

STRAIGHT LINE

Woes of returnee workers

They should be helped to their feet

WE join the global society in expressing our deep concern over the lack of safety and stable future for migrant workers. Bangladeshis constitute a large proportion of migrant workers worldwide. Not only have they been contributing to the economy of the employing states but also add-on to our national growth by way of remitting more than 10 billion dollars annually. And, away from home, many have to toil in adverse conditions more often than not.

Returnees from Libya, who are under focus now, speak of the latest crises that they are faced with. There's big humanitarian crisis in Libya where thousands of migrant workers from different countries suddenly find themselves without job and uncertainty looms large over their future. Returning home is itself an issue let alone their question of rehabilitation, compensation and restoration of job in Libya.

Unfortunately there have been words of anguish from the returnees that our mission staffs have not been responsive to their conditions. These are natural disappointments of suffering people. They should not feel abandoned. If necessary, we should strengthen our missions in Tripoli, including those in Egypt and Tunisia so that they can extend all assistance to our workers and professionals and arrange speedy and safe evacuation. We must do everything to bring them home.

At home, we appreciate the government efforts. Reception facilities have been opened at the airport and there's a welfare desk working to attend them. The repatriated are being received and paid Tk.1000 each as travel expense. International Organization for Migrants (IOM) is helping to transport them to their destinations from the airport.

We need to do more for them. We owe a lot to our wage earners overseas. Both, public and private sectors should lend a hand of assistance for their rehabilitation. Financial support must be ensured to all in accord with situational reality. Proper counseling should also be extended so that they don't emotionally break down.

We agree with the migration experts at a roundtable in Dhaka last week that there should be a global voice for ensuring safety of migrants from both the sending and destination countries.

Booster for light engineering

Power supply and patenting crucial

INDUSTRIES Minister Dilip Barua has put a well-merited emphasis on light engineering which traditionally came lower down the order of priorities with successive governments. Resultantly, the sector, mostly confined to informal private initiatives, received a half-hearted approach, at best and, a lip-service at worst.

But there has always been a strong potential for light industries to grow in the country. Apart from a pioneering enterprise in the sector with prospects for backward linkages to SMEs, a light industrial baseline has existed rather quietly behind the scene.

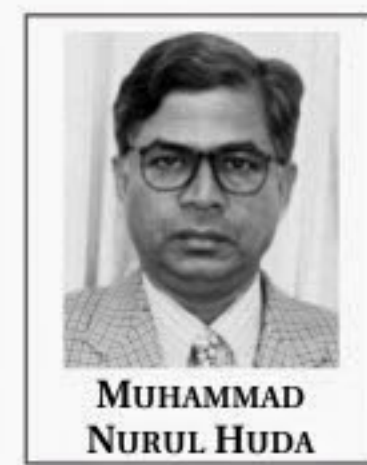
For instance, the knock-down technology mastered in Dholaikhal over the years and its ingenious improvisations have been head turners even for qualified engineers. The self-made technicians with the sleight of their hands backed by acquired knowledge of the basics disassembled, reconstructed and welded worn out machines into near perfect working order. They have rendered a great service to repair and maintenance sector.

Basically, they make do with old, discarded or dubiously procured machines and their parts. If this sub-sector is formalised with assured supply of machines and tools, some skill training and financing, they could be manufacturers of new light engineering products.

That is not where all our attention should be concentrated, it is just one window of opportunity before us to be boosting light engineering. In fact, the focus should be largely on the entire gamut of light engineering sector developments displayed at the international light engineering technology trade show at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre organised last Wednesday. A hundred industries from Bangladesh, India and China participated in the fair exchanging notes and placing their products in the context of advancements made in terms of industrial and engineering equipment, materials, services and technologies.

The government's recognition of the light engineering in its industry policy as 'a thrust sector' should be followed up by bank-rolling and easier patenting procedures inter-

The dignity of difference



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

CITIZENS of a democratic polity could justifiably ask if there was a dignity of difference. In other words, whether dissent or difference of opinion as opposed to those of the establishment is a healthy attribute of a pluralist dispensation? One has to admit that the cultivation of inaccurate prejudice damages the tolerance, liberality and compassion that are the hallmarks of a democratic culture.

The question is, can we in Bangladesh defend a liberal principle by retaining a medieval prejudice? Don't we witness a temper which presses a partisan advantage to a bitter end and does not understand and respect the other side and does not feel a unity between all citizens?

It is time perhaps to appreciate and recognise that democracy depends upon habits of consent and compromise which are attributes only of mature political societies. The lawful government by a majority, under the rule of abiding law, and with freedom of opposition and dissent is an exceptional human achievement.

Therefore, we have to be pragmatic to understand that if the spirit of moderation does not prevail, Bangladesh society will slide into divisions and hatred will replace goodwill.

Discerning observers wonder if a good number of our public leaders personify the arrogance of power, the exact opposite of the unfeigned humility of caring guardians. Some have pretensions to infallibility while others appear to be under a solemn promise never to become wiser.

The dignity of difference has to be ensured in our parlance because that would guarantee the harbouring of objectives whereupon men and women would wonder beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications.

The freedom and dignity of difference will handsomely compliment the demands of democracy -- the need of an aristocracy of talent, of knowledge and of character. This aristocracy has to take to public life for the survival of democracy in Bangladesh.

If difference is not accorded dignity, then the individual would be precariously subordinated to the state and our nation will be made up of one-dimensional human beings. When we dwarf our folk to turn them into docile instruments we will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished.

Holding a different view on national issues should be a respectable stance because that will ensure that arbitrary power does not wear the garb of constitutionalism. The dominant impulse must be the freedom from fear; pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the official class.

The dignity of difference will be catalytic in establishing true leadership by unleashing the full power of the organisation and releasing the potential and energy of all concerned.



ARTBOX IMAGES

When groups will function harmoniously the synergistic effect of such harmony will be felt at the earliest. The sustained harmony will ultimately ensure the good of the country in the long years ahead.

The freedom and dignity of difference will handsomely compliment the demands of democracy -- the need of an aristocracy of talent, of knowledge and of character. This aristocracy has to take to public life for the survival of democracy in Bangladesh. For that to happen, the dignity of difference has to be manifested.

The dignity of difference will ensure the passage of our constitution to the next generation in its majesty to protect and unite the country. We have to decide whether, shorn of its strength, our constitution shall become an idle mockery and perish.

Each generation will have to defend the right to differ and fight for it and only then freedom will survive.

Experience demonstrates that a free democracy can be converted overnight into an authoritarian state when the right to differ is smothered and dignity of difference is buried.

We have to remember that democracy, with the dignity of freedom and opposition, is not the normal way of organising society, but is a rare human achievement. It demands the cooperation of large numbers of citizens in the active work of the government. The state has a claim on our energy, time and thought. Our resistance to the indignity of difference will put us on our mettle, for no government could be the repository of all the wisdom.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

The cost of government decisions

ZIAUR RAHMAN

THE recent initiative by the government for a new airport in Arial Beel, and the subsequent decision to move it across the Padma Bridge due to a tenacious citizens' uprising and lasting impact on the government's decision have been food for thought for all concerned citizens.

The recent spate of events had pushed the government anew into realising that regional and national stakeholder acceptance is an imperative before trying to bully the common citizens into resigning to the fates of the high and mighty, while forgetting that the government comes to power on the wings of citizens' votes. Therefore, this constituency of power base must not be ruffled with if sense continues to prevail by the political leadership. Aptly, sense and sensibility rushed in at the cost of lives, economic dislocation and amongst a flurry of violent street protests.

This article addresses the public policy issue of constructing a new airport, the logic behind changing decisions, and the impacts of mega projects.

A new airport in Arial Beel was planned to be constructed through acquiring 25,000 acres of land. However, amidst heavy resistance, death and injury, the government switched the location to the other side of the Padma river. Bangladesh is a signatory to many international conventions safeguarding wetlands and ecological enclaves. However, the decision to completely overrule our global commitments would have been irresponsible behaviour. Indeed, the belated but judicious decision to change the site is welcome.

The government has to undertake comprehensive stakeholder dialogues and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) to measure the

impact of setting up the airport in the new location. Adequate steps must be taken through ensuring that no popular outbursts occur.

To brand itself as a progressive democracy with vibrant economic climate for investment and employment, all projects and policies by our government must pass through cost-benefit tests ascertaining the impact on its citizens and connected stakeholders. Without such analysis, Bangladesh will experience volatile political climate that vested quarters may exploit to unsettle the government, hurting the country economically and politically.

The vital institution of democracy

A mega project requires large foreign currency commitments, thus putting stress on our foreign currency reserve. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on imports; therefore, every time the taka devalues, it becomes more expensive to buy essentials like rice, oil, sugar, etc.

sits atop the principle that major policy decisions are taken through dialogue, and they should be framed to uplift the general well being. People do not want to live amidst fear, repression or uncertainty. If there is frequent public outcry, the confidence of the people will continue to fade.

The government came to power with an overwhelming majority by offering to give shape to the dream of "Golden Bangladesh." Therefore, the political government's moral responsibility is to set and implement policy decisions following democratic norms.

Arial Beel is abode to a rich cluster of plants and trees, fish, animals and birds, insects and many other living

organisms, all contributing to balancing the ecology of Bangladesh and acting as a reservoir by channeling water during rainy seasons. It also holds the excess water of the rainy season and ensures that the flood water does not inundate parts of Dhaka, Munshiganj and other areas.

Without weighing the colossal loss of the total ecology through conducting EIA, the GOB wanted to setup an international airport in that very enclave. The Ministry of Environment had also not been properly consulted, questioning the transparency in process.

Agricultural land is shrinking at an alarming rate, and top soil fertility is

falling drastically. Arial Beel has been a bastion of agricultural production and a haven for sweet-water fish reproduction. By 2025, the population of Bangladesh may cross the 20 crore mark. Without securing food supply, the constant threat of food security cannot bode well and may contribute to social disharmony and anarchy.

From a practical consideration, efficiency and optimum use of current airports may also be properly calculated. Before the GOB considers such a colossal project costing in excess of Tk.50,000 crores, it ought to do a full blown study of the current capacity, usage and efficiency of all the international airports in Bangladesh.

Permanent dislocation is painful and emotionally trying. Dislocation related psychological disorientations are seldom quantified; therefore, the national fraying of psychological mind frame needs to be factored in while calculating the associated emotional costs for any large projects.

A mega project requires large foreign currency commitments, thus putting stress on our foreign currency reserve. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on imports; therefore, every time the taka devalues, it becomes more expensive to buy essentials like rice, oil, sugar, etc.

The global price hike introduces food and energy security risks. Bangladesh must build its own food reservoir and energy infrastructure to counter international supply shocks. Amidst these risks, Bangladesh also needs to manage its foreign currency. Thus, large projects like an airport will use up much needed foreign currency and ration project loans from the banking sector to other projects (due to crowding out effect) of national importance. So, the cost benefit of mega projects needs to be reviewed according to direct and indirect impacts.

Given the recent debacle in the capital market, financially affecting 3.3 million plus direct investors and also concurrent volatility in foreign exchange market, after it had faced a crunch in the money (call money rate rose as high as 190%) market in December 2010 and January 2011, the government must be vigilant in ensuring that no further ebbing of investor confidence results.

Let better assessment and sensibilities prevail; let political considerations and support for vested quarters not be the driving force in the government's agenda. Lastly, strong debates before actually constructing a new airport must be initiated.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 5

1953

Soviet leader 'on brink of death.' Rumours circulate in Moscow that Joseph Stalin, the long-time leader of the Soviet Union, was near death.

1956

US court victory for black students. The United States Supreme Court upholds a ban on racial segregation in state schools, colleges and universities.

1971

On this day people from all walks of intellectual life in Bangladesh including poets, writers and artists joined the movement for democratic rights. Meanwhile there were reports of the army firing into crowds of demonstrating Bengalis at various places. Finally in Rawalpindi the regime decided to reinforce the army in Bangladesh by airlifting more soldiers from West Pakistan to the province.

1993

Johnson gets life ban from athletics. Disgraced Olympic sprinter Ben Johnson was banned from athletics for life after failing a drugs test for a second time.