

## Reducing cost of doing business

### Policy backup and stability crucial

**I**n a pre-budget discussion held at the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce & Industry (MCCI), Industrialists and economists were unanimous in their calls for steps that would be conducive to reducing the cost of doing business. Emphasis was placed on increasing investment in infrastructure and reducing lending interest rates so that industry and agriculture may receive a boost, particularly in the aftermath of a spate in political unrest that has severely affected all sectors of the economy. Economists are of the opinion that the budget needs to have policy measures that will facilitate financial support to farmers so that they may weather fluctuations in rice prices. With regards to improving the investment climate, calls have been made to fast-track setting up of special economic zones, for both domestic and foreign investments.

Some experts believe that the tax net needs to be broadened to facilitate greater revenue generation for the exchequer and at the same time allow for a general reduction of taxation rates. Given the general shutdown the economy experienced from the last quarter of 2014 into the immediate aftermath of polls due to political violence, it has become imperative for the government to rethink imposition of value added taxation for small business during the troubled period. Some experts take the view that recapitalisation of loss making state-owned banks with tax payers' money instead of making the boards accountable is a step in the wrong direction. The overarching message is that political stability must be ensured for the economy to function smoothly and for business to recuperate from losses suffered.

## Thousands stranded at sea

### A blot on human conscience

**N**EARLY 900 Rohingyas and Bangladeshi migrants have been rescued from smugglers' boats stranded at sea, but their fates remain uncertain with Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia insisting on pushing back the boats and deporting those who land ashore. Over the last week alone, at least 2,800 migrants have been rescued, and it is estimated that another 8,000 of them are stranded in boats in the Andaman Ocean and Malacca Straits without adequate food, water, or sanitation, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

We note with concern that the appeals from the UN, IOM and human rights organisations to give refuge to the boatpeople on humanitarian grounds have fallen on deaf ears of East Asian governments. The practice of turning back refugees, with no consideration of their subsequent plight, is an affront to basic human decency and a gross violation of human rights and international laws. According to UN conventions, a country has an obligation to "render assistance to those in distress at sea", and not send back a victim of persecution back to her country where her "life or freedom would be threatened."

Respective governments must refrain from turning back destitute refugees, and make an urgent coordinated regional effort to save the lives of thousands of migrants. We are deeply disappointed that Myanmar has spurned calls for a planned summit on the issue, particularly as it is the Myanmar government's continued persecution of the minority community that has forced thousands of Rohingyas over the years to risk their lives in the dangerous seas.

International bodies and Western powers must exert pressure not just on East Asian governments, but the Myanmar government as well, to address the underlying factors that thrust vulnerable populations towards a gory future.

## COMMENTS

**"Internet can lift up 10m Bangladeshis: Zuckerberg"**  
(May 13, 2015)

Jitu Khan

How? We need to know the full road map and not the dream only. We need to ensure the basic human rights first, then free internet.

Mahedi Hasan

Providing free access to Facebook won't really reduce poverty because poor people don't even have the ability to buy a device through which they can use the internet.

Mahfuz Khan Emon

It's highly appreciable that Bangladesh is one of the fastest growing developing countries in Internet use. We have the talent and the potential but we need more facilities and access.

Shinara Hussain

People can't afford food; how will they afford internet and devices on which to access it?

**"Modi's visit to Bangladesh: Hope for faster resolutions"**  
(May 12, 2015)

Tariqul Islam Khan Arif

Nothing will happen according to our expectations.

**"Scuffle at Dhaka airport"**  
(May 11, 2015)

Mohammed Jamal

Arrival and departure card filling and taking bribes for this is a regular occurrence at the airport. Even at the immigration, the police do whatever they can to harass the people.

# Caring for our cities

## STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD  
NURUL HUDA

**P**OLITICAL commentators and activists of different hues may have justifiable reservations about the absolute credibility of the just concluded mayoral elections in Dhaka and Chittagong. However, ordinary citizens, the

residents of the two cities cannot be faulted for nursing hopes of improvement in the city services about which many promises and commitments have been made. Expectations are all the more heightened as our new and young city fathers exude admirable optimism.

The ground reality, however, carries the risk of shortening the honeymoon period of the victors as the challenges are many. To be specific, barring some select areas of our major cities, the overall environment presents a dismal look. The disturbing part is that basic municipal functions like conservancy, scavenging, collection and disposal of solid waste and garbage are not in order. Unhygienic conditions have been further compounded by horrendous pollution.

The question is, are our cities liveable? Do the people enjoy the basic amenities necessary for a healthy life? The unfortunate reality is that while we may pride ourselves in having master plans for the metropolises, we are not yet able to collect and dispose of our garbage in a scientific and sustainable manner. Needless to say, the ordinary residents expect to be assured of the basic facilities of life and would not like to be bothered about political shenanigans.

In Bangladesh we may be passing

through institutional exhaustion and there are cogent reasons to believe that the concept of local government has suffered most. No matter how loud our pronouncements on the so-called 'devolution of power' and the 'new social contract', the vital link in the hierarchy of government has not grown. This has happened because historically we have perhaps believed in a strong centre and reposed our confidence in strong charismatic personalities.

The issue, quite clearly, is one of managing the megacities of the present time



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

and in that process one needs to identify the shortfalls. The question is have the structures of the government become weak over a period of time and if our bureaucrats are trained to deal with complex urban issues? To be specific, when lack of civic services causes resentment and bitterness in the people, or congestion, lack of employment and drug addiction give rise to violence and crime, do we take it as a law and order problem and try to tackle as such.

recognise the community's potential and initiative in solving their problems. A very important factor would be appropriate professional intervention. With its weaknesses and incompetence notwithstanding, the government has a role. However, the government will have to accept alternative models when those are tested and presented.

The community, possibly helped by the NGOs and the professional groups, can take care of smaller projects like the inter-

nal sanitation system. For the external work and the costly disposal system, the government has to play its role. In such cooperative ventures government's responsibility is reduced by half. So, if this approach succeeds in sanitation system and maybe low-cost housing, it can surely work in primary healthcare, elementary education, and family planning.

As of now, the government at the national level has taken upon itself all the responsibilities of development. Consequently, the government is not able to satisfactorily deliver the social sector services to the people. It may be time to evaluate the delivery system in civic services to reach the target groups. The new concepts of working with the communities, having trust in the local government leaders and creating partnership in development need to be tested and implemented.

What we see now in our big, medium or small cities is largely the consequence of there being no adequately empowered responsible local government. Various government departments, autonomous and semi-autonomous organisations and development authorities have mostly arrogated the powers and functions of the local government institutions to themselves. So local government could not take root and develop organically.

Admittedly, we have a problem on hand in respect to devising an adequate delivery system pertaining to civic services. Changes with regard to the content of local government meant to ensure participatory local governance has not taken place. Therefore, in the short run concerted efforts for devising greater innovations toward delivering civic services have to commence and continue. For substantive reforms of local government we may have to wait.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## Unlocking the potential: South-South cooperation

MOHAMMAD MEJBAHUDDIN

**F**OREIGN aid which entails transfer of resources, both financial and technical, from north to south has remained the dominant form of development cooperation since the end of WWII. However, the cessation of the cold war gave impetus to not only greater mobilisation of foreign aid but also to its effective use. The aid effectiveness agenda of the 90s emphasised not only on development results, but also urged the provider countries to channelise their aid in a transparent way respecting the national systems.

The expected transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be a watershed in the global aid architecture. The transformative nature of the SDGs will necessitate not only much stronger and effective political coalition and partnership among governments, private sector, civil society organisations and the like in the northern and southern countries, but also among countries of the south. The huge amount of resources that will be required to attain the SDGs in economic, social and environmental areas cannot be met from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) alone. The Financing for Development Meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 2015 will explore in greater detail the potential of different sources of development financing including the SSC.

The UN Secretary General's Report of 2014 on South-South cooperation highlighted stronger economic performance of the southern countries and greater cooperation among them. The South-South cooperation is initiated, organised and managed by developing countries themselves. This typology of development cooperation has been found to be not only cost-effective but also culturally more congruent. The sharing of knowledge and experiences about socio-

economic development can help to adopt appropriate, inclusive and effective development solutions in the developing countries.

It is expected that South-South and Triangular cooperation among southern countries in trade, investment, remittance, development assistance, technology transfer and knowledge sharing will figure prominently as an important instrument of development cooperation in the post-2015 era. The full potential of South-South cooperation would be realised if the developed countries and multilateral organisations participate in

**Bangladesh is championing the resurgent mode of development cooperation under South-South banner globally, regionally and also at the country level.**

a triangular relationship with financial and technical support to solve the complex development challenges countries in the south face. The exchange and cooperation among southern countries in these areas have increased substantially albeit somewhat inconspicuously. The rising trend in their cooperation is exemplified by the fact that in 2012, South-South trade and investment comprised 25 percent and 52 percent of global merchandise export and FDI flows respectively.

Some of the middle-income economies of the south have become outstanding

sources of development assistance and providers of technical support for institutional and human capacity building. The rapid increase in such South-South cooperation has challenged our preconceived notions of the international development cooperation architecture. The South's potency as an economic force with ability to complement the traditional North-South mode of Cooperation has started to get global recognition. The Human Development Report 2013 (UNDP) published under the rubric 'The rise of the South' gives ample testimony to the south's new found vitality as an important mechanism of development cooperation.

The countries in the south possess a rich trove of development knowledge. Some of the success stories of Bangladesh that can be shared with other countries include: improving girls' education through introduction of a conditional cash transfer programme in 1997; near universal coverage of the sanitation programme; local adaptation strategies to climate-induced natural disasters; disaster preparedness; non-formal education through GO/NGO partnership; micro-credit as a tool for skill formation and poverty reduction; and use of ICT and mobile telephone to empower the poor.

Bangladesh is championing the resurgent mode of development cooperation under South-South banner globally, regionally and also at the country level. The Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN is the current President of the General Assembly High-Level Committee on South-South cooperation. Senior secretary, Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance is the chairperson of the Asia-Pacific Development Effectiveness facility (AP-DEF), a regional platform for the southern countries in Asia-Pacific region to learn from each other's development experience and to coordinate positions on global discourse on development. At

the country level, the Economic Relations Division (ERD) is taking measures to bring the South-South cooperation under a policy framework through adoption of a foreign aid policy. Efforts are also underway to embed South-South cooperation in the government machinery by creating a new administrative wing. Bangladesh has also decided to become a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a southern initiative to support infrastructure financing in the region.

South-South cooperation has been in existence for nearly 60 years. It has had a chequered journey starting with the UN Conference in Buenos Aires in 1978 that provided the first global framework for SSC. The Accra Agenda for Action in 2008 is the tipping point for resurgence of SSC as a tool of development cooperation.

Against the backdrop, the Economic Relations Division of Bangladesh's Ministry of Finance, along with UNDP and UNOSSC is convening a high level international meeting on May 17-18 this year on South-South and Triangular Cooperation in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. A large number of participants from southern countries including from multilateral organisations are expected to attend this event.

The upcoming meeting will be an excellent opportunity to discuss how to further strengthen South-South collaboration, in particular in the field of science, technology and innovation and exchange experience in the application of technology in key sectors such as agriculture, health, infrastructure development, climate change and renewable energy. Concerted efforts will be needed to unlock the full potential of SSC by embedding SSC in national development strategies along with a strong policy support.

The author is a senior civil servant currently working as Senior Secretary of the Economic Relations Division (ERD), Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadlystar.net

### Free speech comes with responsibilities

There is a limit to freedom of speech. We can say and do whatever we want as long as we harm no one. But the moment we hurt someone verbally or physically, we lose that privilege. That is exactly what had happened on the night of the shooting in Garland, Texas on May 3. An anti-Islam group held a contest with a \$10,000 winning prize for the best drawing of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). During the shooting, two gunmen had injured a security guard but in the end, they were both eventually shot down by the police.

The organisers of the event had held it to show that Muslims no longer intimidated them. One of the organisers and an outspoken anti-Islam activist, Pamela Geller describes Muslims as a 'special class'

which America could not offend. But being a democratic country why should the US offend any religion or race? The organisers' actions had offended Islam and disrespected their Holy Prophet. And what were the consequences of those actions? Shootings. Anti-Islam groups often instigate actions offensive to Muslims, with the intention of a violent result. Then Muslims all over the world face the blame. But does it make sense to blame millions of people for the horrendous deed of only a few? Not to mention that these few are not considered Muslims because their actions contradict the teachings of their own religion.

People must understand that if someone hurt their belief, they should not and cannot answer with violence. We will never make peace till the day everyone responds with peace. Husna A. Mirza Homelawn Street Jamaica Hills, NY, USA

### Plight of session jam at BRUR

Session jam has reached the worst level in Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur (BRUR). Students who got admitted in the session 2012-13 are now studying in 3rd semester (except one or two departments) when they are supposed to be in their 5th semester. If this condition goes on, it will take them five to six years to complete their graduation.

We, the students of Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur earnestly request the authority concerned to take necessary steps to solve this problem as soon as possible.

Abdul Mojid (Sabu)  
Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur