

New World Order—or 'Orders'?

by Alan Chalkey

Gorbachev's Next Task

A new Union Treaty redefining the relationship between Moscow and the 15 republics of the Soviet Union was put to a referendum on Sunday. A unique event, and a commendable show of courage. According to press reports, Gorbachev's gamble appears to have paid off as none of the republics returned a 'no' majority.

But that's only half the story. The issue of independence for the three Baltic states — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — remains unresolved, since they even refused to take part in the ballot. It may not be feasible to hang on to the Baltics much longer, especially as the three, unlike other republics in the union, have experienced sovereign existence between 1918 and 1940. An ominous signal also emerged from the Russian Federation, by far the largest of the republics, where voters appear to have approved a supplementary proposal to turn the chairmanship of the Federation's parliament into an executive presidency.

Gorbachev now has a rough measure of his problems. He is also assured that people of the Soviet Union do not wish to see the USSR disintegrate. The question now is: for how long?

Gorbachev's policy of economic and political restructuring is under threat. While mere utterance of the word 'perestroika' produces thunderous applause in the Congress of Deputies, in reality it has become an abandoned child. Economic reforms, cornerstone of Gorbachev's policy for national renewal, have sputtered to a halt. Instead of a free market, the economy is going through a free-fall. The consumer market is in a worse shape than it was even during the so-called 'stagnation period' of Leonid Brezhnev. Last year Germany sent emergency food supplies to prevent famine breaking out. The spectacle of a one-time superpower needing food relief like an Ethiopia or a Sudan is a sobering thought indeed. For the Soviet people, who lost 20 million comrades in the war against Germany in 1941-45, the idea of relying on German assistance for economic survival is laced with bitter irony.

Failure of perestroika to produce the goods has put the other pillar of Gorbachevian philosophy, glasnost, under equal strain. Press criticism of Gorbachev's handling of the economy and the crisis in the Baltics has weakened his authority. Bureaucratic obstacles on perestroika's path and moves to curtail glasnost have raised fears in liberal circles in Moscow that the Gorbachev revolution may not be irreversible.

The rise of Boris Yeltsin as a parallel source of power now adds further fuel to the fire. The motive behind Yeltsin's manoeuvres is not yet clear, but it is something the Soviet Union could have done without at this particular moment in time.

On the whole, the Soviet people have chosen what is by far the more sensible path. But the dissenting votes were many, and Gorbachev would do well to heed that warning in his dealings with the republics in the future. The Soviet republics need one another for security as well as prosperity; but they also need greater freedom to develop their individual national cultures and preserve their traditional ways of life. With this referendum he has been given a breathing space, a second chance to make perestroika work.

Not So Simple A Problem

In all trains to and from Kishoreganj, there has been lately a marked rise in ticketless travelling. So says a report emanating from that town which is evocative of the memories of a horde of immortals of Bengali culture and literature.

Too bad, undoubtedly. Specially when one remembers that government has given in to a World Bank suggestion that trains not earning its own way through should go, one cannot help worrying over the danger the ticketless ones are throwing themselves and others of the area into.

There is no question about the easy ride being a crime. That settled, let us try to look at the problem through other angles. To begin with, not all ticketless rail travellers are non-paying joyriders. Most of them are made to pay by railway personnel many of whom do not take delight in seeing a passenger with a ticket. Specially in the areas where railway lives but peripherally — some of which has been described by Monajatuddin in graphic detail. It is symbiosis in action on those timeless and out-of-this-world local trains.

The services offered by most local trains are hardly salable. Lights and toilets and seats are missing from the trains as a matter of norm. How much railway can charge for such service really? Not the value of full ticket — specially if the train does not conform dependably to any schedule.

The report, published on Tuesday in The Daily Star, supplies the third point to ponder. One cause of ticketless travelling is the passengers' inability to buy a ticket — it's beyond their capacity. They are all working people, using the train to go to work and to go back from work. They are contributing, undoubtedly, to national economy. Labour mobility is a necessary precondition for economic well-being. Insisting on a ticket at the current prices will mean a contribution to unemployment as well as to lessening of economic activity.

There are no easy answers to these questions. The recent emphasis on inter-city and express trains at the expense of local trains has not ushered in any prosperity for the railways. It continues to lose badly. It carries progressively less passengers and even lesser freight.

The whole question is crooked and warped. The inter-city craze was one expression of looking at it in a particular way. Making passengers in the interior ticket-minded will require more than just honest personnel. Who will take care of those extra things? And how?

Train was once the best affordable transport for our people. Why shouldn't it become that again? We want the possibilities of that to be looked into with more seriousness than ever before. For the sake of our economy, our people and, not the least, our railway.

It was in the midst of the Persian Gulf crisis that US President Bush referred to a "new world order" which could result from that crisis.

To some older readers, the phrase had an unpleasant ring — it was an echo of Hitler's "New Order in Europe" and Japan's "Co-prosperity Sphere in Asia." Surely this new New Order was not another power-crazy dictator's idea of a world, no better than slavery?

Of course, that was not what Bush meant. He meant that now United Nations would have "teeth", that it would stop tyrants in their tracks and protect nations from invasion. If that were to happen, then it would be for the first time in the world's history. Previous attempts to set up a kind of "world peace force" have failed.

The League of Nations could not prevent Mussolini from invading Abyssinia, and it was quite powerless when Hitler began his invasions in 1936. The great Congress of Vienna, discussing post-Napoleonic power, failed to create any peacekeeping force in 1816.

But there have been some powerful semi-global forces led by one nation which imposed a "peace" — Alexander and his Macedonians, Claudius at the peak of the sprawling Roman Empire, the Kings and Queens of Iberia for whom the Pope divided the whole world, and Queen Victoria's Empire last century which ruled a quarter of the world's people and half its trade.

These have now all gone into historical mists, leaving behind only colourful relics of colonial times in Asia from the Moguls and Parsees to the Filipino voice to the church spires of India to the Portuguese forts of Malacca and Macau.

But which is the world's leading force now? There isn't one, in fact.

The US has no "empire", any more than the UK has. "Colonies" has become a dirty word (even in Hongkong, one of the last of them). The US is not the financial power it used to be, because it is deeply in debt.

The great financial powers are Japan, West Germany and Taiwan, but these countries seem to want to avoid global political power. And in any case if they were to take up the role, there would be loud protest from many nations.

Thus we must ask the question: what is the outlook for international cooperation, instead of competition?

With the failure of the global trade talks in Geneva, and the news of violence and war in Iran, Iraq, Israel, Central America, East Africa, North Africa, the Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Sri Lanka, are these all harbingers of a renewed bloodthirsty era, and one of beggar-my-neighbour policies?

The world does not lack for institutions and meeting-places for the solving of prob-

lems and the patching-up of quarrels. Since 1945, dozens of them have been added to the little group left behind by the League of Nations (such as the International Labour Organisation and the World Health Organisation).

The United Nations has created a vast superstructure of well-staffed bodies, devoted to food and agriculture, culture and education, population, women's affairs, the environment, development funding, disarmament, etc., etc. But these are not a "force"; they cannot impose their decisions, however wise and peaceful,

has since had to reduce its work to the lending of international money and advice on how it is spent.

The World Bank has been more successful. It was formed to lend money for infrastructural work (power, communications, roads and railways, irrigation, farm supply systems health, etc.) to the poorer nations. Some twenty years later a similar lender was set up in Manila, the Asian Development Bank. These two institutions have continued to lend out billions of dollars equivalents over the years, with almost no bad debtors. They lend for up to 50

laboration — a Pan-American Union, a European Community, a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (and, for a while, a Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation as well), an Australia-New Zealand-US treaty (now inoperative), a "Comecon" (an acronym for the Russia-East Europe economic cooperation body), a Warsaw Pact, and an Association of Southeast Asian Nations. More recently there has arisen a South Asian cooperation body, and back in the 1950s there was a grouping called the "Bandung nations", (this has now broadened into several bodies summed up under the phrase the "non-aligned nations," but the membership is not formalised).

history of man has there been such an effort to form global meeting places and promote peaceful agreement between nations.

But alas, most of them lack "teeth" — even of the most rudimentary kind. At best, these bodies can just refuse to cooperate with a country which does not accept its reasoned decisions, or it can eject such a nation from its membership (as the United Nations has done against Taiwan and — for a while — Indonesia, for instance).

Nearly all nations are very jealous of their "sovereignty," which can be defined for any purpose. When they act "in their national interest," they may well damage the interests of other sovereignties.

Thus far, very few nations (if indeed there are any) are willing to hand their powers over to an international body, especially in defence and foreign affairs.

So all one can do is wish President Bush's idea well, to see what people have in mind for this "new world order," and hope that it means peaceful movement, peaceful trade and peaceful communications round the globe.

— Depthnews Asia

Which is the world's leading force now? There isn't one in fact.

and any nation can withhold operation of any decision as "interfering in its internal affairs." The UN also has four regional Commissions (the Asian one is in Bangkok), with many roles and committees. But these, too, are powerless to impose; they can only persuade.

Formed soon after the United Nations are two international institutions of some strength, but only in their restricted fields. The International Monetary Fund was designed to bring order to the currencies of the world, but unfortunately it could not survive a gold crisis in 1971, and

years, and much of the money is at very low or no interest.

Those two are not the only sources, though. Countries run their own funds (chiefly to ensure that their own nationals do the supplying, frankly). There is a Colombo Club; there is "IGGI," the inter-governmental group of aiding-nations to Indonesia; there is a "Paris Club" of debtors for several nations. There are Common-wealth and Inter-American and French ex-colony bodies looking after aid to special areas.

Then there are the political bodies, which also aim sometimes to provide economic col-

One of the more hopeful institutions, formed around the same time as the World Bank and IMF, has been the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which has had almost a worldwide membership at one time and another. This agreement, which has only a tiny permanent staff and no fixed address for meeting, is devoted to pulling down the barriers to international trade, and has been moderately successful.

But its latest attempt at a new agreement, which included services industries for the first time and became a battleground over agricultural subsidies, has crumpled. It may be revived, but hopes of a sound pact are dim.

To sum up: never in the

NO-ONE knows how many they are. Official statistics on Russian blacks, the children of African fathers and Soviet mothers, are unavailable. Their numbers may run into the thousands. Leningrad alone is believed to have about 1,000 Russian-born blacks.

Last autumn about a dozen met here to launch an Association of Afro-Soviets to promote their interests. Said organising committee leader Joseph Okum, whose father is Ghanaian: "We hope our association will unite all Soviets who have their roots in Africa and the diaspora."

"Many Afro-Soviets have never in their lives seen people of their like before. It is a delight for each of us to feel that he or she is not alone in this world."

The association, yet to be registered as a charitable society, aims to attract world attention "to our perilous existence before we disappear like the dinosaurs" as Michael Zayatsky, whose father is an Ethiopian, puts it.

They tried unsuccessfully to attract the attention of a human rights conference held here last autumn by former Soviet dissidents and human rights activists and their counterparts from the former socialist bloc countries. The mainstream press decisively shunned them.

Okum says the association's immediate objective is to raise funds to set up an orphanage in Leningrad for Afro-Soviet children. He and his 12-member "initiative committee" plan a national hunt for abandoned children of African descent in orphanages and baby homes.

Africans Want Orphanage for Abandoned Black Russians

Charles Quist Adade writes from Leningrad

Russian blacks—usually the children of African student fathers and Soviet mothers—have formed an association in Leningrad to attract world attention to their plight 'before we disappear like the dinosaurs.' They want first to conduct a national hunt for abandoned children of African descent and to set up an orphanage for them. The plight of these blacks in the Soviet Union is often serious. Discrimination is common. They become outcasts at school and in the army are made scapegoats at the least pretext.

"They will count and note them down," starting with Leningrad orphanages since "we have no funds now to travel the length and breadth of the country."

To raise funds, the association intends to open an African cafe which will also serve as a cultural centre.

Okum pleads: "I hope we can count on the goodwill of African officials, Afro-American organisations and charitable organisations everywhere to come to our rescue."

The seeds of the problems of these youths, the oldest of whom are now 25, were sown in the early sixties. The Soviet Union, then projecting itself as the leader of the world-wide anti-colonialist liberation movements, invited large numbers of "African youths dreaming about socialism" to take up university and college studies in the USSR.

That was soon after Joseph Stalin's death and Soviet society was still closed behind the

iron curtain. Vladimir Vydrin, an African studies lecturer at Leningrad University, recalls: "The initial reaction of Soviet people to what was termed the black wave was that of benevolent amazement."

The African student population was and still is predominantly male. For many Soviet women marrying a foreigner provided the only chance to get outside the Iron Curtain and glimpse the luxuriant life abroad. "A spate of marriages, mostly of convenience, followed."

On graduation, the young fathers, especially those from poor homes, faced the dilemma of going home with their families or leaving the children behind.

Soviet officials did not encourage foreign students to stay on after completing their studies. Under Soviet law foreigners cannot take up dual citizenship. New draft legislation may allow foreigners to do

so after living in the country for a specified number of years.

At present students are scared away by the militia and KGB soon after completing their studies. Concessions are not given even to those who have Soviet wives. Until perestroika, even students who had fallen out with their home governments were sent home on completion of their studies, often to face persecution.

This is why so many were compelled to leave their families behind. Many intended to return but economic constraints at home meant few ever did so.

Soviet authorities have never encouraged marriage between Soviet women and Africans. Recent press campaigns openly discourage Soviet women from marrying men from Third World countries.

Reports on "horrible sufferings" of Soviet wives in Ethiopia and Cuba have been carried in Pravda and Izvestia,

among others. Some said Soviet women were sold into slavery or forced into prostitution to survive.

The emergence of yet another racial group is a bother to Soviet officials, who are hard-pressed already with the inter-ethnic violence in the Southern republics and an surge in other inter-racial and inter-ethnic problems.

The Soviet Union's official anti-racist stand at international forums does not extend to the domestic front. Racial abuse and discrimination is a daily occurrence. Although a recent constitutional provision makes racial abuse punishable by law, it seems doubtful the courts will prosecute offenders.

Afro-Soviet children have had to put up with much racial intolerance, bigotry and hypocrisy. Neighbours and sometimes relatives scoff their mothers for "shamelessness and debauchery." The children

become outcasts in public schools.

Eighteen-year old Marina, whose father came from Chad, says: "My only protector is myself. My tool is to pretend I don't see, don't hear and don't care."

More difficult are the lives of black Russian boys drafted into the Red Army, where ethnic discrimination is extremely severe.

Michael Zayatsky, who related harrowing experiences from his two-year call-up service, said: "Often there is, only one black in a whole detachment and it is tempting to make a scapegoat of him at the least pretext."

Gorbachev's perestroika politics, although it has allowed for ethnic self-expression and assertion, has brought no improvements in the living conditions of Afro-Soviets. Like many of the lower Soviet strata, they live in horrible conditions below the poverty line. The transition to market economies and the collapse of the state-managed economy has meant a further deterioration.

Now nationalist tensions and the rise of Russian fascism could pose serious dangers for Soviet blacks.

Lecturer Vydrin says: "Although for now the fascist organisations are more concentrated in a struggle against Zionists and Masons it is feared that with time they may remember others who spoil the purity of the Russian nation." — GEMINI NEWS

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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.

Asian Cup TT

Sir, Ping Pong, officially known as Table Tennis, has maintained its grace with ever increasing popularity both in the living room and out at the park.

Miniature tennis on the table, (Table Tennis I) represents an ideal combination of stamina, agility, and physical flexibility and allures everyone of any age. Like most of the sports, TT has always been a very good means of socialisation everywhere. TT played the pivotal role in resuming US-China relations two decades ago switching enmity into amity that returned China back to the UN and thus revolutionised international relations — famous as Ping Pong Diplomacy.

Once again, the Chinese paddlers displayed superiority smashing their neighbours out, despite absence of world level performance, at the 8th Asian Cup Table Tennis Tournament in Dhaka recently. On the host side, the compe-

tion was an honour for standard-deficient Bangladesh being the venue, as was an education afresh, from placings to manners, which will enlarge her vision for the upcoming World Championships in Japan.

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Form of Govt

Sir, I would like to reproduce the opening few lines I wrote in an article titled "Tribute to Zia": "In learning to play piano, all ten fingers are in motion, it won't do to move a few fingers only, and not the others said Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. Our beloved leader late President Ziaur Rahman knew the meaning of this. He had all his fingers on the pulse of his country, and always struck the right keys. He moved his fingers on all the sectors of development in Bangladesh and worked hard to bring about socio-

economic changes for the rapid development of his country."

Now that Shahid Zia's party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is again forming the government and BNP's Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia has already assured the nation that the government will complete the unfinished tasks of Late Zia and follow his ideals to improve the lot of the common people, we sincerely hope that the BNP Chief, and every member of her govt., like Shahid Zia, will put their fingers in every segment of the country's politico-economic set-ups.

Meanwhile, we earnestly hope that only honest and dedicated persons will be appointed in the key-positions of the government. We want that the 'practice' of both higher and lower levels corruption be banished from the soil of Bangladesh for ever. It is also expected that the new government will adopt every measure keeping in view the general welfare of the common people. They will also work hard to contain the politics of hate and non-cooperation by applying democratic principles.

Perhaps, parliament is the right place to decide on the future form of gov-

ernment in Bangladesh. I personally feel that the parliamentary form will do well in the present context of our country. The leader of the majority in parliament will be the Prime Minister who will head the government while the parliament will appoint a President as the head of the state. In this regard I feel that the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed may be requested to continue as the President of Bangladesh. The Acting President has already proved his efficiency and credibility as the country's Head. If Justice Shahabuddin accepts such request, it will also save the nation an immediate expense of hard earned money for holding a presidential election.

M. Zahidul Haque,
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Royalty and politics

Sir, Recent comments made by Princess Diana about Prime Minister John Major has stirred in quite a few criticisms from various quarters. First and foremost is that the Royal Family, by convention, is not supposed to comment about politics. They are to

stay out of politics absolutely. This means they are not to even slightly talk or make public their personal opinions about any political topic or personality.

However, it seems that modern day Royal Family members are different from their predecessors. They do not want to be silent spectators to the political events of their time. Therefore, time and again they are seen to be making this or that comment on political personalities.

Perhaps, in future the convention which prohibiting the Royalty from getting involved in politics has to be amended.

We have to wait and see, what happens in time with the modern day tendency. Hadi Talukder Banani, Dhaka.

Environmental pollution

Sir, These days when we all are so aware of the hazards of pollution, we should, at all costs, avoid doing anything which will pollute our atmosphere and, by extension, our environment.

However, we still see that despite grave warnings from experts we do not take them seriously. A news item recently

said that dumping of polythene bags in drains is resulting in health hazards for the local community in Barguna. They cause the drains to be blocked and thus stop easy flow of rain water. It is known to us water logging can have so many ill-effects.

I hope the citizens of our country should consider this as a threat to health and try their best not to create such a situation. Dolly Mojumdar, Tangail.

Aspirin and heart attack

Sir, A news item, recently published, says that low doses of Aspirin, helps prevent heart attack. This has been proved to be correct, both in the cases of men as well as women.

Doctors have discovered that such a dose helps reduce heart attacks by 30 per cent. Well, anything even low doses of medicine intake, is good enough, if it really can save us from heart attacks.

We would hopefully look forward to more such research findings as might help further recovery from diseases. Taher Ahmed Bijoyagar, Dhaka.