

Expand investment in higher education

Keep research at the forefront

THE world is now moving towards a knowledge-based society. In the 21st century the countries that are likely to lead the world will be the ones which will be most creative and innovative. And it is at the university level education and research that new ideas are most likely to emerge.

In the context of such a global trend, Bangladesh will have to invest far more than it does today for higher education. The good news is that private sector has come forward with investment and has set up several quality private universities that are providing high standard education, producing a much needed expertise that we so desperately look for.

Now the government has to come forward to strengthen this trend and increase its own investment for higher education, especially in research. The new growth areas where we can make an inroad are bio-technology and ICT.

Our public universities need extensive support from the public exchequer to modernize its science departments. Here we see a grand opportunity for public-private partnership. Our universities need to produce graduate and post-graduate scholars who can respond to the need of an industry so that both can benefit. A case in point is the growth of pharmaceutical industries which are providing employment for highly qualified scientists and are willing to support research initiative by the universities.

We feel the need for a strong government policy to fund and promote higher education. We congratulate the University Grants Commission (UGC) for holding a very significant international conference with the assistance of British Council whose recommendations should receive serious attention from our policymakers.

A terrible tragedy

We condole the deaths in Kolkata

THE Kolkata hospital fire has left us shell shocked. Needless to say, it has been a human tragedy of appalling proportions. At least 90 people, including a Bangladeshi, were killed at Amri Hospital in the congested Dhakuria locality of South Kolkata. The fire broke out at 3:00 am, when the 160 patients admitted at the hospital were asleep.

Fleeing from the scene and failing to alert the fire services department in a timely manner spoke of the callous manner in which the hospital authorities handled the situation. The fire services did not arrive until three hours later at the scene, that too after the local police station reported the fire to them.

The blaze originated in the basement, originally designed as a car park but which was being used as a storage area for combustible material. The thick, poisonous gas passed through the air-condition ducts choking the patients of the wards to their demise.

Young men from local slums launched the first rescue effort. Regrettably, they were driven away by the hospital guards until much later when they made their way in by smashing windows to ease the fire pressure and helping trapped patients to safety by hand.

The ghastly scene of immobilised patients being evacuated using ropes and pulleys left the aggrieved relatives traumatised and clashes with the authorities were reported.

Despite Kolkata authorities' reminders not to overlook breaches of safety or building regulations, nothing was done to prevent it. Though punitive action is underway, the loss of lives is irreparable. Indeed, our heart goes out in sympathy for the bereaved families. We wish speedy recovery of the wounded as we convey our grief to the people of neighbouring West Bengal.

There are certainly lessons to be learnt, especially in Bangladesh where sudden outbreaks of big fires are not

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST Friday in Durban, South Africa, the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC) ended in an anti-climax. In spite of the 7 billion people of the world waiting patiently to hear the good news of a successful outcome from the climate change talks, there was so little to report. There were no breakthroughs, nothing much to write home about.

The talks had in many ways failed. Although the final outcome is still being negotiated this Saturday, even after the Conference closed, not much else was expected.

So what happened? And why did it so happen?

Ministers of environment and negotiators from 195 countries had gathered there to reach an understanding to cut carbon emissions. The Kyoto Protocol, the only binding climate agreement in the world today, will end next year (2012) and the talks in Copenhagen and Cancun held in the last two years had failed to replace or renew it. Durban was the last chance. But it seems it did not happen.

So, without a renewal of Kyoto, the world will need to brace for more extreme weather conditions. There will be severe drought in many places, more cyclones, freakish weather and poorer crop conditions. There will be greater spread of diseases among humans and animals.

To understand the reasons for the failure to reach an understanding to craft a binding agreement, it is important to follow the four great debates that took place in the conference halls of Durban.

The first debate was about the Kyoto Protocol itself. The rich countries had committed under Kyoto (till 2012) to reduce carbon emissions by 5%. But this time, Japan, Russia, Canada and Australia was reluctant to agree to an extension of the Kyoto Protocol. It may

be mentioned that the USA had opted out of Kyoto when it was first agreed to, as India and China were not a part of the 5% cut in emissions.

These rich countries from now on (that is after 2012) want to adhere to voluntary targets and pledges. But the rest of the world, including Bangladesh, seeks legally binding targets. They are afraid that the rich countries may take the opportunity of voluntary targets to emit more carbon and thereby raise world temperatures.

The second debate was about carbon emissions. The rich countries, especially those belonging to the European Union, wanted China, which is the biggest polluter in the world, as well as developing countries commit to deeper cuts in emission. The rich would continue to stay with their present carbon emissions. They are of the

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opinion that unless these developing countries reduce their emissions, the world temperatures would continue to rise and cannot be contained within the target of 2 degree Centigrade increase from the pre-industrial temperatures. But the rest said that the pledges of the rich could lead to a 4 degree rise in temperatures.

The third discussion was about money. In Copenhagen, the rich had pledged to give \$100 billion a year after 2020 to all poor countries to adapt to climate change But it was not agreed then how the money would be spent, who would administer the fund and from where (public or private sources) this money would come from.

The last issue debated at Durban was on how to protect the forests in the

tropics in return for the money generated by carbon credits. Since most of the forests are in countries where governments are found to be corrupt it was alleged that the money would not percolate down to those whose livelihoods depend on the trees. So, in case the money is not disbursed to these people, they may start cutting the trees and thereby reduce the source of oxygen in the world.

Now that no agreement on renewal of Kyoto has so far taken place, there would be no legally binding international deal to cut carbon emissions after the end of 2012. But the rich will try for a deal by 2015 to come into force by 2020. They, however, have many legal and moral obligations to meet before they can move along this road map. The European Union is the lead party to this initiative. Already, 120

Conference of the Parties (COP), there could be face- saving incremental deals. This could take place at Durban.

The first deal could be the understanding about the structure of the \$100 billion Climate Fund. The second is announcing the progress on programmes to save tropical forests from clear-cutting. Transfer of clean energy technology to emerging nations is another announcement. Finally there has been a refinement in the system for verifying that countries are taking steps to cut emissions. So these could be a part of the final announcement. But let us wait for the Durban document.

The Bangladesh delegation led by the environment minister participated in the deliberations at Durban. The minister himself made a statement where he sought a second commitment of the Kyoto Protocol. He described Bangladesh as a frontline vulnerable state with almost no contribution to global emissions.

So Bangladesh sought additional resources for the period 2013-2019 from developed nations on an incremental basis to reach \$100 billion each year by 2020. The minister also mentioned that the country had created a \$300 million Climate Change Trust Fund from its own meager resources to implement Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.

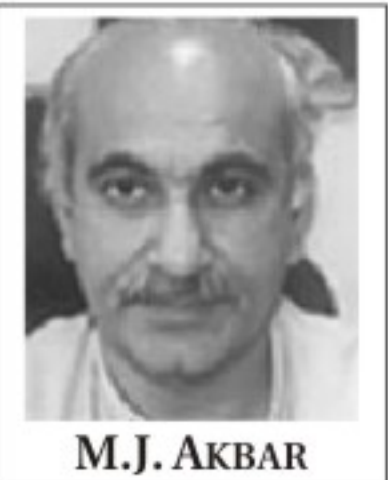
With the Durban Conference being a far cry from the success expected, the population of the world is entering a period when food supply will be scarcer and there will be mass migrations. Anyone with imagination can see the awful human consequences of that.

There is no doubt also that by putting so much carbon in the atmosphere through the use of fossil fuels, we have irreversibly changed the Earth. Experts say we won't have another Ice Age, not at least for another 200,000 years!

The Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC will meet again next year, and this time we should try to do better for ourselves.

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BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

THE decision on FDI in retail has been so clumsy that there is a counter-intuitive theory to suggest that it must be secretly

brilliant. There is always a good case to be made for chaos as an alternative to coma.

The Delhi variation of the chaos theory is persuasive, if you happen to belong to the innermost ring of the many concentric circles of power that constitute the capital of India. Thus travels the logic: the decision was taken during a Parliament session to deliberately provoke opposition parties into hostility. A shut Parliament is good for a government without answers on contentious problems from the statehood of Telangana to the state of Anna Hazare. Add low economic growth (the rate has slipped to 6.9%) and high inflation, and you have enough to keep opposition hungry in Parliament.

FDI successfully deflected the primary focus of a session during which BJP, with able help from Subramanian Swamy on the outside and former telecom minister A. Raja on the inside, hoped to whittle down Home Minister P. Chidambaram. The Almighty has turned an attentive ear to Chidambaram's prayers.

The corruption debate had only one side; a hapless government under relentless attack. Foreign investment has at least two sides. Government can

always claim that it will create jobs, help farmers and bring down prices -- who's to check? These are projections drawn in smoke against a 10-year horizon, by which time most of today's leaders will be irrelevant. The helpful bit for the establishment is the existence of a mall class which hopes to turn India into America before the next general election, or at least within its lifetime. So, even if Rahul Gandhi takes a hammering in Uttar Pradesh next year, as his resident intellectual Jairam

Pranab Mukherjee, expected turbulence from Bengal, for he is familiar with Mamata Banerjee's style.

But Dr. Manmohan Singh and his finance minister were thrown aback by the DMK's sudden discovery of spine. Sometimes injury can be good for your political health, and DMK has decided that it is not going to take its wounds lying down. Its strategy for Sonia Gandhi is borrowed from Mahatma Gandhi: it has begun a non-cooperation movement. It does not, as

If the prime minister was surprised by his allies, he must have been startled by the revolt over FDI within the Congress triggered by Defence Minister A.K. Antony. This was more than local political manoeuvring for while Antony fell silent, Ramesh Chennithala and Sanjay Singh decided that this would be a useful banner to unfold.

Ramesh seems to have whispered at the cabinet meeting where the FDI decision was taken, the Youth Congress can always be sure of a warm welcome at any mall pub.

Pity, you can never be equally certain about what will come into the House with the storm you induce. There was never any danger to survival, since this cabinet decision did not need confirmation by a vote in Parliament. This was a ruckus problem, not a mortality matter. The Congress was confident of being able to manage an aggregated opposition. It was taken aback by a disaggregated government. The leader of the House,

yet, demand independence from UPA, but it wants a sort of Dominion status. It will make life as difficult as it can without seeking separation. The hurt at Kanimozhi's long imprisonment is apparent; in DMK's eyes this was betrayal. Some insiders are livid; they are hinting that 2G money was shared in equitable proportions but DMK was left alone to twist in the wind.

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Chennithala from Kerala and Sanjay Singh from Amethi in Uttar Pradesh decided that this would be a useful banner to unfold.

Denied the foreground, Anna Hazare flickered in and out of the screen from the background. Perhaps it is time to check out a seeming paradox.

The Anna Hazare movement is over, but it is not dead. It is over because it has completed its historic work. It is alive because it has successfully convinced Indians that corruption is not the enemy they must destroy in order that the nation might survive. Some smug ministers imagine that Hazare's demand for radical change was maverick theatre, that the last scene has been played out and its impact can be erased by procrastination given the proverbial limitations of public memory. Memory might be fickle, but anger is not. Corruption has touched the national gut because it has corroded the body. Corruption is pervasive and persistent. Corruption is not sectarian. Retail FDI may enrage 10% and enthuse a different 10%, but bribery is the loathsome price 80% pay to the 20% with power.

In the immediate future, Anna Hazare might overplay his hand. He might even invite a few jeers. But the next general election will be a burial ground for anyone who thinks Anna Hazare's movement has lost its life.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 11

1917

British General Edmund Allenby enters Jerusalem on foot and declares martial law.

1946

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) is established.

1948

The United Nations passes General Assembly Resolution 194, which established and defined the role of the United Nations Conciliation Commission as an organization to facilitate peace in the British Mandate for Palestine.

1964

Che Guevara speaks at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City.

1994

First Chechen War: Russian President Boris Yeltsin orders Russian troops into Chechnya.

1997

The Kyoto Protocol opens for signature.

2001

The People's Republic of China joins the World Trade Organization.