

Card and cash for farmers

Useful scheme, implement it efficiently

THE government's decision to introduce the Agri-input Assistance Card and Cash Assistance for 1.82 crore farmers is certainly a move in the right direction, given the sector's crucial role in our national economy. The farmers have for years been the real driving force behind the good performance of the agriculture sector.

Providing the farmers with necessary logistical and financial support for raising food grain production should always be a matter of top priority. The government has also taken the necessary steps to remove procedural complexities, so that the farmers can easily get the card and cash assistance. It is no doubt a welfare scheme for the farmers that will come in very handy for them, particularly when they are cash-strapped. We saw in the past how they suffered due to non-availability and high prices of fertilisers and diesel. Obviously, the facilities that the government has decided to offer them will help boost production. We believe the prime minister's optimism, that it will bring about welcome changes, is well founded.

However, a huge scheme like it cannot be implemented without the bureaucracy and local political leadership working in tandem, honestly and efficiently. If experience is anything to go by, we witnessed many times in the past that political interference coupled with mismanagement and corruption completely neutralised many good moves of the government. The decision makers have to bear in mind that the possibility of corruption and irregularities creeping in cannot be ruled out while implementing a countrywide programme on such a scale.

The prime minister has asked the government officials to discharge their duties with a sense of commitment. We fully endorse her point but it is equally important that the programme does not assume any partisan character. Only the genuine farmers should be its beneficiaries.

The government is clearly ahead of all its predecessors in adding the element of dynamism to the agriculture sector. It has set its priority right as the runaway population growth and the global price hike of food grain make it doubly important for us to maintain the agriculture sector's productivity. The renewed emphasis on this sector will not only help the farmers but also initiate some new thoughts on how to support the agriculture sector and raise its overall performance. It is no doubt an innovative project, which will translate the theoretical stress on farmers' well-being into a tangible and useful scheme.

Highway tragedy, again

The root causes need addressing

WITH the death of another youngster on Tuesday in a road mishap in Bogra, the issue of highway safety has once again come to the fore. And as is usual in such cases, an angry mob burnt down the killer truck, vandalised roadside shops, put up a barricade on the Bogra-Rangpur highway paralysing road traffic for about four and a quarter of an hour until the police intervened to calm down the crowd and restore normality in the area.

The too familiar sequel to such road mishaps notwithstanding, we disapprove of the way in which the public who witnessed the accident and resorted to widespread rampage and vandalism in protest. And as in every other case, intervention by the police or administration brought the stalemate on the roads to an end. But this certainly should not be the ideal way to face the problem of road mishaps whose number is on the increase with attending violent outbursts of the public. It is important that the root causes lying behind these road accidents are seriously looked into and duly addressed.

The reasons for which the angry locals resorted to vandalism and kept the highway under their control appeared to be somewhat different in the Bogra case. For rather than just pouring their anger on the driver who was apparently responsible for that particular mishap, their demands pointed to the factors that led to the accident.

In this particular case, quite clearly the reckless driver as well as the absence of road-breakers and narrowing of the roads due to the presence of unauthorised shops was the immediate reasons behind the accident. In other cases, one would find lack of proper observation of traffic laws by drivers, many of whom are either poorly trained or have no training to drive the vehicle. Faulty road design, lack of road maintenance, unfit and un-roadworthy vehicles, absence of patrol on the highways, sitting of temporary bazaars on the roads and so on also often contribute to road tragedies. These are again linked to corruption, inefficiencies, mismanagement and irregularities in the government offices that are supposed to look after these affairs. And all these issues have to be addressed in earnest, if the government wants to establish order and discipline on the roads. Otherwise there will be no end to the deaths on the road and angry mob syndrome that goes with them.

Premature death of a student from a poor rural background due to reckless driving is a matter of great sorrow and we sympathise with the family thus bereft of their beloved one. In the same breath, we call upon the government to take urgent steps to address the root causes of such tragedies.

Restraint is needed

Both the ruling AL and the main opposition BNP have to exercise utmost restraint in the interest of the nation. It needs no explanation that, here, the ruling AL has to set example to be followed by the main opposition BNP and others.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT was good to see that the leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, led the opposition lawmakers into the house on February 11 after skipping it for sixty-plus consecutive sitting days since the beginning of the second session of the ninth Parliament on June 4.

The people have hailed the return of the BNP-led opposition to the house and they expect that both the ruling AL and the main opposition BNP will be respectful to each other to make the Parliament effective and do everything possible to develop a political culture that contributes to the successful functioning of democracy.

The opposition chief whip, who took the floor shortly after their return to the house, demanded parliamentary discussions on a number of issues, including price hike of essentials, law and order, campus violence, and killing of Bangladeshis on the border. He also presented the much-talked-about charter of demands, which includes, inter alia, additional seats in the front row, lifting of the cases filed against Khaleda Zia and her two sons, revoking the government's decision of scrapping the lease-hold of her residence in the Cantonment, giving opposition lawmakers chairmanship of two more parliamentary standing committees and stopping AL's female lawmakers from supervising development activities in the opposition lawmakers' constituencies.

The opposition urged the speaker to expunge the treasury bench's "indecent remarks" on late president Ziaur Rahman. Speaker Abdul Hamid reportedly assured the opposition that he would allow them to participate in discussions on "important issues."

So far, this was good. But, what followed in the House in past few days has frustrated most people. House proceedings shown on BTV and the reports carried by newspapers show how the treasury and opposition bench MPs have locked horns and verbally attacked and blamed each other indecently for "misrule" in the country, creating an intense situation in



The sanctity of the House must be maintained.

the house.

The MPs taking part in the thanksgiving motion on the president's address used indecent and unparliamentary language, and even launched personal attacks on opponents ignoring the rules of procedure of parliament. The speaker's request to the MPs not to use indecent and unparliamentary language in their statements and not to attack their opponents has so far fallen flat. We saw his helplessness when he failed to bring the House to order and asked what he could do if everybody shouted.

The opposition questioned the neutrality of the speaker and staged walkout on three consecutive sitting days till February 15.

It is not clear to many as to why the top level leaders in the treasury bench have been vocal in making personal attacks on late president Ziaur Rahman, particularly of his burial near the parliament, when the government is faced with prob-

lems like upward trend in the rate of inflation, price spiral of food and other essential commodities, decline in export growth rates, decline in imports of key items required for economic growth, decline in the growth of revenue collection compared to 2008, deterioration of law and order, killing of Bangladeshis on the border, etc.

their demands.

What many people fear is that if the street agitation and violence gain momentum, the functioning of Parliament will be seriously hampered. This has been the experience of the past twenty years or so of the parliamentary democracy in the country. This also threatens the process of our parliament-

ary democracy. Would it not be wise for the government to seek cooperation of the opposition to find solutions to these problems? This will be appreciated by the people. Even if the opposition does not come forward, it will go in favour of the government.

The cabinet decided on February 15 to rename the establishments named after late president Ziaur Rahman, including the Zia International Airport, which is to be named Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) International Airport, and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman University, Barisal, which will be named Barisal University. The opposition BNP has already threatened a countrywide movement against the decision. We have to wait to see as to what extent this decision of the government affects functioning of the Parliament. BNP has already made it clear that they would raise their voice, simultaneously in Parliament and on the streets, to realise

ary democracy.

An old saying goes: "Politicians think of the next election while statesmen think of the next generation." Bangladesh has so far got many politicians but very few statesmen. It may not be an overstatement that our national political leaders place individual and party interests above national interests. This has adversely affected both the economic and the political development of the country.

Democracy is yet to take root after thirty-eight years of independence. Both the ruling AL and the main opposition BNP have to exercise utmost restraint in the interest of the nation. It needs no explanation that, here, the ruling AL has to set example to be followed by the main opposition BNP and others.

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Agreements and arguments

The imperative now is to implement the agreements as fast as possible, with the proviso that long-term engagement is required to make the outcome sustainable. In each stage of the graduation, the steps taken must be transparent, accountable and widely discussed.

ABDUL BAYES

IT is unfortunate that any discussion on the relations between Bangladesh and India generates more heat than sense; evokes more emotions than economics; and allows rhetoric to reign over the reality on the ground. For example, our bilateral trade deficit with China is more than that with India, but deficit with India is more sensitive an issue. A politically motivated anti-Indian sentiment on the part of a segment of politicians in our country might have caused it, or a big-brotherly attitude in some on the other side of the fence might have fueled the fire.

Whatever the reason, the implications of such a negative outlook are not far to seek. Mistrust and misgivings between these two neighbourly countries stalled the process of negotiations on bilateral issues of mutual interest since 1975. Politicians might have won the battle but the people of both the countries lost.

However, the momentum for peaceful, stable and welfare-oriented development of the people of the two countries gathered steam after the PM's recent visit to India and signing of agreements on a few key issues. Such agreements have long been overdue. But we need to see that they are in line with our national interest; that our people will be better off than before; that the craze for regionalism does not raze our national sovereignty. Thus, sensible debates and dialogues are needed to bring the agreements under what Amartya Sen called "public reasoning."

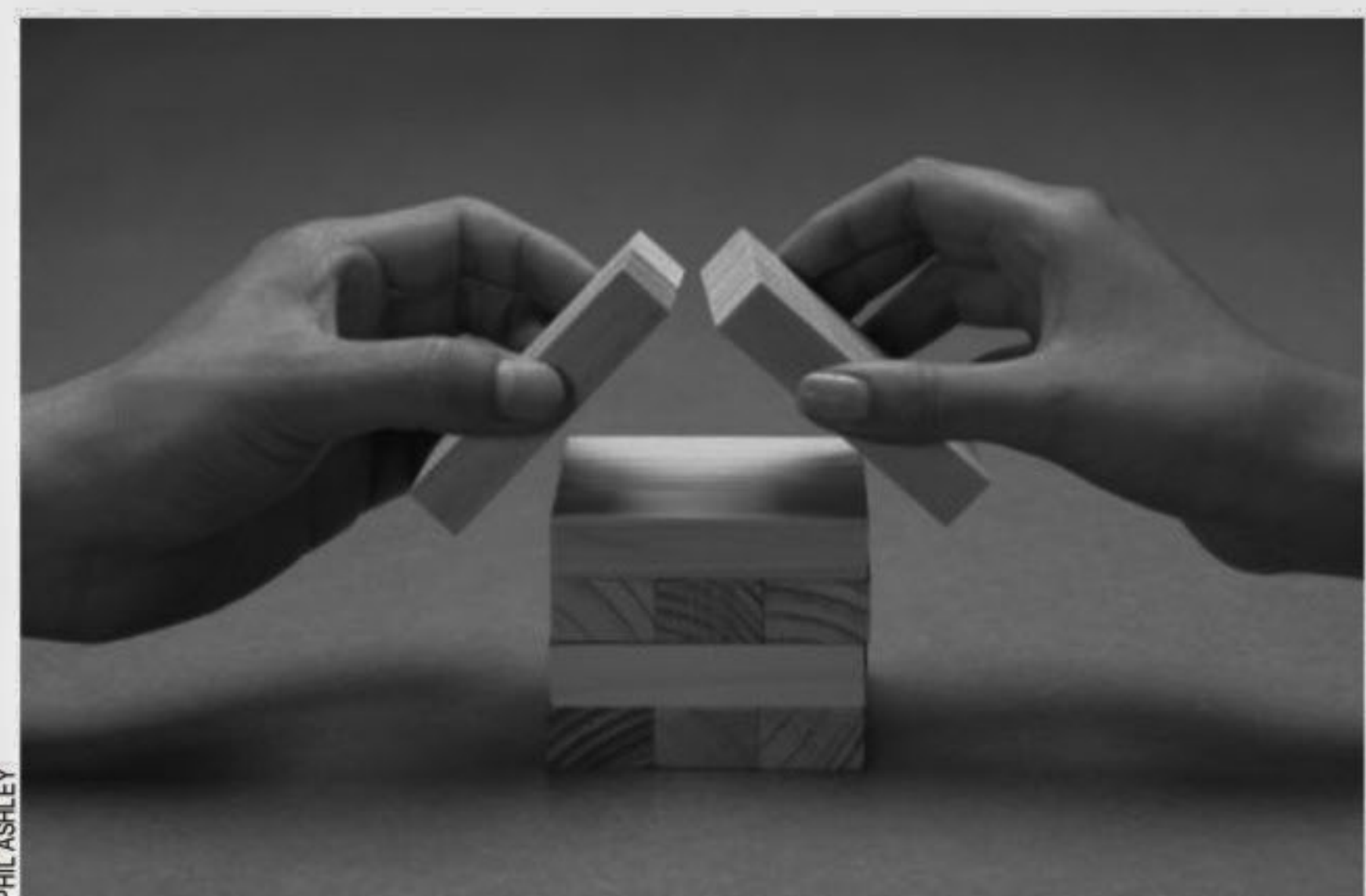
The Policy Research Institute (PRI) organised a workshop recently in Dhaka on the pros and the cons of the agreements. It was moderated by noted economist Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, and Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhiit graced the occasion as chief guest and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni was special guest. The presence of advisers to the PM, H.T. Imam, Dr. Masihur Rahman, M. Azizul Islam

(former adviser), M. Syeduzzaman, M.K. Alamgir along with eminent economists, diplomats, representatives from donors and business enriched the workshop.

Before we take up the issues, let us remember that the concept of regional cooperation or integration of the economies of Bangladesh and India is not new. These two economies were more integrated before the partition in 1947 when protective walls were erected to restrict the flow of goods and services across the border. After our independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visualised Bangladesh as "Switzerland of Asia," implying that the country would be the hub of trans-country trade. Switzerland is a country with the highest density of transit facilities, but the country is still one of the most secured and developed countries in Europe.

Dr. Masihur Rahman pointed out that the aims of cooperation with India are: (a) well-being of the people through sustained economic development, accelerated via cooperation with neighbouring countries. Peace and stability are prerequisite for sustained growth, and hence require regional cooperation; (b) getting rid of extremism, cross-border crimes and secessionist movements, and diverting scarce resources to productive pursuits; (c) use of the weapon of language (diplomacy/consultancy) rather than language of weapon (war/enmity) to solve emerging problems, and (d) replacement of reciprocity by broad-based (comprehensive or holistic) approach to cooperation.

The benefits from such agreements could be higher FDI from India, more access to the markets of the north-eastern states, reduction of acute power shortage in northern part of Bangladesh (due to import of 250 MW electricity), more cargo at Mongla port (which may contribute to the growth of the lagging southern region), the credit line of \$1 billion equivalent IRS (at 1.7 percent interest rate for 20



Relations are built brick by brick

years with a grace period of 5 years) along with its fungibility and lack of conditionality could be spent on welfare oriented projects at Bangladesh's will. The dredging of our rivers with Indian assistance is another "only win" game.

Dr. Sadiq Ahmed identified low labour productivity, weak trade logistics, and infrastructural constraints as the reasons for Bangladesh's backwardness. He observed that of the 30 border districts, some 29 districts are a part of the lagging regions, and growth and investment in the lagging regions will benefit tremendously from reducing cross-border restrictions on trade, transport and investment. Removal of these restrictions will also facilitate agglomeration economies and production sharing arrangements, as in East Asia under Asean plus 3.

The sea could be a vast source of revenue and economic growth as renowned sea ports of Rotterdam, Singapore and Hong Kong have shown. Through better land, air and sea connectivity, Bangladesh can become an Asian commercial hub. The improvement of bilateral relations with India could increase Bangladesh's exports from \$350 million to \$800-900 million.

The overall integration could enhance GDP growth rate by 2 percentage points. Trade and investment opportunities in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh are huge as agro-processors of our country can take

advantage of the raw materials lying there. By and large, we are in a win-win situation through the Agreements reached with India.

Bangladesh has agreed to allow India to use our ports at a price for the services rendered. Like any other country of the world, we had been allowing our airports to be used by other airlines in exchange for a payment; tenants have been cultivating land; owners rent out houses for rent etc. None of them implies a hand-over of assets.

Empirical evidences shows that relatively more open economies are relatively better off than closed ones. Trade is always a positive-sum game. We should see whether our overall welfare improves from transit and trade rather than estimating whether we gain less than others or vice versa.

There are many countries in world that provide transit facilities to others (e.g. Switzerland) but hardly face any security problem. High-tech scanners could make the job simple.

The imperative now is to implement the agreements as fast as possible, with the proviso that long-term engagement is required to make the outcome sustainable. In each stage of the graduation, the steps taken must be transparent, accountable and widely discussed.

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