

Tribute to Tagore

The observance of the death anniversary of Poet Rabindranath Tagore, which falls today, provides us with one more occasion to reiterate our commitment to the national heritage of our country, a heritage that covers a wide spectrum of art and literature, poetry and music, theatre and films, and, indeed, every facet of our living culture. We cannot talk of this heritage without seeing Tagore as a central figure in a continually evolving drama. In this drama, we are the players as well as the spectators, whether we are singing a Tagore song, watching his play "Charulata" on Bangladesh television, admiring one of his paintings or joining in our national anthem.

"We shudder to think of Bengali literature without Tagore", a critic once said. Perhaps the Poet himself would have challenged this contention on the ground that the potential of a literature, hidden or explored, is much greater than anything a single creative genius can offer.

Yet, there is no denying the fact that there is no individual in our literature who has touched and influenced our lives from so many directions and often with such intensity and even passion as Tagore. It is also no wonder that, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, we see the fourth—or perhaps the fifth—generation Bengalees, in Bangladesh, West Bengal and in other parts of South Asia, singing Tagore songs, staging his plays and feeling the impact that the great poet has exercised on generation after generation of Bangla-speaking people everywhere. In this respect, the unique position of our Poet—Kabiguru to many and Gurudev to his students—remains unmatched among all contemporary writers and poets of the world.

Year after year, anniversary after anniversary, we pay our tributes to Tagore with due solemnity and reverence. One observance is no different from another. To some, it is all very ritualistic; to others, it is a somewhat routine soulless exercise. Our hope is that we can add a new dimension to the traditional observance of a Tagore anniversary, perhaps even from this year. For one thing, pleased as we are to know that some 460 pages of rare manuscripts of the Poet have just reached the West Bengal Government from London, we cannot help hoping that we, in Bangladesh, may have a chance of seeing them in Dhaka, perhaps in a mobile exhibition brought here from Calcutta. (Here, we must congratulate the Indian High Commissioner in London, L.M. Singhi who prevented the manuscripts from being auctioned away to another country). Similarly, we wonder if the authorities in West Bengal, perhaps in co-operation with UNESCO, would let us have prints of the massive collection of paintings by Tagore which are housed in Shantiniketan. Again, can there be more scholarships for Bangladeshi students to join Viswabharati? And have the universities in Bangladesh done their share in promoting the study of Tagore literature?

As time goes on, turning this great poet from being a contemporary figure into a historical personality, it becomes more and more important to find new ways of upholding the legacy of Tagore. We can make a start in this direction from this anniversary.

Glimmer of Hope in Cambodia

Despite reports of scattered fighting, the ceasefire in Cambodia which came into effect on May 1, appears to be generally holding. More importantly, international confidence in prospects for peace after 21 years of non-stop combat seems greater than ever before. For the past two decades, one war had begun even before the previous conflict had had the chance to end—between Lon Nol's US-backed military regime and the Khmer Rouge (KR) in 1970-75, between Pol Pot's KR and anti-Pol Pot factions during 1975-79, and between Vietnamese-backed forces of Heng Samrin and an anti-Vietnam coalition led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk but dominated by the Chinese-backed KR fronted by Khieu Samphan but controlled by old Pol Pot.

Judging by the complex nature of the conflict and active involvement of outside parties, it is not too difficult to see why a resolution has proved elusive over all these years. Khmer Rouge's complete distrust of the Vietnamese and their allies in Phnom Penh, and in turn, the grave suspicions Vietnam and its Cambodian friends nurture about Chinese intentions, have worked to build a massive psychological barrier between the warring factions. In the end, only sincere and persistent efforts by third parties such as Indonesia, Australia and France managed to breach that wall of mistrust enough to allow a ray of hope to penetrate.

But the crucial factor was the thaw in Sino-Vietnam relations. Beijing's pressure on the KR, which had steadfastly refused to any ceasefire that would leave Hun Sen sitting pretty in Phnom Penh, was instrumental in achieving the ceasefire agreement.

With both Hanoi and Beijing evidently weary of fishing in troubled waters, and the United Nations assuming a central role during the transition, the cloud of hate and suspicion seems to have lifted to a large extent.

Of course, it would be grossly optimistic to suggest that Cambodians will start to live as one, happy family from tomorrow. But the process of reconciliation, which could not even begin for the greater part of the past decade, has now been set rolling. The task facing the newly-formed Supreme National Council (SNC), which will have to administer the country until free and fair elections are held, is an extremely difficult one, as the latest fighting has shown. But with goodwill on all sides, including continuing rapport between Hanoi and Beijing on this issue, the SNC may well succeed. A lot will depend on how the KR, which is not renowned for its democratic credentials, behaves during the transition. The international community, which played such a vital role in bringing about the ceasefire, will now have to be even more careful in how it deals with the new situation. Top priority ought now be given to maintaining the fragile bond of trust that has apparently emerged in the war-torn country.

WE are soon to be ambushed by something for which there hasn't been much in the way of planning. By-election to the Madaripur seat left vacant by the untimely death of Ilyas Mohammad Chowdhury is due by the 19th of this month, but that is now quite impossible since the Election Commission (EC) would require at least 30 days to prepare for it.

On the other hand, by-elections to the 10 other seats (four in Rangpur, two in Dhaka, and one each in Bogra, Chittagong, Shariatpur and Bhola) vacated by people winning more than one seat in the February 27 general elections, are due to be held by September 11, as they were postponed for three months from the scheduled date of June 11 by a unanimous decision of the Jatiya Sangsad.

The problem has highlighted an apparent lack of urgency in government as well as opposition and other non-government circles about as important an issue as elections to more than three per cent of Sangsad seats.

Not only have 11 voices been missing from debates on crucial constitutional issues, but also people in 10 constituencies have been without elected representatives since the fourth Sangsad was dissolved on December 6 last year.

The delay is most unfortunate because we really ought to build-up the habit of holding elections — to however few or many constituencies — on the scheduled date i.e. within 90 days of a vacancy occurring, as a matter of course.

Elections are part and parcel of the democratic process, and it is as important to hold them on schedule as it is to hold them freely and fairly. The whole process should be on automatic drive, with the Chief Election Commissioner's hands on the steering wheel with electoral laws and regulations as his driving manuals.

Maintenance of strict neutrality and independence on the part of the EC was one of the points deemed absolutely vital by a leading American civic awareness group which

monitored and evaluated the Feb. 27 polls.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) said in its post-poll report that much of the acceptability of the Feb. 27 results was due to the unquestioned neutrality and integrity of the interim government and the EC.

"Future elections, however, are likely to take place under more partisan, elected governments and, potentially, in more polarised environments", the NDI report observed, "accordingly, the Election Commission should immediately undertake a major effort to update the nation's voters lists", the report said.

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One such task was the much-talked about and widely-criticised electoral rolls or voters list. Most parties, especially eventual winners Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), expressed grave reservations about the authenticity of the list during the run-up to the polls. It was widely acknowledged that the list was stuffed with fictitious names while a large number of eligible voters were left out.

The complaints were not limited to metropolitan Dhaka, but applied to the rest of the country as well. It was as-

Coming By-elections : New Test for Electoral Process

by Sabir Mustafa

sumed, quite naturally, that one of the first tasks the EC would undertake after the elections would be to thoroughly recast the electoral rolls to make votes cast in future elections more credible.

Not surprisingly, the NDI report's recommendations gave top priority to this problem.

"An accurate register of voters is essential, and there seems to be serious problems with existing voters list. The Election Commission should immediately undertake a major effort to update the nation's voters lists", the report said.

going to shed the current voters list of the stigma it acquired during the Ershad era.

The by-elections are likely to see the further growth of a new breed of local activists produced by the Feb. 27 polls — the election monitors. The NDI, which took a particular interest in promoting local observer groups, followed up its February visit with a series of seminars and workshops in Dhaka last month dealing with monitoring the electoral process as well as civic responsibilities in the post-poll environment.

In its election report, the

lead credibility to the results (or not, as the case may be), falls almost entirely on local observers and political parties. Since these polls will be held under a partisan government, the role of the independent observer to ensure fair play becomes that much more crucial.

As well as simply observing the process, one other way monitor groups verify the results in many foreign countries is through parallel vote counts of their own, by collecting and tabulating results from various polling stations. This system has been developed not only because people do not have much faith in the government counting process, but also as a

means to continually ensure proper checks and build up public confidence.

It goes without saying that if the administration of the polls and counting of votes do not have any credibility with the public at large, then the whole exercise becomes a meaningless waste of time and money.

During the last elections, the total lack of any parallel vote counts in this country caused some concern for the NDI observer team. The NDI report, however, noted the lack of experience and technical expertise among domestic observers to efficiently organise such an undertaking. But it can also be safely added that many people in this country even lacked the awareness that parallel vote-count was possible and desirable.

One of the main thrusts of the NDI effort since then has been to advise and train domestic groups and political parties in this respect. The NDI report noted that at present only the major political parties were in a position to

put independent vote tabulation into effect across the country because of the large cadre force at their disposal. Smaller groups however, could tackle a random but representative selection of constituencies to study the trend in any future general elections.

The Election Commission now has to undergo a major change of attitude and practice to accommodate new factors and actors in the electoral process.

During the Feb. 27 polls the EC actively discouraged independent domestic observation by refusing accreditation to such groups. In addition, presiding officers in many polling stations went against existing rules by refusing to give polling agents of candidates copies of the result tally sheet, the NDI report said.

Both these factors will seriously hamper independent observation, and do more harm than good to efforts to sustain public trust in the electoral process a solid foundation. Close observation and parallel vote-counts during the coming by-elections are imperative, especially as the government will not be a neutral one.

The greatest responsibility now falls on the shoulders of the Election Commission. It is in the field of cooperation with independent, local observers that the extent of the EC's independence or its wishes to demonstrate that independence, will become apparent.

If the EC allows access for all monitor groups to polling stations, and makes sure presiding officers provide all polling agents and other observers with signed result tally sheets, then it will be feasible to accurately judge the fairness of the administration and results of the polls.

There cannot be any room for complacency anymore, as everyone is well aware of the consequences of public apathy. It is now apparent that we have nearly got the hang of this election thing, but unless all independent groups receive official encouragement and help, the election process may soon begin to lose its hard-earned respectability.

A NEW CHAPTER OPENS IN INDOCHINA — II

US Big Business Fights for Foothold in Vietnam

Barbara Stewart writes from Ho Chi Minh City

DESPITE the 16-year trade and aid embargo, a spunky Vietnamese version of perestroika known as doi moi has set off a rush of foreign investment from European, Asian and Australian entrepreneurs. Now a new wave of investors is bringing an amused gleam to the eyes of the Vietnamese. The Americans have arrived.

Two years ago Hanoi introduced doi moi to salvage a dying economy. The policy promised to sanction private business, encourage foreign investment and open the nation to a market economy. The play worked. Today — embargo or not — international businessmen are finding that the hot spot for investment is Vietnam, in particular Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City.

A boom town mentality complete with overnight millionaires and promises of easy riches is sweeping over this southern city. On Dong Khoi Street buzzwords like joint venture, investment capital and market opportunity are as thick as bicycles.

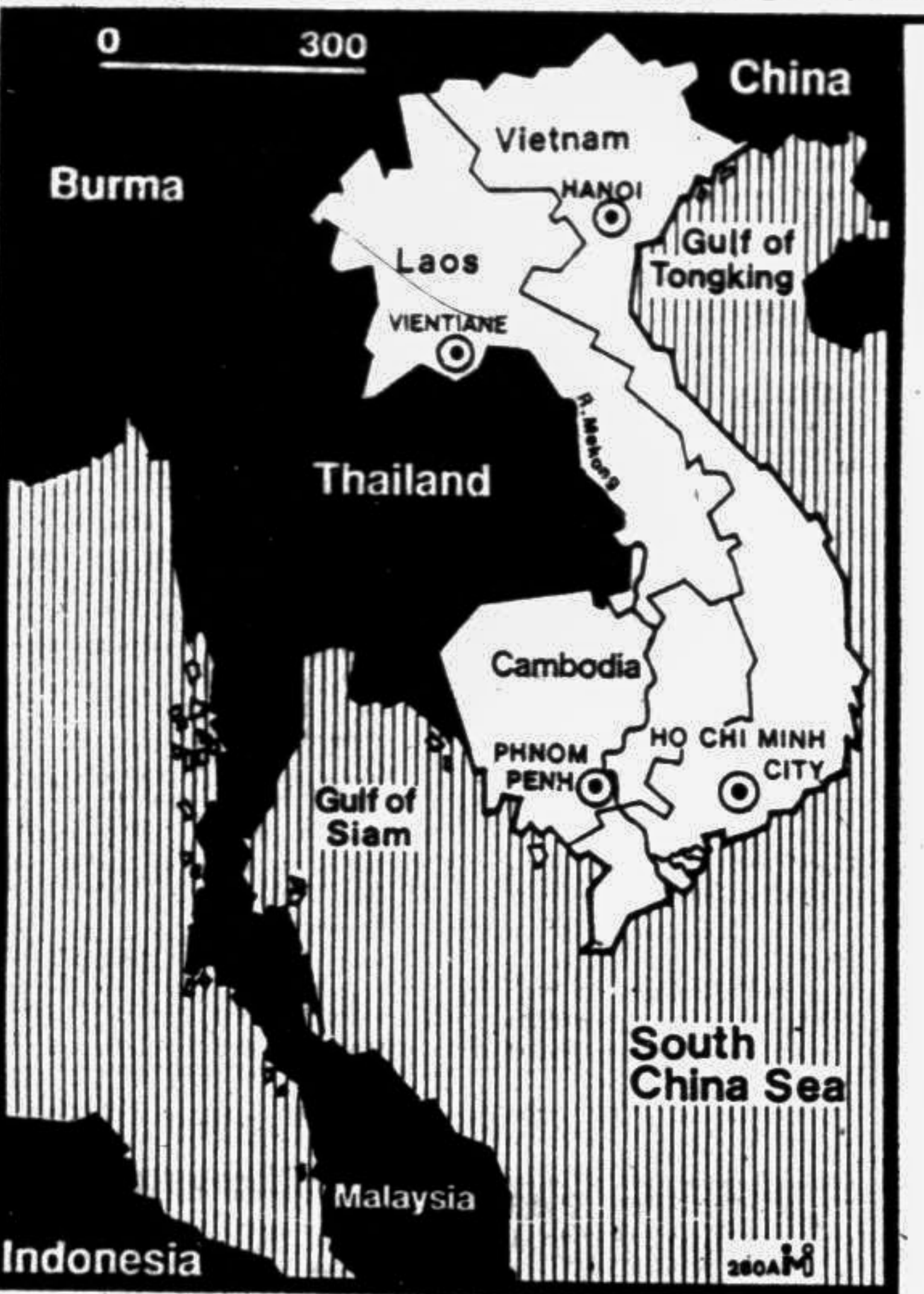
American businessmen, weary of the old and mouldy US trade embargo, have devised ways round the restrictions, forming dummy corporations based in Hong Kong, Bangkok and other acceptable-to-Washington Asian cities.

In the lobbies of the major international hotels in Ho Chi Minh City, accents from Georgia, Texas and New York can be heard discussing terms and shipments or factory sites. For the record, the meetings are portrayed as preliminary or exploratory, but they end with signed orders specifying delivery dates.

The US-led aid-and-trade embargo was provoked by Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979. Support for the embargo suffered a fatal blow when Hanoi pulled its occupation troops out of Cambodia.

Last October, when all but a

The Americans are back in Vietnam. Although trading with the Hanoi government is still forbidden, businessmen are finding ways round the embargo. Since Vietnam introduced its own form of perestroika and opened the doors to capitalism, entrepreneurs from Europe, Asia and Australia have been moving in. US oil companies, fearing they will be left out, are anxious to win rights to the promising oilfields offshore.



few troops had been recalled to Hanoi, Washington moved the goal posts. It demanded the embargo stay in place until Vietnam halted the intra-country warfare among Cambodia's cantankerous factions and established peace in that coun-

try. Hanoi tried to negotiate an end to the Cambodian quarrels, but peace is only now beginning to seem possible, and Washington is staying aloof.

Two years ago Hanoi implemented the most liberal investment code in Asia.

Western and other capitalist companies saw rich pickings in a country of cheap labour and great natural resources. Competition is tough. French, Dutch and Australian representatives are fighting to outdo the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese.

Vietnamese fascination for America and Americans gives US ventures an edge. Dang Hong Tan, director of one of the region's largest textile and garment factories, admits to doing business with several Americans, albeit those representing corporations registered in places other than the US. He believes buyers fear that if they do not run the risk of cutting through the embargo today they will be missing the opportunities of a growing marketplace tomorrow.

The Vietnamese, aware of the power of the American oil companies in Washington, have let it be known that they are reserving potential blocks of the rich White Tiger oilfields for US companies. They hope this will induce them to apply pressure and get the embargo lifted.

So far only Japanese and European syndicates have begun exploring Vietnam's petroleum potential. Four Japanese companies are negotiating for exploration rights in the petroleum-rich waters off Vietnam. Another group of Japanese investors has an oil refinery on the planning board.

Nine European oil firms, including Royal Dutch Shell, Total and British Petroleum, are also exploring for hydro-

carbons offshore.

Hanoi still hopes to woo back Mobil Corp, which struck oil offshore in Vietnam in 1975, just before Saigon fell. Mobil, forced to the sidelines by the embargo, makes no secret of its keen interest in returning to what is considered one of the best oilfields in Southeast Asia.

Many large US corporations, too big to slip under the embargo net, worry that the opportunities in Vietnam will pass them by before the US government lifts the embargo.

Their worries are well founded. Two of the most aggressive Japanese trading companies, Sumitomo Corporation and Kanematsu, have received approval from the government in Tokyo to open offices in Hanoi. Japanese companies have thus far worked quietly. Tokyo officially supports the embargo, but claims it cannot control what its private sector does.

Recently, Credit Lyonnais

Securities of Asia, a subsidiary of one of France's largest banks, agreed to provide technical assistance to Vietnam to setup a capital market within five years.

In Britain, Coventry Polytechnic School has just agreed to provide the country's first capitalist business courses, introducing a new Vietnamese generation to the art of making a deal British style.

The end of the US embargo, when it comes, will release vital aid, loans and investment funding that will bring a welcome surge to the economy.

Washington seems to be slowly pulling its head out of the sand. The State Department recently opened an office in Hanoi to help locate US servicemen missing in action in the Vietnam war — presumably a first step towards normalising relations between the two countries.

Americans are only too pleased to be back in Vietnam. Said one executive, whose business is registered in his Vietnamese wife's name: "Vietnam represents a great opportunity — and that means lots of opportunities for me".

— GEMINI NEWS
BARBARA STEWART is accredited to the UN in New York and often visits Southeast Asia. She specialises in economic and development subjects in the region.

OPINION

Afghan Solution

The only realistic way to solve the Afghan problem is a political solution. The UN plan, offered by Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar, stimulates sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-alignment and Islamic status of Afghanistan, as well as the right of self-determination for the people of the country and their right to change political, economical and social system without interference.

For the achievement of the solution a framework of transitional period should be worked out while the details for the same be settled by dialogue between conflicting Afghan parties. The transitional mechanism has to be set up which should have full support of the population and persuade its confidence to take part in free and fair elections.

All hostile activities during the transitional period should be stopped. Any arms supply to the conflicting parties should be banned during the transitional period under relevant agreement. The necessary assistance of UN or any other international agency is desired and necessary during transitional period and elections.

The whole spectrum of political groups in Afghanistan should be taken into consideration, including the present Kabul regime, while ways and means for the political settlement are being found out. Both in the country and abroad President Najibullah is considered as a national leader backed by real military support. He is able to prevent possible bloodshed and to play stabilizing role during the transitional period.

The developments in the Persian Gulf have shown clearly that the international community won't be interested to see in Kabul a regime whose actions would be unpredictable. It may not be forgotten that the leader of "Islamic Party" Hekmatyar and the head of "Islamic Union for Liberation of Afghanistan" Sayaf sent their military units to fight against coalition forces.

To augment the peace process OIC countries should help ensure immediate termination of arms supplies to any hostile Afghan party from any source along with simultaneous ceasefire by all such parties.

Hasan Jamil
Maniknagar, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

To contain disasters

Sir, Cyclone, tornado, flood, water salinity and draught are now supposed to be the manifestation of Greenhouse effect in our country. The abrupt fall in underground water level seems to us as the apparent reason of natural calamities. The scientists are of the opinion that the warming of global temperature due to accumulation of "Greenhouse gases" is one of the major causes of natural calamities in undeveloped countries like Bangladesh. The industrial waste dumped by the developed countries is also one of the major causes of Greenhouse effect. It is reported that the recently held two world climate conferences had failed to persuade the ma-

ajor polluters of the world's atmosphere to cut down their emissions.

Few industrialised developed countries control the international platform for all activities. So in the World Climate Conference, one of the scientists commented "the world does not provide poor countries like Bangladesh with any mechanism to sue those who are responsible for global warming and resultant catastrophic flood and cyclone."

With a predicted 209 centimetre rise in sea level by the year 2100, one-third of Bangladesh will go under water, and one-third of its population will be forced to re-locate. The economic efforts will be disastrous.

Massive creation of forest and vegetation, non-use of trees, and plants etc. as fuel, digging of ponds, canals, rivers and building water reservoirs on our part can minimize the brute Greenhouse effect. Creation of massive forest like the Sundarbans from Khulna upto Cox's Bazar across the shores can serve as a barrier to the cyclonic tidal bores. The season of plantation of trees has already commenced. The parliament is in session. So we urge upon it to introduce a bill suggesting measures aiming at massive afforestation programme and finding out devices how to persuade the industrialised countries not to pollute the world's atmosphere.

Md. Anwarul Afzal,
Raninagar, Noagaon.

Health policy

Sir, I endorse the view expressed by your correspondent under the caption "A patient's question" published on 23rd July in the letter column.

I want to ask only one question to BMA in particular and the good doctors of our country in general: Have you finished drafting a "people oriented health policy" to replace the "Health Policy" which was scrapped by the Acting President at the instance of the BMA and our good doctors.

An early reply will be highly appreciated by the poor people of this country, for whose benefit our good doctors have made much sacrifice in the past.

Vox populi