

Why?

Both parties vying for same venue!

BOTH the AL and BNP have expressed their intention to hold a rally in Suhrawardy Udyan on January 5 to commemorate 'Democracy' in their own way. Reportedly, the AL's plan to celebrate the day and its public announcement in that regard were made following the BNP's announcement and request for permission of the DMP was sought to use the said venue on January 5.

We would, therefore, not be remiss in suggesting that the AL's plan for January 5, that includes holding rallies in as many as eighteen spots in the capital, has been announced with the ulterior motive of disrupting BNP's programme. Already the AL intention to precipitate a situation has been partly successful in that the DMP has announced that no permission for rally would be given if there is a chance of clash between AL and BNP.

We wonder why the ruling party is unwilling to provide even the minimum of political space to its main opponent. This was one of the reasons for the BNP's utterly injudicious and harmful reaction in 2015 when it called for countrywide blockade that degenerated into the worst kind of violence that the country had ever witnessed.

While we are relieved to hear that BNP intends to avoid confrontation with the AL in this regard, we wonder why the AL cannot display more grace and tolerance, being the ruling party, and allow the BNP the use of the Suhrawardy Udyan, more so when the BNP had sought its use first. Are there no other spots for the AL to organise its rally on January 5?

AL's negative approach bodes very badly for democracy, whatever little there is left of it.

A clean Dhaka

A difficult but achievable goal

WE commend and endorse the "Clean Dhaka 2016" campaign launched by the mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation who has pledged to set up multiple waste transfer stations, public toilets, remove illegal billboards, repair hundreds of roads of Old Dhaka, and free roads and pavements from illegal occupation, among other things.

It's a grand vision but the mission is complex and multidimensional. Will the city corporation be allowed to coordinate the function of the 50 plus departments that are responsible for the planning, development and management of Dhaka's roads and streets? Can it mobilise enough resources to carry out the ambitious project? Does it have a well-trained staff on board? Can they free roads and pavements from vendors without providing them with an alternative livelihood? How to handle the influx of people to the capital everyday? How can a sense of ownership be instilled in the residents so that everyone works together to make this city livable again?

It's not enough to know what needs to be done. Who will do what should be clearly defined so that there is no administrative overlap and the changes are sustainable. Making Dhaka clean is a Himalayan task. But it has to be done. The city corporation alone cannot do it. It needs participation from all.

But most importantly, such campaigns must have adequate and proper mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation in the absence of which lofty ideas such as this, often presented with much noise and fanfare, offer minimal benefits to society.

COMMENTS

"AL, BNP plan rallies at same venue" (January 3, 2016)

Leonard Neshraj

Please don't create anymore havoc.

"Development up, democracy down" (January 2, 2016)

Rakibull Hossain

Our GDP has been stuck in the 5.8 - 6.5 percent range for the last 15 years. We cannot seem to go above 6.5 percent because of a lack of respect for democracy and human rights. Only democracy and the rule of law can ensure sustained development.

"Rooppur nuke plant: \$12.65b deal inked with Russia" (December 27, 2015)

Saad Hussain

Hope the maintenance work will be carried out properly.

Zannat Zerine

It seems the government is hell-bent to implement this nuclear power plant, even at the cost of our environment.

Welcome to Bangladesh

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

TIGHTENING of recent security measures at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka, is a laudable initiative of the government. Not only has this cleaned the airport vicinity of people accompanying passengers and crowding the place, it has also led to travellers inside the airport to feel more assured. Well, some wouldn't, however, miss the opportunity to take advantage of such tight security.

I became the subject of one such opportunist during my recent travel. Before boarding a flight at the last security check, a lady asked whether and how much money I was carrying. Being baffled by her question, I said I was carrying very little money as I use credit card. Then she directly asked me to leave some money for her and her colleagues. It took me a few seconds to retort and ask her to come in front of everyone while I give her the money. She probably had the wrong catch! But I wonder how often these airport staff take such adventures and how much money they earn from innocent travellers.

The inflow and outflow of air travellers in Bangladesh has increased manifold, as the prosperity of the country has increased over the years. In addition to about 7.6 million wage earners, more and more people can now afford to make trips abroad for business, education, health and holidays. Similarly, thousands of expatriates - from officials of international aid agencies to diplomats, consultants and foreign investors also travel to Bangladesh every week.

Bangladesh is becoming a commercially important destination among global investors. Investors see a lot of potential in a number of sectors, including financial institutions, hospitals, pharmaceuticals, readymade garments, power, telecommunications, construction, food, and fast moving consumer goods (FMCG). Recent improvements in the country's per capita income, graduation to a lower income country status and commendable credit ratings have caught the attention of the global community. It has boosted the image of the country significantly.

Airport infrastructure and services, however, have not kept pace with the development of the country in other areas. The airport building itself is unappealing to start with. In contrast, when one travels through the streets of Dhaka, several parts of the city look like some of the advanced countries of Southeast Asia with plush buildings, new flyovers and colourful shopping complexes.

When someone lands at an airport of a country, it tells a lot about that country. It is like the gateway of the country. Thus, the image of a country somewhat rests on it, as this first impression lasts for a long time. What impression does our own airport give to someone who is visiting Bangladesh for the first time? Poor air conditioning system, smelly toilets, mosquito bites?

These, however, are relatively trivial issues. The most

painful experience is of course the long wait for one's luggage. Many surveys of the airline industry have shown that passengers, particularly of the red-eye flights, hate the wait for their luggage on arrival. Thus, all good airlines fix this problem first. In our case, this situation is actually deteriorating. One of the reasons behind this is the fact that Biman has the responsibility of ground handling of many airlines. This information is enough to understand the efficiency level in this regard. One can also probably relate to why Biman, despite new aircrafts and good pilots, cannot become profitable. Its airplanes do not fly on time, services of cabin crews are sub-standard, and they often misbehave with passengers.

So after travelling for hours with little or no sleep, when passengers finally cross the long immigration line, the wait for another hour or more for their

But it is still not enough to handle long queues when a few flights land or depart at the same time. Computers do hang up quite often. At times, some of the airlines have to make special request to the immigration officials to clear passengers of their flights quickly to maintain their flight schedules. Supervision can be improved. Not everyone has the same level of skills or work with equal sincerity. Some would keep staring at others or gossip with fellow officers in front of passengers. Further automation and training are needed for swift services.

Customs have improved too. Recovery of unauthorised and illegal items channelled through the airport by customs officials is praiseworthy. At the same time, harassment in the name of checking suitcases has reduced. Strict customs is good for earning revenues and security improvement. But it can be done in a



luggage becomes truly agonising. And if you are down on your luck and don't get your suitcase even after all this, it's bound to try your patience once again. For quite sometime, one wouldn't find any representative either from the airline you travelled with or civil aviation personnel to lodge complaints of missing baggage.

Of course, there have been improvements regarding the safety of the things in the suitcase. There was a time when passengers wouldn't know whether they would get their suitcases intact or not. I myself lost things from my suitcase many times while departing from and arriving in Dhaka. This has reduced over time due to better oversight.

Immigration has also improved a lot, thanks to digitisation and a change of attitude of duty officers.

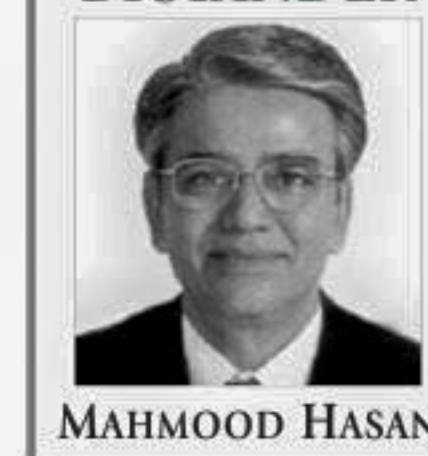
passenger friendly way. Attitudes towards the returnee migrant workers should be more sympathetic and cooperative rather than hostile.

Airport infrastructure is directly linked to economic development. It not only connects people across the world but also creates employment and generates revenue. On the other hand, an improved airport can increase the demand for other sectors in the economy and boost productivity. For a long time, discussions and plans for a modern airport have been on the table of Bangladesh policymakers. But the selection of an area for a new airport itself continues to be a challenge. While the country awaits a befitting airport, the existing one can be improved within its own structure.

The writer is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Nepal's economy in chokehold

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

IT has become difficult to follow Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's style of diplomacy. He is seen as a darling to the West, primarily because India

promises a big market for them. Nearer at home, he has shown two different faces. With India's arch rival Pakistan, Modi seems to have suddenly chosen Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif as his "buddy". But with Nepal, Modi has turned out to be Kathmandu's *bête noire*.

It has been nearly four months since the unofficial economic blockade imposed by India on Nepal began. Relations between the Himalayan republic and its southern neighbour have been steadily deteriorating since the promulgation of Nepal's new Constitution in September 2015. Delhi was unhappy as the new charter has apparently discriminated against the Madhesi people living in the Terai region and had asked Nepal to amend the Constitution to ensure more rights for the Madhesis.

The agitating United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF), which represents the Madhesis, blocked all the road entry points from India to Nepal. This has created a serious shortage of all essentials, particularly petroleum products.

Though Delhi has denied any part in this blockade, people firmly believe that India has instigated the Madhesis to create road blocks. Leaders of main political parties and the media in Nepal oppose any change to the Constitution.

The new communist Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (63), known to be a nationalist, also does not seem to favour any change to the Constitution.

On December 31, 2015, Oli called Modi over telephone to exchange New Year greetings. Oli briefed Modi on the political developments in Nepal and the Indian PM suggested that Nepal should find a durable solution to the political problems through consensus or *sahmati*. Oli informed his Indian counterpart that he was "not anti-India" and was willing to resolve the constitutional problems as he wanted to strengthen ties with India. Modi's statement that there was "no blockade" shows that India refuses to recognise that it has imposed obstructions.

Earlier, Nepali Deputy Prime Minister Kamal Thapa was in Delhi on December 1, 2015 when he presented a four-point road-map aimed at resolving the Madhesi crisis, which was supported by Delhi. At a recent meeting Prime Minister Oli expressed his displeasure that despite an understanding, India has not reopened customs at Nepal-India border points and described the blockade as "inhuman and beyond imagination".

The blockade has actually choked Nepal's economic life. Nepal's Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel issued a White Paper on November 24, 2015, describing the current economic situation of Nepal created by the undeclared blockade. The minister painted a bleak picture, saying that the nation's economy will only grow by 2 percent as opposed to the earlier estimate of 6 percent because of the blockade. The reason for this slow-down, he explained, is the shrinking of economic activities with the obstruction

on supply caused by the blockade.

Paudel pointed out that only 4.1 percent of the capital budget allocation of (Nepali) Rs. 74 billion could be spent during the first three months of the current fiscal year (July 2015 - July 2016). The service sector - hotels, tourism, transportation etc, which grew at 6.1 percent last year - has been destroyed due to acute shortage of fuel and will not exceed 3 percent growth this year.

The lack of cooking gas has hit the population severely. People have turned to cutting trees for firewood. And with winter setting in, the forests are fast disappearing, leading to an ecological catastrophe. The fuel blockage has been described as worse than the earthquake and has become a humanitarian crisis.

Inflation has risen from 6.9 percent (July, 2015) to 8.3 percent (September, 2015) with the food sector being badly hit. Imports have declined to Rs 130 billion (July-September 2015) compared to Rs 191 billion of the corresponding period of the last fiscal year. Exports dropped from Rs 22.53 billion to Rs 16.81 billion in the same period. The debt burden has risen to Rs 539 billion, which is 24.5 percent of Nepal's GDP.

Agricultural production will go down by 10 percent, with a risk of food insecurity. Around 2,200 industries have shutdown, with more than 200,000 employees rendered jobless. Demurrage piling up on stranded trucks and containers in Kolkata have surged to Rs 5 billion.

The land-locked country had suffered massive earthquake in April 2015, in which 9,000 people died and 700,000 were made homeless. Due to the agitation and blockade, the govern-

ment has not been able to start the reconstruction work, though \$4.1 billion has already been sent in from international donors. UN Secretary General Ban-ki Moon has urged India to lift the blockade and allow the Nepali government to engage in reconstruction efforts.

The grim economic situation has driven Nepal to seek assistance from its northern neighbour. China has already supplied 1.3 million litres of petroleum products in October and sent essential commodities to the country. Nepal has also received another consignment of fuel worth 10 million RMB in December 2015. There are reports that Prime Minister Oli will be visiting China in March 2016, before going to Delhi. Sources close to the Prime Minister say that Oli will go to Delhi after India has lifted the blockade.

Narendra Modi visited Nepal in August 2014 and pledged \$1 billion for Nepal's reconstruction work as part of his "neighbourhood diplomacy". But Delhi's undeclared support and instigation for the Madhesis has cost it its goodwill and has unnecessarily earned the distrust of Nepal's traditional elites, who rule the country.

Recent reports indicate that Prime Minister Oli is considering amending the Constitution to accommodate India's concerns. Even if the current confrontation is resolved, it will take a long time before Indo-Nepal relations are healed. Delhi needs to step back and respect Nepal's sovereignty. By choking the Nepalese economy, Modi is creating instability in South Asia.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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New Year resolutions

Every December, people make resolutions for the upcoming New Year. But things go back to square one after a couple of days. It seems resolutions are meant to be broken. Feelings of frustration creep in when we fail to maintain the resolutions.

So instead of making resolutions for 2016, we can take refuge in the memorable quotations of three eminent authors and poets.

1) "If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way" --- Napoleon Hill

2) "Every moment is a fresh beginning" --- T. S. Eliot

3) "Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start now and make a brand new ending" --- Carl Bard

If we adhere to these messages and concentrate on performing our duties sincerely, provide utmost value to each moment of life and strive for a better future instead of lamenting over past faults and deficiencies, 2016 will automatically turn out to be a year of achievements.

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata, India

Winter nights for the homeless

I fully agree with the suggestions made in the letter "Life in winter nights" published in this daily on December 30, 2015. I would earnestly like to request the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society to immediately mobilise and go door-to-door to collect old clothes (dresses, bed sheets, blankets, mufflers, other old warm clothes), cash, and whatever that can be spared. This could be life saving for the poor and homeless living on the streets of Dhaka and other cities.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka