

## Another ship breaking yard?

*Proceed with caution*

IT is with more than a little bit of concern that we read the report, which appeared in this newspaper on Monday, about the government's plan to allow setting up of a new ship breaking yard in Barguna district on the banks of the Baleshwar. Perhaps the compulsion of the government to earmark new areas, given the way the industry has expanded, is understandable. And we also understand that the report of the committee set up in this regard is all but ready; however, the downside of the issue should not be overlooked.

There is no doubt that ship breaking industry, or ship recycling yards as many term it, is linked with our construction industry, and any impediment to its growth is likely to have more than a ripple effect on the country's economy. But what concerns us is the blatantly unchecked way the industry has expanded, based on scrap ships with hazardous chemicals finding their way into the breaking yards. This has had the most severe impact on the ecology and the health of the workers. It has dealt a severe blow to the flora and fauna as well as the environment in the areas around the only ship breaking yard in the country, Sitakunda.

In this regard the government must take note of the caution of the environmentalists that has been sounded from time to time, and as is being done now in this particular case, too. It is astonishing that in the five-member team that visited the proposed site one does not find the name of any DoE representative or of any environmentalist.

The proposed area is in an equally ecologically sensitive area, if not more, than the Chittagong coast, more so because it is in very close proximity of the Sunderbans. And the marine and bird life will face risk of extinction if such an inherently hazardous industry is allowed to be set up and operate without the standard precautions like insistence on pre-certification of a ship before it enters our territory.

There is need to consider the long term impact of a venture on the ecology of the country against the benefits.

## E-service at Jessore DC Office

*Let it prove user-friendly*

INTRODUCTION of one-stop e-service at Jessore Deputy Commissioner's office to rid the local administration of red tape and inefficiency in the delivery of services is a step in the direct direction. With the launch of this service, people will not have to frequent the DC office to find a designated official for submission of an application or seeking a document.

It is also heartening to note that since most people in the district levels are not familiar with the computer, leave alone the internet; the service provides for them an alternative whereby they can hand over the application to or procure a document from the e-service centre in person. Alternatively, they can send the material through the district portal or by post thereby getting the job done by concerned officials. If operated systematically and transparently, this will also help curb corruption.

However, any system is as good as its implementation which is why we are concerned about the capacity building in terms of trained manpower required to make the e-service work in Jessore before it can be replicated throughout the country. In order to keep the system operational, there has to be highly motivated officials at work and maintenance culture should be built into the system. Also crucial is an uninterrupted supply of power during the office hours to keep the computers functional in the first place.

As we understand it, the service has to do with administration including revenue collection and land documentation. It will also have to attend to law and order issues and development works of different agencies. The basic pre-requisite for implementing the service is awareness building among the people about its benefit and how to go about it.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 11

**1727** George II and Caroline of Ansbach are crowned King and Queen of Great Britain.

**1899** Second Boer War begins: In South Africa, a war between the United Kingdom and the Boers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State erupts.

**1910** Former President Theodore Roosevelt becomes the first U.S. president to fly in an airplane.

**1912** First Balkan War: The Greek Army liberates the city of Kozani.

**1954** First Indochina War: The Viet Minh take control of North Vietnam.

**1986** Cold War: U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev meet in Reykjavik, Iceland, in an effort to continue discussions about scaling back their intermediate missile arsenals in Europe.

**1987** Start of Operation Pawan by Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka that killed few thousand ethnic Tamil civilians, several hundred Tamil Tigers and few hundred Indian Army soldiers.

# Regional route to development

MOHAMMAD MOHIUDDIN ABDULLAH

BANGLADESH is strategically located between South and South East Asia. It has good relations with all countries in Asia and can become a strong and dependable partner in progress in this region. The twenty-first century began with high hopes for Bangladesh with pronouncement of "look east" policy. The attempt to look east was unfortunately short lived and haphazard. Bangladesh may consider adopting a step-by-step strategy for Asian economic integration.

One of the most useful existing frameworks that could facilitate this is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) that brings together the South Asian nations of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka and Asean members -- Myanmar and Thailand. Bimstec was established as an inter-regional grouping in June 1977 to promote free trade, increase cross-border investment and tourism and promote technical cooperation among the South Asia and South-East Asia.

The aims of Bimstec are (a) to increase importance of South Asia in the global economy; (b) to maintain the growth momentum and to further promote inter-regional trade; (c) to liberalisation and the harmonisation of trade procedures.

The foreign ministers of Bimstec countries, the top decision making Forum, meet annually to review the progress while the foreign secretaries meet regularly to review and discuss cooperative activities agreed upon at the ministerial meetings. Participants in these meetings underscored the need for better transport infrastructure and logistics in the Bimstec region to further increase inter-regional trade. The rapid expansion of inter-regional

trade in the magnitude experienced in the last decade is unlikely to continue unless the severe constraints in transport infrastructure and logistics in the region are simultaneously addressed and removed.

The road network connecting Bimstec region is not well developed and does not allow large trucks to operate at efficient speeds within acceptable level of safety. There are no rail connections between Thailand and India or Bangladesh.

Over the past decade, Escap member countries have benefited substantially from the process of globalisation. Many of these successes have been achieved through improved transportation. The Asian-Highway and Trans-Asian Railway networks, formalised through the related inter-

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governmental agreements, are the major building blocks for the realisation of an international integrated inter-model transport and logistic system as a long-term vision for the development of the transport sector in order to meet the growing challenges of globalisation.

Bangladesh has signed Trans-Asian Railway network agreement but not the Asian Highway agreement. It is the failure of the government to sign Asian Highway agreement in time which may affect the development of this region. In order to move forward Escap needs to address the infrastructure issues as well as the non-physical issues for

the development of an international integrated inter-modal transport system. The government should take necessary steps to sign the AH agreement immediately for economic development of this region.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been supporting regional cooperation among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal through the South Asian Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme since 2001. The aim of SASEC is to develop a regional transport and trade facilitation to improve intra-regional transport connectivity establishment of missing rail link, introduction of modernised cross-border management, human resource development for operating modernised cross-border management system. The objective of ADB is to help SASEC countries

natural resources and water resources, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery. Establishment of joint ventures, scientific and technological cooperation and development of international tourism and will speed up completion of transport links by land, water and air.

Progress in furthering relations within Saarc has been intermittent and painfully slow. Trade among Saarc member countries has not risen, rather it has remained stagnant or even dwindled in some cases. Political commitment of the member countries to achieve the objectives of SAARC is absolutely necessary for regional cooperation.

Various regional cooperation organisations and forums are working to overcome poverty as well as develop infrastructure for economic development in South-East Asia. If Bangladesh and India act imaginatively, this region can be transformed from being a relatively underdeveloped periphery of the subcontinent as well as South-East Asia region to a centre of a thriving and integrated economic space, linking the dynamic and growing economics of South and South-East Asia with a network of highways, railways, pipelines and transmissions lines crisscrossing the region.

Should we not dream that one day it will be possible to drive or take a train from West Bengal to Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura via Bangladesh, from Kolkata to Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore via Dhaka? This could open the way for millions of tourists, pilgrims, workers and businessman to travel in both directions. Apart from the direct economic benefits that would flow to it, Bangladesh could earn considerable transit revenues.

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### BYLINE

# Seen, obscene and unseen



M.J. AKBAR

WEALTH is far easier to recognise than poverty. Wealth is either seen or obscene; poverty remains largely unseen. Poverty of the worst kind is hidden in those parts of India -- or indeed the world -- where it is outside the provenance of government, and beyond the interest of individuals and institutions who fuel the engines of modern life, like business concerns or bureaucracy or media. Those of a liberal persuasion do feel the occasional moral twinge at the passing sight of near-starvation, but poverty does not appear on any balance sheet, liberal or conservative. The cure for liberal guilt is aversion. We take our eyes off the hungry. We leave the responsibility to government.

Government is a curious mixture of personal interest and impersonal decision-making. We know from experience that the best service that government provides is lip service. Do not sneer at lip service. It has been developed into a science. Statistics are the data of this science. They seem to have the legitimacy of fact, as if facts were synonymous with truth. But it is a good alibi, a perfect vehicle for the psychological postponement of a decision, since no one is really desperate for a solution.

Data keeps whirring away in some dark corner of government, giving the illusion that someone is

actually doing something about anything. In our case, data is the preserve of a cavernous Planning Commission, headed at the moment by an impervious "foreign-returned" bureaucrat who confuses self-importance for governance. It would be a good idea to introduce Montek Singh Ahluwalia to India. Both he and India would benefit from greater familiarity, since Ahluwalia will remain the effective head of the Planning Commission as long as Dr. Manmohan Singh is prime minister.

The interesting part of the story is that Ahluwalia, now even more famous as the father the Rs. 32 a day poverty line, does not apply

tence.

The argument offered for changing the parameters seems plausible. A rich nation, ipso facto, has the ability to raise the poverty line because of its economic surpluses. How about a different perspective? Rich nations are rich precisely because they have changed their definition of poverty. What makes a nation rich? The creation and appropriation of wealth by a thin community at the ozone layer of society, which then uses its power to prevent dissemination of this wealth downwards to the extent it can? Or the creation of what might be called a more generous, and therefore general, wealth that

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the criterion for measurement of poverty that nations like America and Britain observe. We take the bottom-up approach: the minimalist cost of a handful of essentials required for basic survival, in effect a computation of calories sufficient to keep you alive. The richer nations calculate poverty as a percentage of average wealth; if anyone slips a certain percentage point below that average then he or she is deemed poor, and therefore in need of help. This is why the poor in those nations never fall into a starvation net, or are forced into a subsistence exist-

ensures a better life to the hundreds of millions at the lowest economic levels?

There is a harsher Indian response, a violent theory barely disguised in smug accusation, that the poor deserve what they get, that they are responsible for their own fate. When logic confirms that this is absurd, that the poor are victims, that poverty cannot be dismissed as a self-perpetuating punishment, we resort to silly fallacies like destiny, the ultimate argument for complacency. We have got away with this in the past because the hopeless were also helpless, bereft of the ability to

challenge the injustice that was killing them, in slow, tortured stages. It is one of the great achievements of democracy that such devastating inequity is not sustainable. Political rights are a means to economic empowerment, or they are nothing.

Feudalism and colonialism could get away with long periods of brutality, of which famine was an extreme symptom. But the best of emperors and viceroys knew that empire ebbs when the poor are driven to death by economic apartheid. An American museum edition of Jahangirnama in my library is liberally illustrated with wonderful reproductions of Mughal miniatures. Among the heroic scenes there is one very unflattering portrait of Jahangir, given pride of place on a full page. The emperor has drawn his bow, not while on a hunt, or in battle, but in order to kill an ugly hag. This is hardly an image that the lord of India would want to preserve for the future. It puzzled me until I read the caption inscribed around the picture. The hag represented poverty, and the emperor was killing poverty.

Diwali is around the corner. Maybe we should raise a collection and send this edition of *Jahangirnama* to each member of the Planning Commission as a Diwali gift.

The writer is editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, and India on Sunday, published from London.