

Face Rohingya issue upfront

International hands-on role called for

WITH 30,000 registered Rohingya refugees and anything between two and five lac unregistered ones in Bangladesh, the country has long been at the receiving end of all the fallout of a problem created in Myanmar. As if that was not enough, the latest wave of persecution of Rohingyas from the Rakhine state put additional strain on Bangladesh's nerves. The country finds itself between the rock and the hard place. On the one hand, we share humanitarian concern with the rest of the world, but on the other, we are resource-constrained to host any more refugees on a durable basis.

The issue is fundamentally Myanmar's handiwork in more ways than one. They have withdrawn citizenship rights to the Rohingyas some two decades ago and continued with a persecution policy against the ethnic minority in Rakhine state, their historical habitat. Without state support they are unable to coexist with Buddhist majority, so that they are not only stateless but also effectively destitute. Even the Myanmar president holds the position that the Rohingyas should find their place in other countries. This is in contravention of citizenship laws grounded in historical claims, let alone the provision for citizenship by naturalisation that countries can and do apply in legitimate cases.

In a context where, Bangladesh and Myanmar have failed to resolve the problem bilaterally it falls on the international community to intervene and persuade Myanmar to accept its own citizens. The West has levers with Myanmar, which too is opening up to be responsive to such overtures from the former.

Unfortunately though, the international community has not so far come forward to protect the rights of Rohingyas in the same way it defends the rights of minorities in other troubled spots around the world. In that view of the matter, the call going out from the seminar jointly organised by NHCRC, Bangladesh and UNHCR on Saturday in Dhaka must be heeded by the international community.

We wholeheartedly commend and endorse the suggestion for immediately convening an international summit among neighbouring Asian countries, including China, the donor community, Myanmar government and opposition parties and representatives of Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists to address the Rohingya question in its entirety.

Science education in decline

Take urgent steps to reverse the trend

THE falling trend of students' enrolment in science at secondary level of education, as found in a study, has an alarming signal for the country. That is because, the preparatory phase for higher education in science begins from the secondary level.

The study conducted by a local private think tank further shows that most important among the reasons behind this regressive trend is ever-declining interest of students as well as their parents in science education. And this has to do with factors like poor standard of science teaching and of teachers, especially in rural schools, common fear among students that science subjects are hard to learn, higher costs of the education.

If the decline continues unabated, a bleak prospect awaits the nation's future. We will fall short of technical manpower including engineers, doctors, scientific researchers and academicians. The running of its existing industrial and scientific institutions, far less establishing new ones, will become problematic.

In a bid to find a way out of this negative situation affecting science education, educationists, scientists, academicians, representatives from the government's education department, journalists and guardians discussed issues pertinent to the problem at a roundtable jointly organised by Freedom Foundation and this paper. It came up with a set of recommendations, the salient points of which include: reducing the cost of science education; supplying the science students with textbooks that are less voluminous, interesting and easy to understand; appointing qualified teachers with sound mathematical background in the schools and providing monetary and other incentives to teachers and students. Also stress was laid on better and intensive lesson planning by teachers for the classes; holding regular science fairs and launching massive campaign in the media.

At the policy level forming a national taskforce to address the decline and reforming education curricula was stressed.

It is hoped that the government would take these recommendations seriously and roll back the declining

Padma Bridge: No more brinkmanship

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

IN the wake of World Bank's (WB) cancellation of its contract with the Government of Bangladesh on June 29, 2012 for \$1.2 billion credit for the Padma Bridge, I wrote in these columns on July 2 that the government faced an acid-test which like any other challenge in life could be converted into a new opportunity. This in our view then and now could, however, happen only if the government shunned its typical denial syndrome and generated the courage and commitment to ensure a fully independent, credible investigation into allegations of corruption and deliver exemplary punishment, if found guilty.

We also commented then that the World Bank's decision to cancel the contract was not only debatable but also an example of chopping off the head because of a headache. It was our view that the WB, a newcomer to the world of openness and accountability, could be more strategic and could continue to engage with the government. We had called upon the WB to review its decision.

As a stakeholder in the business of low-interest credit for development projects in countries like Bangladesh which is indeed the lifeline of WB itself, we were convinced that the Bank should not only come back to Padma but also take the responsibility as a key fiduciary agent of the project to ensure integrity, transparency and accountability in its implementation process.

Vindicated as our stance was then on both counts as it is today in the context of the WB's decision to revive its loan agreement, our basic premise remains that neither the WB, nor the government has any right to deprive the people of Bangladesh of the development opportunity for alleged cor-

ruption of a handful of people.

After almost a year of brinkmanship since allegations of corruption in the project was first raised, the Government today has to take the correct lesson out of the experience so that it doesn't face any recurrence of such self-embarrassment in the days to come before the eyes of the people of this country as well as international community.

The return of WB may be viewed at the moment as a diplomatic gain for the government. However, taking the proper lesson out of the whole episode, it must now firmly abandon the ostrich-like denial syndrome of reject-

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ing allegations of corruption and take these seriously to ensure due investigation free from any bias or influence so that exemplary action is taken against those found guilty without any fear or favour. Failing this, the sense of satisfaction in the corridors of the government and beyond can be short-lived.

The government's failure to act promptly as soon as allegation of corruption was brought has not only undermined its own credibility, but also led to the possibility of depriving the people of the country of the multi-purpose dream-bridge -- a high profile electoral commitment of the government, the return from which has been estimated to be 1.5-2.0 percent higher GDP.

There is no reason to believe that resumption of WB funding to be evidently joined by other donors like JICA and ADB for the bridge will by itself help regain the eroded trust of the people of the country about the government's respect to its own electoral pledge against corruption in general and for that matter in the implementation of the Padma Bridge project.

To achieve that trust, the government must ensure strong and faultless measures to prevent all forms of illicit act and conflict of interest, particularly high profile cases of collusive corruption involving people in posi-

alliance government.

The brinkmanship that the government indulged into in the whole process was epitomised by the way that the last remaining roadblock, e.g., the fourth condition of WB, was handled. This may have unfortunately widened the space in which conditionalities typical of the likes of the WB could go beyond ensuring transparency and accountability and safeguards against corruption that Bank is preaching today.

The negotiating team headed by the external affairs adviser to the prime minister supported by a desperate finance minister must be commended for the breakthrough. But there is no doubt that the "getting to yes" was far from a position of strength as far as the government is concerned. The bargaining position of the government may weaken further and affect the degree of flexibility and independence in the decision-making process unless the government demonstrates and sustains unqualified political commitment against corruption.

Agreeably enough, it needs a rather unlikely optimist to believe that such delivery is going to come about in any significant way at a time when the policy structures appear to be increasingly entering the grips of those who are part or protectors of the collusive forces involved in the alleged instances of grand corruption rather than those who would be supportive of effectively challenging impunity. The silver lining can be found, ironically though, in the fact that time is running out for delivery against commitment consistent with the government's electoral pledge at the core of which was corruption control.

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Waking up from the inertia

COOMI KAPOOR

WIDELY criticised for the government's policy paralysis, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh decided a week ago to kick-start the stagnating Indian economy by implementing a slew of long-pending economic reforms.

The most far-reaching decision was to allow 51% foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail, a political hot potato. The move is opposed not just by opposition but also by many of the allies in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

Equally unpopular was the decision to raise the price of diesel by 5 rupees a litre and put a cap on the number of subsidised LPG cylinders a family was entitled to in a year. Within days of the announcement, the UPA's maverick ally Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress pulled out of the government to protest what she termed were "measures which are against the interests of the poor and common people." She claimed that her party was not taken into confidence before the announcement of the major economic reforms.

With Banerjee pulling out 19 MPs from the government, the UPA faces a major political crisis with the government reduced to a minority in Parliament. It hopes, however, to tide over the crisis by seeking outside support from the Samajwadi Party (SP) of Mulayam Singh and the Bahujan Samaj Party of Mayawati. Both are opposed to the new measures but could be relied on to bargain hard with the beleaguered UPA government.

The SP, along with eight other parties, in fact lent support to a nationwide strike on Thursday against the economic reforms. But it is unlikely to pull the rug from under the government's feet.

The Congress is hopeful that no political party would seek a vote of confidence in the immediate future and it can ride out the political storm as few parties want a general election just yet.

The Congress itself shrugged off destabilising fears. In fact, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram promised



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more reforms in the next month and a half. Among them are to allow 49% foreign investment in the aviation sector. A similar limit has been sanctioned for FDI in power exchanges. The government has raised FDI in broadcast carriers to 74%. It has also cleared the partial sale in four huge state-run firms.

The much-awaited reform measures come in the wake of a bleak financial scenario with the government mired in drift and an unwillingness to take hard decisions. The GDP growth in the first quarter was down to 5.5%. Countering the resistance to the government's big reforms push, Manmohan Singh declared at a meeting of the full Planning Commission that "courage and some risks are needed" to break the policy logjam and to revive growth.

The Prime Minister's bold initiative was praised by the corporate world and business press. "Reforms approved by the Cabinet are a welcome signal to investors every-

where," said Ajay Banga, US India Business Council (USIBC) Chairperson. "These big-bang reforms send a clear signal that India is open for business" was the view of USIBC president Ron Somers.

The Washington Post, which had recently severely criticised the prime minister for his inertia, called it "a dramatic push", while the Wall Street Journal hailed it as "the toughest reforms." After the announcement on September 14, Indian stock markets rallied to a 14-month high while the rupee appreciated to a two-month high against the dollar.

The argument for FDI in retail is that India, as the world's second largest producer of fruits and vegetables, loses a quarter of its produce through lack of proper cold storage and transportation facilities. Refrigeration for food preservation is rudimentary and some 7% of Indian grain rots in fields and granaries. This unacceptable wastage could be minimised with cold storage facilities

and back-up infrastructure.

Foreign investment in cold chains has not been forthcoming because India has denied prospective developers access to retail sales. It is hoped that large foreign retail chains like Wal-Mart, Tesco and Carrefour will bring in modern technologies and food processing, which will benefit the farmer and increase employment in the rural sector.

There are already several foreign retail groups present in India in different forms, like cash and carry, wholesale and in the back end. Now they can move to the front end of the business. Incidentally, the government had eased conditions for single brand retailers by removing the clause that made it compulsory to source 30% from the small and medium sector.

Those opposed to FDI in multi-brand retail point out that the Indian retail sector has the biggest self-employed workforce in the country after agriculture. FDI in retail will be a major setback for small shopkeepers and curbside retailers, they argue.

Leader of the opposition in the Upper House of Parliament Arun Jaitley observed, "Structured international retail does not create additional jobs. It displaces existing jobs." He also pointed out that international retail sources cheaper products internationally, so that the first impact will be felt by the Indian manufacturing sector.

The government counters that each state is free to decide whether to welcome multi-brand foreign retailers and that it is not compulsory for them to open up. This will mean FDI retailers will be restricted to states run by the Congress party such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Assam and Delhi.

With the battle lines clearly drawn, it now remains to be seen whether the government's economic reforms would threaten the stability of the central government. Most expect it will pull through and survive the rest of its term till May 2014, however.

The writer is a leading Columnist associated with The Indian Express.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 24

- 622** Prophet Muhammad completes his hijra from Mecca to Medina.
- 1180** Manuel I Komnenos, last Emperor of the Komnenian restoration dies. The Byzantine Empire slips into terminal decline.
- 1932** Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar agree to the Poona Pact, which reserved seats in the Indian provincial legislatures for the "Depressed Classes" (Untouchables).
- 1980** Iraq bombs Iran as hostilities increase.
- 2007** Between 30,000 and 100,000 people take part in anti-government protests in Yangon, Burma, the largest in 20 years.