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The new Bangladesh that is taking shape

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"I DON'T believe that we are a poor country. It is a perception that needs to be dispelled," says Bangladesh High Commissioner to Malaysia, Mohammed Masood Aziz, of the nation often described as among the poorest in the world.

At first glance, this appears a most perplexing statement from an economist by training, given the facts as they appear to most of the world.

There are numerous questions that come to mind as one tries to decipher his contentious remark about the relative wealth of his nation.

Has he considered the fact that the Bangladesh economy is in part dependent on remittances that hundreds of thousands of young men repatriate to their families to buy so-called "luxury" products that many elsewhere take for granted.

In Malaysia alone, there are 82,000 Bangladeshi workers - a mere fraction of the 400,000 before the 1997 Asian financial crisis - whose remittances help, to a certain extent, to keep the economy afloat.

Is he not aware that the 32-year history of the nation less than half the size of Malaysia but with almost 140 million people has hinged on efforts to keep the economy intact while grappling with more than its share of natural disasters?

That political in-fighting has consumed most of the people the rest of the time?

Does he realise that Malaysia with its RM6 billion investment and Japan and South Korea with their even bigger investments have helped provide the jobs and wages that Bangladeshis urgently need?

Masood, once the secretary-general of the South Asia Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) Chamber of Commerce and Industry, readily accepts that his statement needs explanation extending beyond the pale of the usual per capita income comparisons.

Prefacing his comments with the remark that he has a different picture to paint of Bangladesh, he rushes into an explanation that reveals the depth of his conviction and the reality of his perception.

He eschews the popular belief that the relative well-being of a nation has to be measured by how much the people earn on the average (RM1,500 last year).

Masood prefers to look to an unlikely indicator - the daily calorie intake - for a more equitable answer. The average Bangladeshi consumes 1,800 calories, he says with characteristic zeal, adding that 60 per cent enjoyed a 2,200 calorie diet equal to that of North Americans, Europeans or, for that matter, Malaysians.

"It is very good mix of food. It is a balanced diet of rice, fish and lentils. And we are talking three square meals a day," he told the New Sunday Times in an hour-long interview recently on a host of issues, including Bangladesh today.

To this optimistic perspective, he says, one has to add the strength of the 30 million-strong middle class.

"The middle class is enormous," he says, adding that the 20 per cent of Bangladeshis who fell into this category amounted to more than the combined population of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

"This is the point that I am trying to present to potential investors in Malaysia and the region - look at the market side. We have nearly 30

million people with effective demand."

He cites the example of how 300 units of Proton cars were snapped up in a day when sales opened in Dhaka, with 2,000 units to be delivered by the end of the year and 5,000 reconditioned Proton cars to be bought for use as taxis.

Clearly, Masood prefers to see the silver lining and not the grey clouds which hover around when he scans Bangladesh's horizon.

Many would, however, find fault with the veracity of his argument, subjective as it is.

He wittingly refuses to reflect on the living standards of the 110 million other ordinary folk who have not much more than the high calorie food that they eat and the roof over their head.

But the former director-general of the Foreign Ministry is, obviously, satisfied with his reading of the situation, a view that he ardently wants others to share.

"Since 1971, we have added 55 million people to the population. We had to sacrifice valuable agricultural land for homes. Yet, we are self-sufficient in food," he says with the satisfied look of a true believer in Bangladesh's success story.

It appears that a light is truly at the end of the tunnel, lit by the very people who have taken their destiny into their hands and a few Asian countries like Malaysia, Japan and South Korea which have proven to be loyal friends.

In this, he feels that Malaysia can play an important role in terms of investments besides exporting technology and know-how, especially in ICT to Bangladesh.

He is also extremely happy with Telekom Malaysia's role as the second largest cell phone service supplier with a nearly RM800 million investment base there.

"The future in the telecommunications industry in Bangladesh is immense. TM is among the leaders there today," he said adding that Bangladesh still needs a million cell phones.

Masood attributes Malaysia's close ties to Bangladesh to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who he feels has a soft spot for the country.

He feels that Dr Mahathir, who has visited Bangladesh twice since 1992, has a special place in his heart for the country "which shares a common ethos with Malaysia".

The articulate 56-year-old first-time envoy dazzles with his facile speech when it comes to describing the relationship between Bangladesh and Malaysia and Dr Mahathir's pivotal role in the equation.

The interest that Dr Mahathir kindled in Bangladesh among Malaysians with his first visit to the country has snowballed.

Today, a variety of Malaysian companies has entered, or are on the threshold, of investing in the country.

This has expanded to the Penang State Government's interest in encouraging some of its consumer electronics factories to relocate to Bangladesh.

At this juncture, it will be useful to go back into history for a look at Bangladesh and the variables that have forged the country into what it is today.

When Bangladesh came into being after the war of liberation, few were convinced that it could survive the economic and political turmoil that would inevitably come its way.

After being attached for decades to the political and economic centres of West Pakistan through an umbilical cord that stretched more than 1,000 kilometres, independence was both welcomed and, justifiably, feared.

A mere 23 years of being the eastern half of a nation which itself had been yet to recover from its birth pangs, the tiny nation on the banks of the Ganges, Jamuna and Meghna rivers came into existence on a bed of problems.

It was a land in turmoil; its institutions rent by a struggle over the right to its own culture, language and political existence. This would lead to a brief but unforgettable time of upheaval like that never seen before.

Yet, slightly more than three decades and much introspection and action later, the nation is surprising detractors with its resilience.

Not that all vestiges of the uncertainty of the last three decades have disappeared.

Bangladesh still suffers from an image-problem, both of its own making and from popular perceptions within the international community that refuse to die.

For one, it still wears the face of poverty despite the emergence of a broad band of middle class citizens who are proving to be the engine of domestic economic growth.

For another, it is still unable to discard the mantle of restive politics, a mark of much of the Indian sub-continent despite the relative calm in Dhaka these days.

Masood makes light of the political feuding in Bangladesh, a phenomena that has enveloped society in the nation since the 1970s, describing it as "a reflection of the intellectual vibrancy of politics in our country".

With most of the interview over, it seems strange that Masood has yet to speak of the role of the international media in painting a picture of Bangladesh as a nation that never should have been with a natural catastrophe occurring ever so often.

But he does not disappoint and delves, for a few quick moments, into the alleged sins of the international media who, he seems to think, have failed to portray Bangladesh in its correct perspective.

He blames them for perpetuating misconceptions "like the one that disaster is the order of the day in Bangladesh."

But quickly the dark moment of recrimination is over and Masood is back to thinking of the future.

With seasoned diplomats like Masood making strides in telling the world about the new Bangladesh taking shape, it appears that half the battle of perceptions may already have been won.

The ball is now in Bangladesh's court to win the other half by walking the talk and earning its rightful place in the community of successful nations.

Note: The bilateral trade balance stood at nearly RM1 billion in Malaysia's favour with Bangladesh exporting RM130 million, mainly in marine and agricultural products and jute and importing RM870 million, largely palm oil and electronics.