

Finance minister's honest observation

Follow it up with action

WE are greatly heartened by the finance minister's bold and timely (some may say very late) observation that government interference is responsible for the rise in the amount of classified loans, in the Sonali Bank in particular, and in other state-owned banks. We commend him for his candour and forthrightness. These are the traits that earn him our respect.

We have seen that the finance minister shows the gumption, occasionally, to call a spade a spade. He must have been aware of this state of affairs for some time. We assume it must have been its gigantic nature and the ever-increasing tendency that triggered his outburst.

Indeed, classified loans in the state-owned banks have been on the rise for many years despite the continuous rescheduling of loans, which should have convinced the government that the big and habitual defaulters have made "rescheduling" into a game and never intended to repay their debts at all. Experts have been repeatedly saying that the risk posed to our economy by the ill-discipline in the financial sector has actually been increasing gradually because of this tendency.

While we thank him for his frankness, we would be remiss if we did not bring to the notice of the minister the vital and central role of the finance ministry, and of the finance minister himself, in stopping the rot in the banking sector by addressing the problems that have been plaguing the sector for years. With that in mind, we hope that the ministry will take substantive action to improve the condition of not only our state-owned banks but also the financial sector as a whole by restoring discipline therein.

Question leak an ingrained malady

Short-term measures will not cure it

IT may be premature to talk about short- or long-term cure for a malady that has become entrenched in our psyche when we cannot see any worthwhile measure at all to combat this menace. The distressing aspect is that the demand for leaked questions is growing incrementally, for exams of all levels, including class I. That, regrettably, exposes the attitude of parents of children in their formative years, who seek out leaked questions. Are we looking at a future generation whose life would have been built on dishonesty, because their parents were not interested in what they learned but only in their grading?

Last year ended with reports of widespread leakage, and this year has started with the same news. The education minister was very unconvincing in his denial on the very first day of the ongoing SSC exams that the disclosed questions did not bear any similarity to the actual. The fact was different. In spite of his fire and brimstone statements, the menace has continued. He has not spared the teachers, but blaming any one particular group will not help.

We have come to a point when the matter merits attention like any other epidemic, one that is eating away slowly at the vitals of the society. Admittedly, there is no quick fix for it. But knee-jerk reactions and ad hoc measures will not help either. Both short- and long-term measures are needed. But first of all, the systemic flaws and the loopholes must be corrected and plugged. And the cleansing must start with the ministry, and the education boards. That is where the primary problem lies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Are we ready for the next flash floods?

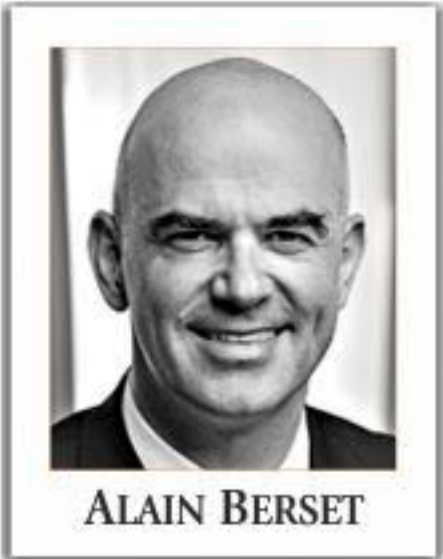
Last year, six districts of the north-eastern part of the country got affected by flash floods resulting from heavy rainfall and sudden gush of water from Meghalaya and Assam. These floods caused huge losses to the farmers, with around 2.5 lakh hectares of land inundated. Generally, flash floods hit the greater Sylhet region in April each year, but in 2017 they came a month earlier, which indicates a rapid change in the climate. Sunamganj was the worst affected among the districts as 113,000 hectares of its land were submerged, according to a report published by The Daily Star on April 14, 2017.

Therefore, pro-active planning and necessary preparedness are inevitable to reduce the loss. Introducing crop insurance and different social safety net programmes, increasing market opportunities by strengthening supply-chain management system, and improving early warning system could be some effective steps to reduce the loss and damage caused by flash floods.

SM Saify Iqbal, Dhaka



Broadening and deepening relations in the 21st century



SWITZERLAND and Bangladesh have been fostering good relations for decades. For many years, contacts primarily revolved around development cooperation efforts. As important as that field is, our goal must be to move ahead and broaden bilateral relations between our two countries. Attention is increasingly shifting to trade, cultural exchanges and cooperation at international level.

I hope that my visit to Bangladesh—the first by a Swiss president—leads to even closer exchanges in these areas, and I am looking forward to the talks with Hon'ble President H E Md Abdul Hamid, Hon'ble Prime Minister H E Sheikh Hasina and other members of her cabinet. Switzerland and Bangladesh are old friends who are renewing their acquaintance. We can draw on the past and recall that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman envisaged the future state of Bangladesh as the "Switzerland of the East." Or we can stress current similarities, such as the fact that both countries, despite their totally different geographies, are particularly affected by the impact of climate change. That calls for a common commitment.

What is particularly urgent right now is the relief effort for the Rohingya refugees. Switzerland expressly acknowledges the important role played by the authorities and people of Bangladesh in tackling the crisis. Switzerland too has been swift to strengthen its humanitarian efforts in Bangladesh and has increased its emergency aid budget. This will help to provide refugees from Myanmar with food and water, build accommodation and invest in sanitary facilities. Switzerland is also providing support for the infrastructure and equipment at two state hospitals, and is helping with efforts to improve access to the health system in



Harano Sur (Lost Tune) by Reetu Sattar at the Dhaka Art Summit 2018. The Summit is partnered by the Pro Helvetia Foundation of Switzerland.

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSEHD

and around Cox's Bazar. I will use my visit to see the situation for myself.

Switzerland's strengthened humanitarian efforts build on the decades of Swiss-Bangladeshi cooperation. Swiss projects in the areas of local governance encourage political participation by the local population and support local administrative structures in providing important services. The aim of Swiss development cooperation is to improve the living standards of poor and disadvantaged population groups.

Upturn in economic relations

Thanks to its continually high rates of economic growth and its impressive poverty reduction measures, Bangladesh is approaching the World Bank's defined status of a middle-income country. In view of the ongoing challenges, I congratulate the country on these successes and look forward to the prospective upturn in our bilateral economic relations. Switzerland and Bangladesh enjoy mutually beneficial bilateral economic relations; growth in bilateral trade has almost doubled over

the past seven years. Swiss knowhow is appreciated in Bangladesh, notably thanks to the presence of numerous Swiss companies. Bilateral investment has also been growing, proving the strong relationship between Swiss and Bangladeshi businesses.

Bangladesh's strong textile and garment industry, whose exports to Switzerland account for a major share of bilateral trade, benefits from Switzerland's support via the International Labour Organization's "Better Work Bangladesh Programme." The broad range of training services has helped to generate a strong industry presence and boost technical capacity.

Significant opportunities for economic exchanges exist in a number of other areas including the green economy and information and communications technologies. Switzerland has a lot of knowhow in these fields. Switzerland recognises Bangladesh's efforts in further strengthening democracy and rule of law which are instrumental for deepening of our bilateral political and economic relations. In this spirit, Switzerland will

continue to work with the government of Bangladesh, as well as civil society organisations and NGOs.

Perceived distance shrinking

Alongside political and economic affairs there is a third area in which cooperation between our two countries is gaining momentum, namely cultural exchange. I am particularly delighted that a beacon project such as the Dhaka Art Summit, partnered by the Pro Helvetia Foundation, is taking place during my visit. Culture is an outstanding and enjoyable way of coming together.

Decades of globalisation, hastened further still by digitalisation, mean that the perceived distance between Asia and Europe is rapidly shrinking. And that is necessary because the world faces challenges that can only be tackled together. I am therefore very grateful to President Hamid for inviting me to Bangladesh. I am looking forward to the visit and our countries' next steps together.

Alain Berset is President of the Swiss Confederation. He is on a four-day visit to Bangladesh.

Going Digital

Realising the dreams of a Digital Bangladesh for all



SEVEN years and many grey hairs ago, two friends and I authored a book together on the digital transformation taking place in the country where we made bold

proclamations on everything from widespread digitalisation of government services and ubiquitous computer-based education to booming software and IT services exports and a deeply entrenched knowledge-based digital economy. The book's eponymous title was pregnant with the promise of digital emancipation. Today that promise, though partially realised, looms as a Pyrrhic victory casting gloomy aspersions over the dreamscape.

Since the mid-nineties, the whole world has been in thralls of the digital dreamscape. Every few years a new Internet search engine like Alta Vista, Ask Jeeves, Yahoo, Google or Yelp came along; a new email service like Hotmail, Yahoo Mail or Google Mail flourished; a new way to bare your soul to anyone via MySpace, Facebook, Google+, Tumblr or Twitter became available; a new messaging service like ICQ, Skype, FaceTime or Snapchat helped us connect to all and sundry; a new payment service like Square, Pogo, or Bitcoin hobbled along; a new mapping service like MapQuest, Google Maps, TomTom or Waze bamboozled us with uncannily accurate road directions; a new video service like Flickr, Hulu, Vimeo, or YouTube kept flooding us with videos of all kinds; and many other such crazy innovations kept popping up like stars on a virtual sky.

These web services and Internet applications became the cynosures of the cyber-world that commanded millions of dollars in start-up funding from sharp-eyed venture capitalists like Andreessen Horowitz co-founded by Marc Andreessen—the developer of the first web browser 'Mosaic' or from tech-savvy angel investors including celebrities like Ashton Kutcher of Two and a Half Men fame. Many a time these stellar web businesses brought billions in market value to entrepreneurs and investors alike. Presumably, there have been more self-made billionaires in the last two decades than in all of human history. And the pace of the cyber juggernaut is accelerating as we speak.

While we are mesmerised by several hundred-billion-dollar valuations of

Apple, Google, and Facebook, cyber pundits are already talking about the next killer app or the next search engine darling. And just imagine that 15 years ago nobody heard of the present-day 545-billion-dollar behemoth Facebook. Its purchase of Instagram in 2012 for a billion dollars raised a lot of eyebrows until the world was stumped by Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp for USD,19 billion in 2014. At the time of purchase, Instagram was two-and-a-half years old. To top the cyber-race to a billion dollars, in 2013 a barely-two-year-old Snapchat made headlines by turning down a three-billion-dollar cash offer from Facebook.

Speculations are rife in the blogosphere that in a few years we might even have a billion-dollar cyber start-up that might be only a few weeks old! Most of these audacious entrepreneurs are in their twenties and thirties and

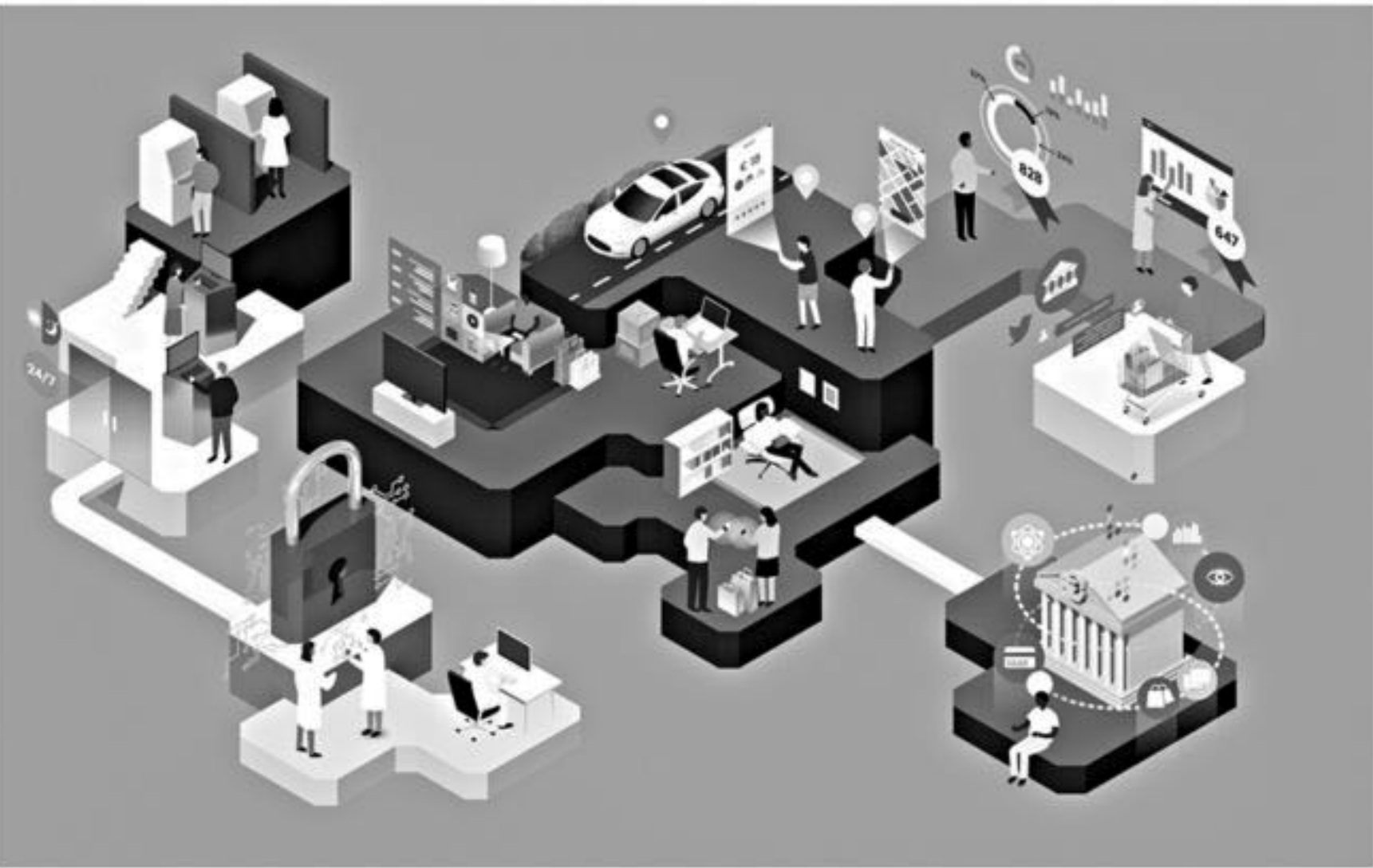


ILLUSTRATION: Jing Zhang/Mazakli.com

some are even in their teens. With such gold rush in cyber-space, no wonder young people the world over are totally psyched about becoming the next tech billionaire. All the mega stars of the cyber world are based out of the US and almost all of them are located in Silicon Valley—the tech industry wonderland straddling the narrow valley in between Stanford University and University of California at Berkeley.

However, there are thousands of other success stories that escape our attention as news of the giants of the tech world starve the minnows of press and media coverage. The lion's share of these medium to small stars of the cyber juggernaut are from outside the US and therein lies our hope, nay, our dream of catching a slice of the cyber supernova blindingly unfolding before our very eyes.

Unfortunately, we are still ill-prepared

to give our dreams a chase as severe weaknesses in both demand and supply sides of the industry douse our entrepreneurial fire and kill any budding cyber idea before it even has a chance to hatch.

On the demand side, neither have we been able to create a substantial e-commerce market locally nor have we been allowed to tap into the global e-commerce market. This failure is largely due to the absence of enabling regulatory and infrastructural environment both of which require positive interventions by the government and the legislature. Regulations and rules concerning online payments, digital transactions, IP telephony, mobile value-added services and data privacy are some of the areas where huge relaxations and opening up are required. In the last two decades, while the world raced ahead, we only made plans and bickered on

implementation.

On the supply side, the failures are many; we failed to create industry-specific skilled human resources that would have allowed entrepreneurs and investors to leapfrog the steep learning curve of cutting-edge technology; we failed to establish IT parks to insulate the entrepreneurs from the nefarious power and internet disruptions of the country; and we failed to adopt venture-capital-friendly regulation for cushioning the high risks associated with cyber investments.

Just as cyber businesses can create huge wealth out of thin air in a stride, a thriving cyber entity of today can also vanish into thin air tomorrow. In social media, MySpace and hi5 were huge hits at one time and now most people don't even remember them. Same goes for Alta Vista, Ask Jeeves and Yahoo—search

engines that ruled the day until Google came along. The cyber space is the new world that has already been discovered but a world that is continuously shape-shifting. Enterprising visionaries are fast claiming large chunks of that world but rapid changes in the landscape throw open new opportunities for land-grabbing all the time. Sadly, we are nowhere on the scene.

In all this doom and gloom, we still see scintillating signs of the promise we hold when a barely-eight-year-old local e-commerce venture gets an equity investment from the private investment arm of the World Bank at USD 10 million valuation, or a three-year-old local bike-hailing service gets valued at over USD 40 million. Many more are waiting in the wings only if we let them fly unhindered. The nation as a whole reached nine figures in software services export several years ago and is on course to reach ten figures within the next three years. However, we stand witness to the gradual transformation of a sleepy agrarian economy of the early 20th century into an emerging industrial hub of the 21st century that is steadily embracing digital technologies in all spheres of its socioeconomic activities. It may be impossible to imagine what the next 100 years will be like but it is certain that without a firm footing in the digital way of life, we shall be relegated to the gutters of history.

Despite a world-class ICT policy adopted nine years ago and the 'Digital Bangladesh' vision espoused by the government, we are not seeing any quantum leaps in digital developments. We have achieved a lot in the last 20 years but those are only incremental and disjointed developments that are pathetically short of an ecosystem that can spawn and nourish the digital dreams of our young IT entrepreneurs. These young entrepreneurs are well-poised to chase the cyber bounties not as a rainbow always just out of reach but as real-life incarnations of the next Alibaba.com—the e-commerce monolith of China—or the next Flipkart.com—the first billion-dollar e-commerce site of India. If any place in the world has the imaginative power to rewrite the knowledge of yesteryears, it is the land of Satendra Nath Bose, Lalou Shah and Rabindranath Tagore. Government policymakers, please unravel the shackles and let no one hold us back.

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Habibullah N Karim is an author, policy activist, investor and serial entrepreneur. He is a founder and former president of BASIS and founder/CEO of Technohaven Company Ltd. Email: hnkarim@gmail.com