

Defusing the Tension

Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has rendered a service to the nation by throwing his weight behind the need for early resolution of the two issues which have been agitating public minds for months. In his timely and straightforward TV/radio address on Wednesday night, he has made two strong pleas to the Jatiya Sangsad. First, he has urged the parliament to take necessary constitutional measures at the outset of the coming budget session to pave the way for his exit from the present position as the Acting President. Secondly, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has called for "an immediate settlement" of the issue of the form of government which, as he puts it, has "created a lot of speculation," certainly an understatement in so far as the delay in resolving the issue has touched off a sense of crisis within the country, aggravating the continuing divisiveness among political parties.

It is possible, the immediate consideration that prompted the Acting President to make the address was to clear the air of some unwarranted speculations about his own intentions and, to be more specific, about the alleged delay in his "transferring power" to the parliament. These speculations had sought to create the impression, with some success, that Justice Ahmed was clinging to power and thus denying the elected BNP administration its rightful role in governing the country. It was important for the Acting President to set the record right, as he has now done by asking for constitutional measures to facilitate his departure from the present position. If it was important to uphold the personal integrity of Justice Ahmed, it was certainly essential to ensure that the neutrality of the office, the highest office in the country he now occupies, remains above all doubts.

The relationship between the two pleas made by the Acting President is significant, but more political than constitutional. Unless the two major parties at the Sangsad, the ruling BNP and the opposition AL, agree on the issue of the form of government, they are unlikely to come together in providing the necessary constitutional cover for the exit of Justice Ahmed from his present office. In this sense, the resolution of the question of the form of government is of the highest priority.

Since the Acting President's pleas to the parliament are, in effect, directed at the two major parties, especially to the ruling BNP, it is good to note that all the groupings have given positive responses to the Wednesday night address. The reaction from the ruling party is certainly a bit more guarded than others, because, after all, the Acting President had, perhaps unwittingly, allowed a gap to develop between his office and that of the Prime Minister. It is now up to both — the Acting President and the Prime Minister — to work together, using their constitutional and political mandates judiciously, and set the process in motion for enacting the measures Justice Ahmed has asked for. The Acting President's address on Wednesday undoubtedly helped in defusing a tension, the kind of tension the country can do without, but we can prevent a sense of crisis from developing again only by halting the drift that has set in. The coming JS session should indeed bring about a qualitative change in our political scenario, the change that may well be more important than the budget presented by the Finance Minister. If such a change does not come about, the country will be in trouble, in a very serious trouble.

Clampdown in Algeria

There is no question that democracy has suffered a major set-back in Algeria. President Chadli Benjedid has imposed a state of emergency for a period of four months, dismissed the government and has postponed the country's first multi-party parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 June.

The present clashes were in many ways predictable. When the Islamic Salvation Front (FSI) registered a surprise victory in the municipal elections held a year ago, it was predicted that they would make a bid to gain political power through the ensuing parliamentary and the presidential elections. Last year's overwhelming victory of the FSI took the ruling party completely by surprise and since then they have been in the defensive and have been unable to devise any electoral strategy to counter the popular wave in favour of the fundamentalist FSI. It is this failure of devising a counter political strategy that has necessitated the use of force at present.

The root cause of the popular disillusionment with the National Liberation Front is of course its failure to solve the fundamental economic problems of large-scale unemployment and of meeting the basic needs of the people. In addition there was also a growing sense of resentment to what many considered to be the over westernisation of the Algerian society induced by the country's traditional relations with the West and its close and ever-growing cultural links with France.

The present turmoil has raised renewed doubts about the future of Algerian President who is universally credited with the task of having steered the country towards more and more democracy following its revolutionary and military dominated past. The fundamentalist forces which are taking advantage of the dissatisfaction of the people and exploiting it for their own political ends, will have to be fought politically and not by bringing the military into the streets.

For the immediate future the move by President Benjedid may help to restore law and order. But a stable peace will have to be brought about through the political process. For this an early restoration of democratic practices and the holding of the now postponed elections at the earliest possible opportunity are the first steps. To bring this about both the Fronts — the Liberation Front and the Salvation Front — must put the interest of the nation above that of their respective parties.

Fahd Becomes the Major Player in the Middle East

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

The Baker shuttles around the Middle East aimed at setting up a peace conference are stalled. But a bonus for him was the sudden decision of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council to deal directly with Israel. A major influence in this change was Saudi Arabia. King Fahd has moved from quiet diplomacy to a more upfront role in the Middle East.

According to the US, AGCC members "will also participate in any meeting that will include the countries of the region to discuss issues pertaining to arms control and de-

struction of all weapons of mass destruction, water resources and protection of the environment."

This amounts to direct talks with Israel as part of the broad

dialogue between it and the "frontline" Arab states: Jordan, Syria, Egypt and the Palestinians.

It represents a reversal of an earlier decision by Saudi Arabia and its AGCC allies to stay away from the proposed peace conference, leaving peace bargaining to the states directly concerned.

The earlier stand was probably the result of Israel's continued rejection of the main points of a possible formula favoured by the Arabs, such as the UN Resolutions 242 and 338, the Palestinian representation, a Soviet and European Community (EC) role and the involvement of the United Nations.

The US has now been able to persuade the AGCC members — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman — not only to support the regional meeting idea but also to take part in it and subsequent direct talks with Israel on water and arms control.

The AGCC endorsement came when the Soviet Union

had actively associated itself with the peace offensive, and after consultations with European Community (EC) foreign ministers in Luxembourg.

That the historic Arab concession failed to produce a breakthrough towards resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is certain, but Saudi Arabia's involvement may bring enormous advantage to Israel in the long run. It provides the symbolic support of the Islamic world as a whole.

When Saudi Arabia invited American and other Western troops to defend the kingdom against the security threat posed by Iraq's August 2 invasion of Kuwait, the Saddam Hussein camp accused King Fahd of desecrating the holy lands and acting in an un-Islamic spirit.

The crushing defeat of Iraq, Saddam's brutal treatment of Shi'ite and Kurdish rebels and the rapid withdrawal of Western forces changed the tide of Islamic public opinion in favour of Saudi Arabia.

Diplomatic relations with Iran have been restored after a three-year break over the Haj

pilgrimage. Under an agreement in March the boycott of the annual pilgrimage was lifted.

In recent years King Fahd had played the quiet role of mediator and guide in determining Arab and Islamic policies on international, regional and Gulf issues.

As Crown Prince, before becoming King in June 1982, he long influenced peace moves, oil pricing and production policies. As the monarch, his stature has increased enormously.

The 1982 Fez peace plan, the first purely Arab compromise formula adopted at an Arab summit in the Moroccan city in that year, was the product of a Fahd initiative.

It was based on the proposals articulated by Fahd, providing for guarantees by the UN Security Council for "peace among all states of the region, including an independent Palestinian state."

The success of Saudi diplomacy was also seen in the Taif Accord on the Lebanese situation on the basis of a formula worked out by an Arab League peace committee.

King Fahd had played a key part in brokering the package of political and constitutional reforms endorsed by the Lebanese parliament and which has been instrumental in restoring peace in the civil war-ravaged country.

— GEMINI NEWS



Laos Hopes to Give up the Tin Cup

Philip Gorton writes from Vientiane

TINY Laos, which has for nearly two decades relied on the benevolence of foreign donors, is in the midst of a financial crisis this year due to the loss of Soviet and Eastern European aid money, according to a top UN official.

Country representative for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Amerah Hag-Perrera said in an interview that Laos will have to repay much of its accumulated debt in hard currency for a change.

"Laos has reached a critical situation in its development," she said. "We are trying to help them fill the gap by mobilising external resources."

Previously, Laos has been able to repay its debts which total over US\$500 million, mainly with coffee, soybeans, tin and timber.

Total foreign assistance for Laos in 1990 was slightly over US\$150 million, far more than the total government expenditure which stood at about US\$115 million.

Nearly US\$25 million came from Eastern Europe or Russia in the form of non-convertible currencies. Much of the other assistance from these former brotherly socialist states, was in professional and technical expertise and military assistance.

Laos total exports are about US\$60 million annually, according to the United Nations. Real growth of GDP was 9.4 per cent in 1990 with inflation hovering around 50 per cent.

Agriculture contributes about 60 per cent of a total US\$350 million GDP. But only

1.5 to 2 per cent of the GDP arose from cash transactions prior to the economic reforms which took hold after 1987, according to UN statistics.

Laos began a massive restructuring of its economy in the late 1980s. But up until 1988 nearly every market transaction was carried out on a barter basis, trading goods for goods and using no currency transactions.

Laos has been anxious to capitalise on the economic success of its southern neighbour, Thailand, but keep out

would allow the government to increase its revenue base."

Economic growth in Laos has been concentrated in the capital and planners warn that farmers in the countryside are already growing anxious about what they see as an over-abundance of wealth in urban areas.

Nearly 85 per cent of the population live in rural areas. Only 13 per cent of the population receive a secondary education. Adult literacy is still only 35 per cent for females and 65 per cent for males.

restructure commercial laws and train business managers in the private and public sectors. Total assistance is over US\$10 million annually for Laos, a country of just 4 million people.

The government has embarked on a new economic re-

form mechanism," said Ms. Hag-Perrera. "They are streamlining the government structure and privatising state enterprises."

The privatisation in Laos has taken on what people in the West might even consider drastic. Even places that were once public parks — like the centrepiece water fountain in

the capital — are charging admission.

Western investment has still been low but some surprises have come along. The Hunt Oil Company, owned by a notoriously anti-Communist American family in Texas, has taken a contract to explore for oil in Southeastern Laos.

— DEPTHNEWS ASIA

OPINION

City Traffic—a Few Suggestions

The self-made chaos prevailing on city roads needs drastic measures to bring back discipline on road. Nobody follows the traffic rules — rickshaws being the biggest violators. Pavements and islands are occupied by vendors, roads are littered with construction materials like — bricks, sands, iron rods etc. causing immense inconvenience to road users, overbridges are hardly used while roads are crowded, zebra crossings are there only in name, motorists and rickshaw pullers cross much beyond to a point sometimes obstructing the vehicles from other direction and blocking the left turn invariably, while pedestrians somehow zig-zag their way to the other end at a great risk to their lives. All these are happening with impunity in the presence of the traffic police without any sense of guilt on the part of anybody. One wonders if there is any law in this country!

In a country like our where rules are observed more in breach, it is not like other

disciplined countries where traffic signals are enough to regulate traffic. Here without strict enforcement of laws, the present chaos on roads can not be remedied. It is becoming more and more necessary as more and more vehicles and people are taking to roads. Since rickshaws pose the biggest hazard, a separate track should be earmarked for them on every road and their compliance strictly enforced by posting traffic police at a reasonable distance on all main roads. In Karachi even the auto-rickshaws have to clear away from the motorists' path on the main roads.

Secondly, the car parking on both sides of the roads should be avoided on main and busy roads. During peak hours the lane that take the maximum traffic should be kept free of parking. For example, if in the morning hours traffic is heavy on one side of the road, parking of vehicles may be done on the other side and vice versa in the afternoon. Double parking should in no

case be allowed. In shopping areas like new Elephant Road, Hawkers' Market etc. parking during busy hours, say after 4.00 p.m. should be prohibited. This will ensure relatively smoother flow of traffic on main roads during busy hours.

Thirdly, the mobile unit of police sergeants should keep a vigilant eye on all road traffic and take the violators to task on the spot. The suggestions are perhaps, nothing new. But what we need is enforcement to bring the road traffic back on its respective track.

All concerned have to be taught anew respect for law which regrettably is on the wane in the country. To my mind, this is mostly because of apparent ineffectiveness or non-application of the laws which encourages us to be defiant and more and more indiscipline and that is manifested in every sphere of our lives. This calls for immediate measures to save the society from further degeneration.

H.R. Chowdhury
Moghbar, 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.

Economic planning

Sir, We refer to the conversation on economic planning in Bangladesh, published in The Daily Star on May 25. We thank you for the excellent opportunity you have created for your common readership on some better understanding of the issues and challenges involved in the economic planning in Bangladesh. We would like to find that the recommendations made by Prof. Rehman Sobhan and Mr. M. Syeduzzaman, our distinguished economists of world repute, during their discussions with you are given serious consideration by our government.

We are happy to fully support their views that we are not short of experts/professionals to carry out consultancy services to our country's requirements. Though not a complete surprise, they have rightly highlighted that our past regimes have all failed to determine our national priorities. And they also have badly suffered from managerial incapacities. All that our Planning Commission did so far was nothing beyond the preparation of Annual Development Budget. And that

our negotiating teams in the Paris Aid Consortium meetings contributed nothing except to offer our apologetic explanations to the issues raised in the Country Economy Memorandum circulated by the World Bank, besides honouring the obligations of the donors.

We would, however, like to see our democratically elected government to gather enough courage to take up approaches that there should be only one document on the agenda for the Aid Club meetings namely the priorities and economic policies of the government of the sovereign country and seek the club members' support thereto. Nothing should anymore be imposed on us and our own destiny even at the great risk of being rejected by them. We have already tasted the results of the donor-oriented development plans and projects for our country.

The government has to prove to the people its capabilities to develop and manage the country's own economy to be best of our own designs.

M. A. Baaque
Dhaka Cantonment.

Adoption

Sir, The letter appearing in your "Opinion" column of May 20, 1991 under the caption "Adoption: A Social Problem" takes in the plight of the adopted child, once grown, who seeks to know his 'roots'. Although the writer dwells more on the conditions prevailing in the western world, conditions which are entirely different from our own, he touches briefly on adoption as we know it, in Bangladeshi society.

In the western world adoption has become an acceptable answer to childlessness and the child receives due recognition both within the family and outside and, of greatest importance, legally. Today, with more and more women choosing to stay single, the idea of adopting a child has been mooted, but even in the west the one-parent family faces a lot of difficulties, particularly if the single parent happens to be female, so possibly the family best thought to be suitable to adopt a child will still be one where there are two parents. However, the point the writer has raised circles around the adopted child's search for his own identity once the fact of his adoption becomes known to him. In the face of this possible trauma the only answer is not to hide the fact that the child has been adopted in the first place for, in so far as I know, those who have successfully avoided this probable outcome are those parents who were honest right from the

time the child has been old enough to understand. Most problems grow out of the shock experienced by the adopted child when he, or she, discovers the truth.

In our country the problems are totally different for, to begin with, the childless woman is treated like a social pariah, therefore the need arises to pass the adopted child off as her own. Secondly, the adopted child whose background is unknown but the fact of adoption is admitted, without a 'family identity' is unable to contract a suitable marriage, even though the foster parents may be of good standing in society. These social conditions find their reflection in the fact that when couples openly adopt they adopt from within the family, usually the child of a brother, and the family is aware of it from the start — unfortunately the child is often kept in the dark and only comes to know the truth when some relative, intentionally or not, reveals it to the child with all the predictable results. And, even when legally adopted, the adopted children get no legal recognition, and if the law does not deny them their moral rights the rest of the family will certainly do so. Mr. S. Chowdhury is right to think of adoption as a social problem but more so here than in the west because, in our society, family background is of prime importance, whereas in the west it is the individual who matters most.

Sylvia Mortozza
Dhaka.

Cyclone warning

Sir, A recent news item in your esteemed daily said that the cyclone warning system which exist in our country at the moment is quite faulty. This not only results in giving out vague signals, meaning that often the signals do not specify the area, where the cyclone might hit. Also the intensity of the cyclone is sometimes not told to the people of the area in details.

This was proved during this severest cyclone which hit the coastal areas on the 29th of April, causing immense loss of life and property.

The director of Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation says that the signals given out, namely signal number 10 or 9, does not often make sense to the people living in the relevant area.

Therefore, it is clear, that we should have a system which is able to give out signals clearly and specifically, in a way which will be understood by the people of that area, and so that they can take timely precaution. This will help save valuable lives as well as property.

Prevention is better than cure. There should not be any devastation at such a scale so that we do not have to ask for relief from abroad.

Z. Ahmed
Rampura, Dhaka.

Corruption

Sir, No one knows when the propagation of 'corruption' started through acceptance in each and everyone's mind like a 'universal truth'. Its dangerous effects ruin every individual's day-to-day living atmosphere and it's like a pollution very hard to control. People all over the world are quite acquainted with this but in a country like Bangladesh where corruption plays a very dominating role in almost all sectors. We, like experimental guinea pigs, are severely affected by its direct or indirect impact.

So far remedies are concerned, to overcome these problems, I would suggest as follows: The present democratic government should take all sorts of preventive measures without further delay; mass participation in anti-corruption movement should be started in a programmed way to help the government; sector-wise task force can help to isolate this vice categorically and suggest follow up measures for quicker result; encouraging for higher productivity in every sector ultimately will decrease the rate of corruption; religious movement in relevant fields may also create some impact; proper press coverage and motivation can play a very significant role so that there remains a check and balance system.

Byzidur Rashid
Naya Pallan,
Dhaka.