

Government's resolve reassuring

But do something fast about Dhaka

WE take heart from what the PM articulated while expressing her government's determination not to allow any further housing projects that do not meet the new criteria set up in this regard. And it is about time too. It need hardly be emphasised that Dhaka city is reeling under the pressure of not only unplanned housing but also lack of other facilities and amenities that a capital should provide.

There is no doubt that Dhaka has been turned into concrete jungle in the last three decades. The natural catchment areas of the city have been filled up to make room for new buildings, but not even the minimum breathing space required for the people of the locality has been catered for. Power of money, of some of the realtors, and greed, of some of the officials, have colluded to transform what was once a placid and beautiful metropolis into very nearly an unlivable place. That is why, after every light shower during the rainy season, life in the capital comes to a grinding halt.

It is very good to know that the government will not allow any future housing projects that do not provide for playground and preserve the natural water bodies in the locality, and that it plans to break up the city into zones and build satellite towns to reduce pressure on the capital. Whilst all these are splendid ideas these will also take some time to consummate. But what Dhaka needs in the short or immediate term would have to be taken up first. Thus it necessitates formulation and implementation of plans to address the woes of the Dhaka city dwellers by improving the standard of the civic amenities in the capital on an urgent basis.

That is why, pending the concretisation of the address that the PM articulated during her address to the participants of a 2-day seminar organised by BAPA and Bangladesh Environmental Network, we feel that the government should urgently address the issue of traffic congestion of Dhaka city. In fact it would be extremely helpful if arrangements were made to build a few flyovers at major bottlenecks in the city on an urgent basis, as has been planned for Chittagong. It would also be helpful if arrangements for car parking, in the vicinity of major shopping centres, could be made immediately to spare the people the sufferings caused by traffic jam, and any other actions that would make the life of road users less difficult.

While the government should undertake newer plans to bring the capital at par with other metropolises in the region, immediate measures should be taken up to address the problems of city dwellers.

Fazle Hasan Abed honoured

He has made the nation proud

FAZLE Hasan Abed, founder and chairperson of BRAC, has been a name that we have duly been proud of. He is a visionary whose relentless efforts and innovative ideas have changed life in many ways as far as the poor in our country, and beyond, are concerned. It is great news that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of Britain has taken note of Mr Abed's services to humanity and decided to knight him honour bestowed upon only truly remarkable personalities. Needless to say, Mr Abed belongs to that rare genre of committed human beings who love to work for the less fortunate, happily and selflessly.

Today BRAC is the biggest NGO in the world working in no fewer than three continents. That alone tells Mr Abed's success story rather convincingly. He has been able to bring about a quiet revolution.

The challenge of alleviating poverty in Bangladesh must have been a formidable one in the early 1970s. BRAC has shown the way to millions of rural poor and instilled in them the confidence to come out of the vicious poverty cycle which was a stumbling block in the way of development. But men like Mr Abed never give up. He has proved that concerted and planned action can help overcome the biggest odds. BRAC is now globally recognised as a pioneer of poverty alleviation. He has shown that Bangladesh can indeed be a model to all developing and underdeveloped countries fighting poverty.

The fields in which BRAC works are many and all of them have been selected in light of our socio-political needs. For example, BRAC's non-formal primary education programme, which targets the under-privileged children, expanded to a point where it had 37,500 primary schools in June 2008 and it continues to grow. Its public healthcare programme is now a major service provider in the health sector for more than 92 million people. The programme includes some vital components like immunization and services for mothers. The immunization drive has been a huge success.

The recognition given to Mr Abed once again reminds us that dedication, commitment and integrity are always rewarded in the long run. When BRAC started in 1972, it was a modest beginning for the organisation. But Mr Abed's leadership and guidance has elevated it to the position that it has now. We congratulate Mr Abed on his being honoured by Her Majesty and believe that it will only further boost his indomitable spirit of working for our collective good.

Do not aim for headlines, please

Here is an interesting one: "Corruption at court starts from the listing of cases. Bench officers of courts indulge in corruption due to inefficiency and carelessness of judges concerned." Well, is that breaking news? Not at all! We have been writing on this issue for decades but no one cared to listen. Just because the attorney general has said it today does not mean things will improve like a miracle.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

IF nothing that needs to be changed is changing; something is slowly but surely undergoing changes deep within many of us. Somehow, we are not thinking and talking the way we did one year ago. We are not analysing things the way we did a year ago. For some unknown reasons, we are thinking, analysing, talking and acting more like those cynics than anything else. We were not cynics a year ago, and we have not become hardcore cynics, yet. But we are scared, as we can feel the changes taking place in the labyrinth of our minds.

In a social get together conversations are beginning to sound more like conversations that take place in a cathedral. One bewildered person asks another more bewildered person: "Bhaisab, what is going on?" There is no response from the other side, no initiation of dialectic invectives, no intelligent interaction, only two pairs of blank eyes lock and at one point disperse. Why is it happening this way?

The answers are to be found in the print and electronic media news items. Read newspapers on Monday and do your own analysing. "IGP to be elevated to 3-star general"... now the cynic inside you will ask, will it make the police force more powerful overnight and help bring down the crime rate in the country? Your guess is just as good as mine. Read: "Redesign university curriculum," and ask yourself... who will do it? Where is the expertise? Where is the finance? No one knows.

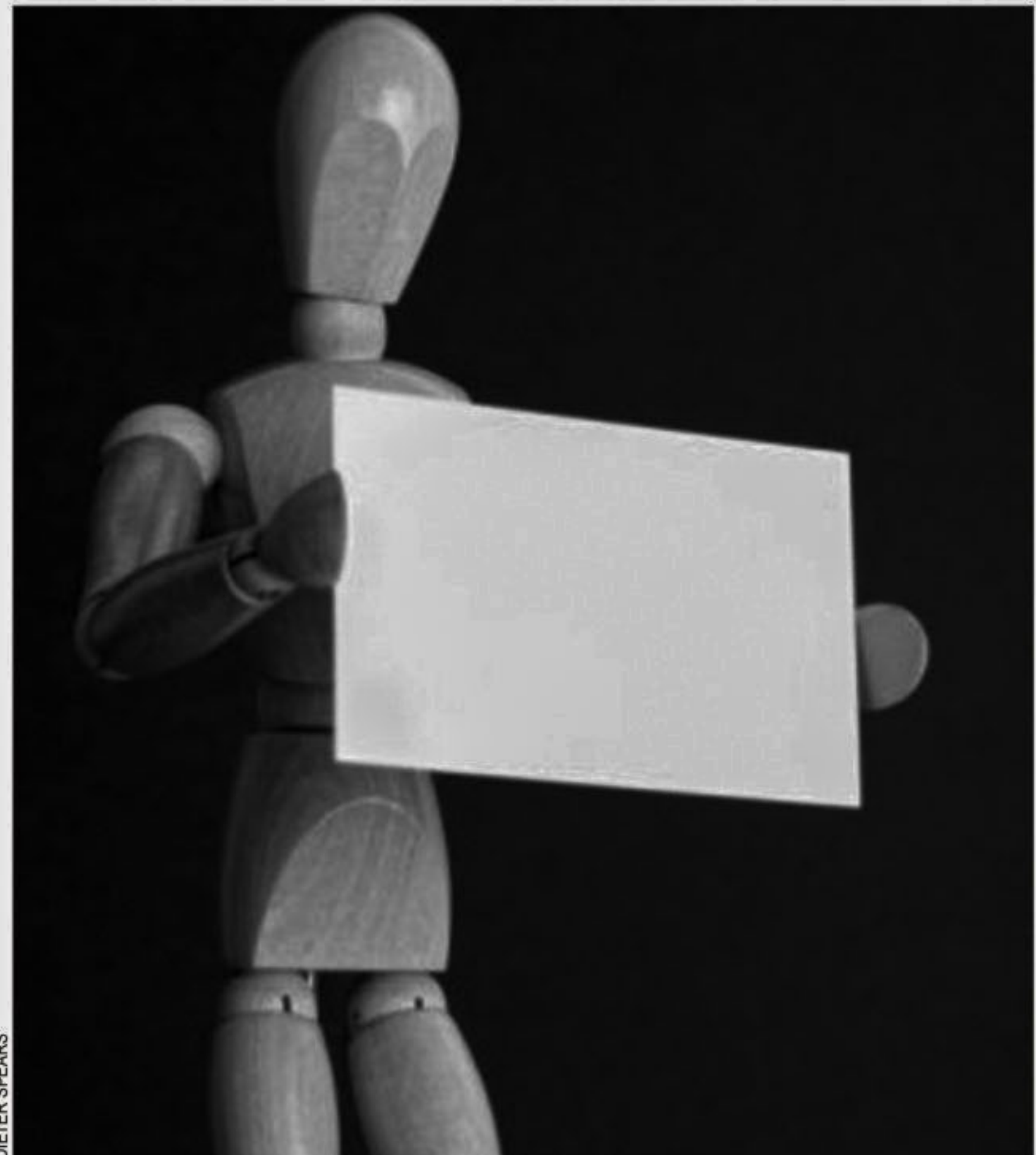
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decades but no one cared to listen. Just because the attorney general has said it today does not mean things will improve like a miracle. If he has some idea of where the problem lies then he should ask the government to take immediate steps. Judiciary is the last resort of the oppressed, therefore, there must not be any room for incompetence and the corrupt.

There is more to turn you into a cynic. "Law Commission left out of focus. Government yet to respond to its 2-year reform plan." We all know that modernising the legal system and updating some old laws are vital for ensuring justice as well as good governance, yet nothing moved towards that direction till yesterday. Therefore, we are exactly where we were left stranded by the previous governments as far as law reforms are concerned.

Another headline that we have been reading since the time of Adam and Eve goes like this: "No more unplanned housing in Dhaka." It is the favourite line of the ministers -- past, present and future. While such speeches are being delivered from the podium, hundreds of trucks unload bricks on the sidewalks for the under-construction buildings, and hundreds of water bodies and playgrounds are turning into housing plots every day.

Today the headline reads: "JS sits today without BNP." Yesterday it read: "JS sits today without Awami League." You see, media people just have to change the position of names. It's not a difficult task, as our politics is so predictable. Please go ahead: "8 highway trauma centres to reopen." Cynics want to know why did they close down in the first place? Who own and run them, actually? They also want to know whether those centres would turn into money-making sources for the political workers of the ruling



Headlines say it all!

party if started again? Can the government assure us of qualified physicians, nurses and medicine available 24 hours?

To say the least, we are suffering from tremendous mental anguish after reading big talks concerning solving of traffic congestion (while a couple of hundred cars hit Dhaka roads every day), reopening of circular waterways, building expressways, doing bazaar monitoring, protecting our forests and rivers, removing brick kilns from unauthorised locations and so on and so forth. We can read the lips of the political leaders when they deliver speeches from the podium. We know what they would say next.

Has anyone in the government thought about the fact that already one year has gone by from a term of five years? Only "four years" are all that is left to them. They have

"many promises to keep." But how? Cynics wonder what mechanism the government has up its sleeve to ensure implementation of all the major projects that are supposed to increase national output, alleviate poverty, generate employment, address global warming fallout, tackle the yearly floods, increase electricity production and ensure digitalisation of Bangladesh.

Therefore, cynics request the government not to go for the headlines with big words, but to go for intense implementation work to achieve the targets to fulfil election pledges. Let the media find out about your good works and give them due place in the news.

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ONE YEAR OF THE GOVERNMENT

Commerce: Good job, could have been better

My suggestion to the government is to refocus on policy issues rather than market intervention. Excessive market intervention through price control may lead to market failure. Hence, focus should be given on regulating the supply side by ensuring local production and timely import.

MAMUN RASHID

ONE of the promises of the new government in its election manifesto was to stabilise commodity prices in the local market. The AL government took over office during a crucial time, when the local market was facing price spiral due to commodity price volatility in the global markets, there was uncertainty among importers, natural disasters, policy failures during the caretaker regime etc. The highest priority of the new government was increasing production, market intervention and ensuring supply to ease as well stabilise the commodity market.

The government has shown good performance by stabilising rice and edible oil prices. However, throughout the years, we observed "passing of the buck" between the government and businessmen. The price of a commodity, if procured locally, is dependent on production costs, transportation costs, storage costs, and wholesalers' and retailers'

margins.

Commodity price, if procured internationally, usually reflects international market price, shipping costs, importer's margin, distributors' margin and retailers' margin. Hence, if there is a hike in commodity prices, importing countries like Bangladesh will also experience a rise. To safeguard ourselves from market movements, we need to ensure timely and adequate import of essentials.

We have seen such efforts from our government this year. The government intervened in the market prior to Ramadan to control price movements. The commerce ministry arranged buffer stocks and tried to address the supply side through imports. However, the market has not seen the full benefits of such initiatives. Rather, issues of "syndicate" (cartel) and hoarding were highlighted by the ministry.

My suggestion to the government is to refocus on policy issues rather than market intervention. Excessive market intervention through price control may lead to market

failure. Hence, focus should be given on regulating the supply side by ensuring local production and timely import.

Local production can be increased through formulating and monitoring a national agriculture policy, which must incorporate timely distribution of agriculture inputs, distribution network management, subsidy arrangement, increasing involvement of the private sector, reflection of consumer desired prices, crop selection, crop diversification, modernisations and etc.

The government's role is not only to ensure timely imports, but also to manage the distribution network and sales of imported commodities since these are the intermediaries that ultimately ensure the supply to the consumers. Hence, the role of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) could be strengthened further. However, this "strengthening exercise" is not for putting TCB in competition with the private sector "biggies," but to enable it to intervene in the market as a price stabiliser in time need of.

At the same time, we need to focus on capacity building of TCB and put the right person in the right job. Incidentally, we are yet to see moves in this direction. Greater transparency is required to ensure smooth channeling of imported goods. Policies should be also accommodative to encourage market competition and needs to address the demand side of the market by formulating policies to protect consumer interests.

Our leaders should also focus on trade policies. In the past, we had lost ground in various trade forums and trade related agreements. Debates over TIFA are still going on. We have to incorporate the benefits of the TIFA in line with the WTO and attempt to obtain market access to the US, particularly duty free or least duty access of RMG to the US, which Bangladesh could not achieve in the WTO. Our representatives should take on the leadership in such forums. Our leaders must focus on the country's competitive advantages, bargaining capabilities and the need to be loud and clear. The art of negotiation should be applied in a dispassionate and coherent manner to reach to a win-win destination.

So far we could not reap the full benefits of the Safta agreement. While the lion's share of our imports comes from India, our export to India in FY 2009 was only \$277 million, while export to Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan were \$19 million, \$8 million and \$76 million respectively, which constitutes only 2% of the country's total export of \$15.5 billion. Our government should focus more on regional/bilateral trade opportunities. Here comes the role of our diplomatic missions, which can uphold the country's competitive advantages and promote our export products.

The new Export Policy 2009-2012 has focused on a number of policy measures

which are likely to bring positive changes for our country, such as classification of export products, restructuring of the priority sectors and the special development sectors along with renewed focus on market expansion, diversification of the export basket and identification of new products.

In the new policy agro-products, light engineering goods, home textiles, ICT/ software, and ocean going vessels are identified in the priority sector list, which is consistent with the government policy of reforming the agriculture sector, promoting ICT education and building digital Bangladesh along with facilitating the thriving sectors of the country. Under the special development sector finished leather goods, uncut diamonds, textiles from hill tracts, fresh flowers and ceramic goods have been emphasised. These are definitely new avenues and if nurtured correctly can propel export earnings. Providing protections to these industries from foreign players will be a major challenge for the government.

The commerce ministry should also address the infrastructure issue with utmost priority. Industrial growth has been suffering from inadequate transportation facilities, inefficient port management and energy crisis. The cost of doing business is still high in Bangladesh compared to other South Asian countries. As per the Doing Business 2010 report, Bangladesh is ranked 4th among the South Asian countries.

The government plans to build deep-sea ports, Padma bridge, and elevated express highways to address the infrastructure constraints. Funding these projects is the prime issue. Private sector capital and foreign capital will play a major role in this aspect. To ensure smooth flow of capital, market development, facilitating investments, and resolving energy issues should be the prime focus areas of the government.

The commerce ministry should work closely with the finance ministry to ensure proper budget allocation and commodity price control, the agriculture ministry for efficient local procurement, the foreign ministry for promoting country's export products to the foreign markets, and the home ministry to ensure law enforcement.

Mr. Faruk Khan has an open mind to new ideas. He is possibly the first commerce minister without any cloud on his name with regard to personal integrity. With a bit more focus on his core ministry affairs, a drive to ensure support from other stake holder ministries, and "in-house" capacity building to tackle the bi-lateral issues, he could remain remembered in the pages of history; though satisfying consumers in an emerging economy and supporting wealth creation through the business community is a tough job.

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AMAHAD DRINK NEWS