

ME Conference Likely — Peace Unlikely

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

ONE of the fall-out effects of Saddam's madness appears to be the US's present effort, apparently a serious one, to find "peace" in the Middle-East. Some earlier efforts through shuttle diplomacy did not yield any result because of intransigence of the parties and particularly of Israel and the failure of the US to put due pressure on it. This time, after having battered an Arab country to liberate another, President Bush felt obliged to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. He owes this to the Arabs.

Secretary of State James Baker's five visits to the M-E after the Gulf war and particularly the fifth trip to five countries of the region reflect determination of the US administration to bring the Arabs and Israelis to the negotiating table. When Baker came out firmly against the Israeli settlements saying it "is an obstacle to peace," the seed of resolution of the conflict was sown. The world expects the US to remain committed to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict without showing any more favour to Israel.

Industrialised countries would generally go by, as it has been done since the Gulf crisis. As the US would not do anything that would harm the interest of Israel, Prime Minister Shamir does not have to worry much about it. Still Baker did not get the "yes" answer from Shamir before he left in Moscow. However, it now appears that Israel would participate in the peace negotiation. Shamir has already said the peace conference could be held in a month or two within the framework of peace negotiations between Israel and the Arabs. This has

the peace process advance. One can see the implications here unless the US prevails on Israel for a reasonable approach on Palestinian representations. This seems to be Shamir's main play to wreck the proposed conference putting the blame on the Palestinians. When so much of water has flown down the river, the US must reject the path of Israel and bring everyone (if necessary talking directly with the PLO as it did before), directly concerned in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinians are the most concerned party and undoubtedly more important than anybody else. Without them there could

be no peace in the M-E. Firm action by the US would bring the Israeli leadership to its senses. The US has probably already realized that now in the present M-E situation it is Israel which stands against the US peace efforts. The Israeli leadership is trying its earlier trick of dealing separately with individual Arab countries, a case by case approach as happened in case of Egypt, and induce one or two Arab countries and particularly Syria, now the last and the only source of some threat to Israel, to the negotiating table by offering some concessions. Shamir already said, "As the way things are currently presented, it seems that we are approaching a start to talks with Arab countries even if there remains problems to resolve, such as the composition of the Palestinian delegation to a future peace conference." He is already talking of future peace conference meaning thereby that Israel would talk to those who would turn up at the conference now and talk to others in future when they also decide to go by Israel's terms.

These are some of the options which could be considered in finding a way to the peace negotiations provided concerned parties are serious enough to embark on such course. The Arabs have already said yes to the US proposal. They can not be blamed any more. It is only Israeli government which is still holding out despite the fact that 78% Israeli people support the US move for a peaceful negotiation. It seems that peace is unlikely with Shamir in the helm of Israeli affairs unless the US comes down heavily on him and his ultra-conservative government, the US would probably be right to do so to support the majority Israeli view, and guides them to the path of reason and peace.

Despite all positive signs one cannot be sure whether the peace conference would at all be held. In the entire exercise Palestinian problem does not seem to have received adequate attention.

President Bush's concrete step to stop the Israeli settlement in exchange for lifting of Arabs' economic boycott against Israel through G-7 support has special significance. G-7 call carries two messages: (i) the international community remains firm on the fact that the land belongs to the Arabs and Israel has no right to build settlement on it; (ii) lifting of Arab boycott would mean indirect acceptance of the existence of Israel and that the dealing with it was no more a crime in the eyes of the Arabs.

The Arabs also showed pragmatism by favourably responding to G-7 call and agreeing to lift their economic boycott provided Israel stops building settlement in the occupied Arab land. Secretary Baker's success with President Assad of Syria was difficult but nothing unexpected. In collaboration with his full focus and half focus Assad has nearly finished his worst Arab rival, Saddam. His gamble of sending troops to support Operation Desert Storm has so far paid dividend. He managed his firm foot-hold in Lebanon and indeed would represent Lebanon in the forthcoming peace conference. Luckily for Lebanon, Assad's firmness has brought some kind of peace there. Assad is

Secretary Baker worked with Israeli leaders with patience and skill. He told them that the US has got what Israel has been asking for the last 43 years — direct negotiations with the Arabs. The opening of the conference would, however, only be a formality with the UN as "silent observer" with no role to play. The EEC's role would be minimal as it would be represented by its current chairman. Soviet Union with its present domestic turmoil and its hat being passed on to the US and other

been repeated by some of his colleagues also. Indeed, Shamir termed the peace overture of Assad as "revolutionary." Despite all these positive signs one cannot be sure whether the peace conference would at all be held. In this entire exercise Palestinian problem does not seem to have received adequate attention though Baker did meet some representatives of the Palestinians of the occupied territories including occupied East Jerusalem; and there lies

Jerusalem who met Baker even in his last visit said, "To have a Palestinian in the negotiation is a decision of the Palestinians, no talks will start without Palestinian from Jerusalem." The PLO chairman Arafat who does not figure anywhere in the context of peace conference as he aligned himself with president Saddam said, "Attempts to ignore these questions or exclude them or even to find nebulous formulas for them can only lead to the collapse of any effort to make

the peace process advance. One can see the implications here unless the US prevails on Israel for a reasonable approach on Palestinian representations. This seems to be Shamir's main play to wreck the proposed conference putting the blame on the Palestinians. When so much of water has flown down the river, the US must reject the path of Israel and bring everyone (if necessary talking directly with the PLO as it did before), directly concerned in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinians are the most concerned party and undoubtedly more important than anybody else. Without them there could

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ASEAN and Burma

The move by ASEAN to send the Philippines Foreign Secretary Raul Manglapus to Rangoon to make what is said to be a "constructive" approach on Burma's political stalemate raises only a slim hope of any change of heart on the part of the military junta, now officially called the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC).

This lack of optimism about the Manglapus mission stems partly from the fact that the move is a direct result of the pressure from the United States on the six-nation grouping that it must use its position to push for a return to democracy in Burma. So, it must be clear to all, including to the junta in Rangoon, that the ASEAN will not go far in making things uncomfortable for the rulers in Rangoon. Then, there is a clear declaration from the recent ministerial meeting of the alliance, just held in Kuala Lumpur, that ASEAN is opposed to any punitive measures, like sanctions, against Burma as advocated by the United States and other Western powers.

In taking this soft line, members of ASEAN are undoubtedly guided by their own somewhat short-sighted commercial and economic considerations in dealing with Burma. A number of them, especially Thailand and Singapore, have lately expanded their existing trade links with Rangoon, while new logging concessions obtained in Burma by Thai companies have raised outcries from environmentalists in the region. Meanwhile, there are indications that China, by far the largest arms supplier to Burma, remains cool to the pleas from Washington that it should scale down, if not suspend, its export of weapons to Rangoon. These weapons reportedly include large amounts of small arms and ammunition which are used against political dissidents and minorities in the trouble-torn country.

True, members of ASEAN and China may make some immediate gains from their dealings with Rangoon. However, they should realise that it is Burma of tomorrow, a country which is governed under a popular democratic system, that offers them a real opportunity for a dramatic and vastly expanded economic collaboration, backed by aids and investments from the United States and other industrial democracies. When such a popular government assumes office in Rangoon, as indeed it will one day, its leaders may take a long time to forget how the country's neighbours had been of so little help to Burma's democratic forces during their long struggle for justice.

No matter what Mr Manglapus finds in Burma during his coming mission, he should take the lead in persuading his country as well as other members of ASEAN to pressuring SLORC junta to halt the wave of arrests and intimidation of political dissidents and honour the results of national elections held in 1990. To decline to take such a position would be totally immoral for a leader of a country like the Philippines whose own struggle against autocracy and dictatorship had provided inspiration to many countries in this region, including Burma and Bangladesh. Indeed, it will be sad if, at this moment, it is left to the United States to take up the battle for human rights in a country of this region, with Asian nations themselves dragging their feet over such a clear-cut issue as a return of democracy in a country based on a free and fair election.

A Genuine Faux Pas?

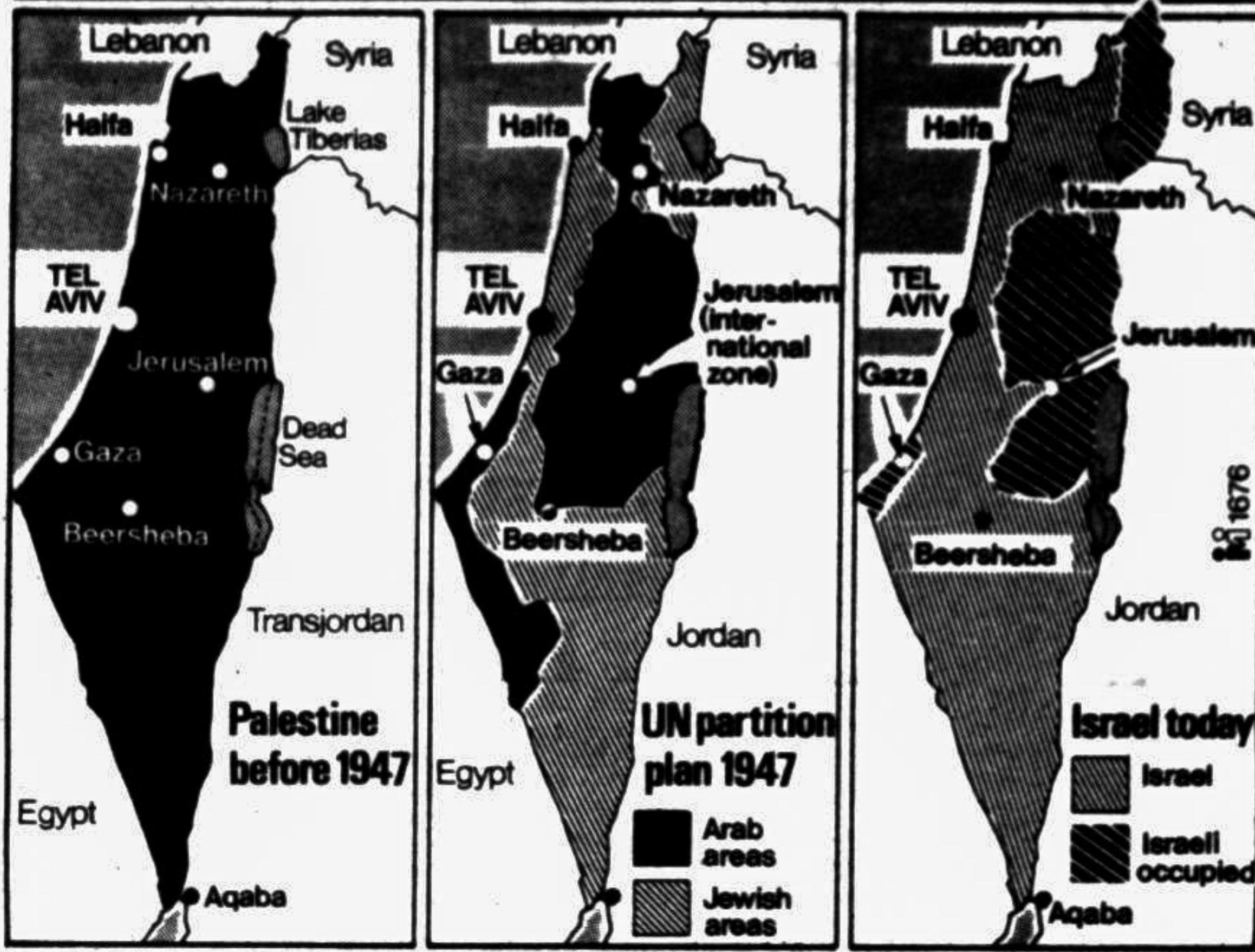
It is good that the government cares for feedback over its actions. It is better that it even sometimes chooses to heed some of the responses. A most welcome turn in such government-governed interaction has been the withdrawal of the appointment of a retired Army physician to a national professorship. We offer the government sincere congratulations on the action following which the Bangladesh Medical Association withdrew its call for a doctors' token strike against the appointment.

However, that happy decision cannot stop one to question as to what made the government make a national professor of Major-General Mahmudur Rahman Chowdhury in the first place. Was it that perhaps most of its constituents wanted to show appreciation of General Chowdhury's service? But then the choice of national professor as a token of that appreciation has been ill-advised. It beats our wits to come to think that this was something happening not during the regime of a dictatorship but under a government elected democratically and making itself accountable to Parliament. It has been a case of a genuine faux pas if there was ever such a thing.

As it happens with awards — the prestige of the institution depends much on the persons who receive them. Any award to be universally coveted is first to be honoured by the acceptance of it by the awardee, rather than the other way round. When Qazi Motahar Hossain accepted the national professorship, or even Dr Ibrahim, the office came readily to earn universal esteem. That has not been the case always. On top of this the procedure laid down to name scholars to national professorship has, sometimes, been followed more by infringement than by abidance.

The appointee to the august office has of course some obligations to discharge under the very institution of the professorship. To date not one among the so many luminaries had fulfilled all of those obligations. The story of the office became so much murky that it was easy for a less wary administration to use this for a pat on anyone's back who had been particularly loyal to some important people. We feel sad to recognise that the present administration — the repository of endless expectations as it is — has been less than wary in this particularly delicate matter involving the very best in the nation.

From Palestine to Israel



THOUGHTS ON DHAKA UNIVERSITY PROBLEMS — II

Pragmatism can help Resolve Issues

by Dr ATR Rahman

HIGHER education is much more expensive than primary and secondary education. Financing higher education involves questions of access and payment. It is one thing to have access to higher education for anyone who wants it, but it is another thing who pays for it. The 'conversation' refers to the ideals of egalitarian and elitist society. These ideals are very complex and we tend to use them without understanding their full implications in various socio-economic development aspects. The ideal which is most relevant to us and which we seldom use is pragmatism. This ideal calls our attention to the reality that higher education costs lot of money and someone has to pay it. If we want the government to pay for it, we have to provide the government with the necessary fund through taxes and other ways. We pay one of the lowest amounts of tax among developing countries (8% tax-GDP ratio), yet we want the government to do almost everything for us. Pragmatism directs us to realize that demands on government resources are diverse and ever-increasing in Bangladesh and it is always much more than the available resources. In this context, is it not appropriate to suggest that only beneficiaries of higher education should pay a significant portion of it. Also higher education contributes significantly to trade, industry and the corporate sector and they should share the cost of development and current operation of higher education.

This is the concluding part of the commentary, on the "Conversation" between the Vice-Chancellor Dr. Maniruzzaman Mia and The Daily Star team (July 21), published yesterday.

excellence" in the education and training of our young men and women for leadership positions in various spheres of society. The important point to note is that our discussion of ideals and goals should be guided by pragmatism and realism, thereby taking due note of what we already have and what change is realistically possible.

It is important that the financial autonomy of a university is critical to its proper functioning and sources for its financing should be diversified among government, students and their parents, trade and industry, and alumni. A Committee/Commission under the sponsorship of University Grants Commission comprising of representatives from University, Government, trade and industry, alumni may be formed to review this subject and make recommendations.

Employment of Graduates

Some observations were made in the 'conversation' regarding the employment of

university graduates, particularly those who happened to be workers of various student fronts and later, with possession of arms, became members of organised groups of extortionists or collectors of protection money from various businesses. Some also suggest that these groups got organized for lack of employment opportunities and their number may be spreading in the city.

There is no adequate data about the employment status of Dhaka University students. While there are only guesses, it is also believed that there is widespread unemployment among university graduates. But there is no way to find out how much of the unemployment is actually due to lack of employment opportunity and how much is due to 'unemployable' quality of graduates. I venture to suggest that university students can be divided into three categories, best, better and average while the adverse impact of continuing unfavourable academic ambience on these groups has been different. The most hard hit is the large group of average students, who for lack of adequate instruction and guidance could not get a good education and who in the competitive job market could not fare well against small groups of better and best students usually least hit by the disruptions. Best and better students are usually more motivated, can learn without significant guidance and prepare themselves adequately for employment and advanced studies at home and abroad.

their job opportunities. The government and higher educational institutions should also develop a system of forecasting trained manpower requirements at home and abroad.

As regards the graduates and students who are currently members of organized groups who for lack of current or anticipated employment opportunity are engaged in Mafia type activities, serious consideration should be given to bring them into the mainstream of the society. Given the goodwill and openness, it may not be difficult to devise appropriate ways to resolve this problem. We must not forget that whatever these graduates and students are doing are mostly conditioned by the society, and given proper opportunities they will revert back to normal social life.

Conclusion

There is widespread popular expectation that political parties should resolve this issue and we sincerely hope that they will fulfil the popular expectation. We strongly hope that pragmatism, backed by a realistic appraisal of our current situation and future expectation while keeping in view our overall national interest and development goals will guide us in resolving the various problems in our higher educational institutions.

To the Editor

VAT campaign
Sir, Since VCP/VCRs are used extensively in the country, video tape programmes on VAT can be distributed (at subsidized rate) at vertical and horizontal levels for publicity and training, produced either locally or obtained from abroad.

For television, the programmes should be in popular style for general knowledge, and not training or technical material. The radio's role would be limited, without the visual medium.

The print media can produce supplements, and print a series of advertisements and commissioned articles.

The whole campaign could cost several lakh Taka, but ultimately enlighten people about the intricacies of VAT.

A. Mawaz
Dhaka

Talents search
Sir, Behind all achievements were talents. Talented people brought about the dawn of civilization and have continuously been advancing it with inventions and improvements. Historically, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman were among the most famous civilizations the world had before this modern one. Although the present world has been experiencing rapid changes in almost all aspects due to the impact of scientific advances,

the western Europe and northern America are popularly referred to as the modern civilization (exact geographic periphery like the preceding ones is still controversial).

Together with the confusion, contradiction, and controversy over their pioneers of the modern technologies, most of the same or similar technologies are available all over the world today. One or another nation can possibly claim the superiority in the latest developments of intelligence, specifically in scientific know-how, in the respective field of specialization. Undoubtedly, USA, UK, France, Germany, USSR and Japan are the most overall developed states on earth today.

This popular western civilization is fast influencing the rest of the world remarkably — the countries/regions with contrasting value systems, choices and preferences, and socio-psychology altogether. Unlike most of the past civilizations, the whole world is virtually being equipped fast with the technologies invented or developed mostly by those western countries and manufactured by few others as well.

All these inventions and developments have been performed by the people possessing talents who are very few in number. Talented people are present almost everywhere but not evenly distributed though. Western parts of the world seem to be fortunate enough to

have comparatively more talented people who are advancing the civilization with their products. No wonder, the western countries are leading the rest of the world in almost all sectors, having had the positive factors of development working in their favour in a cyclic order that is referred to as Affluent Circle.

Based on the realities as well as potentialities, LDC

Bangladesh needs talented people of world standard for a self-reliant nation within a target span, and advanced vision coupled with graduated strategies should benefit this developing nation in evaluating the feasibility of a Talents Search project for each of her sectors.

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