

# Gulf War Casts a Shadow Over ASEAN

## Election Tribunals

It has been reported in this journal that the Election Commission is likely to set up 64 tribunals in each of the 64 districts of the country to adjudicate election disputes. We welcome this planned initiative. Election Tribunals are not new. But the role and function of the ones being contemplated are likely to be quite different from those of the past.

The proposed tribunals will enjoy a lot of power, a proper and impartial use of which can help make the election truly free and fair. According to clause 63(1) of the Representation of the People's Order, the tribunal can declare null and void any election if it is satisfied that the "election of the candidate has been induced by corrupt or illegal practice" or that a "corrupt or illegal practice has been resorted to by the candidate or his election agent or any other person in connivance with the candidate or his agent".

These clauses strike at the root of a series of corrupt electoral practices which have so often in the past perverted our polls. The very fact of the existence of such clauses can serve as effective deterrent for all those candidates or their agents who may be contemplating to adopt unfair means.

The type of violence that we have come to associate with polls in our country consists of buying votes, getting votes through intimidation, creating a situation of insecurity so that supporters of one's opponents do not come to cast their votes or the physical occupation of polling stations to ensure that vote is cast for one's own candidate only. All these violations of election rules are covered by the aforementioned clauses of the Representation of the People's Order.

We would like to express a stern word of caution to all candidates not to underestimate the will of this Election Commission in scrupulously adhering to the letter of the law in upholding the above mentioned rules. The candidates should not be misguided by whatever may have happened in the past. This Election Commission enjoys and reflects the mood of the people, and the mood is to hold a free and fair election. Anybody trying to subvert it will have to face the wrath of the people and any action against them will have the full support of the people.

The proposed tribunals will also hear complaints of excess spending, over the limit of Taka 3 lakh. This means that a candidate, having won the election, can have his result rescinded if the tribunal is satisfied that the candidate actually spent more than what was allowed. This should serve as a reminder to all those who are participating in the coming election that they have to fight and win the election through fair and legal means.

We extend our whole hearted support to all the efforts of the Election Commission in ensuring the fairness of the coming polls. The idea of setting up tribunals, in this context, appears to us to be a sound one. The setting up of the tribunals should be announced as early as possible and full publicity should be given to their role, function and authority. All the political parties should fully brief their nominees as to the importance of scrupulously following the election rules and of the risk they run of having their election results overturned by the tribunals if they adopt unfair means. Reputation of the political parties is also likely to be stained if too many of their nominees are found to be guilty of violating election rules by the tribunal.

## The Crime Healer's 'Crime'

We deplore this abominable practice. One or two youngmen crouching in the foreground with this or that small arm and quite a squad of policemen standing behind striking a most ludicrous pose. Why should newspapers publish such photographs at all? Journalistic indiscretion has encouraged police to look eagerly for such an occasion — a lifetime's chance it seems for looking foolish.

Such photographs, to be sure, are in bad taste. And they make a travesty of human rights — making a convict long before one has been convicted by regular processes of law. The police people are acting clearly against law when posing with someone they have caught for some alleged crime. The newspapers extend a hand of complicity by publishing the unlawful photo taken deliberately to criminally hurt the person ensnared by men and means not above suspicion. And both police and the newspapers very evidently give a damn to such inviolate things as human dignity.

A young woman with a revolver in her hand — that was a very striking photo to come across in the pages of Monday's newspapers. More so because the woman was weeping and she was not really holding the weapon. The piece of steel appears to have been thrust upon her close-fisted hands.

Underneath the photo ran a two-column headline in black bold letters: 2 women held for stealing revolver. The accompanying story however tended to show that it was a bag that the two sisters allegedly picked up. Having no X-Ray eyes they couldn't have divined that it contained a revolver — a fully loaded one at that.

Even if Suryabanu, the elder of the two sisters nabbed, had stolen the revolver — knowing full well the thing for all it is worth — publicizing such a photo would be as bad in law as the act of stealing itself — which is, incidentally, still a long way from being proved.

Defencelessness arising out of poverty and social inequity has always invited savaging by men and women of power and better situation. We have seen how in numerous houses the masters and the mistresses torture serving children and nubile young women. The job of such agencies as police should be — and still is — to help change this. But we all know that's a far cry — a foolish expectation with things as they are and with a press taking delight in printing the photo of a crying Suryabanu with a revolver thrust on her — of a woman having parents and children and brothers and sisters back home — of a woman having still an identity in a society of her own. No one has the right to hurt her that way — the question of whether she has committed a crime or not being completely immaterial and irrelevant.

With virtually no region of the world completely spared from a fall-out of the Gulf conflict, it is instructive to study how different countries are facing up to the consequences of a war almost no one wanted, rearranging their priorities and, finally, thinking of what even six months ago would have been regarded as unlikely or even impossible.

In this respect, the countries in South East Asian region, grouped together in the six-nation alliance, known as ASEAN, seem to be in a particularly difficult situation.

Internationally, ASEAN is regarded as a success story of regional co-operation, perhaps even an object of mild envy by countries in other areas. However, this success invariably obscures several inner stresses and strains inherent in the varying sizes, economic potential, political systems, racial compositions and even external alliances of members of the grouping.

Out of the six, three—Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia—are exporters of oil, while the other three—Philippines, Thailand and Singapore—are dependent on oil imports. However, one of them—the city state of Singapore—has one of the largest refineries in the world. Out of the six, Indonesia and Brunei are overwhelmingly Muslim, Thailand overwhelmingly Buddhist and the Philippines almost entirely Christian. The remaining two—Malaysia and Singapore—describe themselves as multi-racial, multi-religious and even multi-cultural. However, in reality, the Islamic bias in the Malaysian life remains as strong as the Chinese accent in Singapore.

Then, what has kept the six countries together?

If one leaves aside the inevitable rhetoric about their shared history, cultural assimilation across their ethnic barriers and religious tolerance, their shared economic growth and their

common realisation that they must work together to promote it provide two important elements in the thrust within the alliance.

No ASEAN leader would claim that countries of the grouping have achieved this growth entirely on their own.

Just look at the figures of these countries, including of the Philippines which is still seen as a sick man of ASEAN, of their trade, investment, inflow of foreign capital and, finally, joint ventures, mainly with two of their most important partners, the United States and Japan. Then one would know where

Cam Ranh Bay base in Vietnam; the solution of the Cambodian conflict and pressure from Hanoi on Southeast Asian countries to open trade and economic ties; and further liberalisation of China's economic and political policies.

Now, reports from different South East Asian capital suggest that all these issues, just mentioned, are being put in the cold storage to enable the decision-makers to concentrate on one single issue—the fallout from the Gulf war, with all its varied implications.

In one major development, foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia, both

Jakarta which has a history of anti-Chinese riot is that if the war prolongs and touches off anti-American violence, big multinational US operations would start looking towards Singapore, Bangkok and Manila as their alternative bases.

Significantly enough, while Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta are anxious to distance themselves from the United States' at least on defence matters, three other ASEAN members—Singapore, Thailand and Brunei (a Muslim country but closer to Singapore than to Malaysia) would like to have "continued US military presence in Asia to ensure a stable balance of power", according to diplomats quoted by the International Herald Tribune.

It is said that a section of leaders in the Philippines who had once opposed the continued presence of US bases in their country are also rethinking their positions in favour of the status quo.

Geographically, Iraq is too far away from the ASEAN countries to be seen as a direct threat to their own security. But these countries, especially Thailand whose sprawling capital, Bangkok is bursting at the seams, remain apprehensive of Iraqi-backed terrorism.

Taking a longer term perspective, virtually all the ASEAN countries remain deeply concerned about the process of destabilisation that has been set in motion, first by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, then by the counter-attack launched against Baghdad by the multinational force, and finally by the barrage of propaganda unleashed by Baghdad. The growing fear in Southeast Asia is that if the conflict goes on much longer, the process of destabilisation may affect countries in Asia in a way that even the most astute expert may not be able to work out in advance.

## AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

this growth, perhaps a large part of it, comes from.

In pushing the ASEAN on the road to economic progress, the United States provided another supportive element: its military bases in Thailand (until the end of the Vietnam war) and the Philippines (now under negotiation). Meanwhile, talks are going on between Singapore and Washington about the city republic providing some limited base and repair facilities to the UN navy, especially if Manila terminates the base arrangement.

Until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the six South East Asian countries have been studying their future options with a mixture of guarded optimism and some shrewd calculations. During this study, which had been going for months, the ASEAN experts have noted the decline of the Soviet military power from this region and of its possible withdrawal from the

Muslim countries, have publicly suggested that countries in the region should take care of their own destiny and thus reduce their dependence on the United States.

Although the two ministers would defend their suggestion on the ground that Washington is too busy elsewhere, meaning the Gulf, to pay much attention to Southeast Asia, the two separate statements offer an implied recognition of the anti-US sentiments becoming stronger at the mass level. This has placed the moderate pro-US governments in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta in a quandary. They have officially backed the UN Security Council resolutions against Iraq and have been supportive of both the Saudi Arabia and the Kuwaiti government in exile. But, then, as in a few other Muslim countries, Saddam Hussein has emerged as a hero in the eyes of Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia. The worry in

# CENSUS IN INDIA

## Mind-boggling is the Word for It

S. Muthiah writes from Madras

For a month, 1.5 million enumerators are tramping through cities, towns, villages, jungle and hilltop country counting the people of India. The population is now up to something like 800 million each year it rises by about the total population of Holland.

What has been called "the world's greatest administrative exercise" is now underway in India. The work of the 1991 Census has just been completed and the ground laid for the great head-count between February 9 and March 5. Training for the operation has been going on for two years.

In the first stage every type of shelter was listed and numbered. Over the last nine months house-listing has been going on with numbers being given to any type of "structure that affords shelter and serves as housing for people."

Says A R Nanda, Registrar-General and Census Commissioner: "From the lowly jhuggis (shanties) to tents, from boats and carts to trechous, every type of 'home' has been numbered."

Nanda is the latest in a line that has been carrying on an operation first introduced in India by the British in 1871 and which has gone on without a miss every ten years since.

The numbered units will be grouped in blocks—200 to a block in urban areas and 250 to a block in rural areas. A group of blocks is assigned to each enumerator.

More than 1.5 million enumerators, working with 300,000 supervisors, were selected and all went on training programmes. They were primary school teachers or junior level government officers selected for their familiarity with a particular area, its customs, habits and dialects.

The training prepares the enumerators to fill forms correctly with answers to such questions as age, gender, education and employment status.

and also sensitises them to the social realities on the ground. Nanda says: "When, for instance, the enumerator reaches a point in his questioning where he wants information about the women in the household, he needs to be extra careful in the Indian context that he offends no one."

"Usually in rural India, it is the male head of the family who answers all questions. And he often plays down the work done by the women of his household. We try to train the enumerators to get a more accurate picture tactfully."

The trained enumerators are fanning out throughout the

country. Often they will have to visit a home two or three times before they find people willing to provide the information.

At the same time they have to take care the same person is not counted more than once. Special arrangements have to be made to count mi-

grant labour, those on holiday and religious pilgrims. The work is tedious and involves long hours. Questioning, recording, counting and rechecking is the enumerator's lot. Yet the pay is paltry. The mind-boggling census of India is called "a labour of love."

Till now the census has concentrated on demographics and socio-economic data. This time it also seeks data on the housing and employment situation for government planners.

The first provisional results of the census will be available from mid-March 1991, just ten days after all the questionnaires are in. Tabulation and publication of provisional results and reports will begin in the second half of 1991 and go on till 1995.

That is about the time publication of final figures begins. Publication of final reports will go on till it is time for the preliminary work to begin for Census 2001—that is, 1991.

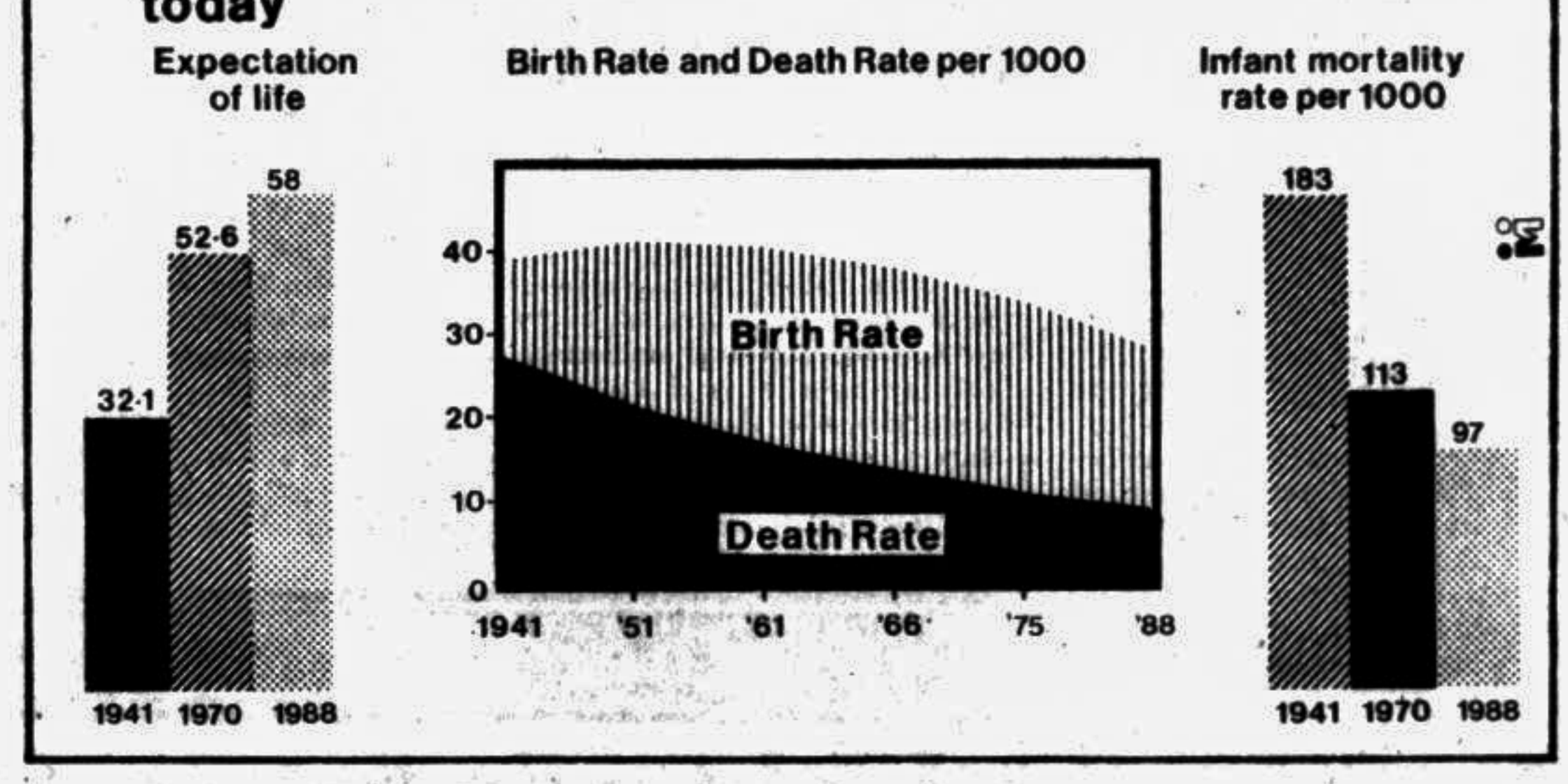
The publication programme of the census of India is one of the biggest in the world. The records published run into thousands. To make this date more readily available Nanda is planning to set up census services data cells to provide information at the touch of a keyboard.

For all the march of science, the march of the million or more enumerators through slum and field, high-rise and hilltop, is the only way the date can be collected. — GEMINI NEWS

S. MUTHIAH was a senior journalist with The Times of Ceylon for two decades. He is now involved in printing and publishing but continues to freelance.

## India: life and death

In India over the last 50 years the birth rate as well as the death rate has fallen. Yet the population has risen from 319 million in 1941 to about 830 million today



## 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.

### Overseas call booking

Sir, It is a common experience with almost all who require to make overseas calls to undergo a tedious exercise attempting various numbers and then get a call booked. Previously such calls used to be booked from No. 152 while No. 162 was for reminder when there was delay in getting the call booked. The department in appreciation of difficulties of the overseas callers have given some more Telephone Numbers viz. 244958, 244969, 319226, 501777, 608080, 419313, 383016 for booking and for the purpose of reminder, in addition to 162, the callers

have been advised to contact 402199 and 413744. But despite such a grand and wide consideration, the callers to their dismay have to take a long exercise to get a call registered within a reasonable time. The difficulties beggar description.

Moreover, call registration number is given only when a call is booked with Tel 152. As no registration number is given when a call is booked with telephone numbers other than 152, the relevant column of the register maintained at caller's end remains blank with no scope for referring the registration number in case of necessity. It is pre-

### An appreciation

Sir, This week-end magazine of your daily was indeed laudable. It had a number of pieces which provided both variety and pleasure for those who love and enjoy reading. We hope that you will continue zealously what you have started to do. For, it is often difficult to keep the tempo of things going. Mainly because, it is actually difficult to get good writers and pieces in English, particularly, in our country. A good and informative newspaper is always welcome. It provides a breath of fresh air from the drudgery of everyday bore-

dom. We have high hopes and do wish your esteemed journal fulfil our expectations.

Renu Sarwar  
Tangail

### Wild bird preservation

Sir, This refers to Inam Ahmed's feature "Traders mint money." It is appalling that every year the law against the capture and sale of migratory birds is flaunted blatantly by traders and neither the police nor organisations like the Wild Bird Preservation Society, take any action against it. All we get, year after year, is a newspaper article about this criminal practice. What about the police officials who must surely be witnessing this criminal sight each winter? Why can't they simply stop their vehicles, confiscate the birds and set them free?

And would it not be more valuable for wildlife protection organisations to picket these traders, at least at the main spots mentioned in the article, instead of just quoting the dire consequences of these actions? All it would need is to get volunteers through its membership and organisations like the Boy Scouts etc., to pressurise the police into taking action to penalise the culprits. Not the least of them being unscrupulous buyers who provide the market can therefore be considered the main culprits in the decimation of migratory birds in Bangladesh.

May we request the media to build up public awareness against the destruction of wildlife in this country through a series of articles, instead of the token one articles per year?

S.R. Ghuznavi  
Barikhara.

## WHAT OTHERS SAY

### For Collective Security

"It won't be another Vietnam," President George Bush keeps saying about the Gulf war. That is a sure applause line. Americans now agree that the long US military involvement in Southeast Asia was a disaster for America. But the president's oratory, and the applause, are confusing, because Americans still differ sharply about the nature of the disaster.

For liberals, Vietnam was an immoral war, in support of insupportable Saigon regimes. Worse, America lost its innocence through napalm attacks, carpet bombing and the My Lai massacre. The lesson: America should be wary of presidential and Pentagon scenarios and go to war only as a last resort.

For centrists, Vietnam represents good intentions gone awry, proof that John F. Kennedy's summons to fight any Communist foe and bear any military burden was simply beyond America's means. Obsession with an unwinnable struggle distorted priorities and politics, ignited inflation and undermined patriotism. They, too, wish urgently to avoid another costly crusade in the name of American determination that ends up dissipating American resolve. To them, the lesson is: Pick wars carefully, fight with a sense of proportion.

For conservatives like President Bush, Vietnam represents mainly a failure of political will. First, Washington forfeited public support by fighting a limited war, resisting, for example, military demands for all-out bombing of the North. Then, by withdrawing US troops amid domestic political protest, America showed the world that it lacked staying power. Conservatives believe that this showing invited subsequent policy disasters such as Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Iran, to them, the lesson is: The United States must prove that it has the will to fight for freedom.

Thus, in the Gulf Mr. Bush moved rapidly to build up American forces. He quickly gave up on the economic embargo, which needs months to work. And he has lately been pressing for all-out military victory.

Are any of these lessons of Vietnam relevant to the Gulf war? Probably not, if only because circumstances have changed so greatly. The United States is no longer in a global confrontation with communism. And Washington can no longer afford the global commitments that a Pax Americana, Kennedy-style, would require.

The need to deter aggression remains—with collective security, not new and improved versions of power projection in the Cold War style. That means not just financial burden sharing and formal UN votes but also serious commitments to joint diplomatic, economic and, if necessary, military actions in defense of international law.

— The New York Times.