

THE NEXT HOPE

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Significant World Bank pledge

Normalisation of relations welcome

THE visiting World Bank (WB) chief has stated that Bangladesh has made "great progress in reducing child malnutrition and stunting" and committed to provide US\$1 billion over the next three years to that effect. We are happy to see that relations with the WB have been normalised and we are back on track, having been derailed over the Padma Bridge financing issue, which had unfortunately driven a wedge between the bank and the government. Whatever shortcomings there were on our side it is now clear that the WB acted rather highhandedly, which ultimately led to the cancellation of the loan earmarked for the building of the bridge.

We are glad that things have moved beyond that and we echo the prime minister's feelings that the WB has showcased our success in reducing poverty over the last three years. It is good to see this very important development partner give due recognition to the government's social safety net programmes that have helped reach the extreme poor and promote women empowerment.

We look forward to more constructive cooperation between us and the WB, and from all indications it appears that the bank is looking at avenues for greater involvement in areas beyond poverty reduction, particularly, in promoting private sector investment by strengthening governance and improving the investment climate.

One third goes abroad illegally

Create an efficient recruiting system

IT is indeed unsettling to note that one-third of Bangladeshi migrant workers resort to illegal channels to go abroad. According to a survey conducted by non-governmental organisation Manusher Jonno Foundation, 71 percent of the youth fall prey to irregular migration. Unskilled Bangladeshi workers, who venture abroad to get decent employment in countries that demand their labour, face an array of hardship in the foreign soil as it is. Among them, the most vulnerable are those who make use of illegal channels, making them susceptible to various forms of exploitation and ill-treatment.

More importantly, migrant workers who are lured by the alluring promises of traffickers often end up stranded in the seas or trapped in slave camps. Of those who make it to the promised land, many do not have any job security and are not even entitled to legal protection. Their mobility is restricted, job uncertain, and, they at times, fall victim to mistreatment, fraud and other forms of abuse in the hands of their foreign employers. In some countries, denial of wages, assault and confinement is rampant. Also, illegal migration can lead to incidents of physical and sexual abuse and torture for ransom.

The solution lies in creation of an effective recruiting system. We must not forget that it is the high cost of fees in the legal channel that drives the job seekers towards illegal migration. In this background, it is imperative that we make the legal channels accessible so as to dissuade human trafficking. Timely government intervention, we believe, can keep the fees within the reach of the poor. It is also important to focus on sending skilled workers abroad.



KNOT SO TRUE
RUBANA HUQ

A car hit one of the workers working in our house this morning. He was cleaning the wall and the car smashed his bones. Apparently, a big microbus had hit the car from behind, slammed against the car in front of it and speeded off in a hurry, while the driver was busy speaking on his cell phone. The poor driver of the car in the front was defenseless with his brakes failing and hitting the worker, who had to be rushed to the hospital. Unfortunately, there is no price tag attached to the lives of the poor in our country. While millions of people are being lifted out of the extreme poverty trap and while the latest figures indicate that the percentage of this group is 12.9 percent, almost 10 percent of the total population, and while we take pride in the poverty dipping from 44.2 percent in 1991 to a remarkably improved 18.5 percent in 2016, the fact remains that most of us living in our elite bubbles, lack empathy and are investing in aggression.

Just the other day, I was almost deafened by a VIP horn. In the short ride from Airport road to Banani, the VIP horn rattled my sanity. Addicted to Twitter, I got ready to take a picture of the car and prepared to launch a battle in social media, complaining against the unnecessary ruckus the vehicle had created. On the ground, I had expected at least two protocol cars accompanying the "VIP" vehicle. Sensing this, our driver turned around and said, "Madam, choto cheley, choto gari", meaning it was a young boy in a small car, who was bulldozing his way through the traffic. All he had was a horn. He was just a kid, with his license plate hidden by a hugely protective bumper. All I saw was "Dhaka Gha" and nothing beyond. Unfortunately, we have innumerable tales of VIPs' son pulling out guns in public and threatening people. We also have sons and daughters pulling multiple VIP stunts in our societies. In fact, we have too many VIP antics in our platter who do not assume real responsibility. Quite sadly enough, our town is ridden with audacity.

Our latest vision is to take the extreme poverty figure close to zero by 2030. At the pace that Bangladesh is moving, we should be able to achieve that way earlier. After all, our workers take loans to buy refrigerators these days; after all, the children of our workers are getting admitted to better schools and colleges, and after all, just the sound of "Shonar Bangla", triggers goose bumps in almost all of us. According to the latest World Bank update, on the scale of the Shared Prosperity Premium, Bangladesh has outperformed India, Bhutan and Pakistan but is still lagging behind



ILLUSTRATION: RICHARDWALKERBLOGS

Vietnam, China and Cambodia. This basically means that the consumption of the poorest has grown remarkably well. Bangladesh, in spite of the decrease in remittance from countries of Gulf Cooperation Council, has continued to grow with earnings from the readymade garment sector, which is continuing to feed and sustain the export basket, irrespective of the taka appreciating against the euro, pound, INR, Pakistani rupee and even Chinese Yuan in August 2016. Even think tanks are reporting findings of improved perceptions relating to the economy of Bangladesh. According to a survey conducted by Centre for Policy Dialogue in February-April 2016, more than 37 percent respondents indicated positive impressions about the improved business environment. Meanwhile, the indomitable spirit, with which the country moves on, is still an enigma to all. Bangladesh is indeed growing at a speed that beats all the textbook narrative.

Suddenly, the recent realignment of diplomatic lines speaks volumes of this country's strategy. Suddenly, we are important to many. Russia, with its vastness of six million square miles, eleven time zones vast, the largest country in the world is building our first nuclear plant in Rooppur. China, the 4,000-year old civilisation and not just a nation, by wanting to be a two-ocean power (Pacific and Indian) is investing heavily in a country like Bangladesh, buying good relations, ensuring trade links back home and marathoning towards its Belt and Road initiative. And in spite of Bangladesh being

surrounded by India because of the 2,545-mile long frontier and with the Bay of Bengal having too much access to the country, India may now need to rethink its strategy and consider Bangladesh as an important partner in international diplomatic policies.

This is a time, when China, Japan and India are all competing to build Bangladesh's first deep-sea port, with contending plans that may lead to pitting these countries in direct competition with each other, stalemating Bangladesh's strategic importance in the process. Strange that once upon a time Bangladesh, a country predicted to be doomed, has now equally, if not more surprisingly, smashed all ceilings and is headed to the top.

I was listening to the current World Bank President talk the other day. He referred to a "collective paranoia" that had led Korea to build and prepare for next challenges. I agree. We must all not be complicit and ready ourselves for the next leap the next time around. The diversification in our export basket is a reality that we must consider and while we figure our next steps, it is essential for us to invest in social capital. The strength of this country lies in its people, its own labour, without which progress will only be a mirage. Prosperity cannot happen with those on the bottom rung of the ladder struggling to have three square meals a day. Real progress can only be inclusive and as a nation, we must set daily reminders on our conscience.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

Xi Jinping's milestone visit: transforming dynamics

MUHAMMAD AZIZUL HAQUE

CHINESE President Xi Jinping, considered by many as the most powerful leader in China after Mao Zedong, arrived in Dhaka on his milestone visit to Bangladesh on Friday, October 14, about half an hour before the mid-day stroke of the clock; and only a couple of hours later he and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina were together witnessing China's signing of the largest investment deals yet concluded by Bangladesh with any single country at the latter's office. China signed 27 deals worth USD 24.45 billion with Bangladesh to provide soft loans for some key infrastructural, power and energy, and other projects. And even as the two leaders were attending the deal signing ceremony, at a different hotel in Dhaka, 13 Chinese companies and as many Bangladeshi entities inked 13 joint venture agreements involving USD 13.6

expanded bilateral relations, following the massive investment deals between China and Bangladesh. 'Strategic relationship' signifies more intensive engagements and consultations, and heightened coordination and cooperation on all issues of mutual interest – including counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and other security issues – at bilateral, regional and global levels. And all those initiatives will have nothing clandestine about them. Noteworthy here is the fact that China has strategic partnership with India and Pakistan too.

The two countries have agreed to work together for the implementation of the OBOR project and the BCIM-EC, a south-running offshoot of the new Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The OBOR project, masterminded by Xi Jinping himself, would prove beneficial to all the countries along the belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. These

and prosperous one by 2041.

This visit of President Xi will definitely go down in the annals of Bangladesh-China bilateral relations as a major event that marked, to quote the president himself, "a new historical starting point." These large investments from China and the prospect for more in the course of time have indeed ushered in a new era for the Sino-Bangladesh ties; and these investments will spark new dynamics in the two countries' cooperative relations and engagements, which will lift them to a much higher trajectory. Consequently, it will yield and expedite further socioeconomic progress in Bangladesh. Thus far, the entire Bangladesh has remained Dhaka-centric. We may now witness the rise of Chittagong as a mega-city with two wings, one on either side of the river Karnaphuli, upon the completion of the multi-lane tunnel project under the river. Chittagong can truly develop as the

situation, but with no hegemonic strings attached. China's history does not prove it particularly expansionist. It has generally preferred to remain within its frontiers, except during the Yuan dynasty when basically the Mongol Khans ruled over China and extended their empire across West Asia and parts of Europe.

Opportunities do not always present themselves to be seized. They sometimes only briefly and softly knock at the door. If you do not respond, you miss the boat. Asian countries are generally doing very well economically, in sharp contrast to stagnation or very slow growth in the West. The current century is styled "the China-led Asian Century". Asia is in the limelight and is holding the global attention. Almost all our neighbouring and regional countries are prospering well. India is one of the fastest growing major countries. Even Myanmar is doing very well and is poised to attain 8.4 percent growth in the current fiscal year (April 2016 - March 2017), despite the fact that they are just emerging from protracted and atrophying junta rule. In FY2015-2016, Myanmar received an FDI of USD 9 billion, and the total amount of the FDI received by it from 1988 to 2015 was around USD 60 billion.

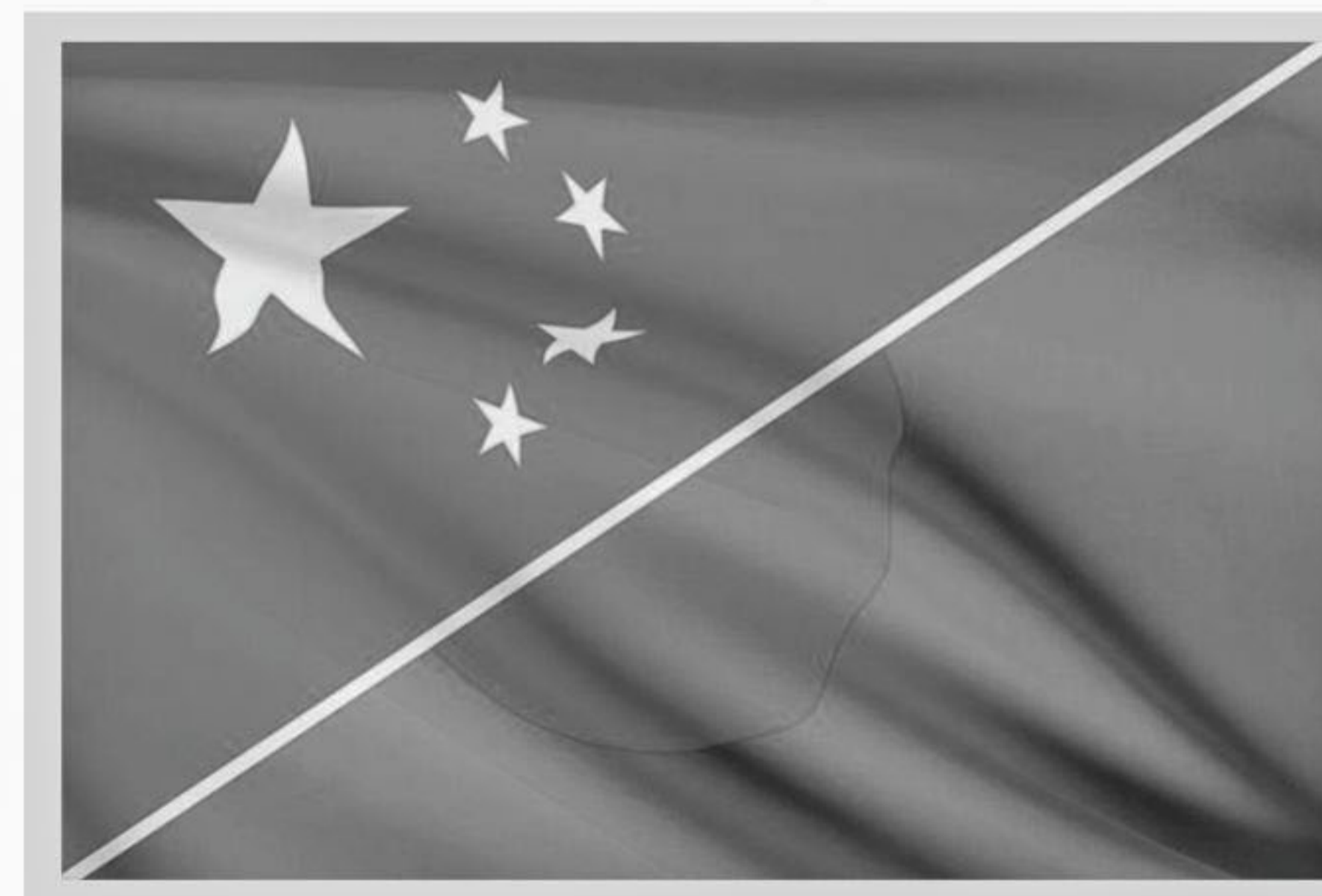
We cannot afford to lag behind. We need technology, and we need requisite funds from abroad for further development of our country. And at the moment, it is only China that has the capability to provide us with funds as large as we have seen them pledge during the just concluded visit of President Xi. We must avail ourselves of development funds and we must be able to utilise them to materialise our cherished dream of a poverty-free, enlightened, knowledge-based, peaceful, non-communal and truly prosperous Bangladesh.

These huge investments from China and other recent investments from countries like Japan and India bear testimony to the confidence those countries repose in our government; and are also indicative of its success in conducting the country's foreign policy with tact and acumen.

There are, however, a host of formidable challenges. Terrorism, militancy, religious extremism, communalism, sectarianism, inordinate delays in implementation of the projects, lack of trained, efficient and skilled manpower, unplanned and uncontrolled growth of the population, as well as political unrest and instability, etc, could cause serious impediments to the implementation of the projects within stipulated time-frames. The government will need to continue addressing these challenges to ensure reaping benefits from these staggering foreign investments.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to China.

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billion of Chinese investment in Bangladesh to promote bilateral trade. The investment pledges that together amounted to USD 38.05 billion caught most Bangladeshis by surprise. It is heartening to note that all political parties hailed the huge investments pledged by China. And our business community was overjoyed.

It has been the first Bangladesh visit by a Chinese president in 30 years since the visit of then president Li Xiannian to Dhaka in March 1986. True, the people of Bangladesh had expected big pledges from the Chinese President during his much awaited visit. But most people were not confident that the investments would be really so big, so staggering. Apart from signing the deals, the two countries used the occasion to upgrade their ties of strategic partnership, which was indeed essential to infuse requisite synergy into the further deepened and

international connectivity projects, President Xi's brainchild, are meant to open up China's vast land-locked central and western regions to the outside world and financially integrate them to the countries of Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe in mutual benefit. AIB and BRICS Bank are two other international cooperative initiatives launched by President Xi's China in the interest of economic integration and collective socioeconomic development of the countries across the world. And a by-product of all this would be China's enhanced positive image and political clout across countries and continents.

With improved regional connectivity and transportation network, Bangladesh's trade would receive a major boost; and these would accelerate her march towards her goals of becoming an upper middle income country by 2021; and a developed

financial capital of the country; and with such further loans from abroad in addition to our own national income, the whole of Bangladesh may be transformed into a vast city state over the next three decades or so. For a healthy growth of that vast city state, free from filthy and unliveable urban slums, Bangladesh needs continuous economic and technical assistance from her capable friends. We hope the massive Chinese investments will inspire other countries to choose Bangladesh as their investment destination.

Many countries across the globe, especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America, were wallowing in poverty for lack of funds needed for socioeconomic development. China, with its enormous capacity for extending loans, is providing critical funds to many of those countries. It has extended a helping hand in mutual benefit and in a win-win

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Authorities must facilitate our right to know

I completely agree with Dr. Shamsul Bari's article titled "Right to know, not need to know" on October 17, 2016. I would like to add that while we have the right to information, it is a complex matter. A lot of information is often confined within offices due to corrupt workers.

The government should take proper steps to bring all public offices under e-governance system. Not only would it ensure transparency, but also help reduce the possibility of corruption. Our government has created many websites for our welfare, but more than seventy percent of citizens unfortunately do not know about them due to lack of proper publicity or awareness.

Awareness of correct news and e-governance systems will ensure the efficient dispatch of information we have been demanding.

Minhazur Rahman Rezvi, On email

Hoping for a peace-loving President of the United States

I watched every speech in the election campaign and every debate when Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were running for presidency. Those were interesting, their attitudes were positive and they behaved most respectfully to each other.

But this time everything has changed in America - the campaign has become sullied because of Donald Trump, the Republican presidential candidate who is behaving most outrageously. We are learning many things about him which are shameful and inappropriate.

We hope the people of America will be wise to choose the right person as their next President. We are hoping for the best, as America is a powerful country with a hold all over the world.

Nur Jahan, Chittagong