

President Gul's visit to Dhaka

It has offered a window on opportunity for greater economic links

TURKISH President Abdullah Gul's two-day visit to Bangladesh has had a degree of significance that should be obvious to all. An indication of the substantive nature of the visit is to be had in the fact that the president was accompanied by a 180-member team, of which as many as 100 were businessmen and investors looking to opportunities for greater economic exchange with Bangladesh. President Gul's meeting with leading Bangladeshi businessmen yesterday and his remarks on trade relations between Dhaka and Ankara only make stronger the case for further economic cooperation between the two nations in the days ahead.

President Gul's feeling that despite Bangladesh's annual growth rate of 6 per cent there are yet a number of steps necessary to transform the country into a middle income economy is well taken. One hardly needs to be reminded that in today's fast paced world, we in Bangladesh cannot but redouble our efforts toward giving the economy the spurt it is so much in need of. And that kind of spurt, as the Turkish president has said in so many words, can result from Bangladesh's ties with other nations. Where cooperation with Turkey is concerned, the volume of trade between the two countries amounted to US\$658 billion in 2009. What might cheer us a little is that our exports to Turkey during that period have been a little higher than Turkey's to us. Bangladesh exported goods worth US\$523 million to Turkey, while Turkey's exports amounted to US\$134 million. Now, as the Turkish leader informs us, the target is to boost the two-way trade to a billion dollars in 2010.

There are quite a few other areas where we can derive advantage from our links with Turkey. As President Zillur Rahman has noted, Dhaka will welcome Ankara's assistance in its river-dredging endeavours as well as in boosting its energy production and ship-building. Other factors such as information technology, tourism and assistance in developing our agro-based industries can also come in. On our part, we can explore newer areas where increasing our exports to Turkey is concerned.

So the scope for wider economic cooperation between the two countries is there to be tapped in on. Through his visit, President Abdullah Gul has only underscored the urgency of it with our own President. It is now for us to get down to the task of working out the details of how such cooperation can be brought about, and how soon

Fire at Garden City

Another damning indictment on safety standards

THE blaze at the Japan Garden City apartment building, the way it engulfed beyond source taking a toll of seven lives and the manner in which it was handled all make the tragedy look so preventable in hindsight. Actually, these have been a horrific eye-opener to the poor fire safety standards that are built into the high-rise apartment building complexes. Ranging from design deviation through lack of internal fire fighting arrangements including dearth or absence of fire extinguishers and water hydrants that never get supervised to non-compliance with fire drill and awareness requirements, you name it, the gaps in the chain are horrendous.

In the specific case of Garden City building, the explanations are at best confusing and at worst pathologically deceitful. The real estate builder who has to its credit 1500 fully constructed flats claimed that the building in question was equipped with fire extinguishers and hydrants fitted with hoses which could not draw water as electric connection was cut off for safety reasons. Was there an auto-active generator which could have proved useful? The answer is no. As for fire extinguishers, most appeared to be in no condition to work. This is not the first time that whatever remained by way internal fire fighting capacity went kaput. Besides, in the maintenance of security staff, the notion of fire fighters among them is missing; it is all dressed up for gate-keeping and saluting inhabitants and visitors in and out.

The fundamental question is two-some: first, it falls on Rajuk to ensure that there are necessary underpinnings of fire safety devices within high-rise buildings, subject to periodic checks on their adequacy in terms of number and efficacy. Secondly, the developers owe it to their clients to see that once taking possession of their apartment they are safe from the hazards of fire and other forms of accidents. They must have the internal mechanism to prevent fire that usually originates in a small source from spreading including carrying out periodic fire drills, awareness building exercises and serving instructions on do's and don'ts.

The Rajuk may already have sent out a team for appraisal on the ground. Legal action should be taken against those found responsible. But there is a pressing need in general for a survey to be conducted by a specially assigned taskforce to ascertain the safety status particularly of high-rise apartment buildings with follow up actions to improve things up to an acceptable level.

Reshaping student politics

We need to positively change campus politics without deviating from democratic practices. If we abruptly cut party politics on campuses, it will germinate again. Instead, we need to stop feeding it so it dies from the root.

IFTEKHAR IQBAL

BANGLADESH never had real student politics. Instead, what the student community did in 1952, the 1960s, 1971 and 1990 was much bigger, bolder and glorious than real student politics. Though they used different political forums, students united to serve their nation in its most trying moment, for national interest and democratisation.

The Oxford-Cambridge style of student representational activity may offer insight on what student politics is, and how it can be practiced on Bangladesh campuses. I refer to Cambridge, whose student politics is impressive and Dhaka University, which was fashioned on the Oxbridge model. Cambridge offers activities in which students work together to assert their rights and get their voices heard, remaining aloof from petty party politics as reflected in their representation, academics, practical and cultural activities.

Regarding the institutional arrangement of representation, little difference exists between Cambridge and DU. Both have a collegiate-residential system, student bodies in the colleges (halls, in the case of DU) and a central student union, the Cambridge one being called CUSU (Cambridge University Students' Union). Both are theoretically concerned with student well-being.

Yet, DU student politics remains diametrically opposite of what is practiced at Cambridge. Since independence, only DU has seen an average of two students murdered every year, prompting suggestions to de-link "student politics" from national politics. However, "banning" or "de-linking" student politics may not solve this problem and instead, may create confusion and chaos, frustrating all good intentions. Instead, the student community's power and potential should be unleashed through "real" student politics. When students are engaged and given space, party-politics among them will eventually weaken and disperse. For instance, major UK political parties are active on the Cambridge campus, but they have no institutional voice in the CUSU. How do we get non-political students represented?

First, DUCSU's federal nature must be restored. This requires forming a hall committee, electing a representative body for each hall, which elects the DUCSU central committee. The tenure of the elected student body at both hall and DUCSU levels should be one year. Elections should be synchronised between hall and the DUCSU committees so they work simultaneously. Once elections are held, and a DUCSU committee formed, the latter should not be

the ultimate decision-maker. Instead, there should be a council of representatives, consisting of all elected hall committee presidents. Even better is having two hall committees, one of undergraduate students and the other of all graduate students. Though the DUCSU committee is the central administrative body, the council, represented by the halls, should provide checks and balances to decentralise power and dampen the desire for central positions. This way, a council member participating in the central decision-making process should be satisfied in his/her hall activities as a "political" territory. Secondly, no student should run twice for presidential positions at both DUCSU and hall levels. Thirdly, an expenditure ceiling should be set during all elections, so that poorer students get an equal opportunity to run.

Obviously, election campaigns should not involve ideology, but broad, relevant issues, relating to academic, practical and socio-cultural activities. A candidate or panel of candidates should run on respective election manifestos relating to those areas. Once elections are over and DUCSU and hall committees are formed, elected members should immediately start realising their election pledges.

The DUCSU should have an academic committee, represented by different university faculty, and its president. DU authorities should officially involve a DUCSU academic committee representative in important academic matters. One may recall that in recent efforts to introduce a semester and grading system, student representation was not ensured.

In addition, DUCSU should have a sub-committee headed by a female student who looks into problems relating exclusively to the university's female students.

A separate committee should arrange and oversee entertainment events on campus.

Cambridge has over 500 various clubs and societies, with CUSU offering them practical support in some way. DUCSU should encourage forming and sustaining such societies. For instance, students can form a Dhaka University Society for Creative Writing, or Dhaka University Society for Non-Violence etc. Similar Dhaka University societies exist, but can be brought under the DUCSU.

Publication is a very important student empowerment tool. CUSU's main mouthpiece is *The Cambridge Student* (TCS), an editorially independent weekly. The paper's aim is to provide:

- High quality news, features, sports, and coverage of events and relevant issues for the student body;
- A platform for open debate and discussion.



Students should have the right to voice their concerns.

The central academic committee should look into various academic issues including:

- Hosting academic seminars and workshops for students and faculty (It was a pleasant surprise to discover in the British Library that Abul Hossain, a Dhaka University economics lecturer, presented a paper in 1927 on "The Problem of Rivers in Bengal" right at the DUCSU!).
- Informing prospective students of various aspects of university life.
- Introducing new students to university facilities.
- Supplying and making available books and related study material in libraries.
- Dealing with any problems that students have with their teachers or supervisors.
- Managing complaints that students might have regarding university examinations and supervisions.
- Any other issues that affect students' academic performance.

The DUCSU, by appropriate institutional arrangement, should look into the following:

- Assisting university administration in allocating hall seats justly and fairly.
- Supporting students with disabilities.
- Ensuring hygienic and appropriate food in the hall and campus-wide canteens.
- Ensuring physical and sexual safety of students on campus.
- Keeping campus clean and environment-friendly.
- Ensuring that campus and halls remain drug-free.
- Ensuring that the university medical establishment offers standard medical services.
- Providing career counselling for departing students.
- Providing photocopy, computing and electronic services.
- Providing student ID and discount cards, among others.

- An opportunity for students to gain and develop journalism and newspaper management experience.

We need to positively change campus politics without deviating from democratic practices. If we abruptly cut party politics on campuses, it will germinate again. Instead, we need to stop feeding it so it dies from the root. We can do this by vigorously campaigning for "real" student politics.

The decline of campus party politics should not be insulting or alarming to mainstream political parties. National

parties should support the rise of a non-party political regime on campuses, even if it requires temporarily neutralising their student wings. When non-political student leaders train in appropriate campus politics, they will be assets as post-campus-life leaders for all national political parties. Realising the issue's importance and an informed decision from national political parties is crucial.

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The problems have begun

As a symbol of economic unification, sixteen European nations share a common currency. But all these nations have divergent economic and fiscal policies. So the ultimate problem is the non-existence of a political union, which can exercise centralised control over economic policies.

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FOR months, European politicians have been expressing worries about their sagging economies and the rising euro. They have been calling for a weaker currency to help boost exports. Yet, when in the first week of February 2010, the euro dropped to \$1.36 (a significant drop from \$1.50 in November, last year) the news was received with concern in Brussels and other European capitals. This time, the concern was not about a temporary rise or fall of a currency in the foreign exchange market but about the growing speculation in the financial market over the future of the 16-member euro area's common currency -- the euro.

The immediate reason for all this speculative attack was the suspicion that debt-ridden Greece -- a member of the euro area -- would not be able to meet its financial obligations. In mid-January, it was revealed by the statistical office of the European Commission that Greece had been deliberately fiddling its books to hide its real budget deficit, which was 12.7% of the GDP instead of 3.7% as reported before.

The speculation was strengthened by the widespread belief that besides Greece, there were other more important members of the euro area who were also hiding their real budget deficits which, according to the European Central Bank regulations, can not exceed 3% of their GDPs in any given year. Worries about a domino-effect, covering countries like Portugal, Spain and Italy, intensified, as fear grew that these countries' governments were not capable of taking drastic measures to bring their public finances under control and therefore, would eventually default.

Any such default would not only affect the

countries concerned, but also severely undermine the credibility of the euro as a globally accepted currency for trade and commerce.

Making things worse, the cost of insuring the debts of Greece, Portugal and Spain rose to record levels causing stock markets to tumble and the borrowing costs in the most vulnerable countries of the euro area to soar. The return of the infamous "credit default swaps CDS," which very nearly destroyed AIG and forced the American government to intervene with massive financial help to avoid an international chain reaction of bank failures, created a panic situation in the international financial market.

Now that the credit default swap market has turned against Greek, Portuguese and Spanish government debts, their governments will have to pay even larger premiums to finance their debts. This phenomenon will also affect perfectly healthy companies in the private sector in a perverse manner by forcing them to pay higher interest costs, which in turn will make their products less competitive in the export market. As a result, it will be more difficult for these southern countries of Europe to get out of the recession.

The 16-nation common currency has removed the possibility of devaluation by any one single country. Unable to increase taxes and at the same time, unwilling to adopt drastic austerity measures because of possible strikes and social unrest, some nations may even think of abandoning the euro to achieve economic growth. But trying to leave the euro would also create huge legal, financial and exchange rate problems because it was not contemplated that a member would ever try to leave the euro club. So, what can the European Union do to avert a situation like this?



Is the euro about to topple?

The European Union is not a sovereign entity. As Floyd Norris of the New York Times pointed out recently, "At the heart, the problem is Europe's unwillingness to choose either unification or separation. It wanted economic unification, with continued independence of nation-states." As a symbol of economic unification, sixteen European nations share a common currency. But all these nations have divergent economic and fiscal policies. So the ultimate problem is the non-existence of a political union, which can exercise centralised control over economic policies.

Since it is inconceivable that Europe will ever have a political union like that of the United States, will the euro eventually disappear?

The euro has brought enormous benefits to the euro area nations. Therefore, it's highly unlikely that core members of the euro area -- Germany, France, and Netherlands -- will allow the euro to disappear or allow sovereign default of a euro

member. The EU will somehow muddle through as it has done before.

The head of the European Central Bank is already playing a discreet but influential behind-the-scenes role to arrange a conditional rescue package from a yet-to-be-constituted European Monetary Fund, with restrictions on further reckless borrowing and profligate government spending for countries like Greece and Portugal, which will not only help these countries to get out of the current debt crisis but also strengthen the position of the euro in the long run.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the euro will not come under occasional attacks from the speculators in the future. Given the structural weakness of the organisation -- it is merely an economic union and not a political one -- the European Union should take this opportunity to put in place adequate mechanisms as soon as possible to fight them off.

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