

Financial irregularities hit spotlight

CAG must be better equipped

FINANCIAL irregularities to the tune of nearly Tk6,200 crore has been detected by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). In its first ever media presentation, the data was compiled from 17 different audit reports and made public. It is sad to see that Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has topped the list of defaulters. Not only has there been gross negligence involved in realising fines and fees, serious anomalies have been detected in the manner in which licenses have been handed out in the telecom industry. The state-run banking sector remains on the CAG radar as having indulged in malpractice on the question of rescheduling of loans and interest waivers. Ministries have been found to have meddled in unlawful practices when it came to tendering.

Startling as the revelations may be, the problems associated with graft and abuse of power is an old one. The CAG is the sole authority that can check fraudulent practices in the State bodies. And although nearly Tk77 crore has been spent to carry out these audits, the CAG has for years been kept understaffed. Now why is that? The only plausible explanation would be to protect vested interest groups which indulge in such unlawful practices. Overlooking corruption is a fatal mistake, for it steadily strips away at already eroded state of governance as corrupt officials manipulate the system to benefit themselves. Graft also drains away critical resources needed for economic development.

Turning digital dream into reality

Generous policy and funding imperative

WITH its large youth population, Bangladesh is poised to become an emerging IT-based economy, so said the country's state minister for Information and Communication Technology recently. The optimism does not also seem quite out of place, given that by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ranking, compared to last year, we have moved a notch higher and been placed at 145th position among 166 countries on the global ICT index. What is more, at present, around 69 per cent of the population are connected by mobile phones and more than 18 per cent of them regularly access internet service available on their sets.

But all these uplifting pieces of information about the digital dream only indicate the nation's latent potential in the sector. But so far as the concrete measures needed to transform our internet-savvy youth into an economic force is concerned, precious little has been done. Regrettably, the existing job market cannot still accommodate all the youths coming out every year with their ICT diploma or graduations in computer engineering from different universities and institutions. And worse, the government incentives backed by generous funds for the would-be ICT entrepreneurs still remain a far cry.

So, for the ICT sector of the economy to take off, the government must extend all-out support to the sector in terms of both policy and finance. At the same time, to popularize the internet further as well as to make it more user-friendly, the government must reduce its access cost, which is rather high for common users.

Vacancy announcement: Enlightened citizen required

MUAZ JALIL

BANGLADESH is a country with great prospect; one of the fastest growing economies of the world which has transformed itself successfully over the last few decades from Kissinger's "Basket Case" to Ban Ki-moon's "...model for the world". This is a country which has prospered in spite of periodic natural calamities, political chaos, international crisis and many multifaceted challenges. As the country plans to take the next big leap towards becoming a more developed nation, both economically and politically, there seems to be ample vacancy in the enlightened citizen category. While many educated people do exist, recent thuggish and goon like behaviour by students of the 'highest echelon of academic excellence' on unarmed citizens left such belief in the educated mass in tatters. After all if this is the output from the famed Oxford of the East, one has to right-size their expectation regarding the rest. Furthermore, distressingly, there seems to be an ever increasing pressure towards further politicizing of educational institutions, the rationale for which is lost among intellectuals, ordinary citizens and pretty much everybody and anybody living outside the cocooned world of political parties. It is therefore no surprise that in some occasions even professors pay the ultimate price. Such situation leaves one depressingly cynical about the prospect of drawing enlightened citizenry from output of such educational institutions. However law of large numbers dictates given the sheer number of people entering the system, some good must come out. But then if we look at our middleclass countrymen treading the streets of big cities, one is bound to feel a tad bit depressed at the overall mentality. A rickshaw or CNG bumps in to a car, even if there is a hair-line scratch on the car, the characteristic response from the educated owner of the car is often to drown the other driver in a volcano of putrid verbal abuse and if given sufficient time to escalate, physical ones. Resorting to violence to address a difference in opinion is so ubiquitous that it is not so uncommon to see feasts fights erupting out of petty issues such as addressing fare of a rickshaw ride! And if you are political parties then you have carte-blanche to use your goons to destroy, maim, burn people and property indiscriminately, simply because you disagree. Leave it to their educated supporters and you shall find the finest use of sophistry and mental jousting to defend their actions. Our country needs enlightened people who put country's interest before their petty politics and self interest.

The writer is a student at Cambridge University

Dragon sees, dragon does



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

THERE was no Google and there was no gmail. It was 3 degrees in Beijing and your columnist hopelessly looked for access to the virtual space. A young man in his early 20's from Bangladesh studying Fine Arts in Beijing had answers to my problem: Baidu in place of Google and 123.com in place of Gmail. That was it! Though the English results from the Chinese Baidu were far from being close to Google's efficiency, it was still an alternative.

In spite of Winter peaking in Beijing the land seemed to be breathing warm air across the region. The think tanks, policy makers and academics seem to be syncing with the globe with more optimism and positivity than ever. Starting from APEC, ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), G20 to BRICS, China has been active all over the globe. The focus now is visibly the six economic corridors that China wants to build, of which two most are important: the Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar one and the China-Pakistan one. Rest four connects to Europe, Middle East, Singapore, Turkey, Russia, Iran and Mongolia. And the new silk road that China so wants to build is going to be all about Infrastructure and cooperation on Trade and Economy, Financial institutions, Energy, Industrial Investment, Culture/educational exchange, environmental and maritime boundaries. It is indeed time to retrace the Asian Renaissance.

The positive message that was sent out during Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit from both Chinese and the American ends was also very clear: these two sides are not warring at any cost anytime soon. China and the European Union also seem to be recalibrating. However, one question that plagues the mind is a relatively simple one: how are the South Asian states going to align themselves today? While we are attracting attention from all the meaningful powers of the world, who do the smaller states in South Asia strategically position themselves with? Is healthy alignment a necessity today? How serious is China itself? While most of the questions will be answered by Time, the last question will perhaps be best answered below:

Where is Yiwu? Most of us may not know. It's in Zhejiang province in China that has just launched a cargo train with Madrid, 3 days ago. The train that will run for 13000 km has 82 containers and originates from the largest commodity market in Yiwu and runs through Central Asia from Western China and enters Europe to connect with Spain. The other countries that are touched in the route are Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany and France. The train from Yiwu will reach Madrid in 21 days. Ever since the Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a 50 billion dollar fund for the 21st century Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk road, things have been moving fast.

So China is serious, really serious about connectivity. BCIM initiative is one of the issues that are prioritized in their agenda. Why would Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar connectivity be important for the region? To put it simply, BCIM will connect around 440 million people in these four countries and cover an area of 1.65 million square kilometers which will include multiple functions in multiple zones including transport hubs, production

centers, financial centers and much more. In order to turn this into a reality, an investment into people-to-people contact is essential along with all the governments working on both bilateral and multilateral platforms at the same time and pace.

How is China doing now? Some say that the Chinese miracle has come to an end and that the GDP growth may very well come down to four percent eventually. There's also talk that if 7% can be sustained by China over the next ten years then Chinese economy would double in size. The catch-22 scenario pops up when one reads about the property bubble and the banking crisis in China, which is prompted by the private sector debts being almost 200% of GDP. This harsh reality can probably be balanced by innovation, more productivity and more consumer-spending. One must also remember that per-capita GDP of China in 2013, according to World Bank, was \$6807, almost the same as Iraq and South Africa, whereas US is at \$55143 and South Korea at \$25977. Also starting from 650 million poor in 1978, China's number of poor has come down to \$82 million and is spread over 14 poverty clusters in Central and Western China.

Reality is, China is at crossroads now. While critical income disparity has hit China, globally it is mostly Chinese presence which is becoming visible in the map. The Chinese outward foreign direct investment is increasing every year. Starting from Chinese FDI amounting to \$629 million in 1985, \$913 million in 1991, \$50 billion in 2008, \$74.65 billion in 2011, \$77.22 billion in 2012, China's FDI in the globe today totals over \$300 billion dollars running across 170 countries. This change began to take place almost after the Asian economic crisis in 1997-1998 when the Second Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee of the CPC decided that a number of state owned enterprises would invest abroad and run factories in Africa, Central Asia, Middle East, Central Europe, South America and other regions. In 2001, China's "Going Out" policy was formalized while China acceded to World Trade Organization, which made sense for China to go global. At a time when global markets oscillate on a seasonal basis, it is perhaps best for Asia to stay together. Therefore, for all practical purposes, it makes sense for the Chinese dragon to crisscross all over the globe and finally come back home to its own nest in Asia.

Where is Bangladesh placed in all this? After July 1, 2010 when the Chinese government awarded a duty free status for RMG exports from Bangladesh, exports have been steadily rising. In 2013-14 the figure is touching close to \$300 million dollars. Since there is a potential to substantially push this figure, both sides need to invest in each other's strengths and make optimum use of available opportunities...

During most meetings and seminars in Beijing over the last two days, the Chinese spoke only in Chinese and their electronic presentations were also not in English. With every sentence, there was an interpreter communicating what was being said. But with the Q&A session, one thing that became clear was their relative proficiency in English. Most of them seemed to know English well and yet chose not to speak the alien tongue. At times like this, one ought to remember that nations have the right to be proud, if and when it's their time. And it's certainly time for the Asian pipers to play their own tune.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

Kathmandu Summit for regional integration

SUSHIL K LAMSAAL

TODAY in Nepal, the 18th SAARC Summit kicks-off bringing together the leaders from Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. As regional leaders assemble for the summit, South Asia pulsates with optimism and hope, and looks forward towards an era of accelerated growth and well-being for the peoples inhabiting the sub-continent. In the three decades of its existence, SAARC has progressively emerged as an indissoluble ingredient in South Asia's identity and in its imagination. There is reason to believe that this Summit in Kathmandu will signal a break with the past, and usher SAARC into an era where the hopes and the dreams expected from this regional institution will begin to fructify.

Bound together not only by deep bonds of history, geography and culture, but also by common aspirations for stability, peace and prosperity, the South Asian region is a vital cog in the wheels of the world order. Located strategically between the energy-opulent West Asia and the manufacturing hub of East Asia and Southeast Asia, the region constitutes 3.43% of the global landmass and produces 6.5% of all incomes, and sustains almost a quarter (23%) of the entire population living on earth. Indeed, the goals of global order and wellbeing cannot be imagined in the absence of a peaceful, vibrant and forward-looking South Asia.

Obviously, there are enormous challenges in the region. The deprivation and the marginalization faced by hundreds of millions of its people, and the scourge of poverty and widening socio-economic inequalities drag the region from realizing its full potentials, and from attaining in full measure the scope for economic growth, social enhancement and decent living standards for its people. It is a matter of concern that about half of the world's poor reside in the region, and that disease and illiteracy continue to haunt them. This calls for the urgency to act immediately since the dreams of the peoples of the region cannot be deferred.

Just as there are huge challenges, there are nonetheless enormous potentials for social change and for economic growth in South Asia. It is the largest market in the world, where half of the population is under the age of twenty-five. It is home to immense human and natural resources, cultural heritage, and scientific and technological prowess, and occupies a central stage in the world's flow of trade and commerce. There are huge opportunities for fueling trade and investments and starting off the levers of innovations and technological knowhow towards creating a common knowledge-based economy. These are the areas where SAARC needs to lay its focus, in order that its dreams for ensuring a life of dignity for its people and for the full-realization of their potentials come true.

In this context, there is reason to believe that this SAARC Summit will inject new dynamism to the process of regional integration. It may be emphasized that there is consensus among the leaders of the region on the need to

accelerate the implementation of various initiatives agreed under the SAARC framework, particularly those that seek to promote regional integration and build common infrastructures for enhancing trade and investments among member states. Evidently, there is an agreement among member states that they need to connect in order to cooperate. The stage for realizing the dream of a prosperous South Asia is set.

Since its inception, SAARC has come a long way. Several regional institutions have been created and consolidated, and the requisite legal framework for co-operation is firmly in place. The process of trade liberalization in the region has gained momentum, even as the goal of attaining regional economic integration has made it to the common agenda of SAARC. Perhaps more significantly, the South Asian identity has not only gained currency during this period but also found acceptability and recognition. SAARC may initially have been a mere acronym, whereas it is now a meaningful symbol of shared identity among the peoples of the region. Therefore, the dream of finding a common thread of South Asian commonality has already materialized.

For these reasons, SAARC holds enormous promise, and this promise can effectively be realized by focusing on three major pillars in the immediate future: trade, connectivity and technology. The first pillar of co-operation is facilitating the free movement of goods, services and people, and significant progress has been made in this field under the SAARC framework. It may be recalled that several legal and policy infrastructures have been created and institutionalized to promote intra-regional trade. This is no mean achievement. Similarly, SAARC has been cognizant of the value of investing in human resources, and in encouraging the creation and spread of technologies and innovations. No region in history has progressed in the absence of innovations and the creation and proliferation of technologies, and neither will South Asia. Therefore, the promotion of technologies and the enrichment of human capital should be foremost in the SAARC agenda.

However, the need of the hour for enhancing regional co-operation is to focus on the elements comprising the second pillar: infrastructures and connectivity. It is expected that the 18th Summit, whose emphasis is on deeper regional integration, will do precisely that. Through regional frameworks for rail, roads and energy co-operation, SAARC will go a long way in heralding a new era of co-operation. This will not only lay the foundations for increased trade and investments in South Asia, but also create an atmosphere of partnership and collaboration. The people will be able to interact at a deeper and a more meaningful level to create, disseminate and emulate each other's technologies and innovations for shared benefits. Such partnership will be the precursor to the creation of a knowledge-based society in South Asia, which will no doubt help realize the dreams of a dignified and prosperous life for all the people of the region.

The writer is Chargé d' Affaires of Nepal in Bangladesh.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pedestrians' right of way

Dhaka metropolitan police recently said that mobile courts would jail or fine 'jaywalkers'. My question is, who are the jaywalkers? Aren't they pedestrians? In all civilised countries of the world, I have seen vehicles always stop to let the walkers pass. They have zebra crossings at road intersections with "walk/no walk" signs. What have we done to let the pedestrians walk across roads safely? Almost nothing.

There are very valid reasons for the pedestrians not using the overhead or underground walkways. I recommend all road intersections should have zebra crossings with "walk/no walk" signs. Let us remember that the pedestrians have the right of way on roads and never even think of taking that right away. Give them their rightful space to walk.

Shahjahan Hafiz
Gulshan, Dhaka

Israel should accept responsibility

This refers to the above news item published in TDS on November 21, 2014. The news states that Israel said it would cooperate with a UN investigation into Israeli attacks on UN facilities during last summer's Gaza war after denying to cooperate with a separate UN Human Rights Council investigation. During the war, at least six UN-run facilities were hit by Israeli fire, killing twenty-four people. More than 2,100 Palestinians, most of them civilians, were killed during the war.

It is appreciated that finally Israel agreed to cooperate with UN. What Israel had done and been doing is clear violation of human rights in every sense; they should have the guts to acknowledge it.

Sunehra Shakhawat
On e-mail

DMP's laudable move to stop jaywalking



I highly appreciate the DMP for their initiative to set up mobile courts to stop jaywalking from 25th November. I hope our public will respond very well and cooperate fully with the law enforcing agency to stop the jaywalking.

Jamshaid Taher
Banani, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "BCL blames it on outsiders!," published on November 22, 2014

Mortuza Huq

Doesn't matter who the BCL leader thinks is responsible.

Ahmed Aziz

The people of the country know the truth.

"Modi and media: Critic is your best friend?" (Nov. 21, 2014)

Biswanath Ghosh

Read this piece and found it quite informative. In India, the foundation of democracy is deeply rooted and there have been a number of occasions when the electorates have proved their maturity.

"The British didn't conquer India..." (Nov. 21, 2014)

M. Emad

I have all the Dalrymple books in my collection. I request him to write a book on the 18th Century Bengal (life and rebellions as seen by the Europeans) using the untouched East India Company original papers at London (UK) Archives.

"Mobile court to stop jaywalking" (Nov. 22, 2014)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Some police personnel extort money from hawkers of footpath. Would DMP be able to stop their extortion and make the footpath free to walk? Unruly bikers also drive on pavements and footpaths. Do they have enough guts to penalise these unruly bikers?

Ahmed Aziz

There is no footpath remaining where one could walk and foot bridges are infested with hawkers and criminals; people have no alternative.

Snr Citizen

Some offices should be shifted outside of Dhaka. It is possible to manage everything if the population of Dhaka is reduced.

Rafiquel Islam

I really appreciate this decision.