

## S&P rating remains same

### Economy could perform better

DESPIITE scoring the same stable "BB-" in the long-term and "B" short-term sovereign credit ratings by S&P, a US-based financial services company for the last six years, the economy has witnessed steady growth with little fluctuation. The country is held back by some nagging problems associated with poor revenue-generation capacity and a serious shortage of basic infrastructure. The volatile nature of the country's politics has always been a wild card and when combined with poor administrative and institutional constraints actually holds back better economic growth. What has assisted Bangladesh to move forward in economic terms is the large inward remittance base of expatriate labour engaged in overseas markets.

Our ratings could certainly improve if we could address our infrastructure bottlenecks and although GDP growth rate is a healthy 5.4 percent, a better business operating environment would certainly help encourage investments (including foreign direct investment). Looking at the fiscal scenario, we find that S&P forecasts government debt to remain modest over the coming fiscal year, but again with marked shortfalls in social and infrastructure areas, the government will probably need to make greater financial commitments to overcome these problems in the long term.

That the government is putting emphasis on revenue generation is good news. The reforms being undertaken to streamline the VAT system in the current fiscal would certainly help. Regulatory weaknesses as in the central bank's limited independence and the underdeveloped capital markets are major weaknesses in the financial area. Overall, the country is progressing but the economy could do better if we could address our most pressing deficiencies.

## Bondage perpetuates amid growth!

### Development for whom?

WE are so engrossed in the exponential development figures that we hardly care about those people who are toiling in enslaved conditions to fuel the growth engine. The grim picture came out in a recent survey report prepared by Australia-based Walk Free Foundation. It says that over 15 lakh people in Bangladesh are engaged in modern slavery with some 44 percent of the population being vulnerable to the scourge. Regrettably, the situation has deteriorated since 2014 when the number was 6.8 lakh.

The global slavery index defines slavery as "situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, abuse of power and deception". According to the report, the most common form of slavery in Bangladesh is forced labour which is particularly prevalent in manufacturing, manual labour, construction, drug production and farming. Commercial sexual exploitation, child marriage and trafficking are also perpetuating the worst form of exploitation.

The findings of the report lay bare the poor condition of labour rights in Bangladesh. The labourers engaged in informal sectors are the worst victims of exploitation. There is hardly any regulation to protect the rights of these workers. Our law enforcement initiatives are also not adequate to deter crimes like forced prostitution, trafficking and child marriage. The implementation of programmes and policies to address this abhorrent situation are not cohesively implemented by the government. We can't emphasise more on the point that we need to abolish all forms of inhuman labour to ensure equality, human dignity and sustainable development of the country.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### The sorry state of education



PHOTO: STAR

Education is the backbone of a nation. But the recent state of education in our country is worrying. The high number of GPA 5 holders does not only undermine the education system of the country, but could also be responsible for shattering the future of Bangladesh as learning becomes less of a priority to getting high marks. The decision by policymakers to focus on the numbers instead of the quality of education could be a factor that leads to the deteriorating state of education in our country. When will the country be able to develop a proper system where teachers and students will value learning? This should be a wake up call for the concerned authorities, and they should work to improve the situation immediately before it is too late.

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### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING


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PREDICTABLY the issue of 'illegal migration' had featured most predominantly in the latest state elections in Assam. For the BJP this has been a

hobbyhorse, used conveniently to seek votes during elections. That this would be used as the main electoral issue in the Northeast, particularly in Assam elections, was predictable and the vigour with which it was pursued unsurprising. During the state election campaign, the BJP president Amit Shah had 'promised to stop illegal infiltration once and for all if the party is voted to power' by sealing the porous border.

However, allegations of 'illegal migration / infiltration' from Bangladesh are not new. A few decades ago we had heard the BJP leaders' outlandish figure of twenty million illegal Bangladeshis in India although one was not sure what method was used to arrive at that number. And even if such figures are not mentioned these days, the issue has been exploited to draw votes nonetheless. BJP leaders are on record saying during the run up to the Indian elections of 2014 that all 'illegal Bangladeshis' would be sent home packing once their party was elected to power. We are not aware how many, if any at all, 'illegal' Bangladeshi have been traced out and sent back in the two years that the BJP has been in power.

One is a bit confused here by the use of certain words by Indian politicians, ex-diplomats and the media to describe movement of people across the border. Both the words 'illegal migration' and 'infiltration' are being used in this context. There is substantive difference between the two and the Indians must decide which is which. If it is 'infiltration' India would want us believe it to be, then it cannot be in thousands since the word

# The bogey of 'illegal migration'

implies surreptitious movement in ones and twos across recognised borders. They couldn't, as Amit Shah avers, have entered the state in lakhs in this manner. And if indeed there was 'migration' - implicit in the word is the number of people involved - one wonders how, with nearly 80 percent of the borders along Bangladesh and the State of Assam's border fenced, such large scale movements were at all possible. And how is it possible, as Shah accuses, for the migrants to have,

form by our foreign ministry is absolutely correct. However, what is surprising is the comment of our high commissioner in New Delhi that Bangladesh is willing to sit with India to 'resolve' the issue. One wonders whether it was an impromptu statement the ramifications of which had not been fully visualised. His comment is very simplistic and one would benefit from his suggestions for resolving an issue which Bangladesh doesn't recognise in the first place. One

migration' is indeed an issue? And why should Bangladesh have to shoulder the responsibility for a phenomenon whose occurrence predates 1947 and 1971? Moreover, the validity of the term "illegal migration" is contested by some on the grounds that since there is no regime of legal migration between the two countries, the question of illegality is a misnomer.

The reality is that there is cross border movement of people, because of the very nature of the border areas



PHOTO: AP

"snatched away jobs and resources of local youths"? It is as if a Bangladeshi has to just cross the border to be handed a job before he can say Jack Robinson. And which local will give away the jobs and resources to outsiders? Those who raise the bogey of infiltration/illegal migration from Bangladesh would be well advised to revisit the history of Assam and the development of the demographic pattern in that state over many centuries.

Absence of any reaction to the allegation of 'illegal migration' in any

wonders too whether our foreign ministry concurs with him, since so long Bangladesh has been very consistent, rightly, in dismissing such allegations. The statement of our high commissioner assumes greater significance when juxtaposed with the comment of a former Indian high commissioner to Dhaka, in the same context, that Dhaka should accept this as fact. Would it be remiss to think that our high commissioner's expressed willingness to sit with India to resolve the matter is in effect acknowledging that 'illegal

and the way the border was drawn. In reality, movements across borders are a seasonal phenomenon, and during lean periods between 5000 and 7000 people go to India to work in the fields. On the other hand there are, reportedly, half a million Indians in Bangladesh and no one knows how many of them have work permits. The compulsions for crossing are many and cross border movements are not from one direction only.

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## HUMILIATION OF A HEADMASTER

# A symptom of the disease

AHRAR AHMAD

THE headmaster of a school in Narayanganj was humiliated about two weeks ago. If that sounds like the beginning of a Kafkaesque short story, it comes close. It was a cringe-inducing moment, at once surreal and jarring. A headmaster was being publicly punished though there were no formal charges against him, no substantive or procedural due process had been followed, no evidence of wrongdoing presented, and no law-enforcement agencies involved. This was a rather brazen display of audacity and arrogance on the part of an MP, and clearly indicative of the famous "culture of impunity" that characterises Bangladesh today.

When Sir Edmund Hillary was asked why he had undertaken the incredible challenge to climb Mt. Everest, he had responded, "Because it is there". Similarly, if our MPs are asked why they did, or said, or decided on something, they can easily respond, "Because we can" (with the clear implication that they can get away with it).

Teachers have habitually been afforded a position of respect and admiration that few other professions can claim. The sentiment is universal, long-standing and deep. Perhaps it is no longer true. And, that is the crux of the problem. Things that used to matter to us, no longer do. Traditions that had been sanctified over time, now can be dismissed with disdain. Actions that would be considered inconceivable earlier, are now passé. This is emblematic of the political culture we have fashioned for ourselves. Public humiliation is now part of political theatre. The tamasha of politics has now been transformed into the politics of tamasha.

It is easy to condemn the MP. But, this incident also demands some self-interrogation. Have we all not contributed to the creation of this moment? Are we all not complicit in generating the enabling environment in which such actions become possible and, in some ways, perhaps inevitable? Have we not become inured to the violations of law, custom and morality, to an extent where they do not mean much anymore? Aren't the problems this incident has exposed, and the questions it has generated, much more fundamental and troubling?

Does it not reveal an environment of distrust and disrespect that afflicts the entire body politic, a gradual weakening of our social structures, the erosion of the values of decency and fairness, and the dismantling of the norms and customs that have sustained us, and perhaps defined us?

Who can we look up to, which body can we trust, what ethical system can we use to distinguish right from wrong? Where are the icons that exemplify our virtue, courage and honour? What legacies, lessons and inspirations, do we see around us? The moral landscape is, admittedly, rather bleak.

The Parliament, through its multiple responsibilities of legislation, representation, oversight and public education, is supposed to ensure and reflect the importance of good governance and democratic order. But is the current body, having come about through a process that may have been constitutionally valid but politically questionable, fulfilling its role? And what standards do the MPs set? Isn't the honour and integrity of their position sometimes compromised by the personal conduct of some, the language used by others (sometimes even in the floor of the House), and their willingness to display their power through flouting of laws? Doesn't the action of this MP insult the very institution he represents, or is he merely its ugly and exaggerated embodiment?

Can we look to our political leadership for direction and guidance? But do they not display a cynical and opportunistic aptitude for shape-shifting in order to pursue short-term interests? Do they not thrive on rhetorical hyperbole and bullying tactics, on sycophancy and pandering, on money and mastans? Do they not create a hyper-polarised partisan atmosphere through presenting grotesque caricatures of each other (thus one is either a Pakistani razakar or an Indian dalal, an unenlightened mullah or a decadent secularist, an opponent of our independence or an enemy of our religion)? What real alternatives do they present?

Do our public servants always behave in ways that reassure the confidence of the people? Physical and verbal assaults are routinely inflicted on others (sometimes by a minister, a Thana Nirbahi administrator, a police officer, or local goons acting at the behest of the powerful). Political vendettas can be carried out through deploying the instruments of the State including the legal system. Law enforcing agencies often break the law, and are hardly ever held accountable for their transgressions.

Didn't this perception of lawlessness in some ways lead the MP to assume the role of prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner? Couldn't the members of the school board follow established rules, couldn't the mosque authorities inform the police, couldn't the MP instruct the people to let justice take its course? None of this happened, because few of them had any trust in the legal system, or in the moral

compass of the nation.

Moreover, a whisper, an innuendo, a suggestion is enough to agitate the public. The fundamental principle behind the rule of law is that a person is innocent unless proven guilty. Is that being honoured? How can the sanctity of law, or the spirit of democracy, be maintained when people are afraid of being accused of causing offense (against a faith, or the PM, or the Parliament, or the judicial system, or the military, or the spirit of the liberation war or historical issues surrounding it, and so on), and be subjected to vigilante justice? How can freedom of speech flourish when sensitivities are so high, and public patience so low, when dissent is considered dangerous, any critique is considered to be a challenge, and all opposition is viewed as an existential threat that must be crushed? How credible are the preachy platitudes about democracy coming from people who are not its best exemplar? Even the private sector has lost its previous lustre. This not only refers to some well-known "scandals" (Landmark, Destiny, Basic Bank, Stock Exchange, and so on), but the practice of the super-rich to exploit workers and put them in harm's way, evade taxes, send their money abroad in dodgy deals and shady arrangements, and flaunt their newly found (and often ill-gotten) wealth in conspicuous consumption with a vengeance. They demand deference only because they can buy it.

And finally, by doubling down, refusing to apologise, and proclaiming that he will do anything to defend his faith, has the MP not affronted that very faith by donning the mantle of being its saviour (given his boorish demeanour, his profane language, his cruel actions)? Is his behaviour consistent with the message of Islam with its emphasis on tolerance, mercy and justice? Is he protecting Islam, or using it to protect himself?

The MP's behaviour offers a metaphor for our times. His gesture of defiance and contempt is like an upraised middle finger thrust into the face of the entire nation. And how will we respond? There will be some shaking of heads and gnashing of teeth. Some statements will be issued. Some brave young men and women will try to express their protest and outrage. But ultimately, nothing will happen to him. He has friends both in high and low places. His party will not expel him, the Parliament will not censure him, and his constituency, due to intimidation or manipulation, will not abandon him. That is the real shame of Bangladesh, and its tragedy.

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