

Latin America Tries Again for a Common Market

Frank Nowikowski writes from Buenos Aires

Saddled with a history of regional divisions. Latin America has been unable to agree on various proposals for economic integration. A new, four-nation treaty nudged along by the US and the prospect of a united Europe, may just make the difference.

FOUR Latin American countries have agreed to form a common market in the southern cone of South America. The heads of state of Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, who met recently in Asunción, the Paraguayan capital, signed a treaty to create a free trade zone known as Mercosur by 1995.

This is the third major attempt to establish a degree of economic integration in Latin America. The catalyst for it was the prospect of a united Europe in 1992, and US reaction to it in the form of a call by President George Bush for a free trade zone from Alaska to Tierra Del Fuego.

While the Latins would welcome free trade with the US, and indeed have long complained about being hurt by US tariff restrictions, they fear being dominated by US economic might.

Previous US proposals for hemispheric integration were rejected by Latin Americans. Exactly 100 years ago, Argentina threw out just such a US proposal, citing its close cultural links with France, Spain and Italy, which it would not abandon.

Now the formation of Mercosur strengthens the bargaining position of Latin governments with the US. But Latin American countries still need to overcome significant differences among themselves.

Lack of political will has defeated previous attempts at Latin American economic integration. A Latin American Free Trade Association (Lafta) was

launched in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1960, but it came to nothing.

It was replaced in 1980 by the Latin American Integration Association (Aladi). This produced few results apart from a case-by-case reduction of export/import tariffs. A meeting in 1990 of the 10-nations in Adlai failed to agree on any of the main items under discussion.

The history of Latin American inability to agree on integration is rooted in Spanish control of the region.

To maintain its strong centralised control, Spain discouraged trading links between its American colonies. The jealousies and rivalries thus created continued after independence, dashing the integrationist dreams of liberating generals such as Bolívar and San Martín.

Even as late as 1989, only 35 per cent of Latin America's trade was within the region.

Mexico broke Latin ranks when it announced that it wanted to join in a free trade zone with the US and Canada. It is the third largest trading partner of the US, after Canada and Japan. Sixty-five per cent of Mexico's trade is with the US, and less than 4 per cent with the rest of Latin America.

Central American countries are more concerned with rebuilding a war devastated area than with economic integration. The Andean countries are enfeebled by the trade in narcotics. Argentina and Brazil have serious economic adjustments to make before they can break away from hyperinflation and crippling debt.

Chile, the relative success story in the region, is doing all right on its own and has declined to join any new club until it demonstrates it is successful.

Even without Chile, the new southern cone bloc could become a formidable economic unit. Between them the four countries have 200 million people or 44 per cent of the region's population, and generate over 50 per cent of the region's gross domestic product. They have a combined economic output comparable to that of Britain.

Mercosur should be in a strong position as a bloc to trade on the world markets. With the addition of Chile, and most probably Bolivia, the position is enhanced.

However, politicians will not have an easy task welding a harmonious unit. First of all the bloc will be dominated by the Brazilian economy. Brazil has 80 per cent of the popula-

tion of the new group and accounts for 72 per cent of the gross domestic product.

More worrying is that the economies of the major partners of Mercosur have been heading in different directions.

Under President Carlos Menem, for instance, Argentina has been stepping up its drive towards a Thatcher-style free markets while Brazil has abandoned its liberalisation programme, which failed to curb its hyperinflation, and has returned to government wage and price controls and is keeping protectionist barriers in place.

In Argentina the political will for a southern cone common market is very strong. There has been little discussion on the disadvantages to Argentina in forming an economic union with a dominant Brazil which is increasingly reverting to protectionism.

In theory, countries in the southern cone unit should strive at ending competitive production, and this means some painful decisions will have to be made.

But in the considerate Latin way, the smaller economies of Uruguay and Paraguay will have an extra year to come into line, and all the partners will retain a gradually diminishing list of

protected areas. In view of the amount of work that needs to be done, the target date of December 31, 1994 for Brazil and Argentina to scrap trade barriers, seems remarkably optimistic. Europe is only now eliminating trade barriers between member states, 35 years

after the Treaty of Rome. When the BEC was set up in 1971, the member countries had already achieved macro-economic stability, low inflation and growth. For Argentinians and Brazilians struggling to achieve macro-economic stability, and defeat hyperinflation and huge public deficits, Mercosur is perceived not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. — GEMINI NEWS

FRANK NOWIKOWSKI has worked as a journalist in Europe, Africa and South America.

Four get together



May Day and Labour Movement in Bangladesh

by Mesbahuddin Ahmed

LIKE every year this year also May Day has been observed throughout the world. In Bangladesh, May Day is a national holiday. Radio and Television hold special programmes, newspapers published news and articles focusing the main events and significance of the day. What does the day bring for the workers of Bangladesh? Why is this day significant to the Bangladeshi workers? May be the day is significant with those who work eight hours a day, get increased payment for overtime, and enjoy a extra holiday the May Day. But for those workers who have to work even on May Day and other national holidays without any extra payment for over time work and who have been hired and fired at the whims of the employers since there is lack of application of the labour laws in their cases, what meaning the Day brings to them?

I would like to describe in brief the condition of the workers of the much talked-about important foreign-currency-earning Garments Industries. What do the workers get, out of these earnings? They are to work more than eight hours but they do not get more wages for the extra hours. Employers reportedly even do not allow them to enjoy holidays they are entitled to. In this case Government Labour Department and Chief of Factories Inspection apparently remain indifferent. What does labour law mean when it is not enforced and protection denied to the concerned people?

Some years ago former President General HM Ershad paid visit to some garments industries and observed unlawful labour practices by the owners. But this visit did not bring about much changes for the people working there. The condition of workers in the re-rolling mills, tea gardens, the vast majority of private owned

industries are more or less the same.

Even now worker lose their jobs on trying to form Trade Unions. Yes, there is a law under which a worker can go to court with his grievances. But one knows that the case will be pending in the labour court for years together. How can a poor worker sustain and maintain a case for so long when he has no job. The condition of workers in the small industries are worse than those in the big industries. Here the strength of workers is less, union fund is not sufficient to go for legal battle with owners or for any kind of struggle, whereas owners can easily employ substitutes for them. There are no minimum wages for private owned industries and establishments.

I do not want to say that the workers of state owned industries and big industries are well of and in better shape. What protection they get, including wages commission, is not available for the workers of the private owned industries. Even in pre-liberation period, we had better labour policies to protect all including private sector workers. In our neighbouring countries, like India and Sri Lanka, the workers are better paid than the workers in Bangladesh. Although the GDP is increasing, but paradoxically the workers' real wages are decreasing in real terms.

In the last four years trade union movement in Bangladesh advanced significantly by the formation of SKOP (Sramik Karmachary Otkya Parishad — alliance of workers and employees).

There are no major trade union national centres what

can command a considerable number of workers in their fold in Bangladesh: it is difficult to say how many trade union centres are there in Bangladesh. So far 19 federations (centres) are registered with the Director of the labour office. There are many unregistered federations too.

A politician expressed his wish to form a trade union federation simply by saying that he will also form a national trade union federation when his political party got split, and a fraternal trade union federation of the party in question denounced this leader. It is as simple as that. Very often they are imposed from above and not federations of unions in true sense. The approach is first national federation, then unions, and not union and then federations of unions as it should be. When the military comes to power they also form national trade union federation, even allegedly engaging security agencies for the purpose.

In this situation of fragmented trade union centres, the SKOP has emerged seemingly as a true trade union federation of unions of the working people. Many trade unions who are not affiliated with any component federation of SKOP have also joined the SKOP. The most significant achievement of the last six years of democratic movement is the SKOP. The SKOP is not engaged only in the struggle for increased wages of workers but also has achieved success in ensuring the protection of law to the workers' rights.

If the SKOP continues to exist and can be strengthened further, it will be a unique achievement of the working

class in Bangladesh. Amongst about 12 lakh organised workers and employees, a good number are without affiliation with any centre federation. And there are about 18 lakh workers engaged in various sectors but are not organised under trade unions.

Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969 as amended upto now is one of the main statutes governing labour management relations in Bangladesh. It is equally applicable to both public and private sector establishments and industries with some exceptions such as police, defence service and administration of the state. The Employment Labour (Standing Orders) Act 1965 states the terms and conditions of employment of industrial workers, concerning their classification, leave, holidays, stoppage of work, lay off, retrenchment, discharge, termination of employment, provident fund etc. This law empowers an industrial worker to seek redress of his grievances on matters covered under this Act through procedure laid down under this Act. In addition the Factories Act of 1965, the Shops and Establishment Act 1965 also deal with condition of work and terms of employment practice.

A worker cannot get legal protection from Director of Labour, Chief Factory Inspector's Office or Labour Court unless he is sufficiently equipped with or becomes resourceful. If he does not have social and political support or support from administration or if his trade union is not strong enough to protect him, it is difficult for him to get legal protection. I want to say its enforcement. Enforcement of law depends on the attitude of administration and the strength of trade union.

The writer is a trade unionist and general secretary of Jaityo Sramik Jote.

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.

Pedestrians and drivers

Sir, A warning is being published by you almost daily against rash driving on the top of first page of your journal. To me, it appears funny. It is trucks and buses who mostly kill the pedestrians and passengers of other smaller vehicles, because drivers and conductors of these two heavy vehicles are illiterate and addicts. Your message hardly reaches them. It would be better, if you have nothing to publish on that place, to insert some other good thoughts, which may find way into action.

You or your readers may rebuke me, but I confess that I have a soft corner in my heart for truck and bus drivers. Above all, they are

also human beings. How it may be possible for a single driver to keep his eyes on thousands of pedestrians many of whom appear to be strolling on the middle of the road instead of just crossing it? The pedestrians too should take care of themselves.

K.R. Zakhmi
Rupali Bank Ltd.
Z.O. Khulna.

Form of govt.

Sir, Presidential or parliamentary? I am a bit non-plussed by the passion displayed on this issue.

It appears to me to be putting the cart before the horse.

It depends on the quality of the material (raw material) we have to govern the country. Are the norms of the society dictated by the President or the parlia-

ment — or vice versa? A TB patient cannot climb the mountain, regardless of the backing and props. An unfit and unhealthy society cannot produce a healthy parliament.

Physician, heal thyself first. There is only one basic problem: to resist temptation (which is also half the religion). The rest are corollaries. Let us take up first things first.

A. Mawaz,
Dhaka.

'Tolerance in Islam'

Sir, On April 22nd '91 your esteemed daily carried a letter from Mr. M. Zahidul Huq with the caption 'Tolerance in Islam.' It has been stated in that letter that the 6th verse of Sura Al-Kaferun has been abrogated by an Ayat No.19 of Sura Ale-Imran. This seems to be an incorrect information. The best authority on Al-Quran and its verses, including the abrogated ones, if any, is the Holy Prophet (S.M.) himself. We shall be grateful if Mr. Huq could let us know any statement of the

Prophet (S.M.) (authentic Hadis) on the abrogation of the verse 6 of Sura Al-Kaferun.

Apparently the question of abrogation of verse 6 of Sura Al-Kaferun by verse 19 of Sura Ale-Imran does not arise as the latter only confirms, elucidates and further strengthens the stand which a sound believer is directed to take in the former verse. Verse 6 of Sura Al-Kaferun firmly asserts that there can be no compromise on the question of "DEEN"—or the way of life, and the verse 19 of Sura III elucidates what that "DEEN"—or the way of life is,—which is the only acceptable "DEEN" with ALLAH SUBHANAHU TA'ALA.

The above stated position does not, however, disturb the contention of Mr. Zahidul Huq regarding tolerance in Islam which he establishes correctly by quoting the relevant Ayate-Karima in the last paragraph of his letter.

A.F.M. Yahya
Banani, Dhaka.

A Challenge, yet Again

We have been reminded, once again, how vulnerable we are to natural calamities. Floods, cyclones, tidal waves and the like continue to devastate us over and over again. As we begin to put our house in order and make some progress, in our long and arduous struggle for economic development, comes a cyclone or a flood and we are back, literally, to where we started from. Not quite. We come out more determined and experienced to rebuild our country, as our actions in tackling the present crisis, we hope, will show.

What we have done to tackle situations like this in terms of building safe shelters, constructing roads to provide immediate follow-up services, setting up a communication system immune to cyclones and floods, etc are issues we will examine later. For the moment our undivided attention must be focused on reducing the sufferings of those who have lost virtually everything except their lives. We must, urgently, set in motion an efficient and effective relief programme.

The tasks to receive highest priority are providing food, drinking water and temporary shelter for the cyclone victims. According to reports, dry food is already being air dropped in the affected areas. But later food distribution will have to be undertaken on a more massive scale through distribution centres set up on the dry grounds of the cyclone affected areas.

Providing safe drinking water is a formidable challenge. Massive supply of water purifying tablets is the first step. Reaching them to the needy people is easier said than done, for air dropping them is risky and physically reaching them is quite impossible for the moment. However, as the water recedes a large scale programme of sinking tubewells must be undertaken. We know from experience that water borne diseases spread immediately following inundation and people who somehow survive the cyclone fall victims to cholera or diarrhoea or some such diseases.

Providing shelter for the thousands of homeless people will be another urgent task before us.

We have some idea of what needs to be done. The real challenge is how to go about doing it and from where to get the things that we need. As to putting the logistics of relief operation in order every institution and public body concerned must be called upon to do its bit. First, of course, the government machinery must be put to effective use. The armed forces, consisting of army, navy and the air force, who have done excellent jobs in the past, are already intimately involved in the relief operation. Political parties will also have to shoulder considerable responsibility in these efforts. With service to people as the highest priority, they should undertake relief programmes wherever they have the capacity to organise such activities.

We expect the government machinery, which has gathered considerable experience in organising relief operations under such conditions, to give an exemplary performance at this moment of national crisis.

A word of warning must be made public against hoarders and profiteers who are known to take advantage of such calamities to push up prices of essentials by creating artificial scarcity of items.

As the extent of devastation becomes clear we realise that it will be difficult for us alone to meet the urgent needs of the victims. The Prime Minister has therefore launched an appeal to the international community to come to the aid of Bangladesh. It is our hope that the UN, the donors and the world community in general will heed her call and act immediately to help the suffering humanity.

Above everything else it is our own efforts to help ourselves that will be the most effective assistance to our people. Let us share once more, whatever we have, with our unfortunate compatriots and organise an effective relief campaign as we did during the great floods of 1988. Our people exhibited that marvellous trait of compassion, fellow feeling, sacrifice and service to fellow human beings during that all-pervasive flood, which went a long way in mitigating the suffering of our people. Let us rise to the occasion once again.

Primary Education Week

The National Primary Education Week-91 concluded last week in Mymensingh with the education minister present as the chief guest. The 'week' was held under the auspices of the National Academy of Primary Education. One feels gratified to know that such an academy exists and cannot help wondering about the profusion of the number and kind they come in. And there is also a feeling of inadequacy caused by the ignorance of the working of NAPE and the ground it is supposed to cover.

The piece of news reporting the observance of the week, as published on Monday's issue of The Daily Star, is not supremely helpful in getting a picture of the fare. Was any attempt at assessment of the past and present performance in the relevant field and any effort to mobilise and motivate the personnel that man the big profession of primary teachers made during the 'week'? We are not sure. And it looks more like the holding of a festival. That's good, to be sure. But with the hole our primary education is stuck up in — or shall we say the mire — a mutually back-slapping session would be an outrageous thing.

Best primary teachers were selected and rewarded during the week. Money incentives are always a good thing to look forward to and work your way to. It can yield, by the way, even some beneficial good work in the schools — about which one can never be too sure. But recognising devoted and capable service with sizeable money awards is a good thing as it is — however lousy be the ways of assessing the quality of the service turned in. The authorities would do well to improve upon their mechanism and dependability of teacher performance assessment if the rewards are indeed to help generate better teaching.

Cash prizes also were given to 18 children for best performance in recitation, dance, extempore speech, drawing — it must be painting —, singing and acting. How many of these things are taught in the primaries? Almost all of these are what is called 'extra-curricular activities', why? Do the primary schools, by themselves, hold with any regularity such functions as would engender a love for these in the children? A national week in a whole year cannot make up for the gaps that are there in all of the tens of thousands of primaries.

OPINION

Rajshahi, yet to be a City

Today the importance of Rajshahi City Corporation Town can hardly be over emphasized. More so now that this Divisional town has been given the status of 'city' and there happens to be a fledged 'City Corporation' to serve the needs. It is situated in the heart of the northern region of Bangladesh and sites include the famous century old Rajshahi College, famous British period historic central jail, the Varendra museum, the historic Shah Makhdum shrine, a university, a medical college, a cadet college, an engineering college, a radio station, the sericulture industry, various government and non-government head offices, a stadium and a number of institutions.

But it is a matter of surprise and regret that many of the vital problems and need of Rajshahi city have not yet been solved or attended to by the relevant authorities and I should like to draw their kind attention to some major ones.

A genuine sorrow of this town turned city is that it is not included in the itinerary of any foreign cultural troupe or state guest or a reputed team of footballers, cricketers, hockey players, etc. although there are a big stadium, an auditorium and places for their accommodation (Circuit House, Parjatan Motel).

The famous holy shrine of Shah Makhdum, situated by the side of the famous Padma river depicts the history of the long battle of Islam at Rajshahi. As such Rajshahi should also be a venue of Islamic conference and Qirat competition which are joined by participants from abroad.

The foreign information services of USA, USSR, China, Japan and others are yet to open their offices here. At present, there are only two foreign information services of the UK and India in this town. Foreign Missions, as least in the status of Deputy High Commissions or Consulates can be opened at Rajshahi for keeping touch with this neglected northern region for foreigners as Uttara Ganabhaban is situated in this region. The presentation of credentials of ambassadors may also take place sometimes at Uttara Ganabhaban so that this region can well be known to them.

One Medical Post-Graduate Institute with Hospital, an orthopaedic hospital and a paediatric hospital are urgently needed at Rajshahi, besides the existing RMCH.

The famous century old Barendra Research Museum should be developed in a modern way through accommodating memories and replicas of the Freedom Fighters' and other martyrs of our Liberation Struggle in 1971 and also of the historic 1990 Democratic Movement. Pictures and life-sketches of noted personalities, such as journalists, writers and social workers of the northern region should be also preserved therein.

The defunct only government branch managed Bengal daily newspaper published from Rajshahi 'The Dainik Barta' should be reopened on a modern style soon and circulated throughout the country and one weekly English newspaper managed by the government should also be ventured. The latter will enable the foreigners to learn about this region.

One Bangladesh Television branch studio should be opened at Rajshahi to cover the goings on in the region, besides the existing branch of Radio Bangladesh.

Present incomplete Divisional National Stadium should be developed with modern facilities to pave the way for developing sports in this region.

Several crossings, over bridges, islands and fountains should be constructed on and beside the main busy roads for enhancing the beauty of Rajshahi City as well as meeting the need of traffic and pedestrians.

Day and night BRTC town service should be introduced and the time of present private town bus service should be extended up to midnight for the welfare of the public.

Rajshahi Airport should be developed so as to facilitate international air-route with other neighbouring states. Some international standard hotels should be set up at Rajshahi for foreigners and VIP guests.

A Fish Harbour and River Beach may also be profitably developed also to add to the waterfront attraction. And for beneficial recreation, one modernised 'public park' (besides the existing Mena Park), one botanical garden, and a zoo are very much needed here.

Our different top political leaders in public meetings held at Rajshahi during their election campaigns evinced assurance that neglected Rajshahi should be developed in line with other developed City Corporation towns (cities). Shouldn't the present democratic government fulfill the long standing public demand of a region?

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