

## CROSS TALK

## Cutting down on unnecessary rhetoric

*Further misunderstanding with World Bank undesirable*

THE World Bank (WB) in a press release dated September 25 stated that Bangladeshi high government officials have misrepresented WB's position on waiving the cancellation of Padma bridge financing. Yet the WB has not stated clearly where the government has misrepresented the bank's position. We are perplexed and concerned why such a rather stern tone has been taken by the WB giving the impression that the government must stay in line and observe all conditions. We think this is unfortunate considering that it has been only five days since a green signal was received on the troubled project. We are taking exception to the reprimanding line.

On our side, we wonder why after what had happened and a turn for the better having taken place, we are still in a "WB versus Bangladesh" mode instead of being wholeheartedly in a "WB and Bangladesh" or "WB with Bangladesh" mood. WB has reiterated in its last letter that it had provided credible evidence about wrongdoing and Bangladesh agreed to cooperate in the investigations. We have also indicated our decision to meet the other demands of the WB.

Bangladesh side has been repeatedly saying there has been no corruption. Even the finance minister has lately reiterated that no corruption has taken place centring on the project. In view of such strong statements from Bangladesh side that no wrongdoing has taken place it is all the more imperative, even desirable on our part to go through the investigations and get our position convincingly vindicated thereby.

That the WB has come back to a project they had withdrawn from is unprecedented in the history of the institution. We express gratitude to our development partners like Japan, China, USA, UK and India for their cooperation in the matter. We also thank the WB for agreeing to finance the project in principle. Now we must have the mindset to work with the WB cooperatively. Simultaneously, we should refrain from making comments which may even remotely send any wrong signal to the World Bank.

## We mourn Ataus Samad's demise

*He will be remembered for his journalistic qualities*

WE are saddened by the passing away of the veteran journalist Ataus Samad who, through his fearless reportage in times of the country's acute political crises, had brought in a journalistic trend marked by honesty, authenticity and above all, a vision. We express our deep condolence to the bereaved family.

Ataus Samad was a true journalist. Although he was versatile, his forte was reporting. In his illustrious journalistic career spanning five decades, he upheld objectivity and authenticity. Seen from this angle, he belonged to one of the vanishing breeds of journalists. In reporting, he believed in rushing to the spot first in order to gain first-hand knowledge and then seek out the truth with utmost diligence.

A witness to all our progressive political movements, he reported courageously during the country's most remarkable upheavals and convulsions, including the mass uprising in 1969 and the liberation war in 1971, when journalists were among the most vulnerable species in the eyes of Pakistani junta. He was also a major catalyst in garnering public support for the anti-Ershad movement in 1990. For his unrelenting reportage from a hide-out during Ershad's military rule, he was eventually incarcerated.

Relentless in his quest for truth, he engaged himself in a lifelong war against dictatorship to uphold democracy and human rights. In addition to political reporting, he was also efficient in social and human stories. His editorial excellence also deserves mention.

Equally adept in both English and Bangla, he demonstrated journalistic virtues and qualities that are worthy of emulation by the new genre of journalists. With his demise, we have lost not only a competent journalist but also a true



MOHAMMAD  
BADRUL AHSAN

ONE must say that at long last Bangladesh Biman is fulfilling its brand promise. When it

spreads its wings, in the literal sense it's your home in the sky. Everything that happens on the ground gets airborne and travels with you.

Corruption, sloppiness, inefficiency and partisan bickering are aviation fuel to an airline gone way out of line. Every time it flies is a miracle.

The pilots still know how to fly the planes, and the air hostesses still smile at you. The aircrafts take off if they land and land if they take off, subject to the subjunctive that they fly at all. Sorry to say, our national flag carrier is a compulsive joke.

Two weeks ago, Biman passengers were stranded in Muscat airport for the outlandish reason that its leased aircraft went AWOL over an agreement row. In June, four Indonesian pilots hired by the airline were flying F28s without visa, work permit and license from the civil aviation. Our national airline is hopping on wobbly crutches of borrowed planes and borrowed pilots.

The end result is a state of near paralysis. Biman has cancelled all its domestic flights until November 29. It has also cancelled its flights on three international routes and reduced the number of flights on five others. When going gets tough, tough gets going. The airline is cutting corners to run hajj flights.

It didn't have to be like this though. Only last October Biman received a new Boeing aircraft, which was endearingly named Palki by the prime minister. That was the first of the ten aircrafts Bangladesh Biman is going to receive between 2011 and 2019 under a \$1.2 billion sales agreement with the world's leading aircraft manufacturer Boeing. The airline also announced that it was going to hire 14 foreign pilots to fly its new aircrafts and train local pilots.

Let me tell you what went wrong.

*Do we need to have a national airline? If our prime minister travels in a foreign airline on her state visits, our nationals get stranded in foreign airports, and our workers risk job terminations abroad because they can't fly on time, what's the glory of having a notional carrier that is always counting losses?*

A frog once asked a centipede which leg it put forward first when it started to walk. Every time the centipede tried to figure it out, the legs got tangled and it stumbled to the ground. It's the same thing that must have thrown Biman into chaos. We asked it to become profitable, and got it confused. In its unhabitual attempt to make some money from the hajj flights, the airline almost got itself crippled.

That makes us curious as to how the people who run Biman run their homes. There is no housekeeping,

no budgeting and no planning ahead of time. How do they do their projections? How do they work out their algorithm for profit? How do they pick routes, schedule flights, devise promotions, prioritise strategies, control costs and calculate revenues?

These questions are relevant because foreign airlines operating in Bangladesh are minting money. These airlines have increased their number of flights, grown market share and brought in bigger aircrafts for capacity handling. Does the

Biman management ever wonder how others enjoy so much sunshine in the same sky, which looks cloudy for them?

Perhaps they don't. Busy with recipe, they forget cooking. They are procuring new aircrafts, hiring new pilots and tackling the irate employees, but don't have time to focus on the real stuff, their business objectives. That's one thing they need to decide first. Should Biman be treated like a business? Or, should it be a picnic at taxpayers' expense?

May be, Biman is only a piece of

the puzzle that pervades this country. Its hopeless condition persists like viral genome in a dormant infection. If the government is contentious, politicians are obnoxious, banks are porous, bureaucrats are pretentious, businessmen are deviant, law enforcers are notorious, advisers are dubious and intellectuals are spurious, why should Biman bother to be precious?

Do we need to have a national airline? If our prime minister travels in a foreign airline on her state visits, our nationals get stranded in foreign airports, and our workers risk job terminations abroad because they can't fly on time, what's the glory of having a notional carrier that is always counting losses?

There are 196 countries in the world, out of which 143 owns national flag carriers. Out of them only 37 are fully state-owned, and 38 are partially state-owned. Some of the major airlines of the world such as Qantas and British Airways have been divested to the private sector. Even Air India is under that consideration since its market share slipped to fourth place after Jet Airways, Kingfisher and Indigo.

Bangladesh Biman is certainly in the wrong business. If you think airline, it thinks submarine. It has been sinking on purpose, because submarines need constant depth. One can argue which between the flag carrier and the nation is dragging the other down.

The writer is Editor, *First News* and an opinion writer for *The Daily Star*.  
Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

# Myanmar's moment

SALMAN HAIDAR

AUNG San Suu Kyi is currently in the middle of a triumphant visit to the US.

The country that led the world in imposing harsh sanctions has opened its arms to her and poured out its respect. The US Congress has given her its Medal of Honour, a rare award, President Obama has received her in the White House, the media and the public have besieged her.

The president of Myanmar will visit the US shortly and though he cannot be expected to receive a comparable welcome, his presence will underline the point that, after so much tribulation, Myanmar has finally emerged from the shadows. This is Myanmar's moment, more specifically it is Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) moment.

People everywhere have joined in saluting her courage and fortitude, and bidding her welcome after so many years in seclusion.

With these developments, a new chapter has opened in Myanmar.

However, notwithstanding the favourable political events of the last few months, it should not be assumed that Myanmar is now finally out of the woods.

International opprobrium and the burden of sanctions are over but Myanmar remains beset with problems of political consolidation and economic reform.

The liberalisation brought about by a reformist president has made possible the change for which the country and the world have waited so long, the major new development being, of course, that ASSK has been able to return to unfettered political activity. She has swept the by-elections in which her party was able to participate and she now has a significant group of followers in Parliament.

Her popularity is not in doubt and she is set to resume the mantle of leadership that was forcefully ripped from her. It will be necessary, however, to amend the Constitution so as to remove the prohibition imposed on anyone married to a

person of foreign origin from becoming president -- an unobtrusive move by the former junta against ASSK that has done nothing to diminish her popularity.

It is a more tricky matter to gauge the condition of her party and its capacity to fight in the elections that may take place before too long.

According to some accounts, the NLD, ASSK's party, is not without its problems. ASSK towers above all others but there are quite a few formerly prominent figures that have their own groups and factions and would not wish to be ignored in any new dispensation.

Bringing the different personalities together in one political structure is a leadership challenge and resumption of the normal political activity that has been suspended for so long may not be an altogether simple matter. However, this is only

*The poverty of Myanmar's inhabitants coexists with the lavish endowments of nature, and already, after the liberalisation of the latest phase, the world is taking notice and looking eagerly at fresh opportunities in Myanmar.*

to be expected, given the abnormal conditions that have prevailed in Myanmar.

There is no current roadmap for further liberalisation, nor can any backsliding be wholly precluded, for those who have enjoyed the fruits of power without the bother of answering to the public may fight to retain at least some of their privileges. However, the tide is flowing against them and it would seem that the new generation is all too aware that their country has been left far behind in the race for progress.

Such elements favour reform and regard it as unavoidable in the present circumstances. Indeed, there seems to be something of a ferment on the political scene; much is happening and there are many different processes to watch and assess.

Political easing needs must be complemented by economic

liberalisation, for which the demand seems to be increasing. Myanmar was a relatively prosperous part of Asia at the time of its emergence from British rule. It was an important source of rice, timber, oil, and other commodities, and many foreign trading companies were active in that country.

A substantial and active Indian trading community had been part of the local scene for decades by the time of independence. But foreign, including Indian, business activity tailed away as Myanmar's military-led rulers opted for autarkic economic management and the economy stagnated to the point that the country that was once in the forefront became instead the backmarker in a region that was thrusting ahead.

Yet Myanmar is endowed with substantial natural resources. In this

respect, it is perhaps the last of the major undeveloped and unexploited regions of Asia. The poverty of its inhabitants coexists with the lavish endowments of nature, and already, after the liberalisation of the latest phase, the world is taking notice and looking eagerly at fresh opportunities in Myanmar.

In this, until now China has been well ahead of the rest. It has been active in Myanmar since its own liberalisation policies of the 1980s.

Until that time, the growth areas of China were grouped around the coast, and the remote interior provinces were more or less left to their own devices. But with further liberalisation, these more distant parts were encouraged to take initiative for themselves, and Hunnan in the south-west rapidly opened up towards its neighbour Myanmar. Roads were built to connect them,

giving better access to the sea and to the booming Asean region. Since then, the infrastructure has been well developed and further China-led expansion of economic activity has become a feature of Myanmar's development. Like so many others, China seems to covet the natural resources of its neighbour, and it is better placed than the others to do something about it.

In contrast, India's links with Myanmar have developed in a less focused manner.

When the army-led coup took place and ASSK was ousted, Indian sympathy was all for her. Ties with the rulers in Yangon, her captors, became much weaker, and at a time when China was rapidly developing its relations, India-Myanmar ties were in the doldrums.

Gradually, however, and without shedding its sympathy for ASSK, India felt it must become more active, for it could not ignore the steady growth of the Chinese presence --and for Myanmar, too, it was desirable that India should be more actively engaged with it. Thus there was a gradual rebuilding of the India-Myanmar relationship, with India taking pragmatic initiatives for closer ties.

A few high-level visits were exchanged, leading to better contact between the two. Some rather tentative ideas of restoring overland connections were also explored, though there were inhibitions on India's side as it was not yet ready to open full access to its own North-east through which these roads would have to pass.

That hurdle has not yet been overcome but a much more open approach to access issues through the North-east may have become possible after the prime minister's recent visit to Yangon which has set the relationship on a new course. After decades of relative inattention, ties with Myanmar are now seen as an important first step in India's "Look East" policy.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary of India.  
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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 28

**1538** Ottoman Venetian War: The Ottoman Navy scores a decisive victory over a Holy League fleet in the Battle of Preveza.

**1787** The newly completed United States Constitution is voted on by the U.S. Congress to be sent to the state legislatures for approval.

**1791** France becomes the first European country to emancipate its Jewish population.

**1928** Sir Alexander Fleming notices a bacteria-killing mold growing in his laboratory, discovering what later became known as penicillin.

**1939** Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union agree on a division of Poland after their invasion during World War II.

**1939**