

## Plight of haor people Is nature to blame only?

ACCORDING to reports, nearly two hundred thousand farmer families in the north eastern region of the country are in severe distress having lost everything in flash floods which have come earlier than normal, just before the harvest time. We had only recently called upon the government to address the distress of these farmers on an emergency basis. Some OMS and relief in terms of cash and rice we understand, have been provided in some of the affected areas only, but more substantive measures need to be undertaken to address the long terms consequences of the untimely flood this year. What good is OMS if the affected people do not have cash at hand to buy food on sale? And although the interest on agricultural loan has been waived by the government the farmers would need both cash and kind to tide over the interregnum till the next harvest, this area being a one-crop land.

But it is not so much the flash floods but the breaches in the embankment that cause us concern. And the government should immediately go into the causes of the multiple breaches in the embankments. Reportedly, some of the repair work last year was not done properly. There are allegations of misuse of funds by local WDB officials. Flash floods are not new to the people of this area and the government had taken measures by embanking the likely threatened areas, which gave away at many places in this instance, due to flawed repair work. Not only must the mending of the breaches be started as soon as possible, those responsible for dereliction of duty in repairing the embankments must be made examples of.

## Congratulations to Nazbin and Mizanur

*You have made us proud!*

WE congratulate the two young entrepreneurs of our country who have made it to the "Forbes 30 Under-30 Asia: Social Entrepreneurs" list for their works aimed at helping people in Bangladesh. We hope their examples will encourage more young people to work hard towards achieving their dreams and in creating a better and brighter future for themselves and for this country.

One of the recipients of the honour, Shougat Nazbin Khan, established a school which charges a minimal tuition while offering free textbooks, school uniforms and transport to make it easier for the rural poor to get educated. Moreover, she also developed a low-cost solar irrigation system for which she was awarded the Green Talent award in 2015. The other young entrepreneur on the Forbes list, Mizanur Rahman, founded Physically-Challenged Development Foundation in 2008. The non-profit organisation aims to provide young people with disabilities with work skill training and to raise awareness on disability issues.

What their success proves again is that through their unique talents, hard work and perseverance, the youths of this country can achieve anything and compete with the best in the world.

But for more youths to succeed like Nazbin and Mizanur, when 25 percent of the population in Bangladesh between the ages of 15 and 29 are neither in the education cycle nor involved with any economic activity, the government and society in general must extend them their helping hands. That is something that must be aimed for, keeping in mind that the youths of today are the builders of tomorrow.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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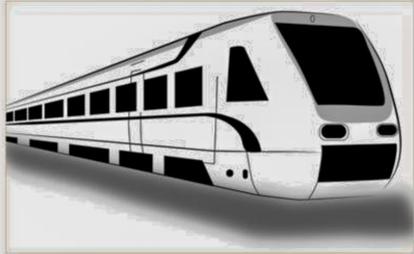
### Dhaka-Rajshahi direct train service needed

A few years ago, a friend of mine was travelling from Plymouth to Preston in the UK. Before the journey started, the station announced that the train would be five minutes late. My friend was surprised to receive notification of a delay as short as five minutes. Given that he missed his next connecting train from Birmingham, the train authorities enquired after where he needed to go, and arranged for a car that would personally drop him to the Preston station, without any extra charges. They did this for all passengers.

It is hard to imagine such treatment here. While travelling on the Rajshahi train, passengers are notified only when the delay surpasses an hour or more. The toilets are never cleaned. A 3-4 hour journey from Rajshahi to Dhaka takes more than six hours. We urge the government to clear out these issues of inefficiency. We would like them to introduce a Dhaka-Rajshahi direct train that will maintain quality standards and guarantee a journey of 3-4 hours.

On another note, the government has increased train fares twice so far, which is inconvenient for less privileged passengers like rickshaw-pullers and other struggling labourers. We urge the concerned authorities to introduce some compartments for those who can only afford cheaper fares.

Mawduda Hasnin, Rajshahi



### THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

Bangladeshi media was dominated by the Teesta water sharing issue which, as predicted, still remains unsolved with the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee saying that there is not enough water there to share.

Bangladeshis are, however, being asked to get over this disappointment because of the nearly USD 10 billion worth of agreements signed between some of the leading companies of the two countries in the power, energy, logistics, education and medical sectors. And because India will give Bangladesh USD 5 billion in loans, which includes USD 500 million in military assistance.

Not everything about the loan has been made clear yet, but what we do know is that the credit for the military sector has been given by India with 1 percent interest to be repaid over the next 20 years. The rest of the loan too is concessional with terms and conditions that are reportedly quite favourable for Bangladesh. More so, even than what China agreed to during President Xi's visit to the country. But with regards to the USD 10 billion deals, as always, the devil is in the details.

Of the USD 10 billion, USD 1.6 billion is a facility agreement for debt financing the construction of the 1,320 MW Maitree Power Project in Rampal, between the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company and Exim Bank of India, which has widely been opposed based on its possible ramifications for the Sunderbans.

Another major portion will be spent on a hydropower facility to be built in Nepal by an Indian private company. In that regard, a Memorandum of Understanding worth USD 3.15 billion

was signed by the Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) and India's NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam Ltd to import 500 MW of power from the facility.

However, a controversial guideline introduced by India may prevent Bangladesh from cheaply importing electricity from Nepal directly, through Indian territory, as the guideline does not allow such electricity transit. Rather, India may 'facilitate' such trans-border trade of electricity through its own agencies that will buy electricity from a neighbouring country and sell it to another under separate bilateral

agreement is honoured. The PDB already signed a supplementary agreement with the same Indian company to import 60 MW power from a gas-fired power plant in Tripura for Tk. 645 per kilowatt-hour - said to be a "high price" by Bangladeshi experts. What is frustrating in this specific case is that India had transported heavy machinery for the power plant from West Bengal to Tripura, through Bangladesh, paying no fees.

Under another agreement, Adani will sell electricity from its power plant in Jharkhand to the PDB for US 8.658 cents per unit and Reliance from its power

plant to be installed at Meghnaghat for US 7.3123 cents, which are both reportedly higher than recent prices offered by Bangladeshi companies. Moreover, a contract signed to import 250,000 tonnes of diesel per year between the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation and Numaligarh Refinery Limited will again cost Bangladesh a higher premium compared to rates in the international market.

While the benefits of all these deals may seem skewed more towards India than Bangladesh, what is certainly in India's favour is the balance of trade between the two countries. According to



agreements (such as the one mentioned).

The reason this 'guideline' is controversial is because the eight-nation SAARC organisation, back in November 2014, signed a framework agreement which said that member states would try to waive export/import duties, fees and other charges for cross-border trade of electricity which the Indian guideline contradicts by providing for tariff and transmission charges on cross-border trade of electricity through Indian territory. This will likely cost Bangladesh more to import electricity from Nepal through India, unless the SAARC

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data from the Indian High Commission, Bangladesh imported goods worth USD 5.45 billion from India and exported goods worth USD 689.62 million in fiscal 2015-16. To bring some parity to the great disparity, India had, in 2011, offered zero-duty benefit to most Bangladeshi products.

But only the following year, the Indian government had imposed a 12.36 percent countervailing duty on Bangladeshi apparel shipments - the country's main export item. Another major blow was dealt recently when the Indian government imposed an anti-dumping duty on Bangladesh's jute exports. The significance of this should not be overlooked as India used to account for about 30 percent of Bangladesh's jute shipments.

But because of the anti-dumping duty, jute good export to India already fell, year on year, by 52 percent to 6,872 tonnes in January and 37 percent to 6,155 tonnes in February, according to data from Benapole customs. Back when the duty was imposed, Bangladeshi traders had hoped that the issue would be resolved during the PM's recent India visit. Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

In general, it seems then that the Bangladeshi government has again agreed to deals with India which, on paper, seem to benefit India more than it does Bangladesh, as has been the case quite often lately. Although Bangladeshis may not be too unhappy to provide India concessions at times, given the history that the two countries share, how long are such sentiments likely to last, if concessions continue to be as one sided as some argue they have been over the last few years?

This is something that the Indian side should seriously evaluate. And what the Bangladeshi side should assess is: why have deals between the two countries lately seemed to its own citizens, to have favoured India more than Bangladesh? This is something the Bangladeshi government must provide answers to, to those that it represents.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.

## Why have we failed to promote tourism?

### OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

of Bangladesh, a matter of shame and concern for us. We Bangladeshis - a self-applauding nation - now have to acknowledge some of our fundamental problems when dealing with foreign visitors. We need to tackle these challenges as soon as possible if we are to enjoy the economic and financial benefits from the tourism sector, which could be a hugely prospective source of income for the country 20 years from now.

Even without reading Rabindranath, Nazrul, Dwijendra Lal or Jibonananda, we know how beautiful our country is. Boating in the Kaptai lake of Rangamati could be one of the exhilarating experiences for anyone in the world. We possess the longest sandy beach in the world, Cox' Bazaar, as well as the largest mangrove in the world, the Sunderbans. Our list of natural wonders in non-exhaustive. Bangladesh has hills, rivers, beaches, forests, and a great tradition of cultural diversity - attributes that should be attractive enough to draw world travellers.

We are actively seeking foreign direct investments (FDIs) yet we can hardly manage slightly over 2 billion dollars, which is one percent of GDP. Tourism already provides for 2.4 percent of our GDP. We can easily turn this to 5 percent, which is still a rather conservative estimate as globally, on average tourism accounts for a

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higher percentage of countries' GDP. The travel and tourism sector provides over 10 percent of global GDP and ensures 10 percent of world employment. Given our natural treasures and the prospective goldmine of tourism, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, we can reach the global average in 20 years. Reaching half of the global average - 5 percent of our GDP in 10 years - is very feasible. However, the main challenge is to revitalise relevant institutions and correct the bureaucratic mindset if we are to improve tourism in our country.

The government's failure to understand how tourism can be improved lies in the post-independence socialist manner of intervention in tourism. It is a constantly evolving, innovative business where currently, the government's capacity to remain at the cutting edge seems entirely impossible. A nation does not hire bureaucrats, whose main task is to administer the country with the rules and regulations crafted by lawmakers at the Parliament, to cause impediments in

## PM'S VISIT TO INDIA

# The devils in the details

potentially profitable sectors like tourism. In the post-independence vacuum, we erroneously pushed the bureaucrats to run mills, factories, and even the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC). Expectedly, the nation spawned a series of failures, as in the case of flop movies where the director seizes the role of the hero in the film. In Southeast Asia, which saw the highest growth in tourism in the last 30 years, the governments mainly provided the mega infrastructure and security. The rest was left to private enterprises that championed a thriving hospitality industry.

Much to our surprise, the government formed a new body to promote tourism, the Bangladesh Tourism

outperformed Pakistan in the counts of safety and security, ground transportation, and natural resources. But in the counts of 'tourist service infrastructure,' India ranks 110, Pakistan 125, and Bangladesh 133, which is the worst in the world index if we ignore Congo, Burundi, and Sierra Leon. And that is the main point as to why our tourism does not flourish.

Dhaka's airport, which recently has been labelled as Asia's ninth worst, is the first point of distress for tourists. Although it failed to be tourist-friendly, it succeeded in being the best mosquito-friendly airport in the world. Bathrooms have an unbearable stench and there are no paper towels there probably to ensure

environmental justice? After washing their hands, people are forced to aggressively shake their hands - an exercise that helps blood circulation and muscle building. Passengers avoid any transit in Dhaka to minimise their sufferings. Recently, one comment in the airport quality survey reported the presence of stray cats in Dhaka's airport, indicative of our soft hearts and love for biodiversity. Waiting for the luggage develops the mental faculty of tourists through patience and prayer. The time has come to build a new international airport with a grand view and all modern facilities to boost tourism. Of course, the service staff should be prompt and cordial as they are in the airport of smiles, Bangkok. Tourists fly in search of warmth and recreation - the same way the Siberian birds fly to Jahangirnagar University lakes.

As a resident, I do not believe Dhaka is one of the worst liveable cities in the world, although the index claims as such. But when it comes to traffic, I believe the notoriety is well deserved. A Patalrail (underground train) is no alternative to rescue a dysfunctional Dhaka. The metro rail on the surface (if ever built) will work like a palliative paracetamol for a patient with an appendix pain. Making the entire Chittagong Hill Tracts more tourist-friendly with all amenities is imperative. Creating tourism zones in the style of economic zones will further boost the industry, stimulating economic growth in a Rupashee Bangladesh.

The government need not maintain so many authorities in the name of promoting tourism. They should be consolidated and should be merged with appropriate institutions like the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA). Economists find a positive association between the growth of tourism and FDIs. Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam would never have enjoyed that high level of foreign investments had they not actively helped private enterprises accelerate tourism. In the last two years, Vietnam progressed eight steps up in the tourism index to occupy the 67th position, enabling the economy to draw huge foreign investments in the same time frame. The relationship between tourism and investment is symbiotic and synergic: they feed each other to spur economic growth.

Why did Bangladesh do worse than Pakistan? Under different components of the index, Bangladesh

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Picturesque destinations like the Ratargul Swamp Forest in Sylhet should be able to draw tourists with ease. But due to poor management, Bangladesh's tourism industry remains extremely weak.

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED