

Putting water in the sand?

Reform before refinancing public banks

We find it absurd that the state-owned banks should ask for Tk 20,000 crore allocation in the next budget, despite continued poor performance of some of these banks. We have been pointing out the folly of bailing out corrupt institutions which refuse to institute changes in management in spite of several scams over the years. Regrettably, no significant steps have been taken to reform loan giving mechanism and oversight process of these banks. These are good examples of bad management and flouting of all banking rules to approve loans to parties that simply do not qualify for mega-sized bank credit!

Sadly, all advice by banking experts and the government's own fact-finding missions have been ignored. Instead, till date the government has tried to bail out these banks by pumping in Tk 14,505 crore of taxpayers' money. On the other hand, severity of the matter has been trivialised by terming the sums involved as peanuts.

Recapitalisation of public banks cannot take place year after year without taking concrete steps to plug the holes in the system that allow for loans to be given to dubious parties. While the small and medium sized enterprises that form the backbone of the economy find it very difficult to get loans from state-owned banks—here we are, handing out thousands of crores of taxpayers' money to banks that will continue to give out loans that will in all probability go “bad.” Today, the banking sector is in a sorry state, and unless the plunder is stopped, the regression may be irreversible.

Rafiq deserves a good turn by DU

Ease his distress

A meritorious student of Dhaka University, Ehsan Rafiq, was a victim of some BCL cadres' wrath. His pictures in newspapers demonstrate the viciousness of the beating he had been subjected to, for a very trivial reason. As a consequence, Rafiq has lost the use of his right eye; we hope only temporarily. But compounding the matter is the fact that he needs to go abroad for further treatment to improve the condition of his badly damaged eye. Unfortunately, his father, who is of modest means, cannot bear the expenses.

The father has requested the university authorities for monetary help, but has reportedly not received any response yet. We hope DU would demonstrate its empathy for the unfortunate victim of unbridled use of muscle power of party cadres in the university, and respond urgently to the request for ex-gratia help to give Rafiq a chance to restore his vision.

We are pleased to note that the committee set up to investigate the matter has already submitted its report. And what is equally important, apart from the monetary help, is for Rafiq to get justice. The report should be dealt with promptly at the monthly Senate meeting. The perpetrators should be dealt with in a matter that will not only be an example to others but will match the severity of their violence, which could eventually result in not only leaving a university student permanently blind in one eye, but also blunting his future prospects in life.

Finding balance in foreign trade



depreciating against the US dollar and pressure on the country's foreign reserves increasing.

The main cause for this has been imports, which went up by 25.76 percent year-on-year during July-December to USD 26.31 billion in 2017, according to Bangladesh Bank (BB) data; offsetting export growth of USD 17.69 billion (7.8 percent) such that the trade gap could surpass USD 19 billion in FY17-18, should the trend remain unchanged.

First half current account deficit in FY17-18 was already at its all-time high; USD 4.76 billion in contrast to USD 543 million in FY16-17. USD 40.23 billion worth of letters of credit were opened, also up 74.76 percent year-on-year, with import orders nearly doubling—led by purchases for the Rooppur nuclear power plant which amounted to USD 28.25 billion. That aside, the other most notable increases took place in the import of rice because of crop losses, capital machinery or industrial equipment used for production, and industrial raw materials.

The government is still failing to provide some of the most basic support to exporters even in our most well-established exporting industries. How it can be counted on to provide any substantive support to other sectors in the interest of export diversification is difficult to comprehend.

And that is not necessarily a bad thing (except in the case of crops). Because increased imports of capital machinery and industrial raw materials could increase overall output capacity in future and be indicative of growing confidence among businesses and investors. To achieve the right balance in foreign trade, therefore, the focus of policymakers should have been on formulating consistent and coherent export maximisation strategies.

That, however, has not been the case. This may be a little tricky to see at first glance, as export data does seem to indicate otherwise. For example, export earnings in July soared 26.54 percent to USD 3.2 billion led by garment, whose shipments rose 17.08 percent year-on-year to USD 2.47 billion in the month starting FY17-18, marking a strong rebound from FY16-17 that concluded in June, according to data from the Export Promotion Bureau.

In August, exports reached USD 3.64 billion, the



Bangladesh's trade deficit nearly doubled to USD 8.62 billion in the first half of fiscal year 2017-2018.

highest in a single month in the country's history, going up 10.64 percent from a year earlier and 13.75 percent from the previous month. In December, exports again increased by 8.42 percent over the same month in FY16-17, with garments fetching USD 14.77 billion in the first six months, up 7.75 percent from the same period a year ago, while export of jute and jute goods jumped 21.48 percent to USD 574.06 million. Yet, if we look at government policies in regard to the exports of garment and jute alone in that time-period, or their complete absence at key moments, the inconsistencies and incoherence become glaringly apparent.

To start with, what is interesting is that garment export struggled in the latter half of FY16-17, experiencing a decline even of 4.49 percent year-on-year in February; and surprisingly soaring in July, despite the European Union, which accounts for over 54 percent of our exports, banning direct cargo flights from Dhaka to the 28-nation bloc in June, following the lead of the UK (who just lifted the ban yesterday), Australia and Germany.

At the time, USD 1 billion worth of garment orders were being lost in a year due to the inefficiency of airport authorities, according to Siddiqur Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. Which means that losses incurred by exporters ever since have most likely been higher, as the decision further complicated matters by requiring Bangladeshi businesses to have their consignments re-screened at a third airport en route to an EU country.

This increased shipping time of goods to the EU from 17-18 hours to more than two days. And, as many airlines coincidentally reduced their cargo transport capacities from Bangladesh in that time, cargo congestion, especially because of problems also at the Chittagong Port, magnified considerably.

All this because the government had failed to set up the necessary screening and security mechanisms, and has continued to fail, even after all these months of the ban being in effect. Had that not been the case, how much more exports would have risen by and how much better off our balance of payment position would have been, is anyone's guess.

Earlier this week, it was reported that the

government had finally urged India to allow Bangladesh to use its airports for exporting goods to third countries. Again, what took the government this long to ask, or simply react to such a serious crisis, is difficult to predict or understand.

Meanwhile, jute exports too suffered a major setback because of the government itself, after it whimsically imposed a ban on the export of raw jute on January 18 to the complete shock of producers. This, once again, shows the incoherence in the government's thinking as it was jute exports that had played a vitally important role in FY16-17, when garment exports were down significantly.

This shows that the government is still failing to provide some of the most basic support to exporters even in our most well-established exporting industries. How it can be counted on to provide any substantive support to other sectors in the interest of export diversification—considered to be of highest importance by experts—is difficult to comprehend.

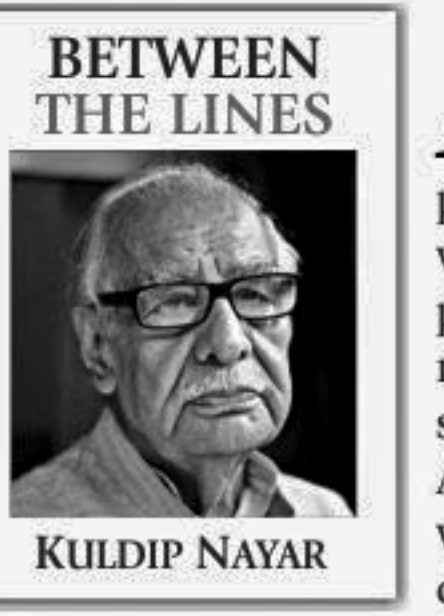
All is not gloom, however, as overall exports performance, despite the lack of policy support, is encouraging. Also encouraging is that, according to a recent report by this newspaper, BB “is set to upgrade the Bangladesh Automated Clearing House in a bid to help businesspeople settle their local export- and import-related transactions in a day instead of [the] existing 7-10 days.” The system should be up and running in early May.

Given such positive developments, the government doesn't really have to do a thousand things to better balance our trade accounts. Rather, it needs to formulate simple and coherent strategies to support exports in the long run.

Experts and stakeholders have already mentioned some key aspects such strategies should include—addressing congestions at various ports, ensuring adequate power, energy and infrastructure. The challenge now, it seems, is to make the government listen so that its policies change from being unplanned and erratic to something well-planned and concrete. That is the best way it can help increase exports and better balance our foreign trade.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

Asma Jahangir as I knew her



example was followed throughout the subcontinent. The place from where she announced the foundation of Human Rights Commission, an organisation to protect individual rights, also became the venue for meetings to normalise relations between India and Pakistan. I watched Asma putting great efforts to change the influence of religion on society. The bane of problems was the mixing of religion with politics.

Only a few days ago, she rang me from Lahore to say that she would now have more time to work for the normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan after marrying off her daughter. Maybe this was her way of telling that she had miles to go to change a religious-oriented society into a secular one.

Asma can have the satisfaction of having India and Pakistan on the same page even though their reluctance to come nearer to each other was apparent. Asma made Islamabad and New Delhi realise that they had no alternative except to sit across the table and discuss the reasons why the two could not bury the hatchets. Although New Delhi had decided that it would have no talks with Pakistan until the latter stopped giving shelter to the terrorists, Asma believed that there was still some room for a patch-up.

However, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj was unequivocal in her statement that New Delhi would have no discussion with Islamabad until it realised that terrorism and talks did not go together. Asma felt that Islamabad faced certain problems with the military which had to be sorted out before any meaningful meeting could take place. She was very positive about the

possibility of such a meeting and she could somehow persuade the powers-that-be to see reason.

But my disappointment is that there was little response in India on the death of Asma even though she had dared her country's military, the sworn enemy of India. It was heartening to see her devotion to the cause of improving relations between India and Pakistan. I always supported her efforts.



Colleagues of lawyer and rights advocate Asma Jahangir mourn during her funeral in Lahore on February 13.

I was allotted a bungalow as a member of the Rajya Sabha in Lodhi Estate where Asma would bring girls and boys from Pakistan to meet their counterparts in India. Asma named that place the Pakistan House. The boys and girls from Pakistan would shed tears as they would bid farewell to the boys and girls in India. She would also take the Indian youth to Pakistan so they could learn from the society which was tilting towards a particular religion.

Asma, a symbol of Pakistan's human

rights and resistance, was also a fierce opponent of military dictators for over four decades. She was also a strong advocate of India-Pakistan peace and was part of several “Track 2” delegations to India. Not only that, she has also had a prominent career as a lawyer after beginning her career as an advocate in the judiciary. She was also the chief of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan which indicates her popularity.

Even today, the Pakistani judiciary

I remember Asma taking on the might of martial law administrator Zia-ul-Haq in the early eighties when she was in the thick of the movement to restore democracy. She was imprisoned for leading the protest movement, but Asma had become a champion activist soon after. There were occasions when her lift was blocked but she braved those threats and continued to stand up against dictators. In the process, she helped establish the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which she also chaired later. She would often say that it was the Commission's duty to defend all religious minorities. The Commission during her chairmanship also tackled successfully highly charged blasphemy accusations along with cases of honour killings.

Asma also pioneered the women's rights movement in her country at a time when human rights were not considered an issue in Pakistan. Thanks to Asma, today people, particularly women, talk about their rights and even the political parties, including religious parties, realise the importance of women's rights. The credit for this goes to Asma.

One particular issue that Asma stoutly defended was the Christians charged with blasphemy. Several people from the minority community faced death penalty as blasphemy is an offence that attracted the severest punishment. She was also instrumental in fighting cases relating to the recovery of missing persons free of cost.

Asma won several awards including the Roman Magsaysay and the Peace Prize from the United Nations Development Fund. But for her, awards hardly meant anything. Her sole aim was to restore democracy in the country because of her unwavering belief in it.

Similarly, Asma not just fought for the people of Pakistan but also for people from all over the world, including the Palestine, and the struggles that people faced elsewhere. No doubt, she made a lot of enemies at home because of the battles she chose but she viewed the challenges as something that cannot be ignored. That speaks volumes of Asma.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Avoid racially insensitive content

Recently, a local television channel aired a telefilm called *Chobir Proticchobi*, which I later watched on YouTube. What particularly drew my attention was that the film featured two actors of African descent, who were referred to using the “n-word.” I do not understand how in this day and age derogatory terms such as this are allowed to be used on a public platform. True, racism isn't a big issue in Bangladesh and most of us aren't even aware of how bad it can be in the more advanced countries, but shouldn't the scriptwriters have at least researched before putting it out there? The film also featured two well-known Bangladeshi social media stars. What worries me is that their presense might have the effect of endorsing and promoting objectionable and racially insensitive remarks.

I think it's high time we stopped making telefilm to cater to a specific group of audience. There are many talented and seasoned actors, writers and directors in our media industry and their talent and knowledge should be utilised when producing content. In any case, social media stars, who hanker after instant fame, are not the best people when it comes to representing our society.

Zinath Jahan, By e-mail

