

Mahakhali Satellite Station

On the face of it, the Mahakhali satellite station project has been well-stopped. By discreet government terminology it was suspended as soon as the previous regime fell and a review of the A to Z of the highly suspect deal is under way. The information seeping out since then cannot but persuade one to wish that something very defined and even drastic should be done in the matter—and soon. In fact, it is universal knowledge how good a goldmine the T and T Board under the symbiotic patronage of the past President was for expose stories unveiling operations that can serve as all-time models of corruption. It must have been that renown which inspired the present dispensation to go for stopping the project early in its tenure. The bits that are out can be pieced even very casually to form a scandal involving not only the 300 crore Taka face-value of the project but a loss of at least 6500 crore Taka to the nation as a whole.

All of Bangladesh's telecommunication links with the world abroad is to date the business of the T & T Board which earns a profit of about 100 crore Taka exclusively from that service alone. The total international link load is being carried by the two satellite stations at Betbunga and Talibabad. Early in the year past a Tk 300-crore project was taken up to build a satellite station at Mahakhali.

Why was it needed? The promoters of the project said Betbunga was no more a facility to be depended upon. For one it was situated in 'insurgency' territory. And then the gadgets equipping it since colonial Pakistani times are by now old and obsolete and in no position to handle the ever-increasing load of international telink with any amount of efficiency.

That plea was plainly hollow and World Bank saw through it all and objected to the shutting down of Betbunga and building a new station in Dhaka city. Betbunga is in the most secured part of our Hill Tracts—Rangamati. And there could never be any question of scuttling Betbunga. It could be given that balancing-modernisation-replacement-and-expansion - BMRE - shot and updated for a rather cheap charge, 100-crore Taka. It could in that case take on practically all of the present demand for telink service with about a 900-channel system. The other facility at Talibabad could then very well supplement Betbunga. The combined capacity then could carry us into the new millennium.

This was a very sensible and promising scenario. But this was ditched to make room for a Tk 300-crore new facility to be built with private British collaboration—please see The Daily Star of Saturday—and to be run for 19 years by the British collaborator. The game is rather transparent. It strongly smells of hefty kickbacks.

The Mahakhali satellite bungle is but typical of a whole series of financial and developmental horror stories distinguished for the most part by plain swindle. And the Mahakhali bit should teach us not to be fooled by the price-tag of a project and to go for what it would cost by an exhaustive overall counting of all aspects of it. It would decidedly be sweeping to say that our development budgets in effect meant hundreds of billions of Taka borrowed to line the pockets of those in power and to rain it on hordes of ruffians—with a view to perpetuating their hold on state power. But a more reasonable approach to the use of our development funds cannot easily be found. Here lies one of the main ways of how our independence—built on an unrelenting struggle for democratic rights and a democratic polity—was compromised from within. Bangladesh was literally up for grabs for too long a time and on too many a ways to be able to retain any semblance of democracy and socio-economic justice in the systems it practised both as a state and as a society. Crimes of the Mahakhali satellite station kind have to be exposed very thoroughly and actions taken to set the injuries right and stem the rot from spreading.

Voice of the Children

What a pleasure it is to hear about our children receiving international prizes for their creative work. Muntazar Mansur, a student of class V from Chittagong received a Grand Prix at the Asian Children Painting Festival in Tokyo jointly organised by Unesco and Mitsubishi. The painting of this young artist was judged as one of the seven best out of a total of 1,23,875. A few weeks back two young artists, Syeduzzaman and Md. Iqbal Hossain, received the Nehru Memorial Gold Medal for painting at a competition held in Delhi. A few months ago a Bangladeshi girl won a place at a prestigious international conference in Amsterdam organised by 12 Nobel Laureates. Going through our national dailies we often come across news of stunning successes and rare achievements of our young people. On our television the young peoples' programmes are often the liveliest.

Well, the fact that we have a bright young population, at least among those who can go to good schools, is well known. What perhaps is not so well known is what we are doing to encourage them further to develop their talents. With perhaps a few notable exceptions our schools are usually heavy on conventional studies, burdensome on home work and almost negligent on creative aspects of education. In spite of all this the fact that we still have talented youngsters is a tribute to the devotion of the parents in nurturing the genius of our young ones.

Isn't it possible to give some sort of a voice to our young people so that they could articulate their views on national and international issues. At this critical juncture of our national life we should hear what young people have to say about our political systems, economic policies, and social goals. It might not be a bad idea to make our leading politicians face a question and answer session conducted by our youngsters. Let the politicians hear what our young boys and girls are thinking about the future of the country, of the political parties, of the campaign they are conducting and of the issues facing the nation now. Maybe we can think of organising a mock parliament where they can articulate their views on issues of concern to them. Maybe our mass media, especially our television, could give this idea some consideration.

Let us give our children a voice. It may surprise us all to find out what we can learn from them.

Canadian MPs have just returned to their homes and their voters after harrowing days of debate about the Gulf. The House of Commons vote at the end showed how divided Canada is on the issue of waging an aggressive war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Canada has committed 24 CF18 aircraft, two warships, one supply ship, a Boeing 707 refueling aircraft and a total of 1,850 troops to the multinational force. Indeed, Canadian aircraft have already been involved in bombing raids on Kuwait and Iraq. Canada is also establishing a field hospital in the war zone.

On the face of it, the Commons vote might have suggested that Canada is united—and certainly more united than was the United States Senate. For the motion, to support the efforts of the United Nations to end "the aggression of Iraq against Kuwait," was easily carried by 217 votes to 47.

But that is far from the whole story. For a start, the motion was cunningly worded so that its opponents would appear to be undermining the United Nations.

Second, it was narrowly phrased to define Canada's objective as being confined to liberating Kuwait and nothing more. The debates in the US Senate took place on broader ground and Senators voted on whether they would give President Bush the power to wage unlimited war.

Critics of Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney say this motion is typical of his tactics for sliding his people by stages into positions where they would have refused to go had they known the destination beforehand. Once in that position, they find it hard to retreat.

It has happened twice already since he became leader in 1984. His first move was into a free trade deal with the United States. If Canadians refused it, they were told, the

Canada Worries Over Loss of Peacekeeping Image

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

While Canada's contribution to the multinational force facing Saddam Hussein has rated little attention from the world media, it has caused consternation at home. The parliamentary debate ended with a vote overwhelmingly in favour of supporting United Nations efforts, but some MPs complained that forces had already been committed before Parliament was properly consulted. Others worry that Prime Minister Brian Mulroney—whose popularity rating is now only slightly greater than his shoe size—joined the war for his own political benefit.



BRIAN MULRONEY Following the US to war

Americans would take punitive trade measures.

The second was his attempt to change the constitution through the Meech Lake Accord, an agreement that would have granted Quebec status as a distinct society within Canada and given provinces more power over restructuring institutions like the Senate.

When the Meech Lake Accord was about to fail because not enough provinces would ratify these constitutional amendments, Canadians were warned that French-speaking Quebecers would take the Accord's failure as rejecting them as "a distinct society," which was not the change most critics found objectionable.

The same pattern has been followed over the Gulf War. The country's largest circulation paper, the Toronto Star, called it "the pattern of deception that has sugar-coated Canada's complicity in George Bush's plans for war."

It began immediately after Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2. Mulroney spent a day at Bush's holiday home in Maine and assured him of support. On August 10 he announced at a press conference that the government was sending three ships to the Gulf, to help enforce the economic blockade.

Since then, wrote Star political columnist Carol Goar, "Canada's role has been growing by dribs and drabs. Not once was Parliament consulted before our forces were given added responsibilities." Parliament in fact was not re-

called until September 24, ten days after he had added 16 CF-18 fighter aircraft, with ground attack capability, to defend the warships.

The next time MPs assembled was the day the deadline expired, and they were still talking when bombing raids began. By then it became, in Mulroney's terms, a question of loyalty to the United Nations and of support for the Canadian troops already in Saudi Arabia.

Protesters rallied in large crowds, in sub-zero temperatures, in cities across Canada. Fringe groups demanded that the troops be withdrawn from the Gulf. Most protesters were dismayed that Canada's well-earned reputation for peacekeeping would be destroyed if her troops took on an offensive role.

For by then Mulroney was saying the CF-18s would be given the job to "sweep and escort" American bombers on their way to Baghdad. Eight more of these aircraft were added as the debate in Parliament went on.

The opposition Liberal party were in confusion. Their previous leader, John Turner,

came out strongly for the motion. The new leader, Jean Chretien, who has been notably indecisive, at first spoke against the use of force, saying sanctions had not been given enough time to work. But he finally backed it "to show support for Canadian troops."

Audrey McLaughlin, leader of the socialist New Democratic Party, argued that Canada as a middle power had more influence in maintaining peace, than winning war. "We have the moral responsibility to use whatever means we can to stop the madness."

She called for a free vote, but the other party leaders refused. Four Liberals broke ranks, while 39 of the other opponents were New Democrats. One, American-born Phil Edmonston from Quebec, has a son in the US forces in the Gulf.

An opinion poll, taken between January 16 and 21, indicated the New Democrats may have made the unpopular, if principled, move. Three-quarters of those questioned back the US decision to use force and the Mulroney government's decision to send Canadian troops to the Gulf. A

few weeks earlier only 60 per cent approved the presence of Canadian troops.

But according to the poll, the peacekeeping self-image held by Canadians has not faded. Only 36 per cent agreed that Canada "should actively participate in military action and send our troops into battle against Iraq."

In contrast, 53 per cent wanted Canadian troops to stay there "for defensive purposes only." As well, nearly three-quarters believed a solution to the question of a Palestinian homeland was critical to peace in the Middle East.

Is Mulroney, whose popularity rating has sunk recently to 12 per cent, hoping to recover as Margaret Thatcher did after the Falklands War? He may certainly gain some points with those who see him as resolute ally of the United States (although he has taken pains to suggest his actions were in support of the United Nations). He may be tempted to try an early election against the floundering Chretien, rather than run the full course of five years until 1993.

He would be taking a gamble. The mood of the Canadian public is deeply unhappy. One point on which most agree is that Canada desperately lacks principled leadership.

Many think back nostalgically to "the golden era" of Lester B. Pearson, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his skilful diplomacy in unravelling the Suez crisis in 1956.

One emotional moment during a recent peace march in Ottawa of 2,000 people from Parliament to the Defence Department came when a small group began to cry, "Where are you, Mike Pearson, now that we really need you?" Yes, indeed. —GEMINI NEWS

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India's millionaires' club is growing. Millionaire watchers recall that some 30 or 40 years ago, the only millionaires you could see wandering around hotels and the busy shopping centres of the world were business tycoons—captains of industry, princes and maharajas, occasional doctors and lawyers.

The scene has now changed dramatically. There is a new breed of the wealthy on the scene—the corporate executives.

Five years ago, company directors here say, "Even wild dreamers would have found it hard to imagine that salaried employees even in multinational companies would earn so much as to join the ranks of India's growing population of millionaires."

Sudhir Gupta, a top executive working with a multinational, points out: "In five short years, the entire corporate remuneration landscape has changed beyond all recognition. We have friends who are earning more than a million rupees annually. You throw a stone in a board room and you will hit dozens of them."

Chief executives and vice-presidents are now earning more than 2 million rupees (US \$160,000) per annum. The personal tax rate in India is a bit steep. It is 54 per cent at the income level in which most top executives fall.

And most of these men and women know how to beat the system. Or at least their employers do. Not all this money is given out in the form of taxable cash salary. In order to minimise tax, the major part is paid out in the form of perks.

In a typical case, for example, Satish Sharma, 35, marketing director, lives in a large four-bedroom apartment which costs the company upwards of 50,000 rupees (US \$4,000) per month. Thus, the company executive is being paid in kind a sum of 600,000 rupees (US \$48,000) per annum on this account only. Additionally, the salaries are around 200,000 rupees (US \$16,000) annually. Then they have chauffeur-driven company

Corporate Executives: the New Millionaires

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

cars costing employers about 100,000 rupees (US \$8,000) annually.

Their houses are furnished at a cost of 100,000 rupees per annum. And they have a minimum of three or four air-conditioners which again involve an expenditure of more than 50,000 rupees per annum. This package is rounded off with perks such as servant allowances, education allowances for children, medical reimbursement, club bill reim-

bursement, entertainment allowances, leave travel concessions and annual bonuses.

And this package does not include occasional favours such as paid holidays abroad for the executive and his family, and housing loans of up to 1.5 million rupees (US \$120,000) at very small rates of interest.

Indeed, one of the jobs of chartered accountants working with companies is to cook the books to give the maximum tax benefits to corporate managers. Some of these clever people have discovered ways of converting at least part of this perquisite value into take-home income.

Then quite a few companies are paying their senior employees cash salaries under the counter which can be very substantial. It's no longer a corporate secret that the Birla group of companies, one of the biggest in the country, are disbursing brown paper packets containing anything between 5,000 rupees and 20,000 rupees per month to top-level employees. This, apart from the so-called top drawer salaries on which taxes are

paid. Take the case of Dr. A. Gupta, who is a technical director with one of these firms. He says quite plainly: "I have almost the same qualification, or perhaps better, than an architect or a doctor. I have qualified from an American university. I have an MBA degree and some 15 years' experience. My employers know my value. So if I get something like 2 million rupees annually with an occa-

100,000 rupees per annum at the lower end of the spectrum. On an average, seven to eight years down the line, the executive has graduated to a 150,000 rupees annual salary plus car and a house. This category gets a young executive almost 30 years' old total emoluments worth more than 300,000 rupees.

"Within 15 years of getting into the swim, most executives worth their MBAs have cata-

It is not just top executives. Firms are queuing up at institutes of management to hire the best and the brightest

lapsed into the next higher bracket. At this stage in their career, high-performance executives gross over 1 million rupees per annum," says a corporate analyst.

According to Tarun Seth, a former senior manager with Hindustan Lever and currently a respected consultant and tutor. "The big increase in corporate salaries is a recent phenomenon. I would imagine that salaries have increased sharply at the low end of the managerial ladder during the last few years. The fourth Pay Commission hiked the salaries of government officials and defence officials very substantially in 1986. The corporate sector had to keep pace with this jump in salaries. And since then they have gone up in the same proportion."

Another factor, according to business economists, is the rapid expansion of industries since the early 80's. Combined with a significant hike in growth potentials this has resulted in lots of new job opportunities which do not match

ional holiday abroad, no one should grudge me that."

Employers realise that this is the only way to retain some of the top experts. As a senior official of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce explains, "Some employers are scared that if they do not have highly qualified managers, their firms would get sick and their ratings will fall at the stock exchange. This very thought drives them to hire the best talent available."

And it is not just the top executives. Even the cubs straight from a management school are paid 5,000 rupees (US \$400) a month from day one. Indeed, dozens of firms are queuing up at the Indian Institutes of Management in Ahmedabad and elsewhere to hire the best and the brightest.

Foreign banks such as Citibank are paying fresh MBA recruits 65,000 rupees per annum plus accommodation worth another 60,000 rupees per annum. Multinationals such as Hindustan Lever and Procter and Gamble end up paying new recruits almost

with the supply of trained and experienced managers.

The result is obvious. More money for capable and experienced managers. According to one industry analyst, every time an executive changes job he gets a hike of earnings between 30 and 50 per cent in total emoluments. And in some areas such as petro-chemicals there are 100 per cent increases. This pushes managers into the 1 million rupees bracket before they are 35 years old.

Strangely, job switches at the very top are rarely motivated by monetary considerations. And increasingly, many job hoppers even at lower levels are making changes not so much for money as for job content or learning potential.

But this latter group is still in a minority. For the majority, it is money that holds the key.

Most companies which pay hefty salaries are also highly profitable and can, thus, afford to pay such salaries. For instance, Citibank's Indian operations, which employ a mere 300 people, earn a net profit of over 170 million rupees which allows for generous pay packets for its staff.

In neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh and even in Sri Lanka—with economies which are more open to foreign investment than India—managerial remuneration is on an average between 25 and 50 per cent higher than in India.

This is a significant fact because it indicates that a background of poverty and low GNP need not preclude a low salary level for managers. And experts predict that the salary boom will continue into the foreseeable future, probably resulting in another round of doubling before the mid-point of the decade has been crossed.

The Indian manager is finally getting his price. —Depthnews Asia

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.

Intellectuals and topical issues

Sir, It was refreshing to come across the new column 'At Home and Abroad' (Feb 4), discussing a very topical issue, namely, the role of the intellectual in raising the quality of the political life. The column raises, and faces, a rather sensitive issue honestly and squarely.

Instead of the use of the word 'intellectual', it is perhaps preferable to use a

broader term. There are many non-intellectual citizens who also 'think' in their own humble ways and styles, and would like to ventilate their views on issues of public interest.

These thinking citizens may not be politicians, public servants, academicians, or even professionals; but are those who take a keen passive interest in political developments as observers, commentators and contributors to national

thinking at various levels.

As it was rightly pointed out in the column, these enlightened citizens unfortunately do not get the benefit of the doubt from the 'other' side (those at the receiving end). The views expressed are seen mostly in the political context; which is rather uncharitable. The discussions might have a bearing on politics but the subject could be non-political. The administrator and the opposition feel that their domains had been invaded. We also see, strangely enough, that righteousness is based on popularity; the popular can do no wrong!

This subjective and restrictive mentality is not conducive to free and frank analyses of burning issues. Many such contributions do

not see the light of the day. The editors (and publishers) do not have much elbow-room in view of the prevailing intolerance in the society. The intolerance factor is very high; and the sensitivity rating of this intolerance is also very high! What is the solution?

Sir, you have courageously taken in hand a noble, but loaded issue. A thinking citizen.

Trial of Ershad

Sir, Open trial of the deposed President Ershad should be started without any further delay. If the ousted President Ershad is tried in the civil court, I believe many hidden facts pertaining to the misdeeds of the authorities and elite

will be revealed during the court proceedings. These facts will greatly help in isolating the core of some of the vital national problems.

Perhaps, many ills and errors have been rectified by now, had we succeeded in making public trials of the alleged killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and President Ziaur Rahman immediately after their assassinations.

Trial of Gen. Ershad appears to be one of the essentials for bringing political stability in the country. M. Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

If any kind of informed public opinion is to be allowed to play its desirable role in these events, people must be told and shown to the maximum extent practicable what is going on. They must be prepared to expect more horror scenes, like that which came from Tel Aviv. And they must be permitted—or is it compelled?—to face up to the fact that ordnance means explosives, that B-52s bombing "Republican Guards" means a lot of people—combatants, to be sure, but equally people—are going to be pulverized and incinerated for the sake of sparing one's own men and women. These are the awful calculations of wartime. A government needs the constant check and guidance of its own people in making them. That will not be possible if it is widely believed that this war is just a board game or that success can be had on the cheap.

—The Washington Post.