

## A billion dollar opportunity

### Improve governance

BAKGLADESH has 32 thrust sectors that have the potential to bring billions of dollars in investment and export earnings, according to a seminar organised by Dhaka Chamber of Commerce. The sectors include apparel, agriculture, ICT, light engineering, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, frozen food, energy, handicrafts, ceramics, tourism and healthcare. To achieve this goal, the country will have to focus on job creation, rethink commerce, mobilise youth human capital, and reduce lending risk, participants of the seminar concluded.

The task now is to work out smart and pragmatic strategies to overcome the challenges. Also, it might be realistic to shortlist the sectors that have greater advantages than others. Bangladesh has come a long way in terms of economic as well as human development defying the naysayers. The industrious people of the country, successive governments, non-government organisations, and cooperation of international community all have a claim to this success story. Greater success is within our reach provided that we get the basics right: peaceful environment, physical infrastructure and transparency.

Tomes of research indicate that corruption is eating away at the gains made. Corruption will have to be curbed. A stronger engagement of the private sector will be essential to attaining any development goals. More emphasis will have to be given on training. A lot of expatriates want to contribute more to the development of the country. Opportunities should be created for them both by the public and the private sectors. We hear a lot of rhetoric on foreign investment. The reality is that confidence remains in deficit. Investors are sceptical for reasons real and perceived.

That Bangladesh is a land of opportunities is no longer news. The job is to turn those into results.

## SUST students suffer closure

### How long will this damaging culture continue?

A clash among several factions of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) on December 21 prompted the university Syndicate to close it down for 15 days. Although the decision was reversed a day later following student protests, such closures have become routine in educational institutions where BCL factions clash resulting in these institutions being shut down and residential halls vacated, which hits the students the hardest. It plays havoc, not only with the academic calendar but creates panic among students as they are given hardly any time to vacate residential halls.

It makes little or no sense as to why law and order cannot be enforced at universities. Why are armed activists allowed to operate with impunity holding hostage the thousands of ordinary students who have come to study? Why are university authorities unable to call in the help of the law to contain any clash happening on the campus but simply close it down in the hope that tempers will cool and the matter will subside? It is precisely because authorities are unwilling or unable to take strong steps that would be conducive to maintaining some semblance of peace and quiet on these campuses that these elements get away by creating disturbance.

This culture of operating under political patronage that allows student wings to create chaos with impunity has to stop in the interests of the greater good. Session jams, cancelled classes and examinations are not what students signed up for, especially when they are caused by petty feuds of political cadres.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

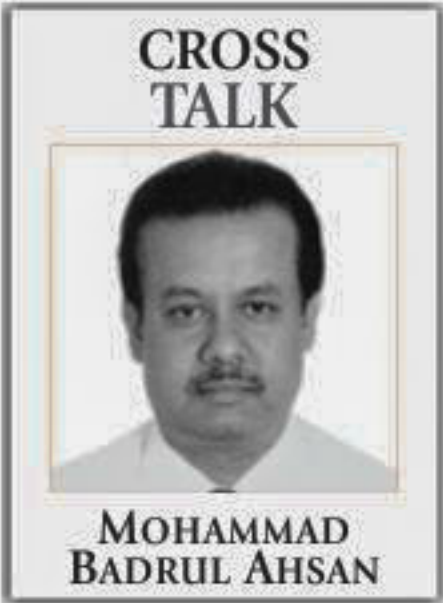
### Friends of Bangladesh

We are heartened at the proposals put forward by the 'Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee' who requested the Mayor of DNCC to name certain roads of diplomatic zones after friends of Bangladesh who went out of their way to help us during our liberation war. Among them, Mrs. Indira Gandhi's name comes to mind at once. The Mayor has reportedly accepted the proposals.

The road connecting the Gulshan Two circle with Baridhara may be named after Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Other roads should also be named after Senator Edward Kennedy, Gen. Jacob, Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora, Field Marshal SAM Manekshaw and a few PVC recipients during the 1971 war, and Soviet Union leader Brezhnev.

The country and all our people ought to show gratitude and remember these friends who came to our aid during times of need.

Dr. SN Mamoon, Dhaka



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ALEPPO is now more than a historic city; it's the boiling point of mankind where human lives are changing into vapour. In this nether region, the forces of evil have come together. At least 400,000 people killed as per the UN estimate, Aleppo is also the punching bag for the powerful nations and their sparring partners. At this moment, it's the greatest concentrated expression of death and destruction on earth. Aleppo is the reflection of an increasingly violent world in a perilous pothole.

The Syrian city has been turned into a slaughterhouse, besides being a theatre for global showdown. Bashar al-Assad is having a showdown against his enemies. The Russians are flexing their muscles against the Western countries, particularly its archrival, the United States. The Iranians are jousting with the

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Saudis. The Alawites are fighting the Sunnis.

It's an irony that one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world faces depopulation and desolation. But more disturbing is Aleppo's absurd position in a complex network of proxy wars. Its many wars waged inside one, which is being fought because one ruler is desperately clinging to power. It doesn't



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

certainty is a celebration of free-market economics. Yet I find the Uber-Mania in Dhaka a tad bit concerning. One may very well suggest that I am a pessimist, but please do understand that my overarching concern is quite genuine. In its totality, Uber does not solve, enhance or lighten Dhaka's transportation problems. From a broad picture, it really has no predominant effect.

Let us look at the economics of this. A 6 km. Uber ride from the DCC Market in Banani to the Jatiyo Sangshad Bhaban in Agargaon would cost a consumer approximately Tk. 250. Bangladesh's current average per capita income is approximately Tk. 102,000 per year. Thereby, a common Bangladeshi who earns this mean income, has approximately Tk. 280 to spend per day on consumption and private investment spending. Now if this person spends Tk. 250 on a single Uber ride from Banani to Agargaon, he/she is left with a mere Tk. 30 to spend per day. This trivial economic model illustrates the fact that Uber is not for the average Bangladeshi. It is expensive and inaccessible for the majority of people. It is marketed towards the more privileged classes of our society. If one has the financial ability to ride around the streets of Dhaka via Uber, then surely why should one question or attack them for it? But only a very minute proportion of Bangladeshis can be identified as rich. Moving outside the glamour of Gulshan and Banani, there exists a country which is in dying need of enhanced public transportation and communication infrastructure, and not a showmanship of a global transportation phenomenon. Back to my point about Toronto, the only really negative thing about this city

# Aleppo burning today, whose city is next?



A Syrian man walks through rubble in Aleppo.

PHOTO: AFP/DIMITAR DILKOFF

make sense why it should be anybody's business other than the Syrians.

John Nixon, the CIA official who had interrogated the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain after his arrest, has recently shared his insight with us. He wrote in Time magazine on December 16 that the hanged Iraqi dictator should have been left in power. He said Saddam had warned him during the interrogation that the Americans would fail in Iraq because they didn't know the language and the history of the country, and they didn't understand the Arab mind. Nixon's prescription is that the world may have to deal with the leaders it abhors if it wanted to bring stability back in the Middle East.

The very idea of removing rulers by any means other than popular has proven to be dangerous time and again, because it fumbles more than it fixes. Ideally, the people should have the right to change their governments either by ballot or any means they deem fit for their cause. The people alone should have the power to make that choice and fight for it. Such a change is organic, because it's deeply rooted in people's heart.

Anything imposed doesn't work akin to human immune system designed to reject anything it doesn't recognise. As a matter of fact, inorganic governments are

a modern concept. The British used the cookie-cutter approach to create nations after World War II, many of which have been caught in religious, sectarian and ethnic tensions ever since their birth. The creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 is a case in our front yard. Roughly 24 years later, Pakistan was bifurcated because aspirations of people in its two wings couldn't be reconciled.

The mistakes of Afghanistan and Iraq are being repeatedly repeated in Libya and Syria. Aleppo razed to the ground is reminiscent of Kabul and Baghdad in the earlier years. It's the same vicious circle repeated when people, tempted to escape oppressive regimes, jumped from frying pan into fire. The illusion of freedom has killed more people than the atrocities of autocracy. More people now are living in fear of destruction, dislocation and death than any time before.

Aleppo right now is the sharpest point in the meltdown of humanity. It's the height of horror that this civilisation does little to prevent senseless killing. When the Nazis killed the Jews during the Second World War, the world didn't have the United Nations. Then the world didn't have televisions, mobile phones and other advancements to send information and images at the touch of a button. The Holocaust was a hidden

business until the allied forces discovered the Nazi concentrations camps.

In comparison, the tragedy in Aleppo is unravelling frame by frame in front of our eyes. The entire city is a giant gas chamber executing its residents, whose only crime is that they are citizens of a country ruled by an arrogant man. Children in this cauldron of cruelty require psychological support so that they can cope with the stress. Aleppo is a living hell where life is just a fluke between two explosions.

Aleppo is also an affront to human pride in the safe zones of the world. The highfalutin words flowing from the towers of power and the high seats of humanity get drowned out by the sounds of bombs and missiles. This city is yet another reminder that civilisations in the end eat out of the hands of barbarians!

Proof of it exists in the disparate tensions. Terrorists terrorise, and hegemonic nations remain hidebound. Both sides playing with fire, neither is bothered that the world is going to erupt. Aleppo is burning today. Who knows whose city is next?

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# Dhaka needs a revolution in its public transportation network

FROM the very top, I think I should make it clear that living in the snowy apocalyptic hell of Toronto, I do use Uber from time to time. It is a fantastic service which in all



PHOTO: AFP

extensively and support the domestic economy. There is a widely successful structure of prioritising public transportation first, allowing the majority of the citizens to access affordable inter-city services and lastly move onto assisting the growth of external transportation schemes. Bangladesh cannot and must not forget that. Yes, we should have Uber, yes we should continue to celebrate private entrepreneurship, but that cannot be at the cost of forgetting the needs of the majority of our people. In addition to being the abode for the rich and privileged of Bangladesh, Dhaka is also a city of hard-working men and women who travel by buses and trains every day to earn a daily living. It would be an insult to the diligent public if we fail to

acknowledge the severity of Dhaka's public transportation woes. These same woes have contributed to Dhaka consistently holding a high ranking in the list of *Least Liveable Cities in the World*, a denunciation which we should look to overcome.

The Transportation Sector has received 26 percent of the budgetary allocation in the 2016-17 fiscal year, a percentage higher than that of any other national

as fans not working and harassment inside public buses and trains. These are all problems which can surely be solved through directed resources, planning and monitoring. Nevertheless, we as a society should realise the gravity of these transportation problems. Yes, ambitious rail projects and bridge constructions are imperative for domestic economic growth and long-term prosperity, but our government should not ignore the plight of the common man.

Lastly, back to my point about Uber. The Almighty has given my family the ability to send me to Canada to complete my higher education, and yes I travel by Uber from time to time to avoid the insanity of the cold. Yet the same father who pays for my tuition also travelled regularly to his office in Mothijheel from our house in Gulshan, via the inter-city train service. He did so because he felt it was affordable and time-saving, but he did so until the day he felt it was unsafe. He and many such fathers and mothers would continue to do so, if our public transportation was up to scratch. It sadly is not. A Grade-10 Economics student could tell us that prioritising public transportation would reduce the consumption of fuel, decrease the use of private cars and encourage citizens to travel via local buses and trains. This is not a problem to which there is no solution.

Uber is a delightful institutional success for the transportation sector and it is equally wonderful that it has reached the streets of Dhaka. But do remember, Uber is not the answer to our traffic-jams, but public transportation is. Our government has invested strongly in this sector, and one hopes that a significant proportion of these resources are directed towards the development of Dhaka's inter-city bus and rail service. We are seeing some good signs, but what we need are not mere signs. Dhaka needs a revolution in its transport sector. We as citizens have a responsibility to continuously demand for such, rather than simply hailing the arrival of a service which would cater to the top 5 percent of the city.

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