Dhaka, Wednesday, August 14, 1991

Time for Action

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, while welcoming new entrants to her party, called upon the people to launch a movement against bribery, corruption and other anti-social activities.

We welcome her exhortation and sincerely hope that our people, especially the members of her own party, will be inspired by the words of the PM and take effective steps in this regard. However, the question which is central to the issue is what concrete steps has the government taken up till now to stem the rising tide of corruption in the country, especially in the government offices and autonomous bodies. Understandably it is not an easy task and our newly elected government cannot be expected to achieve miracles. But we can and do expect our government to do the possible. We recall that in her first address to the government officials, on assuming office as the PM, Begum Zia singled out corruption as one of the main problems facing our country. She declared that drive against it would be one of the priorities of her government. What government actions followed from it the public is yet to know.

Among the various problems we are faced with, corruption is perhaps the one that is most debilitating. It affects our performance in all other sectors. It erodes public confidence in the government's ability to manage the affairs of the State and affects donors' confidence on our ability to appropriately use their assistance. This in turn tarnishes our goodwill among the people of the donor countries whose taxes constitute the aid that we get. It is not only for the external goodwill, but more so for our development needs and self respect that we should go all out in our fight against corruption. The PM has once again raised the question of fighting corruption. But a serious effort to tackle corruption requires thorough planning and a step-by-step plan of action, which the nation awaits from her government. In the process of every day corruption there are givers and takers. Obviously if the givers would report to the law enforcing authorities as to who the takers are, then it would not be so difficult for the legal process to get to the bottom of ordinary corruption. Then there is of course the corporate corruption. Given that our economy is aid dependent, the involvement of foreign firms and agencies in local corruption cannot be ruled out. In fact, according to some, the cuts and kickbacks in huge foreign tenders and supplies have linkages that connect the local to the international.

In all this our government must learn from the experiences of such countries as Singapore where corruption is now virtually non-existent. We have other examples like Hong Kong where a Royal Commission has done pioneering work in how to eradicate, and later prevent, corruption within the government machinery. There are other examples like Thailand where such attempts did not produce the desired results. We need to know why.

We think that the time is now appropriate for the PM to make a move in this direction. Now that the question of form of government is behind us and the necessary constitutional amendments are in place, Begum Zia's government should not wait a moment longer to take the necessary legal, political and administrative steps to remove the disease of corruption from our social and political life.

When Small is Powerful

Everything small cannot be unfailingly beautiful. But they can sometimes be quite powerful. One could choose Britain and later still Japan for modern-day proofs of the same. Well, no one ever really thought of Britain or Japan as small, God knows why. And everyone would readily agree that Cuba is truly small. Puny to be precise. And look at the way it has been daring the world's mightiest and, thanks to Gorbachev, only superpower, namely, the United States — for a straight thirty-two years running.

Cuba has now capped its political spriteliness by a very heartwarming show of sporting clout. It was an accepted power in the arena for quite some time now. But two things tended to make observers not to expect much fireworks from Havana in the nineties. One, keeping to its orthodoxy as a Marxist-socialist state, absenting in an undoubtedly foolish-looking way from the Seoul Olympics, must have had profoundly inhibiting influence on competitive sport of all kinds on that island. Two, with the collapse of socialistic regimentation in East Europe, the socialist sporting machine has also taken a bad beating there.

But those estimations were unwarranted. Cuba became the miles-ahead champion in the current Pan American Games beating US to a distant second and to the latter's first defeat in 40 years since the Games were instituted. And the way it happened! Imagine beating the Americans in the field-and-track or athletic events 18 gold medals to 9. In the overall medals table till Monday US was trailing Cuba 78 to 100 golds. And again imagine the Americans losing all but one of the 12 golds at stake in boxing. Wonder of wonders the Cubans took golds in what was long a US specialty and even monopoly — diving.

Cuba, in the first place, never had an East German-like sporting regimen — and an exuberant Cuban nationalism, pepped up further by being beleaguered by its overwhelming neighbour, — is helping Cuba mightily not only to survive but also to excel in certain areas.

Fifteen-year-old Capriati the same day climbed to world number 7. She is green even as a teenager and quite small. But tennis is the fiefdom of the teen kings and queens — only Capriati seems to be younger of them all.

India is sportingly speaking a very small nation. The same Monday Viswanathan Anand, its chess prodigy, held World Cup favourite and former world champion Anatoly Karpov to a stormy draw. This was the pleasantest poof of the day of small being at times also powerful.

Middle East Slowly Inches towards Peace

response to US Secretary of State James
Baker's latest proposals may
well mean the beginning of
peace talks in the Middle East.

Baker, who has paid five visits to the region since the end
of the Gulf war, has obtained
commitments from Syria,
Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi
Arabia to attend a face-to-face
conference with Israel.

Most significant is the Suadi statement that the long-running boyeott of firms doing business with Israel will be ended if Israel stops building settlements in the occupied territories. The Bush administration has made it clear that it considers the settlements to be the main obstacle to peace in the region.

in the region.

The US has not concealed its enthusiasm about the Syrian position. Once branded as a terrorist sponsor on a par with Libya, Syria's participation in the war against Iraq has led to a complete U-turn in American attitudes to the country. Before leaving for his visit to Greece and Turkey, President Bush hailed the Syrain response as a "breakthrough."

This current phase of the erratic Middle East peace process in reminiscent of the talks between Israel and Egypt in the 1970s. Many Palestinians have pointed out the similarity between the late Egyptian President Sadat's decision to go to Jerusalem in 1977, and the current willingness in the Arab states to negotiate directly with Israel.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, concluded at Camp David under the auspices of Jimmy Carter, led to an Israeli withdrawal from Sinai.

At the time, the PLO con-

by Benjamin Cohen

It seems that a real chance is beginning to emerge of peace negotiations in the Middle East. Even Saudi Arabia has laid down a formula which will enable business to be conducted with Israel. Meanwhile, in American eyes, Syria can do no wrong. Any sidelining will be of the Palestine Liberation Organisation — again. Kuwait would rather recognise Israel than deal with the PLO.

demned Sadat as a traitor, and the Arab countries joined in the chorus. Now, an increasingly isolated PLO is faced with the spectacle of Israel's contemporary arch-enemy, Syria, repeating the act.

PLO support for Saddam



Hussein contributed heavily to the organisation's marginalisation from the diplomatic process. Yasser Arafat's de facto recognition of Israel in November 1988, almost one year after the intifada (uprising) began in the occupied territories, seemed to indicate that the PLO would become the decisive actor in Middle East politics.

Despite Israeli protests, the US even began a short-lived dialogue with the PLO. Yet the Gulf crisis, and the subsequent hostility to the Palestinians in the Gulf countries, has meant that the US envisages no independent PLO role.

The PLO's preferred option, a UN-sponsored international peace conference, is no longer on the cards. Instead, the US proposals are focussing on a symbolic opening ceremony attended by a silent UN observer, followed by the negotiations. It is highly unlikely that the PLO will be able to organise Arab opposition to this, especially in the Gulf.

A poll recently commissioned by a Saudi sponsored newspaper in London showed that many Kuwaitis (including those in the pro-democracy movements) were deeply hostile to the PLO, and were generally in favour of recognising Israel. Kuwait had previously been a crucial source of political and financial support for the PLO.

This lack of official Arab support has been compounded by a fresh defeat for the PLO in Lebanon. After Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to wipe out the PLO, much of the Organisation's infrastructure was smashed.

However, PLO guerrillas were the main power in the Sidon area, out of the reach of both the Syrian and the Israeli spheres of influence. At the beginning of July, Lebanese army forces mounted an effective operation to disarm the PLO fighters in Sidon.

PLO weakness means that the Palestinians will have to make do with a joint delegation led by Jordan's Kung Hussein. Bassam Abu Sharif, a senior aide to Yasser Arafat, has said that such an approach is acceptable. Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders in East Jerusalem like Faisal Husseinf and Hanan Ashrawi have already met with Baker and are regarded as possible participants in the delegation. These leaders are identified with Fatah, the mainstream faction in the PLO led by Arafat.

The PLO's radical wing, chiefly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Leberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the

Islamic Movement, have long been sceptical of Baker's diplomacy.

However, the real spotlight is on Israel. While Israel has officially been calling for direct talks with the Arabs ever since its formation in 1948, hatred of Syria in the country's governing circles runs deep. At the beginning of July, Deputy Foreign Minister Benyamin Netanyahu made statements of Israeli television which were almost a declaration of war: "Syria is a big obstacle in the Arab world against nay progress in the political process."

"If they want to destroy this obstacle, Syria must be crushed ... unfortunately, we don't see this position in the US ... Syria is the greatest enemy which is threatening our existence."

Baker is attempting to persuade israel that its real interest lies in peace negotiations. There is also a cost. In September, Congress will discuss whether to give israel the \$10 billion in aid that it has asked for to absorb the huge wave of Jewish immigrants. This could well hinge on israel's readiness to enter into talks and to halt the construction of new settlements in the occupied territories.

are required on the Israeli political scene that there may be fresh elections. Leading rightwingers, like Housing Minister Ariel Sharon and Knesset member Geula Cohen, have made clear their commitment to further settlements. They could make life very difficult for Prime Minister Shamir, who depends on their support to stay in power.

who depends on their support to stay in power.

The israeli left is demanding that talks be entered into immediately. One group of prominent Israelis, left by former General Matti Peled, has written to Congress demanding that US aid be linked to an Israeli agreement to end

the settlements.

The deep mistrust of Syria further complicates these divisions. Dr Martin Kramer, of the Dayan Centre for Middle East Studies, says Syrian President Hafez as Assad has a different agenda: "He believes that, with the loss of the Soviets, the Arabs are weak and may have to halt their struggle for a while. He'll say future generations can free Palestine."

It is highly unlikely that the Baker initiative will run smoothly. While a supportive consensus seems to be emerging in both Israel and the Arab states, the painful iscussed - like arms control. the return of the occupied terfitories and Israel's security needs - will mean frequent and perhaps irreconcilable disagreements. Central to this problem, as Baker has probably realised, is that neither side really trusts the other. - GEMINI NEWS

BENGAMIN COHEN is a British freelance journalist who specialises in writing on the Middle East.

Villagers' Daily Truce with Khmer Rouge

ILLAGERS living along the fringes of malarial rainforests enter daily into a pact with Khmer Rouge guerillas as they go in search of the precious sandalwood used by wealthy Asians as incense for funerals and religious ceremonies.

The finest quality pale yellow heartwood can fetch as much as US\$300 a kilogram.

The bullock carts that trundle off government-controlled Highway Four into the rainforest are taxed by the guerrillas at 10,000 to 20,000 riels (US\$10-20) per cart, according to villagers.

"The guerillas say in the forest, 'we are the king, so you must pay us money' to cut the wood," says Nhear Hann, 37, a communal leader of Tran Trayung, a refugee camp in the province of Kompong Spue, an hour's drive from the capital, Phnom Penh.

While the government has largely secured the flat and open terrain of the country's rice fields, the Khmer Rouge remain in control of pristine rainforests on the rainy seaward slopes of southeast Cambodia. Though many wildlife species in these forests have been under attack from soldiers in search of meat, the dense forest remains

largely intact.

Last year, at the height of a government offensive, provincial authorities moved civilians further away from the forests and nearer to the highway.

The aim was to separate Khmer Rouge guerrillas from their "secret cadres" and their access to food in villages that lie at the foot of forested hills.

The population of Tran
Trayung became a part of an
estimated 190,000 internal
Cambodian refugees, most of
whom have fled their homes in
the last two years.

The government policy of isolating the Khmer Rouge in the forest has some similarity to the American "strategic hamlets" tactic used in the Vietnam war.

Yet a year after the villagers were moved, guerrillas still come down from the mountains in search of food, cigarettes and an opportunity to talk politics. Nearly 200 Khmer Rouge soldiers near here recently conducted villagers up into the hills for a political seminar.

These villagers were issued with new identity cards for cutting wood. They were also told that the Khmer Rouge was preparing to lead the country with the backing of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Both government officials and villagers say that since Prince Sihanouk persuaded the warring factions to agree in principle to a ceasefire in June, Khmer Rouge forays into Cambodian villages have continued in earnest.

Officials say the forays — which rarely involve exchanges of fire — are assisted by villagers who collude with the guerrillas. The guerrillas, wielding Chinese-made AK-47s, take what they want, even

All along the fringes of Cambodia's vast rainforests, a decades-old alliance between guerrillas and villagers continues to fuel a war of nerves and

Philip Gorton writes from Tran Trayong, Cambodia

Economic and blood ties between villagers and guerrillas are one reason why the civil war in Cambodia lingers on

intimidation. Far from the peace table, an unverified ceasefire appears to hold no more weight than the paper it is printed on. Government officials and Western doctors here say they expect the war to die a very slow and lingering death.

Young men are still joining the Khmer Rouge, the force that once imposed on lowland villages an ultra-Maoist agrarian revolution that left over one million dead.

Despite widespread repugnance displayed in large towns towards their brutal terror, Khmer Rouge cadres have had some success with their most recent propaganda claims that Prince Sihanouk is backing them.

The guerrillas rarely mention Pol Pot, believed by Western diplomats to be still heading the secretive Khmer Rouge faction that carried out one of the most brutal pogroms in modern history.

"Even the guerrillas are fighting for democracy and liberation and want Sihanouk to be their leader," says Chhey Him, 38, leader of over 400 families in Tran Trayung.

Mr Chhey denounces the past actions of the Khmer Rouge, for whom in 1978 he drove a truck that took prison-

including computers, satellite

television and sense numbing

rock music - is now giving us

dog inspectors. This is

progress - and as we are

always seeking progress, I am

sure the day is not far off when

ers to brutal executions and burial in mass graves. But in the presence of officials loyal to the Phnom Penh regime, he says the guerrillas have become "more honest and less brutal" in recent years.

"Most of the old guerrillas have good intentions," says Mr Chhey. "The intellectuals have always meant well — it was the young killers who committed the crimes. I believe they have changed in the last 10 years." Like many residents of Tran Trayung, Mr Chhey has relatives fighting with the Khmer Rouge.

The sway guerrillas hold over villagers — by virtue of blood ties, economic links and geographic proximity to villages — explains a general

of the civil war ending soon.
The Khmer Rouge can ac-

scepticism about the prospect

tivate anywhere," says Yim Sokhum, deputy governor of Kompong Spue province. "It is a condition of being human that you cannot cut off your blood relatives."

Government officials have so far rejected the idea of disarmament in advance of elections. They say the Khmer Rouge have stockpiled enough arms and ammunition underground to last them for months or years.

"The Khmer Rouge will keep soldiers and weapons in the jungle even after an election," says Chhom Khonny, 23, a former guerrilla who left the Khmer Rouge last June without telling them. He says he now fears for his life.

Yet Mr Chhom is typical of young men in Tran Trayung who speak with affection about Khmer Rouge leaders in the jungle — even after they have returned to the relative stability of a refugee camp.

"Our leader, Thoch San, seemed to be a nice person; it is his soldiers who are sometimes reckless," he says.
"During the meetings he had with us what he said seemed very open-minded."

Like other young men who, the government often claims, were "kidnapped" by the Khmer Rouge, Mr Chhom grew restless and joined friends who had preceded him after what he says was a family dispute.

Meanwhile, Phnom Penh has asked for, and secured, United Nations backing for a plan to return villagers to their original homes once peace comes to Cambodia. It involves United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) assistance for education, resettlement

For the moment, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation is assisting displaced Cambodians by providing potato, pumpkin and corn seeds. The government hopes that such assistance can help supply villagers with basic needs and decrease their dependence on the Khmer Rouge. — Depthnews Asia

OPINION

HBFC Loan Article 15 more than six months to col-

(a) of the Constitution of Bangladesh it is the responsibility of the State to provide "basic necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care". But we are a poor nation. So it is not possible on the part of the Government to provide such basic necessities of life.

The multi-storied housing

loan facility was introduced in 1976 by the Government of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman. He apprised the Saudi Arabian Government about the slum position of city areas for which they benignly lent Tk. 500 crore or so "as grant" for development of slum areas in the big cities. This fund was placed at the disposal of the HBFC and thus the multi-storied housing loan scheme was initiated in the country. The HBFC started to provide loan at 5% interest. It continued for sometime. Thereaster, they started to enhance the rate of interest. At present the HBFC rate of interest is 10-%.

From the very inception it was found that the loan which HBFC started to sanction, was absolutely inadequate to meet the cost of construction for which almost 95% of the houses remained incomplete. The loances could neither complete the construction nor could they repay the loans. Even if some of the loances could complete their constructions by borrowing from friends or relations, on receipt of house rent they were to pay the personal loans on priority basis. As a result, they become defaulters. The procedure of sanction-

ing loan was also a complicated one. Many documents were to be collected from different government offices but without spending excessive time and money nothing could be arranged. As a result, it took

lect the required documents. Thereaster, these papers were to be submitted to the HBFC, and now the real harassment began. The applicants were to undertake expensive persuasion at every stage of the movement of the files, otherwise the files would have been 'vanished'. As per procedure of the HBFC the sanctioned amount was to be drawn in 10 to 12 instalments and at different stages of construction. It took more than a year to get the last cheque. The instalments started to fall due from the 1st day of the third month of receiving the last cheque. In the meanwhile a huge amount was claimed as lump-sum interest from the loances. This amount accrued in the period between the drawing the first and the last

According to the condition of granting loan the applicant had to invest at least 10% of the sanctioned amount. But how a man, if he is service holder, can manage to invest such an amount without borrowing from some other sources. So, the loanee, on receipt of the 1st/2nd instalments of loans, had first to pay-off the borrowed portion of the loan from other sources which was taken to fulfil the conditional investments of

The question of the rate of interest is a big, burdensome factor for the borrowers. The loans were sanctioned at simple interest and the HBFC authority claimed that it was charged at simple rate. But when calculated it would reveal that the HBFC actually charged the interest at compound rate, which was much higher than the commercial bank rate. In protest the "House Building Loanees Association" has been moving from pillar to post, to debar the HBFC authority from calcu-

lating interest at compound rate but to no effect. The loanees could never be able to pay off such high interest and they became defaulters in the eyes of the HBFC. Before recommending a loan the HBFC officers visited the site of construction to see for themselves whether the necessary infrastructure facilities were available there. In many cases there were no road facilities and in some cases, even if there were, the roads were kutcha. As a result, after construction the houses remained vacant for months, even for years together, yielding no envisaged rental. Consequently, for failure to pay off the instalments the loances became defaulters. As a result of the loances

being defaulters the HBFC can

sell out the houses without any reference to the loanees concerned, according to the HBFC ordinance 1973. This ordinance is absolutely an autocratic one. According to the Article 31 of the Constitution of Bangladesh it is clearly against the fundamental rights of a citizen. "Any law inconsistent with fundamental rights to be void" as per Article 26 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. as such, urge upon the honourable Members of the Parliament and the honourable Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad to kindly pass a law rescinding the House Building Firance Corporation Ordinance (21973 so that it does not cause infringement upon the fundamental rights of the citizens. And I would urge upon the HBFC authority to allow moratorium for five years so that the loanees can pay off their personal loans and also most benignly request them not to dispose of the mortgaged properties before the expiry of the stipulated payment period as enunctated in the mortgage

Rafiq Azad Motijheel, Dhaka

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.

Beast inspects man!

Sir, I had the occasion to visit the US recently and like many times before arrived at the Los Angeles international airport from Singapore. Los Angeles is a beautiful and modern city - a city where I spent my youth and a large part of my adult life beginning in the mid-sixties. It is always a joyous and pleasant experience for me to visit Los Angeles much of my education and work experience were acquired there and many pleasant memories are entwined with that city.

I arrived at the Bradly international terminal which is massive and modern and was specially built for the Olympic Games. Though, Bradly is very clean and efficient but is not as user friendly as Changi in Singapore or Don Muang in Bangkok. Certainly, it does not have the warmth, colour or brightness of either Changi or

Don Muang.

However, an incident at the airport this time amused me.

Although, I have gone through Los Angeles or other interna-

tional airports on numerous occasions — this was the first time I came across an incident like this.

I was standing in line to get through immigration and customs and after a long tiring flight was a bit tired and inalert, maybe, I was dozing off - when something stirred me. sensed people around me shifting a bit and there were muffled giggles and snickers and people were looking at a little dog on a leash pulling a smallish uniformed man around. The little mutt was sniffing hand and other luggage of passengers in line, sometimes stopping at some luggage which attracted its attention, whereby, the officer would open the bag for suspicious items.

Los Angeles police has K9 (canine) units for crime detection — this was the first time I saw man being examined by beast. The incident gave me the strange feeling of human society being diminished and dehumanized. The West that has given us many innovations

Although, I was aware that

we will see dog police (or police dogs) inspecting people in Dhaka, Bangkok or Singapore.

Naz Shafinaz

Motijheel C/A, Dhaka.

Ban on smoking

Sir, Quoting Malaysian Deputy Minister for Health Mohammed Farid Arefin, it has been published in the press that the Malaysian government has banned smoking in government office buildings, restaurants, hotel lobbies, airconditioned buses and taxis.

Being a member of nonsmokers' campaign, I warmly
congratulate the Malaysian
government for their bold
move to discourage smoking
habit. I feel, our government
can also prohibit smoking in
government office buildings.
This will not only help in significantly reducing the number
of potential smokers but will
also contribute in checking a
popular act of bribing officials
by offering cigarettes.

M.Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka -1207.