

Up on the competitive index

Create enabling environment to build on it

WITH all the things Bangladesh might be doing wrong, one cannot deny that there are a few things we are doing right. Bangladesh moving eight notches up in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) is a clear indication of that.

Improvement in two key areas—macro-economic management and infrastructure—helped Bangladesh make progress in the index for 2013-14, according to the Global Competitiveness Report (GCR) to be released by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh.

With the political unrest in Bangladesh for most of 2013 the infrastructure, and economy were both obviously affected. But it is commendable that given those factors Bangladesh still rose up from 118th to 108th place in the GCI.

This goes to show that given a productive and progressive environment Bangladesh can improve in all sides, let it be economy, policy or climate change mitigation.

GCI reported, corruption, inadequate supply of infrastructure, access of financing to poor work ethics and unstable policy to be the main problems of doing business with Bangladesh. As there are no wild cards here and these are the same problems experts in Bangladesh would identify as key issues in our country we hope that our government and people are paying attention to these factors and taking small and big actions for change.

The progress of Bangladesh is for everyone, it does not leave out any community or background. So we hope we can think for the greater good and keep moving forward.

3G comes to Bangladesh

Ensure optimal use

AFTER years of waiting, third generation (3G) mobile technology finally comes to Bangladesh in full swing with the auctioning of spectrum to four operators.

The technology will not only drastically increase internet speed, but with it the number of internet users in the country, which is currently at only eight million, most of whom use narrowband mobile internet. The service in particular and digitisation of the nation in general will, it is hoped, contribute significantly to socio-economic development, not to mention the opening up of a wider, brighter world of infotainment for users.

Accompanying our excitement, however, are some practical concerns. The existing infrastructure is less than reliable and must be improved if it is to keep up with the service. Internet access is still limited, especially in rural areas, and must be made to reach the widest network of users. The costs, which are already on the high end, should not be allowed to soar with this new service. Considering the bidding price, the stakes are high, and so are expectations of users, operators and the government alike.

We hope that efficient and affordable 3G services will be launched not only 'in the fastest time possible' as promised by mobile operators, but that it will also reach divisional cities within the given timeframe as is a condition of the licence, so as to benefit the greatest number of people with high-quality service in today's increasingly digital world.

CHINADAILY

Obama lacks legal basis

EDITORIAL

WITH US President Barack Obama's push for military action against Syria passing its first hurdle in the Senate, the countdown to military intervention by the United States in the Middle East country has begun ticking again.

With the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voting 10 to 7 in favour of a resolution authorising the use of military force in Syria, it could go before the full Senate next week.

However, before proceeding any further US lawmakers may want to triple check both the legal and moral grounds on which Obama has built his case.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on Tuesday that any military attack on Syria must have the approval of the UN Security Council. He said that a US attack without the endorsement of the UN would be unlawful and could lead to further turmoil in the conflict-ridden country.

Ban said any use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances will be a serious violation of international law and any perpetrators must be brought to justice.

But Obama is trying to jump the gun. The UN chemical weapons inspection team, though it has concluded its investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus last week, has yet to produce an official report confirming chemical weapons were used and if so by whom.

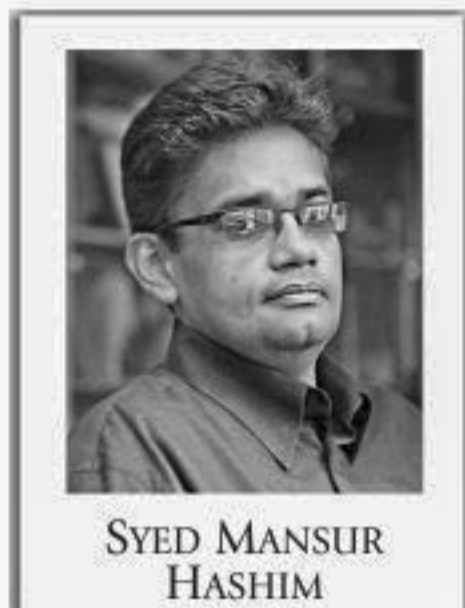
Without UN authorisation, the US obviously lacks a legal basis to proceed with military action and the arguments it is using to justify its case do not hold water.

Obama may be driven by a self-imposed moral obligation when he insists that the regime of Bashar al-Assad should be punished for using chemical weapons.

He also linked likely strikes on Syria with the US' global leadership when he suggested over the weekend that both US' allies and adversaries will draw conclusions if the US fails to act over Syria.

In fact, as fewer allies have sided with the US this time when compared with the military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan or even Libya, and the majority of the world's countries still support political solutions to the Syria crisis, it is the US' unilateralism and defiance of international law that are really weakening its claims to global leadership.

Where is the electric vehicle headed?



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

DRIVING an electric vehicle (EV) is akin to making a statement. The owner obviously cares for the environment to the point that the substantial additional investment required to procure an EV over and on top of a similarly equipped petrol-driven vehicle, is considered justified. Though EV sales more than doubled between 2011 and 2012, electric vehicles represent a mere 0.2% of global vehicle sales. Yet, the industry is projecting sales to jump to approximately 2% by the year 2020.

It is understandable why major global car companies are investing heavily in EVs. With \$8.7 billion invested in research and development since 2008, some crucial breakthroughs have taken place, like reduction in the price of batteries that power EVs. It also explains why 8 out of the 10 top automobile manufacturers (controlling an approximate 63% of global market share) have or are in the process of introducing EV models. With maturing technology, EV is perhaps one of the more promising technologies that could play a major role in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, a major cause of global warming.

EVs, if introduced in significant numbers, serve the purposes of countries hoping to conform to the International Energy Agency's (IEA) "2DS" scenario that depicts a "future energy system that would limit average global temperature increases to 2°C by 2050. In this scenario, the transport sector's potential share of overall CO2 reductions would be 21% by 2050. In order to meet this share, three-fourths of all vehicle sales by 2050 would need to be plug-in electric of some type."

According to IEA data, several countries are in the process of assisting the growth of the EV sector by providing sizeable investments in R&D and consumer incentives. The past two years have been particularly significant for the EV market. In 2010, there were a maximum of 3 EV models widely available to consumers; in 2012 that number had jumped to about 8. This trend suggests that the average consumer has more choice in terms of product variety, a key feature that could help increase sales in the future.

China, that represents one of the largest car markets in the world, has introduced electric taxis in Shenzhen and Hangzhou. Impressive sales figures have been recorded in France, Netherlands and the US. The success of EVs depends in large part to the availability and convenience with each these vehicles may be "charged." Charging is either "slow" or "fast" and roadmaps differ from country

to country. Japan intends to have 2 million slow charge and 5,000 fast charging points by 2020, the US has a deployment target of more than 22,000 chargers over the same period and the Netherlands hopes to have 20,000 slow and 100 fast chargers by 2015. Each country will inevitably follow a different path choosing between slow and fast charging. That pattern will largely depend on consumer preference.

From what has been discussed thus far, the EV market should keep on growing. The massive surge in sales in 2012 compared to preceding years can in part be attributed to the national policy initiatives of some of the biggest economies. As highlighted in a recent IEA publication titled Global EV Outlook, China allows purchase subsidies of up to RMB60,000 while Denmark waives registra-



tion and road tax on purchase of EVs and integrating EVs into the electricity smart grid. Another big player India is giving subsidy of Indian Rs.100,000 or 20% of the cost of vehicle (whichever is lower) and fostering partnership across government, private sector, industry and academia for R&D efforts.

At the end of the day, would a burgeoning global electric vehicle industry have any serious impact on the Bangladesh automobile scenario? Probably not; as we have neither the financial support to initiate any of the many forms of subsidies mentioned above, nor are we in any state to supply the electricity that will be required for EVs to recharge. In addition, the passenger vehicle segment in our market is heavily dominated by used or, "reconditioned" vehicles. At the end of the day, the cost differential between the average petrol-driven and electric vehicle is at present too high to attract any major attention from potential vehicle owners in Bangladesh.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Equity and standards in tertiary education

SALIMULLAH KHAN

TERTIARY education has faced a crisis all over the world since the 1960s. As one war ended another began. Education provided the royal road to social mobility for many in the former colonial world, especially among the middle classes. Demand for tertiary education intensified as social expectations steeply rose. By that time, economic growth began to stagnate. This widening gap between the number of job-seeking educated young people and the effective demand for their skills caused a crisis in education on a world scale.

After liberation, Bangladesh had only a handful of public universities. Since the turn of the century, both public and private universities have proliferated. Growth, i.e. access is in itself a good thing. Equity, or filtering down, is however quite another. Growth in itself will not take care of equity. Education does not filter down. If it did, in 1947, after a hundred years of filtering down, literacy rate in the country would not remain stuck at 6% of the population.

How are our universities doing now?

Bangladeshi universities have, as many commentators put it, been virtually in freefall insofar as international rankings are concerned. If those rankings, for all their bias, are any indicator of standards in higher education we have reasons for concern. A daily cites this state of affairs as added proof that official claims of unprecedented improvement of education is a myth.

According to a set of guiding rules available in draft to us, proposed by the University Grants Commission and now awaiting further consideration of the government, foreign universities, their branches, and even coaching centres (or "tuition providing/study/teaching/coaching centres" as the UGC has it) are going to be permitted to operate in Bangladesh. Nothing could be more welcome to all those interested in the expansion of efficiency of tertiary education in the country than the promotion of a spirit of honourable rivalry with foreign universities.

The new policy, it is claimed, would help local students to have an education of global standards. Will it, really? It is one thing in principle. In practice, it may be quite another. There is no conflict, the University Grants Commission seems to think, between provisions of the *Private Universities Act, 2010* and the draft guiding rules for foreign universities. A closer view, however, may reveal a good deal of papering over the cracks. They relate to both, questions of fairness or equity and of standards.

A glaring inconsistency is the provision relating to allowing 'study centres' on an equal footing with other universities, public and private, domestic and foreign. For instance, these study centres are permitted to confer university degrees on a par with other universities. It is an unwelcome deviation from the common rule that standard for university degrees needs to be uniform throughout the nation, isn't it?

The *Private Universities Act, 2010* does not permit any university in the country to operate, even provisionally, unless it has at least three faculties and six departments in place. The coaching centres run in the name of foreign universities, as the proposed rules provide, will be per-

mitted to conduct a complete programme or just a part of a programme. Accordingly, they will be permitted to open shop on a floor space of three thousand square feet, or of another size, depending on expansion of programmes or the student body. Requirements in question for domestic private universities provide for no less than twenty-five thousand square feet.

Another highly inequitable point shows up in the provision relating to the structure of registration fees and reserves funds. The registration fee for coaching centres is stipulated at Tk.300,000, whereas the comparable fee for a foreign university or for a branch will be Tk.2,500,000 and Tk.1,000,000, respectively.

Likewise, as per reports published in a national daily, the reserve fund on deposit required is Tk.10,000,000 for a coaching centre, whereas its counterpart for a branch or 'campus,' is Tk.30,000,000. The sum is Tk.50,000,000 for a foreign university set up as joint-venture with Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and, finally, for a full-fledged foreign university the figure will be a fulsome one of Tk.70,000,000. It is also noted, incidentally, that such figures of registration fees and reserve funds remain subject to further determination by the Universities Grants Commission.

As a third provision has it, foreign universities or their branches or coaching centres are permitted to repatriate their profits, subject of course to the permission of the chancellor. It amounts to permitting withdrawal of profits. Education is also a commodity. One wonders about ethics of equal treatment of all capitals, domestic and foreign, all the same. Is it not like sailing the boat of free competition on an uneven keel?

The draft rules first circulated in 2011 provided, believe it or not, that it would suffice for a coaching centre to maintain a library with no less than 1,000 titles and one would still treat it like a university. This in itself is a tell-tale comment on the question of standards. It raises further questions.

According to a recent report published in Dhaka newspapers, not a single university from Bangladesh has ranked even in the top 500 of the academic ranking of the world universities. Can the new guidelines to elevate coaching centres help put a break here? What can such a sustained slide in the standards of tertiary education spell but sustained disaster for the nation?

It is certainly not enough for a government to say that it can do no more than direct the efforts of the people, and help them wherever they appear to require most assistance. If the object of the government is to extend education throughout all classes of the people without sacrificing standards of higher education, it cannot afford to indulge in universal abandon. Without uniformity and fairness in competition it is next to impossible to achieve a sustainable level of efficiency or standard.

Education is a demand not of the middle classes alone, but of the whole nation. The state is the last resort in this business. One expects the state to stand by the people. It appears that the state is tilting towards certain special interests, which may unfortunately also mean dashing of the people's desire for standard tertiary education.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Story of a dictator

I have just finished reading Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" set largely in the Dominican Republic during the tyrannical rule of Rafael Trujillo (1930-61). Even in Latin America -- a region known for its dictators -- Trujillo was a class of his own. He had zero tolerance for dissent, real or perceived, and his opponents had a habit of disappearing mysteriously without a trace. He renamed public buildings, bridges and prominent landmarks after himself and his family members: even the capital city Santo Domingo was renamed Ciudad Trujillo. Large billboards were erected all over the country proclaiming "God in Heaven, Trujillo on Earth." His sycophants even recommended him for the Nobel Peace Prize! Sounds ominously familiar, doesn't it?

Moinuddin M Nasrullah
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Felani's murder 'justified'!

Democratic (!) India surprises us as its strange justice system condones the murder of Felani.

It seems that the Indian border security forces hold the principle of 'might is right' even if it is a small unarmed girl. Possibly even a wild tiger would not have killed a small child. But for 'trigger happy' Indian security guards, it was a case of legitimate target practice!

Thankfully, there are sensible Indians across the borders who have protested against this open official disregard to justice. We need to be wary of our 'friendly neighbour.'
Surprised Bangladeshi
Dhaka

Scientists' retirement age

Recently the cabinet has approved a proposal for increasing the retirement age of the scientists of BCSIR to 67 years. After a long wait, the BCSIR scientists have received their due recognition for which the government deserves appreciation.

Meanwhile I strongly feel that the retirement age of all the scientists including those in BARI, BRRI, BJRI, BINA should also be raised to 67 years appreciating their importance for country's economic progress and development. Perhaps it would not be illogical to suggest that the retirement age of the public university teachers should also be increased to 67 years. The entry age of service in research organisations and universities should also be relaxed up to 35 years.

I sincerely call upon the government to consider the above suggestions.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Comments on post editorial, "Why can't our elections be peaceful?" published on September 6, 2013

Muhammad Rafiqur Rahman Khan

Whenever AL gets power, it goes berserk. This I saw in early seventies, soon after liberation. See, how Bangabandhu introduced BAKSAL rule! Again, this time AL is enjoying absolute power under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and having this power the party Leadership has gone totally berserk.

Ash C.

The only honourable way out for the PM is to reach an amicable settlement at the soonest possible time with the opposition on holding the national election in a peaceful manner. This will help remove the fear factor (of reprisal?) the PM might be harbouring in her mind.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

The mentality of keeping BNP away from election will not bring any good for the nation.

Javed Helali

BNP must take part in the election against all odds. Our people will do what they think is the best for our country.

Hafeezul Alam

This is 2013 and it's no more possible for any party to resort to unfair means without being discovered by the ever-vigilant media and the international community. I believe, the present government is quite capable of running an election-time government and hold the election peacefully, provided all opposition parties cooperate with it.

Fazlul Bari

It will be wise for the AL government to dissolve the parliament and form an all party government headed by the speaker. That government should not be called a caretaker government. It should have another name.

"Worries abound" (September 8, 2013)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

If BNP is voted to power, they will reap the benefit of AL's folly.

Shahin Huq

Awami League as a political party is the greatest loser. All these draconian laws and misrule are making its affiliates disillusioned. I am quite sure Awami supporters who have conscience will remain completely inactive in the next general elections.