

Bad Times for Belgrade

For most East European countries, the transition from Communism to democracy has been marked by severe ethnic tensions which, for four decades or more, have been lying underneath the tightly-controlled authoritarian system. In the case of Yugoslavia where the federal government had always been less harsh than in other countries of the region, the situation should have been less difficult. Unfortunately, the worst possible scenario has been unfolding for Yugoslavia. The country is on the brink of a civil war posing the danger of a break-up of the federation.

Part of the problem lies in the post-Tito political system that has made the rotating presidency of the federation weak, without giving the republics a real sense of autonomy that could help the process of socio-economic development of each ethnic or religious group. An explosion that would shatter this uneasy relationship existing among the republics and various ethnic groups always seemed only a question of time. What the unhappy country — and the outside world — did not know when and how the explosion would take place.

There is a general consensus among experts that atleast part of the blame for the latest explosion must be placed at the door of Slobodan Milosevic, the Communist leader of Serbia, the largest of the country's six republics. It is also the home of a large Albanian minority, the victim of a crackdown that a majority Serbians have reportedly welcomed. This gave the opportunity to Mr Milosevic to strengthen his hold not only over Serbia but also on other republics. The situation provided communists in various republics to agree to free elections which, held last year, forced communists out of office in all the republics, except Serbia and Montenegro. So, Yugoslavia became a split nation.

There is nothing unexpected with the retreat of communism in four out of six republics. It is also nothing unexpected that students in Serbia should take to the streets to stage demonstrations against the communist regime of Mr Milosevic. There is also nothing surprising that atleast two republics — Croatia and Slovenia — should now threaten to secede if Yugoslavia is not transformed into a loose confederation.

The Yugoslav army has now appeared on the scene, with the warning that it is ready to deal with any situation that aggravates ethnic tension and triggers off a civil war.

A solution does not lie with the army. It lies with the process that should put an end to the communist regime in Serbia and pave the way for a free and fair multi-party election at the federal level. Then, there may come about the right climate for dealing with ethnic differences. The United States has already warned that the intervention from the army on the side of the communist regime of Mr Milosevic will bring an end to all aid from Washington. Similar warnings have been issued by west European countries.

At the time of its liberation two decades ago, Bangladesh received substantial material and moral help from Yugoslavia, especially from the late Marshal Tito. This friendship between Dhaka and Belgrade endures. At this moment, our hope is that Yugoslavia will survive the test facing its political entity and, whether it remains a federation or is transformed into a loose confederation, continue to play its significant role in international affairs, as one state.

Surgery at Home

An Australian oral and maxillological surgeon left Dhaka last week after spending a fortnight treating patients at Dhaka Dental College. This was not the first philanthropic visit by a foreign surgeon to this country. Nor is it likely to be the last. They provide, free of cost, a kind of specialised medical service desperately needed, but not available in this country.

Their visits are welcome and greatly appreciated. But they also expose our failures. Dr Fitzpatrick found Dhaka Dental College's oral and maxillological unit rather primitive, lacking in essential equipment. The 20-bed unit also happens to be the only one of its kind in Bangladesh.

Such a poor state of affairs would probably have been tolerable had there been a shortage of expertise. But that is really not the case. There are hundreds of trained and experienced Bangladeshi medical practitioners scattered around the globe. But, as long as opportunities to apply their knowledge do not exist here, they are likely to remain overseas. The brain-drain is as much the product of financial incentives abroad, as lack of facilities at home.

At the same time people are becoming increasingly aware of specialised treatments available elsewhere for various ailments, afflictions and accidents. Consequently, a growing number of people, both affluent and not-so-affluent, are travelling abroad. Considerable amount of foreign exchange is thus spent without having any positive impact on the national economy.

Institutional development has suffered a great deal from government inertia and lack of enthusiasm from the private sector. In the past, when awareness was low and public propensity to spend on health matters not directly related to life and death was correspondingly not high, unwillingness to invest heavily on specialised facilities may have been justified. But that is no longer the case. Services provided by surgeons like Dr Fitzpatrick do not save lives, but they do make living a lot more pleasant, with an incalculable impact on a man's or a woman's self-confidence. As such a large market now exists to promise attractive returns on investment. Private sector efforts, with a little encouragement from the state, can go a long way towards arresting and eventually reversing the brain-drain. The government could play a positive role by offering tax and other incentives to people wishing to set up such services. The outward flow of patients could also be reversed by offering cheaper alternatives at home.

THE chances are growing that by the end of 1991 much of Southern Africa will be more peaceful than it has been at any time in the last 30 years. Wars that are estimated to have claimed at least 1.2 million lives in Angola and Mozambique seem at last to be winding down while in South Africa the year could see the real end of 43 years of apartheid.

Peace agreements in conflicts in the former Portuguese colonies, which date back long before they became independent in the wake of the Lisbon coup d'état of 1974, will be a direct result of the end of the Cold War.

On December 12 an unprecedented meeting took place in Washington between the then Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Jonas Savimbi, the leader of the US-backed rebel UNITA movement in Angola. At the same time US Secretary of State James Baker met Angolan Foreign Minister Pedro van Dunem.

It was yet another stage in joint US-Soviet action to defuse conflicts which in the past each had stoked up through their surrogates. Mediating on Angola was the former colonial power, Portugal. More talks will be held in the US in mid-January and Portugal hopes a peace settlement will be signed by March.

Crucial to success is the decision by the Marxist-oriented Angolan government of President Dos Santos to switch to a multi-party system. The first stage will be completed in April. This satisfies the US and will give UNITA the chance to participate in government in Luanda.

Soviet pressure and the independence of neighbouring Namibia has led to the exit of Cuban troops ahead of schedule.

The last Cubans will leave on July 1 and if all goes to plan and both superpowers stop supplying their clients — UNITA and Luanda — elections will be held under the eyes of international observers.

An agreement signed in Rome at the beginning of December could also lead to peace in Mozambique where the rebel Renamo movement (Mozambique National Resistance) has been fighting the government in Maputo since long before neighbouring Zimbabwe became independent in 1980.

Under the pact the rebels are to stop fighting along the railway line that links landlocked neighbouring countries to the sea. Zimbabwean troops supporting Mozambique also have to stand off and an eight-nation monitoring commission with representatives from both sides has been set up.

At the same time, in a pattern somewhat similar to the one in Angola, the government of President Joaquim Chissano has set up a multi-party state and introduced a market economy. Renamo will be able to take part in elections and its leader Alfonso Dhlakama allowed to stand as president.

It is unique as it would bring colour to an otherwise dreary prison and offer a new approach to social reform for hardened criminals.

Every Sunday, some 300 of about 1,200 inmates in a south Calcutta jail gather at a large hall to pick up brushes and paints. Under the tutelage of two of Calcutta's better known painters, they participate in what prison authorities hope would change them from murderers, rapists and kidnappers to responsible, and creative, members of society.

Bikash Bhattacharya and Paritosh Sen, well-known painters of Calcutta, have together launched the project. As Bhattacharya explains, "Such ventures are noble. And I am happy to be associated with them. In a city where the artistic temperament is always lauded, such projects are successful and set an example to others."

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It's Looking Brighter in Southern Africa at last

by Derek Ingram

If the long and hard negotiations on Angola, Mozambique and South Africa bear fruit in 1991 Southern Africa should see an improving situation in the entire war-weary region. Both former Portuguese colonies are talking to their rebel movements and both are moving towards multi-party government. And in South Africa it is hoped talks aimed at producing a new constitution and involving all the main political parties will start soon.

tial candidate.

The third side of this regional triangle of peace — South Africa — holds hope, but is much more problematical. Almost 12 months after the release of Nelson Mandela the country enters a year in which the long political honeymoon of Mandela and President F.W. de Klerk will be at an end.

The months of sizing up each other must now give way to the real business. Talks about talks have run their course and promise of a real demolition of apartheid has now to be fulfilled. African patience is wearing thin and Mandela must begin to show results from his personal rapport with de Klerk. Murmurs of "sellout" are inevitable in such a situation. Negotiation usually leads hardliners to argue that talking is a waste of time.

The crunch will come in February when the South African parliament reassembles. De Klerk promises legislation abolishing the cornerstones of apartheid, the Land Act and the Group Areas Act.

Oliver Tambo, at 73, and Nelson Mandela, at 72, are in an unenviable position as lead-

ers of a 78-year-old movement, the African National Congress (ANC), that has not yet produced the goods. The majority of its membership is young and thrusting while its leaders are wise and careful and anxious at the end of their lives to reach at least the foothills of power.

The new mood of the National Party under de Klerk has opened up the situation at last, but real change and absolute proof that apartheid is on the way out is still lacking. What if the military, supported by white extremists, take control? Or if a law and order breakdown, fuelled by the rivalry between the ANC and Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha Movement, causes de Klerk to pull back?

The point is being reached where the talking can no longer be carried out only by the ANC and the government. The more radical Pan African Congress (PAC), Inkatha, the black consciousness movement AZAPO, the mainly white and liberal Democratic Party and the extremist white AWB all have to be brought together if a lasting solution is to be found and a new constitution formulated.

THE misadventure of Saddam Hussein in this second Gulf war, initiated by him, has been very costly indeed. Iraq lies prostrate and vanquished. Her cities have been ravaged by thousands of tons of bombs; her bridges, industrial installations, military hardware, lie in ruins. Whereas the first Gulf war against Iran could be considered a draw inspite of her smaller size, in the second Gulf war, she was routed with her soldiers running for cover against the advancing allied forces led by the US. During the seven-month crisis tiny Iraq faced against superpower America. She garnered sympathies around the world and Saddam evoked admiration among many young hearts. All that has gone with the wind. The woes of Saddam and Iraq are not over yet; for this multi-ethnic country, the lid may just have come off the cauldron of discontent.

During the crisis noises have been coming from Washington of a new order in the Middle East. Since Camp David agreement 1979 Egypt has entered firmly in the Western camp. With Iraq lying prostrate the task should be easier. With an eye on the Gulf oil, the Saudi-led GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) becomes the nucleus around Egypt. During the crisis Iraq tried desperately to draw Israel into the conflict thereby making it the traditional Arab-Israeli conflict rather than singly Iraq facing the US-led coalition. The gamble failed as the US held Israel on a tight leash.

One interesting fallout was the Iraq-Iran rapprochement. As the economic embargo

fore the end of apartheid has been secured. The ANC headed off moves to lift sanctions in mid-year, but in December the European Community lifted bans on investment. Talks are starting up about raising the sporting boycott.

Of immediate urgency is the ending of the violence between ANC and Inkatha supporters that wracked the townships all through 1990.

Then there is the thorny issue of sanctions. The international line, insecure at the best of times, is buckling be-

cause of the leaders of the 50 nations of the Commonwealth meets in Harare. The timing and place of this summit could be just right, since by then full-scale talks in South Africa should be well advanced. — GEMINI NEWS

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Second Gulf War—its Aftermath

by Arshad-uz Zaman

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financiers of Palestine and after the Gulf war their dependence on the US has greatly increased. All these factors put together make the present situation fraught with danger for the Palestinians.

The second Gulf war puts the world on notice that the USA has totally recovered from her Vietnam syndrome. We have seen the massive arrival of US forces including land forces far away from her shores. The fond hope of Saddam that the fear of casualties would tie up the hands of Bush proved totally illusory. The second Gulf war presented the world with a new American weapon — CNN (Cable News Network). Like an extraterrestrial object it alone has access to all corners of the globe.

Paul Kennedy in his remarkable book "Rise and Decline of the Great Powers" brilliantly analyses the state of the two superpowers and spells out in detail their decline. Inspite of that the truth is that they alone are on the global stage because no credible challenger has appeared on the horizon as yet. As the first US soldiers had started pulling out from the sands of Arabia, Mr. Bush and Mr. Baker have started crisscrossing the globe in an effort to find an acceptable solution to the Palestinian problem. If past is any guide, this problem still promises to be a much harder nut to crack than Mr. Saddam Hussein.

him is whether he will be able to pursue a career of painting after his eventual release. "I doubt very much," he murmurs, adding: "Not many will buy paintings from an ex-convict... we are selling only because we are imprisoned in a place which is normally associated with the bad elements of life, not with something as creative as art and culture."

But most convicts who were questioned agreed that the school has brought about a refreshing change in their regimented lifestyle. Painters and writers like M.F. Husain and R.K. Narain from other parts of the country have been asked to visit the jail.

An official adds that visiting authors talk with the inmates after the day's work is over and that the experience is obviously good masala (spice) for most of them." Moni Shankar Mukherji, a celebrated Bengali writer, who visited the prison recently, remembers: "I loved it because I have often heard about visits by eminent people to prisons and the matter ends there. This is something that will, hopefully, continue and make things better for the prisoners."

Echoes Swapan Maiti, 24 convicted of murder and rape: "I would love to paint through out the week. Nobody has given us so much care here."

Subimal Chatterjee, a senior jail official, points out: "There has been a marked change in the behaviour of several convicts after this school was started. For instance, drug racketeering has dropped inside the jail along with incidents of sexual harassment on Sundays."

Other jail wardens say that their task has been made easier. There are less instances of attempts to bolt the prison.

The convicts are enjoying this project... they get a reprieve from the routine menial labour. According to Uttam Sau, a 30-year-old prisoner serving time for double murder, "this school has conveyed a very important message to us. We are not the write-offs that society thinks we are."

Painter Bhattacharya adds:

"Here, the chances of failure are more than that of success because you simply cannot motivate in a short time someone who has spent years inside a hell hole. It is more than an experiment. It is a challenge."

Concludes Sister Shanti from the MOC, "Though

inmates to her Home for the Mentally Retarded called Shishu Bhavan. But the government did not accept this suggestion.

But today Mother Teresa is elated. Her two visits, since the start of the art school, are still recalled fondly. "She said she could not come regularly but every week some nuns from the Missionaries of Charity (MOC) come here and read out her message. They even bring food," says Amit Basu, a prison official.

A portion of the money raised through sales are earmarked for the MOC, which works among the poor in 80 countries, relying mainly on donations to run hospitals, orphanages, leprosy homes and soup kitchens for the destitutes.

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otherwise it is quite difficult to understand as to why suddenly people of a certain place want to end their lives.

We all want to live as long as possible on this beautiful earth of ours. Even a person who has crossed his eighties, does not want that his life should come to an end. Death sounds scary and dreadful to him also.

Scientifically, suicide cases are to be studied carefully by experts. We do not feel very comfortable, when we hear about people ending their own lives.

Life is short, anyway, why then end it even before the real end comes?

These by itself is a bigger tragedy than anything else.

Rabeya Majid

Mohakhali, Dhaka,

Iftar' items

Sir, We seem inclined to go for all fried things available at the first hand to meet the requirement of "Iftar". And it is despite the fact that we more or less are aware of the lesser food value and greater harmfulness of such items.

The other day I was

passing through a market street crowded by vendors frying and selling "Iftar" items and their eager buyers, in the afternoon. There were some fruit vendors too, but attending a much lesser crowd. There were, of course, no milk or sandwich vendors!

Some shops, may be termed as comparatively posh, tend to sell them, but the price is too high for the commoners. Why not such items have become commonplace by now, I don't understand. That does not cost very much; then why should it be so much high-priced? And not only sandwich or like items, we may also innovate some completely indigenous or local fast food items - beneficial to health and marketed at a cheaper price, can't we?

Manik Chowdhury,

Wari, Dhaka.

