



Political acrimony, ties with NGOs worry donors

Bangladesh Development Forum meets tomorrow

STAFF REPORTER

Law and order, confrontational politics, corruption and government-NGO relations will top the agenda of the much-talked-about Bangladesh Development Forum meeting 2004 scheduled to start in the city tomorrow.

The development partners' platform, known as the local consultative

group (LCG) has already prepared a 21-point discussion paper which states that the government is yet to set up an independent human rights commission as promised. It has also expressed concern over the attitude of the law enforcing agencies against opposition political parties in carrying out their political programmes.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia

would inaugurate the BDF 2004 meeting at Hotel Sonargoan at 5 pm.

Though the BDF has lost much of its importance as for the last few years the tradition of committing a specific amount of aid was given up in the mid-90s, the meeting is crucial to determine the attitude of the donors who take their required

feedback from the government side.

Sources said that the government would seek additional assistance to combat corruption, improve law and order, and to improve infrastructure. Besides special assistance might be sought for preparing the country's textile and clothing sector to cope with the post-MFA challenges. The entire demand package for the next year would be nearly 1.4 billion dollars.

The BDF, popularly termed the Paris Consortium as the annual meeting of the Forum used to be held in Paris previously, will find Dhaka as its venue for the fourth time after 1973, 1997 and 2003.

The BDF 2004 will have seven working sessions on various issues that include PRSP, governance, partnership between NGOs and the government, infrastructure development, improvement of trade and investment climate, improvement of human development and utilisation of foreign aid.

Though the government would enjoy a very comfortable situation on the issue of macro-economic achievements for the progress that was attained last year in improving different macro economic fundamentals, including forex reserves situation, floating of exchange rate, budget deficit and monetary reform, the donors are likely to be critical issues on the overall governance issue.

Many donors are really worried over the intensification of political instability and acrimony and if things

continue like this, the country would definitely fail to utilise the aid money, noted a donor representative belonging to an Asian country.

He said that it was the responsibility of both the government and the opposition to bring back normalcy on the political stage as without a stable political environment, the donor's effort to make the country successful in achieving its poverty reduction target would be futile, he added.

But the good news for the government is that the World Bank has already promoted the country from the lower case to middle case in its annual evaluation report.

Another burning issue is the NGO-government relationship. The western donors are vocal about the issue and the recent handling of a leading NGO and the government's efforts to make regulations on NGO activities has sent a wrong signal to the donors.

At a meeting with the government side, some ambassadors of European countries recently observed that more regulations would pave the way for more government control.

Even the NGOs who are known to be sympathetic to the ruling party expressed concern over the high-handedness of the law enforcers against some leading NGOs. But the government maintained that the NGOs indulging in political activities under the signboard of NGO would be taken to task.

The high officials of the World Bank, the coordinator of the BDF,

recently made it clear that the reform of the police administration would be focus of their attention at the BDF as they believe that this was crucial to improve the poor law and order situation.

Many other donors felt that though the government initiated some steps in this regard, it failed to make any significant progress in improving law and order.

The government would also face criticism on the issue of privatisation as the drive has slowed down. The governments initiatives in carrying out reforms in the banking sector encouraged the development partners but the failure to privatise the losing state-owned enterprises which were listed for privatisation initially was interpreted as lack of commitment from the government's side.

Many donors felt that the delay in the formation of the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission might be seen as lack of sincerity on the issue when the criticism was that the administration was tainted with corruption.

Despite all the negative criticism, high-ups in the government believe that compared to the other poor countries, the overall performance of the country in the economic sector would be sufficient to convince the development partners to expand their aid net.

Another issue would be the finalisation of the PRSP in line with World Bank prescribed millenium development goal.