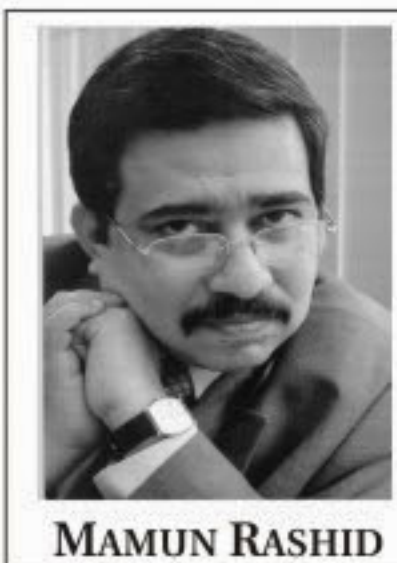


THIRD EYE

Money from migrant workers



MAMUN RASHID

OVER last 35 years or so, Bangladesh economy has been increasingly integrating with global economy. The

external sector, including export of human resources, has played an important role towards the improvement of its macroeconomic performance. In 1981, the external sector accounted for 13.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), which more than tripled to 40.2% by 2010.

Trade integration of Bangladesh's economy with the global market registered a remarkable rise during the same period, indicating a strong structural transformation from being aid-dependent to being trade-reliant. Consequently, the share of overseas development assistance (ODA) in GDP declined from 5.6% in 1991 to 2.1% in 2010. Total export stood at \$16.2 billion and imports at \$23.7 billion in 2010 compared to \$725 million and \$ 2 billion respectively in 1991.

Against this encouraging performance of the external sector, remittance, despite some recent slides, has been increasing at an overwhelming rate. It recorded \$1.7 billion, which was 2.5% of GDP in 1991, and surpassed the \$10 billion threshold in 2010, accounting for 11% of the total GDP of Bangladesh. The ODA flow was 3 times more

than remittance in the 1980s and 1990s, but lately, this trend has reversed and the latter has overtaken ODA by about 5 times.

Bangladesh is an exporter of professional, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers to more than 22 countries. The number of Bangladeshi workers going abroad has increased from only 6,087 in 1976 to 475,300 in 2010, with the highest being 875,000 in 2008.

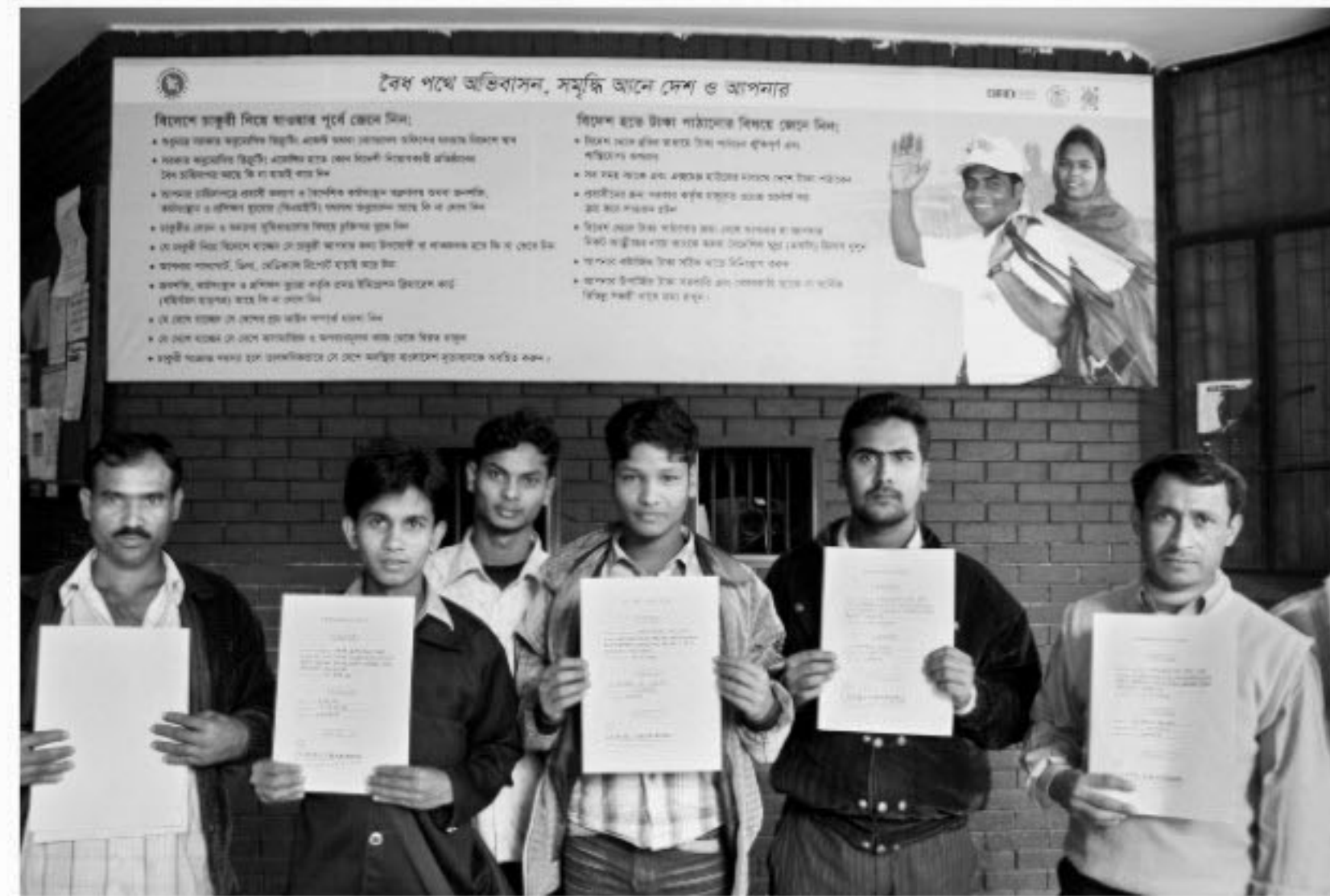
Saudi Arabia remains the largest importer of workers from Bangladesh, accounting for the lion's share of total workers who went abroad during the 1976-2010 period. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Malaysia are the other two important destinations for Bangladeshi workers. Bangladeshi migrants are also working in the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, New Zealand, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Africa, Japan, Mauritius, Jordan and Lebanon.

Between 1976 and 2010, about 6.7 million workers went abroad with temporary work permit to the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe. This is about 12.7% of total labour force of the country. The buoyancy of remittances during 1991-2010 has mainly taken place in view of the rise in the number of short-term migrants to Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Libya, Bahrain, Iran, and to Asian countries such as Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Brunei.

The developmental impact of migration depends, to a great extent, on the policies concerning labour outflows, education, training, capacity building, remittances and protection of interests of workers.

However, most of the human resources sent by Bangladesh are in the category of less skilled and semi-skilled category. During 1976-2010, the share of unskilled workers accounted for about 49% in total overseas employment while the share of professionals was only 3.7%.

As mentioned earlier, a recent decelerating trend has been observed in case of overseas migration. There was almost 25% decline in the outflow of migrant workers and only 2.49% increase (while the previous increase figures used to be in the range of 15-20%) in the inward remittance during 8 months of the fiscal year (FY) 2011 against the same period in FY10. The



SHAFIQUL ISLAM KAJOOL/DRINKNEWS

decline in overseas migration during this period was due to decline of workers export to the Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two major destinations of Bangladeshi workers, by 51.7% and 10.3% respectively.

Though a market diversification is being observed in terms of Bangladeshi labourers migrating to the non-Middle Eastern countries for work, the share of Bangladeshi workers in these countries is still low since the demand is for more skilled workers is high in these countries. Therefore, policies should also focus on availing the benefits of increased demand for skilled workers in the new and emerging markets.

The issue of short-term labour migration in various trade and economic cooperation agreements may be pursued to increase overseas employment. Bi-lateral agreements

can increase the benefits of temporary movements of labour for countries of origin through greater certainty of access and enabling conditions. Such agreements can ensure that credentials of migrant workers are accepted in the destination countries.

Information on demand for labour in various sectors in destination countries, adequate bargaining power to negotiate the terms and conditions of employment are prerequisites for successful agreements. Bi-lateral agreements can include provisions such as monitoring and managing migrations.

Bangladesh, being a labour surplus country, with above average work ethics, has the potential to become a key global player as a source country for the supply of less skilled human resources to devel-

oped countries. Therefore, managing the flow of workers through maximising the outflow of workers and increasing inflow of remittances is an important strategy for poverty reduction.

In order to have effective migration management, adequate institutional structures and mechanisms have to be in place. The developmental impact of migration depends, to a great extent, on the policies concerning labour outflows, education, training, capacity building, remittances and protection of interests of workers.

I was privy to a study undertaken by Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) on doubling Bangladesh inward remittances in 5 years and tripling this by 2021, which was found to be very much possible. The laundry list identified, in this regard included (with some already mentioned above), Bangladesh's better relationship with the Muslim world, overall space acquisition of the East European and some rich African countries, effective bi-lateral negotiations between the governments, loans or financial support to the migrating workers, further deepening of the capacity building approaches through GOB-NGO linkages and overall improvement in inward remittance management space.

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Role of media in Japan crisis

MONZURUL HUQ

SINCE the disaster at Fukushima nuclear power plant, the media in many countries have been painting a doomsday scenario for Japan, as if taking it for granted that the devil unleashed by the tsunami was swallowing everything in its way and making Japan a very dangerous place to live in. Many saw in the perceived danger a similarity with Chernobyl and predicted a serious outcome for those who were still in that "all of a sudden turned into a land of sorrow." This ignited panic and started the exodus of expatriates from Japan.

Quite unfortunately, a small number of diplomatic missions in Tokyo too joined the bandwagon and were hurriedly closed. Despite repeated advice from the Japanese about not deciding anything based on rumours, they fell prey to the hyped-up propaganda of some media.

This hyper-propaganda about the danger of radiation reached its peak when people in a country as far as Poland started buying anti-radiation iodine tablets. Now that things are gradually becoming normal in Japan, many are asking what the real motive was behind the spreading of so much panic. Rupert Murdoch's "Sun" for example, went the farthest as it somehow felt responsible for saving the endangered people in Japan by shouting in a loud voice "Get out of Tokyo."

As Japan slowly but steadily reemerges from that presumed darkness, many of the predictions and conclusions of the alarmist press are turning out to be baseless or far from reality. Even in the West, a more rational approach to the disaster is now emerging, allowing people to rethink not only about the real extent of the danger, but also about Japan's ability to fight in an adverse situation in a very effective way.

BBC, for example, broadcast the views of an Oxford professor, who has questioned the scientific and factual basis of most of the doomsday-scenario reporting that appeared right after the nuclear power plant accident. One such

hard fact cited in the BBC report is the real extent of damage in Chernobyl. Few are really aware that the confirmed death toll in Chernobyl was just 28 fatalities among emergency workers and 15 cases of child thyroid cancer.

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There had also been many misleading accounts and figures in the press related to the danger of radiation and the level of radiation fallout considered harmful to human health. These too added to the fear of ordinary citizens. The fear factor also made everyone an expert on the effects of radiation as they too were busy in Facebook or Twitter frantically spreading the same message of uncertainty.

Too much focus on the nuclear accident is also overshadowing the real tragedy that had been brought about by the earthquake and tsunami. The latest casualty figure as of Sunday evening (Mar 20) shows the number of people killed as 10,804, with 16,644 still missing. Moreover, thousands more are forced to live in emergency shelters where there are shortages of food, water and other essentials. Many of them have nowhere to go as their homes have been washed away by the tsunami.

As life is slowly getting back to normal, the focus rightly being diverted from the nuclear accident to the plight of the survivors, and also to those whose sacrifice has once again compelled many to

think that it is unlikely for Japan to sink as long as there are those who would always stand to protect others in times of misery, without thinking about their own safety. There are two cases that I would like to tell our readers about, and both involve young ladies.

The media in Japan, as well as the New York Times, reported about Motoko Mori, a 29-year-old social studies teacher and swimming team coach at Takata High School in Rikuzen-Takata town, much of which has been flattened by the tsunami. On that fateful Friday, Ms. Mori was at school when the earthquake hit. Tsunami warning was issued immediately, and after checking to make sure that all the students were safe she rushed to the shore to look for her swimming club members who were practicing at a newly built pool overlooking the sea, knowing pretty well the danger of ignoring the tsunami warning. That was the last time that anyone saw her. Neither she nor any member of the team returned.

The second young lady was 25-year-old Miki Ando, a clerk at the crisis management department of the local government office of Minami Sanriku, another coastal town flattened by powerful waves. Right after tsunami warning was issued, she started urging people to take necessary precaution without delay through the public announcement system. Her announcement reportedly saved many lives as she continued warning people well until the moment powerful waves washed away much of the building. Nobody has seen Miki Ando since then, but we know for sure that she has made her place in the hearts of millions Japanese, whom she will continue to inspire in coming days.

Japan is still struggling to cope with the aftermath of the disaster. However, as long as there are people like Motoko Mori and Miki Ando, we know the nation will never surrender to what outsiders might see as fait accompli. This is probably the lesson that many need to learn once again, including the diplomatic community that was so anxious to look for a place to hide.

Sent from Japan.

Radiation is good for you



LET'S stop panicking about radiation. This message is aimed at my friend Ah-Fat who told me to shut the windows despite the warmth of the morning.

"I calculate that the radioactive death cloud from the Fukushima nuclear plant will arrive here by noon," he explained. (Clearly he had been reading the international press.)

I doubted that shutting the windows would provide enough protection, but I'm no expert, so I did as he told me.

Around 11.50 pm, he leapt to his feet and pointed through the glass. "There it is, right on schedule," he said.

I followed the line of his finger, and said: "That's not a radioactive emission from Japan. That's just a cloud."

None of this surprised me. The main thing that happens after a disaster is that panic arises among people who enjoy that sort of thing.

An hour later, Ah-Fat claimed he could smell radiation. I pointed out that

- 1) Radiation doesn't have a smell, and,
- 2) He lives above a hair-dresser's, a category of shop

which always smell disgusting, because they use so many chemicals that the fumes combine into a lethal cloud way worse than Fukushima and closer to Bhopal.

Discussing this later at the bar, I was curious to learn from a self-described scientist that some boffins now think radiation is good for you.

I retorted: "The residents of Hiroshima might disagree."

But then I remembered that I myself owned a historical document showing radiation having a positive effect: an April 1963 edition of The Amazing Spiderman.

The scientist clarified himself: Low level radiation has been shown to be good for you in certain situations.

With his iPhone, he Googled several surveys which showed that radiologists, nuclear plant staff and airport security staff get fewer cancers than people in jobs with no exposure to radiation. It's amazing but true.

Most surprising was a recent study in Florida in which mice suffering from Alzheimer's disease were given two hours of "talk time" on mobile phones (which emit low levels of radiation) every day for seven months. "Memory problems of the older Alzheimer's mice disappeared," researchers at the University of South Florida said.

Irritatingly, the report failed to answer the obvious questions.

- 1) How did they locate mice

with Alzheimer's disease in the first place? Did they hang out at mice apartments to see which ones remembered their door entry codes?

2) What did the mice talk about for two hours a day?

3) How did they know which mice had memory problems? Did they eavesdrop on their conversations?

Mouse One: "Yay, my brain works perfectly again."

Mouse Two: "Is that right?"

Mouse One: "Is what right?"

The next day was so hot that Ah-Fat reluctantly opened the windows, even though the Fukushima radioactive death cloud was running late.

I told him not to worry. "There are lots of documents which indicate that low-level radiation has positive effects," I said, handing him a reading list:

- Godzilla,
- Spider-Man,
- the Fantastic Four,
- the Silver Surfer,
- the Incredible Hulk,
- the Daleks
- etc.

You can't deny evidence like that!

I could have added that radioactivity has been scientifically proven to benefit mouse-sized brains, but I stopped myself.

For several of my dear friends, that would have been a little too close to the truth.

To know more, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com

CORRECTION

In the interview of Raja Debashish Roy published in the March 29, 2011 issue of the Daily Star, a part of the reply to a question was inadvertently left out. We publish the question and the answer in full:

DS: Do you think that the Hill region was properly represented at the Peace Talks and Agreement Signing with the government in 1997?

RDR: I feel that question of how 'properly' the CHT was represented, or not represented, as the case might be, is far less important than the question of how acceptable the Accord's terms were, or are. The Accord does not fulfill the aspirations, or even expectations, of a large number of people in the CHT, including from within the indigenous population, but it is generally accepted as a reasonable agreement that could undo many of the past wrongs, and take the region forward towards democracy, self-determined development and protection of the identity and integrity of the region's different peoples. However, a de-gendered approach, and a respectful attitude towards the rights and needs of all the peoples, particularly those with small numbers and extreme marginality, can only make the process more democratic and inclusive.

The error is regretted.