

## Rationale of PM's UK tour

*An avoidable question-mark*

EVER since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assumed power she made certain official visits to countries of great import to Bangladesh. Admittedly, such visits overseas have helped inject a new dynamism to Bangladesh's foreign policy.

That said, we are constrained to comment on her trip to UK, given its nature, the size of the delegation and its agenda or the lack of it as revealed to the press.

For all we know, she will join a council session of the UK chapter of Awami League, attend a programme at the House of Commons and a discussion on World Peace organized by the Oxford Union. As if to underline the lack of specific and pre-scheduled agenda for the trip it has been given out that she will give interviews to BBC, The Telegraph and some local Bangla media.

A PM's visit without fixed appointment with her counterpart or protocol-wise acceptable equivalent does not help the dignity of her office. Of course, courtesy calls may be paid to her by top British functionaries but that again is not sufficient ground for embarking on a 5-day trip.

Furthermore, it appears that one of the highlights of the visit is going to be her attending Awami League council session in London. This does not sit in with the political reform agenda which emphasized the disincentivising of overseas associations of major political parties, which cause embarrassment to country's image. They ended up transporting confrontational politics of the country abroad.

We do realise that even the most prominent of heads of government may need holidays from busy schedules. In fact, many top leaders around the world go on short vacations to return with renewed vigor and newer ideas to their post. Our Prime Minister can certainly look for such breathers occasionally to go on a private visit rather than have made a visit whose justification may be tenuous at best.

On available information, therefore, the trip looks to have been ill-conceived, ill-advised and avoidable.

## Why go for a toothless ACC?

*Its independence is crucial to fighting corruption*

THE statutory anti-graft body, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), as it now stands after the amendments made to the original ACC Act, 2004 by the cabinet can be compared with a bird that faces the imminent prospect of losing its wings. By these amendments made recently, the government has finally pushed through its proposals conceived in early 2009, to curtail the anti-graft body's independence, amid opposition from the international anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International (TI) and the ACC chairman himself. And once these amendment proposals thus approved by cabinet are made into law in the ongoing Jatiya Sangsad (JS) session, it will become a veritable reincarnation of its previous self as the Anti-Corruption Bureau.

But who wants the return of the Anti-Corruption Bureau under the garb of ACC, which was subservient to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in the matter of getting approval from the executive before drawing any proceedings against corrupt government functionaries? It may be recalled that in TI's recent survey, the bureaucracy was found to be one of the most corrupt sectors of the administration. As it stands, in the present scheme of things, the ACC will be required to seek permission from the government, if it intends to file any graft case against a civil servant.

The present move made by the incumbent government to rob ACC of its independence runs counter to the strong public opinion in favour of an independent ACC. It all gives credence to the contention that the ruling Awami League has shifted substantially from its pre-election pledge to ensure good governance through establishing transparency and accountability in the administration apparently yielding to the pressure from the bureaucracy. Furthermore, the provision that the ACC will be accountable to the president will hardly help matters given the fact that under the parliamentary system of government, the president has to work on the advice of the Prime Minister (PM) in every matter except for appointing the Chief Justice and the PM. So, it only adds to the impression that the ACC is being left in control of the executive.

An independent ACC with real power is not only a reflection of a popular demand, but also a strong booster for good governance enhancing the image and credibility of the government.

Hopefully, the ruling Awami League will have a rethink on the matter before placing the ACC amendment bill in its present shape in parliament.

# Why a new airport?

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, ndc, psc (Retd)

WE already have the name of an airport that is still in a "pre-liquid" stage. But that is not our concern. Nobody should have any quarrel with the idea of having important iconic structures named after iconic figures, certainly not with the idea of having it named after the Father of the Nation. But some irreconcilable critics ask whether it is to have an airport named after Bangabandhu that a new airport is being built or the other way round? But that is not the issue.

One doesn't either have a particular preference for the area proposed for the site of the new airport. That is not the problem either. Anywhere, where an airport can be built and which meets our future requirement should do. It doesn't matter whether that is in Gopalganj or Chagalnaya, or Rangpur or Dhaka Dakhhin, or in Dublar Char. However, the only concern one has at this particular moment with the proposal is the very idea of a new airport as well as the recommended site.

In this context one couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised by the rapidity with which this project has moved since its conceptualisation in 2009. One should have no quarrel with the issue if the idea has stemmed from objective study and not from political considerations. Unfortunately, as things have emerged, one cannot be faulted for seeing it as the brainchild of partisan thinking, more so by the manner the issue has been handled. When it takes years to complete feasibility study of much smaller projects in terms of size and financial outlay, this takes the cake.

The idea came to public knowledge sometime early 2010, and in August the same year a pre-feasibility study by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism sought approval of the cabinet committee on economic affairs to implement the project that was estimated to cost Tk.50,000 crore. The committee had also visited seven sites in Gazipur, Tangail, and Mymensingh districts, and selected

three among those. But the site was changed shortly thereafter. We are not sure why.

But the rationale proffered by the government for the project as being of "an urgent necessity," and the speed with which it has moved (reportedly, land acquisition has already started) and the change of proposed site, have raised serious doubts about the inspiration behind the idea.

The pre-feasibility study report making a case for it says that about

have started end of 2008, but since discarded) a second runway on the western side was proposed.

The third argument is, due to space constraint in the terminal building, modern five-level security concept cannot be employed, which is mandatory as per the ICAO guidelines. This is a very potent argument. One would like to ask as to how other international airports, smaller than the HSJIA, address the stipulation.

Fourthly, proximity of the canton-

dispel the public perception that it is a whimsical undertaking stemming from political pressure.

It is indeed a vast project that not only involves constructing a new airport but many other things besides, which will involve 25,000 acres as compared to the 2,000 acres that the HSJIA occupies. And, do we have a ministry of environment study of the ecological impact of the project?

There may well be a need for a new

*It is important for the public to know whether or not we could have done with modifying and expanding the existing one. It is important to dispel the public perception that it is a whimsical undertaking stemming from political pressure.*



AMTRUL RAJIV

80% of the air passengers use Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSJIA). Mentioning passenger handling capacity in percentage terms is quite crafty. Without having an idea of the actual number of passengers that use the airport now it means nothing.

The second logic -- the airport has only one runway and its annual passenger handling capacity is 80 lakh, which is inadequate compared to increasing number of passengers. The statement is unclear. What will be the actual number of the "increasing number of passengers" tomorrow, next year, after five years, and ten years hence? Under the upgrading scheme of the then ZIA (which was to

ment and major conurbations to the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport makes its extensive future expansion impossible. One has to only look at the north and north western side of the airport to see the vast tract of empty land that can be utilised for expansion.

In this context we feel that the government is obliged to make public the details of the study basing on which the plan for a new airport has been approved, as also the logic behind shifting the choice to Airal Beel. It is important for the public to know whether or not we could have done with modifying and expanding the existing one. It is important to

answered is have we done all the necessary studies to justify discarding the current one and going for an altogether new one? Have we spent the optimum effort in evaluating the need for a project that will involve more than \$7 billion, and impact a large number of people adversely?

There is always a predilection for mega-projects that is justified by tenuous arguments, and where other considerations than public good motivate ideas. That is what the government should guard against.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

CAM DONALDSON

ANOTHER example of the global influence of the ideas of Nobel Peace Laureate Professor Mohammad Yunus is exemplified by the action and research agendas that are now formulating in countries like the United Kingdom. In Scotland, in particular these ideas, along with an accompanying research agenda on microcredit and social business is taking route.

**A unique opportunity**  
Recent global trends present a unique opportunity to build a distinctive programme of research at an unusual point in time for Western societies. Although societies in lower-income countries have been re-thinking human and economic development from the bottom up for some time, advanced economies are now thinking about developing new solutions to persistent, stubborn and widening gaps between best and worst off in terms of health.

Such inequalities are compounded by continuing high rates of deprivation, unemployment, worklessness and financial exclusion in the poorest communities. Many parts of UK suffer disproportionately from such challenges, and we do not yet know how best to address them. As the "sick man of Europe," Glasgow, the city in which my university is located, exemplifies such challenges.

Microcredit and social business are exemplars of potential solutions. Built on notions of community development, the former has grown into a multi-national, multi-billion-dollar industry over the past 30 years. Only recently has it expanded into middle and higher income economies. Globally, little is known about longer-term impacts of microcredit on health and well-being, and even less

## Yunus ideas exported to Scotland

about social business in such terms. Our university, therefore, has established the Yunus Centre to address such knowledge gaps by:

- Conducting collaborative research line with Glasgow Caledonian's mission of the "common weal," thus aiming to improve life chances of the poorest members of society

its growing global network of partner universities and the place of GCU in the "Grameen family."

As community-based interventions, addressing material circumstances and promotion of self-reliance, a research programme aimed at development and evaluation of microcredit and social business inter-

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- Developing an original research programme around the notion of microcredit and social business as social, economic and public health interventions;
- Developing new research interfaces across disciplines and areas of expertise, such as health economics, financial exclusion, public health, social business and microcredit; and
- Building a high-quality core programme of research combined with significant international collaborations, facilitated by the university's strong community links,

ventions would address in a holistic fashion the challenges of poverty, place and empowerment that bedevil many pockets of Western society.

**The research pillars**  
The programme of research and capacity building in the Yunus Centre for Social Business & Health at GCU will be built initially on two pillars:

- Evaluating Grameen microcredit entities in UK. This presents a unique opportunity to build datasets on cohorts of Grameen customers right from the beginning of these operations in their different geographical contexts. We would, first, assess "community

readiness" for microcredit before moving to build a longitudinal study involving several hundred customers (of Grameen and relevant comparators) to assess the impacts on aspects such as outreach, levels and sources of income, health behaviours and

- measures of health and well-being; Microcredit, social business and well-being: laying the foundations. Given the lack of development of this whole area of research in academic environments, we would hope to lay the foundations for future capacity by establishing a multi-disciplinary PhD programme. Students would: address theoretical and conceptual foundations of microcredit and social business both in their own terms and as interventions for improving public health and well-being; test data collection instruments for future extensive evaluations; and conduct preliminary evaluations and case studies, especially of social business innovations. A network of such businesses is being built; preliminary research has commenced with one and discussions with others have indicated strong interests in mixed methods research using robust comparator groups.

Along with our third pillar of the Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing, based in Dhaka, and with the aim of providing a top-quality nursing education for young women from Bangladeshi rural communities, an exciting two-way partnerships in action and research is developing in which Scotland and Bangladesh are learning from each other and with global implications.

Professor Cam Donaldson is Yunus Chair in Social Business & Health, Glasgow Caledonian University.