

Assisting the Democratic Revolution

by Paula Dobriansky

The Politics of 'Famine-like Situation'

Within minutes of her arrival, after successful participation in the Commonwealth summit at Harare, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia thought it fit to make the claim that there was no famine-like situation in the northern districts and to dismiss press reports on the situation as "politically motivated". The system of official briefing must receive high marks in this particular instance, for the PM felt confident enough to say what she said without a more thorough and first hand evaluation of the situation. As the press conference was held immediately on her arrival — at the airport — we will have to assume that the briefings that she received were through telephone, telex or fax. All these are effective means of communication no doubt, but a poor substitute for detailed reports which, no doubt, were waiting for her to be looked into at her earliest convenience. Her words would have been weightier and of far greater impact if the nation knew that they were made after a thorough study of official reports, which themselves are so often inadequate and, if we may say, sometimes motivated. The Prime Minister, by now, must have become aware that unpleasant truths have a way of disappearing from official reports and that party subordinates often say what they assume the boss would be happy to hear. This is particularly true in our country where government officials have learnt it the hard way that it 'pays' to be a 'yes-man' than to be the harbinger of bad news; and party officials feel little need to risk their access to the PM by pointing out the inadequacies of their own performance. After all if the PM was told that the situation was bad, then the very ministers who had gone to receive her at the airport would be at fault.

It may therefore be advisable to take some time before castigating the press. Because in the midst of official reticence and party loyalty, it is the press — and freer the better — that brings the bad news. In so doing we would be happy to be wrong. But what would be the cost to the nation if the press is right and the government concludes at the outset that it is wrong?

The fact that nearly 50 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line is not the fault of this government. In any given time there is widespread malnutrition and highly inadequate housing and shelter. Given the fragile nature of our economy the slightest disturbance in the normal flow of essential commodities create exaggerated impact, leading to scarcity and death. Therefore it does not take much to have a famine-like situation. The law minister Mirza Golam Hafiz said the other day that severe flooding was uncommon in the northern districts and as a result both the people and the officials were unprepared to handle this. There is food in the country and perhaps, as the government claims, in the flood affected areas. But is that food reaching the poor and the needy? In the flood affected areas there is no work. There is no money in the hands of the destitutes with which they can buy what they desperately need. Government sponsored work under test-relief has just started.

Back in 1974 we also noticed a tendency to underplay the situation in Rangpur with disastrous results. There is a similar tendency to downplay the impact of the recent flood which, as we have said earlier, is not the government's making. Then why is this mentality? Why can't we take the nation into confidence and say it like it is. The fear is that opposition will play politics with it, and the fear may be well founded. But if exaggerating the effects of the floods is the politics of the opposition, then downplaying it is the politics of the government. We condemn both. And while both sides play ping-pong with disaster figures the innocent people suffer.

The Vanishing Bamboo

Bamboos are an inseparable part of housing practices in Bangladesh over many centuries. Rice eating and bamboo-built houses are the two distinguishing marks that make Bangladesh a member of the rich and ancient Eastern development of civilisation bringing it in line with most of the rest of the subcontinent and China and Japan. When in analogy to the iron curtain, politicians and journalists started using the expression 'bamboo curtain' to designate the great eastern version of a closed society, we remember to have been hurt a little for we, rightly enough, always had been counting ourselves as very much a bamboo people.

There is news from Chapainawabganj that an acute shortage of bamboo in the five upazilas of Shibganj, Nachol, Gomastapur, Bholahat and Sadar has been impeding rural construction work as well as cottage industry based on bamboo. This is bad enough. But the root cause of this — fall in bamboo cultivation and production due to root-stocks of this tall and hard and specially-good-intensile-strength member of the grass family being bought up by brick manufacturers to fire their kilns — is a regular horror. It is obvious that the ban on the use of firewood — of whatever tree source — in the brick manufacturers' kilns is not being effectively enforced. The lapse can only be explained as being made possible through corruption. Steps must be taken forthwith to identify the brick fields resorting to the criminal practice and to summarily punish them.

Bamboo production has indeed been falling all over the country making it a national problem of true concern. Bamboo is the biggest and the best of all our construction mainstays which can hardly be replaced by anything in a matter of decades. And ecologically speaking there is possibly no need for looking such substitutes for bamboos are the cleanest things to have for mass-scale housing, creating no pressure whatsoever on the desired minimum measure of green life, we must have so as to ensure good life in our country.

The number one problem with bamboo production is that it continues to be a matter of domestic bushes of puny sizes and collection from natural growth in the hills. There has never been any setting plantations of it through state, corporate and private enterprise. It is high time that head-way were made in this regard with all seriousness.

Bamboos have other good uses besides being used as thatches and pillars and fashioned into gift nicknacks. The best among them is making furniture out of them. Once bamboo furniture finds favour with popular fancy — the pressure on our meagre and ever-dwindling timber resources could largely be eased.

HISTORICALLY speaking, the Cold War — defined in terms of all-out superpower confrontation — has ended. The crumbling of the Soviet bloc, the collapse of the Soviet state itself, and the demise of communism as a viable ideological construct, domestically and internationally, have precipitated transformations so sweeping that only two years ago we could not in our widest dreams imagine them. As Vaclav Havel has said, what we are witnessing is nothing less than "a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness."

In addition to the most recent stunning geopolitical transformations such as the promising prospects for nuclear and conventional arms reduction heralded by the president's bold initiative, the prospect of an end of the regional conflicts of the 1980s — in El Salvador, Angola, Afghanistan and even Cambodia — and the diminution of the threat of war in Central Europe, we are confronted by extraordinary and historically unparalleled prospects for the expansion of democracy on every continent.

Indeed, the universality of democracy and its applicability to all of mankind's diverse conditions is demonstrated by the fact that democratic appeal transcends geographic, racial and cultural boundaries. In that respect, our founding fathers were right, "all men are created with certain inalienable rights." To be sure, democracy has ebbed and flowed in the past. Respected political scientists, such as Samuel Huntington, have observed that following the collapse of the Napoleonic empire in 1815, and in the aftermath of World War I, a number of countries seemed to embark on a path of democracy — yet, most of these democratic gains proved fragile. Recently, in some countries, like China, democratic revolutions have been stymied, and in other states, like Haiti, we seem to be witness-

nessing a pendulum swinging between a positive move toward democracy and a return to the brutal past. I believe firmly, however, that the current round of democratic revolutions is unique — the advent of modern means of communications combined with an innate human aspiration for democracy means that all tyrants are living on borrowed time. These trends are reinforced by the fact that we, and our allies have made the pursuit of democracy a key part of our foreign policy.

Part of Behaviour

Our actions, as Americans to promote freedom outside the Soviet bloc are numerous and have become a permanent part of American behaviour both at governmental and private levels. Let me mention a couple of examples.

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A constitutional convention was held two weeks ago in Mongolia to discuss that country's legal foundations, and to explore ways to accelerate its movement toward democracy. USA sent a federal district court judge, John Kane, who participated in that conference and substantively assisted in the drafting of that country's newly proposed constitution.

In countries of francophone West Africa, like Benin, Togo and Mali, national conferences have been held to negotiate with the military regimes in power. From these conferences, a pattern has emerged. First, an interim government is formed, and the officially controlled press begins to open up. As independent media flourishes, opposition political parties emerge, a new constitution is drafted, and elections are held. USA has supported this process by sponsoring a regional conference on journalistic ethics, through practical symposia on how to run a newspaper, by

sending American constitutional experts to assist with legal drafting, and by sponsoring a conference for military officers about the proper role of the military in a democracy. Since military coups have often overthrown democratically elected governments in the Third World, bringing the military within the proper rule of law framework is particularly important. We feel that the American tradition, featuring both the principle of civilian control of the military, combined with wide-ranging professional military autonomy, is particularly instructive.

Paraguay's recently held mayoral elections likewise augur favourably for the development of democracy in that country, upon its emergence from decades of authoritarian

offer to these countries which are making the democratic transition? What we can offer them — with our blueprints and with our concrete assistance — is to help lay the institutional foundations of modern democracy. Such foundations rest on five cornerstones.

The first cornerstone is the structure of government itself. It is easier to praise the ideals of democracy than it is to construct a workable, durable, democratic government. Indeed, democracy means much more than a one-time overthrow of a tyrannical regime or even a free election or two. We are talking about creating a limited government that accords a wide berth of individual liberties because it is run by virtuous leaders, one that is unable, because of vari-

ous checks and balances and other auxiliary precautions, from abusing power even if it is inclined to do so.

A fair and independently functioning judicial system makes up the second institutional cornerstone of democracy. An individual in a democratic society must find economic and political justice. Indeed, it is the judicial system that shifts the base of these societies from totalitarian edict to the rule of law.

The third cornerstone of any democracy is education. East European educators have sought and received desperately needed assistance from their American counterparts. They are working — and imagine the enormity of this task — to replace, wholesale, old educational systems based on the tenets of Marxist-Leninist doctrine with new systems based on Western liberal arts.

The fourth cornerstone of democracy is a free, independent media. A totalitarian nation speaks with one voice, the

Implementation of Strategies

administration's commitment to democracy building is more than inspiring rhetoric and the channelling of economic assistance to democratic governments. Indeed, it permeates all aspects of our foreign policy carried out by all agencies as well as private organizations and individuals. We have sought to promote respect for international law, delegitimize the use of aggression as a tool of statecraft and instill greater appreciation of the possibilities offered by international institutions. We have not succeeded everywhere and some democratic transformations remain elusive. However, the fact that we and our allies are willing to use all means at our disposal to curb international outlaws, underscores the seriousness of our resolve and commitment to bring about a "new world order" of free and democratic countries dedicated to the rule of law, whether at home or abroad.

It is important to ensure, of course, that our assistance efforts focus precisely on fostering these five fundamental cornerstones. We cannot, and should not, seek to prescribe precise democracy recipes. The key reason for this is not just modesty — as recognized by many political philosophers, there has to be a match between the political system in any country and its culture, geography and history. Democracy cannot be just transplanted from one soil to another. Moreover, in fostering these fundamentals, it is important to recognize that this task is not the province of governments alone — we have no exclusive monopoly on democratic virtues. The private sector has a key role to play as well. Moreover, our democracy promotion efforts do not have to be perfectly streamlined and rigidly orchestrated — a certain degree of repetition and overlap does not hurt. As part of USA's methodology, we fully utilize all of our communication and information tools — radio, TV, publications, exhibits, exchanges, briefings of foreign journalists — in support of our democracy building efforts.

Having introduced these parameters, it is necessary to address some of the challenges and obstacles to peaceful democratization that exist today.

One such under appreciated and frequently misunderstood dimension is that of ethnic strife, which has rocked Africa, India and Southeast Asia — as in the case of Burma — for generations, as well, of course, as the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In terms of sheer human suffering, ethnic strife plays an almost unimaginable role in these parts of the world. Many conflicts are a natural outgrowth of the demise of communism, while others are age old and have nothing to do with political ideology.

Democracy provides the only procedural basis which such intractable conflicts can possibly be resolved. It is democracy which provides the necessary framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes between vehemently opposing parties — a framework which includes the ideas of compromise, loyal opposition, the protection of individuals from tyranny by any majority, and the participation of minority groups in representative government.

Intolerance, Narcotics, Terrorism

Another challenge to the course of democracy building is religious intolerance, bigotry and xenophobia. Globally we have observed that many regional and civil wars have been fueled by such hatreds. The spirit of religious tolerance and respect for other people's beliefs are essential ingredients for a stable and democratic body politic.

A further challenge to the course of democracy building is narcotics trafficking and narco-terrorism. In our own hemisphere, terrorism based on the vast illegal narcotics trade has spawned a grave threat to democratically elected governments in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. Faced with bumper coca crops, dire poverty, huge underground economies and a geography conducive to smuggling and insurgency, honest leaders make moral decisions at their peril.

Columbus

Next year, 1992, will mark the quincentenary of the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus. USA will be conducting a number of special programmes to stimulate a discussion about the relevance of Columbus' example to the world today.

Christopher Columbus was a visionary — a man of tenacity, optimism and courage who emerged from a culture of oppression to change forever the course of human history. The 500th anniversary of his discovery of the New World comes at another, similar time — when mankind is struggling to overcome oppression, when hundreds of millions of people are waking to the light of human freedom for the first time. In this atmosphere, the discovery of the New World 500 years ago is more than a historical fact; it is a metaphor for the way in which the tenacity of a visionary can pry open new, better worlds.

Christopher Columbus set sail convinced that the world was round and determined to prove it. People of the world today have their own convictions and their own unwavering determinations. From Eastern Europe to Africa and from Southeast Asia to the Soviet Union, next year people the world over will be reminded of Columbus' conviction and of the results of his actions 500 years ago, as they set their countries' course away from tyranny and toward a new order.

The author is associate director for programmes at the United States Information Agency. The above article is based upon a speech titled "Strategies for Assisting the Democratic Revolution" that was delivered to the American Bar Association conference of "Rule of Law in U.S. Foreign Policy and the New World Order" in Washington on October 10.

Lithuania

Learning to Love Independence

WEEKS after Moscow officially recognised Lithuanian independence, all the windows in the Lithuanian parliament in Vilnius are still sealed with wires. Thousands of canvas bags full of wet sand still block every exit and passageway in the building — reminders of the long fight for freedom.

To suggestions that these security measures are being kept out of fear of either the Soviet Army or KGB, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis said the only attack his republic feared now was one from extremists.

"Even the White House in Washington has anti-terrorist squads and they have much less to fear than we do," he added.

Neither the barricades nor the constant surveillance of helicopters in downtown Vilnius can take away from the Lithuanian people their elation at their newfound sense of freedom.

It has been a long and difficult struggle to which some had given their lives. And now the people of Lithuania, in paying tribute to the dead, are being given a chance to express their joy at independence.

Hundreds assembled recently to pay tribute to seven customs officers, shot dead, in August by Omon (the special Soviet Union police unit) in the village of Medininkai on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border.

They gathered around a simple timber cross surrounded by seven wicker baskets full of flowers, each bearing

Lithuanians learn to value their newfound freedom by honouring those who died so they could attain it. Ivona D. Knothe of IPS reports from Vilnius



the name of one of the dead. The ceremony was opened with a speech by the highest customs official and followed by national songs, sung by a variety of delegations in national costumes.

The fact that people were able to even hold such a function was remarkable, but even rarer was the open hostility shown by the mourners against the Omon, a group once given all the special privileges accorded the KGB.

Independence has not only eroded the powers and privileges of this special police unit, but has forced its mem-

bers to go in hiding, fearing reprisals from the very people they terrorised.

"This spontaneous reaction is very new for Lithuanians," said Roman Verbugon, a TV journalist from Vilno, who attended the memorial service for the slain officers.

"Up till now, people here were only participating in the state-organised ceremonies like the May 1st parades, but now I think this spontaneous get-together will teach them independence and self-responsibility quicker than any university," Verbugon added. Early in September on the

first day of the new school year, hundreds of students were also given the opportunity to pay tribute to those who had died in the freedom struggle.

Following opening day school ceremonies, the students were taken to the Antakalnio Kapines, a cemetery in Vilno close to the St. Peter and St. Paul Cathedral — to lay flowers in the graves of the 21 had died since Lithuania declared its independence on January 13, 1991.

Each student, with flowers in hand, climbed the 100 stairs leading to the graves of the young people, who, as one student put it, had "died for our freedom".

The teacher allowed us to bring the flowers to be put on the graves of those who died for our freedom," said seven-year-old Great Rimas.

The first grader was lighting a candle on a single grave with white flowers. The grave belongs to Loretta Asanovicite, a 24-year-old girl who was run over by a tank. She was part of a massive demonstration of people, who had unsuccessfully tried to protect the TV transmission tower from the Soviet military on Jan 13.

Asanovicite, the only woman among the 21 now buried in this cemetery, clearly had a special place in the hearts of the uniformed schoolgirls of Vilnius.

"She has already become a symbol for my female pupils," said fourth grade teacher Angele Lenkatyte, who brought more than 60 students to pay tribute to the dead heroes.

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.

A word of caution

Sir, On October 2 last Sir Allan Green, the Queen's Counsel and the Director of Public Prosecutions was nabbed by a police officer in a back street of King's Cross in London while Sir Allan was "kerb crawling" after a girl of pleasure. He could have easily wriggled out of this predicament by pulling a few strings, though a 1985 law provided that not only the poor girl, but also her customer could be hauled up. But compelled by his code of honour, the Director of Public Prosecutions gave his full particulars to the police officer, and went home to break the news to his wife and two chil-

dren. The next morning he submitted his resignation to the Attorney General and in the early morning of 4th October Sir Allan left the country with his wife.

Nearly three decades from now a British Cabinet Minister, with the potential of being a future Prime Minister had to resign when his indiscretions came to light. A potential presidential candidate in the USA had to withdraw when his frailties were widely given publicity through the different media. In Japan a would-be Prime Minister lost the prospect when a geisha girl reported to the press that she was his mistress for several months.

In this country and till the coming of the former President Ershad, there were no reports of any indiscretions on the part of Head of the Government/Head of State. During the time of the former President, there were numerous reports in the foreign press, but these were banned in this country. Only after his downfall, the reports began to circulate very widely in the local press which became free.

In a democratic system of government where the press is free, all holders of high offices must distance themselves from all the basic human weaknesses, otherwise they may be blackmailed or suffer extreme humiliation in society affecting not only their career but also their loving image to their dear near ones.

Shahabuddin Mahtab
Dhaka.

Tax

Sir, I would like to refer to the letter of Mr Sadek Alce under the caption "Income Tax

on dividend" published earlier in your esteemed daily on 21.7.91. I feel inclined to state something in this connection.

The letter writer has said that his daughter had to pay Tk. 5/- against her dividend income of Tk. 50/-. It is nothing wonder for the earlier government which had imposed Jamuna, Relief and Development surcharges even on small savers' bank accounts. In the face of widespread resentment, the present government in the last budget exempted such charges in case of such accounts where total balance did not exceed Tk. 5000/-. But at the same time it has also been prescribed that even if the balance exceeded by Taka 1/- a sum of Tk. 120/- would be deducted as tax against such accounts.

It is true that in a welfare state the subjects owe a responsibility to pay rents, rates and taxes to form the State Consolidated Fund to run the day to day administration of the country. But the former

government perhaps had little sympathy and concern for the commonman and thus recklessly imposed taxes on all utility services to such an extent that it exceeded all past records. It was very much expected from the democratic government that it would at least withdraw the taxes last imposed on all items to provide instant relief to the tax-ridden common mass.

In this connection I venture to suggest as follows: 1) Savings Accounts from 5001/- to 10,000/- should be taxed an uniform sum of Tk. 20/00, and Tk. 10001 to 15,000, Tk. 40/

2) Tax on dividend income should be tax free upto certain limit say Tk. 500.00. It should be Tk. 5/- for dividend income upto Tk. 2,000/-. And similar slab if necessary. 3) Development Surcharge and Excise duty on utility services should be exempted for bills where amounts fall below Tk. 2000/- and a certain percentage when it exceeds that limit.

4) That in view of serious sufferings of people of the lower strata, such taxes and charges should not be imposed for at least five years in case of utility bills. Tk. 500/-.

M Ibne Glas
Massey, Dhaka

Smuggling in EPZ units

Sir, Please refer report on above on page seven of your daily dated October 12. I am surprised at the report stating 'enterprises said they did not know that the contrabands were coming with the consignment'.

How can one believe such statement when illegal goods worth crores of Taka are being smuggled in depriving the exchequer of much needed funds in the form of revenue. Please do publish or inform of stated BEPZA enquiry report that should be an eye opener to all.

Md Aktar Hossain,
Shantibagh, Dhaka.