

A Test for Gorbachev

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has been trying his best to soften his stand on the Lithuanian crisis, but he is still far from ready to make an about-turn in the Moscow's policy of confrontation towards the Baltic state. This is the impression gathered from the statement made by the Soviet leader at a press conference on Tuesday. However, the most significant part of the statement lies in the disclaimer of Mr Gorbachev about his direct personal responsibility for the recent tragic happenings in Lithuania, leading to substantial casualties caused by army firing. The disclaimer by Mr Gorbachev himself is, of course, worded most carefully. The translation provided by the Tass is as follows: "The developments in Vilnius and Riga are by no means the manifestation of the policy line of the Presidential authority, for the sake of which it was instituted. Therefore, I resolutely draw aside all speculators, all suspicions and calumnies on that score. Neither domestic nor foreign policy has undergone changes."

It is a little surprising that the Soviet leader did not choose a more direct way of telling the people of Lithuania that he himself did not give the order to the army to shoot at people and that his presidential authority had been underlined by "unwarranted actions by the troops."

The statement is open to different interpretations, all of them pointing to a difficult, in fact, an explosive situation that exists throughout the Soviet Union, between Moscow and Vilnius and finally between the civil authority, as symbolised by Mr Gorbachev himself, and the army command. At the same time, it seems likely that, as with the civil authority, the army command is no longer an unified one. If this conclusion is a valid one, one must face up to the danger that if the forces of disintegration gain upper hand in different republics, even the armed forces will not be able to act as a united force to the Soviet Union as a single political entity. It is this tragic possibility that haunts Kremlin.

At this moment, one hope — there may be just a few others — lies in getting the people involved in a constitutional process. Such a process may start in less than two months time when every Soviet citizen will declare his or her position on "preservation of the USSR as a revitalised Federation of equal sovereign republics", to quote from a political commentary from Moscow. It will be a challenging exercise in a country that has taken only a few small steps towards democracy. In the proposed referendum, scheduled for March 17, every Soviet citizen will face this question, "Do you consider it necessary to preserve the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics as a renovated federation of equal Sovereign Republics, with rights and liberties of person of any nationality fully guaranteed?"

This carefully-worded question is undoubtedly biased in favour of the preservation of the Soviet Union as a loose confederation, one in which the rights of different republics will be preserved and freedom of individual citizen respected but one in which Moscow continues to symbolise the central authority, however limited it may be.

We do not know how the situation will develop between now and the referendum and how the people will make their choice on the question of the preservation of the Soviet Union. As a friend, Bangladesh would earnestly hope that the referendum will produce a positive outcome and that, under the leadership of Mr Gorbachev, the Soviet Union will, as a single entity, continue to play a major positive role in world affairs.

Of Shawls, Scarves and Old Clothes

With the coming of winter the west sees new fashion parades of fur coats, leather jackets and knitted cardigans. It is the weather that brings in the celebrations of Christmas and New Year with rounds of fruit cake and rich puddings. It is time for exchanging of cards and presents, dancing, carol singing, warm hugs and handshakes.

The coming of the cold season may not be as glorified and welcomed in Bangladesh but nevertheless it is a time when people flaunt their embroidered shawls and imported jeans. Going about to offices, schools and shops one sees the gay accoutrement and wonders where the young at heart have the means for the latest in knitted wears, and suitings. Women have their trips to the neighbouring countries to be grateful for when they wear their beautifully flowered scarves and wraps over their saris.

Winter is also the time for good vegetables like peas and beans, tasty fish, fresh eggs, "paesh" and "pitha" with coconut, ground rice and brown sugar. Prices may not be cheap but food is more abundant. One can relish the "kebab paratha" or "mugh palau" or even "khichuri" more in this weather than in the hot sweltering days with the intermittent rain and thunder.

While the well-to-do in Bangladesh can certainly line their nests in winter weather, this year the mercury has dropped more than in previous years. This has resulted in hardships for the poor. A number of people have been known to even die, not being able to shelter themselves adequately. Men have to resort to sleeping on pavements, with little to shelter them against the cold, mist and fog. Even though the price of warm second-hand garments are sometimes as low as Tk 25, beggars on the streets in Motijheel and Gulistan cannot even provide themselves with an old "katha".

Perhaps the affluent, with money to spare, could donate old clothes and money during the cold winter days as is done during Eid for "zakaat". It will take Taka 100 to clothe four poor children with second-hand clothes. While nobody will ask the lucky and privileged to part with their collection from Rome or even from New Elephant Road, the old wornout rejects from the homes in Banani, Dhanmondi and Maghbazar could save the day for the beggar boys and barefooted flower sellers at road corners.

The prevailing trends show that our economy has been on the decline for last few months.

Manufacturing activities are in a critical condition. The export-oriented industries, except tea and jute, are still doing well, but there are widespread complaints about declining profitability in the face of rising costs and very insignificant premium in XPB.

The domestic market-oriented industries also appear to be in serious problems mainly due to shrinking demands. The macro level indicators point out a disconcerting trend. The first relates to the declining imports of industrial imports. Statistics show industrial imports upto October, 1990 amounted to Tk. 990.88 crores against proportionate target of Tk. 1638.74 crores showing 40 percent shortfall. The L/c opening during November/December, 1990 was also very low.

The second indicator is about the declining collection of Excise Duty from manufactured goods showing that activities in this sector hampered. Excise Duty collection during July-November, 1990 stood at Tk. 633 crores as against the target of Tk. 902 crores. Collection during December, 1990, according to National Board of Revenue source, went down further.

Taking into account the declining revenue from Custom Duty, which during July-November, 1990 was Tk. 874 crores as against the projection of Tk. 980 crores, the first casualty of the setback will be the government's revenue earnings. Not withstanding a serious situation, the Government has decided to pay 10 per cent additional Dearness Allowance to the Government and Sector Corporations employees. Similar payment to the workers of the

The threat of famine in northern Ethiopia has brought a measure of cooperation between two of Africa's oldest enemies - the official government on Addis Ababa and Eritrea's armed independence movement.

With the help of each, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) is preparing to dock at the crucial Red Sea port of Massawa with a consignment of food aid. The UN move comes after months of talks following the capture of Massawa by the Eritrean People's Liberation front (EPLF) last February.

The port was closed for most of 1990 while the WFP sought agreement with the EPLF and the Ethiopian government on Addis Ababa on deliveries of aid to Eritrea, where the worst drought in memory now threatens more than two million lives.

In December the WFP announced that a chartered ship the UN flag would leave Djibouti for Massawa in early January.

Food unloaded in Massawa will be distributed equally between the EPLF and the beleaguered Ethiopian government, which, in Eritrea, now controls only the capital Asmara, the nearby garrison town of Keren and the port of Assab.

The port facilities at Massawa, rehabilitated by the EPLF after a fierce struggle for control of the town, may handle up to 15,000 tonnes of WFP aid a month if the agreement holds.

The agreement to open Massawa is thus one key to saving Eritrean lives in the months to come. If all goes well the WFP may be able to increase its initial estimated deliveries, the programme might also expand to allow relief from other sources in

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The Distance Education system has been the most successful innovation in importing higher education since the Second World War. For the last two decades 'distance education' has shown a phenomenal acceptance both in the west as well as in the developing countries of Asia-Pacific region. This is in response to a variety of demands for education which exert pressure on political systems. Even though formal education system has expanded enormously, it is unable to meet the demand. Since resources are limited, a massive expansion of the formal system is not possible. Moreover, the formal system has certain rigidities which prevent some sections of society from gaining access to it.

Distance education is known by several names, such as, correspondence education, home study, independent study, external study, open learning, open education off-campus programme, etc.

In recent years, the term

To the Editor...

Right of voters

Sir, Now that polling to the General Elections has been announced for Feb. 27, I, as a citizen and voter, do not understand why some groups are asking the government to ban or restrict nominations and prevent certain parties or persons from standing for the election.

It is the voters who will now decide by voting whom they want. It appears to me to be highly undemocratic that any one wishes to preempt the will of the people.

If we voters make a mistake, we suffer according to our judgement, and to the best of our knowledge and beliefs.

What parties or groups can do is appeal to the voters (not threaten them with dire consequences) why they should not vote for some one, and leave it to our judgement. This is quite a different issue from the suspicion that the polls might be rigged or the polling would not be conducted in a fair manner. For the latter they can appeal to the Election Com-

WINDOW ON THE ECONOMY

Sectors Sound Alarm Signals

A Regular Column by Ashraf Chowdhury

Public Sector mills and factories is a matter of time. Such concessions will cost an additional expenditure of Tk. 325 crores.

This coupled with the need to spend about Tk. 30 crores for the ensuing General Election, already affected the announced programme for price support to the Aman crop. The Government may be unable to lift 1.5 million tons, as announced, due to resource constraints. Domestic demands particularly that of the farmers, will be aggravated further. Consequently, the domestic market-oriented industries will have to face more critical situation and, if there is no respite, there will be more industrial sickness. More and more industries will close down aggravating the stagflation which is already crippling economy. Inflation is already close to 20 per cent. In this situation, the reported rumours that the government may decide for further adjustment of the value of Taka is disconcerting. Exchange rate depreciation will not help stepping up exports when world trade is less than buoyant. Besides, it will have the least impact on remittances from the Gulf countries which

have started drying up. Remittances during the first two weeks of January, 1991 was less than 50 percent of the normal monthly figure of US \$ 75 million per month. It is widely feared that with the start of Gulf War, remittances are likely to dry up further.

The world Bank and the IMF are believed to have already shown their dissatisfaction over the economic trend and have reportedly threatened to discontinue further disbursements of promised assistance. It is understood that the IMF has warned the Ministry of Finance that it would withhold disbursement of the second instalment of Financial Sector Credit until recovery performance of the nationalised commercial banks improves to the indicated level. Here, it may be recalled that at the beginning of the current financial year, the IMF wanted the nationalised commercial banks to recover a minimum of Tk. 510 crores. Until November, 1990 the recovered amount was reportedly only Tk. 8.5 crores. The worst defaulters were the Public Sector Corporations, particularly BJMC, BTMC and PDB.

On the other hand, the World Bank has threatened that it will withhold the second instalment of the Fuel Sector credit unless revenue collection of the PDB improves. The major recommended mechanism for improving PDB's revenue was reduction of the system loss, which officially is close to 40 per cent. Pilferage reportedly accounts for bulk of such a high rate of system loss. The recent discussions of World Bank's South-Asia Director with the Chief of a Political Alliance for privatisation of PDB's distribution to step pilferage of electricity yielded no result. The privatisation proposal was opposed.

Until now very little seems to have been done to monitor the current economic trend to ensure co-ordination of macro level approaches which can have an effective impact on an stagnation, help improve Government revenue and can reassure the donors and the trade and industry. Admittedly, major policy initiatives cannot be expected from a caretaker Government, but the issues like concerted efforts to support the price of Aman crop cannot wait. Similarly, very little seems to have been done to tackle the problems caused by non-recovery of nationalised commercial banks and PDB. Faced with liquidity problems, the NCBs have reportedly been curtailing the credit facilities of the borrowers including those who are doing relatively well. Needless to mention that in the present situation what is necessary is to provide some extra credit facilities to the manufacturing industries so that dislocation of productivity may be as minimum as possible. There are no sings yet to tackle the problems of the exporters arising from declining premium on XPB.

Way Cleared for Food Aid to Reach Stricken Ethiopians

Jeremy Harding writes from Asmara Eritrea

As famine once more strikes the war-torn areas of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea one factor is hopeful: the warring government in Ababa and the Eritrean independences movement holding the port of Massawa have agreed to cooperate.

Massawa. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, drought and war have combined to claim millions of lives since the mid-Seventies. Eritrean nationalists took up arms against Ethiopia in 1961 after nine years of unsuccessful federation. A year later, Emperor Haile Selassie annexed the country outright. Famine swept through Eritrea and Ethiopia in the early Seventies and led to the overthrow of the emperor.

In 1978 the Soviet union threw its military weight behind the Marxist-Leninist government in Addis Ababa and drove the EPLF into the barren wastes of northern Eritrea.

Since the famine of 1984-85 the EPLF has made big military gains and Ethiopia's Second Revolutionary Army is now confined to a small government enclave centred on Keren and Asmara in the northern province.

The war complicates famine relief. Almost all food supplies enter EPLF areas on a cross-border route from Sudan, where successive Sudanese governments have allowed the Eritreans to operate.

The Tigrajan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) operates

a similar route from Sudan. Unlike the Eritreans, the Tigrajan are seeking only greater autonomy from Addis Ababa, not full independence. Its wars are equally savage, however, and Tigrajan is also threatened by severe famine. At present, some relief enters Tigrajan and the Ethiopian

of Wello from port of Assab in an operation coordinated by a group of Ethiopian churches.

That this relief continues to run through and to rebel-held areas is seen as an important gesture by Addis Ababa, but none of the food unloaded at Assab reaches the population highlands of Eritrea.

Such a route is vastly superior to the present cross-border run to EPLF areas and the inadequate airlift to the government enclave, which now has no overland supply line, although it holds more than a million hungry people, most of them Eritrean civilians.

The EPLF, meanwhile, is dug in to mountain trench positions within 50 kilometres of Asmara. Along the southern front, the steep rise to the Eritrean positions is littered with bodies - the remains of a failed assault by Ethiopian troops last September.

Two hundred metres behind the lines, young children tend cattle in the flanks of the hills where they cannot be seen by Ethiopian troops in high trench positions on the other side of a bleached valley of stone.

They would run the risk of mortar fire to graze their cattle in view of the government forces if there were any pasture left. There is not. All the supplementary grazing has been used up and livestock are beginning to die at an alarming rate.

The EPLF is better equipped to deal with the present crisis than that of 1984-85. This is partly because the Eritrean Relief As-

sociation, the relief wing of the EPLF, has been a beneficiary of the funds disbursed in the wake of the last famine.

Previously there were less than a dozen worn-out Fiat trucks to haul grain and water around the controlled by the EPLF. Today the rebels have a fleet of at least 300 large vehicles.

At night, when the risk of attack from Ethiopian MIG aircraft is minimal, the dry river beds and mountain passes are thick with dust as water tankers and trucks full of grain forge down from the Sudanese border to relief points camouflaged in the hills.

A water development programme, begun in 1985 and backed by a foreign aid consortium, has also improved Eritrea's ability to weather a bad year.

Many more hand-dug wells exist now than during the mid-Eighties and currently three drilling rigs are prospecting and boring in EPLF-held areas.

Both the increase in transport capacity and the benefits of the water programmes, however, must be set against the drastic character of the drought and fact that since 1984-85 the EPLF has doubled the territory and with it the population - under its control.

There are now few engagements on the ground, but Ethiopian fighter-bombers continue to terrorise civilians in EPLF-held areas. Even so, drastic food shortages of water and grazing have become the main cause of displacement.

While the fate of Asmara hangs in the balance, lack of rain looks sure to take a heavier toll in Eritrea than the sporadic hail of cluster bombs which falls on this troubled country. — GEMINI NEWS.

Distance Education can Deliver the Goods

by Hedayet Ahmed

open learning is used extensively to convey the meaning of distance education. Open learning covers a wide range of innovations and reforms in the education sector. Included are changes that aim to improve such things as the participation of learners, instructional design, methods of transmitting information and support to learners. In this system, restrictions on learning are lower than those in formal educational institutions. Educational opportunities are planned deliberately so that access to knowledge is available to individuals in spite of barriers such as geographical distance. The distance education universities in the world are known as open universities. In these institutions the concept of openness is linked to the idea of access to educational opportunities.

Unlike the formal system it is very flexible and accessible. Its courses and teaching systems do not impose rigidities. It provides very large numbers with access to education and it can reach people in their homes. The teaching material produced by several such institutions is of a high quality. What is unique about the material is that all its students have the benefit of the same standard material. In the conventional system, the quality of teaching varies from teacher to teacher, from one institution to the other in the same area. Most important, distance education is cost-effective and is found to be less expensive than the traditional education system.

Distance education is a complex system and involves elaborate planning. There are three continuous stages, i.e. planning during conceptual

stage, planning during evolutionary and growth stages and planning during maturity. After an institution is established detailed planning regarding the objective, strategies and operational plans, implementation of plans, policies and procedures for control and evaluation need to be spelled out. In a well-established institution, it is necessary to review the performance so as to respond to the changing societal needs. Apart from sustaining the educational effectiveness and organizational efficiency, planning as a generic process will provide a continuous direction to the distance education institution.

Evaluation in distance education has two different facets. Firstly, evaluation of students' performance and secondly, evaluation of the programmes of distance education on a

continuing basis. Both kinds of evaluation are essential to keep the distance education institutions sound. Training in the context of distance education has two facets. Firstly, offering courses to train personnel to meet shortages in different areas as part of its academic programme. Secondly, training the personnel engaged in distance education itself on the methodologies of the new system.

A large number and variety of functionaries are engaged for different operations of distance education. They are policy makers and planners, administrators, subject-matter specialists, curriculum designers, course coordinators, tutors and counsellors, correspondence material writers, editors, writers of radio and TV scripts, etc. These different categories of people re-

quire different types of skills, viz. knowledge skills, executive skills, production skills, research skills, human relation skills, etc. Training programmes should take into account all such requirements.

The Ministry of Education has already undertaken a feasibility study on the establishment of an open university in Bangladesh. Recently, as part of this study a high level team of policy-makers, planners and academicians visited Thailand, India, Pakistan and the United Kingdom to gain first hand knowledge about the working of the open university system.

In the event of setting up an open university in Bangladesh, it is to be borne in mind that the proposed institution must be based on our needs and resources and within the framework of our social and technological development. In other words, the development of an open university system has to be planned in phases so that it is built on a sound foundation.

other paths left to investigate but to foot the one which is fuled by hard work and heroism.

But who will come out with that call? We have a law learnt only to depend on our politicians which perhaps has not been our best idea. All professionals

must join in this struggle to build the country. There is hope still left for us but only if we are ready to sacrifice. The key word is that, but have we shown any interest in that?

Sushil Barua
Khulna

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