

Towards Better Planning

Minister for Planning M Zahiruddin Khan spoke for a cross section of experts in the country when, on Saturday, he emphasised the need for strengthening the planning mechanism which he rightly described as "fragile", lacking in well-defined strategies and targets. In recent past, we have heard such opinions from non-official circles who, by now, have learnt to accept that while their views sound well and read even better in newspaper headlines, their impact on the corridor of power remains only marginal. Credit goes to Mr Khan for seeing the situation from a perspective that often escapes the attention of government leaders. What the Minister for Planning will now do to put his ideas into practice, especially in giving a new lease of life to his assigned responsibility, is another matter. At this stage, we need not assume that his moves will cause any — or much — disappointment.

To put the subject in a historical context, the role of planning and of the two entities — the Ministry and the Planning Commission — have undergone several ups and downs, raising doubts about their usefulness in our present-day economic scene. While many of these doubts have now been removed, there still exists a misconception in some minds that with the country increasing its commitment to privatisation in trade and industry, the role of planning as such has been marginalised. The discussion held at the "Media Round Table", organised by The Daily Star last month, greatly helped in removing this misunderstanding. In this context, the Minister himself rightly made the case in favour of a "meticulous formulation" of a development plan, without which there would not be proper utilisation of the country's limited resources. Other experts stressed that it was important for Bangladesh to initiate "supportive intervention policies" to promote the growth of the private sector, as had been done in such countries as Japan, South Korea and Malaysia, provided they were not restrictive and regulatory in character.

In the case of Bangladesh or any other LDC, the additional need for planning relates to such fields as education, health care, family planning and reduction of poverty, where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should start playing an increasingly important role, in co-operation with government agencies.

By now, Mr Khan must have developed his own ideas as to how the planning mechanism should be strengthened. We hope, his ideas focus on the need for inter-action between his Ministry and the Planning Commission on the one hand and a cross section of our educated people on the other. In this context, it is particularly important to promote a continuous dialogue with the private sector not just in Dhaka but in other metropolitan centres, indeed in all districts. We see the need for a similar dialogue with the academic circles, the media and the special interest lobbies. There are also no reasons why the Ministry of Planning cannot make its own moves to engage political opposition groups in this exercise, in the hope their inputs too would help in raising the level of planning and even de-politicise, perhaps in a limited way, our overall approach to economic development. To make such dialogues useful, it would be important, indeed essential, to put them in a well-defined framework, instead of treating them as on-and-off public relations exercises. If Mr Khan can move in this direction, he will earn the goodwill of patriotic sections of our people — and most certainly of this paper.

An Example and a Warning

The sentencing to death of human beings is never something that can cause satisfaction. In any civilised society, one cannot but wonder why most individual lives be taken away, ceremoniously by the state, instead of finding some other ways to deal with problems of law and order. That we still have to impose capital punishment on our citizens stands as a supreme tragedy, not only because our judicial system has failed to inject a greater sense of humanity into itself, but also because we, as a nation, have yet to develop to a stage where gruesome murders, such as those of Mahiya Islam, Sagera Morshed, Sharmin Akhter Ritma to name but a few, are an aberration.

Unfortunately, violent muggings and murders are no strangers to our daily life. Every morning on the front pages of national newspapers we read reports of some act of brutality or other committed by men on fellow men or women (is it really a coincidence that virtually all the violent crimes are committed by men, while women are too often the victims of such brutal crimes?). The violence continues and increases inexorably, and with it, the nation's moral fabric unravels at an even faster pace. Modern society can give birth to many problems, but those societies invariably equip themselves with the means to find solutions that are humane and just. But we seem to be heading down a one-way street, which leads nowhere but to jungle of lawlessness where one's life is worth no more than the watch one is wearing, and there is no one to protect either the life or the watch.

In this grim context, the sentencing to death by hanging last Saturday of five men for the murder of Mahiya Islam, comes as a strange light in the darkness. Light, because it stands as an example and a warning to all those muggers up and down this country who think nothing of knifing or shooting helpless men and women for the sake of a few hundred takas. But also strange, because, while we wish to applaud the judgement, our sense of triumph is muted by two facts. First, that five more people have now got to die, five people guilty of the vilest of crimes, but five human beings all the same; second, the Mahiya trial was an exception because hundreds of other cases of muggings and murders are still unresolved.

How many of the other cases reached the courts? How many trials do we hear about? What happened to the Sagera Morshed murder case? Why can we not pursue all those cases with the same kind of speed and efficiency as we showed in the case of the Mahiya murder?

Yes, we shall be euphoric and triumphant, but only when we learn that the "example" set by the judgement on the Mahiya case was not only for criminals, but also for the law enforcement agencies and the judicial process. Criminals be warned, the judge said. But we also say, policemen also take note that dispensation of justice is possible in Bangladesh, because you have just proven it. We expect to see more justice done in the future and less crimes.

While a wave of democratic reforms is changing the political face of countries in different continents, replacing, as in Bangladesh, an authoritarian regime by a popular system, some countries are being pushed from inside to go in the opposite direction, against the wishes of their own peoples.

In this respect, Zaire in Africa and Burma in Asia would top the category. And, sadly enough, Thailand now figures prominently on the list, like a close second to Burma in this region.

It is all very sad — and paradoxical. After all, here's a country which, endowed with a vibrant economy, has been relatively free from civil strife and spared of the kind of volatile issues which have caused havoc in many Asian countries, especially in this region. At first glance, the scenario seems all set for a healthy, balanced growth of Thailand in all different fields, including — rather especially — in its political system.

However, this view is superficial, which obscures the persistent failure of the country to develop a democratic system, one that meets the aspiration of the nation's well-educated middle class and makes the government accountable to a freely-elected parliament.

Since 1932 when an uprising by young army officers led to the replacement of absolute monarchy by a constitutional one, the military has staged some 19 coups, mostly bloodless, on average about one every three years. Victims of the army take-over were generally weak civilian administrations which had either lost popular support or seen their majority in the parliament dwindle under defections.

However, from time to time, coup leaders staged their moves against their own kind — ageing generals — thus revealing personal ambitions and hidden tensions which lie underneath what often looks like a well-disciplined army.

With every take-over, the army has tightened its grip over the power structure, often imposing a new constitution on the country that is more authoritarian than the last one.

Does the present crisis, triggered off by the bloodless army coup in February against the civilian government of Prime Minister Chatchai Choonahavan, fall into the established pattern? Yes, but only partly.

In the first place, the widely-accepted charges of corruption against the deposed Prime Minister — the government has now seized nearly \$24 million in assets from Mr Chatchai — provided the coup with a little popular appeal among parliamentarians and a section of the media.

However, this mood of limited approval quickly disappeared, especially after United States administration denounced the coup, suspending its aid and preferential trade ties with Bangkok. This sent alarm signals through the business community of Thailand, which was

This is the first of a two-part series, based on the writer's recent visit to Bangkok.

left wondering what the Bush administration might do next to support the democratic rights of the people of what was, until recently, one of the staunchest allies of Washington.

On the other hand, it did not take long for the media and political circles in Thailand to realise that the charges of corruption against the Chatchai administration served as no more than a cover for imposing on the country a constitution that is far more authoritarian and undemocratic than any previous one and, finally, for the assumption of power by the army chief, General Suchinda Kraprayoon as the new Prime Minister, without of course running in the

Kittikachorn. The protest rallies, held in Bangkok last week, which, according to one report, had drawn as many as 100,000 to one meeting, have apparently put the military on the defensive. In the original draft constitution, 270 members of the Senate, all appointed by the military, had the right to vote on the selection of the prime minister, along with freely-elected 360-member lower house. The proposed draft also gave other powers to the Senate, virtually placing it on the same footing as the lower house.

Now, as result of the protests last week, army-dominated National Legislative Assembly



election. (The new draft constitution, if approved, would allow a head of the government to be selected from outside the parliament, as had been the practice in the last constitution, an unheard-of procedure in a so-called democratic country.)

Whatever may be the feelings of the Thais about General Suchinda's personal ambitions — they are unlikely to be complimentary — it is the draft of a new constitution, drawn up by army-appointed authors, which has evoked some of the loudest and angriest protests seen in the Thai capital in recent years, not since 1973 when a massive uprising, led by the students of the Thammasat University, had led to the fall of the government of Field Marshal Thanom

has done away with the power of the Senate to have a say on the selection of the prime minister and on the approval of the annual budget. However, the Senate is still left with wide powers in other areas, giving the student community, the academic circles and the media strong enough reasons to continue with their agitation.

Under the draft constitution and a new election law, national polls would be held in April, thus giving Thailand five crucial months to work out its political destiny.

Here, a number of possible scenarios are being closely studied by experts in Bangkok. Here, a number of possible scenarios are

being closely studied by experts in Bangkok. Assuming the army junta, especially General Suchinda, remains on the defensive, it would probably make more concessions to the pro-democracy forces and further reduce the powers already given to the Senate. But it is unlikely to change the basic structure of the Senate whose role, as the army sees it, is to serve as a watch-dog over the elected lower house.

In such a scenario, Gen. Suchinda may also modify his own plans. Instead of taking over as the Prime Minister right after the April election, the army chief may find a low-key civilian politician as an interim head of the government, and thus allow the heat to be off before he steps forward as a new "strong man" of Thailand. The present Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, a former diplomat technocrat, is ruled out as a possible interim choice. He has already spoken up against the draft constitution and there is no love lost between him and the army.

Another scenario suggests that the current pro-democracy agitation will be gaining increased momentum in coming weeks, almost in a revival of the 1973 upsurge. If this happens, no one can dismiss the possibility that the agitation may turn violent and stop the army from meddling with the country's political destiny.

The two scenarios offer promises of victory for the pro-democracy forces, a limited one in the first case and a far-reaching, dramatic one in the second case. However, can one assume, with any degree of certainty, that the current movement against the draft constitution will not suddenly fizzle out, leaving the student community, the media and other protesters out in the cold?

If this happens, the blame will largely lie with political parties which, over the years, have done nothing to build up their power base in the country, promoting their own socio-economic programmes. Being essentially Bangkok-based, revolving around old and tired politicians, these parties are political organisations only in name, with little to offer the people anything even remotely resembling an agenda for political stability and economic progress.

If, in coming months, political parties can take their pro-democracy movement to various parts of the country, to the north and north-east and to the south which, right until the end of the sixties, provided support for the Democratic Party and for left-oriented groupings, there may be some hopes for the democratic future of Thailand.

Otherwise, the political vacuum will continue indefinitely, providing one opportunity after another to the army to play the role of a "saviour" of the country on its own terms.

(The second and concluding article of the series will appear later this week.)



A view of a pro-democracy rally held in Bangkok last week. Courtesy: The Bangkok Post

ANXIOUS leaders in Vietnam are working to establish a new relationship with their northern neighbour China as they watch the disintegration of communism in Russia.

There are very few who believe anymore that the Marxist-Leninist road will really lead to a worker's paradise, so what is left is party-to-party relations," says a Canadian diplomat with long Indochina experience.

Western diplomats fear that Vietnam's historical enemy in Beijing is ready to reciprocate with trade and political encouragement that will strengthen Hanoi's one-party system.

They say there is a great danger of Vietnam assuming a hardline position that gives secondary considerations to democratisation and human rights.

Both countries have similar authoritarian traditions that began with all powerful emperors and evolved into authoritarian Marxism. "In the past, we gave shared a common point of view," says Tran Cong Man, a retired General and a senior Vietnamese party official. "Our internal political situations were similar."

Vietnam's drawn-out process of normalisation of relations with the United States may only be adding to the likelihood of Hanoi and Beijing solidifying their relations. "If the US remains reluctant, what other choice do they have but to go completely into the arms of the Chinese?" says a French diplomat.

For over a year, China and Vietnam have been meeting behind closed doors to work out the basis of a new relationship. The two countries fought a proxy war in Cambodia for the past decade, but have agreed to put their differences

Global Real Politik Prods Vietnam Closer to Arch-enemy China

Philip Gorton writes from Hanoi

But this year, the Soviet Union abruptly ended most of its trade with Vietnam, and is now threatening to abandon the country politically as well.

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aside and back a United Nations peace plan for that country due to be signed this month in Paris.

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Vietnam and China have a great deal in common culturally and philosophically. Until a

few hundred years ago, Vietnam used the Chinese language and maintained similar royal courts. China held away over Vietnam's military and foreign affairs for almost 1000 years until 938 AD.

They both admire and are afraid of the Chinese system," says Russian diplomat Igor Novikov. "The Chinese tried again and again to assimilate the Vietnamese."

Another factor pushing Vietnam closer to China is the feeling in the top political circles here that Moscow has failed them. For decades, the Soviet Union acted as a big political brother to Vietnamese Communists.

"Russia never understood Vietnam," says Mr Novikov. "We should have helped them develop their export potential and consumer goods."

Even the government has

Of Campus, Violence and Politics

A R Sharif

The Dhaka University campus has come to be hot again after lull for a month. It flared suddenly on November 27 just when the university authority was in a meeting to discuss violence on the campus.

The new flare-up comes just one month after five men were killed and ten injured seriously in the Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal clashes. The incident was so gruesome and tragic that it sparked off instant and angry protests all over. Our heads hung in shame as we saw our political leaders each rushing to see only his/her own loyalists among the injured or dead. University teachers at once went on strike which continued ever since. In the face of such angry reactions from all quarters, it was hoped that violence on the campus would die down. Now it seems violence has come to stay there and our politicians are unable to contain it.

Violence remains despite everything said and done against it. In fact, the campus has turned into a battle ground for the ruling and the opposition political parties with their student fronts fighting, apparently without any serious cause. Much of what is going wrong today on our campus could be due to the manner in which our politics has been functioning. The bottomline today is that our national politics is being embarrassed by our politicians.

Of late, Prime Minister Khaleida Zia's senseless and discolouring of a deep-rooted conspiracy behind campus violence has introduced a new dimension to this crisis. Addressing the Khulna University's academic inauguration on November 26, she repeated her government's resolve to curb violence on the campus. But she could not do it on mere assumptions. She has to be sure about the real cause before she hopes to cure the malady. If conspiracy is really the cause, let the conspirators, irrespective of their affiliations, be known to the public before being brought to book with people's co-operation. We can assume what is conspiracy but we can't suspect who the conspirators could be. What do they want to gain by keeping our universities and other seats of learning behind schedule? We only guess, this could be the result of some foolish lackeys playing unknowingly in the hands of our

enemies, who might be planning to emaculate us as a nation. In that case we must deal with them firmly. It needs courage and commitment — both administrative and ideological. Do our government, or for that matter political leaders, have both? We don't question their sincerity but we doubt if they have the courage to call a spade a spade, and then weed the evil out politically, and legally of course. The government must allow law to bite when it must. Campus should not be above the law. How funny it looks when armed 'criminals' chase each other, the police only remain watching nearby and do not, or not being allowed to, act upon. Lack of action so long has let violence only to spread beyond the campus. Our roads, rails and highways are anything but safe. Uprooting rail lines and blocking highways stopping the nation's communication network on Nov 25 and 26 last seemed to be bad symptoms of a worst malady.

We have been watching with interest and anxiety how politics of our age and clime has lost its high pedigree and tradition. Politics down the ages remained an instrument of human welfare, both in regional and global contexts. Unfortunately for some Third World countries including ours, it degenerated into an instrument of exploitation and self-aggrandisement. It has even made some of our politicians to play double standards and act according to the rules of expediency. They condemn killings while abetting the killers in the same breath. Dr Milton's gunning down on Nov 27 last year has not surprised us. But his killers still remaining at large has stopped our imagination.

It is height of hypocrisy. We think, campus violence grows not from the politics, of either the students or the politicians, but from the politicians' belief that they can't do without students' back up support. That's why student fronts like Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal or Chhatra Shibir on our campus are today synonyms for Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party or Jamaat-Islami. Political parties must realise that politics in an arena where one does not antagonise the people. Our people are fed up with campus violence. They

diplomat says. China offers a ready-made example of a country whose economy is still growing despite its entrenched ideological preferences.

Trade between China and Vietnam is bringing them closer. The two countries have done a border trade in upwards of US\$1 billion over the last three years.

In contrast, Soviet trade plummeted to just 15 per cent of its 1990 level in first half of 1991. — Depthnews Asia

Ceremony of Innocence

Sir, Of late, while I was browsing among the letters in your letters column my attention was drawn to a brief letter captioned "Delight in Disorder" by Mr. K S Nazmul Hasan. Since then I was thinking on it and searched for a remedy with my disjointed thoughts. Thanks to Mr. Nazmul for writing on such a thought provoking topic. Who was this "I"? It's not the author himself. It can be anybody — a seer like Teresias (Greek God with power to observe every thing) of all our hypocrisy and cunningness. We are in rats alley and there is a mad race going on where the ceremony of innocence is drowned for ever. We are inhabitants of a diseased world without any consciousness. Spiritual dryness is our very characteristic and there is no way of regenerating our belief that gives significance and values to man's daily activities. Sex brings no fruitfulness and death heralds no resurrection. Mr Nazmul made a satire of our present society which

looks much like the wasteland of T S Elliot. Our society now needs crucifixion and only then there will be resurrection. The write up said little but implied so much viz, there was indication of the terror of life — its hypocrisy, emptiness, its loneliness and irrational apprehension as well as its misuse. It contained deliberately horrible scene of our lust. A further expression of the sense, of nothingness and meaninglessness is defended along with a mood of social futility and inadequacy that haunts a good soul. "I" the good soul moves unhappy not really at home or equipped to fight the awkwardness and fruitlessness of society in which he is condemned to live. He is haunted not only by a knowledge of the pettiness and triviality of the society but he had a vision of life more real and beautiful. He seeks the delight. But could not find it. He has long since strayed from the reality to the artificial and barren existence in which he now suffocates as in WB Yeats' words:

"and everywhere — /The ceremony of innocence is drowned/The best lack all conviction while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity."

This is the outcome of "all our scientific democratic fact finding heterogeneous civilization." The remedy willed but never achieved. There is desperate attempt at ordering the chaos but it breaks into pieces. Ulfat A. Wastin Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

Canal digging Sir, Canal digging programme has started again in the country. The programme definitely bears merit. It can, on one hand, help in boosting agricultural production through ensuring irrigation facilities in the dry season and on the other, promote pisciculture. But I would like to put emphasis on one point, these canals should be excavated scientifically and appropriate measures should be taken to retain their existence to serve the purpose for which are being dug.

M. Zahidul Haque Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka