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Haor areas unprotected

No excuse for lack of progress in embankment construction

THIS year so far has been a particularly good one for farmers in the haor region of Sylhet as there have been no flash floods this season. As we already know, flash floods in the past two years had devastating consequences for people living in haor areas. But a year later, one thing still stands out. Construction of embankments, it seems, is far from being completed and anomalies are apparently rife, as per a report published in this paper on Tuesday.

This sounds awfully familiar. Similar allegations had plagued the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) last year. Had it not been for the failure of the BWDB to construct and repair embankments, the scale of destruction last year could have been drastically reduced and thousands of livelihoods protected. The calamity was largely manmade.

Why then has the construction work of embankments not yet been completed? The schedule for completion was February 28 which was then extended to March 15; two deadlines have already passed by. According to a community spokesperson, more than 90 percent of the scheduled work remains incomplete. Furthermore, government rules are being violated in constructing the embankments, resulting in their low quality.

There is no doubt that this time too, farmers would have had very little protection had there been flash floods but perhaps it was a stroke of luck that saved them this time around. It is incomprehensible as to why construction work is moving at a snail's pace when precisely such negligence was largely to blame for thousands of hectares of farmland being wiped out in the past years. Not only is it a waste of public money but also goes to show the BWDB's disregard for protecting the haor areas. There is clearly a need for oversight and monitoring in the construction of embankments, especially in light of past allegations of corruption against the BWDB, because haor people's fate simply cannot be left to chance.

Badarganj primary education in a fix

Why this shortage of headmasters?

WE fail to understand precisely why 65 out of 176 government primary schools of Rangpur's Badarganj upazila have no headmasters. The schools in question have been in operation without headmasters for a decade or more. Indeed, there is also a chronic shortage of assistant teachers. Hence, the quality of education and the overall administration in these institutions that serve the needs of 9,750 children have been severely hampered. In the absence of headmasters, senior teachers have been doubling as acting head masters and inevitably this puts pressure on maintaining both academic calendar and administration, neither of which runs smoothly.

Although we are informed that the Upazila primary education office has prepared a database of vacant positions in these schools and forwarded it to the Directorate of Primary Education, the bigger question here is why it took more than a decade for the upazila office to come to this realisation. We pride ourselves on our primary education enrolment, but if this is the state of staffing of teachers and administration in schools in one particular upazila, one wonders how bad the situation is all over the district or even in other districts.

It also points to a general lack of monitoring and assessment of the directorate in question. We cannot overemphasise the need for quality primary education. This is the time when children need to increase their knowledge of understanding and reasoning and getting the right education is crucial. The boys and girls of Badarganj upazila are being deprived of better education because of no fault of their own and we would hope the Directorate of Primary Education will take steps to recruit headmasters for the 65 schools as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BB should independently do its job

As private banks experience serious liquidity crises, it is essential for the Bangladesh Bank (BB) to intervene before things worsen any further. BB slashed the cash reserve requirement (CRR) by one percentage point down to 5.5 percent, effective from April 15.

The decision was completely unwarranted, and we wonder whether the BB is being allowed to function independently. Reducing the CRR will not protect the interest of depositors. Banks must strengthen their governance and recover non-performing loans to prevent liquidity crisis from recurring.

Biplob Chandra Das, University of Dhaka

Changing the English spelling of five districts

The government decided to change the English spelling of five districts a few days ago. It seems to me that the correction has not been done properly. I was happy to see that the government had attempted to correct their spellings but was disappointed with the end result.

To my understanding, Chattogram, Jashore and Barishal do not conform to the Bengali spelling and intonation. Chattogram should have been rewritten as Chottogram. Jashore should have been rewritten as Joshore, and likewise, Barishal should have been Borishal.

I hope that the concerned authorities will give the matter some thought and make the necessary changes forthwith.

Minhazul Azam, By email

Is LDC graduation a panacea?



SELIM RAIHAN

BANGLADESH has successfully met all three criteria for LDC graduation in the first review in March 2018. It is expected that Bangladesh will be able to meet the graduation criteria in the second review in 2021 and will finally graduate from the LDC status in 2024. Benefits of graduation from the LDC status are cited to include an improved country-image and higher rating for investment by international rating agencies which may attract larger foreign direct investment.

However, there are a number of risk factors for Bangladesh associated with its graduation from the LDC status. Simulation results from the global dynamic general equilibrium model suggest that the loss of preferences in the markets of European Union, Canada, Australia, Japan, India and China in 2027 (the year which will mark the end of preferences for Bangladesh if the country can officially graduate from the LDC status in 2024) might lead to an annual reduction in total exports of Bangladesh by 11 percent which would be equivalent to around USD 6 billion given the current projection of growth in exports. Also, many of the exemptions of WTO provisions, including the cut in tariff and subsidies and adherence to intellectual property rights (especially for pharmaceuticals sector), which are currently enjoyed by Bangladesh as an LDC, will no longer be available after 2027.

Furthermore, as Bangladesh has already graduated from the World Bank's "low-income" category to "lower-middle income" category, the scope for loans at lower interest rates would be limited. It is important to mention here that many of the aforementioned prospective benefits are not "automatic" as the country has to work quite a lot to materialise those benefits. In contrast, almost all of the possible losses would be "automatic" as soon as the country graduates from the LDC status. Therefore, the country has to prepare itself over the next nine years to counter these losses.

In order to have a better understanding of Bangladesh's progress

in the per capita Gross National Income (GNI) in a cross-country context over the period between 1980 and 2016, we have compared the experiences of 140 countries (excluding the high-income countries). It appears that Bangladesh was able to increase its per capita GNI from USD 206 in 1980 to USD 1,433 in 2016. There were some countries, like Somalia, Cambodia, Nepal, Chad and Myanmar, which had per capita GNIs lower than that of Bangladesh both in 1980 and 2016. However, most of the Sub-Saharan African countries had per capita GNIs higher in 1980 but lower in 2016 than that of Bangladesh. This suggests that Bangladesh outperformed

Bangladesh both in 1980 and 2016. But Bangladesh has been able to reduce the gaps in per capita GNIs by 2016 with some of these countries (mostly the slow-growing upper-middle income countries), but the gaps widened with some other countries (high growth performing countries like China, Singapore, Thailand, Botswana and Poland), compared to the gaps in 1980.

This analysis evokes that though Bangladesh's experiences in growth in per capita GNI over the past three and a half decades were much better than those of a number of countries, especially the Sub-Saharan African countries, Bangladesh was outperformed

and political institutions and quality service delivery by the public institutions are crucial in sustaining the development process.

LDC graduation is not a panacea. There are genuine concerns that though the business-as-usual process of economic and social development might lead Bangladesh to graduate from the LDC status by 2024, such business-as-usual process will certainly not lead to achieving the much larger and important development goals. Becoming a non-LDC and graduating from the current status of "lower-middle income" country to an "upper-middle income" country is not the same, and therefore, avoiding the



For Bangladesh, avoiding the middle-income trap and meeting the stiff SDG targets in the coming years will not be easy.

those Sub-Saharan African countries in terms of growth in per capita GNI over the last three and half decades. In contrast, interestingly, Vietnam and Lao PDR had per capita GNIs lower in 1980 but higher in 2016 than that of Bangladesh. Both Vietnam and Lao PDR outperformed Bangladesh during the period under consideration. In 1980, per capita GNIs of Vietnam and Lao PDR were only USD 43 and USD 102 respectively (much lower than that of Bangladesh) but increased to USD 2,059 and USD 2,237 respectively in 2016. There are some countries which had per capita GNIs higher than that of

by the leading growing economies of Southeast Asia and Africa. Given Bangladesh's poor record of attracting foreign direct investment, the high concentration of exports, weak competitiveness, and poor physical and social infrastructures, the country has to learn how these high-performing countries have been able to attract the large volume of foreign direct investment, noticeably diversify their export baskets, enhance competitiveness, and significantly improve physical and social infrastructures. Also, experience of most of these countries suggests that improvement in the quality of economic

"middle-income trap" would be a forthcoming challenge. On top of all these, attaining the stiff targets of SDGs by 2030 would be a gigantic task for Bangladesh. The changing global and regional scenarios also appear to be much more challenging. All these suggest that Bangladesh has to make some extraordinary efforts in its economic and social development process in the days to come.

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North Korea out of the cloister

SALMAN HAIDAR

IN an unexpected new development, North Korea has stepped out of its long-standing seclusion and taken a few steps to reach out into its neighbourhood, thereby doing something to breach its self-imposed isolation.

Few such gestures have been made by North Korea in the last several years—the country apparently preferring to follow its own course and remain aloof, even though the rest of its region teems with activity and Asia's fast-moving advance has become a synonym for economic progress across the globe.

North Korea has remained relatively quiet at a time when the other part of the sundered peninsula, South Korea, has galloped ahead and found place in the OECD group of developed countries. So

pressures for political and economic transformation may be taking shape in Korea, there is a sense that some sort of important change could be in the making.

As yet, North and South have not done much to bring significant easing of their mutual relations: there is no love lost between the different parties on the Korean peninsula which have been at daggers drawn for decades, always on the verge of serious discord and strife.

Pyeongyang lags economically behind but never concedes primacy to Seoul, and refuses to acknowledge its own relative economic backwardness. Each of the sides is well-armed and well-prepared for all consequences, as indeed they have been for many years: there have been occasional flashes of open conflict, and only very few calmer moments to provide a touch of relief. It is because of

experiences, which remain potent decades after the Korean war of the 1950s.

With all this, the important shift in the situation that brought North Korea into the reckoning was unexpected, even startling. Relations between that country and the USA had long remained hostile and there seemed no prospect of change, both having settled into a frozen relationship that left no room for anything but offensive exchanges. But in the midst of the long-standing harsh exchanges, a wholly unexpected reversal of events took place and North Korea and USA decided to bury their differences and turn a new leaf in their relations.

This abrupt change in events appears to owe much to President Trump, who is believed to pride himself on his deal-making ability and seemed very willing to

much was achieved through the exercise of Presidential choice.

North Korea and USA may still be far removed from the kind of cooperation that some may desire but their exchanges of the last few weeks have undoubtedly opened a new era that has put away, at least for the present, the bitter exchanges that marked their earlier relationship.

One of the important factors that appear to have had an impact on the changed situation is the rise of China and its enlarged influence on regional affairs. China has been North Korea's bulwark from the earliest days and has never lost its pre-eminence in this respect. It has sometimes looked like a difficult balancing act between China and the different countries of the area, riven as they are by diverse interests and conflicting demands.

The regimented, well-drilled society of the North has not lost its ability to take initiative as and when the need arises, and it has now shown readiness to join the USA in the kind of venture that required unaccustomed flexibility from both sides.

Perhaps the crucial factor that has induced a measure of change in East Asia is North Korea's decision to arm itself with a nuclear weapon. This has been a profoundly disturbing development, for reasons that are very well known but yet it would seem that North Korea has ventured into this very sensitive territory, to the great complication of its expectation of any sort of normal association with others in its region.

Non-proliferation is a very important doctrine for Japan and will no doubt continue to attract sanctions as it has for many decades, even if the USA finds a less stringent way of expressing its views. Nor can it be supposed that the nuclear and other challenges remote from India, for neighbouring Pakistan has laboured intensively to obtain a nuclear weapon and has succeeded in meeting its goal.

North Korea took the initiative in this respect, fearing that it could be subjected to nuclear attack and should therefore be enabled to defend itself with all manner of weapons, including nuclear weapons.

Pakistan has ostensibly followed much the same path, though it has been led into a dangerous strategy of brandishing nuclear weapons at its foes, including India.

Asia's eastern rim has at times been overwhelmed by problems and beset with instability. However, there seems to be a calmer prospect for the immediate future. President Trump's forceful ways appear to have paid off for the present, to the benefit of the affairs of the region. But further tests lie ahead.

Salman Haidar is India's former foreign secretary. Copyright: The Statesman/Asia News Network



North Korean cheerleaders prior to the women's preliminary round ice hockey match between the unified Korea team and Switzerland. North and South Korea took advantage of the Olympic sporting assembly which permitted large numbers of athletes to come together and revive memories and experiences.

PHOTO: AFP

far as India is concerned, Seoul has become one of its valuable economic partners, having outstripped its counterpart, which has been left standing in its wake.

Why this reversal of economic fortune should have taken place in Korea is not easy to divine, but it has happened and a pattern of economic advancement has taken place, and after so many years it is difficult to see what sort of alternative may be available to Pyongyang.

Nevertheless, and without seeing how far change can reach and what sort of

this long and unhappy background that the most recent developments have given a hint of change and brought a measure of hope that matters could improve.

Internal changes in North Korea have been an important part of the changing scenario, with some slight easing of movement so as to permit a little coming and going between North and South. And there have been other helpful gestures too, with the parties taking advantage of the great Olympic sporting assembly that permitted large numbers of athletes to come together and revive memories and

come to terms with Pyongyang.

Before the parties got together and made common cause, it seemed most unlikely that they would succeed. But President Trump proved his staff and his advisers wrong, wresting himself free of the constraints normally attached to a Head of State, and taking in his own hands his country's dealings with North Korea.

The foreign policy purists were taken aback, as well they might have been, and nobody would recommend such a course as the standard way of dealing with such situations. But in this particular case,