

Sharing the Grief and Distress

For Bangladesh, since April 30, there is no news but one news. The print media is stretching itself to the point bursting in its efforts to be up to the job. The electronic media, television in particular, is bringing to all homes the horror that is life in the devastated offshore islands. There has literally been a surfeit of exposure for the disaster — even before the main hit areas have been reached in any effective manner.

Life in Dhaka, as elsewhere in the unaffected towns and villages, however, presents a picture of shocking contrast. There is no sign anywhere that anyone, any family, and section of people have been touched and moved by the tell-tale pictures and the voluminous coverages of suffering and death.

Bengalees are a politicised nation, so goes one of the popular generalisations. One cannot but tend to agree with the generalisation when one of the 'movements' takes hold of the society or there is an election fever of the kind we had in February. Politics informs our life—very truly indeed. A virtual *keyamat* or doomsday strikes the eastern coastal region, kills more than 200 thousand instantly and affects a rated 10 million — the Bengalees cease to be a politicised nation! No political party — the masters of the people's mind — goes to the streets with their acorns of workers and supporters — to express grief, to declare solidarity with the victims, to inspire people to a spirit of sacrifice.

Harking back to Dhaka's response to the Midnapore cyclone devastations in the early forties, Dhaka's streets rang with the melodic "Bhikkha Dao Ogo Purabashi". The whole city wept with them. And every man and woman came forward with their mite. On the apocalyptic 12th of November, the '70 Tsunami or 'Gorki' struck — on the 18th a three-mile long bare-foot procession of the best men and women of the city went round the streets. Out of that grew the biggest private relief effort — the Durjoy Nirodh Andolan Committee's expedition to Char Kajal in Galachipa. Even the other day when inland spates in rivers flooded hundreds of villages but no threat to life was posed other than through the outbreak of diarrhoeal epidemics — hundreds of boys got down to making ORT packets and hundreds of girls bent their heads to roll out chapatis. And dozens of brigades carried the food and drug to the spots.

Is this the same Dhaka? Dhaka always sets a pattern for the rest of the country to follow. Dhaka has not as yet been seen overly distressed by the doomsday visitation over the Bay regions in spite of a 'national mourning day' which passed off as hollow and as something foisted as it was indeed.

Is this a kind of mindlessness that has taken hold of us? Years and years of autocratic rule has persistently and systematically discouraged any popular reaction to or involvement in anything of national importance. Is our people taking advantage of that cozy yet dangerous indifference, — so beloved of the autocrats?

Let the streets of Dhaka again cry to the '70 refrain of 'Kando Banglar Manush,' let thousands endlessly trudge the roads with tears in every eye, let hundreds rush to the disaster every day for months — with whatever they can take. The need of the hour is not only to reach succour to the distress but also to realise a maximum popular involvement if only to expiate the sin of not being able to truly share in the grief.

Labour for the Gulf

The Geneva-based International Labour Organisation (ILO) has decided to press Gulf nations to apply internationally recognised labour standards for migrant workers. The decision is a welcome one, and not before time either.

The issue is of the utmost national interest for Bangladesh. Before the Gulf crisis unfolded, over 70,000 Bangladeshis were employed in Kuwait and 15,000 in Iraq. At present 125,000 are in Saudi Arabia. We are hoping our returnees from Kuwait will get their old jobs back, and also new recruitment will be carried out in Bangladesh. We are looking to increase our share of the Gulf labour market as remittance from expatriates represents the largest single source of foreign currency earning for the country. Therefore it is vital that we maintain and enhance our presence.

In view of the ILO initiative, it is now necessary to review the overall situation regarding the financial and social conditions our expatriates have faced in Gulf states in the past. The ILO is highly critical of treatment meted out to Asian workers by their Arab employers, and we believe the criticism is not totally without basis. We know many of our nationals in the Gulf have had to put up with treatment that would not have been acceptable to people from economically more advanced countries.

But the scenario now is a dramatically changed one. By our resolute support to the cause of Kuwaiti freedom, and through the sufferings our people underwent, we have shown that the basis of our friendship with Kuwait and other Gulf states is more than simply money. We expect the Kuwaiti as well as governments of other Gulf countries to regard Bangladesh as a political partner rather than a supplier of manpower only.

But it would be wrong for Bangladesh to approach Gulf countries on a bilateral basis over this issue of treatment of labour. We should, of course, use our close relationship with Arab countries to impress upon them the need to change labour relations in their countries, including trade union rights for migrants, job security, income stability etc. But first and foremost, we should pursue the ILO initiative with vigour and make employment in the Gulf a respectable as well as lucrative occupation. That will certainly be good for the individuals involved, will contribute towards maintenance of friendly relations among states concerned, and last but perhaps most important, it will help to preserve our sense of national honour.

LET it be said, and justifiably so, that those who perished in last Monday's (April 30) cyclone did so in spite of us — meaning that they died under circumstances beyond the wildest dream of our control. In the same vein, let it NOT be said that those who are perishing now or are most likely to, in the next few days, will do so because of us — meaning that they will have died due to our unpreparedness, inefficiency, lack of co-ordination and splintered response. That however appears to be wishful thinking. For it is becoming increasingly doubtful whether we will be able to escape a damning verdict of posterity for our handling of the disaster relief operations.

We got off to a wrong start when the Prime Minister, within 24 hours of the devastating cyclone, claimed that due to her government's adequate preparedness the loss of lives have been minimised. She could hardly had the facts before her to make such a claim so early in the day. Now as the number of the dead crosses 300,000 and the fear is that it might reach a much higher figure, it may be said that she need not have rushed to make that claim which, to our surprise, she repeated a few days later in the parliament and in her address to the nation on 2nd May. Two things happened as a result. First, an element of propaganda entered into the serious business of saving the survivors. Second a feeling of complacency entered the bureaucracy, giving rise to false sense of being in control of the situation. It may be said that it was this false sense of complacency that made us lose crucial hours and days before we faced the facts that what had happened was a

once-in-a-century disaster, and that managing its aftermath was a stupendous task. Frankly, what precautionary measures are we talking about? Yes, the TV and Radio did broadcast warnings, repeatedly asking people to go to safe shelters. But the PM, more than anybody else, knows how many shelters there are for the 6.5 million people reportedly inhabiting the affected areas. We have gathered enough experience in disaster management to know that following a cyclone and a tidal wave, how difficult it becomes to provide the most rudimentary wherewithal for people to survive.

It does not need too much imagination to think that a tidal wave will wash away most of the dwellings because they are mud huts anyway. There will also be an acute shortage of drinking water as all wells and tubewells will either be inoperative or unusable. So immediately after the cyclone we will need shelter, a huge quantity of water, purifying tablets, if not supply of pure drinking water and of course, food. Dry food, especially.

We also know from our past experience that the only way to provide relief in the coastal areas immediately following a disaster is by helicopters. Would it not have been possible, given that we had about 36 hours of lead warning time, to contact our friends abroad to

loan us a few helicopters immediately, in case of need. Telling people to go to shelters — which were only a few in number and miles away from homes anyway — do not constitute "every precautionary measure".

The claim that "relief work was going on in full swing in the affected areas" is perhaps another example of complacency. How 'full' is the 'swing' of the relief operations now going on are more than adequately reflected on the pages

of our national dailies. It is not my intention to find faults with the laudable effort of the government in reaching relief to the distressed people. Even in the best of times many parts of Bangladesh remain inaccessible to communication. During the rainy season it is normal for many areas to be totally cut off. So the difficulty faced by the relief workers in reaching the cyclone victims is well understood, and better still, appreciated.

The problem is in creating an impression that things are well within control and that everything possible is being done. One direct result of the above syndrome is the lack of public response in coming to

aid of the distressed people. Dhaka city, as mentioned elsewhere in this page, usually becomes filled to the brim with people and organisations going out to collect public donation for relief work. Yes the students and a few committed organisations well known for their relief work, have come out. But it is not the type of public outpouring that is required to galvanize the nation into action.

The initiative taken by the PM in this connection needs

to be discussed. She has appealed to all political parties and others to co-operate with her government in the relief effort. Her appeal is well timed and laudable. In her address to the nation she has correctly pointed out that political differences exist between parties in a democracy. But that should not preclude co-operation in a national crisis. So far so good. However, questions could be raised as to what practical steps she has taken to put her appeal into action. Has she created a forum or some mechanism in which all the political parties could come together and have some sense of participation in the national effort to overcome the disaster?

But at the same time Begum Zia's refusal, so far, not to involve the opposition, is short sighted.

This writer wrote in an earlier column that the PM may feel that involving the opposi-

tion will dilute the role and credit of her government in proving that she is in effective command of the situation and that her government can deliver in face of crisis.

Either she knows something strikingly different about the disaster than we do, or she is making a mistake by underestimating the magnitude of the task facing her government in providing relief to the disaster stricken people of the coastal belt.

It is the view of this writer that the PM should make some sort of an all party Parliamentary Committee, with her in the chair, to assist the government in the relief and rehabilitation work that lies ahead. All parties in the Parliament should be part of this Committee and they should be given as much of an effective role as possible without hampering the efficiency of government actions.

This will create confidence and enthusiasm among the people. They want to see their leaders work in unison and not adopt conflicting paths when the nation is facing this acute crisis. Such a move will create confidence among donors and perhaps add to their current enthusiasm in coming to Bangladesh's aid.

The Prime Minister should not go about tackling this crisis alone. As the head of the government her role is, and will continue to be, pivotal. Taking all the political parties along will be a wise step for her and a confidence building step for the people. It will also be a step which will greatly strengthen democracy and be a damper to the forces that are waiting for her to fail.

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To Overcome the Present Crisis

PM should Involve All Political Parties

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

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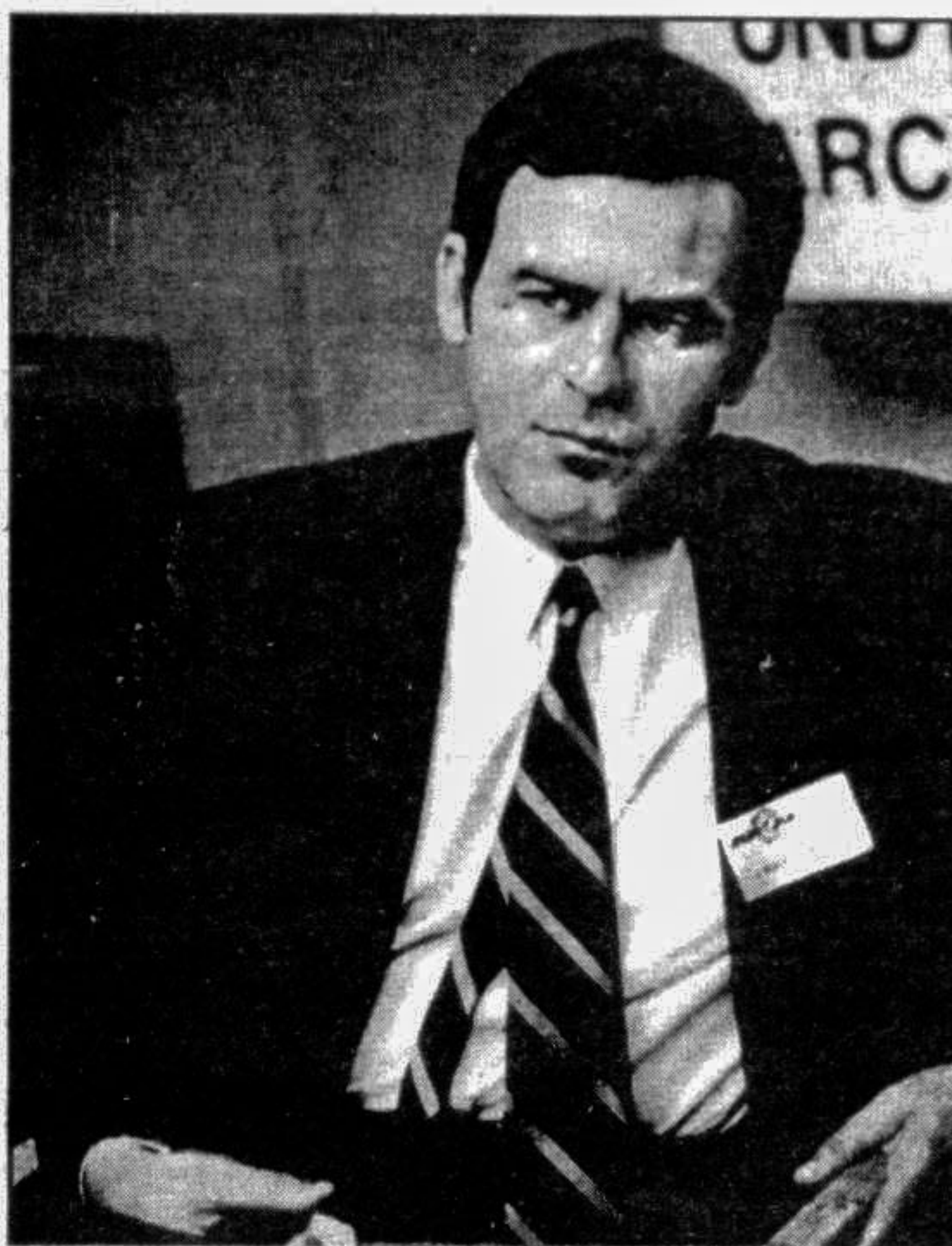
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Romanian Bishop in New Battle for Minorities

Eve Kouidri Kuhn writes from Vienna

Romania after Ceausescu is described as a democracy, but is it? Especially if a democracy is defined by its treatment of minority groups. Bishop Laszlo Tokes, whose treatment by the authorities helped spark off the Romanian revolution in 1989, tells that oppression of minorities is still the norm in Romania, and he is in the thick of it once again.



Bishop Laszlo Tokes of Romania Caught up in a new battle to defend minorities

around his fight for the legal defence and rehabilitation of his church, and for the basic rights of the minority population of Hungarians in Romania.

As a result, he says, his telephone is tapped and he needs round-the-clock protection.

He encourages visits from journalists and friends from the West in the hope that publicity might avert a more serious situation.

"Policemen are guarding our house, but of course that is an ambiguous situation because

you do not know when they may put you in prison. Your defenders could become your prisoners."

Bishop Tokes's congregation now numbers 300,000, and another Calvinist diocese in Romania has 600,000 members. He estimates the total Reformed Calvinist population in Romania at more than a million.

Eastern Europe's minority problems, believes Tokes, were always hidden rather than solved. The difference between the past and now is that it is now at least possible to talk about the problems.

However, he said that although the situation had improved since the popular uprising, with more ethnic schools and a relatively free press, the gains made were brought about by the people themselves and owed nothing to the new Romania government.

"The present regime wants to take back many of the rights and freedoms not only from the Hungarian minority but from other minorities and even from the Romanian people," he says.

Tokes's central thesis is that the Romanian people do not themselves have resentment against minorities. He points to the revolution in which the people united against Ceausescu: "It was very moving and suggestive of a union between different ethnic groups, not only at the beginning of the uprising but for about two months."

It was after this period that the political manipulation began, he says. Eighty per cent of

the Securitate (Secret Police) kept their positions and still maintain the structure of communism.

"They are the ones who began to make divisions between the people. We then realised how Ceausescu's regime destroyed the mentality of the people, how he poisoned social relations."

He thus sees the main problem as needing to change the mind-set of the people which developed under the many years of Ceausescu rule. "For us it is not enough to have economic support, we need the contribution of the democratic world to change the mentality of the people."

The people of Romania, he says, are being misled since they have no source of information and no experience of how to deal with the problems of co-existing with minorities.

However, the problem involves not just ethnic minorities but also intellectuals and the political opposition.

As a result, people are leaving the country, and although many of these are from minority groups the majority of those leaving are ethnic Romanians. "It is not only a minority problem," says Bishop Tokes, "but also a social one."

Tokes talks of earlier efforts by Romania to get rid of its minorities. "Nobody talks now of Romania anti-Semitism, but after the Second World War they got the Jews to leave the country, and then the Germans. In the third phase they began a policy to remove the Hungarians, the weak and the opposition."

This policy still exists, he

says, and is carried out by a group called Vatra Romaneasca. Vatra representatives were elected under the colours of the National Salvation Front and, says Tokes, they pursue an unbridled anti-Hungarian propaganda campaign with the tacit support of the country's new leaders.

Tokes reports that after a recent four-month stay in Hungary, recovering from an accident, he received on his return a hostile reception both from the Front and the press: "Not only Romanians attacked me. I was the target of a whole propaganda campaign because I am a symbol of the revolution and the beginning of a social transformation."

"I became the target of anti-democratic attacks. As a matter of fact the Securitate is still attacking me."

"Thank God, in the past few months many Romanians have realised that we are not the enemy: the enemy is the dictatorial post-communist regime which wants to take attention off the real problems of the country and throw attention on the minorities."

The problems persist within the church itself, which Tokes says seeks to serve the national identity as well as the identity of the Hungarian minority: "The compromised church clergy is still present. They were collaborating with the communists so it is a very delicate, complicated situation."

"Even inside the church we have to start democratisation and a kind of purification; not with revenge of course, only in a Christian way of selection and the improvement of church life." — GEMINI NEWS

EVE KOUIDRI KUHN is a Vienna-based freelance journalist who writes for the UN Observer and broadcasts for the German radio service Deutsche Welle.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"Tolerance in Islam"

Sir, This refers to Mr. Abu Sharaf Sadique's letter (27/4/91) which he wrote contradicting the content of my letter (22/4/91) on the above subject.

Well, Mr. Sadique has pointed out a lot of mistakes in the numericals of quotations mentioned by me but he didn't express a single word concerning the sixth verse of the Sura Al-Kafirun on which my discussion was based. The sixth verse reads — "Lakum di nukum wolia din" (you shall have your recompense and I shall have my recompense).

There is, of course some controversy about the matter of abrogation in the

Holy Quran. But the Quranic verse which I have quoted does not bear the word 'NONE' as stated by Mr. Sadique. It does contain the word 'WHATSOEVER'. Once again I would like to reproduce here the quotation made by me from the "Translation of the Holy Quran" with short notes and Introduction by Maulana Muhammad Ali, M.A. LL.B., produced by A.A. Verstage of Basingstoke, England (First Impression 1928), Page 20, Part-I, Chapter 2, Section 13, Verse 106 — "Whatever communication we abrogate or cause it to be forgotten, we bring one better than it or like it. Dost thou not know that Allah has power over all things?"

I think, my quotation was not misquoted to defend the fact that quoting of the sixth verse as the absolute end is not appropriate.

Because if this verse was the absolute end, then the Holy Prophet (SM) of Islam wouldn't have to undertake so much hardship to preach Islam among the unbelievers in Arab as well the rest of the world. If that was the absolute end then we wouldn't have to think so much about our religion, Islam; perhaps there wouldn't be any need of Bishaw Ejtima etc. As a matter of fact, it is the responsibility of every Muslim to transmit the message of Islam to every nook and corner of the world. And it is our duty to invite people to the path of Islam. If we just stop our mission considering the direction in the sixth verse of Sura Kafirun, then the religion of Islam would not flourish and being Muslims we would definitely do an injustice to the entire mankind by depriving them

from having the message and invitation of Allah and His Prophet (SM).

Meanwhile, I would again say that the verse under reference definitely teaches us tolerance and the habit of observing 'sabr', for Allah is the Supreme Authority to award win or defeat to His creatures.

Another quotation I made from Sipara-III, Sura-2, verse-256, reads — "No compulsion in faith". I referred this verse as an Islamic principle with a view to upholding the trait of 'Tolerance in Islam'.

Because Allah has prescribed Islam as the only religion for man and being Muslims, it implies on our part to establish Islam at any cost. But Allah has forbidden us to compel anybody to accept Islam.

Hence, in an Islamic society, there are non-Muslims who are being protected by the law of Islam on the ba-

sis of the above mentioned principle.

M. Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka-1207.

B.M.D.C. affairs

Sir, In December 1990 there started at Bangladesh Management Development Centre at Sobhanbag a movement against its erstwhile D.G. on the plea that he could not run the centre properly. There were posters all over the centre demanding his ouster but in languages hardly befitting the educated people supposed to belong to the institute. However, after several months, a new D.G. has been appointed recently.

When the new D.G. arrived things were hoped to work properly. But that is not so. The instructors are not interested in taking classes yet. There is no 'course' taking place. I, on several occasions, returned disgusted because they did not even want to talk about

the courses they might have in future.

I wish things would turn better if only an enquiry at the highest level took place. We would surely want B.M.D.C. to start normal classes soon and its affairs come to a normal state. A would be participant, Dhaka.

Donations for the distressed

Sir, A rather silly tradition is threatening to establish its inviolability through steady usage over recent years. Why must donations be handed over directly to the Prime Minister? The hard-pressed Head of State surely has more urgent matters to attend to than give of her valuable time to receiving donations (for the state) from people. Will people's generosity dry up, one wonders, if they are requested to lodge their contributions directly into designated bank accounts? Mizanur Rahman Gulshan, Dhaka