

Dhaka, Sunday, April 14, 1991

Dhaka-Beijing Ties

On the face of it, the sixth meeting of the China-Bangladesh Joint Economic Commission (JEC) which concluded here on Thursday looked very much a routine exercise. We are now pleased to note that the four-day deliberation turned out to be far more substantive and forward-looking than observers had expected.

In one sense, the significance of the meeting went considerably beyond what was on its formal agenda. It provided the first contact between a high-level Chinese delegation, led by a Vice-Minister, and the new elected government of Bangladesh, with the two sides taking advantage of this opportunity of assessing each other's thinking and reiterating their commitment to the continuing expansion of China-Bangladesh relations. In this context, it was good to hear the leader of the Chinese delegation, Wang Wen Dong recall the contribution made by the late President Ziaur Rahman to the rapid opening of Beijing-Dhaka ties. Thereby, he acknowledged that the present administration would continue the tradition set by the first BNP government.

The deliberation on economic issues produced a number of significant results. Here, the government should be pleased that the Chinese have agreed to continue with the barter trade with Bangladesh for one more year, as requested by Dhaka, when they have already ended similar arrangements with other countries. With the two countries maintaining \$31 million worth of barter trade each way annually, the continuance of the system gives Dhaka a bit of a breathing time to switch to "trade for cash" basis. This means that to avoid the widening of trade imbalance or rather in order to reduce it by stages — at the moment, the balance is very much in favour of Beijing — Bangladesh must continually look for new areas for the expansion of its export trade with China. Here, the increase in our urea production, over the next two years, should help in doubling or even trebling our export of this commodity to China in coming years.

The impressive list of projects in Bangladesh in which China is involved, as published by this paper yesterday, underscores a shared commitment of the two countries to reach out to new areas of economic co-operation. Here, we are particularly pleased with the Chinese offer to build a modern hospital, to provide technology for the development of the country's sericulture and silk industry and to agree to build a bridge on the river Mahananda, the third Beijing-aided road bridge to be constructed in this country.

When completed, all these projects will be of immense value to Bangladesh. There is another area of Bangladesh-China economic co-operation which we should never lose sight of, an area that must be developed and strengthened to its fullest potential. To put it simply, it is learning from China in the field of rural industrialisation. All reports from independent sources show clearly, with the help of statistics, that China has made impressive — some would say, incredible — strides in changing its countryside, in creating over 100 million jobs in rural industries and in halting the migration to urban centres. In short, new socio-economic forces have been set in motion which, in time, will make China the best model for many developing countries in the world, including Bangladesh.

It is imperative that Bangladesh sets up the necessary framework, under JEC, to raise the level of our bilateral co-operation in this field. If this country can eventually achieve half as much as what has been done in China, in the field of rural development, we will be seeing a bright light at the end of the tunnel.

No More Sreepur

The disaster at Sreepur upazila in Gazipur last Wednesday has left a big question mark hanging over the state of our construction industry, and particularly compliance with existing regulations. The textile mill, whose collapsed roof left an as yet unknown number of hapless workers dead, was undergoing construction at the time. Workers apparently felt safe as they took shelter under the very roof they were building. Their faith in the durability of the roof proved tragically erroneous.

Concern is now mounting that the accident may have been purely due to negligence on the part of the engineer and designer, who also happens to be the contractor in this case. There is concern that the pillars supporting the roof were too far apart to provide adequate support. Questions have also been raised about the quality and correct mix of the material used. These are common allegations about construction works in the country, but until a proper investigation is carried out into the disaster, we are not likely to know exactly why the roof collapsed.

However, there are in Bangladesh, as in any other civilised country, laws and regulations dealing with building construction and safety procedures. The question now is, are these rules being complied with? If not, then who is responsible for not ensuring compliance? It is just not good enough to enact high-sounding laws, unless the will exists to implement them firmly and indiscriminately.

A look at Dhaka buildings undergoing construction can fill one with horror. Very few of them use proper scaffolding materials, most seem to be balancing precariously on bamboo poles. Extra floors are continually added to many existing structures, without reinforcing the foundation or even floors below. Welding works, renovations etc. are carried out on floors high above street-level without any precaution for pedestrian safety.

Sreepur, instead of providing another opportunity for speech-making, should become a platform for positive action. That means bringing the entire construction industry under proper supervision. With growth of urban centres all over Bangladesh, this is no longer a luxury issue. Strict rules and guidelines have to be laid down and enforced vigorously. Liabilities for injuries and death have to be made legally-binding and buildings have to be brought under a proper insurance scheme. Uncontrolled growth of concrete blocks will have to be checked through an effective system of certification. To begin with, investigation should be undertaken into unsafe high-rise structures so they no longer remain a constant death-threat to the public as they do at present.

The above editorials originally appeared in the issue of The Daily Star of yesterday (13 April, 1991) which, due to mechanical failure in the printing plant, could not be published for a general distribution.

Was This the Way the Kuwait War was Supposed to End?

by Derek Ingram

War, it is always said, solves nothing. The conflict in the Gulf delivered a wrecked Kuwait back to its people, but new horrors have struck the Iraqis, dashed the hopes of the long-suffering Kurdish people, and stirred old quarrels among neighbouring countries. The suffering grows as the liberators from the West pack up for home. It looks as if it has all gone horribly wrong and nobody really knows what to do next.

TELEVISION news bulletins about Iraq these days often carry a warning when they are shown in the West. "Viewers," says the newscaster, "may find some of the pictures they are about to see disturbing."

There follow the now all-too-familiar scenes of broken bodies, weeping, burned and bleeding people lying in wrecked hospital wards without succour, rooms of torture, roads lined with refugees.

The aftermath of the brief, bloody war against Iraq is proving once again the truth of the oft-quoted words of the German General Hans von Seeckt of World War One: "War is not the continuation of policy. It is the breakdown of policy."

As we look around the Gulf there is nothing much for anyone to be proud of: people tearing each other to pieces in Basra and Kirkuk, oil wells flooding across the desert sand and turning sunshine into darkness, a "liberated" Kuwait full of human beings choking over the fumes, birds floundering in the slime, camels pathetically sprawled, legs agley, in death.

And no one really knows what to do about it all. Saddam still reigns. The Kurdish people, for so long conveniently ignored by the big powers because they had nothing much to offer and wanted only to be in charge of their own affairs, seem consigned to more years of oppression. Without even water, thousands wander the countryside looking for leaves to eat.

It looks very much as if the attempt to rescue one group of people, the Kuwaitis, with a country of sorts and rich resources, has been achieved at the cost of sacrificing another and much bigger group, the Kurds, who have no country and whose resources are owned by others.

Was this the way ahead the United States and its coalition allies planned when they started bombing Baghdad on the morning of January 17 1991? Obviously not, though what scenario exactly was envisaged we shall not know until it eventually emerges in some politician's memoirs.

If it was thought that somehow Saddam Hussein would be toppled by one of his colleagues and Iraq would find a new government that could come to terms with the coalition and start

to rebuild a peaceful Iraq then it has all gone horribly wrong.

As tens of thousands of refugees pour out of Iraq into neighbouring countries the Middle East jigsaw becomes not less but ever more complicated. Iran has old scores to pay off with Iraq. So does Turkey, which historically has treated its Kurds as badly as the Iraqis.

The opportunity to tackle the Palestinian problem is blighted because Yasser Arafat, still the moderate face of the PLO, has put himself out of court with the Americans by treating with Saddam.

War is a disastrous simplifier. With it come massive exercises in public relations that turn black into white and allow no grey areas between.

After it is all over people are brought face to face with the truth and start raking up the questions. The Gulf war was so short the questions have not been far behind, but Saddam Hussein has shown himself to be such a tyrant that many dubious actions of the western countries are being overlooked.

Usefully forgotten is the fact that in September 1980 the US and Britain blocked Security Council resolutions condemning Iraq's attack on Iran or that in March 1982 the US State De-

partment took Iraq off the list of countries practising terrorism so that it qualified for trade credits.

The CIA gave Iraq intelligence throughout its war with Iran, with the US Navy often jamming Iranian radar during Iraqi attacks. And President Ronald Reagan "bitterly opposed" attempts by Congress in July 1988 to impose sanctions on Iraq for gassing the Kurds. Even in 1989 Britain was the biggest single exhibitor at the Baghdad Arms Fair.

Many Arabs believe that if the West had acted faster three years ago when Arafat recognised the right of Israel to exist on Palestinian land, Saddam could never have emerged as an Arab saviour or prompted the PLO to stand by him against the West.

Always at the heart of the modern Middle East tragedy is the plight of the Palestinians. By virtue of his tyranny Saddam is disowned by his onetime sympathisers, but unless this underlying problem of the Palestinians is addressed another Saddam is, right now, being born.

The eclipse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war has left the United States as sole superpower. Given that the Middle East holds nearly one-third of the world's oil, it is no acci-

dent that the region has long been a centre of Washington's attention.

Iran caused the downfall of President Jimmy Carter. Iraq put George Bush on a pedestal from which he may survey the world for nearly six years more. And this short war may have put General Colin Powell or General Norman Schwarzkopf on course to become president of the United States.

The dominance of the United States has been compounded by the fact that the leadership of the developing world is at a low ebb indeed. In the Kuwait crisis the voice of the Non-aligned Movement went unheard.

In years gone by the Movement could field such giants as Jawaharlal Nehru, Josip Tito, Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah. Today there are no such leaders. In this latest crisis the Movement found itself rudderless, mainly because the country in the chair, Yugoslavia, was rent by internal divisions. India had a Prime Minister jacking any international experience who was expected to fall at any moment — and did.

The political incoherence of the world has seldom seemed greater than it does in the wake of the Gulf war. To the breakup of the Soviet empire and an inarticulate Third World is now added a divided Muslim world. Saddam's extraordinary determination to take his people to self-destruction has seen to that.

So, blinking and bewildered, what we have begun to call our global village is emerging from one of its periodic fits of madness. When the curtain rang down on the battle of Kuwait on February 28 and the oil wells poured their flames and acrid smoke into the sky, it was all rather like the final moments of The Twilight of the Gods, the last part of Wagner's Ring cycle.

The heavens break out in fire and Valhalla, the banquet hall of slain heroes, crashes in flames over the gods. As with The Ring, we are left in awe at what we have witnessed and wondering what can possibly come next. — GEMINI NEWS

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Ethnic Parties Search for Role

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

WITH the return to multi-party democracy, more than a dozen ethnic political parties are defining their role in the new political process amidst accusations of their centrifugal, divisive role.

The rise of these political groups poses a challenge to the mainstream political parties dominated by majority ethnic groups.

However, they are unlikely to make a dent in the political process unless the new powers in Kathmandu are highly ignorant of various ethnic sensitivities.

The Election Commission, after an inordinately long waiting period, has finally fixed May 12 as polling day for elections for the 205-seat House of Representatives, the lower house of the new parliament.

Chief Election Commissioner Surya Prasad Shrestha said 10.7 million eligible voters include those in the 18-21 age bracket many of whom will be exercising their right for the first time.

Some argue the rise of ethnic parties and violent Communist groups comes amidst disturbing indications of the terrible toll that the hydra-headed demon of electoral violence can inflict on the tender body of Nepal's fledgling democracy.

One of the main ethnic groups has been the Nepal Sadbhavana Party agitating recently for autonomy to the Terai region, the flatland bordering India. Its main com-

plaint has been that the southern people have been discriminated against by Kathmandu rulers for a long time.

The Nepali Janajati Party has called for a federation of 12 provinces on the basis of dominant ethnic groups. Khagendra Jung Gurung, a former minister, has called on fellow Gurungs, Magars, Thakalis and Lamas to give up the centrist Nepal Congress and Communist factions to work for the upliftment of ethnic communities.

The Mangol Rashtriya Mocha reportedly maintains an

armed camp and its members are committed to take up arms in the interest of the Mangol community. Gopal Gurung, leader of the group, denies its involvement in terrorist activities.

The list goes on but one of the main complaints has been that the political process, whether under the authoritarian one-party system or under the current multi-party democracy, is controlled by three dominant ethnic group: the Newars, Chettris and Brahmans.

That is where the problem lies. The Nepal Sadbhavana Party's activists began a hunger strike last February in support

of a five-point demand on the eve of Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's official visit here in mid-February.

"We plan to draw the attention of India to the inhuman and discriminatory treatment meted out on the Terai people of Indian origin," said Gajendra Narayan Singh, president of the Nepal Sadbhavana Party.

Mr. Singh said in addition to autonomy to the Terai region, he will fight for recognition by the Nepali government

Prime Minister Krishan Prasad Bhattarai refused to oblige, he accused it of being discriminatory.

"What is it if not discrimination when 83 seats have been allocated for the Terai with a population of 8.5 million while 122 seats have been allotted for the hills with a population of 9.5 million?" he asks.

"Those in power have compelled us to choose a path of struggle and the coming struggle will indeed be waged in the interest of the exploited and ignored communities," Mr. Singh adds.

Police batons charged activists of the Nepal Sadbhavana Party in February when they wanted to forcibly enter the Tudor-style Singh Durbar, the former Rana palace which houses the central secretariat, for a sit-in to press their demands.

"Discrimination against ethnic groups in the country might adversely affect the national unity," Dharmananda Jha, a party activist, says. "National unity has reached a very doubtful state because of the suppression and discrimination meted out against us."

One of the problems in the Terai has been the distribution of citizenship certificates. Mr. Singh has been asking that all those residing in Nepal at the time of the promulgation of the 1990 Constitution be given citizenship certificates. The Cabinet decided in

February that all persons included in the voters' list during the 1980 National Referendum who actually had already applied for naturalised citizenship certificates by April 1981 will be given the certificates.

A Home Ministry official said citizenship certificates were distributed last year to 8.2 million people, including 23,294 people who had applied for naturalised citizenship. He would not say how many still needed to get such citizenship.

In an effort to integrate the hill and Terai population, King Mahendra opened up the Terai for the settlement of the hill population. Social scientist

Frederick Gaige in his 1975 book, "Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal", describes the Terai as a "population vacuum."

If the process of settlement of the hill people in the Terai continues, anthropologist Melyvn C. Goldstein says, Nepal will be transformed from a classic mountain kingdom to a predominantly flat, subtropical and urban nation.

By all indications at the moment, ethnic parties do not seem to have any future. The best bet here is that they would disappear within either the democratic Nepali congress or various factions of the Communist. — Dephnevas Aska

OPINION System Loss

It is dismaying to note that our electric and water supply utilities operate at a system loss of above 40 per cent. This could be a world record. We better check up in the Guinness Book of Records. Professionally and economically it is unacceptable.

The foreign donor agencies who partly finance the relevant projects have also hinted their reservation about the system losses; and are said to be insisting on a number or pre-conditions for continuous release of the fund instalments. Similar hesitancy has been expressed by foreign investors who are exploring the possibilities of setting up industries in Bangladesh — there are many snags in the operational system of the incentives offered — which look attractive on paper. These 'bugs' have to be eliminated, to enhance our planning and industrial images.

As demand increases exponentially, development rises linearly; and the gap increases on a time scale. Therefore it is difficult for the operators to plan remedial measures, as many factors and circumstances are beyond local control; and constraints outstrip requirement.

No doubt our technical personnel are aware of the problems, and the options available for solutions (including the order of priorities). Some of the remedial measures are open secrets, and cannot be put down in official and formal papers, as these refer to the human side. Some are mentionable, such as inefficiency; and some are not, for example, corruption (which cannot be admitted officially for fear of possible defamation). Institutionalised corruption should be debated at high level internally within the government.

The technical, administrative, and planning drawbacks could be identified easily enough. The critical areas are the mechanisms for policy-making decisions, and the formalities prevalent in current practices for labyrinthine processing methods for according approval to projects. During the earlier autocratic regime, the Planning Commission was reported to have become more or less a sideline spectator and a rubber-stamping body. The

tussle is between centralized autocracy on the one hand, and democratic institutionalized way of working on the other. The other factor harming our planning exercises is the lack of feedback from outside the public sector. We have no 'think tank' set-ups. Hence the high-level input from outside is more or less missing or ineffective. The administration used to work on a closed-loop principle of the colonial days. Public debates are discouraged; and drafts of summaries of projects are not circulated in an effective manner to invite constructive criticism from the society. Of course the most important missing link was the absence of the parliament.

In the early days of our career, it was instilled into us that in case we had no access to the rules and regulations on a particular issue, we should go by one rule-of-the-thumb: act and decide as if the business were your own. We are aware of the popular saying: 'Company Ka Maal, Darya May Dhaal' (if the company loses, I am not concerned).

What is needed is deterrent punishment. We are famous for our misplaced kindness, and make a big noise about wrong issues. The moment deterrent punishment is meted out to somebody, there is a hue and cry, with hartals and agitations. Appeasement, nepotism, and favouritism creep in; and we are back to square one. Sometimes ruthlessness is a virtue, to deal with the wrong doers: (If I am wrong, I must be punished. Those who defend me 'illegally' should also be pulled up). The very impression that one could get away by doing something wrong and unlawful seriously undermines the principles on which the sense of discipline is based. Instead of pulling out the sapling and throwing it away, later we point to the big tree which had grown up since, and everyone can see.

Our leaders must not support the wrong causes to become popular. It needs moral courage, and lot of guts to be tough. The government may fall, but the principles universally accepted, as tested by time, during the whole course of human civilization.

A. Mawaz Dhaka

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.

Can we afford this wastage

Sir, It is indeed very sad and disheartening to realise that even after having gone through so much, in the form of sacrifice in the recent democratic movement, and hardship as resultant Gulf war fall-out, we haven't learnt much.

I am saying this after observing the wastage of electricity in the form of illumination, in this Eid season. As the Eid comes closer, each and every shopping centre is putting up extra lighting. The most surprising thing is that these shops do not stop at this extent, they go a step further in the so-called celebration of the festivity season. Within a shopping complex itself, each shop is illuminating its entrance, in an effort to attract customers.

Now the question is, can a poor country like ours afford so much of celebration and in this form? It is no secret that our economy is in a dissipated state.

Moreover, already the capital city does not have enough electricity to cater to the needs of all its dwellers. So we experience regular power failures during summer time, to our great difficulty. For along with power cut, there is scarcity of water too. And one can imagine what this means in the hot and humid summer months.

Thus in my opinion if the shopkeepers are unaware of this gigantic problem, then it is the duty of the authorities concerned to remind them of it and see that they abide by genuine necessity.

This is no time for any extravagant spending. All of us from every class must keep this in mind.

Shahed Majid Azimpur, Dhaka.

Rickshaw risk

Sir, The unforeseeable and unwelcome embrace with solid earth by passenger, having been bolt out

from the seat of cycle rickshaw like billiard-ball, is not an uncommon feature on the roads of our metropolis. Many valuable lives have been lost and many have sustained injuries, leave alone the embarrassments in the scenario.

Our memory is still fresh with profound sorrow at the sad and sudden tragic end of an illustrious tender soul like Nafsa Kamal in a similar accident near ~~the~~ crossing.

Whilst I hasten to add my voice to the chorus of condolence for the bereaved family of the deceased through your column, I would like to ask the city-fathers how long they would remain silent spectators. Is there no way to solve this problem which is growing in gigantic magnitude? To minimise risk, passengers in the plane have seat belts to fasten in times of possible danger, the cars these days have safety belts for the front seat occupants and steel helmets have been enforced for motor-cycle riders for the sake of safety. Why not seat belt and a side mirror for rear view are made compulsory for our cycle rickshaws! Perhaps some better idea may come out of the brainstorm of our city-

fathers. A.R.M.F. Hadi Gulshan, Dhaka.

Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, Twenty years have passed but the matter related to repatriation of stranded Pakistanis is still hanging. These people are living under sub-human condition in different repatriation camps in Bangladesh. The unhygienic living condition is not only affecting the health and hygiene of the camp inmates but people living around these camp area as well.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has already requested the special envoy of Pakistani Prime Minister, Mr Mir Hazar Khan Bujrani who recently visited Bangladesh, to raise the issue of repatriation and sharing of assets between the two countries with the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

We strongly hope that the Govt. of Pakistan will settle the issues at the earliest possible time without any further procrastination.

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