

Bastille Day



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Interview : Ambassador Serge Degallaix

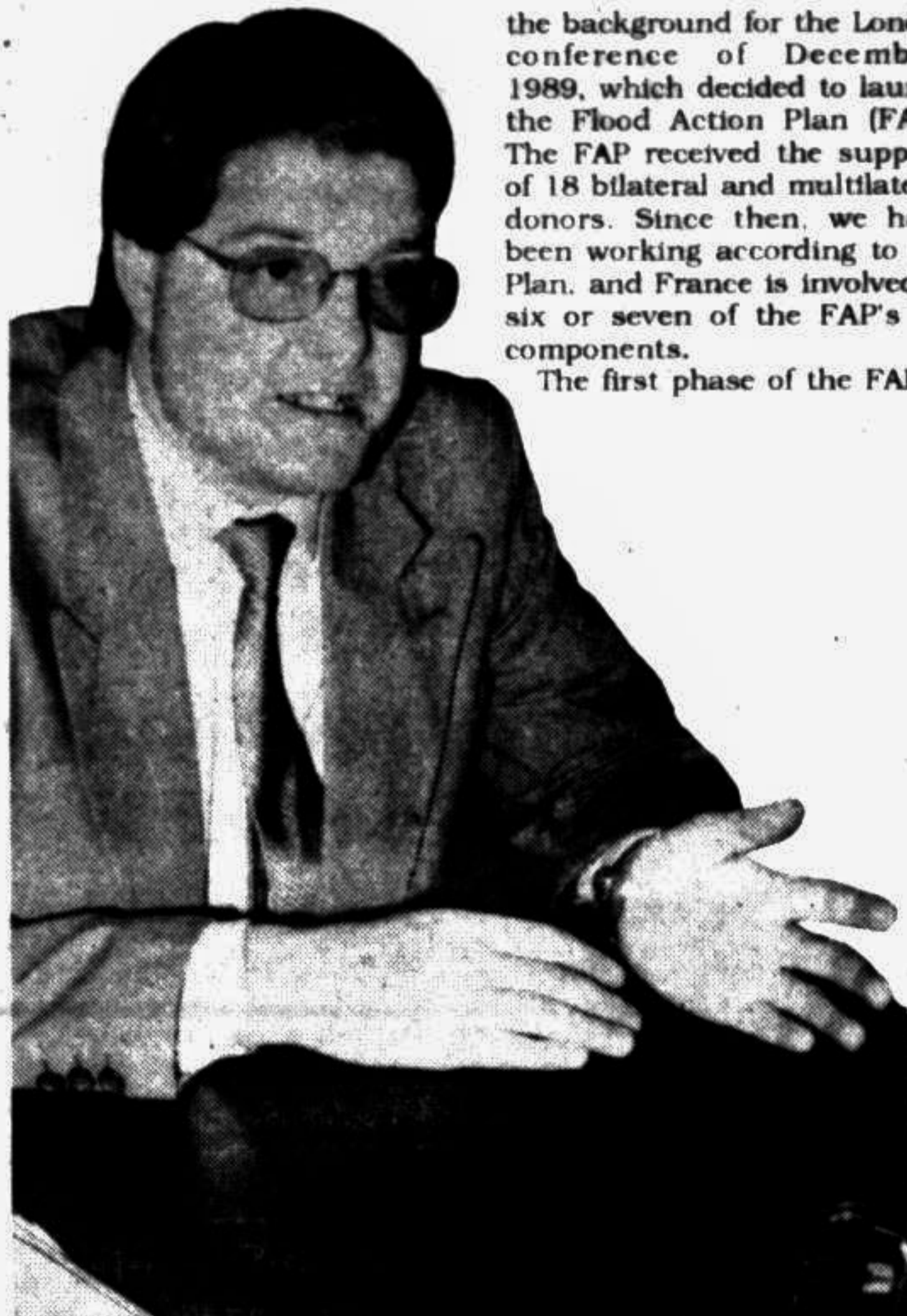
Promoting the Image of Bangladesh

FRANCE was one of the first countries which came forward to help Bangladesh in tackling the enormous problems of rehabilitation and development faced by the country's war-torn economy. Since then, relations have continued to grow at different levels, from development assistance to trade to political cooperation. As champions of Third World causes, Dhaka and Paris have naturally found themselves drawn towards each other in their common struggle to eradicate inequality and underdevelopment. In recent years, as SERGE DEGALLAIX, Ambassador of France to Bangladesh explained to Daily Star Assistant Editor SABIR MUSTAFA, France's leading role in two issues directly affecting this country — external debt and protection against natural calamities — hold out the prospect of bringing the two countries even closer:

Daily Star: You were present at the second LDC conference held in Paris last year, where France took the initiative in writing off debts owed by LDCs. What is the current situation regarding debts?

Serge Degallaix: President Mitterrand announced at the Paris conference the writing-off of debts owed by LDCs to France. A few weeks after that, I wrote to the Bangladesh government confirming the cancellation of debts owed by Bangladesh to France. Around US\$100 million was written off, and now all our official development assistance to Bangladesh is given in the form of pure grants, not loans. We don't want to build up the debt again.

At the international level, I must say that some countries have already cancelled some debts. If you remember, the Americans have cancelled debt that grew from the food aid programme. So, after only one year of the Paris meeting, we are beginning to see some results and more commitments to solve the debt issue.



Degallaix: Bangladesh is the best.

DS: Now, during the 1988 flood as well as the cyclone this year, Bernard Kouchner came to Bangladesh, showing the concern France has for this country's well-being. Since 1988, exactly how has France been involved in projects to combat natural calamities, such as the Flood Action Plan?

S D: As you know, as well as Bernard Kouchner, the wife of our president, Danielle Mitterrand, was also here. The president's special counsellor, Jacques Attali who is now the chairman of the European Bank for Reconstruction, also came to Bangladesh. Just after the 1988 flood, we launched a study. This study, among others, carried out by experts from the UNDP, Japan, the USA etc, served as

the background for the London conference of December, 1989, which decided to launch the Flood Action Plan (FAP). The FAP received the support of 18 bilateral and multilateral donors. Since then, we have been working according to the Plan, and France is involved in six or seven of the FAP's 26 components. The first phase of the FAP is

mainly studies and pilot projects, and it is a clear sign that we want to tackle very carefully all the economic, technical and environmental issues that will be raised by such an ambitious plan. France agreed to bear one-sixth of the entire cost of the first phase of the Plan decided in London, which is not so bad. The studies are going on, and the reports will be available next spring, in 1992. Then the decision will be taken to go further with the Plan, and works will possibly start during the dry season of '92-'93. Of course, it will take time, but as I said, we want to deal very carefully with this problem.

DS: What was the result of Bernard Kouchner's visit following the cyclone?

S D: Apart from immediate relief supplies, we granted 20,000 tons of wheat for emergency rehabilitation, to be used in Food for work programmes to build and repair embankments to protect crops during the monsoon. We also decided to devote funds to medium-term rehabilitation programmes. A French team came to Bangladesh and negotiated and signed protocols on June 12, some six weeks after the cyclone, to give US\$10 million in grants for rehabilitation in the field of telecommunication, Chittagong airport, vaccines, mobile hospitals and others. So far, our immediate response amounts to around 15 to 20 million dollars.

As you know, Bernard Kouchner will preside over a meeting on July 16, this Tuesday, in Geneva to discuss rehabilitation of Bangladesh after the cyclone. We are very proud to be the chairman of this meeting, as we were of the New York meeting after the 1988 floods.

DS: Moving away from floods and disasters to more productive areas, do you have

Is there any exclusively French projects in Bangladesh?

S D: Yes, of course, the FAP is a new project. But we have been involved, from the very inception of Bangladesh, in mainly two fields. The first one is productive infrastructures. We used to finance power generation, transmission, distribution. We also used to finance civil aviation — we built the Zia International Airport — transportation, and we are still working in the field of telecommunications.

There is an on-going study into water supply for Dhaka, and by the end of the year we will know better and the time will be right for taking a decision for installing water plants to supply Dhaka, which suffers badly from a lack of water during the dry season.

DS: Will this meeting in Geneva discuss permanent measures such as shelter-building?

S D: Yes, I think that will be one of the most important points the meeting will discuss, to try to set up an ambitious programme of cyclone shelters. As you know, according to experts Bangladesh needs between three to four thousand cyclone shelters, and at present there are only 300.

DS: Is France involved in anything other than the FAP?



Leading France into an Integrated Europe: President Francois Mitterrand and Prime Minister Judith Cresson.

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France's Cultural Heritage

THE priority given to culture by the Government was represented, in 1990, by the 7.9% increase in the budget devoted to it which thus amounts to 10.4 billion francs. The main areas concern the heritage, museums, creation and teaching the arts.

France's cultural heritage is made up of 30,000 buildings and objects listed as "historical monuments," four million works of art, 20,000 archaeological sites and 400,000 reels of film, plus the photographic treasures accumulated since Niepce and Daguerre. This wealth has to be protected and

much in the way of business interaction with Bangladesh?

S D: It is often the case in commercial relations between a developed and developing country that there is an imbalance in trade in favour of the former. Since last year, this imbalance has changed in character.

France is now buying more from Bangladesh than selling. This discrepancy, which is becoming greater and greater, is mainly due to the fact we are buying more and more ready-made garments and leather. We are now the world's second-largest importer of garments from Bangladesh and the third-largest buyer of Bangladeshi leather. Last year our purchases from Bangladesh increased by 60 per cent, and there has been a 40 per cent increase on top of that since January this year. This is quite impressive.

(continued on facing page)

promoted, and this is the purpose of the "Heritage plan," launched in 1986.

Museums. In eight years, the number of visitors to French museums has grown from 10 million to 14 million. The Eiffel Tower is no longer the most visited monument. It has been overtaken by the Georges Pompidou Centre. The Grand Louvre follows close behind with 19,000 visitors a day. The Musee d'Orsay, devoted to 19th century art, receives over 10,000 visitors.

There has been a revival in provincial museums, of which there are about a thousand. Their funds have been doubled in 1990 and they are keen to improve reception facilities, especially for children and for the handicapped. They are also coming outside with travelling exhibitions on buses and lectures in hospitals and prisons.

Help for theatres is aimed at decentralizing the dramatic art, aiding creation, reorganizing the national theatres (Comedie Francaise, Odeon, ...) and promoting tours for theatrical creations.

Cinema. 42% of French people aged over 15 go to the cinema at least once a year. The plans for boosting the 7th Art (advancing on receipts, aid for writing scenarios, and a 50 to 70% State guarantee for financing ambitious films) are bearing fruit.

To the east of Paris, at Joinville-le-Pont, where the first film studios were created at the beginning of the century, a competition was launched in 1989 to create a Cinema City, offering directors six sound-stages in an area of 6,500 m².

Music and Dance. The

panorama of musical production is filled by performances by lyrical theatres and festivals. In addition to the big national orchestras, such as the Orchestre National de France and the Orchestre de Paris, there are 14 regional symphony orchestras. State aid also goes to jazz, rock and variety music with the creation of auditoriums, grants to musicians, etc.

The new Opera-Bastille opened in spring 1991 and it is already a promising success. New classes are being created in the national conservatories and independent companies are receiving aid. Measures encourage the reinserion of former dancers into professional life. And the Music Fete, invented in France in 1981, is now celebrated almost all over the world.

Big Building projects are transforming the face of Paris. In the last few years the Orsay Museum, the Cite des Sciences et de l'Industrie, the Arab World Institute and the Great Arch at la Defense have been inaugurated. The prestigious Louvre museum remains to be finished and the City of Music, still being built, remains to be opened. After that, work will begin on the Bibliotheque de France (French Library) which will open to the public in 1995.

Books. French publishing is proud to offer one of the richest catalogues in the world. Reading is the main pastime of about 16% of French people. They prefer novels (52%) and history books (46%). In order to encourage writing and reading, books benefit from special economic support. Writers' residences are being built, a sabbatical year is offered to those writing for young people and more and more grants are given for poetic creation. In 1989, the first Fete du Livre (Book Festival) was held with gusto, while the "Library for everyone" programme, aimed at covering France with a tight network of reading and book-lending centres, was drawing to a close.

This overview of the cultural policy would be incomplete without recalling the effort undertaken against the remaining illiteracy which can still sometimes be found in the army, in underprivileged districts and in prisons.

Masters of the French Style

ONE has already been a member of the very exclusive club of grands couturiers for a long time. The other recently attracted considerable attention when he joined. Both of them fill the fancies of elegant women all over the world.

Today, this man is purely and simply the greatest grand couturier in the world", wrote the American magazine, Harpers Bazaar. That premonition was published in 1972. In 1991, it is a fact.

This is borne out by the honours the French designer has been collecting all over the world for the last ten years: retrospective exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1983, at the Palace of Fine Arts in Peking, at the Museum of Fashion Arts in Paris in 1986, in Sidney in Australia, and at the Hermitage in Leningrad in 1987. In 1985, French President Francois Mitterrand gave him the Legion of Honour and, shortly afterwards, he received the Oscar for the greatest couturier for all of his work.

Thanks to this support, Yves Saint-Laurent's career has followed an exemplary course. The story begins in 1955, when the young prodigy designer, who has just arrived from the colourful Algeria of his childhood, joined the Christian Dior firm as an assistant. He became the chosen favourite and, when the couturier died, he was appointed as the artistic director of the company which, at the time, was run by Marcel Boussac, a big name in textiles.

He achieved immediate success, with his first collection, revealing a personal style and, that year, presenting a fashion which was to be all the rage: the "trapeze" line. In the following years, Yves Saint-Laurent was the only person able, by instinct, to masterfully grasp and interpret the spirit of "the street". The shy and quiet avant-garde designer introduced roll-necks and leather jackets on the catwalks. It was something unheard of in the still stilted

world of haute couture. The spirit of these fashions did not appeal to Marcel Boussac but delighted women whose life-style has moved on to greater freedom.

In 1961, Yves Saint-Laurent left Dior to set up his own firm with the help of the business manager Pierre Berge and the American financier Mack Robinson. From then on, from season to season, he went from success to success, with a style market by a rare sense of proportions and colours, sometimes inspired by artists: the Mondrian line, Pop Art, the African line, Ballets Russes, the Scottish line (winter 91-92). Classical styles were skillfully reinterpreted: dinner jackets, suits, safari suits, hooded jackets and sailor-suits.

In 1966, he launched his collection of ready-to-wear clothes for women (Saint-Laurent Rive Gauche), on sale in 110 exclusive shops throughout the world, and then for men. There are also his furs and accessories sold under licence: jewellery, scarves, glasses, shoes, leather goods, cosmetics and perfumes ("Opium", created in 1977, is a world best-seller).

It took Saint-Laurent thirty years to achieve all this. Is Christian Lacroix in the process of scoring the same success at a faster speed? Some strange coincidences can be noted in their careers. The latest arrival in haute couture made a triumphant entrance in the 80s, like an invigorating tonic in a sector in which creativity was slowly falling asleep.

Fashion writers, who are so often blasé, and buyers, who are always so critical, were absolutely flabbergasted by his highly imaginative first collection. It was to hit the headlines in magazines. A new shape was born with a tight waist and short, puffy, swirling skirts, made of shimmering materials and accompanied by baroque accessories. Just like Saint-Laurent, Lacroix comes from the sunny south, from the town of Arles in Provence, where he was born in 1951. From there, he has kept his



Conquering the world: Fashion designers Yves Saint-Laurent (left, with Chinese friend) and Christian Lacroix (below).

love of festivities, of dazzling colours and of the toreros in light-catching colours.

Lacroix also started out at a grand couturier's Patou, where, from 1982 to 1986, he created a fashion full of humour. As a result he received the "De d'Or" (golden thimble) award and some attractive offers. With the backing of the financier Bernard Arnault, he also launched his own brand in 1986 and went from strength to strength with his haute couture collection, his Lacroix Luxe line for shops in 1987, ready-to-wear in 1988, accessories in 1989 and his perfume, "C'est la vie", in 1990, and this man, who dreamt of equalling Dior, also designs theatre costumes, just like Saint-Laurent.

Will his lightning success be as durable as that of his illustrious elder?



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