

Dhaka, Thursday, March 7, 1991

**Opportunities in new Kuwait**

Bangladesh's policy on the Gulf, initiated by Ershad and continued by Shahabuddin, has rested on a principle and a consideration: the inviolability of international borders, and the high economic stake Dhaka has in its dealings with states in the Gulf. Time has now come for Shahabuddin's government to pursue the second issue with vigour.

The first and foremost to be affected were Bangladeshis working in Kuwait. Some 80,000 returned last year. To this day very few have found jobs here. The quickest route to their rehabilitation — and their dependent-families' salvation — is their return to their old jobs in Kuwait.

For those employed by private companies in Kuwait, the situation presents a tricky problem. Many of them are owed up to several months' salaries by their previous employers. Some fear that new people may be recruited in their places in order to forego back payments. We would prefer to treat the fear as groundless, but our government cannot be complacent.

A great deal of sound diplomacy and hard lobbying on the part of Dhaka is now in order. Our embassies both in Kuwait City and Baghdad should be adequately staffed to tackle the difficult task ahead with vigour and imagination. The foreign and labour ministries here in Dhaka have two immediate tasks ahead of them. One is to persuade the Kuwaiti authorities to impress upon private companies that it is in their interest to reemploy old hands, rather than hire new, inexperienced ones. It is not simply a matter of our men getting their jobs back; it is also a question of Kuwaiti reconstruction getting off to a good start. Secondly, the two ministries should coordinate with their Kuwaiti counterparts in order to effect an orderly return of Bangladeshis. The thing to remember here is that Kuwait is a devastated country, with essential services and amenities in ruins. A disorganised rush by Bangladeshis to get back may cause serious difficulties for Kuwaiti authorities, as well as unnecessary sufferings for returnees.

The crucial question of the role of manpower agencies has to be addressed urgently. In the past, many unscrupulous operators had relieved poor families of their life savings. Expatriates had found themselves working for astonishingly low wages.

For many expatriates, it had taken several years just to repay the debt they had incurred in order to pay the labour merchants. From now on, the government should strictly monitor activities of these agencies and root out the cowboy operators. The labour ministry should see to it that our people are not caught out as in the past. Labour recruitment should now become an organised and totally above-the-board affair.

The chambers of commerce in Dhaka also have an important role to play in helping their members acquire business opportunities in the new Kuwait.

A bit of aggressive marketing of our expertise and experience in infrastructural work in the Middle East could lead to Bangladeshi companies getting a fair slice of the cake. Of immediate concern is the issue of currency. Returnees have deposited all the old Kuwaiti dinars they managed to bring out at Sonali Bank branches per government instruction last October. The old dinar has now been de-monetised and new dinars issued by the Kuwaiti government. The finance ministry in Dhaka should act quickly to exchange old dinars for new, and allow returnees to withdraw equivalent Taka, or even dinars.

**Mastans Must Go**

A report says about 300 mastans are making the life of town-dwellers in Jamalpur a regular hell. They operate with impunity from sanctuary offered by important and powerful bigwigs of the area. They pay their keepers back by forcibly occupying disputed land and property for them — and in so many other criminal ways. A list of these reads like a story fashioned of unmitigated horror. Snatching, hijacking, robbery and mugging and extortion are the more standard ones among them.

The message is clear for residents of any one of the six upazilas of Jamalpur — if you have a school-going daughter, try to migrate to some northern town where girls are less likely to invite the lurid eye, or failing, pack her off to America or wherever in which case you will not be molested on your child's account.

Jamalpur is not much of an urbanised district. With the mighty Jamuna washing its northern flank and the branches of that crisscrossing it — Jamalpur is neither an awfully rich spot of a place. If such a district with a comparatively sparse population is in the grip of a 300-strong horde of mastans, what would be the situation in the more fortunate areas? Counting out Dhaka, the capital of mastans, the 63 districts must be serving as a pasturing ground for 30 thousand hardened mastans — those in the know of the police.

How to fight and curb this particular type of new-fangled delinquency? That police alone is not match for it is by now accepted by all quarters. This is no ordinary run-of-the-mill criminality. It is social malaise involving a hefty dose of politically inspired infection. If police and administration and top social crust cannot contain it — it will suffice for them not to abet it.

Just come to think of the irony encapsulated in the much-feared word! Only the esoteric few among the most advanced ones in religious mysticism used to be privy to that coveted word for distinction: mastan. In Dhaka we were to have the last in that line — Mastan Gama. He was a maestro in classical vocal music, an ustad of ustdas for all of the subcontinent. For more than that — he was a mastan. And he was loved and respected universally for that. He sang only in mazars and slept only in makbaras.

The modern-day mastans must go if only to make the room for the old association to revive.

**T**he Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) — tainted in the West by its association with Saddam Hussein — is struggling to secure a place not only in a post-war peace conference, but also in the history books.

Dr. Nabil Sha'ath, diplomatic advisor to PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, said in London that the West seems to have suffered "selective amnesia about the PLO role," in trying to prevent the Gulf war.

Said Sha'ath: "When peace comes, it will be a vindication of the continuous efforts by the PLO, since the beginning of this conflict, to arrive at a peaceful solution."

Sha'ath, who is also Chairman of the Palestine National Council and a senior member of Arafat's Al Fatah movement, was in London as part of a PLO initiative to get its message out to the Western media, politicians and academics.

He told reporters that Palestinian diplomats in Moscow played a key role in securing the visit to Baghdad by Soviet envoy Yevgeni Primakov as well as the return visit to Moscow by Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz.

According to Sha'ath, PLO executive members Abu Ma'azen and Yasser Abed Rabbo were in Moscow from the start of Soviet peace proposals.

Arafat and other senior PLO figures have already described other PLO-brokered peace proposals they claim fell short because United States did not want them to succeed.

**PLO Wants Place at Peace Talks and in History Books**

Benjamin Cohen and Rula El-Rifai write from London

**The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), concerned at damage caused in the West by the perception that it has been too close to Saddam Hussein, is trying to reassert its role as the only representative of the Palestinian people. Top PLO spokesmen are stressing the diplomatic role it has played in the Gulf crisis.**

According to a senior PLO source, one such plan was in place only a few days after the August 2 invasion of Kuwait and would have led to talks between Saddam and Saudi Arabia's King Fahd. But that deal was scuppered at the Arab League meeting of August 10, a session that eventually led to Egypt, Syria and Morocco joining the anti-Iraq alliance.

In his most detailed interview since the crisis, Arafat himself told the London-based newspaper, Mideast Mirror of another PLO peace plan accepted by Saudi Arabia.

Arafat said that deal was confirmed by the controversial statement from Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz that he saw nothing wrong with Kuwait ceding land to Iraq. Arafat said the US had once again intervened, pressuring Riyadh to withdraw from the deal.

When asked why the PLO's side of such stories had not

been heard, Sha'ath said he was not sure if the cause was a deliberate attempt to squelch the PLO, the organisation's inability to reach the media or a failure to explain itself properly.

Close PLO ties with Saddam have required a lot of explaining. For his part, Arafat has said links to Saddam were necessary to keep all channels of communication open, something emphasised again by Sha'ath.

But in the Mideast Mirror interview, Arafat went on to say that the Palestinians could not possibly have joined the side that accepted what he called "American-French-European military presence in our Arab lands." It had to throw in its lot with Saddam because of his strong opposition both to Israel and to the presence of foreign troops in the region.

Clearly the PLO is worried that the Palestinian question, which had been the focus of

attention in the Middle East for more than 40 years, was eclipsed by the Gulf war.

Even more worrying was the diplomatic blow suffered by the PLO because of its perceived alliance with Saddam and by the widespread support for Saddam among Palestinians living in the occupied territories.

Sha'ath said the Palestinians and the PLO would not be the only ones with reputations to live down at the end of the conflict. He asked how the US and Britain will be perceived in most of the Arab world when the war is over. "All of us will have to do damage control after the war," he said.

Nevertheless, Sha'ath and Arafat have both reaffirmed their 1988 commitment to shun terrorism, effectively recognise Israel and use diplomatic means to resolve the Palestinian question.

Since the August 2 invasion, the PLO has actively promoted the idea of linkage and has time and again pointed to what it sees as the apparent hypocrisy in the West going to war with Saddam to uphold UN resolutions while ignoring UN resolutions that condemn the Israeli presence in the occupied territories.

Said Sha'ath: "The end of this war cannot possibly avoid linkage. The application of international law to this war will allow the implementation of Resolutions 242 and 338," the UN resolutions that demand Israel withdraw from the territories.

Because of its ties with Saddam, the PLO claim to represent the Palestinian people, and subsequently its right to join in a post-war conference, has been challenged in many Western capitals. But Sha'ath said the fundamental principles of self-determination should still apply, and that includes the right of Palestinians to have territory and to choose

their own representatives.

Regardless of how the Palestinians are represented, it is unlikely that Israel will attend a peace conference. On February 5, Bezaevim Zevri, who supports the expulsion of all Palestinians from the territories, was appointed to the Israeli cabinet, symbolising the increasingly hardline stance of Yitzhak Shamir's government.

While Israel is not likely to have any contact with the PLO, Sha'ath said the West should insist on its presence at a post-war conference.

"If the West can place this huge armada in the Gulf then surely they are capable of pushing Israel into its peace process," he said.

For the PLO, the next battle is to restore its credibility in the West and to regain the momentum it had been building during three years of intifada in the occupied territories.

As Arafat is quick to point out, seasoned Middle East observers have many times said "Bye, Bye PLO," only to see the organisation and its charismatic leader rise from the ashes. — GEMINI NEWS.

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**Overpopulation Eats up Syria's Desert Produce**

Mounir B. Abboud writes from Beirut

**I**TS agricultural wealth notwithstanding, Syria is fighting a tough battle in its attempt to attain self-sufficiency in food.

Already, Syrians are being encouraged to move back from the cities to the land, with the government raising the prices of wheat, barley, sugarbeet and cotton. The agriculture ministry provides farmers with advice, training and soft loans.

Yet as its population increases every year, the Arab country is striving to cope with food and grain shortages that are threatening to widen the gap between food production and consumption.

According to Damascus University, Syria now has a population of 13,338,000, of which 49.3 per cent are below 15 years old.

With the drop of grain production last year, Syrians are asking when the production of

strategic crops like grain and cotton would become stable. Self-reliance is also important, the Syrian press says, also because most grain-exporting states are using food as a political and economic weapon against Third World countries.

Agriculture, or food security, takes second place only to defence in the Syrian govern-

**Food security takes second place only to defence**

ment's order of priorities. Some of the economic difficulties Syria has been experiencing had been attributed to the need to achieve a strategic parity with Israel — the central theme of President Hafez Assad's 19-year-old rule.

Diplomats say Syria owes Moscow some US \$ 14 billion, mainly for military equipment including modern T-80 tanks, MIG-29 fighter planes, and

medium range ground-to-ground missiles. A large portion of Syria's foreign exchange is spent on food imports, despite a clampdown on buying goods abroad to save hard currency and promote local production of essential commodities.

areas for wheat cultivation are being exploited.

According to official projections, Syria will achieve self-sufficiency in wheat by year 2000 while there will be shortages in barley by 49 per cent and in corn by 58 per cent.

In order to meet grain requirements by year 2000, Syria must produce 3,694 million tons of wheat by that time, as well as 4,124 million tons of barley and 588,000 tons of corn. Farming will need 182,000 tons of seeds while consumers will require 182,000 tons of food grocery.

Demand for grain is expected to jump to 8.5 million tons by the year 2000. Projected production will not exceed 6,282 million tons. This means that Syria will not produce more than 73 per cent of the expected demand, or actual needs.

One way to attain self-sufficiency in food is the expansion of irrigated grain areas at the same time using high-yield varieties. The irrigated area for wheat cultivation is still small — not exceeding 229,000 hectares, or 21 per cent of the total area for wheat cultivation.

A parliamentary committee has reported that Syria's main economic problem will centre on food, namely grain.

According to the press, the Syrian citizen is getting his full needs of vegetable-related food as well as 66 per cent of his needs for meat. The parliamentary committee reported that self-sufficiency in food

dropped because of population increase. Despite an increase in grain production, growing consumption outpaced this increase. The decline in food self-sufficiency led to an increase in annual wheat imports.

The parliamentary committee attributed the decline in food self-sufficiency to an increasing population, years of drought and to consumption exceeding the rate of food production.

The committee affirmed that grain production would have increased if the irrigated lands were expanded. The irrigated land did not increase in the last 20 years by more than 176,000 hectares. From about 475,000 hectares in 1979, irrigated areas increased to 651,000 hectares by 1988.

—DEPTINNEWS ASIA

**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.**

**To offset contrabands**

Sir, Is Bangladesh becoming a smuggler's paradise? News of seizure of contraband goods these days generate such an impression. Among the prominent smuggled items are Indian clothing, books, videos, and cosmetics, Far-eastern cigarettes, wines, pornos, and electronics, and drugs from anywhere that are collectively responsible for the gradual degradation of national economic vitality and socio-cultural norms.

The recent sensational smuggled gold case indicates the extent of the international network including high-ranking Bangladeshi officials who have been making their fortune at the cost of national welfare. The zigsaw puzzle has been completed by the latest episode of unearthed contraband video and electronic equipment at Gulshan and ZIA.

Major ramifications of such contrabands in an LDC like Bangladesh include underground market stimulation and probable monopolization, falling demands for domestic products, decrease in local productions and wages, increase in lay-offs and unrests of industrial labours, civil strife, and so on culminating in economic imbalance — inflation or recession. In order for the national economy to be at equilibrium, the market stabilising mechanism ought to be applied; and one of the essential measures is an adjustable national import policy that must cope with the fluctuating international markets vis-a-vis domestic demand-supply index.

However, optimum supply of quality local products

at competitive prices will offset the contrabands and will boost national commerce. One other fruitful effort should be the effective enforcement of customs regulations, which must conform to the national traits, coupled with adequate security facilities at traffic points in particular and around the border in general. Above and beyond all, the nationalistic sentiment is what required most for a prosperous national economy.

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**Democratic values**

Sir, Now that the most expected parliamentary election is over and neutral national and international observers have termed the February 27 election as totally free and fair, it has proved one fact that the political consciousness of our people has increased significantly during the past few years and in favourable environment they can perform their just role. If good sense of responsibility prevails on both government and opposition sides, I am sure, it won't be much difficult on our part to establish true democracy in the country and thereby turn Bangladesh into a welfare state.

We sincerely hope that the new government to be formed under the leadership of BNP will do everything to improve the lot of the common Bangladeshis through implementation of the democratic values and principles in letter and spirit.

We congratulate all the winners in the Parliamentary Election and wish

them success in the national tasks.

M. Zahidul Haque  
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**BTv: Quality control**

Sir, I have been procrastinating for long to write this letter on BTv's apathy to the technical quality control of the TV commercials advertisements, with which we viewers have to put up for a couple of hours every evening. The repetition is boring enough, but with poor quality control (technical, not the contents or the message, which is a different issue), watching the screen becomes unbearable.

The shortcomings are basically simple, but are persistently continuing. The problem could be summed up as sheer lack of professional pride, coupled with indifference to responsibilities at various levels. It is very likely that these examples of poor operational quality have been discussed many times at departmental meetings; but no relief by way of better service is being provided to the loyal viewers; who can not exercise the option of switching to another network.

If a quality control code is followed by all the parties concerned (the clients, and the commercial and engineering wings in BTv), then this sort of complaint won't arise.

Many of the advertisements are played back many times. As the audio-visual qualities deteriorate after many playbacks, there should be a routine mechanism for regular rejection and replacement of the worn-out and unacceptable materials. All these considerations have to be incorporated in the contract agreement with the clients.

Another irritation is poor operational standard. The viewer has to constantly adjust the sound and brightness levels, as these do not match with

the preceding and subsequent programmes. These are simple pre-checking and coordinating jobs inside the TV station (provided the client had been provided with the correct specs for preparation of the ads.).

This type of lapse is a symptom of the current society: not being sensitive to the sense of duty, poor efficiency; lax supervision; and absence of deterrent preventive measures. We lose millions of man-hours this way.

The new government have one more job at root level: motivate increase of efficiency at individual and collective levels; and to inculcate the sense of duty. Do your job well, and the country will take care of itself; (the end goal of business is better service, not more profit).

BTv is quite capable of tackling its problem if somebody puts his foot down. Strictness is a virtue we lack (afraid of being unpopular) in this land of abundant vices. We have shown we can hold a 'normal' general election. This is a good starting point to improve ourselves.

A. Mawaz  
Dhaka.

**To revive moral values**

Sir, There is a Hadith which states — "Moral character and decent conduct are the Virtues." I think, in the present days, we need to strictly follow this Hadith for our correction and to revive our de-ranked moral values. It is evident that a person with moral character never betrays with his conscience and it is his decent conduct which makes him acceptable to everyone.

M. Zahidul Haque  
Dhaka

**CORRIGENDUM**  
The words 'rightly' or 'in 4th line of 2nd para of the letter entitled 'Age of Superannuation' published on March 2, stands deleted.

**OPINION**

**AL and Leadership**

I think most political analysts expected better performance from Awami League in the just held general elections. It is the oldest, people orientated, field based organisation. I venture to speculate why this happened.

I believe Awami League started losing its popularity from about 1973 when sycophants and unscrupulous people started to get the ear of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was evidenced in the graffiti and vocal assertion about misuse of Red Cross gifts. Then P. O. 9, Special Powers Act, the Press and Publications Act alienated the thinking and educated people. It will be very interesting to find out who advised Bangabandhu to organise Rakshi Bahini. This infamous Bahini allegedly killed hundreds of unarmed villagers at the behest of petty party leaders. The villagers, too, got estranged. The worst was when, without any mandate from the people, even proper discussion in the Parliament, the Constitution was amended to provide a single party Presidential system. Awami League had always been for a Parliamentary system. This sudden volte face perplexed everybody. There was communication gap between the people and the government and the confidence and pride people felt for Awami League began to evaporate. So when conspirators murdered Bangabandhu and his family members there was no doubt shock and grief but no public protest or agitation whatsoever. And only 4 years earlier, the nation had fought, at the call of Bangabandhu, the mighty Pakistan army to victory.

Awami League is the only organised party consisting mostly of loyal supporters. It, unlike many newly formed parties, did not originate around an individual nor composed generally of deserters and time servers. But after Bangabandhu, the party was without a helmsman. It did not go in for mass movement. Without struggle, the party tended to become atrophied. When it selected a leader, it lacked political wisdom. It chose as leader a person whose greater qualification, if that is a

qualification, is that she is daughter of Bangabandhu. She has no charisma or organising ability like her father, nor his large heartedness. Who could have imagined Bangabandhu's daughter would be frightened to announce participation in 1986 Election within the prescribed time set by General Ershad with a threat of dire consequences? Now after her party's partial defeat, she did not have the courtesy to congratulate her victorious opponent; her pre-election speech on Radio and Television also lacked sense of proportion. She seems unable to take correct and firm decision. She sent Dr. Kamal Hossain to Demra (in 1986) and Mirpur (this time) instead of Dhanmondi or Mottijheel. I heard an interesting conversation between two rickshaw pullers in Dhanmondi. One accused the people of Mirpur for rejecting Dr. Kamal Hossain, when another stated that the fault was not of the people of Mirpur. Sheikh Hasina deliberately sent Dr. Hossain to those constituencies where he would be less known to the ordinary voters. A self-respecting person would have resigned leadership after defeat at the hands of quite unknown persons by such big margins. It is reported she has done so.

Now, the principal and most important factor for BNP's victory is the support the party received from the student community. Since 1946, it is the student community which determines the fate and path of political movement. General Ershad could only be removed when the student community got united and organised and led the mass upsurge. During the last two years, Chhatra Dal has emerged as the most popular and powerful while Chhatra League is splintered into innumerable groups. Begum Khaleda Zia's expulsion of Ovi-Niru group shows her political sagacity and courage.

If Awami League is to regain its position, which it certainly deserves because of its past sacrifice and suffering and the loyalty of its supporters, the party must have a charismatic leadership.

—Akbar Kabir