

Government's callous indifference boggles the mind

Why is it not taking any ice-breaking initiative?

THE people are greatly perturbed by the heightening political tension and unrest in the country. Their trepidation is all the more pronounced seeing the doors to political engagement slammed shut one after another. There appears no opening in sight, nor even a glimmer of hope to nurture by way of breaking free of the albatross around the citizens' neck. Only some half-hearted and often contradictory banter.

Despite continuing hartaal, violence, blood-letting and enormous damage to property, the major political players are basically doing nothing to address the doom-gloom scenario. The simple question exercising the public mind is that nobody is taking responsibility for the unfolding consequences of a dire strait the country is first sinking into.

The government is in the overall charge of the country and its remit dictates that it come forward in a crisis situation which basically is of its own making. In our view, the government is making no effort at all to try and resolve the crisis in any way. On the contrary, it has been shifting positions with the passage of time.

The sole issue revolves around a single point which is agreeing to a political structure before the polls that will ensure participation from all political parties and a credible election. Now the government side at one point gave us to understand that it had moved closer to an interim arrangement before the polls. The leader of the opposition too made it clear that the BNP was agreeable to an interim government in one form or the other.

Instead of progressing along the line, political parties recklessly indulged in empty speech making, and the ruling party in particular, showed the incapacity of separating the caretaker or interim issue from that of the war crimes. Every now and then, it would attribute opposition's demand to their agenda against war crimes trial.

The ministers and the ruling party leaders never tire of repeating the prime minister's rhetoric on the issues, thereby refusing to be part of any meaningful political discourse.

Of all the criticisms that the government has courted by its arbitrary actions, the one that is absolutely indefensible is its persistent refusal to take any initiative to resolve the deepening national crisis. Resultantly, a lot more violence and sense of insecurity seemingly lie in store for the people.

Let us conclude with a clear message that in no way the government can escape the responsibility for resolving the current crisis upfront and headlong. We want to see a positive bent to things negative and counterproductive.

The line between life and death

Should not be so thin

JUST a few days back a photograph of Habibur, a Power Development Board employee, was on the cover of The Daily Star. His body was lifeless, hanging from the electricity pole near Bakalia Fultala Canal in Chittagong city. No safety gears were seen on him and the live wires caused this untimely death of Habibur as the city underneath went about their daily activities.

One of the mission statements of Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) states "to follow international standards and adopt modern technology and practices in power generation activities." However, Habibur's death, does not show the following of any modern practices or standards and the absence of safety gears is a prime proof of that.

Also by international standards, protocols for power development board employees while at work place should be taught as second nature. Information and training on rights as a power development employee should also be of high priority. Staring at the disheartening photograph of Habibur, whose face and body was blurred in the image in the Daily Star as it could cause trauma to the readers, doubts remain about BPDB's implementation of compliance with employees' rights to training and minimum safety standards.

Another mission statement of BPDB reads "To reach self-sufficiency by increasing of its income and reduction of expenditure through efficiency improvement and diversification of activities." If increasing efficiency and reduction of expenditure translates to sending out BPDB workers without safety gears we suggest it is time BPDB revises its mission and vision statements, not just on paper but in practice. Until BPDB does that, we fear more unnecessary losses and

FDI and economic diplomacy

MOHAMMAD JASIM UDDIN

VARIOUS literatures show how economic diplomacy reduce barrier to and negotiate deals on investment at multiple levels. Not only is the meta-effect of economic diplomacy on investment inflow positive, but the cementing of a country's image and economic diplomacy for FDI is literally evident. The former identifies the role of economic diplomacy in making a country a more attractive destination to invest in. Needless to say, there is a link between economic diplomacy and FDI.

We are used to comparing economic policy or our gains with China and India; so, why not focus on economic diplomacy in regards to FDI? Both with a diverse set, and similar at times, as well of economic diplomacy (see Box 1) have by now been desired choices for global investment.

Whatever lesson Bangladesh learns from the economic diplomacy of China and India is a key to Bangladesh. 'Whether manufacturing or service sector are to be prioritised' are questions that can be looked into.

Economic diplomacy calls for an engagement with a shift in the global FDI composition. It demands encouraging FDI in priority areas where Bangladesh's gain for long is productive. FDI in manufacturing, both RMG and non-RMG, is to be prioritised; globally branded FDI firms in Bangladesh's RMG must be pursued.

Economic diplomacy has to prioritise export-driven FDI in manufacturing. It has to focus on improving the quality of the FDI inflow. "Alternative Development Model" by Ambassador Milton Nathaniel Barnes pays attention to investment by non-resident citizens. NRBs must be encouraged to invest in Bangladesh.

It is crucial to carry on negotiation with three types of countries:

- Those that have already invested,
- Those that have recently shown

interest to invest, and

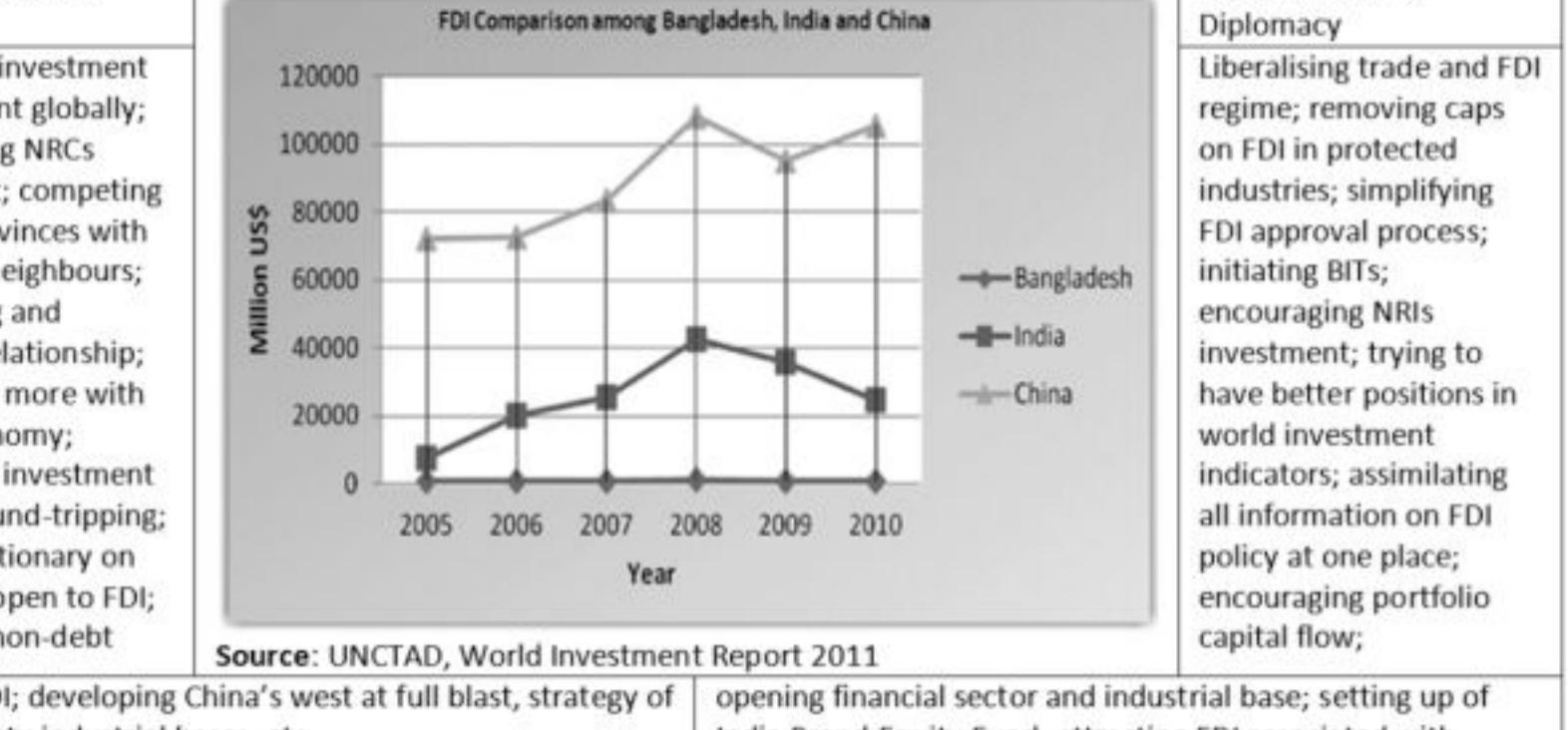
- Those who are potential for Bangladesh.

For the first group, economic diplomacy is to advance negotiations with them and keep them busy with their sectors invested.

For the last two, undertaking supportive measures to attract them to invest in Bangladesh is crucial. Besides, four initiatives are important: strengthening economic diplomacy with the US, looking for ASEAN outward FDI, engaging with initial BRICs, and negotiating FDI from G-20.

Strengthening economic and commercial diplomacy to negotiate BITs with as many countries as possible is crucial. Existing BITs have to be economically reviewed. Regional, sub-regional and plurilateral cooperation are functional to tap investment complementarities.

Box 1: Comparing Chinese and Indian Economic Diplomacy for FDI Inflow



Source: UNCTAD, World Investment Report 2011

creating FDI; developing China's west at full blast, strategy of

reviving rusty industrial bases, etc.

These are crucial to Chinese FDI inflow into its

manufacturing, financial and non-financial sectors.

Indian Economic Diplomacy
Liberalising trade and FDI regime; removing caps on FDI in protected industries; simplifying FDI approval process; initiating BITs; encouraging NRBs investment; trying to have better positions in world investment indicators; assimilating all information on FDI policy at one place; encouraging portfolio capital flow; etc.

ties in world media, marketing and branding of Bangladesh, and making scientific guidelines on how investors will be benefited are highly important.

Existing brand organisations, which have successfully invested in Bangladesh and gained, can be requested to showcase success stories from Bangladesh. Marketing campaign to redefine Bangladesh's image as an investment destination is important. Public diplomacy to actively publicise image of Bangladesh and to attract FDI is crucial. Other important instruments are shown in Box 2.

What China and India have done and what Bangladesh has to do in case of economic diplomacy is the big difference for the latter to attract itself as a destination to receive comparable amount of FDI inflow. For Bangladesh, it is crucial to have a focused FDI strategy: how much FDI

Bangladesh could target within what time, from whom and in which sector? Where opportunity is more and where it is less i.e. assessing area-based opportunity and deploying economic diplomacy in line with that is vital.

Finally, it is vital to internationalise Bangladesh's local companies.

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Box 2: Crucial Instruments of Economic Diplomacy to Increase Bangladesh's FDI Inflow

- Arranging investment-promotion international seminars, 'road shows', conferences
- Adoption of various programmes: bilateral talks, press briefings, and salesmanship through fair-talk-forum abroad
- Continuous negotiations to incorporate Bangladesh as an investment destination
- Increasing FDI inflow by eminent personalities
- Concentrating to investment mobilisation efforts
- Providing information on business climate, opportunities and competitive strength of Bangladesh

At a multilateral level, Bangladesh's economic diplomacy has to be familiar with the multilateral FDI. GoB and its concerned agencies as well as non-public organs home and abroad must work together at multiple levels to increase FDI inflow to Bangladesh. NRBs, Bangladeshi ambassadors, business diplomats, representatives working at regional and global financial institutions, and media are important actors as well to attract Bangladesh as a destination for global FDI.

For Bangladesh, one of the funda-

mental is to exercise the instruments of economic diplomacy to increase FDI inflow to the country. The most important instruments are concluding BITs, double taxation avoidance agreements, and FTAs. Building the foreign investors' confidence through

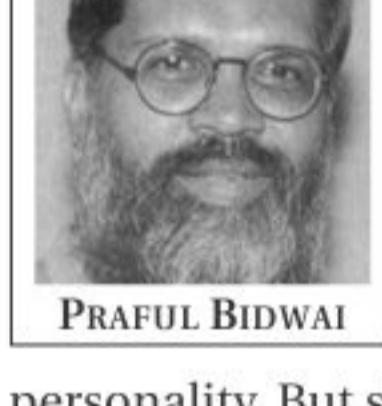
consistent lobbying and regular high-level exchange visits at commercial levels is crucial.

Encouraging NRBs and liberalising policy for them are important. Vital is to liberalise rule governing FDI, capital market, and intensify global economic integration. Increasing role of Bangladesh embassies and becoming ambassadors the foremost salesmen of Bangladesh are highly crucial.

Also essential is to promote consular and commercial diplomacy. Bringing out booklets on success stories, increasing promotional activi-

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Spiral of violence in West Bengal



PRAFUL BIDWAI

TRINAMOOL Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee is India's most abrasive, volatile and hysteria-prone political personality. But she surpassed herself with her tantrum at a protest by Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) activists against her trivialisation of the custodial death of student leader Sudipta Gupta as a "petty" matter.

When she and Finance Minister Amit Mitra visited the Planning Commission in Delhi on April 9, CPM activists demonstrated at one gate of the building. The police advised her to use another, protest-free, gate, and offered to escort her.

She refused and insisted on entering the first gate. She was heckled. In the melee, Mr. Mitra's shirt was torn. Nobody was injured. The CPM promptly apologised. But Ms. Banerjee cancelled her Delhi meetings, abruptly returned to Kolkata, and spent three days in hospital.

In response, TMC activists ransacked and torched hundreds of CPM offices in West Bengal. They also vandalised parts of Kolkata's prestigious Presidency College.

Ms. Banerjee's tantrum has further antagonised Bengal's urban upper-caste middle-class, dominated by Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas, who despise her for lack of good education and her coarse manners. But she has diverted attention from Gupta's death, and turned the tables on the Left.

The CPM is paying dearly for the Delhi protest. It doesn't know how to counter the repression it faces in West Bengal. Politburo member Sitaram Yechury admits it has "lost some ground" thanks to the TMC's "politics of terror."

Ms. Banerjee is on a collision course with the state election commission on the dates of the coming panchayat elections, which are due soon. These are vital to demonstrating

her continuing clout. Whenever the elections are held, it's clear that the TMC will intimidate CPM so it doesn't file nominations in about a third of all panchayats.

In this, ironically, the TMC will be seen by many as replicating what the CPM often did in power. Muzzling opponents has long been institutionalised in Bengal politics. To understand the irony (and its limits), one must recall the violent past of that politics.

Bengali nationalism was never fully integrated into India's Freedom Struggle, but dominated by "revolu-

tionary terrorists," and later by Netaji Bose.

Post-Independence West Bengal saw stable Congress rule for less than 15 years before plunging into popular agitations for food, etc. Then followed two United Front governments, composed mainly of Left parties, led by the breakaway Bengal Congress.

The period 1968-71 witnessed immense social turmoil, 400 "political disturbances," workers' gheraos of managers, 7,400 arrests without trial, 1,771 political murders, and 200 deaths in police firing. The Naxalite movement, born in 1967, spread. Industrial capital fled Bengal.

Yet more violence came with President's (Central) Rule in 1970-72, the S.S. Ray-led Congress government of 1972-75 -- which seized power through rigging -- and the Emergency that followed.

Aided by the Congress-led Chhatra Parishad students' union, Ray severely repressed the Left, arresting, beating and killing hundreds of activists, and crippling democratic politics. The TMC is the direct heir of the Parishad.

In 1970-72, some 600 CPM mem-

bers and 320 Naxalites were killed in prison. Hundreds of youth suspected to be Naxalite members/sympathisers were shot in broad daylight. Many more were tortured.

Particularly gruesome was the Cossipore-Baranagar police massacre of 150 Naxalite sympathisers. As a reporter wrote: "Dead bodies were everywhere -- bodies with heads cut off, limbs lost, eyes gouged out, entrails ripped open ..."

The state cynically exploited intra-Left rivalries to eliminate opponents. The Naxalites were subdued and the parliamentary Left weakened

through mass-scale human rights violations.

1967-1977 in West Bengal was the most violent and undemocratic decade in any Indian state since 1947.

It's only when the Left Front, comprising the CPM, Communist Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party and Forward Block, came to power in 1977 that law-and-order was re-established and the democratic process resumed.

The Front released political prisoners and put the police on a tight leash. Revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, it embraced moderation -- or Indian-style Social Democratic politics. It initiated the Operation Barga land reform, which registered tenants and gave them security. It pioneered panchayat raj, and worked for balanced Centre-state relations.

The TMC is using violence to shore up its fortunes. It's tempting, but wrong, to see the CPM and TMC as clones. The CPM drifted, or was forced, into violence. The TMC is quintessentially violent, and knows no other politics.

favoured for plum jobs. Corruption and bossism grew. In 1994, the Front adopted a new industrial policy without internal discussion, which favoured the main class enemy: the "big bourgeoisie."

Aggressive land acquisition followed, alienating the CPM's small and middle-peasant core-supporters. The Front criminally neglected health, education, food security and other public services.

West Bengal's social development indices fell. It adopted an elitist "industrialisation-at-any-cost" policy, but didn't attract much industry. Unemployment and unrest soared.

To sustain these policies, and maintain hegemony, the CPM marginalised the other Left parties and used coercion against its critics -- a tactic learnt in 1970-76, perhaps in self-defence.

The Front's support among the poor shrank. Yet it could set a world record of 34 uninterrupted years of winning elections because the weak opposition got further divided with the 1997 Congress-TMC split. By 2006, the Left had 235 of the Assembly's 294 seats, TMC a mere 30. The Left's arrogance grew.

With Singur and Nandigram (2007-8), the Left's base started eroding rapidly. Muslims, strongly supportive of the Front because of its secularism and containment of communal conflict, started drifting away after the Sachar Committee exposed their low status and under-representation in government jobs in West Bengal relative to other states.

In 2008, the Left withdrew support to the United Progressive Alliance, enabling a TMC-Congress coalition in West Bengal, which swept the 2009 Lok Sabha and the 2011 Assembly elections.

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