and
- The presumption that factory owners would not want to relocate due to lack of proper schools and other services. In these cases the government may act as a facilitator.

As a poverty reduction strategy RMG may speed up economic growth in Bangladesh. By employing one person in a rural setting we may extend benefits to two or three persons. The problems and solutions to RMG labour unrest are not financial only. We need to look more at key issues and potential solution within the sector.

Labour unrest cannot be reduced only through warnings or police action. The government must not ignore violation of rules and procedures by factory owners. Sudden closure and withholding of pay and other dues of workers are violations of industrial regulations. The government and the BGMEA must pressurise owners to clear all dues before a factory is closed. To involve the concerned parliamentary committee in such matters may be a good idea. Bureaucratic handling of such sensitive matter cannot bring an acceptable solution.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.