

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

A second opportunity



THE anti-corruption drive by military-backed Fakhruddin-led caretaker government, 2007-08, gave a tectonic jerk to the corrupt. What seemed valid then, may have been overtaken by events; but it couldn't detract from the then prevailing public notion of validity of the cause.

The rather noisy crackdown on corruption suspects was to fizzle out down the road. Clearly, the self-arrogating "crusaders" had bitten more than they could chew. Yet, the overwhelming impression was that it struck fear in the minds of high and mighty, even though excesses were committed in certain cases.

Many rags to riches and back to rags stories seemed to be in the offing. Such a convulsive shake-up had been necessary and that it couldn't have come a day later -- so the citizenry thought. Each day fat sacks of ill-gotten money would spill out and assets holdings beyond known sources of income disgorged in full public glare. As though a town crier was constantly beating the drums making unsavoury announcements.

Expectations ran high in the cusp of a neutral administration. On the barometer of public excitement the mercury rose as quickly as it touched the bottom.

That the caretaker government would flip-flop on its anti-corruption agenda was in its DNA code itself. It was only to be expected since constitutionally all odds were stacked against it. This was an unelected government without a constitutional mandate but working under the cover of Emergency. Emergency power is a

double-edged sword. It enables the users to make sensational revelations, but it comes at a cost. The shylock extracting his pound of flesh foraging on the pasture of "discredited victims" wealth made some big money of their own. Money which has lost its owner gets to be owned by those who handle it!

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The true extent of money recovered is yet to be made public. More to the point, the then ACC failed to prove its cases against the corrupt and make them face the full force of law. This is a typical instance of "sincerity" being the mirror image of incompetence.

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the wrongdoers. But now, we are experiencing perhaps the second coming of an opportunity to cleanse the Augean stable courtesy of the World Bank. WB's concerns over integrity have been insistent demanding satisfaction from the Government of Bangladesh on the self-evident lack of transparency in the process of



selecting a consultant and meeting provisions of Public Procurement Act 2006.

Where an unelected government had failed, an elected government is expected to succeed. But to our dismay, the government is playing ping-pong with the "conspiracy to corruption" that the World Bank has detected in such detail. An entire set of public func-

tionaries has been incriminated with the result that their names can only be cleared through no-nonsense investigations conducted by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The full text of the World Bank panel's latest letter to ACC is self-explanatory. In a nutshell, the World Bank seeks to know ACC's assessment of the former communication minister Abul Hossain's role in the whole process. Precisely, it would like to get the ACC's view of the significance of the following events: (a) The meeting held on May 29, 2011, between the SNC representatives and the government officials; (b) Mr. Hossain's attendance at that meeting; and (c) the subsequent event that SNC Lavalin moved to the top of the tender list, and the reference on the notepad to "4% Min"?

The ACC chief asserts that both the anti-graft body and the World Bank are working towards the same aim of unearthing the truth. In the same breath though, he says that suspicion about corruption is a cognisable offence in the eye of the World Bank. In Bangladesh, however, documentary evidence is required to prove one's guilt.

The bottom line is, it's more of the same: Save the skin of the former minister, if need be through prevarication about the incriminating circumstances.

The Bank's panel comprising persons of high reputation and professional skill on the whole has been persuasive, cooperative and engaging as well. The panel has taken note of ACC chief's observation that he (the former minister) will be under rigorous scrutiny during the investigation. Let's keep faith with it.

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Britain is open for business

ROBERT GIBSON

BRITAIN'S immigration policy has drawn much criticism over the last year. It has been accused by parts of the British media of hobbling British business, of placing a "Keep out" sign on the White Cliffs of Dover.

I am aware that in Bangladesh too there is real concern that the UK is closing its doors. I want to reassure readers that the British government is wide awake to the benefits of migration to the UK economy. If there were a sign, it would read "Open for business."

The British government has been clear in its aim to reduce net migration to the UK. Yet it is equally committed to ensuring that highly skilled Bangladeshi workers, business people, students and visitors view the UK as one of the best places to invest and do business, study and visit.

Bangladesh, along with other countries in Asia, continues to be a key focus of our attention.

Bangladesh's financial services sector is well represented in the UK. Increasingly companies from other sectors are looking seriously at how they might best operate in the UK and use it as a springboard into the wider EU.

Let me provide some further encouragement.

Countries are investing more in the UK than the rest of the EU altogether. Successful businessmen, including many Bangladeshis, are aware that the UK makes it easy for entrepreneurs -- it is ranked first in Europe by the World Bank as the easiest place to set up and run a business. This is complemented by some essential facts for business.

One, Britain is, and intends to remain, one of the world's largest economies. We are the sixth largest economy with an annual GDP of over \$2.4 trillion.

Two, we have one of the most business-friendly environments. The current government has cut red tape. It cut corporation tax to 24% last year and will bring this down further to 22% by 2014.

Three, Britain is the place to be if you want to do business in Europe. We offer direct access to the largest single market in the world -- the EU.

Four, Britain is the place to be if you want to be a global player. Britain is where the world raises its capital and trades its shares, through the City of London and the Stock Exchange.

Five, our UK Trade and Investment Offices offer a bespoke service to encourage entrepreneurs to set up their global HQ in the UK.

Six, we are in the right time zone -- allowing you to talk to Asia in the morning and the US in the evening.

Of course it is not just businessmen who find Britain an appealing prospect. We have the best connections in the world: Heathrow Airport handles more international flights than any other airport, and Britain speaks the world's language -- English has been confirmed as

the dominant, global language of business.

We are a world leader in the things which drive prosperity and growth -- science, technology and innovation.

We are a world leader in education. Of the top six universities in the world, four are British.

And we can do difficult things well. For example, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were delivered on time, in budget, with friendliness, humour and style.

Turning specifically to UK visas and the myth that Britain is closed and no longer wants foreign students, business people and visitors, let me deconstruct this. The UK processes over 30,000 applications each year in Bangladesh. A large majority of Bangladeshis who apply for a visa get one -- 68% in 2012. Of the 10,703 people who applied for a visit visa, 75% (8,127) were successful.

We aim to make our visa service as accessible as possible with application centres in Sylhet and Dhaka. Something some other countries do not have. We process most short-term visa applications within 15 working days, and successful

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applicants usually receive their visas more quickly than this.

We aim to make our visa service as convenient as possible, with special services for business and frequent travellers. From tomorrow (January 19) we will also open our application centres at the weekend, and we are considering the introduction of online applications.

Last year, of those Bangladeshis who applied for a business visitor visa, 80% were successful. A total of 1,784 and up from the previous year's figure of 1,500. In reforming our migration policies, the British government conducted an extensive global consultation.

It listened to business in the reform of work visas, for example keeping intra-company transfer visas outside the migration limit.

There is no limit on the number of business visitor visas. The high volumes that we issue are important to oil the wheels of business between our two countries -- to attend meetings, arrange deals and negotiate agreements or contracts, undertake fact finding missions, conduct on-site visits and so on.

The UK is doing more than ever to

make entrepreneurs welcome. We have made changes to our visas for investors and entrepreneurs -- providing greater flexibility. Far from making settlement more difficult for entrepreneurs and investors, the new rules provide a fast track to settlement in the UK. And there is no limit on their numbers.

Furthermore, we are not closing the door to skilled workers from Bangladesh. We continue to welcome those who can fill gaps in the labour market. The government announced a limit on general skilled migrant visas and it then fixed this limit at 20,700 each year until 2014, to allow businesses to plan.

No one has been refused a skilled migrant visa because of this limit. And no company has been impeded from investing in or trading with the UK because of this limit.

Turning to those who wish to study in the UK, last year we issued 2,655 student visas. 86% of applications were approved. In total there are 430,000 international students from non-EU countries. That is 14% of the UK student population. This underlines the fact that genuine students will be given visas.

We want genuine Bangladeshi students to come to the UK in large numbers. So we have set no limit on their numbers. You will have read about the abuse of UK student visas over the past couple of years. It would have been irresponsible to allow this to continue and for students to be exploited. The new student visa rules protect and support good students enjoying the UK's finest universities. Anyone who meets the new criteria is welcome.

Graduate employment opportunities still exist for international students. We want talented Bangladeshi and other graduates to work in the UK. Yes, we closed the visa route to allow graduates to work in low-skilled work not commensurate with their qualifications, or not work at all.

But contrary to much reporting, graduates can continue to work after their studies. They can work in graduate-level employment for a licensed employer and earning a graduate-level salary -- for three years, with the possibility of extending for a further three years. We have also introduced a visa for graduate entrepreneurs that allow students who have world-class innovative ideas to stay in the UK and develop their ideas.

In conclusion, the myth is that there is a "Keep out" sign on the White Cliffs of Dover. The reality is that Britain is open for business.

The writer is British High Commissioner to Bangladesh. (This article is exclusive to The Daily Star)



High Commissioner Robert Gibson

Who is secure when Khaleda Zia is insecure?

ABDUL MATIN

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia failed to appear before a court in Dhaka on January 6 "due to security concerns during the *hartal*," according to her counsel who applied for adjournment of the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case against her. The judge asked the counsel why she had called the *hartal* when she was aware of the hearing of the case on the day. The counsel replied: "The interest of the country and the nation was much greater than hers. And that is why she called the *hartal*."

The objective of the article is not to discuss the merit of the case against Khaleda Zia or of the justification of her absence. I would only like to know who feels secure on a *hartal* day when Khaleda herself feels insecure with all the security around her? Moreover, how is the interest of the country served by arson, vandalism and sporadic explosions?

People have not forgotten what Khaleda used to say against *hartal* when she was the prime minister. While *hartal* never served the interest of the country when she was the prime minister, how can it now when she is the leader of the opposition?

The general election is not too far. If she comes to power following the trends of the previous elections, the next leader of the opposition will surely again call *hartal* "in the greater interest of the country" like Khaleda is doing now. Khaleda will again give sermons against *hartal*, like she did in the past.

The election only changes the party and the people in the government but the speeches of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition on *hartals* never change. They sound like recorded voices, no matter who is in power and who is in the opposition.

Hartal is justified against an oppressive military regime. It is hard to justify one against a democratically elected government unless it is a peaceful one like that of December 18, 2012, and for good reasons. The people never support coercive *hartals* which result in arson and vandalism.

Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith favours a ban on *hartal*. *Hartals* should not and cannot be banned. They can be and should be regulated. The opposition

should cooperate with government if it wants to regulate *hartals*. After all, they will be the main beneficiary of regulation of *hartal* as they hope to come to power after the next general election. They can expect to rule peacefully, at least for five years, if *hartal* is regulated by an act of parliament.

For regulation of *hartals*, the following suggestions are made:

- It will be necessary to issue a legal notice to the government at least thirty days before calling any *hartal*, showing the reasons for it. After receipt of the notice, both the parties will sit together to resolve the issues by direct negotiations within the first fifteen days. If direct negotiations fail, both parties will try to resolve the issues through arbitration within the next fifteen days. *Hartal* may be called only after the expiry of thirty days if both direct negotiations and arbitration fail to resolve the issues;
- The duration of *hartal* must not exceed 6 hours on any day. No organisation will be allowed to call more than four *hartals* in a year. Not more than one *hartal* will be allowed in one month;
- No picketing will be allowed during *hartal*. Processions, if any, must be peaceful. The police will not resist any procession. They will, instead, provide security to the procession and assist in maintaining discipline;
- Any act of vandalism, looting, arson or coercion during *hartal* should be tried speedily in a court of law. Video footages of arsons and vandalism should be accepted as sufficient evidence of commission of such crimes;
- Any organisation calling *hartals* should take full responsibility and pay compensations for any damages to public or private properties during *hartal*;
- Calling or enforcement of any *hartal* without following the regulations will be a punishable crime.

All the economic parameters of our country are indicative of a speedy growth to prosperity. The farmers, factory workers, entrepreneurs and expatriate workers are doing their jobs while our political leaders are not. Let us regulate *hartals* and bring some civility to our political culture. Posterity will never forgive us if our political leaders fail to do so "in the greater interest of the country."

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