

Bangladeshi Women's Pakistani Ordeal

Talking to newsmen on Friday in Dhaka, a Pakistani human rights campaigner raised the issue of thousands of Bangladeshi women and children enduring a miserable life of exploitation, imprisonment and oppression in Pakistan. According to Zia Ahmed Awan, over 1,500 Bangladeshi women are currently languishing in Pakistani prisons, ostensibly for entering the country illegally, while thousands are forced to take up prostitution in major cities such as Karachi, apparently as a way of avoiding imprisonment.

These hapless women go through a harrowing experience after being lured by smugglers posing as manpower traders, with promises of decent jobs and salaries. Once in Pakistan, they end up either in prisons, brothels or sold to wealthy Pakistanis as virtual slaves. Few manage to escape. Awan claimed that Pakistani police and administration are in league with the smugglers, providing them with virtual immunity, but no protection to the unfortunate women.

This issue, however, is not a new one. This abominable trade in human lives has been going on for 10-15 years now. Unfortunately, successive Bangladesh governments have turned a blind eye to the plight of a section of its own people. Dhaka has done little to pressure Islamabad into bringing the smugglers and their associates in Pakistani officialdom to book. The women, instead of being treated as victims of a crime, are being treated as criminals by the Pakistani police, and our government seems oblivious to the facts.

At the same time, our own border guards, the Bangladesh Rifles, have not, we regret to note, lived up to our expectations in checking this illegal human trade. There should be much greater cooperation between BDR and the Indian Border Security Force to prevent these people from getting to Pakistan in the first place. But the attitude, on all sides, appears to be one of bottomless indifference.

We commend Zia Awan and his organisation, Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid, for their tireless work in freeing our hapless women from a miserable and degrading existence. They have not been successful so far, because all their pleas have fallen on deaf, official ears.

But is it not the Bangladesh government and people who should be doing the campaigning? Should our collective, national conscience not be filled with feelings of guilt as well as anger at the degradation suffered by our women? How has it been possible for our governments to remain silent over this issue for such a long period of time?

Awan said during his visit to Dhaka that he received some positive feedbacks from the ministers he met to discuss the issue. We hope this positive feedback will soon be translated into action. That means making people aware of what is really going on, and launching a diplomatic offensive to force Pakistan to release imprisoned Bangladeshi women and taking stern action against smugglers and their official protectors. At home BDR must become more vigilant and stop this modern-day slave trade. Just as important, the government needs to take up an extensive programme to repatriate and rehabilitate the women after they return from their Pakistani ordeal.

Peace in Cambodia

There will be much relief but hardly any jubilation over the latest statement of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian leader, that all four warring factions have reached "90 percent" agreement over the future course of action. The accord, the result of long drawn-out meetings in Thailand, provides for participation of the three resistance groups and the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government in an interim administration and later in a UN-supervised election.

With differences over ten percent of the plan still to be resolved hopefully at another meeting in October one cannot yet talk in terms of a full agreement. With deep-rooted distrust dividing all the four factions and a highly temperamental Prince in charge of the show, anything can still go wrong with the efforts to end the 12-year civil war in this former Indo-China country. But, then, if the six million inhabitants of this unhappy country are tired of continuing uncertainty and the fear of new hostilities, the leaders too cannot but be exhausted of the on-and-off negotiation.

Among the four factions, now joining hands to work towards peace, there are really two winners: The Vietnamese-backed Hun Sen government which has won a fair measure of international credibility; and the Khmer Rouge which had provided Cambodia a decade ago with one of the bloodiest regimes in modern times. Probably still the best-armed faction among the resistance groups, the Khmer Rouge will now have a respectable place in the interim administration and take its chance in the national polls. No one would be surprised if the election produces a Khmer Rouge victory, although the international opinion would probably favour the return of Hun Sen administration in coalition with the Sihanouk faction.

Meanwhile, a 1988 document, outlining a long-term plan of the Khmer Rouge, just released by the Associated Press, reveals that this internationally discredited faction remains determined to seize power in Cambodia, through a combination of political struggle and armed actions. What's worse, the plan appears to be based on a speech delivered by Pol Pot, the man who ran the show during the massacre in Cambodia 12 years ago, despite claims by other Khmer Rouge leaders that he was out of the picture.

There was a time when an international lobby had asked for war trials of Pol Pot and his close associates for crimes committed against the Cambodian people during the Khmer Rouge regime. This demand is no longer heard, even from Prince Sihanouk who lost one of his sons during the massacre.

Political realities have changed the perspective. It seems more important now to establish peace and stability in Cambodia than to bring the Khmer Rouge — especially Pol Pot — to trial. "The Killing Fields" becomes only a footnote in the Cambodian history.

At this stage, one can only hope that all the three factions which have fought the Khmer Rouge at various times, will remain united against Pol Pot and his gang, and against the repetition of another massacre.

Balance of Power Tilts to Gulf Moderates

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran caused a major change in geopolitical attitudes in the Gulf region. Religious leaders preached then of exporting "revolutionary zeal" to the rest of the world, but now it seems the moderates have gained the upper hand in the conflict between conservative extremists and liberal pragmatists. Gemini News Service looks at the crucial role played by Iran in the recent release of Western hostages, and at the new mood in the region following the Gulf War.

THE crucial role played by Iran in the dramatic release of Western hostages by Lebanese fundamentalists in August could mark the climax of the struggle for political influence between radicals and moderates that has followed the Gulf crisis. The moderates seem to have regained the upper hand.

Conflict between conservative extremists and liberal pragmatists is nothing new for the sensitive Gulf region, where the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran dramatically changed the strategic situation and geopolitical attitudes.

Even as Iran was in the grip of severe upheaval, with its religious leaders talking of the "export of revolutionary zeal" to the world in general and the neighbouring areas in particular, the first Gulf war broke out between Iran and Iraq in late 1980.

Then, in August last year, came the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, just as the region was trying to adjust to circumstances created by the eight-year war, a major oil slump, global recession, plus unsettling fallout from the Lebanese civil war and the persisting Palestinian issue.

At the time, the changes sweeping across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, giving birth to a new realism based on superpower detente, were beginning to reach the

Gulf states, which have traditionally followed a tribal-religious system of government.

Only in Kuwait were voices for representative rule being loudly raised, and it seemed



PRESIDENT RAFSANJANI
Pragmatic leader

that the Emir, Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmed Al Sabah, was ready for limited compromise.

But there was a sharp shift in favour of political pragmatism — although not necessarily democracy in the Western sense of the word — with the mustering of the US-led multinational force and with the emergence of a unique consensus at the United Nations, involving all the major powers.

The fierce air war and incredibly short ground offensive that drove the Iraqi invaders from Kuwait in late February appeared to herald the death of the brand of radical fundamentalism propagated by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The blow to this body of opinion was all the more glaring in view of Saddam's rhetorical and religious attempts to link the situations in Kuwait and Israeli-occupied lands.

The failure of the Palestinian leadership properly to judge the events and make correct responses also con-

tributed to the apparent reversal suffered by radical politics. The Palestinian Intifada uprising was overshadowed and the Lebanese factions' clout was eroded.

Iran's neutrality in the second Gulf war, under the moderate leadership of President Hashemi Rafsanjani, brought the revolutionary regime closer to the West and to Arab Gulf neighbours.

The Iranians, eager to build up a carefully nurtured rapprochement, normalised relations with Saudi Arabia, Britain and, to a great extent, with France.

The radical lobby in Tehran, were considerable power has been wielded by a variety of factions since the 1979 Revolution, saw its influence undermined by the clear gains achieved and promised by a moderate stance.

This was reflected inevitably by pro-Iranian hardliners in Lebanon taking a pragmatic course which led to the release of Western hostages

and can lead to permanent resolution of the issue.

The other equally important element in this Middle Eastern equation is Syria. President Hafez Al Assad took the opportunity to end his country's isolation and shed its pro-terrorist image by upholding the legitimacy of Kuwait and committing his forces to the anti-Iraq coalition.

A year ago, few could have ever imagined Syrian troops fighting side by side with American forces.

This new-found comradeship with the Western powers ultimately enabled the Syrian troops to help President Elias Hrawi defeat General Michel Aoun, end the militia control of Beirut and also to extend the pro-Western government's authority to southern Lebanon.

This had a decisive impact on the hostage situation, with the radical and shadowy groups losing the political relevance of their actions and safe havens to keep their captives. And just as the Syrians de-

clined to back the Middle East peace mission of US Secretary of State James Baker by agreeing to attend a peace conference with the Israelis, the hostage breakthrough was reached in Lebanon with the release on August 8 of British television journalist John McCarthy.

In Kuwait, the vociferous pro-democracy lobby is now lying low following the Emir's promise of parliamentary polls in October 1992. Even the issue of Kuwaiti women being given the right to vote is not being pressed.

Pressure for liberal change in Saudi Arabia, dramatised last year by a group of defiant women driving their cars on Riyadh's main highway, is no longer in evidence. King Fahd has no doubt promised a more representative consultative council and the moderates are content, for the time being, to bask in the glow of recent successes.

Whether in Iran, Syria, Kuwait or other Gulf Arab states, the current trend favours the pragmatists and realists. That means stability in the traditional sense, not democracy in Western style. The hostage developments are set to consolidate this trend.

— GEMINI NEWS

MOHAMMED ASLAM is on the staff of the Khaleej Times, Dubai, and was formerly with the Times of India.

The Rise and Fall of BCCI

IT has the ingredients of a rags-to-riches story of a refugee who built up a financial empire from scratch, and a large-hearted Arab Sheikh who helped him do it.

There was greed and wheeling-dealing involved, but no more or less than there is behind most great fortunes. Today, the US\$20 billion banking conglomerate is in limbo. Thousands of small depositors from Manila to London have lost their life's savings.

When Agha Hasan Abedi set up the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) in Pakistan in 1973, the Shi'ite refugee from India wanted it to become a 'bank of the Third World' that would help developing countries catch up with the West.

Abedi's vision combined the spiritual zeal of a devout Muslim, the business acumen of an experienced banker and the vast oil wealth of an Arab Sheikh with professed concern for the world's poor.

At BCCI's annual manage-

ment conferences, Abedi often ruminated on the 'blessings of Almighty Allah' and the need to "help the oppressed and the underprivileged".

He introduced compulsory deduction from BCCI staff salaries which went to charity. BCCI set up a foundation in London which awarded the 'Third World Prize'. South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe are past recipients.

The bank also helped set up the South magazine and convened Third World advertising congresses in Manila and Beijing.

Abedi's timing was right. With Pakistani talent and Arab money, BCCI grew. When the Bank of England suspended the group's operations on July 5, BCCI was one of the largest private banks in the world.

Behind BCCI's success was

The dream of building a Third World banking empire to challenge Western financial giants ends in scandal and the loss of billions of dollars of hard-earned savings of small depositors. Mushahid Hussain of IPS reports from Islamabad.

Abedi's partnership with Sheikh Zayed Sultan Al-Nahayan of Abu Dhabi, whom oil had transformed from a Bedouin nomad to a billionaire nearly overnight.

In 1988, BCCI started running into problems. Last year it admitted to charges of laundering Colombian drug money, and a grand jury in Florida jailed several Pakistanis for involvement.

By then, the bank was nearly US\$500 million dollars in the red.

Sheikh Zayed stepped in and injected one billion dollars to revive the bank, giving him 77 per cent controlling ownership.

BCCI's auditors, Price Waterhouse, reported insider loans and suspicious accounting. Bad loans reportedly totalled two billion dollars.

But the regulators did not move until Price Waterhouse released its most damaging report yet on BCCI last month. When he learnt of it, Sheikh Zayed pumped in another

US\$700 million.

The Sheikh was willing to pour in "a few billion more" and restructure the company, but the Bank of England froze BCCI assets anyway. Abu Dhabi condemned the move. His honour stung, Sheikh Zayed is said to be in no mood to bail out the bank anymore.

Late last month, at the request of Abu Dhabi, the British high court decided to postpone for four months a decision on BCCI's liquidation. But in Washington, the Federal Reserve indicted the bank and Abedi for "the largest bank fraud in world financial history".

Some have cited the BCCI affair as a conspiracy by Western banks to bring down a fast-rising Third World competitor, but BCCI had serious problems. Its dizzying growth was not matched by a sophisticated institutional base.

BCCI also suffered from what Middle Eastern and South Asian financial analysts call a "Third World style" of functioning.

Abedi exercised personalised control over BCCI until his retirement last year. Bank insiders say he disbursed largesse on whim, rewarding bureaucrats with cushy jobs.

There were also unrecorded deposits, doctored account and mysterious loans.

BCCI branches around the world were mostly staffed by offspring of Pakistani and other important Third World officials. The criteria for their appointment was connections, not competence. The bank employed 12,000 Pakistanis, and most internal memos were in Urdu.

Abedi raced ahead of his rivals in the international banking world which never quite accepted him as a legitimate competitor. In doing so, he changed the rules of the game.

"My vision was to be good to all types of people, to have a good reputation and make a profit at the same time," Abedi said in a recent magazine interview.

After selling off his share of BCCI to Sheikh Zayed for US\$500 million in 1990, Abedi is now convalescing in his Karachi home, recovering from a heart transplant.

Abedi says he does not blame anyone. His only regret is that BCCI was singled out for attack while Western banks which he says are guilty of far more serious offences are let off.

But his old friend, the Sheikh, whose reputation for honesty has been sullied by the scandal, may not be satisfied with that explanation.

Is Gorbachev's Political Future Bleak?

by Vladimir Markov
Political Analyst, Novosti

MANY observers assert that Gorbachev has no future. I think he does.

It's true that very recently (before the coup, though) Gorbachev's authority plunged to the rocky bottom. Inconsistent economic reforms and sharper crises made him bete noire inside the country. Opinion polls revealed that Gorbachev's chances to be elected President in direct popular elections probably due next year were nil.

However, things stood that badly only until August 19, the coup. When Gorbachev was ousted, his life threatened, people throughout the country felt a surge of sympathy to him. The major demand Yeltsin and other pro-democratic politicians issued to coup organisers was Gorbachev's address to the nation. Obviously, their struggle was not only directed at Gorbachev's reinstatement, but for most Soviets and Muscovites who erected barricades to protect the Russian Parliament and the President which personified democracy and liberty.

Lacking accurate information and grasp of the situation after the days of his isolation,

Gorbachev launched the old volley of rhetoric about the party and the socialist ideal at his first press conference. In doing so, he nearly, missed his last chance, given to him by fate.

However, Gorbachev's subsequent actions demonstrated his ability to learn fast. The new Gorbachev has already dissolved CPSU ruling bodies, ousted the Party from economic structures, the Army and KGB, began a serious overhaul of all power structures and displayed his readiness for "business talks with those who want to leave the Union." Before he avoided these issues nearly at all costs, apprehensive about possible fierce opposition from many traditionalists in the Army, the KGB and defence sector. Perhaps, he worried that radical reforms might have triggered off coup attempt two years ago, when pro-democratic forces were isolated and dispersed.

"They say I have returned to a different country. I agree. But you see a different man before you too." These Gorbachev's

words at a parliamentary session indicate his decisiveness to further promote peaceful revolution boosted during the coup.

Despite the natural buildup of Yeltsin's power, Gorbachev remains the only politician in the eyes of many, who can consolidate the entire society around his alliance with Yeltsin. Gorbachev's authority in the country has not only grown, but also remains high enough with millions of cautious traditionalists. It is crucial that Yeltsin and Gorbachev seem to be ready to pursue their joint efforts. Thus objectively Gorbachev has not lost, but, rather, won in the eyes of millions. Despite verbal harassment in the Russian Parliament, he met Yeltsin halfway in replacing old fossilized federal structures with a new democratic framework.

The USSR president will retain significant terms of reference in future. The Soviet Union a confederation or not, it will rest on a new democratic system of relations between republics. Constituent

republics will hardly choose to sever all economic links with other Soviet regions. He will probably be in charge of enormous stockpiles of missiles, energy and transport policies. Gorbachev's booming international prestige also responds to the interests of republics and the whole country.

There's one more aspect to it. Aggravating centrifugal trends Gorbachev warned against in the Supreme Soviet are explained by the staunch support the coup organizers enjoyed from the proponents of a single Union. Today, some republican leaders already grumble that Russia has accumulated too much weight and clout in Union affairs.

Apparently, much will depend on the personal chemistry between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. They need each other and they may well complement each other. If they manage to forget their old bruises and fights and try to unite all democratic forces in the country, I believe that Gorbachev will run for President and take office again, with Yeltsin's and Sobchak's (the Mayor of Leningrad) support.

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.

Save the singing bird

Sir, How much protein you need to preserve your health? And to procure it should we eat everything irrespective of all the species of other living beings of this world? This question is haunting me since I saw eggs of 'Quelle' bird on sale at Gulshan DIT Market. A "do not touch" sign over a basket of some small black-spotted round things attracted my attention. After enquiry I came to know that these are eggs of "Quelle" and people eat it for protein. I had a great shock of my life. All the beautiful songs about these singing birds

started hitting my ear. A very famous song requesting "Quelle" to stop singing as the morose lover is thinking of her dearest, will have no meaning after some time if we all start eating the eggs of this romantic, singing bird of our country or of anywhere in this world.

Certainly we need protein for our health — but those who are able to purchase these eggs, I am sure, are not at all suffering from lack of protein and there are so many things in this world from where you can have 'enough' protein. Why take the risk of jeopardising the existence of the innocent

birds by eating their eggs? I feel depressed even by thinking that Bangladesh, famous for its singing birds, will have no more birds on the top branches of the trees to sing. No singer will sing a song by praising the musical tone of the birds, no painter will paint a couple in love beneath the bough with the singing bird sitting on it and the scenery more romantic and artistic.

To preserve our planet Earth we are having seminars, discussion forums; lots of articles and essays are being published. But what effect all this has drawn on us — if we even cannot stop eating a small egg of a small bird who gives us pleasure only with its existence, keeps the earth worthy of living by singing and giving peace to some otherwise depressed and disturbed soul.

I would like to draw attention of the concerned authori-

ties about this. Please save the birds and its eggs.

Munira Khan
Green Road, Dhaka.

Garbage and drainage

Sir, The population of Dhaka city is increasing fast, rather very fast, — the reasons are many but that are not my points of discussion. It was more or less 2.5 million before liberation of the country and now it is well above 6.5 million — an astounding rise by four millions in two decades! By now the city has also expanded area wise with some marked change in its skyline too. But its drainage and garbage clearance remain much below an efficient level simply to the suffering of the tax-paying residents.

By experience we know

population pressure in any area increases garbage accumulation and renders existing provision or provisions of drainage inadequate. Thus it requires of the authorities concerned fast and efficient clearance of garbage and immediate provision of adequate drainage facility. Otherwise the concerned locality would cease to be livable by minimum standard.

However, the authorities concerned have replaced the slow, bull-driven small scavenger-carts by fast automobile garbage trucks and are said to have been trying to improve the drainage situation. We remain just hopeful when garbage still remains accumulated and rainwater doesn't find a let out but only overflows the filthy drains in almost all old city areas, as well as similarly overpopulated areas around the posh business district — Arambagh, Fakirapool, Gopibagh etc.

All this not only keeps the

residents stranded in their houses in a polluted atmosphere, but also the other passers-by at bay, despite both having urgent pieces of business to do.

We demand of the authorities more efficient service in these regards on an urgent basis, at least in the overpopulated areas of the city on priority basis.

Kazim and Laila
Narinda, Dhaka.

Quality of products

Sir, Of late we are making a dent in production of some consumer items, that's good. But that we have no care towards enhancement of their quality, is bad.

For example, the ball-pens — by now a considerable number of brands have landed in the market but none is an improvement over the earlier one. Similar is the case with the match-boxes. A consumer

